

**A Cybernetic Approach to Continuity  
In US Foreign Policy**

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## **Abstract**

One of the basic themes in the study of international relations is the phenomenon of continuity. To account for this continuity, scholars usually resort to one of two different explanatory strategies: purported long-term goals of states or the psychology of those who dominate the state's foreign policy making. This paper proposes an alternative way of thinking about continuity. First, we lay out a picture of foreign policy continuity for a particular state, the United States, indicating the different levels of policy and what features a multilevel argument about continuity must have. Second, we turn to the cybernetic tradition and sketch out a class of theories about policy making, those which emphasize means-, rather than ends-driven activities. We then indicate how, in general, such theories can address the issue of multi-level policy continuity. Finally, we return to the issue of U.S. foreign policy and put forward a sort of test issue to apply and evaluate cybernetic explanations: how to account for the repeated resort to the same sort of policies even after major foreign policy disasters. Our answer, cybernetically, is that U.S. policy makers engage in what we would call tactical learning.

One of the basic themes in the study of international relations is the phenomenon of continuity. States are widely believed to pursue policies which, although obviously crafted to the particulars of specific situations, nonetheless revolve around a core that is stable for decades, if not centuries. Thus, a casual glance through both scholarly monographs and introductory textbooks reveals statements about state X's long-term goals, pressure group Y's core interests, or leader Z's ideological fixation, in each case as manifested through any number of specific policies.

To account for this continuity, scholars usually resort to one of two different explanatory strategies. Some focus on long-term goals, whether read off from the geopolitical situation of the country in question (e.g., the need for warm-water ports or natural resources, for allies or buffer states) or from internal characteristics of the country (e.g., a liberal political and economic system, a sense of exceptionalism, ingrained racial prejudices). Other explanations center instead on the psychology of those who dominate the state's foreign policy making: crusading or pragmatic personalities, perceptual or cognitive biases regarding particular kinds of information, deep-seated fears of chaotic situations, perhaps due to traumatic collective memories.

Whatever the virtues of any of the above explanations for the continuity of a state's foreign policy, they suffer from several important defects. First, they tend to lack a translation mechanism by which they can account for specific foreign policy decisions.<sup>1</sup> How exactly is it that the myriad of policies a state pursues across various issue areas are accounted for by a particular goal or personality characteristic? For

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<sup>1</sup> On this point, see Sylvan and Majeski (2007: ch. 1).

example, does the goal of pursuing open political and economic systems tell us much about protecting the environment? If so, how? Off the bat, then, entire classes of policy turn out not to be accounted for by long-term factors. But the same question arises for those types of policies which do fall within the scope of the latter. For example, if a state is supposed to pursue the goal of open markets, does that mean that whenever decisions must be made about trade or investment, negotiators will always push for a maximalist solution as opposed to a compromise? Does it mean that if leaders have a strong disposition in favor of democracy, they can never back dictators, even as a temporary measure (and in that case, how long is “temporary” (see Kirkpatrick, 1979)? Even if this issue is resolved, questions of timing and policy choice still persist: if people of a given skin tone are considered incapable of self-rule, should their lands be annexed, ruled through intermediaries, or turned over to other states or institutions; and when should this happen, and for how long? Finally, what is the relation between long-term factors? If more than one is at work, then which takes priority, under what circumstances, and how? Nothing in the literature sheds any light on this subject. In short, explanations for policy continuity as indicative of long-term goals or abiding psychological characteristics are not, in fact, explanations at all.

The overriding problem with trying to explain policy continuity by long-term factors such as goals or leaders’ psychology is that the notion of continuity is of necessity multi-level. On the one hand, policy is made at particular times, for particular problems, often in particular places; and it is frequently remade as situations change. This implies that policy is contoured along multiple dimensions. On the other hand, arguments that stress sempiternal goals or biases spotlight a single dimension, to the exclusion of all others, thereby either ignoring all the other facets of policy or being obliged to claim that they somehow reflect the principal dimension.

For this reason, arguments about continuity have to take into account multiple factors and treat either goals or psychological attributes as only one out of many dimensions in characterizing policies. In addition, arguments about continuity have to be able to account for the obvious twists and turns in day-to-day policy making and the patterns and repetitions that seem to exist across routine decisions. Standard long-term factor arguments do not even begin to grapple with these problems.

This paper proposes an alternative way of thinking about continuity, one which avoids the above problems. The argument advanced here is developed at greater length in a forthcoming monograph, replete with many intricacies and numerous detailed historical examples. Here we present a stripped-down version. Our argument will be in three parts. First, we lay out a picture of foreign policy continuity for a particular state, the United States, indicating the different levels of policy and what features a multilevel argument about continuity must have. Second, we turn to the cybernetic tradition and sketch out a class of theories about policy making, those which emphasize means-, rather than ends-driven activities. We then indicate how, in general, such theories can address the issue of multi-level policy continuity. Finally, we return to the issue of U.S. foreign policy and put forward a sort of test issue to apply and evaluate cybernetic explanations: how to account for the repeated resort to the same sort of policies even after major foreign policy disasters. Our answer, cybernetically, is that U.S. policy makers engage in what we would call tactical learning.

## **1. Dimensions of United States Foreign Policy**

A look at the process of U.S. foreign policy making – both in terms of public statements by policy makers as well as in the behind-the-scenes documents and

meetings that record options and decisions – shows that the participants understand themselves as addressing problems and trying to solve them. The problems in question may be highly localized in time and space, such as a balance of payments crisis in Mexico, a coup d’etat in Thailand, or public pressure to stop the expansion of military bases in Italy; alternatively, policy makers may see themselves as addressing region-wide questions or long-term problems for multiple countries around the world. This latter possibility suggests as well that policy-making is understood as internally ordered by levels, so that, for example, the particular problems of Italian bases today are seen as part of larger questions. Although these latter can, in principle, be of various sorts (so that, as one possibility, base problems in Italy are part of the class of base problems generally, which in turn are part of the class of military deployment problems, which then are part of the class of readiness problems, and so forth), in practice, they tend to be packaged by country. That is, military base problems in Italy are seen as instances of Italian problems in general, along with problems such as Italian military withdrawal from Iraq and nonwithdrawal from Afghanistan, the indictment and possible extradition of CIA officers on kidnapping charges related to an “extraordinary rendition,” the trial of a U.S. soldier accused of having killed an Italian carabinieri in Iraq, the survival of the Prodi government and the role of various leftist parties there, among others.

In general, U.S. policy making tends to revolve around problems classed by country. This is not to deny that some problems are not seen as country-specific (e.g., the ozone hole), but most of the time spent by high-level (and for that matter, more junior) policy makers is on particular problems in particular countries. Interestingly, the vast majority of those problems have little or nothing to do with the foreign policies of those countries, whether toward the U.S. or toward other states (for

relatively wealthy countries like Britain or Italy, this is not true; such countries tend instead to be viewed by the U.S. as junior partners whose role is to help out the U.S. (on a variety of issues) but rather with the internal problems faced by the governments of those countries. That is, policy makers in Washington and in the field have as their principal activities the solving of problems that, strictly speaking, pertain to the domestic affairs of other countries. For such countries, the U.S. assumes an oversight role, something which implies ongoing and active surveillance of political, financial, military, and other activities in those countries; and this surveillance is one of the principal tasks of the U.S. missions around the world.

In practice, problem-solving by the U.S. involves the use of various policy instruments: perhaps spending money on development activities or in propping up a currency; perhaps training of a country's troops or collaborative activity against narcotics traffickers; possibly covert political action against dissident groups or giving advice on the details of an electoral law. These activities, as well as the surveillance which precedes, accompanies, and follows them, implies that U.S. officials enjoy both formal permission by the states concerned and a *de facto* acceptance by those states that the U.S. role is normal, albeit perhaps obnoxious. Our term for this, borrowed from Eisenstadt (1963) and from the practice in ancient Rome, is *clientilism*: much of U.S. foreign policy making involves problem-solving for client states.

Of course, not all states in the world are U.S. clients. Our current estimate is that some 81 states are, either in the junior partner category or in the resource transfer one. A significant number of other states are outside the fold: the U.S. follows what is going on there and may, as a matter of bilateral policy, attempt to cooperate, but there is no presumption in either Washington or the capitals of those states that the U.S. will try to solve their problems. Some of these states, indeed, are seen as other states'

clients (e.g., former French colonies in Africa). Still other states are understood by U.S. officials to be enemies of the U.S.: not necessarily dangers in any military sense, but as having arrangements of political and economic power which the U.S. considers unacceptable. Those regimes are themselves problems for the U.S. and, if the opportunity presents itself, Washington attempts to overthrow them.

Our focus in this paper is on client states. The U.S. has had clients since the 1890s, when, for at least a few years, the planter regime that took power in Hawaii with the complicity of a local U.S. naval commander was refused annexation and had to content itself with the role of American ward. The Spanish-American War then ushered in a second client – Cuba – whose status as such was written into law via the Platt Amendment. A few years later, Roosevelt created a third client when he detached Panama from Colombia. Over the next decade and a half, most of the other states in Central America and the Caribbean became U.S. clients.

A second, much more extensive wave of client acquisition occurred beginning in World War II. Within a decade, most states in South America and Western Europe had become U.S. clients, as well as a smattering of states in Oceania, East Asia, and the odd state here or there (e.g., Liberia). After that, other clients have followed, particularly after decolonization (some of Britain's former colonies in the Caribbean) or after a war (several of the Gulf states; Afghanistan and Iraq). Most of these client states, as indeed most U.S. clients acquired over the past century, remain in that status. Only a relative handful were clients but are no longer: states like Hawaii, which were annexed to the U.S.; states like China, Iran, and Cuba, which have undergone revolutions; and states like South Vietnam, which, as a result of Hanoi's victory in the war, no longer exists. Needless to say, the U.S. does not look with favor



on the possibility of losing clients and resists most possible losses of clients, making great efforts even afterward at recuperating them.<sup>2</sup>

Seen in this way, U.S. foreign policy regarding clients is multilevel. In a day to day sense, U.S. policy makers are engaged in trying to solve their clients' problems. This involves the use of one or more policy instruments; and if a given instrument is unsuccessful, this redefines the problem so that a different instrument is tried. Of course, the U.S. may fail, but even then, all hope is not given up that by some other means, the former client might move back into the fold. While all this is going on, the U.S. is from time to time taking on additional clients, in some cases as a reaction to the loss of other clients (e.g., Thailand to compensate for China).

With these considerations in mind, we can now define continuity in U.S. foreign policy. At one level, it involves the repeated effort at solving problems in a given client until such time as the client might be lost. At another level, continuity involves the repeated acquisition of clients. Both of these levels may involve the promotion of democracy or open markets, just as they may involve particular psychological orientations toward specific countries or leaders; but equally, continuity is also compatible with the support of dictators, closed economies, and various leadership personalities.

## **2. Cybernetics and Means-driven Policy Making**

As we have depicted it, U.S. foreign policy cannot usefully be characterized as goal-driven. To be sure, policy makers at any given moment are trying to accomplish particular tasks in specific states, but those goals are both multiple in nature and subordinate to the particular problems at hand. What, for example, is the U.S. goal

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<sup>2</sup> In addition, clients do not "graduate" into non-client status, but instead, once they become sufficiently wealthy no longer to require the infusion of U.S. resources, become junior partners.

currently in Iraq? Is it to support the Maliki government, to crack down on anti-Sunni actions by Shiite militias connected with the Maliki government (and in some cases trained and supplied by the U.S.), to promote democracy in Iraq and throughout the region, to defeat “terrorists” in Iraq, or to avoid the political embarrassment of U.S. withdrawal, to list some of the more commonly cited goals? In one sense, all these are goals of U.S. policy; in another sense, they are all subordinate to the task of carrying out the counterinsurgency campaign. That campaign, however, is a collection of specific, day-to-day activities involving armed patrols, political negotiations with regional and local leaders, and coordination with Iraqi troops. To be sure, the counterinsurgency campaign can be said to have as its goal the ending, or at least diminution of, certain insurgent activities; but by the same token, this latter is simply the most pressing current problem U.S. leaders see themselves as facing in Iraq, not some kind of fundamental goal. To see policy making as problem solving, thus, is to reconceptualize goals in a more limited way, as a collection of concrete activities. Indeed, from everything we know about the counterinsurgency campaign (including the latest “surge”), the prospect of ending insurgent activities was coupled with, and arguably subsequent to, the choice of particular activities; this is how alternate policy instruments, such as negotiations with Iran and Syria, were ruled out. Arguably, the means – military counterinsurgency activities – came first and the goal – the ending of insurgent activities – followed. Other goals were then in turn stapled onto the policy. Goals are real, but they either come second or are in essence a relabelling of the means.

One field of study which conceptualizes means and ends as we have done here is cybernetics. We use this term in contrast with alternative fields, such as organizational theory, in homage to early and influential work by Norbert Wiener, W.

Ross Ashby, and John von Neumann (see Mirowski, 2001), although our approach is also influenced by pioneering organizational theorists such as Herbert Simon, James March, and Richard Cyert.<sup>3</sup> The core notion is one of a well-defined sequence of activities which can be seen as embodying a goal, and of more comprehensive sequences and goals as repertorially arranged. A classic example is that of the automated antiaircraft gun, famously analyzed by Wiener and Bigelow. This involves a feedback mechanism, so that when shots fail to hit an airplane, information on the miss serves to trigger adjustments in the gun's angle and the leading of future shots. We have here two sequences of activities: shooting, and adjusting the next shot on the basis of feedback. Although the gun can be said to be designed to achieve the goal of shooting down specific planes, the gun by itself has no goals in mind and the goal is thus a way of labelling, and hence understanding, the sequences.

In principle, the sequences of the gun's shooting and adjustments can be carried out entirely without human intervention. Nonetheless, the sequential activities logic can be extended easily to actions undertaken by human beings. If, for example, the automated antiaircraft gun fails at too high a rate, the designers may have to go back to the drawing board and redesign it, say to shoot faster and with more accurate information. This in turn may require the design team to hire new engineers and perhaps metallurgists, as well as to have access to recently developed tracking technologies. We could therefore conceptualize the redesign process as one of increasing budgets, the number of employees, their access to information, and so forth; and each of those can be understood as a sequence of activities; jointly, they embody the goal of redesign. Organizations such as air defense design units are in this

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<sup>3</sup> See March and Simon (1958) and Cyert and March (1963). See Steinbruner (2002) on extensions of the term and the mixing of the ideas of Ashby and Simon. Note as well the relevance of the earlier work of Karl Deutsch (1966). Of course, Allison (and Zelikow 1999) was influential in bringing organizational theory to the study of foreign policy.

sense repertoires of sequences of activities, with problem solving a matter of engaging in particular sequences. The remaining issue, which is not trivial, is which of those sequences are engaged in, and on what basis they are adopted. (For example, is there a search among sequences? Are sequences considered in a random order, or with those most frequently adopted being chosen first? Is the criterion for adopting a sequence that the sequence seemed to work the last time around, or that it resembles a “successful” sequence; or conversely that the sequence can be implemented more quickly or at lower cost than others?)

Understanding more complex activities as sequences of less complex ones is at the heart of the cybernetic approach. (It also lends itself well to computational models.) Understanding organizations as repertoires of sequences is an important corollary. In both cases, goals are very much secondary: not that they do not matter, or that there is no attempt to satisfy them, but that it is difficult to separate them empirically from the specific tasks that comprise the activities and repertoires of the policies and organizations being studied. This has several important implications. First, goals have no practical, or for that matter, explanatory, significance except insofar as they are embodied in a set of particular, ongoing, activities. Certainly, persons carrying out those activities, or their superiors, may desire particular end states and hope that somehow, in some way, the activities might contribute to bringing about those end states; but this by itself hardly helps explain why the particular activities were engaged in at a particular time. (One is reminded of the famous colloquy between Rick Blaine [Humphrey Bogart] and Louis Renault [Claude Rains] about why the former came to Casablanca: “My health. I came to Casablanca for the waters.” “The waters? What waters? We’re in the desert.” “I was misinformed.”)

Second, and as a corollary, since there is no way of predicting even the immediate, much less longer-term, consequences of activities (since there may be problems with executing the activities, with the reactions of adversaries, and so forth), the idea that the latter are chosen as the optimal way of achieving the former is clearly incorrect. No doubt, officials strive to do the best they can under the circumstances, but this does not mean that they weigh all, or even many, alternative activity sequences. The problem is not only the well-known one of cognitive limitations, but that the repertoire of activities is both limited and lumpy. Limited, because it takes time to establish organizations, give agents resources, and train them to carry certain tasks. Lumpy, because activities are not added to the repertoire that differ by only epsilon from existing activities.

Third, for these reasons, policy making is most likely and sensibly understood to be means, rather than ends-driven (Lindblom, 1959; 1979). We see policy makers as facing immediate problems, some of them with regard to the failure of their current policies, and as attempting to solve those problems by considering practical alternatives, i.e., by considering one or more of the available policy instruments in their repertoire. Precisely how this process occurs is an important question, with some of the possibilities hinted at above. For example, it may be that the organizations most heavily involved in the existing policy are asked to scale up the scope of their activities. Alternatively, the bureaucratic losers in the previous round of policy making may put forward their preferred sequence of activities. Another possibility is the well-known garbage can model, in which an alternative is chosen more or less at random from whatever is available.

An elegant example of foreign policy as means-driven comes from the U.S. war against the Taliban in late 2001. Since the Taliban had taken over in the mid-

1990s, the U.S. had maintained its ties with the leader of the Northern Alliance, Ahmed Shah Massoud, whom it had assisted in the 1980s when he was fighting the Soviet Union. Massoud wished for U.S. support against the Taliban, but this was refused for a number of reasons; instead, the CIA maintained contact with Massoud both as an insurance policy for the future and then, as concern grew about Osama Bin Laden, for the purpose of gathering intelligence. However, the prospect of aiding Massoud was brought up over and over, by both U.S. officials and Massoud himself. Finally, shortly before September 11, high level officials approved a plan to help Massoud's forces against Al Qaeda, with the understanding that this would involve Massoud launching an offensive against the Taliban. After the attacks of September 11, this plan then served as the nucleus of anti-Al Qaeda efforts, with the notable addition of U.S. bombing. Ostensibly, the Taliban were being given the choice of cooperating with the U.S. or being attacked, but since the U.S. had already begun helping the Northern Alliance, whose principal purpose was fighting against the Taliban, the goals associated with this offer (getting Bin Laden while avoiding war with the Taliban) were meaningless and appropriately short-lived.<sup>4</sup> In this case, we clearly see that the desire to do something about Al Qaeda in Afghanistan was means-driven, with the specific end (evicting the Taliban from power) being stapled on, as it were, once the means were adopted. Indeed, the means in question served as a kind of nucleus, so that the Pentagon's Special Forces were added to the CIA's officers, and then the Air Force's bombers were added to the Special Forces.

Thus, the cybernetic approach, with its emphasis on sequences and repertoires, and its de-emphasis on goals, lends itself to explanations of policy making in organizational terms. This does not mean that policy makers may not be creative, or

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<sup>4</sup> Discussion drawn from Sylvan and Majeski (2007: chapter 6); see also Coll (2004).

that organizations are never created or eliminated, but it does mean that policy making, as an activity, involves working with means. At times, policy makers may decide that the existing repertoire of means is inadequate and they may strive to construct new organizations, but even then, this is more a matter of subdividing existing activities and giving them additional resources and a new organizational home than of inventing policy instruments out of whole cloth.<sup>5</sup> Nor, by the same token, does an emphasis on organizations mean that we are denying the existence of psychological processes and cognitive constraints. Nonetheless, and in spite of the fact that pioneering cybernetic theorists such as Simon closely linked the analysis of organizations with various sorts of psychological limitations on microeconomic-style decision making, we think it important to separate the two. However much officials may exhibit availability biases, satisficing, and loss underestimation, and so forth, they cannot simply push buttons or give generic orders. They must rely on organizations to report on problems, to present them with alternatives, and to execute policy. Moreover, policy making is an inherently social process, in which officials from organizations have to work with leaders, even dictators. For these reasons, it is important to insist on the organization locus of cybernetic approaches to policy making.

It is important not to fall into the trap of thinking that there is some kind of sharp divide between more general and more specific types of policy making. Both involve consideration of sequences of activities from among repertoires of such sequences; both involve a kind of tailoring of the pre-set activities to the specifics of the situation; and both involve a mixture of practicality and creativity. Field officers

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<sup>5</sup> In our book, we discuss several examples of this: one is the development of the Exchange Stabilization Fund, in the Treasury Department, to institutionalize and give greater resources for currency support in client states than had earlier been the case with ad hoc Wall Street bank loans; another is the tasking of the newly-created CIA with covert and paramilitary operations, using former OSS officers who were housed in other agencies or else demobilized at the end of World War II.

responsible for carrying out a policy are faced with problems and unforeseen circumstances every day. Deciding which of their policy instruments and capacities to employ, and with what nuances, takes a very high order of skill, at least as much as those which Cabinet-level officials display in their deliberations. This comes out quite clearly in the memoirs of various diplomats, intelligence operatives, and others who are responsible for day-to-day policy making; they should not be thought of as clerks.<sup>6</sup> Put differently, we can rewrite the famous “turtles all the way down” metaphor about ontology to say that there are sequences all the way up – and creativity all the way down.

### **3. A Test Case: Foreign Policy Disasters and Tactical Learning**

We saw above that the phenomenon of foreign policy continuity, at least for the United States, is usefully understood as a two level process, in which the failure of a particular policy instrument to solve a given problem for a client is followed by new efforts to solve that problem, at least until such time as the problem either is eliminated or the client is lost; and in which the process of acquiring new client states goes on. Both of these processes can be accounted for by various cybernetic explanations (see our monograph for a detailed discussion).

Why do policy failures lead to continued efforts at solving a particular problem? The standard answer to this question highlights psychological processes of selective perceptions, cognitive rigidity, and other pathologies that prevent leaders from fundamentally rethinking the situation (see Levy, 1994; Tetlock, 1991; Jervis, 1976). This may be true, but it misses the heavy reliance of leaders on available organizational instruments. For example, in the early days of the CIA, its eventual

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the memoirs of Kermit Roosevelt (1979) and William Sullivan (1984).



paramilitary wing, then known as the Office of Policy Coordination (OPC) was running exile raid operations (often inherited from the British) in Albania, Ukraine, and some of the Baltic republics. These were uniformly dismal failures, with exiles being betrayed (including by Kim Philby) and parachuting to their deaths in the field or in show trials. These failures were understood in Washington and, after a while, even expected; but the operations continued, in part because there were no other instruments available and in part because of concern over what would later come to be known as disposal problems (i.e., what to do with zealous exiles who felt that they had been let down). Instead, the operations were adjusted somewhat to alter certain of their tactical characteristics. A similar process took place a decade later, with exile raids being led into Tibet; and then, a few years later, once more, this time with Cuban exile raids after the Bay of Pigs. Thus, tactical learning, to adapt one of Tetlock's phrases, can better be explained organizationally than psychologically. Numerous other examples can also be cited, up to and including the current U.S. surge campaign in Iraq.<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, the second level of continuity is usually glossed (when it is addressed at all) as an aspect of U.S. expansion, explicable by some of the long-term factors with which we began this paper. Over and above the generic problems we listed with such types of explanations, those approaches run into another difficulty: the enormous heterogeneity of clients in terms of regime type, prior political allegiances, and regional security factors. In our monograph, we were able without any difficulty to adduce at least five different contexts of client acquisition, and this was only after fairly extensive classification efforts. The striking thing about those

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<sup>7</sup> A short note on nomenclature. Tetlock's distinction between tactical and other sorts of learning ought not to be interpreted as a distinction between concrete and abstract learning. In Deweyan, pragmatic terms, learning is always directed in some direction for some purpose (Dewey, 1916).

contexts is that, although they differ radically from each other, the general policy instrument chosen, i.e., client acquisition, was the same. In other words, we have a situation with multiple ends and a single means. Cybernetically, this makes sense, particularly if the generic instrument of client acquisition is instantiated by a series of more specific policy instruments (e.g., a customs receivership in the Dominican Republic, a military aid program in Greece, PL 480 aid in Ghana). Client status is the most immediately available means.

Nonetheless, even if cybernetic approaches do a good job of accounting for both levels of foreign policy continuity, it may be thought that since there are psychological and long-term factor explanations for these same phenomena, they should be improved upon rather than discarded. We therefore propose a kind of test case that combines the two levels: how to respond to the loss of a client. This is a kind of disaster for U.S. policy makers, even if in the grand scheme of things it is small potatoes as compared with the prospects of being bombed, say, or being occupied militarily. Approaches based on long-term goals do not usually address these kinds of situations, except insofar as they would presume that short-term disasters would not have any effect on policy making. In fact, there is considerable evidence to the contrary and strong indications that disasters trigger “agonizing reappraisals.” Conversely, psychological approaches suggest that such disasters are the one time when officials might rethink their assumptions.<sup>8</sup> From our perspective, though, such predictions are likely to be incorrect. If policy making is a matter of choosing among available instruments, then for a disaster to trigger a reluctance to take on new clients, or even to keep helping existing ones, the repertoires of available policy instruments would have to include at least one sequence of getting rid of existing clients or

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<sup>8</sup> See Tetlock (1991: 29-30). Just why this should be the case, though, is not clear as Tetlock provides no reason except the vague notions that enough is enough, or that eventually older officials will retire.

eschewing new ones. To the best of our knowledge, no such sequences exist. At most, the U.S. has some experience in aiding or triggering a transfer of power from a supposedly incompetent leader to a more satisfactory one (e.g., its backing for a coup against Diem in South Vietnam), but this is a far cry from a policy of cut-and-run, to use the standard label with which such policies are derided. (And keep in mind that we are referring to how the loss of one client might lead to cut-and-run in another one.) As for acquiring new clients, although the U.S. does not always accept every would-be client (notoriously, it took a number of years for the U.S. to accept Jordan, in spite of Hussein's please), close analysis of disasters shows that they are not followed by a general policy of refusing new clients. This can be seen clearly in some of the more classic cases.

In 1949, the U.S. "lost" China to the communists. This triggered a massive wave of political recriminations in Washington, but instead of leading to other clients being cut loose or new clients being refused, the former (e.g., South Korea) were embraced even more strongly and new clients (Thailand and Taiwan) were welcomed on board. After 1959, with the loss of Cuba and the enormous political disaster two years later of the Bay of Pigs, Kennedy not only redoubled efforts to overthrow Castro but took on new clients nearby: Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. After the disappearance of three client regimes in Indochina, the U.S. took on new clients in Southeast Asia (Malaysia and Singapore). Finally, after the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, the U.S. not only carried out a proxy war to overthrow its new enemies there, but reinforced its efforts to hold on to El Salvador and, for good measure, added seven new clients in the region. This is hardly indicative of a rethinking of foreign policy; it is instead the very picture of what we mean by policy continuity.

Cybernetically, such a response makes perfect sense. If a given client is lost because of failure to solve a problem, then the immediate task would seem to be to adjust policy instruments so that the next time they are used, the chances of success are assessed as greater. A classic case in point is the way in which another disaster (this one having to do with the so-called Iran-contra affair, an effort at dealing with the repercussions of the loss of two clients) was dealt with:

The Bush Administration's reliance on clandestine operations that have not been reported to Congress and its dealings with intermediaries with questionable agendas have recalled, for some in Washington, an earlier chapter in history. Two decades ago, the Reagan Administration attempted to fund the Nicaraguan contras illegally, with the help of secret arms sales to Iran. Saudi money was involved in what became known as the Iran-Contra scandal, and a few of the players back then—notably Prince Bandar and Elliott Abrams—are involved in today's dealings.

Iran-Contra was the subject of an informal “lessons learned” discussion two years ago among veterans of the scandal. Abrams led the discussion. One conclusion was that even though the program was eventually exposed, it had been possible to execute it without telling Congress. As to what the experience taught them, in terms of future covert operations, the participants found: “One, you can't trust our friends. Two, the C.I.A. has got to be totally out of it. Three, you can't trust the uniformed military, and four, it's got to be run out of the Vice-President's office”—a reference to Cheney's role, the former senior intelligence official said.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Hersh (2007).

Notice that not only is the learning in the above example purely tactical – how better to carry out similar operations next time – but that the person leading the consideration of alternatives was one of the principal officials involved in the disaster. One presumes that the range of policy instruments considered was narrow.

In short, neither type of standard approach is of much help when it comes to the tactical learning characteristic of disasters connected with the loss of a client state. Indeed, to the extent that standard approaches even address the issue, they give erroneous predictions. By contrast, cybernetic approaches give far more accurate accounts of what happens.

We conclude with an interesting implication. On our account, the United States will continue to pursue the same type of foreign policy even after disasters take place. If this is so, then what are the chances of the U.S. ever changing its policy in a fundamental way? It is worth recalling that prior to the 1890s, the U.S. did not have a client state policy, so that for all the historical roots of that policy (e.g., policy toward Native Americans and Hispanics), there was a genuine shift of policy at least once over the course of U.S. history. The question is what might trigger an analogous shift in the future. On our account, losses or disasters would not; quite the contrary. Even extremely expensive (financially and diplomatically) disasters, such as is currently taking place in Iraq, are unlikely to induce policy makers to order the bureaucracy to come up with entirely new, non-client-based, policy instruments. Any fundamental changes that may occur are not likely to be the result of learning by U.S. officials; rather, they might involve shifts in the internal politics of U.S. clients.

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