Bad World: The Negativity Bias and International Politics

Dominic Johnson and Dominic Tierney

Abstract

Political scientists have often highlighted the role of positive biases such as overconfidence as an important dynamic in international relations and a cause of war. However, psychologists have recently stressed that people display a range of negative biases as well, which may be even more pervasive and powerful. Across a wide variety of psychological domains, a consistent pattern emerges in which “bad is stronger than good.” Compared to positive information and events, negative information and events cause greater physiological, cognitive, and emotional reactions, are processed more thoroughly, and produce memories that last longer—a collection of phenomena that converge to paint the world in a bad light. We show how the “negativity bias” provides a unifying explanatory framework to explain disparate and puzzling phenomena in international relations, including threat inflation, the security dilemma, gambling in the face of loss, and the tendency for leaders to learn from failures rather than successes. We also show that the negativity bias compliments, rather than contradicts, the literature on overconfidence: optimism and pessimism occur in different and predictable contexts, generating a range of novel predictions for international relations.

Just as courage imperils life, fear protects it.

—Leonardo da Vinci

I hate to lose more than I love to win.

—Jimmy Connors

The evil that men do lives after them;
the good is oft interr’d with their bones.

— Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

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In the early years of the twentieth century, Germany was the greatest power in Europe. It had a dynamic and growing economy, and was protected by the strongest army and the second most powerful navy on Earth. Nevertheless, Berlin was terrified by the prospect of being encircled by enemies. In 1912, Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg wondered whether it was worth planting new trees on his estate given that “the Russians would be here in a few years in any case.”

Despite Germany’s power, as Jonathan Steinberg put it: “here were her leaders, nervously expecting Sir John Fisher [and the British Fleet] at any moment, or the hordes of invading Slavs. The normal techniques of historical analysis must grind to a halt before this German weltpolitische Angst.”

German paranoia before World War I, and Berlin’s proclivity to dwell on every negative sign while ignoring positive developments, illustrates a more general tendency in international relations where “bad is stronger than good.” Here, “good” refers to information, events, beliefs or feelings with the potential to cause desirable or positive outcomes. “Bad” refers to factors with the potential to cause undesirable or negative outcomes. States experience numerous events that are good (acquiring wealth, achieving military victories, or gaining allies) and numerous events that are bad (losing resources, suffering military defeats, or gaining enemies). Despite the occurrence of both good and bad events, however, states tend to fixate on bad information. They focus on threats, are averse to losses, and draw lessons from failures more than successes.

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These puzzling behaviors can be explained by what psychologists call the “negativity bias.” Humans display a range of psychological dispositions that converge to make their thoughts, goals, and recall systematically primed to attend to bad events more than good ones. Negative events cause greater physiological, cognitive, and emotional reactions, are processed more thoroughly, and produce memories that last longer, compared to good information. In a landmark review of the literature, Baumeister and colleagues described the negativity bias as “one of the most basic and far-reaching psychological principles.”

Despite its significance, the “negativity bias” has received little or no attention in political science. One component of the negativity bias—loss aversion—is well known as part of prospect theory, but scholars in political science may be unaware that this is just one component of a much broader phenomenon.

The negativity bias has several important implications for international relations theory and practice. First, the negativity bias offers a coherent way to organize multiple psychological factors. There is a considerable literature on the role of psychological dispositions in international relations, such as emotions, reputations, and numerous biases in judgment and decision-making. The negativity bias combines a number of apparently disparate psychological phenomena into a single “meta-bias”—a fundamental disposition that offers significant explanatory power and applies over a wide range of conditions.

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5 Ibid., p. 357.
Second, the negativity bias has important consequences for international relations theory. The bias supports features of realist theory, explaining why states fear each other and fail to cooperate, and why the security dilemma is so pervasive. The independent variable—psychological bias—deviates, however, from the traditional realist focus on the international system. The negativity bias also suggests limits on the explanatory power of constructivism. If leaders are predisposed to focus on threats more than opportunities, fight harder to prevent losses than to make gains, and draw analogies with failure rather than success, then the potential for constructing state relations is bounded in predictable ways.

Third, the implications for policy-makers are also considerable. The negativity bias can encourage threat inflation, risky gambles in the face of loss, and skewed learning from history. Although one can counsel a leader to be self-aware, it is difficult for an individual to ward off the effects of psychological biases, especially meta-biases such as the negativity bias that are supported by numerous reinforcing mechanisms. Instead, policy-makers must create decision-making routines that are specifically designed to avoid falling prey to the negativity bias.

Fourth, the negativity bias co-exists with biases towards positivity. People tend to be overconfident about their abilities, their control over events, and their future life chances. This apparent contradiction can be explained by the fact that each bias applies to different domains. People are drawn toward negative information about the external environment and other actors, but they are drawn to positive information about themselves. This combination of biases may explain a significant paradox in international relations: the fear that underlies the security dilemma in peacetime, and the prevalence of
overconfidence on the eve of war. Decision-makers overstate the number and severity of threats they face, while simultaneously exhibiting overconfidence about their capacity to deal with those threats—a potential recipe for disaster.

The paper is divided into six sections. The first section introduces puzzling behaviors in international relations where bad is stronger than good. The second section shows how these behaviors can be explained by the negativity bias. The third section explores the negativity bias with a case study of the Vietnam War. The fourth section explains the relationship between the negativity bias and the positivity bias. The fifth and concluding section considers the implications for major theoretical paradigms in international relations, and for policymakers.

PUZZLES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Many scholars have noted puzzling phenomena in international relations where negative information exerts a more powerful influence than positive information—or in other words, where bad is stronger than good. This behavior is evident at three distinct chronological stages of interactions between states (Figure 1): (1) threat sensitivity, where leaders show greater receptiveness to, and processing of, threatening information that appears on the “radar”; (2) loss aversion, where leaders tend to gamble when facing potential or actual losses; and (3) failure salience, where leaders and publics learn from past disasters more than triumphs.\(^8\) Below, we explain each of these stages in turn.

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\(^8\) In terms of our chronology, loss aversion can occur at two slightly different time points: (1) when a decision-maker is weighing up options that involve potential losses contingent on the decision (e.g. should I accept a continuing loss of status or fight a war to try and restore it?); or (2) when a decision-maker has
Figure 1. Bad is stronger than good at three chronological stages of interaction among states: assessing threats (prior to the event), anticipating or experiencing loss (prior to and during the event) and reflecting on failure (after the event).

Threat Sensitivity

In international relations, leaders tend to be extremely sensitive to threats. Stephen Van Evera described threat inflation as “a pervasive feature of international politics and an important cause of international conflict. States have a chronic tendency to exaggerate the aggressiveness and offensive capabilities of other states.”\(^9\) There are innumerable examples of threat inflation, from misplaced British fears in the 1750s that France was about to invade North America, to German paranoia about “encirclement” before World War I, from exaggerated beliefs about Soviet ICBM strength in the early 1960s (the supposed “missile gap”), to overestimates of Iraq’s WMD strength before 2003.\(^{10}\)

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Information on threats as opposed to opportunities is often received and processed in an asymmetric manner. Whereas states fixate on signs of danger, Deborah Larson found that information suggesting that an enemy is behaving favorably tends to be “ignored, overlooked, or dismissed as propaganda.” Even when leaders assess similar states in the same period, negative information seems to have the upper hand. During the 1970s, for example, Robert Jervis noted that the United States paid more attention to negative data suggesting a potential loss of influence in Ethiopia than to positive data suggesting a gain of influence in Somalia. The same asymmetry is evident in domestic politics. In an analysis of U.S. public opinion during the Cold War, Miroslav Nincic found that: “the penalties facing the leader found guilty of mistakenly underreacting to a Soviet threat are far more severe than those inflicted on one whose error consists of wrongly overreacting to that threat.”

Policy-makers and scholars recognize that the intentions of other states can change, but they focus far more on the danger of a shift from benign to malign intent, rather than vice versa. Larson found that there were multiple occasions during the Cold War when mutual mistrust prevented an alleviation of the conflict despite the interest of both sides in cooperating. “A state widely regarded as unreliable, such as the former

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Soviet Union, will have to carry out many cooperative acts to convince the other side that it can be trusted to honor an agreement. Whereas trust takes a long time to create, it can be destroyed in an instant. 15 Many in the West were slow to trust Mikhail Gorbachev and reciprocate Soviet approaches in the 1980s due to the belief that Moscow would quickly revert to the expected aggressive and intransigent behavior. 16

The tendency to prioritize threats in international relations is also part of the foundational concept of the security dilemma. Defensive actions intended to enhance security such as military spending can inspire fear and distrust, producing arms races and war—even among states with compatible interests. 17 Leaders appear to be inclined to assess their rival’s behavior in the worst possible light: as a demonstration of predatory motives. It is therefore difficult to avoid the security dilemma through policies of restraint or reassurance. The Soviet reduction in conventional forces in the 1950s and 1960s, for example, did not lead to a substantial reappraisal of Soviet motives in the United States. 18

The greater sensitivity to negative information is also evident in other domains of international relations. In one study on public attitudes toward trade, Michael Hiscox found that giving subjects negative information (the possibility of job losses) reduced

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15 Larson, Anatomy of Mistrust, p. 33.
16 Ibid.
support for trade expansion by 17 percent, but giving subjects positive information (the possibility of lower prices) did not increase support for trade expansion.19

Johan Swinnen found similar results with information on global food prices. Alterations in food prices produce both winners and losers: high prices advantage poor rural farmers, and disadvantage poor urban workers, whereas the reverse occurs with low prices. But the reporting of price movements tends to accentuate the negative. When prices are high, media coverage focuses on the urban poor; when prices fall, coverage focuses on the rural poor. The bad news is always more salient.20

Negative framing can also have a greater impact than positive framing on public attitudes toward international issues. During the Israeli-Palestinian peace process from 1995 to 2003, one study found that the “media presentation of peace and security conditions as deteriorating has a significant negative influence on the public’s expectations...[but]...a presentation of an improving situation has an insignificant effect.”21 This was a problem because the media fixated on negative events like “conflict, threats and danger,” and thus acted as “peace spoilers.”

**Loss Aversion**

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21 Sheafer and Dvir-Gvirsman, "The Spoiler Effect: Framing Attitudes and Expectations toward Peace," p. 211.
A second puzzling phenomenon in international relations also reveals the primacy of bad over good: loss aversion. Whereas threat sensitivity focuses on dangers emerging on an individual or a state’s “radar,” loss aversion concerns human responses to the prospect or experience of negative events, and tends to occur chronologically later in time. When states envisage or encounter a gain they are relatively cautious, but when they foresee or experience a loss they adopt risk-seeking behavior. According to Jonathan Mercer, loss aversion “suggests that fear of loss and not hope of gain causes most wars, that threats against a state in the domain of loss may backfire, that we should anticipate lower than optimal levels of trade (because people overvalue goods in their possession), and that radical economic plans aim to avoid losses rather than to secure equivalent gains.”

Leaders expend more effort to prevent or overturn a loss than to make a comparable gain. For example, during the Iranian Hostage Crisis, the Jimmy Carter administration faced a certain loss of reputation and domestic support if it did nothing, and instead chose the risky gamble of a rescue mission, which went disastrously wrong. More generally, Jeffrey Taliaferro has argued that great powers are averse to accepting even relatively minor losses in wartime, and instead gamble by persevering in conflicts. Mark Haas also explained U.S. and Soviet behavior during the Cuban Missile Crisis as a

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24 McDermott, Risk-Taking in International Politics.

product of risk-acceptance in the domain of losses. Meanwhile, Miroslav Nincic found that public and congressional support for the use of force tends to be higher when the operation is designed to prevent a loss rather than produce a new gain.

**Failure Salience**

The greater strength of bad over good is also apparent in how leaders and publics remember and learn from history. Here, learning refers to “a change of beliefs, the degree of confidence in one’s beliefs, or skills as a result of the observation and interpretation of experience.” One of the major ways that leaders learn from the past is by drawing historical analogies, or “an inference that if two or more events separated in time agree in one respect, then they may also agree in another.” Analogies are a form of data retrieval that provides guidance for policy-making, by clarifying the strategic and moral stakes in a crisis, and the likely success of different strategies.

History, of course, is replete with potential parallels, so which analogies stand out for leaders? Decision-makers are more likely to draw analogies with past debacles rather than triumphs—an asymmetry that we call failure salience. Analogies can either be positive (referring to previous successes as models to repeat) or negative (referring to previous failures as warnings to avoid). Leaders tend to highlight warnings from history rather than models to emulate. Especially powerful are failures that were unexpected at

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the time, although as Levy notes, even “predictable failures are still more likely to lead to learning than are successes.”

Ernest May, in his classic work on analogical thinking, “Lessons” of the Past, does not distinguish between positive and negative analogies. According to the authors’ tally, however, May provides 105 instances of decision-makers drawing historical parallels. In 87 cases (or 83 percent), decision-makers referred to past failures as warnings to avoid, while in just 18 cases (or 17 percent), they referred to past successes as models to emulate. This suggests that negative analogies are either more common or deemed more important—at least in May’s sample.

Michael Roskin divided recent U.S. history into a series of eras, where foreign policy was defined by the memory of a particular historical event: the isolationist “Versailles paradigm” of the 1920s and 1930; the interventionist “Pearl Harbor paradigm,” of the early Cold War; and the non-interventionist “Vietnam paradigm” of the 1970s. All of these paradigms are based on negative analogies, or perceived policy failures. Interestingly, people did not tend to look back to previous successes. The non-interventionists of the interwar period and the 1970s, for example, did not celebrate other eras of American restraint. Instead, they criticized the debacles of World War I and Vietnam.

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31 May, E.R., Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. ix-121. States have also been found to be more likely to change alliance status if they perceived previous alliance decisions to have been bad rather than good. See Reiter, D., Crucible of Beliefs: Learning, Alliances, and World Wars (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).
Yuen Foong Khong began his book on historical analogies by offering a sample of important historical parallels employed by statesmen—and every one is negative. Officials sought to avoid a repeat of the War of 1812, World War I, Munich, Pearl Harbor, revolutionary Cuba, the *Pueblo* Crisis, Vietnam, and the Cultural Revolution, respectively.\footnote{Khong, *Analogies at War*, p. 3-6.}

Scholarship on moral analogies, or parallels drawn with the ethics, rather than the success, of a past action, also finds that leaders usually refer to previous negative actions. For example, a major reason why the United States rejected a surprise air strike on the Cuban missile sites in 1962 was the desire to avoid a “sneak attack” that would be morally analogous to the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor.\footnote{This phenomenon is consistent with the finding in psychology that when judging morality, immoral acts are more profound, more diagnostic, and carry more weight. We can all agree that negative behavior in international relations is wrong, but there is little consensus about positive moral behavior. Failing to intervene to stop genocide is more clearly wrong than any particular intervention to stop genocide is clearly right. Once we examine specific “moral” actions in international affairs, the normative clarity starts to blur, and we tend to question the motives of the actors involved. See Tierney, D., “‘Pearl Harbor in Reverse’: Moral Analogies in the Cuban Missile Crisis,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (2007), pp. 49-77, p. 60.}

The tendency to draw lessons from failures rather than successes is especially important because it suggests that analogical thinking tends to eliminate policy options from the menu, rather than adding new ones. Leaders draw parallels with historical disasters, which serves to remove similar choices from consideration.\footnote{Ibid., p. 60.}

**Explaining the Primacy of Bad Over Good**

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Overall there is strong evidence from international relations that bad is stronger than good. When leaders survey the world, negative information appears to loom large, promoting the inflation of threats, an aversion to losses, and the salience of past failures. But how do we explain it?

One possibility is that this behavior fits perfectly well within the framework of rational choice, in which actors calculate the probabilities and the associated costs and benefits of each option, and then select the policy that is expected to produce the highest utility.\(^\text{36}\)

Threat sensitivity may be consistent with rational actor assumptions for at least three reasons. First, threat sensitivity could be an effective strategy to maximize utility in a dangerous world. Realists argue that mistrust reflects the behavior of rational states with competing interests in an anarchic self-help system.\(^\text{37}\) If the costs of missing or ignoring threats outweigh the costs of inflating them, it can be rational to overweight negative information. States might waste resources in preparing for dangers that never materialize, but this may be a small price to pay compared to the cost of attack by a rival that is wrongly assumed to be benign.

But Larson and others have argued, however, that rational choice is not a good explanation of threat inflation because the sensitivity to danger appears to systematically undermine state interests.\(^\text{38}\) Francis Gavin, for example, described a dangerous tendency toward “nuclear alarmism” which exaggerated the danger of nuclear proliferation. “By

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\(^\text{38}\) Van Evera, "Foreword" in *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear*; Larson, *Anatomy of Mistrust*. 
overreacting to current dangers while mischaracterizing those of the past, however, nuclear alarmists drive misguided policies that could threaten international stability and U.S. interests today and in the future.\textsuperscript{39} Furthermore, the rational explanation for threat sensitivity has a high burden of evidence because it requires that actors consciously decide to inflate threats as the optimum strategy in anarchy. In the archival record, therefore, we would need to find that decision-makers chose to prioritize good over bad as a deliberate strategy.

A second rationalist explanation for threat sensitivity holds that if good events in international relations are more frequent than bad events, leaders may reasonably focus on negative events because they are exceptions to the rule. States may expect other countries to display neutral or moderately positive behavior most of the time, so threatening behavior grabs attention because it represents the greatest deviation from this reference point.\textsuperscript{40} However, the puzzle is not just that people are more likely to notice bad events, but in addition, that those bad events are weighted more heavily in assessments than good events.

A third rational explanation is that negative events in international relations may be more diagnostic, or more revealing about the true nature of another actor than good events. To maintain trust one needs to be good all the time, while mistrust can result from a combination of good and bad behavior. Therefore, bad actions may be more instructive than good actions in avoiding exploitation.\textsuperscript{41} The problem with this explanation is that it


\textsuperscript{41} Interestingly, in cases where extreme positive behavior is more diagnostic like intelligence (anyone can act dumbly, only an intelligent person can display high intelligence), subjects tend to weight positive behavior
begs the question of why there is an asymmetry in reputational assessment in the first place. Why do good reputations require consistent positive behavior but bad reputations do not require consistent negative behavior?

It is even more difficult to provide a rationalist explanation for loss aversion and failure salience. If states are trying to maximize utility, why gamble in the face of loss? Taliaferro argued that great powers persevere in failing conflicts far longer than a rational cost-benefit analysis would predict. And if states are trying to maximize utility by learning from history, they ought to evaluate both successes and failures. Instead, officials learn from a skewed sample of potential analogies overwhelmingly focused on failure.

In all three cases, rational choice and accurate assessments would seem to be more effective at maximizing utility than threat inflation, loss aversion, and failure salience. Without a satisfactory rational explanation, therefore, what other factors may explain these puzzles?

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Taliaferro, Balancing Risks.

May, Lessons of the Past.

Alternative variables may explain specific instances where bad is stronger than good. Leaders may, for example, highlight threats for domestic political gain. But such factors are not a parsimonious explanation for the primacy of bad over good in widely varying domains. In addition, if leaders highlight threats to win domestic support, this begs the question: why is the public attentive to this argument? Larson, Anatomy of Mistrust, p.15.
THE NEGATIVITY BIAS

The primacy of bad over good in international relations can be explained by what psychologists call the “negativity bias.” Although the psychology literature often appears to have an example of every conceivable bias, a striking pattern stands out. There is a general negativity bias in the way human brains works, where negative factors have greater effects than positive factors in cognition, motivation, emotion, information processing, decision-making, learning, and memory. Crucially, this is not a conscious strategy that humans select to maximize utility in today’s environment. Instead, it appears to be a fundamental predisposition rooted in the evolution of human cognition.

In 2001, renowned psychologist Roy Baumeister and colleagues published a landmark study of the negativity bias. Following their review of a vast range of psychological literature, the authors found the primacy of bad over good to be so systematic and pervasive that it represents a “general principle or law of psychological phenomena.”45 Despite their efforts to identify contrary instances where good might be stronger than bad, there were “hardly any exceptions … [and psychologists] may have overlooked the extent of [the rule’s] generality.”46 A second major review by psychologists Paul Rozin and Edward Royzman reached a similar conclusion, finding a profound negativity bias in human cognition. When bad and good co-exist, bad usually

45 Baumeister et al., "Bad Is Stronger Than Good," p. 323.
46 Ibid., pp. 323, 324.
dominates human perceptions—“a very general principle” that “holds across a wide range of domains.”

Identifying a negativity bias in human psychology is not straightforward because it is difficult to show that good and bad events are objectively equal. However, the experimental studies reviewed by Baumeister et al. and Rozin and Royzman have confirmed and replicated the phenomenon in carefully controlled laboratory conditions, where positive and negative stimuli can be manipulated to be identical in magnitude (e.g. monetary reward and loss) and other factors ruled out. Furthermore, these experiments show that when there is a mix of stimuli, the outcome is more negative than the sum of the parts would logically predict.

Most significantly for us, the negativity bias offers a parsimonious explanation for all of the puzzles identified above in international relations. In the following sections we draw on the considerable body of scholarship on the negativity bias in psychology to explain threat sensitivity, loss aversion, and failure salience.

Explaining Threat Sensitivity

Why do leaders tend to inflate threats? The negativity bias provides an explanation. Psychological studies suggest that there is a fundamental human tendency to search for negative information and fixate on potential threats with a kind of “tunnel vision.”

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48 Rozin and Royzman, "Negativity Bias, Negativity Dominance, and Contagion."

Information about threats looms larger than information about opportunities.\textsuperscript{50} In one study, for example, subjects located a lone angry face in a grid of happy faces more quickly than they located a lone happy face in a grid of angry faces. In other words, people are drawn to faces that signal potential danger.\textsuperscript{51} Later research by Öhman et al. revealed that the bias was apparent with threatening faces but not with other kinds of negative faces, such as sad faces, suggesting that the brain has a specific sensitivity to threat.\textsuperscript{52} Another study found that negative images produce more attention and neural activity than positive images.\textsuperscript{53}

Negative information can have powerful emotional effects that exceed the impact of equivalent positive information. At the extreme, bad events can produce significant emotional trauma and psychological damage, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, or psychosis. Trauma in early life can even alter biological gene expression, with significant alterations in behavioral dispositions.\textsuperscript{54} Similar positive events do not usually generate equivalent psychological extremes in the other direction. Baumeister and colleagues noted the “lack of a positive counterpart to trauma.”\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{53} Smith et al., "May I Have Your Attention, Please: Electrocortical Responses to Positive and Negative Stimuli." The brain’s differentiation of negative and positive images occurs extremely quickly—within 100 milliseconds.
\textsuperscript{55} Baumeister et al., "Bad Is Stronger Than Good," p. 355.
Negative data can also dominate positive data in assessments of other actors. The study of impression formation in psychology has identified a “positive-negative asymmetry effect,” where bad information about someone is weighted more heavily than good information. For example, in a series of experimental studies, subjects gave negative traits like “heartless,” and positive traits like “sincere,” scores on a scale. But when subjects offered an overall judgment of someone with both positive and negative traits (e.g., heartless and sincere) the final score was more negative than the combination would logically suggest. Another study found that negative information influences impressions of political candidates more than positive information. In other words, perceived character weaknesses were more important than perceived character strengths in shaping evaluations.

Actions are also given biased weighting. When someone commits a morally bad action it has a more profound impact on impression formation than a morally good action. Indeed, a disproportionate number of good deeds are required to compensate for a bad deed, and evil acts can prove unforgivable. When subjects were asked how many lives a murderer would need to save—on separate occasions, always putting his own life at risk—to be forgiven for his crime, the median answer was 25. In a similar vein, relationships are damaged more profoundly by bad behavior than they are healed by good

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behavior. Accordingly, the key to successful relationships can be to decrease negative behaviors, rather than increase positive behaviors.\(^5^9\)

One result of the sensitivity to negative information is that bad reputations are hard to lose and easy to gain, while good reputations are hard to acquire but easy to lose.\(^6^0\) Similarly, familiarity can lead to attraction, but it also breeds contempt. Living close to someone increases the odds of becoming friends, but it even more strongly increases the odds of becoming enemies. Proximity offers opportunities for people to display and observe negative behaviors, which are then overweighted in evaluations.\(^6^1\)

Laboratory experiments show that bad behavior (cheating) quickly establishes negative reputations that are remembered by others who withhold cooperation as a result.\(^6^2\) In fact, a central finding of psychology is the powerful “cheater-detection mechanism” that humans show across contexts and cultures. It appears that we are primed to identify people who may exploit us. People are able to solve cognitively challenging problems more effectively when abstract information is replaced with information about cheats.\(^6^3\) Other experiments show that, in public goods games, it is


easier to achieve cooperation by punishing cheats (i.e. promising negative consequences) than by rewarding those who play fairly (i.e. promising positive consequences).  

Explaining Loss Aversion

Why do leaders tend to gamble when they experience loss? Again, the explanation appears to stem from the negativity bias. Losses feel worse than foregone gains precisely because negative information looms larger and is processed more thoroughly. As Smith et al. write: “negative stimuli are often evaluated more extremely than normatively equally extreme positive stimuli.”

People’s brains react differently to losses than to gains, in ways that deviate from rational choice and expected utility theory. In a famous series of experiments, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky experimentally manipulated subjects to be in a “domain of gains” (choosing among alternative gains) or a “domain of losses” (choosing among alternative losses), and discovered that this frame has a dramatic effect on preferences. In the domain of gains, people are generally cautious and risk averse. By contrast, in the domain of losses people become risk acceptant and are willing to gamble rather than consent to even small losses. Put simply, losses hurt more than gains feel good.

The related “endowment effect” describes the finding that people demand more money to give up something they already own (a loss) than they will pay to receive an

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65 Smith et al., "May I Have Your Attention, Please: Electro cortical Responses to Positive and Negative Stimuli," p. 171.
66 Kahneman and Tversky, "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decisions under Risk.", McDermott, Risk-Taking in International Politics: Prospect Theory in American Foreign Policy.
identical item (a gain). For example, as soon as subjects received a coffee mug in experiments, the perceived value of the mug increased, and subjects became reluctant to sell it, even for more money than it was worth.\textsuperscript{67}

Another associated effect is the tendency to focus on “sunk costs,” or outlays that have already been incurred and cannot be recovered. Rather than basing a decision on future gains and losses associated with available options, people often seek to regain or rationalize past losses through redoubled commitment. In the “dollar auction” game, for example, people make bids to win a dollar, and once made, these bids are forfeited. As participants start to outbid each other, they tend to focus on how much money they have already lost, which traps them into further losses. The result is that subjects often keep bidding until almost all their resources are gone, with the winning bid usually far exceeding the one-dollar prize (behavioral economists make a tidy profit playing this game with students around the world).\textsuperscript{68}

Explaining Failure Salience

Why do leaders tend to draw analogies with past disasters rather than triumphs? The negativity bias in psychology provides an answer. Baumeister et al. wrote that: “bad


things will produce larger, more consistent, more multifaceted, or more lasting effects than good things.”

Studies show that bad events are recalled more easily than good events, are processed more thoroughly, produce more extensive causal reasoning, and tend to become the basis for learning and reflection. We fast track failures into memory storage, and then quickly reactivate these memories when an analogous episode occurs. Psychologists have described so-called “flashbulb memories,” in which particularly dramatic (often traumatic) events are “burned” into memory and more easily recalled thereafter.

We remember failures more readily than successes. In one study where subjects were asked to recall important emotional events, negative events were reported over positive events by a margin of around four-to-one. The impact of bad events can also linger much longer. People tend to adapt more slowly to deal with bad episodes like accidents than to positive occurrences like winning a lottery. When people are asked to keep diaries of their day-to-day life, research finds that bad events are more likely than good events to carry over and influence the following day’s mood. In experimental

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69 Baumeister et al., "Bad Is Stronger Than Good," p.325.
games where people either cooperated or cheated, subjects recalled cheats’ faces more accurately.\(^\text{74}\)

Memories of failure are also processed in more thorough and complex ways. Subjects reflect more carefully on the causes of negative events, which prompt more cognitive work and “why” questions.\(^\text{75}\) For example, after betting on sporting events, subjects spent more time analyzing failed rather than successful bets.\(^\text{76}\) Or, as David Hume put it in 1757: “Prosperity is easily received as our due, and few questions are asked concerning its cause or author...On the other hand, every disastrous accident alarms us, and sets us on enquiries concerning the principles whence it arose.”\(^\text{77}\)

**Why Do We Have a Negativity Bias?**

Why do people display the negativity bias? Psychologists have argued that the pervasiveness of the negativity bias across a wide range of domains suggests that it is rooted in human evolution. If the three phenomena discussed above—threat sensitivity, loss aversion, and failure salience—lent advantages that increased survival and reproduction in our ancestral environment, then they may have been favored by natural selection over time.

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\(^{76}\) Gilovich, "Biased Evaluation and Persistence in Gambling."

\(^{77}\) Hume, D., *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion and Other Writings (Edited by Dorothy Coleman)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 129.
Threat sensitivity, including the prioritization of dangers over opportunities, may have been advantageous in the Pleistocene environment in which we evolved because the cost of missed opportunities was regret, whereas the cost of ignoring threats was possible death.\(^7\) The key to survival was to avoid even a single negative experience with a predator, a pathogen, or dangerous terrain. To steer the organism away from danger, mammals evolved a dedicated fear-learning center in the amygdala, which is subconsciously activated by stimuli in the environment.\(^7\) Many animals display a threat sensitivity bias in the form of species-specific defense mechanisms that aid survival, such as a mouse’s instinct to run from large creatures (or any random noise or shadow) in its environment.\(^7\)

There may also be a specific evolutionary explanation for loss aversion. McDermott et al. argue that in our ancestral environment, the optimum strategy during periods of abundance was caution and risk-aversion. But during periods of scarcity, when survival was in the balance, the best strategy was to take more chances in the search for resources.\(^7\) Another example comes from territorial behavior. Across the animal kingdom, owners of territories tend to win fights against intruders even if they are

\(^7\) Baumeister et al., "Bad Is Stronger Than Good," pp. 357-360.


smaller. This may reflect a greater willingness to fight to avoid the loss of known territory than to gain new but unknown territory.\textsuperscript{82}

Failure salience may also be adaptive. Learning from negative events can help prioritize threats, aiding survival in our ancestral past. This is why, for example, even a single negative interaction with a dog can create a long-term fear or phobia. The same is true among other animals. Rats exposed once to food that is poisoned will never touch it again.

**The Costs and Benefits of the Negativity Bias in International Relations**

The negativity bias may have evolved because threat sensitivity, loss aversion, and failure salience were good strategies for maximizing fitness in the environment in which we evolved. But does the negativity bias have a positive effect in international relations? From one perspective, threat sensitivity may help states to survive in the international system. The attention paid to negative acts, and the overweighting of bad behavior in assessments, could prepare states to deal with predatory rivals, and deter aggressors in the future. The broader effect could be to stabilize the international system. Theoretical and experimental studies suggest that the deterrence, detection, and punishment of cheats is essential for cooperation among humans, and the same dynamics may be necessary for states to cooperate in the anarchical international system.\textsuperscript{83} If all states believed that one good action balanced out one bad action, this might encourage bad behavior.


In other respects, however, threat sensitivity is a profound barrier to cooperation. Baumeister et al. describe the consistent primacy of bad over good as “a disappointingly relentless pattern.”\(^8^4\) In international relations, states focus on negative events and behaviors, see their rivals in the worst possible light, and miss opportunities for collaboration. Threat sensitivity may contribute to the security dilemma, for example, which has been blamed for producing unintended and self-defeating results, including diminishment in security, a waste of resources, and war.\(^8^5\) In the absence of threat sensitivity, states would be less likely to assume that rearmament is automatically indicative of aggressive intentions, and more likely to understand this behavior as the actions of a security-seeking state.

A psychological bias toward loss aversion could also help individual states survive in the international system by encouraging a wary and defensive posture rather than a risky and offensive one. In turn, this dynamic could stabilize the international system by diminishing the degree of aggression.\(^8^6\) Just as the sensitivity to negative information discourages rivals from predatory behavior, so the tendency to gamble in response to loss may improve deterrence. An aggressor may predict that the defender will not yield easily or readily accept a loss. Was Germany’s acquisition of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871 worth the cost of permanently alienating France?

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\(^8^4\) Baumeister et al., "Bad Is Stronger Than Good," p. 362.

\(^8^5\) Jervis, "Cooperation under the Security Dilemma.". There are other psychological dynamics that may exacerbate the security dilemma. Larson highlights the role of (1) pre-existing beliefs shaping the interpretation of information, (2) in-group out-group biases, and (3) the fundamental attribution error and the tendency to see enemy behavior as dispositional. Larson, D.W., "Trust and Missed Opportunities in International Relations," Political Psychology, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1997), pp. 701-734.

But other effects of loss aversion may be less salutary. Once actors find themselves in the domain of loss they become risk acceptant, encouraging reckless decisions such as the rescue mission in the Iranian Hostage Crisis or Japan’s decision to attack the United States in 1941, as well as the escalation of costly military campaigns.\(^87\)

Furthermore, as Mercer noted, overvaluing one’s own goods may produce less than optimal levels of trade because we are reluctant to part with our possessions. In addition, valuing what one gives up more than similar concessions by the opponent may undermine peace negotiations.\(^88\)

The disposition toward failure salience may be a useful bias in countering the problem of policy inertia. People tend to view information in ways that fit existing predispositions, and organizations have vested interests in maintaining the status quo. Sensitivity to the lessons of failure can break through this resistance and facilitate necessary policy change. Here, one bias counteracts another. Sitkin wrote that: “failure is an essential prerequisite for learning,” because it unfreezes hardened attitudes and prompts experimentation.\(^89\)

One study found that major changes in U.S. security policy since 1945 always followed significant failures in intelligence, deterrence, or war fighting.\(^90\)

But failure salience can also produce skewed learning and policy errors. Ernest May argued that leaders typically employ historical analogies badly, failing to “analyze


\(^{88}\) The domain of losses can also, in certain situation, encourage actors to take risks that facilitate cooperation. See Mercer, "Prospect Theory and Political Science," p. 12.

\(^{89}\) Sitkin, "Learning through Failure," p. 232.

the case, test its fitness, or even ask in what ways it might be misleading.”

The bias toward failure salience may be a contributing factor. Leaders do not learn by considering the full range of historical examples. Instead, they prioritize failures, especially those that were unexpected and involved their own country. In assessing a policy of appeasement, for example, actors tend to focus on a single instance of failure from the 1930s—the Munich Crisis. Meanwhile, we are drawn toward our own state’s failures, while downplaying or ignoring lessons from the failures of our opponents. This violates Bismarck’s dictum that a fool learns from his own mistakes, while a wise man learns from the mistakes of others.

In summary, psychologists argue that the negativity bias was adaptive in our evolutionary past, promoting attention to lethal threats, holding on to valuable resources, and remembering sources of danger. But there is no reason to assume that the bias continues to be advantageous in our very different environment today. Table 1 summarizes the potential costs and benefits.

91 May, Lessons of the Past, p. xi. See also Khong, Analogies at War, p. 31.
93 Other effects are not clearly positive or negative. The tendency to learn from failure but not success could explain how reputations are formed in international relations. Officials often worry that compromising with an adversary will undermine the nation’s reputation for resolve. But as Jonathan Mercer has shown, states rarely perceive the adversary as lacking resolve in the current crisis, regardless of its previous behavior. The negativity bias could be part of the explanation. Cases where an adversary backs down tend to be instances of policy success and will therefore feature less prominently in historical memory. By contrast, cases where an adversary displays resolution will tend to be policy failures and will stand out more in historical memory. The greater salience of cases where adversaries display steadfastness encourages an image of the enemy as resolute. This dynamic also explains why, as Mercer noted, states are more willing to give their allies a reputation for irresolution. Instances where allies back down will tend to be cases of policy failure, which loom large, while instances of allied resolution will tend to be successes, which feature less prominently. Therefore we are prone to remember cases where our enemy was strong and our allies were weak. Mercer, J., Reputation and International Politics (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996). See also Hopf, T., Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965-1990 (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Press, D.G., Calculating Credibility: How Leaders Assess Military Threats (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005).
### Table 1. Advantages and disadvantages of the negativity bias in human evolution and in contemporary international relations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component of the Negativity Bias</th>
<th>Advantages in Human Evolution</th>
<th>Advantages in Modern International Relations</th>
<th>Disadvantages in Modern International Relations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threat Sensitivity</td>
<td>• Detect threats to survival</td>
<td>• Detect threats before being exploited</td>
<td>• Causes unnecessary conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Detect cheats before being</td>
<td>• Deter aggressors</td>
<td>• Exacerbates security dilemma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>exploited</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss Aversion</td>
<td>• Maintain territory</td>
<td>• Deter aggressors</td>
<td>• Produces risky gambles in the face of loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Take more risks as resources become scarce</td>
<td>• Diminish expansionism</td>
<td>• Wars are more costly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure Salience</td>
<td>• Prioritize memories of danger</td>
<td>• Avoid repeating errors</td>
<td>• Skewed learning from history</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Facilitate change</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

THE VIETNAM WAR

In this section, we explore the utility of the negativity bias in understanding the causes, course, and consequences of the Vietnam War (that is, the full chronology laid out in Figure 1). The negativity bias predicts two dynamics: (1) that actors displayed threat sensitivity, loss aversion, and failure salience (Hypothesis 1), and (2) that these behaviors resulted from the negativity bias and not rational calculation (Hypothesis 2). As noted before, loss aversion is already familiar to political scientists, and we therefore draw on existing scholarship. We focus instead on threat inflation and failure salience, and show that they were significant phenomena in the Vietnam War, and can be explained by the negativity bias rather than rational choice theory. This method raises several potential challenges.
First, it is not easy to show that bad was stronger than good, and that actors displayed the three behaviors, in a case study. Outside of the laboratory, it is hard to hold the value of positive and negative factors equal. However, we can look for evidence that decision-makers tended to focus on negative information even though both negative and positive information were present.

Second, even if we establish that threat sensitivity, loss aversion, and failure salience were present, we need to show that the negativity bias was the cause. How can we distinguish the negativity bias from a rational explanation in a case study? What would be the observable implications of each rival explanation? If the rationalist explanation holds true, we would expect to see: (1) actors searching for or highlighting negative information as a conscious and deliberate strategy to maximize utility (perhaps even explaining this logic to others), and (2) the primacy of bad over good reflecting the prevailing costs and benefits of the environment (that is, overweighting negative factors tends to lead to success).

If the negativity bias holds true, we would expect to see: (1) the prioritization of bad over good occurring at a sub-conscious level without a mindful choice or even discussion, and (2) the prioritization of good over bad occurring even when this behavior diminishes utility given the environment.

Why is Vietnam a good case to consider? First, making claims about psychological factors requires considerable data about the beliefs of key actors. Due to the release of the Pentagon papers and extensive previous research on Vietnam, this is a case where the relevant data is available.  

Second, Vietnam presents a challenge for our theory because it has formerly been used as a classic example of positive biases.\textsuperscript{95} This may make it harder to find negative biases operating in the opposite direction, making it a tough test. As we argue later, however, both biases can and do co-exist, but they are manifested in different domains.

Third, there are important outstanding puzzles about U.S. behavior in Vietnam that the negativity bias can explain, including why decision-makers were so sensitive to the Communist threat in a state of marginal strategic importance, why they responded to loss with escalation, and why Vietnam has been such a powerful historical analogy for later generations. Several of these dynamics have been noted before, but scholars have not recognized that they all stem from the same underlying psychological explanation. In the following sections, we consider, in turn, threat sensitivity, loss aversion, and failure salience in Vietnam.

Threat Sensitivity in Vietnam

Once Vietnam appeared as a potential threat on the U.S. radar, Washington exhibited classic symptoms of the first stage of the negativity bias: threat sensitivity. Many historians and political scientists agree that the U.S. government assessed information and subsequently inflated threats in ways that deviated significantly from a rational response to the environment.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, two events occurred in parallel in East Asia. First, in a negative development for the United States, South Vietnam was increasingly

imperiled by a Communist insurgency, and was in danger of moving into the Communist orbit. Second, in a positive development for the United States, profound divisions emerged between Communist China and the Soviet Union. In overall strategic terms, the Sino-Soviet split was far more significant than the fate of South Vietnam. But as the negativity bias would predict, U.S. decision-makers fixated on the bad news in Vietnam, and downplayed the good news in China.

U.S. decision-makers were highly sensitive to threatening information, and tended to process this information more fully than positive data. During the 1950s and 1960s, Washington focused intensely on information suggesting a diminishment of U.S. influence in East Asia. Decision-makers wrongly saw the nationalist-Communist movements in Vietnam and elsewhere as monolithic forces, orchestrated by Moscow and Beijing. According to the logic of the domino theory, the fall of South Vietnam would be catastrophic, and trigger a wave of Communist takeovers in East Asia.96 Vietnam was one of the first wars of national liberation during the Cold War and therefore seen as a critical test of American resolve and credibility. As General Earle Wheeler saw it, if the United States walked out of this one, it would just have to face other conflicts.97

John F. Kennedy described Vietnam as the “cornerstone of the free world in Southeast Asia.” 98 If the United States faltered: “the whole world, in my opinion, would inevitably begin to move toward the Communist bloc.” 99 According to Robert Kennedy, the president assumed that the fall of Vietnam would “have profound effects on our

97 Khong, Analogies at War, p. 129.
99 Ibid., p. 73.
position throughout the world.”\textsuperscript{100} Herring concluded that, “Kennedy and most of his advisors accepted, without critical analysis, the assumption that a non-Communist Vietnam was vital to America’s global interests.”\textsuperscript{101}

President Lyndon Johnson was even more committed to maintaining a non-communist South Vietnam. Communist subversion, Johnson said, represented “a dangerous threat to the...stable evolution of developing nations everywhere.”\textsuperscript{102} He added, “if you start running from the communists, they may chase you right into your own kitchen.”\textsuperscript{103} Wheeler claimed that a loss in Vietnam would mean: “country after country on the periphery would give way and look toward Communist China as the rising power of the area.”\textsuperscript{104}

At the same time, Washington paid relatively little attention to information about Soviet losses in countries like Egypt, Ghana, and, most importantly, China.\textsuperscript{105} The communist divisions did not impress Kennedy, and he told Congress that the “Soviet-Chinese disagreement is over means, not ends. A dispute over how best to bury the free world is no grounds for Western rejoicing.”\textsuperscript{106} Even when U.S. decision-makers discussed the split, they did not necessarily think a divided enemy was any less threatening. An independent China might cause more trouble, while keener competition between the


\textsuperscript{101} Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, p. 107.

\textsuperscript{102} Leffler, \textit{For the Soul of Mankind}, p. 211; Herring, \textit{America’s Longest War}, p. 115.

\textsuperscript{103} Leffler, \textit{For the Soul of Mankind}, p. 213.

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., p. 213.

\textsuperscript{105} Jervis, "Political Implications of Loss Aversion", p. 189.

\textsuperscript{106} Leffler, \textit{For the Soul of Mankind}, p. 175.
Communist states could lead to further Soviet aggression.107 During the early 1960s, most of the U.S. administration continued to reject China’s membership of United Nations.

Was the domino theory and caution about Communist divisions a rational response to ambiguous information? Historians and political scientists argue that the domino theory became an idée fixe or a preoccupation that was resistant to modification even in the face of countervailing evidence, and thereby deviated from rationalist expectations. Larson argued that threat inflation during the Cold War was not merely a matter of rational actors having different or faulty information, or simply erring on the side of caution. The United States and the Soviet Union did not objectively assess the available information, but instead systematically ignored evidence that the other side desired to cooperate.108

Turning to the Sino-Soviet split, one could argue that U.S. wariness was a rational response to Mao’s hard-line stance through the 1960s, the radicalism of the Cultural Revolution, and China’s championing of leftist insurgencies.109 But scholars and policy-makers have suggested that U.S. leaders were slow to accept the Sino-Soviet split and capitalize on this development. Former U.S. diplomat Paul Kreisberg recalled: “the astonishing thing was, in spite of…[evidence of the split]…for several years, there continued to be a great reluctance inside the U.S. government to acknowledge that there was a Sino-Soviet split. There was a widespread view that it was all a fake.”110 Warren Cohen also concluded that Kennedy held an “obsession with the imagined threat from

107 Herring, America’s Longest War, p. 114.
China” and “was slow to understand the significance of the Sino-Soviet split.”111 Qiang Zhai argued that Washington fixated on what it saw as China’s aggressive rhetoric, missing an opportunity to alter the course of relations.112 In his memoirs, Robert McNamara wrote: “In retrospect, one can see the events of autumn 1965 as clear setbacks for China, which contributed to its turn inward and the Cultural Revolution the following year…But blinded by our assumptions and preoccupied with a rapidly growing war, we—like most other Western leaders—continued to view China as a serious threat in Southeast Asia and the rest of the world.”113

There was an asymmetry of skepticism that suggests a role for psychological bias. Potential opportunities in China received more critical assessments than potential threats to U.S. interests in Vietnam. Indeed, the obsession with Vietnam, and the reluctance to accept the Sino-Soviet split, proved to be mutually reinforcing. Washington primarily blamed Beijing for the situation in Vietnam, which in turn encouraged the impression of China as America’s leading adversary.114 In addition, with China perceived as pulling the strings in Hanoi, the geopolitical stakes were raised. Stephen Van Evera argued that, “In the 1960s U.S. leaders also believed Vietnam’s communists were vassals of China, a mistaken notion that crucially supported arguments for American involvement in Vietnam.”115 Furthermore, U.S. escalation in Vietnam encouraged cooperation between

115 Van Evera, “Foreword” in American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear, p. xiv.
Moscow and Beijing to aid Hanoi, partly fulfilling the original fears of a monolithic opponent.\textsuperscript{116}

Domestic political dynamics were also at work. Kennedy and Johnson remembered the Republican claims that the Democrats had “lost” China to the communists in 1949.\textsuperscript{117} Johnson thought these earlier setbacks would be “chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{118} But the broader public view of the danger in Vietnam may simply evidence the negativity bias writ large—ordinary Americans were also sensitive to threatening information in East Asia.

**Loss Aversion in Vietnam**

Following Johnson’s decision to commit to a major military intervention in Vietnam in 1965, the battlefield situation deteriorated and the United States faced a potential defeat. Entering the domain of losses prompted a second manifestation of the negativity bias: loss aversion. According to Taliaferro’s detailed study of the case, rather than cut its losses and wind down the war effort, the United States deviated from a rational cost-benefit analysis by gambling through escalation in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{119} Concern over sunk costs also became an argument against dovish options. As Thomas Milburn and Daniel Christie wrote, the enormous U.S. investment in Vietnam made it, “increasingly difficult to even

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{117} May, *Lessons of the Past*, p. 99.
\end{footnotesize}
consider the possibility of rapid de-escalation or withdrawal.” This aspect of the Vietnam case has been examined extensively before, and our intention is not to reiterate these findings here, but rather to point out that this well-established observation is consistent with the predictions of the negativity bias rather than rational choice.

**Failure Salience in Vietnam**

There are two dimensions to failure salience in the case of Vietnam. First, U.S. policymakers employed historical analogies when deciding what to do in Vietnam. Did negative analogies predominate as predicted? The evidence is nuanced. Yuen Foong Khong highlighted four analogies that were most frequently invoked by U.S. decision-makers in private in 1965. One was positive (copying the British success in Malaya from 1948-1960); one was mixed (repeating the successful defense of South Korea from communism in 1950-1953 while avoiding a recurrence of Chinese intervention); and two were negative (averting repetition of the 1938 Munich Crisis or the 1954 French defeat at Dien Bien Phu).

As expected, negative analogies outweighed positive analogies—but not decisively. The negativity bias does not mean people will never use positive analogies, only that they will be used less often. Furthermore, in this case there may have been additional factors at work that promoted references to prior successes. For one thing,

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121 Khong, *Analogies at War*. 
Washington’s successful military record meant that the obvious negative historical analogy—a past war that the United States lost—did not exist.

The second way that historical parallels featured in the case of Vietnam is the subsequent use of the war itself as an analogy. After the conflict ended in costly defeat for the United States, as the negativity bias would predict, Vietnam became a widely referenced historical analogy and source of learning. According to Michael Roskin, the Vietnam experience established a non-interventionist paradigm that would define the post-1970s generation.\textsuperscript{122} The lessons of Vietnam were applied in cases of potential U.S. intervention from Angola to Central America—although not everyone agreed on what these lessons were. The maximalist lesson was that U.S. military interventions were doomed to fail. Narrower lessons focused on the risks of fighting counter-insurgency wars, or conflicts without public support. For example, the perceived necessity of securing international and domestic backing for war, and employing decisive force to avoid protracted fighting, powerfully shaped the Powell Doctrine and U.S. strategy in the 1991 Persian Gulf War.\textsuperscript{123}

President George H. W. Bush hoped that the country had finally turned the page on this chapter in American history: “The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian peninsula. It’s a proud day for America—and, by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”\textsuperscript{124}

\textsuperscript{122} Roskin, “From Pearl Harbor to Vietnam.”
But the Vietnam analogy would endure—even in cases that were non-analogous. For example, the situation in Somalia after the October 1993 *Black Hawk Down* battle was as divorced from Vietnam as one could imagine. U.S. casualties in Somalia were over a thousand times lower than in Vietnam, and President Bill Clinton had announced that the United States was ending the mission in Somalia and pulling out. Nevertheless, 62 percent of the public believed that the intervention in Somalia “could turn into another Vietnam.” The analogy remains common today. By October 2009, 52 percent of Americans thought that the conflict in Afghanistan “has turned into a situation like the United States faced in the Vietnam War”—even though casualties in Vietnam were over fifty times as high as in Afghanistan.125

To summarize, the negativity bias can shed new light even on a case like Vietnam that has been extensively studied. Previous authors have noted several of the individual psychological dynamics outlined above and have stressed that the subsequent decisions do not align with rational choice theory. We suggest that these different dynamics are not coincidental, but instead are part of an overarching and systematic negativity bias.

### POSITIVITY BIASES

We have argued that puzzling behaviors in international relations where bad is stronger than good may be explained by the negativity bias. There are domains, however, where good is more powerful than bad. Fortunately, these are not random, but instead stem from systematic sources of variation.

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Mentally healthy people typically exhibit a range of positivity biases that amount to three forms of overconfidence: exaggerating their perceived qualities and capabilities, overestimating their control over events, and over-optimism about the future (sometimes collectively labeled “positive illusions”). This is not just a normative prescription for thinking positively. Rather, people have deeply seated cognitive and motivated biases that make them overconfident by default. The effects have been replicated across a wide range of subjects (not just college students), in numerous settings, and with large samples sizes. A survey of a million high school students, for example, found that 70 percent rated themselves as above average in leadership ability (only 2 percent rated themselves as below average). More striking still, every single student rated themselves as at least average in their ability to get along with others, and 25 percent of students placed themselves in the top 1 percent. More recent studies have confirmed that overconfident biases extend to laboratory studies that simulate decisions for war.

Why are we overconfident? Positive illusions may have been adaptive in our evolutionary past by boosting ambition, aiding persistence in the face of adversity, and helping to bluff opponents, thereby increasing survival and reproductive success relative to individuals with a perfectly accurate view of the world. However, we would expect

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overconfidence to be bounded, not limitless. Extreme overconfidence would be worse than none at all, by encouraging unnecessary risks and costly conflicts.\textsuperscript{130}

In international relations, overconfidence can play a major role in the outbreak of war. On the eve of fighting, oftentimes all sides believe they will win. In two major studies, Geoffrey Blainey argued that overconfidence is “a potent and pervasive cause of war,” and Stephen Van Evera found it “crucial to an understanding of war.”\textsuperscript{131} Positive illusions may also encourage poor planning, provoke wars that would otherwise be avoided, and risk battlefield defeat against superior opponents. One recent study argued that overconfidence is particularly likely when elites expect war to be imminent, and switch into what psychologists call an “implemental” mindset.\textsuperscript{132}

Many accounts suggest that U.S. leaders systematically exaggerated the likely success of intervention in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{133} During 1962, for example, the administration may have been overconfident about counterinsurgency efforts in Vietnam.\textsuperscript{134} The 1963 Hilsman-Forrestal report was less optimistic about the war effort but still concluded that the United States was “probably winning.”\textsuperscript{135} Robert McNamara, the Secretary of Defense, was, at least initially, “certain of an American victory.”\textsuperscript{136} When Undersecretary of State George Ball opposed sending U.S. ground troops to Vietnam because of the


\textsuperscript{132} Johnson and Tierney, "The Rubicon Theory of War."

\textsuperscript{133} Johnson, Overconfidence and War, chapter 6.

\textsuperscript{134} Herring, America's Longest War, p. 91.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., p. 93.

French experience of “three hundred thousand men in the paddies and jungles,” President Kennedy said, “you’re just crazier than hell. That just isn’t going to happen.”

U.S. overconfidence was bounded, not limitless. There were also skeptical voices in the administration that suggested Vietnam could be a long struggle. After returning from a trip to Vietnam in 1965, for example, Army Chief of Staff Gen. Harold Johnson warned that, in historian Mark Moyar’s words, “victory could require five years and 500,000 U.S. troops, well beyond what the President and the rest of the civilians had expected.” The resulting course of the war suggests that even these relatively gloomy estimates were overly optimistic.

There is also a positivity bias with certain types of memory. Precisely because the recall of negative events, especially those relating to the self, can damage self-esteem, we seem to have developed psychological defenses to reduce this effect. People tend to recall their own bad behavior less frequently, and more easily recall events that facilitate a positive self-image. Therefore, although people often recall U.S. failure in Vietnam, there is an exception when actors look back on their own personal performance. Unsurprisingly, the memoirs of key decision-makers focus on their own positive contributions to the war effort and their lack of responsibility for the ultimate outcome.

Richard Nixon argued, for example, that he had achieved “peace with honor,” until anti-war forces stabbed the country in the back.141

**Reconciling Positive and Negative Biases**

How do these negativity and positivity biases coexist? At first glance, they appear contradictory: people simultaneously prioritize bad over good, and good over bad. If our attention is drawn to threats, if the experience of loss is profoundly uncomfortable, and if we draw analogies with failure, we might reasonably predict underconfidence in such a seemingly unfavorable environment. But precisely the opposite occurs. Despite seeing the bad in almost everything we also hold positive illusions about our own place in the world.

However, negative and positive biases can be reconciled because they operate in different domains. Negativity biases tend to affect perceptions of other actors or events, whereas positivity biases tend to apply to perceptions of ourselves. While negative events are generally more salient, and are processed more thoroughly when we assess other people, we do the opposite when assessing our own capabilities, experiences, and future. The world of international relations is therefore one of perceived threats on the one hand, and perceived confidence in dealing with them on the other. Leaders are sensitive to negative information, averse to losses, and draw analogies with past failures. But at the same time, they tend to be overconfident in their ability to overcome these threats if they are realized.

A similar dynamic operates with the use of historical analogies. Actors will tend to downplay their own individual failings, and produce a rose-tinted view of their own past and their role in bringing about successes or laboring against the failings of others. A decision-maker may focus on a nation’s historical failures, while simultaneously adopting a self-serving view of the past that reduces any personal contribution to policy debacles. After the Vietnam War, a CBS television program accused General Westmoreland of deliberately deceiving Johnson and the public into believing they were winning the war when in fact they were losing. Westmoreland was so outraged by this sleight that he sued in a highly publicized trial that examined half a million pages of documents.142

This duality of positive biases in self-perception and negative biases in perceptions of others mirrors the asymmetry of the Fundamental Attribution Error (FAE). We tend to give “situational” explanations of our own behavior (I did this because I was forced to) and “dispositional” explanations of other people’s behavior (they did this because it is their character). However, this effect can switch when one is dealing with success or failure, or good and bad behavior. Our own successes or good behaviors are attributed to our dispositional qualities (I’m skilled and hard-working), while our failures or bad behaviors are attributed to situational factors (I had no time and lacked the tools to do the job properly). But the reverse is true for others: successes or good behaviors are explained away as the result of favorable circumstances, whereas failures or bad behaviors are attributed to deficiencies of character.143

An evolutionary perspective is also helpful in reconciling the coexistence of the positivity and negativity biases. The negativity bias is adaptive because it helps to detect threats and remember dangers. The positivity bias is also adaptive because it promotes ambition and persistence in the face of obstacles. An individual who exhibited both biases, which are contingent on circumstances, would tend to survive and reproduce more effectively compared to an individual who maintained a set of biases that were attuned towards negativity or positivity irrespective of the domain.

This does not mean, however, that this combination of biases is well suited to the modern era of international relations—which is a world away from our evolutionary past. States may see the world as more threatening than it really is, while also exaggerating their capacity to remove these perils with the use of force. This may explain why, on the eve of conflict, actors can be both fearful of the future without war and confident of victory with war.

In 1914, for example, the Austro-Hungarian elites saw the threat from pan-Slavic nationalism to the multinational empire in almost paranoid terms, using images such as imprisoning webs, or engulfing seas, to describe the danger. But at the same time Vienna exhibited profound overconfidence about the probable outcome of war. According to Samuel Williamson, once the July Crisis erupted, Hapsburg policy “rested on hopes and illusions rather than realistic chances for success.” This combination of beliefs encouraged the Austrians to respond to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand with force: “in July 1914 Austria-Hungary’s leaders were the first to opt for war, and they did

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so with plan and foresight.\textsuperscript{146} The same dynamic may also have been evident before the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Thomas Ricks described the George W. Bush administration as “simultaneously ‘worst-casing’ the threat presented by Iraq while ‘best-casing’ the subsequent cost and difficulty of occupying the country.”\textsuperscript{147}

**CONCLUSION**

The negativity bias helps to explain a wide range of behavior in international relations, including the sensitivity to threatening information, the tendency to gamble in the face of loss, and the inclination to recall failures more than successes. One manifestation of the negativity bias—loss aversion—is already familiar to political scientists, but other aspects of the bias are not well known. The negativity bias is present where actors face decisions over potential or actual losses, but it is also evident before this moment (when threats first appear on the horizon) and after it (when actors recall past failures).

There can sometimes appear to be a laundry list of psychological biases that push and pull actors in every conceivable direction. The negativity bias is different in that it represents a powerful central tendency or “meta-bias,” where a large number of individual biases all push in the same direction. It is therefore more likely to have a significant influence on decision-making across varied contexts. The negativity bias is not a conjecture based on a handful of obscure psychological studies, but instead a core psychological principle that has emerged from hundreds of studies that found consistent results. Two major review articles in flagship psychology journals have concurred that

\textsuperscript{146} Hamilton and Herwig, eds., *Decisions for War, 1914-1917*, p. 47.

the negativity bias is a fundamental aspect of human nature that is both pervasive and powerful.

What are the implications of the negativity bias for international relations theory? The negativity bias produces some support for the realist view of international relations, because it predicts a world where states exaggerate threats, are quicker to judge other actors negatively than positively, and find cooperation hard to achieve. The negativity bias is particularly consistent with defensive realism because it promotes a world that is wary but stable: the focus on threats and the aversion to losses deter aggressors, while also cultivating distrust, preventing cooperation, and exacerbating the security dilemma.148

The psychological origins of the negativity bias are distinct from neorealism, which explains the tragic nature of international politics in terms of the anarchic international system. According to Tang, “The ultimate source of the security dilemma is the anarchic nature of international politics,” which produces fear, insecurity and self-help behavior.149 The negativity bias, however, relocates the source of the security dilemma away from anarchy per se toward human nature—and specifically our tendency to prioritize bad over good. In other words, anarchy may be a necessary but not sufficient explanation for the security dilemma. After all, our close evolutionary relative, the chimpanzee, lives in anarchy, and conflict is common. Our other close relative, the bonobo, also lives in anarchy, in relative harmony. This suggests that anarchy does not in

148 It is also interesting to consider that the negativity bias may have contributed to the emergence of long-term patterns in international relations, such as the preeminence of sovereignty, the trust and etiquette among diplomatic missions, and the territorial integrity norm. See Zacher, M.W., "The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and the Use of Force," International Organization, Vol. 55, No. 2 (2001), pp. 215-250.

itself explain whether you get conflict or cooperation among competing organisms. Rather, additional behavioral and environmental factors are necessary. With a different kind of evolved human psychology, the security dilemma among humans might be significantly exacerbated, reduced, or even absent—even if we held anarchy constant.

The notion of universal dispositions is a challenge for constructivists, who tend to deny the importance of evolved human nature. The negativity bias suggests that international politics is not entirely constructed. Rather, we are predisposed to behave in certain ways that limit the range of worlds that can exist. It would be difficult to construct a world in which positive data was more salient than negative data, in which actors gambled in the domain of gains rather than losses, or drew analogies with historical successes rather than failures. In other words, the capacity to construct international relations is bounded, not limitless. Anarchy is what biased human minds make of it.

There is significant potential, however, for constructing what “negative,” “positive,” “loss” and “gain” actually mean. The point at which states assimilate or accept a loss of territory, status or power, for example, and readjust their reference point from the domain of loss to the domain of neutral is likely shaped by a wide variety of political, psychological, and cultural dynamics. The negativity bias is an organic aspect of human nature but “negative” is not.

If the negativity bias is a relatively fixed aspect of human nature then it may be analogous to anarchy: an invariant but essential characteristic underlying and shaping the international system. Of course, this means that the negativity bias may make war more likely compared to a world where the bias did not exist, but it cannot easily explain why
war occurs at one moment rather than another. As a fundamental dynamic, however, the negativity bias explains broad patterns of state behavior in the international system.

There are several policy implications. First, leaders should be aware of the dangers of systematically exaggerating threats, gambling in the domain of losses, and learning from an overly narrow sample of analogies. Second, decision-makers should recognize the risks that arise from a combination of negativity and positivity biases, especially exaggerated fear about a threat and exaggerated confidence about the utility of force. Third, leaders must realize that opponents might exhibit the negativity bias: biased responses can be expected even if we are unbiased ourselves. For example, loss aversion means that deterrence may be easier than compellence because opponents will not readily accept a loss.

Fourth, diplomacy is like marriage: many positive interactions are needed to balance out a perceived sleight and create an enduring special relationship. Negative events must be avoided even if the cost is substantial. Fifth, leaders can take advantage of the negativity bias. For example, dramatic shifts in policy may be easier to achieve if key audiences believe they are in a domain of loss and subsequently become risk acceptant. This is true of escalatory policies, but it could also apply to difficult dovish policies like giving up land for peace.

Of course, it is easy to identify biases in experiments but very hard to eliminate them in practice. Even if we are aware of these biases, we cannot simply switch them off. Instead, leaders need to install structural safeguards that directly counter the negativity and positivity biases. One option is for a policy-maker to deliberately play the role of “devil’s advocate” and argue that perceptions of threats and historical events is overly
focused on the negative, whereas perceptions of the state’s own capabilities is overly focused on the positive. This is no easy solution, however, because where such devil’s advocates have existed, like detractor George Ball in Johnson’s circle during Vietnam, other decision-makers often ignore them or, worse, believe that their presence is keeping the group open-minded when in fact the debate remains narrow.

There are numerous opportunities for future research applying the negativity bias to international relations. Previous authors have noted a number of outstanding questions about loss aversion, which we endorse as well. In addition, we propose that the negativity bias could be studied in experimental crisis decision-making and further case studies of prominent wars, in order to identify the factors that increase or decrease the effect of the bias. The negativity bias is fairly constant and universal in its prioritization of bad over good. But specific components may vary in strength. Threat sensitivity, for example, might be expected to be more acute among those with a conservative ideology, or in relation to specific types of threats, such as those with a “face” (an obvious human agent) rather than ecological threats like global warming. We also suspect that the negativity bias may have major implications and provide novel predictions for other areas of political science, from domestic political campaigns to international trade and finance.

References

McDermott et al. described the need for more scholarship on loss aversion, especially “group decision-making, reference point specification, and emotion.” McDermott, “Prospect Theory in Political Science: Gains and Losses from the First Decade.” Mercer also highlights weaknesses in our knowledge of loss aversion, such as the absence of a theory of frames (how they are set in the first place), or an understanding of how actors determine themselves to be in the domain of gain or loss, and understanding what exactly constitutes a risky choice. See Mercer, "Prospect Theory and Political Science."


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