Elite Ideologies and Popular Support for U.S. Foreign Policies*

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Historians of U.S. foreign relations have long focused on the decision-making processes, motivations, and negotiations of policymakers. Yet to understand the implementation of policy in a large democracy such as the United States, we must also comprehend how policymakers were able to acquire public consent for their policies—or at least avoid strong public opposition to them. How, for example, have policymakers been able to get Americans to support the decision to go to war, or conversely, to begin to see a hated enemy as a valuable ally? A specific instance of the latter was the post–World War II decision to make the recent enemy, Japan, into a valuable “junior ally” or “bulwark against communism” in East Asia.¹ The political reasons for this policy have been straightforward: the Cold War was intensifying, and this caused the

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¹ For a fuller treatment of this topic, see: Naoko Shibusawa, America’s Geisha Ally (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
United States to abandon earlier policies that had sought to democratize Japan and to make Japan pay for the damage it wreaked during its imperialist rampage throughout the Asia-Pacific region. U.S. policymakers reacted to the perceived communist threat by deciding to prioritize Japanese economic recovery to make Japan a model capitalist country in East Asia to the disadvantage of the Asian victims of Japanese imperialism. This “reverse course” was an about-face of policy, but the American public easily went along with this decision—why? This phenomenon is especially curious since Americans had come to hate Japan ferociously during the war.

The answer is that elite policymakers were able to obtain broad popular support for their foreign policies by drawing upon long-standing narratives or ideologies in U.S. culture about Americans and non–Americans. Ideological thinking, therefore, helps explain how policymakers gain support for their foreign policies—in particular, support for drastic policy changes. “Ideology” or “ideological thinking” in this content is not meant to be an indictment, although the word “ideology” retains a negative connotation in the United States. Many continue to think of “ideology” as a pejorative—some continue to think of it as synonymous with Marxism, as was commonly believed during the Cold War. During the Cold War, American policymakers, mainstream intellectuals, and others believed that “ideology” was what the other side had: namely, “a system of wrong, false, distorted, or otherwise misguided beliefs.”

What they themselves believed, Americans labeled simply as commonsense or “the truth.” But since the Cold War’s end, American scholars of American foreign relations have increasingly been better equipped to recognize

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