

**AMERICA AT WAR:
AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION DURING WARTIME,
FROM WORLD WAR II TO IRAQ**

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Chapter 1: Introduction: America at War

In early 2006, with the initial successes in Iraq a distant memory, public opinion seemed to have turned against the war. Republicans continued to support President Bush's foreign policies, but the nation as a whole did not. Though support for the war had remained fairly stable since the beginning of 2004 (Jacobson 2008), not since March 2004 had a majority of Americans agreed that the U.S. "did the right thing in taking military action against Iraq."¹ Bush's public reaction to this grim news was to belittle the polls. At an appearance at Freedom House in March 2006, he exclaimed, "You don't need a president chasing polls and focus groups in order to make tough decisions. You need presidents who make decisions based on sound principles."²

Bush's public face, however, hid a more complicated political reality. From the beginning of the war, the Bush administration planned and executed military strategy with the public firmly in mind. There is, in fact, clear evidence that the administration was paying close attention to the polls. On November 30, 2005, Bush outlined his future strategy for Iraq in a speech at the U.S. Naval Academy. As the *New York Times* subsequently reported, Bush heavily emphasized the concept of "victory," using the word 15 times in his speech, posting "Plan for Victory" signs on the podium, and entitling an accompanying National Security Council report, "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq." The origins of this "victory" theme can be found in the public opinion research of National Security Council (NSC) advisor Peter Feaver, a political scientist at Duke University who has argued that support for war depends on citizens' beliefs

¹ Source: CBS/New York Times polling, available at <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>; accessed May 12, 2006.

² *Washington Post*, March 30, 2006.

about the correctness of war and its likelihood of success.³ Bush's strategy was therefore not only a response to opinion polls; it was an attempt to influence those polls by emphasizing the prospect of eventual success in Iraq.

Bush's attention to public opinion polls in the realm of foreign policy puts him in good company among modern presidents. Lyndon Johnson tracked public opinion on Vietnam beginning from 1965 onward, employing specialists to analyze both media and private opinion surveys and draw conclusions about the direction of the public mood. The scope of this collection and analysis effort was immense; under Johnson, according to Jacobs and Shapiro, the White House became, "a veritable warehouse of opinion surveys" (1999, 595). The introduction of opinion polls into the war-making decision process dates back to the 1930s. As long as there have been surveys, polls have played a central role in the formation of policy concerning matters of war and peace. Franklin D. Roosevelt's interest in public opinion is well known. Throughout his presidency, Roosevelt carefully cultivated various "channels to the public mind" (Steele 1974). Many of these techniques were methods well tested by politicians.⁴ But unlike his predecessors, Roosevelt had considerable access to scientific opinion surveys. The early years of FDR's presidency, after all, coincided with the rise of opinion polling in America. Given that the public's voice has long held great consequence for politicians, how are we to understand the meaning of that voice and its place in the political process?

³ Feaver joined the NSC staff as a special advisor in June 2005, and the "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq" report posted on the White House Website in November 2005 showed that the document's author was "feaver-p." White House officials confirmed that Feaver played a significant role in drafting the plan (Shane 2005).

⁴ See Herbst (1993) for a description of strategies employed by Congressmen to measure public opinion in the 1930s and 1940s. For instance, FDR employed a clipping service that monitored 350 newspapers and 43 magazines to track trends in editorial opinion (Steele 1974).

In this book, I argue that the lessons learned from studies of public opinion on domestic issues ought to inform our knowledge of public opinion in the foreign realm. Much of our understanding of opinion during wartime has proceeded from the notion that times of war are unique moments in political history. I argue that such thinking is incorrect. Instead, public opinion about war is shaped by the same attitudes and orientations that shape domestic politics. Thus, public opinion during times of war is properly viewed as a continuation of the same processes that shape public opinion during times of peace.

Public Opinion and War

Considering the importance of the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy, it is not surprising that the study of war and public opinion is a flourishing industry within political science. Some scholars of international relations have studied “audience costs” – the mass public’s potential to punish politicians who do not follow through on military threats – by exploring the way these costs enable leaders to signal their resolve in international crises (Fearon 1994; Baum 2004; Smith 1998). Others have investigated the way in which an organized political opposition affects the process of crisis bargaining (Schultz 1998). In addition, a large literature has grown around the “the democratic peace” – the question of whether democratic governments are less prone to international conflict than states with other forms of government (Doyle 1983, 1986; Gowa 1999; Huth and Allee 2003; Maoz 1998; Morrow 2002; Russett 1993; Small and Singer 1982). These scholars often look to the mass public as the primary cause of military action or inaction. As Reiter and Stam (2002) argue, democracies cannot wage war without at least the tacit consent of their citizens. According to these scholars, it is the fear of an unreceptive public that often keeps the dogs of war at bay in democracies.

Public opinion scholars have taken up this theme and closely examined the nature of the public's preferences in times of crisis, conducting systematic studies of individual conflicts and series of wars in an attempt to determine what it is that leads citizens to rally to war or to reject an internationalist position.⁵ The result of this vast literature, however, is an inconclusive set of findings. Early authors, such as Almond (1960) and Lippman (1922) argued that Americans' preferences over foreign policy were largely incoherent – nothing more than shifting and changing “moods.” More recently, authors such as Feaver and Gelpi (2004); Feaver, Gelpi, and Reifler (2005-2006); and Larson (1996) have gone to the opposite extreme, arguing that opinions about foreign policy adjust directly to dynamic world events in sensible ways. Furthermore, with rare exceptions (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Baum and Groeling 2004), the study of foreign policy attitudes has largely been divorced from the study of domestic politics. In fact, an entirely separate literature has developed on public opinion concerning foreign policy (see Holsti 2004 for a comprehensive review). As a result, the study of public opinion and war lacks a coherent center or a consistent collection of results.

An additional problem with the existing work on public opinion and foreign policy is that scholars have largely focused on developments in the Cold War and post-Cold War periods in isolation, one war at a time. What we know about mass reaction to war, we have learned from failed international interventions – such as Korea and Vietnam – and relatively short-term military excursions – such the 1991 Gulf War, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. In the process, studies

⁵ See, for instance, (Baum 2003; Belknap and Campbell 1951; Burk 1999; Eichenberg 2005; Foyle 1999; Gartner and Segura 1997, 2000; Gartner, Segura, and Wilkening 1997; Feaver, Gelpi and Reifler 2005-2006; Holsti 1992, 2004; Kull and Lewis 2003-4; Larson 1996; Mueller 1973, 1994; Nincic 1988, 1992; Page and Shapiro 1992; Popkin 1991; Schwarz 1994; Sobel 2001; Zaller 1992, 1994).

of public opinion during wartime have seemingly forgotten the rise of the polling industry in the 1930s and 1940s and have almost completely ignored World War II – a war that was in many ways a unique event in American history. World War II was the only war in the last two centuries in which Americans were directly attacked by another nation before becoming engaged in active combat. Furthermore, unlike recent wars, World War II was waged with and against the same European nations that had provided generations of immigrants to America.

Seminal studies of public opinion and war have largely set aside such concerns. Mueller's (1973) path-breaking book, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, for instance, devotes only three pages to World War II. More recently, Holsti's (2004) comprehensive treatment, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, devotes less than ten pages to the Second World War. Thus, quite paradoxically, the systematic study of the relationship between government and the mass public during wartime, at least the work conducted by political scientists in the last 40 years, has overlooked the largest and most important international conflict in U.S. history – one with potentially important lessons for the study of public opinion and war more generally. In fact, as I discuss in greater detail in the chapters that follow, to the extent that scholars have drawn any lessons from the Second World War, these lessons have been based on a faulty understanding of the public's reaction to that war.

This book is an attempt to fill this gaping hole in our knowledge. In advancing a general theory of public opinion and war, I address a number of conflicts in American history, but maintain a particular focus on World War II. This book therefore brings our understanding of the dynamics of a conflict that was in many ways a unique effort into the general study of public opinion and war, thereby enriching both our knowledge of that war and our general understanding of how public opinion is forged in times of crisis. I make use of a rich trove of

opinion data that were collected from 1935 to 1945, but – for reasons that I make clear below – have remained largely untouched for almost 60 years. But I also draw upon polls from familiar contemporary cases. The conflicts I study range from relatively minor military interventions – like the 1999 Kosovo conflict – to large scale wars spanning many years – like World War II and Vietnam. Though these wars differ in many respects, I find common patterns in the organization of public opinion during wartime that can change our understanding of public opinion in both the foreign and domestic arenas.

In this book I argue that, contrary to the conventional wisdom regarding public opinion and foreign policy, public opinion during times of crisis – and during war in particular – is shaped by many of the same attachments and enmities found on the domestic stage. Considering public opinion and foreign policy in isolation from the rest of the field of public opinion is not only unnecessary; it is a misguided enterprise. The public might be briefly influenced by dramatic events, such as Pearl Harbor and 9/11, but – as in the domestic arena – public opinion is primarily structured by the ebb and flow of partisan and group-based political conflict.⁶ These factors shape support for policies of war just as they shape policies of peace. Moreover, we can understand critical public choices during times of international conflict – notably support for civil liberties and the election of political leaders – by looking to the factors that shape opinion on the domestic stage. In these realms, the feelings of threat and fear generated by international conflict influence opinions and choices in the same ways that they influence public decisions surrounding domestic policies. In short, the study of domestic politics and international affairs –

⁶ Certainly, partisan and group-based attachments are not the only factors that shape opinion on international policy. For instance, Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) convincingly demonstrate that foreign policy attitudes are structured by core values and abstract beliefs regarding appropriate general governmental strategies.

at least in the realm of public opinion – can and should proceed from a common foundation. My book therefore builds upon other scholars – such as Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) and Zaller (1992) – who have applied the lessons gleaned through years of research on domestic public opinion to understand public opinion about matters lying beyond the water’s edge. By revisiting faulty lessons from World War II and drawing on seemingly disparate survey evidence from an over 60-year era of American involvement in international affairs, I draw broader conclusions about the roots of public attitudes toward foreign policy. In doing so, I provide a coherent understanding of public opinion during times of crisis that brings together several divergent lines of research in the fields of international relations and American politics.

My findings also have important implications for the study of domestic politics. Just as our study of domestic opinion can inform our study of public opinion and foreign policy, the study of public opinion and war can shed new light on the nature of public opinion more generally. In domestic politics, the positions of prominent political elites have – with rare exception – changed only gradually. It is difficult in these circumstances to disentangle the relative importance of mass preferences and elite positions. In the realm of war, however, elite positions are sometimes more malleable. In the last decade alone, Democratic and Republican presidents have both rallied the nation to military action using very similar justifications. Moreover, once foreign commitments have been launched, it is difficult for leaders to extract the country from involvement abroad. Vietnam, for instance, may have been Johnson’s folly, but after 1968, it became “Nixon’s War.” Given the sometimes abrupt changes in elite positioning and rhetoric on critical foreign policy issues, the study of public opinion and war can illuminate the dynamics of public opinion more generally in a way that the study of domestic politics

cannot easily do. Times of war may be distinctive in several respects, but they can inform our general understanding of the formation and expression of public opinion in important ways.

Overview of the Book

In the next two chapters, I set the stage for the analysis that follows by providing a historical overview of the different military interventions and conflicts discussed in the book. In doing so, I make the case that we can learn much by comparing and contrasting the trends and relationships in the patterns of public opinion across the different wars. I pay special attention here to the Second World War, a conflict that looms large in American history, but also one that has largely been passed over by scholars of public opinion. Generations of researchers have ignored the vast stores of information concerning the public's preferences during this crucial moment in American political life, in large part because this data is difficult to work with and were collected using procedures that – from a modern perspective – seem arcane. However, I utilize methods that account for the shortcomings of these early survey efforts and dispel several myths that have arisen concerning the nature of public support for World War II; in doing so, I bring the Second World War into the systematic study of public opinion and war.

The two sections of the book that follow take up topics central to the formation and expression of public opinion during times of war. I first examine the roots of public support for war. This section of this book makes a simple point: domestic politics has a large impact on how people think about war. There is a growing consensus among political scientists and even some policymakers that citizens, on the whole, hold views of foreign policy generally, and war specifically, that move in response to changes in those world events that are salient and reflect on American interests (Holsti 1992, 1996; Jentleson 1992; Nincic 1988, 1992; Page and Shapiro

1992; Feaver and Gelpi 2004; Feaver, Gelpi, and Reifler 2005-2006). For instance, a prominent line of argument in this vein is what Burk (1999) calls the “casualties hypothesis,” the view that the American people will shirk from international involvement in the face of war deaths (Mueller 1973). I question the assumption of scholars in this tradition. In Chapter 4, I review the literature on the influence of events on public opinion concerning war. Existing accounts of the roots of public support for military action fail to specify the mechanism by which members of the mass public process information concerning the events of war. While events may ultimately help shape public opinion, the mechanism by which these events exert influence on opinion is complex. It is not the direct influence of the causes and consequences of war themselves that determine public opinion. Instead, the same factors that shape opinions on other policies – attachments and enmities forged on the domestic political scene – also shape public opinion on war.

I begin to explore these factors in Chapter 5. Using data from a variety of conflicts that seem to differ in their particulars – Vietnam, the War in Iraq, and World War II – I find a common structure to opinion: patterns of conflict among partisan political actors, above all else, shape mass opinion on war. Here, the revised picture of public opinion during World War II is especially significant. Even in a war where – according to conventional wisdom – the mass public rallied as one in direct response to the notorious attack at Pearl Harbor, the residue of partisan political conflict emerges as a powerful influence on public opinion. Opinions on foreign and domestic policies, it seems, are formed using the same processes. Here we can see how the tides of war may matter for public opinion. There is little reason to suspect that the mass public can independently evaluate the political implications of ambiguous wartime events. However, political elites with a stake in the outcome of policy decisions have the power to shape

the meaning of those events for the public. Thus, patterns of consensus and dissensus on the interpretation of wartime events by politicians – who have partisan and career aspirations – shape public opinion more than the events themselves.

In Chapter 6, I turn to another factor that influences opinion, namely feelings about particular groups in society. Beliefs about the groups to which individuals feel attachment or enmity may be forged in the domestic arena, but these beliefs also structure their attitudes in the foreign policy realm. To provide evidence for this contention, I draw primarily on data from World War II – a time when internal ethnic divisions were a highly visible part of the social sphere. Large segments of the American population could trace their ancestry to the very countries the U.S. fought with and against. Before the U.S. entered the war, those citizens with ties to Allied countries were more likely to support intervention while those from Axis countries advocated isolationist policies. The entry of the U.S. into war diminished differences between citizens who could trace their recent ancestry to Allied countries and those citizens whose parents were born in the U.S., but the differences in support for war between these groups and citizens who descended from Axis countries persisted. Thus, in some circumstances, even large-scale unifying events cannot erase long-standing ethnic differences. I also demonstrate that one's feelings toward other groups can shape public opinion. Affection or hostility toward Germans, Italians and Jewish citizens—opinions that had most likely been formed independently of foreign events—had a significant impact on individuals' opinions about involvement in the war. Negative feelings toward groups from Axis countries and positive feelings toward individuals descending from Allied countries were correlated with more interventionist attitudes. Negative feelings toward Jews, on the other hand, were correlated with anti-interventionist sentiment.

In the third section of the book, I move beyond explaining attitudes towards war and investigate how normal democratic processes are shaped by the public's experiences during wartime. Chapter 7 explores how political judgments critical for the foundation of democracy are generated in times of war. Specifically, I investigate civil liberties judgments during World War II, Vietnam, and the period following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Consistent with the themes of this book, I find that the basic structure of civil liberties judgments remains the same in times of war and peace. While the particular conditions of war may change the manner in which members of the mass public judge the desirability of restrictions on civil liberties, those factors which scholars have used to gauge support for civil liberties – most notably perceptions of threat – shape civil liberties opinions in times of war as well. In war, as in peace, it is the perceived threat that diminishes support for civil liberties. In general, attacks on America – or the onset of war—increase citizens' willingness to limit civil liberties, at least for a time. However, as threats recede, citizens begin to resist encroachments on their basic values. Thus, while the particular circumstances of war may be unique, they influence civil liberties judgments through mechanisms that are familiar from studies of domestic politics.

In Chapter 8, I examine the role of war in shaping presidential elections. I begin by examining the effect of judgments about particular wars on the vote. A number of scholars have argued that opinion concerning the Iraq war crucially shaped the outcome of the 2004 election. I make the case that this conclusion is erroneous. Given the partisan nature of support for war discussed in Chapter 5, I argue that it is impossible to uncover the effects of war on the vote by examining a single election in isolation. During war, people judge the correctness of military actions through the lens of their partisan predispositions, not vice-versa. Any analysis that treats such attitudes as causally prior to vote choice is therefore inherently erroneous. I instead take a

longer view of electoral history, considering every presidential election from 1952 to 2004. I find that war can affect electoral outcomes in two ways, both of which are crucially rooted in the normal political process. First, war – like the economy – can serve as a performance issue for leaders. Just as leaders may be punished for poor economic performance, they might also be hurt by bad news coming from abroad. Second, I find that the emotions of fear and threat that are brought about by war – not war itself – can change the dynamics of elections. Specifically, foreign crises can cause citizens to place a high value on leadership, thereby advantaging the party in power. Both Franklin D. Roosevelt and George W. Bush, it seems, benefited from the conditions of crisis that began under their respective watches.