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Strategic Politicians, Public Opinion, and the Gulf Crisis

I know whose backside is at stake and rightfully so. . . .

George Bush, on chances of victory in the Gulf War

Past studies of the mass media and public opinion, strongly corroborated by the experience of the Gulf War, make two key points: At least in the domain of foreign affairs, the media normally take cues from government officials, "indexing" coverage to the range of opinions that exist within the government.¹ Further, mass opinion tends to follow elite opinion, with the most politically attentive members of the public following elites most closely.² These results imply a stark political world in which elites lead, masses follow, and the press does the bidding of the government.

This top-down model of political influence can be defended as a useful first approximation of what occurs in foreign policy decision-making, especially in foreign policy crises. Nonetheless, reality is always quite a bit messier than social scientific models make it out to be. The major limitation of the top-down model is that, even in situations in which elites appear to be firmly leading mass opinion, the public can have substantial influence over its leaders. This influence arises from the fact that political leaders, most of whom are under threat of electoral retribution, take great care to lead public opinion only toward goals that the public will, in retrospect if not always in prospect, applaud. Thus, politicians attempt to be responsive to future opinion at the same time they are trying to shape current opinion.

An illuminating example comes from the Vietnam War. There is no evidence that the American public in 1964 was eager for a fight with communist guerrillas in Vietnam. But President Lyndon Johnson clearly feared that if he failed to prevent a communist victory, the public would repudiate him and his party for "losing Vietnam." Hence, he followed public opinion by *leading* it into a war that neither he nor the public wanted.

V. O. Key, Jr., gave a general account of such cases in his classic study of *Public Opinion and American Democracy*. The only public opinion that really counts in American politics, he contended, is the public opinion that politicians hope they might be able to create by their own actions, or fear might be created by the attacks of opponents in the next election. As a result, politicians' estimates of possible states of future opinion have more effect on policy-making than current opinion, which, as the politicians know, may evaporate overnight.

There are, as the reader will soon see, formidable barriers to rigorous demonstration that anything so slippery as "anticipated future opinion" affects foreign policy decision-making. However, the phenomenon is too important to be neglected because fully adequate evidence and analytical techniques are unavailable.

Method

This chapter examines four key decisions in the process by which the United States was led into the Gulf War, showing, to the extent possible, how calculations concerning current and future public opinion influenced each decision. The events I examine are:

- President Bush's decision to stake his political reputation on the expulsion of Iraqi troops from Kuwait, which he did when he declared the aggression "will not stand."
- The decision of congressional Democrats to give virtually unanimous support to Bush's decision in August to send 200,000 U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia.
- Bush's decision in November to send an additional 200,000 troops to the Gulf. In so doing, Bush was, in effect, choosing to forgo reliance on economic sanctions and to rely instead on either the threat of force or the application of force to resolve the crisis.
- The vote of Congress in January 1991 to authorize the president to use "all necessary means" to force the Iraqi army to withdraw from Kuwait.

For evidence I rely primarily on published accounts of decision-making, which are mostly journalistic, and my own interviews of top staff aides to key decision-makers. Those interviewed included aides to most congressional leaders on this issue in both parties and in both houses. The only important exception is Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell, whose office refused to allow me access to any members of his

staff. I also spoke to two executive branch officials, namely, a top staff member from the National Security Council and a top military official in the Pentagon. Interviews were conducted in winter 1992–93.

The obvious difficulty with these kinds of data is that sources tend to stress motives they regard as legitimate, such as “making good public policy,” and to downplay political motives, which they see as tainted. The appropriate response to this natural bias in interview data is not, I believe, to ignore indications of concern about public policy, but to make inordinate efforts to discover what political motives may have made some visions of good policy more attractive than others, so as to present a more balanced picture of what occurred.

Four Key Decisions

“THE LINE IN THE SAND”

Four days after Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, Bush declared in an impromptu news conference, “This will not stand, this aggression against Kuwait.”

There is little doubt that when the president uttered these words he was staking his political reputation on the removal of Iraqi troops from Kuwait. “A President Puts Himself on the Spot” was the how the *New York Times* described Bush’s action in a headline the following day.³ “If Mr. Bush is blustering during an international crisis,” added columnist William Safire, “he will be the one who ‘will not stand.’”⁴

What *political* reasons might a president have had for taking the fateful and politically risky step of pledging himself to force Iraqi troops from Kuwait?

One possible explanation for Bush’s actions can be quickly dismissed: He was *not* responding to any overt pressure from public opinion or the media for a tougher stand. Polls did not yet exist in what still seemed a minor crisis, and media coverage of the president’s initial actions—a strong condemnation of the invasion coupled with winning U.N. support for an economic embargo against Iraq—was wholly favorable without suggesting that the president should do either more or less than he had. As the *New York Times* editorialized: “The U.S. has no treaty obligation to come to Kuwait’s aid. But the Gulf states still look to Washington for leadership and help in organizing action. President Bush has responded with the right lead—a strong national stand and a strong push for collective diplomacy.”⁵

It is, however, easy to infer domestic political rationales for Bush’s

stance. First, success against Iraq would obviate criticism that Bush had responded weakly to an aggression that was certain to drive up oil prices, exacerbate the impending U.S. recession, and perhaps even bring on a new energy crisis. (The effect of higher oil prices on the weak U.S. economy was discussed in a key decision-making meeting, but there is no indication Bush considered this point important.)⁶ In light of the Bush administration’s efforts to build up Iraqi power in the 1980s and its weak diplomatic response to Iraq’s threats against Kuwait prior to invading it, it was likely that Democratic criticism would be especially sharp.⁷

Second, a rollback of the Iraqi invasion could constitute an important part of the president’s record in the 1992 election. In his first two years in office, the president had accomplished little he could take credit for.⁸ His most notable action so far had been to abandon his famous pledge of “Read my lips, no new taxes,” which he did in June 1990.

Finally, the crisis afforded the president an opportunity to overcome long-standing criticism that he was a weak and unprincipled leader, a moral “wimp.” Gary Trudeau detailed the nature of the allegation during the 1988 campaign. Bush, he maintained, is “not a wimp in the sense of lacking physical bravery.”

The issue is rather one of moral courage, the willingness to place oneself at risk for one’s principles. . . . The unflinching inclination to hold everybody else’s coats during the great conflicts of our times has led to a persona of shimmering translucence—hence the No-where man. . . . President unDukakis . . . the classic cipher.⁹

Such complaints were widespread in the summer of 1992 and continued into the Gulf Crisis. Commenting on Bush’s acceptance of a budget agreement with Congress that included big tax increases, columnist David Broder wrote:

The budget fiasco in the capital has left few politicians untarnished, but the damage to President Bush is particularly serious—for good reason. The president has revealed to the nation’s voters that you can’t have the courage of your convictions if you lack any convictions. He—and we—will be fortunate if the lesson is not seized upon by Saddam Hussein and other foreign antagonists.¹⁰

Elizabeth Drew reported in the *New Yorker*, “A Senator said to me recently, reluctantly, ‘We all know instinctively that this is not a strong man. It’s greatly disturbing. I try not to think about it. I don’t know anyone who’s honest with himself who doesn’t think this.’” It is hard to

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imagine a president who wouldn't be personally disturbed by such criticism and eager to put it to rest. But psychology aside, a president with Bush's reputation for moral indecision who stood by while U.S. interests were damaged, and who had the misfortune of a bad economy at the same time, would be risking mortal political damage. It is notable, therefore, that as soon as Bush pledged to liberate Kuwait the media reached a consensus verdict that the promise, if redeemed, "could virtually assure reelection."¹¹

There was, of course, also great risk in attempting to liberate Kuwait. But if our concern is what political incentives the president could have had for taking this risk rather than standing by, it is easy to find some rather strong ones.

All of the preceding is, of course, pure inference. What actual evidence exists on the question of whether Bush was motivated by political concerns?

Two kinds of evidence exist: testimonial evidence from those who dealt with Bush in the crisis; and statistical evidence on when, in general, presidents take military action.

Testimonial accounts of Bush's motives for making the pledge stress the president's own beliefs about the need to stand firm against aggression.¹² By many reports, Bush was determined to stop Saddam before he could, like Hitler after his takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1938, use the fruits of aggression to become even more dangerous. Bush was further concerned that, coming at the beginning of the "new world order," the conquest of Kuwait could invite similar aggression by other countries unless dealt with effectively.

The national security official to whom I spoke also underscored the importance of Bush's own view of the crisis. "This president to an extraordinary degree said, 'This is right and I'm not going to be influenced by the polls if I'm confident on the right course.'"

Before concluding from this testimonial evidence that no calculation occurred, one must ask how likely it is that one could uncover evidence of calculation even if, in truth, Bush had been politically motivated. For one thing, discussion of political considerations, if any occurred, would probably have been limited to Bush's closest aides, who would then remain loyally silent. For another, decision-makers need not be aware of their real motives—need not, that is, say to themselves or anyone else. "I am going to take this grave action to bail myself out of a political mess"—in order to have been influenced by politics. They can simply allow themselves, possibly unconsciously, to be persuaded by reasons

that someone else, in different political circumstances, would not find persuasive.

It is worth noting, in this connection, that Bush's publicly stated goals are not really so far from the political goals I have suggested. After all, a president who leads an effective international response to, as Bush sought to convince the public, the greatest threat to world peace since Nazi Germany, thereby playing Churchill to Saddam's Hitler, would obviously avoid criticism for "losing Iraq" or being a wimp. Lofty international goals may thus satisfy down-to-earth political needs, and may be pursued or even created for this reason.

Yet how, in view of these concerns, could a researcher *ever* show that politicians have taken grave political decisions for reasons of political interest?

Actually, quite easily: by gathering data on whether, over many diverse cases, politicians facing a certain situation act consistently in accord with their supposed interest.

For the present problem, such data have already been gathered. According to three studies, U.S. presidents from Truman to Reagan have, in fact, been more prone to use force at times when the country was in economic difficulty.¹³ Thus, President Bush, in launching the Gulf War in the midst of the 1990–91 recession, conformed to the general pattern.

The correlation between use of force and economic difficulty is, I should add, far from perfect. Nor do the data alone explain why the correlation exists. Yet the data do show a connection between the political vulnerability and decision-making that bears scrutiny.

I will have more to say about these data after some additional data have been reviewed. In the meantime, discussion may be summarized as follows: All of the testimonial evidence concerning Bush's behavior in this phase of the Gulf Crisis depicts a president who acted on the basis of his conception of U.S. interests. Yet a parallel explanation for this behavior, based on Bush's political vulnerabilities, can be readily constructed, and there is quantitative evidence that one of Bush's vulnerabilities—a weak national economy—has affected foreign policy decision-making in past administrations.

THE CONGRESSIONAL RALLY BEHIND THE PRESIDENT

A few days after declaring that Iraqi aggression against Kuwait would not stand, Bush announced that he was sending combat troops to Saudi Arabia to protect that country from invasion by Iraq. Congressional support for this decision was immediate and clear. As Senator George Mit-

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chell, Democratic leader in the Senate, told the press: "American interests and our long-standing ties with Saudi Arabia make the president's decision to help defend Saudi Arabia the correct one. . . . It is important for the nation to unite behind the president in this time of challenge to American interests."¹⁴ Many members of Congress made similar supporting statements and no member of Congress publicly opposed the initial decision to commit U.S. ground forces to the region.¹⁵

Congressional support for Bush in this phase of the crisis appears to have been politically important. With Congress supporting the president, the media were deprived of oppositional sources, which constrained them to be supportive, which further enhanced public support for Bush. With strong support for his policies at home, the president's threat to use force gained credibility abroad, which strengthened his hand in pulling together an international coalition against Iraq. The initial congressional and public support for his policies may also have encouraged Bush to escalate the level of military confrontation later on.

Elite support which generates mass rallies for presidential policies is common in foreign policy crises (see Brody, Chapter 10 in this volume). How can it be explained in this case?

When I asked a senior foreign policy aide why congressional leaders rallied behind the president's decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia, the question struck him as silly. "Why not support the president when he stands up for American interests? You can always withdraw your support later if you want to. In the meantime, go along." This aide also said that he had seen intelligence reports suggesting that Iraq intended to invade Saudi Arabia. "I've seen lots of this kind of data in other cases, and not all of it showed what the president said it showed. But this time, the evidence was strong."

These factors came up in other interviews and were never contradicted. Iraq's aggression was perceived in Congress as a real threat to American interests, and there was little political cost to supporting the president, so why not go along, at least for now.

It should not be assumed, however, that Congress would acquiesce in any presidential action in a crisis. Although some legislators doubted that the U.S. interest in Kuwait was strong enough to justify war, few doubted that the U.S. had an important interest in the region. Such judgments are best understood as reflections of reigning conceptions of geopolitics, and were the only apparent motivation of the congressional rally in August.

It appears especially unlikely that congressional leaders were toadying to public opinion in their support for Bush's policies rather than ex-

pressing their own feelings. For one thing, congressional endorsement of Bush's decision to send troops to the Gulf began in the same news cycle in which the policy was announced, before public reaction was known. For another, some congressional leaders who praised the president in August criticized him in November when he announced a policy they disliked. Although polls had by then shown Bush's Gulf policies to be popular, these leaders (though not necessarily all member of Congress) showed little hesitation in lambasting the president.

So here it appears that Washington elites took an action—public endorsement of Bush's Gulf policy—on the basis of their own convictions. In so doing, they were not, in any discernible way, responding to public opinion but helping to shape it. They did so, however, in the comfortable knowledge that if Bush's policies failed, they could bail out without incurring political damage to themselves.

THE NOVEMBER TROOP DEPLOYMENT

The August deployment of 200,000 troops to the Gulf was too small to take offensive action against the 400,000 Iraqi troops in Kuwait. The purpose was simply to defend Saudi Arabia. But on November 8, Bush announced the deployment of enough additional troops to give the United States and its allies the capacity to launch offensive actions.

The additional troops profoundly transformed the crisis. The initial expectation was that events would play out over many months or perhaps years while sanctions and diplomacy ran their course. But the American force was now too large to wait in the desert while sanctions ran slowly on, so the timetable for resolution of the crisis speeded up. Either Iraq would withdraw within three or four months, or the U.S. would go to war.

Congressional Democrats were furious about the new troop deployment, claiming that it "boxed us in" to a position in which they would have two bad choices: acquiesce in a presidential decision to use force, which most Democrats thought was bad policy, or breach national unity by "taking on" Bush in the midst of crisis, which was political dynamite.

Republicans, however, sympathized with Bush's decision to speed up the crisis. If U.S. troops were kept in the desert for an extended period, said a Republican Senate aide, "we would start getting letters from families with loved ones overseas, stories about little babies who had never seen their fathers, then the inevitable accident in which lots of GI's are killed . . . then pictures of children in Iraq starving from the boycott." Congress, he said, responds to this kind of thing. "I think you would have seen a process of weakening of American resolve" which would

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have made it hard to start a war if sanctions failed to work. "This is a classic case of the 'best' policy [i.e., trying sanctions first] being politically impossible."¹⁶

Another aide to a Republican senator saw the same nightmare. "It would have been a delight to the Democrats," who would be constantly "sniping at Bush" and "eroding support for his policy" with the public. And then, once the public support was gone, the Democrats would want Congress to vote. "This is a very partisan place . . . a sick place," he said.

In my interview with the National Security official, I asked whether the domestic political effects of the second troop deployment—boxing in the Democrats, and avoiding a drawn out affair in which public support would erode—had been intended by the administration, or were merely fortuitous coincidence. The latter, he said; military concerns entirely determined policy. "Without additional troops, we had no chance of persuading Saddam to leave Kuwait," he said. "Why should he leave if we couldn't make him leave?"

I also asked whether the decision to send extra troops had been affected by the Vietnam War, in which flagging public support made it politically impossible to send more troops when they were needed. Perhaps troops were sent early because public support wouldn't exist when they came to be needed. "That's the same question you just asked," he replied. "We weren't thinking about domestic support when we decided to send more troops." He agreed that public support might wear thin during an embargo, but "we always assumed that we'd have the support to do what needed to be done."

At this point I asked whether the Bush administration had paid *any* attention to public opinion during the crisis. Certainly, the official replied, "In order to make our threats credible to Saddam and to hold our international coalition together, it was tremendously important for us to demonstrate that we had national unity in support of our policies."

What practically was done to assure such public support, I asked. "We worked a lot harder than usual on putting out statements, getting the president out there explaining the policy, sending people out to speak to groups." Seeking U.N. approval for the use of force, he added, was also part of a strategy to bolster domestic public opinion.

"Public relations was not a strength of this administration," in large part because Bush didn't like having to make speeches, the official said. "But on this we really tried."

Again, then, testimonial evidence indicates that political considerations and public opinion played no role in the Bush administration's decision. The administration was concerned about public opinion, but

this concern manifested itself in efforts to convince the public to accept the policies that the Bush administration judged to be the best.

But as before, there are reasons to doubt this conclusion. First, the decision was taken in a context in which the public had supported Bush initiatives so far. For example, 66 percent said in a CBS-*New York Times* survey just before the troop announcement that it was the "right thing" to send troops to Saudi Arabia. As can be seen in table 1 of my earlier essay (Chapter 9 in this volume), there were clear indications that the public, though not clamoring for more aggressive policies, would go along with stronger action if so urged. So if the Bush administration didn't worry much about public opinion in deliberating over the second troop deployment, it was because it had learned it didn't have to. It could anticipate that a public that had supported its initiatives up to that point would respond favorably to new initiatives as well.

There is, in addition, indirect evidence of a more fundamental political influence. In a study of wars since 1815 that involved democracies, Gaubatz (1991) found that nations were less likely to become engaged in wars at election time than at other times.¹⁷ Although the reason for this was not clear, avoidance of political risk appeared a likely possibility.

Although neither Gaubatz's study nor the studies I cited earlier use data from the Bush years, the patterns they find correctly anticipate Bush's two key decisions in the Gulf crisis: As the country was slipping into recession, Bush sent troops to the Gulf and pledged to force Iraq to leave Kuwait; and, in a separate decision, he dispatched enough extra troops to make sure that, if war did occur, it would occur in 1991 rather than in 1992, the election year.

How does one evaluate this evidence? Although the coincidence of the particular case of the Gulf War with a general pattern cannot prove anything about the one case, it can certainly raise suspicion. If that suspicion still seems unwarranted, consider the following: If Iraq had invaded Kuwait at the beginning of 1992, and if the U.S. economy had been booming at the time, would the president have been as likely to risk war as soon as troops could be readied for assault, as Bush did in the Gulf crisis? Or would he have been more likely to rely on sanctions until after the election, even if that meant waiting a year or more?

These questions, though obviously unanswerable, make clear, I think, that the suspicion raised by the correlational data is reasonable, and that the general issue under examination—whether presidents take account of the likely political impact of their foreign policy decisions—must be taken seriously even when, as in the case of Bush and the Gulf War, there is no testimonial evidence that the president did so.

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CONGRESS AUTHORIZES THE USE OF FORCE AGAINST IRAQ

On January 12, Congress voted on resolutions authorizing the president to use "all necessary means" to drive the Iraqi army from Kuwait. After a decorous debate, the resolutions passed by votes of 52–47 in the Senate and 250–183 in the House.

These vote margins were roughly in line with contemporary opinion polls, which showed the public divided but leaning toward war.¹⁸ The votes of individual House members tended, in addition, to line up with opinion in their districts: The stronger Bush had run in a district in 1988, the more likely its representative was to vote for use of force (Jacobson 1993). Taken together, these facts strongly suggest that the congressional vote on the war was a well-calibrated response to the public opinion that existed at the time of the vote.

Yet to take this as the whole story of the public's influence on the Gulf War vote would be greatly misleading. Members of Congress are deeply strategic players whose visible actions often obscure their real intent. Consider this example from the Gulf Crisis: Senate liberals, as I was told by a well-placed source, initially wanted Congress to vote in September on a resolution that would both approve Bush's decision to send troops to the Gulf and set strict conditions on the use of those troops in an offensive operation. Liberals put aside this plan, however, after concluding that, in the flush of public support for the president that existed in September, and with a congressional election coming up in November, Republicans might be able attract enough support from electorally vulnerable Democrats to reverse the intent of the resolution. Rather than voting to restrict Bush's authority to take military action against Iraq, as liberals wanted, Congress might pass an amended resolution that would permit Bush to use force at his discretion. It was, the liberals therefore calculated, safer to wait until after the election and after public support for Bush had begun to erode, since that would increase chances of a dovish vote in Congress.

Such strategic maneuvering, which routinely occurs in Congress, can turn evidence of apparent responsiveness on its head. What looks at first like Congress doing the bidding of the public becomes instead congressional leaders manipulating events so that they can use public opinion as a cover for doing what they want to do anyway.

This problem is key to interpreting the action Congress finally took on the Gulf War. When Congress reconvened after the election, public support for Bush's gulf policies had, as liberals had anticipated, declined. By

quite lopsided margins, the public also appeared to favor congressional debate, as this CBS News–*New York Times* poll item shows:

President Bush and his advisers have said public debate over whether we should fight Iraq will hurt the effort to persuade Iraq to get out of Kuwait. Others say Congress should be able to debate the issue openly. What do you think? Will debate hurt the effort to get Iraq out of Kuwait, or should Congress be able to debate the issue openly:

| | |
|--------------------|-----|
| Hurt effort | 25% |
| Debate openly | 65 |
| Both (volunteered) | 3 |
| Don't know | 8 |

In view of this, many liberals wanted to vote on a resolution to restrict Bush's powers to go to war, and to do so in December. The reason for moving quickly was fear that, as the U.N.'s January deadline for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait approached, public pressure for a prowar vote might become too strong to resist.

Yet the Democratic leadership, though wanting to limit Bush's powers to make war, nonetheless put off scheduling a vote until January. Why it did so, and how public opinion affected its decision, is what I shall now try to explain. Since, however, the leadership's actions must always fit the needs and preferences of its followers (see Cox and McCubbins 1992), I begin with the views of ordinary members of Congress.

Ordinary members. In the middle of November, as war was growing more likely, Defense Secretary Dick Cheney gave a briefing to about a hundred members of the House. As Bob Woodward described the scene in *The Commanders*,

After an hour, Cheney said, "I assume all of you guys want to vote up or down on the proposition."

The room erupted. There were shouts of no and yes (p. 311).

Many members of Congress did not initially want to vote on whether the U.S. should go to war against Iraq. Some legislators, most commonly from very safe seats, were eager to play the role of partisan gladiators. But the majority of members were more hesitant. They would get little credit no matter how the war turned out but might face retribution if they either opposed a successful war or supported a disastrous one. In

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this situation, many members saw no reason to commit themselves to a position any sooner than necessary, and a few, as I was told, wanted to avoid taking a position even at the very end.

Such reticence is normal in Congress. Although members may have particular issues on which they are always prepared to do partisan combat, few are eager to take on issues that are both highly conflictual and highly salient to the public (Arnold 1991).

Eventually, however, congressional leaders scheduled a vote, thus forcing members to take a public stand. When I asked staff aides how members decided to vote on the war, virtually all said public opinion had been a modest influence on decision-making and that the members' own judgments about "the right policy" to follow were paramount. The vote was, in a phrase that came up repeatedly, a "conscience vote," one that many members had anguished over more than any they had ever cast. "When you're voting whether to send soldiers into battle, you don't think about politics," I was told many, many times.

One could, however, just as easily make the opposite argument: "When you're voting whether to send soldiers into battle, you had better think about the politics, because if you take the wrong side of the issue, your constituents are likely to notice." And, in fact, a few legislative aides went on to observe that the vote was a conscience vote mainly because current public opinion was split and the most politically relevant aspect of the decision, the outcome of the war, was unknown. For example:

[O]ne congressional aide explained to me after . . . "The vote was a potential career-killer—either way." The members of Congress knew that they could be caught on the wrong side of history—but when they voted there was no telling which side that would be. (Drew 1991, p. 86).

An aide with many years of experience on Capitol Hill put it this way:

You're talking about a body of politicians about as good as any in the world, and suddenly they're not getting a clear message from the public. Some guys, of course, are all conscience on every vote, but most members wanted to make a political decision and couldn't.

. . . A lot of the anguish you heard so much about was just because members couldn't get a clear message from the public.

The notion that many members voted their conscience only because they were forced to do so by circumstance was, as I indicated, volunteered only a few times. But after the idea was suggested, I raised it many

more times myself, and in only one case did someone disagree, this person saying it was "too cynical." In the other cases, I got a silent nod, a statement of "well, of course," or some other form of assent.

We have, then, a convergence of two powerful forces: The normal reluctance of members of Congress to risk their careers on salient and controversial issues, and members' uncertainty over how the action they took would appear to the public in light of future events. Both encouraged a low-profile approach to the issue.

Two other features of the congressional vote are noteworthy. The first is the solemn manner in which it was conducted. Partisan acrimony was put aside as member after member went before colleagues—and, of course, the television audience—to offer heartfelt and thoughtful accounts of their votes. The occasion was, as several aides still proudly recalled, one of "Congress' finest hours."

These decorous trappings had great importance to members. In dangerous circumstances, it is essential to cast what in Congress are called "explainable votes"—votes that appear well-reasoned, well-informed, and sincere.¹⁹ And this is what the long, dignified debate on the war, which was not really a debate at all but a series of unrelated monologues, permitted members to do.

The other notable feature of the vote was its partisan composition. Essentially all of the Republicans and 70 percent of the Democrats cast party-line votes. Such voting is by no means unusual. Legislators come from districts that differ in partisan orientation and tend to reflect those differences in their voting. Whether one counts this as the influence of public opinion, since different publics select different types of members, or the influence of conscience, since members, once elected, may cast ideological votes that are akin to conscience votes, is not clear. Undoubtedly, both factors contributed to the partisan coloration of the war vote.

As in the examination of decision-making in the White House, then, one can identify two quite different explanations for why key decisions were made. One stresses that, after much soul-searching, members of Congress voted their consciences. This explanation came up in most interviews, and in some it was the only one given much credence. The other explanation stressed political calculation—that any vote was risky, that members were frustrated by the difficulty of anticipating how future opinion would judge the war, and that little could be gained and much possibly lost by high-profile involvement in the issue.

The Democratic leadership. As in any foreign policy crisis, the president set the agenda to which Congress had to respond. The essence of Bush's

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policy was to "threaten war to prevent war"; that is, make a credible threat to force Iraq from Kuwait in the hope that it would then withdraw on its own accord. The president further asserted that his role as commander-in-chief gave him all the authority he needed to make good on this threat.

The Democratic leadership of Congress—in particular, Speaker Thomas Foley and Senate Leader George Mitchell—had two fundamental objections to this agenda. They opposed war until sanctions had been given a long try, and they objected to the assertion that the president could start a war without authorization from Congress. "Under the American Constitution, the president has no legal authority—none whatsoever—to commit the United States to war," asserted Senator Mitchell. "Only Congress can make that grave decision."²⁰

From the president's side, disagreement with Congress was a source of concern but no apparent anguish. The president, according to published accounts and my interviews, worried that congressional opposition might give encouragement to Iraq but felt confident that he had both the moral right and sufficient political support to go to war without Congress. "Nobody cared about Congress," as a military official bluntly stated.

Public opinion was more important to the administration, but here Bush was confident. "Low levels of public support for war before the war started were no problem," explained the same military official. "We felt the country basically supported the military effort, and that as soon as the fighting started, there would be a surge of increased support." Then, if the war could be won quickly enough, public support would never become an issue.

The complement of presidential confidence was congressional trepidation. The leadership's problem was how to oppose the president without asking too much of politically cautious party members or risking public backlash. This was no easy task. Real opposition would draw Democrats into a partisan crossfire many would prefer to avoid. It could also undermine the strategy of threatening war to avoid war, thereby making Democrats liable to the charge that, in opposing Bush's policy, they were making war more likely. Why, after all, should Iraq back down peacefully if Democrats were going to tie Bush's hands?

Hence, when Bush announced the second troop deployment, the leadership faced a dilemma. It could, as many liberals wished, take advantage of weaker public support for Bush to press for limits on the president's unilateral ability to use force. Or it could hold back, see how events unfolded, and hope for more favorable conditions later on.

Republicans made sure Democrats were acutely aware of the political dangers of confrontation. Republican Senator Trent Lott said in November that if Congress allowed a debate to become "a backing away from the [administration's] policy, it could be giving aid and comfort to Saddam." In using language from the constitutional definition of treason, Lott sent a message that some Democrats were still angry about more than two years later. Bush made the same point by showing a group of legislators a clipping from an Iraqi newspaper purporting to describe congressional opposition to war.

With these incidents in mind, I asked an aide to a leading Senate Republican whether Democrats might have faced attacks questioning their patriotism if they had vigorously opposed Bush's policy. "That's not a possibility," he replied. "That's a fact." Democratic aides to whom I spoke made little effort to conceal their fear of such attacks.

Further, it was not clear that Bush would respect a vote that went against him. This was perhaps the most sensitive point. "There was," an aide said, "a fear that Bush would go ahead no matter what Congress did." The prospect of U.S. troops poised for battle, or perhaps going into combat, fighting and dying, while the courts refereed a dispute between Congress and the president was regarded as "horrendous." It could give the whole government, but especially congressional Democrats, a black-eye in public opinion that would last for decades. And there was no guarantee it would stop the war.

In these circumstances, a Democratic push to limit Bush's war-making power seemed risky no matter how it might come out. Antiwar Democrats might find themselves branded as traitors, abandoned by their more cautious colleagues, and ultimately defeated in their bid to restrain the president. Or, equally perilous, Democrats might win the vote, plunging the nation into "a constitutional crisis within a foreign policy crisis" that would upset everyone.

So, faced with a potentially lose-lose proposition, Democratic leaders decided not to press for an immediate vote on Bush's war-making powers, and to rely instead on public hearings to make the case against war (see Entman and Page, Chapter 4 in this volume). As Representative Lee Hamilton accurately forecast in early December, "Congress is going to be on the margin of any decision to use force."²¹

The leadership did not, however, abandon all effort. There was one type of congressional vote that Bush could perhaps be compelled to honor, namely, one that he himself had requested. There was, of course, a Catch-22 here: the leadership knew that Bush would never request a vote unless he was certain in advance he would win, but it nevertheless

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began trying to induce the president to request such a vote. As part of this effort, Foley reportedly assured the president in meetings with him that he would not invoke party discipline to pressure Democrats into voting as a bloc against the president.

Why, if the leadership knew it was likely to lose a vote that Bush requested, did it care about having one? Because it felt that a presidential request would create a precedent that would strengthen the role of Congress in the foreign policy-decision-making process. That, apparently, was the most that the House leadership felt it could get from the crisis.

But Bush would not concede even that much, ignoring pleas from both Democratic and Republican leaders that he request a vote. Finally, amidst charges of political cowardice,²² Foley and Mitchell decided on their own to schedule a debate on a war resolution to begin January 10, with a vote to follow immediately. This meant that debate would occur after diplomacy between the U.S. and Iraq had ended, so Congress could no longer be accused of undermining the policy of "threatening war to avoid war." But it also meant that the vote would occur just before the U.N. deadline, at which time many expected fighting to begin. This made opposition to the war resolution seem like voting against the troops who would fight it, a perception that, by many accounts, made it harder to vote against war.

It is striking that Foley, in announcing his decision to hold a vote on the eve of war, announced at the same time that he expected the president to prevail. In keeping with his earlier assurance to Bush, Foley also said the vote would be a "conscience vote" in which the leadership would make no attempt to line up votes against the war. Mitchell, in announcing the Senate vote, made no prediction about who would win in that chamber, but two other Senators predicted the war resolution would pass.²³

Shortly after Foley and Mitchell announced that a vote would be held, the president wrote a letter asking Congress to support the war. As the *New York Times* noted at the time, "Bush made the request only after Congressional leaders said in recent days that he was almost certain to receive Congressional endorsement"—provided that he worked hard for it.²⁴ So, in contrast to the House Democratic leadership, Bush did not declare a conscience vote. Rather, he led an all-out lobbying operation, which complemented the large and well-organized prowar whip organization that had been working unopposed in the House for several weeks under the leadership of Representative Stephen Solarz.

Under these rather advantageous conditions—a huge U.S. force transported to the Gulf and poised for battle; all diplomacy at an end and

the clock ticking down on the U.N. ultimatum to withdraw; the Democratic party mounting no organized opposition to the president's policies and, in fact, remaining mostly silent for over a month; and the Democratic House leadership declaring a "conscience vote" and conceding victory to the president—Congress voted a green light for offensive action in the Gulf.

It is essential to realize that it was no accident that Congress voted under these particular circumstances. The time of the vote was chosen, after much deliberation, by the Democratic leadership.²⁵ The decision-point appears to have come in December, when leaders decided against a galvanizing partisan vote. This was, as indicated earlier, a time when polls showed the public lopsidedly favoring congressional debate, when public support for Bush's policies had declined some 10 to 15 percentage points from its summer peak, and when the public was divided over the prospect of using force. It is thus hard to argue that public opinion, at least as expressed in polls, determined the outcome.

Then what did? I pressed hard in my interviews to find out and, as usual, everyone's initial responses stressed concern about good public policy. One aide, a political scientist who has since returned to academia, said the leadership was motivated by the belief that conflict with the president—that is, a constitutional crisis—would be dangerous for the troops in the field and bad for democratic government generally. He said he was "astounded" by the extent to which the leadership ignored partisanship and tried to do what was right for the country. "In my time on the Hill I saw nothing as apolitical as this vote," he said. "There was a strong feeling of moral righteousness." Another aide said over and over that the issue was just not "ripe" for a vote until January. And another staffer stressed Foley's concern both to do what was right for the country and—in a franker acknowledgment of political factors than the others—to protect the reputation of Congress. Instigating a vote that might well lead to a constitutional crisis would accomplish neither of these goals. Was Foley, I asked, not also concerned about what was good for the Democratic party? "This was a case when good policy was good politics," the aide replied.

I would draw particular attention to the last remark, except that I would restate it as, "This was a case when national unity was good politics." Despite their opposition to an early war, Democratic leaders were clearly reluctant to undercut the president or disrupt national unity. There were apparently two reasons for this reluctance. One was that, as described in the last section, many Democrats whose votes would be needed in an all-out fight were disinclined, whatever their preferences

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on the war, to be dragged into such a fight. The other was the leadership's judgment that, whatever the polls seemed to say, the public didn't really want to see Congress vying with the president to see who could control foreign policy. It wanted a smooth, confident national effort, and if it got a partisan mess instead, it would be more inclined to blame the Democrats—with their long-standing vulnerability as weak on foreign policy—than to blame the president. Nobody would win, but Congress as an institution and the Democratic party would be the biggest losers. Thus, when I asked a veteran Democratic aide what would have happened if Congress had voted in December against allowing Bush to go to war on his own authority, he was hardly able to take the question seriously: "We would have been accused of appeasement, of playing into Iraq's hands. . . ," he exclaimed. "We'd never do that, it would be a disaster. . . . It couldn't happen."

The stress on national unity was never more apparent than in Foley's speech during the House debate. He spoke strongly against war, but ended with the plea that "however you vote. . . . let us come together after the vote with the notion that we are Americans here, not Democrats and Republicans, all anxious to do the best for our country. . . . without anything but the solemn pride that we voted as our conscience and judgment told us we should."²⁶

These are the words of a man standing against a measure he knew would be extremely popular in a few days, when the fighting began, and who didn't want himself or his party, despite their antiwar beliefs, to be guilty of anything that could be called obstructionism. Foley was speaking his mind, but he wasn't getting in the way of those who wanted war.

Clearly, not everyone in Congress was so worried about a galvanizing partisan fight. Some members of both parties began demanding a vote on the Gulf War as early as October. I was especially curious about Republican Senate leader Robert Dole, a loyal supporter of the president who was among the earliest and most insistent in demanding a congressional vote. When I asked an aide familiar with Dole's thinking why the senator had taken this position when it might precipitate a constitutional crisis, he replied that Dole thought the Democrats were trying to "have it both ways"—engaging in cheap partisan criticism of Bush without being willing to go squarely on the record in favor of an alternative policy. Thus, he said, congressional maneuverings on the war were essentially "a political exercise between warring parties trying to set each other up. That's the way it works here, and Dole wanted to draw the lines clearly." Meanwhile, on the other side of the aisle, some Democrats

felt equally strongly that the party should go all-out and let the chips fall where they may.²⁷

It is notable that none of the partisan gladiators on either side of the issue suffered politically from the war, and some may have slightly increased their national visibility. Indeed, in the end, almost everyone had something to be grateful for in the way the war vote was handled. The gladiators were able to make principled declamations on national television; the cautious were given ample opportunity in a dignified setting to cast explainable votes; Congress enhanced its popular standing because of the manner in which it conducted its "debate,"²⁸ and enhanced its institutional status because Bush finally sought its approval for war; and, not least important, the country was spared an ugly constitutional crisis. The leadership had done its job, not by following public opinion, which did not really exist on the critical questions of how and when a congressional vote should be taken, but by thinking carefully about how the public would likely react to future events.

One other point is worth pondering. As has been widely noted, victory in the Gulf War, although a boon to Bush's short-term popularity, failed to help much in the 1992 election. The usual explanation is that the public turned its attention to a more salient matter, the economy. Another factor, however, may be the way the war vote was handled. Although many congressional Democrats felt and spoke strongly against the war, their opposition was so carefully modulated and packaged that it hardly penetrated to much of the public. This is apparent in the results of a June 1991 survey by the National Election Studies:

Before the war actually started, do you think one political party was more in favor of using military force in the Persian Gulf than the other party was, or do you think they were about equal in their support for using force? [emphasis in the original]

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Democrats favored force more | 1% |
| Both supported force equally | 60 |
| Republicans favored force more | 38 |
| Don't know | 1 |

With most Americans unable to remember the Democratic party's position on the war just five months after it occurred, it is hardly surprising that Bush had trouble capitalizing on it in the election. But what if the Democrats had succeeded in defeating the war resolution and provoking a constitutional crisis? That, surely, would have been memo-

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rable, and memorable in a way that would have hurt the electoral prospects of the Democrats.

Conclusion

Social scientists are properly skeptical of studies, like this one, that rely on unsystematic data. It is too easy for someone with an active imagination and any talent for writing to spin out alluring stories. Yet, especially in the early stages of inquiry, studies using such data can be useful. In this paper, I have sought to contribute in two areas: the role of domestic politics in foreign policy decisions, and the role of elites in shaping mass opinion.

PUBLIC OPINION AND FOREIGN POLICY

Scholars of foreign policy have traditionally paid little attention to domestic politics. Decisions to go to war, in particular, have been thought far too important to be susceptible to influence by mere politics. That presumption, however, is changing. Chagrined by quantitative studies showing that a variety of domestic and political factors are correlated with foreign policy decision-making, scholars are now scrambling to develop a better understanding of how exactly domestic factors influence the international behavior of states.

One question for foreign policy specialists is how states can behave as "unitary actors," that is, develop and stick to a set of coherent policy goals. Certainly the United States managed an impressive degree of national unity during the Gulf Crisis. So the question is how, despite the fact that Congress and the presidency were controlled by different parties in the Gulf Crisis, it did so.

The basis of national unity, as I have suggested, was in elite perceptions of future public opinion, perceptions that were probably quite well-founded. President Bush, fearing the fallout of a do-nothing policy in the midst of a recession and judging that the public would follow and ultimately approve strong leadership, steered a firm, straight-ahead course. The leaders of Congress, judging that the public would be repulsed by the effects of a strong challenge to Bush's leadership, declined to go all-out against it. One can certainly imagine conditions under which elite solicitude for mass opinion would have different implications for national capacity to behave as a unitary actor, but it is noteworthy that domestic politics can, under at least some conditions, support such action.

Another question in the foreign policy literature is whether mass

opinion tends to be pacifist or warlike. This classic question does not resonate well in the Gulf Crisis. If we assume, for the moment, that my analysis of elite calculations is correct, and assume also that the anticipations of public opinion formed by successful politicians are likely to have a realistic basis, American mass opinion can be characterized as follows: warlike in its presumed readiness to punish Bush for losing Kuwait; warlike in its presumed unwillingness to brook messy challenges to Bush's assertive leadership; but pacifist in its presumed dislike of bloody wars and costly holding actions, which is what induced Bush to get the fighting over quickly and well before the election. In other words, the public wanted to have its cake and eat it too—to enjoy the benefits of an assertive national policy but not to incur the costs. So to ask whether a democratic mass public is pacifist or warlike may be like asking whether a public prefers a high level of government services or low taxes: It prefers both, of course, and will offer politicians every incentive to give it both.

Finally, a factor that seemed important in my analysis but has not received attention in quantitative studies of decision-making is a politician's *domestic* reputation for toughness in dealing with foreign adversaries, which appears to be highly valued among U.S. politicians. Democratic aides conceded that their party's reputation for weakness was a constraining factor in the calculations of the House leadership. In my interviews with executive branch officials, I did not feel it would be fruitful to ask whether Bush was also concerned about his reputation as a strong leader in foreign affairs, but I tried earlier to show why anyone in his position would have had reason to be so concerned. Eisenhower's willingness to allow France to be defeated in Indochina; Kennedy's hyper-tough responses to Khrushchev's provocations; Johnson's fear of being responsible for "losing Vietnam"; and Nixon's freedom to be the one to "go to China" seem additional, well-known instances in which domestic reputation may have been a factor in foreign policy decision-making. It would therefore seem worthwhile to find some way of quantifying domestic reputation and testing its presumed effects.

ELITE LEADERSHIP OF MASS OPINION

The primary conclusion of this chapter is that, many exaggerated reports of its demise to the contrary, the democratic interplay between leaders and followers was alive and well in the Gulf Crisis. Politicians of both parties were, as past studies have shown, active agents in shaping public opinion, but they took care to lead toward goals the public would ultimately approve; or, in the case of congressional Democrats, to avoid

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leading toward goals the public would not approve. In both cases, the threat of electoral retribution gave pause to the wielders of power. As the president himself expressed it, "I know whose backside is at stake and rightfully so. . . ."29 Congressional Democrats, thinking of their own posteriors, felt the same way. The interplay between leaders and followers did not turn on the mechanical translation of poll results into public policy, but the officials who took the nation to war were nonetheless vividly mindful that the public they were leading would hold them accountable for their leadership.

Notes

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1. The "indexing hypothesis" was proposed by Bennett (1991), who based his study on earlier work by Cohen (1973), Sigal (1973), and others.
2. See Gamson and Modigliani (1966), Mueller (1973), Brody (1991), and Zaller (1992). Studies by Brody, Iyengar and Simon, and Zaller (Chapters 10, 8, and 9 in this volume) also corroborate this view.
3. Article by R. W. Apple, Jr., *New York Times*, August 6, 1990, p. A7.
4. "Now or Later," *New York Times*, August 7, 1990, p. A19.
5. "Iraq's Naked Aggression," *New York Times*, August 3, 1990. Editorials in the *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, and *San Francisco Chronicle* take similar positions; the *Wall Street Journal*, was a bit more hawkish, but by no means urged military action.
6. U.S. News and World Report (1992, p.50).
7. A basis for criticism was present from the start; see Dorman and Livingston (Chapter 3 in this volume); David Hoffman, "U.S. Misjudgment of Saddam Seen: Early Evidence of Bellicosity, Drive for Dominance Noted," *Washington Post*, August 8, p. A1.
8. The Soviet empire was crumbling, but a *New York Times* headline during the unification of Germany indicates Bush's difficulty in claiming credit for it: "Bush Declares He Does Not Feel Left Out by Gorbachev and Kohl," July 18, 1990, p. A1.
9. "Still a Wimp," *Washington Post*, November 4, 1988.
10. "An Absence of Guiding Principle," *Washington Post*, October 12, 1990, p. A21.
11. Jack Nelson, "Conflict in Gulf Is Make or Break Test for President," *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1991, p. A8. Also David Shirbman, "Iraq Crisis Presents

- Bush with Crucial Opportunity to Define His Presidency, Determine His Future," *Wall Street Journal*, August 7, 1990, p. A18.
12. See Smith (1992) and *U.S. News and World Report* (1992) for summaries of available accounts.
 13. Ostrom and Job 1991; James and Oneal 1991; Brace and Hinkley 1992.
 14. Karen Tumulty, "Bush Gets Solid Backing from Congress," *Los Angeles Times*, August 9, 1990, p. A8.
 15. *Congressional Quarterly 1990 Almanac*, p. 727.
 16. See also "A Dangerous Mirage," *Washington Post*, November 1, 1990, p. B7, where Henry Kissinger writes that "by the time it is evident that sanctions alone cannot succeed, a credible military option will probably no longer exist."
 17. Gaubatz's study involves 17 democracies and 45 wars between 1838 and 1973. Three other studies, examining use of force rather than war initiation and focusing on the U.S., muddy this picture, finding positive, negative, and null relationships between electoral calendar and use of force (Ostrom and Job 1991, p. 315 and passim). The expected political effects of a minor use of force (e.g., Johnson's air raids on North Vietnam after the Tonkin Gulf incidents of August 1964) would likely be different than those of actual war.
 18. For analyses, see Mueller, forthcoming; William Schneider, "Public Backs Gulf War as Last Option," *National Journal*, January 5, 1991, p. 5; Richard Morin, "Two Ways of Reading the Public's Lips on Gulf Policy," *Washington Post*, January 14, 1991.
 19. See also Fenno (1978) and Kingdon (1989).
 20. *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, p. 736.
 21. Cited in C. Madison, "Sideline Players," *National Journal*, December 15, 1990, p. 3024.
 22. See Jeffrey Birnbaum, "New Congress, Full of Sound and Fury Over Iraq, Fuels Bipartisan Outrage by Signifying Nothing," *Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 1991, A8.
 23. See Adam Clymer, "Votes Backing Use of Force Are Predicted in Congress," *New York Times*, January 7, 1991, p. A7.
 24. "Bush Asks Congress to Back Use of Force," *New York Times*, January 9, 1991, p. A6.
 25. Aides to the top House leadership said the leadership felt it had a good but not certain chance of winning a vote in November or December, and contemporary journalistic accounts bear out this view (see R. Jeffrey Smith, "Capitol Hill Hearings Seen to Be Setback for Bush's Policy," *Washington Post*, December 1). Bush, by published accounts, also feared he would lose a fall vote. Yet most aides to less well-placed members, perhaps influenced by intervening events, thought the prowar position could have carried at any time. By all accounts, however, support for war in Congress grew stronger by January, when the vote was finally taken, than it had been in November.
 26. *Congressional Record*, January 12, 1991, pp. 441-42.
 27. There were, however, signs of restraint. A Nunn aide said "no one contemplated there would be a constitutional crisis because Bush would abide by Congress' decision, having asked for it." But what if Congress voted against war without having been asked by Bush? "I don't think there was ever any dwelling on that possibility," he said, because few favored that.

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28. According to the CBS-*New York Times* polls, the percentage saying Congress was doing a fair or good job went from 23 in the fall of 1990 to 48 in February, 1991.

29. Woodward (1991, 331).

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Conclusion

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