Causes of American Domestic Attitudes Toward the Use of Military Force

How do Americans decide to use military force overseas in a time of international crisis? A preponderance of research suggests that the determinants of individual attitudes fall into three categories: dispositions people have regarding world and political affairs, demographic characteristics, and—less explored—cognitive perceptions of strategic circumstances. While few studies have pursued an explanation that relies on public understanding of strategic circumstances, the research presented here suggests that perceptions of threat and opportunity play a significant role in individual development of opinion regarding the use of military force in specific situations. That is, individuals adapt dispositional notions that are oftentimes influenced by demographic characteristics in order to formulate an opinion toward immediate circumstances.

Introduction

In the wake of recent terrorist attacks against the United States, an overwhelming majority of Americans favor military action against those responsible and support President Bush's declared war on terrorism—a war that is being characterized as global and indefinite. Faced with the prospect of open-ended military engagement around the world, it is—perhaps now more than ever—important to understand but is far from certain what influences American support for the use of armed forces abroad (Gaubatz 1995; Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser 1999; and Sobel 2001). {PRIVATE }

Perspectives regarding the value of public opinion toward U.S. policymaking vary greatly. Public attitude toward foreign policy in general is often criticized as lacking factual

and intellectual substance and as being guided by emotion rather than reason (Almond 1950; Morgenthau 1973; Tocqueville 1958; and Wittkopf and McCormick 1990). Others, however, find American public opinion quite stable and rational. Instead of being whimsical, changes in public attitudes are typically prompted by significant events or alterations in the international system, such as during a crisis or confrontation, and are therefore reasonable (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Jentleson 1992; and Page and Shapiro 1992 and 1994). Many theorists simply conclude that, despite evidence of the public being ill-informed about international matters, there is "more to fear from processes and policies that blatantly disregard public sentiments than from those that make a serious effort to engage the public" (Holsti 1996, p. 21).

Despite normative differences regarding desirability, an increasing number of studies provide evidence that public opinion indeed has a palpable, if not growing, impact on U.S. foreign and security policies (Edwards 1981; Foyle 1999; Graham 1988 and 1994; Holsti 1992; Jacobs and Shapiro 1995 and 1999; Johnson 1971; Kernell 1978; Nixon 1978; Ostrum and Job 1986; Russett 1990; and Sobel 2001). At a minimum, public opinion establishes a framework or guidelines within which policymakers are able to consider various policy options (Almond 1950; Key 1961; Sobel 2001), if for no other reason than because democratic leaders want to be reelected (Serafino and Storrs 1993). In any case, unlike many less-severe foreign policy issues, war is heavily dependent on public involvement—from preparation to participation (Everts 2000). Indeed, conventional warfare is severely limited, if not impossible, without the support of the mass public (Bailey 1964). Therefore, understanding what influences American public opinion when deciding whether to go to war is vital to developing durable foreign and security policies.

Due to a "rally around the flag" phenomenon observed among the American populace once international conflict becomes a *fait accompli* (Brody and Shapiro 1989; Holsti 1996; Jentleson 2000; and Lian and Oneal 1993), this study does not explore attitudes once armed hostilities are underway nor does it consider hypothetical invasion of the United States. Rather, it examines why individual attitudes vary toward the *initiation* of U.S. force overseas. Because the introduction of any military power during crises invariably has warlike implications, attitudes toward the use of force are—for the purposes of this paper—inextricably linked with general opinions of foreign war. Moreover, war is traditionally considered the ultimate corrective in international affairs and thus, by definition, often a function of foreign policy (Clausewitz 1982; Orme 1997; and Waltz 1954). The inability to escape overall discussion of attitudes toward U.S. foreign policy when examining opinions of armed force becomes more apparent in the next section, which looks at a person's willingness to support military action abroad as a means to classify individual views on international affairs as a whole—this is a prevalent method used throughout relevant scholarship. Therefore, attitudes toward foreign and security policy are also useful for understanding the determinants of attitudes toward American use of armed force.

Several theories provide insight into how Americans decide whether military force is an apposite means when confronted with international crises. These analyses can be divided into three broad categories. One approach suggests that ideas or dispositions people have regarding world and political affairs in general guide individual attitudes about war and the utilization of military might. Another method for explaining public opinion toward the use of force falls within demographic factors or the daily lives of individuals. These studies look at dissimilarities associated with gender, race, education levels and other considerations

that comprise specific situations of the individual. In short, this research attempts to explain decisions in terms of types of people and personal circumstances. A third category relies on the cognitive perception of the situational strategic circumstances facing the United States. Lastly, a few scholars have recently used an integrative approach, combining but adding different weights to variables present in the above categories to provide more nuanced explanations. My research will draw on the integrative approach to provide greater insight into American mass decision making about the use of armed forces overseas.

The following sections discuss in greater detail the above categorical approaches to explaining attitudes toward war and the use of force.

Attitudinal Predispositions

Throughout much of American history, there has been a venerable perception that "politics stop at the water's edge" (Jentleson 2000; and Jordan, Taylor, and Mazarr 1999). This has not always been the case, however, and many analysts find that partisanship has increasingly characterized foreign and security policy debate over recent decades (Destler, Gelb and Lake 1984). Several studies indicate that prior to the Vietnam conflict, public attitudes toward international affairs could hardly be considered partisan (Holsti 1996; and Hughes 1978). Since Vietnam and the Johnson administration though, clefts over foreign policy have progressively developed along party lines (Holsti 1996; and Sobel 2001). For example, in relation to Democrats, Republicans more heavily favored military intervention to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in polls taken prior to the January 15 deadline imposed by President Bush ("The Public Opinion and Demographic Report" 1991). However, when references to the Bush administration were omitted from questions

regarding the use of force, partisan differences became less significant although they unambiguously persisted (Holsti 1996).

Indeed, ideology and party identification are consistently recognized as having a strong correlation with attitudes toward the use of force (Russett, Hartley and Murray 1994; Holsti 1996; and Wittkopf 1990). To explain this, some theorists suggest that rather than reasoning policy issues for themselves, most people take cues from elites they identify as representing their own political values (Converse 1964; and Zaller 1991). Such "knowledge of these cues [however] is likely to depend on general levels of political awareness" to begin with (Zaller 1991, p. 1216). Others have argued that individuals respond to policy debates based simply on the perceived credibility of their sources (Key 1961; and Mueller 1973).

While a good deal of study regarding partisanship revolves around liberal-conservative ideological dispositions generally associated with the two major political parties (McClosky 1967), many researchers have broken up the liberal-conservative taxonomies into values geared more specifically to foreign policy in order to better explain variances that could not be accounted for solely by party identification (Hero 1969; Russett, Hartley and Murray 1994). The first is a distinction between internationalists, who largely favor U.S. involvement in a wide range of global activities, and isolationists, who are inclined toward a narrow scope of U.S. participation in matters overseas (Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser 1999). Among the internationalists, there is a second divide between those who are considered cooperative and militant (Holsti and Rosenau 1986; Hinckley 1992; and Wittkopf 1990). These dimensions provide us with four distinct foreign policy belief systems that also account for differences regarding ends and means of U.S. activities abroad, not simply whether America should have a part in global matters. Sobel (2001) broadly

explains these new categories as follows. *Internationalists* favor a "combination of conciliatory and conflict strategies" in accord with the internationalist tendency mentioned above. *Accommodationists* embrace cooperative internationalism, while *hard-liners* take a militant internationalist approach. Finally, *isolationists* reject the above forms of internationalism and most U.S. activity abroad that is not directly relevant to the country's survival.

While these belief systems can often be identified with domestic-issue typologies, such as liberal, conservative, populist and libertarian, they demonstrate that classifying respondents by simple partisanship is incomplete. For example, Holsti (1996) suggests that Democrats are accommodationists and unsupportive of militant internationalism, while recent trends place a majority of Republicans as internationalists or hard-liners—the two groups that advocate more militant internationalism and are posited on either side of accommodationism on a continuum from least to most interest in seeing a robust U.S. foreign policy. Moreover, others have claimed that isolationists are less-well educated and have little understanding of international issues. Therefore, rather than having strong positions against specific U.S. involvement overseas, as traditionally considered part of the isolationist paradigm, they are simply apathetic and largely subject to outside influence (Mandelbaum and Schneider 1979). Additionally, they are motivated more by "valence than by position issues" and may find themselves aligning with either group—accommodationists or one of the militant internationalists—as circumstances may warrant (Wittkopf 1990, p. 29; also see Schneider 1983).

In any case, the persistency of partisanship as a strong correlate of attitudes toward military force compels the testing of its significance. However, there also appears to be

interrelation among party identification and predisposed notions regarding *whether* and *how* the United States should be involved overseas, as they relate to decisions of whether to employ military forces. Therefore, the four belief systems established above should also be tested to better determine the value of ideological dispositions in the decision making processes regarding whether or not to use force as a "corrective" during an international crisis.

Demographics

The uniqueness of individuals has long been studied as a potential correlate of decision making. With the diverse makeup of the United States, such research toward decisions of foreign policy and military force has found a fitting milieu, corroborative evidence and a receptive audience (Bailey 1964; and Bardes 1997).

Education

Education has long been considered a predicator of American attitudes toward foreign policy in general and use of force in particular (Hero 1969; and Hughes 1978). Traditionally, it has been thought that "increasing levels of education are associated with stronger support for internationalism" and that, conversely, the less educated the more isolationist tendencies an individual reveals (Holsti 1996, p. 178). In fact, Holsti (1996) believes this to be one of the most well-grounded generalizations about American attitudes toward foreign policy (also see Watts 1985). Moreover, some scholars noticed support for militant internationalism shift to accommodationism among higher educated people in the 1970s (Hughes 1978). On the other hand, support for military action against Saddam

Hussein was highest among persons with some college experience, followed by college graduates, high school graduates, and those with less than high school diploma (Holsti 1996). While a correlation between education and attitude may exist, it was obviously not a linear relation in this study. Additionally, in the 1980s a significant percentage of the higher educated populace shifted back toward militant internationalism or hard-line views (Wittkopf 1990).

In short, while many analysts find that education has a strong correlation with attitudes toward military action, other findings have left the nature of this relationship unconvincing. Despite the uncertainty of the strength reported by some studies, a relationship between education and willingness to employ force overseas is expected. Moreover, several theorists also discuss a connection between education and the cognitive skills able to make foreign policy judgments (Schneider 1974-75; and Wittkopf 1990). Therefore, education is predicted to have an influence on foreign policy outlooks in general and willingness to use force specifically.

Gender

For centuries, the image of gender roles toward war has been that men go to war and women try to stop them (Elshtain, 1987). In recent history, however, American women can hardly be considered pacifists when examining their overall support for World War II, Korea and Vietnam (Conover and Sapiro, 1993). While the differences in attitudes among men and women certainly do not warrant the above stereotype, consistent variances do merit the inclusion of gender as a potential cause of the willingness to use military force.

Several studies over the last two decades indicate that a gender gap exists over

foreign policy issues, particularly those concerning war (Fite, Genest and Wilcox 1990; and Frankovic 1982). That is, women have been less supportive of the use of force during crises than men. While some studies have found gender differences largely disappear when combined with other variables (Wittkopf 1990, 1995), recent polls continue to show a discrepancy in level of support for military force between the sexes. For example, a May 1993 Gallup Poll questioning support for possible U.S. air strikes against Bosnian-Serb forces in order to protect Muslim enclaves revealed that such strikes were favored by 44 percent of the male and only 28 percent of the female respondents. Moreover, leading up to the Gulf War, women were nearly equally divided on possible U.S. military action, while men displayed much stronger support (Holsti 1996).

Many theories have attempted to explain the gender gap but few have been tested. In 1950, Almond suggested that "more women than men seem to be ignorant of or apathetic to foreign policy issues" (p. 121). More precisely, it may be that among the older American cohorts, women have lower levels of education than men and are therefore less attentive to international matters (Bendyn, Finucane, and Kirby 1996). This suggests that dissimilarities in attitude are not a result of inherent differences between men and women. Rather, gender differences are a function of society. Another such example supported by several researchers suggests that mothering impacts the views of women toward the use of force (Ruddick 1989). Women do more parenting and are therefore "more empathetic and less concerned with their own autonomy and individuation" (Conover and Sapiro, 1993, p. 1080). While others have attributed the gender gap to men being more biologically disposed toward violence than women, most theorists do not accept biological determinism as a strong rationale (Conover and Sapiro, 1993).

To be sure, a correlation between gender and warlike or pacifist attitudes is often assumed. Several studies have found this to be valid but the evidence suggests that the relationship is not strong enough to allow gender to be a reliable predicator of attitudes toward the use of force. Moreover, the correlation may be a function of other sociodemographic factors that have been tied to gender, such as political identification and education. Nonetheless, there is a significant enough gender gap to warrant consideration in determining variances in opinion regarding military force.

Generational

Karl Mannheim once argued that persons belonging to the same age group share a "common location in the social and historical process," thereby limiting "them to a specific range of experience, predisposing them for a certain characteristic mode of thought" (1952, p.291). Indeed, many researchers have considered generational gaps a fitting explanation for historical shifts—that occur approximately every generational time-span—in American public moods over internationalism and the willingness to use force (Klingberg 1952; and Roskin 1989). For example, Cantril shows in his 1951 study that there was a positive correlation between age and the willingness to use force against a belligerent Germany leading up to World War II, although support was low across the board until the attack on Pearl Harbor.

This notion of a generational gap carried over into the Vietnam era, as several studies began to conclude that the most distinguishable public divide is between persons whose views were shaped by pre-World War II events and those who experienced the Vietnam conflict (Allison 1970-71; and Russet 1975). That is, those who believed

isolationism and accommodation during the interwar years gave way to German expansionism and led directly to World War II were more internationally oriented and more likely to support the use of force to secure U.S. objectives overseas. Conversely, the generation who saw Vietnam as American foreign policy gone astray was more likely to be isolationist or cooperative, and would therefore be less supportive of military action abroad.

While theoretically sound, Holsti (1996) maintains that the generational gap does not hold up empirically. Indeed, polls taken during Vietnam indicate that the myth of the militant elder and pacifist college student was incorrect. Rather, several studies indicate that younger respondents were more likely to support U.S. military involvement in Southeast Asia (Converse and Schuman 1970; and Mueller 1973). Moreover, polls taken since Vietnam regarding U.S. military intervention demonstrate little age difference in opinion, particularly when other sociodemographic characteristics are considered (Wittkopf 1990). For instance, attitudes regarding U.S. military involvement in Bosnia during the early 1990s provided little if any evidence for the generational thesis (Holsti 1996). One study, however, did conclude that a generational gap existed in the perception of analogies, such as between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Hitler's Germany or Vietnam, drawn during a crisis. However these analogies were found to have little impact on individual positions toward the use of force (Schuman and Rieger 1992).

Recent evidence suggests that age does not have a strong relationship with attitudes toward the use of force. However, the theoretical strength of a generational gap and earlier findings require age to be taken into account as a possible cause of variation in individual attitudes. Moreover, I suspect that age may influence other variables that have a more direct impact on individual opinions, such as education. The potency of this relationship—and the

potential for others—also necessitates controlling for age.

Race

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s confrontation with the Johnson administration over the conflict in Vietnam (for King's speeches against U.S. policy in Vietnam see Carson and Shepard 2001) highlighted a racial divide over American foreign policy. Most studies regarding race and political attitudes have a domestic focus and generally surround issues of civil rights (Tuch and Sigelman 1997). However, Holsti (1996) suggests that recent studies may demonstrate that race is emerging as "one of the more powerful sources of foreign policy cleavages" (p. 181). For example, pre-Gulf War surveys indicate that, when provided three options of withdraw, sanctions or war, only 25 percent of the black respondents favored initiating war, compared to 54 percent of the white respondents. Moreover, subsequent surveys show that compared to whites, blacks tended to more strongly favor intervention in Haiti and Somalia, while the opposite occurred regarding support for military action in Bosnia (Holsti 1996). Additionally, in relation to white Americans, non-whites have generally been shown to have a strong isolationist orientation (Hughes 1978; and Wittkopf 1990).

There are several theories put forth for the rise in minority interest in foreign policy issues, such as the end of conscription and development of a professional army that has led to a predominantly black military, controversy regarding American policies toward Africa and Haiti, and increased minority activism among the U.S. government (Holsti 1996). However, it is unclear whether equally plausible explanations like education and party identification, that can also be related to race, account for differences in attitudes (Wittkopf

1990). Nonetheless, the discrepancies between races over attitudes toward recent military interventions require that race be considered in the following tests.

Regionalism

Throughout most of American history, region has been thought an indicator of foreign policy attitudes but this relation has become increasingly less significant. For example, Almond wrote in 1950 that "regional differences in foreign policy attitudes were quite pronounced in the period before World War II, but the evidence for the period since Pearl Harbor shows regional differences to be of declining importance" (p. 131). Rather, he offers an alternate explanation of a rural-urban divide; that an urban background would more likely predispose a person to internationalism, while rural persons would have more isolationist tendencies. However, Wittkopf suggests that regional variances still exist with regard to militant or cooperative orientation toward international affairs (1990). Throughout most of the 1970s and 1980s, he argues, the East could be characterized as accommodationist and the Midwest as hard-line. The South, however, shifted from a hard-line orientation in the 1970s to internationalist in the 1980s, while the West vacillated between internationalism and accommodationism. While evidence for a strong regional gap is mixed at best, the potential for a weak correlation continues to exist and will be tested in the following section. While I don't expect significant variance between regional characteristics and the decision to use force, I expect region to be a stronger factor in party identification and belief systems that are typically considered more directly related to attitudes toward the use of force.

Religion

Religion is another strongly considered correlate of decision-making but one that has received little attention in the foreign policy realm (Jelen 1997; and Wittkopf 1990). Nonetheless, religion has often been shown to play a role in attitudes toward specific foreign policy (Hero 1973). For instance, overwhelming Jewish support of Israel provides a case in point (Rosenberg 1967). Moreover, Rosenberg finds that Jews are disproportionately liberal and therefore more accommodationist than most religions, which are split among fundamentalists, who are typically hard-liners, and liberal denominations, who are often more conciliatory (1967). Indeed, he finds a strong correlation between "religiosity" and belief systems. That is, the more religious a person describes themselves, the more likely they are to be a hard-liner and willing to use force as a corrective. Wittkopf agrees with Rosenberg's characterization of Jews and also suggests that Protestants generally have hard-line tendencies, while Catholics can be characterized as internationalists. In addition, he finds that those individuals who do not associate themselves with a particular religion tend to fall in with accommodationists (1990). Therefore, I believe religion will have an influence on willingness to use military force but it will largely be determined by their level of religiosity.

Socioeconomic Standing

Karl Marx led off one of the first scholarships examining economic and class determinants and war. His work was followed by Hobson (1902) and Lenin (1939) suggesting that capitalism inevitably leads to imperialism and conflict. In the United States, scholars began to look at this correlation during the Vietnam Conflict (Ikenberry 1989, p.

131). However, little work has been done to link individual socioeconomic status directly with attitudes toward the use of force abroad. Nonetheless, there is evidence that a socioeconomic position may impact an individual's relative education level, thereby having indirect influence on the person's attitude toward military force (Galtung 1967; and Tuch and Sigelman 1997).

Strategic Considerations

Another but less explored approach to explaining American decisions whether to use military force focuses on individual understanding of the challenges facing the United States on a situational basis (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987 and 1990; and Jentleson 1992). That is, people make decisions based on a host of threat images, perceived net benefits and the likelihood that a particular course of action will produce the wanted outcome (Herrmann 1986; and Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser, 1999). However, Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser suggest this perhaps incorrectly assumes that people "can make instrumental calculations about how likely certain courses of action will be to produce valued outcomes in specific situations" (1999, p. 553). Cottam (1977) and Herrmann (1985), nonetheless, identify three images that may guide individual choice regarding the use of force: the relative power of the United States in relation to a would-be adversary (opportunity), perceived motives of an opponent and their connection to U.S. interests (threat), and political culture of an adversary (whether any alternative other than force is applicable). While these are subjective judgments, it is thought that they may play a role in decision formulation. These would also be consistent with recent studies of the American public's consideration of potential casualty levels when weighing a military action's objective and likelihood of success (Klarevas 2000;

Moskos, et al. 1996-1997).

Integrative Approach

Recently, several studies have taken an integrative approach to explaining the complex determinants of decision-making. These scholars add differing weights to each of the values discussed above in order to explain how dispositional and demographic characteristics are combined with cognitive, situational perceptions in order to formulate individual attitudes toward the use of force. For instance, Hurwitz and Peffley argue that public attitudes largely result from an incorporation of substantive images of an adversary and core dispositional values (1987). Others, such as Zaller, suggest an integrative model that relies more heavily on aspects of an individual's daily life and cost-benefit perceptions of prospective military action in order to explain American opinions of using force overseas (1992). Still others have argued that situational strategic matters often overwhelm dispositional beliefs and demographic correlates. However, demographic factors, particularly those relating to education, continue to play a role in an individual's willingness to use force (Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser 1999).

If a state's perception of relative power, threat and opportunity shapes its posture toward a potential adversary (Morgenthau 1973; and Waltz 1979), it seems only logical that the same factors have influence on the attitudes of individuals faced with the same question. Therefore, the determinants of opinion toward the use of force cannot be solely explained by predisposed ideological notions or demographic characteristics. Suggesting otherwise would argue that, at the extreme, Americans are ideologues that fit a dispositional mold or are bound to the beliefs held within certain taxonomic categories that identify individual

characteristics. The abundance of empirical evidence shows that attitudes toward the use of force do not abide by either of these false propositions. Therefore, the remainder of this paper looks at the integrative approach to explore how different people internalize external images and threats in order to formulate a decision about American use of force during an international crisis.

Attached is a chart identifying the relationship of various correlates of attitudes regarding military force.