Introduction

While anecdotal evidence suggests that public opinion is not a dominant factor in decisions on whether or not to undertake military operations, there is ample evidence that the public opinion environment shapes the way military operations are justified and even, in some cases, the way they are designed and conducted.[1] And, as shown in the Vietnam War, Lebanon, and Somalia, presidents ultimately can find that an unfavorable public opinion environment can impose constraints on the range of politically feasible policies.[2]

This report describes American public opinion toward the global war on terrorism (GWOT), and it identifies the key factors that are associated with—and can be used to predict—support for or opposition to military operations conducted under the umbrella of the GWOT. The study builds upon the insights of an earlier RAND analysis that identified the key factors associated with support or opposition—and the willingness to tolerate casualties—in a wide range of wars and military operations, including World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the first Gulf War, and the U.S. interventions in Panama and Somalia (Larson, 1996a).

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[1] See Chapter Four, "Domestic Constraints on Coercion," in Byman, Waxman, and Larson (1999). Public opinion considerations also frequently lead the president to try nonmilitary means before military ones, not because of any belief that they will necessarily work, but in order to demonstrate that all other nonmilitary alternatives have been exhausted and that military action is "the last resort."

[2] To be clear, while public opinion can impose political costs for pursuing unpopular policies, it does not necessarily prevent presidents from pursuing them. Moreover, the willingness to remain on a politically costly path can vary by president, and by policy issue.

Background

Scholarly work on American public opinion during U.S. wars and military operations has generally tended to focus on four issues:

1. Efforts to understand the circumstances under which presidential uses of force lead to "rallies" in support for the president;[3]
2. Efforts to understand whether presidents use force in an effort to boost their approval ratings or otherwise divert attention from political woes;[4]
3. Analyses of the dynamics of American public opinion during past U.S. wars and military operations;[5] and
4. Efforts to understand the factors that influence public support or opposition to uses of military force more generally.[6]

The present work generally seeks to make a contribution to the third and fourth of these areas of research: analyzing the dynamics of public opinion during specific military operations, and better understanding the factors that influence support and opposition.

It also, however, seeks to break new ground on the fourth area. In addition to analyzing ecological (aggregate) public opinion data, it relies on bivariate and multivariate analyses of respondent-level data for each case, including multivariate statistical modeling of the factors that influence individual-level decisions to support or oppose specific military operations. This combined approach offers a better chance of

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[3] See, for example, Mueller (1973), Edwards (1990), especially pp. 143–152, and Brody (1991).

[4] Some scholars have noted that presidents often see a "rally" in their presidential approval ratings when they use military force, and others have contended that U.S. presidents engage in "political" or "diversionary" uses of force, i.e., they seek to divert attention from domestic woes and increase their public standing by undertaking military action abroad. For various views in this debate, see Ostrom and Job (1986), Gelpi (1997), Levy (1993), Meernik (1994), Meernik and Waterman (1996), and Leeds and Davis (1997).

[5] Examples of this genre include Mueller (1973, 1994), Larson (1996a), Sobel (1989, 1998), and Klarevas (2000).

[6] See, for example, Jentleson (1992), Oneal, Lian, and Joyner (1996), Jentleson and Britton (1998), Klarevas and O'Connor (1994).

understanding, in a robust way, which factors have been most influential in individuals' support for and opposition to past military operations, and it avoids the problems associated with regression analyses of ecological data that do not adequately control for important influences on support and opposition that are to be found in cues in the wording of public opinion poll questions.[7]

Approach

The study used a four-step approach for the analysis of the public opinion data.

First, we conducted searches of The Roper Center's POLL database, Gallup's database of questionnaires,[8] and other relevant websites[9] for relevant data on each war or military operation. We typically used a keyword connoting the location of the operation (e.g., "Somalia," "Haiti"), sometimes in combination with other keywords to find specific polling questions of interest (e.g., "Haiti and casualties," "Iraq and approve").

Second, because responses can be so sensitive to question wording and other factors,[10] we sought to develop multiple indicators for each of the attitudes of interest by using a variety of questions and building trend data wherever that was possible. To heighten comparability and transparency, we emphasized data from questions that

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[7] Jentleson (1992), Klarevas and O'Connor (1994), and Jentleson and Britton (1998), for example, regressed the percentages approving of a wide number of military operations on judgments the authors made about the nature of the policy objectives or other characteristics of the situation, but did not control for all of the potential sources of variation that can influence approval or disapproval.

[8] Gallup has a keyword-searchable database of all of the questionnaires that have been used in its surveys.

[9] For example, The Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, and New York Times, ABC News, CBS News, Cable News Network, and NBC News publish their survey results, often including full questionnaires and graphics, and PollingReport.com provides useful compilations of data.

[10] See Kagay (1992).

were worded in a straightforward fashion and asked about support and opposition of various kinds,[11] or about beliefs that have been shown to be closely associated with support in past wars and military operations.[12]

In most cases, to ensure that we were reaching robust conclusions, we also compared these results with other questions that contained cues that would be expected to raise or lower support. In this, we tried to take a page from Franklin Roosevelt, who, it is said, would not accept a polling result regarding a policy issue as a firm statement of the public's opinion on the issue unless it could be shown that it reflected fully crystallized public opinion. His test was whether polling questions whose wording was favorable toward the policy and those whose wording was critical of the policy returned essentially the same percentages supporting and opposing; results that fell short of this standard reflected public opinion that was not fully crystallized, which might firm up in response to events on the ground, presidential leadership, or public deliberation of the underlying issues and tradeoffs.[13]

Third and finally, to refine our understanding of the factors that were at work in individuals' decisions to support or oppose past military operations, we acquired a number of datasets that contain respondent-level data from polls conducted during each operation.

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[11] For example, to assess support, we searched for questions that asked about approval or disapproval for going to war or taking military action, the presence of U.S. troops, and presidential handling of the situation, and questions that asked respondents whether they thought the intervention had been a mistake, whether the United States had made the right decision, and whether it had done the right thing in using force.

[12] The most important of these beliefs have to do with the importance of the perceived stakes, whether in traditional national security or moral or humanitarian interests; the perceived prospects for success, i.e., the extent to which the public believes that the United States will secure its objectives, whatever they may be; the likely and actual costs of the operation; and party orientation, which will condition which leaders members of the public are most likely to respond to. For a discussion of these factors, see Larson (1996a, 1996b, and, especially, 2000).

[13] Daniel Yankelovich has explored the question of crystallization in public attitudes. See Yankelovich (1991). Kagay (1992) provides a nice discussion of uncrystallized public opinion and the various factors that can affect responses, and he advocates "looking at the preponderance" of evidence, as we do.

We performed bivariate tests of association between support and our various independent variables—the importance of the stakes, prospects for success, casualties and other costs, party, information consumption, and so on—and estimated one or more multivariate models that predicted individuals' support for or opposition to each operation.[14]

As just described, the research presented here actually illuminates the beliefs, individual-level characteristics, and basic logic that individuals have used in deciding whether or not to support a wide range of military operations. Throughout, it emphasizes robust findings—within and across cases—rather than odd results that may have arisen from tendentiously worded questions, so-called "house effects," or other idiosyncrasies.[15]

A Note on the Importance of Question Wording

To illuminate the influence of question wording on responses, we now present two examples involving public opinion on a U.S. intervention in Bosnia from 1993 to 1995; our analysis of support for the U.S. intervention in Bosnia in the next chapter provides an even more systematic and compelling illustration of the importance of question wording.

Example One

Table 1.1 presents the results of two questions from polling on May 6, 1993, that asked respondents if they favored or opposed air strikes in Bosnia. As shown, although the questions were asked the same day, the results varied dramatically, with anywhere from 35 to 65 percent favoring and 32 to 55 percent opposing air strikes, depending on question wording.[16]

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[14] In the case of Somalia, our model predicted escalation or withdrawal sentiment.

[15] For example, Sobel (1996) and Larson (2000) document apparent biases in polling done by the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA).

[16] The margin of error for polls with this sample size is plus or minus five percentage points.

Table 1.1
Support and Opposition for Air Strikes in Bosnia, May 6, 1993

As you may know, the Bosnian Serbs rejected the United Nations peace plan and
Serbian forces are continuing to attack Muslim towns. Some people are suggesting
the United States conduct air strikes against Serbian military forces, while others say
we should not get militarily involved. Do you favor or oppose U.S. air strikes?
(Gallup/CNN/USA Today, May 6, 1993, N=603)

Favor	36%
Oppose	56
No opinion	6
Depends	3

Specifically, would you support or oppose the United States, along with its allies in
Europe, carrying out air strikes against Bosnian Serb artillery positions and supply
lines? (ABC News, May 6, 1993, N=516).

Favor	65%
Oppose	32
No opinion	3

The higher level of approval in the second question *could* be at-
tributable to the fact that the question mentioned the participation of
European allies (such cues typically can boost support), or that the
first question might imply to some that air strikes would be unlikely
to influence the rejectionist Serbs, or that the first question explicitly
mentions that some oppose military involvement. It also could be
that questions asked before one of these two questions included cues
that colored responses to subsequent questions as well; we simply
cannot know for certain.

   If these were the only data available on the question, however, it
would be impossible to say whether most Americans favored or op-
posed air strikes, as the two results suggest that opinion on the matter
was highly sensitive to differences in question wording and therefore
probably not very well crystallized.[17] In such a case, it would be criti-
cal both to avoid the use of single-poll results and to compare the re-

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[17] By comparison, if both results had found comparable majorities approving or disapprov-
ing, that would suggest that attitudes on the matter had crystallized.

sults from various polling efforts to understand the extent to which responses were sensitive to question wording and other factors.

Example Two

As a second illustration, as shown in Table 1.2, three different polling organizations asked about support or opposition for U.S. participation in a peacekeeping force in Bosnia immediately after President Clinton's November 27, 1995 speech on the matter.

As shown, we cannot say for certain what percentage of Americans actually supported or opposed the use of force in Bosnia (the former ranged between 33 and 46 percent, and the latter between 40 and 58 percent), but if the percentages in Table 1.2 were the only

Table 1.2
Support and Opposition to Troops in Bosnia, November 27, 1995

Now that a peace agreement has been reached by all the groups currently fighting in Bosnia, the Clinton administration plans to contribute U.S. troops to an international peacekeeping force. Do you favor or oppose that? (Gallup/CNN/USA Today, November 27, 1995, N=632)

Favor	46%
Oppose	40
No opinion	14

(President Bill) Clinton said now that a Bosnian peace treaty has been signed, he's sending 20,000 U.S. troops there as part of an international peacekeeping force. Do you support or oppose sending 20,000 U.S. troops to Bosnia as part of an international peacekeeping force? (ABC News/Washington Post, November 27, 1995, N=519)

Support	39%
Oppose	57
Don't know	4

Do you favor or oppose sending up to 20,000 U.S. troops to Bosnia, as part of a NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) peacekeeping force, to enforce this peace agreement between Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia? (CBS News, November 27, 1995, N=504)

Favor	33%
Oppose	58
Don't know/No answer	9

available data (as seems to be the case), we would be able to draw one reasonably robust conclusion: a majority of Americans at the time of the president's speech failed to support U.S. participation in the peacekeeping operation in Bosnia, even when cues that would have been expected to increase support were present in the questions.[18]

Although we can only speculate on the reasons for the observed differences because other influences also could have been at work,[19] they are probably largely attributable to question wording.[20] For example, we note that: the questions that mentioned the contribution of 20,000 U.S. troops received lower levels of support than the one that didn't (the implication of the potentially high costs accompanying such a large force would be expected to reduce support); the questions that mentioned President Clinton received higher support than the one that didn't (mentioning the president can increase support); and the question that mentioned U.S. participation in a NATO peacekeeping force that would "enforce" the peace agreement got lower support than the questions that simply mentioned U.S. participation in an "international peacekeeping force" (for many, "enforcement" seems to imply a higher possibility of combat, and casualties).

Robust Analyses, Robust Support

We use the concept of robustness in two distinct ways.

First, we use the term in the sense of robust results, i.e., results that emerge from analyses that have considered responses to questions

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[18] Additional evidence can be found in the fact that only about four in ten approved of President Clinton's handling of the Bosnia situation in the ABC News/Washington Post and CBS News polls.

[19] These other influences can include differences that arise from such factors as differences in polling organizations' sampling frames, sampling error, question order effects, response option order effects, and other sources.

[20] To resolve the matter of whether question wording was at work, and assuming a large enough sample size, one could have used a split sample, where respondents were asked the same set of questions in the earlier part of the survey, but all three versions of the question were then asked of a third of the sample. This would have removed other potential causes of the difference. Of course, neither polling organizations nor scholars have shown a great deal of interest in understanding the degree to which support and opposition for a military operation in fact hinges on question wording.

that may vary in their wording, timing, and other features, and contrast with results that emerge from a single poll or highly selective use of polling results. For example, we sought to characterize support not only in terms of the overall percentages supporting, but also how often a majority actually supported or opposed the operation, and the structure of support (discussed next).[21]

Second, we use the term in the sense of robust support, i.e., support that appears to be relatively insensitive to increasing costs, setbacks on the battlefield, or other factors. This contrasts with conditional support, wherein support is contingent on a narrow set of conditions such as low casualties, coalition participation, or other factors. Operationally, the most robust support would be indicated by support that remained high even in questions that mention the distinct possibility of substantial casualties, a long and drawn-out campaign, or other undesirable characteristics.

The robustness of support can also be inferred from the distribution of responses in questions that asked respondents about the strength of their support for or opposition to a military operation (see Figure 1.1).

As suggested by the figure, robust support can be inferred in cases where a large majority of respondents strongly support the operation, and declining percentages offer weak support, weak opposition, and strong opposition (the dark columns); in a similar way, robust opposition could be inferred in cases where a large percentage strongly oppose the operation, with smaller percentages weakly opposing, unsure, or supporting.[22]

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[21] For example, we report the average, the number of times questions of this kind were asked, and the number of occasions in which a majority supported.

[22] We assume something of a graceful failure mode in public support in response to marginal changes on the ground, i.e., that those who strongly supported an operation at the beginning but became disillusioned would first shift to weak support, then to weak opposition, and finally to strong opposition. Of course, major events could well yield far more dramatic shifts, but absent any data on the matter, the assumption certainly is a plausible and testable one.

Figure 1.1
Robust Support and Opposition
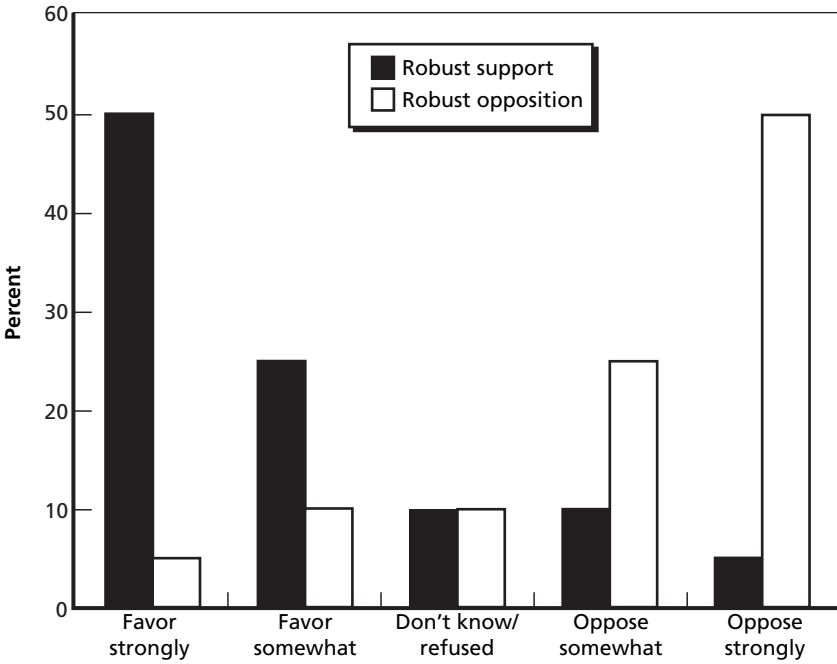
In cases where subgroups (e.g., party) divide, and where the attitudes of one subgroup (e.g., members of the president's party) are characterized by robust support and another subgroup (e.g., members of the opposition party) by robust opposition, the result can be said to be "highly polarized by party," which is typically not a very robust structure for support, since it diminishes the prospects that a majority of Americans support the operation.

Organization of This Report

This report is organized as follows:

- Chapter Two presents an overview of two models that in combination can be used to diagnose public opinion toward past military operations, and which provide the logic and theory for the multivariate statistical modeling that predicts individual-level support or opposition to past military operations based upon a very small number of predictors.

- To better understand the foundations and dynamics of public support and opposition for recent past U.S. military operations, Chapter Three applies the model developed in Chapter Two to diagnose the key beliefs and individual-level factors affecting American public opinion on a number of military operations conducted over the last decade. These include withdrawal and escalation sentiment in the final stages of the U.S. intervention in Somalia, and support for and opposition to the U.S. interventions in Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo.

- In Chapter Four, we assess the beliefs and individual-level characteristics related to support and opposition to U.S. military action conducted under the umbrella of the GWOT, including Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan, and military action in other locales such as Yemen, the Philippines, the Sudan, and Somalia. Most of the analysis was completed in September 2003, although modest efforts were made to update key data series in May 2004.

- In Chapter Five, we assess the beliefs and individual-level factors related to support for and opposition to Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), the U.S. military action in Iraq. As with Afghanistan, most of the analytic work was concluded in September 2003, with modest efforts to update key data series in May 2004. We conclude the chapter with a few words on changes in Americans' attitudes toward Iraq as of August 2004.

- In Chapter Six, we provide conclusions and discuss the implications of our analysis for the U.S. Army and national political and military leaders.

We also include an appendix that reexamines some of the conclusions from RAND's 1996 study, *Casualties and Consensus*, in light of these new cases.

Finally, in a separate volume we provide more detailed technical information on our statistical analyses: see Eric V. Larson and Bogdan Savych, *American Public Support for U.S. Military Operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad, Statistical Appendixes,* Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, TR-167-A, 2004.