JOHN MUELLER

PUBLIC OPINION ON WAR AND TERROR

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CATO INSTITUTE

Contents

Executive Summary

Leaders, elites, and the media may put ideas on the shelf, but that doesn't mean people will buy them. And when they do, it may often be best to conclude that the message has struck a responsive chord rather than that the public has been manipulated.

As people sort through offerings on display, they pick and choose which ideas to embrace and which threats to fear. Some ideas become salient or even go viral while others stir no interest whatever. People can accept cues from those seeking to "manipulate" them—such as public officials, party leaders, opinion elites, the media, and advertisers. They can let themselves be affected by social and group influences or identities. They can respond to facts. They can apply rough, but ready, preexisting heuristics or attitudes, or "core" or "gut" values. Or they can simply succumb to whim and caprice.

This paper, mostly applying public opinion trend data, briefly illustrates the dynamic by assessing the public reaction in the United States to three episodes: First, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, focusing particularly on the fact that anxieties about terrorism persist despite reasonable expectations that they would have waned. Second, the extensive alarm inspired in the United States by the rise in 2014 of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Third, the 2003 Iraq War, evaluating the degree to which the George W. Bush administration was able to manage public opinion before and during the war, with some comparisons with public opinion on other wars, particularly the 1991 Gulf War.

In general, it finds that the public is not very manipulable at least on such salient issues as these. Indeed, it often appears that the public is manipulating the would-be manipulators more than the other way around. Moreover, after the public has clearly embraced a fear or idea, leaders, elites, and the media will often find more purchase in servicing the idea than in seeking to change it.

More broadly, this thesis jells with studies finding that 90 percent of new products fail to sell despite massive promotion campaigns, that advertising in political campaigns has at best only a marginal impact, that the media tends to pursue stories not only for their intrinsic importance but for their ability to generate clicks, and that the U.S. president's supposed "bully pulpit" is neither.

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Introduction

James Risen is certainly correct to observe that "fear sells."[1] However, H. L. Mencken pushes too far when he says that "the whole aim of practical politics is to keep the populace alarmed (and hence clamorous to be led to safety) by menacing it with an endless series of hobgoblins."[2] Not all efforts to sell fear, threats, or ideas more generally find a receptive audience. People are regularly bombarded with ideas, and as they sort through these ideas, they pick and choose which to embrace and which to fear. For example, Americans believe that terrorism is a threat but don't fear genetically modified food, and a great many remain substantially unmoved by warnings about global warming—even in the face of warnings that sometimes reach apocalyptic proportions.

This paper, mostly applying public opinion trend data, illustrates the dynamics of public opinion formation by assessing the public reaction in the United States to three episodes:

1. the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, focusing particularly on the fact that anxieties about terrorism persist despite reasonable expectations that they would have waned;

2. the extensive alarm inspired in the United States by the rise in 2014 of the vicious Middle East insurgent or terrorist group, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); and

3. the 2003 Iraq War, evaluating the degree to which the George W. Bush administration was able to manage public opinion before and during the war, with some comparisons with public opinion on other wars, particularly the 1991 Gulf War.[3]

In general, it finds that the public is not very manipulable at least on such salient issues as these. Leaders, elites, and the media may propose, but that doesn't mean people will necessarily buy the message. And when they do, it may well often be best to conclude that the message has struck a responsive chord rather than that the public has been manipulated. Indeed, it often appears that the public is manipulating the would-be manipulators more than the other way around. The last sections of this paper discuss that proposition more fully and broadly, and although the data come from the United States, it seems likely that the process under discussion has wide applicability.

> "People are regularly bombarded with ideas, and as they sort through these ideas, they pick and choose which to embrace and which to fear."

One example may help explain the dynamic: a famine in Ethiopia in the mid-1980s inspired great public concern in the United States. This phenomenon is often taken to have been media-generated because it was only after the famine received prominent media coverage that it entered the public consciousness. But a study by Christopher Bosso suggests a different interpretation. At first the media were reluctant to cover the famine at all because they reckoned this story to be, like other African famines, a "dog-bites-man" event. However, going against the journalistic consensus, NBC decided to do a three-day sequence on the famine in October 1984. This inspired a huge public response, whereupon NBC gave the story extensive follow-up coverage, and its television and print competitors scrambled to get on the bandwagon, deluging their customers with information that, to the media's surprise, was actually in demand.[4]

There is a sense, of course, in which it could be said that NBC "caused" the phenomenon: it put the issue on the public's radar and primed its reaction to the event. Once the public was aware of the famine, NBC then "magnified" the event. But the network was constantly doing three-day stories, and this one just happened to catch on; there have been plenty of famines in Africa, including a later one in Somalia that

the United States in part caused, but none inspired the same reaction as the Ethiopian crisis. It seems more accurate to say that NBC put the issue on the shelf—alongside a great many others—and that it was the public that put it on the media's ongoing coverage agenda by demanding, and responding to, the magnification of the story. Ironically, Bosso's study is published in a book titled *Manipulating Public Opinion*. In a very important sense, it seems clear that in this case the public was manipulating the media, not the other way around.

This experience suggests that the public can be remarkably capricious about the events and information by which it chooses to be moved. Some offerings become salient or even go viral while others stir no interest.[5] People can accept cues from those seeking to "manipulate" them—such as public officials, party leaders, opinion elites, the media, and advertisers.[6] They can let themselves be affected by social and group influences or identities.[7] They can respond to facts.[8] They can apply rough, but ready, preexisting heuristics or attitudes, or "core" or "gut" values. Or they can simply succumb to whim and caprice.[9]

But prediction is, to say the least, uncertain, and the question of what "causes" an opinion to crystallize or even go viral becomes tricky. For example, someone once countered existing fashion by wearing his baseball hat backward. The response was favorable: a considerable number of people deemed the innovation to be cool and followed the example. But does this mean the fashion leader "manipulated" the followers? One suspects that if the same person had worn his hat with the brim to the side, the same responders would have reacted negatively. The relevant "causal" variable seems to be rooted in the psychology of the exposed—or in their neurons or genes—not so much in the intention of the "trendsetter."

It's also useful to examine two arenas in which efforts to manipulate the public are clearly paramount: commercial marketing and election campaigning. For each, the success rate is rather unimpressive.

Although consumers embrace some commercial products, most products—no matter how well packaged or promoted—fail to ignite acceptance or even passing interest. "Build a better mousetrap," Ralph Waldo Emerson supposedly once said, "and the world will beat a path to your door." However, the implication of this homely homily is savagely

mistaken: it is untrue that all you have to do to profit is to create a better product after which people will eagerly snap it up without further effort on your part. In fact, according to John Lienhard, there have been well over 4,400 patents issued for mousetraps in the United States and, although at least *some* of them must represent decided improvements, only a few have made any money.[10] Indeed, the failure rate for new products and services is something like 80 to 90 percent.[11] For high-tech startups the failure rate may be closer to 95 percent.[12] If extensive purposeful promotion could guarantee acceptance, we'd all be driving Edsels and drinking New Coke—legendary marketing failures in 1958 and 1985 by two of the (otherwise) most successful businesses in history: the Ford Motor Company and Coca-Cola.

> ## "The public can be remarkably capricious about the events and information by which it chooses to be moved. Some offerings become salient or even go viral while others stir no interest."

Much the same holds for political campaigning. As Diana Mutz points out, "the scholarly consensus" on the degree to which campaign advertising shifts votes is that the impact "is marginal at most." Moreover, even when advertising effects do occur, they "appear to be short lived."[13] An examination of 49 field experiments found any "persuasive effects" of campaigning to be "minimal."[14] Like those seeking to peddle the better mousetrap, those who seek to sell ideas are at the mercy of the reaction—and the whims and caprices—of those they are seeking to "manipulate." And they fail far more often than they succeed.

In the same manner, the efficacy of the U.S. president's bully pulpit has often been found to be much overrated—a prominent study of the issue, in fact, is titled *On Deaf Ears*.[15] Thus, when President George W. Bush vigorously tried to sell Social Security reform in the wake of his reelection in 2004, he found that the more he tried to rally public opinion on the issue, the lower support for the idea sank.[16]

9/11 and the Terror Threat

Many contend that the public's fears about international terrorism are manipulated by members of "the terrorism industry"—the media, businesses with relevant commercial products to sell, "experts" seeking the spotlight, and politicians trying to gain leadership credentials.[17] It seems likely, however, that such threat entrepreneurs are more nearly playing to, and perhaps exacerbating, existing fears rather than creating them.

ANXIETY ABOUT TERRORISM AFTER 9/11

The public anxiety over terrorism that erupted after the attacks of September 11, 2001, is a case in point. The number of people who replied "terrorism" when asked the perennial poll question, "what do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" registered at zero on the day before the attacks and 46 percent on the day after.[18] This abrupt change, obviously, was created by the event itself, not by elite cues, peer pressure, media coverage, or authoritative narratives.[19]

Poll questions specifically focused on terrorism during the decade and a half after that event generally find little decline in the degree to which Americans voice concern about terrorism. Although other issues—particularly economic ones—often eclipse terrorism as a topic of daily concern, the 9/11 attacks and the fears that they inspired clearly continue to resonate in the American mind.[20] On some questions, concerns about terrorism soared at the time of the 9/11 attacks, dropped in subsequent months, but then failed to decline much further in the years thereafter. On other questions, the rates of concern expressed at the time of the attacks never declined, remaining at much the same level over the subsequent decade and a half.

The first pattern can be seen in Figure 1, which shows the public's responses to the vivid, clear, and personal question of their own perceived vulnerability to terrorism. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, those who professed to be very or somewhat worried that they or a family member might become a victim of terrorism spiked to around 60 percent. This declined to around 40 percent by the end of 2001, a level that held at least through 2019, when the question was last asked.

The second pattern is displayed in Figure 2, which reflects concerns over the likelihood of another terrorist attack "causing large numbers of American lives to be lost." The percentage of respondents holding such an attack to be very or somewhat likely "in the near future" registered at over 70 percent in the immediate aftermath of September 11, 2001; it was still at that level when the question was last asked in 2017. It spiked even higher at the time of the terrorist attacks in London in 2005 and in Paris at the end of 2015, each of which killed dozens of people.[21] Nor did the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 prove to be a moment of closure.

> "Many contend that the public's fears about international terrorism are manipulated by members of 'the terrorism industry.' Such threat entrepreneurs are more nearly playing to, and perhaps exacerbating, existing fears rather than creating them."

These findings are rather surprising because there is reason to have expected that concerns and anxieties about terrorism would erode over time. To begin with, objectively speaking, there is little reason for Americans to fear Islamist terrorism. Indeed, since the 9/11 attacks, Islamist terrorists have managed to kill a total of about 100 people in the United States (49 in a single shooting), or about five per year.[22] Moreover, there were remarkably few major Islamist terror attacks in other countries in the developed world,

Figure 1
Worry about becoming a victim of terrorism, 1995–2019
"How worried are you that you or someone in your family will become a victim of terrorism?" (Very worried; somewhat worried; not too worried; not worried at all)
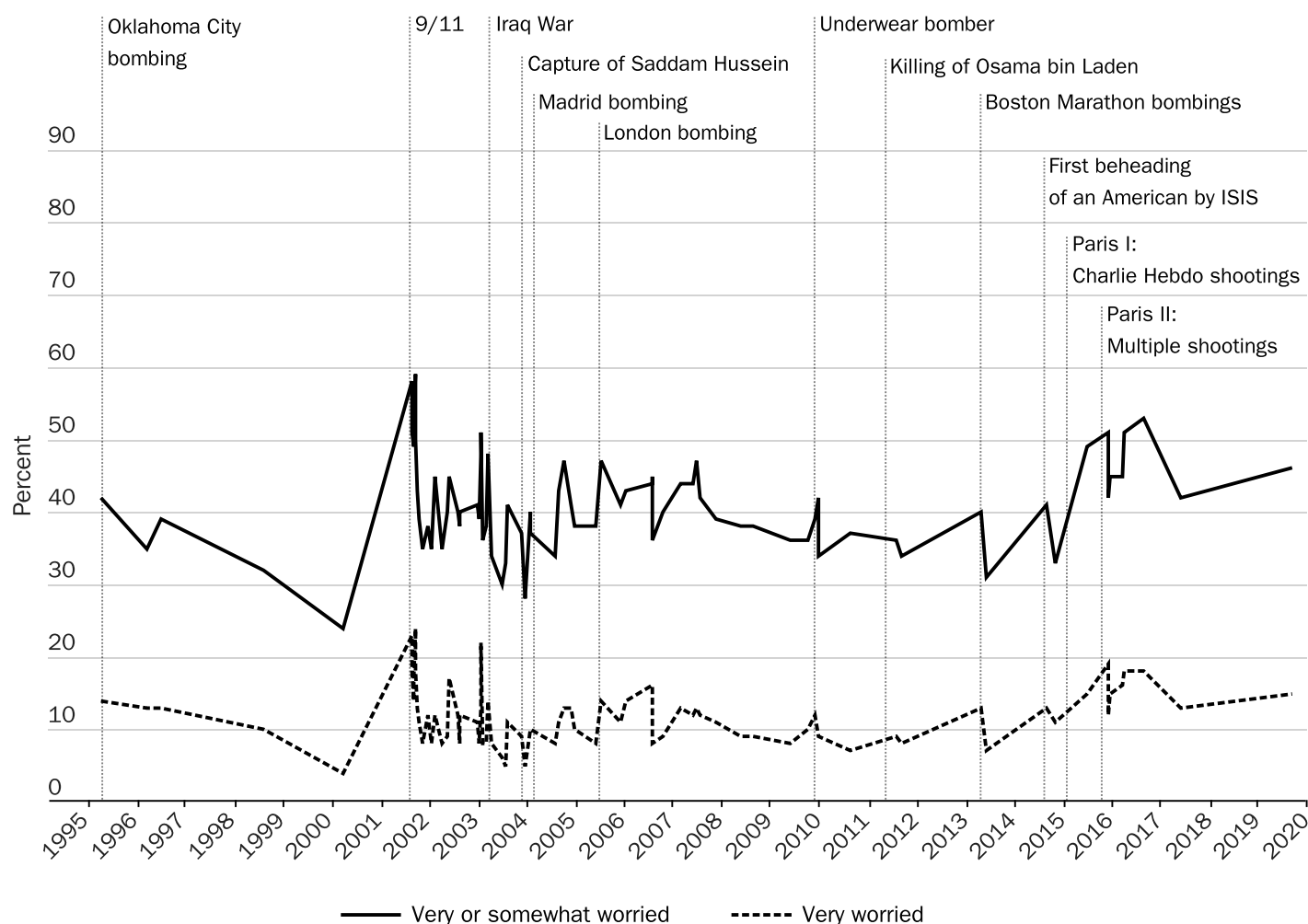
Sources: *USA Today*/Gallup and CNN/Opinion Research Corporation.

particularly during the decade after 2005. In addition, nothing remotely comparable to 9/11 has occurred anywhere in the world: the 9/11 attack stands out as an aberration.[23] Indeed, over the past several decades, data gathered in the University of Maryland's Global Terrorism Database suggest that there has scarcely been a terrorist act, within a war zone or outside it, that (as a single event) inflicted even one-tenth as much destruction as the 9/11 attacks. And international terrorist groups have failed since to consummate any attack of any magnitude on American soil (or, for that matter, in the air around it), while the homegrown terrorist "plotters" who have been apprehended have mostly proved—while perhaps somewhat dangerous at least in a few cases—to be

amateurish and almost absurdly incompetent. In a RAND Corporation's summary assessment from Brian Jenkins, "their numbers remain small, their determination limp, and their competence poor."[24]

It might be expected that the huge increases in counterterrorism efforts and spending—totaling well over $1 trillion—would have something of a reassuring effect on public consciousness. Indeed, Michael Hayden recalls a dictum he issued as the director of the National Security Agency two days after 9/11: "We were going to keep America free by making Americans feel safe."[25] America has remained free, but the polls strongly suggest that it is not because Americans came to feel safe.

Figure 2

Perceived likelihood of a large terrorist attack, 2001–2017

"How likely do you think it is that another terrorist attack causing large numbers of American lives to be lost will happen in the near future?" (Fox/Opinion Dynamics)

"How likely do you think it is that in the near future there will be a terrorist attack in the United States causing large numbers of lives to be lost?" (Quinnipiac, *Washington Post*)
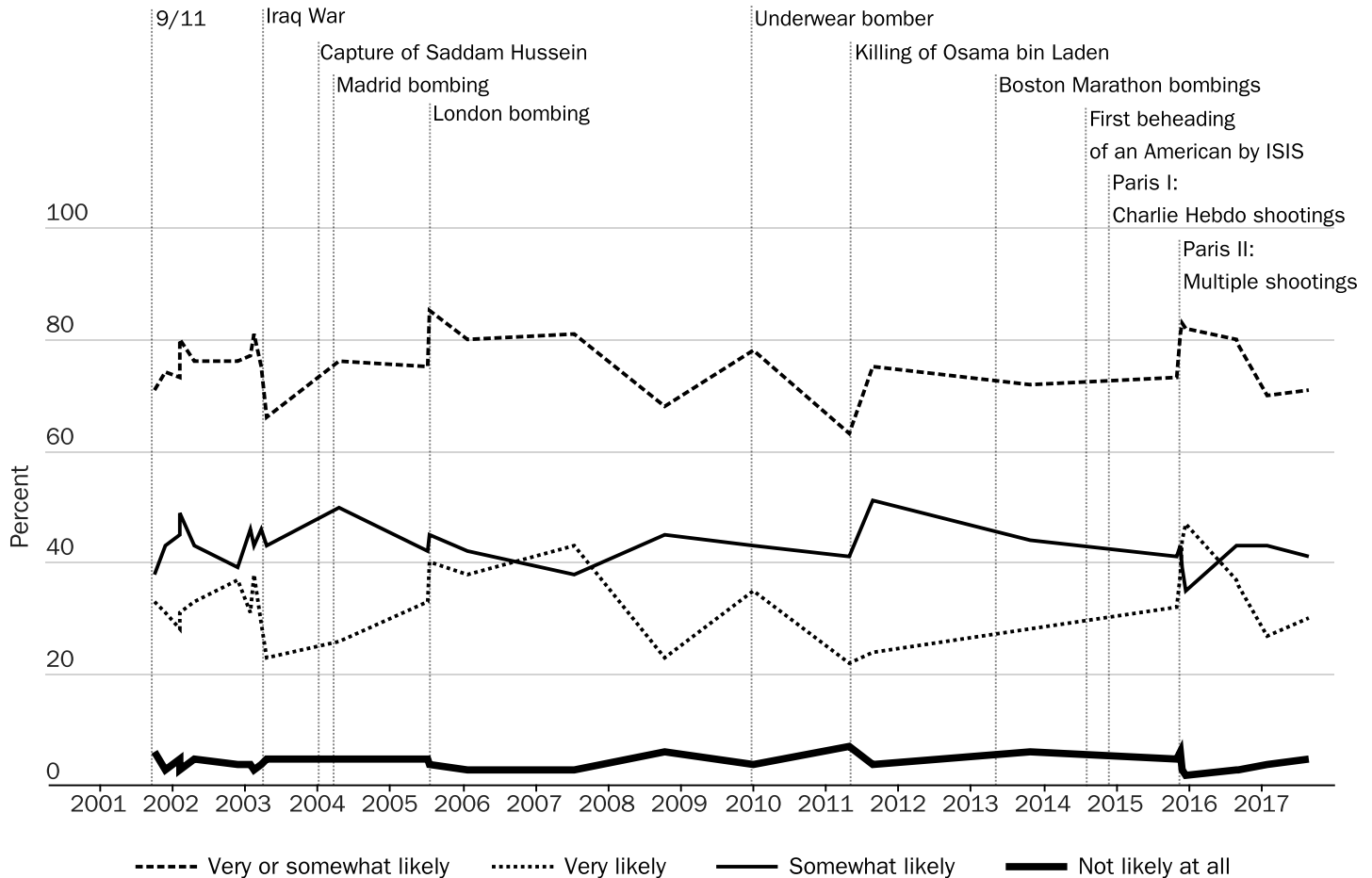
Sources: Fox/Opinion Dynamics, Quinnipiac, *Washington Post*.

It is also important to note that it is rather easy to register a change of opinion in these polls. Most questions, as in Figures 1 and 2, provide a graduated response range that makes it easy to report and observe even small levels of opinion change. For example, respondents are not obligated to choose between deeming another terrorist attack to be either likely or unlikely. Rather, they can go from "very likely" to "somewhat likely" or from "somewhat unlikely" to "not too likely." For the most part, they have declined to do so, at least in the aggregate.

Of direct import to this paper's purpose, terror-related alarmism from public officials and media organizations actually declined over the years. In particular, explicit predictions

that the United States will need to brace itself for a large imminent attack, so common in the years after September 11, 2001, became rare. In the run-up to the 2004 election, for example, Homeland Security chief Tom Ridge informed the public that "extremists abroad are anticipating near-term attacks that they believe will either rival, or exceed, the attacks that occurred in New York and the Pentagon and the fields of Pennsylvania" while Attorney General John Ashcroft, with FBI Director Robert Mueller standing beside him, announced that "Al Qaeda plans to attempt an attack on the United States in the next few months [with the] specific intention to hit the United States hard."[26] We haven't heard proclamations of immediate peril like that for well over a decade.[27]

And it certainly appears that there has been a notable reduction in experts voicing concern that terrorists will acquire weapons of mass destruction, especially nuclear ones, a major preoccupation for several years after the 9/11 attacks. It was in 2004 that Harvard University's Graham Allison issued his "considered judgment that on the current path, a nuclear terrorist attack on America in the decade ahead is more likely than not."[28] Meanwhile, former Secretary of Defense William Perry calculated an even chance of a nuclear terror strike within the next six years, while in 2007 physicist Richard Garwin put the likelihood of a nuclear explosion on an American or European city by terrorists or other means at 20 percent per year, or 87 percent over a 10-year period.[29]

> "If the public remains terrified by terrorism, there is likely to be considerably more purchase in servicing those fears than in seeking to counter them."

Media attention to terrorism also generally declined over the years following 2001; although, this reversed somewhat after the dramatic and attention-arresting rise of ISIS in 2014. The general decline in terrorism interest is observable in the public opinion data represented in Figures 1 and 2. In recent years, polling agencies have substantially reduced the frequency with which they polled on terrorism-related issues.

It certainly appears that, far from creating or perpetuating these (rather irrational) public fears, elites have been governed by (or manipulated by) them. Thus, leaders seem incapable of pointing out that an American's chance of being killed by a terrorist is 1 in 4 million per year or that Islamist terrorists have killed about five people per year in the United States since 2001.[30] And to suggest that the risk posed by terrorism might be at an acceptable level (or even to discuss the issue) appears to be utterly impossible.[31]

For the media and other "opinion leaders," the incentives were (and are) to play to the consensus galleries and to stoke their fears: if the public remains terrified by terrorism, there is likely to be considerably more purchase in servicing those fears than in seeking to counter them. It is thus probably best to see public opinion as a primary driver—or cause—in the excessive counterterrorism policies that took place after September 11, 2001. In 2010, anthropologist Scott Atran mused, "Perhaps never in the history of human conflict have so few people with so few actual means and capabilities frightened so many."[32] And that continues to be true. If people want to be afraid, nothing will stop them. In this case, the public could not be "manipulated" by facts, by the absence of large terrorist attacks, by declines in alarmism by public figures, or by reduced media coverage of the issue.

DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM

However, as it happens, the public's lingering concern is not so much with terrorism per se but with international terrorism specifically. The most plausible explanation for the remarkable absence of erosion in terrorism-related concerns is that the public regards Islamist terrorism as part of a large and hostile conspiracy and network that is international in scope and rather spooky.[33] In the words of Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza, Islamist terrorism is seen to be a "subversive enemy" that is "foreign in origin but with possible domestic supporters organized in covert cells, hidden yet seemingly everywhere, and providing a direct and open ideological challenge to American democracy and capitalism."[34]

In stark contrast, the public is not nearly as moved by terrorism that does not have an external referent. There were hundreds of terrorist attacks in the United States in the 1970s.[35] However, these were mainly domestic in origin and scope: for the most part, they did not have a significant foreign or external referent and are little remembered. That holds even for the highly destructive Oklahoma City attack that killed 168 people in 1995. In the aftermath of that bombing, as shown in Figure 1, over 40 percent of the public reported being worried about becoming a victim of terrorism. However, unlike the post-2001 dynamic, this percentage declined considerably in the years following the Oklahoma City bombing.

A potentially instructive comparison is with concerns about domestic Communists during the Cold War. Like they believe today that Islamist terrorists are within our midst, many Americans after World War II believed that domestic Communists were connected to, and agents of, a vast, foreign-based conspiracy to topple America. Extravagant alarmist proclamations about the degree to which such "masters of deceit" and "enemies from within" presented a threat to the republic found a receptive audience.[36] In contrast, there apparently was no audience during the Cold War for the proposition that the threat presented by domestic Communists was overblown. That is, *no one* ever seems to have said in public, "Many domestic Communists adhere to a foreign ideology that ultimately has as its goal the destruction of capitalism and democracy and by violence if necessary; however, they do not present much of a danger, are actually quite a pathetic bunch, and couldn't subvert their way out of a wet paper bag. Why are we expending so much time, effort, and treasure on this issue?"

Press and political concern about the internal Communist enemy probably peaked in 1954, when some 40 percent of the public deemed domestic Communists to present a great or very great danger. Although the central attention of the press (and of the public) turned to other matters (as it essentially did after the 9/11 attacks), concerns about externally linked domestic Communists, like concerns about externally linked domestic terrorists after 2001, seem to have crystallized within the public consciousness. As a result, the percentage considering these threats a danger barely declined in the ensuing 10 years even though media interest fell greatly—indeed, by a factor of about 10. When last tapped in the mid-1970s—a full 20 years after its probable peak—concern about the domestic Communist danger was still at 30 percent even while press attention to that internal enemy had fallen to zero for the simple reason that there was not much of anything to report about its antics.[37] This phenomenon also suggests that continuous reminders about a threat are not needed to sustain public alarm.

"Concerns about externally linked domestic terrorists seem to have crystallized within the public consciousness, and continuous reminders about the threat are not needed to sustain public alarm."

The Rise of ISIS

One of the most remarkable phenomena of the past several years is the way an especially vicious militant group calling itself the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) captured and exercised the imagination of the public throughout the world, even in Western countries that were scarcely directly affected.[38] It burst into official and public attention with some military victories in Iraq and Syria—particularly taking over Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, in June 2014.[39]

As shown in Figure 3, the American public at first saw the situation in Iraq as a minor problem—at any rate, having withdrawn from Iraq at the end of 2011, it was initially unprepared to send American troops to help when civil war seemed to erupt yet again in the beleaguered country.[40] Outraged at ISIS's brutalities, however, the United States and other Western nations began bombing ISIS's positions in 2014 after the fall of Mosul, and in response to this, ISIS members, unable to attack these countries directly, retaliated by performing and webcasting several beheadings of defenseless Western hostages in the late summer and early fall of 2014.[41] These vicious acts escalated alarm. Following the webcast beheadings of Americans—tragic and disgusting but hardly the level of destruction wreaked on 9/11—some 60 to 80 percent of the American public came to view ISIS as a major security threat to the United States. And, although only 17 percent had advocated sending American ground troops to fight ISIS immediately after its surprising success in Mosul, after the beheadings, that support rose to over 40 percent. For a while in February 2015, after the death (apparently in a Jordanian airstrike) of an American captive, Kayla Mueller, support spiked even higher—to upward of 60 percent. Indeed, on a separate poll in 2016, of the 83 percent who said they were following the news about ISIS closely, fully 77 percent said that they deemed ISIS to present "a serious threat to the existence or survival of the U.S.," and two-thirds of these said they felt "strongly" about it.[42] Although ISIS inspired dozens of homegrown terrorist plots in the United States between 2015 and 2018, none of these involved ISIS operatives or fighters from the Middle East who had infiltrated or returned to the country.

Elites did likely help to create the alarm over ISIS, and then, sensing a responsive audience, they were soon feeding it. After the beheadings began, Sen. Dianne Feinstein (D-CA) insisted that "the threat ISIS poses cannot be overstated"—effectively proclaiming, as columnist Dan Froomkin suggests, hyperbole on the subject to be impossible.[43] Equally inspired, Sen. Jim Inhofe (R-OK), born before World War II, extravagantly claimed that "we're in the most dangerous position we've ever been in" and that ISIS is "rapidly developing a method of blowing up a major U.S. city."[44]

> ## "The media quickly became canny about weaving audience-grabbing references to ISIS into any story about terrorism."

For its part, the media quickly became canny about weaving audience-grabbing references to ISIS into any story about terrorism. Especially impressive was the ingenious ploy of the editors at the *Daily Beast* when it published a thoughtful article titled "How ISIS's 'Attack America' Plan Is Working."[45] The teaser for the article left out the word "how," cleverly transforming the message of the piece in an effort, presumably, to attract frightened readers and to service their alarm. Such clickbaiting behavior continued even as ISIS went into decline.[46]

But it was a dramatic (and disgusting) event, the webcast beheadings in the Middle East, that seems to have been critical.[47] Although media and elite cue-givers certainly played a role in this remarkable phenomenon, events mostly, or at least substantially, triggered the essential dynamic of the public alarm.

Figure 3

Perception of ISIS as a major security threat and support for ground troops, 2014–2017

A. "In response to the recent violence in Iraq, do you favor or oppose the United States sending ground troops into Iraq?" (CBS/*New York Times*)

B. "Do you favor or oppose the United States sending ground troops into combat operations against ISIS forces in Iraq or Syria?" (CNN/Opinion Research Corporation)

C. "Do you favor or oppose the United States sending ground troops into Iraq or Syria to fight ISIS (Islamic) militants?" (CBS/*New York Times*)

D. "Would you favor/support or oppose the United States sending ground troops to fight ISIS (Islamic militants) in Iraq and Syria?" (Reason-Rupe, Pew Research Center, Quinnipiac)

E. "Do you think the U.S. military should have combat troops on the ground in Iraq or not?" (Quinnipiac)

F. "Please tell me if you approve or disapprove of the United States taking that action in Iraq in response to the current situation . . . Putting U.S. troops back on the ground." (Fox)

G. "Do you support or oppose the United States sending ground troops back into Iraq to help the Iraqi government defeat Islamic militants?" (Quinnipiac)

H. "Please tell me whether you favor or oppose each of the following . . . Sending U.S. ground troops to Iraq or Syria." (CNN/Opinion Research Corporation)

I. "Would you favor or oppose the United States sending ground troops to Iraq and Syria in order to assist groups in those countries that are fighting the Islamic militants (commonly known as ISIS)?" (Gallup)
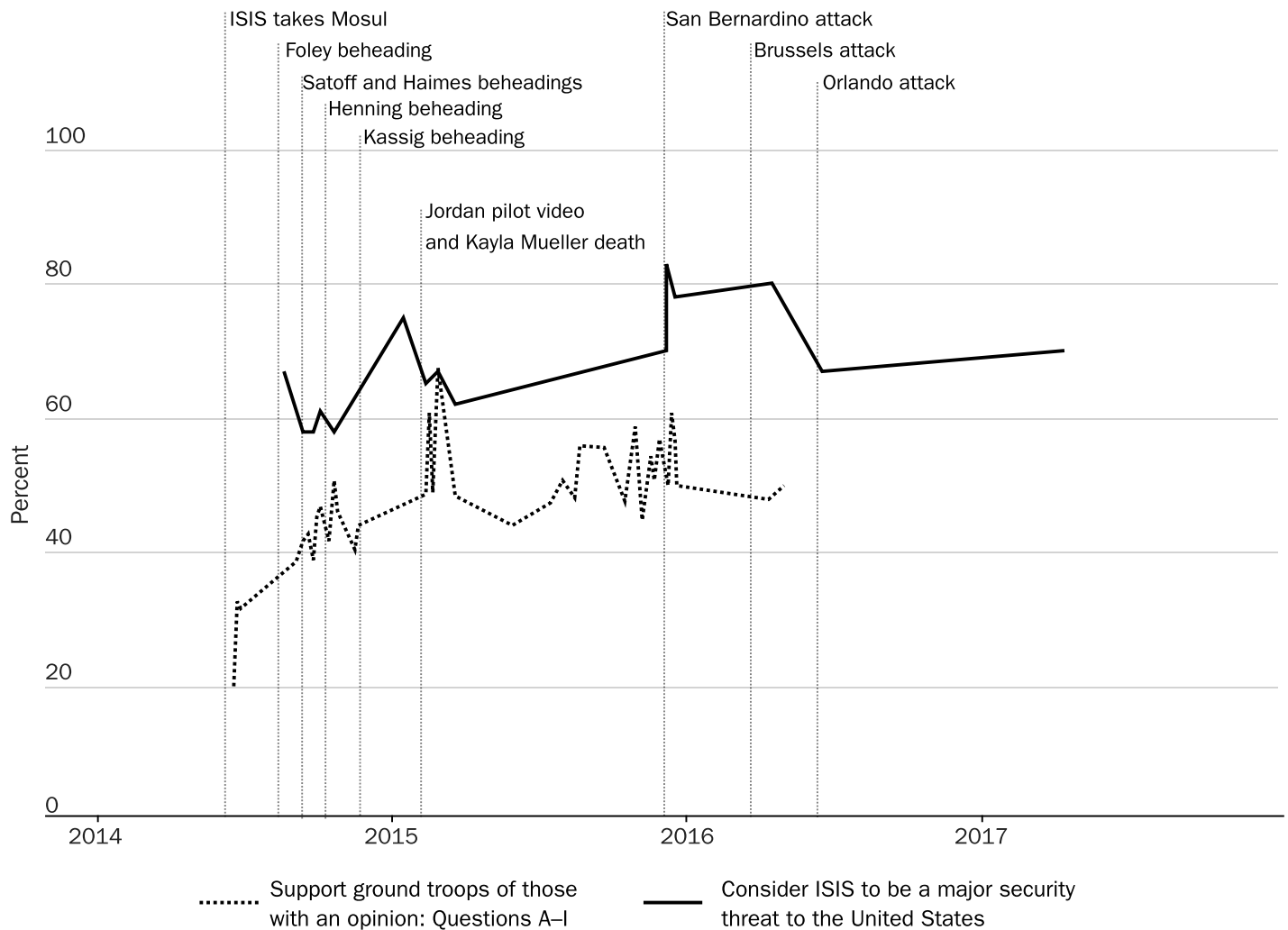
Sources: CBS, *New York Times*, CNN, Opinion Research Corporation, Reason-Rupe, Pew Research Center, Quinnipiac, Fox, Gallup.

Wars in Iraq and Elsewhere

Throughout the decade after the 1991 Gulf War, polls in the United States document a fair degree of support for the use of military force to depose Iraq's Saddam Hussein.[48] In early 2001, as Figure 4 shows, 55 percent of respondents favored the idea of "invading Iraq with U.S. ground troops in an attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power." However, despite this potential opening, hawkish politicians and elites apparently still considered an invasion to be a nonstarter, and few, if any, advocated such a course at the time: there were public declarations and congressional appropriations to support opposition groups in Iraq, but no one was really calling for a war to depose Saddam Hussein.[49]

As Figure 4 also shows, the percentage of the American public favoring an invasion of Iraq leapt to nearly 75 percent by the end of November 2001, which was not only after 9/11 but at a time when it seemed that the invasion of Afghanistan, which began October 7, had been a remarkable success. The insistence of elites or the media may have paid some role here, but at the time, the chief focus was on 9/11 and on the Afghan War—in Bush's speech announcing the upcoming Afghan venture, for example, Iraq is only mentioned once and then simply as the enemy that the United States had fought a decade earlier. The public reaction documented in that poll, however, may have helped encourage the discussions that

Figure 4
Support for invasion of Iraq, 2001–2003
"Would you favor or oppose invading Iraq with U.S. ground troops in an attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power?"
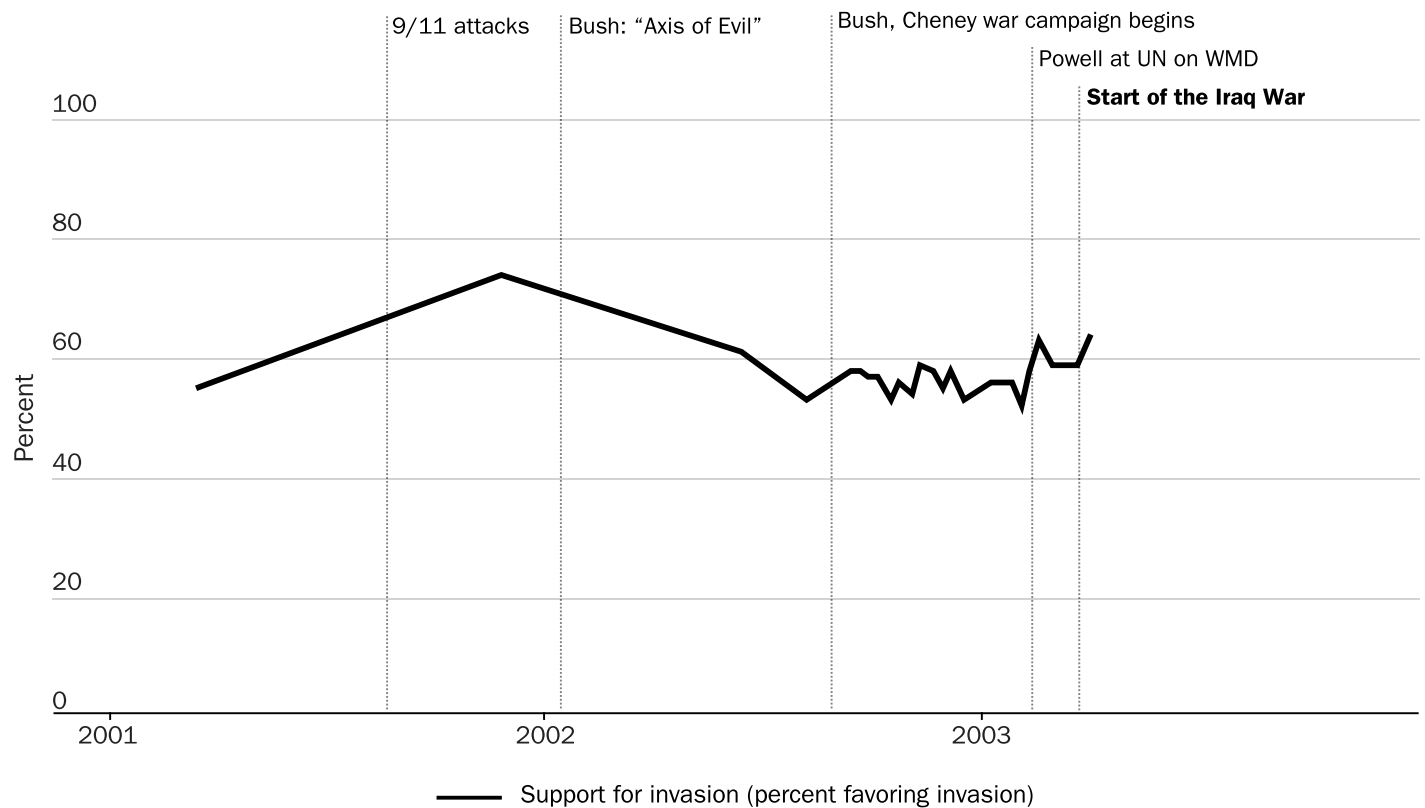
Source: Gallup.
Note: WMD = weapons of mass destruction

were then underway within the administration about launching a war against Iraq; and in his State of the Union address January 29, 2002, two months after the poll, Bush publicly positioned Iraq prominently on his "axis of evil" hit list while announcing that Saddam Hussein presented a "grave and growing danger" to the United States.

However, despite such dramatic proclamations from the bully pulpit and even though polls found about half the population professing to believe that Saddam Hussein had been personally involved in the 9/11 attacks,[50] support for invading Iraq, as shown in Figure 4, dwindled over the next several months until by August 2002 it was about where it had stood before 9/11.

> "Despite dramatic proclamations from the bully pulpit, support for invading Iraq dwindled until it was about where it had stood before 9/11. The administration, despite strenuous efforts and general approval or acquiescence by leaders of the Democratic Party, was unable notably to increase that support before it launched the war in March 2003."

Then, beginning in August and September 2002, the administration launched a concentrated campaign to boost support for going to war. However, despite strenuous efforts and general approval or acquiescence by leaders of the Democratic Party, it was unable notably to increase that support before it launched the war in March 2003: with one exception, approval for sending the troops never ranged more than 4 percentage points higher (or lower) than the 55 percent figure tallied shortly after George W. Bush came into office in 2001, nine months before 9/11.[51]

An interesting comparison can be made with the run-up to the 1991 Gulf War presided over by George H. W. Bush.

He, too, spent a great deal of time and effort seeking to boost support for sending the American military into action to eject Iraq's invading forces from Kuwait. For the most part, however, during the entire course of the debate over war, there was little change in the degree to which popular opinion supported the idea of initiating a war in the Persian Gulf. People did not become consistently more hawkish or dovish, more war eager or war averse, or more or less supportive of Bush or his policies. Their perceptions of the reasons behind involvement and the reasons for going to war apparently did not change very much either. There was, however, an increase in fatalism—in the percentage who saw the war as inevitable.[52] Overall, neither Bush was able to swing public opinion toward war—though, conceivably, they were able to arrest a deterioration of support for war.

Some evidence suggests that if an alternative perspective on going to war had been more effectively promulgated in the run-up to the Iraq War, it might have been effective at reducing support for war—that is, at least some Americans would have reversed their favorability for war if they had seen certain arguments against it. In *Going to War in Iraq*, Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy, and George Marcus argue that some people—well-informed Democrats and independents in particular—were responsive to arguments opposing the Iraq War during its run-up. For the most part, such people could find these arguments only in a subset of newspapers, but if they did come across them, the arguments "had resonance" or found a "receptive" audience or "aroused strong opposition." At the same time, Republicans so informed chose to remain utterly unmoved. Thus, in this case "newspaper content"—that is, information that happened to be presented, or put on the shelf, by some newspapers—"appears to have shaped directly public support for the war," at least for those predisposed to being shaped.[53] In another study, one with a cross-national perspective, Matthew Baum and Philip Potter stressed the role of parties or party elites who, mainly through the media, were able to alert voters to what they considered to be foreign policy missteps and failures. They found that opposition to the Iraq War was generally strongest in countries where, for various reasons concerning electoral structure and media access, the anti-war argument was most successfully promulgated.[54] However, as with the Feldman, Huddy, and Marcus study,

this seems to be more nearly a commentary on the potential potency of the anti-war argument to receptive people than on the effectiveness or agility of those bearing the message or of the media transmitting it.

PATTERNS IN SUPPORT FOR WAR

The experiences in the run-up to the two wars again suggest that there are rather distinct limits to the effectiveness of the bully pulpit. However, it does not appear that the president necessarily needs public support in advance to pull off a military venture.[55] The public generally seems to be willing to go along—not that it has much choice.[56] But it reserves the right to object if the cost of the war comes to outweigh its perceived benefit. Sometimes the public has seemed quite supportive of going to war as troops are sent into combat, as in World War II, Korea (1950), Vietnam (1965), Panama (1989), Somalia (1992), and Afghanistan (2001). At other times, the public has been at best divided on war, as in Lebanon (1958 and 1983), Grenada (1983), the Gulf War (1991), Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1995), Kosovo (1999), and the Iraq War (2003). In some cases, the ventures have been accomplished at costs that the public seems to have deemed acceptable, as in World War II, Panama, Lebanon (1958), Grenada, the Gulf War, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. In others, support dropped as costs grew, as in Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. And in others, the public's dismay at rising costs was met by abrupt early withdrawal, as in Lebanon (1983) and Somalia (1993).[57] And, of course, if public support declines, the opposition party is likely to see it as an advantage to be exploited.

Patterns for war support suggest, then, that the public essentially applies a rough cost-benefit calculation when considering the value of military intervention, balancing the perceived benefit of the military mission against its perceived costs. These generally follow a familiar pattern: as American casualties and other costs mount, there is at first a rather strong erosion in support; then, there may be a more gradual (sometimes a *much* more gradual) decline.[58] Thus, in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, support decreased as casualties—whether of draftees, volunteers, or reservists—increased.

Although this suggests that Americans have a sense of, and react to, war's increasing costs, it does not mean that wars are equally supported as costs accrue. Specifically, the public placed a far lower value on the stakes in Iraq than it did in the earlier anti-Communist wars in Korea and Vietnam. Thus, in 2005 the percentage of the American public finding intervention in Iraq to have been a mistake, when around 1,500 Americans had been killed, was about the same as in Vietnam at the time of the 1968 Tet Offensive, when about 20,000 American soldiers had died.[59] That is, casualty for casualty, support dropped far more quickly in the Iraq War than it had in either of the two earlier wars. A more extreme case is Somalia, where support dropped quickly after fewer than two dozen battle deaths.[60] This effect is unlikely to be explained by a change in cost tolerance. Americans expressed great willingness to expend lives to go after al Qaeda in Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attack. Using consistent measures, the Afghan war was initially supported far more than ventures into Korea, Vietnam, or Iraq.[61]

> "The public does not seem to be very manipulable as war support declines, a process that is dominated by a rough comparison of benefit and cost."

The public does not seem to be very manipulable as war support declines, a process that is, as suggested, dominated by a rough comparison of benefit and cost. By contrast, it has sometimes been argued that support for war is determined by the prospects for success rather than by the costs of the war—that Americans are "defeat phobic" rather than "casualty phobic"—and therefore that "persuading the public that a military operation will be successful" is "the linchpin of public support."[62] Under the sway of this notion, President George W. Bush tried to use the bully pulpit to boost support for his war by pushing ideas about victory and winning in a set of speeches at the end of 2005. In one, surrounded by signs that said, "Plan for Victory," he used the word "victory" 15 times, twice with the modifier "complete."[63] As with his

very considerable efforts to sell his Social Security plan, however, the campaign proved futile, as shown in Figure 4.

As it happens, however, things actually did improve in Iraq at the time of what was called the "surge"—when Bush added troops who were able to work productively with locals who had become hostile to the Iraqi insurgents and their brutality.[64] The American public clearly got the message that conditions were improving: between 2007 and 2008, the percentage of people who thought U.S. efforts were making things better rose from 30 to 46 while those believing that they were having no impact dropped from 51 to 32. And the percentage holding that the United States was making significant progress rose from 36 to 46 while the percentage concluding that it was winning the war rose from 21 to 37. Despite this change, however, as Figure 5 suggests, support for the war did not increase—nor did it do so on other questions

designed to tap war support, including questions asking if the war had been worth the effort or the right decision or questions seeking to find how many favored staying in Iraq as long as necessary for victory.[65] American casualty rates also declined after 2007, but this also had no effect on support for the war even though there had been studies predicting that decreased casualty rates would cause support for the war to increase.[66] Successful prosecution of a war and reduced casualty rates, it appears, are unlikely to convert people who have already decided that the war has not been worth the costs.[67]

There were blips of ups and downs as support for the Iraq War declined, as shown in Figure 5. These seem mainly to have been related to factual developments, not to media or elite persuasion, and they were often rather peculiar. For example, support for the war in Iraq dropped for a while at the time of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 as

Figure 5
Support for invasion of Iraq, 2003–2019
"In view of the developments since we first sent our troops to Iraq, [looking back] do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to [fight in] Iraq, or not?"
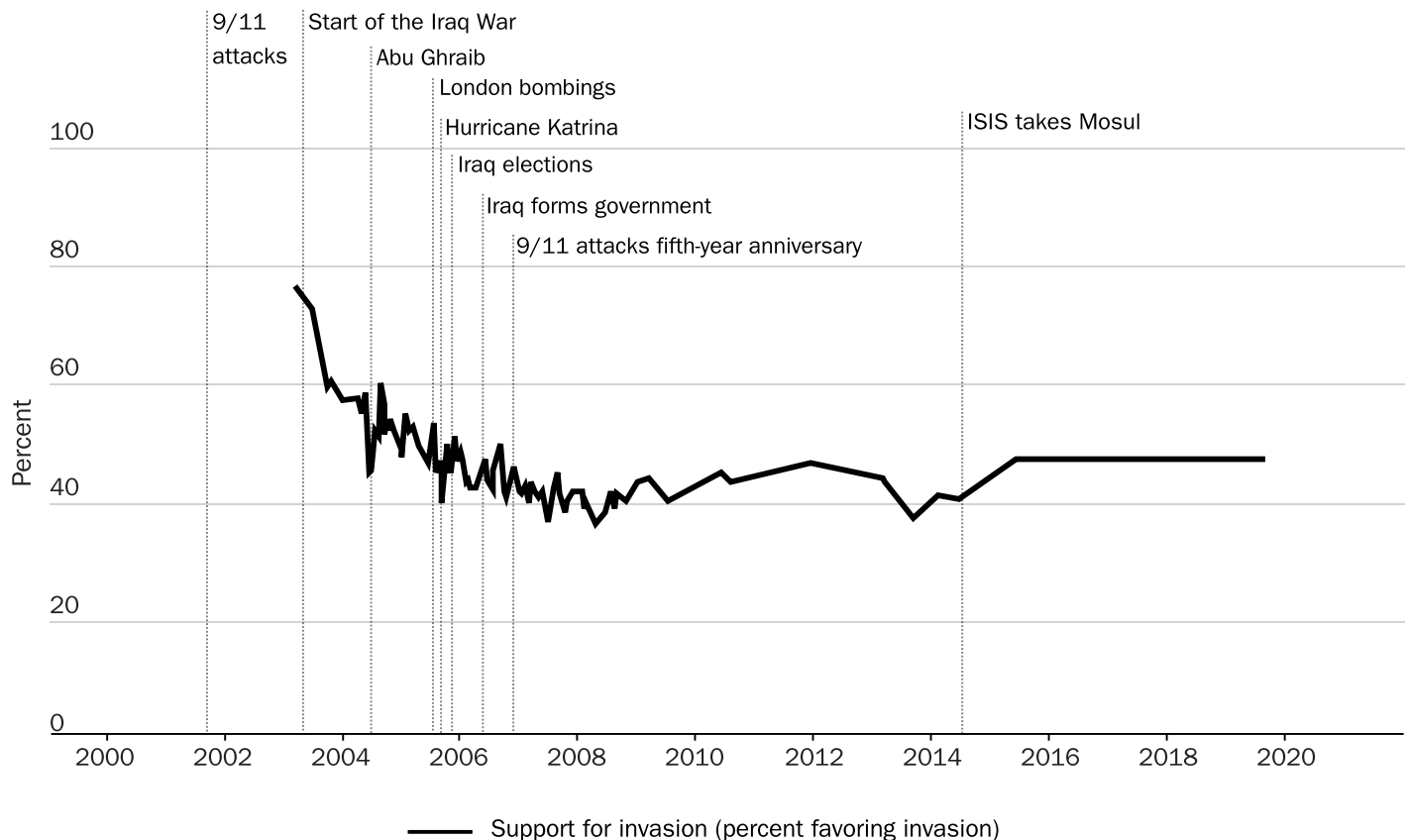
Sources: Gallup and other polling agencies.

Americans were led to wonder about the nation's priorities. This decline, however, was more than reversed, it appears, by the successful Iraq elections of November 15, and within days of those elections, war support dropped again to a level slightly lower than was registered before either event took place. Similarly, a decline in support in 2004 at the time of the Abu Ghraib prison disclosures was eventually mostly reversed. In addition, support for the war temporarily rose after terrorist attacks in London in July 2005 and at the time of the fifth anniversary of 9/11 in 2006, an event and non-event, respectively, that apparently reminded Americans of what the war was purportedly all about. However, other anniversaries or notable terrorist events—such as the 2004 Madrid train bombings, which were even more destructive than the 2005 London bombings and were, like the London attacks, extensively covered by the media—did not seem to have an effect.[68]

It should be stressed that the labels supplied for the upward and downward bumps in Figure 5 are decidedly ad hoc. After the fact, an effort was made to consider what could plausibly have triggered or "caused" each rise or fall—although some of these phenomena, of course, might simply be caused by sampling or other errors in polling procedures. However, taking the rises and falls at face value, it certainly seems that the events that the public happened to consider significant were less than fully predictable—a special dilemma for media editors trying to deliver the news the public wants to hear.

PARTISAN DIFFERENCES

Besides the decline of support, there was one significant public opinion development in the United States during the Iraq War, and it seems to owe virtually nothing to either the media or opinion leadership. This was the creation of a massive partisan division on the war. The public, or much of it, has frequently viewed war through partisan lenses.[69] However, as Gary Jacobson has documented, the public opinion partisan split for the Iraq War of 2003 was considerably greater than for any military action over the

previous half century. An interesting comparison on this can be made with the 1991 Gulf War. In the run-up to each war, Democrats were less likely to support war than were Republicans, but the partisan gap among the public was *far* wider in 2003 than in 1991.[70] This is remarkable because Democratic leaders in Congress stood in strong opposition to launching the earlier Gulf War, while they mostly remained silent or were even generally supportive of the war effort in Iraq. That is, partisan elites disagreed far more in the run-up to the 1991 war, but partisan public opinion differences were far greater in the 2003 one.[71]

> "Partisan elites disagreed far more in the run-up to the 1991 war, but partisan public opinion differences were far greater in the 2003 one. Rather than being led by party elites, the Democratic base jerked a reluctant party leadership toward an anti-war stance."

The bottom-up phenomenon is also suggested by the way organized opposition to the Iraq War grew within the Democratic Party. Rather than being led by party elites, the Democratic base jerked a reluctant party leadership toward an anti-war stance. Base opinion was instrumental in engineering the party's 2004 nomination for the presidency of the most credible anti-war candidate, John Kerry. Then, in the 2006 and 2008 elections, Democratic activists worked to field successful anti-war candidates for the House and Senate, many of them Iraq War veterans, substantially increasing in each case the number of Democratic seats. And, in 2008, Iraq War opponents were a cornerstone of the success of the only major presidential candidate to have opposed the Iraq War, Barack Obama—although he later proved to be something of a disappointment to them on the issue.

Public Opinion as a Primary Driver

It certainly appears that the media and elite cue-givers had little to do with the fears and threats envisioned by the public after al Qaeda's 9/11 attack and after the 2014 beheadings by ISIS. In addition, media and elite cue-givers were unable to generate increased support for military action in Iraq in the run-up to the war. Nor were they responsible for the broad partisan division that developed during the Iraq War in which the base seems to have done more manipulating than party leaders.

To the extent that the public accepts elite, media, and partisan cues, it is probably better to see the cue-givers not so much as opinion leaders but as entities who seek to prime public attunement to various issues—putting ideas on the shelf—but in the end leaving the public to embrace, reject, or ignore as it chooses. In an important sense, the process is often bottom-up.[72]

SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF THE PERSUASION PROCESS

In his book, *Selling Intervention and War*, Jon Western has looked not only at instances in which the people attempting to do such selling succeeded but also at ones in which they failed. He repeatedly finds that the public has often "resisted persuasion" and that sales pitches work when the arguments made are ones that "the public [is] willing to accept" or when they "strike a chord" or "resonate" with the public.[73] Another way to put this is to suggest that the message has sometimes "activated latent beliefs and dispositions."[74] Or, as Ronald Krebs puts it, politicians have sometimes found an "eager audience" or a "rhetorical route" that is "politically safe."[75] This conclusion is also seen in a series of experiments carried out by Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza in which people responded favorably to elite cues on one policy, were unmoved on another, and were moved in the opposite direction on a third.[76]

The phenomenon can be seen in the political rise of Donald Trump in 2015–16, when Republican voters seemed to have been entirely capable of rejecting elite cues, whether promulgated by leaders of their own party or by the mainstream media. Trump seems to have successfully played and tapped into what Katherine Cramer calls "the politics of resentment," but as her book demonstrates, Trump did not invent the resentments—they had long preceded him.[77]

> "To the extent that the public accepts elite, media, and partisan cues, it is probably better to see the cue-givers not so much as opinion leaders but as entities who seek to prime public attunement to various issues. In an important sense, the process is often bottom-up."

Indeed, the discovery of this group of resenters and an appreciation of its size, argues Brian Rosenwald, was rather inadvertent. Executives in AM radio "had no interest in political outcomes," but "they wanted to captivate listeners and make money, and they discovered, essentially by accident, that conservative political talk—in the mouth of an entertaining personality—achieved this." That is, "it turned out that talk radio hit a nerve with a segment of the public that was disgusted by what they perceived as the mainstream media's liberal bias." The process was one in which broadcasters "stumbled upon an untapped market" and then "capitalized on it."[78]

Central to this development was Rush Limbaugh, a four-time failed disc jockey who "had no intention of affecting elections or legislation, and no inkling that he could." However, in the role of political commentator, he proved to be a "master showman." He found that "caller after caller celebrated him for his views," and he progressively "adapted his show to satisfy his fans and fulfill a newfound sense of duty to them." Far from

creating the phenomenon, says Limbaugh, he thrived "because I validate what millions of Americans already think."[79]

As Rosenwald continues, "Trump was the ideal candidate for the political world unleashed by talk radio and its progeny. His pugnacious style—constantly lashing out at liberals, the GOP establishment, and the mainstream media—was exactly what talk radio had offered for almost three decades." He generated support among those who "at last had what they had craved for years: a candidate who sounded like their champions on the air, who didn't care about establishment approval or the politically correct press and wouldn't cave in the name of governance." In the process, he "alienated many voters with his comments, but a sizable portion of the electorate bought what he was selling."[80]

> ## "Politicians found that most Americans, concerned that the bombings would lead to greater involvement in yet another war in the Middle East, were decidedly unwilling to support even the limited punitive bombing of Syria, and the bombing was never carried out."

Cramer's book was written before the rise of Trump; indeed, Trump's name does not even appear in the index. But in a 2020 interview, she concurs with Rosenwald, suggesting that perhaps the main reason for Trump's appeal is "that he communicates to these people that he's going to stick up for them and not let anybody push them around" and that he "resonates with this feeling that nobody has been listening to them for decades."[81] In the process, Trump proved highly adept at telling his base what it wanted to hear. For example, support for Trump's immigration stance, which had worked well in 2016, had waned by 2020, at which point Trump pivoted to seek other issues that would resonate.

Eventually Trump came to dominate the Republican party so much that congressional Republicans quaked in terror when his baseless claims about how the 2020 election had been stolen from him resonated with Republican voters. "When we talk in private," wrote one, "I haven't heard a single congressional Republican allege that the election results were fraudulent—not one. Instead, I hear them talk about their worries about how they will 'look' to President Trump's most ardent supporters."[82] Trump's base, accepting his claims, was doing the "manipulation," not the Republican elite.

The process could also be seen in 2013 when President Barack Obama dramatically proposed military action in response to chemical weapons use by the Syrian regime in Syria's civil war. Leaders of both parties in Congress quickly fell into line on the issue. Moreover, these bipartisan leadership cues were accompanied by extensive media coverage that included disturbing photographs of the corpses of Syrian children apparently killed in the attack. Nonetheless, politicians found that most Americans, concerned that the bombings would lead to greater involvement in yet another war in the Middle East, were decidedly unwilling to support even the limited punitive bombing of Syria, and the bombing was never carried out.[83]

Later, in 2015, nearly a decade and a half after the 9/11 attacks, Obama decided that he wanted to place terrorism in what he considered to be its "proper" perspective and ventured to suggest that the threat of terrorism, even that presented at the time by ISIS, was not "existential" in nature—an observation that is "blindingly obvious," as security specialist Bruce Schneier puts it.[84] Obama was ready to go further—to attempt to alter the accepted narrative even more. When his closest adviser told him that people were worried that ISIS would soon take its beheading campaign to the United States, he derisively replied, "they're not coming here to chop our heads off." And he is said to have "frequently" reminded his staff that terrorism takes far fewer lives in America than do handguns, car accidents, and falls in bathtubs. But Obama never summoned the political courage to mount an extended effort toward combating public fears of terrorism. Indeed, out of concern that Obama would seem insensitive to the anxieties of the American people, his advisers reportedly fought to keep him from doing so.[85] As Greg Jaffe of the *Washington Post* noted at the time, the experience was "a stark reminder for [Obama] that the

post-9/11 'season of fear,' which [Obama] had hoped to move the country past, hasn't yet ended." That is, Obama and others were haunted by a lesson put forward by analyst Stephen Sestanovich: "It's not good politics to display your irritation with the American people."[86] Again, any "manipulation" in this case came from the public.

Similarly, people who downplay the threat presented by global warming have found (but not created) a responsive, and therefore encouraging, audience. On the other hand, people who downplay the threat presented by terrorism (or who seek responsibly to put that threat in sensible and rational context) have generally not found one.[87] In the marketplace of ideas, as in the material one, there is no guarantee that the best product will prevail.

AGENDA SETTING

Some researchers have concluded that the media and opinion leaders are important not so much because they influence opinion one way or the other but because of the important independent role that they play in gatekeeping, framing issues, and setting or priming the agenda for public discussion. "Americans' views of their society and nation are powerfully shaped by the stories that appear on the evening news," they argue, and they find that "people who were shown network broadcasts edited to draw attention to a particular problem . . . cared more about it, believed that government should do more about it, reported stronger feelings about it, and were much more likely to identify it as one of the country's most important problems."[88]

The process definitely works sometimes. It could be seen in action, for example, immediately after Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990. There appears to have been a certain wariness and confusion on the part of the public as to how to interpret the event. This uncertainty evaporated a few days later, however, when President George H. W. Bush announced that the United States would send troops to Saudi Arabia. At that point, the contest in the Persian Gulf soared to the top of the political agenda: the public bought it as an important item.[89]

But, while Bush may have set the public agenda at the outset of the crisis, his experience in that war's aftermath

suggests that he was far from all powerful in this respect. Immediately after the war ended in early March 1991, the public's interest shifted—without being led or primed or manipulated by much of anyone—to the troubling state of the economy. It was clearly to Bush's political advantage to keep the war and foreign policy as lively political issues during his reelection campaign of 1991–92, and he certainly tried to do that. But despite the advantage of his enormous post-war popularity,[90] he found himself unable to divert attention to topics more congenial to him, something that was very much to the benefit of his challenger, Bill Clinton.[91]

> "Once the Gulf War began in 1991, the media found that their consumers wanted a great deal of information about the exciting war and that they did not want to hear anything critical about the military. The media complied."

In all this, the media generally acted much more like followers than leaders or manipulators.[92] The media dutifully reported what was being said and done, of course, and commented extensively on it in columns and editorials; but it was the message and consumer demands that dominated the media, not the other way around. Once the Gulf War began in 1991, the media found that their consumers wanted a great deal of information about the exciting war and that they did not want to hear anything critical about the military. The media complied. One accounting found that 95 percent of all television news sources that discussed the performance of the American military praised its effectiveness.[93]

In contrast, the media substantially ignored anti-war protest demonstrations during the war. The editors at the *Los Angeles Times* war desk, noting from polls that the public seemed to support the war 80/20, decided that it made sense for their coverage to be similarly "balanced." That proportion would have been generous. According to one study, during the war only 1 out of 878 on-air sources who appeared on newscasts

over the major television networks represented a national peace organization.[94] And another found that newspapers during the first three weeks of the war devoted 2.7 percent of their print space to peace activities while the comparable figure for television network news was 0.7 percent.[95]

Had the war gone badly, it is reasonable to suspect that the press would have become critical—though it probably would have followed, rather than led, political and public discontent.[96] Without failure in the war, the media remained frozen in advocacy. Then, after the war, the media sensed correctly that their consumers' interest had shifted to the economy, and the media followed suit.[97]

The public thus often substantially sets its own agenda. It can be quite selective and often rather unpredictably so, not only about which facts to embrace or be moved by (as noted in the discussion of Figure 5) but also by which issues it wishes to pay attention to. For example, about the only time the American public chose to pay much attention to the war in Bosnia, a venture that elites and the media much publicized and much agonized over in the 1990s, was when an American airman was shot down behind enemy lines and when American troops were dispatched to the area to police the situation.[98]

Of course, although opinion elites and the media do not necessarily create public fears, they are quite willing to take advantage of them—to see their market potential—when the opportunity presents itself. Consider journalist Charlie Savage's account of the underwear bomber's failed attempt to blow up an airliner over Detroit at the end of 2009. This incident caught the attention of the public and increased concerns about terrorism for a while (Figures 1 and 2). Political elites, however, remained uncertain about the incident's longer-range importance. Then, a few weeks after the event, Republican Scott Brown won an open seat in Massachusetts, and when Republican officials investigated this remarkable phenomenon, they concluded that their candidate's harsh stand on terrorism was instrumental to the result and were quick to follow up. They reasoned that if the terrorism argument could "sell" so productively in a normally Democratic state, it would "sell" everywhere.[99] They were following, not inspiring, public sentiment.

Newsrooms—as anyone who has spent time in one knows well—are inhabited by a special class of people—editors—who spend their lives assessing potential stories and evaluating each one's likelihood of consumer interest, staying power, and short- versus long-term popularity. Every reporter has gone in with a seemingly interesting story or angle only to be greeted with the ultimate putdown: "Nah. Nobody's interested in that."

> "The public thus often substantially sets its own agenda. It can be quite selective and often rather unpredictably so, not only about which facts to embrace or be moved by but also by which issues it wishes to pay attention to."

This does not mean that stories are composed solely with the market in mind—something that would be unwise because of the difficulty of predicting what news consumers will be interested in. In fact, in a study about how journalists decide what is newsworthy, Herbert Gans found that journalists do not "directly take the audience into account when selecting and producing stories" but rather that they assume "what interest[s] them [will] interest the audience."[100] Journalist Dan Gardner substantially agrees. Reporters, editors, and producers do not calculate their stories in order "to boost revenues and please their corporate masters," he concludes. Rather, "they do it because information that grabs and holds readers grabs and holds reporters. They do it because they are human." A story is likely to be "newsworthy" if it includes "novelty, conflict, impact, and that beguiling and amorphous stuff known as human interest." But "human interest" means that, for the story to succeed, it must interest humans.[101]

SHIFTING FEARS

When analyzing the media's role in shaping public opinion, it is vital to avoid selection bias in which the analyst focuses

only on the issues that catch on after the media give them play while neglecting the huge number of issues initially given equal play that never generate much of a stir at all. People often seem quite capable of making up their minds without much reliance on either the media or opinion leaders.[102]

It is not easy to explain why people are more impressed by some fears and threats than others. Research on what hazards are likely to inspire public anxiety has produced a laundry list of suggested amplifying factors, including

- recent experience;
- the uncontrollability of the risks;
- the dread (or fear) those risks inspire;
- their involuntary nature or catastrophic potential;
- whether their dangers can be preventively controlled, are certain to be fatal, or can easily be reduced;
- whether they might entail an inequitable distribution of risk (that is, whether they seem random or "unfair" and affect seemingly defenseless populations);
- their threat to future generations;
- whether they are produced by malign actors or would personally affect members of the public;
- whether a threat is increasing or not observable, unknown to those exposed, new or unfamiliar, scientifically uncertain, or difficult to measure; or
- whether a threat would have immediate effect or affect many people.[103]

Weighing such disparate considerations can be tricky. Thus, Daniel Gilbert argues that people are less afraid of global warming than terrorism because climate change is unintentional, doesn't violate moral sensibilities, looms in the unseen future, and happens gradually.[104] But much the same could be said for nuclear reactor accidents, and the one that took place at Fukushima in 2011 has had a huge impact around the world even though the accident, caused by a rare tsunami, resulted in no direct deaths. And, although some people say that they don't like flying because they have no control over the aircraft, they seem to have little apprehension about boarding trains, buses, taxicabs, and ocean liners.

"Opinion on a policy issue can also change—sometimes rather mysteriously."

Also, public reaction to terrorism stemming from a domestic source is not as extreme (or long-lasting) as it is to terrorism that seems to be connected to a hostile foreign entity such as al Qaeda or ISIS.

Opinion on a policy issue can also change—sometimes rather mysteriously. Public support for the "war on drugs" lasted for decades, even though the policy can objectively be said to have failed miserably.[105] Yet by 2014, popular support seemed to have significantly waned, especially on the marijuana issue. Public opinion surrounding gay rights, particularly about gay marriage, tracked a similar pattern along almost the same timeline. For several decades, there was very little increase in popular support for gay marriage.[106] Then, around 2014, what appears to be a very substantial change of opinion on the issue took place. Why either of these changes came about at that particular time is difficult to fathom.[107]

Conclusion

In his important book *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, John Zaller begins his epilogue on what he calls "elite domination of public opinion" with an epigram from V. O. Key, Jr.'s *The Responsible Electorate*:

> The voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input. As candidates and parties clamor for attention and vie for popular support, the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from the alternatives and outlooks presented to them.[108]

But Key's metaphor is surely misplaced. Echoes are mechanical reflections. If I am in a suitably configured cave and yell out "life is a fountain" and "life is not a fountain," the echo will obligingly and uncritically send back both contentions. Unlike an echo, the public is, to use Key's word, "selective."[109] Elite consensus sometimes precedes shifts in public opinion, suggesting that the public can be attentive to elite and media cues.[110] But not all efforts to sell fear or threat or ideas more generally succeed. And the public reacts selectively not only to the pronouncements of elites and media stories that, as Key puts it, "clamor for attention and vie for public support" but also to events and objective information.[111] In the mid-1980s, the public deemed an African famine, mostly ignored initially by the media, worthy of its alarmed attention but did not do the same for a civil war in Bosnia that received huge media coverage in the early 1990s. So it is with the lasting power of emotion-generating events: the hostage-taking in Iran in 1979 resonated for decades, but the Gulf War of 1991 was soon forgotten.[112]

The notion that elites "dominate" public opinion and that "the voice of the people is but an echo" can be countered by suggesting that it is not true in a variety of prominent instances, and that is what this paper seeks to do. There were quite a few reasons to expect that public fears about terrorism would wane in the years following the 9/11 attacks, including the fact that elite alarmism on the issue became much less strident; but mass anxiety remained unchanged. A president who genuinely thought the alarmism was overdrawn was even dissuaded from saying so in public for fear of a negative public reaction.

> "Elite consensus sometimes precedes shifts in public opinion, suggesting that the public can be attentive to elite and media cues. But not all efforts to sell fear or threat or ideas more generally succeed."

In addition, the public strongly opposed the bombing of Syria even though partisan elites were united in support of it, and partisan differences within the public were far greater for a war that elites from both parties had supported than for one in which they were divided. ISIS alarmed elites from the start, but the public became concerned particularly when ISIS executed a few hostages and then webcast the executions.

More broadly, this thesis jells with studies finding that 90 percent of new products fail to sell despite massive promotion campaigns, that advertising in political campaigns has at best only a marginal impact, that the press tends to pursue stories not for their intrinsic importance but for their ability to generate clicks, and that the bully pulpit is neither.

As commercial marketers, political strategists, and public officials have found, the public often fails to "echo." Or, to put it another way, at any time there are a myriad of ideas swirling around, and anyone who could accurately and consistently anticipate which of these are going to generate mass public interest would move to Wall Street to become in very short order the richest person on the planet.[113]

Notes

1. James Risen, *Pay Any Price: Greed, Power, and Endless War* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2014), p. 203.

2. H. L. Mencken, *A Mencken Chrestomathy* (New York: Knopf, 1949), p. 29.

3. The data are from press releases and reports by polling agencies, from material posted at PollingReport.com, and from the extensive iPoll collection of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at Cornell University.

4. Christopher Bosso, "Setting the Agenda: Mass Media and the Discovery of Famine in Ethiopia," in *Manipulating Public Opinion: Essays on Public Opinion as a Dependent Variable*, eds. Michael Margolis and Gary A. Mauser (Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks, Cole, 1989), pp. 153–74.

5. Examples of the phenomenon concerning the waxing and waning of anxiety about nuclear weapons are traced and discussed in John Mueller, *Atomic Obsession: Nuclear Alarmism from Hiroshima to Al-Qaeda* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 55–61; compare John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 269.

6. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*; and Adam J. Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

7. On this phenomenon, see especially Joshua D. Kertzer and Thomas Zeitzoff, "A Bottom-Up Theory of Public Opinion about Foreign Policy," *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 3 (July 2017): 534–58.

8. Omar Wasow, "Agenda Seeding: How 1960s Black Protests Moved Elites, Public Opinion and Voting," *American Political Science Review* 114, no. 3 (August 2020): 638–59.

9. Caprice is particularly likely in exercises that need to be gotten over with, are costly to carry out (if only in time), and are not rewarded or punished according to how well or poorly they are executed—such as voting, responding to opinion surveys, and participating in most experiments. For an extreme example of caprice in action, see John Mueller, "Choosing among 133 Candidates," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (Autumn 1970): 395–402.

10. John H. Lienhard, *Inventing Modern: Growing Up with X-rays, Skyscrapers, and Tailfins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

11. Kevin J. Clancy and Robert S. Shulman, *Marketing Myths That Are Killing Business: The Cure for Death Wish Marketing* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), pp. 8, 140.

12. Robert X. Cringley, *Accidental Empires: How the Boys of Silicon Valley Make Their Millions, Battle Foreign Competition, and Still Can't Get a Date* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1992), p. 232.

13. Diana C. Mutz, "The Great Divide: Campaign Media in the American Mind," *Daedalus* 141, no. 4 (Fall 2012): 87.

14. Joshua L. Kalla and David E. Broockman, "The Minimal Persuasive Effects of Campaign Contact in General Elections: Evidence from 49 Field Experiments," *American Political Science Review* 112, no. 1 (February 2018): 148–66. There has been concern of late about the impact of "fake news" on election campaigning. However, political campaigns, as anyone who has suffered through one knows, are wall-to-wall fake news as incumbents strategically distort their records in office and their challengers do the same. With more participants, the fake news heap simply becomes higher and deeper. Its added impact on elections appears to be quite minor. On this issue, see Brendan Nyhan, "Fake News and Bots May Be Worrisome, but Their Political Power Is Overblown," *New York Times*, February 13, 2018. The same seems to hold for the computer-generated targeting of campaign messages: one consumer paid $2.1 million for the information and concluded, "It was useless. We used it in the way they told us, and it had no discernable impact whatever." Dexter Filkins, "John Bolton on the Warpath," *New Yorker*, April 29, 2019.

15. George C. Edwards III, *On Deaf Ears: The Limits of the Bully Pulpit* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). See also Ronald R. Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of US National Security* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 4; and James N. Druckman and Lawrence R. Jacobs, *Who Governs? Presidents, Public Opinion, and Manipulation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), ch. 6.

16. Gary C. Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter: George W. Bush and the American People* (New York: Pearson Longman, 2007), pp. 206–18.

17. On the "terrorism industry," see John Mueller, *Overblown: How Politicians and the Terrorism Industry Inflate National Security Threats, and Why We Believe Them* (New York: Free Press, 2006), ch. 2.

18. For data, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts: The Policing of Terrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 81.

19. For the argument, however, that it was "thanks to a successful narrative project" that al Qaeda terrorism came to be seen as a "security threat," see Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*, p. 25n104.

20. On this issue in a different context, see Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties: A Cross-Section of the Nation Speaks Its Mind* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), ch. 3.

21. For much more trend data showing the same phenomenon in more than a dozen poll questions on terrorism, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "Public Opinion and Counterterrorism Policy," Cato Institute White Paper, February 20, 2018, from which much of the discussion in this section derives. That paper, in turn, revises, updates, and considerably extends material in chapter 2 in Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*. The figures in that book, in that paper, and in this paper are also online in John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "Trends in Public Opinion on Terrorism," May 14, 2020, politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/terrorpolls.pdf, where they are routinely updated. See also Brigitte L. Nacos, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, the Media, and Public Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), ch. 3; and Clem Brooks and Jeff Manza, *Whose Rights? Counterterrorism and the Dark Side of American Public Opinion* (New York: Russell Sage, 2013), chs. 3, 6.

22. John Mueller, ed., *Terrorism since 9/11: The American Cases* (Columbus: Mershon Center, Ohio State University, 2020), politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/since.html. The 49 were killed in the shooting spree at a nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in 2016 by a private security guard who was trained in the use of firearms. For details, see Mueller, *Terrorism since 9/11*, case 80. The overall probability that an American will be killed by a terrorist (whether Islamist or not) in the United States, with the events of 2001 included in the count, stands at about 1 in 4 million per year. For the period since 2001, the concern of this paper, the odds are far lower—about 1 in 50 million. For an extended array of such comparative data, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "Responsible Counterterrorism Policy," Cato Institute Policy

Analysis no. 755, September 10, 2014, p. 5; and Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, p. 138.

23. For early suggestions that 9/11 might prove to be an aberration, see John Mueller, "Harbinger or Aberration? A 9/11 Provocation," *National Interest* no. 69 (Fall 2002): 45–50; John Mueller, "False Alarms," *Washington Post*, September 29, 2002; John Mueller, "Blip or Step Function?," paper presented at the National Convention of the International Studies Association, Portland, OR, February 27, 2003, politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/ISA2003.PDF; and Russell Seitz, "Weaker Than We Think," *American Conservative*, December 6, 2004.

24. Brian Michael Jenkins, *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies: Radicalization and Recruitment to Jihadist Terrorism in the United States since 9/11* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2011), p. 1. See also Bruce Schneier, "Portrait of the Modern Terrorist as an Idiot," *Schneier on Security* (blog), June 14, 2007; Risa A. Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States: How Serious Is the Threat?," *International Security* 36, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 7–47; John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "The Terrorism Delusion: America's Overwrought Response to September 11," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 81–110; Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, ch. 3; and Mueller, *Terrorism since 9/11: The American Cases*. For evidence that reality is reflected in much of the script of *Four Lions*, a satirical British comedy film about bumbling would-be terrorists, see Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, pp. 112–15.

25. Shane Harris, *The Watchers: The Rise of America's Surveillance State* (New York: Penguin, 2010), p. 137.

26. John Ashcroft neglects to mention this episode in his memoir of the era: *Never Again: Securing America and Restoring Justice* (New York: Center Street, 2006). For an array and sources of such predictions, see John Mueller and Ezra Schricker, "Terror Predictions," May 2, 2012, politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/PREDICT.PDF. On these and other alarms, see Mueller, *Overblown*, pp. 43–37; John Mueller and Mark Stewart, "Terrorism Poses No Existential Threat to America. We Must Stop Pretending Otherwise," *The Guardian*, February 24, 2015; John Mueller, "The 9/11 Anniversary: 15 Years of Alarmism—and Counting," *National Interest*, September 12, 2016; Nacos, Bloch-Elkon, and Shapiro, *Selling Fear*.

27. Ronald Krebs also documents a (rather limited) official mellowing of the "war on terror" rhetoric. Ronald R. Krebs, "The Rise, Persistence, and Decline of the War on Terror," in *How 9/11 Changed Our Ways of War*, ed. James Burk (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), pp. 56–85; and Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*, pp. 269–75.

A compilation of alarmist predictions about terrorism has no entry after 2011: Mueller and Schricker, "Terror Predictions." No update has been necessary.

28. Graham Allison, *Nuclear Terrorism: The Ultimate Preventable Catastrophe* (New York: Times Books, 2004), p. 15. In 1995, he had predicted, "In the absence of a determined program of action, we have every reason to anticipate acts of nuclear terrorism against American targets before this decade is out." Graham Allison, "Must We Wait for the Nuclear Morning After?," *Washington Post*, April 30, 1995, p. C7.

29. On these assertions, see Mueller, "The 9/11 Anniversary." For the antidote, see Mueller, *Atomic Obsession*, chs. 12–15.

30. John Mueller and Mark Stewart, "How Safe Are We? Asking the Right Questions about Terrorism," *Foreign Affairs*, August 15, 2016.

31. On such issues, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, *Terror, Security, and Money: Balancing the Risks, Benefits, and Costs of Homeland Security* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Mueller and Stewart, "Responsible Counterterrorism Policy"; and Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, pp. 251–57. See also Peter Bergen, *United States of Jihad: Who Are America's Homegrown Terrorists and How Do We Stop Them?* (Crown Publishers, New York, 2016), pp. 270–72; Benjamin H. Friedman, Jim Harper, and Christopher A. Preble, eds., *Terrorizing Ourselves: Why U.S. Counterterrorism Policy Is Failing and How to Fix It* (Washington: Cato Institute, 2010); Stephen M. Walt, "Monsters of Our Own Imaginings," *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2016; Jeremy Shapiro, "Why We Think Terrorism Is Scarier Than It Really Is (and We Probably Always Will)," *Vox*, March 28, 2016; and Daniel Byman, "Trump and Counterterrorism," *National Interest* (January/February 2017): 66–67.

32. Scott Atran, *Talking to the Enemy: Religion, Brotherhood, and the (Un)making of Terrorists* (New York: Ecco, 2010), p. xiv.

33. On this issue, see also Brooks, "Muslim 'Homegrown' Terrorism in the United States"; and Mike German, *Thinking like a Terrorist: Insights of a Former FBI Undercover Agent* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2007), ix.

34. Brooks and Manza, *Whose Rights?*, p. 40.

35. Brian Michael Jenkins, *Would-Be Warriors: Incidents of Jihadist Terrorist Radicalization in the United States since September 11, 2001* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2010), pp. 8–9.

36. J. Edgar Hoover, *Masters of Deceit: The Story of Communism in America and How to Fight It* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1958), p. 81. See also Joseph McCarthy, "Enemies from Within," speech to the Women's Club, Wheeling, West Virginia, February 9, 1950.

37. For data and an extended discussion, see Mueller and Stewart, "Public Opinion and Counterterrorism Policy," pp. 20–22; See also John Mueller, "Trends in Political Tolerance," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 1–25. Another comparison might be made with concerns about witches that consumed Europe between 1480 and 1680. They were seen as corporal entities in league with the devil, the ultimate spooky foreign adversary. On this comparison, see Mueller and Stewart, "Public Opinion and Counterterrorism Policy"; and Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, ch. 2.

38. On its impact on Chinese perceptions, an effect that led to a major crackdown on Muslims in the western province of Xinjiang, see Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee, and Emir Yazici, "Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression: China's Changing Strategy in Xinjiang," *International Security* 44, no. 3 (Winter 2019/2020): 9–47.

39. The conquest of Mosul was essentially a fluke. The attackers' intention seems to have been merely to hold part of the city for a while in an effort to free some prisoners. Dexter Filkins on "The Rise of ISIS," *Frontline*, PBS, produced by Martin Smith and Linda Hirsch, aired October 28, 2014. The defending Iraqi army had been trained by the American military at a cost to U.S. taxpayers of more than $20 billion. Loveday Morris and Missy Ryan, "After More than $1.6 Billion in U.S. Aid, Iraq's Army Still Struggles," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2016. Nonetheless, it simply fell apart in confusion and disarray, abandoning weaponry, and the city, to the tiny group of seeming invaders even though it greatly outnumbered them by perhaps 30 to 1—even taking into account the fact that many soldiers had purchased the right to avoid showing up for duty by paying half their salary to their commanders. Ned Parker, Isabel Coles, and Raheem Salman, "Special Report: How Mosul Fell—An Iraqi General Disputes Baghdad's Story," Reuters, October 14, 2014; Byman, "Trump and Counterterrorism," p. 72; and Max Abrahms, *Rules for Rebels: The Science of Victory in Militant History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 10. See also John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "Misoverestimating ISIS: Comparisons with Al-Qaeda," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 4 (August 2016); and John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart, "The Islamic State Phenomenon," paper presented at the National Convention of the International Studies Association, Baltimore, MD, February 25, 2017, politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/ISISisa2017.pdf.

40. A poll in relatively war-approving Alabama as early as

2005 asked whether the United States should be prepared to send back troops to established order if full-scale civil war erupted after an American withdrawal. Only one-third approved doing so. Sean Reilly, "Poll Shows Alabamians Still Support President," *Mobile Register*, May 22, 2005.

41. Daniel Byman and Jeremy Shapiro, *Be Afraid. Be a Little Afraid: The Threat of Terrorism from Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Brookings Institution Policy Paper no. 34, November 2014, p. 17.

42. Full data: Mueller and Stewart, "Trends in Public Opinion on Terrorism," p. 16. In 2015, a woman in Salem, Illinois, became alarmed that "the ISIS" were coming to her church, misunderstanding a message about the arrival of retired minister Michael Ice and his wife. Bruce Kropp, "ISIS Not Coming, but the Ice's Are," WJB Radio, February 23, 2015, posted at politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/ISISinIllinois.pdf. The impact of ISIS on public opinion can also be seen in the rise in anxiety documented in Figures 1 and 2, particularly after the attacks by ISIS returnees in Paris in November 2015. However, by 2017 as ISIS went into pronounced decline, both trend lines had retreated to where they had been before the rise of the group. Figure 5 suggests that the rise of ISIS increased support for the war in Iraq. Other data show a similar effect on support for the war in Afghanistan: see Mueller and Stewart, "Trends in Public Opinion on Terrorism," p. 19.

43. Dan Froomkin, "The Congressional Hyperbole Caucus," *The Intercept*, September 10, 2014. See also Micah Zenko, "Exaggeration Nation," *Foreign Policy*, November 21, 2014.

44. Phil Cross, "Senator Inhofe Warns of Potential Terrorist Attacks on U.S. Soil," Fox 25 Oklahoma City, August 20, 2014.

45. Susan Zalkind, "How ISIS's 'Attack America' Plan Is Working," *Daily Beast*, June 22, 2015.

46. In one case, for example, reporters somehow concluded that by massacring people in various locales in various countries, the group was actually growing in appeal—or in "allure" in the words of the headline writer. Carol Morello and Joby Warrick, "Islamic State's Ambitions and Allure Grow as Territory Shrinks," *Washington Post*, July 4, 2016. An opinion article acknowledged that the appeal of Islamic State as "the promise of living in an Islamist utopia" and as a victorious military force was in severe decline and that the group had suffered many defections in the ranks. But the group's shift in focus from dealing with territorial degradation to slaughtering civilians in random attacks was taken not to be a sign of its "desperation and weakness" but one

that demonstrates its "strength and long-term survival skills." Hassan Hassan, "Is the Islamic State Unstoppable?," *New York Times*, July 9, 2016. On the phenomenon, see also Max Abrahms, "Op-Ed Pundits Think Islamic State's Baghdadi Is Smart Because He's Cruel. That's Nonsense," *Los Angeles Times*, November 6, 2016; and Abrahms, *Rules for Rebels*, especially pp. 201–3.

47. President Barack Obama arrestingly commented on the phenomenon in an interview in 2014. He noted that ISIS had made a major strategic error by killing the hostages because the anger it generated resulted in the American public's quickly backing military action. If he had been "an adviser to ISIS," Obama added, he would not have killed the hostages but released them and pinned notes on their chests saying, "Stay out of here; this is none of your business." Such a move, he speculated, might have undercut support for military intervention. Peter Baker, "Paths to War, Then and Now, Haunt Obama," *New York Times*, September 13, 2014.

48. Eric V. Larson and Bodgan Savych, *American Public Support for U.S. Military Operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005), pp. 132–38.

49. For example, Defense Department adviser Richard Perle, who would prove to be one of the most ardent proponents of war in 2003, published an article in 2000 that, while strongly advocating a policy hostile toward Saddam Hussein, recommended only protecting and assisting resistance movements within Iraq, not anything resembling an invasion by American troops. Richard N. Perle, "Iraq: Saddam Unbound," in *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy*, eds. Robert Kagan and William Kristol (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2000), pp. 108–9. For the argument that this suggests that there really wasn't much of a drive at the time to establish a liberal or conservative "hegemony" or "world order," see John Mueller, *The Stupidity of War: American Foreign Policy and the Case for Complacency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 71–72, 90.

50. Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*, p. 139.

51. For similar data using a wide variety of questions, see Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*, pp. 97, 109. See also Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, revised edition (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 278. By contrast, see Chaim Kaufmann, "Threat Inflation and the Failure of the Marketplace of Ideas: The Selling of the Iraq War," *International Security* 29, no.1 (Summer 2004): 30–32.

52. John Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), ch. 2.

53. Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy, and George E. Marcus, *Going to War in Iraq: When Citizens and the Press Matter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 113, 157, 167 (for responsive), 19–20, 26, 165–66, 174–75, 204n11 (for Republicans), 137 (for shaped directly).

54. Matthew A. Baum and Philip B. K. Potter, *War and Democratic Constraint: How the Public Influences Foreign Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

55. See also John Mueller, "Public Support for Military Ventures Abroad," in *The Real Lessons of the Vietnam War: Reflections Twenty-Five Years After the Fall of Saigon*, eds. John Norton Moore and Robert F. Turner (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2002), pp. 187–89; and John Mueller, "Public Opinion as a Constraint on U.S. Foreign Policy: Assessing the Perceived Value of American and Foreign Lives," paper given at the National Convention of the International Studies Association, Los Angeles, CA, March 15, 2000, politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/ISA2000.pdf.

56. Interestingly, across several scenarios about attacking North Korea, more people were willing to support a presidential decision to do so than approved of the action itself. Alida R. Haworth, Scott D. Sagan, and Benjamin A. Valentino, "What Do Americans Really Think about Conflict with Nuclear North Korea? The Answer Is Both Reassuring and Disturbing," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 75, no. 4: 179–186, July 2, 2019.

57. John Mueller, *War and Ideas: Selected Essays* (New York: Routledge, 2011), pp. 180–83. See also Larson and Savych, *American Public Support for U.S. Military Operations*.

58. John Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973); John Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome," *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 6 (November/December 2005): 44–54. There are no poll data to confirm the conclusion, but it seems likely that the support of the Soviet people for their government's war in Afghanistan in the 1980s declined as Soviet casualties mounted, even though information about what was actually going on there came to them primarily through word-of-mouth, not through the controlled media or from official pronouncement.

59. Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome," p. 45.

60. Mueller, *War and Ideas*, p. 177.

61. For data, see Mueller and Stewart, "Trends in Public Opinion on Terrorism," pp. 19–20; and Mueller, *War and Ideas*, p. 200.

62. Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 236–37.

63. Scott Shane, "Bush's Speech on Iraq War Echoes Voice of an Analyst," *New York Times*, December 4, 2005.

64. Bob Woodward, "Why Did Violence Plummet? It Wasn't Just the Surge," *Washington Post*, September 8, 2008; Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 7–40; and Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), especially pp. 262–63. On this phenomenon more generally, see Stephen Biddle, Julia Macdonald, and Ryan Baker, "Small Footprint, Small Payoff: The Military Effectiveness of Security Force Assistance," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 1–2 (2018): 89–142; and Mueller, *The Stupidity of War*, pp. 117, 128–37.

65. For data, see Mueller and Stewart, "Trends in Public Opinion on Terrorism," p. 21.

66. Scott Sigmund Gartner, "The Multiple Effects of Casualties on Public Support for War: An Experimental Approach," *American Political Science Review* 102, no. 1 (February 2008): 105.

67. Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome," p. 49.

68. There was also a notable upward shift in support for the war on many polls when Saddam Hussein was captured in mid-December 2003: Mueller, *War and Ideas*, pp. 198, 203. However, the specific poll question tallied in Figure 5 fails to register that effect because the question was not asked until a month after the capture, by which time any upward boost had evaporated.

69. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion*, pp. 116–22; and Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, ch. 6.

70. Jacobson, *A Divider, Not a Uniter*, pp. 131–38.

71. Mueller, *War and Ideas*, p. 197. See also Feldman, Huddy, and Marcus, *Going to War in Iraq*, pp. 19–21, 152. Compare Berinsky, *In Time of War*, p. 102.

72. In a study that looks at U.S. national security policy in quite a different manner, Ronald Krebs compares narratives on the war on terror. He points out that the narrative that

proved to carry the day declared that on 9/11 "evil terrorists attacked a blameless America because they hate the values Americans hold dear and which America epitomizes." In contrast, there was an alternative narrative holding that "the United States was hardly blameless, due to its heavy-handed behavior abroad, or that the attacks, though horrible, did not mark a rupture in the fabric of world politics." Insofar as the alternative narrative generated any attention at all, it did not, to say the least, strike a responsive chord. Instead of inspiring "reasoned argument," notes Krebs, it generated "deep hostility and charges of disloyalty." Krebs, *Narrative and the Making of U.S. National Security*, pp. 145–47. Thus, comedian Bill Maher lost his job when he suggested, shortly after the event, that the 9/11 hijackers were not cowards but that those using drones were. Interestingly, James Fallows could not find supporters of what Krebs identifies as the dominant public narrative in the foreign and defense establishment at the time: "There may be people who have studied, fought against, or tried to infiltrate al-Qaeda and who agree with Bush's statement. But I have never met any. The soldiers, spies, academics, and diplomats I have interviewed are unanimous in saying that 'They hate us for what we are' is dangerous claptrap." James Fallows, *Blind into Baghdad: America's War in Iraq* (New York: Vintage, 2006), p. 142. On this issue, see also Max Abrahms, "Al Qaeda's Scorecard: A Progress Report on Al Qaeda's Objectives," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 5 (2006): 509–29; and Marc Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence: The Emergence of Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), ch. 1.

73. Jon Western, *Selling Intervention and War: The Presidency, the Media, and the American Public* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), pp. 5, 20–21, 179, 229. See also Mueller, *War and Ideas*, pp. 216–17. Steven Casey documents the methods used by government leaders to shore up support for the Korean War, but he supplies little evidence to suggest the selling efforts worked with the public, concluding only that they may have prevented support from collapsing entirely and from "totally overwhelmingly Truman's Cold War policy." Steven Casey, *Selling the Korean War: Propaganda, Politics, and Public Opinion 1950–1953* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 367. For the argument that the public in the Vietnam War came not so much to reject Cold War policy as to reject the tactic of warfare for implementing it, see Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*, ch. 2. Something similar may have been at work during the Korean War.

74. Brooks and Manza, *Whose Rights?*, p. 157n3.

75. Krebs, "The Rise, Persistence, and Decline of the War on Terror," pp. 62, 71.

76. Brooks and Manza, *Whose Rights?*, ch. 6.

77. Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

78. Brian Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America: How an Industry Took Over a Political Party That Took Over the United States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), pp. 3, 19.

79. Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America*, pp. 1, 21, 11, 31, 37. On this process, see also Marc A. Thiessen, "Commentary: Long before Trump, Limbaugh Championed the 'Forgotten Americans,'" *Washington Post*, February 21, 2021.

80. Rosenwald, *Talk Radio's America*, pp. 9, 230. One rather bizarre result of this bipolar effect was that support for international trade soared during the Trump presidency: it seems that Republicans increasingly supported it because they thought Trump was for it while Democrats increasingly supported it because they thought Trump was against it. John Mueller, "Trump's Attacks on Free Trade Have Actually Made It More Popular with Voters," *Reason*, August 27, 2020.

81. Meagan Day, "We Can't Ignore Rural Voter Resentment: An Interview with Katherine J. Cramer," *Jacobin*, October 10, 2020.

82. Morgan Rimmer and Rachel Janfaza, "GOP Sen. Ben Sasse Slams Republicans Who Plan to Delay Certification of Joe Biden's Win," CNN, December 31, 2020.

83. Pew Research Center, "Public Opinion Runs against Syrian Airstrikes," September 3, 2013. See also John Mueller, "Syria: It Wasn't Isolationism," *National Interest*, October 14, 2013. On the episode, see Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House* (New York: Random House, 2018), pp. 237, 240. In 2017 and 2018, Donald Trump got away with similar bombings by doing these abruptly and then by not further escalating.

84. Bruce Schneier, "Obama Says Terrorism Is Not an Existential Threat," *Schneier on Security* (blog), February 3, 2015. See also Mueller and Stewart, "Terrorism Poses No Existential Threat to America."

85. Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine: The U.S. President Talks through His Hardest Decisions about America's Role in the World," *The Atlantic*, April 2016. For an evaluation of the "bathtub" comparison, see John Mueller and Mark G. Stewart "Terrorism and Bathtubs: Comparing and Assessing the Risks," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 33 no. 1 (2021): 138–63.

86. Greg Jaffe, "What's Actually Driving Obama's 'Keep Calm and Carry On' ISIS Strategy?," *Washington Post*, November 19, 2015. Something similar happened to President Dwight Eisenhower on the notion of whether the Soviet Union really threatened to launch a major war. See John Mueller, "Why Obama Won't Tell the Truth about Terrorism," *National Interest*, December 12, 2016; and Mueller, *The Stupidity of War*, pp. 39–41.

87. For a discussion of this issue, see Mueller, *Overblown*, pp. 197–98. Some efforts to reduce the fear of terrorism include Frank Furedi, *Culture of Fear: Risk-Taking and the Morality of Low Expectations*, revised ed. (London: Continuum, 2002); Bruce Schneier, *Beyond Fear: Thinking Sensibly about Security in an Uncertain World* (New York: Copernicus, 2003); Jeffrey Rosen, *The Naked Crowd: Reclaiming Security and Freedom in an Anxious Age* (New York: Random House, 2004); Benjamin H. Friedman, "Leap Before You Look: The Failure of Homeland Security," *Breakthroughs* [MIT Defense and Arms Control Studies] 13, no. 1 (Spring 2004); John Mueller, "A False Sense of Insecurity?," *Regulation* (Fall 2004): 42–46; Ian S. Lustick, *Trapped in the War on Terror* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); James Fallows, "Declaring Victory," *The Atlantic*, September 2006; Mueller, *Overblown*; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); A. Trevor Thrall and Jane K. Cramer, eds., *American Foreign Policy and the Politics of Fear: Threat Inflation since 9/11* (London: Routledge, 2009); Friedman, Harper, and Preble, *Terrorizing Ourselves*; Heather MacDonald, "The Ever-Renewing Terror Threat," *Secular Right* (blog), February 13, 2011; and Gene Healy, "Al Qaeda: Never an 'Existential Threat,'" *Cato at Liberty* (blog), Cato Institute, September 13, 2011. For more recent efforts: Christopher A. Preble and John Mueller, eds., *A Dangerous World? Threat Perception and U.S. National Security* (Washington: Cato Institute, 2014); Doyle McManus, "Column: After Paris, We Must Keep Unreasonable Fears in Check," *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 2015; Rosa Brooks, "The United States of Spinelessness," *Foreign Policy*, December 15, 2015; David Cay Johnston, "America: Home of the Wimps?," *Al Jazeera*, December 17, 2015; Eyal Winter, "Op-Ed: How Not to Treat Terror Anxiety," *Los Angeles Times*, December 23, 2015; Anthony H. Cordesman, "Fear versus Fact: Getting the Facts on Terrorism," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 17, 2015; Anthony H. Cordesman, "New Year's Resolutions on Terrorism: Panic, Politics, and the Prospects for Honesty in 2016," Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 28, 2015; Mueller and Stewart, *Chasing Ghosts*; Christopher A. Preble, "We Are Terrorized: Why U.S. Counterterrorism Policy Is Failing, and Why It Can't Be Easily Fixed," *War on the Rocks*,

January 8, 2016; Shapiro, "Why We Think Terrorism Is Scarier Than It Really Is"; Marc Sageman, *Misunderstanding Terrorism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2017), p. 170; and Sageman, *Turning to Political Violence*. On the issue more generally, see Robert H. Johnson, *Improbable Dangers: U.S. Conceptions of Threat in the Cold War and After* (New York: St. Martin's, 1997).

88. Shanto Iyengar and Donald R. Kinder, *News That Matters: Television and American Opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 112. See also Richard A. Brody, *Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion, and Public Support* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 111; Bruce Russett, *Controlling the Sword: The Democratic Governance of National Security* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), ch. 4; Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in American Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 339–48; and Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, ch. 12.

89. Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War*, pp. 22, 132.

90. Page and Shapiro, *The Rational Public*, pp. 348–50.

91. On this phenomenon, see Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War*, pp. 131–33.

92. See also Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War*, pp. 132–33.

93. Robert Lichter, "The Instant Replay War," in *The Media and the Gulf War: The Press and Democracy in Wartime*, ed. Hedrick Smith (Washington: Seven Locks Press, 1992), p. 227.

94. Norman Solomon, "The Media Protest Too Much," *New York Times*, May 24, 1991.

95. Craig LaMay, "By the Numbers," in *The Media at War: The Press and the Persian Gulf Conflict*, eds. Craig LaMay, Martha FitzSimon, and Jeanne Sahadi (New York: Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, Columbia University, 1991), p. 50; and Lichter, "The Instant Replay War," pp. 224, 228.

96. On similar behavior by the media in Vietnam, see Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War*, p. 74.

97. A few months after the war, television network anchors found themselves observing in a panel discussion on C-SPAN that, although they personally considered foreign affairs to be of major and increasing importance to the country, they were cutting their coverage of foreign events because their customers wanted them to concentrate on

domestic issues. It was quite clear who was setting the agenda. As it dashed to new issues, the media allowed the impression to linger that the Iraqi army had been massive and that it had been systematically demoralized and slaughtered by precise American firepower. Compare: John Mueller, "The Perfect Enemy: Assessing the Gulf War," *Security Studies* 5, no. 1 (Autumn 1995): 77–117. As the BBC's John Simpson pointed out a few months after the war was over, "not many people seem interested in finding out what really happened." John Simpson, *From the House of War: John Simpson in the Gulf* (London: Arrow Books, 1991), p. xiv. And a book published a full year after the war observes, "the complete story of why and how [the war] happened has gone largely untold." U.S. News and World Report, *Triumph without Victory: The Unreported History of the Persian Gulf War* (New York: Times Books/Random House, 1992), p. vii. It's a considerable indictment.

98. Richard Sobel, "The Polls—Trends: United States Intervention in Bosnia," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (Summer 1998): 258–59. See also Western, *Selling Intervention and War*, pp. 264–65.

99. Charlie Savage, *Power Wars: Inside Obama's Post-9/11 Presidency* (New York: Little, Brown, 2015), pp. 82–88.

100. Herbert J. Gans, *Deciding What's News: A Study of* CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, Newsweek, *and* Time (New York: Pantheon, 1979), pp. 229–30.

101. Dan Gardner, *The Science of Fear: How the Culture of Fear Manipulates Your Brain* (New York: Dutton, 2008), pp. 167–68.

102. Page and Shapiro, *The Rational Public*; and John Mueller, "Public Opinion, the Media, and War," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media*, eds. Robert Y. Shapiro and Lawrence R. Jacobs (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 675–98.

103. Paul Slovic, Baruch Fischhoff, and Sarah Lichtenstein, "Facts and Fears: Understanding Perceived Risk," in *Societal Risk Assessment: How Safe Is Safe Enough?*, eds. R. C. Schwing and W. A. Albers (New York: Plenum, 1980), pp. 181–216; Mark G. Stewart and Robert E. Melchers, *Probabilistic Risk Assessment of Engineering Systems* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1997), pp. 208–16; and Jeffrey A. Friedman, "Priorities for Preventive Action: Explaining Americans' Divergent Reactions to 100 Public Risks," *American Journal of Political Science* 63, no. 1 (January 2019), https://doi.org/10.1111/ajps.12400.

104. Daniel Gilbert, "If Only Gay Sex Caused Global

Warming," *Los Angeles Times*, July 2, 2006.

105. Renee Scherlen, "The Never-Ending Drug War: Obstacles to Drug War Policy Termination," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 45, no. 1 (January 2012): 67–73. See also Christopher C. Coyne and Abigail R. Hall, "Four Decades and Counting: The Continued Failure of the War on Drugs," Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 811, April 12, 2017.

106. Kenneth Sherrill, "The Political Power of Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 29, no. 3 (September 1996): 469–73; and Alan S. Yang, "The Polls—Trends: Attitudes toward Homosexuality," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61, no. 3 (Autumn 1997): 477–507.

107. A contrast can be made here with an observation by Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon. They note that 70 percent of the American public picked illegal drugs as the country's most important problem in 1989 but that only 5 percent did so in February 1991 during the Gulf War. They suggest that the "most plausible explanation" for this change was that news coverage had shifted, not that the public was capable of shifting its attention on its own or that the media were following the shift in interest by its customers. Shanto Iyengar and Adam Simon, "News Coverage of the Gulf Crisis and Public Opinion: A Study of Agenda-Setting, Priming, and Framing," in *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War*, eds. W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 168.

108. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, p. 310; and V. O. Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting, 1936–1960* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 2.

109. An example of such selectivity can be found in a study of how a precinct in California voted on a set of nine "noncontroversial" propositions on the ballot—ones involving technical matters placed on the ballot by overwhelming bipartisan majorities of the state legislature. Only 1 percent voted exactly on these propositions as recommended by the *Los Angeles Times*. John Mueller, "Voting on the Propositions: Ballot Patterns and Historical Trends in California," *American Political Science Review* 63, no. 4 (December 1969): 1205.

110. Berinsky, *In Time of War*, p. 217.

111. In his book, V. O. Key, Jr. specifically differentiates his position from those that "regard the voter as an erratic and irrational fellow susceptible to manipulation by skilled humbugs." In contrast, he says, "The perverse and unorthodox argument of this little book is that voters are not fools. To be sure, many

individual voters act in odd ways indeed; yet in the large the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives presented to it and the character of the information available to it." Key, Jr., *The Responsible Electorate*, pp. 4, 7.

112. For further discussion of this phenomenon, see Mueller, *War and Ideas*, pp. 183–85, 192–93; and Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War*, ch. 9.

113. See also Mueller, *War and Ideas*, pp. x–xii.

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