“Pretty Prudent” or Rhetorically Responsive?

The American Public’s Support for Military Action

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In the United States, public support can play a crucial role in the decisions to initiate and terminate military action. Some scholars argue that the public holds “prudent” opinions regarding the use of the military—supporting efforts to stop aggression but not to engage in nation building. We argue that what seems like a “prudent” opinion may be driven more by the White House’s rhetoric. Experimental tests show that the rhetorical complexity has a more powerful impact on the respondent’s support for military action than the actual policy goal, although this result is substantially tempered by political awareness.

Keywords: public opinion, military intervention, pretty prudent public, experiment, and rhetoric

Considerable attention and scholarship have focused on the connection between American public opinion and foreign policy, particularly the use of military force. This attention is well justified since public support may well be a necessary condition for successful military engagement by a democracy.1 Recent history provides a number of examples to support this proposition. Saddam Hussein, Slobodan Milosevic, and Mohamed Farah Aideed all commented that a relatively few American military casualties would reverse American public opinion and lead the White House to withdraw troops from their respective countries. The case of Somalia is particularly instructive. Three days after the October 1993 battle in Mogadishu—in which eighteen American Special Forces troops were killed—President Clinton announced the withdrawal of U.S. troops, fulfilling Aideed’s prophecy.

Although many scholars argue that the American public does not know enough to effectively evaluate and hold a rational opinion concerning foreign policy, others dissent, holding that the public’s attitudes on foreign policy are both relatively stable (Page and Shapiro 1992) and coherent (Wittkopf 1990). For our purposes here, one particularly important set of studies argues that the American public is “pretty prudent”: that public support for the use of military force is driven by reasonable assessments of the policy goal (Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton 1998). Specifically, the “pretty prudent public” (PPP) argument holds that Americans are generally supportive of the use of military force to stop aggression but not to affect internal political change. Though a number of studies have found empirical support for this argument (see, e.g., Oneal, Lian, and Joyner 1996; Hermann, Tetlock, and Visser 1997; Holsti 2004; Eichenberg 2003), and it is seen as “currently the leading explanation of public support for the use of force among IR [international relations] scholars” (Perla and Felix 2006, 6), the empirical foundation on which the theory rests remains relatively small and limited largely to examinations of aggregate-level data from a small handful of cases. The paucity of corroborative individual-level analysis is particularly troublesome.2 We suspect that individual-level analysis may provide additional insights into the formation of public opinion regarding the use of military force; indeed, in this article, we suggest that the public may...
not be as uniformly prudent as previously thought. Instead, we suspect that the public—or at least a large swathe of the public—is susceptible to the political rhetoric surrounding the proposed use of military force, especially that emanating from the White House. A key component in our analysis concerns the level of complexity in the rhetoric. Simply put, policy explanations that are plainly stated and easier to understand are likely to receive public support, regardless of policy goals. Conversely, policy explanations that are complicated and convoluted are likely to face greater public skepticism, again regardless of policy goals.

To explore this possibility, we employ an experimental design that permits greater illumination of the individual-level dynamics at work in public support for military force. Using four different hypothetical treatments involving the commitment of U.S. troops, we varied (1) the complexity of the rhetoric involved and (2) the focus of the policy goal, collecting data from a large sample of university undergraduate students. The results, which fit closely with Zaller’s (1992) reception-acceptance-sample model, indicate that while the policy goal can be an important component of support, the level of rhetorical complexity can also have a significant impact on public attitudes, especially among those who are less aware of international affairs. In the spirit of Jentleson’s original study (1992, 50), we present these results as something of a “plausibility probe” rather than as definitive assessment; we think the findings are strong enough to justify further empirical explorations of the individual-level dynamics that underlie what may be collectively “pretty prudent” judgments.

The article unfolds in four sections. First, we discuss the connection between foreign policy and public opinion, focusing on some of the properties of public opinion that are most relevant for considerations of foreign policy, especially the “prudent public” literature and that on rhetorical framing. In the second section, we detail and discuss the experiments we use to generate our data. The third section presents our principal findings. Foremost among these is that across cases, more rhetorically complex administration explanations received less policy support than did simpler statements of policy goals. In addition, we find strong evidence that interest in and exposure to international news makes citizens substantially more “prudent” in their views, while less attentive citizens evince greater susceptibility to the complexity of rhetoric (see Zaller 1991, 1992). In a fourth and final section, we conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings and suggest paths for future research.

Public Opinion and Support for Military Intervention

For the past half century, most empirical analyses have shown that the public pays little attention to foreign policy (e.g., Almond 1950; Rosenau 1961; Hughes 1979; Neuman, Just, and Crigler 1992; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 1994). Indeed, most subsequent studies have been variations on a theme first articulated by Gabriel Almond in 1950: the public’s “characteristic response to questions of foreign policy is one of indifference” (p. 53). That Americans, or citizens of any other democracy for that matter, pay little attention to foreign affairs should not be too surprising. As Stouffer (1955) has argued, people have to contend with their daily lives and have little time or expertise to follow the often complex workings of international relations. Jentleson and Britton (1998) even contended that this inattention grew after the end of the cold war, when Americans were urged to focus on “the economy, stupid.” Of course, limited public awareness is not confined to questions of foreign policy. “Response instability” (where poll respondents shift their views on similar questions over time), which seems to indicate the prevalence of “nonattitudes” in the mass public (Converse 1964), has been noted on a wide variety of issues (see, e.g., Converse 1964; Converse and Markus 1979; Zaller 1991, 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992). However, from Converse’s pioneering 1964 study onwards, most researchers have found greater response instability on foreign policy issues than domestic ones. While Converse’s findings have been criticized on both methodological (e.g., Achen 1975) and temporal grounds (e.g., Nie and Anderson 1974), the revisionist scholarship has “scarcely touched the well-established finding that most people’s knowledge of politics is quite meager” (Page and Shapiro 1992, 9), especially in the arena of foreign affairs.

Even though the American public may be “politically unsophisticated” (Zaller 1992), members of the public will provide responses to foreign policy questions when queried about them by pollsters. The relative instability of these responses, however, renders them quite vulnerable to what Zaller (1992, 32) termed “response effects”—the context in which the
questions are asked, the wording of the questions, the order in which alternative responses are presented, and trivial alterations in the questions. In large measure, this is because citizens do not carry a firm set of policy opinions in their heads; rather, when asked about an issue, they proffer answers based on what “considerations” happen to be at the “top of their head[s]” at the time (Zaller 1992, 36-37). These considerations are formed in response to frequently conflicting persuasive political messages, and the extent to which individuals are susceptible to such persuasive political communications is a function of their political awareness. According to Zaller (1992), individuals who have high levels of habitual political awareness are more likely to be aware of the streams of persuasive communications being directed at them, but they are also more likely to resist them if they are inconsistent with their basic belief structures. Thus, it is not surprising that Mueller (1973, 1) in his study of War, Presidents, and Public Opinion found “respondents pontificating in a seemingly authoritative, if basically ’truthful’ manner on subjects about which they know nothing or to which they have never given any thought whatsoever.” These quick, crude, and superficial answers are poorly informed, not well thought out, and therefore, not likely to be very “prudent” in any meaningful sense of that word.

Other scholars have argued that the public is (or at least can be) more coherent than often credited. For instance, there is considerable evidence that the public pays more attention when there are adequate political stimuli in the environment. In particular, high-stimulus/high-information events such as presidential campaigns tend to capture and focus public attention while informing public opinion (Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1976; Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989). While members of the public may still not carry set opinions in their heads, during certain periods they do have more information on hand to examine issues critically, a first step at least toward prudence. Like presidential campaigns, foreign policy crises tend to be high-stimulus/high-information events. That is, once the United States becomes embroiled in a foreign policy crisis, the level of media attention increases dramatically, enhancing public awareness and providing citizens with more information (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Chaffee and Kanihan 1997; Baum 2004). It seems reasonable to conclude that the public is at least somewhat better informed about foreign policy issues when they involve the potential, near-term use of military force.4

The “Pretty Prudent” Public

Jentleson (1992; see also Jentleson and Britton 1998) has been a primary advocate of the view that the American public is actually reasonably sensible when it comes to attitudes concerning the use of military force. He argues that none of the factors usually cited for driving public attitudes toward military intervention (i.e., strategic interests, presidential cues, and risk aversion) provides a very convincing account for empirical reality over the past forty years. Rather, in two important papers, Jentleson (and his coauthor) argued that Americans have a “pragmatic sense of strategy” (Jentleson 1992, 71) that leads them to be more supportive of military intervention in cases where the foreign policy objective (FPO) involves restraining international aggression (what Jentleson terms “foreign policy restraint” [FPR]) than in implementing internal domestic change in the target country (what Jentleson calls “internal political change” [IPC]). Such an orientation is “pretty prudent” according to Jentleson (1992) because troop deployments for purposes of FPR are likely to involve “strategies that are primarily military,” goals that are more concrete and intuitively comprehensible, dangers that are more clear and present, commitments that are more short-term than long-term, and actions that are more clearly sanctioned by international laws and norms. In contrast, interventions aimed at IPC are likely to be just the opposite and to involve sticky issues such as sovereignty and internecine conflicts among competing domestic interests. According to Jentleson (1992) and Jentleson and Britton (1998), while they may not know much about the issues involved, the public uses considerations of FPO as an economizing device to decide whether proposed troop deployments are likely to be justified. Far from being nonpurposive, “there is a pragmatism, a reasoning, and a logic to the basic patterns of when [Americans] will and will not support the use of military force” (Jentleson and Britton 1998, 466). The public is, Jentleson and Britton concluded, “pretty prudent.”

In the first article, Jentleson (1992) examined eight cases from the late cold war period, plus American attitudes toward the first Persian Gulf War. Examining aggregate patterns of support gleaned from some 140 public opinion polls, he found strong support for his FPO thesis. The data analysis is rather simplistic and lacks any multivariate models to test alternative hypotheses, but they do betray a telling ordering of cases. After recalculation to exclude
surveys tainted by the “halo effect” of retrospective evaluations of military success, average poll numbers across the cases show greater public support for those interventions premised on FPR than those committing troops for purposes of IPC. Considering six cases from the 1990s, Jentleson and Britton (1998) found continued support for the “pretty prudent public” thesis. While their basic analytical approach remains the same (i.e., comparing and contrasting mean survey support measures across cases), the analysis in this paper is considerably more sophisticated, making use of multivariate models that permit the authors to control for various intervening factors (such as elite consensus and whether the policy involved multilateral support in the international community) and to test their hypothesis against competing theories.

While the PPP theory has clear advantages and attractions, not least among them its parsimony, it also has limitations. Perhaps chief among them is the fact that its empirical support comes from aggregate-level data. Such data, while important, restrict our analytical leverage in several important ways. First, the paucity of cases available for aggregate-level inspection limits empirical analysis, even if the number of polls examined exceeds one hundred. Second, as a synchronic theory, it is hard-pressed to explain changes in public support for a military commitment over time (Perla and Felix 2006, 7). Third, focusing as it does on the aggregate, the PPP theory may well exaggerate how “prudent” members of the public actually are. A good bit of evidence from social psychology clearly questions basic elements of the rationality assumption. While it is important (especially for policy considerations) to note that the public in the aggregate may be essentially rational, stopping there leaves much of the story untold. Shifting to the individual level increases the analytical and empirical leverage available to examine such factors as the causes and limits of rationality and how and why public support for use of military force may alter over time. More pointedly, a focus on individuals will permit us to examine the effect of rhetoric as a limiting factor on public rationality and support for the commitment of American forces.

**Does Rhetoric Matter?**

Jentleson (1992) and Jentleson and Britton (1998) certainly recognized that reality is more complicated than their elegantly parsimonious, aggregate-level analysis can fully capture. However, their approach does not provide the data needed to address these complications beyond acknowledging their data limitations (1992, 54) and the intricacies involved in analyzing public attitudes toward foreign policies (1998, 414; see Zaller and Feldman 1992). We propose to do significantly more, lifting the lid to examine more directly the formation of individual attitudes toward troop commitments, focusing particularly on the role played by nonrational factors such as rhetorical framing. In doing so, we build upon insights such as those generated by Oneal, Lian, and Joyner (1996), who showed that presidential statements per se tend to increase popular support for military intervention. If statements alone foster support, then it seems probable that the White House could frame interventions by portraying them in clear, emotional terms that would elicit greater public support independent of the policy objective. A policy seeking to affect internal political change could be described in simple, succinct, emotionally laden terms. For example, the president could discuss a moral imperative to protect innocent people from the internal violence sweeping their country. Such clear rhetoric would likely increase the public’s support of the policy. Alternatively, policies seeking to stop aggression could be explained in convoluted manners that focused on the importance of sustaining sovereignty, supporting international norms, protecting regional balances of power, complicated historical disputes over borders, or the like. If—as seems plausible—the public responded positively to the former while negatively to the latter, that would count as evidence that individuals are not as prudent as the PPP thesis suggests.

The president’s ability to lead public opinion is not boundless, of course. In addition to opposition from Congress and other elites who constrict the president’s influence (see, e.g., Powlick and Katz 1998), members of the public have varying capacities to evaluate the rhetoric coming out of the White House. Following Zaller’s (1991, 1992) work, the more knowledgeable citizens are about international affairs, the more they should be able to determine if the policy is one restraining aggression or affecting internal change, regardless of rhetoric. Seeing or reading news reports about a brewing crisis weeks or even days before the president decides to intervene gives the individual a context in which to place the military intervention and the rationale it spawns. For example, reading about the disintegrating situation in Somalia prior to the announcement of Operation Restore Hope would have given Americans the information necessary to determine that any intervention would almost certainly
involve a fair amount of nation-building. In fact, it seems reasonable to assume that this is true even in the abstract. That is, even in cases that might spring upon the largely unaware public, those who are more familiar with international news are probably more likely to have an informational framework within which to consider critically justifications offered by the White House (again, see Zaller 1992).

Following this reasoning, we propose four empirically testable hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: As the simplicity of explanations for military intervention increases, so will public support, regardless of the goal of the intervention.

Hypothesis 2: The public will tend to support foreign policy restraint interventions more than interventions aimed at internal political change.

Hypothesis 3: Foreign policy restraint interventions that are explained with simple rhetoric will receive the most support from the public.

Hypothesis 4: Individuals with more exposure to international news will be less moved by presidential rhetoric concerning military interventions than those with less exposure.

Empirical tests of these hypotheses permit us to examine, at the individual level, the factors that contribute to the collective prudence noted by others. This will permit us to continue the task begun by Eichenberg (2003, 111) to explore “differences within the general public” in terms of their policy prudence. More important, we will be able to fine-tune the PPP thesis, exploring the extent to which, and the conditions under which, prudence is undermined by the “rhetorical responsiveness” (RR) of individual American citizens.

**Experimental Method**

To analyze the impacts of the type of military intervention involved (stopping aggression or nation-building) and the rhetoric (simple or complex) justifying the intervention, we developed four unique mock news stories as treatments for an experiment. Each story described one of the two policy objectives in either simple or complex terms, resulting in the following story categories: simple stopping aggression, complex stopping aggression, simple nation-building, and complex nation-building. Table 1 presents sample quotations for each of the four accounts; full copies of the treatments are available in the appendix.

Each story was based on a conflict between two fictitious Latin American countries in the case of the stopping aggression and one fictitious Latin American country in the case of nation-building. With the exception of the intervention type and the clarity of the rhetoric, all other aspects of the stories were similar. Each story mentioned that the countries were close to important oil supplies, that all diplomatic channels had been exhausted, that the Organization of American States (OAS) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would provide support for American troops, and that—although it was hoped that casualties should be minimal—there was a threat to American troops. The stories averaged 350 words and were formatted to look like a New York Times article printed from the Internet.

We ran the experiment three times in large sections of the introductory American Government course at the University of Missouri, once in spring 2005, once
in fall 2005, and again in spring 2006; in total, 824 students participated. In each class, the four treatments were randomly distributed to the students with an attached questionnaire. In addition to asking how well they understood the article and whether they supported the policy as described, we also asked a conventional battery of demographic and political knowledge questions. In addition, we asked respondents about their feelings toward the current conflict in Iraq as a control, placing this item at the end of the questionnaire to minimize contamination of our results through contextual priming.

Although college freshmen are not necessarily representative of the broader American public, scholars have found that it is possible to draw reasonable inferences from student experiments. Mintz, Redd, and Vedlitz (2006, 769-70) argued that “student experiments may actually tell us a great deal about the behavior of the public” and that “experiments can be conducted when students represent [the public]” particularly when drawn from a school population that is representative of the American public. We believe our sample is a relatively good one that fits this profile.16 At an absolute minimum, our data provide a sample of younger, middle- to upper-middle-class adults who should be better informed than the average American. Thus, we would expect that any impact we find for rhetorical complexity would be even stronger in the less informed, less educated general population.

Findings

Rhetorical Clarity

We begin our analysis with a manipulation check by looking at the perceived clarity scores for the treatments. Respondents were asked to rate (on a scale from 1 = very unclear to 6 = very clear) how clearly the treatment they read provided a justification for military intervention.17 The articles that were perceived to be clearer were, in fact, those we designed to be so: the complex articles received a mean clarity score of 3.63, while the simple articles received a mean score of 3.76.18 The differences may appear substantively small, but they approach statistical significance ($p = 0.059$), indicating that although readers noticed the desired differences, the complex articles were not incomprehensible to them, nor were the clear articles overly simplistic. Such subtle differences, we think, are more realistic and indicate that our results are not likely driven by overly dramatic differences that would be uncommon in real world media coverage.

It is worthy of note that the highest clarity score comes from the simple description of intervention seeking to stop aggression compared to all others. This difference supports our intuition that policies aimed at restraining aggression can enjoy at least a subtle rhetorical advantage over those aimed at nation-building since they may be innately easier for officials to articulate and for the public to grasp.19 We will return to this matter below.

Linking Rhetoric, Intervention Type, and the Level of Support

We now turn our attention to the impacts that rhetoric and stated policy goals have on public support for military intervention.20 Table 2 shows the mean level of support for military intervention provided by our study participants for each hypothetical account.21 Two patterns are immediately obvious, although somewhat subtle. First, in terms of policy types (i.e., comparing the columns), these simple averages show that there was more backing for FPR (stop aggression) than for IPC (nation building), just as the PPP thesis suggests there should be. Second, in terms of rhetorical complexity levels (that is, comparing the rows), in cases of both curtailing aggression and internal nation-building, our experiment participants were relatively more likely to support intervention when the rhetoric they read was clearer, as our alternative RR thesis would suggest. While substantively not large, the ANOVA revealed (from the $F$-statistic) that these associations are significant ($p$-value = .003). This provides support for hypothesis 1, that less rhetorically complex descriptions receive more support; hypothesis 2, that the public is more supportive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2</th>
<th>Mean Level of Support by Treatment Type</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stop Aggression</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple</td>
<td>2.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex</td>
<td>2.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F = 4.61$</td>
<td>$p$-value = .003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell entries are arithmetic means of experimental participants’ reported levels of support for U.S. military intervention in each situation, measured on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly oppose (1) to strongly favor (5).
of military commitments to stop aggression; and hypothesis 3, that interventions aimed at stopping aggression that are described in simple terms receive the most support.

In Table 3, we take the analysis a step further by controlling for participants’ levels of exposure to international news. Of those reporting that they watched or read two hours or less of international news per week, the relationships from Table 2 largely held (not surprising since this subset constituted some 74 percent of the total number of experimental participants). These less informed participants supported both types of aggression-stopping policies and the simple explanation of nation-building at a statistically equivalent level; as before, they showed significantly less support when presented with the complex nation-building rationale. As before in Table 2, these results are statistically significant \( p \)-value = .001 according to the ANOVA. The key point of focus from our perspective is that among this group, support for commitment of troops for nation-building purposes is reasonably high as long as the rhetorical explanation is reasonably clear.

The remaining 26 percent of study participants, who reported more than two hours of exposure to international news a week, proved themselves to be consistently more “prudent” in their assessments. Although clearer policies were preferred to those less clear, these differences are only marginally significant \( p = .088 \). On the other hand, this group of better informed participants consistently displayed significantly higher support for the policies aimed at stopping aggression compared to those explained as focusing on internal nation-building. The differences with the less informed group are marked \( p = .001 \); across the four categories, participants with greater levels of international awareness were consistently more favorably disposed toward the commitment of U.S. troops to stop aggression (regardless of how complicated the rhetoric) than were the less savvy and consistently less supportive of nation-building policies (again, regardless of rhetorical complexity).

These results strongly suggest that exposure to international news has a conditioning effect on how prudent citizens are in their attitudes. Those paying closer attention to the world around them seem better able to cut through rhetorical complexity and evaluate policy goals more directly. To illuminate this dynamic more clearly and test our hypotheses more fully, we construct a multivariate model to allow us to control for other possibly confounding factors. We begin by bifurcating our data, allowing us to analyze the attitudes of better-informed participants separately from those of less well-informed participants. Although there is some loss of empirical leverage when splitting data in this manner, it saves us from the analytically inelegant and computationally clunky alternative of interacting news exposure with every other variable on the right-hand side of our equations (a strategy that chews up degrees of freedom and presents potentially significant multicolinearity problems).

To assess hypotheses 1 through 3 (that clear rhetoric increases support, FPR gains the most support, and the interaction of these two will increase support), we include three dummy variables: one that indicates simple rhetoric, one that indicates a stop aggression policy, and one that indicates a simple stop aggression policy. In combination, these three dichotomous variables provide information about all four treatment types. We also include the variable measuring the perceived clarity of the article (described above).

### Table 3

Mean Level of Support by Treatment Type, Controlling for Media Exposure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0-2 Hours’ Media Exposure</th>
<th>2+ Hours’ Media Exposure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stop Aggression</td>
<td>Nation-Building</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>2.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex</td>
<td>2.90</td>
<td>2.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( F = 3.39 )</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( p)-value = .001</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell entries are arithmetic means of experimental participants’ reported levels of support for U.S. military intervention in each situation, measured on a 5-point scale ranging from **strongly oppose** (1) to **strongly favor** (5).
We include four additional control variables on the right-hand side. First, we expect gender (males coded 1, females 0) to have an effect on support, since numerous previous studies have shown that men are typically more supportive of military action than women (see, e.g., Eichenberg 2003; but also see the literature reviewed in Holsti 2004). Second, we include a standard 7-point measure of party identification (ranging from strong Democrat at 1 to strong Republican at 7). Given the increased partisan polarization apparent in the past decades and the Republican Party’s embrace of a more “muscular” foreign policy, we believe this is a better control than political ideology, and we expect stronger Republican identifiers to evince more support for military engagement, ceteris paribus. Third, we control for participant attitudes regarding the current situation in Iraq. Although we went to considerable lengths to distance our experimental treatments from Iraq, it is likely that those supportive of American intervention in the particular situation in Iraq will also support the military interventions described in the hypothetical news stories. Therefore, we employed a conventional national survey question asking participants whether they approved of President Bush’s handling of Iraq. Finally, we asked nine standard political knowledge questions and summed all the correct answers to form an index.

We present results from our two ordinary least squares (OLS) models—one for those with more exposure to international news and one for those with less—in Table 4. In the first model (those respondents not exposed to much international news), all three variables representing the four stories are significant at least at the .10 level, with the rhetorical simplicity variable rising to the .01 level. To interpret the impact of the different news stories, we add the coefficients of the three dummy variables as appropriate. Table 5 shows the different impacts each treatment has for those respondents exposed to two hours or less per week of international news. The results indicate that for the less internationally aware, the simplicity of policy rhetoric has as powerful an impact on levels of support as the type of intervention. Our findings show that among less attentive members of the public, there is—as the PPP theory suggests there should be—reasonably strong support for intervention aimed at stopping external aggression. There is also strong support—in fact, holding other factors constant, the second strongest support—for committing troops for nation-building purposes, if—and only if—the rhetorical explanation is simple.

### Table 4
**Estimating Support for Intervention**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0-2 Hours’ Media Exposure</th>
<th>2+ Hours’ Media Exposure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple rhetoric</td>
<td>.267*** (.110)</td>
<td>.099 (.205)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stop aggression policy</td>
<td>.275*** (.111)</td>
<td>.36* (.196)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stop aggression/simple</td>
<td>−.299* (.157)</td>
<td>−.021 (.280)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of perceived clarity</td>
<td>.213*** (.036)</td>
<td>.282*** (.058)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender (1 = male)</td>
<td>.403*** (.088)</td>
<td>.390*** (.145)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party ID (1 = strong Democrat/7 = Republican)</td>
<td>.03 (.028)</td>
<td>.094** (.044)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approve of Bush’s handling of Iraq</td>
<td>.872*** (.123)</td>
<td>.598*** (.203)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political knowledge index</td>
<td>−.024 (.025)</td>
<td>−.023 (.043)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.248*** (.181)</td>
<td>0.960*** (.312)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>401</td>
<td>173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted R²</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standard errors in parentheses.
*Significant at 10%. **Significant at 5%. ***Significant at 1%.

### Table 5
**Combined Effects of Four Treatments on Less Informed Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Intervention</th>
<th>Combined Effect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Simple stopping aggression</td>
<td>.243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex stopping aggression</td>
<td>.275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simple nation-building</td>
<td>.267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex nation-building</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, the perceived level of clarity significantly increased support for intervention. For example, participants who found the story to be “clear” rather than “somewhat unclear” (less than one standard deviation shift) had an average support level of 2.8 rather than 2.4. Adding this effect to the treatment effect, it seems safe to conclude that those who are not exposed to much news react as much to descriptions of interventions as to the policies themselves. Consequently, while policy types do have an impact, it would seem a stretch to describe such citizens as “prudent,” since their prudence is so conditioned by...
their uninformed responsiveness to administration rhetoric.28

It is worth noting that two of our control variables also had an impact on support. As anticipated, men and those approving of Bush’s handling of Iraq demonstrated robustly greater support for military intervention in the hypothetical cases.29 Interestingly, we see no significant impact from the political knowledge index. Participants with more knowledge about the world were no different than those with less, indicating that—unlike media exposure—general information does not help citizens slice through political rhetoric. We suspect that this noneffect is most likely due to inherent differences between general knowledge and current information; as Holsti (2004, 322) put it, “It is not clear knowing the name of the foreign minister of Israel, the countries added to NATO since the end of the Cold War, or the nations that held democratic elections in Africa since 2000 will add substantially to the public’s ability to render more informed judgments on major international issues.” As we note next, current information does appear to influence citizens’ abilities to be prudent.

As the right column of Table 4 shows, those who watched or read more than two hours of international news a week evince very different reasons for supporting military intervention. Among our primary variables of interest, only the policy goal of the hypothetical intervention significantly affected the respondent’s level of support, with participants showing significantly greater willingness to support military intervention for purposes of stopping aggression than for purposes of nation-building. For these more attentive citizens, the level of rhetorical complexity in the policy rationale and the interaction of the rhetoric and policy are utterly insignificant. That is, respondents supported the interventions aimed at stopping aggression over those seeking nation-building, regardless of the rhetoric used. In short, it is this more attentive segment of the public that is most prudent in its opinions.

Even this more elite group of respondents, however, was affected by how well they felt that they understood the news article. Indeed perceived clarity had a powerful substantive impact on their support. All other factors equal, participants who thought the justification was “clear” supported the intervention at a level of 3.3, while those who found the article “unclear” supported the policy at the only 2.4 level. Even for the attentive, “prudent” portion of the public, the White House is wise to speak in clear and compelling syntax.

The other significant difference between these two groups is the impact of party identification. While partisanship was insignificant in the equation for the less engaged, it is a significant predictor of support for military engagement among the more internationally attentive, with higher levels of Republican identification associated with greater willingness to back American military intervention. In part and unsurprisingly, this reflects the tendency of more attentive citizens to identify more strongly with one of the parties. Respondents who pay closer attention to current events are more politically minded, and consequently, they are more likely to see themselves as either a “strong Democrat” or “strong Republican.” Especially given the context of strong Republican support of the American presence in Iraq, it is not surprising that Republican participants demonstrated higher levels of support for intervention in the experimental scenarios.

As in the previous model, men and those approving of Bush’s handling of Iraq were more likely to support intervention, although the effects of both variables are somewhat more attenuated among the more attentive compared to the less attentive. Again, political knowledge does not show a statistically significant independent effect, although levels of general knowledge are significantly higher among this more attentive public.30 Clearly, general knowledge does not replace a more current understanding of the surrounding world.

Conclusions and Implications

In this study, we have employed an experimental method to examine at the individual level just how prudent the public is when it comes to supporting foreign military intervention, dynamics that have previously been explored almost exclusively at the aggregate level (Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton 1998). Extending preliminary work by Eichenberg (2003), our findings testify to the wisdom of disaggregating public opinion and the value of “analysis of differences within the general public” (p. 111). We show that members of the public are neither uniformly prudent in their opinions, nor completely irrational when it comes to support for putting troops in harm’s way. Instead, the reality is more complicated, influenced by such factors as gender, partisanship, international awareness, and the type of rhetoric used to justify the proposed military intervention. Those who pay little attention to international news are greatly affected by the rhetoric the
White House uses to define and explain a military intervention. That portion of the public is probably best referred to as “rhetorically responsive” or, to trope Jentleson’s (1992) original language, “barely” prudent. The smaller subset of the population that pays considerably more attention to international events is much different. Although they tend to support policies they believe they understand more clearly, rhetoric matters less to them and policy focus more, as they systematically favor policies aimed at stopping aggression over those seeking internal political change. These respondents could be characterized as “very” prudent.

Among other things, our focus on the individual dynamics underlying aggregate preferences allows us to understand why the modifier “pretty” is necessary to understand just how prudent Americans are. Jentleson’s (1992) core finding that the public is prudent is an accurate description of communal preferences not because individuals are overwhelmingly sensible in their judgments, but because a core of well-informed citizens tends to be, even while a sizable majority of Americans responds as much or more to rhetoric than to reality. The rhetorical advantage enjoyed by FPR in terms of being expressed in simpler terms conspires with the otherwise relatively random distribution of preferences among the less informed (Page and Shapiro 1992) to create a collective (though not overwhelming) public prudence that is stronger in the aggregate than at the individual level.

Moreover, our analysis serves as a reminder that White House rhetoric matters. If the president is able to define the intervention in simple, compelling terms, he is likely to get considerably more support from the public. While well-informed citizens are likely to evaluate the policy for what it is, a majority of Americans will buy what the White House sells them. This effect may be even more pronounced in the general population compared to our sample of university undergraduates. Our respondents tend to be better educated and of higher socioeconomic status than the average American. One would expect that they are more likely to pay attention to international affairs, read the news (online or in print), and the like. Therefore, the students in our study were probably more able to discern the policy goal from the rhetoric than the American population. Consequently, the White House’s ability to define interventions is likely stronger than our results indicate. Our data show that this issue is particularly important for administrations that desire to engage in IPC, since both intuition and empirics tell us that such policies are less amenable to simple, compelling descriptions.

The findings also speak to the connection between domestic politics and international conflict. In particular, the president’s ability to frame interventions with simple, compelling language makes it easier for the White House to engage in diversionary tactics. Our findings also suggest that the constraining effect a democratic public has on its leadership may be conditioned by the leader’s ability to manipulate the foreign policy rhetoric. If the public is swayed by the message, then there is less to constrain the leader. Scholars should consider these individual effects when developing models of domestic politics and foreign policy.

As we noted at the beginning of this article, we offer our analysis as a “plausibility probe” (Jentleson 1992, 50) into the wisdom of further disaggregating public opinion when considering the prudence of American attitudes toward military intervention. We think our findings fully justify continued exploration along these lines. Specifically, we would offer several suggestions for future research. First, we do not deal fully here with growing importance of humanitarian crises and the moral issues they raise. Jentleson and Britton (1998) showed that humanitarian interventions are more likely to receive support than those seeking internal political change without a humanitarian component. Our results provide some support for this humanitarian effect, since the treatments describing the mock intervention used terms such as “moral imperative” and discussed protecting the people of the Latin American nation. These moral issues seem to drive the respondents to support the policy as much as they support interventions to stop aggression, perhaps tainting our results. Future research should attempt to tease out these analytical distinctions, perhaps using the four categorizations recommended by Eichenberg (2003): foreign policy restraint, internal political change, peacekeeping, and humanitarian intervention. Second, the generalizability of our results should be verified with a research design that does not rely on college students. While such experiments are both more costly and more difficult, advances in Internet-based designs (see Iyengar 2002) and field experiments (Gerber and Green 2000; Green, Gerber, and Nickerson 2003) provide potentially fruitful paths for further exploration. Third, although public attitudes do not exist in a vacuum, the ongoing conflict in Iraq clearly casts a long shadow over the opinions of our study participants and, hence, over our analysis. While researchers clearly have no control over such matters, a more generalizable understanding of American opinion toward foreign military engagements may have to wait until America is not in the midst of one.
Notes

1. Early examples of the literature on the impact of public opinion on governmental decision making—especially as a constraint on governmental action—include Key (1961) and Rosenberg (1961); more recent examples include Kupchason (1984) and Powell (1991). See also Mueller (1973) on the role of public opinion in promoting casualty aversion policies; Feaver and Gelpi (2004) on the impact of public reaction toward events in Mogadishu on subsequent policy decisions in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Kosovo; Ostrom and Job (1986), James and Oneal (1991), and Fordham (1998, 2002) on public reactions to diversionary use of force; and Doyle (1986), Domke (1988), Maoz and Russell (1992), and Papayoanou (1996) on public opinion as a critical element in the “democratic peace.”

2. See Eichenberg (2003) for the only, partial attempt of which we are aware to “extend [Jentleson’s] framework to an analysis of differences within the general public” (p. 111).

3. Zaller’s (1992) reception-acceptance-sample model, wherein better-informed individuals are more likely to be aware of persuasive communications but are nonetheless less likely to be swayed by such communications, which are inconsistent with their basic values, than less aware individuals. As Zaller (1992, 267) noted, “If a person has little prior information and little access to alternative communication flows, information reaching him from a dominant campaign will have large effects.”

4. The public may also be more rational collectively than individually. As Page and Shapiro (1992) argued, while individuals may hold very irrational and unstable opinions, in masse these opinions tend to be quite reasonable once aggregated, since poorly informed citizens are randomly arrayed on either side of the issue. Individuals may be quite poorly informed, but “the logic of crowds” (Surowiecki 2004) involves pooling the responses that increases the rationality of public opinion collectively.

5. In the 1998 analysis, they added a third category, humanitarian intervention (HI). For purposes of simplicity in our experimental design, we focus on the two-category model posited in the initial article. However, there are elements of humanitarian concern in our nation-building accounts; we will return to this point in the conclusion.

6. According to Jentleson (1992, 71), the modifier is necessary because while it is essentially prudent, the public can be swayed by irrational considerations such as “flag-waving” and “overrelishing” little victories.

7. Prudence can be a relative term—as one person’s prudence may be another’s folly. Jentleson’s (1992) conceptualization, however, concerns neither the outcome of the policy nor any of its specific tactics. Instead, it aims at a simple definition: a policy with foreign policy objectives that do not defy general international norms. As the cases listed below indicate, Jentleson also operationalized his distinction with specific examples. Since we are largely attempting an extension and reanalysis of Jentleson’s original arguments, we believe further explication of these terms lies beyond the scope of our paper, although we acknowledge their ambiguity.

8. Specifically: the invasion of Panama, the bombing of Libya, the invasion of Grenada, reflagging of oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, troop commitment to Lebanon, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the civil war in El Salvador, and anti-Sandinista activities in Nicaragua.

9. The cases involve actual or possible interventions in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Iraq, North Korea, and Rwanda.

10. This problem grows when some polls have to be excluded to reduce the “taint” of the halo effect. In the case of Libya and Panama, for instance, there were twice as many “post-” polls as “pre-” polls, which Jentleson (1992) had to exclude from his analysis.

11. This literature is voluminous; prominent and particularly relevant examples would include Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky (1982); Kahneman and Tversky (1984); Quattrone and Tversky (1988); and McDermott (2004). Indeed, the observed public preference for foreign policy restraint (FPR) as opposed to internal political change (IPC) may reflect an “endowment effect” (Thaler 1980), in which people value protecting what they have more than gaining what they do not have (for an excellent overview of various forms of prospect theory, including the endowment effect, see Levy 2003). Specific to this article, Americans may value foreign policy restraint more because it defends the status quo and support internal political change less because it seeks a gain to the status quo.

12. It also permits us to tell whether the act of aggregation was the sole cause of the public’s apparent prudence.

13. Another limitation to Jentleson’s (1992) theory is the definition of “prudent.” As discussed above, his definition is restricted to the initial evaluation of a policy based on what he considers widely held international norms (sovereignty) and attainability of the policy. Clearly a policy could start off as a very attainable effort within international norms, only to shift to a disastrous outcome. For example, the initial intervention into Somalia was limited to securing food deliveries to the starving citizens and was quite successful. Not long after this initial success, the policy shifted into one aimed at state-building and failed miserably. Whether this policy was prudent depends upon when one evaluates it. Future literature should take the changing and complex nature of these policies into account when assessing the public’s support for them.

14. Studies in the prospect theory tradition have also taken account of such rhetorical possibilities. Although we do not explore this matter in depth here, it is possible that rhetorical differences in how policy options are framed make it more or less difficult for citizens to determine how the proposals relate to their “reference points” (for a discussion, see Levy 2003).

15. The literature on “integrative complexity”—the differentiation of political communications in terms of both differentiation and integration—is well developed and well represented beginning with the pioneering work of Schroeder and his colleagues (Harvey, Hunt, and Schroeder 1961; Schroeder, Driver, and Streufert 1967) through to the works of Tetlock and his colleagues (Suedfeld and Tetlock 1977; Tetlock 1983; Tetlock, Skitka, and Boettger 1989; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Our definition of complexity rests on how the policy is defined and described. Another definition of complexity could tap the policy itself; for example, a policy reliant on different actors, timing, and so on could be defined as complex. This second definition, however, would violate our experimental design. By making the policy itself more complex (rather than just the rhetoric used to describe it), we would conflate complexity with policy type—just the problem we seek to avoid with the experimental design.

16. At the University of Missouri, the American Government course attracts an unusually broad range of students, as it is a general education requirement for all undergraduate students.
who do not either place out of the requirement based on high school performance or take an alternative course in the Department of History. In addition, as the flagship state school in a state whose demographic profile largely mirrors those of the larger United States in terms of such things as median income, unemployment rates, urbanicity, and so on, and whose politics are reasonably competitive, the University of Missouri has an overall student body that is more representative of the public than those at many universities or colleges.

17. While there is certainly a difference between clear/simple and unclear/complex, we asked the respondents about clarity as a way of assessing how simple or complex the text was, because we felt that this was a more natural way of wording the question (rather than asking, e.g., “How complex was the language of the text?”).

18. To verify our intuitions and participant responses, we also evaluated each treatment using the readability functions available in Microsoft Word, which generate scores based on sentence length and word complexity. The Flesch Readability Score offers a rating in which higher scores indicate greater readability. In our experiment, the simpler treatments were both perceived to be clear and generated higher readability scores (54.7 for “clear, stop aggression” and 51.9 for “clear, nation-building”) than did the more complex ones (50.5 for “complex, stop aggression” and 50.2 for “complex, nation-building”). Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level scores (where lower scores indicate simpler text based on educational grade–level comprehensibility) tell a similar story: 8.7 for “clear, stop aggression” and 9.1 for “clear, nation-building”; 9.3 for “complex, stop aggression” and 9.4 for “complex, nation-building.”

19. Consider two examples. When Saddam Hussein first invaded Kuwait, President Bush told the American people, “This aggression will not stand.” It is hard to imagine a clearer, simpler statement of a policy goal. While the details of how Iraqi troops would be removed from Kuwait were not explicat, the president succinctly expressed the intention to end Iraq’s foreign aggression. In marked contrast, consider Somalia, a vivid example at the other end of the spectrum. American intervention was first described as a hunger relief mission; over time, this initial mission turned into one centered on weakening the power of the different warlords, especially the Aideed clan; finally, Clinton administration officials began to define the policy goal as the formation of a stable government. The vagaries of nation-building seem inherently more subtle and complicated and, thus, likely to involve more sophisticated rhetoric.

20. Study participants were asked to rank their level of support for military intervention in the given situation on a 5-point scale ranging from strongly oppose at 1 to strongly favor at 5.

21. Given the facts stipulated in the treatments (i.e., the relative geographical proximity to the United States, the possible impact on American energy interests, the multilateral nature of the proposed intervention), some may find these numbers relatively low. Overall, 47 percent of participants were relatively hawkish (placing themselves at a 4 or a 5), 31 percent were relatively dovish (at 1 or 2), and 22 percent chose the middle category. These numbers are considerably more polarized than Kohut and Toth’s (1994) breakdown of public attitudes a decade ago.

22. Although, in a slight departure from Table 2’s results, the less informed showed the greatest levels of support for the complex, aggression-stopping explanation.

23. In addition to the controls discussed below, we also tested for differences between the three classes. There were no significant effects in these tests.

24. For example, we intentionally situated the hypothetical scenarios in a part of the world far removed from the Middle East and, as noted above, placed the question asking about Iraq at the very end of the survey instrument.

25. The question read, “Do you approve or disapprove of the way Bush is handling the situation in Iraq?” Ideally, we would also have additional questions querying participants on such matters as their opinion regarding the initial intervention in Iraq and (irrespective of their attitudes toward the Bush administration’s policies) whether they supported the maintenance of a U.S. presence, complete withdrawal, or something in between. Since we were limited in the time we could use for the survey instrument and were sensitive to the danger that too many questions regarding Iraq policy could unduly taint responses in light of the Iraq situation, we confined ourselves to this single question, which our intuition tells us captures most of the effect of the current situation.

26. The questions, which appear in the supplemental material (http://prq.sagepub.com supplemental), ranged from the relatively easy (“Who is the current Secretary of Defense of the United States?”) to the relatively sophisticated (“How would you characterize Brazil’s political system?”).

27. We opt for the greater ease of interpretation of ordinary least squares (OLS) equations rather than more technically appropriate ordered logit or ordered probit models, although all such estimators yield substantively similar results.

28. Studies utilizing functional MRI technology appear to show that individuals that possess political sophistication exhibit different cognitive processes that utilize the “C-System” of the brain, which controls reflection or effortful and intentional social cognition, when compared with their less sophisticated counterparts who utilize the “X-System,” which is associated with reflexive cognition (see Lieberman, Schreiber, and Ochsner 2003; Lieberman, Jarcho, and Saptute 2004).

29. Since Republicans were more likely to approve of Bush’s handling of the Iraq situation, we performed the typical battery of diagnostics on the model to ensure that multicollinearity was not high enough to interfere with the substantive interpretations of our results.

30. The lack of influence in this model is not due to a lack of variation. Although the mean knowledge scores between those exposed and not exposed to international news differ significantly, their standard deviations are quite similar.

31. The president’s ability to define actions is not a constant. Foyle (1999) showed historically that the White House needs time to be able to lead public opinion. Crisis situations make such opinion leadership more difficult. Still, today’s twenty-four-hour news coverage makes it all the more important for the president to frame the discussion when deploying the military.

32. Using the 2004 National Election Study (NES) and the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study, we found substantially higher levels of interest in politics and current events among students in the eighteen to twenty-four age group than among members of the general public.

33. In such efforts, time itself can be unusually hostile to an administration. While the public may initially rally-round-the-flag on an IPC matter, as casualties mount, the situation on the ground becomes more complicated, initial goals become blurred, commitments expand to become (or at least seem) more open-ended, and competing perspectives and sources of information vie for the public’s attention, simple and compelling explanations of IPC policies will be especially difficult to articulate.
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