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**THE DOG THAT WON'T WAG:
THE DIVERSIONARY THEORY OF WAR AND PRESIDENTIAL USES OF FORCE**

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ABSTRACT

Anecdotal evidence has long alleged the efficacy of the "rally 'round the flag" effect (Mueller, 1970; 1973), the propensity for the American public to put aside political differences and support the President during international crises. Indeed, the belief that presidents are aware of this phenomenon and will turn to foreign adventurism as a means of diverting public attention from domestic troubles, bolstering presidential popularity, or influencing impending elections is the foundation of the diversionary theory of war. This study examines the conditions surrounding and preceding 193 militarized interstate disputes between 1933 and 1992, as identified by the Correlates of War project. It is discovered that presidential uses of force are in fact more often associated with higher than normal consumer confidence levels, that presidential approval levels prior to uses of force are not significantly different than average levels for the study period, and that the propensity to use force does not appear to be influenced by the electoral cycle.

INTRODUCTION

On Monday, August 17, 1998, President Bill Clinton appeared on national television in an address from the White House Map Room to admit to an "inappropriate relationship" with a former White House intern, Monica Lewinsky. The following day, an overnight Gallup Poll revealed that while the president's job approval rating remained virtually unchanged -- 62 percent expressed approval of Clinton's performance as president, as compared to 65 percent prior to the Lewinsky speech -- the public's assessment of the president's personal favorability had plummeted overnight from 59 percent to 39 percent approval. With the president humiliated, his party demoralized, and several prominent Republicans calling openly for his resignation, the media began its post-mortem dissections of the Clinton presidency.

Three days later, American naval vessels in the Arabian and Red seas launched more than one hundred cruise missiles at suspected terrorist sites in Afghanistan and Sudan in response to the bombings of the U.S. embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam thirteen days earlier. Despite public opinion polls showing that two-thirds of Americans

supported the Clinton Administration's actions, more than one-third of those surveyed--36 percent--felt that the president had ordered the attack to divert attention from the Lewinsky scandal, while almost sixty percent of respondents felt that it was legitimate for members of Congress to question the timing of the military action (CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll, August 21, 1998). Members of Congress and media pundits alike posited a "Wag the Dog" scenario, a reference to a popular movie in which a president manufactures a military conflict with a minor foreign country as a means of diverting public attention from a sex scandal. Nevertheless, Clinton's public approval ratings, which had fallen five percentage points in the days following his Lewinsky speech, did not budge following the attacks on Afghanistan and Sudan.

Despite the White House denials that the missile attacks were designed to bolster the president's popularity and divert attention from the burgeoning scandal, the prospect nevertheless did not seem beyond the realm of possibilities. While the notion that a president might provoke a crisis solely for political gain suggests a disturbingly cynical political calculus, the assumption that he might do so appears to be fairly widespread among the American electorate. If such is the case however, it is reasonable to assume that there is evidence for this phenomenon beyond the anecdotal.

Few aspects of political behavior and interaction have elicited as much attention and study as has war, and the conditions surrounding presidential exercises of this authority have engendered considerable debate as well. While concern over the nature and scope of the presidential war power is as old as the republic itself--"[t]he constitution supposes, what the History of all Govts demonstrates, that the Ex. is the branch of power most interested in war, & most prone to it," James Madison wrote Thomas Jefferson in April, 1798 (Madison, 1900-1910, v. 6, p. 312)--it is only in recent decades that quantitative and analytical assessments of the circumstances surrounding presidential uses of force have been attempted. For the most part, these studies have fallen into two general categories: those addressing the circumstances surrounding and perhaps contributing to such decisions, and those focusing on the political and electoral ramifications of such decisions on the president and his party.

Public approval has become the coin of the realm for the modern presidency--presidents with broad support are more successful in pushing their legislation through Congress, in avoiding having their vetoes overridden, and in securing reelection for both themselves and members of their party. Anecdotal and some empirical evidence suggests that one of the most effective and simplest means of bolstering one's public approval is through uses of force, which are routinely accorded considerable television coverage and serve to spotlight the president's diplomatic and military expertise, not to mention his resoluteness as a leader. Given the disparities between past and more recent research into the "Rally 'Round the Flag" effect, as well as the serious ethical and political considerations raised by the issue, further research into the phenomenon is warranted.

Are presidents prone to making such decisions as a means toward diverting public attention from poor economic conditions, bolstering their public approval ratings, or influencing impending elections? In order to refine present theory and understanding of

the diversionary theory of war and presidential uses of force, this research will reexamine the rally effect, employing a data set never before incorporated into past research on the phenomenon – the Correlates of War Project's Militarized Interstate Disputes data set, encompassing all militarized interstate disputes occurring between 1814 and 1992 – and extending the analysis to include ten presidential administrations, the Roosevelt through the Bush presidencies.

II. Previous Research

A. Presidential Approval

The importance of public approval and support to presidential success is well documented. Both Abramson, Aldrich, and Rohde (1986) and Fiorina (1981) note that voting behavior in presidential and congressional elections is influenced by the popularity of the White House incumbent, while Marra and Ostrom (1989) demonstrate that the president's public approval ratings play a role in the distribution of congressional seats. Presidential popularity has also been linked to presidential success in congressional roll call votes (Edwards, 1980), the success of presidential policy initiatives (Rivers and Rose, 1985), and congressional reactions to presidential vetoes (Rohde and Simon, 1985).

Popular presidents have more leverage in persuading other political actors to adopt administration priorities and policies as their own (Neustadt, 1980) and are more likely to present bold and ambitious legislative packages to Congress (Light, 1982). Although not binding, Crespi (1980) has observed that "[p]residential approval ratings have created a pseudo-parliamentary situation, whereby the president faces a monthly vote of confidence from the total electorate...this vote of confidence is accepted by both politicians and political analysts as an indicator of the president's political clout and, therefore, of his ability to govern effectively." (Crespi, 42). Quite simply, presidents enjoying substantial popularity and public support have more options and resources available to them and fewer concerns about congressional resistance to their policies, while unpopular presidents may be more vulnerable to congressional recalcitrance and investigations.

Presidential popularity is not a constant, however, and every president in the era of modern public opinion polling has seen his approval ratings wax and wane, sometimes considerably, for reasons that are often unclear. Marra, Ostrom, and Simon (1990) note that there are three basic, though not mutually exclusive, schools of thought as to the dynamics that influence presidential popularity. One school of thought begins with the observation that, for most incumbents, public approval "moves ineluctably downward from the first day in office" (MacKuen, 1983, 178). Advocates of this perspective (Cronin, 1980; MacKuen, 1983; Mueller, 1970; 1973; Stimson, 1976;) maintain that presidential approval is characterized by a gradual and steady erosion over the course of a presidential term, and that while events and developments may temporarily delay or even reverse this decline over the short-term, it cannot be forestalled indefinitely.

A second school of thought emphasizes the domestic and international contexts in which the president operates and to which presidential popularity responds. According to this approach, presidents are continually assessed based on their abilities to satisfy the expectations and desires of the electorate. Public approval has been shown to rise and fall in response to such stimuli as the rates of unemployment and inflation, levels of international tension, battle deaths during periods of war, and the success of the president's legislative agenda (Kernell, 1978; Hibbs, 1982; MacKuen, 1983; Ostrom and Simon, 1985).

The third school of thought accepts this relationship between public approval and environmental stimuli, but emphasizes instead the symbolic nature of the presidency and the potential for ameliorating the negative impact of events in the domestic and international arenas through political drama and effective public relations strategies. Faced with the inevitable loss of such an important political asset, presidents might be expected to do whatever is in their power in attempting to minimize or even reverse this seemingly inexorable decline in public approval (Brace and Hinckley, 1993; Brody and Page, 1975; Haight and Brody, 1977; Kernell, 1986; Lee, 1977; Neustadt, 1980; Ragsdale, 1984; 1987). Kernell (1986) and Brace and Hinckley (1993) even posit the development of a "public relations presidency" in the postwar era in which incumbents strategically or reactively "act in deliberate ways to achieve heightened popularity in the polls and in elections" (Brace and Hinckley, 1993, 382-384). Activities such as televised addresses, foreign and domestic travel, press conferences, and Rose Garden signings are all designed to present a coherent message or theme to the electorate, all with an eye toward maximizing and maintaining public approval.

B. Diversionary Theory of War

While the realist school of international relations holds that virtually all international behavior can be explained through such exogenous factors as the prevailing level of international tension and strategic balance, the diversionary theory of war posits that such internal domestic factors as presidential approval, election cycles, and the state of the economy may affect decisions to employ force as well (Levy, 1989). The popular presumption that presidents will turn to military adventurism to divert attention from dismal economic conditions, faltering popularity ratings or pending electoral misfortune is well represented both historically and in the mainstream media, and owes much to the in-group/out-group hypotheses found in the sociological literature (Coser, 1956; Simmel 1898). Domestic considerations in both London and Buenos Aires undoubtedly played a role in the escalation of the Falklands War in 1982 (Norpoth, 1987), and when the *New York Times* reported in August 1992 that the Bush Administration was considering military action against Iraq in order to bolster the President's reelection chances--a charge angrily denied by the White House--the presumption that a President might take the nation into battle to secure his own political objectives appeared to be widespread. Attempts at corroborating this conventional wisdom initially met with mixed results

however, and early research found little or no relationship between domestic political or economic conditions and instances of foreign conflict (Hazelwood, 1973; Kegley, Richardson, and Richter, 1978; Rummel, 1963; Tanter, 1966; Wilkenfeld, 1968).

However, later research has found evidence to suggest that domestic politics does play some role in the foreign policy decisions of national leaders. In recent decades, statistical evidence has suggested that presidential uses of force may indeed redound to the benefit of the chief executive's public approval ratings (Mueller, 1970; 1973; Lee, 1977; Kernell, 1978; Erikson, Luttbeg, and Tedin, 1980; Sigelman and Conover, 1981; MacKuen, 1983; Brody, 1984, 1991; Ostrom and Simon, 1985; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987; Russett, 1990a). Such benefits may prove transitory, however. Although the Reagan and Eisenhower administrations enjoyed significant short-term boosts in public support following popular military operations, Presidents Truman and Johnson both saw their public approval ratings plummet over the long term as a result of long and unpopular wars. George Bush, in perhaps the most telling example of the fickle nature of presidential approval in recent years, was denied reelection and turned out of office just eighteen months after registering the highest public approval ratings ever measured for an American president following the stunning victory by the United States over Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War. Clearly, the decision to use force may backfire if the electorate perceives that the commander-in-chief is exercising his constitutional authority for political gain.

On the other hand, scholars such as Arthur Stein (1978) have suggested that wars may in fact have a disintegrative effect on national cohesion, as families lose friends and relatives in combat, consumer goods become scarce, and national resources are redirected toward the war effort. More recent research, including that of James and Oneal (1991), Hugick and Gallup (1991), Brody (1991), Lian and Oneal (1993), Oneal and Bryan (1995), James and Rioux (1998), and Baker and Oneal (2001) have cast doubt on the efficacy of this "Rally 'Round the Flag" effect in explaining variations in presidential popularity. Clearly, the relationship between presidential uses of force and presidential popularity is obviously more complex than conventional wisdom would have us believe.

Subsequent research has suggested that presidents may be more likely to consider military force when economic conditions are poor. James (1988), Russett (1990a; 1990b), Russett and Barzilai (1991), James and Oneal (1991), and Brace and Hinckley (1991) corroborate Ostrom and Job's (1986) findings that deteriorating economic conditions positively affect the likelihood that a chief executive will decide to employ military force in a crisis. Because economic conditions are so much more difficult to manipulate in the short term, presidents may find the use of military force abroad a more effective option for increasing their popularity. Mintz (1993) contends that the Bush Administration's decision to abandon economic sanctions in favor of military force in order to eject Iraq from Kuwait was due in part to worsening economic conditions in the United States in the fall of 1990, while Wang (1996) found that higher expected values for war and greater costs for backing down during war were associated with domestic considerations--poor economic conditions, the proximity of presidential elections, the number of seats held by the president's party in Congress--and with more violent

responses to crises on the part of the United States. On the other hand, Meernik (1994), in focusing on 458 presidential opportunities to use force between 1948 and 1988, found that levels of U.S. military aid and prior U.S. uses of force had a greater impact on presidential decision-making than did such domestic variables as popular approval or economic conditions.

Conventional wisdom also contends that political leaders should be more favorably disposed toward foreign conflict in order to elicit a rally and bolster their public approval when their personal popularity is low. Ostrom and Job (1986) and James and Oneal (1991), however, find that presidential uses of force are in fact more likely when public approval is high, suggesting that relatively high levels of popular support are a prerequisite for the use of military force abroad. Similarly, Morgan and Bickers (1992) reviewed aggressive foreign policy actions on the part of the United States from 1953 through 1976, and found that the White House is more prone toward such behavior when the president is faced with a loss of support among his core partisans rather than from among the electorate as a whole, and that lower approval ratings from within the president's own party were found to have an impact on the U.S. initiation of militarized disputes. This finding is somewhat at odds with those of Lian and Oneal (1993), although the latter employed a somewhat different variable--U.S. uses of force--as their dependent variable.

Lindsay, Sayrs, and Steger (1992) maintain that presidential decisions to use force in a crisis are influenced less by public opinion than by the White House's relationship with Congress, while Brands (1987) argues that the U.S. interventions in Lebanon, Grenada, and the Dominican Republic were facilitated primarily by the lack of congressional opposition to such moves. Taken together, these findings suggest that, contrary to popular sentiment, political leaders do not routinely resort to force as a means toward bolstering their public approval ratings over the short-term.

While past research has suggested that public support for American presidents routinely increases in the short-term after uses of force (Mueller, 1970, 1973; Brody and Page, 1975; MacKuen, 1983), this support is often ephemeral and is likely to wane should the conflict become long-term (Cotton, 1987; Kernell, 1978; Mueller, 1973). Might presidents time uses of force short of full-scale war to improve their own electoral prospects or those of their party? James and Oneal (1991) found that decisions to resort to military force are more common during the third quarters of presidential election years, a finding corroborated by Russett (1990b), suggesting that chief executives might be trying to instigate rallies in order to further their own political and electoral interests. Stoll (1984), on the other hand, finds that presidents are actually less likely to resort to military force during election years, although uses of force are more likely to occur when the United States is involved in an ongoing war, while Gaubatz (1991) finds that democratic states in general are more likely to become involved in foreign conflicts earlier rather than later in their election cycles. DeRouen (1995) finds that while the state of the economy plays no direct role in presidential decisions to use force, there is a significant relationship between presidential popularity and the state of the economy, a

nonrecursive relationship between popularity and the use of force, and therefore an indirect linkage between the economy, presidential approval and uses of force.

These findings present us with some troubling ethical questions. Ostrom and Job note that "as the leader of one of the world's great powers, the President of the United States is charged with the responsibility of guiding and implementing policies to protect and advance U.S. interests abroad." (1986, 541) However, their findings and those of others suggest that presidents from Roosevelt through Bush, when acting as commander-in-chief, have been more influenced by partisan politics than by the nation's strategic interests. If our leaders are truly motivated to use force not for national defense or strategic considerations but primarily in the hope of partisan gain, then the moral shortcomings of Watergate, Iran-Contra, and Whitewater must pale in comparison.

However, if presidents do in fact employ America's armed forces in attempts at arresting declining popularity or influencing elections, a program of education for U.S. leaders is sorely needed, because recent research indicates that the rally effect is neither certain nor strong. Offsetting this small expected benefit is the danger that the use of force for limited, political purposes might lead to an extended war, a result which has typically had a strong and uniformly adverse effect on presidential popularity (Cotton 1987). Furthermore, the potential benefit to be accrued from such a political use of force is only about half that of a prime time televised foreign policy speech (Russett 1990a, 36).

III. Statistical Analyses

In order to determine whether presidents in fact pursue militarized interstate disputes as a means toward diverting public attention from poor economic conditions, influencing the electoral process, or bolstering presidential popularity, this paper will consider whether certain factors -- prior presidential popularity, the proximity of elections, economic indicators -- make presidential uses of force more likely. Data were compiled on militarized interstate disputes to which the United States was a party, presidential approval prior to the initiation of the use of force, public perceptions of business conditions, personal finances, consumer confidence and expectations, and the proximity of elections.

A. Militarized Interstate Disputes

Perhaps the most comprehensive data sets on international conflict is the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MIDs) data set, a revised version of Gochman and Maoz's (1984) original data collection compiled by the Correlates of War (COW) Project. The MIDs data encompasses the years 1816-1992 and provides detailed information on the more than two thousand militarized disputes in which one or more states threatened, displayed, or used force against one or more other states over the course of this time period; of these disputes, 308 involved the United States.

The COW project defines a "militarized interstate dispute" as "a set of interactions between or among states involving threats to use military force, displays of military force or actual uses of military force. To be included, these acts must be explicit, nonaccidental, and government sanctioned" (Gochman and Maoz, 1984:587). Given these criteria, relevant cases must involve national political entities that are participants in the interstate system--disputes with terrorist groups, separatist movements, or other nonstate actors are therefore not included.

Although the MID data set includes 308 militarized interstate disputes involving the United States dating back to 1816, modern public opinion polling on presidential approval did not begin until the middle of the 1930s, and even then polls were conducted only sporadically. This research will therefore focus only on the 193 militarized interstate disputes in which the United States was involved between 1933 and 1992, encompassing the Franklin Roosevelt through the George Bush administrations.

Figure 1 indicates that instances of militarized interstate disputes involving the United States are not distributed uniformly throughout the period being studied. Most notably, militarized disputes prior to 1948 appear to be significantly rarer than those in the post-1948 period. A number of potential explanations might account for this phenomenon. The relatively sparse nature of pre-1948 incidents may be simply a coding artifact, perhaps indicating the difficulties involved in identifying militarized disputes through historical records and media sources decades after the fact. Given the improved communications technologies that we find later in the study period, it may be that relatively minor uses or displays of force that would have been covered in media accounts in the latter portions of the study period may have been overlooked in the media accounts of the 1930s. Similarly, media attention on the American activities in the Pacific and European theaters in World War II might have resulted in the omission of relatively minor incidents that would have been covered more thoroughly in more peaceful times.

Another potential explanation for the relative scarcity of U.S. militarized disputes prior to 1948 is that the United States may simply have had neither the inclination nor the opportunity to become involved in such disputes. Indeed, prior to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor that led to the U.S. entry into World War II, there were strong isolationist sentiments among both the general public and within Congress; such sentiments might have dissuaded U.S. policymakers from initiating displays or uses of force during this period for fear of provoking a negative reaction from Congress or from the population as a whole.

Alternately, U.S. policymakers might have been willing to engage in displays or uses of force, yet simply not had the opportunities to do so. In their description and discussion of the entire MID data set, Gochman and Maoz (1984) note that militarized disputes involving two or more members of the interstate system -- not just those involving the United States--have not been evenly distributed over the time period of 1816 through 1992. Their analyses of all interstate disputes do indicate a marked decrease in

militarized interstate disputes in the interwar period, especially during the 1930s, followed by another marked decrease in the late 1940s and early 1950s (Gochman and Maoz, 1984:591-592). Similarly, Gochman and Maoz note that “by far the most disputatious period in terms of the numbers of disputes begun and under way has been the nuclear era...” (Gochman and Maoz, 1984:592). Gochman and Maoz attribute this increase in part to the growth in the size of the interstate system, as former colonies in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East gained their independence in the 1950s and 1960s.

Given the fact that the relatively few U.S. militarized interstate disputes in the pre-1948 period mirror the generally lower dispute levels globally, it is reasonable to assume that this finding is not a data collection artifact and does in fact reflect the generally less disputatious international environment the United States faced in the interwar period. Concomitantly, as the United States emerged as a world superpower and engaged the Soviet Union in a Cold War in the post-World War II era, opportunities for militarized interstate disputes increased, and attitudes toward such conflicts among both U.S. elites and the general public likely changed.

Of the 308 militarized interstate disputes since 1814 in which the United States has been a participant, 193 occurred during the period under study, 1933-1992. Figure 2 reflects the distribution of MIDs by administration during the study period. As indicated, the Reagan and Eisenhower presidencies experienced more militarized interstate disputes, and hence more opportunities to enjoy rally effects, than did the other modern presidencies. This disparity is obviously due not only to the fact that Eisenhower and Reagan both served two full terms in the Oval Office, but also that their presidencies coincided with the relatively more disputatious environments of the 1950s and 1980s.

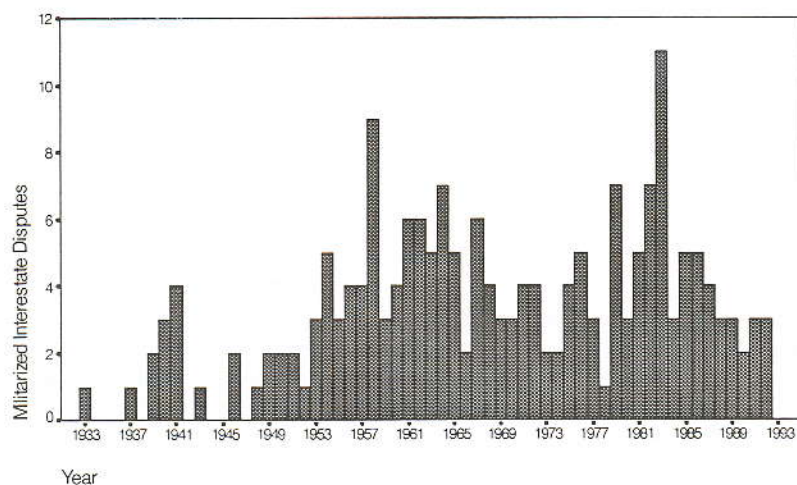


Figure 1

U.S. Militarized Interstate Disputes Per Year

Tables 1 and 2 provide descriptive information on the disputes themselves in which the United States was involved between 1933 and 1992. Table 1 is based on data included in the Militarized Interstate Disputes data set and reports the highest action reached by the participants in the disputes in which the United States was a participant. As indicated, displays of troops, ships, planes, or other mobilizations accounted for more than 27 percent of the highest actions in the disputes, while border violations and blockades accounted for more than twelve percent. Twenty-three percent of actions consisted of occupations of territory, seizures, clashes and raids. Declarations of war and interstate war account for just over three percent of U.S. responses over the study period.

Table 2 measures the hostility level to which the dispute escalated. The fourteen types of military action presented in Table 1 are clustered into three broad categories. *Threat to use force* entails threats to use force, to blockade, to occupy territory, or to declare war. *Display of Force* includes alerts, mobilizations, and shows of force. *Use of Force* refers to actual blockades, occupations of territory, seizures, clashes, declarations of war, war, or other uses of military force (Gochman and Maoz, 1984). This typology is consistent with the coding scheme for events data employed by Leng and Singer (1977) and by Stoll (1987). During the period in question, disputes in which the United States was a participant escalated to an actual use of force in just one-quarter of the cases considered, while threats or displays of force accounted for almost fifty percent of the cases.

B. Presidential Approval

For the purposes of this study, presidential approval levels are based on the Gallup Organization's measurements of this phenomenon beginning in the Roosevelt administration and continuing through the conclusion of the first Bush administration in January 1993. Gallup (1972) includes the presidential approval data for the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, the figures for the Eisenhower through Reagan administrations are found in Edwards and Gallup (1990), while the statistics for the Bush administration are compiled in Saad (1993). However, the Gallup Organization's measurements of presidential popularity were sporadic during the Roosevelt and Truman administrations. During the Roosevelt presidency, Gallup asked only four presidential approval questions in 1943 and none in 1944, perhaps out of concern that any evidence of public dissatisfaction with the chief executive might hinder the war effort; in fact, the poll of December 1943 is the last of the Roosevelt presidency. Furthermore, as late as the 1970s the presidential approval question was omitted from surveys in the months preceding presidential elections, perhaps to avoid influencing the electoral outcome.

In order to ensure that any rallies associated with presidential uses of force were not contaminated or influenced by other contemporaneous events, cases in which the relevant public approval ratings were measured more than six weeks prior to or following the interstate dispute were omitted. Reliable public approval figures are therefore available

for only 167 of the 193 interstate disputes in which the United States was involved between 1933 and 1993.

The presidential approval data indicate that, on average, commanders-in-chief have been neither unusually popular nor unpopular prior to becoming involved in foreign disputes. The mean public approval presidents have enjoyed prior to uses of force is 56.54 percent

Table 1
Highest Action in Dispute by Either Party

| | N | Percent |
|-------------------------------|----|---------|
| No Militarized Action | 0 | 0 |
| Threat to Use Force | 8 | 4.1 |
| Threat to Blockade | 0 | 0 |
| Threat to Occupy Territory | 0 | 0 |
| Threat to Declare War | 0 | 0 |
| Threat to Use Nuclear Weapons | 0 | 0 |
| Show of Troops | 9 | 4.7 |
| Show of Ships | 23 | 11.9 |
| Show of Planes | 18 | 9.3 |
| Alert | 7 | 3.6 |
| Nuclear Alert | 0 | 0 |

| | N | Percent |
|-------------------------|-----|---------|
| Mobilization | 2 | 1.0 |
| Fortify Border | 0 | 0 |
| Border Violation | 20 | 10.4 |
| Blockade | 4 | 2.1 |
| Occupation of Territory | 1 | 0.5 |
| Seizure | 10 | 5.2 |
| Clash | 13 | 6.7 |
| Raid | 20 | 10.4 |
| Declaration of War | 2 | 1.0 |
| Use of CBR Weapons | 0 | 0 |
| Interstate War | 4 | 2.1 |
| Joins Interstate War | 0 | 0 |
| Missing Values | 52 | 26.9 |
| Total | 193 | 100 |

Table 2
Hostility Level of Dispute

| | N | Percent |
|-----------------------|-----|---------|
| No Militarized Action | 0 | 0 |
| Threat to Use Force | 8 | 4.1 |
| Display of Force | 79 | 40.9 |
| Use of Force | 50 | 25.9 |
| War | 4 | 2.1 |
| Missing Values | 52 | 26.9 |
| Total | 193 | 100 |

just slightly above the average popularity level of 55.75 percent for all Gallup presidential approval polls during the entire study period; t-tests indicated a t-value of 1.10 and a two-tailed significance level of 0.273, indicating that the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in these scores cannot be rejected. This indicates that there is likely no relationship between uses of force and prior presidential popularity.

This simple test suggests that the popular wisdom that presidents are more likely to turn to foreign adventurism when their popularity is either unusually low or unusually high is in error.

On the other hand, as indicated, presidential popularity prior to militarized interstate disputes tends to increase as the hostility levels of the disputes in question escalate. On average, presidents have tended to enjoy public approval levels more than ten percentage points greater when entering into a war than they do when engaging in a display of force.

Table 3

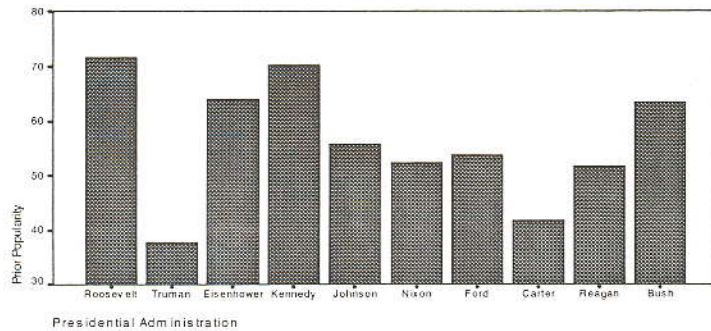
Public Approval Prior to Use of Force

| | N | Mean | SD | Min. | Max. |
|--|-----|-------|-------|------|------|
| Presidential Approval Prior to All Militarized Interstate Disputes | 167 | 56.54 | 13.45 | 26 | 87 |
| Presidential Approval Prior to Threat of Force | 5 | 56.2 | 13.48 | 39 | 72 |
| Presidential Approval Prior to Display of Force | 38 | 53.63 | 12.94 | 32 | 78 |
| Presidential Approval Prior to Use of Force | 119 | 57.13 | 13.44 | 26 | 87 |
| Presidential Approval Prior to War | 5 | 64.4 | 15.95 | 37 | 76 |

These findings are consistent with those of Ostrom and Job (1986) and James and Oneal (1991), who found that presidential uses of force are more likely when public approval is high, suggesting that relatively high levels of popular support are a prerequisite for the more serious categories of militarized interstate disputes. As indicated in Figure 3, however, there are wide disparities among presidential administrations in public approval levels prior to rally events. Only the Truman and Carter presidencies appear to have become involved in militarized interstate disputes when their public approval levels were low, while Presidents Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Bush each tended to enjoy fairly robust popularity levels prior to uses of force. These findings cast doubt on the efficacy of the diversionary theory of war, at least insofar as presidential approval is concerned.

Figure 3

Average Presidential Approval Prior to Rally Event



C. Economic Conditions

The state of the economy has long been recognized as an important influence on presidential popularity (Kernell, 1978; MacKuen, 1983; Ostrom and Simon, 1985; Marra, Ostrom, and Simon, 1990; Wittkopf, 1994). The economic data in Table 4 are based on components of the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center's Index of Consumer Sentiment and the Conference Board's Consumer Confidence surveys. The Michigan data were sporadic through the late 1940s and early 1950s, but were reported quarterly by the 1960s and monthly by the late 1970s. The Conference Board's data, unfortunately, does not begin until 1969. Nevertheless, the variables employed, Michigan's consumer expectations of personal finances (PERFIEXP) and consumer expectations of business conditions over the next twelve months (BUSCON12), as well as the Conference Board's indices of consumer confidence (CCINDEX) and consumer expectations (EXPECTS), capture the attitudes of the public and are naturally influenced by public perceptions of unemployment and inflation.

Summary statistics for the consumer confidence data prior to the militarized interstate disputes are found in Table 4.

Table 4

Consumer Confidence Measures Prior to Militarized Interstate Disputes

| | N | Mean | SD | Min. | Max. |
|--|-----|--------|-------|-------|--------|
| Business Conditions - 12 Months | 152 | 120.47 | 35.32 | 32 | 168 |
| Personal Finances Expected | 147 | 121.74 | 10.22 | 92 | 141 |
| Consumer Confidence | 94 | 87.00 | 18.90 | 43.2 | 138.20 |
| Consumer Expectations | 94 | 93.87 | 17.10 | 45.20 | 122.40 |

As might be expected, all of the consumer confidence variables are positively correlated with one another and these correlations are all significant at the 0.01 confidence level. For the purposes of this research, the most recent consumer sentiment survey data prior to the use of force are employed. Cases in which the most recent consumer sentiment survey is more than three months prior to the use of force in question are omitted.

The mean values for *Business Conditions - 12 Months* (120.42) and *Personal Finances Expected* (121.74) are somewhat higher than the average for the entire 1947-1987 period covered by the data (111.94 and 118.96, respectively), and these differences are significant. Comparing the means of the *Business Conditions - 12 Months* data resulted in a t-value of -3.20 and a 2-tailed significance level of 0.002, while a comparison of the means of the *Personal Finances Expected* data returned a t-value of -2.24 and a 2-tailed significance level of 0.027. The null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in these scores may therefore be safely rejected in these instances.

The mean values for *Consumer Confidence* (87) and *Consumer Expectations* (93.87), however, are virtually identical to those for the entire 1969-1992 period covered by the Conference Board's data (90.77 and 94.41, respectively), and t-tests indicated that the differences were not statistically significant. While the findings for *Consumer Confidence* and *Consumer Expectations* would seem to counter the premise of the diversionary theory that presidents are more inclined to turn to military adventurism to divert public attention from the state of the economy, the findings for "Business Conditions" and "Personal Finances" suggest that presidents may, counter intuitively, be more likely to become involved in uses of force when consumer confidence and expectations are relatively high.

D. Electoral Calendar

As noted previously, there is a widespread assumption that presidents might resort to foreign military action as a means of influencing impending elections. While some research has suggested that presidents are indeed more likely to become involved in uses of force as elections approach (Ostrom and Job, 1986; James and Oneal, 1991), others have failed to find such a relationship (Stoll, 1984; Gaubatz, 1991). In order to assess the relationship between uses of force, presidential approval, and the electoral calendar, the variable NEXTELEC will represent the months remaining until the next presidential election.

Table 5

Hostility Level and Months until Next Election

| Hostility Level | Mean | N | SD | Min | Max |
|-------------------|-------|-----|-------|-----|-----|
| All MIDs | 23.31 | 193 | 13.16 | 0 | 47 |
| Threats of Force | 26.17 | 6 | 14.76 | 6 | 44 |
| Displays of Force | 25.52 | 40 | 11.12 | 1 | 41 |
| Uses of Force | 22.62 | 139 | 13.44 | 0 | 47 |
| War | 22.00 | 8 | 17.19 | 1 | 42 |

As indicated in Table 5, the propensity for the president to lead the nation into a militarized dispute does not appear to be related to the electoral calendar. When all 193 MIDs cases are considered, the average amount of time until the next presidential election is just under two years. While there is a positive correlation between the use of force and a presidential election in the same quarter--excluding uses of force in December and the latter part of November following an election--the relationship is not statistically significant. This suggests once again that presidents do not seem to routinely schedule uses of force as a means of influencing impending elections.

It may be that presidents who wish to influence impending elections through uses of force would only favor certain kinds of military action. Given the potentially disastrous effects a major military endeavor might have on a presidency, as evidenced by the Truman and Johnson experiences, a chief executive might be more inclined toward threats and displays of force rather than uses of force or war in the months preceding elections. However, as indicated in Table 5, there appear to be no appreciable differences among the different hostility levels in the amount of time until the next election. For each hostility level, the average amount of time until the next presidential election is about two years.

IV. Conclusion

Conventional wisdom, sociological theory, and past research have often suggested that presidents may be inclined to seek out foreign military adventures in order to bolster sagging public approval ratings, influence voting behavior prior to elections, or divert attention from lackluster economic conditions. Such theories have gained credence in recent decades through statistical and anecdotal evidence suggesting that such uses of force may raise the chief executive's public approval ratings, although the benefits appear most often to have been minor and transitory, in both real and political terms.

The diversionary theory of war, the widely held belief that presidents will be predisposed toward uses of force in militarized interstate disputes as a means of boosting their own public approval ratings, diverting public attention from domestic political or economic troubles, or to influence impending elections, assumes, of course, that the rally effect is in fact real, or at least that presidents believe that it is. However, key elements of the diversionary theory of war have been brought into question as a result of this research. Despite popular presumptions to the contrary, presidents are in fact not more likely to become involved in crises when their popularity is low, and actually are more likely to enjoy higher than average public approval levels prior to becoming involved in militarized disputes. The economic data presented also suggest that presidents are not more inclined to seek out foreign military diversions when the consumer confidence in the health of the economy is low, but that in fact consumer confidence and expectations tend to be higher than average prior to a dispute. Similarly, the proximity of elections does not appear to be a factor in the onset of militarized interstate disputes either.

However, while these results do cast doubt on the proposition that presidents are inclined toward international adventurism as a means of bolstering their own political positions, it is possible that presidents in political difficulty are in fact simply more selective and discriminating in their choices as to what activities they choose to divert public attention. As indicated previously, Russett (1990a) notes that a president may realize a greater boost to his public approval ratings through a nationally televised primetime speech without the long-term risks entailed should a limited military dispute escalate into war.

That a president may elicit a surge of patriotism and public approval for his administration and its policies through an international crisis is perhaps one of the most deeply held tenets in American politics, and for a number of years the anecdotal evidence that such a phenomenon in fact existed was supported by the prevailing empirical research (Kernell, 1978; Mueller, 1970; 1973). More recent studies (Brody, 1991; Lian and Oneal, 1993; Oneal and Bryan, 1995; James and Rioux, 1998; Baker and Oneal, 2001), however, have cast doubt on the efficacy of the rally effect to accurately account for and explain what happens to public opinion and presidential popularity during militarized interstate disputes; while public support for the president during international crises does increase in many instances, this increase is often small, is by no means certain, and appears to be contingent on a number of contextual factors. Clearly the relationship between presidential uses of force and presidential popularity is more complex than conventional wisdom would have us believe.

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