

















































































































































































































































Overall, Reagan's narrative met all three of the framework criteria. At times, even individual speeches met all three criteria, as did the speech he gave in honor of D-Day in 1984. In this speech, he described the actions of the soldiers who participated in the landing at Normandy as aligned with US strategic interests and motivated by American values and ideals. He emphasized that American popular support for the force and the mission provided credibility, demonstrating the importance of the relationship between the public and the military. Finally, he was careful to assert that this was not just a historical event. He described the contemporary conflict with the Soviet Union as similar to the challenge that faced the United States during World War II. This speech was a masterful example of Reagan cultivating a compelling narrative about the relationship of the public and the military being crucial not only to military success, but also strategic American success.

When we compare Carter's and Reagan's narratives against the framework, Reagan is the sure winner. With regards to improving public perception of the military, he met and exceeded each criterion. He consistently and eloquently spoke about the requirement for a strong military to ensure national security, described the military as sharing desired American values, and painted an image of a military transformed into a first-rate fighting force. Carter's performance with regards to the framework is more nuanced. He took many of the same actions as Reagan: he grew the defense budget, increased support to veterans' programs, talked (at times) about military servicemembers embodying the values that he held dear, and took efforts to improve military credibility. His "malaise speech" indicated that while he believed the division between society and the military to be affecting the nation's morale and confidence, he did not offer a counter-narrative or a recommended solution during this speech. Translating his beliefs and actions in a coherent and convincing narrative eluded Carter. As has been described, he struggled to develop effective narratives on all topics, and when it came to influencing public opinion, it limited his effectiveness.

The utility of the framework used in this paper cannot be formally measured, but the results can be compared to the one quantitative measure of public opinion of the military that exists for this time period. When Carter entered office, Gallup polling revealed that 57 percent of surveyed Americans had "quite a lot" or a "great deal" of

confidence in the military. This number fluctuated during Carter's presidency, ultimately slipping to a 50 percent confidence level by 1981, the end of Carter's term in office. During Reagan's presidency, Gallup polling showed that confidence in the military rose: in 1985, 61 percent of polled Americans had "quite a lot" or a "great deal" of confidence in the military, and in 1989, at the end of Reagan's presidency, 63 percent of polled Americans had "quite a lot" or a "great deal" of confidence in the military.<sup>33</sup> While this increase in public confidence in the military cannot be exclusively attributed to the effectiveness of Reagan's narrative skills, the Gallup polling substantiates that public support of the military rose during Reagan's presidency.

The degree of presidential influence on public opinion is difficult to assess, but some research suggests that a simple presidential message is more likely to gain support from the public.<sup>34</sup> This is a potential reason for why Reagan was able to garner more popular support for the military than was Carter; he was a master of creating simple, clear, and consistent messaging. Carter did a great deal to improve the credibility and capability of the military, but he did not focus on changing public opinion. Comparing his approach to Reagan's raises the question as to why he did not devote much attention to this matter. Ultimately, Carter and Reagan seemed to have placed different value on public support of the military. Reagan recognized that society's feelings about the military mattered. More than just a domestic nicety, public support for the military directly translated to strategic capability against the Soviet Union. Scarcely a page of Reagan's writings and speeches about the military, as well as the memoirs of Weinberger, failed to highlight public perception of the military as a problem that needed a remedy. Carter never made this connection. Though Carter noted the divide between the military and society with sadness and dismay, he did not prioritize it and took little action to mend the divide.

---

<sup>33</sup> "Military and National Defense: Confidence in the Military," Gallup poll, 1975-2019, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1666/military-national-defense.aspx>.

<sup>34</sup> Drury et al., "'Pretty Prudent' or Rhetorically Responsive? The American Public's Support for Military Action," 84.

## Conclusion

The Vietnam War left its mark on the military institution, both in terms of its capability and its relationship with the American public. The distrust and lack of confidence with which the public regarded the military was particularly problematic in light of the newly-created all-volunteer force. Memories of My Lai, free fire zones, and “fraggings” darkened the perceptions of the average American. Without a draft to compel service, the military had to make a case to the wider population that it was a valid career option. If it failed to do so, recruitment and retention would suffer, and the military would be undermanned both in numbers and quality of service members. Additionally, public support for the military was essential to the overall US ability to counter the Soviet threat. The Vietnam War had reinforced the lesson that without public support for the military and the operations in which it engaged, the United States could not sustain resolve. The post-Vietnam military, then, was faced with insufficient budget, aging equipment, underqualified personnel, and a negative relationship with society. All in all, this was the “hollow army” that General Meyer described to Carter.<sup>1</sup>

Carter and Reagan each were faced with the challenge of modernizing the military in the context of a Soviet threat and economic challenges. Comparing how they addressed these problems, particularly how they messaged the credibility of the military to the public, provides insight on how each was able to influence an important aspect of civil-military relations. Using a framework that evaluates how well each president’s narrative put forth an image of the military as aligned with US strategic interests, motivated by American values, and characterized by credibility and professionalism, suggests how much each president was able to affect public perception of the military.

Both Carter and Reagan increased the defense budget and focused on technological modernization, although they diverged on which specific technological solutions were appropriate to meet security challenges. For example, while waiting for stealth technology to develop, Carter stopped production of the B-1 in favor of an

---

<sup>1</sup> Frank L. Jones, *A “Hollow Army” Reappraised: President Carter, Defense Budgets, and the Politics of Military Readiness*, Letort Papers, no. 54 (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2012), 2.



version. In fact, Reagan's narrative was so effective that some have suggested that he was responsible not just for the improvement in public perception of the military, but also for the impression that the military was weak during the Carter administration. While campaigning, Reagan portrayed the military as in crisis, saying "we're in greater danger today than we were the day after Pearl Harbor. Our military is absolutely incapable of defending this country."<sup>3</sup> While capability and credibility would increase with continued modernization and funding, Carter had already grown the defense budget, pursued technological modernization, improved support to veterans, and increased pay and benefits. What Carter had not done was effectively message these efforts to the American public. Always the "great communicator," this was what Reagan could do that Carter could not. Motivated by his priority of improving the public's perception of the military, Reagan's corresponding positive narrative increased public confidence in the military that trended upwards through the Gulf War and still resonates today.



---

<sup>3</sup>Richard Stubbing, "The Defense Program: Buildup or Binge?," *Foreign Affairs* 63, no. 4 (Spring 1985).















