

# War Policy, Public Support, and the Media

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Perhaps no element of the current conflict in Iraq engenders more emotion and acrimony within the military than debate concerning the role and influence of the news media on public opinion and national policy. Debates regarding this subject are nothing new. Since at least the Civil War, anecdotal assertions associated with media influence on American wars have caused controversy among government officials, members of the military, scholars, pundits, and members of the press as they continue to argue the media's effects. Historically, contention over the issue of media influence has become particularly acute when the policies of the administration executing the conflict are perceived as being either too slow, or failing, to achieve their political objectives at the cost of mounting casualties.

Under such circumstances, critics of the press have been predictable in accusing the media of editorial bias that undermines public support for military operations, while most reporters have been equally predictable in countering that they are just faithfully reporting what they observe. This subject probably received its most severe examination and critique in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, when media influence over public opinion and policy became the subject of dozens of commissions, scholarly workshops, conferences, and countless research papers and books.<sup>1</sup> Among the first, most notable, and most influential of the many post-mortem works was Peter Braestrup's meticulously documented book, *The Big Story*, an examination of the linkages and relationships of political decisionmaking as influenced by media reporting during and immediately after North Vietnam's Tet Offensive in 1968.<sup>2</sup> So traumatic was this train of exhaustive examinations that the question of media bias and its influence on policy and public opinion during the Vietnam

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War continues to surface as a fixed point of comparison almost immediately whenever the United States has become involved in subsequent conflicts. This contentious disagreement is again evident in current comparisons of the press coverage of Iraq with that of Vietnam, kindling new debates regarding the influence of the media over public opinion and policy.

As a result of this reemerging debate, it is useful and appropriate to revisit the relationship of press reporting, public opinion, and war policy, and to seek a theoretical understanding of how these relate to each other. A good point of departure is to examine the conclusions that many social scientists reached concerning the relationship of the media and war policy during the Vietnam War.

### ***Vietnam and Subsequent Conflicts***

The assertion that biased media coverage was the decisive factor in turning domestic US public opinion against the war in Vietnam has been closely analyzed and convincingly challenged by a large number of distinguished and disinterested researchers. Among the most respected studies were those conducted by Daniel Hallin and Clarence Wyatt, who, after analyzing the effect of so-called negative media images of the war on the American people, found virtually no evidence to support any causal relationship between editorial tone and bias in the media with loss of public support for the war.<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, in perhaps the most widely quoted study of the relationship between public opinion and news reporting from Vietnam—one regarded by many as the seminal work on the subject—Ohio State University professor John Mueller compared and analyzed the effects of the media on public opinion during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. He “found that support for the wars among the general public followed a pattern for decline that was remarkably similar,” even though the media were neither as pervasive nor as critical during the Korean conflict as they were during the Vietnam War.<sup>4</sup> He summed up his conclusions as follows:

Many have seen Vietnam as a “television war” and argue that the vivid and largely uncensored day-by-day television coverage of the war and its brutalities made a profound impression on public attitudes. The poll data used in this study do not support such a conclusion. They clearly show that whatever impact television had, it was not enough to reduce support for the war below the levels attained by the Korean War, when television was in its infancy, until casualty levels had far surpassed those of the earlier war.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, Mueller found in his study evidence of a recurring tendency in public responses to national conflicts that flatly contradicts the notion of media domination of policy formulation through the biases of editorial tone in reporting. He called this tendency the “rally round the flag” phenome-

non.<sup>6</sup> Other researchers have noted this phenomenon as well, expressing consternation over an observable recurring dynamic of public opinion that does not respond in accordance with models that posit a predictable loss of public support based solely on “rational” responses to untoward policies or events in war. For example, public opinion researcher Nelson W. Polsby wrote, “Invariably, the popular response to a President during [an] international crisis is favorable, regardless of the wisdom of the policies [the President] pursues.”<sup>7</sup> Commenting on Polsby’s observation, researcher Richard Brody added, “This counterintuitive movement of public attitudes—backing the President when his policies may have been unwise or even unsuccessful—is what intrigues public opinion researchers. When things go badly, or the outcome is unclear, the public’s positive response needs to be accounted for.”<sup>8</sup>

A notable example of this “rally round the flag” phenomenon over a fairly sustained period of time was observed in British public opinion polling during the Thatcher government’s handling of the Falkland Islands War. At the onset of the crisis, the British public mood and press comment toward the government for its preparedness and handling of the initial stages of the Falklands confrontation was highly critical. However, as the crisis unfolded, and as the Thatcher government took decisive steps to retake the islands from Argentina by armed intervention, the level of public support in Great Britain steadily grew—from 44 percent approving military action to reassert control over the Falklands in early April 1982 to more than 80 percent in late May 1982.<sup>9</sup> An article published in *Public Opinion* summarized what was to some researchers a perplexing shift in public support:

[By the time] of the landing and as British losses mounted, some observers expected public support to begin to dwindle. In fact, the opposite occurred. By that time the *Sheffield* had been lost, Sea King helicopters had been ditched, Harriers had been lost, the HMS *Antelope* was sinking and scores of lives lost, but 80 percent of those polled thought on the 23d of May that the government was right to go ahead with the landing on the Falklands.<sup>10</sup>

In a later study, Mueller observed the same pattern recurring in the ebb and flow of public opinion related to Operation Desert Storm. In the

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months immediately following Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait, the public approval rating for then-President George H. W. Bush's handling of the war declined from 76 percent approval in August 1990 to 54 percent in October 1990. This decline was widely interpreted, even by those in the White House, as a reflection of public dissatisfaction with a growing perception of seemingly ineffectual policies in response to Saddam Hussein's continued occupation of Kuwait. However, public support began to climb somewhat as the United States began transparent preparations for possible military intervention, bolstered by the President's ultimatum to Iraq on 8 November that military force would be used if Saddam Hussein's regime did not abandon Kuwait. And, upon initiation of the air campaign on 16 January 1991, there was what can be fairly described as leap in public support registered in polls and continuing throughout the conflict.<sup>11</sup> As Mueller notes,

War galvanized public attention, and support soared for the war and for the President. And this seems to have led to a sort of boosterism within the media. . . . Those thinking we had made a mistake sending troops to Saudi Arabia dropped 13 percentage points, those approving Bush's handling of the Persian Gulf situation rose 19 points, those approving his handling of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait rose 24 points, those approving the way he was handling the Iraq situation rose 28 points, those approving the job he was doing as President rose 18 points, those trusting him to make the right decision on war went up 20 points. . . . These indices generally remained high throughout the war, and Bush's popularity took another bolt upward—to a phenomenal 89 percent [through March 1991].<sup>12</sup>

Public opinion researchers Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame assert that this jump in public support was directly attributed to the manner in which the President "encountered public resistance at half a dozen turns in the crisis and overcame it, not with soaring rhetoric, but with bold actions, each of which shifted public opinion toward support of his policy."<sup>13</sup>

After analyzing media influence on war policy during Desert Storm, Mueller went on to note,

The role of the media in influencing thought is often considered to be enormous. Most research on this issue, however, concludes that, in the main, media reports simply reinforce or strengthen beliefs already held by their readers and viewers. . . . Moreover, once Bush launched the war, the public (and Congress and the media) were catapulted into cheering, uncritical support that resembled bloodlust to some horrified observers.<sup>14</sup>

The same pattern of public support rising in correlation with demonstrations of decisive military action has been observable over time during Operation Iraqi Freedom. In the early phases, the Gallup Poll recorded a dramatic jump in domestic US approval for the President's handling of the war in Iraq, rising

from 55 percent in December 2002 to 76 percent approval in April 2003, correlating with the highly visible and successful combat operations specifically directed at the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, popular support for both the President and the war steeply declined as events in Iraq settled into a pattern of what many in the public apparently regarded as inertia and stagnation, reaching its nadir in June 2004 with 51 percent disapproval in both an ABC News/*Washington Post* survey and a CBS News/*New York Times* survey and 49 percent disapproval in a Gallup Poll for roughly the same period. However, following similar "rally round the flag" patterns observed in conjunction with events in previous conflicts, public confidence in the President as reflected in all major polls had a modest but significant uptick in apparent correlation to bold military actions associated with counterinsurgency operations in Fallujah from September through November 2004, as well as after positive events stemming from determined coalition support of Iraq's elections and the resulting Iraqi voter turnout. This was registered in a 52 percent approval rating in the ABC News/*Washington Post* survey in January 2005 and a 57 percent approval rating as recorded by a Gallup Poll in early February 2005. The CBS News/*New York Times* survey recorded a 49 percent approval for roughly the same time period, up from 42 percent in June 2004.<sup>16</sup>

The same "rally round the flag" phenomenon has been evident in other instances of US military expeditionary intervention. Polling reflected broad and intense public support for relatively short-lived military actions during the *Mayaguez* incident and the invasion of Grenada, even though both were executed on extremely short notice without "preparation" of the so-called "public information battlefield" beforehand.<sup>17</sup> In addition, both were characterized by notable operational shortfalls and errors, including resulting casualties, and were treated with considerable disdain in some highly visible press reporting. In contrast, public opinion dropped in response to the government's handling of the seizure of the *Pueblo* in 1968 and to the taking of American hostages in Iran in 1979—especially in the aftermath of the aborted Desert One hostage rescue operation—both of which also resulted in loss of materiel or life.<sup>18</sup>

How does one account for a rise in public support for some military actions even in the face of losses and mistakes, and a decline in public support for others experiencing similar shortcomings, with both types of crises being subject to all manner of critical news coverage?

### ***The Surprising Insights of Clausewitz***

For an understanding of this phenomenon, certain strands within Clausewitz's theory of war as developed in his seminal work *On War* seem to account for the observed "counterintuitive" and "irrational" behavior noted by Mueller and others. Though Clausewitz was writing well before the mod-

ern theories and vocabulary of public opinion polling and public relations, he described certain elements within the category of what he called “moral forces” that we would today identify as closely resembling factors of human nature associated with the modern concept of public opinion.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, in laying the groundwork for his theory, he took pains to exhort strategists contemplating the use of military force to recognize the dominant influence that such moral forces have on the conduct of a war, making it incumbent on them to properly stimulate and shape these forces to establish the political conditions for success.<sup>20</sup> He wrote,

The moral elements are among the most important in war. They constitute the spirit that permeates war as a whole, and at an early stage they establish a close affinity with the will that moves and leads the whole mass of force. . . . The effects of physical and psychological factors form an organic whole, which, unlike a metal alloy, is inseparable by chemical processes. In formulating any rule concerning physical factors, the theorist must bear in mind the part that moral factors may play in it. . . . Hence most of the matters dealt with in this book are composed in equal parts of physical and of moral causes and effects. One might say that the physical seem little more than the wooden hilt, while the moral factors are the precious metal, the real weapon, the finely-honed blade.<sup>21</sup>

These moral forces included what Clausewitz described as a natural “primordial hatred and enmity” resident in the people toward those perceived as enemies.<sup>22</sup> He describes this instinctive animus as characterized by latent “hostile intention” manifest in an “impulse to destroy the enemy.”<sup>23</sup> The character of these elements in response to perceived enemies within the family of moral forces logically implies that public support for wars is not so much an act of intellectual deliberation as it is a collective emotional reaction to events due to what Clausewitz elsewhere described as a latent “hatred and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force.”<sup>24</sup>

Consequently, what we today describe as public opinion regarding a war would be properly understood not as a rational action, but primarily as a noncognitive passion guided by an instinctive faith that a population invests in the intellectual judgment and wisdom of trusted political leaders. Consequently, Clausewitz’s theory implies that the naturally occurring animus for an enemy would be primarily stimulated and conditioned by the character of political policy as reflected primarily in its manner of execution.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the intensity and focus of public opinion would mirror the character of national policy itself: “If war is part of policy, policy will determine its character. As policy becomes ambitious and vigorous, so will war. . . . It can be taken as agreed that the aim of policy is to unify and reconcile all aspects of internal administration as well as of spiritual values.”<sup>26</sup>



Conversely, Clausewitz warned, if policy were weak, the moral forces of the state would then mirror its weakness, resulting in dissipation of the irrational element of enmity resident in the people, which would in turn be reflected in weak or declining public support for the conflict.<sup>27</sup>

So policy converts the overwhelming destructive element of war into a mere instrument. It changes the terrible battle-sword that a man needs both his hands and his entire strength to wield, and with which he strikes home once and no more, into a light, handy rapier—sometimes just a foil for exchange of thrusts, feints, and parries.<sup>28</sup>

Money and other resources are usually running short and his moral impulse is not sufficient for a greater effort. In such a case he does the best he can; he hopes that the outlook will improve although he may have no ground for such hopes. Meanwhile, the war drags slowly on, like a faint and starving man. Thus interaction, the effort to outdo the enemy, the violent and compulsive course of war, all stagnate for lack of real incentive.<sup>29</sup>

These Clausewitzian assertions with regard to the relationship of policy and morale appear to provide insight and explain with surprising precision the differences observed among the various conflicts and crises as previously noted by public opinion researchers. Scrutiny of real-world events largely appears to validate what many scholars have found and what Clausewitz's assertions regarding the correlation of policy versus the prevailing character of moral forces seem to predict. This accounts for a stronger correlation between the degree of strength and resolve of leadership in defining war policy as reflected in successful military operations mirrored in public opinion than correlation with other influences such as the critical tone or editorial bias of press reports. As noted by Brody, "In the aggregate, the public seems to respond to policy outcomes, not to the means of achieving them; the response is pragmatic rather than ideological."<sup>30</sup> In other words, public opinion is more responsive to actual battle-field results than to the ideological words promulgated to the public through whatever medium. Clausewitz expresses this specific relationship as follows:

Trophies apart, there is no accurate measure of loss of morale; hence in many cases the abandonment of the fight remains the only authentic proof of victory. . . . This shame and humiliation, which must be distinguished from all other psychological consequences of the transformation of the balance, is an essential part of victory. It is the only element that affects public opinion outside the army, that impresses the people and the governments of the two belligerents and their allies.<sup>31</sup>

### ***Revisiting the Vietnam Experience***

Bearing the above in mind, and revisiting the salient and much-debated issue of media influence on policy in Vietnam as a possible tool for as-



sessing the current effects of the media on policy concerning Iraq, clearly public support and media tone have a complicated and correlated relationship. But, as noted previously, an enormous amount of research has produced little credible evidence to establish a *causal* relationship between so-called bias or slanting of media coverage and public opinion concerning the war. When pondering this important question and establishing intellectual perspective, one should perhaps first ask oneself to consider how long the people of any nation can be expected to maintain popular support for a conflict that lasts 12 years, is bankrupting their country, causing spiral inflation with resulting domestic hardships, costing large numbers of casualties, and which has obviously stagnated and is failing to achieve policy objectives—irrespective of a sniping media tone or slant.

William Hammond, regarded by many as the premier authority on military and media relations during the Vietnam War, also concluded that there was little evidence to support a causal relationship between the tone of editorial reporting and the general public opinion. However, he does suggest that there was evidence to support a causal relationship between the factual content of information communicated through the media and shifts in public opinion, often in ways critics of the media might not expect. For example, he notes the following with regard to public opinion polls taken during and immediately following the Tet Offensive in January 1968, widely and wrongly asserted by many to have been a decisive turning point marking the final irrevocable downturn in public support for continuation of the war:

Whatever the pessimism of the press, however, the majority of Americans went their own way. Queried by the Gallup Poll on whether they considered the war a mistake, 45 percent responded “yes,” the same percentage as in December 1965; 43 percent said “no,” a drop of 3 points; and 12 percent had no opinion. Even more telling, the number of those who considered themselves “hawks” on the war rose 4 percentage points between December and February, while those who saw themselves as “doves” fell by the same percentage. The number of those expressing confidence in the government’s military policies in South Vietnam rose from 61 to 74 percent. Queried by Louis Harris on whether a bombing halt would hasten the chances for peace, 71 percent of respondents favored continuing the bombing, a rise of 8 points over the previous October, while the number of those favoring a halt fell from 26 to 18 percent.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, if Hammond’s interpretation of polling is a correct analysis of US domestic public opinion through the first part of 1968, the factual content of media reports, in most cases accompanied by editorial content opposing the war, evoked in a significant segment of the US public a desire for more—not less—aggressive and decisive action to finish the war on terms favorable to the United States. Hammond goes on to note the following:

If Americans were unwilling to repudiate the war, they nonetheless appeared increasingly dissatisfied with their President. Willing to back any decision he made, they saw little forward motion on his part. . . . The air of indecision that hung about his policies as a result took a toll on his standing in the polls, where disapproval of his handling of the war rose from 47 to 63 percent by the end of February. . . . If the gloomy reporting of the press had little effect on American public opinion, it nonetheless reinforced doubts already circulating within the Johnson Administration.<sup>33</sup>

Apparently, though the editorial tone of media coverage did not have an immediate significant effect on domestic US groups already divided in their opinions regarding the war, it did appear to have what proved to be a decisive effect on President Lyndon B. Johnson himself. Consequently, it is worth highlighting that the moral center of the plurality supporting continuation of the war (either at the same level of commitment or through escalation) appears to have held more or less firm somewhat beyond the Tet Offensive. But this moral center appears to have given way when President Johnson, the policy figure who had led the country in the war and was therefore the moral center of gravity in maintaining support for continuing the war, announced in one televised flourish that he would not run for the presidency, would order a halt to the strategic bombing of the north, and would spend the balance of his remaining time in office trying to negotiate an “honorable” peace. When the man who led the war gave it up, American war policy was apparently converted in the eyes of many from the terrible sword of war to the “light rapier” in the manner described by Clausewitz, resulting in a loss of faith and an irrevocable, permanent downturn in support for the war among elements that were formerly holding firm.

In search of additional empirical evidence to explain or account for the complex trends in public support for the war in Vietnam, the RAND Corporation sponsored two studies to examine the relationship of casualties to political policy under circumstances of armed conflict. These included examination of the possible impact of the news media. In the first study, published in 1994, RAND researcher Bernard Schwarz asserted that he had found evidence that seemed to support the presence of the kind of instinctive animus described by Clausewitz among the American public during the Vietnam War, implying that conventional wisdom concerning the nature of public opinion during that conflict has been habitually wrong. He concluded that the evidence regarding the nature of public support for the war had been consistently misinterpreted, and that until quite late in the conflict, setbacks in the war did not make the majority of American people responding to surveys more “dovish” and less supportive of the objectives and sacrifices of the war, only less supportive of the perceived lack of boldness in the policies govern-

ing the way the war was being waged. In addition to polling data, Schwarz used indirect evidence from a highly respected analysis published earlier in the *American Political Science Review*, which he summarized as follows:

Much anti-war sentiment, in fact, reflected disillusionment with the war and the concomitant desire not to withdraw troops but instead to escalate the war to get it over on terms favorable to the United States. This explains a curious and overlooked fact. In the 1968 New Hampshire primary, the dovish anti-war candidate Senator Eugene McCarthy polled a surprisingly high 42 percent of the vote against President Johnson, convincing the President that his popular support had so eroded that reelection was impossible. McCarthy's strong performance was widely interpreted at the time as pro-peace vote. . . . But among McCarthy voters, those who were dissatisfied with Johnson for not pursuing a harder line in Vietnam outnumbered those who wanted a withdrawal by a margin of 3 to 2. . . . [By November] a plurality [of those who had voted for McCarthy] . . . switched to the hardline candidate Governor George Wallace.<sup>34</sup>

Because Schwarz's atypical conclusions generated significant interest among public opinion researchers and policy leaders, RAND commissioned a second study, published in 1996, by Eric V. Larson to examine in much greater depth the relationship of casualties to political decisions during armed conflict. After a more exhaustive examination of contemporary polling data collected during the Vietnam War, Larson concluded that the existing empirical evidence could not substantiate Schwarz's conclusions that casualties and setbacks had increased public support for an *escalation* of the conflict—though Larson did assert that there was evidence of hardened support for gradual disengagement under circumstances favorable to the United States.<sup>35</sup> As a result, RAND formally withdrew the first report and substituted the Larson report as its officially authorized study on the subject. In a summary of his conclusions, Larson wrote:

At the extremes, some have argued that casualties and declining support have led to increasing demands for immediate withdrawal, while others (e.g., Schwarz, 1994) have argued that casualties and declining support have led to inexorable demands for escalation to victory. The data appear to contradict both extreme views, while being broadly consistent with other past RAND work and work by other scholars that demonstrates the importance of leadership and objective events and conditions in the level of the public's commitment to an ongoing military operation.<sup>36</sup>

One of the most important findings of this study is the central role of leadership—and divisions among leaders—in support for military operations and preferences regarding strategy and the level of commitment. Many public opinion analyses tend to ignore leadership or to treat it simplistically as presidential

manipulation of public opinion or a search to find justifications that will resonate with the public. . . . Substantial evidence supports the proposition that leadership consensus or dissensus is an essential element in the character of public support for US military interventions.<sup>37</sup>

As can be noted, Larson asserted that analysis of the existing empirical evidence pointed to two dominant factors evoking support as expressed in public opinion polling: the strength and character of political leadership, and the outcome of actual “objective” events resulting from political decisions—two of the prime factors also highlighted by Clausewitz as key elements shaping the character of a war.

Possible evidence illustrating the relationship of these two factors surfaces again even late in the Vietnam War, when overall trends in public disapproval of the war were virtually irreversible after years of conflict that had exhausted and demoralized the American public. Indications of policy stimulating the instinctive animus resident in the people noted by Clausewitz appear evident in the dramatic, albeit short-lived, positive shift in public support that occurred in apparent reaction to the Cambodian incursion of 1970, aimed at attacking Vietnamese regulars in cross-border sanctuaries. This brief but significant shift occurred even as general public support was ebbing and at the height of editorial opposition to the war in the media.<sup>38</sup> As Larson observed, “I find ample—and compelling—empirical support in the narrow issue area of US military operations for the importance of opinion leadership and much weaker evidence supporting the case for a bottom-up process.”<sup>39</sup> This “bottom-up process” might reasonably include editorial comments or a perceived slant in news reporting.

### ***What Really Influences Public Opinion?***

Obviously the technological means both to wage war and to communicate news about wars have dramatically changed since Clausewitz’s time. Close examination of modern practical experience, however, seems to validate that public support is better explained by Clausewitz’s theory as a mirrored response to the nature of war policy and actual events, rather than by modern hypotheses asserting either a calculated cost-benefit analysis on the part of the public focused on casualties, or the dominant effects of editorial tone or slant in news coverage. Nevertheless, in sounding the depth and strength of such instinctive animus toward an enemy, one very significant lesson from the Vietnam experience should be especially clear: this wellspring of animus in the people described by Clausewitz is not inexhaustible, and is only partly renewable as a conflict continues. This is suggested in the absence of a public opinion bounce in support for Nixon’s incursion into Laos in 1971,

also noted by Hammond, signaling the American people had reached a state of emotional culmination for supporting the war and would no longer respond to the stimulus of bold, aggressive policy in Vietnam.<sup>40</sup>

In summary, as intimated by Clausewitz, the most important factor in tapping and shaping the “blind hatred” for an enemy that underpins public support for a conflict is aggressive, decisive national policy as reflected in bold actions to achieve clear, specific political and military objectives. Conversely, the absence of such focused and bold policy appears to be the primary factor that dissipates the resolve and focus of the people’s “moral forces.” It is also useful to note that such aggressive policy increasing the commitment of a people’s moral forces to the cause would include policy measures to demand participation and sacrifice from citizens on the home front in building the “battle sword” of overwhelming force, as well as to fund and produce the robust logistical support systems that are required in the execution of grand national policy to achieve military objectives.

Therefore, assuming the validity of these observations and this interpretation of Clausewitz’s theory, one is led to conclude that the best “information operations” campaign aimed at engendering domestic psychological support as well as demoralizing and defeating adversaries is an aggressive policy reflected in bold battlefield operations and commensurate administrative supporting actions to achieve clear and specific political and military objectives.

This discussion is not intended to ignore or discount the influence of detractors in the media—especially in the global media age—who willfully misreport with the intent of undermining war policy and sowing doubt in the domestic populace. Intuitively one recognizes in such media reports a corrosive effect on national morale and public support for a war that is difficult to measure or counter. However, this analysis offers a theoretical perspective to suggest that between the two competing factors of press and policy, by far policy—as manifest by bold leadership and action—has the greater influence on public opinion. This conclusion suggests that modern communications technology has not made adversarial media more persuasive in dampening the primeval instinctive animus resident in human nature, but it has made such voices—which are now more numerous and louder—more potentially distracting for the public, policymakers, and those who execute policy through action. As Larson additionally observed,

Although the media may not have the impact on the substantive policy preferences of the public that some impute to it, technological and other advances could have a profound effect on democratic governance. Perhaps the most important effects would be a *perception* among policy makers that the electronic media are shortening their decision cycles and the increasing availability of “flash” polling that often reflects little more than ephemeral and transitory opinion.<sup>41</sup>

The collective national challenge is for wartime policymakers to understand that the nature of perception generated by the immediacy of the media is “ephemeral and transitory,” and that the most important long-term factor shaping public support is a focus on formulating and resourcing clear, bold policy that the military can translate into decisive action without getting distracted.

Moreover, when boldness, clarity of objectives, and effectiveness of policy are reflected in deeds in accordance with the implications of Clausewitz’s theory, the nature of the ruthlessly competitive modern media system ensures that the press will report that clarity and resolve to the public as the factual content of its news coverage. The news media remain the principal messengers of bold policy to the public, and they will report it purely as a consequence of relentless marketplace competition, irrespective of whatever baggage of bias some quarters of the media establishment may attach to it. As a consequence, assuming the correctness of the policy in its articulation and the boldness of its execution, domestic public support will take care of itself. To reflect on Clausewitz once more:

In short, at the highest level the art of war turns into policy—but a policy conducted by fighting battles rather than by sending diplomatic notes. . . . No major proposal required for war can be worked out in ignorance of political factors; and when people talk . . . about harmful political influence on the management of war, they are not really saying what they mean. Their quarrel should be with the policy itself, not with its influence. If the policy is right—that is, successful—any intentional effect it has on the conduct of the war can only be to the good. If it has the opposite effect, the policy itself is wrong.<sup>42</sup>

#### NOTES

1. For a sampling of various opinions both asserting and contesting media dominance on public opinion and policy, see the following: Anthony A. Adams, “A Study of Veteran Viewpoints on TV Coverage of the Vietnam War,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 54 (Summer 1977), 253; *Battle Lines: Report of the Twentieth Century Fund Task Force on the Military and the Media* (New York: Priority Press, 1985); Edwin Emery, “The Press in the Vietnam Quagmire,” *Journalism Quarterly*, 48 (Winter 1971), 619-20; Leslie H. Gelb, “The Essential Domino: American Politics and Vietnam,” *Foreign Affairs*, 50 (April 1972), 459-75; Martin F. Herz, *The Prestige Press and the Christmas Bombing, 1972* (Washington: Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1980); James Reston, “The End of the Tunnel,” *The New York Times*, 30 April 1975, p. 41; Michael J. Robinson, “The Media in Campaign ’84: Part II; Wingless, Toothless, and Hopeless,” *Public Opinion*, 8 (February/March 1985), 43-48; Harry B. Summers, “Western Media and Recent Wars,” *Military Review*, 46 (May 1986); Harry B. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1982); William C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York: Doubleday, 1976), pp. 31, 174-75; Caspar W. Weinberger, “A Free Press and National Security,” *Defense* 85, October 1985, pp. 2-7; *The War Powers Bill: Legislative Analysis No. 19.92nd Congress* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 17 April 1972), p. 29.

2. Peter Braestrup, *The Big Story* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1977).

3. Daniel C. Hallin, “The Media, the War in Vietnam, and Political Support: A Critique of the Thesis of an Oppositional Media,” *Journal of Politics*, 46 (February 1984), 19; for a more extensive treatment, see Daniel C. Hallin, *The “Uncensored War”* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986); Clarence R. Wyatt, “At the Cannon’s Mouth: The American Press and the Vietnam War,” *Journalism History*, 13 (Autumn-Winter 1986), 104-13; for a more in-depth treatment, see Clarence R. Wyatt, *Paper Soldiers: The American Press and the Vietnam War* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1995).

4. John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1973), p. 65.



5. Ibid., p. 167.
6. Ibid., pp. 53, 58.
7. Richard A. Brody, "International Crises: A Rallying Point for the President?" *Public Opinion*, December/January 1984, p. 41; for another example of this "rally round the flag" phenomenon, see also *The Gallup Report*, "Americans Sanction More Raids if Libyan Terrorism Continues," No. 247, April 1986, pp. 2-12.
8. Brody, p. 41.
9. Robert Worcester and Simon Jenkins, "Britain Rallies 'Round the Prime Minister," *Public Opinion*, 4 (June/July 1982), 54.
10. Ibid.
11. John Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 70.
12. Ibid.
13. Michael Duffy and Dan Goodgame, "Warrior for the Status Quo," *Time*, 24 August 1992, p. 41.
14. Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War*, pp. 129, 138.
15. *The Gallup Organization*, "Americans Pessimistic About Future in Iraq, Disapproval of Bush's Handling of War in Iraq at 56%," 11 January 2005.
16. PollingReport.com, *President Bush: Job Ratings*, <http://pollingreport.com>. It is worth noting that the pattern reflected in most polls regarding the conflict in Iraq indicates that fluctuations since mid-2004 appear to occur mainly among self-styled independents, with the remainder of public opinion having polarized roughly along party lines at roughly 40 percent in either support of or opposition to the war.
17. Brody, pp. 43, 60.
18. Ibid.
19. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 184-85.
20. Ibid., pp. 88, 184-85.
21. Ibid., pp. 184-85.
22. Ibid., p. 89.
23. Ibid., p. 76.
24. Ibid., p. 89.
25. Ibid., pp. 86-89, 137-38.
26. Ibid., pp. 606-07.
27. Ibid., p. 604.
28. Ibid., p. 606.
29. Ibid., p. 604.
30. Richard A. Brody, "The Media and Public Support for the President," in *Taken by Storm, The Media, Public Opinion, and U.S. Foreign Policy in the Gulf War*, ed. W. Lance Bennett and David L. Paletz (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 210.
31. Clausewitz, p. 234.
32. William M. Hammond, *The Military and the Media, 1968-1973* (Washington: Center of Military History, 1996), p. 121.
33. Ibid., pp. 121-22.
34. Benjamin C. Schwarz, *Casualties and Public Opinion, U.S. Military Intervention, Implications for U.S. Regional Deterrence Strategies* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, Arroyo Center, 1994), p. 15. Report subsequently formally withdrawn by RAND. Retention of the Schwarz quote in this article despite the report being withdrawn by RAND results from a personal interview with Mr. Schwarz on 4 March 2005. He indicated that although he agreed with and recommended the conclusions noted in the second RAND study with regard to his own initial analysis of the polling data, he nevertheless expressed continuing confidence in the conclusions reached by the researchers he had referenced in his original work as noted in these publications: Philip E. Converse et al., "Continuity and Change in American Politics: Parties and Issues in the 1968 Election," *American Political Science Review*, 63 (December 1969), 1101; Philip E. Converse and Howard Schuman, "'Silent Majorities' and the Vietnam War," *Scientific American*, 222 (June 1970).
35. Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations*, MRC-726-RC (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 25 April 1996), p. iv.
36. Ibid., p. xix.
37. Ibid., p. xx.
38. Brody, "International Crises: A Rallying Point for the President?" p. 43; Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*, p. 56.
39. Larson, p. 2.
40. Hammond, p. 439.
41. Larson, p. 6. Italics added.
42. Clausewitz, p. 608.