Prospecting for War: 9/11 and Selling the Iraq War

By:

Daniel Masters
Department of Public and International Affairs
University of North Carolina Wilmington
601 S. College Rd.
Wilmington, NC 28403
mastersd@uncw.edu

Robert M. Alexander
Department of History, Politics, and Justice
Ohio Northern University
Hill Memorial 202A
Ada, Ohio 45810
r-alexander@onu.edu

Word Count: 9,733

NOTE:

This article was originally published in *Contemporary Security* and is cited as follows: Masters, D., & Alexander, R. M. (2008). *Contemporary Security*, *29* (3), 434-452. Retrieved from http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/856309538-59327469/content~content=a906240658~db=all~tab=content~order=page%20–.

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Current literature on the foreign policy process focuses almost entirely on elite packaging of foreign policy prospects with little or no attention on why the general population may accept or reject those options. Thus, a more complete understanding of the foreign policy process requires knowing the conditions under which when people will accept the foreign policy sales pitch. We propose using prospect theory–a model of decision-making that suggests people are inclined to escalate risks to avoid or recover losses—in order to understand the way in which context and emotions shape perceptions and support of foreign policy options. Prospect theory helps to explain the significance of elite behaviors like threat inflation, which are designed to link discrete foreign policy actions to conditions related to intensely emotional events in order to advance a preferred policy. To illustrate the utility of prospect theory to the foreign policy process we turn to the Iraq War policy process, and why the Bush Administration found a receptive audience to its public sale of the war. This study concludes that perceived losses in the security condition of the United States caused by the 9/11 terrorist attacks provided a context, or reference point, used to frame the decision for war with Iraq. Moreover, the public sale of the war involved an effort by Senior Administration Officials to link Saddam Hussein to terrorism and 9/11 in order to cast a particular frame that was more likely to illicit risk-seeking behavior from the general population. This, combined with a collapse in elite opposition that could counter-frame the option for war, contributed to an alignment in public perceptions of terrorist threats and support for the proposition of an offensive war with Iraq as a prospect to escape the threat of terrorism.

Introduction

Military ventures are routinely portrayed in a macro-security framework that defines threats and establishes foreign policy priorities. The macro-security framework is used to build support among the general population for military action. In the recent past, the Cold War framework defined U.S. military undertakings throughout the world—including, the Middle East, Asia, and Eastern Europe. Today, the 'War on Terrorism' narrative appears to have replaced the Cold War narrative, defining military endeavors in Afghanistan[1], Iraq, and may yet serve to define a military mission in Iran. We are most interested in the run up to war with Iraq. Popular accounts suggest that the push for the Iraq War was couched as an extension of the war on terrorism more broadly and specifically linked to the events of 9/11.[2] We analyze why the general population was inclined to accept the war on terror narrative framing of the Iraq war. Specifically, we seek

to answer how and why 9/11 affected the public sale of the Iraq War. If we can fully appreciate the conditions under which the general population accepts elite framing of public policy choices, we can better grasp the dynamics of foreign policy decision making in open societies.

What we know to this point is that the campaign for the Iraq War involved a process of issue framing. Issue framing is best described as a manner where elites emphasize…"a subset of potentially relevant considerations when constructing their opinions".[3] Issue framing involves weaving exogenous circumstances into a separate problem in order to advance a preferred perspective regarding the issue. By linking 9/11 to Iraq, the prospect of a discrete offensive war takes on defensive characteristics as part of a larger war on terrorism. As the argument goes, through the Iraq War the United States would better secure itself from the growing threat of terrorism. Although this synopsis may explain the issue frame presented by the Bush administration, it fails to account for *why* the public was willing to accept the frame.

In order to understand why the general population accepted the 9/11-Iraq linkage as a frame for the war we turn to prospect theory. This model of decision making suggests people are inclined to accept risks they would otherwise reject when the perceived structure of options is a choice between competing losses. One explanation of the public's acceptance of the Iraq War is found by examining the impact of 9/11 on the security outlook of the general population. The attacks resulted in a lost sense of security among the general populace that was exploited by the Bush Administration to support an option (the Iraq War) that citizens would not have otherwise chosen. Linking 9/11 with Iraq inflated feelings of insecurity among the general population, especially in regard to the Iraqi threat. The inflated insecurity was fueled by the Bush administration's rhetoric, but made possible due to the way humans process decisions. In this context, the Iraq War becomes a choice between competing losses: One could accept the post-

9/11 conditions as they were (a sure loss of security caused by 9/11) or engage in an offensive war against Iraq (a gamble to improve security after 9/11). In short, 9/11 provided the necessary context that allowed the Iraq War to advance as a policy option. The policy frame exploited the way humans *process* choices, thus encouraging an option the public would not have otherwise likely have adopted—the option to support war in Iraq.

This study unfolds in three parts. First, we review the extant scholarship regarding the onset of the Iraq War noting that present studies analyze the way the war was framed to the public, not why the public was willing to accept the frame. Second, we propose a prospect theory model of decision-making in relation to the foreign policy-making process. Doing so enables us to focus more exclusively on the elite-mass dynamic involved in moving foreign policy options forward. Finally, we examine public opinion data on threat perception, support for the Iraq war, and popular beliefs about the likelihood of terrorist attacks if the United States failed to take action against Iraq in order to ascertain the degree to which context and emotion shaped popular support or the war. We believe prospect theory provides an accurate understanding of why Americans were so amenable to siding with the Bush administration's claims to invade Iraq. In a more general sense prospect theory proves useful for understanding elite mobilization behavior and the conditions under which the masses are most susceptible to framing effects. In other words, when elites successfully link unrelated foreign policy actions into a security framework based upon a tangible perception of losses (like insecurity caused by an attack), combined with a collapse in elite counter-framing (where public monologues supersede dialogues), it will likely result in broader acceptance of objectively risky foreign policy actions. The study indicates that conditions leading to the Iraq War were a "perfect storm" of events, but such conditions are not unique to the Iraq War case. For example, there is similarity in the Iraq case, with Russia's

response to terrorist bombings in Moscow (1999) used to justify military actions in Chechnya, among others

Background

Policy making is a process that generally involves an elite-to-masses *dynamic*. The final policy decisions are made within the confines of the elite governing circles (however defined by the polity). Before a decision can be taken, a process develops to advance a particular agenda item and a preferred policy formulation. We refer to this period as the public sale period. The public sale, requires a mobilization process, involving efforts to increase public support for policy decisions and implementation.[4] When analyzing mobilization we, as scholars, tend to focus our attention on elite behavior as it relates to agenda setting, and ignore the masses as an important ingredient. However, to fully appreciate how policy preferences are advanced and implemented, it would serve us well to devote some attention to mass behavior as it relates to agenda setting. Clearly, mass support is *relevant* to elevating preferred agenda items. To date, the vast majority of studies on decision making regarding the Iraq War focus on the Bush administration's mobilization of public opinion prior to the decision for the Iraq War, with academic treatments centered particularly on agenda-setting, patriotism, and the framing of the Iraqi regime as one that was tied to the larger war on terror. In each instance, attention is focused on the elite-to-masses input ignoring the masses-to-elites feedback.

For instance, Michael Mazaar argues that John Kingdon's model of agenda-setting, and groupthink are the most relevant aspects to the Iraq War policy process.[5] Many key actors in the Bush administration were advocates of removing Saddam Hussein from power prior to Bush's ascendancy to the presidency. Mazaar asserts that 9/11 provided the policy window to carry out

a long-awaited plan to depose Saddam Hussein. The terrorist attacks on 9/11 serve as focusing events to provide the catalyst for action that enables policy entrepreneurs to more feasibly sell their desired courses of action. Mazaar further notes that the problems of groupthink are especially potent during the very crises that stimulate policy windows. In regard to Iraq he argues that "when an option is worked out in advance and slipped into policy during a crisis, this case suggests, it will not be subject to sufficiently rigorous debate."[6] Much evidence suggests that the lack of debate found within the administration was echoed in the political arena as few elites challenged the move to invade Iraq.

In a more nuanced way Jon Western, and Ronald Krebs and Jennifer Lobasz, separately develop lines of thought on elite mobilization of public opinion by citing the executive-branches agenda setting advantage, executive cohesion, fragmentation in the opposition, and a convoluted presentation of the Iraq regime's past behavior as essential to the public sale of the Iraq War.[7] Specifically, Western asserts that public opinion is (in part) dependent on available information which is transmitted through by elites such as the President of the United States and senior administration officials.[8] The Bush administration selectively used intelligence to present particular versions of evidence to support the war policy, and was actively supported by neoconservative intellectuals, to dominate the policy discussion in their favor.[9] Meanwhile, Krebs and Lobasz indicate that any elite opposition from Democrats in Congress was silenced because the Bush administration seized the advantage on the rhetorical front to define war in Iraq as part of the war on terror, thereby silencing opposition as opponents realized their rhetorical counterbalance would not gain traction in the post-9/11 threat environment.[10]

Another stream of research focuses on the significance of patriotic feelings in the wake of 9/11. It is suggested that the dramatic increase in support President Bush received after 9/11

emboldened his administration's more hawkish stance toward Iraq. As noted above, a great deal of evidence suggests that members of the Bush administration had been concerned with regime change in Iraq for over a decade. Thus, the 9/11 attacks served as a focusing event providing the window to launch the long awaited offensive against Iraq. Prior to these attacks, Bush's approval rating was around 50%. After the attacks, his rating soared to nearly 90%. Marc Hetherington and Michael Nelson note that this increase nearly doubled the surge George H. W. Bush received prior to the Gulf War (1990-1991).[11] They further note that in the wake of 9/11, George W. Bush received the highest approval rating of any president in history and the degree of patriotic support he enjoyed seemed to last longer than any previous president.

When considering the significance of patriotism in the public's support for the Iraq War, Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner conclude that "while the rally-around-the-flag phenomenon likely played a role in support for the war in Iraq, the levels of support for this war were so high and so largely unconditional that spontaneous patriotism alone cannot account for it".[12] Consequently, they suggest that the administration's *rhetoric* was responsible for support of the Iraq War. Their content analysis of the president's speeches demonstrate that Bush was successful in his framing of a preemptive war against Iraq as intimately related to the war on terror.

In sum, scholarly treatment of the Iraq War policy process has been dominated by a one-way discussion on the elite dynamics. While helpful, these treatments fail to account for *why* the American citizenry ultimately supported the decision for war. Gershkoff and Kushner accurately identify that issue framing contributed to the public's acceptance of the Iraq War, but rhetorical analysis can only take us so far. Understanding *why* the rhetoric found support is critical a deeper understanding as to why certain policy options move ahead in the public agenda. It is in the gap

between rhetoric and public acceptance of that rhetoric that prospect theory is most informative and useful for understanding the decision-making process that led to the Iraq War.

Prospect Theory and Foreign Policy

Prospect theory is an inductive theory of decision making derived from experiments in the 1970s by psychologists and economists designed to assess the descriptive validity of the basic maxims of Subjective Expected-Utility Theory (also known as Rational Choice).[13] Experiments discovered that individuals display sensitivity to changes and particularly to losses. Such sensitivities were revealed by tendencies among individuals towards loss aversion. Loss aversion is important as it impacts decisions causing people to reverse preferences (based on context), and forgo value maximizing/loss minimizing behavior commonly predicted by rational choice theories. The behavioral anomalies were integrated into an alternative theory of risky choice, known as *prospect theory*. Prospect theory is an empirically based theory of decision making, and one that accounts for social context in the decision process without jettisoning the human agency component.

Since its introduction in 1979, prospect theory has been applied to a large number of fields including management sciences, investment behavior, American politics, and organizational theory.[14] In the field of international relations, prospect theory has been used to analyze foreign policy behavior of states, strategic interactions between states, and served as the basis for a unified theories of choice for state behavior replacing the classical relative versus absolute gains debates between Realists and Liberals.[15] It has been used to explain individual and group decisions, particularly decisions involving the acceptance or rejection of risky behaviors.[16] Most often this model of decision making is used to analyze elite decisions.[17] However, prospect

theory has demonstrated explanatory potential in group conditions[18] and we believe can help us accurately explain why the masses accepted the foreign policy frame and opted to support the Iraq War policy.

Generally speaking prospect theory is a model of decision-making where the decision process involves two steps. First is the editing phase, where options are identified and assigned weights as losses or gains. Second is the evaluation phase, where the prospect with the highest value is selected. The evaluation phase is deeply influenced by the way in which prospects are edited. People evaluate the desirability of options with an eye to a reference point (some condition deemed normal, a status quo, or long established goal). The reference point is important for decisions as it defines how people will interpret options and the change from the reference point those options represent. People generally assign value to change from the reference point as either gains or losses. Defining change in this way matters as people *overvalue losses* relative to gains of equal value. Because losses are overvalued, reactions to losses and gains differ. Individual behavior reflects a general predisposition to avoid losses meaning that people will engage in more risk, exert more effort, and persist over longer periods of time to avoid losses than to secure gains.

The tendency for loss aversion suggests that "people that do not make peace with losses are likely to accept gambles that would be unacceptable otherwise".[19] Consequently, one's reference point is critical as it determines how a decision or policy option is *framed*. The framing of options matters vis-à-vis the decision weights people attach to the outcomes. Decision weights are subjective probability assessments. Generally speaking, certain or impossible outcomes are weighted the heaviest. Outcomes that are *un*likely receive more weight than they should, while *likely* outcomes receive less weight than they deserve.[20] Taken together, framing and decision

weights suggest that when a choice is viewed as a certain loss versus gambling to avoid loss, people are inclined to gamble because it offers the *chance* to avoid loss. The certainty of a positive payoff is not necessary to affect one's decision.

A number of scholars have employed prospect theory as a means to make sense of foreign policy decision-making.[21] Of particular interest to this study is Jeffrey Berejikian's claim that "prospect theory contours the domestic political incentive structure that leaders confront".[22] Likewise, Miroslav Nincic finds that American presidents are rewarded more through public support and congressional compliance when military interventions are defined as protective in nature (loss avoidance) rather than promotive or offensive (gains seeking).[23] Thus, presidents are more inclined to frame foreign actions as protective over promotive, and try harder to sell protective actions.[24] Such behavioral tendencies imply some level of awareness that the public is apt to concede more for protective actions, and that political leaders respond to this environment in ways that will best advance their preferred policy options. In sum, foreign policy is likely to advance when it successfully taps into, reflects, or generates a perception that the foreign policy option best avoids or recovers loss.

Prospect theory is a behavioral model of choice derived from experiments on how people make choices under conditions of risk. As a theory it stands as one of many competing alternatives. Most often prospect theory is contrasted to rational choice theory, which asserts that individuals are strategic decision makers tending to maximize their benefits and minimizing costs. The rational choice model of decision making was never held as an accurate description of human decision making, rather it has been presented as a useful assumption for building predictive models. In addition to being a "useful" assumption, rational choice has served as a theory of human agency that provides guidelines for making strategic choices.[25] As for its

descriptive potential, Berejikian offers the following assessment: "prediction and understanding are not the same…a farmer in pre-Copernican times could do quite well in predicting the timing of the sunrise and sunset…The farmer's model is (in this sense) predictive, but incorrect…and would be useless for more complicated tasks."[26] This particular characterization is best evidenced by Stephen Borrelli and Brad Lockerbie's (2008) study on the Iraq War that notes public opinion displays rational aspects, while also implying emotional and symbolic aspects related to framing effects.[27]

Prospect theory is also cast as particularly complicated compared to other theories of social and human decision making. For instance, threat inflation is often used as a way to explain foreign policy outcomes, particularly the Iraq War. Threat inflation asserts that individual decisions can be manipulated by way of making claims that go beyond the realm of ambiguity, contain consistent patterns of worst case assertions (even if unlikely), evaluate evidence to favor worst case threat assessments, and based on circular logic.[28] Threat inflation clearly occurred during the public sale of the Ira war. However, threat inflation does not explicitly describe why the inflated threats would matter to an individual as the target of the rhetoric. Prospect theory is useful because it describes the nexus of environmental conditions that frame a decision and the internal mechanisms on how people react to the framed decision. Examining the Iraq war though the lens of prospect theory allows us to focus our attention away from elites and onto the masses as a collection of individuals motivated (largely) by loss aversion.

Framing Effects and Public Attitudes towards the Iraq War

Using prospect theory to evaluate public attitudes and support for the Iraq War is challenging for several reasons. First, to establish that framing effects matter we must ascertain the following: (i)

public opinion indicates a perception that the social condition is defined by losses from an established reference point (in other words a change in the perception regarding security that is significant and sustained since 9/11), and this condition is linked to Iraq; (ii) one option (no war) is perceived as a certain loss, which carries the greatest weight in the decision calculus, and (iii) the alternative (war) offers a perceived chance to escape the existing loss *regardless* of the risks involved.

It is worth noting that the behavioral tendencies predicted in prospect theory can be diminished, even negated, through counter-framing by elites that challenge any particular policy position.[29] James Druckman has suggested that framing effects are more likely to dominate over normal issue framing when heterogeneous discussion among elites is noticeably absent.[30] When a monologue prevails a single position dominates the discussion, which intensifies risk-seeking behavior.[31] Thus, in order for framing effects to matter in any public policy process, the nature of public discourse must be compromised in some way giving rise to a public monologue. Absent monologue-like conditions, scholars *cannot* possibly tease out potential framing effects, as the policy options that move forward are likely advanced through normal public debate. If, however, monologue conditions are present, the public discourse will likely contain elements of a polarizing discussion, thereby intensifying framing effects.

A second challenge to using prospect theory to evaluate foreign policy cases is the source and quality of evidence. To best determine the presence of a losses frame requires gathering information from the immediate context, which is notoriously difficult to do.[32] However, we can acquire objective evidence through public opinion polls, congressional indicators, public statements, and other publicly available data.[33] For purposes of this study, much of the data provided is derived from public opinion polls conducted by Hart-Teeter/NBC News/Wall Street

Journal, CBS News/New York Times, PSRA/Pew Poll, ABC News/Washington Post, PSRA/Newsweek, and CNN/Time Magazine from May 2002 to March 2003. All polling data is available through the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research.[34]

Introducing public opinion polling data does open some potential avenues of criticism, as does the application of prospect theory to a collective rather than an individual. First, studies on prospect theory often involve individual level experimental methods, or elite case studies. However, a number of experiments and case studies have demonstrated that the predictions of prospect theory are not exclusive to individual level scenarios. The literature suggests loss averse behavior is present in group situations, and that group conditions actually intensify framing effects.[35] whether this applies to the masses is up for debate, and worthy of study. We follow the conclusions of Druckman that when public debate involves a monologue (like the present case) framing effects are prevalent. When public debate involves a dialogue, framing effects *may not* be as prevalent.[36] Finally, the experimental design common to most studies involving prospect theory do control for internal validity best, while aggregated public opinion data does not possess the same assurances.[37] However, this study's application of public opinion polling data in order to evaluate the potential applicability of framing effects is not unique.[38] Moreover, the application of thousands of "aggregate poll results in the public domain are a woefully underutilized resource" for studying framing effects.[39] With these caveats in mind, we turn to the editing phase of the decision making process.

Editing the Iraq War Decision

Our analysis of public attitudes toward the Iraq War begins with the *reference point* and the *frame* used to evaluate the war/no-war options among citizens. The reference point for the Iraq

War is the public assessment of homeland security. The frame used to evaluate the war/no-war option is the change to homeland security following the 9/11 attacks. We make this claim based on the following evidence. First, from 1955 to 1998 there were 11 deaths related to foreign terrorist activity inside the U.S. accounting for only 2.2 percent of all domestic terrorism related deaths.[40] Terrorist threats on U.S. targets overseas were mounting during the 1990s with attacks by al-Qaeda in 1996 (Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia), 1998 (U.S. Embassies in Eastern Africa), and 2000 (U.S.S. Cole in Yemen). The increasing number of attacks indicates an emergent terrorist threat, but perception of that threat does not appear on the home front pre-9/11.

Second, the 9/11 terrorist attacks are a demarcation point where external threats crash through and alter public attitudes on homeland security resulting in a perception of losses and the emergence of a losses frame. Survey data gathered pre and post-9/11 by Roy Eidelson and Mary Plummer indicate an 18.25 percent increase in perceived vulnerability following the attacks suggesting a major short-term shift in perceptions of homeland security.[41] Similarly, Leona Huddy, Nadia Khatib and Theresa Capelos report that in late September 2001, seventy-eight percent of Americans believed a future terrorist attack was likely. Threat perceptions remained robust into early 2002 with 62 percent of poll respondents stating they believed another terrorist attack was likely.[42] Hence, the pre-9/11 security condition most likely is the reference point for individuals (the condition deemed normal, the status quo, or ideal state) and will serve as the anchor for the Iraq war decision.

The post-9/11 security condition represents a shift from the pre-9/11 security condition creating the perception of losses that shapes the way in which the war/no-war prospects are evaluated. The post-9/11 shift in the perception of security is in a negative direction illustrated by a lingering belief that more terrorist attacks were coming. Taken together, the public opinion

polling data (pre and post-9/11) suggest the presence of a losses frame among the general population based on the new security condition.

Feelings of insecurity stimulate a number of emotional responses among people that affect their evaluation of policy options and risk orientations. In general, individuals display belligerence in the face of terrorist attacks. Feelings of injustice increase as people react to their perceived status as a victim of mistreatment. It is common to observe an increase in distrust taking the form of presumed hostility and malicious intent by others combined with feelings of superiority over others. We observe a decline in helplessness as people come to believe they have an ability (or need) to influence or control events.[43] Such a complex of emotions are clearly present among the American population, and manifest in the form of support for militarized reaction to 9/11. Support for war against Afghanistan ranged from 65 to 90 percent, depending on the rate of anticipated casualties.[44]

Support for a war with Afghanistan is expected as it was the country most directly linked to the 9/11 attacks. The question we are confronted with is 'how belligerence targeted at Afghanistan can help to understand public support for extended military action against Iraq?' The answer to this question lies in the nexus where issue framing (mobilization of public support for a preferred foreign policy) taps into, reflects, or creates the perception that extended military action in Iraq would additionally alleviate perceived post-9/11 insecurity, resulting in a framing effect. Thus, the Iraq war/no-war frame is seen in the context of losses related to the post-9/11 homeland security environment.

The empirical evidence is clear that Bush administration officials conflated Iraq with terrorism generally, and 9/11 specifically, suggesting an intent to link general support for a militarized response to terrorism into a policy toward Iraq.[45] The pre-war rhetoric by Bush

administration officials display a high rate of connectivity between images and terminology of terrorism and Iraq.[46] For example, prior to September 2002, there are few efforts to link Iraq to terrorism. However, during the core public sale period for the Iraq War (August 2002 to March 2003), content analysis of speeches reveal that mentions of Iraq and terrorism moved in the same direction suggesting a concerted effort to link Iraq to the war on terror.[47] For instance, in October of 2002 (just prior to the congressional vote to authorize military action in Iraq), President Bush stated: "[Iraq] has trained al-Qaeda members in bomb-making and poisons and deadly gases."[48] The Bush administration also circulated claims that 9/11 hijacker Mohammad Atta met with Iraqi leaders in Prague as late as April 2001.[49] In his speech to the United Nations President Bush stated: "Iraq's government openly praised the attacks of September the 11. And al Qaeda terrorists escaped from Afghanistan are known to be in Iraq".[50] Similarly, the president stated that:

> On September 11 2001, America felt its vulnerability even to threats that gather on the other side of the Earth. We resolved then, and we are resolved today, to confront any threat from any source that could bring sudden terror and suffering to America…Confronting the threat posed by Iraq is crucial to winning the war on terror.[51]

In another speech, President Bush articulated the linkage between WMDs and Hussein's complicity to work with terrorists:

> …when they{threats} have fully materialized, it may be too late to protect ourselves and our friends and our allies. By then, the Iraqi dictator would have the means to terrorize and dominate the region. Each passing day could be the one on which the Iraqi regime gives anthrax or VX—nerve gas—or some day a nuclear weapon to a terrorist ally. We refuse to live in the future of fear.[52]

In the 2003 State of the Union address, President Bush asked citizens to "imagine those 19 hijackers with other weapons and other plans—this time armed by Saddam Hussein".[53]

Evidence from public opinion data, May 2002 through March 2003 (the beginning of the Iraq War), best illustrate the impact of the 9/11-Iraq link. Significant pluralities and majorities of Americans believed Iraq was linked to terrorism, with 45-66 percent of poll respondents stating they believed Saddam Hussein was involved in 9/11.[54] The evidence from public opinion polls suggests that in terms of public discourse, the Bush Administration successfully wove Iraq and terrorism together, creating a particular frame for the decision regarding the war/no-war options.

Evaluating the Iraq War Prospects

The next stage in applying prospect theory to the Iraq War policy process is to evaluate the public attitudes toward the options—war/no war. According to prospect theory, when a decision is viewed through a losses frame the option related to certain losses attracts the greatest weight, while less weight is attached to the risky option that provides an *unlikely* chance to escape losses altogether. What this means is that the emotional response to the certain loss is strongest and that people typically undervalue the riskiness of an alternative because the alternative may allow them to escape losses. Therefore, to determine the impact of framing effects on the war/no war option we must first determine which option held the heaviest weight. The certain option is related to the defined losses and thus provides us with a method for evaluating how the general public views the conditions compared to the reference point.

As illustrated above, perceptions on the post-9/11 security environment strongly deviated from the pre-9/11 condition. About 62 percent of Americans believed another terrorist attack was likely as late as February 2002.[55] Feelings of insecurity have not completely receded in public

opinion polls but they do show a decline from June to September of 2002 dropping to an average of 56 percent. While not definitive, the data suggest Americans were starting to adjust to the changed security environment.

In mid-September 2002 there is a spike in threat perception (72 percent) as it relates to terrorist attacks. Over the next few months (October 2002 to March 2003) when asked "Do you think it is likely there will be another terrorist attack in the United States within the next few months?"[56] respondents answer in the affirmative at an average of 64 percent, which is 9 percentage points higher than the pre-September 2002 period. Mobilization for the Iraq War begins in September 2002, and October marks a high point in this process when Congress was set to make a formal decision regarding the war. In this period, as mentioned above, we notice a marked increase in the number of times Iraq and Terrorism are mentioned in terms that connect the two items.[57] In sum, post-9/11 public opinion polls suggest a general perception of loss, and this perception of lost security persists over a period of time, but spiked (noticeably) in September of 2002 and remained at a higher average rate than the pre-mobilization period. It also suggests an enduring change in the security perspective of the general American population after 9/11. Moreover, the insecurity Americans feel over the potential for another terrorist attack are generalized beyond the war on terrorism to include Iraq and Saddam Hussein. When poll respondents were asked about the result of removing Saddam Hussein from power, a majority (51%) thought it would bring a decline in terrorist activity, or in the terrorist threat to the United States.[58]

The alternative to no war is war with Iraq as a way to escape losses. It is easy to point to conditions inside Iraq and suggest the current situation indicates that the choice was risky. However, to do so would be through the benefit of hindsight. There are two indicators that

suggest taking offensive military action in March 2003 was a risky option. These indicators include: 1) the al-Qaeda threat and 2) the likely increase in terrorist action rather than a reduction.

The al-Qaeda bases in Afghanistan proved to be the direct source of the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Yet, the general belief among the American population was that Saddam Hussein was also responsible. As the argument went, through the removal of Saddam Hussein, the ability of al-Qaeda to act and threaten U.S. interests in the world would be damaged. This logic works if a link between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda existed. The risk of war would be minimized because military action in Iraq would be part of the larger war on terrorism. Under these conditions the two-front war (in Afghanistan and Iraq) would be a single operation and less risky. Accordingly, if either operation fails while the other succeeds, then the terrorist threat would be mitigated.

Saddam Hussein is not tied to al-Qaeda, however, which makes a war with Iraq a risky option. The additional foray into Iraq requires diverting resources from the original front in the war on terror. Resources are split between two operations. Though Afghani operations, by this time, were being handed over to NATO, the U.S. cannot simply abandon one war for another war without repercussions. Taking on two different wars will multiply threats. Any failure, in either Iraq or Afghanistan, would result in safe havens for terrorist camps, planning, and operations. Therefore, by initiating a second war, the U.S. accepted greater risk and pressure to succeed on both fronts.

The second risk associated with the Iraq War decision is tied to its impact on the war on terrorism. Scholars have examined how regime change relates to terrorist activity. Generally speaking, stable political regimes experience lower levels of terrorist action. Stability, of course,

is the key. When there is instability in the infrastructure of the political system, terrorism increases. As political systems change, the institutionalized patterns in the cooptation and corporatist arrangements shift as access patterns are rearranged. In the transitional period the state is most susceptible to dissident movements generally, and terrorism specifically.[59]

In Iraq, the immediate goal was regime change to oust the existing leader and create a new political system. During the transition it is reasonable to expect that existing political institutions would cease to exist or function. New institutions will be created and new patterns of authority will be established. The expected outcome is a likely rise in anomic and non-associational political activity that could turn violent and evolve into various terrorist campaigns. Under these conditions, scholars find that new political institutions lack the capacity to absorb the demands of society or enforce its edicts to ensure order. As the authority of an old regime collapses, regions within the state are harder to control, creating a failed state condition that can allow domestic and foreign terrorist groups to operate.[60]

Taken together, it is clear that moving forward with regime change in Iraq would likely stimulate terrorist activity within the state rather than mitigate it. However, such discussion is noticeably absent in the pre-war rhetoric. This is important given Richard Eichenberg's finding that public opinion is typically quite solid when it comes to committing troops to causes where the citizenry feels they have been threatened.[61] There is far less support for military ventures when it comes to committing American soldiers to act as peacekeepers or working to engage in nation-building activities. Eichenberg states: "restraining adversaries is popular, but intervention in civil wars (or peacekeeping in their aftermath) is generally not".[62] This finding has broad implications in the selling of any war. One would expect advocates of war to emphasize the threat that exists and detail how that threat has existed over time. This is exactly what happened

in the months preceding the Iraq War. Opponents of military action would then benefit from stressing the post-war problems associated with establishing a new regime. Yet, this debate was noticeably absent prior to the Iraq War.

If to put the two options together (war/no-war) the decision is one that is presented as a decision between competing losses. On the one hand, the option *no-war* reflects accepting a certain loss on the part of the masses. This loss is defined by the increased vulnerability American's feel in the post-9/11 security environment. On the other hand, the option of *war* presents the masses a chance to take control of their security condition, and to address their post-9/11 feeling of vulnerability and insecurity. The option for war entails risks (mitigating the al-Qaeda threat and an increase in terrorist activity). The risks associated with war, though high, are undervalued relative to the lower probability that the Iraq War would restore security and reduce society's feelings of vulnerability.

The public opinion polling data on support for the war and terrorist threat perception move in the same direction, suggesting that the Iraq War was viewed through the frame of 9/11. Consider responses to the following questions:

> 1) "Do you approve or disapprove of the United States taking military action against Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein?" (as a measure of support for the risky option),
>
> and:
>
> 2) "Do you think it is there will be another terrorist attack in the United States within the next few months?" (as a measure of perceived losses or vulnerability post 9/11)

Figure 1 reveals threat perception moves independent of support for the Iraq War prior to September 2002. The dashed line in the figure below indicates public support for war with Iraq

from May 2002 to March 2003 (question 1 above). The solid line represents threat perception of poll respondents during the same period (question 2 above). The trend lines move independently until mid-September of 2002, the point at which the Bush Administration begins its mobilization effort for the Iraq War policy.

[Figure 1 about here]

During the summer of 2002, the public assessment on future terrorist attacks against the U.S. showed a decline from the immediate post-9/11 period (from 62 to 56 percent). In mid-September 2002 we observe an immediate spike (72 percent) in threat perception. From September 2002 to March of 2003 threat perception remains at an average of 64 percent. September is a key point as it marks the period when the public sale of the war moved into its most intense phase. This period saw the administration work to capture public support, obtain congressional approval, and establish a U.S. position on military intervention in Iraq for the United Nations Security Council.

Meanwhile, public support for the Iraq War (represented by the dashed line in Figure 1) displays a different trajectory. As early as November of 2001, public support for war with Iraq was as high as 74 percent.[63] Public attitudes on the prospect for war eroded to 30.3 percent in June of 2002 and rebounded, slightly, throughout July and August. Average support for the war in this period was 57 percent (see figure 1). In September, the same period in which terrorist threat perceptions increase, we observe an increase in public support for the Iraq War that peaked in February 2003. Average support for the war in this period was 64.3 percent, or 7 percentage points higher. Finally, public opinion in October of 2002 indicates that a substantial plurality of

respondents (47%) believed the war with Iraq would help in the broader war on terrorism.[64] In short, public opinion, during the public sale period, suggests that Americans believed another terrorist attack was coming, and came to believe Iraq was involved in 9/11 and was a legitimate front in the war on terror.

Political opposition was non-existent during the months preceding Iraq War and opinion leaders "did not . . . do much independently to contain threat inflation".[65] The silence in opposition allowed the perception of an Iraqi regime collaborating with terrorists to go unchallenged in the American public. This is especially noteworthy given the paucity of credible evidence to substantiate the administration's claims.

The collapse in elite competition over the policy frame is attributable to several factors. First, Thomas Christie suggests that there were high levels of congruence between the White House and mass media's agendas on the "central issues of the war—terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and the assembly of a coalition to prosecute the war".[66] Secondly, the Bush Administration made a tactical decision to divert congressional attention on Iraq policy. As early as September 2002, the Bush Administration removed Congress from the debate by claiming that congressional authorization was not needed to proceed with military action against Iraq. Drawing on the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, the administration argued that Congress had given tacit authority to the executive branch to move forward against Iraq for its violation of United Nations Security Council resolutions.[67] The Administration's salvo forced Congress into debating the constitutional authority of Presidential action absent Congressional authorization, *rather* than debating the appropriateness of a war against Iraq. Thus, the debate was not about going to war with Iraq, but whether the president needed congressional approval to do so. While Congress

debated the constitutional authority of action, the Bush Administration continued with its public sale absent any significant elite counter-framing.

The collapse of elite competition over the policy frame is significant because counter-framing disrupts the potential for acceptance. According to prospect theory, individuals tend to accept the formulation of prospects, rather than recasting the decision at-hand once it is presented to them.[68] In the face of heterogeneous elite discussion, acceptance tendencies are mitigated as multiple frames allow individuals to select among policy options. However, this condition was noticeably absent in the 9/11-Iraq case, and "the administration's frame was not countered by intense, sustained criticism by either the press or the Democratic Party."[69]

Bringing the discussion of prospect theory and the Iraq War together we note the following observations from the public record, including public opinion polling. First, the options of war/no-war with Iraq were viewed through a losses frame. That is to say, one option (no war) represents accepting sure losses present in the post-9/11 security environment. The other option (war) is the prospect that represents the chance to recover losses (regardless of how risky the option is). When a decision is viewed this way, prospect theory predicts people will likely select the risky option in order to recover losses. Second, the Iraq War and 9/11 are independent of each other, but through a concerted effort by Senior Bush Administration officials, and a noticeable collapse in public opposition, the two foreign policy issues are linked together into a single macro-security framework. Once the two items are linked, the Bush Administration is effective at probing public perceptions of threat in order to gin up support for the war. Public opinion data suggest threat perceptions and support for the war quit their separate trajectories in September 2002 and begin to move together at levels higher than before the public

sale period began. This finding suggests the general population accepted the elite framing of public policy choices via successfully framing the decision for war as a protective venture.

Conclusion

The policy making process involves an elite-to-masses dynamic. Before any policy is implemented governments must move through a mobilization process, which involves efforts to increase public support for preferred policies. When analyzing mobilization there is a tendency to focus on the elites and ignore the masses, subjecting ourselves to half-treatments on the policy process. To better understand this process it will serve us well to study mass behavior and agenda setting. This study is one attempt to analyze mass support for the foreign policy process leading to the current Iraq War (2003 to present). Much of the previous work on this topic has focused on the elite-to-masses input and ignored the masses-to-elites feedback.

In order to understand why the American public opted to support the Iraq War in 2003 we turn to prospect theory as a model of decision making. Prospect theory is a model of decision making that suggests people are inclined to accept risks they would otherwise reject when the perceived structure of options is a choice between competing losses. Prospect theory was developed through experiments on decision making at the individual level and has been tested numerous times, in cross-cultural conditions, and its predictions are fairly reliable. Applications of prospect theory outside the experimental setting are still new, and face many challenges. Challenges aside, it is our interest as scholars to apply such theories and see if they contribute to our knowledge of the world around us, require adaptations, or simply do not work in real world settings. Already, studies demonstrate that prospect theory shapes the policy incentive structure for elites; meaning that elites tend to have success in advancing certain policies when they define

them in terms of loss avoidance. To that end, we believe that prospect theory offers us some understanding of mass behavior in that the general population of a state is likely to support and help advance a policy option when that option is perceived as a chance to recover losses.

In our application of prospect theory to the public sale of the Iraq War in the United States (May 2002 to March 2003), we drew upon the public record, including public statements of Senior Bush Administration Officials, and public opinion data regarding threat perception (belief another terrorist attack was likely) and support for the Iraq War (do you approve of U.S. military action against Iraq). Our study finds that the options of war/no-war with Iraq were viewed through a losses frame. That is to say, the option of "no war" was akin to accepting a sure loss, which is defined as perceived vulnerability in the post-9/11 world. Meanwhile, the option of "war" is seen as the risky option that offers a chance to recover losses. The war option is risky because a war with Iraq diverts attention and resources from al-Qaeda (placing greater pressure on the U.S. to win both wars) and the military goal of regime change in Iraq is likely to increase terrorist activity, at least in the short-term. Prospect theory predicts that when people view a decision as a choice between competing losses they will likely select the risky option.

An underlying issue in this study relates to how 9/11 and Iraq become linked as foreign policy items. Objectively the Iraq War and 9/11 are independent of each other. A concerted effort by Senior Bush Administration officials and a noticeable collapse in elite opposition, allows the two foreign policy issues to come together into single macro-security framework. Once linked, the Bush Administration is effective at probing threat perceptions to mobilize support for the war. Public opinion data suggest threat perceptions and support for the war quit their separate trajectories in September 2002 and began to move together at levels higher than before the public sale period began. This finding suggests the general population accepted the

elite framing of public policy choices. We cannot determine if the American public would still have accepted the war absent the 9/11 security condition. Nonetheless, the concerted effort by administration officials to link terrorist threats to Iraq suggests an understanding that the best chance at moving the Iraq War policy option forward required the masses believe the policy was inextricably linked to the war on terror macro-security framework.

Implications of our analysis suggest that leaders find willing audiences among populations that have had real security losses. These losses cause individuals to process information under a different context—thus more willing to accept risky behaviors. Our analysis suggests that we need to not only look at those under lost security, but those who are the targets of the counterterrorist response. Certainly, those individuals also feel lost security and they, too, are more willing to engage in risky behavior, rather than diplomacy. Such an understanding, suggests that fighting a war on terror poses significant problems due to the way humans process information.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their comments on a previous draft. We also wish to acknowledge Aaron Karp for his guidance on this project.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS:

Daniel Masters is an Assistant Professor of Political Science in the Department of Public and International Affairs at the University of North Carolina Wilmington whose work has appeared in *Terrorism and Political Violence, Political Psychology,* and the *Journal of Political Science*.

Robert M. Alexander is an Associate Professor of Political Science at Ohio Northern University whose work has appeared in the *Journal of Politics* and the *American Review of Politics,* authored *Rolling the Dice with State Initiatives* (2001) and is the editor of *The Classics of Interest Group Behavior* (2005).

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Figure 1

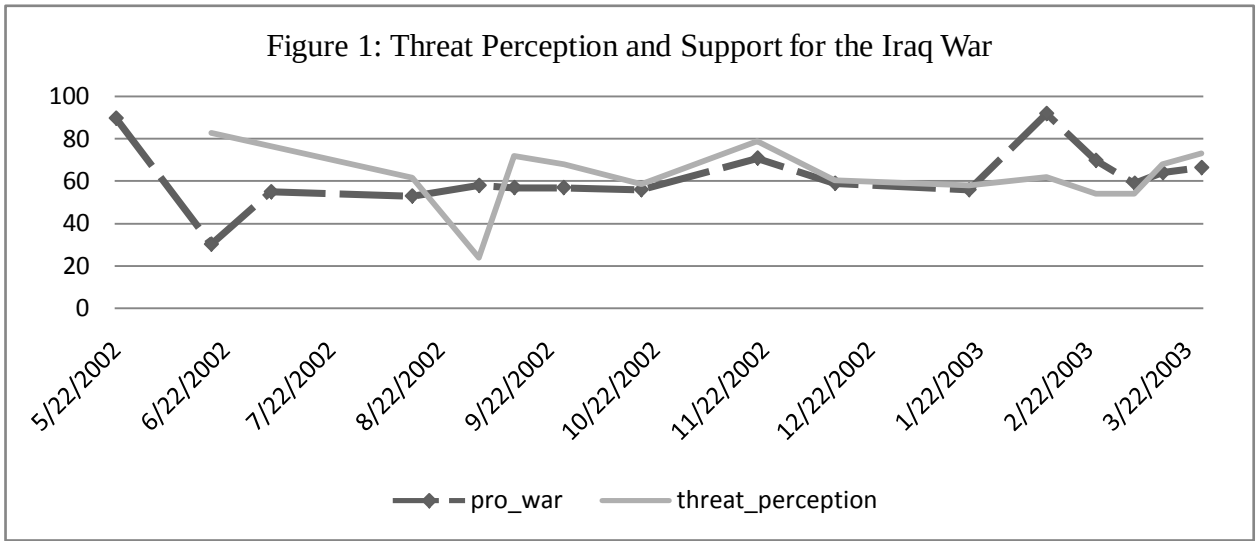
Figure 1: Threat Perception and Support for the Iraq War
100
80
60
40
20
0
5/22/2002
6/22/2002
7/22/2002
8/22/2002
9/22/2002
10/22/2002
11/22/2002
12/22/2002
1/22/2003
2/22/2003
3/22/2003
pro_war
threat_perception