Public Beliefs about the Role of Military Force

Sarah Maxey

Synthesizing public opinion data and existing scholarship, this essay traces four legacies in U.S. public opinion left by two decades of wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. First, short-term boosts in public support and deference to executive authority at the beginning of each war created a permissive environment for institutional changes not easily reversed. Second, growing public skepticism toward these wars did not undermine support for broader internationalist policies. Third, public support for humanitarian action remained resilient. Fourth, the wars increased the gap between public confidence in the military and in elected officials, creating challenges for democratic civil-military relations. Together, the legacies demonstrate that the challenge for American democracy moving forward is not public opinion in and of itself, but how elites strategically misuse or bypass public consent.

Wars change and clarify the relationship between the public and the use of military force. The U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq spanned two decades and encompassed a wide range of stated objectives, from counterterrorism to regime change to humanitarianism. The scope and political salience of these wars made their early stages the focus of scholarship highlighting the power of presidential rhetoric, public reactions to terrorist attacks and threats, and sensitivity to military and civilian casualties.[1] These early studies offer important insights into the short-term effects of each war, but a postmortem that assesses lasting changes is now possible. How, if at all, did two decades of war in Afghanistan and Iraq alter public beliefs about the role of military force?

In hindsight, the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq left four legacies in public opinion. First, public sentiments at the beginning of both wars created a permissive environment for using military force, increasing executive authority, and restricting civil liberties. Public support for these actions did not last, but it did not need to for institutional changes to have long-term consequences. Second, the public became weary of these specific wars but not of international engagement or the use of force in general. The public learned lessons about the limits of democracy promotion but maintained its willingness to support active foreign policy and evaluate the use of force on a case-by-case basis. Third, public support for humanitarian

https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED.a.947

action remained resilient. It did so despite concerns from human rights advocates that the Bush administration's humanitarian justifications for the Iraq War could undermine the effectiveness of these arguments in the future.[2] Fourth, the wars correspond with increased public confidence in the military and decreasing confidence in U.S. civilian institutions like the White House and Congress. Counterintuitively, this growing gap in confidence can embolden the executive and politicize the military, raising concerns about the civil-military relations that are central to a functioning democracy. Together, these four legacies demonstrate that the challenge for American democracy moving forward is not public opinion in and of itself, but how elites strategically misuse or bypass public consent.

The U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq highlight a key aspect of the relationship between public opinion, war, and American democracy: public attitudes do not have to change permanently to enable significant institutional shifts in the scope of executive authority. In the short-term, the public responded to the unprecedented 9/11 attacks with unprecedented support for executive authority and military action, reflecting the view that public opinion can be prudent and responsive to new information.[3] The White House, however, took advantage of this initial boost in public support to expand and entrench executive authority and used heightened public confidence in the military to shield the president from political punishment. As time passed, the public evaluated and questioned the justifications and execution of both wars, learning lessons about the utility of specific policies without losing its tolerance for international engagement in general. By the time the wars became unpopular, however, the White House had developed and strategically deployed tools to make military casualties less visible and minimize the importance of sustained public consent. Whether and how future administrations capitalize on these tools will continue to shape U.S. foreign policy for years to come.

The first legacy of U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is that high initial public support – even support that gradually declines – can entrench lasting institutional changes. Both wars began with support from a strong majority of the public. In the Afghanistan case, the level of support was unprecedented. When the United States launched its initial airstrikes in Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, 90 percent of the public approved of military action and 92 percent approved of George W. Bush's handling of the campaign against terrorism.[4] Public support for expanding operations in Afghanistan and the geographic scope of the campaign against terrorism was also high. Following the deployment of ground troops in mid-October, 88 percent of the public continued to approve of U.S. military action.[5] At the same time, 78 percent thought the United States should take military action against other countries believed to be harboring terrorists.[6]

Despite worldwide protests against the anticipated invasion and criticisms from leading scholars of international relations, 72 percent of the public also sup-

ported the war with Iraq when U.S. troops entered the country in March 2003.[7] The link between overwhelming public support for the "war on terror" and the launch of military operations in Iraq in 2003 is well established. In fact, public support for removing Saddam Hussein from power was higher in November 2001 than when the war began in 2003.[8] In the aftermath of 9/11, Bush labeled Iraq part of the "axis of evil" and consistently discussed the war on terror and Iraq's purported weapons of mass destruction in the same speeches, solidifying their connection in the public's mind.[9] Unified public support was also reflected in limited opposition from Congress, which passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Iraq with the support of 296 of 435 members in the House and 77 of 100 members in the Senate. Bush's political opponents – conventionally expected to question and complicate the process of military mobilization – faced rhetorical coercion from a war-on-terror narrative that insisted "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists."[10]

While both wars began with public support and were bolstered by the broader war-on-terror narrative, they diverged in how long that support lasted – a difference tied to the perceived legitimacy and credibility of the justifications for each intervention. Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan responded to a direct attack on U.S. soil and received broad support from the international community, which recognized the United States' self-defense claims as consistent with existing interpretations of the United Nations (UN) Charter. In contrast, Operation Iraqi Freedom followed a multiyear campaign designed to highlight the threat posed by Iraq's weapons of mass destruction – later shown not to exist. This campaign included a failed attempt to secure UN approval, was met with widespread global protests, and relied on a preemptive rationale that conflicted with conventional interpretations of international law.[11] Unsurprisingly given these differences, support for military operations in Iraq declined quickly while public approval of the war in Afghanistan was more durable. By 2005, 50 percent of people thought the United States made a mistake by sending troops to Iraq and a majority also believed the Bush administration deliberately misled the public about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction.[12] By contrast, perceptions that Afghanistan was a mistake remained a minority view throughout the conflict.[13]

In both cases, however, the public was ready to withdraw troops before the wars ended. By 2005, a majority of the public supported setting timetables for withdrawing from Iraq.[14] Growing opposition to the war bolstered the antiwar movement and led Barack Obama to run as the antiwar candidate in the 2008 presidential election.[15] When Obama announced combat troops would leave Iraq by the end of 2011, 75 percent of Americans supported his decision.[16] Similarly, in Afghanistan, although the public was skeptical of a rapid withdrawal,[17] 62 percent approved when Biden announced that all U.S. troops would be gone by September 2021.[18]

Overall, public support for the U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is a story of a dramatic spike in approval followed by a steady – and in the Iraq case, rapid – decline. While initial public support for each war was high, the pattern of its gradual decline over time aligns with existing scholarship on public attitudes toward military interventions. At the beginning of military interventions, factors like limited information, a lack of dissent in media coverage, and heightened national identity tend to boost public support and deference to the White House.[19] Early support is expected to dissipate as the costs of action become more salient and the White House loses its information advantage.[20]

Consistent with this conventional wisdom, public support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq declined over time as casualties increased. Military casualties represent the most tangible costs of war for a domestic audience, and their relationship to public opinion, while not always linear, is well established.[21] Mounting military casualties in Afghanistan and Iraq influenced public support and vote choice, especially in the 2006 midterm elections.[22] Casualties also influenced the political incentives of elected officials. For Republican members of Congress in districts facing high numbers of war deaths, local pressure encouraged some members to break with the party brand and criticize the war.[23] Despite public concern with military casualties, however, the U.S. public was not casualty phobic. Instead, the relationship between military casualties and public opinion depended on the public's belief that the war was legitimate and likely to be successful.[24]

Civilian casualties also shape public perceptions of military action, but their effect on support is conditional on whether the public believes the United States is doing everything it can to avoid harming innocent people.[25] In the Afghanistan case, the high stakes associated with defeating Al Qaeda and the Taliban, combined with a belief that the military was doing what it could to avoid targeting civilians, meant that public attitudes were not significantly affected by concern about civilian casualties.[26] In Iraq, high-profile human rights abuses such as Abu Ghraib and growing doubts about the legitimacy of the intervention made the public more sensitive to civilian deaths, but these casualties had a limited impact on the public's overall support.[27]

As we will see, the pattern of support for each intervention is mirrored in changes in the public's foreign policy priorities and confidence in the government. While overwhelming support and deference to executive authority was not permanent following the 9/11 attacks, it created a permissive environment for elites to implement institutional changes – primary among them the 2001 Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF), which facilitated the detainment of enemy combatants at Guantánamo Bay, wiretapping by the National Security Agency (NSA), and military action against the Islamic State in Syria as recently as 2017 – with grave and lasting consequences for American democracy. In short,

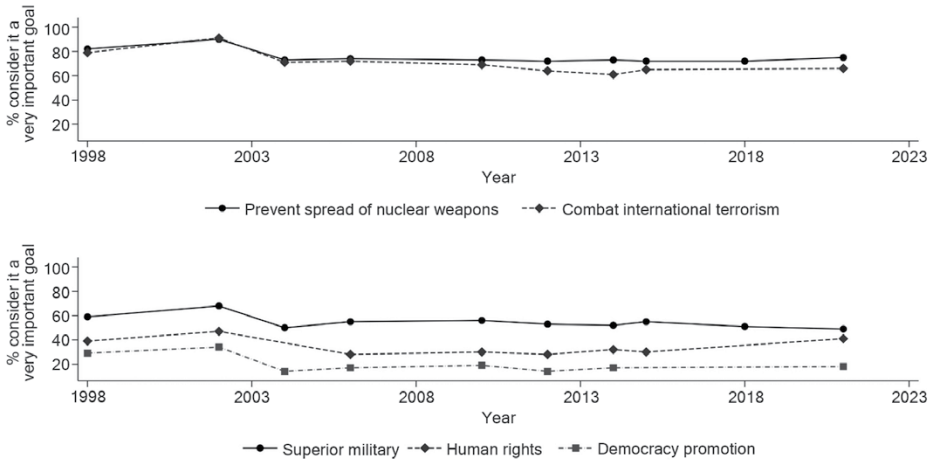
public support does not have to change permanently to enable significant and enduring institutional shifts in the scope of executive authority.

The second legacy of these wars is that while the public became weary of the specific conflicts, it did not lose its tolerance for internationalism. There is no clear evidence of an Afghanistan or Iraq "syndrome" that has made it more difficult for the United States to engage in other future conflicts.[28] Instead, mirroring the initial spike in public support for military action, the experience of the 9/11 attacks and the global terrorist threat that featured in the Bush administration's rhetoric also dramatically increased public attention to foreign policy and internationalist sentiment. Compared with 1998, the 2002 Chicago Council survey reported a 10 percentage point increase – from 61 to 71 percent – in people who thought it was "best for the future of our country if we take an active part in world affairs rather than stay out." This public support for internationalism matched the previous high recorded almost fifty years earlier in 1956.[29]

The spike in public internationalism extended across a wide range of foreign policy goals. Figure 1 illustrates the proportion of the public that viewed different objectives as "very important" goals of U.S. foreign policy in a given year. Unsurprisingly, as the top panel in Figure 1 shows, the 9/11 attacks and buildup to military action in Afghanistan and Iraq increased the perceived importance of the main justifications for each intervention – combatting international terrorism and preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction – though both issues had long been top public priorities. More surprising, consistent with the bottom panel of Figure 1, is evidence that the public initially assigned a greater priority to foreign policy writ large. Similar increases in importance appear in the public's view of both militant internationalist goals, such as maintaining a superior military, and cooperative internationalist goals like promoting human rights and helping to bring democratic governance to other nations. In fact, of the seventeen foreign policy goals included on both the 1998 and 2002 Chicago Council surveys, all but two increased in importance during this period.[30] Notably, because the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq overlapped for almost a decade, these trends cannot distinguish between the independent effects of each conflict.

As consistently as the public's foreign policy priorities rose in the aftermath of 9/11, they declined or returned to their previous baseline by 2004. Although rankings of nuclear proliferation and terrorism declined from their 2002 peaks of 90 and 91 percent, respectively, they remained very important foreign policy goals to a majority of the U.S. public through 2021. Maintaining military superiority is also a steady foreign policy priority for most Americans: while support dropped to 49 percent in 2021, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq did not substantially shift the public's view of military strength as an important component of U.S. foreign policy.

Figure 1
Foreign Policy Priorities



The figure shows the proportion of respondents who rated each item as a very important foreign policy goal in a given year. Not all items are included in all years of the survey. The figure uses lines to connect the data points for ease of interpretation, but these lines do not represent linear trends through years with no data available. Source: Data are from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs surveys. See https://globalaffairs.org/explore-research/lester-crown-center-us-foreign-policy/public-opinion-surveys/chicago-council.

Instead, the wars appear to put the final nail in the coffin of public tolerance for democracy promotion. Even prior to the failures in Afghanistan and Iraq, bringing democratic government to other nations was not a popular aim of U.S. foreign policy. Critics of the Clinton administration's interventions in Somalia, Haiti, and especially Bosnia blamed the White House for conducting "foreign policy as social work" and warned that Clinton was preoccupied with "the social, political, and economic conditions within borders."[31] By 1998, public support reflected these critiques, with only 29 percent of individuals ranking democracy promotion as a very important foreign policy goal. Democracy promotion received the same boost in support in 2002 as other policy aims – reaching a peak ranking of "very important" by 34 percent of survey respondents – but dropped to a new low of 14 percent the following year and remained in the teens through 2021.

Importantly, public attitudes toward democracy promotion – with its emphasis on institutions and nation-building – and regime change – focused on removing the offending foreign leader from power – are not identical. Polls investigating support for regime change are less common, but the data that are available suggest

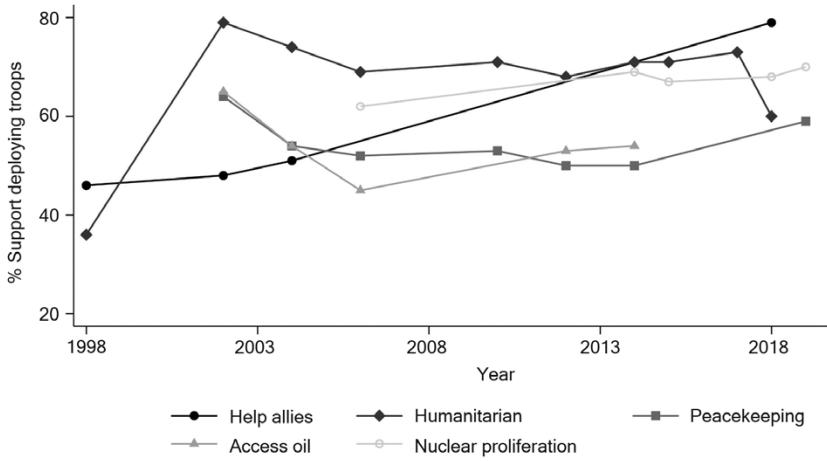
higher initial support and more tempered lessons learned. Regime change was a popular objective for U.S. military action in both Afghanistan and Iraq. In October 2001, 75 percent of respondents thought the goal of U.S. action in Afghanistan should also be to remove the Taliban regime from power, compared with 15 percent who thought the United States should "eliminate the bin Laden terrorist group only."[32] Similar levels of support for regime change also existed prior to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. Even following UN weapons inspections, 79 percent of people reported that Iraqi regime change was still necessary and almost 80 percent of supporters listed regime change as a major reason they approved of the war.[33]

In the aftermath of these wars, the record of public support for regime change is mixed. In 2005 and 2006, the German Marshall Fund probed support for sending military forces to remove authoritarian regimes with a hypothetical scenario that asked participants to "imagine an authoritarian regime in which there is no political or religious freedom." In these abstract scenarios, public tolerance for forceful regime change showed clear signs of decline: 39 percent of respondents in 2005 and 34 percent in 2006 supported the strategy.[34] Reactions to potential U.S. action in Syria since 2012 are consistent with these polls. Only 19 percent of the public thought the United States should launch airstrikes to try to oust the Syrian government.[35]

Reactions to U.S. participation in NATO operations in Libya in 2011 – an intervention that ultimately led to regime change and to the violent death of Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi – tell a different story. When NATO operations began in March 2011, 71 percent of people thought removing Gaddafi from power should be an important goal of U.S. foreign policy and 44 percent thought that the operation should be expanded beyond enforcing the no-fly zone to ensure Gaddafi's removal.[36] In offering support for regime change in Libya, the public also demonstrated an ability to distinguish between the details of different conflicts: 63 percent of registered voters viewed U.S. action in Libya as "completely different" from what was done in Iraq.[37] Taken as a whole, attitudes toward democracy promotion and regime change reveal that the public remains tolerant of using force to remove foreign leaders under some circumstances but has become skeptical of the ability of the United States to shape domestic institutions in the aftermath of military operations.

While most foreign policy priorities remained relatively stable, the next question becomes whether the wars changed the public's view of military action as a legitimate tool of foreign policy. The Chicago Council surveys gauge public support for the use of U.S. troops in response to a wide range of specific and general situations. To evaluate whether the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq changed the public's overall tolerance for the use of military force, Figure 2 maps support for deployments over time and across issues. Consistent with the dramatic ini-

Figure 2
Support for Deploying U.S. Troops Given Different Justifications

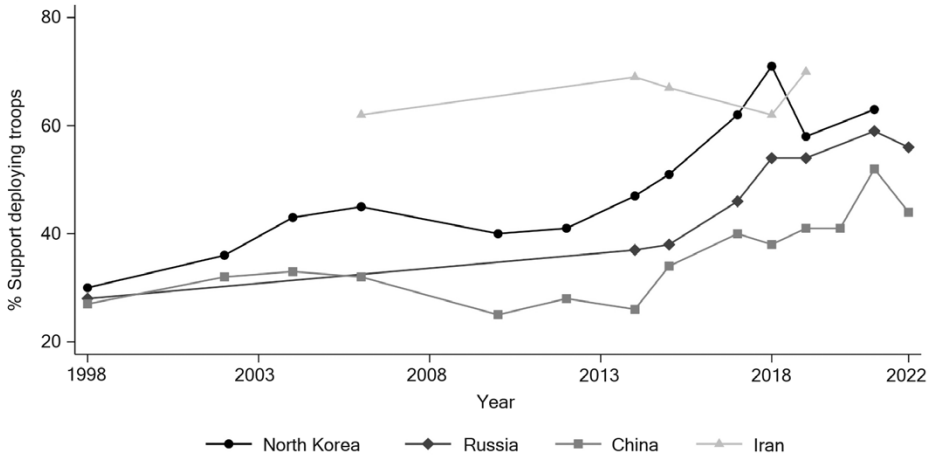


The figure reports the proportion of respondents who supported deploying U.S. troops in each scenario. Not all scenarios are included in all years. The figure uses lines to connect the data points for ease of interpretation, but these lines do not represent linear trends through years with no data available. Source: Data are from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs surveys. See https://globalaffairs.org/explore-research/lester-crown-center-us-foreign-policy/public-opinion-surveys/chicago-council.

tial increases in internationalism, there are modest signs that the early stages of both wars increased the public's willingness to deploy troops in response to foreign policy challenges. For example, compared with the low levels of support for sending troops if Serbian forces killed large numbers of ethnic Albanians in Kosovo in 1998, support for using military force to stop genocide peaked at 77 percent in 2002. Strong majorities of the U.S. public continued to support using force to respond to genocide and humanitarian crises through 2018. The year 2002 also marked the high point in public support for using troops to ensure the supply of oil and participate in peacekeeping operations. Overall, the U.S. public remained willing to deploy troops for a variety of purposes throughout both wars.

Figure 3 focuses on public support for deploying troops to specific countries. The trends in these public responses to more concrete threats suggest that public opinion both constrains the use of force and adapts to new information and changes in the international environment. Despite its inclusion in Bush's axis of evil, only 36 percent of the public in 2002 supported using force if North Korea

Figure 3
Support for Deploying U.S. Troops to Specific Countries



The figure reports the proportion of respondents who supported deploying U.S. troops in each scenario. Not all items are included in all years of the survey. The figure uses lines to connect the data points for ease of interpretation, but these lines do not represent linear trends through years with no data available. Source: Data are from the Chicago Council on Global Affairs surveys. See https://globalaffairs.org/explore-research/lester-crown-center-us-foreign-policy/public-opinion-surveys/chicago-council.

invaded South Korea. A majority of the public did not support military action against North Korea until after the 2014 Sony cyberattacks and nuclear threats that followed. The public also did not support deploying troops to stop Russia from invading U.S. allies or to prevent China from attacking Taiwan until more than fifteen years after the beginning of the war in Afghanistan. Instead, public support for both actions tracked changes in U.S. policy and events on the ground, from Russia's occupation of Crimea in 2014 to China's increasing militarization of the South China Sea. Iran is the notable exception, with more than 60 percent of the public supporting the use of force to halt its nuclear development since polling began in 2006.

Trends in foreign policy priorities and support for the use of military force throughout both wars are consistent with existing accounts of a pretty prudent public.[38] In the short term, people responded strongly to the first direct attack on U.S. soil since Pearl Harbor. The public's early reaction took the form of increased internationalism and support for a broad range of foreign policy goals. This ear-

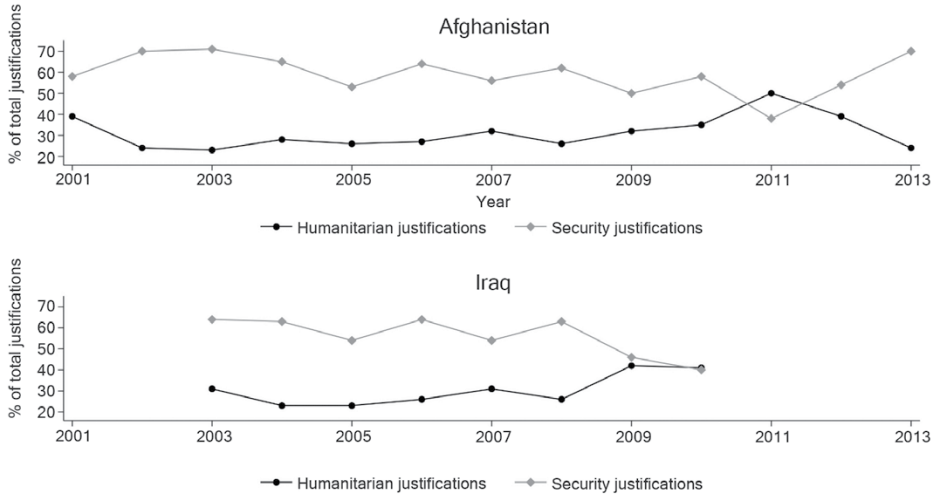
ly reaction was short-lived, however. As the goals of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq failed to materialize, the public scaled back support for specific policies – most notably democracy promotion – rather than calling for retrenchment. Public views of military force are also measured. Rather than becoming uniformly isolationist or hawkish, public assessments of military action responded to new information and varied depending on the specific scenario. While these data cannot pinpoint the exact cause of changing trends, they directly counter warnings that the public's war weariness would prevent the United States from maintaining an active and engaged foreign policy.

Consistent with its continued support for internationalism, the third legacy of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars is that the public maintained a persistent political will for humanitarian actions. In White House communications, Bush – and later Obama – justified military action in Afghanistan and Iraq by emphasizing threats to U.S. security. Intervention in Afghanistan was cast as necessary to bring the perpetrators of 9/11 to justice and prevent future terror attacks. Intervention in Iraq was initially framed in terms of Saddam Hussein's failure to comply with UN resolutions on weapons of mass destruction. When the Iraq intervention failed to uncover the weapons, the development of insurgencies made concerns about terrorism a self-fulfilling prophecy and alternative justification for action.

Security justifications are important but also only one part of the communication strategy used to mobilize public support for war. Presidents also offered a steady supply of humanitarian justifications for action, focusing on how the interventions would promote the welfare and well-being of people in Afghanistan and Iraq. As Figure 4 illustrates, humanitarian rhetoric was not limited to the early stages of these wars, nor did it appear only when other justifications lost traction. Instead, humanitarian claims played a persistent role in explaining the need for military action to the public. They accounted for between one-quarter and one-third of all official justifications across both conflicts.

While humanitarian claims were common across both interventions, Bush's reliance on humanitarian justifications for U.S. military action in Iraq – especially after weapons of mass destruction were not found – raised particular concern for human rights advocates.[39] Humanitarian claims have a unique effect on public attitudes in the United States. By appealing to individuals who are skeptical of military force but committed to human rights, humanitarian justifications help turn traditional doves into temporary hawks.[40] In the Iraq case, the administration's focus on Saddam Hussein's past record of human rights abuses and use of chemical weapons against his own people amplified the threat posed by Iraq and helps explain the awkward coalition of liberal and conservative elites who championed the war.[41]

Figure 4
Presidential Justifications for Military Action



The figure displays the percentage of total yearly justifications for military action in presidents' national addresses that focused on security (diamonds) or humanitarian (circles) goals. Source: Data from Sarah Maxey, "The Power of Humanitarian Narratives," *Political Research Quarterly* 73 (3) (2020): 680–695.

When Bush's primary security rationale for military action in Iraq proved false, the resonance of humanitarian appeals led human rights advocates to caution that their misuse could both facilitate preemptive military action and undermine future efforts to prevent mass atrocities. Gareth Evans, former foreign minister of Australia, outlined this logic, noting "to the extent that the invasion was based on Saddam Hussein's record of tyranny over his own people . . . we have seen almost choked at birth what many were hoping was an emerging new norm of justifying intervention on the basis of the principle of 'responsibility to protect.'"[42]

Instead, evidence from the last twenty years of opinion polls shows that public support for responding to humanitarian crises is relatively resilient. From 2002 until 2018, the Chicago Council on Global Affairs survey asked participants if they would support sending U.S. troops to "stop a government from committing genocide and killing large numbers of its own people." Across this sixteen-year period, more than 70 percent of respondents consistently supported using military force to stop genocide. In fact, support in 2002 was identical to support in 2018 at 77 percent. While the Bush administration's strategic use of humanitarian rhet-

oric in the Iraq case may have changed how elites approach humanitarian interventions, it did not undermine the public's political will for action in response to mass atrocities.

The public also demonstrated its continued willingness to support specific civilian-protection operations, most clearly evident in the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya. Polls at the time showed a public skeptical of getting involved in intrastate conflicts: prior to the intervention, support for creating a no-fly zone wavered between just under and just over 50 percent of respondents.[43] After Obama announced and justified U.S. participation in terms of civilian protection, however, support increased to a strong majority of the public.[44]

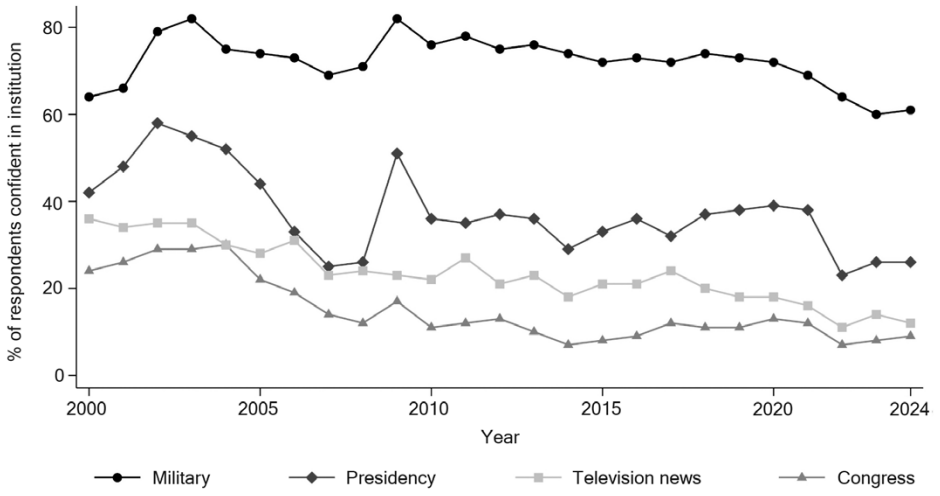
Reflecting the lessons learned about democracy promotion, this support was short-lived. By the end of March 2011, public opinion polls reported that 60 percent of people thought U.S. military involvement would "last for some time," 75 percent thought a long-term commitment of U.S. forces was at least somewhat likely, and 50 percent worried that the United States and its allies did not have a clear goal of taking military action.[45] In short, public support for well-defined civilian-protection objectives remained possible. Consent for achieving humanitarian goals via long-term strategies of democracy promotion did not.

The fourth legacy of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is a shift in the public's relationship with government institutions. The early stages of international crises and military action are the peak of public deference to executive authority. As a result, individuals are most likely to turn toward the executive to interpret the nature of the threat and the range of appropriate responses just when presidential narratives are least likely to be challenged by the media or political opponents.

The beginning of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were no exception to this trend. As the Gallup data illustrated in Figure 5 show, confidence in the presidency rose from 42 percent in 2000 to 58 percent in 2002 and did not drop below 50 percent again until 2005. Heightened public confidence in the White House is consistent with Bush's approval rating, which jumped from 51 percent on September 10, 2001, to 90 percent by September 22.[46] By comparison, the changes in public confidence in other civilian institutions, like Congress, were more muted.[47] Between 2001 and 2002, public confidence in Congress did increase, but only by 3 percentage points. The public's confidence in Congress peaked at 30 percent in 2004 before beginning a steady decline to a low of 7 percent in 2014. Nonpolitical institutions like television news followed a similar trend, steadily holding the confidence of about one-third of the public through 2004 before beginning to decline.

In line with theories of deference to executive authority during international crises, the public had more trust in the federal government's ability to handle international problems than domestic problems. In October 2001, 36 percent of

Figure 5
Confidence in Institutions



The figure displays the percentage of respondents who had a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the relevant institution. Data from Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," 2024, https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/Confidence-Institutions.aspx (accessed October 15, 2024).

people held a "great deal" of confidence in the government's ability to handle international problems, compared with 24 percent who trusted the government's ability to handle domestic problems.[48] Casting domestic actions as necessary to protect the country from external, global terrorist threats thus offered the White House a helpful frame for increasing public support.

In the short term, increased trust corresponded with a rise in the public's acceptance of limits on their civil liberties and actions. Trend data collected by the Roper Center capture the percentage of people from 1995 to 2011 who thought it would "be necessary for the average person to give up some civil liberties" to curb terrorism in the United States.[49] From 1995 to 1997, an average of 34 percent of the public expected to give up civil liberties to curb terrorism. When the question was asked again from September 13–20, 2001, 60 percent of respondents, on average, considered the trade-off necessary – an increase of 26 percentage points. However, the public's tolerance for curtailing civil liberties did not last long. By 2002, the average percentage of "necessary" responses had dropped to 52 percent, declining further to 44 percent by 2003, and reaching a new low of 27 percent in 2009.

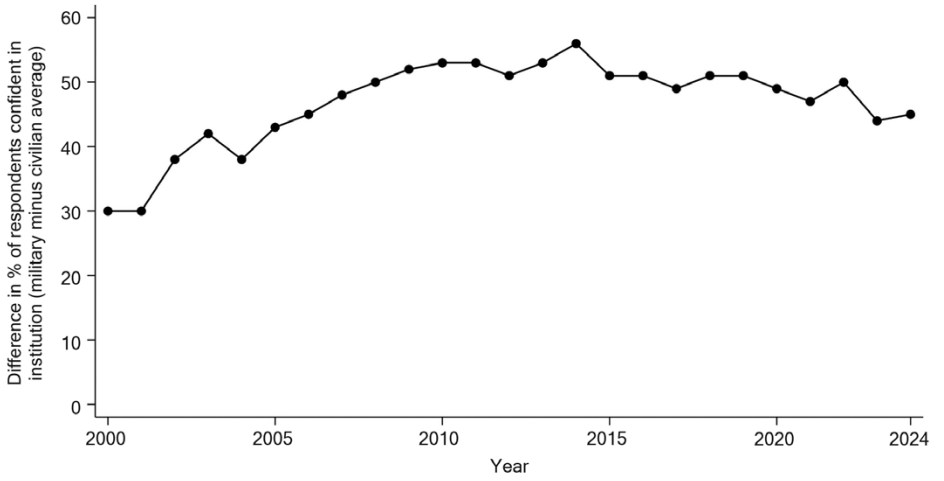
Beyond the White House, public confidence in the military also rose dramatically at the beginning of the war on terror. In 2000, 64 percent of the public was confident in the military; by 2002, the number had climbed to 79 percent, reaching a high of 82 percent by 2003. Unlike trust in the president, public confidence in the military remained high through the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021.[50]

Because public confidence in the White House and Congress declined while confidence in the military remained high and relatively stable, the fourth legacy of these wars is the widening gap in trust between civilian and military institutions. Figure 6 illustrates this gap, plotting the difference in public confidence in the military and average confidence in the presidency and Congress for each year from 2000 to 2024. In 2000, the gap was 30 percentage points; by 2008, it exceeded 50 points, peaking at 56 percentage points in 2014. From 2014 to 2024, the gap declined gradually to 45 percentage points. Despite this decline in overall confidence in the military, the gap between military and civilian institutions remains above the pre–war on terror levels.

For the civil-military relations that are central to a functioning democracy, the implications of this gap are grave and wide-ranging. Because the public holds the military in particularly high esteem, it is deferential to cues from individuals with military backgrounds and responsive to military imagery.[51] Public deference to the military is conventionally interpreted as a signal that the balance of civil-military relations has tipped toward unelected, unaccountable military officials. What such accounts overlook, however, is the reality that civilian leaders, cognizant of the military's popularity, may strategically invoke military advice to serve their own political aims. When taking risky action – like initiating or escalating a military conflict – civilian leaders have an incentive to frame their decisions with references to advice from military officials.

Political scientist Michael Kenwick and I uncovered these incentives and showed that references to military elites were common in presidential speeches about intervention during both wars. Moreover, the White House was more likely to invoke military advisers in speeches with negative tones, like those that anticipated casualties or political risks. This rhetorical strategy appeared most clearly in the middle and late stages of the conflicts, as public support diminished and the costs of action became apparent. In the Iraq case, especially, Bush's references to the military increased with the troop surge and the number of U.S. soldiers killed.[52] For example, in a radio address discussing increased sectarian violence, Bush referenced military officials to assure the public that the United States was still on the path to victory, noting: "Our commanders on the ground are constantly adjusting their approach to stay ahead of the enemy, particularly in Baghdad. General Pete Pace, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, recently put it this way: 'From a military standpoint, every day is a reassessment day.'"[53] Later in the

Figure 6
Confidence Gap Between Military and Civilian Institutions



The figure displays the difference in the percentage of people who had a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the U.S. military and in civilian institutions. The measure of confidence in civilian institutions is calculated as the average of confidence in the presidency and Congress. Data from Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," 2024, https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/Confidence-Institutions.aspx (accessed October 15, 2024).

speech, Bush drew on the words of another U.S. general when acknowledging the risk and reality of military casualties:

> We mourn every loss, and we must gird ourselves for the sacrifices that are yet to come. America's men and women in uniform are the finest in the world. I'm awed by their strength and their character. As General Casey reported yesterday in Iraq, "The men and women of the Armed Forces have never lost a battle in over 3 years in the war."

Beyond mitigating concerns about success and casualties, Bush also highlighted military officials in his responses to domestic opposition. Following the 2006 midterm elections, when Democrats used their new majority in the House to reduce emergency funding for the Department of Defense and for international affairs, Bush contrasted the judgment of Congress against that of military commanders:

> When Americans went to the polls last November, they did not vote for politicians to substitute their judgment for the judgment of our commanders on the ground. . . . The

> American people voted for change in Iraq, and that is exactly what our new commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, is working to achieve. And they expect their elected leaders to support our men and women on the frontlines, so they have every resource they need to complete their mission.[54]

Such statements were not unique to the Bush administration. Obama relied on similar tactics when he led the 2009 troop surge in Afghanistan, assuring the public that decisions related to troop levels were based on the best military advice:

> To meet urgent security needs, I approved a request from Secretary Gates to deploy a Marine expeditionary brigade later this spring and an Army Stryker brigade and the enabling forces necessary to support them later this summer. This increase has been requested by General McKiernan and supported by Secretary Gates, the Joint Chiefs, and the Commander of Central Command. General McKiernan's request for these troops is months old, and the fact that we are going to responsibly draw down our forces in Iraq allows us the flexibility to increase our presence in Afghanistan.[55]

Across administrations, these public references to military advice can increase support for the operation but carry the risk of politicizing the armed forces. Military advice can also reduce the blame individuals place on civilian leaders when operations fail, though political scientist Peter Feaver suggests that in the context of operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, the public held civilian rather than military leaders accountable for outcomes.[56]

The U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq changed both the public's relationship with the government and the balance of the relationship between civilian and military institutions. In the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, heightened public confidence in the government created a permissive environment for restrictions on domestic civil liberties to guard against international threats. These changes facilitated the implementation of legislation like the PATRIOT Act, the legacy and implications of which have lasted far longer than the boost in public support. While public confidence in the White House and Congress eventually returned to or dropped below prewar levels, trust in the military remained high through the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. By increasing the gap in public esteem for civilian leaders and the military, these wars laid the foundation for the growing politicization of military actors, which can threaten democratic norms of civilian control.[57]

The U.S. wars in Afghanistan and Iraq left four legacies in public opinion. First, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, public support for both wars was high. Although this support faded, it was strong enough to facilitate institutional changes with long-term effects on American democracy. Second, while the public grew weary of both wars, it did not overgeneralize the lessons learned.

Over time, the public withdrew its support for democracy promotion rather than lobby for retrenchment more broadly. Third, the public remained capable of separating responses to mass atrocities from Bush's strategic use of humanitarian rhetoric in Iraq.

These first three legacies describe a public that – absent direct attacks on U.S. soil – remains capable of holding democratically elected leaders accountable for their foreign policy decisions. The public itself is not the problem. Instead, as the fourth legacy highlights, the challenges to American democracy appear at the intersection of public reactions to direct attacks and strategic leaders who manipulate public consent to magnify their own power. In the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, this challenge is especially visible in the context of civil-military relations. Decades of war and evidence of elite deception in Iraq amplified the gap between public confidence in the U.S. military and civilian institutions. Capitalizing on public esteem for the military, the Bush administration referenced military advice to justify implementing high-risk policies, deflecting blame and empowering the executive branch. Similarly, as the public's tolerance for forever wars declined, the Obama administration increased its reliance on armed drones to avoid the risk of military casualties and carry out counterterrorism operations below the public's radar. Following decades of war, the U.S. public remains capable of forming prudent attitudes about foreign policy and the role the United States plays in the world. The relevance of public attitudes, however, is conditional on leaders' ability to obscure the nature of their actions and avoid accountability.

In the years since the end of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, challenges to the public's ability to hold elected leaders accountable have only increased. The Trump administration's efforts to expand executive power and overhaul long-standing foreign policy institutions exemplify the challenges and their stakes. On the one hand, public attitudes push against dramatic changes to the United States' role in the world. As of 2024, majorities of both parties viewed maintaining alliances as important and believed the United States should continue to take an active role in world affairs.[58] Additionally, more Americans disapprove than approve of the United States leaving the Paris Climate Agreement, ending U.S. Agency for International Development programs, and leaving the World Health Organization.[59] On the other hand, the Trump administration's ability to take such actions with limited institutional backlash highlights how even short-term permissiveness – facilitated now by the 2024 election, a unified Republican government, and the conservative-majority Supreme Court, rather than external attacks – emboldens the executive branch and can dramatically change the trajectory of foreign policy. Compared with the early 2000s, political polarization has narrowed the opportunities for public accountability, incentivizing politicians to appeal to their base rather than building broad coalitions. In this context, opposition, even from a majority of the public, carries few political costs if it does not include members of the

president's own party. During two decades of war, the U.S. public reiterated its ability to respond reasonably to new information, and growing public opposition to the prolonged wars eventually contributed to policy change. Whether the democratic institutions capable of constraining executive power and channeling public dissent into political consequences still exist today is an open question.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Maxey is Associate Professor of International Relations in the Department of Political Science at Loyola University Chicago. She has recently published in such journals as *Journal of Politics*, *International Studies Quarterly*, and *Journal of Conflict Resolution*. Her book *Doves into Hawks: Talking about Saving Strangers to Build Public Support for War* (forthcoming 2026) investigates how humanitarian rhetoric mobilizes public support for security crises, with unexpected consequences for democracy.

ENDNOTES

[1] Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling, "Reality Asserts Itself," *International Organization* 64 (2010): 443–479; Shana Kushner Gadarian, "The Politics of Threat," *Journal of Politics* 72 (2) (2010): 469–483; Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War* (Princeton University Press, 2009); Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner, "Shaping Public Opinion," *Perspectives on Politics* 3 (3) (2005); Ronald R. Krebs and Jennifer K. Lobasz, "Fixing the Meaning of 9/11," *Security Studies* 16 (3) (2007): 409–451; Douglas Kriner and Francis Shen, "Responding to War on Capitol Hill," *American Journal of Political Science* 58 (1) (2014): 157–174; Eric V. Larson and Bogdan Savych, *Misfortunes of War: Press and Public Reactions to Civilian Deaths in Wartime* (RAND Corporation, 2005); and John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (Wiley, 1973).

[2] Alex J. Bellamy, "Ethics and Intervention," *Journal of Peace Research* 41 (2) (2004): 131–147; and Alex J. Bellamy, "Responsibility to Protect or Trojan Horse?" *Ethics & International Affairs* 19 (2) (2005): 31–53.

[3] Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War*; Bruce Jentleson and Rebecca L. Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42 (4) (1998): 395–417; and Robert Shapiro and Benjamin Page, "Foreign Policy and the Rational Public," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 32 (2) (1988): 211–247.

[4] Gallup, "Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll: U.S. Military Strike on Afghanistan [Roper #31088469]," survey date October 7, 2001 (Roper Center for Public Opinion, Cornell University, 2001), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31088469.

[5] Princeton Survey Research Associates, "Anthrax, Terrorism [Roper #31096745]," survey date October 18–19, 2001 (Roper Center for Public Opinion, Cornell University, 2001), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31096745.

[6] Gallup, "Gallup/CNN/USA Today Poll: U.S. Military Strike on Afghanistan."

[7] David Cortright, *A Peaceful Superpower* (New Village Press, 2023); Brian Schmidt and Michael Wiliams, "The Bush Doctrine and the Iraq War," *Security Studies* 17 (2) (2008): 191–220; and Gallup, "Iraq: Gallup Historical Trends," 2024, http://www.gallup.com/poll/1633/Iraq.aspx (accessed December 16, 2024).

[8] Seventy-four percent in 2001 compared with 64 percent in late March 2003. There are multiple possible explanations for the higher support in 2001, including that public support for aggressive foreign policies peaked during this period–a trend detailed in the following section–that many individuals initially thought Hussein might be behind the 9/11 attacks, and that the public did not yet associate regime change with a large-scale military intervention.

[9] Gershkoff and Kushner, "Shaping Public Opinion."

[10] George W. Bush, "Address to the Joint Session of the 107th Congress, United States Capitol, Washington, D.C., September 20, 2001," in *Selected Speeches of President George W. Bush, 2001–2008* (The White House, n.d.), 117, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/infocus/bushrecord/documents/Selected_Speeches_George_W_Bush.pdf; and Krebs and Lobasz, "Fixing the Meaning of 9/11."

[11] Matthew Evangelista, *Law, Ethics, and the War on Terror* (Polity Press, 2008), 121.

[12] Gallup, "Iraq: Gallup Historical Trends."

[13] Megan Brenan, "Americans Split on Whether Afghanistan War Was a Mistake," Gallup, July 26, 2021, https://news.gallup.com/poll/352793/americans-split-whether-afghanistan-war-mistake.aspx.

[14] Gallup, "Iraq: Gallup Historical Trends."

[15] Michael T. Heaney and Fabio Rojas, "The Partisan Dynamics of Contention," *Mobilization* 16 (1) (2011): 45–64.

[16] Gallup, "Iraq: Gallup Historical Trends."

[17] Hart Research Associates and Public Opinion Strategies, "NBC News/Wall Street Journal Poll [Roper #31116129]," Question 33, survey date February 24–27, 2019 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2019), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31116129.

[18] Quinnipiac University Polling Institute, "Quinnipiac University Poll [Roper #31118441]," Question 28, survey date May 18–24, 2021 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 2021), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31118441.

[19] Matthew Baum, "The Constituent Foundations of the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon," *International Studies Quarterly* 46 (2) (2002): 263–298; and Richard Brody, *Assessing the President* (Stanford University Press, 1991).

[20] Baum and Groeling, "Reality Asserts Itself: Public Opinion on Iraq and the Elasticity of Reality."

[21] Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion*; and Scott Sigmund Gartner and Gary M. Segura, "War, Casualties, and Public Opinion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42 (3) (1998): 278–300.

[22] Douglas Kriner and Francis Shen, "Iraq Casualties and the 2006 Senate Elections," *Legislative Studies Quarterly* 32 (4) (2007): 507–530; and John Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome," *Foreign Affairs* 84 (6) (2005): 44–54.

[23] Kriner and Shen, "Responding to War on Capitol Hill," 159.

[24] Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, *Paying the Human Costs of War*.

[25] Larson and Savych, "Misfortunes of War"; and James Igoe Walsh, "Precision Weapons, Civilian Casualties, and Support for the Use of Force," *Political Psychology* 36 (5) (2015): 507–523.

[26] Larson and Savych, "Misfortunes of War," 157.

[27] Ibid., 161.

[28] Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome."

[29] Marshall M. Bouton and Benjamin Page, "American Public Opinion and Foreign Policy" (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2002), 13.

[30] The two exceptions were "stopping the flow of illegal drugs into the U.S.," which remained stable at 81 percent, and "combating world hunger," which decreased by one point from 62 to 61 percent.

[31] Michael Mandelbaum, "Foreign Policy as Social Work," *Foreign Affairs* 75 (1) (1996): 17.

[32] Ipsos-Reid, "IPSOS-Reid Poll: October 2001 [Roper #31108751]," Question 9, survey date October 19–21, 2001 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2001), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31108751.

[33] Techno Metrica Institute of Policy and Politics, "Christian Science Monitor/Investor's Business Daily Poll: April 2003 [Roper #31109434]," Question 3, survey date April 1–6, 2003 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2003), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31109434; and Techno Metrica Institute of Policy and Politics, "Christian Science Monitor/Investor's Business Daily Poll: February 2003 [Roper #31109450]," Question 28, survey date February 3–9, 2003 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2003), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31109450.

[34] Taylor Nelson Sofres, "German Marshall Fund/Compagnia di San Paolo Poll # 2005-GMF: 2005 TransAtlantic Trends Survey [Roper #31085362]," Question 42, survey date May 30–June 17, 2005 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2005), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31085362; and Taylor Nelson Sofres, "German Marshall Fund/Compagnia di San Paolo Poll # 2006-GMF: 2006 TransAtlantic Trends Survey [Roper #31085365]," Question 64, survey date June 6–24, 2006 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2006), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31085365.

[35] Anderson Robbins Research and Shaw & Co. Research, "Fox News Poll: Obama/Presidential Qualifications/Health Care/Israel: March 2012 [Roper #31092092]," Question 53, survey date March 10–12, 2012 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2012), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31092092.

[36] Opinion Research Corporation, "CNN/ORC Poll: Economy/Federal Budget/Libya [Roper #31095484]," Question 12, survey date March 11–13, 2011 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2011), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31095484; and Gallup, "Gallup News Service Poll: March Wave 1–Politics/World Affairs/Nuclear Power/Unions [Roper #31088932]," Question 3, survey date March 25–27, 2011 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2011), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31088932.

[37] Anderson Robbins Research and Shaw & Co. Research, "Fox News Poll: Obama/Libya/Election/Nuclear Crisis: April 2011 [Roper #31092078]," Question 15, survey date April 3–5, 2011 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2011), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31092078.

[38] Jentleson and Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent"; and Shapiro and Page, "Foreign Policy and the Rational Public."

[39] Bellamy, "Ethics and Intervention"; Bellamy, "Responsibility to Protect or Trojan Horse?"; and Gareth Evans, "When Is It Right to Fight?" *Survival* 46 (3) (2004): 59–81.

[40] Sarah Maxey, "The Power of Humanitarian Narratives," *Political Research Quarterly* 73 (3) (2020): 680–695.

[41] Bill Keller, "The I-Can't-Believe-I'm-a-Hawk Club," *The New York Times*, February 8, 2003; Noreen Malone, "Why So Many Liberals Supported Invading Iraq," *Slate*, May 14, 2021; and Michael Tomz and Jessica L. P. Weeks, "Human Rights and Public Support for War," *Journal of Politics* 82 (1) (2019): 182–194.

[42] Evans, "When Is It Right to Fight?"

[43] Langer Research Associates and TNS Intersearch, "ABC News/Washington Post Poll: March Monthly – Economy/Federal Budget Deficit/State Budget Deficit [Roper #31086990]," survey date March 10–13, 2011 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2011), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31086990.

[44] CBS News, "CBS News Poll: Economy/Nuclear Power Plants/Natural Disasters/Libya, CBS News [Roper #31091033]," March 18–21, 2011 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2011), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31091033.

[45] Associated Press, "Associated Press Poll: March 2011 [Roper #31112401]," survey date March 24–28, 2011 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2011), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31112401; and Princeton Survey Research Associates International, "Pew Research Center Poll: March 2011, Omnibus Week 4–News Interest Index [Roper #31096069]," March 24–27, 2011 (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2011), https://doi.org/10.25940/ROPER-31096069.

[46] Gallup, "Presidential Approval Ratings–George W. Bush," 2009, http://www.gallup.com/poll/116500/Presidential-Approval-Ratings-George-Bush.aspx.

[47] The president, while serving as commander in chief, is a civilian elected official and not an active-duty member of the U.S. military. This distinction is key to civilian control, a fundamental aspect of democratic civil-military relations.

[48] Gallup, "Trust in Government," 2024, https://news.gallup.com/poll/5392/Trust-Government.aspx (accessed October 15, 2024).

[49] "Will People Have to Give Up Civil Liberties to Curb Terrorism (1995–2011)?" (Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, Cornell University, 2022), https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/ipoll/trend/db23a135-4be0-485f-8289-79d798cf1c3b.

[50] Gallup, "Confidence in Institutions," 2024, https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/Confidence-Institutions.aspx (accessed October 15, 2024).

[51] Jonathan D. Caverley and Yanna Krupnikov, "Aiming at Doves," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 61 (7) (2017): 1482–1509; Peter D. Feaver, *Thanks for Your Service* (Oxford University Press, 2023); Tyler Jost and Joshua D. Kertzer, "Armies and Influence: Public Deference to Foreign Policy Elites," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 68 (9) (2024); and Michael

Kenwick and Sarah Maxey, "You and Whose Army?" *Journal of Politics* 84 (4) (2022): 1963–1978.

[52] Kenwick and Maxey, "You and Whose Army?" 1975.

[53] George W. Bush, "The President's Radio Address, October 21, 2006," The American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-radio-address-19.

[54] George W. Bush, "The President's Radio Address, April 14, 2007," The White House, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/04/20070414.html.

[55] Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on Afghanistan, February 17, 2009," The White House, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/statement-president-afghanistan.

[56] Feaver, *Thanks for Your Service*.

[57] See also Rosa Brooks's and Heidi A. Urben's contributions to this volume: Rosa Brooks, "Understanding Current Threats to Democracy: The Limits of the Civil-Military Relations Paradigm," *Dædalus* 154 (4) (Fall 2025): 231–257, https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/understanding-current-threats-democracy-limits-civil-military-relations-paradigm; and Heidi A. Urben, "Politicization of the Military: Causes, Consequences & Conclusions," *Dædalus* 154 (4) (Fall 2025): 214–230, https://www.amacad.org/daedalus/politicization-military-causes-consequences-conclusions.

[58] Dina Smeltz, Karl Friedhoff, Craig Kafura, et al., "America's Foreign Policy Future: Public Opinion and the 2024 Election," Chicago Council Survey of American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy (Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2024), https://globalaffairs.org/research/public-opinion-survey/americas-foreign-policy-future-public-opinion-and-2024-election.

[59] Laura Silver, Jordan Lippert, and Andrew Prozorovsky, "Americans Give Early Trump Foreign Policy Actions Mixed or Negative Reviews," Pew Research Center, April 8, 2025, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2025/04/08/americans-give-early-trump-foreign-policy-actions-mixed-or-negative-reviews.