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Americans and Iraq, twelve years apart: Comparing support for the US wars in Iraq



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ABSTRACT

Significant differences exist in Americans' support for force between the 1991 Persian Gulf War and 2003 Iraq War, even when holding all demographic variables constant. Nearly every group decreased their support from 1991 to 2003, including men and women, Whites and racial minorities, people with high school degrees or higher, nearly all age categories, and Democrat and Independent affiliated individuals. When examining potential causes for decreased support in the 2003 Iraq War, the "nature of the conflict" presents the strongest argument and evidence. The Persian Gulf War aimed to force the Iraqi army from Kuwait, while the Iraq War was aimed at changing the governmental regime of Iraq. The latter conflict was less socially acceptable than the former to Americans. These differences between the conflicts are the best explanation for the change in support, while other explanations, including the changing composition of the population and a less pro-military populace, are insufficient.

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1. Introduction

The reasons for the first and second US military actions in Iraq changed—from forcing the Iraqi army out of Kuwait to stopping Iraq's suspected “weapons of mass destruction” programs and deposing Hussein. On January 16, 1991, President George Bush said “Our objectives are clear. Saddam Hussein's forces will leave Kuwait. The legitimate government of Kuwait will be restored to its rightful place and Kuwait once again will be free. Iraq will eventually comply with all relevant United Nations resolutions” ([New York Times, 1991](#)). On February 10, 2003, President George W. Bush stated “Saddam's got to disarm. If he doesn't, we'll disarm him” ([Dobbs & King, 2003](#)).

In this paper, we describe the nature of this change in American opinion. We explore reasons for differing levels

of support amongst Americans for these two different US-Iraq conflicts. There are many possible explanations for a change in public opinion. First, the overall composition of the American population has changed, changing support for military force; for example, pro-war or anti-war sectors of the population may have increased or decreased in size. Second, specific opinions about the military—such as the general support among Americans—may have changed. Finally, varying levels of support may be explained by factors external to the US population, perhaps the character and rationale of the two different wars.

The little research that has been done on past military conflicts shows interesting patterns that have implications for a variety of groups, including policy-makers and social movements. But, no research thus far has attempted to explore how Americans differed in their opinions of these two similar wars based on their social standings. Our research helps to better understand how the pretext for war impacts public opinion. The two US-Iraq wars offer remarkably similar, superficial conditions attractive for comparing changes in attitudes. Specific details for both wars vary greatly, however. Recent US military build-up in

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the Middle East began in 1990, culminating in conflict during 1991 for what is now called the “Persian Gulf War”. The pretext was to enforce a United Nations (UN) Security Council resolution that condemned Iraq’s military invasion of neighboring Kuwait, a close US ally (Atkinson, 1993; Sifry & Cerf, 1991). The 2003 “Iraq War” began after the previous year’s political build-up to punish US-claimed violations of the UN’s embargo on Iraq, in particular on the importation of weaponry. The US used the pretext of Iraq having allegedly acquired weapons of mass destruction, and alleged collusion between Iraq and the terrorist network al Qaeda, who the US had been fighting in Afghanistan in the “War on Terrorism” since 2001. One of the stated goals of the US’s decision to go to war was to remove Hussein from power (Ehrenberg, McSherry, Sánchez, & Sayej, 2010; Keegan, 2005).

Though the political contexts have changed, the same countries are involved and the heads of state have the same names. A US president named George Bush decided to invade the country of Iraq and its president Saddam Hussein in 1991, and a different US president named George Bush invaded the same country a dozen years later in 2003.² Although the US presidents are different, and the conditions and pretexts for military action have changed, the two events beg comparison. Given the similarities, how has American opinion evolved over this period? Rarely has the political order created such a curious opportunity to analyze shift in American opinion about military force.

2. Popular support for military force

Extensive public opinion research measures American attitudes about US military actions. This research focuses on public support in several ways, including support for general military force or force under qualified conditions, such as self-defense, regime change, retaliation; support for the President’s actions; and policy positions. Previous research on American opinions toward foreign policy considers earlier conflicts including the Korean, Vietnam, Persian Gulf, and Iraq wars and explores the impact of socio-demographic and political views on people’s attitudes on questions regarding military action.

One compelling explanation for the varied support for military action is the specific political character and justifications given.³ Jentleson (1992) notes that Americans are more inclined to support military action if its intention is perceived to restrain another country’s aggression, as

opposed to force that country to change its internal behavior or composition. During the 1980s and early 1990s, US public support was highest for short-term, punitive attacks like aerial bombing Libya, and lowest where government overthrow was intended, such as Nicaragua. Restraint was the official goal in the case of the first Iraq War, where military action was used to enforce a United Nations Security Council mandate to evict the Iraqi military from Kuwait and restrain Iraq’s regional military ambitions. However, the second Iraq War included US rhetoric aimed at political regime change within Iraq. As such, we expect lower support during the second war against Iraq than during the first war. This research considers Jentleson’s hypothesis that the official rationale given to justify a conflict strongly influences public support for military force; we explore his hypotheses, in part, by eliminating alternative hypotheses explaining support for force.

In addition to changing political conditions, studies explore longitudinal pattern changes of the US public’s support for military action. Only a few studies compare the public’s opinions across multiple US military interventions. Often these comparisons do not involve statistical tests, but contrast different findings in a summary fashion. One of the earliest studies to compare attitudes about multiple wars explores the political attitudes of Americans toward both the Korean and Vietnamese Wars (Hamilton, 1968). In both wars, males, whites, high-status occupations, highly educated, high incomes, youth, and Republicans favored a tougher stance, bombing, and standing strong to Korea and Vietnam. The only change between these two wars in Asia is that White Protestants were not the only supporters of toughness in Vietnam, but were joined by Catholics who were previously in favor of negotiation in Korea. Although some findings on the Vietnam War might be contradictory in respect to the popular view of that time period—particularly the pro-war support of the highly educated and youth—it is important to note that the 1964 survey year was prior to the massive military build-up in Vietnam, as well as the anti-war movement mobilization among college-aged youth.

For particular wars, some characteristics that studies consider—and which are of key sociological concern—include an individual’s gender, race, age, socio-economic status, political party affiliation, and media consumption. One of the most robust findings in the literature is that women are less supportive of military conflict, with much research focuses on for US wars in Iraq. Women were more likely to oppose military action before, during, and after the conflict of the Persian Gulf War. American women were also more concerned about casualties, costs of the war, and to have negative emotions about it (Bendyna, Finucane, Kirby, O’Donnell, & Wilcox, 1996). American male college students were more likely than female students to think that casualties were necessary, that the censorship of military information was justified, to feel energized by the conflict, and less likely to feel helpless and depressed (Jayaratne, Flanagan, & Anderman, 1996). When analyzing support for the Persian Gulf War, American women were less likely than men to agree that they supported the war (Eveland, McLeod, & Signorielli, 1995). Men were more likely than women to support a higher level of

² A strong distinction between the two wars may be considered an artificial, social construction as there was an active US military presence in and around Iraq during the interim period, as well as regular aerial attacks. By considering the two wars as unique and separated by peacetime is not merely a convenient operationalization here, however, but a widely accepted although inaccurate view of US military behavior toward Iraq.

³ A variety of explanations are offered to explain longitudinal changes in public support over the course of wars. The two most popular are the casualty and the elite consensus hypotheses. However, each is predicated upon the public having time to react to mounting American casualties or elites withdrawing their support of a war. This study preempts these possible explanations by evaluating public support during conflict beginnings and does not consider wars longitudinally. Burk (1999) offers an overview and test of each hypothesis.

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