

The Rhetorical Strategy of George H. W. Bush during the Persian Gulf Crisis 1990–91: How to Help Lose a War You Won

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Public perceptions of the relative failure of the first Bush administration's policy in the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990–91 can be attributed in large part to its failure both to remove Saddam Hussein from office and to eliminate Iraq's nuclear weapons programme. Those objectives were not, in fact, among those that the administration initially set out to achieve. Midway through the crisis, however, it altered its rhetorical strategy in a fashion that helped to emphasize their significance in the public mind. This rhetorical shift resulted from a belief that its primary objectives were failing to maintain public support for its policies. However, the evidence for such a decline in public support is ambiguous at best, and there is no evidence that the change of rhetoric had any effect upon public support. The Bush administration unnecessarily drew attention to objectives that it could not achieve and helped to ensure public disillusion with the eventual outcome of the conflict.

There are some compelling parallels between the respective wars against Iraq of presidents George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush. In both cases, swift and total military victory and its accompanying public euphoria have been followed by a messy aftermath and a growing degree of popular disillusion. In the case of the younger Bush, no small part of the public's discontent is due to a recognition of the extent to which it was misled about the Iraqi 'threat' and the reasons for going to war. Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction, its links to Al-Qaeda and 9/11, and its alleged importation of uranium from Niger – all of which were proclaimed with great certainty by the president – have been demonstrated to be, to varying degrees, untrue.

By using exaggerated and inflated rhetoric, the younger Bush contributed to the backlash against his Iraq policy in the months after the war ended. In this respect also, he resembles his father, and my goal here is to demonstrate how the first President Bush helped to create a perception that US policy in the 1990–91 crisis in the Persian Gulf was a failure, despite achieving the objectives he sought. By changing the rationales that he offered to justify intervention, he legitimated objectives that his administration subsequently failed to achieve, in turn legitimating the claim that his policy had failed. He changed the rationales used in order to shore up public support for his policy. There is no evidence, however, to suggest that this worked or that, had he not changed them, this would have undermined public support for his policies. Had he not raised expectations he was not able to fulfil, he might have limited future public disillusionment.

Critical opinion on the Bush administration's handling of the crisis has always been divided.¹ On one question, however, there is little room for dispute. In terms of the objectives that the administration identified in the early stages of the crisis – defeating aggression, upholding international law, restoring Kuwaiti sovereignty and protecting access to Middle-Eastern oil (Bush, 1990a, b, c) – its actions were wholly or largely successful. Given that fact, one of the most interesting phenomena in the aftermath of the war was the growth of popular disillusion with its outcome. Within weeks of the end of the fighting, just 52 percent of the public felt that US actions had been totally or largely successful. By June, that number had fallen by 8 percent (Mueller, 1994, p. 277).² Other polls tracking opinion between the end of the war and summer 1991 showed declines of 14 and 19 percent, respectively, in support for the proposition that the war had been worth fighting (Mueller, 1993, p. 214).

How are we to account for this growing public disillusion? One likely factor is the events that followed in the immediate aftermath of the war. The Shiite and Kurdish uprisings inside Iraq and their brutal repression by Saddam Hussein's forces must have affected the public's perception of the war's outcome. Nevertheless, by most standards, and in comparison to most wars, the Bush administration had achieved an unusually large proportion of what it set out to accomplish at minimal cost. The argument that US policy was not a success in terms of the objectives sought is not easily sustainable in the face of the facts. So what alternative explanations for public dissatisfaction are available? Firstly, it is clear that the American public came to see the war as a failure because the administration failed to remove the Iraqi leader from power or to eliminate Iraq's nuclear weapons programme (particularly the former). Polls taken between the commencement of the crisis in August and the outbreak of war in January showed 70 percent or more of the public supporting the pursuit of those goals (Mueller, 1994, pp. 246, 254, 266). Asked during the fighting whether US forces should go beyond the liberation of Kuwait to remove Saddam Hussein from power, 60 percent or more of respondents said yes (pp. 266–8).

There is also post-war evidence to support this connection. A poll containing one question asking whether respondents favoured a return to military action to remove Saddam Hussein from power, and a second asking for their evaluation of the outcome of the war, allows the relationship between the two to be tested: 45 percent of those who judged the war to have been only 'partially successful', 30 percent of those who felt the war was 'largely successful' and 19 percent of those who thought it 'totally successful' favoured resuming military action. Thus, the less successful a respondent saw the war as being, the more likely they were to favour renewed military action to eliminate the Iraqi leader. This is clearly suggestive of the fact that the failure to eliminate him is the reason for their dissatisfaction with the outcome (Time/CNN, 1991).

The removal of Saddam Hussein from power was never among the Bush administration's objectives, and the elimination of Iraq's nuclear weapons programme was, at best, a secondary objective. Why, then, did the American public come to attribute such great importance to these goals? It was partly, of course, because their view of the proper objectives of US policy was not wholly determined by what

the president said. He did not have to create these objectives in the minds of Americans. What he did do, however, was to reinforce and legitimate them through a change in the rationales that he used to justify US intervention. It could be argued, in the administration's defence, that such a shift in rhetoric was necessary in order to maintain popular support for its actions in the Gulf and that public perceptions of failure were a necessary price to pay for the securing of vital strategic objectives. It will be demonstrated here that, on the contrary, the change was unnecessary, had no meaningful impact on public support for its actions and, in consequence, was self-defeating.

In order to demonstrate the validity of these claims, I first seek to prove that there was a discernible change in the rationales offered by the Bush administration for its actions during the crisis and that this was prompted by a concern about declining public support. I then demonstrate that the evidence for such a decline in public support is ambiguous at best. Finally, I show that the change in rationales had no discernible impact on overall public support for the administration's policies but may have affected public perceptions of what its key objectives were and should have been.

Changing Rationales

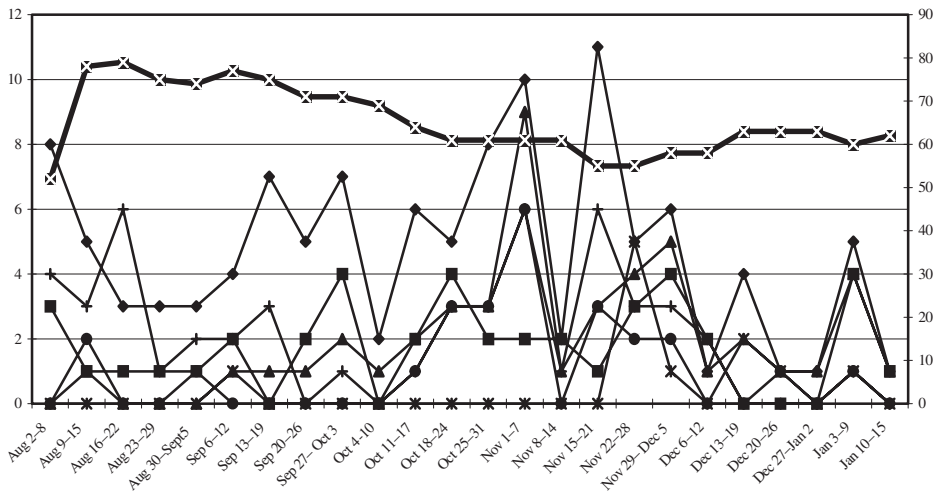
Many accounts of the Gulf crisis have argued that the Bush administration used a variety of rationales to justify its actions and that it did so in an opportunistic fashion in order to rally popular support.³ In fact, the change in the use of rationales was quite deliberate and systematic.

In order to demonstrate this claim, it is necessary to identify exactly what the rationales used by the Bush administration were. Initially, it cited the following factors as underpinning its decision to take action: upholding international law, defeating aggression, restoring Kuwaiti sovereignty, and protecting access to Middle-Eastern oil supplies. From mid-October onwards, however, it gave increasing prominence to a new set of issues: the plight of American hostages held in Iraq, the Iraqi nuclear weapons programme, and human rights abuses in Kuwait.⁴

In order to perform this analysis, the various rationales cited above were both compressed and extended. In the case of the initial set of rationales, these were reduced to 'oil' and 'aggression', because 'upholding international law', 'restoring Kuwaiti sovereignty' and 'defeating aggression' are essentially synonymous. In the case of the second set of rationales, a further one of 'demonizing Saddam Hussein' was added. This is because, although it does not constitute a rationale for, or an objective of, policy, rhetoric that demonized the Iraqi leader did have the effect of justifying the Bush administration's actions.

The analysis of these various rationales in Bush's statements was conducted in the following fashion. In the first place, a simple quantitative analysis was conducted. On how many occasions did he cite them for his policies, and how were the citations distributed over the course of the crisis from 2 August to 14 January.⁵ The results of this analysis are summarized in Figure 1. The quantitative analysis is supplemented by a qualitative analysis of the president's *Public Papers*. The quantitative analysis does not indicate the length of the mention of the rationale on each

Figure 11.1: Data on George Bush's Use of Rationales for Intervention during the Gulf Crisis and Public Approval Rating of his Handling of the Crisis



Notes: Number of references to oil (square), aggression (diamond), hostages (plus), nuclear weapons (asterisk), human rights (triangle) and demonizing Saddam Hussein (circle) and the percentage public approval of Bush (white cross).

Source: <http://www.csd.tamu.edu/bushlib/papers> (accessed 2 October 2003) and Mueller (1994, pp. 193–4).

occasion, the context in which the statement was made or how the rationale was framed. Nor does it indicate whether the rationale was given in response to a question or offered unprompted. All of these factors affect the significance and meaning of the statement.⁶

Oil

Bush made reference to oil on forty-two occasions. The quantitative evidence does not show a shift away from the initial use of this rationale midway through the crisis. The qualitative analysis, however, reveals a different picture. In his references to oil in August and September, he was keen to stress the economic interests at stake. In his very first exchange with reporters after the Iraqi invasion, he emphasized that ‘we are dependent for close to fifty percent of our energy requirements on the Middle East’ (Bush, 1990a). The next day he noted that ‘all you have to do is look at the energy requirements of the world’ to see what is at stake (Bush, 1990b). However, in mid-October, he completely inverted his argument. Both in response to protestors shouting ‘no blood for oil’ and in unprompted statements, he asserted that ‘the fight isn’t about oil; the fight is about naked aggression that will not stand’ (Bush, 1990d) and that ‘we are not in the Middle East to protect oil; we are there to stand up against aggression’ (Bush, 1990e). On six occasions between 16 October and 3 November, he asserted that ‘it’s not about oil’. Then, from 8 November onwards, he changed tack again. Oil reverted to being a reason to be in the Gulf, but not for self-serving purposes. Now he cited the fate

of the economies and peoples of the Third World and Eastern Europe as the reason to protect the Middle-Eastern oil lifeline: 'The march of freedom must not be threatened by the man whose invasion of Kuwait is causing great economic hardship in the countries which can afford it least' (Bush, 1990f).

Aggression

Bush made reference to aggression on 113 occasions. His use of this rationale was very evenly spread throughout the crisis. From 2 August onwards, he repeatedly asserted that 'there is no place for this sort of naked aggression in today's world' (Bush, 1990a) and that 'what Iraq has done violates every norm of international law' (Bush, 1990b). The qualitative analysis does not show the kind of variation that was evident in the case of the 'oil' rationale, and its use was consistent throughout. From early November onwards, however, he did demonstrate a tendency to conflate the 'aggression' rationale with the 'human rights' rationale by making the violation of people, rather than international law, the focus of his rhetoric: 'Protecting freedom means standing up to aggression. You know the brutality inflicted on the people of Kuwait and innocent citizens of every country must not be rewarded' (Bush, 1990f).

Hostages

Bush made reference to the plight of American hostages held in Iraq on fifty-one occasions.⁷ Once again, there is a spread of references throughout the period, but there are also two clear peaks in August and November. The qualitative analysis, however, demonstrates a marked difference in the nature of his comments in these two months. His references to hostages in August and September were virtually all made in response to questions, rather than of his own volition. Moreover, throughout August, he actively sought to downplay the significance of the hostages. Asked on 8 August about the plight of American citizens in Iraq and Kuwait, he insisted that he was 'not going to speculate or hypothecate ... I'm not going to try to heighten tensions in this regard by responding to hypothetical questions' (Bush, 1990g). A few days later he referred to the hostages as 'inconvenienced people who want to get out ... I hope it doesn't become more than that. I have no reason at this juncture to think that it will' (Bush, 1990h). Then, from 23 October to 3 November, he made eleven statements, unprompted in all cases, in a deliberate attempt to draw public attention to the fate of the hostages. On 23 October, he asserted that 'the holding of hostages, innocent men and women, goes against the conscience of the entire world' (Bush, 1990i); and on 3 November, he roundly declared that 'Americans are being held against their will, and we cannot rest until every single one of them comes home' (Bush, 1990j). The virtual disappearance of the issue from his rhetoric after 8 December is explained by Iraq's release of the hostages at that point.

Nuclear Weapons

Bush made only a handful of references to nuclear weapons. It might be argued that there are too few references for it to be regarded as significant. However, it is clear that this rationale for US actions hardly appeared until November. It thus fits

with the pattern of shifting rationales proposed here, and for that reason must be taken into consideration. His argument that ‘every day that passes brings Saddam Hussein one step closer to realizing his goal of a nuclear weapons arsenal’ (Bush, 1990k) seems almost tailor-made for persuading the public of the necessity of US intervention.

Human Rights

Bush made forty-seven references to Iraqi human rights abuses in Kuwait. As with the ‘hostages’ rationale, the quantitative analysis shows a significant peak, with twenty-eight of the forty-seven references occurring between 18 October and 5 December. The qualitative analysis reinforces the significance of this peak. He made a major, unprompted comment on human rights on 15 August when he noted that ‘the reports out of Kuwait tell a sordid tale of brutality’ (Bush, 1990l); but from then until mid-October, his few comments were brief and mainly in response to questions. From 15 October onwards, his comments were spontaneous, extensive and detailed. On 15 October, he said that ‘every day now, new word filters out about the ghastly atrocities perpetrated by Saddam’s forces ... summary executions, routine torture’ (Bush, 1990m). The next day, he referred to what would become a favourite story, claiming that ‘Iraqi soldiers unplugged the oxygen to incubators supporting twenty two premature babies’ and ‘shot the hospital employees’ (Bush, 1990d).⁸ In addition to the premature babies, he also claimed that ‘dialysis patients were ripped from their machines’ and that two children handing out leaflets had been shot in front of their parents (Bush, 1990i).

Alongside his repetition of the premature babies tale, Bush also repeatedly referred to the ‘rape’ of Kuwait. On the 23 October, he said that the ‘rape and systematic dismantling of Kuwait defies description’ (Bush, 1990i). On 3 November, he talked of the ‘rape, pillage and plunder’ of Kuwait (Bush, 1990j). And on 1 November, in his strongest statement of all, he claimed that Iraqi forces had ‘literally – literally, not figuratively – literally raped, pillaged and plundered this once-peaceful land’ (Bush, 1990n). In his efforts to justify his policy, he thus emphasized two of the most primeval images of evil – the murder of children and the rape of innocents (Kellner, 1992, p. 70).

Demonizing Saddam Hussein

The rationale of ‘demonizing Saddam Hussein’ is complicated by the fact that it overlaps with all the others to a greater or lesser degree. Every reason to act in the Gulf was an implicit or explicit condemnation of the Iraqi leader. Nevertheless, in addition to such implied condemnation, Bush made explicit and direct attacks on him on twenty-five occasions. Again, we find a peak in these references, with 19 of the comments occurring between 15 October and 30 November.

Undoubtedly, the most significant aspect of Bush’s personal demonization of Saddam Hussein was his comparison of the Iraqi leader to Adolf Hitler. Sometimes this comparison was implicit rather than explicit: ‘In World War Two, the world paid dearly for appeasing an aggressor who could have been stopped’ (Bush, 1990o). Occasionally, it was implied through the comparison of Iraqi soldiers to Hitler’s SS. He claimed more than once that there was a ‘direct parallel’ between

Iraqi actions in Kuwait and the actions of the 'Death's Head regiments' of the SS in Poland in 1939–40 who 'came in and systematically wiped out a lot of Polish people, lined up kids and shot them. And the same things are going on in Kuwait today' (Bush, 1990p).

On several occasions, however, Bush made the comparison quite explicit. On 23 October, he declared that 'there's a direct parallel between what Hitler did to Poland and what Saddam Hussein has done to Kuwait' (Bush, 1990i). On 1 November, he said that 'they've tried to silence Kuwaiti dissent and courage with firing squads, much as Hitler did when he invaded Poland' (Bush, 1990q). On 15 October, after listing alleged Iraqi atrocities in Kuwait, he simply said, 'Hitler revisited' (Bush, 1990m). On one occasion, he even implied that the Iraqi leader was worse than Hitler: 'This morning, right now, over three hundred innocent Americans – civilians – are held against their will in Iraq. Many of them are reportedly staked out as human shields near possible military targets, something that even Adolf Hitler didn't do' (Bush, 1990n).

In a situation in which the mass of the American public knew very little about the context of events in the Gulf and in which the American media, as we will see, reinforced Bush's message, the Hitler analogy became the dominant prism through which the crisis was viewed. With the analogy came a series of implicit assumptions with regard to both the causes of the crisis and appropriate solutions. In the first place, the analogy identified Saddam Hussein as the sole cause of the conflict and ruled out any possibility of negotiation or compromise, both of which were probably intended effects (Dorman and Livingston, 1994, pp. 72–3). However, the comparison to Hitler also made it equally inconceivable that the Iraqi leader could be allowed to remain in power.

If the need to eliminate Saddam Hussein was implicit in Bush's use of the Hitler analogy, it was more or less explicit in certain of his statements. On at least two occasions, he declared that 'Saddam Hussein will be held accountable' (Bush, 1990d,o) for his actions; and on 15 October, he reminded his listeners that this might be 'Hitler revisited. But remember, when Hitler's war ended there were Nuremberg trials' (Bush, 1990m). On 28 October, he declared that the Iraqi leader's 'crimes are punishable under the principles adopted by the allies in 1945 and unanimously reaffirmed by the United Nations in 1950. Two weeks ago I mentioned the Nuremberg trials. Saddam Hussein must know that the stakes are high' (Bush, 1990o). Not only, therefore, did he create a compelling logic for the removal of the Iraqi leader, but he also implied that he should, and would, be brought before a war crimes tribunal.

The evidence from the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the six public rationales used by Bush is therefore supportive of the argument that there was a shift in their use midway through the crisis. The partial exception is the 'aggression' rationale, the use of which was largely consistent and unchanging throughout the crisis. The 'oil' rationale changed in ways that are consistent with it being downplayed, whereas the other four only became significant elements in his public statements in late October and November. We have also seen, particularly in his comments on human rights abuses and his comparison of Saddam Hussein to

Hitler, the creation of a compelling argument for the removal of the Iraqi leader from power.

Explaining the Changing Rationales

What led Bush to downplay the importance of oil and to focus upon a raft of new rationales midway through the Gulf crisis? The first possible explanation that must be considered is that there was a genuine change in the concerns of his administration as the crisis developed.

In the case of three of the four new rationales, such an argument carries little, if any, weight. This is most obvious in the case of the ‘hostages’ rationale. Bush was aware of their plight from very early in the crisis, though it was not yet clear how they would be treated. His downplaying of their situation in an attempt to persuade Saddam Hussein that they would not shape US policy possesses a clear logic. The sudden outburst of rhetoric in late October and early November does not conform to that logic, nor to any logic of attempting to persuade the Iraqi leader to free them.

The ‘human rights’ rationale is also difficult to explain in terms of changing events or concerns inside Bush’s administration. He has claimed that he became more concerned about the human rights abuses in Kuwait as time wore on (Bush and Scowcroft, 1998, p. 374). By his own admission, however, he was well aware of those abuses from very early in the crisis (p. 341), yet chose not to draw attention to them. There were specific occurrences that might have led him to pay more attention to the issue – he notes an intelligence report of 22 September and a report to him by the Emir of Kuwait on 28 September, both detailing alleged atrocities (p. 374). However, although he did make a significant statement about human rights after speaking to the Emir (Bush, 1990r), his sustained verbal barrage on this issue did not begin until mid-October and was concentrated between then and the end of November. It is difficult, therefore, to explain it simply as a response to developments or his claimed growing concern about the abuses. Much the same can be said of his demonization of Saddam Hussein. The alleged parallel between the Iraqi leader and Hitler came to his mind early in the crisis (Bush and Scowcroft, 1998, p. 375); why then was the public assertion of the parallel concentrated in late October and November?

The one rationale where there is significant support for the argument that changing events led to a genuine change of concerns is the ‘nuclear weapons’ rationale. In this case, a Special Intelligence Estimate prepared for Bush in autumn 1990 claimed that Iraq could possess nuclear weapons within a year, a much shorter period than had previously been supposed (Freedman and Karsh, 1993, p. 220). However, his administration had been well aware of Iraq’s efforts to develop nuclear weapons before the crisis began and had chosen to do nothing about it. Drawing attention to Iraq’s nuclear weapons programme then had not served the administration’s purposes; in November, it did.

That leads to the alternative explanation for the emergence of the new rationales in late October and November – that they were a response to a perceived decline

in popular support for the Bush administration's policies. His own account of the conflict emphasizes his preoccupation with public opinion and declining public support. On 14 September, he wrote in his diary, 'new polls are out: 57 percent support and 23 percent against ... It used to be 7 percent opposed, and I worry, worry, worry about eroded support' (Bush and Scowcroft, 1998, pp. 371–2). Secretary of State James Baker shared these concerns. From the standpoint of mid-November, he wrote that 'for weeks I'd been frustrated by the administration's collective inability to articulate a single coherent, consistent rationale for the President's policy' and that 'we were beginning to pay a political price at home as a result of our rhetorical confusion. Public support for Desert Shield was starting to unravel' (Baker, with DeFrank, 1995, p. 336).

The belief that this perceived 'downward slide' in the polls was due to the Bush administration's failure to get its message across was widely shared among senior administration officials (Bush and Scowcroft, 1998, pp. 399–400). His pollster, Robert Teeter, told him on several occasions in October that there were too many rationales being used and a consequent lack of focus in his administration's message. Teeter suggested that 'aggression' and 'hostages' were the two rationales with greatest public appeal. Baker agreed that the emphasis should be shifted to the hostages as *the* issue that resonated with the American public (Woodward, 1991, pp. 315–16). In John Mueller's view, the hostages and nuclear weapons were the two 'hot-button' issues identified by the administration (1994, p. 118).

What almost certainly reinforced this concern with a possible decline in public support in late October was the fact that the Bush administration was then moving towards a crucial decision. On 8 November, he announced to a surprised public that he was sending a further 200,000 US troops to the Gulf. Having repeatedly insisted that war was not inevitable and that he was prepared to wait for sanctions to work, he now made it clear to most observers that he was in fact looking towards a military solution. The concentration of his strongest rhetoric in late October and the first week of November thus appears designed to pave the way for this controversial announcement.

It is also clear that the Bush administration's discussions in late October had a direct impact on its rhetorical output. On 29 October, Baker gave a speech to the LA World Affairs Council in which the plight of the American hostages in Iraq was given a new prominence (Baker, 1990). Then, on 31 October, Bush stressed the plight of the hostages on three separate occasions (Bush, 1990p, s, t). So marked was the shift in rhetoric that he was asked by one journalist if 'this situation [the hostages plight] [is] being used as a pretext for confrontation' (Bush, 1990s). Finally, the following day, he began his press conference by saying; 'I want to begin by simply restating for the American people some of the key points about our efforts to turn back aggression in the Persian Gulf. I think it is essential that the American people fully understand the objectives of the United States' (Bush, 1990u). This was the statement of a man who was concerned that the American people did not, in fact, understand his objectives. There is, therefore, plentiful evidence to support the contention that, in late October and early November, the administration was growing increasingly concerned about declining public support,

that it felt its rationales were not working and that it began looking for new ways to rally public opinion.⁹

Was It Necessary?

Many analysts agree with the Bush administration's view that there *was* a problem of falling popular support,¹⁰ and there is evidence to support that claim. Polls evaluating his handling of the situation in the Gulf all produced very similar statistics. The highest approval ratings varied between 76 and 83 percent, and all fell between early August and mid-September. The lows varied between 57 and 68 percent, and all occurred in mid-October (Mueller, 1994, pp. 193–6, 203–4). However, as Mueller has noted, although polls that asked for a general assessment of the president's handling of Gulf policy showed a significant fall in support, those that asked more specific questions produced a different picture (1993, p. 202). Thus, questions asking whether the US had made a mistake in sending troops to the Gulf showed a slight increase in those who thought it had between August and mid-October, but one too small to be statistically significant (Mueller, 1994, pp. 198–9, 203–6). Similarly, in polls that asked whether the situation in the Gulf was worth going to war over/using military force, there was no significant decline in support for going to war between August and mid October (pp. 208, 217).

The evidence for a decline in public support is mixed, therefore, and there are other caveats to add. Firstly, there is the possibility that the budget crisis of October 1990 spilled over to affect evaluations of Bush's actions in other areas. His retreat from his pledge not to raise taxes – in an effort to forge a bipartisan budget deal with the Democrats – and the subsequent furore this caused certainly produced a noticeable decline in his general public approval ratings (Mueller, 1994, p. 180). Secondly, the decline in support is measured from a starting point of early August, where virtually all the peaks of approval occur. The fall in support may thus represent a natural and inevitable levelling out as the initial response to his decisive action gave way to a more considered evaluation of the task facing the US. Thirdly, even if support did decline, it rarely fell below 60 percent in any of the polls consulted. Last, but far from least, if there was a decline in support, there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that it was due to the lack of a clear rationale for US actions. Polls that asked whether the public felt they had a clear sense of what the Bush administration's objectives in the Gulf were showed no decline, with 70 percent or more of respondents saying they had a clear idea of why the US had sent troops to the Gulf (pp. 215–16).

Media Impact

Before asking whether the change in rationales affected public opinion, it is important to acknowledge an important fact. They could only affect public opinion if they were accurately communicated to the public by the media. Therefore, it is first necessary briefly to examine whether the media conveyed Bush's rhetoric to the public.

There is an extensive range of studies of the behaviour of the American media during the Gulf crisis.¹¹ On the basis of those studies, it is possible to assert with

confidence that the media did, in fact, report and amplify the messages Bush sought to communicate. Without exception, these studies demonstrate the extent to which the American media uncritically accepted the arguments presented by his administration for public consumption. The incubator story, for example, was immediately picked up and regurgitated repeatedly on both press and television (Macarthur, 1992, pp. 67–8). Not only did the media report the claims, but also, in many cases, they amplified them and pursued them with even greater vigour than Bush himself. In the case of the Hitler comparison, for example, one study found 1,170 cases in which the media made the linkage (LaMay *et al.*, 1991, p. 42). Moreover, the media paraphrased the comment that even Hitler had not used hostages as human shields as ‘worse than Hitler’, and then repeatedly used the false quote (Macarthur, 1992, p. 70). With reference to the hostages, the Garnett Foundation study just mentioned found 2,588 references to ‘human shields’, which made it the second most used phrase in the whole crisis after ‘Vietnam’ (LaMay *et al.*, 1991, p. 42). There seems little reason to doubt, therefore, that the rationales were received by the public.

That process of communication would have been complicated, however, if the media had questioned and criticized those rationales or given space to dissenting voices. In practice, however, both the print and broadcast media were more or less wholly supportive of the Bush administration’s policy. A study by FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) concluded that, between 8 August and 3 January, twenty-nine of 2,855 minutes, or approximately 1 percent, of coverage of the crisis on the five main television channels dealt with opposition to its policy (Kellner, 1992, p. 79). If anything, therefore, the media amplified Bush’s rhetoric and arguments; they certainly did not contradict them.

The Effect of Changing Rationales

Some observers have asserted that Bush was able successfully to rally the American public behind him as he moved towards war.¹² There is little evidence to sustain that claim. The vast majority of polls show no significant changes in public support from mid-October, when he began to unleash his new rhetoric, onwards. One poll asking about support for the use of force showed an increase, but none of the others asking the same or a similar question did so (Mueller, 1994, pp. 217, 219, 221). Similarly, the polls that asked the public whether they felt he was handling the situation in the Gulf well/approved or disapproved of his handling of the situation showed little or no change after mid-October (pp. 193–9; and see Figure 1). Finally, if he hoped that the use of these rationales would increase support for the use of force, most poll evidence suggests that he failed. The American public remained deeply divided over whether to go to war or wait for sanctions to work/seek a diplomatic solution until the outbreak of war (pp. 226–31).

It might be argued that the non-fluctuation of the polls after mid-October indicates that the slide in the polls was halted by the change in rationales. It is impossible to prove or disprove this assertion, because it would require a counterfactual analysis. However, we can test whether the new rationales that the Bush administra-

tion used resonated more strongly with the public than the original ones. If they did, then that would suggest their effectiveness in maintaining popular support; if not, then it is likely their introduction made no difference.

The evidence on this question is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is clear that rescuing the hostages, protecting human rights and eliminating Iraq's nuclear weapons programme all garnered strong approval from the American public (Mueller, 1994, pp. 246, 249, 254–7, 262–3). Equally, the removal of Saddam Hussein and his regime from power was strongly supported (pp. 246–8, 260, 262–3). On the other hand, it is not clear that the original goals that the Bush administration cited to justify its actions in the Gulf – defeating and deterring aggression, liberating Kuwait and protecting western access to Middle-Eastern oil – were any less important to the public.

This is most obvious in the case of the 'aggression' rationale. Whether framed in terms of defeating aggression/deterring aggression or establishing the principle that aggression would no longer be tolerated, this rationale garnered support as great as the other four (Mueller, 1994, pp. 245–8). Even when the question used a much less emotive and moralistic formulation, such as 'making Iraq withdraw from Kuwait' or 'restoring Kuwaiti sovereignty', the American public were solidly supportive of the objective, albeit not to the same degree (pp. 246–9, 254–7, 260–3).

The most problematic of the initial rationales is the 'oil' rationale. Bush's changing rhetoric on this issue reflected his concern that the American public did not see it as worth fighting for, and some who have studied the polls carefully have come to the same conclusion (Mueller, 1993, p. 203). The reality, however, is more complex. This rationale, more than any other, exposes the importance of question-wording in opinion polling. When the public was asked whether protecting access to oil was worth the lives of US soldiers or whether it was worth going to war to keep down gasoline prices, large majorities (61, 65 and 91 percent) responded that it was not (Mueller, 1994, p. 250). However, when the question was more emotionally neutral, a different picture emerged. Questions that asked whether protecting the West's oil supplies/preventing Iraq from controlling a major source of the world's oil/making sure Middle-Eastern oil flows freely were important objectives or worth going to war for regularly produced support of 70 percent plus, comparable to the figures for the October rationales (pp. 245–6, 257, 263). In a poll where the public were asked to identify the single most important reason for US forces to be in the Gulf, oil lagged well behind freeing the hostages (p. 246). But in a different poll, where the 'oil' rationale was offered as one of a range of reasons for US actions along with one or more of the later rationales, protecting access to oil was cited as a good reason for acting by more people than with the other rationales (pp. 244–7). While the data on the 'oil' rationale is contradictory, it does not support the confident assertion that the American public did not find protecting access to oil to be a persuasive reason for intervention in the Gulf.

There is little evidence, therefore, to suggest that the Bush administration's shift of rationales had any effect on the American public's support for its actions. Opinion polls showed no increase in support after it introduced the new rationales, and the possibility that the new rationales may at least have halted a decline in support is

undermined by the fact that they were no more appealing to the American public than the initial ones.

If the change in rationales did not have any noticeable impact on levels of public support for the Bush administration, did it nevertheless affect public perceptions of policy goals? In terms of what the public thought his goals actually were, there is quite strong evidence that his downplaying of 'oil' rationale from late October onwards had some impact. Polls taken early in the crisis indicated that the public felt oil was the principal reason for the administration's decision to send troops to Saudi Arabia (Mueller, 1994, pp. 242–4). Although the president, despite all his efforts, was not able to dissuade large numbers of Americans from retaining that view, a number of polls did show a decline in the proportion of respondents believing he was acting for economic reasons (pp. 242–4).

So Bush may have had some success in changing people's views about why he *was* acting, but did he alter their opinions on why he *ought* to be acting. The evidence for the impact of his words in this case is weaker. What is clear is that, when offered the option of the elimination/removal from power of Saddam Hussein or the destruction of Iraq's nuclear weapons programme, large majorities of Americans chose them as key policy goals right from the start of the crisis (Mueller, 1994, pp. 245–8). Moreover, when given a list of objectives and asked to rank them in order of priority, or to identify which were good reasons for getting involved/going to war, eliminating the Iraqi leader and Iraq's nuclear weapons programme tended to come at the top of the list (pp. 248, 251–2, 254–7).

With regard to the impact of Bush's shaping of these views, his comparison of Saddam Hussein to Hitler was swiftly picked up on and, more importantly, seen as legitimate by the public (Dorman and Livingston, 1994, pp. 69–74). One poll reported in *The New York Times* showed that 60 percent of the public agreed with the comparison ('Poll on Troop Movement Shows Support (and Anxiety)', 1990). There is also evidence that support for the later rationales did increase over time at the expense of the initial ones. A poll on 23 August found 67 percent of the public favouring the removal of the Iraqi leader from power. This, however, made it the least popular of five reasons to act, with both deterring aggression and protecting access to oil ahead of it (Mueller, 1994, pp. 245–6). A poll on 23/24 August found 73 percent in favour of removing him but 92 percent wanted to recover the hostages and 84 percent to force Iraq to leave Kuwait (p. 246). By November, however, that position had been decisively reversed, with eliminating the Iraqi leader and Iraq's nuclear weapons programme comfortably outstripping protecting oil and liberating Kuwait as popular goals (pp. 254–7). The implications of this shift will be addressed below.

Conclusions

This article has sought to demonstrate that President George H. W. Bush unwittingly helped to reinforce and legitimate public perceptions that his Gulf policy was a failure by helping to focus public attention on certain objectives of that policy rather than others. The argument depends upon a number of claims, some of which are more easily demonstrable than others.

It is not possible to prove beyond doubt that those who saw Bush's policy as a failure or relative failure in mid-1991 or 1992 did so because of the failure to remove Saddam Hussein from power or to eliminate Iraq's nuclear weapons programme. However, the circumstantial evidence to support that claim is very strong. Even before the fighting began, clear majorities of the public saw these two goals as among the most important of US policy and said they would not regard US policy as a success/victory if they were not achieved. At least one poll taken after the war appears to confirm the relationship between evaluating the war as a partial failure and wanting to see the elimination of the Iraqi leader.

My second claim is that Bush changed the rationales he used to justify his actions in the Gulf in late October and November. The analysis supports this claim. Although the use of the 'aggression' rationale was broadly consistent throughout the crisis, the 'oil' rationale changed in clear and systematic ways as his administration sought first to deny its relevance and then to make it more appealing to popular opinion. The second set of rationales – 'hostages', 'human rights', 'nuclear weapons' and 'demonizing Saddam Hussein' – all became significant elements in his rhetoric only in late October and November. With the partial exception of the 'nuclear weapons' rationale, their emergence at that point does not reflect any change in the administration's actual objectives so much as a clear concern that public support for its actions was in decline. There is some evidence to support its belief that such a decline in support was real, but there is also evidence that contradicts that claim. There is no evidence to suggest that any decline in support was due to the public's lack of enthusiasm for or failure to understand the existing rationales for US involvement in the Gulf.

Regarding the effect of the change in rationales on public opinion, the evidence is clear in one case but ambiguous in all others. What is clear is that the introduction of the new rationales had no demonstrable impact in terms of increasing support for the Bush administration's policies. The possibility that the new rationales nevertheless halted an existing decline in support is greatly weakened by the fact that they were no more appealing than aggression or even oil as reasons for the US to be in the Gulf. With regard to popular perceptions of Bush's actual objectives, there is evidence to suggest that the reiteration of 'it's not about oil' did at least persuade some people. With regard to public perceptions of appropriate goals, it is clear that he did not create the desire to eliminate Saddam Hussein and Iraq's nuclear weapons programme, but some polls did show a shift in public priorities over time, with those two goals rising in importance as the 'oil' and 'liberating Kuwait' goals declined. That obviously correlates with the shift in his rhetoric, but it is also potentially explicable in terms of other factors such as the treatment of hostages and the general ability of the Iraqi leader to generate hostility towards himself.

Realistically, we cannot prove a causal connection between Bush's rhetoric and public objectives. Nevertheless, it is the case that his rhetoric at least legitimated those objectives and that it did so unnecessarily. There is no evidence that if he had avoided demonizing Saddam Hussein and harping on about atrocities, hostages and nuclear weapons, this would have weakened public support or his ability to prosecute his policy. Had he toned down the rhetoric and sought to dampen

expectations about the removal of the Iraqi leader, he might have reduced future public disillusion.

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Notes

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- 1 Bennis and Moushabeck, 1991; Danreuther, 1991/1992; Freedman and Karsh, 1993; Graubard, 1992; Hiro, 1992; Sifry and Cerf, 1991; Smith, 1992; Woodward, 1991.
- 2 Mueller's (1994) book will be used throughout this article because it contains the single best, freely available collection of polling data from the Gulf crisis.
- 3 Aruri, 1991, pp. 310–11; Elbaum, 1991, p. 145; Freedman and Karsh, 1993, p. 224; Hiro, 1992, pp. 245–7; Smith, 1992, p. 168.
- 4 These sets of rationales are based on an analysis of Bush's *Public Papers* from 2 August 1990 to 14 January 1991. The papers can be accessed at <http://www.csd.tamu.edu/bushlib/papers>.
- 5 The quantitative analysis follows the organization of the *Public Papers*, which provide a list of statements/speeches/press conferences for each day of the presidency. The use of a rationale in a speech/statement/answer to a question was counted as one use of a rationale. If the rationale was used more than once in the same speech/statement/answer, it was counted as one use. If it was used more than once in the same day, it was counted as the appropriate multiple use of the rationale.
- 6 In order to confirm the validity of the quantitative analysis, an intercoder reliability test was conducted using Bush's statements from the month of October as the sample. Agreement between the first and second coders was found in approximately 90 percent of cases.
- 7 There were over 10,000 Western and Japanese nationals in Kuwait when Iraq invaded. After initially implying that these 'foreign guests' were free to leave, the Iraqi government soon began treating them as hostages. Some were moved to strategic locations to function as 'human shields', and the Iraqis hinted that their fate would depend on the actions of their respective governments. In late August, women and children were allowed to leave, followed by a trickle of elderly and ill men, in response to begging missions to Baghdad by assorted Western elder statesmen. The remaining hostages were released in early December when it became clear that they were having no influence on US policy and that keeping them was undermining any international sympathy for Iraq.
- 8 The story turned out to be a fabrication concocted by the PR firm Hill and Knowlton and Kuwaiti officials (Kellner, 1992, pp. 67–71; Macarthur, 1992, pp. 53–70).
- 9 The change in Bush's rhetoric also coincides with the November 1990 Congressional elections. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that the change was dictated by electoral considerations. In his campaign speeches, he sought to distinguish partisan domestic politics from the Gulf crisis and to praise the Democrats for their support. Given that the Democrats' support did indeed remain strong at this point, it would have been self-defeating to play politics with Gulf policy.
- 10 Freedman and Karsh, 1993, p. 206; Hiro, 1992, pp. 228–9; US News and World Report, 1992, p. 174.
- 11 Bennett and Paletz, 1994; Denton, 1993; Kellner, 1992; LaMay *et al.*, 1991; Macarthur, 1992; Mowlana *et al.*, 1992.
- 12 Freedman and Karsh, 1993, p. 291; Jentleson, 1992, p. 66; Smith, 1992, p. 162; US News and World Report, 1992, p. 202.

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