RISK IN AMERICAN FOREIGN MILITARY INTERVENTIONS

A Dissertation
submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Arts and Sciences
of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

BY

CHRISTOPHER J. BOLAN, M.A

WASHINGTON, D.C.
JUNE 1, 2009
RISK IN AMERICAN FOREIGN MILITARY INTERVENTIONS

CHRISTOPHER J. BOLAN M.A.

THESIS ADVISOR: ANDREW BENNETT, PH.D.

ABSTRACT

What factors most heavily influence the risk perceptions of senior American leaders as they consider the use of military force? This study employs qualitative research methods and process tracing to probe the history of multiple American military interventions into Afghanistan and Iraq for insights into the changing risk perceptions of presidents and their senior advisors as they contemplate military action. This research project examines the roles played by the global distribution of power, the nature of the threat as measured by balance-of-power and balance-of-threat considerations, the policymaker’s strategic decision-making domain, and cognitive heuristics. The study charts the impact of these various factors on the perceptions of the political, policy, military, and economic risks associated with American presidential decisions to initiate, sustain, and terminate military interventions overseas. The specific cases considered include President Carter’s decision to avoid military intervention in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, President George W. Bush’s decision to initiate Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan in 2001, President George H.W. Bush’s decision making to both initiate
and terminate Operation Desert Storm in response to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in August of 1990, and President George W. Bush’s decision to order Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 and his subsequent decision to surge additional troops into Baghdad in 2007. In particular, these cases demonstrate the influential roles played by balance-of-threat considerations and the cognitive heuristics of representativeness, availability, and anchoring in presidential decision making.
Contents

Chapter 1: International Relations Theory and Risk .................................................. 12
  The Research Questions .................................................................................... 13
  Conceptualizing Foreign Military Intervention .............................................. 14
  Risk Within a Rational Choice Framework ............................................... 19
  Risk: As Viewed by Foreign Policy Practitioners ..................................... 23
  A Sociological Perspective of Risk ........................................................ 26
  Risk Viewed Through A Psychological Prism .................................... 29
  Heuristics and Biases in Individual Decision making ................................ 33
  Other Components of Risk: ........................................................................ 36
    Time horizons ......................................................................................... 36
    Perceived vs. real risks ........................................................................... 37
  Conclusion ................................................................................................... 39

Chapter 2: Case Selection and Methodology ......................................................... 40
  Case Structure & Focus .................................................................................. 45
  Differentiating and Operationalizing the Dependent Variable: ............... 46
    Political Risk ........................................................................................... 49
    Policy Risk ............................................................................................ 52
    Economic Risk ...................................................................................... 54
    Military Risk .......................................................................................... 56
    Individual Risk Sensitivities .................................................................. 58
  Operationalizing the Independent Variables: ......................................... 60
    International Structure .......................................................................... 60
  Nature of the Threat .................................................................................. 61
Chapter 4: President George W. Bush and Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom (2001) ................................................................. 117
  Background to the Crisis ................................................................. 117
  International Power Structure ....................................................... 119
  Nature of the Threat ..................................................................... 123
    Balance-of-power ....................................................................... 125
    Balance-of-threat ....................................................................... 126
  Domain ........................................................................................ 129
  Cognitive Heuristics: ................................................................. 134
    Representativeness ..................................................................... 134
    Availability ................................................................................ 137
    Anchoring ................................................................................ 140
  Perceptions of Risk ..................................................................... 143
    Political Risks ........................................................................... 143
    Military Risks ........................................................................... 148
    Economic Risks ......................................................................... 150
    Policy Risks ............................................................................. 153
  Conclusion ................................................................................... 157

  Background to Crisis ................................................................... 162
  International Power Structure .................................................... 165
  Nature of the Threat ................................................................... 169
    Balance-of-power ...................................................................... 169
    Balance-of-threat ...................................................................... 172
  Domain ....................................................................................... 174
Cognitive Heuristics..........................................................................................178

Representativeness .........................................................................................178
Availability ..........................................................................................................181
Anchoring ...........................................................................................................185
Perceptions of Risk ............................................................................................187

Military Risk .......................................................................................................187
Political Risks ......................................................................................................192
Policy Risks ..........................................................................................................197
Economic Risks ....................................................................................................200
Conclusion: ..........................................................................................................205

Chapter 6: President George H.W. Bush and Iraq: the Decision to End
Desert Storm (1991).............................................................................................209

Background to Crisis ..........................................................................................209
International Power Structure ...........................................................................211
Nature of the Threat ............................................................................................213
Domain ................................................................................................................214
Cognitive Heuristics ..........................................................................................216

Representativeness .........................................................................................216
Availability ...........................................................................................................218
Anchoring ...........................................................................................................220
Perceptions of Risk ............................................................................................221

Military Risks ....................................................................................................222
Political Risks ......................................................................................................223
Policy Risks ..........................................................................................................224
Economic Risks ....................................................................................................228
Conclusion: ..........................................................................................................229
  Background to Crisis ..................................................................................................................232
  International Power Structure ....................................................................................................233
  Nature of the Threat ..................................................................................................................236
    Balance-of-threat .....................................................................................................................237
  Domain ......................................................................................................................................241
  Cognitive Heuristics .................................................................................................................243
    Representativeness ....................................................................................................................243
    Availability ...............................................................................................................................250
    Anchoring .................................................................................................................................252
  Perceptions of Risk ....................................................................................................................256
    Political Risks ...........................................................................................................................256
    Military Risks ............................................................................................................................261
    Economic Risks ........................................................................................................................264
    Policy Risks ..............................................................................................................................268
  Conclusion: ..................................................................................................................................271

  Background to Crisis ..................................................................................................................277
  International Power Structure ....................................................................................................279
  Nature of the Threat ..................................................................................................................281
    Balance-of-threat .....................................................................................................................281
    Balance-of-power .....................................................................................................................283
  Domain ......................................................................................................................................284
  Cognitive Heuristics .................................................................................................................289
    Representativeness ....................................................................................................................289
Availiability...............................................................................................291
Anchoring.................................................................................................293
Perceptions of Risk ....................................................................................297
Military Risks ............................................................................................297
Political Risks ...........................................................................................300
Policy Risks ...............................................................................................303
Economic Risks ..........................................................................................306
Conclusion: ...............................................................................................309
Chapter 9: Lessons from America’s Military Interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan ........................................................................313
International Structure .............................................................................317
Nature of Threat .........................................................................................320
Domain.........................................................................................................322
Cognitive Heuristics ..................................................................................323
Representative heuristic ...........................................................................323
Availability heuristic ................................................................................325
Anchoring heuristic ..................................................................................327
Anticipating President Obama’s Risk Propensities .......................................329
International power structure ..................................................................330
Nature of the threat ...................................................................................334
Domain.........................................................................................................337
Cognitive Heuristics ..................................................................................339
Directions for future research ..................................................................347
Bibliography ............................................................................................349
Illustrations

Figures

Figure 7.1. “Global Public Opinion in the Bush Years (2001-2008). ..........257

Tables

Table 2.1 Anticipated Influence of International Variables on Risk Propensity ..................................................................................64

Table 2.2 Anticipated Influence of Decision-making Domain on Risk Propensity .................................................................................67

Table 3.1 Anticipated Influence of Variables on Risk Assessment (President Carter & Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979) ......................116

Table 4.1 Anticipated Influence of Variables on Risk Assessment (President G.W. Bush and Operation Enduring Freedom, 2001) .............161

Table 5.1 Anticipated Influence of Variables on Risk Assessment (President George H.W. Bush and Desert Storm) .................................208

Table 6.1 Anticipated Influence of Variables on Risk Assessment (President George H.W. Bush and Ending Desert Storm) .........................231

Table 7.1 Anticipated Influence of Variables on Risk Assessment (President George W. Bush and Operation Iraqi Freedom) ......................276

Table 8.1 Anticipated Influence of Variables on Risk Assessment (President George W. Bush and the Surge in Iraq) .................................312
CHAPTER 1: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY AND RISK

Senior American officials, pundits, and scholars have commented on the novelties associated with security challenges in the wake of the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001. President George W. Bush was fond of characterizing America’s post-9/11 struggle against terrorism as “a war unlike any we have fought before.” 1 In the wake of these terrorist attacks, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld called on the military to “put aside the comfortable ways of thinking and planning, take risks and try new things” in order to deal with these novel threats emerging in a dramatically altered security environment. 2 The National Security Strategy of the United States in 2002 made the case that traditional strategic concepts such as deterrence are no longer relevant in a security environment dominated by the threats of terrorists and rogue nations “more willing to take risks [employing] weapons of mass destruction as weapons of choice”. 3 In perhaps the clearest description of a monumental shift in American national security risk assessment, Vice President Cheney is quoted as noting that if there was even a one percent chance of a nuclear weapon getting into the hands of Al-Qa’ida terrorists; the United States should treat that possibility as a certainty in terms of its response. 4 These vignettes suggest that the process of risk assessment in

4. Ron Suskind, The One Percent Doctrine: Deep inside America’s Pursuit of Its Enemies since 9/11 (New York: Simon Schuster, 2006), 62. The exact quotation of Vice President Cheney as recounted by the author is “If there’s a one percent chance that Pakistani scientists are helping al Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response.”
evaluating options for military intervention may well have undergone a fundamental transformation in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

**The Research Questions:**

How do American senior leaders perceive and assess risks in evaluating options for foreign military intervention in the post-9/11 period? What are the various types of political, policy, economic, and military risks evaluated by these leaders in the decision-making process when considering foreign military interventions? Are leaders more or less sensitive to different types of risk? Is the substantive process of risk assessment in American decision making regarding military interventions fundamentally different in the aftermath of the horrific terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001? Finally, if the process of national security risk assessment has substantively changed, what features in the international and domestic environments best account for these shifts in risk perception?

Mainstream scholarship on international relations regarding risk can be divided into two primary theoretical camps. The first of these camps largely views risk assessment as a process of rational and reasoned choice. In this view, risk is represented as a product of both the anticipated negative consequences and uncertainties associated with a particular event or decision. The various risks associated with a particular course of action are identified and weighed; and a decision is made that maximizes the expected benefit while minimizing the associated costs. However, an alternative school of thought considers the process of risk assessment—particularly those involving high levels of uncertainty—as one that is primarily influenced by human psychological factors. According to this school, a number of psychological factors
such as framing effects and cognitive heuristic principles distort the rational decision-making process and give rise to predictable and observable biases in the decision-making process.\textsuperscript{5} This chapter will briefly explore the range of views on risk assessment within the rational choice and psychological decision-making paradigms.

**Conceptualizing Foreign Military Intervention**

This study will consider risk as specifically related to decisions regarding foreign military interventions. Consequently, it is worth some time to more precisely define the range of historical cases in American decision making that this study will examine.

Nearly thirty years ago, James Rosenau criticized scholarship for its undisciplined examination of this critical concept of intervention writing that “scholarly writings on the problem of intervention are singularly devoid of efforts to develop systematic knowledge on the conditions under which interventionary behavior is initiated, sustained, and abandoned.”\textsuperscript{6} One source of this problem, he laments, is that “there appears to be no agreement whatsoever on the phenomena designated by the term.”\textsuperscript{7} Thirty years later, Robert Jervis similarly observes that despite the plea of

\textsuperscript{5} This theory was originally advanced most prominently by Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, “Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision under Risk,” *Econometrica* 47, no. 2 (1979). One of the most comprehensive examinations of these cognitive factors and biases is contained in Daniel Kahneman, Paul Slovic, and Amos Tversky, eds., *Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).


\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.: 152.
James Rosenau to think more analytically about this critical issue, “the concept of intervention has no precise definition.”

One approach to the study of intervention in international affairs has been to adopt a “common-sense usage of the term which, in effect, allows for any action directed toward another nation to be regarded as intervention.” Bertil Duner employed this approach to the study of military interventions in civil wars when developing his typology of interventions ranging from direct combat engagement to indirect support activities such as the provision of military training and financing for weapons purchases. Such an unrestricted definition would quickly become unwieldy in this study given our focus on American military interventions in the post 9/11 period. The scope and range of military assistance programs sponsored by the United States today alone is tremendous. In FY 2005, according to State Department reporting, the United States spent over $89 million in military training programs to over 100 countries and extended nearly $5 billion in financial grants to allow some 65 countries to purchase U.S. military equipment & services. Investigating every instance of American military “intervention” as defined in this broadest sense is an overwhelming prospect and unlikely to produce insights that are relevant to such a diverse class of cases.

---


15
Others have sought to delimit the range of cases by emphasizing the *coercive* nature of interventions. For instance, in examining American intervention policy in the post-Cold War era, Arnold Kanter and Linton Brooks define intervention as “involvement in the affairs of another state…encompass[ing] the entire spectrum of coercive techniques—diplomatic, economic, military, or new techniques based on new technology—with which we seek to change the character or alter the behavior of another government.”¹² Yaacov Vertzberger employs a similar approach by defining his cases in terms of “coercive military intrusion into the internal or foreign affairs of another state.”¹³ By focusing on the coercive nature of interventions, we can eliminate the vast range of modern voluntary bilateral military and economic assistance programs that are clearly designed to bolster the internal capacity of a host nation. Of course, a number of other actions short of the deployment of military forces into a foreign country might properly be considered “coercive” under this definition. According to this definitional logic, for instance, diplomatic prohibitions, economic sanctions, or military measures taken to interrupt the flow of WMD and other technologies to state and non-state actors would potentially be considered forms of foreign intervention. So in some ways, this formulation remains overly broad.

Still other scholars have sought to further sharpen the focus of their investigations by emphasizing both the nature and purpose of interventions. Rosenau, for instance, defined interventions in terms of what he viewed as the two essential characteristics of intervention.

One is what might be called the *convention-breaking* character of interventions. The other is their *authority-oriented* nature. Stated briefly, all kinds of observers from a wide variety of perspective seem inclined to describe the behavior of one international actor toward another as interventionary whenever the form of the behavior constitutes a sharp break with then-existing forms *and* whenever it is directed at changing or preserving the structure of political authority in the target state.\(^{14}\)

In focusing on the purpose of intervention as influencing the “structure of political authority in a target state,” Rosenau intentionally leaves out an important class of behaviors that might also be considered interventionary. Rosenau observes that his definition would specifically exclude “actions…directed at the policies or capabilities of other nations and not at their authority structures.”\(^{15}\) This narrow construction is also somewhat problematic. For instance, the Israeli airstrike on Iraqi nuclear facilities at Osirak in 1981 would by this definition not be considered a military intervention as it was hardly intended to either remove Saddam Hussein from power or otherwise significantly impact the internal structure or domestic authority of the Ba’ath political party. The clear purpose of this military action was to deny Saddam Hussein a nuclear-weapons capability. Yet could anyone seriously doubt that this was a military intervention by any common-sense definition of the term?

In seeking clarification on the meaning of military intervention, Richard Little has noted that the “that the least ambiguous indicator of intervention is the movement of troops by one independent country across the border of another independent country.”\(^{16}\) This definition hints at an important aspect of military interventions, namely the potential

---

15. Ibid.: 164.
for armed conflict. Andrew Bennett, for instance, in his study of Soviet-Russian military interventionism defines the term “as the use of military force in an intrastate or interstate conflict of a foreign country with the objective of influencing the makeup, policies, stability, or strength of the regime in that country.” This definition gets much closer to the range of cases that will be examined in this study.

I am interested in investigating those instances of military intervention that approach the threshold of military conflict. For the purposes of this study, the definition offered by Herbert Tillema best approximates the class of events and behaviors of military interventions that I want to investigate incorporating three essential aspects emphasized in previous scholarship: (1) it is “foreign” in that it involves the transfer of forces across borders and thus violates the sovereignty of the targeted state or actor; (2) it is both “overt” and “authoritative” in that it involves the officially constituted military forces of the intervening state itself and therefore excludes actions by rogue actors or “covert” operations wherein plausible deniability is a key feature; and (3) it poses at least the potential for combat and armed conflict should resistance be encountered. In particular, he writes,

Foreign overt military intervention includes all authoritative military operations that directly involve a state in foreign combat or unilaterally

and irrevocably commit regular military forces to combat should resistance be met.\textsuperscript{18}

**Risk Within a Rational Choice Framework**

This section begins with an examination of some of the most salient aspects of risk when considered in a rational decision-making process aimed at maximizing benefits and minimizing costs. In this intellectual construct, risk is most frequently viewed as a product of both consequences and probabilities.

**Risk**

One of the most salient aspects of risk in both scholarship and normal usage is that involving both negative and (much less frequently) positive consequences. The close association with negative outcomes is particularly emphasized in today’s more modern meaning. For instance, Webster’s Dictionary describes risk as the “possibility

\textsuperscript{18} Herbet K. Tillema, “Foreign Overt Military Intervention in the Nuclear Age,” *Journal of Peace Research* 26, no. No. 2 (1989): 181. Tillema further clarifies this definition in an explanatory footnote on pp. 187-8 reproduced below for further clarification. “Foreign overt military intervention is operationally defined as direct combatant or combat-preparatory military operations conducted upon foreign territory by units of a state’s regular military forces. It includes conventional deployments of ground combat units that include such actions as alert patrol, offensive maneuver, riot quelling, armed occupation of territory, and battle. It also includes other, usually less intense, combatant military actions such as: commando or other small unit raids; aerial bombing, strafing and rocketry; ground-based artillery or rocketry: and naval gunnery and rocketry. Overt military intervention includes all such operations within territories subject to other’s jurisdiction, and also within distinct non-self-governing territories such as colonies, protectorates, mandated or occupied lands not fully integrated within the generally recognized boundaries of a state. It excludes operations conducted by a state within its own integral territory.

Overt military intervention excludes less blatant forms of international interference such as covert operations, military alerts, shows of force, garrison deployments or deployments of other forces not immediately prepared for combat, incursions across international borders that do not involve occupation of territory or other overt military actions, military assistance, and activities of police units, irregular forces, multinational peace forces and international observer groups that do not directly involve the overt military intervention as defined above. Overt military intervention also excludes incidents confined to small arms border fire, engagements among vessels at sea, or encounters among aircraft in flight.”
of suffering harm or loss” and associates the word most closely with “danger” and “hazard.”

More recent definitions in online dictionaries parrot this definition as “a concept that denotes a potential negative impact.”

This view of risk emphasizing the consequences of decisions and actions is frequently the basis for risk analysis within the framework of a rational decision-making process. For instance, Jeffrey Taliaferro uses “the term risk to characterize situations where any action or lack of action may result in serious losses resulting from a great power’s own behavior, adversary or third party reactions, or other exogenous events.”

Similarly, Yaacov Vertzberger more elaborately defines risk as

the likelihood that validly predictable direct and indirect consequences with potentially adverse values will materialize, arising from particular events, self-behavior, environmental constraints, or the reaction of an opponent or third party.

**Uncertainty**

A second aspect of risk dealt with frequently in academic literature is that of uncertainty. Analysts, however, are divided in their understanding of the relationship between risk and uncertainty. For many, these two concepts are bound inextricably together. Supporters of this approach argue that the existence of any uncertainty surrounding a consequential event implies a certain degree of risk. This is often the case in terms of microeconomics where financial risks are commonly defined as an unexpected volatility or variability in returns.

22. Vertzberger, 12.
However, even in the field of economics, others draw clear distinctions between the terms risk and uncertainty. For instance, Frank Knight in his classical work *Risk, Uncertainty, and Profit* offers this framework for distinguishing between risk and uncertainty:

…Uncertainty must be taken in a sense radically distinct from the familiar notion of Risk, from which it has never been separated…It will appear that a measurable uncertainty, or “risk” proper, as we shall use the term, is so far different from an unmeasurable one that it is not in effect an uncertainty at all. We shall accordingly restrict the term “uncertainty” to cases of the non-quantitative type. It is this “true” uncertainty, and not risk, as has been argued which forms the basis of a valid theory of profit and accounts for the divergence between actual and theoretical competition.\(^{23}\)

As other financial analysts have similarly characterized this distinction, risk then “relates to objective probabilities, [whereas] Uncertainty relates to subjective probabilities.”\(^{24}\) In this analytical framework, risk is a factor that can be calculated in advance based on prior experience or statistically-meaningful information; whereas uncertainty is reserved for those instances wherein consequences are immeasurable and where “[t]here is no satisfactory method of computing the probabilities involved.”\(^{25}\) For example, in this construct, anticipating the role of a dice or dealing of a card would represent a genuine “risk” as the probabilities for a particular number being rolled or card dealt are knowable, limited, and calculable, whereas

---


“uncertainty” would be represented by the potential that the dice were loaded or the deck of cards stacked.²⁶

Much of the scholarship in international relations reflects this dichotomy between those emphasizing the role of consequences and those preferring to focus on the uncertainties and probabilities associated with risk. For instance, Jeffrey Taliaferro argues that distinctions between risk and uncertainty are virtually pointless in the realm of foreign policy decision making precisely because uncertainty is an invariable and essential feature of this environment. Consequently, in his assessment of risk, Taliaferro expressly focuses on “the potential for loss or gain”²⁷ emphasizing the potential range of consequences and thereby virtually ignoring uncertainty as a variable. Rose McDermott employs a similar view, holding the level of uncertainty as a constant and operationalizing risk primarily “in terms of the variance in outcome.”²⁸ As she explains:

…if one option presents a 50 percent chance of winning $5 and a 50 percent chance of losing $10, it is less risky than a gamble which offers a 50 percent chance of winning $50 and a 50 percent chance of losing $100. In this case, neither the positive nor the negative outcome of the first gamble is as extreme as that offered by the second; it is thus a riskier choice to play the second bet, regardless of outcome…²⁹

At the other end of the spectrum are scholars emphasizing the probabilities or uncertainties involved with particular choices and policy options. Patricia Weitsman and George Shambaugh, for instance, categorize risk-acceptant actors as those

²⁶. Dr. Andrew Bennett offered this metaphor as a concrete example delineating these different understandings of risk and uncertainty.

²⁷. Taliaferro, 26.


²⁹. Ibid.
preferring “lotteries” or those options with a low probability of success with potentially high pay-offs while “risk-averse actors are those who prefer ‘sure bets’—policies that have a high probability of success, yet with low potential yields.”

Drawing on the previous work of James Morrow, Weitsman and Shambaugh conclude that the risk preference of an actor ultimately boils down to a “choice between the certainty of a moderate outcome and a lottery over two extreme outcomes.”

Yaacov Vertzberger similarly acknowledges a close relationship between the two terms of risk and certainty. Vertzberger lists “risk certainty” as one of the eight distinct attributes of risk and thus sees the level of uncertainty as an integral component of risk. He writes:

People tend first and foremost to associate risk with the content and nature of the outcome…and outcome value…. Associating risk with outcome probability…comes second…. The term risk will be reserved for situations where not only the probabilities of outcomes are uncertain but the situation itself is ambiguous, that is, poses a plausible possibility that at least some outcomes are unknown and will have adverse consequences for the decision makers. According to this formulation, all risky situations subsume uncertainty, but not all uncertain situations involve risky (ambiguous and adverse) outcomes.

**RISK: AS VIEWED BY FOREIGN POLICY PRACTITIONERS**

Whereas much of the academic treatments of risk emphasize the twin roles played by consequences and uncertainty, many programs aimed at educating foreign policypractitioners...
practitioners have a tendency to explain risk in terms of the relationship between the specified objectives of policy and the means employed to achieve those goals. This view of risk also falls solidly within the rational choice framework. However, this policy-oriented approach views risk as an imbalance between policy objectives, strategic concepts, and resources.

For instance, the strategy formulation model employed at the U.S. Army War College (the highest level of professional military education available for officers) describes strategic risk as an imbalance between the “ends” (objectives of U.S. policies), ways (strategic concepts for employing national instruments of power such as diplomacy, information, economic tools, and military force), and means (resources available to execute the strategy).\(^{34}\) In this context the task for the strategist and policymaker is to minimize “risk” by ensuring an adequate balance between these considerations.

Yet this abstract description of strategic risk is not especially helpful to the scholar, the foreign policy practitioner, or the military strategist charged with developing a comprehensive approach to securing the nation’s interests. Just how, for instance, is a policymaker or military strategist to concretely estimate the composition of the military force, the amount and forms of economic reconstruction assistance, and the content, timing, or structure of a diplomatic approach (strategic ways) that will be required to attain the American goal of establishing a stable and peaceful democracy in Iraq (political end)? Surely, the ultimate goal of American strategy in Iraq must be attainable with the tools, means, and resources available. But of what practical

utility is this description of risk as an imbalance between these almost certainly unquantifiable “ends” and “means”? How should the scholar or strategist attempt to measure such elusive variables in advance of what is a rather nebulous and unknowable outcome?

A book length treatment of national strategy published by the Air University (by its own charter, the Intellectual and Leadership Center of the U.S. Air Force) does little better in terms of offering an alternative framework for the discussion of strategic risk. This publication defines risk at the national level as “the difference between the threats posed to our security by our adversaries and our capabilities to counter or negate those threats.”  But this definition similarly leaves the scholar and foreign policy practitioner with the nearly insurmountable task of quantifying and qualifying both the broad array of threats from state and non-state actors and the capacity of the U.S. government to deal with these diverse threats. For instance, how does one assess whether a policy of confrontation, regime change, containment, or engagement with Iran best minimizes “risks” to America? Is diplomatic negotiation with Tehran inherently less risky than military confrontation? Military conflict with Iran may well place the lives of American service men and women at risk and will likely involve a costly expenditure of the nation’s human and fiscal treasure, but a diplomatic approach that is ultimately unsuccessful in deterring the Iranian use of a nuclear weapon against a metropolitan city in the U.S. is also quite a risky proposition in terms of the tremendous damage that could be inflicted to American society.

Both of these rational examinations of risk as either a calculated relationship between consequences and uncertainty or as an imbalance in strategic ends, ways, and means assume the ability of the analyst or policymaker to quantify and qualify these rather abstract terms in a highly volatile and unpredictable international environment. It is precisely this assumption that some scholars are beginning to question in terms of its applicability to modern-day security challenges.

A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF RISK

A prominent group of sociologists studying modern society are inclined to dismiss altogether the rather traditional views of risk as a purely mathematical product of consequences and uncertainty or as a calculated relationship between strategic ends, ways, and means. These sociologists argue that contemporary “threats” such as the potential for the explosion of a nuclear bomb in the middle of a major metropolitan area, the rapid spread of pandemic diseases, and the severe effects of global environmental degradation render any attempt at traditional cost-benefit analysis in policymaking virtually meaningless. Even before the terrorist attacks of 9/11, German sociologist Ulrich Beck wrote that whereas in the past,

decisions were ….undertaken with fixed norms of calculability, connecting means and ends or causes and effects. These norms are precisely what ‘world risk society’ has rendered invalid. All of this becomes very evident with private insurance, perhaps the greatest symbol of calculation and alternative security—which does not cover nuclear disaster, nor climate change and its consequences, nor the breakdown of Asian economics, nor the low-probability high-consequence risk of various forms of future technologies….like genetic engineering.36

One prominent example displaying the folly of traditional risk calculations in today’s complex and interconnected environment would be the spectacular collapse of global financial markets. In an effort to tame markets and insure against loss, financial managers developed and deployed a range of tools including hedge funds, derivates, and credit default swaps based on certain probabilities and assumptions. Of course, these calculations failed to anticipate the low probability but clearly highly consequential eventuality of a simultaneous collapse in the housing and investments markets, a dramatic decline in the automobile industry, and multiple concurrent crises in the global commercial banking and credit markets. Moreover, the hidden interconnectedness of global markets and the lack of transparency involving many of these financial mechanisms made accurate risk assessments virtually impossible.

Applying these insights directly to the formulation of national security strategies, Danish political scientist Mikkel Rasmussen has argued that the combination of nearly unfathomable consequences and the tremendous range of uncertainties associated with contemporary threats has rendered traditional analysis of risk “as a function of political ends and military means” largely irrelevant.\footnote{Mikkel Vedby Rasmussen, \textit{The Risk Society at War: Terror, Technology and Strategy in the Twenty-First Century} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 7.}

Nonetheless, Rasmussen considers contemporary risk analysis a fundamentally rational decision-making process. However, the process is not one of calculating consequences and probabilities or balancing strategic ends, ways, and means, but rather one in which the policymaker must “choose which risks they most need to prevent and which they have to accept.”\footnote{Ibid., 4.} The first task in the risk management
of foreign policy then is to identify the potential types of risks associated with a particular threat. The second step is to contemplate various alternative courses of action to address those threats and then consider the attendant risks that will most likely emerge from the adoption of one or more of these approaches or solutions to this challenge. Understanding the full range and types of risks associated with the particular threat or challenges thus becomes a critical component in any modern-day risk assessment process. Risk, in this sociological view, becomes disassociated from traditional quantitative calculations of consequence and uncertainty, but nonetheless remains intimately tied to the very process of decision making itself and would appear to be particularly relevant for policymakers struggling with the contemporary security challenges associated with the threats of global terrorism and weapons of mass destruction.

This study will adopt a conception of risk that combines the key insights of both Vertzberger and Taliaferro in that considerations of risk in decisions regarding complex issues such as foreign military interventions necessarily assume high levels of uncertainty. For that reason, this study will emphasize risk as a concept primarily consisting of those anticipated negative consequences associated with specific policy decisions. However, this paper is also sympathetic to the claim of the sociological view that one should not assume that risks in the contemporary security environment can be readily quantified and calculated. Instead, the focus here will be on qualifying the various types of risk (anticipated adverse consequences) associated within a rational policy decision-making process.
**RISK VIEWED THROUGH A PSYCHOLOGICAL PRISM**

A number of psychological and cognitive factors operating at the individual level of decision making have been used to explain why individual perceptions of risk might vary from a purely rational decision-making process. Daniel Kahnemann and Amos Tversky in the 1970’s and 1980’s began studying the psychological factors involved with individual perceptions of risk.\(^{39}\) In particular, Kahneman and Tversky concluded that people are generally risk-averse, feel the pain of losses more intensely than they value the prospect of gains, and calculate their costs/benefits in relationship to an established reference point (often, but not always, the status quo).

Building on this theoretical foundation, scholars have since sought to demonstrate the applicability of these psychological insights directly to the field of international relations. Prospect theory has been used to explain “risky” military interventions of great powers in regions of marginal interest\(^{40}\) and to illustrate the comparative difficulty of compelling another state to sacrifice an already secured possession as compared to deterring a state from an action that is merely contemplated.\(^{41}\) It has been further employed to explain the shifting risk preferences of leaders such as President Roosevelt during the Munich Crisis of 1938\(^ {42}\) and that of President Carter’s

---


40. Taliaferro.


decision to authorize the failed hostage rescue attempt of American hostages in Iran in 1980.\textsuperscript{43} More generally, scholars have argued that prospect theory can help to explain why war is more likely when states find themselves operating in a domain of loss thereby increasing the risk propensities (and potential for miscalculation) of their leaders.\textsuperscript{44} David Welch has recently used prospect theory as a foundation for developing what he calls a “loss-aversion” theory of foreign policy change because, he argues, foreign policy is most likely to change dramatically when leaders expect the status quo to generate continued painful losses.\textsuperscript{45}

Despite these demonstrations of the uses of prospect theory in the field of international relations, this approach still suffers from a number of methodological and empirical shortcomings. Methodologically, perhaps the most significant criticism has to do with the inability of prospect theory to identify a decision maker’s reference point independent of the behavior being examined. Thus the theory is at risk of being tautological. This is potentially a fatal flaw given the critical role played by the reference point in prospect theory. It is, after all, this point that determines whether the decision maker is operating in the domain of losses or gains. If the decision maker’s domain is determined primarily by the apparently “risky” nature of the behavior itself, then it is becomes an empty claim to say that the domain of loss was the cause of such risky decision making. Thus what prospect theory needs so desperately is a separate theory to determine an actor’s reference point ex-

\textsuperscript{43} McDermott, 45-75. See especially Chapter 3: The Iranian Hostage Rescue Mission.


ante. Other significant methodological challenges associated with prospect theory’s approach include difficulties associated with quantifying the anticipated costs and benefits of multiple courses of action, distinguishing between current and future costs, aggregating the risk propensities of individuals in small elite decision-making groups, and in distinguishing and accounting for the varied types of political, policy, economic, and security risks involved in foreign policy decision making.46

Aside from these substantial methodological obstacles, prospect theory has encountered difficulties on empirical grounds, as well. For instance, several scholars have criticized the basis of prospect theory for being largely grounded in psychological studies conducted in antiseptic laboratory settings that do not reflect the actual circumstances in which decision makers find themselves. Translating these psychological findings—that in many cases are based on interviews of college students—to the real world of policymaking is a dubious undertaking in the minds of these critics. Others have noted that even in these studies, the predictions of prospect theory do not hold true for fully one-third of the respondents.47 Given these criticisms, how relevant are prospect theory’s findings to the decision-making process of statesmen?

Additionally, one can certainly question whether the weight of historical events supports the generalizations of prospect theory to international relations more broadly. For instance, Rose McDermott does a credible job of making the case that President


Carter was operating in a domain of loss and that this offers a partial explanation for his decision to authorize the militarily complicated and thus “risky” rescue attempt of the American hostages held in Iran in the spring of 1980. Yet if this is the case, why didn’t President Carter respond much more forcefully and aggressively just months earlier in response to the more serious security challenge of the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan? Presumably his overall strategic reference point and frame of reference would not have dramatically changed in this brief period between the two events. Why would the same President adopt a risk-averse posture in late December 1979 in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, but turn around in April 1980 and select a markedly risk-acceptant course of action in authorizing the hostage rescue operation?

Finally, directly related to the methodological issues related to independently establishing a leader’s reference point are the associated challenges of doing so empirically in the analysis of historical and contemporary events. For instance, one might make a plausible case that in the wake of the devastating terrorist attacks of 9/11, President George W. Bush was operating in a domain of sudden loss that could explain America’s willingness to initiate “risky” military attacks against the Taliban in Afghanistan on that basis. But then how would one explain America’s subsequent invasion of Iraq in 2003? Couldn’t one make the case that President George W. Bush should have perceived himself operating in a domain of gain in light of the visible U.S. military successes in Afghanistan and with both American and international public opinion uniting solidly behind his leadership? Shouldn’t

48. McDermott, Chapter 3.
that have substantially mitigated against a decision to initiate a substantially “risky” military American intervention into Iraq?

**Heuristics and Biases in Individual Decision Making**

Other potential explanations for variances in risk perception are grounded in psychological theories of individual decision making. Here too Daniel Kahneman, along with Paul Slovic and Amos Tversky, was influential in describing cognitive shortcuts and heuristics employed by people in complex decision-making scenarios involving high levels of uncertainty.

Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky demonstrated that these heuristics caused people to improperly assess the probabilities of events which in turn led to significant and systemic errors in risk assessment that departed from a purely rational calculation of the costs and benefits associated the scenario. The key heuristics employed in these circumstances are representativeness, availability, and anchoring.

Representativeness has to do with the degree of association between an event or outcome and the similarity it has with another class of events. In one study, for instance, Kahneman discovered that people were far more likely to judge the profession of an unknown person (Steve) as a librarian if accompanied by a description of Steve as shy and intellectual.

This was true regardless of the objective probabilities associated with Steve being a librarian. These faulty probability assessments were unduly influenced by the irrelevant information conforming to the perceived stereotype of a librarian because such information was

---

50. Ibid., 4.
deemed representative of this class of events/outcomes. In an example more directly relevant to the field of international relations, Jack Levy similarly notes that a study in the 1980’s revealed a representative bias in that “subjects believed that ‘a Russian invasion of Poland and a complete suspension of diplomatic relations between the USA and the Soviet Union’ were more likely than the suspension of diplomatic relations alone.”

This was held to be true despite the fact that the probability of either single event must logically be greater than the probability of the conjunction of those two events.

The availability heuristic has to do with the immediate retrievability, vividness, and salience of the information at hand. As Paul Slovic describes it “[p]eople using this heuristic judge an event as likely or frequent if instances of it are easy to imagine or recall.” Thus dramatic, violent, and catastrophic events receiving frequent attention in mass media (such as terrorist attacks) are likely to cause individuals to exaggerate the likelihood and risks associated with these events regardless of actual evidence at hand. This heuristic has been used to explain, for instance, why people are more concerned with airline crashes than car accidents despite overwhelming statistical evidence that fatalities from car crashes are much more common place than those involving airplanes.

Lastly, the anchoring heuristic implies that people are slow to adjust their probability and risk assessments based on new information and instead overweight the initial estimates associated with an event. This heuristic can be used to explain why


decision makers cling stubbornly to information that is viewed as consistent with initial perceptions of probability and risk. A recent example of this might be public opinion polls conducted years after the 9/11 attacks revealing that a high percentage of Americans (nearly 70%) remained convinced of Saddam Hussein’s involvement with these Al-Qa’ida-initiated attacks “even though the Bush administration and congressional investigators say they have no evidence of this.”

Initial suspicions of Saddam Hussein’s involvement in these attacks thus continued to “anchor” Americans’ assessments for years despite the lack of any concrete evidence to bolster this position.

David Ropeik and George Gray from the Harvard Center for Risk Analysis have drawn on a number of these human psychological factors to explain patterns in risk assessments that appear to exaggerate some types of risk over others. For instance, they note that people are more afraid of novel risks rather than those that are familiar (statistically-rare changes of a biological anthrax attack might be feared more than the much more likely probabilities of being exposed to the flu); people are generally more afraid of dramatic risks that can be easily imagined as particularly awful (being eaten by a shark or suffering from a radiological attack, for instance); they are more afraid of man-made threats than they are of those posed by nature (more concerned with dangers associated with nuclear waste and cell phones than the risks of being exposed to earthquakes or floods); and they are more afraid of risks when levels of uncertainty surrounding the event are particularly high. It is obvious that many of the


modern-day security threats involving global terrorism, the potential use of weapons of mass destruction by rogue nations, and environment disasters related to global climate change fit within these categories of risks that are likely to be exaggerated and lead to a distorted risk assessment and subsequent decision-making process.

**Other Components of Risk:**

*Time horizons*

One feature of risk assessment in the contemporary security environment according a sociological view is that risks are evaluated largely in terms of the future. Policies adopted today are heavily weighted in terms of their impact in influencing the behavior of state and non-state actors in the immediate term and in shaping the broader contours of the security environment in the longer-term future.

When weighing the consequences and uncertainties associated with the risks of particular policies, decision makers must obviously consider both the short-term and long-term likely impacts and effects of their actions. On the one hand, the closer the time horizon being examined, the narrower the range of presumed uncertainties associated with the anticipated effects and the more clearly predicted effects appear. Depending on the political structure of the decision-making process, one might then anticipate that political leaders in democratic governments will be more sensitive to short-term impacts while career bureaucrats adopt a somewhat longer-term perspective even if more narrowly focused on the implications for his/her home agency. As Yaacov Vertzberger writes of anticipated negative consequences,

55. Scott Page makes an interesting counter-case that particular forms of path dependence might better anticipate longer range outcomes, while the near-term outcomes are far more uncertain. See Scott E. Page, “Path Dependence,” *Quarterly Journal of Political Science* 1 (2006).
The closer in time they are, the more vivid and salient they will seem, and the more weight they will be given. Distant negative consequences are under-weighed and perceived as less likely to occur; they therefore have only a minor impact on decisions. Short-term high-risk assessments are given much more weight than assessments of the accumulation of long-term risk outcomes.\textsuperscript{56}

To the contrary, however, Ulrich Beck has suggested that the reflexive thinking of modern society also might potentially make decision makers even more sensitive to the longer-term impacts of their decisions.

The concept of risk reverses the relationship of past, present, and future. The past loses its power to determine the present. We are discussing and arguing about something which is \textit{not} the case, but \textit{could} happen if we continue to steer the same course as we have been. The more threatening the shadows that fall on the present day from a terrible looming future in the distance, the more compelling the shock that can be provoked by dramatizing risk today.\textsuperscript{57}

In either of these cases, it is clear that risks associated with particular policy options (including those involving foreign military interventions) must be assessed for the anticipated impacts on the future—whether in the near, medium, or longer terms.

\textbf{Perceived vs. real risks}

A final characteristic of risk to be considered is the distinction between “real” and “perceived” risk. Real risks are those that are both quantifiable and objectively verifiable. These risks exist in fact and can be proven to be present. Perceived risks are those risks as experienced and assessed by individual policymakers or citizens. While real and perceived risks may be identical, there is also certainly the potential for a significant gap between real and perceived risks. A number of factors

\textsuperscript{56} Vertzberger, 26.

\textsuperscript{57} Beck, 137. Italics in original.
can account for this differential. Limited, incomplete, or inaccurate information (uncertainty) can often account for this difference between reality and perception. In fact, one of many causal explanations for the democratic peace theory rests on the assumption that the transparent nature of information flow in a democratic government reduces prospects for miscalculation and miscommunication and thereby reduces the likelihood of war between democracies.⁵⁸ Another potential explanation for this gap between actual and perceived risk lies in the cognitive limitations, biases, and heuristic shortcuts employed by human decision makers as addressed in much of the scholarship surrounding psychological aspects of decision-making and international relations theories.

This study will focus more intently on risks as they are “perceived” by key decision makers. In understanding (and predicting) the behavior of policymakers, it is the likely “perception” of risks that will directly influence decisions made or policies adopted. Moreover, as discussed previously, a truly objective measure of risk is a questionable undertaking when attempting to estimate the consequences and uncertainties surrounding modern-day security challenges such as the potential for the explosion of a nuclear weapon in a major American city, the human and economic costs of global warming, the potential casualties from the rapid spread of pandemic influenza or biological pathogens, or the global implications of the collapse of the Asian or American financial markets.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have briefly explored the range of scholarly theories offering various explanations for the assessment of risks. In rational choice models of decision making, the process of risk assessment is primarily informed by the potential consequences and uncertainties surrounding a particular event, outcome, or policy solution. In these models, the various types of risk associated with a particular policy option must be identified, quantified, and assessed. Changes in risk perceptions will best be explained by variations in the rational calculations of the consequences associated with particular policy decisions or options. A sociological approach to risk assessment also envisions risk assessment as a fundamentally rational process anticipating consequences of decisions or policies, but nonetheless heavily discounts the ability of governments and policymakers to concretely quantify the consequences and uncertainties surrounding modern-day security challenges such as terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, the spread of infectious diseases, and global climate change. The sociological approach instead emphasizes the need to analyze the trade-offs among the various types of risk associated with a policy decision. Both of these rational choice paradigms of risk assessment subsume the ability to develop a theoretical typology of risks associated with decisions to undertake foreign military interventions. The next chapter will offer one suggestion for a general typology of the political, policy, military, economic risks generally associated with foreign military interventions within a rational choice paradigm that will serve as the dependent variable of interest in this study. Finally, another important theoretical approach to risk seeks to explain the process of risk assessments as one primarily driven by psychological and cognitive factors operating within the decision-making
process itself. This study will employ these variables as factors that can intervene in the decision-making process of individuals assessing the domestic and international risks associated with military interventions.

This thesis explores the central question of if and how the risk perceptions of key American decision makers have changed substantially in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Is the American decision-making process associated with the initiation of foreign military interventions one that remains fundamentally grounded in rational calculations of anticipated consequences? What are the anticipated political, policy, military, and economic consequences of foreign military interventions and how have these consequences been assessed by American policymakers in weighing foreign military interventions in both pre and post-9/11 security environments? Alternatively, how well are the risk perceptions of American leaders explained by human psychological factors impacting decision making? What, if any, affects did the attacks of 9/11 have on these psychological and cognitive factors operating at the individual level of decision making?

These questions argue for a qualitative approach in providing a detailed and contextual analysis of the risk perceptions of American leaders when contemplating the option of initiating military interventions overseas. The next chapter will outline a logical argument for historical case selection focusing on several instances of decisions by American presidents to initiate military interventions into Afghanistan and Iraq both before and after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. It is hoped that these cases will help to illuminate both the consistencies and differences in risk perception in an age dominated by the threat of global terrorism.
CHAPTER 2: CASE SELECTION AND METHODOLOGY

The research paper will employ a qualitative case study technique employing process tracing to examine the evolving assessments of political, economic, and military risks by senior policymakers\(^1\) associated with U.S. decisions regarding military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. These cases will allow multiple cross-case and within-case comparisons spanning significant shifts in the international power structure ranging from the height of superpower competition during the Cold War, to the emergence of a unipolar world dominated by the United States, and through the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In addition to these shifts in the international security environment, these cases vary in terms of the domestic political contexts spanning multiple American administrations and presidents. The study engages these issues of risk perception across all three levels of analysis (international, domestic, and individual) elucidated in Kenneth Waltz’s classic treatise on international relations theories.\(^2\)

With respect to Afghanistan, the study will contrast the risk assessments of President Carter and his principal advisors in the decision to avoid military intervention as a

---

1. For the purposes of this paper, senior policymakers will be defined as those officials who are designated members of the National Security Council, i.e., the president, vice president, secretary of defense, and secretary of state (statutory members); as well as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of Central Intelligence (statutory advisors). The views and perspectives of the president as the constitutionally-designated Commander-in-Chief of the United States armed forces will be given paramount attention.


In the historical cases of America’s lengthy history of military confrontations with Iraq, several critical decisions will be studied. The risk sensitivities of President George H.W. Bush and his advisors will be explored in both the initial decision to launch Desert Storm expelling Iraqi forces from Kuwait (1991) and in his subsequent rejection of the option to occupy Baghdad and remove Saddam Hussein from power. The thesis will examine the perceived risks associated with the decisions of President George W. Bush to launch Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF, 2003) and to subsequently authorize a surge of additional American troops in 2007.

Why these particular cases? In probing the perceived risks associated with military interventions in the post-9/11 period, the American military interventions into Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003, 2007) constitute the universe of key cases of military conflict in the post-9/11 period initiated by a global power with tremendous military and economic capacity for further adventurism. These are thus important historical case studies of military interventions to study in and of themselves. Moreover, doing so would find adequate justification in the tradition of in-depth single historical case studies⁴ that have contributed so much to theory development

---

⁴ For a classical defense of the ability of single case studies to contribute to theory development, see Harry Eckstein, “Case Study and Theory in Political Science,” in *Handbook of Political Science: Strategies of Inquiry*, ed. Fred I Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1975).
as exemplified by Graham Allison’s influential work on American foreign decision making in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.4

Nonetheless, the methodological shortfalls and theoretical limitations of the studies of unique historical events are also substantial and have been thoroughly discussed and debated amongst scholars of history and political science.5 In order to minimize the pitfalls associated with these small-n studies, the research design adopted in this paper will employ what Alexander George characterizes as a method of structured, focused comparison combining and blending “the perspectives and special methods of both the historian and political scientist.”6 In this sense, the focus of the study is provided by a concentration on the risk perceptions of the president in each of these crucial historical case studies. Its structure is provided by the consistency in the general questions that are asked in terms of the factors operating at the international, domestic, and individual levels serving to influence these perceptions of risk.

Of course, focusing on these historical cases of American military interventions into Afghanistan and Iraq also poses some drawbacks. One of the most apparent is the comparatively small number of historical case studies employed regarding foreign military interventions in the post-9/11 period. As with any small-n study,


observations and conclusions drawn will be restricted to cases involving strong similarities within both the international and domestic contexts of decision making. Observations concerning the risk perceptions of these senior American leaders will also necessarily be somewhat contingent not only to the specific historical circumstances of the decision-making process and security challenges confronted, but also to the particular individuals involved in the formulation of policy options.

Nevertheless, there are also some significant advantages to be gained by examining these particular cases of foreign military interventions. First, as previously mentioned, the cases of American interventions in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003, 2007) constitute the universe of cases of American foreign military interventions in the post-9/11 environment. Second, these are cases with profound policy implications for the future of international affairs given the dominant role that is likely to be played by America in future crisis situations threatening global security. Third, the historical record of previous American interventions in these same countries provides a useful basis of comparison in examining how risk perceptions may have altered with significant variations in the international & domestic environments and involving different senior decision makers. Fourth, this particular case selection allows for an examination of risk perceptions both in cases that resulted in military intervention, but also in instances where the decision was either to reject altogether the option of military intervention such as with President Carter’s decision to avoid a military response to the

---

Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan in 1979; or to reject the option of extending an ongoing intervention such as in President Bush’s decision to terminate Operation Desert Storm in 1991 rather than ordering coalition military forces to proceed beyond Kuwait to destroy withdrawing Iraqi forces, occupy Baghdad, and oust Saddam Hussein from power. These particular decisions to avoid military intervention thus constitute important negative cases. Fifth, by employing Alexander George’s methodology of a structured, focused case study, I hope to establish a solid foundation upon which future scholarship can build. In short, I have taken an approach that allows for both comparative and within-case analysis consistent with qualitative methodologies advocated by scholars such as Andrew Bennett and Alexander George.

**CASE STRUCTURE & FOCUS**

The dependent variable in this study is the demonstrated sensitivity of senior policymakers to the political, policy, military, and economic risks associated with decisions to initiate foreign military interventions as gauged by their public statements and the historical record of internal deliberations as best can be accessed through unclassified papers, memoirs, and news reporting. As such, these variables comprise a single substantive focus for this research project. The independent variables in this paper will consist of the systemic distribution of power among actors in the international environment and considerations of balance-of-power and balance-of-threat. Psychological factors including the American president’s

---


reference point in both the international and domestic environments will comprise an intervening variable that serves to potentially alter his overall risk propensity. Similarly, the influence of cognitive heuristics such as representativeness, availability, and anchoring will be considered as intervening variables that might significantly influence perceptions and weighting of the various types of risk considered in the decision-making process.

**Differentiating and Operationalizing the Dependent Variable (Risks Associated with Foreign Military Interventions):**

Having clarified the notion of foreign military intervention in the previous chapter, it is important to begin the process of “unpacking” the types of risk associated with the decisions to initiate these kinds of operations. There are several reasons to devote time and energy to a differentiation of the risks that might be considered by senior decision makers as they contemplate military intervention overseas. As discussed previously, a discussion of risk as a component of a rational decision-making process is contingent on being able to distinguish and identify the various categories or types of risk that should be considered by policymakers. Secondly and theoretically, much of the evidence gathered by psychologists suggests that risk propensities in individual leaders can vary widely across issue-areas. As Paul Kowert and Margaret Hermann affirmed in a 1997 article, “people may be willing to take risks in some areas of their lives but not in others…[and consequently] any effort to study risk taking must take the context of behavior into account.” For instance, one person may well

---


be extremely willing to take financial risks in creating a stock portfolio including overseas ventures, but at the same time be quite hesitant to assume the personal risks involved in traveling overseas to an undeveloped and unfamiliar country to physically investigate the prospects associated with that same investment.

Similarly, in the field of international relations, decision makers are likely to be sensitive to different categories of risk depending on their particular views, backgrounds, positions, and perspectives. A publicly elected decision maker serving a 4-year term in office considering the option of initiating military operations in a foreign country might be expected to emphasize the potential domestic political risks associated with a decision to initiate or terminate a military intervention. However, the recommendation of a seasoned career diplomat regarding that same decision might arguably be much more heavily influenced by perceptions of the risks posed to the country’s international reputation or to the potential for the intervention to yield significant shifts in the global or regional power structure. Meanwhile, a uniformed military officer might focus more intently on the potential for friendly military casualties. Similarly, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget might reasonably be expected to concentrate on issues more directly related to the potential budgetary costs of a military intervention. Distinguishing between different categories of risk allows one to anticipate which types and categories of risk are likely to be most influential to particular policymakers engaged in the decision-making process. By examining these types of risk, I hope to avoid the overly simplistic approach of characterizing particular policy options as either inherently risky or not. Instead, the researcher or policymaker can employ a framework that illuminates, considers, and weighs the various risks involved in a particular decision.
Additionally, a more clearly defined typology of these risks can facilitate a more sophisticated understanding of the interactions and relationships between the various categories or types of risk typically confronted by decision makers. This will lend both theoretical richness to the study of these decisions and simultaneously more closely approximate the actual range of risks as perceived by the decision makers themselves. This approach will in turn allow us to examine some of the relationships between the international and domestic factors impacting decision making regarding the use of military force.

Such an approach also has the potential to help resolve some of indeterminate findings of prospect theory. For instance, Rose McDermott argues the utility of prospect theory in explaining President Carter’s “risky” decision to authorize the military rescue of American diplomats held by Iranians because this decision was made in the domain of loss. Yet she fails to explain the interaction between the military risks of such an operation that were considerable (an operation involving multiple military services in hostile and difficult terrain with significant potential for American casualties) and the admittedly low domestic political risk given the widespread public support for strong action. Thus the decision itself was not truly “risky,” but rather was more specifically relatively “risky” in terms of the low prospects for military success and high potential for casualties, while it was much less “risky” in terms of the domestic political context of the decision itself.

As this example illustrates, it often makes little sense to categorize one policy option—whether military, diplomatic, or economic—as inherently risky in and of itself. Rather the real questions are: What types of risks are associated with this
decision? How are these different types of risk perceived and weighed by key policymakers involved in the decision-making process? What considerations at the international and state-level are most influential to those individual decision makers? Are these considerations changing the process of risk assessment in a post-9/11 world?

**Political Risk**

At base, politics deals with the distribution of power. Just as the concept of power has been examined from a number of different aspects,\(^\text{12}\) so too political risk must be examined from multiple perspectives and from different levels of analysis. Alan Lamborn associates political risk with “the possibility that policy choices will have adverse effects on the power of key members in the decision-making coalition.”\(^\text{13}\)

This definition makes clear that political risks are likely to be viewed quite differently from the perspectives of actors with varying organizational, bureaucratic, and individual interests. However, a single actor may also have to consider various aspects of political risks operating at different levels of analysis. For instance, at the international level, Secretary Powell’s presentation to the United Nations Security Council building the case for American military intervention against Iraq in 2003 clearly was intended to foster international political support and consensus behind a potential U.S. military intervention and thereby reducing the risk of international political opposition. However, this same act—by publicly endorsing a view of


the urgent threat posed by Saddam Hussein—limited Secretary Powell’s ability to effectively oppose a mounting internal consensus within the President’s National Security Council to take military action. This single act might then be argued to have minimized political risks at the international level while increasing the political risks confronting Secretary Powell within the small decision-making body of the NSC.

The management of political risk at the state level can also be focused on issues relating to the separation of powers between Congress and the President and minimizing prospects for domestic political opposition. Many scholars and analysts certainly see this aspect of political risk evidenced in the tremendous amount of time and energy invested by the U.S. administration in securing a joint resolution of Congress authorizing President George W. Bush “to use the Armed Forces of the United States as he determines to be necessary and appropriate…to defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq.”

This measure preserved maximum decision-making power for the President and minimized the prospect that domestic political opposition would subsequently compel an end to military action (the problem of involuntary defection) by demonstrating broad bipartisan political support in advance of any anticipated military action. This action was publicly billed as an important display of national unity confronting the dangerous threat posed by Saddam Hussein in the hopes of reducing prospects for international military conflict. However, it also effectively placed domestic political opposition leaders in the difficult position of choosing between either: (a) supporting the decision to invade Iraq before the consequences of such action were

visible and thereby limiting their ability to criticize this decision after-the-fact; or (b) being labeled as someone who failed to support the nation’s commander-in-chief at a critical time when the American public was feeling particularly vulnerable in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. Viewed from a bureaucratic perspective at the state level, the issue of political risk might more narrowly deal with organizational influence in the decision-making process itself as is consistent with Lamborn’s view. From this vantage point, political risk has to do more explicitly with bureaucratic or decision-making autonomy within the small group itself. Secretary Rumsfeld’s insistence that the Department of Defense formally direct the interagency decision-making process regarding post-conflict operations in Iraq in 2003 is a case in point reflecting this bureaucratic aspect of political risk.

The organizational position of someone within the decision-making structure has the potential to influence the types of these risks to which he or she is most sensitive. For instance, the president in the role of party chief must certainly heavily weigh the domestic political risks associated with any foreign policy option both in terms of his narrow self-interest in getting re-elected, but also out of concern for improving prospects for elections of other members of his party to Congress. This sensitivity to political risk may well explain why President Bush refused to accept Secretary Rumsfeld’s resignation or announce his decision to deploy an additional 20,000 American troops into Iraq until after the mid-term elections in 2006. As commander-in-chief, however, the president must also certainly be keenly sensitive to the international political risks of shifting balances of power and the need to preserve the nation’s credibility and reputation. As head of government, the president is obliged
to consider both the domestic and international economic ramifications of military interventions, as well as those related to the political side of the ledger.

On the other hand, a mid-level career diplomat working at the Iraq desk at the State Department is not likely to be particularly concerned about decisions impacting the political future of a particular party, but is rather more apt to be focused on the regional or global diplomatic impacts of a decision. In this case, a lower ranked State Department official may well be more influenced by broader political calculations of risk at the global or regional level, whereas a higher ranked politically-elected (or appointed) official might be expected to be more narrowly focused on political risk as a function of domestic partisan politics.

**Policy Risk**

Alan Lamborn also drew important distinctions between political and policy risks in his 1985 landmark article on “Risk and Foreign Policy Choice.” In his view, while political risks consist of the potential to affect the power distribution among decision makers, policy risk is defined as “the probability that policy goals will not be achieved.” This definition, however, is problematic for use in this study for two primary reasons. First and foremost, Lamborn’s approach to risk is premised on an understanding of risk as a function of probability while this paper emphasizes those aspects of risk associated with the scale of likely consequences. Secondly, the task of arriving at objective quantification of policy risk in this sense of term is daunting, particularly when decision makers are attempting to assess risks *a priori*. However,
Lamborn in his subsequent discussion of the likely interaction between these two types of risk does offer important insights into policy risks that more readily lend themselves to qualification, if not quantification. These aspects of policy risk include: (a) the connection of the policy to “core values” of the decision maker; and (b) the internal consistency of the policy itself.\(^\text{17}\)

From this perspective, an option that is either contrary to stated policy priorities or departs meaningfully from existing policy frameworks involves a substantial degree of policy risk. Applying this to the issue of foreign military interventions, President Clinton’s decision to launch limited missile attacks on suspected Al-Qa’ida facilities in Sudan and Afghanistan might be argued to have subsumed a minimal degree of policy risk in that these extremely limited military actions did not represent a tremendous departure from the existing policy framework that viewed the challenge of terrorism as a law enforcement matter. Similarly, President G.W. Bush’s decision to authorize Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 might be considered to involve a comparatively higher degree of policy risk in that it represented a significant departure from the campaign pledges of President GW Bush to avoid American military engagement in nation-building operations and represented the first test of a new strategy emphasizing pre-emptive and preventive military interventions.

At an organizational level, perceptions of policy risks can certainly be influenced by organizational cultures and routines. With regard to the uniformed military, for instance, forces are built and trained for particular missions and functions in accordance with existing national strategies and guidance. The military leadership

\(^{17}\) Ibid.: 391-393.
then translates these strategic missions and develops an appropriate force structure and doctrine best suited to accomplish these tasks. Missions that are perceived to be outside this range of capabilities pose additional policy risks as these forces are not ideally equipped or trained to accomplish these tasks. This perception of high policy risk can help to explain the hesitance of America’s uniformed leaders to embrace the post-Cold War humanitarian interventions in Bosnia, Somalia, and Kosovo at a time when the military bureaucracy had been focused on preparing for traditional missions of defeating more conventional armed forces of states such as Russia or Iraq. It also is one possible explanation for the American military’s strong preference for planning a large-scale and deliberate invasion of Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks despite the tremendous pressure from civilian leadership in the Pentagon for a strategy employing a much smaller American footprint with a presumably shorter timeline for deployment of that force. For senior military leaders, these options represented a significant departure from existing (and preferred) policy frameworks and hence reflected higher levels of policy risk.

**Economic Risk**

Economic definitions of risk traditionally center on the potential for profit or loss in a financial sense. As with political risks, perspectives of these risks will vary across the levels of analysis. At the global level, foreign military interventions potentially involve both gains and losses. Gain can comprise securing access to critical economic resources. This, of course, is one common explanation for America’s repeated military ventures in the oil-rich Middle East region. Indeed, President Carter, in his State of the Union Address on 23 January 1980, declared the Soviet
invasion of Afghanistan as “a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil” and thus a threat to America’s vital economic interests.18

At the domestic level, however, economic risks associated with military interventions can be more directly related to the actual and anticipated funding expenditures required to conduct these operations. In this sense, these risks can be thought of as the consequence of a financial “loss” in the traditional sense of the term. The more expensive the intervention, the higher and more significant are the economic risks. Of course, expenditures on military adventures can have both positive and negative economic effects. On the positive side, in a capitalist economic system such as the United States, federal expenditures on military operations often translate into financial gain for private companies and contractors supporting the war effort. This relationship was at the heart of President Eisenhower’s warnings against the dangers of a military-industrial complex that had a shared commercial interest in promoting military conflict. This potential for gain in the private sector is perhaps even greater with today’s American volunteer military being so heavily reliant on civilian contracting support for logical and administrative functions. For instance, as of early 2007 the Pentagon had awarded at least $20 billion for a single defense contractor to provide food and shelter for American military forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kuwait in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.19 At the same time, these operations can impose heavy burdens on current and/or future tax payers as the federal government struggles to find some means of funding these operations. According to


recent reporting from the Council on Foreign Relations, American military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan could cost each citizen $570-$830 per year.\(^\text{20}\)

Of course, these economic risks also have significant implications for the political risks of an intervention at both the international and domestic levels of analysis. At the international level, there is at least the potential for larger political support among allies and coalitions to translate into economic burden sharing. At the domestic level, rising costs may provide political opponents an opportunity to attack those elected officials responsible for running up these large bills to the citizenry. Similarly, corporate profit-making may ease this political risk by ensuring that any “benefits” associated with the intervention are shared with the public and private sector.

**Military Risk**

Military risks are most visibly and immediately related to the potential for casualties. In this standard formulation, military risks increase as a result of the capability of the enemy to inflict damage on friendly forces. For instance, in advance of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, there was a tremendous range of casualty projections based on the assumption that Iraqi forces would resort to the employment chemical or biological weapons. Internal Pentagon planners forecasted as many as 18,000 American casualties in the event Iraq employed these weapons of mass destruction.\(^\text{21}\)

In more traditional risk comparisons then, this kind full-scale invasion against a well-equipped opponent is often considered a high risk operation. These types of high risk


operations are often contrasted to cases like Operations Urgent Fury (Grenada, 1983) or Just Cause (Panama, 1989) where American forces faced comparatively poorly manned, equipped, and trained opposition. Meanwhile, at the international level of analysis, the potential for the escalation of the initial intervention to involve other regional or global powers must also be considered with all of the attendant political, economic, and military risks that could potentially accompany an expansion of the conflict.

Military risks interact with political and economic risks in important and interesting ways. Quite clearly, as a general rule of thumb, the larger the force, the more expensive the operation. From the vantage point of pure financial costs, a larger force will impose a higher cost and thus assume a higher degree of economic risk. However, a larger force more easily capable of quickly overwhelming an opponent might also logically be assumed to involve fewer casualties on the part of the intervening state and therefore represent comparatively reduced levels of military risk. A larger force may also logically be assumed to result in a short, decisive, and overwhelming victory that shortens the length of intervention and thus lowers the overall cost of the military operation. In turn, these expectations of lower casualties and reduced financial expenditures can translate to a decreased level of domestic political risks by assuring citizens that fewer sacrifices will be required. Of course, the intensity and nature of these interactions also vary depending on the structure and relationship of the military to larger civilian society. For instance, the potential for military casualties to transform into significant political liabilities might be assumed to be higher in democratic systems that rely on a conscript force since every citizen is vulnerable to being called to military duty. Thus it might well be argued that the conscript Army
deployed to Vietnam posed a much higher political risk for President Johnson than the all-volunteer force deployed by President Bush in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course, other factors operating at the international level such as the perception of an imminent threat can certainly mitigate or even reverse those calculations of political risk as one might argue was the case in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

**Individual Risk Sensitivities**

Even as international relations literature has generally paid scant attention to the role of individual leaders, a number of scholarly studies by prominent historians, psychologists, and regional specialists chart the important influence individuals have had in world affairs. Individuals critical to the decision-making process will also bring their own unique perspectives and tolerances for risks based both on their own personal backgrounds and bureaucratic positions within the decision-making process.

They will make decisions based both on overall risk propensities and their relative sensitivities to the various types of risk involved with the decision.

Leaders at the top echelon of democratic governments will certainly have to consider the full range of risks posed at the international, domestic, and individual levels of analysis. These factors at the international level will include the political, economic, and military risks associated with the potential for great power competition, the nature of the threat, opportunities for coalition building and burden-sharing, prospects for an expansion of the conflict, and issues of a nation’s credibility. These leaders will also have to consider the domestic political and economic implications of military interventions. In democracies, the domestic political ramifications of foreign interventions will have to include the potential for shifts in relative power between the ruling and opposition parties. Senior cabinet-level officials will also likely have to factor in political concerns over their relative influence in decision-making autonomy within this small group of advisor. Leaders sitting atop bureaucratic organizations will weigh considerations of their own organizational interests and culture.

Economically, top political leaders will have to weigh the potential for financial gain against anticipated costs of the intervention itself, as well as the potential impact on resource allocation among the various organizational players in the decision-making process. Militarily, democratic leaders must anticipate the effects of casualties on the domestic will to support and sustain the foreign military intervention.
OPERATIONALIZING THE INDEPENDENT VARIABLES:

International Structure

At the international systemic level, a number of important factors have been advanced to explain the willingness of states to initiate military conflict. Among the most influential are issues related to neorealist structural theories. At the broadest levels these theories seek explanations for state behavior based on the shape of the existing distribution of power among states in the international system.

The case studies selected in this paper involve decision making spanning significant shifts in the international distribution of power. Specifically, President Carter confronted the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979 during a period of intense superpower confrontation and strong bipolarity. President George H.W. Bush challenged Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990 in immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union during a period of transition from strong bipolarity to an emerging unipolarity. Of course throughout the 1990’s and into the beginning of the 21st century, American dominance of the international scene was an accepted fact of global politics. Consequently, decisions made by President George W. Bush related to Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003) thus arguably took place during a time of strong unipolarity. However, some have argued that by the time he was weighing options for the Iraqi surge in 2006, the world was in a state of weakening unipolarity brought on by the demonstrated inability of the United States to impose its will on an expanding Iraqi insurgency.
**Nature of the Threat**

In attempting to sort out the potential impact of the international distribution of power on the dependent variable of risk perception in this study, it is useful to explore the debate within the neorealist school over the relative importance of “balance-of-power” and “balance-of-threat” considerations. Scholars have argued over which of these considerations at the international level of analysis are most influential in affecting state behavior and decision making. These factors also have important implications for the risk assessments of senior state leaders.

**Balance-of-power**

Balance-of-power theorists argue that calculations involving the material capabilities of states are among the chief factors determining state behavior and actions. As William Wohlforth notes, scholars closely associate both realist and neorealist theories with explanations largely grounded in material calculations of power. Realist explanations in the tradition of Hans Morgenthau emphasize a nation’s geography, natural resources, industrial capacity, population, and military forces. Neorealist scholar Kenneth Waltz is similarly frequently cited for his emphasis on the

---

material calculations of power based on population, territory, resource endowment, economic capacity, and military strength.\textsuperscript{27}

Theoretically, these material considerations should predominate regardless of the distribution of global power since all states have a basic interest in maintaining a favorable balance of this material power over any other state or potential combinations of state competitors. Nonetheless, it also makes some sense that decision makers would be particularly attuned to the risks of military intervention during periods of intense bipolar competition when the potential for these decisions to result in meaningful shifts in the balance-of-power carry particular weight. In this environment, leaders might be expected to be somewhat more risk-averse given the scale of the potential consequences entailed by military interventions. This is what Stephen Walt called the “caution that bipolarity imposes on superpower conduct.”\textsuperscript{28} On the other hand, the absence of this bipolar competition would logically allow states to become more risk-acceptant. This would particularly be the case for a global hegemon operating in a unipolar environment and has been used by some analysts to at least partially explain the growing willingness of American leaders to employ military force in the post-Cold War period.\textsuperscript{29} Meanwhile, anticipating the impact of a nonpolar system on risk propensities is complicated by the absence of both a solid theoretical

\textsuperscript{27} Kenneth N. Waltz, “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” \textit{International Security} 18, no. 2 (1993): 50. As with Hans Morgenthau, it is important to acknowledge that Waltz also admits to the influences of non-material factors such as political stability and competence even as realist and neorealist structural theories have a marked tendency to underscore the importance of material calculations of power.


foundation and an exceptionally narrow historical experiential database. Nonetheless, given the absence of a dominating state, this system of power distribution too might be expected to incline state leaders toward a risk-acceptant behavior as the prospects for being restrained or punished by more powerful actors are greatly reduced. In any case, if balance-of-power considerations are dominant, the risk assessments of state leaders can be expected to emphasize those risks directly related to potential shifts in military and economic power both globally and regionally.

**Balance-of-threat**

In “balance-of-threat” theories, state leaders certainly do not ignore the material considerations included in “balance-of-power” calculations, but underscore the significant roles by other factors of geographical proximity, offensive capabilities, and the hostile intentions of other states. While geographical proximity is a variable that is both concrete and measurable, it is a constant in the historical cases examined in this study since all instances involve American military interventions into Iraq and Afghanistan—both located at a similar distance from the continental United States. Additionally, one can debate the very utility of the concept of proximity in the contemporary security environment given the range of intercontinental ballistic missiles and the capability of small groups of individuals operating from overseas to inflict significant damage as evidenced in the 9/11 attacks. Nevertheless, the variables of offensive capability and hostile intent remain relevant to any discussion of the cases examined here and have varied substantially over the period of time examined from President Carter in Afghanistan to President GW Bush in Iraq.

Just as one might expect, while issues related to “balance-of-power” to predominate during periods characterized by bipolar or multipolar competition, factors associated with “balances of threat” are more likely to be prevail during periods when the poles of power are not readily identifiable such as those of unipolarity or nonpolarity. These aspects of threat related to offensive capability and intent should thus occupy a central place in the risk perceptions of leaders functioning within the confines of these international power structures. The potential impact of these factors on risk propensity should be clear: direct and immediate threats should prompt state actors to be more willing to assume high degrees of risk associated with military interventions.

In the realm of the actual deliberations of foreign policymakers, elements of both balance-of-power and threat are likely to be considered. In this sense, the variable is best envisioned as a continuous variable that represents the relative emphasis given to one set of considerations over the other.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>International Structure</th>
<th>Nature of Threat</th>
<th>Predicted risk propensity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bipolar</td>
<td>Balance-of-power</td>
<td>Risk-averse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unipolar</td>
<td>Balance-of-threat</td>
<td>Risk-acceptant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonpolar</td>
<td>Balance-of-threat</td>
<td>Risk-acceptant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Reference Point and Cognitive Heuristics as Independent Variables**

This study will also examine a range of potential psychological factors influencing the perceptions and assessments of risks at the individual level of decision making. Prospect theory and studies of the influence of the cognitive heuristics employed
in decision making are largely grounded in individual psychological experiments.\textsuperscript{31} Because these influences are focused at the individual level, this study will emphasize the role of these psychological factors as they most directly impact presidential decision making.

In the American system of government there are also some very practical reasons for restricting the focus of these psychological factors on the president. It is the president who is constitutionally charged with the responsibility of serving as the Commander-in-Chief of American military forces and thus has the ability to single-handedly order American units to initiate combat operations. This is not say, however, that other institutions and officials do not also have important roles play in the debate of policy options associated with decisions related to foreign military interventions. Congress certainly has the authority to formally declare war, must provide funding for military operations, and otherwise has important influence in foreign policy formulation. The judicial branch can also certainly make decisions regarding the legality of particular actions undertaking during the course of military conflict. Nonetheless, the president is at least a first among these equals and is arguably the single most important \textit{individual} (if not the most influential governmental institution) in making significant decisions in initiating foreign military interventions. For these theoretical and

\textsuperscript{31} There are important exceptions to this rule and important studies have been done in charting the influences of psychological factors within small decision-making groups such as those typically associated with senior-level decision making in the U.S. Government. One prominent example is Irving L. Janis, \textit{Groupthink: Psychological Studies of Policy Decisions and Fiascoes}, 2 ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1982). Studies have also noted the “risky shift” tendency wherein group deliberations actually enhanced individual risk-taking propensities. In these experiments groups displayed a marked tendency to advocate riskier courses of action than the average of the individual participants prior to the meeting. For an early treatment of this phenomenon see Nathan Kogan and Michael A. Wallach, “Risky-Shift Phenomenon in Small Decision-Making Groups: A Test of the Information-Exchange Hypothesis,” \textit{Journal of Experimental Social Psychology} 3, no. 1 (1967).
practical reasons, this thesis will primarily focus on those psychological and cognitive factors as they shape the risk perceptions of the American president.

**The Reference Point in Prospect Theory**

As briefly reviewed in Chapter One, Prospect Theory argues that the risks associated with particular decisions or policy options are evaluated primarily with respect to a particular “reference point” and impact the overall risk propensity of an actor. If the decision-making process takes place within a domain of anticipated loss, policymakers will be inclined to adopt a “risk-acceptant” option. Conversely, if a decision is made within the domain of anticipated gains, the decision maker is more likely to prefer a risk-averse policy option. The important task for the analyst is to determine that reference point *a priori* independent of the behavior or decision itself.

In identifying this reference point, it is also important to distinguish between the international and domestic environments. Much of international relations theory is built around a basic assumption concerning the unique natures of these two environments; specifically, contrasting the state of anarchy inherent in the international domain with the existing hierarchy and authority structures found in domestic political systems. This study will broadly survey both the international and domestic environments surrounding the decision to initiate a military intervention to determine *a priori* if the policymaker would have likely considered himself to be operating within a domain of gain or loss in both of these situational contexts. Differentiating these domains also has the advantage of identifying global and domestic circumstances under which domestic or international risks might be relatively more influential in decision making. For instance, a policymaker operating
within a domain of domestic loss might be inclined to be risk-acceptant when considering the domestic consequences of anticipated friendly casualties associated with a contemplated military intervention (and therefore be inclined to support an intervention). However, that same decision maker, if simultaneously operating in an international domain of gain, should theoretically be risk-averse when examining risks associated with potential global and regional power shifts (and thereby less inclined to support a military intervention). Which of these propensities wins out?

Table 2.2 Anticipated Influence of Decision-making Domain on Risk Propensity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision-making Domain</th>
<th>Overall Risk Propensity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gain</td>
<td>Risk-averse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss</td>
<td>Risk-acceptant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the reference point acts as an amplification of the overall risk propensity of the individual in both an international and domestic contexts, the cognitive heuristics employed by individual leaders is more likely to magnify only certain types of risk and thereby modify the risk sensitivity of a leader only in relation to particular categories of risk.

**Representative Heuristic**

Risk sensitivities to various types of risk almost certainly vary based on the unique personal backgrounds and experiences of individuals. President H.W. Bush and President G.W. Bush performed identical institutional roles as presidents, commanders and chief of the U.S. armed forces, and leaders of the Republican Party. Both were educated at Yale, both shared common experiences as military pilots, and both obviously were raised in similar family circumstances. However,
one might reasonably expect that the varied professional backgrounds of these two presidents would result in divergent sensitivities to the range of political, economic, and military risks associated with the foreign military interventions undertaken during their time in office. For instance, President H.W. Bush served in several senior level positions involving international affairs including as Ambassador to the United Nations, Chief of the U.S. Liaison Officer in the People’s Republic of China, and as Director of the Central Intelligence Agency. These experiences, one might reasonably surmise, would make President H.W. Bush particularly sensitive to the global and regional aspects of the political, economic, and military risks of American military interventions, while causing him to be comparatively less concerned with impacts of domestic politics and decision making. Indeed, his administration invested a tremendous amount of diplomatic effort in building a large international coalition in the run-up to Desert Storm in the early 1990’s. Moreover, it was a fear of fracturing this international coalition that was influential in his decision to terminate American military operations after the liberation of Kuwait. The fact that he lost his bid for re-election despite the tremendous military success of Desert Storm further suggests that he was less sensitive to the potential domestic consequences of his actions.

Meanwhile, President G.W. Bush had relatively little experience in foreign affairs and many of his policies appear at least somewhat more dismissive of the risks associated with these concerns at the international level as evidenced by his opposition to the environmental agreements of the Kyoto Protocols and the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty in addition to his unilateral withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Indeed, both U.S. military interventions into both Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) under his watch have been criticized by many as largely unilateral operations,
particularly when measured strictly in military terms of American contributions of conventional combat power as compared to those of other coalition partners.

Reliance on specific historical analogies also has the potential to influence decision making and affect the risk propensities of leaders in profound ways. As an intellectual construct, historical analogies are risk-neutral. However, the selection of a particular historical analogy has the affect of establishing a frame of reference that can emphasize or dismiss various types of risk. The analogy of Munich is deployed in arguments to emphasize the negative consequences of inaction and the dangers of failing to immediately confront a growing threat inferring a risk-acceptant posture with respect to military action. In fact, this is the very analogy frequently deployed by President GW Bush in justifying his decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

Of course, historical analogies can have the opposite effect as well. For instance, opponents of Operation Iraqi Freedom are fond of recalling America’s intervention in Vietnam. This analogy reminds policymakers of America’s ultimate failure to prevent the emergence of a communist regime in Vietnam despite the loss of over 50,000 American servicemen and women. This analogy is intended to underscore the risks associated with military casualties and the improbability of successfully employing military force in fostering regime change in a foreign land. This historical analogy is thus intended to encourage an overall risk-averse attitude on the part of senior policymakers when considering foreign military interventions.

*Availability Heuristic*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the availability heuristic has to do with the immediate retrievability, vividness, and salience of the information at hand. Thus
dramatic, violent, and catastrophic events receiving frequent attention in mass media (such as terrorist attacks) can prompt individuals to exaggerate the risks associated with these events regardless of actual evidence at hand. This heuristic has been used to explain, for instance, why people are more concerned with airline crashes than car accidents despite overwhelming statistical evidence that fatalities from car crashes are much more common place than those involving airplanes.

As with the representative heuristic, the availability heuristic is neither inherently risk-averse nor risk-acceptant, but has the potential to shape the sensitivity of decision makers to particular types of risk. The 9/11 attacks were quite obviously tremendously influential in terms of the risk perceptions of President GW Bush. He often reminds audiences that the attacks of that day were the seminal event shaping his entire presidency and making him a “war president.” He regularly recalls the fear gripping the nation that day and portrays the military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan as assuming essential risks in the global war on terrorism. In this case, the political, economic, and military risks of these military actions suddenly become dwarfed by the risks of inaction. As President GW Bush’s introduction to the National Security Strategy of 2002 states:

> And, as a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed. We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. So we must be prepared to defeat our enemies’ plans, using the best intelligence and proceeding with deliberation. History will judge harshly those who saw this coming danger but failed to act. In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action.\(^{32}\)

---

Anchoring Heuristic

Lastly, the anchoring heuristic implies that people are slow to adjust their probability and risk assessments based on new information and instead overweight the initial estimates associated with an event. As with the other heuristics examined here, this factor is theoretically risk-neutral. However, any particular cognitive anchor has the potential to influence both the decision-making process and the risk assessments of leaders.

Here again President GW Bush’s decision to initiate military intervention in Iraq in 2003 can be illustrative. Initial plans called for the American military to withdraw from Iraq within months of the invasion under the assumption that Iraqi leaders would rapidly step in to fill the power vacuum left by Saddam’s overthrow. This assumption caused President Bush and senior cabinet officials to repeatedly underestimate the potential political, economic, and military risks associated with an extended American commitment to Iraq. Furthermore, this assumption was maintained as valid despite being challenged beforehand by available government reports including the State Department’s Future of Iraq Project and the U.S. Army’s Reconstructing Iraq: Insights, Challenges, and Missions for Military Forces in a Post-Conflict Scenario. In this case then, this anchoring assumption may have served to desensitize the President to a myriad of risks that had actually been fairly well anticipated by a number of readily-available government studies.

33. Portions of this document are available through The National Security Archive online at www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB198/index.htm; accessed 14 Jan 09.

CONCLUSION

Traditional treatments of risk in international relations theory represent risk as a mathematical product of anticipated consequences and uncertainty within a rational choice decision-making framework. Meanwhile, competing theories involving psychological factors operating largely at the individual level of analysis purport to offer explanations for systemic variations of risk perceptions from this purely rational calculation. This study suggests an analytical framework for investigating risk perceptions incorporating elements from both bodies of literature. It is a model that is sympathetic to sociological arguments that the risks associated with modern security challenges such as weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, the spread of infectious disease, and environmental degradation do not lend themselves to previous methods of quantification. Instead, the decision-making process is one that identifies the full range of risks associated with a particular policy option and examines the potential trade-offs between these risks. In this vein, this paper offers an initial typology of the range of risks to be considered by policymakers as they consider the option of foreign military intervention.

The historical case studies selected here span major shifts in the international power structure encompassing varying degrees of bipolarity and unipolarity. In doing so, I hope to chart both the continuities and changes in risk perceptions of American leaders through these varied contexts. At the international level, this thesis will specifically examine the potential for “balance-of-power” and “balance-of-threat” considerations to influence the risk perception of leaders. Additionally, this study employs the
decision maker’s reference point and cognitive heuristics as additional independent variables with the potential to significantly influence risk perceptions and propensities.

The reality of contemporary decision making is that senior policymakers must grapple simultaneously with a wide-range of political, military, and economic risks that exist concurrently at the global level and within the state and decision-making group itself. This chapter has attempted to provide at least one potential typology broadly describing the nature of these risks and suggesting how these various categories of risk might interact to influence the perceptions of senior leaders in making decisions regarding foreign military interventions. In doing so, I have drawn heavily from existing international relations theories based on rational choice and psychological models. The subsequent chapters in this thesis will delve into actual cases of American foreign military interventions to examine how various presidents actually assessed these risks and how the risk sensitivities of these leaders might have varied across time with shifting patterns of global power structure, changing views of the nature of the threat, and in varied domestic contexts. From these studies, I hope to draw insights useful for scholars and foreign policymakers alike.
CHAPTER 3: PRESIDENT CARTER AND THE SOVIET INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN IN 1979

BACKGROUND TO THE CRISIS

Afghanistan is located at a strategic crossroads connecting South and Central Asia with the Middle East. It is an impoverished, underdeveloped landlocked country of slightly more than 31 million people with a patchwork of ethnic groups. Nonetheless, the geostrategic position of the country has made it the object of repeated conquests and invasions by foreign powers throughout its history. During the 19th century, Afghanistan was targeted as a “buffer state” in the competition between imperial Great Britain and the Russian Empire. Throughout Afghanistan’s history, regardless of who held the power in Kabul, the central government has never exercised more than limited control over much of the mountainous and remote areas of the country, where local tribal leaders predominate. Afghanistan secured its independence from British rule in 1919, and until 1973 was ruled by a series of monarchs. This period included the introduction of a liberal constitution by King Zahir Shah in 1964. The monarchy was abolished in 1973 when Prime Minister Daoud seized power in a military coup. Throughout the 1970’s, Afghanistan suffered from chronic economic and political instability during which Marxist elements rose to prominence and sought support from the Soviet Union in their struggle for power in Kabul.

For the most part, Afghanistan drew little attention from American policymakers. However, as Soviet influence in Kabul grew in the 1970’s, American policymakers began to focus on Afghanistan as an object of contention between the two competing superpowers. In the 1970’s, as the power of the country’s monarchy was waning, the
power of leftist political parties was on the rise. The People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a Marxist-leaning group, enjoyed political and military support from Moscow. After seizing power in a bloody coup in the spring of 1978, the PDPA leadership attempted to implement a number of secular socialist land and legal reforms that were met with violent resistance by the culturally conservative tribal elements of Afghani society. As this internal struggle intensified, leaders in Kabul increasingly sought outside military and economic assistance from the Soviet Union. Thousands of Soviet political, economic, and military advisors came streaming into Afghanistan to supervise these wide-ranging programs. This expanding bilateral relationship was formalized in a friendship treaty between Moscow and Kabul in December of 1978.

However, Afghani resistance to both the Marxist regime in Kabul and the Soviet presence in the country continued to grow. This discontent culminated in an attempted mutiny in August 1979 when a group of Army officers attempted to seize the Presidential Palace. The specter of disloyalty in the Afghani Army was particularly alarming to the Soviets who felt that this posed a significant threat to Moscow’s position and influence in the country. In September, U.S. intelligence began to track increased readiness of Soviet units near the Afghani border, and an “Alert Memorandum” was forwarded to U.S. policymakers warning that “Soviet leaders may be on the threshold of a decision to commit their own forces to prevent the collapse of the regime and protect their sizeable stake in Afghanistan.”¹ This buildup of Soviet military power culminated in a full-scale Soviet military invasion

on December 27, 1979 involving some 30,000 troops from combat aviation, airborne, and motorized infantry divisions.²

U.S. policy reaction emphasized a range of diplomatic and economic sanctions intended to exact a cost from the Soviet Union for this aggression. Internationally, President Carter and his administration rallied international objection to the invasion, and on January 14th, 1980, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the “immediate, unconditional, and total withdrawal of foreign troops” from Afghanistan. President Carter campaigned hard for an international boycott of the Moscow Olympics, scheduled for the coming summer, in an attempt to deal a diplomatic blow to Soviet international prestige. He also directed that a number of unilateral steps on the economic front be taken, including limitations on Soviet fishing rights in U.S. waters, an embargo on American grain sales to Moscow, and severe restrictions on the transfer of technology to the Soviet Union. The administration also reluctantly withdrew the SALT II treaty from consideration in the Senate. However, President Carter took no overt military actions in response to this perceived threat to international peace and security.

Nonetheless, direct American military intervention into Afghanistan was a distinct possibility and was at least one of the options inventoried by President Carter. Consequently, this case clearly fits within the negative case criteria of the “possibility

principle” advanced by James Mahoney and Gary Goertz. According to the President’s recollection, his National Security Council considered “every conceivable alternative,” although his advisors ultimately concluded that “[d]irect military action on our part was not advisable.”

Of course, in the case involving the absence of military intervention, it can be especially difficult to assess how leaders assessed risks specifically related to the option of military intervention itself. Nonetheless, we can examine memoirs, articles, and unclassified records for hints as to how various military, political, economic, and policy risks were perceived regarding the actions actually taken and then draw some conclusions as to the general effects of the independent and intervening variables of interest in this study.

**INTERNATIONAL POWER STRUCTURE**

This crisis took place in the midst of the Cold War—a period characterized chiefly by competition, tension, and conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union and their respective allies. This period of bipolarity had emerged in the wake of the Second World War, which had exhausted the pre-war great powers of Great Britain, France, and Germany. In this power vacuum, the United States and the USSR rose as the world’s two new political, economic, and military superpowers. It was a time of competing ideologies and alliances, with both powers seeking to win (or compel) states to its side. This structure dominated the international scene from roughly 1947,

---


when President Truman announced his “containment” doctrine, until the formal

The bipolar tension and competition permeating the Cold War certainly fluctuated
in intensity throughout this period. It was particularly tense during crises such as the
Berlin Blockade (1948-1949), the Korean War (1950-1953), the Soviet invasions of
Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968), the Cuban Missile Crisis (1961), and
American engagement during the Vietnam War (1950-1975). However, at other times
tensions subsided. The late 1970’s was one such period as the United States pursued
a formal policy of détente. This period included important bilateral developments
that calmed tensions and reduced the threat of nuclear war. The Strategic Arms
Limitations Talks (SALT) limiting the deployment of offensive nuclear missiles
on both sides represented a concrete manifestation of these policies. This period
of détente, however, was brought to a close by the Soviet Union’s invasion of
Afghanistan in 1979 which ushered in a period of re-ignited bipolar competition that
many historians refer to as the “second cold war.”

*The role of international structure:* President Carter found himself making decisions
and assessing risks in an environment dominated by a heightened sense of bipolar
competition which should incline him toward risk-averse options.

**Nature of the threat**

*Balance-of-threat*

Balance-of-threat considerations were nearly non-existent in terms of the threat posed
by Afghanistan itself when considered in the context of Stephen Walt’s three criteria
of proximity, offensive capabilities, and offensive intent. Afghanistan is located at a distance of well over 7,000 miles from the shores of the United States. Afghanistan was (and remains) an impoverished country with little political, economic, or offensive military capacity to inflict damage on its immediate neighbors. It certainly did not represent a conventional military, economic, or military threat to the United States. Finally, there is no evidence to suggest that the regime in Kabul was intent on attacking the United States. Quite to the contrary, the attention of leaders in Kabul in the late 1970’s was principally focused inward on maintaining power in and defeating a growing domestic rebel insurgency opposed to its program of secular and socialist reforms (albeit with substantial Soviet assistance).

In the words of Cyrus Vance, then President Carter’s Secretary of State, “historically we had held the view that our national interests were not involved there.”

A U.S. State Department Policy Review in 1976 concluded that Afghanistan was “a militarily and politically neutral nation, effectively dependent on the Soviet Union” and recommended that the United States not become “committed to, or responsible for the ‘protection’ of Afghanistan in any respect.” Afghanistan would assume strategic importance for President Carter’s administration only within the context of the larger bipolar competition between the United States and the USSR.

Balance-of-power

Two dramatic international events in 1979 would thrust Afghanistan into the center of U.S. policy decision making, but only within the context of larger balance-of-power considerations. The first of these events was the abdication of the Shah of Iran in January 1979.

Since World War II, Iran (unlike Afghanistan) had been a key component of American strategy in both preserving a favorable balance-of-power in the Middle East and serving as a bulwark against Soviet expansion south toward the oil-rich Persian Gulf. The Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, was first run out the country by the popular Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadeq, in 1951, and then re-installed in power two years later with the help of the CIA. The Shah subsequently proved to be a reliable partner and good friend to America. He allowed the United States to establish electronic listening posts along Iran’s border with the Soviet Union, and he continued to sell oil to the United States during the Arab oil embargo of 1973-1974. In return, the United States provided the Shah with advanced military armaments, as well as political and economic support for his domestic modernization programs known as the “White Revolution.” All of this changed in the blink of eye in 1979, as American policymakers watched in near-disbelief as the Shah fled Tehran and Iranian Shi’a revolutionaries, led by cleric Ayotallah Khomeini, seized power and established the theocratic Islamic Republic of Iran. This sudden loss of a pro-American regime in the oil-rich Gulf was a devastating set-back to America’s balance-of-power strategy in the region.

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in late 1979 represented a further deterioration in America’s position. In the wake of these twin developments, Secretary of State Vance
was compelled to reconsider the shifts in balance-of-power politics both globally and regionally. His first concern was that this represented a new willingness on the part of the Soviet Union to forcefully expand their power beyond the bounds of Eastern Europe. Vance observed that this invasion was “the first example since World War II of Soviet military occupation of a non-Communist-bloc country.”

At the regional level, he expressed concern that the “invasion moved Soviet ground and air forces several hundred miles closer to the gulf and the West’s jugular vein of oil.”

Following the invasion, President Carter likewise evinced concern over the invasion, primarily in terms of its implications for shifts in the regional balance-of-power:

If the Soviets could consolidate their hold on Afghanistan, the balance-of-power in the entire region would be drastically modified in their favor, and they might be tempted toward further aggression. We were resolved to do everything feasible to prevent such a turn of events.

This sensitivity to balance-of-power considerations was displayed clearly in President Carter’s State of the Union address in the week following the Soviet invasion:

If the Soviets are encouraged in the invasion by eventual success…and extend their control to adjacent countries, the stable, strategic and peaceful balance of the entire world will be changed….threaten[ing] the security of all nations, including, of course, the United States, our allies and our friends.

As anticipated by neorealist scholars, the internal debate within the Carter administration in formulating its response to Soviet aggression in Afghanistan was seen primarily within the context of traditional balance-of-power considerations. In

7. Vance, 391.
8. Ibid.
and of itself, an economically poor and militarily weak Afghanistan assumed little import in American strategy. However, when combined with the loss of America’s staunch ally in Iran, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan carried with it the potential for significant shifts in global and regional balances of power that prompted a series of countermoves by President Carter.

**The role of the nature of the threat:** As anticipated by neorealist scholar Stephen Walt, these balance-of-power considerations should prompt American decision makers to be somewhat more risk-averse while emphasizing those aspects of military risks associated with the potential for great power conflict, and generally inclining them to reject options for military “intervention in peripheral areas.”

**Domain**

Internationally, President Carter was operating in a domain of loss at the time he was considering American responses to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Strategically, the United States was suffering a period of retrenchment as it licked its wounds from a stinging defeat in Vietnam. The January 1979 ouster of one of the bulwarks of American power in the Middle East, Mohammad Reza Shah of Iran, by Iranian Islamic revolutionaries had inflicted further damage to America’s reputation and credibility. On November 4, 1979, this generally bad situation was made dramatically worse by the humiliating seizure of 52 American diplomats by a group of Iranian students in Tehran. In addition to these body-blows to American influence and prestige, pro-Soviet regimes had seized power in Angola and Mozambique (1975),

---

Ethiopia (1977), and Nicaragua (1979), which only served to reinforce the impression of Soviet expansion alongside receding American power throughout the globe.

There was also a public sense of concern over a growing gap in overall military capabilities dramatically favoring the Soviet Union. Public reporting of CIA estimates at the time had observed that the Soviet level of defense expenditures grew substantially throughout the 1970’s and exceeded those of the United States by 40 percent in 1977. In addressing this growing deficit in military capability and investment, President Carter pledged to increase U.S. defense expenditures, and the defense budget submitted by his administration for Fiscal Year 1979 represented a significant down payment on this commitment.

This sense of being in a domain of loss with respect to the Soviet Union was most clearly shared by President Carter’s National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski. In a memorandum sent to President Carter in 1978 entitled “Strategic Deterioration,” Brzezinski warned that “Soviet success in the African Horn…in Angola…and now more directly in Ethiopia…might contribute to a further deterioration in the U.S. global position.”

Events in Afghanistan could only have heightened this sense of loss in American influence. A pro-Soviet junta installed the head of a Marxist political party in April 1978. The Soviet Union formalized a series of expanded economic and military

assistance programs with Afghanistan in a friendship treaty in December of the same year. Meanwhile, in early February 1979, the American Ambassador to Afghanistan was kidnapped and subsequently killed, and American officials strongly suspected Soviet involvement.

All of these activities were visible to President Carter and his principle foreign policy advisors. President Carter himself notes that U.S. intelligence had “been observing closely the increased Soviet presence in Afghanistan.” Perhaps even more significantly, Carter had directed that increasingly strident cabinet-level messages be sent to Soviet counterparts “admonishing the Soviets about their obvious moves toward intervention.”\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, in September of 1979 the situation had deteriorated sufficiently that the President ordered Brzezinski to “prepare contingency options in the event of an overt Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan.”\textsuperscript{16} In response, Brzezinski sent the President a personal essay outlining his assessment of a deteriorating situation in which “the Soviets were becoming more assertive and the United States more acquiescent.”\textsuperscript{17}

President Carter was also operating in a strategic domain of loss domestically, as the country suffered through a number of tough economic challenges, including an energy crisis, double digit inflation, high interest rates, high unemployment, and slow economic growth. These frustrations were reflected in mounting public disapproval.

\textsuperscript{15} Carter, \textit{Keeping the Faith: Memoirs of a President}, 471. For an excellent examination of the role played by intelligence reporting in this crisis see \textit{The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979: Failure of Intelligence or of the Policy Process} (Georgetown University, Institute for the Study of Diplomacy, 26 September 2005) Working Group Report No. 111; available online at \url{http://isd.georgetown.edu/Afghan_1_WR_group.pdf}; accessed 12 December 2008.

\textsuperscript{16} Brzezinski, 427.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 428.
of his administration. According to Gallup polls conducted at the time, his approval ratings from May to November 1979 averaged a dismal 32%, which is one of the longest streaks of approval ratings below 40% in presidential history. Another poll, conducted in July 1979, indicated that public satisfaction with President Carter was at a new historic low of only 12%. A poll conducted in early November 1979 found that 53% of the public disapproved of the “way Carter is handling foreign policy,” with only 28% approving of his performance.

President Carter himself clearly reflected this somber mood as he delivered what became known as the “Malaise Speech” in July 1979.

> It’s clear that the true problems of our Nation are much deeper—deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper than inflation or recession. And I realize more than ever that as president I need your help….

> I have been reminded again that all the legislation in the world can’t fix what’s wrong with America….

> It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will….

> The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America…

> Our people are losing that faith, not only in government itself but in the ability as citizens to serve as the ultimate rulers and shapers of our democracy…


The symptoms of this crisis of the American spirit are all around us. For the first time in the history of our country a majority of people believe that the next five years will be worse than the past five years… The productivity of American workers is actually dropping….there is a growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media, and other institutions…

Looking for a way out of this crisis, our people have turned to the Federal government and found it isolation from the mainstream of our nation’s life….The gap between our citizens and our government has never been so wide….What you see too often in Washington and elsewhere around the country is a system of government that seems incapable of action.21

President Carter’s approval ratings did improve marginally for a short time in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian hostage crisis in November, as is consistent with the “rally around the flag effect.” This political bounce extended into early 1980 as the country rallied behind the President in confronting the twin crises of the hostages in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It is possible that this temporary spike in approval ratings could have ameliorated President Carter’s sense of loss in the domestic domain somewhat. However, contemporary newspaper articles discussing these poll results routinely reminded readers that “[p]ollsters have long noted that there is a tendency for the public to rally around a president in a time of crisis” and cautioned against assuming that this spike would “last long.”22 Moreover, the personal diary entries from President Carter’s Chief of Staff reflected the somber mood and sense of loss that engulfed the White House in December 1979:

An even deeper sense of gloom settled in the White House as Christmas approached. The President canceled his plans to go to


Georgia—the first time in twenty-seven years that the Carter family would not spend the holidays together—and ordered that the national Christmas-tree lights not be turned on until the hostages returned from Iran.²³

_The role of domain:_ Contrary to the expectations of balance-of-power considerations in this case, prospect theory would anticipate that policy actions taken by President Carter would be strongly risk-acceptant given the fact that he was operating within a domain of loss both internationally and domestically.

**Cognitive Heuristics**

**Representativeness**

The cognitive heuristic of representativeness has to do with the association of an event or outcome with another class of events. Historical analogies are frequently employed in this regard to frame the initial interpretation of an event and inform the subsequent decision-making and risk assessment process considering likely responses. In this case, President Carter and his senior advisors quickly placed the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan into the context of the prior Cold War history of Soviet military adventurism in the “near-abroad.” The categorization of the invasion into this frame of reference had the effect of reinforcing the balance-of-power considerations discussed previously; likely further sensitized President Carter to the military risks associated with potential superpower confrontation, and highlighted the inability of the West to mount an effective military response to these Soviet interventions.

President Carter’s public and private remarks frequently placed the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan within the context of prior Soviet military actions against neighboring countries such as Hungary (1956) and Czechoslovakia (1968). In a press conference on the day following the Soviet intervention into Afghanistan, the President specifically noted that,

This is the third occasion since World War II that the Soviet Union has moved militarily to assert control over one of its neighbors, and this is the first such venture into a Muslim country by the Soviet Union since the Soviet occupation of Iranian Azerbaijan in the 1940’s.24

In his private phone calls with world leaders, Carter drew on this same history of prior Soviet interventions, observing that he “regarded the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan as an extremely grave development, similar in scope and permanent impact to what the Soviets did in Czechoslovakia.”25 President Carter made direct references to these historical analogies in his private correspondence with Soviet President Brezhnev, noting that the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan represented “the first time since the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia that the Soviet Union has taken direct military action against another country.”26

These historical analogies also formed the basis for the initial policy deliberations of the Carter administration. In preparation for an NSC meeting on December 30th, Brzezinski outlined a series of potential U.S. actions based on “how President Johnson


had reacted to the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia.”

Public analysis within the American press also seized on this particular historical reference to frame the debate, calling the Soviet intervention into Afghanistan “the equal of Moscow’s 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia...to replace what it regarded as an unreliable regime.”

The representative heuristic served primarily to underscore balance-of-power considerations as the Carter administer considered its response. In particular, as neorealist theorists such as Kenneth Waltz and Stephen Walt would surmise, it caused President Carter to weigh heavily the consequences of potential shifts in global and regional power and also imposed a high degree of restraint in considering prospects for military confrontation. As President Carter wrote in a private classified letter sent to Soviet President Brezhnev protesting the Soviet intervention:

Large-scale movements of military units into a sovereign country are always a legitimate matter of concern to the international community. When such military forces are those of a superpower, and are then used to depose an existing government and impose another, there are obvious adverse implications both for the region and for the world at large...

We are both pledged to each other not to exacerbate conflict-fraught situations and to consult when threats to the peace arise. If these mutual obligations are to have any meaning, then they must obviously include a refusal by the superpowers to engage in armed combat except as a very last resort and then only in legitimate self-defense. Because our interests are global, we must recognize that actions taken in one area have a spill-over effect in other seemingly unrelated areas, as well as in that area itself.

27. Brzezinski, 430.
**The role of representativeness:** The net effect of the representative heuristic should serve to reinforce balance-of-power considerations and tend toward risk-averse decision making, particularly as regards the potential for military confrontation between superpowers.

**Availability**

The heuristic of availability deals with the immediate retrievability, vividness, and salience of the information at hand. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan involved a relatively low degree of availability. The strong representative heuristic and established history of Soviet interventions meant that the invasion of Afghanistan could be easily categorized, and in this sense, it did not represent a novel or unique set of challenges to American policymakers. Second, as discussed previously, U.S. intelligence had been tracking the growing Soviet influence in Afghanistan throughout 1978 and 1979. Consequently, the invasion should not have come as a tremendous surprise to policymakers. Third, there was the distant nature of the conflict, over 7,000 miles away from American shores. Fourth, there was a near-absence of real-time media coverage of the invasion due to the forbidding nature of the terrain, the scarcity of reporters on the scene, and the active Soviet efforts to repress news coverage of the invasion. Arnaud de Borchgrave of *Newsweek* was “one of the very few Western newsmen on the spot when the Soviets descended on Kabul, their guns blazing, at Christmas 1979.”

Moreover, upon arrival in Kabul, the Russians and their Afghani allies moved quickly to severe communications with the

---

capital, close the airport, shut down Radio Kabul, and impose a curfew that greatly limited independent news reporting of events.\(^{31}\)

But perhaps the most compelling reason that the Soviet invasion failed to occupy center stage in the minds of American decision makers was that it could not compete with the much more dramatic and compelling nature of the American hostage crisis in Iran. Anyone who lived through this time cannot help but remember the daily television media coverage that typically began and concluded with a countdown of how many days the Americans had been held hostage in Tehran. The renowned American historian Gaddis Smith observed that “the [hostage] crisis absorbed more concentrated effort by American officials and had more extensive coverage on television and in the press than any other event since World War II.”\(^{32}\)

The priority the President Carter gave to the Iranian hostage crisis was evident in both his public and private remarks. At a press conference on December 28th, 1979, President Carter had his first public opportunity to address the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which had taken place only the day before. Nonetheless, President Carter’s remarks gave the hostage situation in Tehran top billing and relegated the more recent Soviet intervention to ‘[a]nother serious development which has caused increased concern about peace and stability.”\(^{33}\) This emphasis on the hostage situation within President Carter’s national security policymaking continued into the next year,


\(^{33}\) President Jimmy Carter, Remarks to Reporters, 28 December 1979.
as indicated by the top billing offered in the White House Press Release on January 2, 1980:

The President met this afternoon with members of the National Security Council and other senior advisors to review the continuing crisis in Iran and to consider the serious threat to peace posed by the invasion of Afghanistan by armed forces of the Soviet Union.34

The central thrust of President Carter’s address to the nation on January 4th, 1980, was to outline his reaction to the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan. Yet even here, President Carter felt compelled to open with a reference to the situation regarding American hostages in Tehran.

I come to you this evening to discuss the extremely important and rapidly changing circumstances in South-west Asia. I continue to share with you the sense of outrage and impatience because of the kidnapping of innocent American hostages and the holding of them by militant terrorists with the support and approval of the Iranian officials.35

As suggested by this White House Press Release, the Iranian hostage situation remained first-and-foremost in the minds of the President and his top advisors. Secretary of State Vance has acknowledged this preoccupation, noting that “[t]he accumulating intelligence on Soviet activities [in Afghanistan] received less top-level attention in the U.S. government than would otherwise have been the case.”36

36. Vance, 387.
Finally, the administration had ordered the preparations of military contingency plans for a rescue attempt of the hostages in early November.37 This effort could not help but divert precious attention away from other pressing issues, including the Soviet invasion. A group of experts assembled by Georgetown University to study President Carter’s decision making during this crisis succinctly concluded,

the White House was intensely preoccupied with the Iranian hostage crisis...[and] the planning for what turned out to be an unsuccessful rescue attempt (Desert One) resulted in another “distraction” from the situation in Afghanistan.38

President Carter himself recalls in his memoirs that “[t]hroughout the crisis over Afghanistan, the meetings between me and my advisors about the hostages had continued without slackening. In spite of my many other responsibilities, the hostages were always on my mind.”39

The role of availability: The relatively low levels of availability associated with the Soviet invasion for American policymakers should serve to generally reinforce risk-averse decision making.

Anchoring

Successful conclusion of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) remained a central goal for President Carter’s foreign policy team. In pursuing this goal, President Carter assumed that the best interests of both superpowers would be served by an


38. The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979: Failure of Intelligence or of the Policy Process, 11.

agreement to reduce their nuclear arsenals. The assumptions embedded in this policy goal blinded the President to the possibility that the Soviets might not share this assessment, caused him to underestimate the likelihood that the Soviets would invade Afghanistan, and likely affected the range of policy options he would consider as a reaction to this act of aggression. A Georgetown Institute for the Study of Diplomacy working group, which included participants in President Carter’s administration, noted:

Conventional wisdom in Washington held that Moscow had a strong interest in SALT II, and interpreted Soviet behavior in this context. In the case of Soviet policy vis-à-vis Afghanistan, it was presumed that Moscow would refrain from a major military intervention because it would almost certainly squelch the treaty. Declassified documents show that many intelligence analysts shared this view.\textsuperscript{40}

At the time of the Soviet invasion, the SALT II treaty was awaiting ratification by the U.S. Senate, and President Carter was initially adamant in refusing to let Soviet actions in Afghanistan interfere with prospects for ratification of this treaty. In private phone conversations immediately following the Soviet invasion, President Carter told German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt directly that he “would not let the Soviet action interfere with SALT.”\textsuperscript{41} In a telephone call with the British Prime Minister that same day, he similarly noted that “we were going ahead with SALT independently of what happened in Afghanistan.”\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40.} The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979: Failure of Intelligence or of the Policy Process, 10.


Initial public statements by senior officials echoed the President’s unwillingness to let Soviet actions in Afghanistan threaten progress in SALT. State Department spokesman Hodding Carter justified continuing these bilateral negotiations as something that remained in America’s national interests and was not “some goody being given to the Soviet Union because they are good guys.”

In the end, President Carter only grudgingly acceded to temporarily withdrawing the treaty from consideration, given the adverse political climate in the U.S. Congress. Postponing ratification of the SALT treaty was perhaps the most devastating casualty for President Carter, and Brzezinski observed that this action was both “personally and politically painful to him.” Years later, President Carter still felt that a deep regret, noting that his “failure to ratify the SALT II treaty and to secure even more far-reaching agreements on nuclear arms control was the most profound disappointment of my Presidency.”

**The role of anchoring:** The reluctance to re-examine the place of SALT II in American and Soviet strategies likely predisposed the President to reject stronger diplomatic, economic, and military actions that could jeopardize prospects for SALT II.

44. Brzezinski, 432.
PERCEPTION OF RISK IN PRESIDENT CARTER’S DECISION MAKING

President Carter’s decision-making process was one that sought multiple and competing views and assessments. This clash of perspectives between advisors is typically showcased in President Carter’s appointment of Zbigniew Brzezinski as his National Security Advisor and Cyrus Vance as his Secretary of State. Brzezinski was known for his rather hawkish and distrustful views of the Soviet Union, while Vance was categorized as a relative dove whose primary interest was in avoiding military confrontation with the Soviet Union at almost any price. At one point, according to Brzezinski, the recriminations between the National Security Council and the Department of State got so bad that President Carter was forced to personally intervene in a private meeting between Brzezinski and Vance.

So that all competing views could be aired in private, President Carter generally preferred to be at the center of small group meetings of his closest advisors when discussing critical foreign policy issues such as SALT, Iran, and Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The President himself would chair these meetings as an active participant “commenting quite often and quizzing the [other] participants,”


47. The meeting, held on 19 December 1978, was intended to clear the air between the two men, each of whom suspected the other of leaking information to the press in order to undermine policy positions contrary to their own. For details of the meeting, see Zbigniew Brzezinski, Power and Principle, 40-41.
generally included the Vice President, the Secretary of State, the Secretary of
Defense, the Director of Central Intelligence, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of
Staff, and one or more domestic counselors, Hamilton Jordan, Jody Powell, or Lloyd
Cutler.\(^{48}\) This model of decision making emphasizing the President’s role is certainly
consistent with the methodology employed in this study.

In reacting to the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter recalled
the range of options he believed was available to him at the beginning of the crisis:

There were three areas within which we could move: military,
economic, and political. Direct military action on our part was not
advisable, but within my National Security Council we inventoried
every conceivable alternative. Worldwide condemnation, continuing
publicity about the Soviet crime, economic sanctions that would hit
the Soviets where they were most vulnerable, and indirect military
assistance to the Afghan freedom fighters were all available options.\(^{49}\)

At the end of the policymaking process, President Carter and his advisors had settled
on an array of actions that were consistent with his this initial assessment of options
available. At the global level, these actions included international condemnation
of the Soviet aggression and an orchestrated diplomatic campaign to boycott the
upcoming summer Olympics scheduled to be held in Moscow. Additionally, President
Carter explicitly sought to pursue a rapprochement with China as a counterweight to
this marked expansion of Soviet influence. Economically, the United States imposed
a range of unilateral sanctions, limiting Soviet fishing rights in American territorial
waters, restricting the transfer of sensitive technologies, and imposing an embargo
on the sale of American grain to the Soviets. Militarily, the steps adopted by the

\(^{48}\) Brzezinski, 67.

administration were restrained by an overwhelming desire to minimize prospects for military confrontation between the superpowers while preserving prospects for successful ratification of SALT II treaty. President Carter did, however, approve covert military assistance to Afghani rebels. Domestically, he made a decision to re-instate the requirement for young Americans to register for the military draft. Each of these options assumed various levels of risk in terms of their potential international and domestic consequences.

Before considering the risk associated with these steps, it is worth briefly recapping the anticipated predictions associated with the dependent and intervening variables considered in this study. First, balance-of-power considerations should compel rational decision makers to exhibit caution, particularly when considering the potential for military conflict between the superpowers. Meanwhile, prospect theory would anticipate risk-acceptant behavior, given that decision makers were operating in a domain of loss both internationally and domestically. The representative heuristic, because it reinforces balance-of-power considerations, should generally favor risk-averse behavior. Similarly, the low availability heuristic anticipates a more risk-averse posture. Finally, the anchoring effect—in this case, of a desire to preserve prospects for the ratification of the SALT II treaty—should dissuade policymakers from adopting more risk-acceptant approaches that would jeopardize the achievement of this key foreign policy objective.

**Military Risks**

We have described military risk as consisting of two primary components: the potential for casualties, and the comparative balance of forces between the
intervening party and those likely to resist the intervention. Admittedly, these are difficult criteria to assess in the case of a non-intervention. However, in a general sense, one can concede that the military risks of an American intervention into Afghanistan aimed at reversing the Soviet occupation would have been quite substantial. The size and quality of the Soviet military involved in this operation would have posed a significant challenge to any U.S. conventional military force. The Soviet mechanized, airborne, and special forces employed in the invasion represented some of best trained and equipped units in the entire armed forces. The initial invasion force alone is estimated to have consisted of nearly 80,000 troops supported by 1,800 tanks and some 2,000 armored fighting vehicles. Within the next two weeks, another two combat divisions arrived in country bringing the total Soviet force to over 100,000 soldiers. Meanwhile, any U.S. intervention force would have had to stage from bases located outside the region, most likely from Europe or the continental United States. They would have had the unenviable job of routing out the Soviet military from reinforced positions in incredibly difficult terrain. Under these circumstances, combat with these well-trained and equipped Soviet conventional military forces from prepared defensive positions would have almost certainly involved thousands of casualties on both sides.

The representative heuristic emphasizing the history of prior Soviet military interventions into Hungary and Czechoslovakia might well have also been a major contributor to President Carter’s dismissal of an option for an American military intervention in Afghanistan. In both of these prior cases, the Soviet military interventions effectively presented a fait accompli to the Western powers. The speed with which the Soviet military moved to consolidate their holds in these countries
meant that any effort to reverse the occupation would substantially raise the political, military, and economic costs of any military response. Another important common feature of the Soviet invasions into Hungary and Czechoslovakia was that neither was actively resisted by Western military intervention. The representative heuristic employed by President Carter, therefore made it quite logical for him to assume that the political, military, and economic costs of a Western military intervention aimed at reversing the Soviet hold on Kabul would both be prohibitively expensive and enjoy minimal prospects for success.

Finally, one consistent feature of President Carter’s foreign policy was an extreme sensitivity to any risks associated with prospects for military confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union. This was a theme that repeated itself both in the period immediately preceding the Soviet invasion and again in the midst of the crisis.

In an address to Congress in the months preceding the Soviet invasion, President Carter underscored the importance of avoiding nuclear war between the superpowers:

> In the 34 years since Hiroshima, humanity has by no means been free of armed conflict; but at least we have avoided a world war. Yet this kind of twilight peace carries the ever-present danger of a catastrophic nuclear war, a war that in horror and destruction and massive death would dwarf all the combined wars of man’s long and bloody history. We must prevent such a war. We absolutely must prevent such a war.”

This concern re-surfaced in President Carter’s private message to Brezhnev sent in reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

> We are both pledged to each other not to exacerbate conflict-fraught situations and to consult when threats to the peace arise. If these mutual obligations are to have any meaning, then they must obviously

include a refusal by the superpowers to engage in armed combat except as a very last resort and then only in legitimate self-defense.\textsuperscript{51}

This desire to avoid military conflict was a theme consistently reiterated by Secretary of State Vance in communications to his Soviet counterparts expressing the administration’s concerns over Soviet activities in Afghanistan. Secretary Vance recalls writing to Soviet Foreign Minister Gromyko, in February 1979,

warning that there was a high risk that each might miscalculate the actions of the other. I pointed out that the relationship between our two countries was the most critical factor in determining whether the world would live in peace, and that the series of events culminating in Soviet actions in Afghanistan had brought us to a fork in the road. I said that it was vital that both of us give sober consideration to the implications of the current situation for each side’s interest in the maintenance of world peace. I went on to say that despite the differing political convictions of our countries, and because of the inherent competitive interests between us, we had sought to establish common rules of behavior that would reduce the risk of conflict.\textsuperscript{52}

While explicitly rejecting the option for direct American military intervention, President Carter had already (in the summer of 1979) secretly approved covert American assistant to Afghani rebels opposing the Marxist regime in Kabul and their Soviet allies.\textsuperscript{53} While this was certainly not public knowledge at the time, it also may well have mitigated the urge to consider more drastic military options. Moreover, President Carter did take other limited steps to reinforce existing American naval forces in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean. His administration also began a


\textsuperscript{52} Vance, 394-5. Italics mine.

\textsuperscript{53} Galster. See also Interview with President Carter’s National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (\textit{Le Nouvel Observateur}, January 1998); available online at: \url{http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/BRZ110A.htm}, accessed on 18 January 2009.
new initiative to establish new “regional security arrangements” with key regional actors, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan, that would provide a regional framework for U.S. involvement aimed at containing further Soviet expansion beyond Afghanistan. These steps, however, were relatively cost-free, involving minimal prospects for direct military confrontation with the Soviet and imposing marginal economic costs on the American taxpayer.

One additional step taken by President Carter in the military realm having significant domestic political ramifications was his decision to reactivate the requirement for young American men to register for military service. This decision sparked “a near-rebellion” among his advisors, including Vice President Mondale who argued that this was “overreacting to the Soviet invasion, and that registration would be politically damaging to our campaign for reelection.” This advice would have been especially hard to ignore, since Carter had come to rely on Mondale for his political judgment and “respected his opinion on the domestic implications of foreign policy decisions.” President Carter ultimately decided to ignore these domestic political risks and moved forward to reinstating the requirement for young Americans to register for a military draft.

On balance, these military steps did not involve a tremendous degree of risk either internationally or domestically. Increased American military deployments to the Persian Gulf represented an incremental step aimed not at reversing Soviet gains

54. Brzezinski, 444-5.
55. Carter, Keeping the Faith: Memoirs of a President, 482.
56. As recounted by Brzezinski, 34.
in Afghanistan, but rather at sending a clear signal that further Soviet adventurism would potentially be more costly.

Moreover, all of these steps taken in the military arena enjoyed a tremendous level of support with the American public and thus represented little domestic political risk to the President as he prepared to seek a second term. In fact, an article appearing in the Christian Science Monitor on January 9, 1980 opined that a “hardening public mood in the US seems to allow President Carter considerable leeway if he wishes to choose new, more assertive approaches.” More specifically, the article noted large public support for the “forward basing” of American strike forces and the supplying of “weapons to the Afghan guerrillas fighting the Soviets.” Even the decision to reactivate the military draft enjoyed support among a “substantial majority” of the American public in surveys taken immediately after the public announcement of the decision.

**Summary of military risks:** Policies adopted in the military arena generally reflected a risk-averse posture on the part of President Carter, both internationally and domestically. These were actions explicitly designed to minimize the risks of military confrontation, and they simultaneously involved a minimal degree of domestic political risk at the time they were adopted. In this sense they are consistent with the influence of balance-of-power considerations and the representative and availability heuristic. The minimal levels of risk involved with these decisions, however, are not consistent with the expectations of prospect theory, which would have anticipated a

58. Ibid.
much more risk-acceptant approach in decision making given the domain of loss in which Carter and his advisors were operating.

Political Risks

Political risks have to do with the distribution of power within decision-making coalitions whether at the international or domestic level. President Carter undertook several international diplomatic steps aimed at punishing the Soviet Union for its transgressions in Afghanistan. His administration worked hard to assemble an international coalition opposing Moscow’s actions. These efforts resulted in a United Nations General Assembly resolution calling for the “immediate, unconditional, and total withdrawal of foreign troops” from Afghanistan, which passed by an overwhelming 104 to 18 vote in January 1980. This resolution continued to be renewed annually by an overwhelming majority until 1988.

Another principle action taken in the international diplomatic venue was a decision by the Carter Administration to boycott the Moscow Olympics. The intent here was to punish the Soviets by denying Moscow the opportunity to exploit the Olympics for propaganda, as Adolf Hitler had done in 1936. Here too, President Carter ultimately met with success as over sixty countries eventually joined the boycott, including Canada, China, Egypt, Indonesia, Japan, Philippines, South Korea, Turkey, and West Germany.

Many of the steps taken by President Carter were intended to counterbalance expanding Soviet influence in Afghanistan by increasing American political, military, and economic influence elsewhere in Asia. This action was certainly consistent with the balance-of-power considerations emphasized by the representative heuristic of
prior Cold War era Soviet military interventions. As early as 1978, President Carter had sent his National Security Advisor to Beijing to accelerate normalization of relations with China with the aim of checking Soviet actions elsewhere. As recounted by NSA Brzezinski:

Growing Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, with the potential threat to the Persian Gulf, the consolidation of the Soviet presence in South Yemen, the mounting crisis in Iran and the very active Soviet public exploitation of it against the United States, all contributed to my feeling that it would be wise gradually to increase the pressure on the Soviet Union’s eastern flank.  

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the administration accelerated these efforts at developing a counterbalancing relationship with the Chinese as President Carter dispatched Secretary of Defense Harold Brown to Peking on January 4, 1980 with the promise of a “new willingness to sell the Chinese sophisticated technology, such as computers, and to coordinate policy in Southeast Asia and the Middle East.” The State Department also took step to speed the authorization of licensing for shipment of “air defense radar, radio, troposphere communications equipment, transport helicopters, truck tractors, and electronic countermeasure devices.” Finally, in September 1980, the President authorized the dispatch of another “high-level Pentagon delegation” to China and approved “export licenses for some 400 items in the area of advance technology in military support equipment.”

For the most part, however, these actions at the level of international politics must be categorized as low risk. The consequences for substantial gains or losses in any of

60. Brzezinski, 420.
63. Ibid.
these areas were minor and limited. Globally, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was roundly condemned leaving Moscow rather than Washington as the isolated party. Additionally, prospects that a U.S.-China rapprochement would substantially shift the regional balance-of-power in Asia were fundamentally limited by irreconcilable disagreements over the status of Taiwan. Neither side in this bilateral relationship was likely to take steps that would significantly impact the military or economic ability of either power to affect the outcome of a military confrontation over Taiwan. Likewise, other steps taken on the international level, such as UN resolutions of condemnation and the boycott of the Moscow Olympics, were largely symbolic rather than substantive in nature and entailed little risk in terms of concrete consequences of either success or failure.

It was actually in the domestic arena that the Carter administration appeared willing to take somewhat riskier political action. One particular decision sparking intense debate within the administration was a proposal that President Carter withdraw from a scheduled nationally televised debate with the other presidential democratic candidates in Iowa. His domestic advisors were violently opposed to this suggestion. President Carter’s memoirs indicate that in debating his decision “most of my staff members and campaign leaders…thought it would hurt us politically.”\(^64\) Nonetheless, President Carter explained the logic behind his decision to withdraw from the Iowa debates:

> I thought in dealing with the Soviets in Afghanistan, with the grain embargo, with a possible boycott of the Olympics, with secret aid that we were giving to the Afghan rebels, with the hostage situation, that…our nation would be best served if I didn’t become an active campaigner that early. Once I got into a political debate which would

\(^{64}\) Carter, *Keeping the Faith: Memoirs of a President*, 474.
In taking this step, President Carter was also considering the practical need to build domestic bipartisan support for his actions in responding to the Soviet invasion. His Press Secretary, Jody Powell, said in January 1980: “The president thinks it important to maintain a posture of not being involved in campaigning actively on his behalf when he is trying to maintain bipartisan support for his policies.”

In other ways, President Carter demonstrated a willingness take risk in the realm of domestic politics. For instance, he openly acknowledged that Americans would need to make sacrifices in responding to Soviet aggression in Afghanistan. In his address to the nation on 4 January, President Carter was clear that the steps he was advocating “will require some sacrifice on the part of all Americans.”

**Summary of political risks:** In surveying this range of international and domestic political risks of actions taken by President Carter, it would again appear that they are generally indicative of a risk-averse approach. An important exception is his decision to withdraw from the Iowa debate, which did signal a willingness to subordinate his own personal domestic political interests to broader considerations of international politics.

---

65. President Carter interviewed at the Miller Center of Public Affairs at the University of Virginia, 29 November 1982 In Don Richardson, ed., *Conversations with Carter* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), 248.
President Carter adopted specific policies in the economic field that were also
designed to punish the Soviet Union. These included a tighter ban on high-technology
exports, curtailed Soviet fishing privileges in U.S. waters, and an embargo on the
shipment of American grain to Moscow. The most contentious of these steps was by
far the grain embargo.

From an international perspective, the timing for such an action appeared particularly
propitious. Moscow appeared particularly vulnerable at the time, as a drought
earlier in 1979 had caused grain production to fall well below production targets. To
compensate for this shortfall, Moscow had made plans to import record quantities
of grain—the largest share of which (about 75% according to some estimates at the
time) was to be supplied by the United States. Consequently, prospects for this
action to serve as meaningful punishment for Soviet transgressions in Afghanistan
were thought to be relatively high at the time.

However, this decision was highly contentious in terms of American domestic
politics. These action elicited strong objection from Vice President Mondale, who
directly “pointed out that this could be damaging in the forthcoming Iowa primary.”
Moreover, reactions from Carter’s political opponents underscored the domestic
political risks entailed by the adoption of this economic measure. As President
Carter’s Chief of Staff Jordan Hamilton recalled some of the political attacks by his
opponents:

69. Brzezinski, 431.
Senator Bob Dole said, “Carter took a poke at the Soviet bear and knocked out the American farmer.” Kennedy charged, “A weak foreign policy can’t be redeemed by suddenly getting tough on farmers.” Ronald Reagan, who had been calling for an Administration that would get tough with the Russians, said: “no one segment of the economy should be asked to bear the brunt of American countermeasures to deal with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.” American Farm Bureau President Allan Grant said, “The President took aim at the Russians with a double-barreled shotgun, and hit the American farmer instead.”

It was precisely because of the domestic political costs of this action that Secretary of State Vance argued that the grain embargo was the most important and significant sanction levied against the Soviets because in his words, “[n]o other measure was as costly to the Soviet Union or as clear a demonstration that the United States was prepared to accept significant sacrifices to impose a price for aggression.”

Perhaps because of this belief in the ultimate efficacy of this step in punishing the Soviet Union, President Carter moved forward to impose this embargo despite the domestic political risks highlighted by his Vice President. President Carter himself was clearly sensitive to the domestic ramifications of this decision, and in his speech to the nation on January 4, 1980 he explicitly addressed this concern stating: “I am determined to minimize any adverse impact on the American farmer from this action.” Despite this consternation, however, Vice President Mondale’s concerns were ultimately proved unfounded. Public opinion polls at the time soon revealed overwhelming American public support for this action. One poll conducted in

71. Vance, 389.
January 1980 revealed that some 80 percent of those interviewed supported the grain embargo, with only 16 percent opposing.\textsuperscript{73}

One area where President Carter was clear that he would accept significant political, economic, and military risks had to do with the potential for the Soviets to advance beyond Afghanistan into the oil-rich Persian Gulf. In his 4 January speech, President Carter emphasized the international and domestic economic ramifications of Soviet actions in Afghanistan: “A Soviet-occupied Afghanistan threatens both Iran and Pakistan and is a stepping stone to possible control over much of the world’s oil supplies.”\textsuperscript{74} His Secretary of State Vance likewise noted,

“That we cannot idly watch vital resources fall under the control of an outside force. Our interests require that we be able and willing to help others resist challenges to their sovereignty and to counter, in particular, a growing Soviet ability to project its power.”\textsuperscript{75}

President Carter’s determined response to these dire possibilities is exemplified in what came to be called the Carter Doctrine, as announced in his State of the Union Address on January 23rd 1980.

The region which is now threatened by Soviet troops in Afghanistan is of great strategic importance: It contains more than two-thirds of the world’s exportable oil. The Soviet effort to dominate Afghanistan has brought Soviet military forces to within 300 miles of the Indian Ocean and close to the Straits of Hormuz, a waterway through which most of the world’s oil must flow. The Soviet Union is now attempting to consolidate a strategic position, therefore, that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil.


\textsuperscript{74} Carter, “Soviet Military Intervention in Afghanistan,” 95.

\textsuperscript{75} Vance, 509.
This situation demands careful thought, steady nerves, and resolute action, not only for this year but for many years to come. It demands collective efforts to meet this new threat to security in the Persian Gulf and in Southwest Asia. It demands the participation of all those who rely on oil from the Middle East and who are concerned with global peace and stability. And it demands consultation and close cooperation with countries in the area which might be threatened.

Meeting this challenge will take national will, diplomatic and political wisdom, economic sacrifice, and, of course, military capability. We must call on the best that is in us to preserve the security of this crucial region.

Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.76

A few observations concerning the implications of this particular action for risk propensity are especially notable. First, none of actions contemplated by President Carter were intended to reverse the Soviet position in Afghanistan itself. Instead President Carter essentially draws a notional “line in the sand,” providing the Soviets a clear warning against future action. Consequently, this action assumes little risk in the immediate term, but rather implies a willingness to accept additional risks in the future. This is consistent with the sociological view of risk assessment emphasizing the future consequences of decisions being made today. Finally, President Carter’s clear acknowledgment that sacrifices would be required of the American citizen is further evidence of his willingness to assume domestic political risks in pursuit of broader political, military, and economic policy goals.

Summary of economic risks: The economic steps taken by President Carter in response the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan reflected a risk-acceptant posture in that they demanded sacrifice from an important segment of the American public in the midst of a presidential election campaign. His announcement of the Carter Doctrine also assumed a fairly high degree of political, military, and economic risks, but only in terms of future costs in the hypothetical case of further Soviet expansion into the oil-rich Gulf.

Policy Risks

As we defined policy risk, these aspects of risk are measured by examining: (a) the strength of the connection of the policy decision to “core values,” and (b) the degree of internal consistency of the policy itself. Thus, decisions that are opposed to the “core values” of the decision maker or that depart meaningfully from existing policy frameworks assume a higher level of risk. With these criteria in mind, President Carter’s actions assumed little policy risk.

First, as we have seen before, one of President Carter’s primary objectives for his foreign policy was to avoid military confrontation with the Soviet Union. The steps he adopted in the wake of the Soviet intervention into Afghanistan were designed to be wholly consistent with this goal. Certainly, the modest military steps to reinforce American naval forces in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean did not significantly increase prospects for military confrontation. Even in hindsight, President Carter is most proud of the fact that during his tenure there was no armed conflict involving the use of American military forces. In reflecting on his presidency as recently as 2006
he noted that his greatest achievement was, “I kept our nation at peace…We never dropped a bomb, we never launched a missile.”

This was similarly the case with his goal of preserving prospects for the ratification of the SALT II arms control treaty. In considering potential U.S. responses, President Carter recalled that “[t]here were some things I did not want to do; one of the most important of these was scuttling the SALT II treaty.” This unwillingness to depart from this existing policy goal was also evident at the time. On January 4th, President Carter underscored the continued importance he attached to achieving this long-standing policy ambition:

> the successful negotiation of the SALT II treaty has been a major goal and a major achievement of the Administration…and the entire world will benefit from the successful control of nuclear weapons through the implementation of this carefully negotiated treaty.”

Furthermore, even as President Carter later grudgingly announced a deferment of “further consideration of the SALT II treaty,” he also optimistically concluded that, as circumstances changed, he would “keep the ratification of SALT II under active review.”

Even after months of continued Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, in April 1980, Secretary of State Vance persistently argued publicly in support of ratification:

> The security advantages of SALT II have been reinforced by recent events. At a time of increased tensions between the superpowers,

80. Ibid.
effective mutual constraints on strategic arms become all the more important.\textsuperscript{81}

There was little in the actions he took that departed meaningfully from President Carter’s core values or that represented a significant disjuncture with existing policy frameworks. Military confrontation was avoided. Prospects for SALT II ratification were only temporarily shelved pending a more favorable atmosphere in the U.S. Congress. Steps toward a rapprochement with China were continuations of a process that had preceded the crisis in Afghanistan. Similarly, his decision to provide covert assistance to the Afghani resistance was made in the summer prior to the Soviet invasion. While the imposition of trade restrictions and limitations on Soviet fishing rights were new, these hardly violated any core tenets of President Carter’s foreign policy framework. Perhaps the action most approaching a departure from existing policy was his decision to impose a grain embargo on Moscow, which some scholars have classified as the one of the first instances of an American president employing “food as a weapon.”\textsuperscript{82}

**Summary of policy risks:** Overall, the decisions made by President Carter in responding to Soviet aggression involved low levels of policy risk.

**Conclusion**

The first portion of this chapter identified the anticipated effects of the independent and intervening variables examined in this thesis. The latter portion of this chapter evaluated the various military, political, economic, and policy risks associated with the decisions made by President Carter in forging America’s response to the

\textsuperscript{81} Vance, 511.

\textsuperscript{82} Paarlberg, A2.
Soviet Union. Table 3.1 summarizes the predicted influence of balance-of-power considerations, prospect theory, and cognitive heuristics, and it assigns an overall level of risk within each of the primary categories of the dependent variable risk.

From this examination, it is apparent that prospect theory did not fare well in anticipating the relative willingness of President Carter to adopt a risk-acceptant posture. President Carter was operating in a domain of loss both internationally and domestically and yet the policies he adopted assumed low levels of risk across the board.

Instead, balance-of-power considerations appeared to inspire a cautious and risk-averse approach that permeated the decision-making process. These balance-of-power considerations were reinforced by a representative heuristic that placed the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan within the broader context of bipolar superpower confrontation. This sensitized President Carter to the dangers of military confrontation, and his policy responses were designed explicitly to minimize these risks. The feature of relatively low cognitive availability during this crisis similarly encouraged a risk-averse approach in responding to the Soviet invasion. According to the analysis of Rose McDermott, this example stands in stark contrast to the risk-acceptant posture of President Carter in his decision to authorize military operations to rescue the American hostages in Iran—a situation with much higher levels of availability, due to the dramatic and novel nature of that crisis.83 Meanwhile, the anchoring effect of SALT II likely reinforced President Carter’s unwillingness to take more stringent steps that might have jeopardized ratification of the treaty.

83. McDermott.
### Table 3.1: Anticipated Influence of Variables on Risk Assessment (President Carter & Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan, 1979)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S Cases</th>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Dependent Variables: Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>Non-intervention</td>
<td>Bipolar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Anticipated Influence on Risk Propensities)

- Risk-averse
- Risk-averse
- Risk-acceptant
- Risk-averse with emphasis on balance-of-power considerations
- Risk-averse
- Risk-averse with emphasis on implications for SALTII

- Prediction supported
- Prediction falsified
CHAPTER 4: PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH AND AFGHANISTAN: OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM (2001)

BACKGROUND TO THE CRISIS

President Jimmy Carter had authorized American covert assistance to the Afghani resistance with the aim of countering the growing Soviet influence in the country as early as the summer of 1979.1 By this action, Carter’s National Security Advisor Carter’s Zbigniew Brzezinski hoped to draw the Russians into a quagmire that would drain Moscow’s military, economic, and diplomatic resources and thus give “the USSR its Vietnam war.”2 President Ronald Reagan initially continued this policy sending military and economic assistance to the Afghani mujahedeen through the Pakistani Inter-Service Intelligence agency (ISI).

In 1985, however, U.S. policy took a decisive turn when Reagan issued his National Security Directive No. 166 directing that the U.S. government “use all available means to compel the Soviets to withdraw.”3 From this point forward American policy was aimed not at tying the Soviets down in Afghanistan, but rather at compelling a withdrawal. Consequently, American support for the mujahedeen warriors intensified including the shipment of 900 lethal anti-aircraft Stinger missiles which were effectively used to neutralize the Soviet advantages in airpower. As is now widely recognized, one of these mujahedeen warriors was Osama Bin Laden, a religiously-

---


2. Interview with President Carter’s National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski (Le Nouvel Observateur, January 1998); available online at: [http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/BRZ110A.html](http://www.globalresearch.ca/articles/BRZ110A.html); accessed on 18 January 2009.

inspired young Saudi who sought to wage jihad against the atheist Soviet presence in Afghanistan.

As a result of these pressures, the Soviet military forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 1989 after a decade-long, costly, and ultimately unsuccessful occupation. The departure of Soviet forces, however, left a tremendous power vacuum in Kabul and civil war ensued through the 1990’s. It was in this environment of domestic chaos that the Taliban, whose rank and file members were largely Afghani refugees studying in radical Islamic schools located in Pakistan, rose to prominence. The Taliban governed Afghanistan from 1996 through 2001 with a brutality that was broadly condemned and denounced by the international community. It was also during this period of Taliban rule that Osama Bin Laden returned to Afghanistan after having failed to inspire Islamic revolution in his home country of Saudi Arabia. In the chaos of the failing state that was war-torn Afghanistan, Bin Laden established the recruiting and training base for the terrorist organization known as Al-Qa’ida (literally, “the base” in Arabic).

From this sanctuary in Afghanistan, Osama Bin Laden issued a religious fatwa calling for jihad against all Americans. In August 1998 Al-Qa’ida terrorists struck American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania killing hundreds (including 12 Americans) and wounding thousands. President Clinton responded by launching cruise missile attacks on Al-Qa’ida training facilities in Afghanistan and a pharmaceutical factory suspected of producing chemical weapons in Sudan. Since that time, the battle between the United States government and Osama Bin Laden has been joined. President Clinton approved a range of actions designed to disrupt his terrorist
Upon assuming office in January 2001, President George W. Bush charged his new administration with developing a more robust range of options to deal with the threat posed by Al-Qa’ida. However, the senior interagency group of cabinet officials (the Principals Committee) did not meet to discuss the options for such a plan until September 4, 2001. One short week later Al-Qa’ida operatives crashed civilian airliners into the World Trade Center Towers, the Pentagon, and a field near Shanksville, Pennsylvania in devastating terrorist attacks on the American homeland killing nearly 3,000 innocent civilians. These terrorist attacks of 9/11, of course, provided the immediate backdrop to the risk assessment of President GW Bush and his senior advisors in weighing the next steps to be taken in what would become America’s Global War on Terrorism.

INTERNATIONAL POWER STRUCTURE

President GW Bush in 2001 found himself operating in a remarkably different world than did President Carter when confronting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. President Carter was dealing in world of intense bipolar competition that compelled him to carefully weigh the risks associated with any military confrontation with the Soviet Union. However, in the late 1980’s the world would witness of the most monumental shifts in the global power structure with the peaceful collapse of the Soviet Union. The symbol of Soviet domination in Eastern Europe fell with the opening of the Berlin Wall on November 9, 1989. One brief year later, the Soviet Union was formally dissolved leaving the United States standing as the world’s single superpower.

American political, economic, and military power was unmatched—some claiming that such global dominance by a single power was a development without parallel in human history. This transition from a bipolar to a unipolar global power structure was perceptively captured by Charles Krauthammer in his seminal Foreign Affairs article entitled “The Unipolar Moment.” He wrote,

The immediate post-Cold War world is...unipolar. The center of world power is the unchallenged superpower, the United States, attended by its Western allies....There is but one first-rate power and no prospect in the immediate future of any power to rival it....American preeminence is based on the fact that it is the only country with the military, diplomatic, political and economic assets to be a decisive player in any conflict in whatever part of the world it chooses to involve itself.5

This period of American global supremacy continued through the 1990’s and into the 21st Century. American conventional military superiority was on display for the world to see as American forces liberated Kuwait from Iraq’s brutal repression in 1991. This remarkable military campaign routed the world’s fourth largest army of nearly 2 million men in 100 brief days.

By other measures, the comparative supremacy of American military was also readily apparent. A leading military analyst at the time observed that the first defense budget submitted by President G.W. Bush in March 2001 was “more than twenty-two times as large as the combined spending of the seven countries traditionally identified by the Pentagon as our most likely adversaries—Cuba, Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Sudan and Syria.”6 Moreover, the American military budget was more than

six times that of Russia and seven times that of China.\textsuperscript{7} American dominance of the international arms trade also grew exponentially in the decade preceding 9/11. According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies the percentage of the U.S. arms market share exploded from 27 percent in 1987 to over 49 percent in 1999.\textsuperscript{8} This growth is particular significant when contrasted with a diminished Soviet/Russian share of the arms market shrinking dramatically from slightly over 35 percent to less than seven percent during the same period.\textsuperscript{9}

Economically, the United States occupied a position of comparative dominance, although some analysts had begun to worry about the emergence of peer competitors toward the end of the 1990’s. Nonetheless, by most measures, America remained the globe’s preeminent economic power. The United States continued to dominate the key international financial institutions including the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the World Trade Organization. The International Monetary Fund’s “World Economic Outlook” published in October 2000 attributed projected global growth in GDP primarily to the lead role played by the “strength of the U.S. economy.”\textsuperscript{10} According to World Trade Organization statistics in 2001, the United States remained the world’s largest single trading nation accounting for over 12 percent of global exports and nearly 19 percent of global imports.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{10} \textit{World Economic Outlook}, (International Monetary Fund, 2000), 7.
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{International Trade Statistics}, (World Trade Organization, 2001), Table 1.5 “Leading Exporters and Importers in World Merchandise Trade, 2000” on page 21.
Of course, not everyone was convinced that American dominance equated to the unipolar structure envisioned by Krauthammer. Samuel Huntington, for instance, argued in 1999 that the international distribution of power was better described as “a strange hybrid, a uni-multipolar system.” Even in this hybrid system, however, Huntington never doubted the preeminence of American power. “The United States”, he wrote, “is the single superpower…the sole state with preeminence in every domain of power—economic, military, diplomatic, ideological, technological, and cultural—with reach and capabilities to promote its interests in virtually every part of the world.”

But perhaps most important in this regard, is that President G.W. Bush himself was personally convinced that America was positioned at the apex of global power and politics. As a presidential candidate in 1999 he spoke of American dominance in all fields of endeavor.

> Our world shaped by American courage, power and wisdom, now echoes with American ideals....For America, this is a time of unrivaled military power, economic promise, and cultural influence. It is, in Franklin Roosevelt’s phrase, ‘the peace of overwhelming victory.’

**The role of international structure:** The unipolar structure of global power should allow the United States to adopt a more risk acceptant policy since prospects for a competitor to mount effective military resistance are low and the likelihood of American military victory is great.

---

The 9/11 terrorist attacks compelled American policymakers to recalibrate their perceptions of balances of power and threat. Bush administration officials had come to office in January 2001 believing that global balance-of-power politics were paramount security concerns for the United States. Certainly, the issue of Afghanistan was far down the list of priorities for President Bush and his advisors. It was the belief of this group that American foreign policy needed to devote primary attention to traditional regional powers such as China and Russia—those countries with the capacity and capability to meaningfully influence the direction and course of global events.

The desire of Bush senior officials to refocus American policies on issues of great power politics was clear well before they assumed office. As then candidate George W. Bush’s senior foreign policy advisor Condolezza Rice wrote, “POWER MATTERS.” She handily dismissed Clinton officials and policies that were “uncomfortable with notions of power politics, great powers, and power balances” and explicitly called for American foreign policies that would “focus U.S. energies on comprehensive relationships with the big powers, particularly Russia and China, that can and will mold the character of the international political system.” She continues,

The reality is that a few big powers can radically affect international peace, stability, and prosperity. These states are capable of disruption on a grand scale, and their fits of anger or acts of beneficence affect hundreds of millions of people. By reason of size, geographic position, economic potential, and military strength, they are capable of influencing American welfare for good or ill. Moreover, that kind of power is usually accompanied by a sense of entitlement to play a
decisive role in international politics. Great powers do not just mind their own business.\footnote{Condoleezza Rice, “Promoting the National Interest,” \textit{Foreign Affairs} 79, no. 1 (2000). Italics added for emphasis.}

This is not to say that the incoming Bush administration officials were unaware of the threat posed by terrorist groups. Indeed, outgoing Clinton officials during the transition repeatedly underscored this emerging threat and urged that the Bush administration turn their attention to this issue immediately. Richard Clarke details the many transition briefings given to Vice President Cheney, Secretary Powell, National Security Advisor Rice and others advocating that they “make al Qaeda your number one priority.”\footnote{Clarke, 228.}

Despite this push, Bush administration officials remained skeptical of the capacity of terrorist groups alone to significantly impact American global interests. In their opinion, these groups were of little consequence without the active financial and material support of state sponsors. In April 2001 at one of these interagency discussions on Osama Bin Laden, Wolfowitz expressed this sentiment saying, “I just don’t understand why we are beginning by talking about this one man bin Laden,… [he] could not do all these things like the 1993 attack on New York, not without a state sponsor.”\footnote{Ibid., 232.} The bias of the Bush administration as it assumed office in early 2001 was clearly that of pursuing a foreign policy grounded in state-centric balance-of-power politics.
Balance-of-power

Afghanistan in 2001 was certainly not in any sense a global or regional power as traditionally measured by political, economic, or military capability. The decade-long war fought against the Soviet Union and subsequent civil war killed over 1 million Afghans, maimed and wounded some 3 million, and compelled upward of 5 million to flee the country as destitute refugees to neighboring Pakistan and Iran. After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, international and American attention to Afghanistan evaporated signaling the near-total absence of great power interests in this landlocked, rural, and poverty-stricken country. The consolidation of the Taliban’s medieval rule in the 1990’s left Afghanistan even more isolated and estranged from the international community.

Economically, the constant military conflict throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s destroyed both valuable croplands and the country’s limited infrastructure leaving Afghanistan one the world’s poorest countries with a per capita GDP of $800. The CIA World Factbook described the dire economic situation on the eve of the 9/11 attacks:

Gross domestic product has fallen substantially over the past 20 years because of the loss of labor and capital and the disruption of trade and transport; severe drought added to the nation’s difficulties in 1998-2000. The majority of the population continues to suffer from insufficient food, clothing, housing, and medical care. Inflation remains a serious problem throughout the country. International aid can deal with only a fraction of the humanitarian problem, let alone promote economic development. In 1999-2000, internal civil strife continued, hampering both domestic economic policies and international aid efforts.  

Afghanistan’s conventional military power was for all intents and purposes non-existent. The CIA offered the following public assessment of Afghanistan’s military capacity, “the military does not exist on a national basis…some elements of the former [armed forces] and tribal militias still exist but are factionalized among the various groups.”

The fact that Afghanistan occupied no place of significance by any traditional measure of political, economic, or military power would make it a poor candidate for attention by the realist state-centric foreign policies of the new George W. Bush administration. Moreover, it was the administration’s emphasis on these aspects of traditional power that caused them to largely dismiss the capacity of small independent groups of terrorists to influence international politics in a meaningful way. Of course, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 were to dramatically change this assessment. The 9/11 attacks clearly demonstrated the capability of terrorist groups to inflict massive damage and compelled the administration to adopt policies focusing on “balance-of-threat” considerations placing increasing weight on the demonstrated intent of potential enemies.

**Balance-of-threat**

Prior to the 9/11 attacks, the threat posed by Al-Qa’ida was evident in Bin Laden’s public declarations of intent to attack the United States. This intent was on display in his February 1998 fatwa calling “all Muslims who believe in God… to kill Americans…in any place they are found.” This threat was combined with a

18. Ibid.
demonstrated capability to do just that in the Al-Qa’ida bombings of the American embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in that same year; and in the subsequent attack on the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000. Ultimately, however, it was the demonstrated capability of Al-Qa’ida to kill nearly 3,000 American citizens on September 11, 2001 that compelled American decision makers to take the threat of Al-Qa’ida seriously enough to consider military intervention.

It was this combination of demonstrated intent and capability that jolted the Bush administration to action and marked a transition from a strategic frame of reference grounded in balance-of-power politics to one more explicitly concerned about the potential threats emerging over the horizon. Perhaps the clearest indication of this was President George W. Bush’s first State of the Union Address following the 9/11 attacks in describing the dangers and threats confronting the country. He opened with an acknowledgement that “the civilized world faces unprecedented dangers.” He further stressed the importance of balance-of-threat considerations:

> Our discoveries in Afghanistan confirmed our worst fears and showed us the true scope of the task ahead...We have found diagrams of American nuclear power plants and public water facilities, detailed instructions for making chemical weapons, surveillance maps of American cities, and thorough descriptions of landmarks in America and throughout the world.20

It is noteworthy that President Bush offers no evidence of the capability of organizations such as Al-Qa’ida to conduct attacks against American facilities or to develop chemical weapons. Instead in this new “balance-of-threat” framework, it is sufficient for him to insinuate that these groups merely have the intent to acquire these capabilities. In this threatening security environment, President Bush sought

to reassure the American public by guaranteeing quick action in response to these emerging threats. He promises that “I will not wait on events while dangers gather. I will not stand by as peril draws closer and closer….America is no longer protected by vast oceans. We are protected from attack only by vigorous action abroad…”21 This transition to a balance-of-threat framework was solidified and formalized in President Bush’s National Security Strategy published in September 2002—a scant one year after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In the introduction, he again underscores the importance of intent over demonstrated capability.

Our enemies have openly declared that they are seeking weapons of mass destruction, and evidence indicates that they are doing so with determination….as a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed…So we must be prepared to defeat our enemies’ plans… History will judge harshly those who saw this coming danger but failed to act. In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action.22

Other senior administration officials echoed this profound assertion that the mere existence of a demonstrated intent to harm the United States was sufficient justification for concerted American action to include the use of military force. Perhaps the most notable of these indications was the assertion by Vice President Cheney that in the wake of the 9/11 attacks even “[i]f there’s a one percent chance that Pakistani scientists are helping al Qaeda build or develop a nuclear weapon, we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response.”23 This statement defies

21. Ibid.
traditional calculations of risk as a combination of probability and consequence. In this sense, the probability that an enemy would actually acquire the physical capability to damage American interests is not only a tertiary concern to the policymaker, it is absolutely irrelevant. Instead the demonstrated intent to acquire such a capability is *prima facie* evidence justifying American action to prevent even the emergence of such a threat. The emphasis by both President Bush and Vice President Cheney on action seems to support the general expectation by Stephen Walt that balance-of-threat frameworks are likely to be more destabilizing and prone to aggressive responses including the use of military force.

*The role of the nature of the threat:* The shift toward “balance-of-threat” considerations should incline the United States toward a more risk-acceptant posture.

**Domain**

Domestically, President Bush’s administration met with a mix of successes and frustrations in the month preceding the 9/11 attacks. On the positive side, President Bush came to office promoting a domestic agenda centered on tax and education reforms. He enjoyed some early and significant successes in these areas. The first major piece of legislation signed in June 2001 by President Bush was a $1.35 trillion tax cut to be spread over 10 years. The other top priority of his administration was the No Child Left Behind Act which was proposed by President Bush only days after assuming office and approved by the House in May 2001 and the Senate in June 2001. President Bush and his senior officials could certainly feel a sense of satisfaction in getting these things accomplished in the early months of the administration.
However, the administration was also plagued by a number of domestic difficulties that would have also cast a darkening shadow over any sense of optimism. For starters, President Bush assumed office with serious questions as to the legitimacy of his election. He actually lost the popular vote to Vice President Al Gore in November 2000. The issue of his election was only decided after a long and contentious legal battle centered on the outcome of the vote in Florida. The net effect of this dispute was to call into question the legitimacy of his presidency and jeopardize any claim to a mandate for action from the people. As political scientist Gary Jacobson put it, “George W. Bush entered the White House with the electorate evenly divided between the parties and sharply polarized along party lines, not least on the legitimacy of his victory.”

By the summer of 2001, even his initial legislative accomplishments on tax and education reforms were running into difficulties. Democrats began charging that President Bush’s tax cuts were responsible for declining budget surpluses. The Congressional Budget Office forecasted a significant reduction in the federal budget from $122 trillion (as estimated in March 2001) to $600 million (as anticipated in August 2001). Democratic leader of the House Gephardt used this as evidence to charge that “Bush’s tax cut has put him on path headed straight for the Medicare and Social Security surpluses” that had been accumulated during President Clinton’s


tenure. Additionally, the initial momentum behind President Bush’s No Child Left Behind Act had stalled by the summer of 2001 and he would not sign this legislation until January 2002. All of this contributed to a sense that by August 2001, the Bush administration “had run out of energy and ideas.”

Internationally, one gets the sense that while maintaining a sense of optimism about America’s potential, President Bush viewed the position of the United States as being undermined by other actors and influences in the international system. He was particularly concerned that President Clinton had placed far too much faith in international organizations and arms control regimes. “In the hard work of halting proliferation,” he would say, “the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty is not the answer.” President Bush had little faith in the ability of international institutions and regime to safeguard American security. Once in office, he immediately sought to reverse this trend by taking concrete steps to withdraw from the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty, the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, and the Kyoto Protocols on the environment. President Bush also expressed concerns that extended peacekeeping and stabilization missions were placing unnecessary strains on the military and negatively impacting the readiness of the force. During his fall campaign in 2000, President Bush said,

> Not since the years before Pearl Harbor has our investment in national defense been so low as a percentage of GNP. Yet rarely has our military been so freely used—an average of one deployment every


27. Arnold, 151.

nine weeks in the last few years. Since the end of the Cold War, our
ground forces have been deployed more frequently, while our defense
budget has fallen by nearly 40 percent.

Something has to give, and it’s giving. Resources are over-stretched…
Morale is down. Recruitment is more difficult.  

Finally, the intelligence traffic reaching the President through June and August was
warning of an impending terrorist attack against American interests. Initially, this
reporting focused on the possibility of an attack overseas, but on August 1st the
FBI issued an advisory indicating that “an attack in the United States would not be
discounted.” This spike in intelligence reporting culminated in a August 6 Presidential
Daily Briefing item entitled “Bin Ladin Determined to Strike in US” and observing
“patterns of suspicious activity in this country consistent with preparations for
hijackings or other types of attacks, including recent surveillance of federal buildings
in New York.”

Moreover, in the months preceding the 9/11 attacks public opinion polls supported
a growing sense of unease with the governance of President Bush. Political scientist
Richard Brody noted that support for President Bush actually dropped 17 points
during the summer and that while “Democrats and independents were [initially]
divided in their assessment of President Bush; by the end of the summer of 2001,
majorities of these two groups gave the president negative marks.” According to
Brody, this decline in approval was statistically significant and “fueled by questions

Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (2004), 262.
raised about the president’s foreign and defense policies and by the movement of the economy toward recession.”32

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 could only exacerbate this already mounting sense of loss both internationally and globally. On that tragic morning in September 2001, the world’s preeminent military superpower suffered the single largest loss of life from an enemy attack on its soil in history—even worse than the surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. But whereas the Japanese attack was conducted by a nearly 400 aircraft launched from six aircraft carriers, the 9/11 attacks were undertaken by 19 individuals armed with little more than box cutters and pepper spray. In his address to the nation that evening, President Bush communicated the sense of vulnerability and grief gripping America.

Tonight I ask for your prayers for all those who grieve, for the children whose worlds have been shattered, for all whose sense of safety and security has been threatened.33

His speech at the National Cathedral on September 14th sounded a similar chord of grief and loss. “We are here in the middle hour of our grief. So many have suffered so great a loss, and today we express our nation’s sorrow.”34

In his book, *Winning the War of Words: Selling the War on Terror from Afghanistan to Iraq*, Wojtek Wolfe conducted an empirical study of President Bush’s public speeches, interviews, and statements from inauguration in January through December 2001. The results of his study lend further credence to the previous analysis suggesting that President Bush was operating in a domain of loss through the spring

32. Ibid., 235.
and summer of 2001; and that this sense of loss intensified significantly after the 9/11 attacks. In particular he notes that,

The loss domain rhetoric more than tripled in September and then nearly tripled again in October. The most often used loss terms in September were hurt, defeat, destruction, loss, and death. Loss domain rhetoric throughout the month focused on hurt businesses, hurt people, and a hurt America.35

**The role of domain:** The international and domestic domains of loss should incline President Bush to adopt more risk-acceptant policies.

**Cognitive Heuristics:**

**Representativeness**

Representativeness has to do with the degree of association between an event or outcome and the similarity it has with another class of events. President Bush almost immediately placed the 9/11 attacks with the representative framework of war.

President Bush recalled his initial thoughts upon being informed by his Chief of Staff Andrew Card that two planes had struck the World Trade Center Towers. “They had declared war on us, and I made my mind up at that moment that we were going to war.”36 President Bush had placed these attacks and the eventual American response within the context of “war” without any consultation or advice from any of his senior cabinet officials or advisors. In his own diary entry that evening, President Bush

---


reinforced this basic representative framework of war, observing “The Pearl Harbor of the 21st century took place today.”

He also communicated this war construct directly and clearly to his subordinates. This framework of war would come to thoroughly permeate the subsequent decision-making and policy formulation process for President Bush and his senior advisors. In his first phone call to Vice President Cheney within minutes after the crash of American Airlines Flight 77 into the Pentagon, President Bush said, “We’re at war.”

In his first call to Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld from onboard Air Force One that day, the President indicated that a military response from the United States would be forthcoming. “It’s a day of national tragedy, and we’ll clean up the mess and then the ball will be in your court and Dick Meyer’s [Chairman of the Joints Chiefs of Staff] court.” Other key advisors lost no time in adopting this representative framework as their own. On September 12th, CIA Director Tenet used the terminology of war in briefing what he himself described as the “War Cabinet.” He began his briefing, “We’re prepared to launch in short order an aggressive covert-action program that will carry the fight to the enemy.” Furthermore, at Camp David that weekend, Tenet presented a plan that would establish the basic outlines for subsequent American action which he titled “Going to War.” He followed this up with an internal

37. Ibid., 37.
38. Ibid., 17.
39. Ibid., 19.
40. George Tenet, At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2007), 175. Italics added for emphasis
41. Woodward, 75-78.
memorandum to top officials throughout the intelligence community on September 16th entitled “We’re at War.”42

This representative framework quickly spread from the internal deliberations of senior policymakers to the public arena. In his address to the nation on the evening of the tragic attacks, President Bush invoked the framework of a war against terrorism.

Today, our fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack in a series of deliberate and deadly terrorist attacks... America and our friends and allies...stand together to win the war against terrorism.43

In discussions with reporters on September 12th, President G.W. Bush introduced this representative framework of war into the public discourse. “The deliberate and deadly attacks which were carried out yesterday against our country were more than acts of terror...They were acts of war.”44 Again, during a memorial service at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC, the President reiterated that “[w]ar has been waged against us by stealth and deceit and murder.”45 This heuristic categorizing these events and America’s subsequent reaction within the strategic context of war became solidified in nearly all subsequent policy pronouncements. President Bush opened the first State of the Union address following the 9/11 attacks with this public declaration of war, “…as we gather tonight, our nation is at war.”46

Beyond this general categorization of these events within the heuristic framework of war, there was little else in history that President Bush or his advisors found useful

42. Tenet, 179.
43. Bush, “Address to the Nation.”
44. Woodward, 45.
45. Bush, “Speech at the National Cathedral.”
as a template for action. The 9/11 attacks and America’s response were thought to represent a unique combination of forces and challenges. The President, in particular, was fond of reminding his advisors and the public that although this is “war,” it is a war unlike any other in history. In a handwritten note President Bush passed to his communications chief Karen Hughes on September 12th, he jotted down some of his key observations—one of which was “No kind of enemy that we are used to.”

Throughout the initial discussions with his senior advisors, President Bush stressed the unconventional nature of the task before them, that this “is a new kind of war; we’re facing an enemy we never faced before.”

**The role of representativeness:** *A representative heuristic of war should predispose President Bush and his senior advisors to emphasize military action and brace them to accept a higher level of military risk.*

**Availability**

The heuristic of availability deals with the immediate retrievability, vividness, and salience of the information at hand. There is little doubt that the levels of availability concerning the terrorist attacks were extremely high for the president, his senior advisors, and the broader American public. The scholar James McCormick observes that “[f]rom an analytic point of view, the events of that day represent one of those rare and spectacular political events that can change the mindset or the image of the public and its leaders regarding foreign policy.” He goes on to argue that the 9/11 attacks, had a more profound effect than…Pearl Harbor, the Vietnam War, or the Berlin Wall—for at least three reasons. First, it was the first

---

47. Woodward, 37.
48. Ibid., 96.
substantial attack on the American continental homeland since the burning of Washington in the War of 1812. The U.S. public had always assumed the security of the homeland, and these events shattered that assumption. September 11 demonstrated that no state or person was secure from those determined to do them harm. Second, September 11 was fundamentally an attack on U.S. civilians, not military personnel (although, to be sure, military personnel were killed at the Pentagon). Even Pearl Harbor and its devastation had fundamentally been directed at military personnel. Third, and importantly, the terrorist attack was the deadliest in U.S. history—costing almost 3,000 lives and surpassing the death toll at Pearl Harbor by almost 1,000.  

For the president and his national security officials, the attacks of 9/11 and America’s initial responses to them would forever be associated with their administration—for better or worse. For each of these officials, this event could not help but assume the highest levels of emotional salience. This was particularly true for President G.W. Bush. Anyone watching television that day can remember President Bush’s shaken face as his Chief of Staff Andrew Card informed him of the terrorist attacks. Bob Woodward describes the moment, “His face has a distant sober look, almost frozen, edging on bewilderment.” For Bush personally, his visit to New York City to see firsthand both the devastation of the attacks and the heroism of the responders was tremendously powerful and created an “indelible impression.” Bob Woodward recounts the impact that this visit had on the president.

For Bush, the sight of the enormous, dark wasteland of wreckage left an indelible impression, one that he would recall as “very, very eerie.” Though he had talked with many others about the devastation, he still was not prepared for what he found. It was “a nightmare, a living nightmare.” Along with destruction far worse than anything he


50. Woodward, 15.
had seen on television or heard from his advisers, he encountered a crowd of rescue workers hungry for revenge. It was an “unbelievably emotional” crowd demanding justice, he recalled. “I cannot describe to you how emotional” the workers were…One pointed to him as he walked by and yelled out: “Don’t let me down.” Bush was stunned. He thought that the words and look on the man’s face would perhaps stay with him forever—“Don’t let me down.” This was so personal, he thought.51

The impact of these events on President Bush were also apparent in his public speeches as he employed emotional and vivid terms to describe the nature of the 9/11 attacks. In his address to the nation on the evening of the attacks, he observed, “The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing, have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness and a quiet, unyielding anger.”52 In advance of a memorial service at which the president was to speak, Secretary of State Powell was concerned enough about the impact of Bush’s visit to “Ground Zero” in New York City that he offered the president some advice on how to prevent being overcome by emotion during his upcoming speech. Powell passed Bush a handwritten note suggesting that he avoid emotionally laden words like “Mom” and “Pop.”53 At that same memorial service at the National Cathedral, Bush again evoked dramatic imagery recalling that “On Tuesday, our country was attacked with deliberate and massive cruelty. We have seen the images of fire and ashes and bent steel.”54

51. Ibid., 69.
52. Bush, “Address to the Nation.”
54. Bush, “Speech at the National Cathedral.”
CIA Director George Tenet also reflected on the emotional salience of the 9/11 attacks for he and others at the CIA. In recalling the many heart-felt condolences sent from leaders and officials from all across the globe, Tenet said,

All of these people knew how much 9/11 had struck at the core of each of us at the CIA. They’d been there; they’d shared our same fears; they knew that each of the thousands of dead was a personal defeat for us. And I’m sure they would have understood as well as anyone outside the CIA the reaction of so many of us—at the leadership level and in the ranks—had in the hours and days immediately after the attack. We’re going to run these bastards down no matter where they are, we told ourselves. We’re going to lead, and everybody else is going to follow. And that’s what we set out to do.\(^5\)

Of course, this was an emotionally searing event for the American public as well. The scenes of the airplanes crashing into the World Trade Center Towers were replayed over and over again on televisions across the globe. According to an ABC News/Washington Post poll conducted on September 11th, 99 percent of the respondents indicated that they were now watching or listening to broadcast news reports as a result of the terrorist attacks and 91 percent were praying for the victims and their families.\(^6\) Of course, these terrorist attacks were explicitly designed to prey on these feelings of vulnerability.

**The role of availability:** The extremely high levels of availability should prompt senior officials to adopt a risk-acceptant posture toward decision making.

**Anchoring**

The heuristic of anchoring involves the overweighting of initial estimates. In this case, one of the key anchoring points for President Bush’s deliberations involved an

---

55. Tenet, 174.

assessment that the responses of President Clinton to terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in 1993, the bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998, and the USS Cole in 2000 were wholly ineffectual. In the view of President Bush and his principle advisors, Clinton’s preference for employing cruise missiles portrayed a sense of weakness that only invited further attacks. Candidate Bush frequently criticized Clinton policies that reflected a sense of doubt about American resolve and power. In his first inaugural address President Bush pledged to correct this failure, “We will build our defenses beyond challenge, lest weakness invite challenge.”

This sense was also conveyed clearly by then Governor Bush to Donald Rumsfeld in the course of the presidential campaign during an informal “interview” for the position of secretary of defense.

He [Rumsfeld] told Bush that during the eight years of Clinton, the natural pattern when challenged or attacked had been a “reflexive pullback”—caution, safety plays, even squeamishness. The Clinton weapon of choice was the standoff cruise missile. Rumsfeld left no doubt in the Bush’s mind that when the moment came, as it surely would, that the United States was threatened, he, as secretary of defense, would be coming to the president to unleash the military. The president could expect a forward-leaning action plan.

Bush had replied, unambiguously in Rumsfeld's estimation, that that was precisely what he wanted. Rumsfeld believed they had a clear, common understanding.

Vice President Cheney echoed this assessment in an interview on Meet the Press,

Weakness, vacillation, and unwillingness of the United States to stand with our friends—that is provocative…It’s encouraged people like Osama Bin Laden…to launch repeated strikes against the United

States, our people overseas and here at home, with the view that he could, in fact, do so with impunity.\textsuperscript{59}

This anchoring heuristic was to directly influence the choice of military options presented to the president at Camp David on Saturday, September 15th. The president had called his key national security advisors to the presidential retreat to consider responses to the 9/11 attacks. General Hugh Shelton was the senior uniformed military officer. He served as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, by statute the senior military advisor to the president. He outlined three potential military response options: (1) cruise missile attacks on al Qaeda training camps that could be launched quickly from deployed naval and air force assets without approval from other countries and without endangering the lives of American servicemen and women; (2) cruise missile strikes combined with piloted bombers targeting both Al-Qaeda and Taliban facilities that would take somewhat longer to organize and place the air crews at some degree of risk at being shot down or captured; and (3) cruise missiles and manned bombers with the addition of combat ground forces including elite units of the Special Forces and potentially some Marines and Army units as well. This last option would require overflight rights and base access from other countries in the region and would certainly endanger the lives of hundreds if not thousands of American military men and women deploying over thousands of miles in a harsh and hostile land. The first two options were quickly dismissed as inadequate in large measure precisely because they resembled the weak responses of President Clinton that they had so heavily criticized during the presidential campaign. There was little

doubt that the group assembled at Camp David was going to insist that the American response would include military ‘boots on the ground’. 60

**The role of anchoring:** Assessments by senior Bush administration officials that cruise missile attacks ordered by President Clinton were wholly inadequate responses to the challenge of terrorism virtually guaranteed that President Bush’s response to the 9/11 attacks would be more aggressive and more acceptant of a higher degree of military risk in order to deliver a more devastating and effective blow.

**PERCEPTIONS OF RISK**

**Political Risks**

President Bush’s decision to initiate American military intervention into Afghanistan involved little political risk as measured by public support for U.S. actions both internationally and domestically.

The outpouring of global sympathy and support for America in the wake of the 9/11 attacks was epitomized in Le Monde’s headline of September 12, 2001, “We Are All Americans.”

In this tragic moment, when words seem so inadequate to express the shock people feel, the first thing that comes to mind is this: We are all Americans! We are all New Yorkers, just as surely as John F. Kennedy declared himself to be a Berliner in 1962 when he visited Berlin. Indeed, just as in the gravest moments of our own history, how can we not feel profound solidarity with those people, that country, the United

---

60. Woodward, 79-80. Richard Clarke offers a similar account of these events in his book Against All Enemies
States, to whom we are so close and to whom we owe our freedom, and therefore our solidarity?\textsuperscript{61}

This emotional empathy was supported by more concrete measures, as well. The day after the terrorist attacks, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) unanimously passed Resolution 1368 which

\textit{Unequivocally condemns} in the strongest terms the horrifying terrorist attacks which took place on 11 September 2001…

\textit{Calls} on all States to work together to urgently bring to justice the perpetrators, organizers and sponsors of these terrorist attacks and \textit{stresses} that those responsible for aiding, supporting or harbouring the perpetrators, organizers and sponsors of these attacks will be held accountable…

\textit{Expresses} its readiness to take all necessary steps to respond to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, and to combat all forms of terrorism…\textsuperscript{62}

Two weeks later the UNSC adopted a wide-ranging anti-terrorism resolution 1373 aimed at establishing an international mechanism to “prevent and suppress the financing of terrorist acts.”\textsuperscript{63} The NATO Council also declared the 9/11 attacks as an attack on all NATO nations invoking the mutual defense Article V of its charter for the first time in history and obligating all member nations of the Atlantic alliance to come to the defense of the United States.

President Bush specifically highlighted this wide-ranging international support for the initiation of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan during a nationally televised address on 7 October 2001.


We are joined in this operation by our staunch friend, Great Britain. Other close friends including Canada, Australia, Germany, and France, have pledged forces as the operation unfolds. More than 40 countries in the Middle East, Africa, Europe and across Asia have granted air transit or landing rights. Many more have shared intelligence. *We are supported by the collective will of the world.*

The actual international political risks of America’s military intervention were quite small given this tremendous outpouring of global sympathy and support. However, President Bush on several occasions (at least in private) communicated his willingness to accept much high levels of political risk and isolation, if necessary. This was never clearer than in his determined refusal to let coalition partners limit America’s freedom of action in prosecuting the war on terrorism. At one point early in discussions with his war cabinet, President Bush emphasized that, “At some point, we may be the only ones left. That’s okay with me. We are America.”

This was a concern fully shared by his Secretary of Defense. Both men were no doubt supported in this belief by a shared sense that America was *the* dominant military global power at the time. Ultimately, when combat operations began on 7 October 2001, Britain would be the sole coalition partner contributing combat forces to the aerial bombing campaign.

Domestically, President Bush’s public approval ratings skyrocketed to new historic highs with virtually no significant voices raised in opposition to the American military intervention into Afghanistan. In the wake of the 9/11 attacks the American public rallied to Bush’s side as never before. To put this boost in historical perspective, President Kennedy received a 12 percent boost in approval ratings following the

---


65. Woodward, 81.
Cuban Missile Crisis (to 74%) in 1963; President HW Bush got a 20 percent boost (to 83%) following Desert Storm in 1991; while President GW Bush received a whopping 39 point boost (to 90%)—the highest public approval rating of a sitting American president in history.\footnote{Shoon Kathleen Murray and Christopher Spinosa, “The Post-9/11 Shift in Public Opinion: How Long Will It Last?,” in The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy: Insights and Evidence, ed. Eugene R. Wittkopf and James M. McCormick (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 99.}

Moreover, Congress overwhelmingly passed legislation giving the President virtually carte-blanche authority to respond to the 9/11 attacks.

\[T]\he President is authorized to use all necessary and appropriate force against those nation, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001, or harbored such organizations or persons, in order to prevent any future acts of international terrorism against the United States by such nations, organizations, or persons.\footnote{U.S. Congress, Authorization for the Use of Military Force, 107 Cong., 1st sess., 2001. S.J. Res. 23.}

The Congressional endorsement of such widespread executive authority to respond with \textit{all necessary force} and against \textit{any nation, organization, or persons} who either planned, authorized, committed, or even \textit{aided} the terrorist was unprecedented in scope.\footnote{Richard F. Grimmet, Authorization for Use of Military Force in Response to the 9/11 Attacks (P.L. 107-40): Legislative History (CRS Report for Congress: Washington, DC, Updated 16 January 2007).} The all but unanimous support for this legislation (unanimous in the Senate, and 420-1 in the House) virtually guaranteed no substantive domestic opposition to Operation Enduring Freedom.

Furthermore, not surprisingly, the American public itself was overwhelming supportive of additional military measures to combat terrorism following 9/11. A
study conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations in 2002 noted that public support for airstrikes jumped to 87 percent, for the employment of American ground troops in attacking terrorist facilities to 84 percent, and assassinations of individual terrorist leaders increased to 66 percent. President Bush was not likely to encounter any substantial domestic political opposition to any aspect of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Even more surprising than the scale of the improvement in President Bush’s approval ratings was its sustained durability. Typically these “rally around the flag” effects linger for a few months as we saw in the case of President Carter as he confronted the twin challenges of the Soviet intervention into Afghanistan and the seizure of American hostages in Tehran (1979). However, President Bush, following the 9/11 attacks, was to enjoy one of the longest stretches of approval ratings above 60 percent of any American president in history. More remarkable yet was President Bush’s ability to ride this wave of popularity to avoid the normal fate of the ruling party to lose seats in mid-term elections. In fact, Republicans in 2002 were able to pick up seats both in the House and the Senate allowing them unfettered control of Congress.

**Summary of political risks:** In this internationally and domestic permissive environment, President Bush confronted virtually no substantive political opposition to Operation Enduring Freedom and consequently confronted little political risk in taking this action.

---


70. Jacobson, 197.
Military Risks

In terms of prospects for casualties, the military risks assumed by President Bush in initiating Operation Enduring Freedom were remarkably few. The number of American CIA and military personnel involved in the initial ousting of the Taliban from Kabul and Mazar totaled in the hundreds. The total American commitment in military and paramilitary manpower in the opening phases of OEF amounted to 110 CIA officers and 316 Special Forces personnel. Moreover, the first American casualty in Afghanistan was not suffered until CIA paramilitary officer Mike Spann was killed in a prison riot outside of Mazar on November 25th—after some 7 weeks of combat operations. At other subsequent points in the military campaign, President Bush displayed a reluctance to risk American military casualties. One prominent example would be the battle of Tora Bora near the Khyber Pass in December 2001 when President Bush opted “to rely on Afghan and Pakistani forces to pursue Osama bin Laden and many of his Al Qaeda fighters…rather than risk U.S. casualties.”

Beyond the issue of casualties, military risk can be assessed by comparing the relative military capabilities of the intervening force and its potential enemies. The military capabilities of the Taliban and Al-Qa’ida paled in comparison to the modern military forces of the American-led coalition forces intervening in Afghanistan. General Wesley Clark, a retired American NATO Commander who lead the allied military

73. Daalder and Lindsay, 123.
campaign in Kosovo (1999), called the Taliban “the most incompetent adversary the United States has fought since the Barbary pirates…They had no understanding of U.S. military capability.” On paper, the Taliban possessed some 100 outdated tanks, 250 armored vehicles, 200 artillery guns and rocket launchers, light anti-aircraft guns and man-portable surface-to-air missiles, and between 9-10,000 fighters. However, the quality of both their maintenance and training was extremely poor and these forces were but shadows of the more modern defenses confronted by the American military previously in places like Kosovo and Iraq. General Richard Myers—an air force officer—assumed the position of the Chairman Joint Chiefs of Staff on 1 October 2001 and would thus be the senior uniformed American military official at the time OEF began. He characterized the air defenses of the Taliban as “meager” and fully anticipated that they would be “pulverized” in the initial U.S. air strikes.

Despite these overall low levels of military risk, President Bush did at times also display a willingness to assume greater levels of risk as anticipated by his representative heuristic of war. This was evident within minutes of being informed of the 9/11 attacks when he authorized U.S. fighter pilots to shoot down commercial airliners controlled by hijackers even if civilians were on board. In the planning for Operation Enduring Freedom, this was most visible in his insistence of having “boots on the ground” as part of any serious option for dealing with the Taliban and Al-Qa’ida. In pushing for the presence of American ground forces he told his advisors, “We are going to rain holy hell on them. You’ve got to put lives at risk. We’ve got to have people on the ground.”

75. Woodward, 98.
In other ways, however, President Bush displayed a remarkable sensitivity to other aspects of military risks and deference to the advice of the uniformed military. Though he and Rumsfeld were relentless in pushing the military to move forward with a much smaller ground force than they were comfortable with, he did not (at the uniformed military’s urging) initiate either conventional air or ground operations until sufficient Combat Search and Rescue teams were in place throughout the region to recover downed pilots and other military personnel who might become isolated and endangered. Similar to air operations over Kosovo, Bush’s military advisors also ensured that the slower moving aircraft dropping humanitarian supplies flew at 18,000 feet—well above the range of the Taliban air defenses. Additionally, the airstrikes themselves were conducted in a very conventional and risk-averse manner. The initial targets would include the air defense systems, aircraft, communications facilities, airports, and runways that represented traditional threats to American air crews.  

Finally, President Bush insisted that the military approve only those targets at minimal risk of inflicting civilian casualties and other collateral damage.

**Summary of military risks:** Given the heuristic representative of war and the high levels of availability, President Bush and his advisors demonstrated a remarkable sensitivity to military risks. Operation Enduring Freedom involved relatively low levels of military risk overall, despite the contrary expectations of these theoretical variables.

**Economic Risks**

President Bush evinced little concerned about the ultimate costs or financial risks of military intervention and was willing to accept an exceptionally high level of risks

76. Ibid., 208.
in this arena. This attitude was displayed at one of the first strategy sessions with his “war cabinet” when CIA Director Tenet offered an estimate of $1 billion to execute an aggressive covert action program to assist the Northern Alliance in fighting against Al-Qa’ida and the Taliban. CIA agents would literally infiltrate Afghanistan with suitcases containing millions of dollars to recruit local tribal warlords. When confronted with this figure, President Bush dismissed the costs as insignificant saying, “Whatever it takes.”

At another point in these discussions, Treasury Secretary O’Neill was explaining some of concerns that new authorities to track, disrupt, and eliminate terrorist funding networks might themselves cause damage to the existing global financial infrastructure. Bush again quickly dismissed these concerns as inconsequential. “This is war, this isn’t peace. Do it. [Bin Laden] needs money and we need to know whoever is giving him money and deal with them.”

However, the initial military intervention in and of itself was relatively inexpensive and therefore involved fairly low levels of economic risk. The CIA “calculated that they had spent only $70 million in direct cash outlays on the ground in Afghanistan [which] the president considered…one of the biggest ‘bargains’ of all time.”

Furthermore, the small “footprint” of conventional military forces meant that the costs for their deployment and sustainment in Afghanistan would be comparatively small as well. The Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments (CSBA) estimated that the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan through its first two months (October 7

77. Ibid., 41.
78. Ibid., 62.
79. Ibid., 317.
– December 6)—a period that included the eviction of the Taliban from Kabul and Mazar—had cost some $1 to $2.2 billion. This cost represents significantly less than 1 percent of the total defense budget in FY2001 of $292.332 billion.

Of course, over time these costs have ballooned exponentially as the military intervention transitioned into a nation-building project. However, a long-term occupation by American forces was not anticipated by President Bush at the time he weighed his decision to initiate military operations. President Bush (as candidate) had been particularly critical of using military units as “permanent peacekeepers” in such places as Kosovo and Bosnia. He considered these non-combat missions a needless drain on American military resources and morale. His Chief of Staff Andrew Card reminded the “war cabinet” in the days before launching Operation Enduring Freedom that “The President won’t want to use troops to rebuild Afghanistan.”

This would be a job left to others in the international community. As the president himself reminded his advisors after Operation Enduring Freedom had begun, “I oppose using the military for nation building. Once the job is done, our forces are not peacekeepers. We ought to put in place [a] U.N. protection and leave.”

**Summary of economic risks:** While the actual economic risks associated with the decision to initiate the American intervention were quite low, President Bush demonstrated a clear willingness to assume greater economic risks offering limited support to the expectations of the representative heuristic of war and high levels of availability.

---

81. Woodward, 192.
82. Ibid., 237.
**Policy Risks**

In the wake of 9/11, President Bush’s foreign policies underwent a significant transformation representing a clear break with policies of the past and consequently assumed high levels of policy risk. Upon his arrival to the White House on the evening of September 11th, he told his assembled team,

> I want you all to understand that we are at war and we will stay at war until this is done. Nothing else matters. Everything is available for the pursuit of this war. *Any barriers in your way, they’re gone. Any money you need, you have it.* This is our only agenda.\(^83\)

In this statement one can clearly see the representative heuristic of war. President Bush also lays bare his willingness to assume both policy risks in terms of eliminating bureaucratic obstacles and economic risks in terms of ignoring the financial costs of actions to be taken. Two scholars at The Brookings Institute characterized President Bush’s reactions to 9/11 as a virtual “revolution” in American foreign policy.\(^84\) In this view, several decisions made by President Bush represented significant departures from existing policy frameworks.\(^85\)

Perhaps the most significant break with prior policy was President Bush’s adoption of the framework of war to characterize both the 9/11 attacks and the American response. This policy framework marked a clean departure from the approach adopted by the Clinton administration that many criticized as viewing terrorism as primarily through the prism of law enforcement. President Bush adopted policies

---

83. Clarke, 24. Italics added for emphasis.
84. Daalder and Lindsay.
much more consistent with war as a model, specifically authorizing the CIA to use lethal means in attacking terrorists such as Usama Bin Laden as they were now regarded as enemies of America.

As CIA Director Tenet described it on the evening of September 11th, “For us at CIA,…the restraints were finally off.”\textsuperscript{86} Specifically, referring to new authorities to hunt down and kill terrorists including Osama Bin Laden, Tenet recounted the shift in risk tolerance among senior U.S. officials:

\begin{quote}
Almost every authority granted to CIA prior to 9/11 made it clear that just going out and assassinating UBL would not have been permissible or acceptable. In the aftermath of 9/11, everyone has become fixated on the word ‘kill’, as if anything but the most vigorous pursuit of the term prior to 9/11 represented some form of risk aversion. It is easy to adopt such a stance after a tragedy like 9/11, but it was simply not the legal or political reality that we operated under prior to that day…It was understandable, in the aftermath of 9/11, when everyone’s risk calculus had changed, that people became more aggressive with regard to taking action.\textsuperscript{87}
\end{quote}

Tenet also explicitly acknowledged the policy risks inherent in his request to the president granting the CIA wide ranging authorities following 9/11. These authorities would include working closely with foreign intelligence agencies known for their brutal methods, recruiting sources with records of human rights abuses, establishing secret detention camps throughout the world, and using “enhanced interrogation techniques.” After presenting his requests for these expanded authorities to the president at Camp David on September 15th, Tenet acknowledged that these actions

\textsuperscript{86} Tenet, 170-171.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 110-112. Italics added for emphasis.
were “a risky proposition when you looked at it from a policy maker’s point of view. Things could blow up.” 88

President Bush also imposed new organizational missions for the FBI and granted them new and broad authorities to disrupt terrorist networks operating in the United States that departed meaningfully from existing policy frameworks. In meetings with his Attorney General Ashcroft and FBI Director Mueller in the days following 9/11, President Bush repeatedly underscored the new policy focus for U.S. domestic law enforcement agencies. From now on, he told them, their missions would no longer be criminal prosecution, but rather to “stop another attack and apprehend any accomplices or terrorists before they hit us again. If we can’t bring them to trial, so be it.” 89 Directly related to this new mission focus, President Bush explicitly directed Ashcroft to seek expanded legal authorities for the FBI to conduct wiretaps, intercept phone calls, and search emails, medical, and financial records. These authorities were lumped together in ground-breaking legislation known as the U.S.A. Patriot Act that was rapidly passed by Congress in late October 2001.

The establishment of the “Bush doctrine” was another meaningful departure from existing foreign policy frameworks. While never formalized in a single coherent document or policy pronouncement, one important tenet of this new foreign policy allowed for tremendous latitude in prosecuting the war on terrorism against the broadest possible range of targets. On the evening of September 11th President Bush declared, “We will make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these
acts and those who harbor them.” As mentioned previously, the U.S. Congress wholly supported this new approach by granting the president the authority to attack not just the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks, but also “those nations, organizations, or persons he determines planned, authorized, committed, or aided the terrorist attacks… or harbored such organizations or persons.” A Congressional Research Study noted that this was the first time that a Congressional authorization for the use of force included not only nation-states, but also “organizations or persons.” This expanded definition of legitimate targets of military action became the casus belli to attack Afghanistan since there is no indication that the Taliban had any prior knowledge or directly supported Al-Qa’ida in planning for or executing the 9/11 attacks.

In contrasting President Bush’s post 9/11 policy with those of his predecessor, Bart Gellman wrote that President Clinton’s approach was,

Reluctant to risk lives, failure or the wrath of brittle allies in the Islamic world, Clinton confined planning for lethal force within two significant limits. American troops would use weapons aimed from a distance, and their enemy would be defined as individual terrorists, not the providers of sanctuary for attacks against the United States.

**Summary of policy risks:** President Bush’s actions represented a clear break from American policies of the past and as such assumed high levels of policy risk.

---

90. Bush, “Address to the Nation.”
92. Grimmet, CRS-4.
CONCLUSION

The surprise, speed, and devastation of 9/11 terrorist attacks shocked the world. The fact that anyone with access to a television could watch and relive the horror of crashing airplanes, burning steel, collapsing buildings, and dying people amplified and magnified the emotional and psychological impact of these events. Given these circumstances of tremendous sense of loss and the dramatic nature of these attacks, prospect theory and the availability heuristic would predict exceptionally risk-acceptant decision making on the part of the American leadership. In the wake of these attacks, President Bush’s speeches also began to focus on the expressed intentions of Al-Qa’ida and reflected a shift from balance-of-power consideration to those more consistent with a “balance-of-threat” framework. This factor too should have spurred President Bush to more risk-acceptant and conflict-prone behavior. President Bush’s heuristic anchor in a belief in the ineffectiveness of any American response limited to cruise missile attacks (such as those ordered by President Clinton) virtually guaranteed that the military option chosen by President Bush would be more aggressive, risk-acceptant, and involve the presence of American ground troops. Lastly, the representative heuristic of war employed by President Bush would anticipate that he be more acceptant of the risks directly associated with combat and military casualties.

Despite these predictions pushing in the direction of risk-acceptant behavior, the levels of risk involved in the initiation of Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan were remarkably low. Politically, President Bush enjoyed tremendous support across the globe and at home. There was no practical need for him to consider the prospects
of serious opposition to an American military response to the attacks of 9/11. Nearly everyone understood and accepted that there would be an American military reaction. President Bush also took calculated steps to minimize the potential political risk. He secured approval of a series of United Nations Security Council resolutions that denounced the attacks of 9/11 and endorsed a range of actions to be taken against terrorist organizations. With the support of NATO, he assembled a “coalition of the willing” that gave both direct and tacit support to OEF. These developments and the unipolar structure of the international distribution of power favored a U.S. military response. Domestically, President Bush secured the broadest possible authorization for military action from the U.S. Congress. However, Bush was also clear in his private discussions with senior advisors that he was indeed quite willing to go it alone if necessary. This indicated a strong propensity to take political risks, although the course of actual events would not directly or immediately test his resolve to assume these risks.

Economically, the initial military intervention was relatively low cost and therefore involved little economic risk as President Bush contemplated his options in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Yet, here too in discussions with his advisors, President Bush reflected a private willingness to accept a much higher level of economic risk in adopting a “cost is no object” approach in evaluating policy options. This dismissive attitude toward costs of military action in the wake of 9/11 has continued with the repeated supplemental funding bills that have passed virtually unchallenged through Congress in the eight years since 9/11. Costs of American
operations in Afghanistan have now exceeded $100 billion.\textsuperscript{94} The fact that America is in deep economic recession may give American officials pause to reconsider this cavalier assessment of costs, but as of the writing of this paper, President Obama appears willing to invest even more of America’s treasure into Afghanistan.

The military risks as measured as actual casualties were also remarkably low and President Bush demonstrated a remarkable sensitivity to the uniformed military’s concerns about establishing adequate CSAR basing before beginning air or ground operations. Nonetheless, it was also clear that President Bush would accept the risk of casualties and he relentlessly ensured that there were American “boots on the ground” as a demonstration of American willingness to accept precisely this kind of risk.

It was in the field of foreign policy itself that President Bush’s actions actually assume significant risks. The actions taken in the wake of the 9/11 attacks broke substantially from previously existing policy frameworks. He approached the challenge of terrorism within the context of war rejecting previous policy frameworks conceiving of terrorism as primarily a legal and criminal matter. He granted the CIA and FBI unprecedented authorities to kill, destroy, disrupt, interrogate, detain, and track terrorist groups operating both overseas and at home. He also undertook the largest reorganization of the federal government since World War II with the creation of the Department of Homeland Security.

Nonetheless, Operation Enduring Freedom was a remarkably low risk operation given the anticipated predictions of the independent variables examined in this paper.

\textsuperscript{94} Amy Belasco, \textit{The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations since 9/11} (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2008).
A number of explanations are possible. For one, the rapid collapse of the Taliban and the retreat of Al-Qa’ida to the sanctuary of the mountains along the border with Pakistan brought the initial military intervention itself to a speedy and apparently successful conclusion. Secondly, diplomatic efforts to hold a loya jirga and rapidly establish a local Afghan government with some semblance of international and domestic legitimacy also reinforced the pre-existing assessment of the Bush administration that American forces would not be required to assume peacekeeping duties or nation-building responsibilities. Lastly and perhaps most importantly, Operation Enduring Freedom for President Bush was only the first step in the global war on terrorism. Even before this military operation had begun, President Bush had ordered his Defense Secretary to begin planning for a military invasion of Iraq. Consequently, the full story of President Bush’s risk propensity in the wake of the 9/11 attacks can not be adequately understood without an examination of the decision making behind Operation Iraqi Freedom—and that is topic for discussion in another chapter.
Table 4.1 Anticipated Influence of Variables on Risk Assessment (President G.W. Bush and Operation Enduring Freedom, 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S Cases</th>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Dependent Variables–Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Structure</td>
<td>Nature of the Threat</td>
<td>Prospect Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain (Int’l/Dom)</td>
<td>Representativeness</td>
<td>Availability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td></td>
<td>Anchoring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GW Bush OEF (2001)</td>
<td>Unipolar</td>
<td>Balance-of-threat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Loss/Loss</td>
<td>War framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low/Low</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low to moderate</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Low to moderate</td>
<td>Overall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Anticipated Influence on Risk Propensities)

- Prediction supported
- Prediction falsified
- Indeterminate outcome

BACKGROUND TO CRISIS

President George H.W. Bush assumed the presidency in January 1990 with sterling credentials for dealing with foreign policy crises. He served as President Reagan’s vice president for eight years (1981-1989) during which he had the opportunity to establish and solidify personal relationships with foreign officials. He also served in senior positions as Director of Central Intelligence (1976-1977), Chief Liaison to the People’s Republic of China (1974-1975), and as America’s ambassador to the United Nations (1971-1973). In addition to this broad foreign policy experience base, he had served in combat in World War II as a U.S. naval aviator. More specifically relevant to the challenge he would come to confront in the Persian Gulf, his experience as a Texas oil businessman provided him a deep familiarity with the economic and financial aspects of the international oil market. It is hard to imagine an American president better suited by his prior experiences to deal with the international crisis that was sparked by Iraqi President Saddam’s Hussein’s lightening fast and brutal military invasion of neighboring Kuwait in August of 1990.

Prior to Bush coming to office, U.S. policy had largely been focused on improving relations with Saddam. In the wake of the Iranian revolution in 1979 ousting the pro-American Reza Shah from power in Tehran, the United States pursued a policy of backing secular Iraq as a bulwark against the further expansion of radical Islam. In 1982 the State Department removed Iraq from its list of states supporting terrorism. President Reagan then authorized a series of high-level American delegations to visit...
Baghdad offering intelligence and military support to Saddam in his battle against Iranian forces. Ironically enough, one of these presidential envoys was Donald Rumsfeld who was dispatched to meet with Saddam in Baghdad in late 1983 and discuss mutual interests including “shared enmity toward Iran and Syria, and…efforts to find alternative routes to transport Iraq’s oil…facilities”¹ that had been shut down by Iran and Syria during the course of the Iraq-Iran War (1980-1988). These visits culminated in the restoration of full diplomatic relations in 1984.

These attempts at bolstering Iraq against Iran, however, ran into a number of obstacles. The international and U.S. intelligence community began documenting several cases of Iraq’s use of chemical weapons both against attacking Iranian military forces and against Iraqi Kurdish civilians at the town of Halabja in 1988. These events compelled U.S. officials to publicly condemn Saddam for these actions and impose restrictions on the sale of American military goods to Baghdad. These American actions in turn encouraged Saddam to respond with complaints of his own. At a February 1990 meeting of the Arab Cooperation Council, Saddam denounced the American naval presence in the Gulf as a “threat to the region.”² Yet even with these negative developments in the bilateral relationship, senior State Department officials as late as April of 1990 had offered the hope that:

If, however, Iraq plays an increasingly responsible role and cooperates with international efforts to control proliferation of nonconventional

---


weapons and improve its abysmal human rights record, the US-Iraqi relationship will improve, with benefits for both countries.\(^3\)

That hope of improved relations ultimately proved ill-founded as tensions between Iraq and Kuwait mounted through the summer of 1990. In the spring, Iraqi officials were complaining loudly that Kuwait was regularly exceeding their OPEC quotas and driving down international prices of oil. In a letter to Arab League Secretary General in July 1990, Iraq’s Foreign Minister Tariq Aziz formally charged that Kuwaiti overproduction was depressing oil prices and therefore robbing Iraq on its ability to earn income. The letter went on to allege that Arab nations were not sufficiently reimbursing Iraq for its defense of the Arab nation during the eight year long war with Iran, and complained directly that Kuwait was illegally extracting oil from the Iraqi Rumeila oilfield. Aziz concluded that in adopting these policies, “We have no choice but to deduce [that Kuwait] is implementing part of the imperialist-Zionist plan against Iraq.”\(^4\)

Kuwaiti leaders dismissed these Iraqi charges as “a falsification of reality”, offered countercharges of Iraqi efforts of drilling oil wells within Kuwaiti territories, and suggested that the Arab League step forward to moderate these disputes.\(^5\) As these intra-Arab diplomatic efforts to peacefully lower these rising tensions continued, Iraq dispatched tens of thousands of combat troops to the Kuwait border. In late July, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein began making overt threats of war. “As God is my witness, we have warned them! If words fail to protect us, we will have no choice but

---

3. Ibid. 3.
5. Ibid., 90-91.
to engage in an action that will reestablish the correct order of things and ensure the
restoration of our rights.”

American intelligence was monitoring these movements closely through July and
U.S. naval units in the Gulf had been placed on alert. Nonetheless, Arab leaders
including Egypt’s President Mubarak and Jordan’s King Hussein were telling Bush
administration officials that Saddam’s military moves were largely bluster. These
assessments were echoed by a consensus among American intelligence analysts who
found it difficult to believe that Saddam—as a champion of Arab solidarity—would
launch an unprecedented invasion of another Arab country. It wasn’t until the
morning of August 1st that senior intelligence officials viewing satellite imagery
became convinced that an invasion was imminent. Even then General Schwarzkopf
(Commander of U.S. forces in the region) and Defense Secretary Cheney could not
tell if this was continued bluffing on Saddam’s part. This debate was, of course,
resolved conclusively on August 2nd when over 100,000 Iraqi troops supported
by thousands of tanks, armored vehicles, and artillery easily overcame the flimsy
Kuwaiti defenses and began the process of occupying and looting the country.

INTERNATIONAL POWER STRUCTURE

At the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the world was in the early stages
of one of the most monumental restructuring of global politics in history. This was a

7. A detailed account of these events can be found in Bob Woodward, The Commanders (New York:
period of transition from a strong bipolar world to one in which the United States was emerging as the world’s sole remaining superpower. The political shifts favoring the United States were undeniable. As Michael Mandelbaum wrote in early 1991

   In 1989 the greatest geopolitical windfall in the history of American foreign policy fell into George Bush’s lap. In a mere six months the communist regime of eastern Europe collapsed, giving the West a sudden, sweeping and entirely unexpected victory in its great global conflict against the Soviet Union. Between July and December of 1989 Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria and Romania ousted communist leaders. Their new governments each proclaimed a commitment to democratic politics and market economics, and the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Europe began. All this happened without the West firing a single shot.\(^8\)

The changes in the military sphere of power also shifted in favor of the United States as the Soviet Union drew down their military presence in Eastern Europe and President Gorbachev embarked on a program “to reduce the size of the armed forces, to introduce a more defensive concept into operational doctrine and to engage constructively in arms-control negotiations.”\(^9\) Nonetheless, at a strategic level, the Soviets retained a powerful nuclear arsenal of more than 2,300 intercontinental ballistic missiles carrying more than 10,000 nuclear warheads\(^10\) that clearly remained capable of devastating any potential opponent. Moreover, the Soviet Union retained a substantial conventional military force (nearly 4 million men under arms in active duty status) that was well-equipped with modern armaments and fully capable of reasserting itself in Europe or elsewhere should that become desired or necessary.

---

10. Ibid., 33 & Table 1 “The Strategic Nuclear Balance” on pp. 212-213.
Economically, both the United States and the Soviet Union were facing difficult times. The global economy was in a slump with the International Monetary Fund writing in May of 1990 that the “pace of world economic activity slowed last year… [and] growth of output is expected to moderate further in 1990.” Nonetheless, there can be no doubt that Moscow was confronting the more serious economic challenges by far. As one economist who advised the World Bank and the United Nations wrote in late 1990:

The deterioration of the economy in the Soviet Union has been so precipitous that it has become fashionable for experts to vie with one another in exposing new weaknesses. In April 1990 the Central Intelligence Agency calculated the Soviet gross national product to be no more than half that of the United States. Viktor Belking, a prominent economist from the Soviet Academy of Sciences, promptly pronounced the CIA figures too optimistic, asserting Soviet output was a most little more than a quarter of the American GNP.

Despite its own economic challenges, the United States continued to occupy a relative position of dominance in the global economy. The American economic output accounted for nearly 25 percent of the world’s Gross National Product (GNP) that was nearly double that of the Soviet Union. Finally, the United States remained the world’s premier trading partner as measured by the value of both exports and imports.

At the time of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, global military and economic trends seemed to clearly be favoring the United States. Nonetheless, this

was a period of transition and the final contours of the newly emerging international structures were not yet clearly definable as unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar. The Soviet Union was certainly becoming visibly weaker with the political collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe and its economic difficulties at home. At the same time, however, it retained formidable conventional and nuclear capabilities that could not be easily dismissed by any potential competitor including the United States. Charles Krauthammer’s perceptive article “The Unipolar Moment” had not yet been published in *Foreign Affairs*\(^\text{15}\) and several scholars and analysts writing at the time argued that the world was returning to a multipolar structure.\(^\text{16}\)

In this uncertain security environment, American officials viewed the U.S.-Soviet relationship as the key to a peaceful global transition to what President Bush would memorably call a ‘new world order’. Indeed, upon assuming office President Bush’s National Security Advisor recalled that “dealing with Moscow and the changes in the Soviet Union was obviously our first priority.”\(^\text{17}\) The continued pull of traditional bipolar politics was also evident in President Bush’s State of the Union Address in January 1990 whose central foreign policy theme was on building “a new relationship with the Soviet Union” and whose major defense-related announcements included the Strategic Defense Initiative and “a major new step for further reduction in U.S. and Soviet manpower in Central and Eastern Europe.”\(^\text{18}\)

\(^{15}\) Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1991). The article itself, however, was based on a lecture given in September 1990 in the immediate aftermath of the Iraqi invasion.


The role of the international power structure: The crisis with Iraq occurred at a time of global power restructuring from one of strong bipolarity to one largely dominated by the United States. This transitional period showed clear signs that were favorable to the United States and disadvantageous to the Soviet Union. This improvement in relative power distribution should provide President Bush the opportunity to accept greater military and economic risks in confronting the challenge posed by Saddam Hussein.

Nature of the Threat

Elements of balance-of-power and balance-of-threat considerations co-existed throughout the crisis. The Bush administration came to office in January 1989 primarily viewing the world through a balance-of-power prism emphasizing the military and economic capabilities of state actors to adversely affect American interests. As the crisis with Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in the next year wore on—and as it became increasingly clear that the Soviet Union would side with the United States its efforts to confront this Iraqi aggression—officials began to weigh more heavily considerations of Iraq’s intent to damage American global and regional interests.

Balance-of-power

In their memoirs, President Bush and his National Security Advisor Scowcroft recount the balance-of-power considerations that dominated early reviews of American foreign policy in the Middle East as they assumed office in 1989.

With fall of the Shah, our first choice as the stabilizing force in the region, the United States turned to a policy of balancing off Iran and Iraq. This led the Reagan Administration to tilt toward Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq conflict, not out of preference for one of two
reprehensible regimes, but because we wanted neither to win the war and were worried that Iraq would prove to be the weaker. After the war, the Reagan Administration set out to institutionalize this somewhat improved relationship with Iraq. It was an attempt to encourage acceptably moderate behavior on the part of Saddam Hussein. There was also the hope of securing a significant role for American business in what was assumed would be a substantial Iraqi reconstruction effort. These objectives seemed to us reasonable and, pending the outcome of the policy review, we continued to pursue them.... On October 2, 1989, President Bush issued a directive (NSD-26) which reaffirmed our strategic interests in the region and, with caveats conveying our concerns, generally confirmed the previous policy of engaging Iraq... [to] promote stability in both the Gulf and the Middle East.19

This emphasis on balance-of-power considerations remained prevalent throughout the policy formulation process leading up to President Bush’s decision to launch Operation Desert Storm to evict Iraqi forces from Kuwait in January 1991. In the very first NSC meeting on this topic on August 2, discussions focused on the global and regional ramifications of the Iraqi invasion in terms of economic and military balances of power. Treasury Secretary observed that “the source of Iraq’s power was oil. Without it, Baghdad would have no money to keep its military going.”20 CIA Director William Webster’s intelligence briefing at an NSC session the next day was devoted nearly exclusively to these traditional balance-of-power considerations.

All the intelligence shows he won’t pull out. He will stay if not challenged within the next year. This will fundamentally alter the Persian Gulf region. He would be in an inequitable position, since he would control the second- and third-largest proven oil reserves with the fourth-largest army in the world. He would also have Kuwaiti financial assets, access to the Gulf, and the ability to put money into his military. There is no apparent internal rival to Saddam....Jordan

20. Ibid., 316.
and Yemen have tilted toward Iraq. Iran is militarily and economically weak, so it would not be an effective counter...”

Deputy Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger offered a similar balance-of-power analysis at that same meeting.

This is the first test of the postwar system. As the bipolar system is relaxed, it permits this, giving people more flexibility because they are not worried about the involvement of the superpowers. Saddam Hussein now has greater flexibility because the Soviets are tangled up in domestic issues. If he succeeds, others may try the same thing…” adding that he believed Saudi Arabia would be Saddam’s next goal with the aim of dominating OPEC and setting global oil prices.

President Bush too initially talked largely in terms of balance-of-power politics in the early discussions of an appropriate American response. At the very first NSC meeting on the crisis, Bush turned his attention to securing support from other major global powers including the Soviet Union and China. These early efforts yielded success as on August 3rd the U.S. and Soviet Union issued a joint declaration that “put the two superpowers on the same side of a major crisis for the first time since the Cold War began.”

Regarding the Soviets, he explicitly noted that while their reaction had been positive thus far, “we don’t want to overlook the Soviet desire for access to warm water ports.” In his initial phone calls with foreign leaders, President Bush specifically underscored the dangers associated with a regional shift in power that would allow “Saddam to secure his hegemony over the Arab world.”

21. Ibid., 322.
22. Ibid., 323.
23. Ibid., 326.
24. Ibid., 317.
25. Ibid., 326. Italics mine.
Balance-of-power considerations also factored heavily into the establishment of military strategy and objectives through the fall. Brent Scowcroft recalled that the military campaign should be conducted “without weakening Iraq to the point that a vacuum was created, and destroying the balance between Iraq and Iran, further destabilizing the region for years.” As late as November, Scowcroft observed that, the core of our argument [for U.S. actions] rested on long-held security and economic interests: preserving the balance-of-power in the Gulf, opposing unprovoked international aggression, and ensuring that no hostile regional power could hold hostage much of the world’s oil supply.

**Balance-of-threat**

Prior to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait, most American officials would likely have ranked Iraq low (but certainly not zero) in terms of its ability to directly threaten the United States based on Walt’s criteria of proximity, offensive capability, and offensive intent. Iraq is after all located some 7,000 miles from American shores. While it possessed the world’s fourth largest army, it certainly did not possess the physical capability of directly attacking the United States with conventional military means. Moreover, the Bush administration had adopted President Reagan’s prior policy of supporting Iraq as a counterweight to Iran. In this environment, Saddam Hussein had little reason to voice aggressive intent toward a global superpower that was expressing a willingness to offer him substantial political and material support.

This began to change, however, in early 1990 as Saddam Hussein intensified his rhetoric against both the United States and her regional ally Israel. In testimony to

27. Ibid., 399. Italics mine
Congress in April 1990, Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs listed a number of threatening actions recently taken by Saddam Hussein. In February, Saddam criticized American naval forces in the Gulf as a “threat to the region.” In March Iraq deployed SCUD surface-to-surface missiles toward the border with Jordan placing them within reach of targets in Israel. In April, Saddam threatened to “burn up half of Israel” should Israel attack Iraq.\textsuperscript{28}

Consequently, balance-of-threat considerations began to coexist with the more traditional concerns over the potential implications of balance-of-power politics. At the first NSC meeting on 2 August discussing Iraq’s invasion, Brent Scowcroft was particularly disturbed by the apparent willingness of senior officials to resign themselves to the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait as a \textit{fait accompli}. He was concerned that the “tone implied that the crisis was halfway around the world” rather than appreciating the dangers that would be posed by Iraq’s ability to dominate OPEC and use its tremendous oil wealth to develop \textit{offensive} capabilities threatening American interests in the region.\textsuperscript{29} As the crisis developed further, there was also the immediate and direct threat posed to Americans with Saddam’s seizure of American hostages on August 17th. Furthermore, as the crisis lengthened, the administration began to emphasize the threat posed by the potential Iraqi acquisition of nuclear weapons that would greatly magnify Iraq’s offensive capabilities. The deployment of American military forces to Saudi Arabia also had the effect of placing these men and women within direct range of Iraqi military capabilities. Iraqi SCUD missile attacks on American military facilities in Dhahran and Israeli civilians near Tel Aviv and Haifa

\textsuperscript{28} Kelly.

\textsuperscript{29} Bush and Scowcroft, \textit{A World Transformed}, 318.
provided dramatic evidence underscoring Iraqi offensive ability to directly threaten American interests in the region.\(^\text{30}\)

**The role of nature of the threat:** This mix of balance-of-power and balance-of-threat considerations in this case make it difficult to offer a clearly predicted effect on the risk propensity of American leaders. In general, however, the fact that balance-of-power considerations predominated in the early part of the crisis should compel a more cautious approach toward decision making seeking to avoid major power conflict. As balance-of-threat considerations achieved greater attention as the crisis continued, however, decision making should tend toward more risk-acceptant behavior.

**Domain**

The horizon on the international front was extremely bright as President Bush assumed office in January 1989. Along with the collapse of the Berlin Wall, communist governments in Eastern Europe began to fall like dominos in the latter half of 1989. Meanwhile, America’s primary international competitor, the Soviet Union had reverted inward to focus on accomplishing much needed domestic political, economic, and military reforms. In his inauguration address, President Bush addressed the tremendous opportunities available in the new international security environment that could only be portrayed as a domain of gain.

> I come before you and assume the Presidency at a moment rich with promise. We live in a peaceful, prosperous time, but we can make it better. For a new breeze is blowing, and a world refreshed by freedom

seems reborn. For in man’s heart, if not in fact, the day of the dictator is over. The totalitarian era is passing, its old ideas blown away like leaves from an ancient, lifeless tree. A new breeze is blowing, and a nation refreshed by freedom stands ready to push on. There is new ground to be broken and new action to be taken. There are times when the future seems thick as a fog; you sit and wait, hoping the mists will lift and reveal the right path. But this is a time when the future seems a door you can walk right through into a room called tomorrow. Great nations of the world are moving toward democracy through the door to freedom. Men and women of the world move toward free markets through the door to prosperity.\(^{31}\)

Even as President Bush received reports of Iraq’s invasion in early August, he wrote:

I was optimistic…The UN had been set up to correct the failings of the League [of Nations], but the Cold War caused stalemate in the Security Council. Now, however, our improving relations with Moscow and our satisfactory ones with China offered the possibility that we could get their cooperation in forging international unity to oppose Iraq.\(^{32}\)

This optimistic view of prospects in the international environment continued in many ways throughout the crisis. In fact, the promise of a “new world order” in which the United States and Soviet Union cooperated to solve global problems was held out as one of the objectives of America’s military intervention. In an address to Congress in September 1990 President Bush noted,

We stand today at a unique and extraordinary moment. This crisis in the Persian Gulf, as grave as it is, also offers a rare opportunity to move toward an historical period of cooperation. Out of these troubled times, our fifth objective—a new world order—can emerge: a new era—freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, more secure in the quest for peace. An era in which the nations of the world, East and West, North and South, can prosper and live in harmony. A hundred generations have searched for this elusive path to peace, while a thousand wars raged across the span of human

---

endeavor. *Today that new world is struggling to be born*, a world quite different from the one we’ve known. A world where the rule of law supplants the rule of the jungle. A world in which nations recognize the shared responsibility for freedom and justice. A world where the strong respect the rights of the weak. This is the vision that I shared with President Gorbachev in Helsinki. He and other leaders from Europe, the Gulf, and around the world understand that how we manage this crisis today could shape the future for generations to come.\(^{33}\)

President Bush could only have been heartened by the overwhelmingly positive response of the international community to the crisis. Literally on the day of the Iraqi invasion, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 660 that “*Condemns* the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait; [and] *Demands* that Iraq withdraw immediately and unconditionally all its forces to the positions in which they were located on 1 August 1990.” Within days of the invasion, the UNSC had passed Resolution 661 “*Affirming* the inherent right of individual or collective self-defence, in response to the armed attack by Iraq against Kuwait” lending international legitimacy to the deployment of American forces to Saudi Arabia. This same resolution also imposed an international embargo on the import and export of Iraqi products and prohibited any commercial, financial, or economic dealings with Iraqi entities with the sole exception of those for “strictly medical or humanitarian purposes.” Over the course of the crisis, the United Nations passed no less than a dozen resolutions condemning Iraq’s invasion and backing American and coalition efforts to compel an Iraqi withdrawal. This series of resolutions culminated in UNSCR 678 establishing a firm deadline of 15 January 1991 for full Iraqi compliance.

with previous resolutions and explicitly authorizing the use of “all necessary means” including military force. These positive developments likely reinforced President Bush’s broader view that prospects for achieving his vision of a peaceful and stable “new world order” were bright, placing him within a domain of gain internationally.\footnote{Although I have made the case that President Bush should have perceived himself operating largely in a domain of gain internationally, a strong counterargument can also be advanced. Kuwait was indeed a regional ally of the United States possessing significant oil reserves. Iraq’s military invasion, the ousting of the pro-American Al-Sabah ruling family, and Iraqi control of those economic resources could arguably have led President Bush to conclude that this development represented a meaningful loss to America’s position in the world. In responding to this sense of loss, his dominant considerations would logically have become the restoration of the status quo ante and the prevention of further loss as would be represented by Iraq’s continued military advances into Saudi oil fields. This is a coherent argument that I find only slightly less convincing than mine. Outside of its oil reserves, Kuwait with its small population and meager military capabilities held little significance to U.S. global or regional strategy. Kuwait’s importance was certainly held to be well below that of other regional allies to include Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel – thus making it a fourth or fifth order regional concern at best for American policymakers. Moreover, this later assessment was broadly shared by a majority of President Bush national security team as indicated by their inclination during initial NSC meetings to let Iraq’s occupation go unchallenged. Consequently, although Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait represented a ‘loss’ in a narrow sense of the term, it did not represent a significant degradation of America’s overarching strategic position in the region. Nevertheless, the strength and quality of arguments on both sides of this debate serve a useful purpose in drawing attention to a primary weakness of prospect theory; namely, the difficulty in definitively determining the perceived operating domain of the decision maker. I want to thank Dr. Andrew Bennett for drawing my attention to the strength of the counterargument that President Bush may well have perceived himself operating in a domain of loss.} The domestic environment at the time, however, was quite different. At home, President Bush found himself largely operating in a domain of loss. The Gulf crisis emerged after President Bush had been in office for more than a year and half—long past the traditional “honey moon” period of high public approval ratings immediately following inauguration. A \textit{USA Today} poll taken in July 1990 showed a precipitous drop in both his overall approval rating (dropping from 64 percent in January to 50 percent) and his handling of foreign policy (from 61 percent to 53 percent). The same poll showed noticeably worse ratings for Bush’s domestic policies with approval ratings below 30 percent for issues like fighting drugs, improving education, and
handling the economy. A Gallup poll conducted during that same month made it clear that economic issues represented a particular drag on President Bush’s popularity with disapproval ratings as high as 58 and 64 percent for his handling of the savings and loans crisis and the federal debt issue respectively. Meanwhile, a Boston Globe poll taken the week before Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait recorded a 16-month low in President Bush’s approval rating and noted that a scant 36 percent would support him for a second term. This poll also indicated that his disapproval ratings also registered a record high with 23 percent expressing an unfavorable view of President Bush.

**The role of domain:** President Bush was operating in a domain of gain internationally that should generally favor risk-averse decision making with respect to issues with global and regional ramifications. In contrast, unfavorable public ratings of President Bush’s policies on the eve of Iraq’s invasion placed him in a domestic domain of loss that should favor risk-acceptant behavior on matters impacting domestic considerations such as American military casualties.

**Cognitive Heuristics**

Representativeness

Representativeness is the degree of association between an event or outcome and its similarity with another class of events. President Bush almost immediately placed

---

the Iraqi invasion within the context of a strong World War II historical analogy. This analogy was particularly influential in establishing what would become the primary goal for American policy—the insistence on the unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait.

President Bush recalled in his memoirs:

In the first weeks of the crisis, I happened to be reading a book on World War II by the British historian Martin Gilbert. I saw a direct analogy between what was occurring in Kuwait and what the Nazis had done, especially in Poland... The book recounted how the German Army swept through an area, followed closely by special units which would terrorize the population. I saw a chilling parallel with what the Iraqi occupiers were doing in Kuwait. I caught hell on this comparison of Saddam to Hitler..., but I still feel it was an appropriate one.39

This historical analogy was certainly strengthened by President Bush’s own personal experience as a pilot who had fought in World War II. It was further reinforced almost immediately by British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as she remembers telling President Bush in their meeting on August 2 that “Saddam was a potential Hitler who must be stopped.”40

This historical representative framework was also prevalent in the public discourse examining the brewing Iraqi-Kuwaiti conflict even before the invasion of 2 August. Charles Krauthammer on July 27th, 1990 published a column in the Washington Post entitled “Nightmare from the Thirties.”

Hitler analogies are not to be used lightly. To be compared to Hitler is too high a compliment in evil to pay to most tyrants. The time has come, however, to bestow the compliment on a tyrant who is truly a

nightmare out the 1930s: Saddam Hussein, president (soon for life) of Iraq.…

What makes him truly Hitlerian is his way of dealing with neighboring states. In a chilling echo of the ‘30s, Iraq, a regional superpower, accuses a powerless neighbor of a “deliberate policy of aggression against Iraq,” precisely the kind of absurd accusation Hitler lodged against helpless Czechoslovakia and Poland as a prelude to their dismemberment.41

President Bush soon seized on this framework and hammered the theme relentlessly in his public commentary throughout the crisis. In drafting his speech to nation that would announce the initial deployment of U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia on August 8, President Bush recollected:

As I prepared my speech, I tightened up the language to strengthen the similarity I saw between the Persian Gulf and the situation in the Rhineland in the 1930s, when Hitler simply defied the Treaty of Versailles and marched on. This time I wanted no appeasement.42

His actual address drew directly on this representative heuristic framework of the events leading up to World War II.

Iraq’s tanks stormed in blitzkrieg fashion through Kuwait…

But if history teaches us anything, it is that we must resist aggression or it will destroy our freedoms. Appeasement does not work. As was the case in the 1930’s, we see Saddam Hussein an aggressive dictator threatening his neighbors.43

This heuristic remained prominent in President Bush’s thinking throughout the policy formulation process leading up to his decision to initiate the American military campaign to liberate Kuwait. Writing privately to his family on New Year’s Eve

42. Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 340.
preceding Desert Storm, he offered these historical reflections as he considered the option of military intervention into Iraq:

> My mind goes back to history:
> How many lives might have been saved if appeasement had given way to force earlier on in the late ‘30’s or earliest ‘40’s? How many Jews might have been spared the gas chambers, or how many Polish patriots might be alive today?44

**The role of the representativeness:** The net effect of this World War II representative heuristic was to solidify President Bush’s determination to set America’s objective in this crisis as the unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Anything less was viewed as the historical equivalent of Neville Chamberlain’s appeasement of Hitler. This wartime heuristic should further signal a willingness of the president to assume high-levels of risk—particularly military risk—to achieve this essential objective.

**Availability**

The availability heuristic has to do with the immediate retrievability, vividness, and salience of the information at hand. The more dramatic the nature of the information, the more inclined one is toward risk-acceptant behavior. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was of high immediate availability to President Bush personally because of the intelligence reporting that was available to him in his official capacity. President Bush lamented the fact that the public did not generally share the same high level of availability, in large part because of the effectiveness of Iraqi censorship of the news coming from Kuwait. As he observed:

Over and over, Iraqi atrocities and stubborn criminal acts would pass by with little comment in the media. People seemed unmoved by the injustices we were witnessing, injustices in which I found even greater reason to resist Saddam. The inability of the television networks to cover these events due to Iraqi censorship was a major problem.45

President Bush explained the inability of his administration to convince the public of the urgency of the crisis as at least being partially due to the low levels of availability of this information to the average citizen. “I think part of our problem was that so much was happening away from public view, and few people outside the top echelon in the White House were paying attention to what was going on in Kuwait.”46

A dairy entry on 22 September 1990 gives a vivid portrayal of the emotional impact intelligence reports were having on the president and their impact on his decision making:

I’ve just read a horrible intelligence report on the brutal dismembering and dismantling of Kuwait. Shooting citizens when they are stopped in their cars. Exporting what little food there is. Brutalizing the homes. Dismantling the records. Indeed, making an oasis into a wasteland. They quote the Norwegian ambassador, a respected observer, who attested to the brutality and to the horrible intention of this dictator, Saddam Hussein. The problem is, unless something happens soon, there may not be a Kuwait....This just hardens my resolve. I am wondering if we need to speed up the timetable.”47

In his memoirs, President Bush further recounted the powerful influence that these personal accounts of the horrors of Iraq’s occupation were having on his own growing inclination to accept risk in his decision making.

46. Ibid., 399.
47. Ibid., 374.
When he came to the White House on September 28, the Emir told me firsthand of the extent of the atrocities Iraqi troops were inflicting on his people, and this too had a deep effect on me. It was during this period that I began to move from viewing Saddam’s aggression exclusively as a dangerous strategic threat and an injustice to its reversal as a moral crusade....I became very emotional about the atrocities. They really gave urgency to my desire to do something active in response. I knew there was a danger I might overreact to what I heard and read. I’d tell myself to calm down, not to let these human rights abuses—bitter and ugly as they were, with medieval torture—cause me to do something hasty or make a foolish decision....It was good versus evil, right versus wrong. I am sure the change strengthened my determination not to let the invasion stand and encouraged me to contemplate the use of force to reverse it....I was frustrated and impatient to resolve the crisis, hoping we could find reason to go in and settle the matter.  

As early as September, President Bush’s closest advisors became markedly concerned about the emotional impact that these reports were having on the president. National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft recalled then that “the President was becoming emotionally involved in the treatment of Kuwait. He was deeply sincere, but the impact of some of his rhetoric seemed a bit counterproductive.” Bob Woodward offered a similar accounting in his research noting that by late September 1990:

Satellite photos and other intelligence presented to President Bush showed that Iraq was systematically dismantling Kuwait, looting the entire nation. Everything of value was being carried back to Iraq; the populace was being terrorized, starved, beaten, murdered…He could see much of it with his own eyes.

As the crisis wore on, the information reaching the President only served to add another level of emotional and dramatic appeal compelling him toward ever more
drastic action. He writes of a particularly gruesome report that arrived to him from Amnesty International in mid-December.

It troubled me deeply and I encouraged others to read it....The report was full of descriptions of specific cases of abuse, documenting the accounts of the most horrible and systematic torture of Kuwaitis. There were gruesome accounts of mutilation and rape, as well as arbitrary executions. I read stories of Iraqi soldiers taking people from their homes and shooting them in front of their families, of people dragged from cars to be beaten and shot, of bodies tossed out into the streets, and of Iraqis withholding medical treatment from Kuwaitis and looting medical equipment. The document retold the story from the first days of the war of Iraqi soldiers removing babies from incubators at one of the hospitals and leaving them to die, now using the eyewitness accounts of the doctors and volunteers who had been there.51

It is not surprising that this emotional recounting of events would be reflected in President Bush’s public commentary, particularly as he braced the nation for war. In his address to the nation announcing the start of Desert Storm, President Bush used descriptive and emotionally-laden language to describe the Iraqi occupation.

Saddam Hussein systematically raped, pillaged, and plundered a tiny nation, no threat to his own. He subjected the people of Kuwait to unspeakable atrocities—and among those maimed and injured, innocent children.52

Similarly dramatic language was used in his State of the Union Address within weeks of launching Desert Storm, describing Saddam’s invasion, as “lawless”, “unprovoked”, and a “ruthless systematic rape of a peaceful neighbor.”53

The role of availability: These high levels of availability did incline President Bush toward accepting higher levels of risk in his decision making as recounted in his memoirs.

Anchoring

The anchoring heuristic is found in the overweighting of initial estimates. These heuristics are in and of themselves risk-neutral. They do not necessarily incline a decision maker toward risk-acceptant or risk-averse behavior. However, they may provide clues as to which types of risk are likely to be most influential in the decision making process.

The primary heuristic anchoring President Bush’s decision making was his early assessment that Iraq’s invasion represented the first test of the post-Cold War international order that required a united response by the international community. As with his determination to reverse Iraqi aggression, this heuristic emerged within the first hours of the crisis deliberations and remained firmly embedded in President Bush’s decision making process throughout.

Brent Scowcroft recalled:

In the first days of the crisis we had started self-consciously to view our actions as setting a precedent for the approaching post-Cold War world....That, in turn, had led directly to our August discussions of a “new world order.” From that point forward, we tried to operate in a manner that would help establish a pattern for the future.....we should attempt to pursue our national interests, wherever possible, within a framework of concert with our friends and the international community.
President Bush’s public comments also constantly reiterated the need for collective action on the part of the international community. At his first press conference on the morning of 2 August the President announced that his first step in addressing the crisis was to instruct “our Ambassador to the United Nations…to work with Kuwait in convening an emergency meeting of the Security Council” and to ensure “that the international community act together” in response to this naked act of aggression.\textsuperscript{54} In a press conference later that same afternoon, President Bush again underscored the necessity for “the nations of the world [to demonstrate] the collective will…to see that Iraq withdraws.” He continued, “We need a collective and effective will of the nations belonging to the United Nations—first the Security Council and then the support of all the others to make it [UNSC Resolution 660 demanding Iraq’s unconditional withdrawal] effective.”\textsuperscript{55} Propelled by the force of this heuristic, President Bush and his team launched a tremendously successful American effort to recruit a broad international coalition to respond to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait. This too was a point constantly emphasized in public remarks throughout the crisis.

In this short selection from President Bush’s 1991 State of the Union Address we can see evidence of all three heuristics (representativeness, availability, and anchoring) reflected in President Bush’s rationale for his actions.

> What is at stake is more than one small country; it is a big idea; a new world order, where diverse nations are drawn together in common


cause to achieve the universal aspirations of mankind—peace and security, freedom, and the rule of law. Such is a world worthy of our struggle and worthy of our children’s future.

The community of nations has resolutely gathered to condemn and repel lawless aggression. Saddam Hussein’s unprovoked invasion—his ruthless, systematic rape of a peaceful neighbor—violated everything the community of nations holds dear. The world has said this aggression would not stand, and it will not stand. Together we have resisted the trap of appeasement, cynicism, and isolation that gives temptation to tyrants. The world has answered Saddam’s invasion with 12 United Nations resolutions, starting with a demand for Iraq’s immediate and unconditional withdrawal, and backed by forces from 28 countries of 6 continents. With few exceptions, the world now stands as one.56

**The role of anchoring:** The anchoring heuristic grounded in a strong preference for united international action, reinforced by his perception that he was operating in an international domain of gain should prompt the President to adopt risk-averse approaches when dealing with issues directly related to the international contributions of coalition partners.

**Perceptions of Risk**

**Military Risk**

Military risk, for the purposes of this study, is primarily assessed in terms of the anticipated numbers of casualties and in comparing the relative balance of forces between the intervening and the defending powers. By both of these measures, Desert Storm assumed significant levels of military risk.

From the beginning of the crisis, the uniformed military briefed the president on the difficulties that American forces would encounter in combating the large and

relatively-well equipped Iraqi armed forces. The Iraqi army at the time consisted of nearly 1 million soldiers and ranked as the world’s fourth largest army. In the early days of the crisis, the American civilian leadership sought to get a better sense of the Iraqi military capabilities that would have to be confronted in the desert sands of Kuwait. The Defense Intelligence Agency’s senior Middle East expert, Patrick Lang summarized Iraqi capabilities in a briefing to Secretary of Defense Cheney on 3 August saying, “They are formidable. They have a very capable military and a developed industrial base. They are modern for a Third World country. They are nationalistic. They are dangerous….They are tough as hell.”

General Norm Schwarzkopf commanded the American military in the region and briefed the President and his senior staff at Camp David the following day. He highlighted the major combat equipment in the Iraqi arsenal. The Iraqi navy was not of particular concern. The Iraqi Air Force had 1,127 aircraft available, although most were defensively oriented and consequently presented little threat to deploying American forces. However, the Iraqi Army was a major concern. The ground forces were the most potent and best equipped of the Iraqi armed forces and included nearly 6,000 tanks (more than 1,000 being the top-of-the-line Soviet T-72; the vast majority of which were already deployed in Kuwait), nearly 10,000 armored vehicles (nearly 1,500 of which were the most advanced models); 3,500 artillery pieces (slightly less than 350 were self-propelled); and nearly 3,000 heavy-equipment transporters for rapidly moving tanks throughout the battlefield. Additionally, the Iraqis had Russian-supplied advanced SAM (Surface-to-Air Missiles) capable of defending key

57. Woodward, 242 & 257.
58. Ibid., 248-249.
sites such as Baghdad against American/coalition air attack. General Schwarzkopf summarized Iraqi forces at this meeting as “not ten feet tall, but…formidable.”

General Powell, the senior uniformed military official as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, at the same meeting offered a football analogy saying that, “This would be the NFL, not a scrimmage. It would mean a major confrontation…He [Saddam] is professional and a megalomaniac. But the ratio is weighted in his favor. They are also experienced after eight years of war [with Iran].”

The military risks posed by these very unfavorable force ratios weighed especially heavily on General Powell as the initial American forces deployed to Saudi Arabia. The first American combat units to be deployed would be from the 82nd Airborne Division. These infantry troops were designed to be readily deployable by air. However, this meant that they deployed without the support of major combat equipment such as tanks, armored vehicles, or heavy artillery. As Bob Woodward describes General Powell’s concern at the time,

The Division Ready Brigade [of the 82nd Airborne Division] was an extremely light force. In the eyes of some military experts, it was little more than a massive airport security detail. The brigade, the 48 jet fighters, the naval airpower in the region and the small Saudi Army were no match for Saddam’s six divisions. It was naked vulnerability, prime time for Saddam to strike….privately, Powell was…concerned about the vulnerability of his initial forces…his troops would be naked and excruciatingly vulnerable.

Of particular concern to both the civilian and military leadership was Saddam’s possession of chemical weapons and his record of using them against Iranian troops

60. Ibid., 324.
61. Woodward, 274 & 278.
during the Iran-Iraq war and against his own Kurdish civilian populations in the 1980’s. A classified CIA report in January 1991 directly addressed the likelihood that Iraq would employ chemical weapons in the upcoming fight against coalition forces. The report noted that “Iraq is like[ly] to use unconventional weapons perhaps at the start of the ground battle, or if frustrated at their inability to draw Israel into the war.”\(^6\) The lead military planner in the Pentagon, Lieutenant General Thomas Kelly, also fully anticipated that Saddam would employ his chemical weapons arsenal.\(^6\)

Given these professional military assessments, President Bush was told to expect several thousand American casualties in the event of combat. On February 22nd, 1991—two days before ordering the initiation of ground combat—General Powell briefed the president on anticipated casualties.

He explained to the president the potential risks of ground combat, including a high cost in lives and the possibility of an Iraqi chemical weapons attack. They would win, but it would be grim and grisly and nothing like the standoff air war. Scowcroft interrupted, saying that the president didn’t need to hear all the gory details, but Bush overruled him.\(^6\)

More specifically, classified medical estimates provided to Secretary of Defense Cheney and General Powell in December 1990 anticipated American casualties of up to 20,000 including 7,000 killed.\(^6\) The public estimates of casualties were more wide-ranging. A letter from Congressional leaders Tom Foley and George Mitchell to President Bush in October 1990 voiced their opposition to offensive military action.

\(^6\) Woodward, 286.


\(^6\) Woodward, 349.
based on estimates of as many as 10,000-50,000 American battlefield casualties.\textsuperscript{66} Meanwhile, former Secretary of Defense McNamara was on record as predicting at least 30,000 casualties while former Senator McGovern testified that the war would not be worth the 50,000 anticipated American casualties.\textsuperscript{67} Of course, other analysts—particularly some of the strongest supporters of military action against Iraq—offered much lower estimates ranging from a low of a few hundred casualties to a high of 3,000 dead, depending on the scenario envisioned.\textsuperscript{68}

Fortunately, actual American casualties were remarkably low given the hundreds of thousands of combat troops involved and lethality of the modern ground equipment deployed by Iraq on the battlefield. Department of Defense records account for 159 combat-related deaths and 467 wounded.\textsuperscript{69}

**Summary of military risks:** As President Bush weighed his decision to initiate combat intervention, the military risks were thought to be quite high, both in terms of anticipated American casualties and the formidability of the opposing Iraqi forces. This is consistent with the anticipated outcomes of balance-of-threat considerations, prospect theory (he was operating in a domain of loss domestically), the World War II representative heuristic and high levels of availability.

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 425.
Political Risks

Political risk has to do with the potential for re-distribution of power within a group. Actions strongly resisted by opponents both in the international and domestic realms carry greater political risks because these opponents can benefit from criticizing policies, programs, or decisions that are either unpopular or that subsequently fail. In the case of Desert Storm, President Bush confronted few political risks at the international level, but substantial domestic political risks.

Internationally, the Bush administration maneuvered deftly to assemble a broad coalition opposed to Iraq’s invasion. The Soviet Union sided with the United States from the beginning hours of the crisis and supported multiple UN Security Council resolutions condemning Iraq’s invasion and calling for Iraq’s withdrawal. Soviet naval forces participated directly in the international armada enforcing the naval blockade against Iraq, although they did not contribute ground forces to the coalition effort. The Soviets ultimately endorsed UNSCR 678 authorizing the use of “all necessary means” to compel Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait thus providing a visible stamp of international approval to the upcoming coalition intervention and lending an important degree of international legitimacy to the American-led military intervention. Moreover, the public political support from the Soviet Union for American policies and actions provided other countries—particularly those in the Third World—the indirect “political cover” they needed to support a U.S.-led effort. Of course, substantive contributions from other coalition partners were also of tremendous value both militarily and politically. Great Britain contributed 45,000 troops, France 18,000, and Canada some 4,500. The military contributions of
Arab countries were particularly potent in terms of regional politics since their very presence denied Saddam’s claim to be acting in defense of the Arab nation. Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Syria contributed tens of thousands of troops to the military effort.

At nearly every turn, American actions were quickly and strongly endorsed by a series of United Nations Security Council resolution imbuing the U.S. military intervention with tremendous levels of international legitimacy. UNSCR 660 condemning Iraq’s invasion and demanding Iraq’s immediate and unconditional withdrawal passed unanimously on 2 August 1990. UNSCR 661 on 6 August essentially made multilateral the unilateral financial and economic sanctions President Bush had imposed on Iraq only days before. UNSCR 665 imposed an international naval blockade of “all inward and outward maritime shipping” bound for Iraq. In all, the UNSC passed a dozen UNSC resolutions condemning Iraq, calling for its immediate and unconditional withdrawal, and culminating in UNSCR 678 on 29 November 1990 establishing 55 January 1991 as the deadline for full Iraqi compliance and authorizing the use of military force to compel Iraq’s withdrawal.

The situation at the domestic level, however, stood in stark contrast to the strong, united, and supportive environment internationally. Certainly, President Bush’s public popularity rose in the days immediately following the crisis, as is consistent with the “rally around the flag” effect. In the last week of August 1990 President Bush enjoyed his highest approval ratings in the 20 months of his administration.70 However, that public support eroded significantly over time as prospects for military confrontation grew. Polls by mid-November indicated that support for President

70. See for example, Joshua Cooper Ramo, “Events Boost Bush Rating Past 80% Survey Finds,” The Boston Globe, 23 August 1990.
Bush’s handling of the crisis with Iraq had plummeted by more than 30 percentage points with well over 50 percent of public saying they were becoming “increasingly concerned” with U.S. actions in the Gulf.\(^\text{71}\)

Moreover, senior-members of the Democratic-controlled Congress—including likely presidential candidates—were visibly critical of the President’s policies. This criticism intensified sharply in late November after the President had announced his decision to send an additional 200,000 troops to the region in building up a coalition force capable of offensive operations to oust Saddam’s forces from Kuwait. Democratic House Majority Leader Richard Gephardt expressly opposed the use of military force and lobbied hard for a policy of continued reliance on the continued enforcement of sanctions.\(^\text{72}\) Meanwhile, Senator Sam Nunn as the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee held public hearings in which former senior military officers criticized President Bush’s decision to send additional troops to the Gulf and warned against the use of force. A Washington Post article summarized the testimony of these two former chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

... Appear...
The domestic political risks to President Bush were manifestly evident in the close votes in Congress on these issues. The House vote authorizing the use of military force on January 12, 1991 was deeply divided passing 250-183 with 170 Democrats opposed, while the Senate version passed with a slim 52-47 margin.74

Finally, it is apparent that senior administration officials were keenly aware of the domestic political risks involved from the beginning of the crisis. As early as August 4th, Defense Secretary Cheney voiced his concerns that the “American people have a short tolerance for war,” that there will a perception that American sacrifices will primarily benefit Japan and Arab “royal families”, and that consequently American public support for military action will “be short-lived.”75 In late October, Democratic Party leaders in Congress presented President Bush with a letter “emphatically opposed to any offensive military action…[urging] that the UN-sponsored embargo must be given every opportunity to work and that all multinational, non-military means of resolving the situation must be pursued.” 76

This hostile environment in Congress encouraged several of Bush’s senior advisors to oppose seeking a Congressional authorization for the use of force out of fear that it might be defeated. In mid-November, Scowcroft highlighted the risk of being rebuffed by Congress observing that this “would be a disaster.”77 In fact, it wasn’t until the United Nations passed UNSCR 678 on 29 November authorizing “all necessary

75. Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 328.
76. As quoted in Ibid., 389.
77. Woodward, 325.
means” to expel Iraq from Kuwait that the administration felt comfortable enough to move forward in seeking formal Congressional backing for the use of force. As Scowcroft wrote, “The UN provided an added cloak of political cover…the November UN resolution was a political measure intended to seal international solidarity and strengthen domestic US support by spelling out that we could use force.”

Despite the narrow passage of a bill authorizing the use of force, however, Congressional and public pressure against military action never fully receded. In December 1990 Mark Shields likened President Bush’s presidency to that of Jimmy Carter in 1979, “an administration in trouble…bereft of ideas…bereft of direction.” Meanwhile, Democratic Representatives Kennedy, Durbin, and Bennett introduced formal legislation in early January to impose a one year wait before initiating military operations against Iraq. Even after the air campaign had already begun, over 30 House democrats sent a letter to President Bush stating that “there is no need to escalate the war in the Persian Gulf.” Meanwhile, other Congressional leaders such as Senator Inouye of Hawaii were explicitly threatening President Bush with impeachment. President Bush clearly felt this political pressure.

I was less upset by those critics in the media and Congress who had a consistent history of opposing the use of force than I was with the others who were not offering constructive solutions but only lecturing us. They had none of the responsibility or the worries that go with a

---

82. See explicit reference to the prospect of impeachment in Bush, *All the Best: My Life in Letters and Other Writings*, 498.
decision to take military action, yet they felt free to attack us. They did not have to contend with the morale of the forces, the difficulty of holding a coalition together, or the fact that time was running out. Above all, they had no responsibility for the lives of our soldiers, sailors, and airmen.\textsuperscript{83}

**Summary of political risks:** President Bush confronted two very different situations regarding the political risks he confronted in the international and domestic domains. The solid backing by a wide-range of countries as expressed in multiple UNSC resolutions and the assembly of a broad international coalition minimized the political risks associated with military intervention at the international level. However, the intense and vocal opposition to the use of military force meant that the domestic political risks for President Bush were quite high. These findings validate the predictions of Prospect Theory as President Bush took the greatest risk in the domestic arena as he was operating in a domain of loss; support the anticipated outcome of risk-acceptant behavior given the high levels of availability; and are consistent with a World War II representative heuristic rejecting “appeasement” and insisting on the full and complete withdrawal of Iraqi forces as the only acceptable measure of victory. The findings are somewhat contrary to balance-of-threat considerations that might have anticipated a greater degree of public support for military intervention during a time of crisis.

**Policy Risks**

Policy risks are measured by the degree of departure from core values or existing policy frameworks. The policy risks inherent in the Bush administration’s approach to this crisis were quite minimal. Moreover, those few risks that did exist were

\textsuperscript{83} Bush and Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, 426.
substantially mitigated by the nature of Iraq’s brutal and naked aggression and the fluidity of the international power structure at the time.

Perhaps the greatest policy risks had to do with shifting attitudes towards the Soviet Union. For the better part of a decade or more, American policy in the Middle East had been explicitly designed to deny the Soviet Union any pretext for military or diplomatic intervention in the region. In the wake of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, President Carter issued a clear warning against further Soviet encroachment. In what came to be known as the Carter Doctrine, he warned that an “attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of American, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”

This policy led directly to the creation of an American military force capable to enforcing this “line in the sand.” President Carter established the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force in March of 1980 to defend “vital” American national interests in the Gulf. President Reagan then established this force as a separate unified military command that is currently recognized as U.S. Central Command. Throughout this period, the primary mission of these military forces was to defend against Soviet encroachments into the region. Similarly, a central objective of American foreign policy in the region was to minimize or counter Soviet influence wherever and whenever possible. This was particularly evident in American efforts to monopolize the Arab-Israeli peace process.

The shifting nature of global politics in the wake of the end of the Cold War provided President Bush’s administration the opportunity to significantly alter this policy

framework. Indeed, the analytical anchor seeking a solution grounded in a united international reaction practically demanded it. Nonetheless, the pull of existing policies aimed at excluding the Soviet Union from the Middle East was particularly strong at the beginning of the crisis. In reflecting this initial policy bias, Scowcroft recalls that in response to Secretary of State Baker’s suggestion to engage the Soviet Union early on in the crisis,

The rest of us were leery of Soviet military participation in coalition efforts. We had worked for decades to keep Soviet forces out of the Middle East and it was premature to invite them in. Cheney, Powell, and I opposed it, although a Soviet naval presence in the international flotilla was less objectionable. Baker thought having them in the coalition ground forces would be a major blow to Saddam. In the end, the Soviets sent a few ships to monitor the blockade but did not take an active role.85

Ultimately, President Bush’s assessment anchored in the belief that this crisis had to be solved within a multinational framework proved stronger than the tug of existing policy. From the first NSC meeting after the Iraqi invasion, President Bush had been on the phone with foreign leaders working to assemble a broad international coalition opposed to Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait. Having the support of President Gorbachev and the Soviet Union in the United Nations Security Council would be critical to these efforts and as discussed previously succeeded in securing several UN resolutions sanctioning American policies and actions designed to compel Iraq’s withdrawal. This change in U.S.-Soviet policy was cemented at a summit meeting in Helsinki with Soviet President Gorbachev in early September when President Bush

85. Bush and Scowcroft, A World Transformed, 338. For a more thorough examination of Soviet decision making in this crisis see in particular Chapter 10 “Soviet contributions to the Gulf War Coalition” in Bennett, Lepgold, and Unger, eds.
“pointed out that US tradition was to say the Soviets had no role to play in the Middle East. This policy had changed.”

**Summary of policy risks:** One substantive departure from existing policy frameworks involved moving from a competitive relationship with the Soviet Union to one grounded in mutual cooperation. This change, however, was greatly facilitated by favorable shifts in the global power structure, the willingness of the Soviets to back the United States in this particular crisis, and President Bush’s anchoring heuristic strongly favoring a united and coordinated international solution. Consequently, policy risks associated with a decision to initiate military operations were substantial, but moderate.

**Economic Risks**

Economic risks are measured in terms of the anticipated financial costs of military intervention. There was a remarkable amount of attention paid to these aspects of the American military intervention. In the case of Desert Storm, both President Bush and the American public were visibly concerned about this economic aspect of intervention and devoted a tremendous amount of effort toward mitigating these risks. Particularly in the early stages of the crisis, much of the administration’s rhetoric (and indeed policy making) focused on the economic threat posed to America by Saddam’s occupation of Kuwait and the potential consequences of letting this aggression stand. Colin Powell’s biographer, Karen DeYoung recounts the attitude prevalent among Bush’s senior advisors at the time:

---

there was no question among the members of Bush’s national security team—Scowcroft and his deputy Bob Gates, Cheney, Powell, Secretary of State James A. Baker, CIA Director William Webster and the president himself—that Iraq’s move threatened U.S. interests. OPEC—the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries—was already immersed in a struggle between producing countries sympathetic to the United States, including Saudi Arabia, and radicals, including Iraq, that wanted to limit production, raise prices and squeeze the industrialized world. With its own oil and Kuwait’s, Baghdad now controlled 20 percent of the world’s known reserves, and the massive Saudi fields were only an hour’s tank drive away.87

Scowcroft himself was to admit that while “naked aggression against an unoffending country” was a serious concern and legal justification for a military response, “what gave enormous urgency to it [Iraq’s invasion] was the issue of oil.”88

The initial NSC meetings were intensely concentrated on the economic aspects of the crisis. At the 2 August morning meeting, Treasury Secretary briefed that “Iraq now held 20 percent of the world’s oil reserves” and would have control of 40 percent if he decided to advance toward Saudi Arabia’s oil-rich eastern province.89 President Bush and Scowcroft both recalled that for the remainder of the meeting, “the participants focused mainly on the economic impact of the invasion.”90 Bob Woodward offers this accounting of President Bush’s intervention at that same meeting:

Bush, the former Texas oil man, seemed horrified that Saddam might get Saudi Arabia. He engaged in an extended analysis of the impact on world oil availability and price…With just 20 percent of the world’s oil, Saddam would be able to manipulate world prices and hold the United States and its allies at his mercy. Higher oil prices would

87. DeYoung, 192-193.
88. Ibid., 193.
89. Woodward, 226.
fuel inflation, worsening the already gloomy condition of the U.S. economy.\textsuperscript{91}

The initial actions of the Bush administration reflected both the economic focus of these initial discussions. The first executive order signed by the president in the first hours of the crisis was one freezing the financial assets of Iraq and Kuwait. It was thought that would be the beginning of a broader campaign to isolate and contain Saddam. The NSC memorandum prepared for President Bush in advance of the 3 August NSC meeting also reflected the priority that would be devoted to the economic aspects of this crisis. The national instruments of power that would be called upon to contain Iraq and compel its withdrawal “would be export controls, other economic sanctions, and enhanced military actions, both unilateral and with others.”\textsuperscript{92}

The public case for action by President Bush and his advisors also reflected a concentrated attention to the economic aspects of this crisis and were in no doubt reinforced by the spiking oil prices and declining financial markets immediately following Iraq’s invasion. President Bush’s address to the nation announcing the initial deployment of American troops to Saudi Arabia underscored the economic threat that Iraq’s invasion posed to the United States and its allies and the economic actions he had already taken.

Immediately after the Iraqi invasion, I ordered an embargo of all trade with Iraq and, together with many other nations, announced sanctions that both freeze all Iraqi assets in this country and protected Kuwait’s assets. The stakes are high, Iraq is already a rich and powerful country that possesses the world’s second largest reserves of oil and over a million men under arms…..Our country now imports nearly half the oil it consumes and could face a major threat to its economic

\textsuperscript{91} Woodward.

\textsuperscript{92} Bush and Scowcroft, \textit{A World Transformed}, 321.
independence. Much of the world is even more dependent upon imported oil and is even more vulnerable to Iraqi threats.\footnote{Bush, “Address to the Nation Announcing the Deployment of United States Armed Forces to Saudi Arabia.”}

The administration was also remarkably honest and upfront about the potential costs of American action—whether military or otherwise. Secretary of Defense Cheney at an NSC meeting on 4 August frankly advised the group that war would cost “one hell of a lot of money.”\footnote{Bush and Scowcroft, \textit{A World Transformed}, 328.} President Bush’s address to the nation on 8 August made it clear that standing up to Saddam’s aggression would “take time and cost a great deal” and said that “Americans everywhere must do their part.”\footnote{Bush, “Address to the Nation Announcing the Deployment of United States Armed Forces to Saudi Arabia.”} General Colin Powell also regularly reminded the president of the financial costs of military operations—albeit in the broadest terms. In communicating the tremendous expenses associated with deploying the additional 200,000 American troops necessary to transition from a defensive posture to one capable of offensive operations, General Powell in a 29 October briefing told the president that “If you give me more time, say three months, I’ll move more troops. It’s that important. You can take me to the Savings and Loan bailout account, and we’ll all go broke together.” At the end of that briefing, President Bush said, “If that’s what you need, we’ll do it.”\footnote{Woodward, 319-320.}

Congress too was vocal in expressing unease about the economic costs of these military deployments. President Bush himself was largely sympathetic to these concerns. Bush recalled:

\footnote{Bush, “Address to the Nation Announcing the Deployment of United States Armed Forces to Saudi Arabia.”}
Congress demanded to know who else was going to put up money for Gulf defense efforts and how much. Our estimates of the costs ran into the tens of billions. Congress’ concern reflected a widespread domestic feeling that we were doing the lion’s share of work in responding to Saddam and were acting on behalf of the world’s interests, not just our own. It was not an unreasonable position, especially in the middle of a budget battle.

While I believed the United States must be prepared to bear the brunt of the military burden, I thought it only just that other countries with interests at stake should contribute.  

This attention to the economic costs associated with American actions, compelled the Bush administration to take deliberate steps to mitigate these risks. The result was a decision to launch a full court press for financial contributions from coalition partners. Secretary of State Baker travelled around the world seeking financial assistance in what was dubbed the “tin cup” tour. These efforts paid tremendous dividends as ultimately allies shouldered $48 billion of the overall $61 billion cost of Desert Storm (according to Congressional Research Service estimates) and covered nearly 80% of the actual costs.

**Summary of economic risks:** There was demonstrated sensitivity by President Bush and the Congress to the economic costs of both action and inaction. Inaction risked ceding Iraq overwhelming influence in setting global oil prices. Military intervention was also recognized as requiring a substantial fiscal investment at a time of global economic difficulty. However, Bush administration efforts to forge a broad

---


international coalition and successfully garner financial contributions from allies significantly reduced the economic risks (and costs) of American military action.

The willingness of President Bush to accept the substantial financial costs of Desert Storm are consistent with the predictions of Prospect Theory given his domain of domestic loss. They are also consistent with a World War II heuristic suggesting the need for self-sacrifice and the anchoring heuristic that saw this crisis as vital to establishing a secure international order during a remarkable period of global transition. The dramatic nature of information reaching the president also generally favored risk-acceptant behavior as did balance-of-threat considerations.

CONCLUSION:

The global international power structure at the time of Iraq’s invasion was in a state of transition from a strong bipolarity to one beginning to tend toward unipolarity. In this case, we expected that President Bush would demonstrate some sensitivity toward risks associated with prospects for a clash of the major powers. President Bush’s initial instincts were indeed to engage the major powers of the Soviet Union and China to ensure minimal international opposition to American actions. This offers some support for the thesis that bipolar structures induce a degree of caution into the decision making of major powers. Of course, Soviet backing for American policies and particularly Moscow’s decision to vote for UN Security Council Resolution 678 authorizing the use of military force to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait meant that this thesis was never severely tested. Moreover, Soviet support for U.S. and U.N. actions freed President Bush’s hands to assume greater military and economic risks to take more aggressive action as the potential for Soviet reprisals, retaliation, or opposition
receded. Meanwhile, balance-of-power considerations that dominated discussions at the beginning of the administration gradually gave way to balance-of-threat considerations as the crisis with Iraq developed from spring 1990 through Iraq’s invasion and well into the deployment of American military forces to the region. This increasing emphasis on the offensive threat posed by Iraqi forces in Kuwait to American interests should have increased the tendency of American decision makers to adopt risk-acceptant policy options.

President Bush confronted two contrasting domains. Internationally, he was operating in a domain of gain suggesting a risk-averse posture. Domestically, however, he faced stiff opposition to his policies placing him in a domain of loss which would anticipate a risk-acceptant tendency in his decision making. President Bush devoted substantial efforts to building a broad international coalition precisely to mitigate these risks at the international level suggesting some degree of risk-aversion as predicted by Prospect Theory. Domestically, President Bush continued to pursue the option of military intervention despite strong and vocal political opposition—indicative of a greater willingness to assume high levels of risk on the domestic front—again as anticipated by theory.

As with the other historical cases considered in this study, cognitive heuristics appeared to play a vital role in decision making and informing which types of risks might be more easily tolerated. The representative heuristic grounded in President Bush’s interpretation of the dangers of appeasement as demonstrated by Europe’s appeasement of Hitler was influential in shaping his insistence that the goal of American policy would be the complete and unconditional withdrawal of Iraqi forces
from Kuwait despite the risks associated with a military intervention. The dramatic nature of the information available to President Bush concerning the brutal nature of Saddam’s occupation served to further solidify President Bush’s determination to assume the risks of military intervention to achieve this goal. Finally, the anchoring heuristic based in a strong preference for united international action, prompted the president to assign particular weight to those risks associated with maintaining a strong coalition. Nowhere was this more evident that in President Bush’s decision to restrain Israeli leaders from retaliating for Iraqi SCUD missile attacks near Tel Aviv and Haifa. This was a decision that was domestically risky given the tremendous political support for Israel in the country. It also assumed some degree of military risk since scarce American resources were diverted from the fight with Iraqi forces to hunt for these SCUD missiles in the largely empty and militarily-insignificant Iraqi western desert. These risks were ultimately considered as inconsequential given the imperative attached to maintaining the cohesion of a coalition that included several Arab contributors.
### Table 5.1 Anticipated Influence of Variables on Risk Assessment (President George H.W. Bush and Desert Storm)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S Cases</th>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Dependent Variables–Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HW Bush</td>
<td>Weakening Bipolar</td>
<td>Balance-of-power with emerging balance-of-threat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Proposed Influence on Risk Propensities)

- **Mildly Risk-Averse**
  - Mixed but tending toward risk-acceptant
  - Risk-averse globally
  - Risk-acceptant domestically

- **Risk-acceptant**
  - Risk-acceptant particularly regarding military risks necessary to achieve goal
  - Risk-neutral but willing to take risks to achieve coalitions

- **Prediction supported**
- **Prediction falsified**
- **Indeterminate outcome**

BACKGROUND TO CRISIS

In early November President Bush announced a doubling of the American military forces deploying to Saudi Arabia “to ensure that the coalition has an adequate offensive military option should that be necessary.”¹ In late November 1990, the United Nations Security Council passed resolution 678 establishing January 15, 1991 as the deadline for Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait. As the American military continued to prepare for an eventual assault on Iraqi forces, Secretary of State Baker made a final attempt at a diplomatic solution. On January 9th, Baker held a six hour-long meeting with Iraqi Deputy Minister Tariq Aziz in Geneva delivering a final ultimatum that Iraq must withdraw from Kuwait or face war. After the meeting, Secretary Baker emerged to a group of reporters with a solemn look declaring that “I heard nothing that suggested to me any Iraqi flexibility whatsoever.”² From this moment on, the use of military force appeared to be virtually inevitable. Indeed, one day after the passage of the UN deadline, President Bush appeared on national television to announce the beginning of Operation Desert Storm with the expressed goal of liberating Kuwait from Iraq’s brutal occupation.

The coalition air campaign would last five weeks and was initially focused on attacking Iraqi command and control; destroying chemical, biological, and nuclear

facilities; and ensuring American dominance of Iraqi airspace so that coalition pilots
would not be regularly exposed to fire by Iraq’s advanced air defense systems. The
second phase sought to isolate Iraqi forces in Kuwait by severing them from their
logistical supply bases in southern Iraq. The third and final phase of the air campaign
relentlessly pounded those Iraqi armored forces entrenched in Kuwait to “soften them
up” for the upcoming coalition ground assault.

No doubt in large measure due to the effectiveness of this air campaign, the coalition
ground campaign proceeded with amazing speed. This ground offensive routed the
Iraqi military forces from their fortified positions in Kuwait in a remarkably brief
four days. The tremendous successes of the ground attack were a pleasant surprise to
American civilian and military leaders who had braced themselves for a tough battle
involving thousands of battlefield casualties and the potential Iraqi use of chemical
or biological weapons. Yet this unexpected and speedy success quickly presented
President Bush with a monumental decision—terminate military operations once
Kuwait had been liberated or seize this opportunity to pursue retreating Iraqi forces
to Baghdad and unseat Saddam Hussein from power once and for all. President Bush
reached his decision to formally implement a cease-fire of military operations quite
literally within 100 hours from the initiation of the ground attack. This left precious
little time to contemplate the full spectrum of options available to him.

Nonetheless, with the Iraqi military forces broken and in open retreat, President Bush
could realistically have ordered the continued pursuit and destruction of these units
all the way to Baghdad, if necessary. As General Schwarzkopf himself noted in a
briefing immediately before President Bush’s formal announcement of a suspension of offensive military operations:

We were 150 miles away from Baghdad and there was nobody between us and Baghdad. If it had been our intention to take Iraq, if it had been our intention to destroy the country, if it had been our intention to overrun the country, we would have done it unopposed for all intents and purposes from this position at that time.⁵

From this statement by the senior military commander on the scene, it is clear that the option to press forward with an American military intervention into the heart of Baghdad was a feasible (if ultimately unattractive) course of action available to policymakers fitting well within the “possibility principle” for negative cases as articulated by James Mahoney and Gary Goertz.⁴

**INTERNATIONAL POWER STRUCTURE**

In the eight months that passed between Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in early August 1990 until the ceasefire declared by President Bush in late February 1991, the world had advanced noticeably along in its transition from a strong bipolar system to one dominated by American political and military might. The military accomplishments of Desert Storm were historic. American forces had deployed thousands of miles and routed the world’s fourth largest army from strongly fortified defensive positions in a brief 100 ground campaign. As General Schwarzkopf himself proudly noted at the time, this was faster than even Israel’s stunning defeat of Arab forces during

---


the Six-Day War in 1967. Politically and diplomatically, the United States had successfully led a global coalition of nearly 30 partners. Moreover, American goals and actions—to include the decision to initiate combat operations to compel the complete withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait—enjoyed the full backing of a dozen United Nations Security Council Resolutions. Finally, American diplomacy had secured solid international financial backing for these operations amounting to fully 80 percent of the expenses associated with Operation Desert Storm.

In the wake of these stunning demonstrations of American power, the outlines of a unipolar world were becoming increasingly sharp and visible to many observers. Charles Krauthammer wrote in March 1991 that “before the war, American ‘declinists’ were in fully voice lamenting America’s decline from its perch at the top of the world.” Particularly in the wake of “the smashing U.S. success in the gulf war,” however, Krauthammer argued that “the United States should acknowledge its new status as the sole superpower and use its dominance to shape a world order congenial to our interests and our values.”

President Bush too perceived that America had emerged from this conflict at the top of the international order.

American political credibility and influence had sky-rocketed. We stood almost alone on the world stage in the Gulf Crisis, with the Soviets at best in sometimes reluctant support. Our military reputation grew as well. US military forces and equipment operated in superb fashion, whereas Soviet weapons, with which the Iraqis were largely equipped, did not reflect well on their maker. The result was that we

emerged from the Gulf conflict into a very different world from that prior to the attack on Kuwait.  

**The role of the international power structure:** The emergence of the United States at the end of this conflict as the world’s superpower should favor risk-acceptant behavior on the part of American leaders given the reduced likelihood of effective opposition from comparatively lesser powers. In this case, the option of a military advance to Baghdad should be favored over a decision to suspend or terminate military operations.

**Nature of the Threat**

Just as the pendulum had swung from balance-of-power considerations at the outset of the crisis to growing concerns about the offensive threat posed by Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait as the crisis advanced, the pendulum had begun to swing in the other direction as a ceasefire was being declared. Senior civilian and military American leaders were convinced at the time that Iraq’s offensive military capacity had been effectively destroyed by the coalition air and ground campaigns. In his televised briefing to nation on the eve of the ceasefire, General Schwarzkopf declared that coalition forces had “almost completely destroyed the offensive capability of the Iraqi forces.”

President Bush and his national security advisor Brent Scowcroft at the time were similarly convinced that they had “crippled the military capability” of Iraq.

With the offensive military capability of Iraq having been severely degraded, if not entirely eliminated, the concerns of President Bush and his advisors returned to

---

traditional considerations of balance-of-power politics in the region. Both President Bush and Scowcroft acknowledged that in the concluding hours of the battle, “We were concerned about the long-term balance-of-power at the head of the Gulf” fearing the destabilizing effects of a severely weakened Iraqi state.¹⁰

**The role of nature of the threat:** Perceptions of a weakened Iraq presenting less of an offensive threat to the United States should prompt American leaders to be somewhat more cautious and risk-averse in their decision making as this sense of threat dissipated thus favoring an end to military operations.

**DOMAIN**

In the previous chapter, I made the case that President Bush was operating in a domain of gain before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, while his position domestically was in decline. However, the overwhelming success of the American-led military intervention solidified President Bush’s already advantageous position internationally and dramatically improved his domestic situation. As he contemplated a decision to terminate coalition offensive operations, the horizons on both fronts for President Bush were now decidedly optimistic and placed him within a domain of gain.

Brent Scowcroft described the atmosphere as President Bush met with British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd in the Oval Office to discuss a decision to end the war in late February 1991.

> There was a sense of euphoria in the air. Ground operations had gone far better than the most optimistic of us had dared to hope—with respect to both successes achieved and casualties suffered.¹¹

¹⁰. Ibid., 489.
¹¹. Ibid., 485.
In his address to the nation announcing the ceasefire, President Bush call this a “victory for all the coalition partners…, for the United Nations, for all mankind, and for what is right.” It was a victory too for American diplomacy in securing UN Security Council sanction for the coalition military intervention and certainly a remarkable victory for American military forces and equipment. This military victory could only have solidified the sense among President Bush and his advisors that they were operating very much within a domain of gain internationally.

Domestically, the war had served to reverse President Bush’s slide in popularity with the American people. Whereas in June 1990, President Bush was facing low approval ratings for his handling of foreign affairs and particularly high disapproval ratings for his domestic policies, by late February 1991 the president was facing overall approval ratings in the high 80s—exceeding those of Harry S. Truman after Germany had surrendered at the conclusion of World War II. Republican and Democratic leaders alike had that sense that the re-election of George H.W. Bush in 1992 was all but inevitable. One senior Democrat at the time observed that President Bush appeared to be “unbeatable.” Meanwhile, Senator Phil Gramm (R-Texas) was predicting “sweeping Republican gains in Congress” in addition to winning the White House. Many economic forecasters at the time were also forecasting that the end of the war would “stimulate the economy …the stock and bond markets…” [and induce] a pretty

15. Ibid.
vigorous snapback in the economy." President Bush’s strong approval ratings both at home and abroad along with improved economic forecasts were strong indicators that he was operating within a domain of gain domestically.

President Bush himself was convinced that both the international community and the American public were solidly behind him as coalition military operations were chasing Iraqi military forces out of Kuwait on the morning of February 26th:

…the coalition and the country seemed strongly supportive. The polls were astronomically high; I’d never seen anything quite like it. The people were together. Their view was we should not let Saddam get away. He had become a symbol of evil and something they could focus on.17

**The role of domain:** Prospect theory would predict risk-averse decision making given that President Bush was operating in a domain of gain both internationally and domestically and thus would anticipate an end to military operations.

**Cognitive Heuristics**

**Representativeness**

This heuristic deals with the degree of association between an event or outcome and the similarity it has with another class of events. As we saw in the previous chapter, one representative heuristic that was particularly influential in shaping President Bush’s decision making was that of World War II. In particular, President Bush had seized on the Munich analogy to assert that Iraq’s aggression in Kuwait must not be allowed to stand and reversed by whatever means necessary. During World War

---

II the allies had insisted on and secured Germany’s unconditional withdrawal from occupied territories. In Desert Storm, coalition military operations had similarly secured Iraq’s complete and unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait suggesting that military action in both cases had successfully achieved their objectives.

As President Bush and his advisors were debating the decision to continue or terminate military operations another historical heuristic influenced decision making; namely, their recent experience in Panama and the difficulties they encountered in locating and deposing Manuel Noriega from power. President Bush in his memoirs recalled thinking about the prospects of using coalition military capabilities to advance on Baghdad and remove Saddam from power.

Apprehending him [Saddam] was probably impossible. We had been unable to find Noriega in Panama, which we knew intimately. We would have been forced to occupy Baghdad and, in effect, rule Iraq.18

Taken together these representative heuristics pushed against further military advances. The World War II historical heuristic convinced President Bush that he had accomplished the equivalent of the Allied victory of Germany by achieving an unconditional Iraqi withdrawal from occupied Kuwait. Moreover, as discussed previously in the section on the nature of the threat, President Bush and his senior advisors were convinced that Iraq’s offensive capability had been destroyed and this too might have reasonably offered a similar historical analogy to the situation of Germany at the conclusion of World War II. Finally, the administration’s recent experience in Panama further inclined President Bush to reject the option of ordering coalition military forces to advance on Baghdad.

18. Ibid., 489.
The role of the representativeness: The representative heuristics of World War II and the recent American experience in Panama combined to incline President Bush to reject a decision to order further coalition military advances once the objective of Iraq’s unconditional withdrawal from Kuwait had been secured.

Availability

Availability has to do with the immediate retrievability, vividness, and salience of the information at hand when contemplating a decision. Those situations with high levels of availability are generally thought to encourage more risk-accept decision making.

For President Bush and his senior advisors, the situation of coalition military forces attacking retreating Iraqi military units was one involving strong emotions evoked by vivid portrayals of the death and destruction at the scene of combat. President Bush saw pictures of the devastating results were portrayed in both classified intelligence briefings and media reporting. Brent Scowcroft recalled that as these officials were considering an end to military operations, they “had all become increasingly concerned over impressions being created in the press about the ‘highway of death’ from Kuwait city to Basra.”

The media broadcast pictures and relayed first-hand accounts of the death and destruction inflicted on Iraqi military forces as they retreated hastily under the pressure of the coalition air and ground campaign. The sole means of retreat for Iraqi forces at the time was along the main highway connecting Kuwait City to the southern Iraqi city of Basra. Thousands of Iraqi vehicles and tens of thousands of Iraqi troops were desperately fleeing literally in bumper-to-bumper traffic presenting

19. Ibid., 485. Italics mine.
easy targets for the advanced fighter jets and helicopters of the coalition. Television footage showed Iraqis emerging from desert dugouts visibly “weeping and stumbling” toward advancing coalition soldiers and attempting to kiss their hands in surrender. U.S. pilots described these air attacks on retreating Iraqi forces like “shooting fish in a barrel.” A British officer interviewed at the scene said: “I find it impossible to think of words to describe this. Dead, mutilated and charred bodies were everywhere.”

_The Washington Post_ offered first-hand accounts describing the scene as “gruesome”, “grim”, “horrifying”, and “apocalyptic.” Meanwhile, human-rights groups were denouncing continued coalition attacks as “senseless slaughter.”

General Powell, the president’s senior uniformed officer, was personally “revolted by the slaughter...a highway turkey shoot was not the image he wanted the American people to have of their brave warriors.” Secretary Baker recalled that General Powell specifically described the scene as a “massacre” and made an impassioned plea to the President to stop this carnage telling him that “We’re killing literally thousands of people.”

26. Waller and Barry.
27. DeYoung. Italics in original.
**The role of availability:** The vividness and dramatic nature of the destruction being inflicted on retreating Iraqi forces by coalition air attacks pushed strongly against a decision to continue a military advance toward Baghdad and favored a rapid end to coalition attacks on retreating Iraqi forces.

**Anchoring**

The anchoring heuristic is grounded in the over weighting of initial estimates and the unwillingness of decision makers to challenge these assumptions even when confronted with contrary information. In the previous chapter we examined the effects of an anchoring heuristic that saw Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait as the initial test of the post-Cold War international order. This heuristic continued to exert pressure on President Bush’s decision making and favored terminating coalition military operations rather than pressing forward toward Baghdad.

President Bush and National Security Advisor Scowcroft echoed the continued influence of this particular cognitive heuristic in their memoirs as they recounted their decision making at the time.

Furthermore, we had been self-consciously trying to set a pattern for handling aggression in the post-Cold War world. Going in and occupying Iraq, thus unilaterally exceeding the United Nation’s mandate, would have destroyed the precedent of international response to aggression that we hoped to establish. Had we gone the invasion route, the United States could conceivably still be an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land. It would have a dramatically different—and perhaps barren—outcome.28

Another anchoring assessment also proved instrumental in influencing the decision making on this score. This was the assessment that a military defeat of Saddam’s

---

forces in Kuwait would inevitably lead to his overthrow in Baghdad. As described by Peter Rodman, “There was also a comfortable assumption that Saddam’s regime would fall on its own, discredited by defeat, like a rotten fruit.” 29 In his diary entry for February 28, 1991, President Bush observed that “television accurately reflects the humiliation of Saddam Hussein” and expresses his hope that “those two airplanes that reported to the Baghdad airport carry him away.” 30

**The role of anchoring:** The anchoring heuristic that viewed this crisis as a test of the post-Cold War period requiring united international action pushed strongly against any decision that exceeded the bounds of global consensus as expressed in existing U.N. resolutions. A supporting assessment anchored in the belief that a military defeat for Saddam would lead to his ousting from power further contributed to this inclination to accept the political, economic, and military risks that would be entailed in a coalition military advance to Baghdad.

**Perceptions of Risk**

I firmly believed that we should not march into Baghdad. Our stated mission, as codified in UN resolutions, was a simple one—end the aggression, knock Iraq’s forces out of Kuwait, and restore Kuwait’s leaders. To occupy Iraq would instantly shatter our coalition…It would have taken way beyond the imprimatur of international law…[and committed America] to fight in what would be an unwinnable urban guerrilla war. 31

---


31. Ibid., 464.
This quote from President Bush’s memoirs portrays his perception of the high levels of political, economic, and military risks that would be associated with a decision to order a military advance to occupy Baghdad.

**Military Risks**

There was some sensitivity to the military risks associated with continued offensive military operations. Senior American commanders on the ground were reporting on February 27th (the same day as President Bush declared a formal ceasefire), that retreating Iraqi units were returning fire against advancing coalition units. U.S. Marine General Neal based in Riyadh in a press briefing that morning said specifically that, “I have not seen any indication that they [Iraqi military units] are laying down their weapons….Quite the opposite…They are retreating under fire.”

Meanwhile, U.S. air commanders were assessing that coalition airplanes would quite likely be shot down by retreating Iraqi forces. In debating this option with his staff, General Schwarzkopf saw that ending the war early would clearly be an advantage in terms of reducing prospects for additional casualties.

At the White House, there had been a sense of jubilation that coalition casualties had been remarkably below the thousands of deaths that many had forecasted. A fight to occupy the Iraqi capital would resurrect the potential for far greater military and civilian casualties given the need to fight in an urban area. Moreover, intelligence community assessments at the time had warned that Saddam would likely employ chemical weapons if his survival was threatened. In the context of a coalition military advance

32. Taylor.
33. Waller and Barry.
34. Gordon and Trainor, 405.
to Baghdad, Saddam could only draw the conclusion that he would have nothing else to lose by employing his weapons of mass destruction in a last desperate attempt to inflict damage and avoid capture. In a C-SPAN interview, Vice President Cheney responded to a question concerning whether U.S. forces should have pressed forward to Baghdad, by rhetorically asking “How many dead Americans is Saddam worth?” Secretary of State James Baker similarly recalled that the U.S. “military wanted no part” of the anticipated guerilla war implied by an American occupation of Baghdad. Finally, President Bush himself was personally convinced at that time that such a military operation “would have incurred incalculable human and political costs.”

Summary of military risks: The military risks associated with continued military offensive operations were considered quite substantial given the potential for a significant number of casualties even against a severely degraded Iraqi military capability. Obviously, the decision to avoid further military confrontation assumed low levels of military risk.

Political Risks

The political risks of continued offensive military were also judged as significant. As suggested by the previous quotation from President Bush, these were estimated to be “incalculable.” The primary concern in this regard was the impact that such a decision would have internationally. President Bush believed that “[t]he coalition would instantly have collapsed, the Arabs deserting it in anger and other allies

In defending this decision, Scowcroft advanced analogous arguments saying that “[i]f we had continued to prosecute the gulf war…, we would have destroyed the coalition” and also believed that “there was no support among the American people” for an advance to Baghdad. Consequently, the dominant perception at the time was that continued military operations assumed significant political risks both internationally and domestically.

**Summary of political risks:** Political risks both internationally and domestically of a military advance to Baghdad were thought to be quite substantial. Again, the decision to end military operations can thus be assessed as assuming low levels of political risk.

**Policy Risks**

The most significant risks associated with a decision to continue offensive coalition military operations had to do with the policy risks. Policy risks involve those actions that depart significantly from core values or existing policy frameworks. It was these considerations that were foremost in the mind of President Bush and his senior advisors as they weighed the option of pursuing Saddam’s fleeing military to Baghdad.

Senior military and civilian leaders alike felt that to authorize a military offensive toward Baghdad would clearly exceed the operation’s expressed goal of liberating Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. Brent Scowcroft in defending the decision not to advance to Baghdad in a Newsweek article in 1996 listed as the first and foremost reason, “that we never had the objective of destroying Saddam’s regime during Desert Storm.”

38. Ibid.
40. Ibid.
Secretary of State Baker repeated these sentiments in a PBS interview:

> We had promised the entire world in building what was an unprecedented international coalition, that we had no interest in occupying an Arab country. We weren’t in this business to occupy Iraq. We were going to do what the United Nations Security Council said we should do, which was unconditionally eject Iraq from Kuwait. That was our war aim. That was our political aim.  

President Bush similarly echoed these same policy considerations in his memoirs.

> True to the guidelines we had established, when we had achieved our strategic objectives (ejecting Iraqi forces from Kuwait and eroding Saddam’s threat to the region) we stopped the fighting….Trying to eliminate Saddam, extending the ground war into an occupation of Iraq, would have violated our guideline about not changing objectives in midstream, engaging in ‘mission creep,’ and would have incurred incalculable human and political costs.

There was virtual unanimity among Bush’s advisers that the military campaign of Desert Storm had achieved the country’s specified objectives. General Schwarzkopf informed President Bush on February 27 that “We’ve accomplished our mission.” Secretary of State Baker advised the president to stop the fighting: “We have done the job. We can stop. We have achieved our aims. We have gotten them out of Kuwait.” Defense Secretary Cheney summarized the significant policy issues that would be raised by a decision to invade Iraq and occupy Baghdad.

> Once you’ve got Baghdad, it’s not clear what you do with it. It’s not clear what kind of government you would put in place of the one that’s currently there now. Is it going to be a Shia regime, a Sunni regime or a Kurdish regime? Or one that tilts toward the Baathists, or one that tilts toward the Islamic fundamentalists? How much credibility is that

---

41. “Interview with James Baker.”
43. Ibid., 485.
44. Gordon and Trainor, 416.
government going to have if it’s set up by the United States military when it’s there? How long does the United State military have to stay to protect the people that sign on for that government, and what happens once we leave?45

In his address to the nation that same evening announcing an end to military operations, the president proudly trumpeted this policy rationale for terminating military operations. “Kuwait is liberated. Iraq’s army is defeated. Our military objectives are met. Kuwait is once more in the hands of Kuwaitis in control of their own destiny.”46

Under these circumstances, a decision ordering a military attack toward Baghdad would clearly represent a significant departure from existing policy frameworks.

There was also a shared sense that to continue attacks on the retreating Iraqi forces would violate basic American ethics and morals. General Powell, as the senior uniformed officer representing the military professional, was a forceful advocate of this position. His biographer recounts this reaction to reports of the devastation being inflicted on retreating Iraqi forces by American and coalition pilots:

Powell himself was revolted by the slaughter…a highway turkey shoot was not the image he wanted the American people to have of their brave warriors. He thought it was ‘ungallant’—killing for the sake of killing that had little to do with the outcome of a war they had already won.47

President Bush too appeared convinced of this line of argumentation asking his assembled advisors in the Oval Office on February 27th, “If we continued the fighting another day…would we be accused of a slaughter of Iraqis who were simply trying to escape, not fight?”48

47. DeYoung, 207.
According to some accounts, Paul Wolfowitz was a lone advocate of continued military operations. Upon being informed of the decision to terminate military operations, he reportedly “was dismayed...that the allies had no intention of going to Baghdad...[and was] still hoping for a coup and wanted to keep the psychological pressure on.” However, he was not in the Oval Office with the president at the time the decision was being made and in any event his senior, Defense Secretary Cheney, had raised no objection at the White House meeting discussing this decision. Furthermore, Wolfowitz himself had subsequently and repeatedly endorsed the decision not to press onward to Baghdad—also highlighting the tremendous risks and uncertainties entailed in such a decision.

Nothing could have insured Saddam Hussein’s removal from power short of a full-scale occupation of Iraq. Very few participants in the pre-war debate have any standing to suggest that President Bush should have done this, given the widespread opposition even to the more limited objective of liberating Kuwait. MacArthur’s disastrous experience in Korea after the stunning victory at Inchon should be warning enough against the assumption that the occupation of Iraq would be as easy as the liberation of Kuwait. Even if easy initially, it is unclear how or when it would have ended.

Summary of policy risks: The policy risks associated with a decision to continue military operations were substantial in that such a decision would have extended beyond the bounds of existing policy limits that called only for Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait and was viewed as inconsistent with American values seeking to inflict minimal damage and casualties. The decision to end military operations thus involved low levels of policy risk.

49. Ibid., 418.
50. Quoted in Solomon.
Economic Risks

The historical record does not suggest that the participants examined issues of financial and economic costs in any degree of detail. The speed with which events were compelling a decision in this case may certainly have contributed to the paucity of serious debate on these issues. Nonetheless, it is possible to make the case that participants assumed the financial costs of continued military operations would be considerable.

Senior administration officials shared a common assumption that the primary alternative to ceasing coalition military operations was an all-out military advance and occupation of Baghdad to unseat Saddam Hussein from power. Such an occupation was thought to have necessarily involved thousands of American troops over a several year period. As President Bush wrote in 1999, “Had we gone the invasion route, the United States would conceivably still be an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land.” Moreover, because this was viewed as a “coalition-busting” proposition, it was likely assumed that America would have borne the entire economic costs of these military operations alone.

Summary of economic risk: A decision to advance the military intervention into Baghdad involved a substantially higher economic risk as it was assumed that this would be a unilateral American operation involving the physical occupation of an Arab capital over several years. Conversely, the decision to terminate military operations involved no additional incremental costs and is associated with low levels of economic risk.

CONCLUSION:

The increasingly unipolar structure of the global power structure provided the United States with broad latitude to continue a military advance toward Baghdad to depose Saddam. However, senior officials had (perhaps erroneously) concluded that Desert Storm had all but eliminated the offensive threat posed by Saddam and would have theoretically reduced their propensity to adopt risk-acceptant positions. At the same time, balance-of-power considerations re-emerged as to the need to preserve an Iraq capable of resisting Iranian hegemony in the region. Meanwhile, prospect theory would anticipate reluctance on the part of President Bush to undertake the risks associated with further military operations given that he was operating in a domain of gain both internationally and domestically. In this case then, balance-of-power considerations and prospect theory both appeared to have overridden the inherent temptation of America to overreach in what was obviously becoming an increasingly unipolar global structure.

Cognitive heuristics also appeared to have played important roles in the ultimate outcome of this decision-making process. The World War II heurist allowed President Bush to equate strategic success with achieving a full and unconditional Iraqi withdrawal from Kuwait which Desert Storm had clearly achieved. Meanwhile anchoring heuristics that saw maintenance of a broad international coalition as vital and simultaneously assumed that Saddam’s military defeat would result in him being ousted from power mitigated against a decision to support continued coalition military operations. The vivid portrayals of the tremendous damage being inflicted on
retreating Iraqi forces by coalition air strikes along the “Highway of Death” pushed strongly in favor of a rapid termination of military operations.

There was virtual unanimity among Bush’s advisors that a military advance to Baghdad would necessarily entail substantial political, military, and economic risks associated with American occupation of an Arab capital in the heartland of the Middle East. Moreover, they were convinced that the political and military objectives of the military intervention had already been met. These limited objectives centered on the liberation of Kuwait and were formally embedded in a dozen United Nations Security Council resolutions and numerous official statements by senior U.S. officials including President Bush himself. The framework of these existing policies became a box from which escape would be exceedingly difficult.

Finally, President Bush and his national security advisor Scowcroft were absolutely convinced that a march to Baghdad would fracture the coalition beyond repair. The fact that none of the participating Arab military units would advance an inch into Iraqi territory confirmed these fears. This political isolation internationally would have placed the entire burden for these military operations on the shoulders of the American citizen both in terms of the high levels of casualties anticipated and the high costs of maintaining a deployed force in a hostile land. These were risks that the administration was simply unwilling to bear, despite the temptation offered by America’s newly confirmed status as the world’s sole remaining superpower.
Table 6.1 Anticipated Influence of Variables on Risk Assessment (President George H.W. Bush and Ending Desert Storm)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S Cases</th>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Dependent Variables–Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domain (Int’l/Dom)</td>
<td>Representativeness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Anticipated Influence on Risk Propensities)

- Muddy Risk-Acceptant favoring continued military operations
- Mixed but trending toward risk-averse favoring termination
- Risk-averse favoring termination
- Favoring termination
- Risk-neutral but unwilling to risk fracture of coalition

- Prediction supported
- Prediction falsified
- Indeterminate outcome
Background to Crisis

Despite the overwhelming military victory secured in Desert Storm in 1990, President George H.W. Bush was defeated by the Democratic candidate Governor Bill Clinton in November 1992. Iraq remained an unresolved foreign policy problem throughout Clinton’s two terms in office. At this time, both Iran and Iraq seemed to be hopelessly bad actors whose regional influence needed to be curbed. The doctrine of dual containment became official U.S. foreign policy during President Clinton’s tenure. To enforce this strategy, the United States, Great Britain, and France imposed two no-fly zones over both the northern and southern thirds of Iraqi territory to offer some degree of protection to the Kurdish and Shi’a communities.

Meanwhile, the United Nations had organized an inspection regime to verify Iraq’s compliance with the cease-fire conditions requiring the verifiable destruction of Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction. Initial estimates anticipated that these international teams of experts would need no more than six months or so to verify Iraqi disarmament. However, Saddam Hussein and these teams engaged in a “cat and mouse” game lasting for more than a decade. Tensions between the United States and Saddam peaked to the point that, after one particular instance of Iraqi interference with a group of UN inspectors in December 1998, President Clinton ordered a four-day bombing campaign against Iraqi facilities associated with its suspected WMD programs. Congressional frustration mounted with Saddam’s provocations including multiple deployments of Iraqi military units to the Kuwaiti border, firings.
on U.S. aircraft patrolling the no-fly zones, and the hindrance of UN inspection teams operating in Iraq. Multiple U.S. military build-ups in response to these provocations compelled Saddam to back down, but cost the U.S. taxpayers hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars. This frustration culminated in the passage of the Iraq Liberation Act in 1998 expressing the sense of the Congress that “it should be the policy of the United States to support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq and to promote the emergence of a democratic government to replace that regime.”

Such was the situation inherited by President Bush when he assumed office in January 2001. The United States military was enforcing two no-fly zones over much of Iraq, exposing American pilots to repeated Iraqi attacks. UN inspections teams established after Desert Storm in 1991 to verify Iraq’s disarmament had been unable to complete their work after a decade-long effort. Meanwhile, international will to enforce economic sanctions was fraying under mounting concerns over the heavy humanitarian toll sanctions were imposing on average Iraqis. The official policy of the United States government was regime change, but few concrete advances had been made in identifying a viable local opposition group with the capacity to overthrow Saddam.

**INTERNATIONAL POWER STRUCTURE**

In many ways, the United States was at the top of its game in the months after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. In response to these attacks, President Bush moved decisively to destroy Taliban and Al-Qa’ida facilities in Afghanistan with the

initiation of Operation Enduring Freedom on October 7, 2001. The combination of advanced air power, American special operations forces, and local Northern Alliance fighters proved a remarkable success. By the end of November, the last Taliban stronghold in the north had been captured, and the remnants of the Taliban and Al-Qa’ida had largely fled into the mountains near the Pakistani border. By December, the last remaining major Taliban-held city in southern Afghanistan, Kandahar, had fallen.

The United States moved quickly to build politically on these initial military successes. By December, American military commanders began transferring important responsibilities in Afghanistan to the UN-authorized International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Moreover, the Bonn Conference, under U.S. political leadership, was convened in December investing the Afghan Transitional Authority with significant domestic and international political legitimacy.

These remarkable military and political successes in Afghanistan in the wake of the 9/11 attacks served to further cement America’s position as the world’s dominant superpower. Thomas Donnelly, a military affairs and defense analyst with the American Enterprise Institute, wrote in the summer of 2002, “The fact of American empire is hardly debated these days. Even those who fear and oppose it….define international politics almost entirely in relation to U.S. power—and especially U.S. military power.” Other prominent scholars were even more assertive in echoing their beliefs that, in the wake of Operation Enduring Freedom, American power had achieved new historical heights. Stephen Brooks and William Wohlforth, in a Foreign Affairs article published in July/August 2002, boldly asserted, “If America’s current

global predominance does not constitute unipolarity, then nothing ever will. The only things left for dispute are how long it will last and what the implications are for American foreign policy.” These scholars went on to elaborate their conclusions based on concrete measures of “the standard components of national power.” For instance, in terms of military power they point out that the United States spends more on defense than “the next 15-20 biggest spenders combined” and that America possesses “overwhelming nuclear superiority, the world’s dominant air forces, the only truly blue-water navy, and a unique capability to project power around the globe.” The authors observed that American military superiority will likely be preserved for the foreseeable future as the government spends three times more on military research and development than the next six countries tallied together. They argue that “America’s economic dominance…surpasses that of any great power in modern history” with an economy that is “twice as large as its closest rival.” Finally, they conclude that “the United States has no rival in any critical dimension of power. There has never been a system of sovereign states that contained one state with this degree of dominance.”

President Bush himself seemed convinced of America’s supremacy in international politics as he contemplated military intervention in Iraq. In a June 2002 speech to graduating cadets at West Point, the President expressed similar views as to America’s tremendous accomplishments and position of global dominance. He said that “America has, and intends to keep, military strengths beyond challenge—thereby, making the destabilizing arms races of other eras pointless, and limiting rivalries

to trade and other pursuits of peace.” America, he further asserted, had not only
triumphed militarily over other competitors, but had also demonstrated its superiority
in political governance, legal institutions, and social values as well.

The 20th century ended with a single surviving model of human
progress, based on non-negotiable demands of human dignity, the rule
of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women and private
property and free speech and equal justice and religious tolerance.\textsuperscript{4}

The introduction to his \textit{National Security Strategy} signed on September 17, 2002
confirmed this assessment as President Bush wrote that “Today, the United States
enjoys a position of unparalleled military strength and great economic and political
influence.”\textsuperscript{5}

\textbf{The role of international power structure:} America’s dominant military, economic,
and political position in global politics should favor risk-acceptant behavior and
decision making.

\textbf{Nature of the Threat}

As we examined in the chapter examining the decision making surrounding Operation
Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, many of Bush’s senior foreign policy advisors
were influenced by state-centric realist views of the world emphasizing the need to
preserve America’s advantage in the global balance-of-power. However, the 9/11
attacks had highlighted America’s vulnerability and underscored threats posed by
small groups of shadowy international terrorists operating from ungoverned states.
In this strategic context, the initial inclination of Bush Administration officials to

\textsuperscript{4} George W. Bush, “Graduation Speech at West Point,” (1 June 2002).
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{The National Security Strategy of the United States of America}, (Washington, DC: The White House,
2002).
emphasize traditional global balances of power quickly receded to the background as senior officials began to make a case for military action against Iraq informed primarily by balance-of-threat considerations.

**Balance-of-threat**

Stephen Walt offered three principal criteria with which to judge balance-of-threat considerations: proximity, offensive capability, and hostile intent. One of the principal lessons learned from the devastating attacks of 9/11 was that America was no longer secured by the traditional geopolitical advantages of having friendly neighbors to the north and south and being surrounded by vast ocean expanses to the east and west. President Bush made this case directly in his State of the Union address in January 2002:

> Time and distance from the events of September the 11th will not make us safer unless we act on its lessons. America is no longer protected by vast oceans. We are protected from attack only by vigorous action abroad, and increased vigilance at home.

He went on to explicitly make the case that Saddam Hussein had both the offensive capability to strike the United States and the demonstrated intent to do so.

> Iraq continues to flaunt its hostility toward America and to support terror. The Iraqi regime has plotted to develop anthrax, and nerve gas, and nuclear weapons for over a decade. This is a regime that has already used poison gas to murder thousands of its own citizens—leaving the bodies of mothers huddled over their dead children. This is a regime that agreed to international inspections—then kicked out the inspectors. This is a regime that has something to hide from the civilized world.

---


States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred.\(^8\)

Other senior administration officials joined this chorus, emphasizing both Saddam’s offensive capability and intention to deliver a punishing blow to the United States and its allies. One of the most dramatic speeches in this regard was delivered by Vice President Cheney in an August 26, 2002, address to a gathering of Veterans of Foreign Wars in Nashville, Tennessee.

The Iraqi regime has in fact been very busy enhancing its capabilities in the field of chemical and biological agents. And they continue to pursue the nuclear program they began so many years ago. These are not weapons for the purpose of defending Iraq; these are offensive weapons for the purpose of inflicting death on a massive scale, developed to that Saddam can hold the threat over the head of anyone he chooses, in his own region or beyond…

Simply stated there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction. There is no doubt he is amassing them to use against our friends, our allies, and against us.\(^9\)

The president himself would frequently return to this theme emphasizing balance-of-threat considerations. His introduction to the National Security Strategy published in September 2002 describes the dangers inherent in the post 9/11 world.

Defending our Nation against its enemies is the first and fundamental commitment of the Federal Government. Today, that task has changed dramatically. Enemies in the past needed great armies and great industrial capabilities to endanger America. Now, shadowy networks of individuals can bring great chaos and suffering to our shores for

\(^8\) Ib\(\text{id.}\).


238
less than it costs to purchase a single tank. Terrorists are organized to penetrate open societies and to turn the power of modern technologies against us…

The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology. Our enemies have openly declared that they are seeking weapons of mass destruction, and evidence indicates that they are doing so with determination.\(^\text{10}\)

President Bush applied these balance-of-threat considerations directly to the case of Iraq in a speech delivered in Cincinnati on October 7, 2002. He told the assembled audience that he was “resolved…to confront every threat, from any source, that could bring sudden terror and suffering to America.” He then zeroed in on the specific danger posed by Saddam, saying that “the Iraqi dictator must not be permitted to threaten America and the world with horrible poisons and diseases and gases and atomic weapons.” With regard to Saddam’s intent to inflict harm on America, he asserted that Saddam “holds an unrelenting hostility toward the United States.”

President Bush went on to elaborate the presumed capabilities of Saddam to deliver his arsenal of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons through either ballistic missiles capable of striking regional targets “where more than 135,000 American civilians and service members live and work” or by means of an alliance with terrorists who could directly “attack America without leaving any fingerprints.”\(^\text{11}\)

Secretary of State Colin Powell was the cabinet-level official most skeptical of the Bush administration’s steady march toward a military invasion of Iraq. He repeatedly voiced these concerns during National Security Council meetings, but was not convinced that his voice was being heard in these internal deliberations. In August of 2002, Powell

\(^{10}\) The National Security Strategy of the United States of America.

requested (and was granted) a private lunch with President Bush so that he might make his case directly to the president to ensure he had a full appreciation for the potential risks inherent to an American military intervention into the heartland of the Arab nation. It was during this discussion that Secretary Powell warned the president of the “Pottery Barn rule” that Iraq is “like a crystal glass…it’s going to shatter…You’re going to own it. You’re not going to have a government….not a civil society. You’ll have twenty-five million Iraqis standing around looking at each other.”

Powell may have been skeptical in private, but his public rhetoric echoed that of other senior administration officials invoking the language of balance-of-threat considerations in describing the challenges associated with Iraq. It was Secretary Powell himself who delivered the administration’s most compelling public case for American military intervention at the United Nations in early February 2003. In this globally televised speech, Powell argued that Saddam had both the capability and intent to attack Americans and our allies in the region. He possessed the offensive capability to deliver chemical and biological weapons through any number of existing means including ballistic missiles, aircraft, and unmanned aerial vehicles. Moreover, Powell asserted that the United States was convinced of Saddam’s intent “to get his hands on a nuclear bomb.” As to Saddam’s hostile and aggressive intentions, Powell said that “nothing points more clearly to Saddam Hussein’s dangerous intentions and the threat he poses to all of us than his calculated cruelty to his own citizens and his neighbors.” He concluded that the combination of Saddam’s offensive capability and his demonstrated hostile intent represented an intolerable threat to the international community.

We know that Saddam Hussein is determined to keep his weapons of mass destruction; he’s determined to make more. Given Saddam’s history of aggression, given what we know of his grandiose plans, given what we know of his terrorist associations and given his determination to exact revenge on those who oppose him, should we take the risk that he will not someday use these weapons at a time and the place and in the manner of his choosing at a time when the world is in a much weaker position to respond?  

*The role of nature of the threat:* The shift in Bush administration rhetoric emphasizing the offensive military capabilities and hostile intentions of Saddam Hussein are indicative of a growing willingness to adopt risk-acceptant behaviors designed to minimize that threat.

**DOMAIN**

President Bush was almost certainly operating in a domain of gain both globally and domestically as he weighed the risks associated with a potential American military intervention in Iraq in 2003.

There was a tremendous outpouring of global sympathy for America in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. The French paper *Le Monde* offered this headline on September 12, 2001, “We Are All Americans.” Meanwhile, American military and political actions in Afghanistan had enjoyed broad international legitimacy. UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1368, passed on September 12, 2001, authorized “all necessary steps to respond to the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.” Moreover, UNSCR 1386, adopted on December 20, 2001, specifically authorized “the establishment…of an International Security Assistance Force to assist in the maintenance of security

---

in Kabul and its surrounding areas” that allowed U.S. military commanders to hand off post-conflict responsibilities to both this force and the Afghan Interim Authority. The military operation itself was astonishingly successful in destroying Al-Qa’ida facilities, including terrorist training bases at a cost of remarkably few American casualties and with a minimum investment from the U.S. treasury. The operation quickly achieved its political-military goal of dislodging the Taliban from power in Kabul. It is hard to imagine a more successful outcome for an American military intervention in the forbidding physical and political landscape of Afghanistan—a place Milton Bearden popularly characterized as a “Graveyard of Empires.”

America’s position at the head of the international community was hardly in doubt. President Bush’s position domestically was even more secure, as he and his Republican party rode a new wave of popularity with the American public. While his public approval ratings in August 2001 hovered around 50 percent, they had spiked to 86 percent by late September in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. These predictably were unsustainably high approval ratings and they did fall somewhat through the summer of 2002. Nonetheless, many of President Bush’s domestic advisors viewed the war on terrorism (and a potential attack against Iraq) as an opportunity to further advance Republican political fortunes. Scott McClellan, the president’s press secretary, pointed out several facts on the domestic scene that would “strengthen the president’s hand” in pursuing a hard line against Saddam. Specifically, he noted that eight in ten of Americans believed that Saddam supported terrorism, nine in ten believed Iraq either actually possessed or at least was in the process of developing weapons of

mass destruction, and over half of Americans mistakenly believed that Saddam was involved in the 9/11 attacks. More directly to this point, Karl Rove, at a Republican strategy session in January 2002, advocated explicitly using “the war presidency for its potential domestic political advantage.” President Bush’s Chief of Staff, Andrew Card, shared the view that Iraq presented an opportunity for the Republican Party. In explaining the timing of the administration’s plan to “sell” the war, which began in the fall of 2002, Card drew on the analogy of business seeking a larger market share, telling a New York Times reporter that “from a marketing point of view, you don’t introduce new products in August.” This domestic strategy ultimately proved successful as the elections in November 2002 secured Republican majorities in both Houses in the “first off-year race since 1934 in which an incumbent president’s party increased its seats.”

The role of domain: Given that President Bush was operating in a domain of gain both domestically and internationally, prospect theory would anticipate a risk-averse approach to decision making.

Cognitive Heuristics

Representativeness

The representative heuristic has to do with the degree of association between an event or outcome and the similarity it has with another class of events. There were

16. Ibid.
18. McClellan, 121.
two representative frameworks that were particularly influential as Bush officials contemplated a military intervention in Iraq.

The first was the extension of the framework of war that President Bush had quite literally established within hours after the 9/11 attacks. In recalling his initial thoughts upon being informed of the attacks, President Bush realized that “They had declared war on us, and I made my mind up at that moment that we were going to war.”20 Later that evening, President Bush reinforced this same heuristic with this entry in his personal diary, “The Pearl Harbor of the 21st century took place today.”21

This same heuristic carried forward into President Bush’s decision making with respect to Iraq, as he and his senior advisors routinely framed the intervention into Iraq as another phase in the Global War on Terrorism. The administration’s repeated efforts to tie Saddam Hussein to the events of 9/11 are the most visible manifestations of this heuristic. Particularly remarkable in this vein, were the continued allegations by both President Bush and Vice President Cheney of Iraq’s ties to terrorism despite CIA reporting to the contrary. The CIA Director, George Tenet, recounts the constant behind-the-scenes pressure his analysts received from senior administration officials to produce evidence of Saddam’s relationship to Al-Qa’ida.22 After each review of the intelligence, CIA analysts “found absolutely no linkage between Saddam and 9/11.”23 Nonetheless, the constant back and forth between the White House and his analysts convinced Tenet that a formal written report should be produced to put an

21. Ibid., 37.
23. Ibid., 341.
end to this seemingly endless debate. On January 28, 2003, the CIA issued a classified assessment entitled “Iraqi Support of Terrorism” concluding that there “was no Iraqi authority, direction, or control over al-Qa’ida.”

Despite these intelligence findings, however, administration officials closely linked the threat posed by Iraq with the war against terrorism and the lessons-learned from 9/11. In a speech outlining his view of the Iraqi threat in October 2002, President Bush emphasized “Saddam’s links to international terrorist groups” and underscored his belief that “Iraq and the al Qaeda terrorist network share a common enemy—the United States of America.” In his State of the Union Address in January 2002, in which Bush included Iraq as one member of an “axis of evil” (the other states being North Korea and Iran), he again drew a direct link to these states and terrorists.

States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred.

One year later, and on the same day CIA formally published its official assessment discounting the prospects of a substantive relationship between Iraq and Al-Qa’ida, the president discussed the threat posed by Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction in the hands of Al-Qa’ida terrorists.

Evidence from intelligence sources, secret communications, and statements by people now in custody, reveal that Saddam Hussein aids and protects terrorists, including members of al Qaeda. Secretly, and

24. Ibid., 358.

245
without fingerprints, he could provide one of his hidden weapons to terrorists, or help them develop their own.27

Secretary Colin Powell’s speech to the United Nations in February 2003, making the case for military intervention in Iraq, similarly emphasized Saddam’s connections with terrorists in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

Iraq and terrorism go back decades...But what I want to bring to your attention today is the potentially much more sinister nexus between Iraq and the Al Qaida terrorist network, a nexus that combined classic terrorist organizations and modern methods of murder. Iraq today harbors a deadly terrorist network headed by Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi, an associated collaborator of Osama Bin Laden and his Al Qaida lieutenants.28

The point of all these examples is not to revisit the stale arguments over whether or not President Bush and his administration misled the American people or distorted intelligence reporting. As CIA Director Tenet readily admits, policymakers are entitled to come to their own conclusions about intelligence analysis. Moreover, CIA reporting did conclusively demonstrate that Saddam was making substantial donations to the families of Palestinian suicide bombers and was sheltering “several prominent terrorists,” including Abu Nidal and one of the suspects involved in the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993.29 The key point is that these top Bush administration officials viewed Iraq through the prism of the 9/11 attacks and assessed the threat posed by Iraq primarily in terms of the potential nexus (no matter how small) between Saddam’s suspected weapons of mass destruction and terrorists. This

29. Tenet, 346.
fits precisely within the framework for the war against terrorism as articulated by President Bush in his graduation address at West Point in June 2002.

The gravest danger to freedom lies at the perilous crossroads of radicalism and technology. When the spread of chemical and biological and nuclear weapons, along with ballistic missile technology—when that occurs, even weak states and small groups could attain a catastrophic power to strike great nations. Our enemies have declared this very intention, and have been caught seeking these terrible weapons. They want the capability to blackmail us, or to harm us, or to harm our friends—and we will oppose them with all our power.\(^\text{30}\)

Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan also served as another important representative heuristic providing a contemporary model for how the military intervention might unfold, and as such it significantly influenced the perception of the risks entailed in such an operation. Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) also offers an interesting case study in terms of how differing representative heuristics can lead to different perceptions of risk.

For the senior civilian leadership at the Pentagon, the recent campaign in Afghanistan served as the dominant representative heuristic for how to approach planning and assess risks for a military invasion of Iraq. However, for the senior uniformed military, the military campaign conducted in 1991 (Desert Storm) provided the more representative framework for yet another military intervention into Iraq. Particularly at the beginning of the planning process, these alternate representative heuristics led to visible and significant tensions between Secretary Rumsfeld and his senior military planners. Ultimately, a compromise was reached—albeit one that heavily favored the opinions of the civilian leadership (as many would argue is the appropriate outcome).

\(^{30}\) Bush, “Graduation Speech at West Point.”
For Secretary Rumsfeld, the initial military plan for intervening in Iraq in 2002/2003 was essentially “refighting the 1991 Gulf War” as it called for a force of 500,000 troops that would require a buildup taking seven months or more. When General Franks had his initial briefing on military planning with President Bush at Crawford on December 29, 2001, he told the president “our current plan for Iraq is called Operations Plan 1003, which was last updated in 1998. As I’ve told Secretary Rumsfeld, it is basically Desert Storm II.” This reflected the military’s preference for the use of overwhelming military force to ensure a quick victory and minimize the economic and human costs of the military intervention.

However, civilian leaders at the Pentagon were far more influenced by the recent military successes in Afghanistan preferring a model premised on the employment of a small U.S. military footprint (primarily special forces) married with superior technology grounded in precision guided munitions. Rumsfeld confronted these differences in historical heuristics directly at the December 2001 briefing as he commented that “I’m not sure that that much force is needed given what we’ve learned coming out of Afghanistan.” From this point forward, Secretary Rumsfeld relentlessly pushed General Tommy Franks (the senior U.S. military commander in the Middle East) and his staff to develop a plan for invasion that would involve many fewer troops on a much shorter deployment timeline—much more in line with Operation Enduring Freedom than with Desert Storm.

General Franks gradually grew to be sympathetic to this viewpoint and acknowledged that the size of the military invasion force could indeed be significantly reduced based on the results seen in OEF. At one briefing, he directly told the president that “if we have multiple, highly skilled Special Operations Forces identifying targets for Precision Guided Munitions, we will need fewer conventional ground forces. That’s an important lesson from Afghanistan.”

But not all of the senior uniformed military were convinced that the risks of a much smaller military intervention force were acceptable. This anxiety and difference of professional opinion surfaced in General Eric Shinseki’s testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee in February 2003. When pressed for his professional estimate of the forces required to secure Iraq, General Shinseki, the Army’s senior uniformed officer, said, “something in the order of several hundred thousand soldiers”—a figure dramatically higher than his civilian superiors were advocating and much in line with the military’s initial preference for a Desert Storm-like force of 500,000. This caused the Deputy Secretary of Defense, Paul Wolfowitz, to publicly distance himself from those estimates, calling them “wildly off the mark” and suggesting a number much closer to 100,000 troops.

The role of representativeness: The primary representative heuristic that viewed the threat posed by Saddam within the context of the broader framework of the Global War on Terror favored a risk-acceptant posture. Another representative heuristic drawn from the conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom inclined the civilian

34. Franks, 350.
leadership at the Pentagon to push for a much smaller American invasion force which in turn would reduce the friendly-enemy force ratios and necessarily increase the presumed military risks associated with the intervention.

Availability

The availability heuristic derives from the retrievability, vividness, and salience of information at hand. Objectively, the availability of the particular threat from a distant Saddam Hussein bottled up in Baghdad should have been relatively low. This might well explain why the Clinton administration did not feel compelled to respond more forcefully to Saddam’s transgressions in the no-fly zones. But the public environment for the Bush administration after the 9/11 attacks was altogether different, and it inclined decision makers to adopt a much more aggressive posture. The Bush administration’s rhetoric emphasizing the ties between Iraq and terrorism and by extension the 9/11 attacks themselves had the effect of recalling the intense emotions, fears, and sense of vulnerability that permeated the nation on that horrific day.

George Tenet, as a hold-over from the Clinton administration, felt this shift in risk propensity particularly keenly as he noted that “in the aftermath of 9/11… everyone’s risk calculus had changed… people became more aggressive with regard to taking action.” More specifically related to the attitude of administration officials regarding Iraq, he recalled:

After 9/11, everything changed… They [Bush administration officials] seized on the emotional impact of 9/11 and created a psychological connection between the failure to act decisively against Al-Qa’ida and the danger posed by Iraq’s WMD programs… it seemed that the United States had not done enough to stop al-Qa’ida before 9/11 and had

36. Tenet, 112.
paid an enormous price. Therefore, so the reasoning went, we could not allow ourselves to be in a similar situation in Iraq... had 9/11 not happened, the argument to go to war in Iraq undoubtedly would have been much harder to make. Whether the case could have been made at all is uncertain. But 9/11 did happen, and the terrain shifted with it.\textsuperscript{37}

The language used by President Bush and his senior officials to portray the threat from Iraq in dramatic and vivid terms also served to raise the levels of availability of the information at hand. In describing the Iraqi threat in October 2002, President began by recalling “the most \textit{vivid} events of recent history… [when] on September the 11th, 2001, America felt its \textit{vulnerability}—even to threats that gather on the other side of the earth.” He went to say that “the Iraqi dictator must not be permitted to threaten America and the world with \textit{horrible poisons and diseases and gases and atomic weapons}.” He described Saddam Hussein as a “\textit{murderous tyrant} who has already used chemical weapons to kill thousands of people.” He asserted that Iraq retained a “massive stockpile of biological weapons…\textit{capable of killing millions}.” He closed by warning that a failure to take strong action against Saddam could result in a nuclear attack.

Knowing these realities, America must not ignore the threat gathering against us. Facing clear evidence of peril, we cannot wait for the final proof—the smoking gun—that could come in the form of a mushroom cloud.\textsuperscript{38}

Secretary Powell’s address to the United Nations in February demonstrated the use of techniques designed to portray the Iraqi threat in the most dramatic and vivid terms. This presentation was televised worldwide and included expert use of satellite photographs and electronic recordings of Iraqi communications that gave

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 305-306.

\textsuperscript{38} Bush, “President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat.” Italics mine.
the evidence additional credibility, visibility, and authority. Here too, Powell relied heavily on information pointing to Iraq’s possession of chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons, the use of which could potentially result in tens of thousands of casualties suffering horrific and painful deaths. In particular, Powell drew on America’s terrifying experience with the anthrax attacks in Washington, DC in 2001.

Less than a teaspoon of dry anthrax, a little bit about this amount [Powell held up a small vial]—this is just about the amount of a teaspoon—less than a teaspoon full of dry anthrax in an envelope shutdown the United States Senate in the fall of 2001. This forced several hundred people to undergo emergency medical treatment and killed two postal workers just from an amount just about this quantity that was inside an envelope. Iraq declared 8,500 liters of anthrax. But UNSCOM estimates that Saddam Hussein could have produced 25,000 liters. If concentrated into this dry form, this amount would be enough to fill tens upon tens upon tens of thousands of teaspoons. And Saddam Hussein has not verifiably accounted for even one teaspoon-full of this deadly material.39

**The role of availability:** The portrayal of the Iraqi threat in these urgent, dramatic, and vivid terms should incline decision makers to adopt a more risk-acceptant posture.

**Anchoring**

The anchoring heuristic deals with the overweighting of initial estimates and assessments. In this case, senior Bush administration officials came to office in January 2001 with a shared assessment that Saddam posed a direct and serious threat to the United States, and they were determined to deal more forcefully with Iraq from day one.

In January 1998 a number of prominent academics and foreign policy experts wrote directly to President Clinton to express their conviction that Iraq was “a threat in the Middle East more serious that any we have known since the end of the Cold War” and advocating for a new U.S. policy aimed “at the removal of Saddam Hussein’s regime from power.” Many of the individuals who signed this letter played important roles in advising Governor Bush during his presidential campaign and came to occupy prominent positions in his administration, including Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, Deputy Secretary of Defense Wolfowitz, Assistant Secretary of Defense Rodman, National Security Council Senior Director Khalilzad, National Security Council Senior Director Abrams, Deputy Secretary of State Armitage, and U.S. Trade Representative Zoellick. President Bush too was personally convinced at the beginning of his administration that Saddam was a serious threat. According to one account of a private meeting between President Clinton and President-elect Bush at the White House in December 2000,

Clinton told Bush that he had read his campaign statements carefully and his impression was that his two priorities were national missile defense and Iraq. Bush said this was correct. Clinton proposed a different set of priorities, which included Al Qaeda, Middle East diplomacy, North Korea, the nuclear competition in South Asia and, only then, Iraq. Bush did not respond.

Indeed, upon assuming office, the Bush administration immediately began a review of U.S. policy on Iraq to search for a more effective strategy. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 gave a new sense of urgency to this review, and Iraq immediately surfaced as a

strong candidate for American military action even though it was clear that Al-Qa’ida was the responsible party. Richard Clarke, the NSC’s senior counterterrorism official, recounts how Wolfowitz and Rumsfeld, in particular, pushed strongly for early military action against Iraq in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

On the morning of the 12th [September 2001] DOD’s focus was already beginning to shift from al Qaeda. CIA was explicit now that al Qaeda was guilty of the attacks, but Paul Wolfowitz, Rumsfeld’s deputy, was not persuaded. It was too sophisticated and complicated an operation, he said, for a terrorist group to have pulled off by itself, without a state sponsor—Iraq must have been helping them…The focus on al Qaeda was wrong, he [Wolfowitz] had said in April, we must go after Iraqi-sponsored terrorism. He had rejected my assertion and CIA’s that there had been no Iraqi-sponsored terrorism against the United States since 1993.  

President Bush attended an NSC meeting later that same day. Rumsfeld immediately advocated for an attack on Iraq, using the limited number of targets for bombing in the mountainous expanses of undeveloped rural areas in Afghanistan as further justification for action. Vice President Cheney intervened in these same discussions to emphasize the importance of going after state sponsors of terrorism, including Iraq.

The president himself initially also appeared inclined to take action against Iraq as he was convinced that Saddam was in some way responsible for the 9/11 attacks. On the evening of September 12, 2001, according to Clarke, the president pulled him aside and said, “I know you have a lot to do and all…but I want you, as soon as you can, to go back over everything, everything. See if Saddam did this. See if he’s linked in

43. Ibid., 31.
44. Woodward, Bush at War, 48-49.
any way…I want to know any shred…” Clarke reminded the president that both he and CIA had conclusive evidence that Al-Qa’ida was responsible and that they “have looked several times for state sponsorship of al Qaeda and not found any real linkages to Iraq.” Despite this, the president responded forcefully, “Look into Iraq, Saddam,” and then departed.

These arguments for targeting Iraq were repeated forcefully at Camp David later that week as President Bush assembled his team to develop an American response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks. National Security Advisor Rice raised the question early on in the discussions as to whether the war on terrorism should expand beyond Al-Qa’ida sanctuaries in Afghanistan. Wolfowitz seized on this opportunity to renew his case for attacking Iraq. He argued that there was a strong likelihood American forces would become bogged down in Afghanistan, while “Iraq was a brittle regime that might break easily.” Moreover, a military intervention in Iraq was “doable,” and he offered his estimate “that there was a 10 to 50 percent chance Saddam was involved in the September 11 terrorist attacks.” Rumsfeld endorsed a similar case for intervention in Iraq, adding that they could take advantage of the large buildup of American forces in the region and expressing his concerns about the “availability of good targets in Afghanistan.” After this discussion, the group took a break and the president sent word out that the afternoon session would focus on Afghanistan. He later offered this explanation for deferring consideration of an attack on Iraq.

45. Clarke, 32.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. Woodward, Bush at War, 83.
49. Ibid., 84.
My theory is you’ve got to do something and do it well and that…if we could prove that we could be successful in [the Afghanistan] theater, then the rest of the task would be easier. If we tried to do too many things—two things, for example, or three things—militarily, then…the lack of focus would have been a huge risk.  

As early as September 16, 2001, after an intense round of discussions with his advisors at Camp David, President Bush communicated his ultimate decision to delay military action against Iraq. He told Rice that “We won’t do Iraq now, we’re putting Iraq off. But eventually we’ll have to return to that question.”  

In a private meeting at the White House in September 2002 with a group of Republican governors, President Bush returned to precisely this question telling them,  

It’s important to know that Iraq is an extension of the war on terror…The international community is risk averse. But I assure you I am going to stay plenty tough.  

*The role of anchoring:* Several Bush administration officials—including the President—had come to office with an assessment of Iraq as a serious threat that must be dealt with forcefully. This initial assessment served as an anchoring heuristic tending toward military confrontation and signaling a willingness to accept the risks associated with a military intervention.  

**PERCEPTIONS OF RISK**  

**Political Risks**  

Political risks have to do with the potential for power re-distribution among group members. President Bush’s choice of military confrontation with Iraq met with

50. Ibid.  
52. McClellan, 139.
tremendous opposition globally. Domestically, however, the situation was somewhat less contentious as the Bush administration had successfully secured an authorization for the use of force by Congress in October of 2002 offering some measure of domestic support, a full six months in advance of actual military operations.

As clearly indicated in figure 7.1, America’s reputation in the international community had fallen drastically from the 9/11 attacks through Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003 and continued to fall in the aftermath of the intervention.

**Figure 7.1.** “Global Public Opinion in the Bush Years (2001-2008).” Reproduced from Pew Global Attitudes Project (available online at http://pewglobal.org/reports/display.php?ReportID=263).

Moreover, even within the countries explicitly supporting American military intervention, their publics were staunchly opposed to the use of force. Great Britain’s Prime Minister, Tony Blair, was one of the most visible supporters of President Bush’s position on Iraq. Yet polls in Great Britain conducted in the weeks before the launch of OIF showed that a scant 15 percent backed an attack without UN
authorization while 45 percent considered President Bush to be a more significant threat to world stability than Saddam Hussein.53 Meanwhile, in Spain, more than eight in ten citizens opposed military action against Iraq.54 The director of the Pew Research Center summarized the findings of his organization’s polling conducted in more than fifty nations on the eve of war. “Looming war with Iraq has taken a further toll on the image of America—not only in countries highly critical of our Iraq policy, such as France and Germany, but also in coalition countries such as Britain, Poland, Italy and Spain,” he wrote.55

Moreover, President Bush was clearly aware of these international attitudes. Polish President Kwasniewski confronted President Bush directly during a private meeting in January 2003, letting him know that “the level of anti-Americanism is extremely high” and that his decision to support Bush by agreeing to send Polish troops to Iraq was politically damaging to him personally.56 President Bush was also very much aware of the bludgeoning that British Prime Minister Blair was taking for his support of Bush’s Iraq policy, as the British press referred to him as “Bush’s poodle.” President Bush had been briefed in March 2003 on the prospects that Blair could be thrown out of government and he understood that this would mean the loss of “his chief [international] ally” in the fight against Saddam.57

55. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 338.
Domestically, the political situation was much less dire, although there was certainly some opposition to the war from varying quarters, to include prominent Democrats and some foreign policy pundits. American public support for a military attack against Iraq reached a high of 74 percent in November 2001 when the war in Afghanistan appeared to have been largely won, but had dropped to only a slim majority by June 2002, as talk of a prospective American military intervention gained prominence in public debates.\textsuperscript{58} In August 2002, President Bush’s father’s national security advisor, Brent Scowcroft, penned an editorial explicitly recommending against military intervention, saying that it “would be very expensive—with serious consequences for the U.S. and global economy—and could as well be bloody” as any American military action would likely prompt Saddam “to unleash whatever weapons of mass destruction he possesses.”\textsuperscript{59}

Nonetheless, by the winter of 2002/2003, public attitudes again began to shift as the administration’s campaign to secure public support for the war gathered momentum. Press Secretary McClellan recalled a sense that strong talk on Iraq would serve President Bush and the Republican Party well by placing Democrats on the defensive in a post-9/11 political environment.

For at least some Democrats, including those with future presidential aspirations, opposing efforts by the White House to confront Saddam Hussein seemed to pose far greater political risk than going along with its approach, particularly in an environment where Americans, concerned about future attacks, supported a tougher approach on matters of national security.\textsuperscript{60}

---


\textsuperscript{60} McClellan, 121.
In September 2002, the administration introduced a resolution to Congress seeking authority to use force in dealing with the Iraqi threat. The results were certainly better than those obtained by his father in advance of Desert Storm. The resolution passed the Senate 77 to 23 and the House 296 to 133 on October 10, 2002, giving President Bush what the New York Times called “overwhelming support to attack Iraq.” The joint resolution explicitly authorized President Bush to use the Armed Forces of the United States “as he determines to be necessary and appropriate in order to defend the national security of the United States against the continuing threat posed by Iraq.”

As military action drew closer, the American public rallied to Bush’s support, as would be expected by the “rally around the flag” effect. Polls taken in March 2003 showed growing support for military intervention in Iraq. The New York Times, on March 11, 2003, concluded that these polls “suggest that President Bush has made progress, at least at home, in portraying Saddam Hussein as a threat to peace while rallying support for a war over rising objections in the international community.” The following week, support for going to war with Iraq surged even higher to 71 percent after President Bush delivered his 48-hour ultimatum for Saddam to leave Iraq.

**Summary of political risks:** The political risks associated with American military intervention were substantial. Opposition to American military action was especially strong internationally. In the summer of 2002, domestic political opposition was

---


63. Morin and Deane.
also notable, but had been significantly ameliorated by Bush Administration actions including the successful passage of a Congressional authorization to use force.

Military Risks

Military risks consist of two primary components, the prospects for friendly casualties and the relative balance between the intervening and opposing forces. There is little evidence in the public record of a substantive discussion of detailed casualty predictions. This may be due to Secretary Rumsfeld’s frequent admonition to the press that there were some things that simply could not be anticipated given the complexity of the variables existing in the real world. During a press conference at the end of February 2003, when asked to anticipate the likely course of a military campaign in Iraq he commented,

We have no idea how long the war will last. We don’t know to what extent there may or may not be weapons of mass destruction used. We don’t know—have any idea—whether or not there would be ethnic strife. We don’t know exactly how long it would take to find weapons of mass destruction and destroy them, those sites. There are so many variables that it is not knowable.  

Civilian estimates of likely American casualties varied widely, with some suggesting something on the order of the less than 200 casualties suffered during Desert Storm, if everything went remarkably well. Others, such as Robin Dorff, from the U.S. Army War College, said that tens of thousands of causalities could be expected if well-trained Iraqi forces mounted stiff resistance from urban centers or if chemical or biological weapons were employed.  

It was indeed the prospect that Saddam would

65. Ibid.
use his weapons of mass destruction that most concerned General Tommy Franks, commander of U.S. forces in the region. General Franks recounted his assumptions that “Iraq possessed and would use weapons of mass destruction, so our forces would likely be fighting in a toxic environment….I was not confident we would be able to preempt WMD use.” This assumption was reinforced by intelligence reporting up to the very start of combat operations. In the few days before the official start of OIF, General Franks’ headquarters had received reporting that Iraqi Republican Guard units were deploying south of Baghdad and had been issued mustard gas and nerve agent in possible preparation for a final defense of the capital city employing these weapons of mass destruction. At the same time, there was reporting that Iraqi ballistic missiles were moving—possibly to link up with those same Republican Guard units possessing chemical weapons. General Franks examined this intelligence reporting and concluded that “we were looking at a strong possibility of gas attacks into our crowded staging areas in Kuwait.” Each of these suppositions by the senior military commander on the scene implied the potential for substantial numbers of American casualties in a military campaign expressly designed to unseat Saddam from power in Baghdad.

In terms of the ratio of combat power between the invading American forces and opposing Iraqi forces, the civilian leadership’s insistence on a small U.S. military footprint raised the level of military risk. While the quality and quantity of Iraqi military forces had been significantly reduced from the days of Desert Storm in 1991 through a combination of international sanctions and the enforcement of the No Fly Zones, the Iraqi military remained a force capable of inflicting serious damage. In

66. Franks, 353.
67. Ibid., 455.
his first briefing to President Bush on the war plan in December 2001, General Franks
drew this comparison, noting that at the beginning of Desert Storm,

the Iraqis had over a million men in uniform. Today they have around
three hundred and fifty thousand. They had sixty-eight divisions
then, today twenty-three. Almost six thousand tanks in 1991, today
an estimated twenty-six hundred and sixty....1780 APCs compared to
4800 in 1991. Their artillery had decreased from 4000 rocket launchers
and guns to about 2700—smaller but still a dangerous threat to an
attacking force.68

Moreover, the American military was providing the vast majority of the combat
power and consequently the burden of casualties was likely to be borne by the United
States. Defense analyst Ivo Daalder noted that only Great Britain was providing
substantial military support to OIF. He added,

Sure, there are some important allies aside from Britain—notably
Japan, South Korea, Spain and Italy as well as a number of ‘new’
Europeans. But of these, only Australia, Denmark and Poland are
actually contributing combat troops and capabilities (2,000 Australian
troops, a Danish submarine and naval escort, and 200 Polish troops
and refueling ship)—all in all, less than 1 percent of the total number
of troops in the region.69

A Congressional Research Service report in March 2003 drew this contrast between
Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom:

U.S. military action against Iraq will not be in the context of a large
collection similar to that formed for Desert Storm in 1991. To date, only
the United Kingdom and Australia have offered their armed forces’
participation. In 1991, 28 nations contributed military units.70

68. Ibid., 348-349. Italics mine.
29 January 2009].
Research Service, Updated 3 March 2003), RL31701.
**Summary of military risks:** The perceived military risk of American casualties was high given military and intelligence assessments that Saddam would order the use of weapons of mass destruction in defense of his regime. Moreover, while Iraqi military capabilities had been degraded since Desert Storm, they still assessed as presenting a significant threat to an invading force.

**Economic Risks**

Economic risks primarily deal with the anticipated financial costs of military intervention. Because costs are dependent on key and unknown variables, such as the anticipated length of the military operation, they are difficult to predict with precision and officials may be unwilling to engage in substantive debates over these issues for fear of giving ammunition to political opponents. Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and other senior DoD officials certainly relied on this logic in refusing to offer estimates to Congress, arguing that “It is not knowable what a war or conflict like that would cost. You don’t know if it is going to last two days or two weeks or two months. It certainly isn’t going to last two years.”

Nonetheless, presidents and Congress must pass a federal budget each year authorizing defense and military expenditures, including those for ongoing operations, so debate over the associated economic and financial costs of a prolonged intervention cannot be delayed indefinitely.

Despite the lack of a public record of debate over anticipated finances, a few general observations might be offered. First and foremost, the economic and financial costs of OIF were almost certainly bound to be higher than those of Desert Storm. Given the strong international opinion against the invasion of Iraq, it was virtually certain

that the United States could not depend on external financial support from coalition partners and other allies. Desert Storm was virtually paid for in its entirety by foreign financial contributions.\textsuperscript{72} As we saw in the previous section on international political risks, the United States was very much isolated on the issue of attacking Iraq in 2003, and one of the likely consequences would be an absence of financial backing from international contributors.

Despite the unwillingness of Department of Defense officials to offer public estimates of the costs of war, a number of estimates appeared from a range of sources, to include other senior government officials. The head of the White House National Economic Council, Lawrence Lindsey, for instance, told reporters in September 2002 that a war could cost as much as $100–200 billion.\textsuperscript{73} Meanwhile, the Director of the Office of Management and Budget said that the cost would likely “be in the range of $50 billion to $60 billion.”\textsuperscript{74} Outside estimates also varied wildly, depending on the operative assumptions built into the calculations. Michael O’Hanlon, from the Brookings Institute, forecasted a cost of between $40–$50 billion for the invasion itself with additional costs of $10–$20 billion per year of occupation.\textsuperscript{75} A report from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences assuming an extended occupation estimated that costs would likely range from $99 billion to $1.2 trillion.\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{72} Bowman.


\textsuperscript{75} Referenced in Bowman.

\textsuperscript{76} Also referenced in Ibid.
Unfortunately, it does not appear that the discussions of economic costs inside the administration were any more rigorous or better refined than the huge range of figures being tossed around in public. To be sure, President Bush did acknowledge that the war on terrorism would require a substantial investment from the nation’s treasury. In his State of the Union Address in January 2002 after Operation Enduring Freedom had ousted the Taliban from power in Afghanistan, President Bush acknowledged that the war on terrorism would be expensive.

It costs a lot to fight this war. We have spent more than a billion dollars a month—over $30 million a day—and we must be prepared for future operations. Afghanistan proved that expensive precision weapons defeat the enemy and spare innocent lives, and we need more of them. We need to replace aging aircraft and make our military more agile, to put our troops anywhere in the world quickly and safely. Our men and women in uniform deserve the best weapons, the best equipment, the best training—and they also deserve another pay raise.

My budget includes the largest increase in defense spending in two decades—because while the price of freedom and security is high, it is never too high. Whatever it costs to defend our country, we will pay.77

Bush administration officials were either silent or overly optimistic when discussing the likely costs of Operation Iraqi Freedom. As we have seen, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld refused to offer specific estimates when asked by Congress or the press, claiming that these were simply “unknowable.” This led to serious frustration on the part of Congressional Democrats, leading Senator Edward Kennedy to charge that the administration was simply refusing to lay out “the cost in blood and treasure for this operation.”78

77. Bush, “State of the Union Address.”
Lawrence Lindsey, who as the senior White House economist had offered an estimate of between $100–200 billion in September 2002, had resigned from office by December—leaving the impression that his “unauthorized” and “excessive” estimate was a proximate cause of his termination. Press Secretary Scott McClellan observed that “his comments on the cost of the war certainly did not help.”79 Meanwhile, other senior officials testified that the American taxpayer would not be burdened with the costs of military operations. Paul Wolfowitz, the second ranking civilian at the Pentagon, told the House Appropriations Committee on March 27, 2003, that Iraq’s oil wealth would be able to finance these operations.

There’s a lot of money to pay for this that doesn’t have to be US taxpayer money, and it starts with the assets of the Iraqi people. On a rough recollection, the oil revenues of that country could bring between $50 billion and $100 billion over the course of the next two or three years.80

Meanwhile, the Director of the U.S. Agency for International Development told ABC’s Nightline that the American contribution to reconstruction efforts would be limited to $1.7 billion, that “we have no plans for any further-on funding for this,” and that the remainder of the costs would be financed with Iraqi oil revenues and international contributions.81 Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld echoed these assessments, saying that whatever the costs of reconstruction in Iraq, “the bulk of it’s going to be paid by the Iraqi people.”82 Scott McClellan observed these overly optimistic assessments of

79. McClellan, 123.
costs and funding requirements were consistent with the private deliberations of the administration writing that senior officials “expected a relatively quick and easy war, followed by a fairly smooth transition funded largely by Iraqi oil.”

**Summary of economic risks:** From the vantage point of the administration officials, the economic risks of military intervention in Iraq were assessed to be small to moderate given their operative assumptions that American forces would not remain long and that Iraqi oil would finance the bulk of the reconstruction required. In hindsight, these calculations may appear to have been naively optimistic, but the evidence suggests that these assumptions were broadly shared by senior administration officials at the time.

**Policy Risks**

Policy risks are those representing a significant departure from either the core values of the decision maker or the framework of existing policies. A military invasion of Iraq aimed at overthrowing Saddam Hussein was certainly consistent with American values of promoting democracy and basic human rights. Even among the strongest opponents of the American intervention, there was a broad sentiment that the world would be better off with Saddam removed from power. In terms of existing policy frameworks, the case can be made that Operation Iraqi Freedom represented both a substantial departure from the existing policies of containment and deterrence; and the first genuine test of the “Bush Doctrine” promulgated in a serious of speeches and formally unveiled as part of the National Security Strategy in 2002. These significant changes in policy have been described by some foreign policy analysts

---

83. McClellan, 122.
as nothing short of a “revolution” in the sense that they repudiated the prior policy of containment, they dismissed the utility of the long-standing policy of deterrence, and they specifically advocated preemption as a necessary and vital component of American national security policies.  

The Bush administration assumed office questioning the effectiveness of existing U.S. policies aimed at containing the threat posed by Saddam. According to this view, international support for sanctions was eroding, and the sanctions themselves were becoming progressively more porous. There were accusations from human rights organizations that international sanctions were responsible for killing tens of thousands of Iraqi children and other vulnerable populations—an impression that Saddam actively encouraged both inside and outside of Iraq. Key members in the UN Security Council, including Russia, France, and China appeared increasingly anxious to relax sanctions enforcement in order to provide business opportunities to their own national industries. This assessment of a failing sanctions regime was shared by several prominent independent observers. Brookings scholar Kenneth Pollack, in his bestselling book *The Threatening Storm*, wrote in 2002 that “sanctions are hemorrhaging.”  

Worse than the fact that the sanctions were becoming increasingly porous was the fact that Saddam was exploiting them for his own personal gain, hauling in as much as $2.5–3 billion annually in illegal trade. It was precisely this


86. Ibid.
illicit flow of money that was allowing Saddam to fund his pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, according to Bush senior officials.

These critiques of the effectiveness of the existing policies of containment and deterrence gained particular credence in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In his address to West Point cadets in June 2002, the president previewed a new strategy that would come to emphasize preemption and offensive action as essential and necessary components of U.S. strategy.

For much of the last century, America’s defense relied on the Cold War doctrines of deterrence and containment….But new threats also require new thinking. Deterrence—the promise of massive retaliation against nations—means nothing against shadowy terrorist networks with no nation or citizens to defend. Containment is not possible when unbalanced dictators with weapons of mass destruction can deliver those weapons on missiles or secretly provide them to terrorist allies…. If we wait for threats to fully materialize, we will have waited too long…the war on terror will not be won on the defensive. We must take the battle to the enemy, disrupt his plans, and confront the worst threats before they emerge. In the world we have entered, the only path to safety is the path of action. And this nation will act.87

Vice President Cheney repeated these essential arguments in making his case specifically for military action against Iraq in August 2002.

As we face this prospect [of Al-Qa’ida acquiring weapons of mass destruction], old doctrines do not apply. In the days of the Cold War, we were able to manage the threat with strategies of deterrence and containment. But it’s a lot tougher to deter enemies who have no country to defend. And containment is not possible when dictators obtain weapons of mass destruction, and are prepared to share them with terrorists who intend to inflict catastrophic casualties on the United States.88

87. Bush, “Graduation Speech at West Point.”
88. Cheney.
In terms of military doctrine, OIF also represented a tremendous divergence from existing policies and programs. Desert Storm provided the existing template for an American invasion of Iraq. Initial military planning in November 2001 called for a steady, buildup of nearly half a million American combat troops in the region over a seven month period. Military operations would begin with a traditional air campaign for several weeks followed by an invasion by a massive ground invasion force that would rapidly overwhelm Iraqi resistance. By the time General Franks briefed the President in February 2002 on the final invasion plan, however, the deployed forces had been cut nearly in half, and the air and ground operations would begin nearly simultaneously. General Franks himself called this a “revolutionary concept, way outside the box of conventional doctrine.”

Summary of policy risks: The policy risks associated with Operation Iraqi Freedom were quite substantial, as they involved a significant departure from the existing policy frameworks of containment and deterrence. From a military standpoint, OIF also departed significantly from existing military doctrine and plans.

Conclusion:

As the Bush administration contemplated military intervention into Iraq from late 2001 through the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003, the United States dominated the global structure. President Bush’s National Security Strategy of 2002 specifically advocated maintaining America’s military superiority beyond challenge. This unipolar nature of the international power structure was certainly conducive to an American military intervention in Iraq, as it would be unlikely to

89. Franks, 367.
meet with any effective military resistance from any regional or major global power. As such, Operation Iraqi Freedom might be highlighted as one example of the temptations of hegemony.

Balance-of-threat considerations dominated both the private deliberations of the administration and its public justifications for an American military intervention into Iraq. This was particularly evident as Bush administration officials asserted various connections between Saddam Hussein, his suspected weapons of mass destruction programs, and terrorism—a dangerous nexus that invoked the prospect of a much more devastating 9/11–like attack. This factor also inclined Bush’s senior team toward military confrontation with Iraq.

The issue of domain would seemingly have pushed in the opposite direction, however, inclining officials to adopt a much more risk-averse posture. Generally, America enjoyed tremendous international sympathy in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. American political and military successes in Afghanistan as a result of Operation Enduring Freedom cemented America’s reputation. Meanwhile, President Bush and the Republican Party enjoyed a rising tide of popularity domestically and rode these favorable public ratings to victory in the mid-term Congressional elections in late 2002. Given these developments, President Bush should have perceived himself operating largely in a domain of gain as he considered the option of military intervention in Iraq. Theoretically, prospect theory would anticipate a general aversion to risk under these circumstances.

Nonetheless, many of the heuristics influential in administration debates inclined officials to accept the risks associated with military action aimed at removing Saddam
Hussein from power. The issue of the threat posed by Iraq was placed firmly within the representative framework of the war against terrorism that had been articulated in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. These repeated assertions by senior administration officials of ties to the 9/11 attacks, coupled with the administration’s emphasis on Saddam’s possession of weapons of mass destruction and his record of brutal repression at home, also raised the levels of availability of the threat for decision makers and the broader American public alike. Finally, there was a durable anchoring heuristic that Bush administration officials held predating their term in office that assessed Saddam as a dangerous threat requiring forceful action. All of these heuristics had the effect of inclining Bush officials toward military intervention aimed at removing Saddam Hussein from power in Baghdad. This combination of these heuristics inclined American leaders to accept the substantial risks inherent in a military confrontation with Saddam. What were those risks?

The political risks confronted by Bush were considerable in the international arena, but were somewhat reduced at home. American military intervention in Iraq was visibly opposed by significant majorities across the globe. Even in countries whose leaders had agreed to provide combat troops, such as Great Britain and Australia, opinion polls indicated strong and widespread opposition. Domestically, President Bush encountered some vocal opposition from Democratic leaders, but managed to secure formal Congressional authorization for use of force in September 2002 with significant levels of bipartisan support.

The military risks associated with OIF were also substantial. While Iraq’s conventional military forces had been degraded from the days of Desert Storm, it was assumed that
Saddam Hussein would order the use of chemical and biological weapons in a last-ditch desperate attempt to inflict massive casualties on the invading American forces.

The administration evaluated the economic and financial risks of a military intervention as quite small based on the assumptions that American military forces would meet with rapid success and the period of American military occupation would be short-lived. Additionally, senior Defense Department officials were adamant that Iraq’s domestic oil production would be sufficient to fund any longer-term reconstruction projects. Meanwhile, the policy risks of OIF were high, as military intervention represented a rejection of the long-standing doctrines of containment and deterrence, as well as the first real test of the “Bush doctrine” of preemption.

Lastly, this case presents an interesting contrast in the risks that actually materialized as a result of the American intervention and those that were anticipated but did not arise. General (retired) Jay Garner was given the task of preparing for the aftermath of the invasion and devoted the majority of his attention to preparing for the following contingencies: massive civilian casualties and a flood of humanitarian refugees resulting from Saddam’s presumed use of chemical weapons; environmental disasters prompted by Saddam’s anticipated destruction of the oil fields and dams; and the requirement for massive economic and infrastructure reconstruction given the decades of neglect under Saddam’s rule. Of course, in hindsight, the first two major contingencies thankfully never materialized. However, the prospects for civil disorder and looting, sectarian violence, and the emergence of a Sunni-based insurgency while unanticipated posed significant risks to the intervention. What explains this divergence between anticipated

and real risks? In part, cognitive heuristics of availability and anchoring can go a long way in providing some explanation. The potential images of thousands of destitute humanitarian refugees fleeing chemically contaminated areas, hundreds of burning oil wells, and scores of flooded towns and villages would provide compelling television and attract global media attention. As such they were contingencies involving high levels of availability and consequently easily drew the attention of policymakers and planners. Moreover, Saddam’s past behavior in Kuwait had provided some evidence supporting the assertion that he would be likely to destroy Iraqi oil fields before surrendering them to advancing coalition forces and U.S. intelligence assessment continued to highlight the likelihood that Saddam would employ chemical weapons in a last ditch effort to inflict severe damage on coalition forces. In contrast, scattered reports of the looting of government ministries and sporadic evidence of an emerging Iraqi insurgency opposed to the American presence were not nearly as dramatic or compelling. Moreover, these less visible contingencies were directly contrary to the views of senior officials grounded in assumptions that the American military intervention force would be ‘greeted as liberators’91 and that a small group of Iraqi exiles such as Ahmad Chalabi would be capable of quickly filling the political void and imposing civil order in the wake of Saddam’s departure and the dissolution of the Baath party.92

91. As asserted by Vice President Dick Cheney in an appearance on Meet the Press on 16 March 2003.
92. For a contemporary summary of the missteps in the post-war Iraq planning see John Barry and Evan Thomas, “The Unbuilding of Iraq,” Newsweek 142, no. 14 (2003). For an insider’s account of the changing political and economic reconstruction strategies within the Coalition Provisional Authority as it transitioned from Jay Garner’s leadership to that of L. Paul Bremer see Kimberly Olson, Iraq and Back: Inside the War to Win the Peace (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006).
Table 7.1 Anticipated Influence of Variables on Risk Assessment (President George W. Bush and Operation Iraqi Freedom)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>US Cases</th>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Dependent Variables–Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Domain (Int’l/Dom)</td>
<td>Representativeness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iraq</td>
<td>GW Bush &amp; OIF (2003)</td>
<td>Strongly Unipolar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Anticipated Influence on Risk Propensities)

- Risk-acceptant
- Risk-acceptant
- Risk-averse globally & domestically
- Risk-acceptant particularly regarding military risks necessary to achieve goal
- Risk-acceptant
- Risk-acceptant

- Prediction supported
- Prediction falsified
- Indeterminate outcome
Background to Crisis

Operation Iraqi Freedom began on March 20, 2003, with the objectives of removing Saddam Hussein from power, eliminating Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction, and establishing a representative government in Baghdad that would live in peace with its neighbors and serve as an ally in the Global War on Terrorism. The United States provided the vast majority of ground and air combat power, with the British and Australians also lending meaningful military support. The military campaign itself was remarkably successful as Baghdad fell to advancing U.S. forces a brief six weeks after the start of combat operations.

American plans had called for a rapid transfer of authority to a transitional Iraqi authority and a relatively short occupation of approximately six months by U.S. military forces. With these plans in mind, President George W. Bush staged a dramatic visit to the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln on May 1, 2003, where he triumphantly announced the end of major combat operations.

My fellow Americans: Major combat operations in Iraq have ended. In the battle of Iraq, the United States and our allies have prevailed...The battle of Iraq is one victory in a war on terror than began on September the 11, 2001—and still goes on...¹

But these initial plans for a speedy American withdrawal from Iraq proved wildly optimistic. Senior U.S. defense officials had hoped that Iraqi exiles, such as Ahmad Chalabi, would be capable of rapidly stepping into the void created by the

dismantling of Saddam’s Ba’ath party regime. However, these exiles, who had spent the majority of their adult lives abroad in Western capitals such as London, proved to have little domestic legitimacy inside Iraq.

Moreover, while the initial American military offensive destroyed some of Iraq’s military capacity, much of the Sunni-dominated Iraqi Army melted into the background and waited to launch a guerrilla-style campaign against the occupying American forces. Indeed, throughout the countryside, a combination of disaffected former Ba’ath party officials, Sunni tribal leaders alienated by the new ruling majority Shi’a-dominated government in Baghdad, and al-Qa’ida inspired and supported terrorists initiated a bloody campaign targeting coalition forces, Iraqi security forces, and Iraqi citizens. This insurgent campaign began in earnest in 2004, continued through 2005, and peaked in 2006. By the summer of 2006, there was open talk of Iraq sliding into the abyss of a bloody civil war with the potential of sparking a much broader regional conflict as neighboring countries felt compelled to move forcefully to protect their interests inside Iraq.

It was in this deteriorating environment that President Bush ordered his cabinet, in the summer of 2006, to begin a quiet review of U.S. strategy in Iraq to determine his options for reversing Iraq’s downhill slide into chaos.²

INTERNATIONAL POWER STRUCTURE

As President Bush considered his options in Iraq in 2006, America’s position in the international community remained one of overwhelming dominance, and the international system remained largely unipolar. Harvard University international relations scholar Stephen Walt observed in 2005,

Describing the United States as the mightiest state since Rome has become a cliché, but like most clichés, it also captures an essential feature of reality. The United State enjoys a position of power unseen for centuries, and citizens around the world are intensely aware of that fact.3

Robert Lieber, from Georgetown University, shared Walt’s assessment and offered more specific justification for America’s dominance of the global scene.

In military terms, no other country or group of countries comes close to approaching America’s capacity in warfare and in virtually every dimension of modern military technology. Nor does any other country have a comparable ability to project power and to deploy and sustain large and effective forces abroad…

Other dimensions of American power are impressive in their own right. The most important of these is economic. The United States, with less than 5 percent of the world’s population, accounts for more than 30 percent of world GDP…

All in all, American primacy is both robust and unlikely to be challenged in the near future. It is robust because it rests on preponderance across all the realms—military, economic, technological, wealth, and size—by which we measure power. And with the possible exception of China, no other country or group of countries is likely to emerge as an effective global competitor in the coming decades.4

As Christopher Layne pointed out in 2006, America’s dominance of the international system was not only evident by virtue of its “commanding preeminence in both military and economic power,” but since the 1990’s, through the successive administrations of Presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush, “the perpetuation of U.S. primacy [had become] a matter of policy.”

The National Defense Strategy of President George W. Bush in 2005 testified to his administration’s assessment of America’s dominant position in the world. It boldly asserted that the United States would “have no global peer competitor and will remain unmatched in traditional military capability” and that America “will maintain important advantages in other elements of national power—e.g., political, economic, technological, and cultural.”

The empirical evidence from 2006 largely confirms these assessments of American military and economic dominance as measured in traditional terms of military might and economic production. According to *The Military Balance*, defense expenditures for the United States alone in 2006 were nearly three times those of Russia and China combined. According to World Bank figures for 2006, the United States represented 4.6% of the world’s population, but accounted for more than 27% of global gross domestic production. In terms of global trade, American exports for 2006 were more

---

than twice that of its next competitors—China and Germany—and over three times that of the next largest exporting economies of France, Britain, and Japan.  

**The role of international power structure:** The continued dominance of the international power structure by the United States in terms of its military and economic power should enable President Bush to adopt risk-acceptant military options.

**Nature of the Threat**

**Balance-of-threat**

By most objective measures of Walt’s criteria of proximity, offensive capability, and intent, the threat from the state of Iraq had been significantly reduced, if not eliminated, by U.S. military forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom. U.S. forces had quickly overcome Iraq’s conventional military forces in their rapid advance to Baghdad in the spring of 2003. Remaining Iraqi military units and capabilities were officially disbanded by order of Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority. Meanwhile, the suspected stores of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, which had represented an intolerable threat to America in the eyes of the Bush administration prior to OIF never materialized. It appeared as though Saddam simply fostered the impression he had these capabilities in order to deter both his foreign and domestic enemies. Finally, a far reaching “de-Ba’athification” program removing Ba’ath Party members from government jobs virtually ensured that anyone sharing Saddam’s aggressive intent would not be in a position of power in the new Iraqi government.

---

Nevertheless, mounting sectarian violence and a growing insurgency, inspired at least in part by al-Qa’ida, provided a context in which balance-of-threat considerations would reemerge. One of the unavoidable side-effects of the American military intervention was to drastically decrease the distance between the United States and the al-Qa’ida terrorist networks attempting to attack American targets. No longer did al-Qa’ida recruits have to infiltrate through U.S. Customs and breach the much tougher post-9/11 border security measures, they could blend in with the local Iraqi population and launch attacks at the more than 100,000 American soldiers who deployed in Iraq. If Al-Qa’ida was no longer capable of bringing the fight to America’s shores, U.S. policy had delivered a vast array of American targets to the Arab heartland. These attacks on Americans were producing deadly results. During the period of major combat operations from March through April 2003, the U.S. military suffered a total of 140 soldiers killed. However, as Iraq descended toward civil war in 2006, U.S. military deaths that year alone numbered 822—representing nearly six times the number suffered during actual major combat operations.\(^\text{10}\)

This perception of threat was particularly strong when the president considered the potential that a collapsed Iraqi state would provide a natural safe-haven for terrorists similar to that offered by the Taliban in Afghanistan to Al-Qa’ida. In announcing the surge strategy in early 2007, the president outlined the consequences of a failed state in Iraq:

Radical Islamic extremists would grow in strength and gain new recruits. They would be in a better position to topple moderate governments, create chaos in the region, and use oil revenues to fund

their ambitions…Our enemies would have a safe haven from which to plan and launch attacks on the American people.\textsuperscript{11}

From this vantage point, al-Qa’ida in Iraq represented a genuine and immediate threat to deployed American forces that satisfied each of Walt’s balance-of-threat criteria. These terrorist groupings were in close proximity to American forces, they had the proven offensive capability to attack these deployed forces, and they certainly had the demonstrated intent to carry out even more destructive attacks if offered the opportunity. This sense of threat was clearly portrayed in the \textit{National Strategy for Victory in Iraq} released by the White House in November 2005.

Terrorists affiliated with or inspired by Al Qaida make up the smallest enemy group but are the most lethal and pose the immediate threat because (1) they are responsible for the most dramatic atrocities, which kill the most people and function as a recruiting tool for further terrorism and (2) they espouse the extreme goals of Osama Bin Laden—chaos in Iraq which will allow them to establish a base for toppling Iraq’s neighbors and launching attacks outside the region and against the U.S. homeland.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{Balance-of-power}

To the extent that balance-of-power factors were considered, these too pushed toward deeper and stronger U.S. action in Iraq. President Bush and his advisors feared that a reduced American presence in Iraq would result in greater Iranian influence not only in Iraq, but throughout the region as well. In fact, in announcing the surge, President Bush argued that the perception of an American failure to achieve its objectives in Iraq would strengthen Iran’s position in the region and that “Iran would

\textsuperscript{11} George W. Bush, “President’s Address to the Nation,” (Washington, DC: 10 January 2007).
be emboldened in its pursuit of nuclear weapons.”\footnote{Bush, “President’s Address to the Nation.”} Within weeks of announcing the surge, the president issued a stern warning to Iran, promised retaliation for American or Iraqi casualties suffered in attacks aided by Iran, and specifically “authorized the U.S. military to kill or capture Iranian operatives inside Iraq as part of an aggressive new strategy to weaken Tehran’s influence across the Middle East.”\footnote{Dafna Linzer, “Troops Authorized to Kill Iranian Operatives in Iraq,” \textit{The Washington Post}, 26 January 2007.} In this instance, concerns about the potential for a significant shift in the regional balance-of-power favor Iran did not inspire caution, but instead were used to support arguments for deepening American military involvement and the adoption of increasingly risk-acceptant decisions.

\textit{The role of the nature of the threat:} Bush administration rhetoric emphasized balance-of-threat considerations and should incline decision making toward accepting the risks associated with further military intervention.

\textbf{Domain}

As President Bush contemplated his options regarding Iraq in 2006, he found himself operating in a domain of loss both internationally and domestically. Growing sectarian violence in Iraq and an apparent inability and/or unwillingness of the Shi’a-led Iraqi government to seriously advance an agenda of political reconciliation led to gloomy predictions of a looming civil war. Global opposition to U.S. military intervention in Iraq had only intensified in the aftermath of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the wake of the ever increasing levels of violence in the country. International polls reflected
a disturbing distrust of American power that was undoubtedly fueled principally by American actions in Iraq. The Pew Global Attitudes Project observed that

In the view of much of the world, the United States has played the role of bully in the school yard, throwing its weight around with little regard for others’ interest…

Positive views of the United States declined in 26 of the 33 countries where the question was posed in both 2002 and 2007…

Respondents to the 2006 survey in 13 of 15 countries found the American presence in Iraq to be an equal or greater danger to stability in the Middle East than the regime of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, while 11 judged it a threat to Middle East stability greater than or equal to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.15

Favorable views of the United States were precipitously dropping even in those countries supportive of OIF. Public approval of America had dramatically declined in Great Britain—the country offering the most substantial military force contribution to OIF other than the United States—from 83% in 2000 to a scant majority of 56% in 2006.16 Meanwhile, contributing coalition partners were responding to these public pressures by reducing or withdrawing their participation in OIF. By 2006, several key U.S. allies had withdrawn their military contingents from Iraq, including Italy, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Norway, and New Zealand.

The situation in Iraq itself was also visibly deteriorating, as was American public support for a continued U.S. presence. By the summer of 2006, attacks on U.S. troops had spiked to 1,000 each week. During this same period, American deaths surpassed 2,500 while the number of wounded in action exceeded 19,000. On July 20, 2006, the

16. Ibid.
President read his highly classified daily update on Iraq, which described a security situation in Iraq that was in dramatic decline.

The deteriorating security situation is outpacing the Iraqi government’s ability to respond…spiraling sectarian violence by Sunni and Shia extremists, including some elements of the Iraqi Security Forces, is becoming the most immediate threat to Iraq’s progress…Violence has acquired a momentum of its own and is now self-sustaining.17

Assessments of a worsening security and political situation in Iraq were consistently shared with President Bush throughout the fall of 2006 as the administration conducted its strategy review. In late November at one such review, Deputy National Security Advisor J.D. Crouch briefed that the “situation in Baghdad has not meaningfully improved…Iraq police in Baghdad are largely ineffective or worse…the enemy has the initiative…Iraqi leaders are advancing sectarian agendas…[and] the tolerance of the American people for efforts in Iraq is waning.”18

Meanwhile, American public attitudes appeared to confirm these somber assessments of events in Iraq. Polls showed that the number of Americans believing that the use of military force was the right decision had declined from a high of more than 72% at the time of the invasion in March to below 45% in late 2006. Similarly, percentages of those who said the decision to go to war was wrong had risen significantly, from a low of 21% in March 2003 to only slightly less than a majority, 49%, as 2006 drew to a close.19 This negative views of developments in Iraq unsurprisingly also heavily impacted President Bush’s approval ratings. According to an AP poll taken in early

17. Woodward, 72-73.
18. Ibid., 245.
December 2006 an overwhelming 71% of Americans disapproved of his handling of the war and only 27% approved of his overall performance, while a mere 9% believed that victory was possible in Iraq and more than 60% doubted that Iraq would ever be capable of becoming a stable democracy.\textsuperscript{20}

The mid-term Congressional elections were viewed by many as a referendum on President Bush’s Iraq policies. The result was a punishing blow to Republican candidates, as the Democrats regained control of both the House and Senate. Democratic House candidates were swept to victory in all regions of the country and accumulated a remarkable 5 million more votes than they did in 2002.\textsuperscript{21} Senior Democrats used these victories to claim a mandate for change in President Bush’s Iraq policies. In the days following these mid-term elections, Senator Carl Levin, soon-to-be Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said,

\begin{quote}
That’s the message that came through so clearly and powerfully last Tuesday from the American people. Most Democrats share the view that we should pressure the White House to commence the phased redeployment of U.S. troops from Iraq in four to six months.\textsuperscript{22}
\end{quote}

In his address to the nation announcing the “surge” of an additional 20,000 American troops into Iraq, the president admitted to the significant setbacks suffered during 2006.

\begin{quote}
When I addressed you just over a year ago, nearly 12 million Iraqis had cast their ballots for a unified and democratic nation. The elections of 2005 were a stunning achievement. We thought that these elections
\end{quote}


would bring the Iraqis together, and that as we trained Iraqi security forces we could accomplish our mission with fewer American troops. But in 2006, the opposite happened. The violence in Iraq—particularly in Baghdad—overwhelmed the political gains the Iraqis had made. Al Qaida terrorists and Sunni insurgents…blew up one of the holiest shrines in Shia Islam—the Golden Mosque of Samarra—in a calculated effort to provoke Iraq’s Shia population to retaliate. Their strategy worked. Radical Shia elements, some supported by Iran, formed death squads. And the result was a vicious cycle of sectarian violence that continues today.

The situation in Iraq is unacceptable to the American people—and it is unacceptable to me…It is clear that we need to change our strategy in Iraq.  

A few short weeks later in his State of the Union Address, President Bush opened with an acknowledgment of the difficulty of the times. We had arrived, he said, “at a defining hour—when decisions are hard and courage is needed…We must have the will to face difficult challenges and determined enemies.” In a subtle admission of his political losses at home he also reminded the nation that “We’re not the first to come here with a government divided.”

**The role of domain:** President Bush was operating within a domain of loss at both the international and domestic levels. According to the basic tenets of prospect theory, this should incline President Bush to adopt more risk-acceptant policy options.
COGNITIVE HEURISTICS

Representativeness

The representative heuristic has to do with the degree of association between an event or outcome and the similarity it has with another class of events. As in his decision making with Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom, President Bush continued to draw heavily on historical analogies from World War II.

President Bush’s speeches and policies reflected a view informed by the lessons of World War II. In particular, Bush saw himself in the role of Winston Churchill, leading the world in a titanic clash for the fate of civilization that would end in victory through determination, perseverance, and sacrifice. After a meeting between President Bush and the Iraq Study Group in November 2006, former Defense Secretary William Perry offered this recollection:

> The president held forth on his views on how important the war was, and how it was tough, how we stay together. It was a Churchillian kind of a thing…. There’s going to be blood, sweat, and tears and all that. It is quite clear that he had this image of a great global struggle, and he was presiding over it, and Iraq was just one element of that, and that the people who were wavering on Iraq did not see the big picture the way he saw it.
> To my mind even as he was saying it, I thought he was comparing himself to Churchill.26

Indeed many of President Bush’s speeches and policies reflected this view of the Global War on Terrorism as an ideological struggle. In this struggle, Islamic radicalism was the historical successor to fascism. The president’s National Strategy for Victory in Iraq makes this linkage explicit.

---

The war on terrorism is the defining challenge of our generation, just as the struggle against communism and fascism were challenges of the generations before. As with those earlier struggles, the United States is fully committed to meeting this challenge. We will do everything it takes to win.\textsuperscript{27}

It was precisely this insistence on some measurable achievement of “victory” that informed President Bush’s decision making regarding the surge. President Bush reminded the American public that the war on terrorism would not end with a formal surrender ceremony on the deck of a battleship, as did World War II. Yet ironically enough in May 2003, President Bush announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq on the deck of an aircraft carrier, the \textit{USS Abraham Lincoln}. During this speech he likened the sacrifices and achievements of the U.S. military to those of the World II generation, recalling that “the daring of Normandy, the fierce courage of Iwo Jima, the decency and idealism that turned enemies into allies—is fully present in this generation.” On this occasion, too, he insisted that, as in World War II, “Free nations will press on to victory.”\textsuperscript{28} President Bush, in announcing the publication of an updated version of the \textit{National Strategy for Combating Terrorism} in 2006, insisted that “We’re on the offense against the terrorists on every battlefront and we’ll accept nothing less than complete victory.”\textsuperscript{29} These themes were echoed in the president’s address announcing the surge strategy, arguing that Iraq was at the center of the Global War on Terrorism, and this battle represented “the decisive ideological struggle of our time,” pitting the forces of “freedom and moderation” against “extremists who kill the innocent.”\textsuperscript{30}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[27.] \textit{National Strategy for Victory in Iraq}, 4.
\item[28.] Bush, “President Bush Announces Major Combat Operations in Iraq Have Ended.”
\item[29.] Woodward, 124.
\item[30.] Bush, “President’s Address to the Nation.”
\end{footnotes}
The role of representativeness: The World War II representative heuristic portraying Iraq as a central front in a global struggle with terrorism should compel President Bush to adopt risk-acceptant policies seen as necessary to achieve ‘victory’—this should be particularly the case with respect to a willingness to accept high levels of military risk.

Availability

The availability heuristic derives from the immediate retrievability, vividness, and salience of information at hand. As is the case with many contemporary military conflicts, global modern communications media are capable of transmitting vivid pictures and dramatic first-hand accounts of the battlefield action almost instantaneously to billions of people with access to a computer, television, radio, or cell phone. Americans were certainly aware of the escalating violence taking place across Iraq throughout 2006. In fact, by December 2006, a majority of Americans had concluded that Iraq was in a state of civil war and that Iraq was destined to become another Vietnam.31 This negative assessment of trends in Iraq almost certainly contributed to weakening public support for continued intervention.

President Bush too was acutely aware of the impact that these reports and images were having on the American public. In a press conference in October 2006, discussing the increasing levels of terrorist attacks and sectarian violence in Iraq, he said,

I fully understand the American people are seeing unspeakable violence on their TV screens. These are tough times in Iraq. The

enemy is doing everything within its power to destroy the government and to drive us out of the Middle East.\textsuperscript{32}

President Bush’s frequent visits to wounded soldiers in military hospitals and his meetings with surviving family members of those killed in action were also searing personal reminders of the violence that was occurring on the streets of Baghdad. The effect of these emotionally laden visits, however, was to reinforce the President’s determination to have American forces remain in Iraq until his strategic objectives for the intervention were achieved—again, a feature of his decision making that is wholly consistent with his reliance on a World War II representative heuristic. After meeting with wounded soldiers at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio in 2006, the president offered these reflections:

\textit{As you know, war is terrible. There’s [sic] horrible consequences to war—that’s what you see in this building…I, as the Commander-in-Chief, I am resolved to make sure that those who have died in combats’ sacrifice are not in vain. And I am resolved to make sure that these kids who are recovering here, that have suffered terrible injury, that their injuries are not in vain by completing the mission and laying that foundation for peace for generations to come.}\textsuperscript{33}

This was a theme repeated in President Bush’s public announcement of the surge strategy as he acknowledged the sacrifices made by service members and validated those sacrifices by his own determination to persevere in Iraq until peace and stability had been achieved. “We mourn the loss of every fallen American—and we owe it to them to build a future worthy of their sacrifice.”\textsuperscript{34}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\end{flushleft}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{34} Bush, “President’s Address to the Nation.”
\end{flushleft}
The role of availability: The high levels of availability of the information concerning the violence taking place in Iraq and the casualties inflicted on American servicemen and women reinforced President Bush’s determination to achieve “victory” and in this sense should favor risk-acceptant decisions viewed as necessary to that success.

Anchoring

The anchoring heuristic deals with the over weighting of initial estimates. In this particular case, the single most critical anchoring assessment in the decision-making process was President Bush’s persistent belief that an American drawdown would equate to strategic failure and would lead to unacceptable consequences. This assessment was further reinforced by the World War II representative heuristic that envisioned “victory” as the only acceptable end-state of the U.S. military intervention into Iraq.

The initial range of options developed by the State Department for National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley’s consideration included (A) “Full Counterinsurgency”; (B) “Selective Counterinsurgency”; and (C) “Keep-the-Lid-On.” Option A was obviously the most aggressive of those offered for consideration and was premised on the deployment of several additional U.S. combat brigades to Baghdad area. This option most closely resembled the surge strategy that the president ultimately adopted. The second option was less ambitious and was primarily aimed at a temporary improvement in the security situation that would allow for a significant withdrawal of tens of thousands of American troops within six months. The third option essentially reflected the status quo policies that were quite obviously failing

35. For a more complete discussion of these options see Woodward, 54-56.
to reduce the growing sectarian violence and threatening civil war in Iraq and consequently represented an option acceding to ‘failure’. This formulation of options then offered only one option (a surge) that was minimally acceptable according to the president’s own decision-making heuristics.

President Bush was adamant from the beginning, however, that any option aimed at facilitating a U.S. withdrawal was not acceptable thus effectively ruling out Option B. A withdrawal would be an admission of defeat in a country that he had labeled the “central front in the war on terror.” President Bush’s public commentary made this position crystal clear. In a press conference on August 21, 2006, the president pointedly dismissed the option of withdrawal:

> You know, it’s an interesting debate we’re having in America about how we ought to handle Iraq. There’s a lot of people—good, decent people, saying, withdraw now. They’re absolutely wrong. It would be a huge mistake for this country.\(^{36}\)

This rejection of withdrawal was a consistent line of argumentation in President Bush’s public rhetoric—American withdrawal from Iraq would represent a strategic and perhaps decisive defeat in the Global War on Terrorism. At a public event later in August, President Bush again dismissed any serious consideration of withdrawal:

> Iraq is the central front in this war on terror. If we leave the streets of Baghdad before the job is done, we will have to fact the terrorists in our own cities….

> If we leave before Iraq can defend itself and govern itself and sustain itself, this will be a key defeat for the United States of America in this ideological struggle of the 21st century…

> If we leave before the job is done, we’ll help create a terrorist state in the heart of the Middle East that will have control of huge oil

reserves. If we leave before the job is done, this country will have no credibility.\textsuperscript{37}

Remarkably, this assumption equating an American withdrawal with strategic defeat was never seriously questioned at the cabinet level, despite the fact that a reduction of U.S. troops was the option preferred by both senior American military commanders reporting to President Bush. Throughout 2006, General Casey in Baghdad and General Abizaid at U.S. Central Command both forcefully advocated (and in fact were in the process of implementing) a strategy designed to build up the capacity of the Iraqi security forces to facilitate the withdrawal of U.S. forces. These preferences for a reduced American presence in Iraq were clearly advanced by these senior officers both publicly and directly to President Bush in private. At a press conference in Baghdad in late October 2006, when asked if U.S. force levels were adequate, General Casey reiterated his assessment that “we need to continue to reduce our forces as the Iraqis continue to improve, because we need to get out of their way.”\textsuperscript{38}

In a White House meeting with the members of the Iraq Study Group in late 2006, General Casey again offered his support for a drawdown, saying “We have to reduce our footprint to a level that is acceptable to the Iraqis. We are two thirds of the way through a three-step process to transfer security responsibility by the end of 2007.” He went on to specifically argue against the surge option, noting that “The more coalition forces we put in, the longer it will take the Iraqis to achieve the objectives that they need to and to take responsibility… [and] more troops…will delay the long-term [political] resolution that needs to happen.”\textsuperscript{39} At a private meeting of senior

\textsuperscript{37} As quoted in Woodward, 108.
\textsuperscript{38} As quoted in Ibid., 183.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 215.
Bush administration officials on December 12, 2006, in anticipating the military’s objections to a surge, the President preempted General Abizaid’s commentary saying “Yeah, I know, you’re going to tell me you’re against the surge.” In response, General Abizaid reiterated the consolidated assessment of the uniformed military that the United States “needed to get out of Iraq in order to win.”

On November 10th, the President assembled his key foreign policy advisors and directed that a formal review of Iraq strategy be completed within two weeks. By this point, however, the president had already become convinced that a surge would be necessary. His public rhetoric, informed by a World War II heuristic insisting on “victory” had in fact ruled out a substantial American withdrawal as a serious policy option. The status quo in Iraq, as represented in existing policies placing increased reliance on Iraqi security forces, was simply untenable. The failure of the existing strategy was the reason for the policy review in the first place, and this ruled out the status quo as a serious option. Indeed, only three days after formally initiating the strategy review, President Bush himself, in a meeting with the Iraqi Study Group, suggested the idea of a surge to act as a “short-term bridging mechanism” that would allow the Iraqis to assume greater responsibility for security. Given the limitations imposed by the president’s own decision-making heuristics, the strategy review he directed in November would not seriously examine the full range of alternative options originally framed by the State Department for NSA Hadley’s consideration. Instead, the process would be used to largely confirm a decision that President Bush had largely already made.

40. Ibid., 284.
41. Ibid., 213.
The role of anchoring: The anchoring heuristic ruling out serious consideration of a substantial withdrawal of American troops and the demonstrated failure of existing strategy left President Bush effectively with no acceptable alternatives to a “surge” in American forces.

Perceptions of Risk

Bush and his senior advisors were aware of the high levels of risks associated with the decision to opt for a surge of American forces into Iraq. This assessment was clearly displayed in an Oval Office meeting between President Bush and General Petraeus on January 26, 2007, as both employed high-stakes gambling metaphors to describe the risks associated with the recently announced surge strategy. In this exchange, the president began by acknowledging the high degree of risk in referring to the surge strategy as a “doubling down” on America’s previous political, economic, and military investments in Iraq. General Petraeus’ response was even more telling, however. “Mr President, this is not double down. This is all in.” While this exchange gives a sense of their overall perception of the high risks involved, it will be useful to deconstruct the various aspects of risk involved with this particular decision.

Military Risks

Military risks are assessed relative to two primary factors: anticipated casualties; and the relative balance of capabilities between the intervening and defending military forces.

42. Ibid., 327. Italics mine.
The surge did not represent a significant alteration in the aggregate balance of military capabilities between the American/coalition forces and the attacking insurgents. The addition of some 20,000 American troops represented less than a 15% increase in overall U.S. force levels inside Iraq. As one analyst observed at the time, “Even with the troop increase, the resulting total of 153,000 U.S. forces in Iraq will amount to less than the roughly 165,000 deployed in December 2005, the high-water mark for U.S. troop strength in Iraq.”43 Furthermore, these reinforcements represented only two-thirds of the force structure that the intellectual architects of the surge strategy, General (R) Keane and Frederick Kagan, considered the minimal essential for executing “a responsible plan for getting the violence in and around Baghdad under control.”44 The surge did not significantly alter the overall balance of forces mix in Iraq and consequently did not materially affect the level of military risk in accordance with this particular criterion.

However, there was nearly universal consensus that a surge of American troops would result in a substantially higher level of casualties as U.S. troops sought to actively engage hostile forces in the difficult urban environment of Baghdad. Tom Ricks, the author of two books on the American military intervention into Iraq, wrote that the surge would result in the “prospect of a more intense battle in the Iraqi capital [which] could put U.S. military commanders in exactly the sort of tough urban fight

that war planners strove to avoid during the spring 2003 invasion.” He goes on to quote a senior Army official saying quite explicitly that “there will be more violence than usual because of the surge.” Several independent military analysts shared this assessment that a surge would necessarily entail increased casualties as American forces left the relative security of large bases to conduct joint operations with a less-than-capable Iraqi security force. STRATFOR, a private analytical think tank, characterized the surge strategy as a “high-risk military operation [that] would come at substantial cost.”

The president himself acknowledged these substantial military risks in his address announcing the surge strategy on January 10, 2007.

The terrorists and insurgents in Iraq are without conscience and they will make the year ahead bloody and violent. Even if our strategy works exactly as planned, deadly acts of violence will continue—and we must expect more Iraqi and American casualties.

**Summary of military risks:** The lack of change in strategic balance of forces coupled with increased prospects for additional casualties places the overall level of military risks associated with the surge strategy in the moderate to high range.

---

46. Ibid.
49. Bush, “President’s Address to the Nation.”
Political Risks

Political risk has to do with the potential for shifts in power distribution within a particular group or body. The surge strategy clearly assumed high levels of political risk both internationally and domestically.

Internationally, public opinion continued to be strongly opposed to the American military intervention in Iraq. This public pressure compelled many coalition partners to withdraw their military contingents and distance themselves from American policies in Iraq. A Pew Research Center survey in June of 2006 charted the decline in America’s image and the rising concerns about American policies in Iraq.\(^\text{50}\) The survey details dramatic declines in favorable opinions of the United States among important allies during President Bush’s tenure, including in Great Britain (from 83% in 2002 to 56% in 2006), France (62%–39%), Germany (78%–37%), Spain (50%–23%), and Turkey (52%–12%). Moreover, results showed remarkably low confidence in President Bush to make the right decisions in foreign policy—with Bush ranking substantially lower than other world leaders, including UK Prime Minister Blair, French President Chirac, German Chancellor Merkel, and Russian Prime Minister Putin.

More explicitly, the 2006 Pew report observed that “majorities in 10 of 14 foreign countries surveyed say that the war in Iraq has made the world a more dangerous place, [while] in Great Britain, America’s most important ally in Iraq, 60% say the war has made the world more dangerous.” A subsequent report in 2007 demonstrated that clear majorities in 43 of 47 countries (including the United States) surveyed

---

\(^\text{50. America’s Image Slips, but Allies Share U.S. Concerns over Iran, Hamas, (Pew Research Center, 13 June 2006).}\)
thought that “the U.S. should remove its troops from Iraq as soon as possible.” A
decision to escalate this highly unpopular U.S. military intervention in Iraq could only
further isolate America in the world of global politics.

Domestically, the situation was not much better, as the surge was opposed by a vast
majority of Democrats (82%) and nearly one-third of Republicans (33%) according
to a poll conducted in January 2007. Moreover, senior party leaders from both sides
of the Congressional isle were vocal in their opposition to a surge. Days before the
president announced the surge in a nationally televised address, House Speaker Pelosi
and Senate Majority Leader Reid sent a letter to President Bush saying “Surging
forces is a strategy that you have already tried and that has already failed. Like many
current and former military leaders, we believe that trying again would be a serious
mistake.” Democratic Senator Edward Kennedy went so far as to formally introduce
legislation that would specifically require Congressional approval to deploy additional
troops to Iraq. Within weeks of President Bush’s address announcing the surge, the
House and Senate offered a concurrent resolution in February stating that “Congress
disapproves of the decision of President George W. Bush announced on January 10,
2007, to deploy more than 20,000 additional United States combat troops to Iraq.”
Throughout the first half of 2007 numerous proposals for binding and non-binding
legislation opposed to the surge were mounted by Congressional Democrats including

53. Eric Pfeiffer, “Pelosi Threatens to Reject Funds for Troop Surge,” The Washington Times, 8
54. Gail Russell Chaddock, “How Congress May Block a Troop ‘Surge’,” Christian Science Monitor,
proposals by Senators Biden, Dodd, Obama, and Clinton, as well as Representatives Kucinich, Murtha, and Jackson. However, Republicans managed to successfully oppose these efforts and none of these proposals reached the Oval Office for the president’s signature and certainly would have been vetoed in any event.

Interesting enough, opposition to the surge within the Republican Party was also significant, if not ultimately persuasive. In the days preceding the president’s announcement, conservative Washington columnist Robert Novak estimated that 37 of 49 Republican senators privately opposed the surge strategy.\textsuperscript{56} Republican Senator Chuck Hagel, a prospective presidential contender himself, called the President Bush’s surge “the most dangerous foreign policy blunder in this country since Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{57} Even Republican supporters of the surge, such as Senator Lindsey Graham, admitted that such a decision was highly unpopular with voters.\textsuperscript{58} These hostile political attitudes reflected the general sentiment of the country, as a Washington Post-ABC News poll taken immediately after the president’s address found that 61 percent opposed the surge even as a majority of 57 percent believed that the United States was “losing the war in Iraq.”\textsuperscript{59}

\textbf{Summary of political risks:} The political risks associated with the surge strategy were high as public opposition to an expansion of the American intervention in Iraq was strong both internationally and domestically. These pressures were ameliorated

\textsuperscript{58} Pfeiffer.
\textsuperscript{59} Abramowitz and Wright.
somewhat for President Bush personally by the fact that he was not eligible for a third successive term. Nonetheless, President Bush had to be somewhat concerned about the political costs that would be paid by Republicans competing in Congressional and other elections. Moreover, there remained the real risks that his efforts would continue to be opposed by a Congress willing to prohibit funds supporting the surge.

**Policy Risks**

Policy risks are assessed in terms of the relative departure of decisions from core values or existing policies. At the most basic level of policy, the surge strategy was an admission that current approaches had failed, and in this sense, represented a significant departure from existing policy. However, the surge strategy was also largely consistent with the overall strategic framework of the Global War on Terrorism and particularly in line with the president’s post 9/11 emphasis on the need to remain on the offensive. In this sense, a withdrawal from Iraq would have arguably represented the “riskier” policy option. On balance then, the policy risks associated with the surge strategy are evaluated as moderate.

The focus on an increased reliance on Iraqi forces had been at the heart of the American strategy in Iraq in 2005. As the president himself noted in a nationally televised address in June 2005, “Our military is helping to train the Iraqi security forces so that they can defend their people and fight the enemy on their own. Our strategy can be summed up this way: As the Iraqis stand up, we will stand down.”

Nonetheless, as sectarian violence erupted throughout Iraq in 2006, key members of

---

the administration, including the president himself, became convinced that a change in strategy was necessary. This inspired a series of independent strategic appraisals at the State Department, the Pentagon, and within the National Security Council, leading eventually to the adoption of the surge strategy. In his televised address to the nation on January 10, 2007, President Bush acknowledged the failure of the previous strategy.

The situation in Iraq is unacceptable… Where mistakes have been made, the responsibility rests with me…It is clear that we need to change our strategy in Iraq…Our past efforts to secure Baghdad have failed…

The surge strategy was designed to correct these “mistakes” and thus constituted a clear departure from the existing policy framework that had guided previous American efforts in Iraq, from the invasion in March 2003 until this point in January 2007.

Nonetheless, a surge of American troops into Baghdad remained remarkably consistent with the administration’s larger strategic framework of the Global War on Terrorism. Two central tenets of this approach to terrorism in the post-9/11 period were an emphasis on the need for America to remain on the offensive and to actively promote American values of democracy and freedom. In introducing the updated National Security Strategy in 2006, President Bush underscored “These inseparable priorities—fighting and winning the war on terror and promoting freedom as the alternative to tyranny and despair.” He goes on to outline the argument for an offensively oriented policy.

We choose to deal with challenges now rather than leaving them for future generations. We fight our enemies abroad instead of waiting for

them to arrive in our country. We seek to shape the world, not merely be shaped by it; to influence events for the better instead of being at their mercy.  

The surge was clearly an option consistent with this overarching offensive strategic framework. President Bush felt that prior American efforts in Iraq had “failed for two principal reasons…not enough Iraqi and American troops…and…too many restrictions on the troops we did have.” Given this analysis of “failure,” the prescription of more troops, more aggressively employed was the obvious corrective measure. Indeed, the president, in announcing the surge, said that more soldiers would enable the United States to regain the offensive. In deploying 4,000 troops to Anbar Province, President Bush pledged they would be used to “keep the pressure on the terrorists” and deny them the ability to re-establish a safe haven in Iraq from which future attacks could be launched. The troops would now “have a green light” to enter neighborhoods, pursue terrorists, actively “disrupt the attacks on our forces…interrupt the flow of support from Iran and Syria…and…seek out and destroy the networks providing advanced weaponry and training to our enemies in Iraq.”

President Bush also viewed the surge as a decision consistent with basic American values of promoting democracy and freedom. In addressing the nation announcing the surge, President Bush made this connection explicitly.

The challenge playing out across the broader Middle East is more than a military conflict. It is the decisive ideological struggle of our time. On one side are those who believe in freedom and moderation. On the other side are extremists who kill the innocent, and have declared their

62. Ibid.
63. Bush, “President’s Address to the Nation.”
64. Ibid.
65. Ibid.
intention to destroy our way of life. In the long run, the most realistic way to protect the American people is to provide a hopeful alternative to the hateful ideology of the enemy, by advancing liberty across a troubled region. It is in the interests of the United States to stand with the brave men and women who are risking their lives to claim their freedom, and to help them as they work to raise up just and hopeful societies across the Middle East…

The changes I have outlined tonight are aimed a ensuring the survival of a young democracy that is fighting for its life in a part of the world of enormous importance to American security.66

**Summary of policy risks:** The surge strategy was a clear departure from the existing strategy of speeding the transition of authority and responsibility to the Iraqi government. Nonetheless, it was an approach largely consistent with other tenets of President Bush’s national security strategy emphasizing the need to go on the offensive and to promote the spread of democracy in the Middle East. For these reasons, the surge strategy assumed moderate levels of policy risk. Moreover, given his ineligibility for re-election to a third term of office, President Bush may well have been willing to adopt a position that was politically unpopular in the hopes of improving the odds of a policy success in Iraq.

**Economic Risks**

Economic risks primarily derive from the anticipated financial expenses of the prospective military intervention. In this case, although the direct incremental costs associated with a surge of 20,000 American troops were moderate when considered in the context of the overall defense budget. However, when considering the long-term implications of the added costs associated with the permanent increase of 65,000

---

66. Ibid.
Army soldiers and 27,000 Marines to the U.S. ground force structure, the financial costs associated with sustaining the surge rose substantially.

The incremental direct costs of the deployment of these additional forces to Iraq through October 2007 were estimated at approximately $5.6 billion. These were the costs over and above the spiraling costs of the American occupation, which Congressional analysis estimated at nearly $2 billion per week or some $300 million per day in 2006. In this larger context of the overall costs of maintaining the American intervention in Iraq, the surge represented a small incremental addition to the Defense Department’s ledger.

The longer-term financial implications of the permanent and sizeable authorized increase in the American ground forces were more substantial, however. According to some estimates, funding the Army increase alone would cost nearly $70 billion for the fiscal years 2009-2013. Yet again, placed within the context of a U.S. annual defense budget in the range of $530 billion, these figures were not particularly alarming.

Nonetheless, the increased economic costs of a surge in American troops were the subject of extensive public commentary and political criticism. Long-time Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee Ike Skelton (D-Mo) strongly criticized the increased costs associated with the surge and thereby raised the political risks for President Bush as well. “The costs of this troop increase in terms of money, troop

and family morale, and degradation of training and equipment is [sic] unacceptable when the potential gains to American national security are so uncertain.”

Other Democratic Party leaders, including House Speaker Pelosi and Chairman of the House Appropriations Defense Subcommittee Representative Murtha, were even more adamant in their opposition, actually publicly threatening to withhold Congressional funding for the surge.\textsuperscript{71}

Despite this very public discussion of the economic ramifications of the surge, however, the internal deliberations of the administration at the White House appeared to deal with these issues only in the broadest terms possible—and primarily within the framework of ‘sunk costs’. In mid-November 2006, the State Department had prepared a position paper advocating a new strategy that would place increased responsibility on the shoulders of the Iraqi government itself. In doing so, this strategy advocated that the United States threaten to withdraw if the Iraqis proved incapable or unwilling to make the tough political compromises necessary to end the sectarian violence.

Senior NSC staffers who were supportive of a surge strategy, readily dismissed the State Department’s proposals as admitting to “a graceful defeat” and argued that “after all the treasure committed and lives lost over three and half years…it was simply unacceptable not to try everything possible to achieve success.”\textsuperscript{72}

President Bush’s speech announcing the surge lacked a single reference to the issue of funding the surge. In fact, the most direct reference to expenditures associated with

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{72} Woodward, 233.
\end{flushleft}
the surge was a statement that the Iraqi government—not the U.S. Treasury—would spend $10 billion on reconstruction and infrastructure development projects. In fact, the White House appeared satisfied in addressing only the most immediate costs associated with the surge by ensuring adequate funding in the FY 2007 Defense budget. When Congress submitted formal legislation in late April 2007 requiring that American troops to begin withdrawing from Iraq when funding for the surge expired at the end of the fiscal year, President Bush simply vetoed it and effectively presenting the Congress (and the public) with a *fait accompli*.

**Summary of economic risks:** The economic risks derived from the incremental cost increases associated with the surge were considered as low to moderate as administration officials focused nearly exclusively on funding only the near-term expenditures through the current fiscal year.

**Conclusion:**

The independent variables examined in this study all tended to push decision making toward a risk-acceptant posture. President Bush’s January 2007 conversation with his new military commander in Iraq, General Petraeus, employing the high-stakes gambling metaphors of “double down” and “all in” to summarize the surge strategy reflect the shared sense that they were embarking on a course of action laden with tremendous risks.

America’s continued dominance of the international power structure in 2006, as measured by traditional indicators of military and economic power, certainly enabled President Bush to take forceful action in Iraq. The perception that continued violence

in Iraq would bolster Islamic terrorists and present an intolerable threat to American interests further contributed to a willingness to take bold aggressive action. Moreover, despite the predominance of American global power, a deteriorating position both internationally and domestically placed President Bush in domain of loss that theoretically fostered a risk-acceptant approach to decision making.

Finally, each of the primary cognitive heuristics most influential in the administration’s decision making created a near-perfect storm that virtually ruled out withdrawal as a feasible option and left open only the question of how large a surge in American forces would be employed to reverse Iraq’s slide toward civil war. The World War II representative heuristic inclined President Bush to take those risks seen as necessary to secure “victory” in the Global War on Terrorism. Meanwhile, the high levels of availability served to reinforce President Bush’s belief that the visible and painful sacrifices of tens of thousands of American servicemen and women and their families could only be validated by “success” in Iraq. Finally, President Bush (and his senior advisors) clung doggedly to an initial assessment that an American withdrawal from Iraq would necessarily equate to a strategic defeat. This assumption was not critically examined and ensured that an alternative option centered on a reduced American presence and increased reliance on the Iraqi government and security forces was never seriously considered.

The levels of risk associated with adopting a surge strategy were substantial across all primary categories of risk considered in this study. Perhaps the most significant area of risk was on the political front. The prospect of a deeper American intervention into Iraq met with strong political opposition both internationally and domestically.
President Bush’s decision to initiate the surge placed him in an increasingly vulnerable position that could be exploited by his political opponents both at home and abroad. The military risks associated were also significant, as President Bush and supporters of the surge strategy admitted that prospects for additional casualties would be higher as American troops departed the relative safety of their isolated military bases to aggressively seek out insurgents in the complex and crowded urban environment of Baghdad’s streets. Meanwhile the internal administration deliberations over economic costs appear to have been cursory at best and the White House appeared to be comfortable with addressing only the near-term costs of the surge and ensuring these were accounted for in the current fiscal year defense budget. Lastly, because the surge represented an admission of failure of existing policies, this change in direction subsumed some degree of policy risk. However, this policy risk was mitigated by casting the surge strategy as an option that was broadly consistent with the major tenets of the strategic framework of the Global War on Terror: the twin pillars of offensive action and democracy promotion.
Table 8.1 Anticipated Influence of Variables on Risk Assessment (President George W. Bush and the Surge in Iraq)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>U.S Cases</th>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Dependent Variables - Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>International Structure</td>
<td>Nature of the Threat</td>
<td>Prospect Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domain (Int'l/Dom)</td>
<td>Representativeness</td>
<td>Availability</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Iraq</th>
<th>Unipolar</th>
<th>Balance-of-threat</th>
<th>Loss/Loss</th>
<th>World War II Victory</th>
<th>Strong</th>
<th>Withdrawal as defeat</th>
<th>High/High</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
<th>Moderate to High</th>
<th>Low to moderate</th>
<th>Moderate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GW Bush &amp; the Surge (2007)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Anticipated Influence on Risk Propensities)

- Risk-acceptant: Prediction supported
- Risk-acceptant particularly regarding military risks necessary to achieve goal
- Risk-acceptant domestically
- Risk-acceptant globally

- Prediction falsified
- Indeterminant outcome
CHAPTER 9: LESSONS FROM AMERICA’S MILITARY INTERVENTIONS IN IRAQ AND AFGHANISTAN

What do these case studies tell us about the risks associated with military interventions? How well did each of the competing theoretical explanations perform in anticipating the influence of international structure, the nature of the threat as expressed in balance-of-power vs. balance-of-threat considerations, the decision-making domain, and cognitive heuristics on the risk propensities and perceptions of American leaders? How might these lessons be applied in appreciating how President Barack Obama might view the risks associated with the use of American military power in present-day circumstances? This concluding chapter will examine each of these questions.

What makes American military interventions risky?

Foreign military interventions vary greatly in terms of the types and levels of risks assumed. This study deconstructs the concept of risk associated with military interventions into component categories of political, policy, military, and economic risks. This approach allows for a more substantive and refined discussion of the various types of risks that might typically be evaluated and assessed by American leaders in weighing the option of employing military force. The cases included in this study ranged from those involving high to moderate to low levels of risk in each of these categories. This approach enables both scholars and foreign policy practitioners to move beyond the basic question of whether or not a military intervention is “risky” to ask the more precise question of what types of risks are associated with a particular military intervention.
For scholars, such a delineation of military interventions into distinct categories of risk will hopefully permit a more sophisticated selection of case studies. For example, a scholar primarily interested in exploring the intersection of international and domestic politics, might focus attention on Desert Storm as a case in which the variables of international and domestic political risks worked in opposition. The researcher could then examine the interaction of these two competing variables and perhaps identify the circumstances under which one is likely to prevail over the other. Alternatively, a military historian might pursue a study contrasting military interventions involving high levels of military risk such as Desert Storm and Operation Iraqi Freedom directly with those cases assuming lower levels of military risk such as Operation Enduring Freedom. The historian might then probe for explanatory factors that contribute (wisely or not) to a leader’s preference for interventions involving these varying degrees of military risk. Additionally, in each of these cases, the economic costs of military intervention were given only cursory examination by policymakers. An economist might probe more deeply into these cases to suggest better models for incorporating economic and financial aspects of military interventions into the decision-making and risk assessment process.

For the foreign policy practitioner, this typology of risks might help to refine and clarify analysis of the full range of risks that should be considered in the decision-making process. Additionally, the structure of these case studies allows for the incorporation of both domestic and international variables into a more complete calculation of the risks of military interventions.
Finally, it is hoped that by examining the role of cognitive heuristics in decision making, policymakers will be more attuned to the potential biases that they themselves are introducing into the assessment of risks as they weigh the option of foreign intervention. These cases consistently chart the important influence of the cognitive heuristics of representativeness, availability, and anchoring in the decision-making process and in subsequent calculations of risk. Policymakers should be aware that these heuristics are likely to define the contours of policy options considered and will almost certainly impact the types of risks they are inclined to tolerate. This is not to say that the use of cognitive heuristics should be avoided, quite the contrary. The vast amounts of information available from the extensive government bureaucracies, the U.S. intelligence community, policy think tanks, interest groups, and the near-omnipresent media threaten to overwhelm senior leaders and decision makers. This surfeit of input compels leaders to employ cognitive heuristics to process and organize the sheer volume of data and analyses. Therefore, self-aware policymakers must be capable of identifying and scrutinizing those cognitive heuristics that will shape their risk assessment and decision-making process.

How well do the independent and intervening variables anticipate the risk propensities of American leaders when considering military intervention?

To assist in making international relations theory more useful to policymakers, Joseph Lepgold suggested that scholars focus their attention on those variables that officials can “control or influence in the short to medium term.”¹ This study has sought to leverage Lepgold’s advice. The majority of the independent and intervening variables included in this study can be manipulated by policymakers. In particular, the cases

examined here demonstrate that an emphasis on balance-of-threat considerations has a strong tendency to inspire risk-acceptant attitudes and behaviors. Policymakers can take advantage of this insight to carefully modulate their commentary as to the offensive capabilities and aggressive intent of another state or non-state actor as these considerations will have the effect (intentionally or not) of creating an atmosphere conducive to risk-acceptant policies and actions.

The variables of international structure, nature of the threat, and decision-making domain anticipate general risk propensities in the behavior of states and individuals. A bipolar structure in international politics is generally thought to induce a degree of caution in decision making given the potential for any military intervention by one major global power to be opposed by the other. In contrast, a unipolar world is argued to encourage a more risk-acceptant posture on the part of the globe’s preeminent power given the absence of a peer competitor capable of mounting effective opposition. Meanwhile, many neorealist scholars postulate that a multipolar structure similar to that preceding World War I is inherently unstable, prone to miscalculation, and thus more readily lends itself to risk-acceptant behavior on the part of states seeking to maintain or gain an advantage in an intensely competitive global security environment.

The nature of threat is operationalized in this study as comprising either balance-of-power considerations centered on broad assessments of aggregate power or balance-of-threat considerations consisting of Stephen Walt’s factors of proximity, offensive capability, and aggressive intent. Balance-of-power considerations are thought to generally incline decision makers toward risk-averse behavior as they must consider
the potential for a military intervention to result in meaningful shifts in global or regional distributions of military and economic power. Conversely, the aggressive intent and offensive capabilities of potential enemies characteristic in balance-of-threat considerations should prompt leaders to more willingly accept the risks associated with a military intervention aimed at reducing or eliminating this threat.

Meanwhile, the predictions of prospect theory are grounded in psychological studies observing that individuals consistently fear losses more than they value gains. Policymakers operating in a domain of “gain” are expected to exhibit risk-averse behavior while those perceiving themselves to be operating within a domain of “loss” are more inclined to adopt risk-acceptant policy options.

INTERNATIONAL STRUCTURE

The cases examined in this study offer meaningful support for the neorealist hypothesis that a bipolar structure induces a degree of caution in decision makers contemplating foreign military interventions.\(^2\) During a period of strong bipolarity President Carter’s highest foreign policy objective was to prevent the outbreak of superpower conflict. When confronted with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, these considerations weighed heavily in the consideration of options available to him. President Carter quickly rejected the option of American military intervention into Afghanistan precisely because of his sensitivity to the prospect that such an act could lead to direct superpower confrontation. Instead, President Carter opted for a

series of diplomatic and economic measures involving much lower levels of political, military, economic, and policy risks.

Further support for this neorealist theoretical assertion was found in the case of President George H.W. Bush as he considered his options in responding to Iraq’s aggression in Kuwait in August 1990. At this time, the international power structure was in the early stages of transitioning from one of strong bipolarity to unipolarity. The pull of bipolar political calculations was particularly evident at the beginning of this crisis. As anticipated by this hypothesis, President Bush displayed clear sensitivity to the risks entailed with the potential for Soviet opposition to an American military intervention. Consequently, he and his senior advisors deliberately set out to secure both Soviet political and limited military support in confronting Iraq’s aggression in order to reduce these risks. These efforts yielded substantial success. The Soviet Union contributed military assets to the international naval blockade and signed on to multiple United Nations Security Council resolutions backing strong action against Iraq including the use of military force. This successful policy of securing Soviet support for American actions practically eliminated the prospect of superpower confrontation and thereby significantly reduced (although certainly did not eliminate) the political, economic, and military risks associated with the deployment of American troops to the region during Desert Shield (the force build-up) and Desert Storm (the military campaign).

Furthermore, an interesting counterfactual case could be constructed in this case positing very different calculations of risks by an American president had the Soviets actively opposed the American military intervention politically and/or militarily.
Soviet political opposition could have weakened the international coalition, made it more difficult for the United States to recruit coalition partners, and dramatically reduced the international financial contributions that ultimately paid for some 80% of Desert Storm. These Soviet actions would have had the effect of substantially raising both the political and economic risks associated with the American military intervention. Furthermore, as the Iraqi military was largely Soviet-supplied and equipped, Soviet financial and technical support could have significantly strengthened Iraqi military capabilities and thereby elevated the military risks to American forces as well. In a time of bipolar distribution of power, these balance-of-power considerations did effectively induce a degree of caution in American decision making and heavily influenced the calculation of risks that would be associated with Desert Storm.

At the same time, the structure of international politics alone cannot be said to be wholly determinative. In the immediate wake of the Desert Storm victory, the shape of the international system was becoming more clearly unipolar, and this should have favored a much more risk-acceptant attitude by President George H.W. Bush. American’s global military and political superiority had been displayed for all to see as President Bush successfully led a broad international coalition to defeat Iraq forces and deployed hundreds of thousands of American troops across thousands of miles to deliver a crushing blow to the world’s fourth largest army in the sands of Kuwait and Iraq. Yet, flush from this tremendous political and military victory, President George H.W. Bush adopted a risk-averse policy of terminating military operations and expressly rejecting the option of ordering U.S. and coalition military forces to occupy Baghdad.
Nonetheless, as the unipolar structure of global power became solidified throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century, U.S. presidents have increasingly resorted to the use of military force including in Afghanistan and Iraq. This has caused some scholars to decry the militarization of American foreign policy. These outcomes are strongly supportive of neorealist expectations that as the “caution that bipolarity imposes on superpower conduct” has dissipated, the global structure of unipolarity has effectively created an environment permissive of risk-acceptant foreign policy decision making on the part of American presidents.

**Nature of Threat**

Balance-of-power considerations should be particularly keen during periods of bipolarity, compelling nations and their leaders to carefully weigh the potential for military interventions to upset existing global and regional distributions of aggregate power. Conversely, balance-of-threat considerations are more likely to prevail during periods of unipolarity, when prospects for effective opposition are minimal. In an international structure dominated by a single global power, considerations such as the offensive capabilities and aggressive intent of potential enemies should prompt the reigning state power to adopt a more risk-acceptant posture including a willingness to assume those risks associated with military interventions that are designed to reduce or eliminate these perceived threats.

The cases examined in this study offer meaningful support for these hypotheses. Both case studies examined during a period of bipolar competition (Soviet intervention

---

4. Walt.
into Afghanistan in 1979 and Desert Storm in 1991) exhibited the pull of balance-of-power considerations and induced a degree of caution on the part of Presidents Carter and George H.W. Bush. Meanwhile, each of the case studies involving crises during a period of unipolarity emphasized balance-of-threat considerations and in each case the president opted to accept the risks associated with a foreign military intervention. Finally, in both cases of non-intervention (President Carter in 1979 and President George H.W. Bush in 1991), balance-of-power considerations inclined presidents to eschew the risks associated with military intervention.

As mentioned, the balance-of-threat hypothesis appears to be strongly supported by the weight of these empirical cases. Even here, however, a degree of caution is warranted. Distinguishing a direct causal relationship between balance-of-threat rhetoric and heightened perceptions of the risk associated with that threat can be problematic. It may be that the causal arrow runs in the opposite direction: namely, that the balance-of-threat rhetoric is itself an effect of these increased threat perceptions rather than the cause. A cynical interpretation of these events then might argue that balance-of-threat rhetoric was intentionally manipulated by senior policymakers as a tool to generate higher levels of public concern about the threat that would translate to domestic political support for military action. This possibility cannot wholly be dismissed. Nonetheless, through close examination of the historical evidence and competing accounts of the decision-making process I have attempted to identify only those instances in which balance-of-threat considerations were genuine considerations in the internal deliberations of the president and his closest advisors.
The predictions derived from prospect theory are clear-cut, although the task of defining the operating domain remains a complicated and extremely subjective enterprise. This theory is grounded in individual psychological studies observing that people generally feel the pain of loss more intensely than they value gains. Thus a person operating in a domain of gain demonstrates a preference for more risk-averse decision making, while someone operating in a domain of loss is likely to display more risk-acceptant behavior.

The cases examined in this study offer relatively weak empirical support for the predicted outcomes of prospect theory. President Carter was operating in a domain of loss both internationally and domestically; yet he adopted an extremely cautious and reserved set of policy options assuming minimal levels of political, military, and economic risks in opposing the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In the aftermath of the tremendous military successes of OEF overseas in Afghanistan and Republican political victories at home in the mid-term elections in late 2002, President George W. Bush was arguably operating largely in a domain of gain. In this context, prospect theory would anticipate a preference for risk-averse foreign policy options. Yet in this domain of apparent gain, President Bush ordered a military intervention into Iraq in 2003 involving substantial political, military, economic, and policy risks. The most solid evidence in support of prospect theory is found in President George H.W. Bush’s decision to terminate Desert Storm after only 100 hours of ground combat. This case of non-intervention anticipated a risk-averse approach in the wake of the tremendous successes of Desert Storm. Meanwhile, the case of President George H.W. Bush
and Desert Storm also drew attention to the difficulties inherent in identifying a clear perception of operation domain. I made the case that President Bush most likely considered himself operating in an international domain of gain. Nonetheless, a (nearly) equally compelling case can be made that he could also quite plausibly have seen himself operating in a domain of loss (see footnote 34 in Chapter 5).

**Cognitive Heuristics**

The cognitive heuristics employed in decision making are used in these cases to probe the particular type of risks or set of risks that policymakers would be inclined to either accept or reject. These case studies demonstrate strong support for the thesis that these cognitive short-cuts explain much of the variation in the risk propensities of the policymakers engaged in these disparate foreign policy crises.

**Representative heuristic**

The representative heuristic has to do with the degree of similarity with which a particular event is seen with another class of events. This intervening variable played a critical role in shaping the decisions and risk assessments in each case examined in this study. President Carter saw the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan as representative of previous Soviet blitzkrieg-like military invasions in Eastern Europe. In each of these instances, the Soviets moved quickly to re-assert communist control; and in none of these cases did the West mount an effective military response. This heuristic thus likely disposed President Carter to accept the Soviet occupation of Kabul as a *fait accompli* that could simply not be easily reversed at an acceptable cost. Meanwhile, President George H.W. Bush drew strong historical parallels between Chamberlain’s appeasement at Munich and the situation he confronted in developing
a response to Saddam’s invasion of neighboring Kuwait. This conditioned President Bush to reject any suggestion of allowing Iraq’s invasion to stand and inclined him to accept the substantial military risks that would be involved with dislodging Saddam’s large and capable armed forces entrenched in Kuwait. Finally, President George W. Bush quickly likened the 9/11 terrorist attacks to the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor at the outset of World War II. He was convinced at that moment that his would be a wartime presidency and the global war on terrorism soon became the central organizing principle of his administration’s foreign policies. It was within this overarching framework that both Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom were conceived and executed. In each of these cases, a representative framework involving a war-time heuristic accompanied the decision to initiate active military combat.

Nonetheless, a war-time heuristic does not necessarily guarantee a decision to initiate, sustain, or deepen direct military intervention. President George H.W. Bush’s decision to terminate coalition military operations was also largely informed by a World War II heuristic. However, in this case, the war-time heuristic was applied to draw a strong parallel between the destruction of the German army in World War II with the apparent coalition military defeat of the Iraqi armed forces. In this instance, President Bush further equated the withdrawal of Iraqi forces from Kuwait with the full and unconditional surrender of Germany at the end of World War II. (In hindsight, this may well have been a flawed historical analogy, as Desert Storm had in fact left much of Iraq’s elite Republican Guard units fully capable of putting down local insurrections and preventing internal military coups.) In this particular case, a war-time heuristic was employed to argue for an end to a foreign military
intervention, reflecting a generally risk-averse posture and highlighting the limitations of using the representative heuristic alone to predict a particular outcome.

**Availability heuristic**

The availability heuristic is associated with the immediate retrievability, vividness, and salience of the information at hand. The impact of this heuristic in fostering a risk-acceptant attitude was most directly displayed in President George H.W. Bush’s memoirs. In recalling the role played by the vivid portrayals of the atrocities being committed by Iraqi forces in Kuwait on his own decision making, President Bush recalled:

> I became very emotional about the atrocities. They really gave urgency to my desire to do something active in response. I knew there was a danger I might overreact to what I heard and read. I’d tell myself to calm down, not to let these human rights abuses—bitter and ugly as they were, with medieval torture—cause me to do something hasty or make a foolish decision...It was good versus evil, right versus wrong. I am sure the change strengthened my determination not to let the invasion stand and encouraged me to contemplate the use of force to reverse it....I was frustrated and impatient to resolve the crisis, hoping we could find reason to go in and settle the matter.⁵

The case of President Carter’s decision to avoid a military response to the Soviet intervention into Afghanistan is the single example in this study involving comparatively low levels of availability. The remoteness of Afghanistan meant that few reporters were on the scene to provide independent and first-hand news reporting of events on the ground. Moreover, the Soviets moved quickly to dominate local media outlets and control the release of information. Finally, although U.S. intelligence reporting had been monitoring Soviet military preparations, senior

---

American decision makers were fully absorbed with the American hostage crisis in Tehran. This meant that senior officials were devoting precious little attention to the course of developments in Afghanistan further diluting the impact of the information available to them. These low levels of availability may well have facilitated a more risk-averse posture as theoretically anticipated.

However, it is also evident from these case studies that high levels of availability do not necessarily push in a direction supportive of military interventions or dismissive of the military risks of combat. The clearest case in this regard involves President George H.W. Bush’s decision to terminate military operations during Desert Storm. Media and intelligence reporting at the time graphically portrayed the devastating effects of coalition military air strikes on retreating Iraqi ground forces along the “Highway of Death.” The images of burning tanks and charred bodies were shocking and created tremendous pressure to terminate coalition operations. Armed with these reports, General Powell recommended the immediate declaration of a cease-fire and argued that continued coalition attacks would be contrary to American values. The president himself was emotionally moved by these vivid reports and ultimately supported General Powell’s recommendation to end combat operations rather than continuing on toward Baghdad in further pursuit of retreating Iraqi forces. In this case, high levels of availability then inspired risk-averse behavior.

Moreover, vivid and graphic information can push in unanticipated directions. President George W. Bush made it a point to regularly meet with servicemen and women who had been wounded in battle. He was visibly and emotionally impacted by these visits. One might first suspect that these visits would push President
Bush to adopt a more risk-averse posture by highlighting the personal costs being born by these individuals as a consequence of battle. Yet for President Bush, these visits only reinforced his desire for “victory” and contributed to his preference for a “surge” in American military deployments to Iraq. In this case then high levels of availability concerning those Americans wounded and killed in action inclined the president to accept the additional military risks of friendly casualties that would inevitably accompany a more aggressive military campaign waged in the complex and demanding urban environment of Baghdad.

**Anchoring heuristic**

The anchoring heuristic deals with the durability and overweighting of initial estimates or assessments. This heuristic played prominent roles in all but one of the historical cases considered in this paper. Throughout the crisis brought on by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, President Carter stubbornly adhered to his determination to pursue formal ratification of the SALT II treaty and rejected the option of direct military action at least in part out of concern that such action would destroy prospects for successful conclusion of the treaty.

President George H.W. Bush’s decision making was largely grounded in an early assessment that his actions in responding to Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait would establish the foundation for the “new world order” being formed in the wake of the collapse of the U.S.S.R. Consequently, his administration went to great pains to forge a broad military coalition that would both help shoulder the military, political, and economic risks associated with Operation Desert Storm and establish a positive foundation for future international cooperation. This same anchoring assessment shaped President
Bush’s decision to terminate coalition military operations, fearing that the foreign occupation of Baghdad would split the broad international coalition he had worked so hard to assemble.

Meanwhile, the decision making of President George W. Bush regarding Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 was heavily influenced by pre-election assessments that Saddam Hussein represented a grave threat to U.S. interests. Consistent with these early assessments, President Bush and many of his key advisors remained convinced that Saddam was involved in supporting the 9/11 attacks (despite formal intelligence assessments to the contrary), and this in turn, reinforced their determination to oust Saddam from power in Baghdad regardless of the substantial political, military, economic, and policy risks that would be entailed in an American military intervention. In the same way, President George W. Bush’s decision to surge additional U.S. troops into Iraq (2007) was meaningfully impacted by his early assessments equating a drawdown or withdrawal of American forces from Iraq with a strategic defeat for America in the Global War on Terrorism. His public commentary had all but ruled out either of these options even before ordering an interagency review of the current strategy, effectively leaving a surge in forces his only viable policy option.

The weakest case demonstrating only a moderate impact of an anchoring heuristic had to do with President Bush’s reaction to the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the form of Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan 2001). In part, this limited influence may well be due to the perceived unique nature of the 9/11 attacks. Even in this case, however, the anchoring heuristic did have a demonstrable (if not wholly
determinative) impact in pushing senior-level administration officials to accept higher levels of military risk than otherwise might have been the case. During the presidential campaign, Governor Bush and his senior advisors had scorned President Clinton’s responses to previous Al-Qa’ida’s attacks (i.e., the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa in 1998, and attack on the USS Cole in 2000) as feckless and weak. Vice President Cheney and others argued that these inadequate responses only served to encourage further terrorist attacks. This anchoring bias effectively guaranteed that the Bush administration’s response to similar terrorist attacks would be much more expansive than the punitive cruise missile attacks favored by Clinton. The discussion among Bush’s senior advisors at Camp David on the weekend immediately following the 9/11 attacks reflected this strong anchoring bias. Initial options presented by the military to President Bush involving various combinations of manned and unmanned airstrikes on Al-Qa’ida and Taliban facilities in Afghanistan were quickly rejected as inadequate. Instead, a consensus rapidly emerged among Bush’s senior advisors supporting the most aggressive military option presented that included the deployment of a significant number of American ground combat units into Afghanistan. It was this later option that formed the basis for what would become Operation Enduring Freedom.

**Anticipating President Obama’s Risk Propensities**

In adopting the analytical framework of this study to today’s security environment, what might we surmise about President Obama’s risk propensity in considering future American military interventions?
**International power structure**

There is a substantial debate among scholars as to the exact nature of the contemporary global power structure. Some are persuaded that the world remains largely dominated by American military and economic, if not political and diplomatic, power. Stephen Walt at Harvard recently wrote that

> The United States has the world’s largest economy (so far), and the world’s most powerful conventional forces. It spends about as much on national security that the rest of the world combined, and nearly nine times more than the No. 2 power (China). It has several thousand operational nuclear weapons, each substantially more powerful that the bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. America is further protected from conventional military attack by two enormous oceanic moats, there are no great powers in the Western hemisphere, and it hasn’t been invaded since the War of 1812…

> American security is not absolute... But surely the United States is about as secure as any great power in modern history.6

Others argue that the contemporary system is devolving toward multipolarity. Scholars such as Charles Kupchan have long forecasted the end of a unipolar world dominated by the United States and the inevitable return to a multipolar global distribution of power.7 Meanwhile, Fareed Zakaria has similarly concluded that “the distribution of power is shifting, moving away from American dominance” to various regional powers, including China, Russia, India, and Brazil.8

Other scholars have invented new characterizations of the international distribution of power. Richard Haas, for instance, has argued that the nature of today’s global power

---

structure is best categorized as “nonpolar.” 9 The essential feature of this nonpolar structure, according to Haas, is an international system “characterized by numerous centers with meaningful power.” 10 Harvard historian Niall Ferguson has described the emerging distribution of global power as one of ‘apolarity’—a system in which the absence of either a single hegemon or multiple competing major powers leaves a power vacuum at the international level. 11 For the purposes of this study, it is not particularly important to conclusively resolve this debate as to whether the world remains effectively unipolar, is returning to multipolarity as advocated by Kupchan, or is transitioning to something more along the line of nonpolarity or apolarity as posited by Haas and Ferguson. The predicted impacts are likely to be the same in terms of influencing the aggregate risk propensities of contemporary American policymakers. In the case of unipolarity, the temptation to act aggressively in the absence of a peer-competitor will be substantial. A multipolar world can be argued to provide rising state and non-state actors with the capacity to meaningfully challenge U.S. policies and actions; and as the 9/11 attacks demonstrated, the ability to inflict substantial damage to American interests. Meanwhile, a nonpolar world “will be difficult and dangerous,” according to Haas, and the net effect of this diffusion of power to multiple centers of power will be to “increase the number of threats and vulnerabilities facing a country such as the United States.” 12 Finally, Niall Ferguson’s forecast for his apolar world in similarly starkly dangerous and threatening terms.

10. Ibid.
12. Haas.
Apolarity could turn out to mean an anarchic new Dark Age; an era of waning empires and religious fanaticism; of endemic plunder and pillage in the world’s forgotten regions; of economic stagnation and civilization’s retreat into a few fortified enclaves.\textsuperscript{13}

In each of these cases, the contemporary international distribution of power (whether unipolar, multipolar, nonpolar, or apolar) would appear to generally incline American policymakers to adopt risk-acceptant behavior either out of temptation (unipolarity), in response to intensified competition between multiple competing powers (multipolarity), or in reaction to the multiplication and diversification of lethal threats (nonpolarity & apolarity).

Furthermore, despite these very different competing analyses as to the general structure of the international distribution of power, there appears to be a common denominator in the recognition that the United States is likely to occupy a dominant position at least in the military and economic realms for the foreseeable future—the traditional measures of a nation’s ‘hard power’. For instance, Richard Haas admits that in his nonpolar world, “the United States is and will long remain the single aggregation of power.”\textsuperscript{14} While noting the shifting distributions of industrial, financial, and cultural power away from America, Fareed Zakaria admits that “at the military and political level, we still live in a unipolar world” dominated by the United States.\textsuperscript{15} Niall Ferguson recently noted:

There is a sense in which the United States, as the dominant, pre-eminent military power in the world today, still has the potential to

\textsuperscript{13} Ferguson.
\textsuperscript{14} Haas.
\textsuperscript{15} Zakaria.
act against what we call ‘rogue regimes’, even if its performance in dealing with the rogue regime in Iraq has been rather disappointing.16

For all the talk of the general diffusion of power in the international system, these analyses seem to suggest that sheer size and extensive capabilities of the American military are likely to remain a tempting tool for American presidents to employ in times of crises for the foreseeable future. President Obama himself appears confident in what he has variously characterized as America’s “overwhelming military strength”17 or what he recently called “the finest fighting force in the history of the world.”18

**The anticipated role of international structure:** Global power structures other than bipolarity are generally thought to be conducive to risk-acceptant behavior of states and their leaders. In particular, America’s overwhelming conventional military superiority will serve as a temptation for presidents to intervene militarily by minimizing the perceived risks associated with military action.

At the same time, it is useful to recall as one scholar observed that American dominance in the military sphere is “an argument about opportunity, not motive.”19 The international power structure can indeed provide incentives and disincentives for state behavior. But this feature of international politics can not solely determine the choices of states or their leaders. With this caveat in mind, let us turn to the other

---

independent and intervening variables included in this study to see what we might
divine of additional factors that are likely to influence perceptions of risk.

**Nature of the threat**

The international power structure, and specifically, American’s tremendous advantage
in conventional military power, may well generally favor risk-acceptant behavior by
American presidents for some time to come. However, this tendency can alternatively
be exacerbated or mitigated by other factors considered in this study including the
perceived nature of the threat. As we confirmed in the historical cases examined in
this study, balance-of-power considerations tend to favor risk-averse behavior, while
an emphasis on balance-of-threat considerations incline decision makers to adopt
more risk-acceptant policy options. The central question then becomes which of
these considerations is likely to predominate in an Obama administration?

In general, President Obama has de-emphasized balance-of-threat considerations in
his public statements. His overarching foreign policy posture aims at building bridges
with allies and extending an open hand to potential competitors. His inaugural
address underscored themes of confidence, unity, hope, restraint, and reaching out to
both allies and enemies.

> On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, unity
> of purpose over conflict and discord…
> We remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth…
> And so, to all other peoples and governments who are watching today,
> from the grandest capitals to the small village where my father was
> born, know that America is a friend of each nation, and every man,
> woman and child who seeks a future of peace and dignity, and we are
> ready to lead once more…
Recall that earlier generations faced down fascism and communism not just with missiles and tanks, but with the sturdy alliances and enduring convictions. They understood that our power alone cannot protect us, nor does it entitle us to do as we please. Instead, they knew that our power grows through its prudent use; our security emanates from the justness of our cause, the force of our example; the tempering qualities of humility and restraint…

To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect…

To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.  

President Obama’s speeches generally seek to minimize the sense of vulnerability to external threats. During his presidential campaign Obama expressly denounced what he called the Bush administration “politics of fear.” Absent from President Obama’s rhetoric is the talk of an “axis of evil.” The phrases “war on terrorism” and “the long war” are absent from the vocabulary of senior administration officials. Finally, Obama’s early foreign policies have included public overtures to hostile state actors, including Iran, Syria, China, Cuba, and Venezuela. On balance, he has effectively dialed down the language of balance-of-threat considerations.

Moreover, his administration has strived to repair or strengthen relations with major regional powers such as Russia and China, demonstrating an increased sensitivity to balance-of-power considerations. In delivering the first major foreign policy address of the new administration, Vice President Biden told leaders attending an international security conference in Munich that President Obama wants to “press the reset button” on the U.S.-Russian bilateral relationship.  

---


of State Clinton avoided mentioning the dicey topic of human rights preferring instead to concentrate on other issues such as the global economy, climate change, and the security challenges of North Korea.

The one important exception to this general rule of avoiding the language of balance-of-threat politics has been the administration’s rhetoric on Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is perhaps no coincidence then that Obama’s most aggressive military actions early in his administration have been taken in Afghanistan (with the addition of 21,000 American troops) and Pakistan (U.S. airstrikes in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas bordering Afghanistan). In these instances, President Obama has relied most extensively on balance-of-threat considerations, emphasizing the aggressive intent of Al-Qa’ida and the dangers that would accompany a resurgence of the Taliban.

So let me be clear: Al-Qaeda and its allies—the terrorists who planned and supported the 9/11 attacks—are in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Multiple intelligence estimates have warned that al Qaeda is actively planning attacks on the United States homeland from its safe haven in Pakistan. And if the Afghan government falls to the Taliban—or allows al Qaeda to go unchallenged—that country will again be a base for terrorists who want to kill as many of our people as they possibly can.22

Lastly, despite the present talk of repairing bridges and extending an open hand to potential adversaries, it is also useful to remember (as Defense Secretary Gates recently did in an interview with Fareed Zakaria) that President George W. Bush too came to office in 2001 speaking of the need for a more “humble America.”23 Another terrorist attack on American soil could similarly compel President Obama to adopt

---

rhetoric and policy positions emphasizing balance-of-threat considerations that would in turn favor the adoption of much more risk-acceptant options.

**The anticipated role of nature of the threat:** President Obama’s decreased emphasis on balance-of-threat considerations coupled with his increased attention to traditional balance-of-power politics is reflective of a risk-averse attitude toward prospects for future American military interventions. Ongoing operations in Pakistan and Afghanistan will, however, remain important exceptions to this general tendency given Obama’s reliance on balance-of-threat rhetoric in describing Al-Qa’ida and the Taliban.

**Domain**

President Obama’s election and his recent international trips would suggest that he perceives himself operating largely within a domain of gain domestically and globally—at least politically. For now, he maintains exceptionally high approval ratings both at home and abroad. Pew polls conducted in April 2009 found that his domestic approval rating stood at 63%, while his personal popularity is even higher at 73%—both ratings substantially higher than those of Presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton at comparable times during their administrations.24 Moreover, on the global scene, a Pew survey conducted in December 2008 found that in many foreign countries, President Obama was strongly preferred over the other U.S. candidates at the time (Senators Clinton and McCain) with majorities in many of these countries saying they were optimistic he would change American foreign policies for the

---

The Sunday Telegraph described the glowing reaction President Obama inspired during the April 2009 G-20 meeting in London. “Mr. Obama’s popularity and star power eclipsed that of all his counterparts…it became clear that Mr. Obama…is seen by many…as president of the world.”

Politically then, Obama likely sees himself operating in a domain of gain both domestically and internationally—a situation that should temper his risk propensity in general terms. However, in other important substantive areas, President Obama is keenly aware that he has inherited a global and national economy in crisis along with deteriorating security situations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and in Pakistan. Within these policy-specific contexts, Obama could conceivably perceive himself as operating within a domain of loss that in turn should make him favorably disposed to relatively high-risk policy options related to these particular issue-areas.

**The anticipated role of domain:** Despite President Obama’s solid political standing globally and domestically, the current economic crisis coupled with deteriorating security situations in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan suggest the strong potential that he sees himself operating in domain of loss favoring risk-acceptant behavior—at least with respect to policies related to these particular substantive areas.


Cognitive Heuristics

Representative heuristic

By definition, the representative heuristic has to do with the degree of similarity with which a particular event is seen with another class of events. At the level of grand strategy, President Barack Obama has been clear in rejecting President George W. Bush’s war-time heuristic that placed American military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq within the strategic framework of the “Global War on Terrorism.” This altered representative heuristic suggests a new approach that will de-emphasize a resort to the use of military force (and reduce prospects of a foreign military intervention) and will instead signal an increased reliance on other instruments of national power such as diplomacy and developmental assistance. Moreover, given his previous criticism of the decision to initially intervene in Iraq in 2003, President Obama is likely to be extremely skeptical of any proposal for additional American military interventions beyond Afghanistan and Iraq.

At a more operational level, however, it should also be noted that there are strong parallels between President Obama’s actions in Afghanistan and those of President Bush in pursuing his surge strategy in Iraq. President Obama’s decision to deploy an additional 17,000 American troops to Afghanistan is eerily similar to the actions of President George W. Bush in surging nearly 20,000 troops into the Baghdad area. Moreover, just as President Bush advocated a policy emphasizing the training of local Iraq security forces, so too Obama has called for the deployment of some 4,000 American troops (in addition to the previous 17,000) to “train and support the Afghan
army and police.”  

Finally, just as Bush called for a parallel increase in the economic aid and reconstruction teams in Iraq in support of the military surge, Obama has called for the military deployment to be “joined by a dramatic increase in our civilian effort… [including] agricultural specialists and educators, engineers and lawyers.”

On the surface, these decisions could be used as evidence supporting the hypothesis that Obama is employing Operation Iraqi Freedom as a representative model for emulation in Afghanistan and potentially elsewhere as well. If so, this would make future American interventions along these lines more, rather than less, likely.

Nevertheless, there are also important distinctions to mitigate against this potentiality. First and foremost, President Obama has long criticized U.S. efforts in Iraq as a distraction from the more important task of destroying Al-Qa’ida. This makes OIF an unlikely model for future American interventions. Second, in announcing the deployment of these 17,000 additional troops to Afghanistan, President Obama assigned these forces the specific mission “to disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan.” This statement imposes important functional and geographic limits for the employment of these troops. This “surge” is thus both functionally focused on attacking Al-Qa’ida terrorist cells and limited to the geographic confines of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Third, these limitations are fully consistent with President Obama’s balance-of-threat portrayal of Al-Qa’ida and the Taliban. Consequently, the particular representative heuristic of a “surge” in Iraq is not likely to be replicated outside of the specific contexts of ongoing military campaigns in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

28. Ibid.
The anticipated role of representativeness: In establishing a clear break from the war-time heuristics shaping President George W. Bush’s decision making, President Obama is taking steps that should decrease his propensity to assume the risks of additional military interventions. However, ongoing campaigns in Afghanistan and Pakistan are likely to stand as exceptions to this rule, given Obama’s emphasis on the aggressive intent and capabilities (balance-of-threat considerations) of Al-Qa’ida and the Taliban.

Availability heuristic

In all cases but President Carter’s reaction to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the level of availability for American senior decision makers was high. American presidents have access to a tremendous array of reporting, from highly classified intelligence reports, to private meetings with foreign officials, to the daily barrage of 24 hours-a-day news outlets.

Fareed Zakaria has recently suggested that high levels of information availability are a constant feature of modern life and might in large part be responsible for an over-exaggerated sense of vulnerability, fear, and threat. He specifically notes that researchers at the University of Maryland have demonstrated that instances of war have been steadily declining since the mid-1980s and that we are now experiencing “the lowest levels of global violence since the 1950s.”29 He quotes Harvard math professor Steven Pinker who calculates that we are living “in the most peaceful time our species’ existence.”30 Zakaria then posits the question of what could account for

30. Ibid.
the prevailing perception that we are living in such desperate and dangerous times despite empirical facts to the contrary.

Why do we think we live in scary times? Part of the problem is that as violence has been ebbing, information has been exploding. The last 20 years have produced an information revolution that brings us news and, most crucially, images from around the world all the time. The immediacy of the images and the intensity of the 23-hour news cycle combine to produce constant hype. Every weather disturbance is the “storm of the decade.” Every bomb that explodes is BREAKING NEWS.\(^{31}\)

The extensive American troop presence in both Iraq and Afghanistan is almost certain to guarantee President Obama (unlike President Carter’s situation in confronting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) access to extensive first-hand reporting of developments on the ground relaying information in vivid terms and in near-real time. Consequently, the levels of availability for him in nearly any emerging crises here will quite likely be high. Furthermore, media reporters embedded with deploying American units will almost certainly narrow the gap between the availability of information reaching the president and the American public. Theoretically, these high levels of availability would generally favor a risk-acceptant behavior. Unfortunately, our case studies yielded mixed results on this matter as we saw that the vivid portrayals of death and destruction along the “Highway of Death” had the effect of sensitizing President H.W. Bush to the risks of continued attacks on retreating Iraqi forces which in turn yielded a risk-averse decision to terminate the military intervention.

Vivid and frequent portrayals of Taliban strikes on coalition military forces could heighten President Obama’s sensitivities to prospects for additional military

\(^{31}\) Ibid.
casualties, reinforce a sense that the tide in Afghanistan cannot be turned with current American military resources, and inspire risk-averse decision making. Meanwhile, even in the relatively remote Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan, media reports of the civilian casualties as a result of American airstrikes are even now serving to fuel the flames of anti-Americanism in Pakistan and are effectively raising the international political risks of continuing these attacks for Obama. Such reporting could conceivably push President Obama into risk-averse behavior supporting the termination of military operations as was the case when President George H.W. Bush decided to terminate Operation Desert Storm.

On the other hand, an equally plausible argument can be constructed that reporting of a rapidly deteriorating security situation characterized by wide-spread sectarian violence in Iraq and the brutal enforcement of Shar’ia law in Afghanistan and Pakistan could also reinforce Obama’s determination to take aggressive action as was the case when President George H.W. Bush received reports of Iraqi atrocities in Kuwait. More aggressive military intervention would also be largely reinforced by President Obama’s balance-of-threat rhetoric regarding Al-Qa’ida and the Taliban. Additionally, President Obama’s political opponents would undoubtedly seize upon reports of the resurgence of the Taliban or Al-Qa’ida in the region as damaging to vital American national interests and thus raise the domestic political costs of inaction for the president. These trends inspired by high levels of availability would thus appear to push in the direction of more risk-acceptant decision making.

A final point worth considering regarding the potential role to be played by the availability heuristic, is that there are still isolated areas in the world that are not
easily accessible either by independent media or U.S. intelligence assets. For now, Iraq and Afghanistan are center-stage and large U.S. troop presences there facilitate first-hand reporting by American and international reporters. However, there is no such presence (yet) in other global hot-spot where American military intervention might be realistically considered. North Korea remains one of the most isolated countries in the world. This absence of vivid and first-hand reporting might well help to explain the lack of more aggressive risk-acceptant American foreign policy thus far. Similar arguments might be constructed to explain the lack of a determined international response to the genocide taking place in southern Sudan. The very remoteness of the Darfur area limits the availability of first-hand, independent, and vivid portrayals of the slaughter of innocent lives and thereby reduces the impulse for more aggressive (and risk-acceptant) actions such as military intervention. Finally, Tehran’s repressive domestic environment and the long history of hostility and estrangement from the United States since 1979 make Iran an especially difficult case for either U.S. intelligence or international media to penetrate with any degree of success. The low levels of availability in these particular cases may well serve to dampen prospects for more risk-acceptant American policy options regarding North Korea, Sudan, or Iran.

**The anticipated role of availability:** High levels of availability of information in Iraq and Afghanistan will generally incline President Obama toward risk-acceptant behaviors designed to deal decisively with the primary threats he has identified there. However, our confidence level for this hypothesis is somewhat diminished by contrary findings in at least one of our case studies (President H.W. Bush in ending Desert Storm). Meanwhile, the low availability of information from remote or underreported
Anchoring heuristic

The anchoring heuristic influences the process of decision making by overweighing initial estimates or assessments that remain resistant to change despite new potentially disconfirming information. As with the other cognitive heuristics, the identification of a particularly influential heuristic requires deep insight into the decision-making process itself. Making such predictions within the first 100 days of a new president’s administration is especially problematic. Nevertheless, some initial observations might be offered.

Obama’s presidential campaign and his public statements thus far have placed a high value on developing an international consensus behind American actions. In this way, he resembles President George H.W. Bush in confronting the challenge of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. President Obama’s foreign trips to Europe and Latin America have emphasized his desire to listen to his counterparts rather than dictate a pre-determined decision or course of action. Similarly, his senior administration envoys such as Senator George Mitchell and Ambassador Richard Holbrooke have each embarked on what are billed as “listening tours” of their respective regions further demonstrating Obama’s desire to minimize international opposition to U.S. actions whenever possible.

Another anchoring heuristic related specifically to the perceived utility of military interventions will undoubtedly derive from the key lessons President Obama draws from America’s recent experience in its post 9/11 military interventions
into Afghanistan and Iraq. In short, President Obama likely views the conduct of Operation Enduring Freedom as “the good war,” while Operation Iraqi Freedom serves as the quintessential example of “the bad war.” In a foreign policy campaign speech in the summer of 2008, Senator Obama had this to say about the military campaign in Iraq:

What’s missing in our debate about Iraq—what has been missing since before the war began—is a discussion of the strategic consequences of Iraq and its dominance of our foreign policy. This war distracts us from every threat that we face and so many opportunities we could seize. This war diminishes our security, our standing in the world, our military, our economy, and the resources that we need to confront the challenges of the 21st century. By any measure, our single-minded and open-ended focus on Iraq is not a sound strategy for keeping America safe.\(^{32}\)

Given these basic anchoring assessments, President Obama is likely to reject options for any additional large-scale military intervention beyond current operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Instead, he will devote substantial attention to building a broad international consensus behind U.S. actions and will favor those military operations assuming a small American footprint, heavily reliant on Special Forces, and narrowly focused on targeting terrorist groups possessing both the demonstrated capability and intent to attack American interests either at home or abroad.

**The anticipated role of anchoring:** Initial assessments of crisis situations by President Obama are likely to be grounded in a firm preference for concerted action from the international community (along the lines displayed by President George H.W. Bush in the run-up to Desert Storm) whenever possible. Given his negative assessments of OIF, he will likely avoid any additional large-scale military

---

interventions with broad political goals such as regime change. Instead U.S. military actions (to the extent they are considered at all) are likely to be characterized by a minimal American military footprint, a heavy reliance on Special Forces, and narrowly focused on targeting Al-Qa’ida related facilities and personnel.

**DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The primary advantages of the case study selection and methodology were laid out in Chapter 1. However, there are three primary weaknesses to this project worth highlighting that future research might profitably seek to address. First, as any qualitative study, this research project involved only a small selection of historical instances (and negative cases) of American military interventions overseas. Consequently, these findings can only be extended to similar cases. More specifically, these results are certainly contingent to cases involving the risk perceptions of leaders operating within the context of American political institutions and decision making. Other systems of government with different political structures could easily inspire a risk calculus that departs significantly from that witnessed in this research project.

A second admitted weakness in this research study is the recent nature of the post 9/11 interventions into Iraq and Afghanistan themselves. This necessarily forfeits any advantage to be gained by a longer-term historical perspective. Moreover, given the contemporary nature of these events, I did not have the advantage of access to the official or declassified records of the internal deliberations of the President George W. Bush administration. Consequently, this study can at best offer a preliminary assessment of the decision-making and risk propensities of these senior officials.
Another important limitation of this study is the fact that these cases examine the decision-making process of only three U.S. presidents. Moreover, all of the post-9/11 foreign military interventions took place under the single administration of President George W. Bush. The findings of this study related to the post 9/11 military interventions then can be fairly critiqued for being potentially highly contingent on the personal attributes and approaches of these individuals.

Given these shortcomings, future studies extending the range of cases examined to include previous cases of American foreign military interventions and other American presidents would be welcome additions to this literature. Additionally, research applying this basic analytical framework to cases involving foreign military interventions on the part of other countries, in other systems of government, and other leaders would be fruitful enterprises that would subject the findings of this study to even more rigorous cross-examination in another cultural context. In this regard, Israel’s repeated interventions into Lebanon spanning significant changes in the international and regional power structures, as well as several different Israeli governments might provide interesting insights into the risk assessment process within a democratic government that has long confronted the security challenges associated with terrorism.


*War with Iraq: Costs, Consequences, and Alternatives*. American Academy of Arts and Sciences.


Bueno de Mesquita, Bruce, and David Lalman. *War and Reason: Domestic and International Imperatives*


Bush, George W. “President Visits Troops at Brooke Army Medical Center.” (1 January 2006). [accessed 31 March 2009].

“Graduation Speech at West Point.” 1 June 2002.


“President Bush Outlines Iraqi Threat.” (7 October 2002). [accessed 3 April 2009].

“President’s Address to the Nation.” Washington, DC, 10 January 2007.

“Press Conference by the President.” (11 October 2006). [accessed 3 April 2009].


_______. “A Period of Consequences.” The Citadel, South Carolina, 23 September 1999.


361


________. “Memorandum of Conversation with German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt.” 1979.

________. “Memorandum of Conversation with Prime Minister of Great Britain Margaret Thatcher


Ferguson, Charles. “No End in Sight.” 2007 (to be released).


Heilbrunn, Jacob. They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons.


Krasner, Stephen D. “Are Bureaucracies Important? (or Allison Wonderland).” Foreign Policy 7, no. 159-179 (1971).


Mabry, Marcus. Twice as Good: Condoleezza Rice and Her Path to Power: Rodale Inc., 2007.


Newport, Frank. Americans’ Satisfaction at All-Time Low of 9%. Gallup, 7 October 2008.


393


_______.”“Why We Stopped the Gulf War”. “Newsweek” (23 September 1996).


Tavris, Carol, and Elliot Aronson. Mistakes Were Made (but Not by Me), 2007.


