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The Dynamics of Diversion: The Domestic Implications of Presidential Use of Force

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THE DYNAMICS OF DIVERSION: THE DOMESTIC IMPLICATIONS OF PRESIDENTIAL USE OF FORCE

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Several studies report evidence of diversionary behavior by presidents, while others dispute findings that suggest domestic politics are part of the use of force decision calculus. We argue that previous studies of U.S. force short of war have failed to articulate what diversion actually means. We approach this important debate from a perspective that brings to bear presidential agenda-setting theory. Rather than treating the use of force solely as a dependent variable, we assess whether the use of force diverts attention by modeling the percent of the American public identifying the economy as the nation’s most important problem. We also include presidential approval in the model. We treat the public opinion measures as endogenous variables that may or may not affect the decision to use force. We employ Vector Autoregression (VAR) methods to evaluate the causal direction of force and public opinion while controlling for the state of the economy and war. VAR is a multiple-lagged time-series approach that allows us to test a variety of hypotheses derived from diversionary and agenda-setting theory. Our results indicate that uses of force by the president have a notable agenda-setting effect, shifting public attention away from the economy. The shift in attention also causes a long-term effect on the president’s public-approval rating.

KEY WORDS: diversionary use of force, rally effect, agenda setting, vector autoregression, media, concern for the economy
Recent efforts at accounting for presidential use of force short of war have centered on diversionary theory (DeRouen, 2000; Fordham, 1998; Levy, 1989a, 1989b). The general argument is that presidents have an incentive to treat an external use of force as a “scapegoat” during times of domestic distress, such as high unemployment, inflation, scandal, or other domestic turmoil (see Brace and Hinckley, 1992; Levy, 1989a; 1989b). For instance many questioned the motivation of President Reagan’s invasion of Grenada in 1983 while the nation mourned the loss of 200 Marines killed in Lebanon. More recently, pundits questioned the motives of President Clinton in ordering military strikes at Serbia, Sudan, and Afghanistan in 1998 and 1999, because the President was in the midst of being impeached. The scapegoat explanation has become linked to presidential approval because a sizable percentage of all rallies in presidential approval in the post-war era have been related to the use of force short of war. Presidential foreign policy decision making is conceivably affected by the intense media coverage of uses of force. This media attention ostensibly helps to focus public attention away from troublesome domestic issues, providing a domestic political incentive for presidents to use force.

Significant lacunae remain in the explanation of the domestic implications of force short of war. Previous studies have not consistently articulated the mechanics of diversion. Force is said to be tied to electoral gain (e.g., Gaubatz, 1991; see also Aldrich, et al., 1989; Nincic and Hinckley, 1991); presidential approval (e.g., DeRouen, 1995; Morgan and Bickers, 1992; Ostrom and Job, 1986); the economy (e.g., DeRouen, 1995, 2000; Fordham, 1998; Hess and Orphanides, 1995; James and Hristoulas, 1994; Levy, 1989a, 1989b; Russett and Graham, 1989); and support in Congress (e.g., Stoll, 1987).

Others dispute findings that suggest domestic politics are part of the use-of-force decision calculus. For example, Meernik and Waterman (1996) argued that presidential approval, the economy, and the electoral cycle had no impact on presidential decisions to use force during international crises. For example, they claimed it was too much to expect a president to use force when the economy is weak to boost approval; such a diversion would provide only very brief relief. They questioned the very core of the diversionary argument by asking whether diversionary force would even have an effect on a public aware of a stagnant economy (see also Gowa, 1998; Meernik, 1994; Yoon, 1997). Lian and Oneal (1993) found that the mean change in approval after uses of force was zero percent and, therefore, we should not expect rally effects to divert attention from domestic problems (see also Edwards and Gallup, 1990).

We present new theoretical and methodological considerations. Rather than treating the use of force solely as a dependent variable, we assess whether the use of force is even capable of diverting attention by modeling the percentage of the American public identifying the economy as the nation’s most important problem. We assume that if the public identifies the economy as “the most important issue” then it is because the economy is not performing well. We treat public concern for the economy as an endogenous variable rather than an exogenous variable that may or may not affect the decision to use force. The perception of a weak economy is a strong indicator of domestic hardship for the president.

Another domestic political effect of presidential force, to this point ignored in the
literature, relates to agenda-setting. Agenda-setting consists of the activities that influence which issues come before government and the public, and how these issues are defined (see Kingdon, 1984, p. 3). Presidents are uniquely situated to influence the foreign policy agenda because of their position and control over the U.S. military. By ordering military action, presidents might possibly be able to shift public and governmental attention to an issue they consider most imperative, providing public and political support for the president’s actions.

Given the significance of agenda-setting to the public-policy process, presidents spend a great deal of effort trying to focus institutional and public attention on their issues (Cohen, 1997; Edwards and Wood, 1999; Kingdon, 1984; Light, 1999; Peake, 2001; Wood and Peake, 1998). By focusing public attention on certain issues, presidents can shape public debate and draw attention away from issues that threaten them. Framing the debate surrounding an issue and defining alternatives are two critical political powers that stem from agenda-setting (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Schattschneider, 1960). Presidents who are effective agenda-setters are better positioned to lead both Congress and the public (Edwards, 1989). Political scientists are mixed in their assessment of the capability of presidents to shift institutional and public attention on issues. A few find presidents as powerful agenda-setters (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Cohen, 1997; Jones, 1994; Kingdon, 1984), whereas others find the chief executive wanting in his agenda leadership, particularly in relation to the public and the media (Edwards and Wood, 1999; Light, 1999; Wood and Peake, 1998). While recent scholarship has focused on foreign policy specifically (Peake, 2001; Wood and Peake, 1998), scholars have yet to focus systematically on the possible agenda-setting effects of presidential uses of force; instead they only examine the effects of presidential speech.

Many studies of force have only indirectly tapped diversion. Instead, they have used the boost in approval just after a use of force known as the rally effect as a proxy for diversion (see Brody, 1984; Hugick and Gallup, 1991; Lee, 1977). There are reasons we should not assume that the rally effect actually reflects a diversion from domestic problems. First, public reaction to uses of force can vary across the population. The masses are typically less supportive of force than are elites (Russett and Nincic, 1976). The media also play an implicit role in gathering support for the president’s actions. Research suggests that the media prime public evaluations of the president with salient issues providing the basis for public evaluation (Brody, 1991; Edwards, et al., 1995; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; LoTiempo and Eldred, 2000). Regan’s (2000) empirical results demonstrate that the media specifically drive U.S. foreign policy substitution vis-à-vis intervention. That is, faced with a choice during an external crisis media attention can influence the president to select intervention. The agenda-setting model suggests that presidential actions significantly influence the media and thus public attention to issues. The agenda-setting model may thus provide a more nuanced explanation of the linkages between force, domestic politics, and presidential approval.

By treating force solely as a dependent variable, researchers are ignoring the possibility that external force can actually increase domestic turmoil if the domestic audience misperceives the external actions (Hazlewood, 1975; Heldt, 1999; Levy, 1989b; Pearson, 1974). Levy (1989b, pp. 268–269) recognized that “some sort of
causal modeling procedure” was needed but that

there is no solid theoretical basis for discriminating among essentially arbitrary time
lags. . . . What is clear, however, is that the attempt to test a hypothesis that is
temporal, dynamic, and causal with research designs that are cross-sectional, static,
and correlational are flawed from the start.

In short, scholars have not paid enough attention to causal mechanisms connecting
internal and external processes (Levy, 1988, p. 669). Based on these important theo-
etical considerations, we employ Vector Autoregression (VAR) to test whether di-
versions occur and in what causal context. This method relaxes assumptions regard-
ing direction of causality and length of time lags.

The main purpose of this article is to assess whether presidential use of force
diverts the public’s attention. In doing so, we may be able to detect domestic motiva-
tions for presidential foreign policy behavior. We invoke the agenda-setting hypoth-
eses to account for attention shifting due to force. Specifically, we will test whether
public concern for the economy decreases after uses of force while controlling for
unemployment and ongoing war. A related question examines whether or not a shift
in public concern primes the public’s evaluation of the president. Does decreasing
concern for the economy lead to higher approval? While our data do not allow us to
tap motivation on this issue, we will also explore the effects of public opinion on
force, as diversionary theory warrants. Is presidential force more likely when public
concern for the economy is high or when presidential approval is low? While much
of the proceeding analysis is exploratory in nature, we find clear relationships be-
tween force and public opinion that shed light upon the domestic political implica-
tions of presidential force.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The diversionary and agenda-setting hypotheses are slightly different. Diversion-
ary theory implies a dynamic two-way relationship between domestic concerns and
external conflict (see Levy, 1989a). Agenda-setting research analyzes the dynamics
of presidential efforts at shifting public and institutional attention to issues (see Cohen,
we briefly discuss our theoretical framework in terms of both the diversionary and
agenda-setting models.

Diversionary Theory

Most studies of force short of war have been couched in a diversionary theory that
borrows from social psychology (see Coser, 1956; Simmel, 1956). This nascent
“theory” posits that external conflict diverts attention from internal conflict or politi-
cal misfortune as social groups (in-groups) will overlook differences and generally
become more cohesive in the face of conflict with out-groups (Coser, 1956; Simmel,
1956). Presidents (or other leaders), cognizant of the phenomenon’s ability to coa-
lesce constituencies and quell dissent, are tempted to pursue diversionary tactics
(Levy 1989a, p. 273). Scapegoating or diversionary behavior implies a two-way relationship between domestic concerns and external conflict. For example, force is used externally in response to domestic problems; in turn, the force reduces internal conflict.

**Agenda Setting**

The agenda-setting literature suggests that attention to issues is severely limited by time and space (Cohen, 1997; Jones, 1994; Light, 1999). Wood and Peake (1998) label this the “economy of attention.” This argument states that political attention to issues (by politicians, the media, and the public) is finite. Attention to one issue necessitates inattention to other issues. In Downs’s (1972) estimation, the attention cycles of issues are codependent. Focusing attention on an important foreign policy issue through executive action should divert the public attention away from other issues. This becomes important when analyzing the domestic political effects of presidential foreign policy activities, particularly presidential uses of force. Stemming from its most basic assumptions, agenda-setting theory suggests that focusing on events (such as uses of force) cause diversions in public attention.

The domestic political implications of diversion might include an effect on how the public evaluates the president or his job approval rating. Priming theory suggests that publics evaluate their political leaders based on issues that are salient at the time of the evaluation (Edwards, et al., 1995; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990; Miller and Krosnick, 2000). When public concern for the economy is high, presidential approval is likely to suffer. This is because the public’s concern for the economy suggests a negative perception of the economy and the public is more likely to use this perception against the president when evaluating him. Dramatic foreign policy events could alter these evaluative cues by shifting public concern to an issue where the president might fair better.

Scholars have identified agenda setting as an important power of the presidency and much of the research suggests that presidents have a great capacity to influence the agendas of the public and other political institutions (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Cohen, 1995, 1997; Kingdon, 1984; Light, 1999). However, there is disagreement among scholars regarding the capacity to which the presidency can focus attention on various domestic and foreign policy issues. Even in foreign policy, scholars have found that presidents are often reactive to media portrayal of world events when determining their agenda. This reactive nature mitigates the ability of presidents to successfully focus attention on their issues (Edwards and Wood, 1999; Peake, 2001; Wood and Peake, 1998).

Nevertheless, most scholars agree that presidents have substantial powers to affect the public’s attention to issues. Presidential activities are given substantial coverage by the national media (Graber, 1997). However, only the most dramatic events garner protracted media focus (Peake, 1999). If public concern follows what the media cover, as many analysts suspect (Bosso, 1989; Dearing and Rogers, 1996; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; LoTiempo and Eldred, 2000; Page and Shapiro, 1992; Regan, 2000), then we might expect only the most dramatic of events to have a substantial public agenda-setting impact.
Brace and Hinckley (1992) identified a variety of foreign policy activities likely to impact public opinion, including travel abroad, presidential summit meetings, speech making, and uses of military force. While presidential activities surely attract public attention, sustaining that attention likely takes the most dramatic of events, especially if other problems are competing for attention. One recent study (Peake, 1999) found that force abroad had the most protracted influence on media coverage among the variety of presidential events identified by Brace and Hinckley. Presidential speech, travel abroad, summits, and other less costly presidential activities rarely led to protracted media focus on related issues. Less than a third of the 31 presidential events examined by Peake (1999) led to a significant change in media attention beyond the week of the event. The greatest identified impacts were attributed to presidential uses of force.

Examining the agenda and priming effects of force on opinion is a useful starting point for analysis. It should be stated that presidential force is an extremely costly undertaking with substantial risks, both domestically and internationally. We shy from suggesting that U.S. presidents use force in order to focus (or divert) attention, instead stating that the diversion hypothesized is an effect of the use of force, not necessarily the motivation behind using force. In addition, this diversionary effect may have further domestic political effects related to the president’s standing among the public.

Beyond influencing the public’s agenda, a shift in media attention in response to force may affect how the public evaluates the president, according to priming theory (Edwards, et al., 1995). By impacting what is salient among the public, the president may be able to influence the public’s evaluation of his job approval in the long run (Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990; Miller and Krosnick, 2000). Force abroad may indirectly affect public approval by increasing the salience of foreign policy (and decreasing the salience of other issues) among the public, thus priming the public to base their evaluations of the president on his handling of foreign policy.

When the president chooses to use force, shifts in attention by the media and public can be dramatic (Bostdorff, 1993; LoTiempo and Eldred, 2000). Whether or not these shifts in public attention to international issues are persistent enough to alter public concern for the economy (as assumed by diversionary theory) remains to be seen. However, the “economy of attention” suggests that presidential uses of force would diminish the public’s concern for the economy as public focus shifts to the international realm. This may in turn indirectly impact the public’s evaluation of the president through priming.

Questions Addressed

We expect uses of force to lead to reductions in public concern for the economy. Diversionary theory implies that force can divert the public from domestic issues tightly linked to their perception of presidential job performance (see Brace and Hinckley, 1992; MacKuen, 1983; Nincic and Hinckley, 1991). To test for shifts in public attention, we look at the percentages of the American public identifying the economy as the most significant problem pre- and postuse of force. In this manner,
we are able to determine if public attention shifted as a result of the force. There is a wealth of evidence indicating the brief life spans of rally effects (e.g., Brody, 1984; Edwards and Gallup, 1990; Hugick and Gallup, 1991; Lian and Oneal, 1993). However, diversions might exist through a different temporal dynamic. Focusing solely on public approval ratings ignores an important element of the public’s evaluation of the president. The attention the public gives to issues is important in priming the public’s perception of the president’s job performance (Edwards and Gallup, 1990; Edwards, et al., 1995; Iyengar and Kinder, 1987; Krosnick and Kinder, 1990). While the rally effect stems from an observation of brief increases in public approval following dramatic presidential events, agenda-setting and priming suggest a longer-term dynamic.

Specifying foreign policy events as an independent variable will allow us to probe for evidence of diversion rather than simply assigning potential motives behind presidential foreign policy behavior. Again, many previous studies made the assumption that a rally effect translated into a diversion. This assumption may be unwarranted. During a crisis-induced use of force, a president may indeed have the sympathy of the American public, but this does not necessarily mean the public has forgotten about, for example, a weak economy. George H. Bush’s popularity rose to record levels in the first months of 1991 during the Gulf War (with a record level 91% approval). Unfortunately for Bush, his approval dropped precipitously (averaging under 40% for 1992) as the effects of a weak economy took hold and public attention shifted to the economy.

The preceding discussion leads us to ask the following questions:

**To what extent is the public diverted by presidential uses of force short of war?** Agenda-setting theory suggests that presidential force will depress public concern for the economy. The dramatic focusing event (the use of force) shifts the public’s attention, thus altering the salience attributed to related issues. In order to attribute the shift in public salience to presidential force, the effects of force must be isolated from other possible influences such as ongoing war and objective economic indicators.

**Does presidential force have direct (and lasting) impacts on presidential approval, or a less direct impact through priming?** While the nature of the analysis cannot speak directly to a rally effect (given the short temporal nature of the effect and our use of quarterly data), the results may shed light on other, less obvious, effects of force on approval. Priming theory suggests that, as the public shifts its concern away from the economy (perhaps due to force), presidential approval will increase.

**Do public opinion and macroeconomic concerns contribute to U.S. force levels?** Do the data suggest presidents use force in order to divert public attention from a poor economy? This is the standard scapegoating question scholars have addressed in the past, whereby the president’s motivation to divert attention is based upon domestic problems (in this case, the economy). We understand that the macro-level data examined here cannot speak with authority regarding presidential motivations to use force. However, identified macro-level patterns may be suggestive of presidential behavior.
RESEARCH DESIGN

Data

The observations are quarterly for the time period 1949 to 1994 ($N = 184$). The primary variable used in this analysis is the percent of the American public identifying economic issues as the most important problem facing the nation (public concern for the economy). The question asked in the Gallup polls was “what do you think is the most important problem facing the country?” The variable collapses all responses pertaining to the economy (Fordham, 1998a). Economic concerns are central to presidential approval and this indicator measures the extent to which the public’s attention is focused on the economy. In other words, when the variable’s value is high, the economy is salient to the public. Jones (1994) and Cohen (1997) use similar variables to measure salience. While we could have focused on domestic scandals, data representing public attention over time are not readily available. In any case, the economy is a key determinant of presidential success (Brace and Hinckley, 1992; MacKuen, 1983).

Presidential approval data are from Fordham (1998). These Gallup data are in response to the question “Do you approve or disapprove of the way _____ is handling his job as President?” We average polls taken within quarters to create average quarterly approval (presidential approval).

We control for the state of the economy using unemployment because this measure is typically considered one of the best barometers of the macroeconomy (Hibbs, 1987, p. 43). For instance, it was shown that a one percent increase in unemployment that lasts for one year will yield a two percent decline in real output (Hibbs, 1987, p. 51). To measure unemployment, we use Fordham’s (1998a) average quarterly unemployment data (unemployment). We also control for involvement in an ongoing war. As Pearson (1974, p. 264) suggested, a protracted conflict may cause conflict in the country sending the troops as public discontent grows. Ongoing war may also “desensitize” the public to rallying if a new conflict erupts (LoTiempo and Eldred, 2000, p. 11). We use war casualty data from Korea (third quarter 1950 to second quarter 1953), Vietnam (first quarter 1965 to fourth quarter 1972), and the Persian Gulf (first quarter 1991) to create cumulative war dead (see Meernik and Waterman, 1996; Ostrom and Job, 1986). This measure is operationalized by taking the log of cumulative war casualties so that we may tap the impact of the ongoing conflict (see Meernik and Waterman, 1996).

We model the use of force (force level) by measuring the quarterly force level (see DeRouen, 1995, 2000; Ostrom and Job, 1986). Our point of departure here was to capture the level to which the president has escalated international crises in a given quarter, rather than to assume that presidents create crises to justify uses of force (see Mintz and Russett, 1992). The uses of force were originally identified by Blechman and Kaplan (1978) and later extended by Zelikow (1987) and Fordham (1998). This force data set has shown to be particularly relevant to studies of use of force short of war (see Fordham, 2000). The uses of force are classified according to level in the Blechman and Kaplan/Zelikow/Fordham framework. The level of force is coded as 0 if there was no force or only a minor use; a 1 if either one major force
Table 1
The Data, Time Period: 1949–1994

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public concern</td>
<td>Percent of the public who consider the economy as the most important problem facing the nation; measured as a quarterly average.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for the economy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential approval</td>
<td>Average quarterly presidential approval (Gallup poll).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Force level</td>
<td>Quarterly levels of force measured by summing the amount and intensity of total U.S. force in a quarter; calculated by adding one to the level of each use of force in a peripheral region and two if the force was used in a major region. For example, if there were two uses in a quarter, then Force = (level + region) + (level + region).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>Average quarterly unemployment rate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative war dead</td>
<td>Cumulative war dead (in thousands) logged.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: DeRouen (2001a); Fordham (1998)

It is important to be able to further distinguish between uses of force. As Marra, Ostrom, and Simon (1990, p. 612) demonstrated, the region in which force was used is crucial to the construct of the force variable. We define major regions for the U.S. as Central America and the Caribbean (the Caribbean Basin), Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa (see Hastedt and Eksterowicz, 1999; Marra, et al., 1990). All others were considered minor or peripheral. Marra, Ostrom, and Simon, (1990) found that major uses in major regions were more likely to elicit rally effects for the president. Force in these regions would be expected to elicit a greater response from the public, because crises in these regions are perceived as serious. One reason for this is that the media cover these regions more fully than minor regions (Graber, 1997). It also seems unlikely that a covert use of force would have much impact on domestic politics. A use of force must be vivid and salient if it can be expected to have domestic political repercussions (Hugick and Gallup, 1991). Richards et al. (1993) also suggested that the public is capable of detecting various levels of salience. In terms of diversionary theory, the in-group/out-group hypothesis posits that a use of force must be directed at an external target “believed to menace the group as a whole and [must be] perceived as solvable by group effort” (Levy, 1989b, 261–262).

We measure quarterly force level in the following manner. In quarters where

component or a strategic nuclear unit was used; a 2 if two or three major force components were used with no strategic nuclear unit; and a 3 if at least one nuclear unit and major force components were used (James and Oneal, 1991, p. 316). Major uses are marked by either one or more combat wings, one or more ground battalions, or two or more aircraft carrier task groups (Blechman and Kaplan, 1978, pp. 49–50).
uses of force occurred, we sum the following simple equation: (force level + region) + (force level + region) +…, etc. This method is capable of capturing the intensity, relevance, and frequency of force. This method also greatly increases the variation in the force variable over time, relative to previous studies that estimate probit, tobit, or Poisson event count models. By not differentiating among uses of force, previous studies have treated minor uses of force no differently from ones as dramatic as the invasion of Grenada. See DeRouen (1995, 2000, 2001b) for further discussions of this operationalization.4

Methodology

With these measures in hand we use VAR methodology (Freeman, et al., 1989; Simms, 1980) to evaluate the causal direction of force and public opinion while controlling for unemployment and ongoing war. There are two standard approaches when assessing a time-series model where reciprocal relationships are likely: structural equation (2SLS) modeling and VAR. 2SLS requires imposing parameter restrictions in order to have an identified equation system. Given that we want to examine the determinants of force, public concern for the economy, and approval without making any of these variables a priori exogenous, 2SLS is inappropriate. The most stringent test of our models would allow the plausibility of force to be determined by approval and public concern for the economy, while at the same time allow force to be a determinative factor in both approval levels and public concern for the economy.

Based on the previous discussion, the statistical approach we adopt must allow for reciprocal relationships while placing as few restrictions on likely relationships as possible. VAR allows analysts to put aside artificial parameter restrictions, letting the data tell us which restrictions are appropriate. The most common critique of VAR is that it is atheoretical. However, where theory suggests weak or competing a priori distinctions, as is the case here, VAR is prescribed (see Edwards and Wood, 1999; Fleming, et al.,1999; Williams and Collins, 1997; Wood and Peake, 1998).

An important advantage of VAR modeling over 2SLS is that VAR provides an internal control for history by including multiple lags of each variable in all equations. Problems of specification error are of less concern, since VAR disturbances are random with respect to time. It is likely that history plays a large role in the dynamics of force and public opinion. In other words, prior approval and concern for the economy is likely to influence current levels of approval and concern for the economy. Since the history of each variable is controlled through the use of multiple lag structures, the exclusion of nonforceful presidential activities (like travel or speech) is less of a concern than if we were using standard regression procedures. While force may not tell the complete story, VAR allows us to isolate the effects of force on opinion (and vice versa). VAR modeling takes the historical dynamics of the endogenous variables into account (Freeman, et al., 1989). VAR can be viewed as a multivariate extension of the Granger (1969) approach to causal inference. Each dependent variable is regressed on lagged values of itself, as well as lagged values of the other dependent variables in the system.5 Relationships are evaluated by conducting joint hypothesis tests for blocs of lags associated with each variable.
VAR models typically exhibit high collinearity due to the multiple lags entered into the system. For this reason, coefficient estimates are useless in determining the relationships between the endogenous variables. Instead, VAR conducts Granger F-tests in order to determine whether or not significant causal relationships exist among the variables in the system. However, these tests cannot determine the direction of the relationship. In order to track system dynamics (and direction), VAR relies on moving average response simulations. Moving average response involves introducing a shock to a variable in the system and tracking out movements in the other variables using the VAR estimates for computing a forecast. Shocking a variable, in our case, means increasing the independent series by one standard deviation and estimating the impact the increase has on the other endogenous series in the system (Wood and Peake, 1998).

To control for economic conditions and ongoing war, we enter quarterly unemployment and the log of cumulative war dead into each VAR system as exogenous variables with no lags. This approach is sometimes termed ARX modeling (Judge et al., 1988). We use no additional lags on unemployment and war dead because these factors are unlikely to be affected by force short of war, perceptions of the economy, or approval levels. This approach provides an excellent control for real-world economic conditions and ongoing war.

**FINDINGS**

The statistical results of the VAR are presented in Table 2. The first question we seek to answer is whether or not a diversion in the public’s concern for the economy actually occurs as a response to presidential force. Does presidential force have a public agenda-setting effect? According to the Granger F-tests presented in Table 2, when force levels are high, public concern for the economy is significantly affected. The F-test for force level is a statistically significant determinant of public concern for the economy. As we would expect, public concern for the economy proves to be inertial; prior public concern for the economy influences current public concern. Despite this high inertia, force apparently has an important effect on public concern for the economy. To assess the direction of the effect, we must turn to the moving average response graphs.

The moving average responses are presented in Figure 1. If force creates a diversionary effect, then the relationship between the two variables (force level and public concern for the economy) should be negative. Figure 1 is organized so that the responses to increases in force level are shown in the first column of graphs. When force levels shift upward, public concern for the economy shifts downward for several quarters following the increased force levels. For every one standard deviation-simulated increase in force level, there is an estimated one-third of a standard deviation decrease in public concern for the economy over the next year. For example, according to the simulations, a shift of force level by three results in public concern for the economy to shift downward by about nine percent over the next year. Public concern for the economy is unlikely to shift quickly in response to force, given the importance of economic conditions and public perceptions of those conditions. A nine percent estimated change over one year is significant, however, especially when
cumulative effects from other foreign policy events on public opinion are taken into account. Clearly, the results suggest that a diversion does occur among the public when presidents use force abroad. The diversion effect may be long-lived, especially if force is sustained, unlike the short-lived gains often seen from rallies in public approval.

### Table 2
Granger Exogeneity F-Tests for the Diversionary Model, Controlling for Unemployment and War

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>F-Statistic</th>
<th>Causation?</th>
<th>Dependent Variable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Force level</td>
<td>2.54</td>
<td>→</td>
<td>Public concern for the economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.059)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public concern for the economy</td>
<td>146.82</td>
<td>→</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.000)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presidential approval</td>
<td>0.305</td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
<td>Public concern for the economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.822)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment</td>
<td>1.09</td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
<td>Public concern for the economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.279)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cumulative war dead</td>
<td>0.136</td>
<td>(1.09)</td>
<td>Public concern for the economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.892)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

| Force level                      | 2.11        | →          | Force level                 |
|                                  | (.100)      |            |                             |
| Public concern for the economy   | 2.41        | →          |                             |
|                                  | (.069)      |            |                             |
| Presidential approval            | 0.153       | (1.09)     | Presidential approval       |
|                                  | (.923)      |            |                             |
| Unemployment                     | 3.00        | (1.09)     | Presidential approval       |
|                                  | (.003)      |            |                             |
| Cumulative war dead              | -2.13       | (1.09)     | Presidential approval       |
|                                  | (.035)      |            |                             |

| Force level                      | 0.457       | Presidential approval |
|                                  | (.713)      |                        |
| Public concern for the economy   | 5.37        | →                      |
|                                  | (.001)      |                        |
| Presidential approval            | 33.17       | →                      |
|                                  | (.000)      |                        |
| Unemployment                     | 1.44        | (1.09)                 |
|                                  | (.151)      |                        |
| Cumulative War Dead              | -2.26       | (1.09)                 |
|                                  | (.025)      |                        |

*Note:* Table entries are F-statistics testing causation between blocks of coefficients of the independent variable (with 3 quarters worth of lags) on the dependent variable in time 0. *P*-values are in parentheses. Unemployment and cumulative war dead (logged) at lag 0 are included as exogenous variables to control for the contemporaneous effects of economic conditions and war. The N is 184 quarters (1949 through 1994). The values entered for unemployment and war dead are t-statistics.
Next, we turn to the question: Do public opinion and macroeconomic concerns contribute to U.S. force levels? Diversionary theory, in its most basic form, suggests these variables provide motivations for presidents to use force (a reason to shift attention). While we lack any notable data that can test this directly, determining whether or not a relationship exists in the data may be suggestive. According to the results in Table 2, unemployment significantly impacts force level. The relationship is highly significant and positive. In addition, according to the Granger F-tests, public concern for the economy contributes to force level. When we examine the moving average responses in Figure 1, we see that the direction of the relationship between current concern for the economy and future force levels is difficult to discern,
given that the slightly negative response is within the confidence interval. Therefore, it is not prudent to conclude a significant directional relationship exists. There also appears to be a significant negative relationship between cumulative war dead and force, which is not unexpected given previous findings in the literature. This indicates that ongoing war limits a president’s options with regard to force (see DeRouen, 2000; Meernik and Waterman, 1996).

While force appears more common following upturns in unemployment, it is imprudent to conclude, given this analysis, that presidents are motivated to use force for direct domestic political reasons. Force levels do not increase following changes in presidential approval, providing further indication that direct domestic political concerns may not prove important to the president’s ultimate decision to use force. On this question, our findings are inconclusive in discerning the effect of opinion on force levels and the data provided cannot directly address presidential motivation.

Finally, which variables have the greatest impact on presidential approval? Many previous studies have suggested that rallies in presidential approval tend to follow uses of force, which is tantamount to diversion. However, other analysts have noted that approval rallies are typically short-lived responses to idiosyncratic events and are unlikely to have noticeable effects on quarterly presidential approval levels (see Brody, 1984; Edwards and Gallup, 1990; Lian and Oneal, 1993). We argue that approval rallies are different than the diversion effect discussed above. According to the results presented in Table 2, force levels have no significant causal effect on quarterly presidential approval. The F-statistic for force on approval is insignificant. Quarterly presidential approval is highly inertial, with previous approval levels being the primary determinant of current approval. It is not surprising to find no effect of force on approval, given the short-lived nature of the rally effect and that the data examined here are quarterly rather than monthly.

As expected by priming theory, public concern for the economy, which we assume means the public perceives that the economy is poor, has a deleterious effect on the president’s quarterly approval. The results presented in Table 2 suggest that public concern for the economy has a significant effect on presidential approval. The second column of graphs in Figure 1 shows the simulated impact of a one standard deviation increase in public concern for the economy (28%). We see that the relationship is negative, with the increase in public concern for the economy leading to about a half-standard deviation decrease in presidential approval over the following four quarters (a cumulative 7% decrease). Unemployment rates do not appear to significantly impact public approval. It is plausible that public perceptions of the economy are more likely to affect the public’s approval of the president than actual measures of the economy’s health. Similar patterns have been shown in voting behavior among the public, where perceptions of the economy’s health are often more important than objective indicators (Heatherington, 1996). Also, unsurprisingly, cumulative war dead has a deleterious effect on public approval. This is consistent with findings in several studies (see DeRouen, 1995, 2000).

The “economy of attention” argument developed by Wood and Peake (1998) suggests that diversion occurs because media and public attention are scarce, or zero sum. Because of this scarcity, high-profile events (such as uses of force short of war) draw so much attention that they significantly impact the agenda. The public’s atten-
tion is drawn to foreign policy in response to an event (due to increased media coverage and presidential attention to the related issues). Scarcity in attention suggests that the upsurge in attention to issues surrounding the event draw the public’s attention away from other important issues (such as the economy). When presidents use force, they dramatically highlight the importance of foreign policy, increasing media attention to related issues and decreasing public concern for unrelated issues.

Secondly, the analysis suggests a plausible, indirect effect of force on presidential approval through the priming of the public’s political evaluations. Force directly effects the salience of international issues in the eyes of the public, leading many among the public to base their evaluation of the president on his handling of foreign policy (Edwards, et al., 1995). In turn, this may lead to a modest boost in approval in the long term, assuming that the president deals with the international issue capably. The findings indicate that increased public concern for the economy shifts approval downward. If presidents can depress concern for the economy through their international activities (force being just one example), they may in turn impact their approval down the road. This would certainly be a lengthy process, quite different from the rally effect identified in previous research. Also, such behavior may lack presidential utility given the risks inherent in using force abroad. Presidents may choose less dramatic activities in order to focus attention on foreign policy issues. The effects these activities have on the agenda are unclear. However, recent research on substitutability has begun to address such questions (e.g. Regan 2000).

CONCLUSION

Previous research has not produced a consensus on either the cause or effects of presidential uses of force short of war. Much of this research has made the implicit assumption that evidence of a rally effect is tantamount to diversion. This may not be the case and deserves closer examination. We tested for observable evidence of diversion associated with force and found that uses of force tend to lead to decreases in public concern for the economy in the quarters that follow, but not to significant quarterly approval rallies for the president. Several scholars have suggested that, since the rally effect is ephemeral or even irrelevant, the political attractiveness of diversionary force in the face of domestic problems is minimal (e.g., Brody, 1984; Lian and Oneal, 1993; Meernik and Waterman, 1996). However, our results reveal an impact from force that lasts for months, even when controlling for the economy.

Our shift in focus notes scholarship that has addressed presidential agenda-setting, particularly presidential attempts to shift focus or change the subject. Recent analyses are critical of the president’s agenda-setting capacity in foreign policy (Edwards and Wood, 1999; Peake, 2001; Wood and Peake, 1998). These studies suggest that American presidents are primarily responsive to the media and uncontrollable international events when deciding which issues to discuss publicly. However, these studies have not explicitly taken into account presidential decisions to use force beyond the president speaking publicly on the issue. In so doing, their focus on presidential speech instead of action may have underestimated the impact of presidential attempts to influence the agenda. The present study clarifies the potential agenda-setting influence of presidents within the “economy of attention” framework.
that governs agenda-setting.

Agenda-setting theory tells us that presidential force (arguably the most dramatic of presidential events) is likely to impact public attention to issues, which may in turn indirectly influence presidential approval by priming the public’s evaluation. The agenda-setting model appears to do a good job of accounting for the effects of force on diversion. The simple rally effect explanation of the domestic benefits of force does not satisfy theoretically. Our results suggest that presidents have plausible incentives for forceful actions, which may include indirect effects on public approval and direct effects on the public’s agenda. Of course, these benefits are often outweighed by the inherent risks associated with using force and are mitigated by opportunities dependent on the international environment (DeRouen, 1995; Fordham, 2000).

Future research should concentrate on the ability of the president to use the media to shift public attention by using force abroad. The development of this article relied upon the assumption that presidential force substantially increases media attention to foreign policy issues (see LoTiempo and Eldred, 2000). Better understanding of the dynamics of force requires an analysis of the media’s agenda as an intervening variable between the president and public opinion. However, given the data-intensive requirements of collecting a media agenda measure over decades of time (see Woolley, 2000), we leave that effort for future study. Another fertile area for research could be based upon the substitutability literature (see Most and Starr, 1989; Clark, 1999; Regan, 2000). Scholars can test for substitutability between force and non-forceful agenda-setting by creating another endogenous variable that captures non-forceful means of diverting, such as foreign travel, treaties, speeches, and summits or other visible actions (see Brace and Hinckley, 1992). While these behaviors are less risky than force, the benefits in terms of agenda-setting (focusing attention) are not likely to be as great, as suggested by recent analysis on presidential agenda-setting in foreign policy (Peake, 1999).

Our analysis, as is the case with other research on presidential force, raises important normative questions that are beyond the scope of this article. While we clearly observe a diversionary effect, we cannot assume that presidents initiate force in order to divert public attention or indirectly influence their approval ratings. Our data do not directly address presidential motivations as to the effect of force. To demonstrate that presidents use the military in diversionary missions, the use of force decision process must be further explored.

NOTES

1. Some of these studies rely on the Militarized Interstate Dispute (MID) data set to measure uses of force. However, Fordham (2000) concludes that the MID data are not particularly amenable to studies of force short of war.

2. The ability to set the agenda implies the president has a variety of powers and that presidents can probably choose from a host of policy options. In other words, the president has the ability to substitute foreign policy (Most and Starr, 1989; Regan, 2000). Leaders may choose less risky options than force when faced with domestic problems. First it should be kept in mind that our measure of force is NOT dichotomous (or polychotomous). It is not an ‘either–or’ measure that denotes force or no force. Instead our force variable measures quarterly force levels. This captures that leaders may, in some
quarters, resort to policy options other than force. In these quarters force levels will be lower. We agree that force is risky and somewhat rare but there is strong evidence that, wielded carefully, it can shape domestic politics. Second, the focus of this paper is whether force can divert. We do not deny that a president faced with domestic problems may resort to policies other than force. However, our research design is not undermined by this possibility. We simply are more interested in whether force does indeed divert attention away from a weak economy. The agenda-setting argument is that presidents can use the media to drive attention in one direction at the expense of the previous direction because there is an economy of attention. In our case, we argue that forceful quarters drive attention away from quarters with weak economies.

3. Blechman and Kaplan (1978, pp. 12–14) listed five conditions an event must satisfy if it is to be considered a use of force short of war: 1) there must have been a change in disposition of some branch of the armed forces such as mobilization, evacuation, reconnaissance, a blockade or use of firepower; 2) the NSC had to have initiated a conscious act; 3) the goals of the use of force must have been to gain influence in the target states; 4) the intent could not have been the initiation of a full-scale war; 5) the ultimate goal had to have been to elicit a certain behavior in the target state.

4. Several scholars have debated the role of opportunities (e.g., Leeds and Davis, 1997; Meernik, 1994). This line of reasoning suggests that the frequency of force may largely be a function of the number of opportunities a president has in a given time period. Previous analyses of force that use our measure of force while controlling for opportunities have not changed the impact of the independent variables (e.g., DeRouen, 1995, 2000). The set of international crises as defined by Brecher and Wilkenfeld (1997), in which the U.S. was involved during our study period, highly correlates with uses of force. In other words, our measure of force approximates the universe of opportunities.

5. VAR includes a predetermined number of lags of each variable in each equation in the system. We determined lag lengths using methods based on Simms (1980). The Simms procedure entails sequentially adding lags to the VAR system and testing for the statistical significance of each additional lag using a modified F test. We tested lags 1 through 10 for the VAR system and determined the appropriate lag to be three quarters.

6. To facilitate interpretation of the moving average responses, and because the variables have no natural metric, we standardize all variables prior to analysis ((x-mean)/standard deviation). All initial shocks are one standard deviation in magnitude. Because innovations are correlated between variables we plot Choleski-orthogonalized responses to one standard-deviation simulated shocks.

7. For a more formal discussion of VAR, see Judge et al. (1988) or Enders (1995).

8. A force level of three is equivalent to a minor force component in a major region or a major force component in a minor region. A force level of three is substantial; however, recent uses of force had much higher values on this variable. For example, the quarter that included the invasion of Panama (in December 1989) had a force level value of 7, up from 4 in the previous quarter. The invasion, which essentially was a major use of force following a minor use of force, should have led to the estimated 9% decrease in concern for the economy. At the time of the invasion, public concern for the economy stood at 38%. The next year, the value had decreased to 21%. The large drop in public concern for the economy suggests that the effects of force (and other foreign policy events) on public opinion are cumulative, so a particularly active president in this realm can impact the public’s agenda even more substantially than the 9% estimate. Also, we must be careful not to suggest that the drop in public concern for the economy in 1990 was primarily a result of force in Panama. While the use of force contributed to the decline in public concern for the economy, other intervening factors, such as media coverage of other foreign policy issues and other foreign policy-related events and actions by the president, are likely contributors as well. The decline in public concern for the economy during 1990 was likely a result of the heavily covered foreign-policy events in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. However, since we use VAR to isolate the effects of force, we can be reasonably certain that force leads to some diversion effect.

9. The entry for unemployment and cumulative war dead are T-statistics and the direction of the relationships can be discerned without moving average response graphs (as there are no multiple lags).

10. It is important to recognize that MAR graphs are often subject to instability, dependent upon the ordering of the variables in the VAR analysis. Various orders were used in order to ascertain if a problem existed. In all cases, the differences between the resultant graphs were negligible, indicating that ordering is not a problem in this case.
REFERENCES


CONTRIBUTORS


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