The Influence of Public Opinion on Post-Cold War U.S. Military Interventions

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ABSTRACT:
The current academic literature predominantly concludes that a president willing to use force abroad enjoys a substantial leeway with American public opinion. These studies typically research the initial decision to intervene, yet fail to examine military options put on the table and the chosen strategy to sustain and win a war: financial and human means, conduct, objectives, duration, supranational mandate, and communication strategy. These studies also fail to unveil the way the executive branch attempts to manage public opinion constraints while at the same time reaching its political objectives. Only by including these considerations can one truly appraise the president’s margin for maneuver with regards to public opinion. Indeed, the president is sometimes compelled to compromise between his desired political and military objectives and what public opinion is willing to tolerate. How is this compromise found? What are the consequences on the ground and on the objectives of American foreign policy since the end of the Cold War?

The question of the influence of public opinion on military interventions is essential to understanding post–Cold War and post–9/11 conflicts; interventions often characterized by their long duration in distant countries with unclear strategic interests. If public opinion is often ready to give the president the leeway to embark on a military intervention, the public’s tolerance is difficult to maintain in the long term when the troops are on the battlefield and victory appears difficult to define and achieve. On the ground, the enemy has learned how to take advantage of democracies and exploit their weakness by terrorizing their population in order to force a withdrawal. The former Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic, the terrorist Osama bin Laden, as well as the Hutu Power in Rwanda knew how to adapt their tactics to this reality. The most commonly cited case is the retreat of American forces from Somalia in 1993 after the broadcast coverage of the Black Hawk Down incident, during which 18 Army Rangers were killed. In order to maintain public support as long as possible for interventions far away from Americans’ day-to-day concerns, the United States often adapted its military strategy and tactics to the detriment of the desired objectives. As a result, and contrary to the predominant literature, this lecture will attempt to demonstrate that public opinion often had a major impact on military interventions by analyzing 5 cases of interventions (Haiti 1994; Rwanda 1994; Afghanistan 2001; Iraq 2003) and 2 cases of military escalation (Iraq 2007; Afghanistan 2009).

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