

ISSA Proceedings 2002 - Perceived Opposition As Argument In Formulating U.S. Terrorism Policy



In Charles Willard's *A Theory of Argumentation* (1989), he maintained that one of the few points of agreement between argumentation theorists was that arguments require dissensus. He defined arguments as "conversations in which opposition is present" (p. 12) and built a theory of argumentation that featured opposition as a central term. He reasoned that, "To prize dissensus goes against an older tradition in Argumentation that values opposition less than the rules that constrain it" (p. 149) Through the choices inherent in opposition, Willard maintained that argument theory could become a theory of freedom worthy of being embraced by all.

Opposition, when employed in certain ways, has embodied the impulse of freedom within communities. However, opposition has also functioned as a constraint for societal actors. Advocates have summoned it to remove options normally available. In particular, "perceived opposition" has worked to constrain choice. Here, I am suggesting a companion phrase to the notion of perceived majorities as introduced by Robert Entman and Susan Herbst (2001). Seeking to create a more nuanced understanding of public opinion, Entman and Herbst have recognized the role of perception in discussions of what the public wants or believes. They have argued that perceived majorities may be more important than even public opinion polls in appeals "to motivate elite behavior on the one hand or legitimate it on the other" (Entman and Herbst, 2001, 221).

At first glance, perceived majorities and perceived opposition may appear synonymous. In practice, however, they have been distinct. The U.S. leadership has not required a majority of the American public to oppose certain actions before they have considered arguments from perceived opposition. A vocal minority has been sufficient to dissuade presidents from particular courses of action. And in some cases, presidential aides generalize various levels of opposition to be tantamount to a discord characteristic of the whole.

Previous scholarship in the area has tended to focus on perceived majorities,

rather than perceived opposition. Most studies that have explored perceived majorities by examining arguments either in the media (e.g. Jamieson, 1992; Kennan, 1986; Demers, 1987) or before the U.S. Congress (Hogan, 1985). While one study has examined the role of perceived majorities within the decision-making discussions held within the U.S. executive branch (Winkler, 2002), it did not focus on the role of perceived opposition within that discourse. The oversight for understanding foreign-policy decision-making has been unfortunate, for as Robert Newman (1982) has noted, "Some decisions, including all crisis decisions, are made by the sovereign, which in the United States means the president plus whatever advisers he chooses to consult" (p. 314).

This study examines the case study of U.S. terrorism policy formation to begin to understand how perceived opposition has functioned within the discourse of the political elite. Drawn exclusively from the background papers of the Carter, Reagan, and first Bush administrations, it unveils how concerns about perceived opposition contributed to the formulation of the U.S. public communication strategies and American military planning in response to terrorism.

Avoiding Vietnam

Using arguments from perceived opposition has been a common strategy of constraining terrorism policy options in internal discussions of the U.S. political elite. While perceived opposition functioned in many ways and in many historical contexts, this analysis focuses on a particular subset of the argumentative approach. Specifically, it examines how memories of the Vietnam War have been invoked to constrain policy options not perceived as favored by the public. The American loss in Vietnam has been the single most recalled historical incident in the written, internally available deliberations about U.S. terrorism responses. Thus, any theorizing about perceived opposition to terrorism policy in the U.S. context requires examination of interpretative frameworks that the nation's political elite have placed on the memory of Vietnam.

America's enemies in the terrorism arena have reinforced the connection of Vietnam with arguments from perceived opposition. They have publicly invoked Vietnam to warn the U.S. leadership against engaging in acts potentially opposed by the public. The behaviors of the captors in the Iranian hostage crisis serve as to illustrate the move. From the early days of the crisis, those who held the embassy compared their quest to the student anti-war protests of the 1960s. They identified themselves with the American protesters by stressing their standing as university students. Generally, they referred to themselves as "the Muslim

Students Following the Iman's Line" and issued more than fifty communiqués to the world media that highlighted their student status. In an explicit reference to the Vietnam experience, the captors released a statement that proclaimed, "the American people have the power to force Carter to return the Shah and the wealth he has 'plundered', in the same way you forced your previous President to end the Vietnam War" (Iran-Cravath, et. al., 1979). The Iranian leadership announced that they did not believe that the Americans would be crazy enough to undertake a war against Iran, arguing it would "be worse than in Vietnam, as this region is of central interest to all of mankind, and war could have grave repercussions in every way" (Iran-Cravath, et. al., 1979). Vietnam had become a one-term sum of perceived opposition by the American culture.

The Vietnam War also reinforced the vulnerability of the United States to the tactics of terrorists. It did so because of the repeated association of the Vietnam conflict with terrorism. John Kennedy was the first president to publicly associate terrorism with events in South Vietnam. In an open letter to President Diem of South Vietnam, Kennedy applauded the Vietnamese people for their refusal to submit to communist terror (Kennedy, 1962). The Johnson administration followed with more than one hundred public statements linking communist aggression and terrorism. Nixon (1974) publicly announced that he would employ a public stance of less inflammatory, more conciliatory rhetoric that displayed "a degree of restraint unprecedented in the annals of war" (p. 585). While Nixon generally refrained from public mention of Viet Cong terrorism, his negotiators at the Paris peace talks routinely reinforced the theme that, "each day innocent civilians die because of [the Viet Cong's] tactics of terror and violence" (Lodge, 1969, 419). With terrorism and the Vietnam War linked for more than a decade in elite public discourse, the withdrawal of American troops from the region ensured that an ongoing legacy of the conflict would be the vulnerability of the United States to terrorism.

Vietnam has become a collective public memory that connected terrorism, public opposition, and vulnerability. Available to those who would both vilify and defend the leadership of the United States, the Vietnam experience has functioned as linguistic shorthand for arguments from perceived opposition. Within the internal workings of the government, Vietnam has served as an emotive argumentative tool for guiding appropriate action.

This study explores a range of presidential contexts for the use of arguments for

perceived opposition in deliberations about U.S. terrorism policy. It relies on the three most recent presidential administrations that have released a significant portion of the background papers. It does so with the hope of uncovering how arguments from perceived opposition function in practice. As the analysis will show, the Vietnam War experience functioned in increasingly complex ways over the course of the Carter, Reagan, and Bush administrations.

The Carter Administration

During the Carter administration, Vietnam served as a situational constraint that prompted a public communication strategy more conducive to future uses of military force. Carter's advisors encouraged him to respond to the combined national experiences of Vietnam and Iran in his public statements. Congressional liaisons Anne Wexler and Al From, for example, encouraged Carter to adopt a security theme in his State of the Union address that responded to both the public's concern about Iranian terrorism and its anxiety about the Vietnam War. They argued,

Americans have traditionally felt secure, part of the greatest and strongest nation on earth. But the past two decades have shaken that feeling. The Vietnam War and recent incidents like the Iranian and Afghan crises have pierced the aura of our military invincibility. The energy shortages and persistent inflation have made Americans aware that their energy and economic security is no longer in their hands... Security is a word that people can both easily understand and identify with... [Security] is something that Americans want in their gut, particularly in unsettling times like we have today. For that reason, your political adversaries will find it very difficult to attack the security framework (Memo, Wexler & From, 1980).

While Carter accepted the advice to stress security as the central theme of his State of the Union Address, he stopped short of relenting to suggestions that he actually use military force to punish Iran. Despite the opinions of Chief of Staff Hamilton Jordan that "a measured punitive act is absolutely essential to your own re-election and to America's image in the world" (Memo, Jordan, undated), or of National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski that a military reaction "could galvanize national support and cause a patriotic upsurge" (Memo, Brzezinski, 1980), Carter refrained from a punitive use of force.

Likewise, Carter never seriously considered a lengthy military engagement with Iran that might have spawned public opposition reminiscent of that experienced

during the Vietnam War. His overriding concern was the Soviet Union, a nation he concluded was poised to intervene in Iran (Carter, 1982). Internal administration analyses at the time detailed the dangerous consequences of a Soviet takeover of Iran: "In geo-political terms, the Soviets would be in a position from Iran to dominate the Middle East and South Asia, and ultimately to deny Gulf oil to the West... A successful Soviet operation in Iran, even if it did not lead to a cut-off of other Gulf oil, would affect the power balance almost as decisively as a long-term disruption of that supply" (Iran-11/79). A top-secret report distributed to Carter's Special Coordinating Committee for the crisis concluded, "The effect of Soviet control of [Persian gulf oil], either through overt military action or by internal subversion or political intimidation, would destroy the free market economies and dissolve our alliances in Europe and in East Asia"(Building Up our Deterrent Capabilities, 1980). Unwilling to risk a confrontation with the Soviet Union for control of the region, Carter chose to reject a use of military force.

Having emphasized security as the nation's primary goal in his State of the Union address and subsequently refusing to use military force in the face of another American humiliation, Carter created a political exigency for new leadership. A top secret review presented to the Special Coordinating Committee for the crisis confirmed that Carter knew his lack of action was producing an untenable political situation. The report warned, "On a number of specific issues, notably Iran and the Middle East, we are in fact losing momentum, with potentially very destructive consequences for our interests" (Foreign Policy, 1980). The review was prophetic. By July of 1980, Carter's approval rating had fallen to an all-time low of twenty-one percent (Greenstein, 2000).

In short, the Carter administration was concerned about the memory of the Vietnam War, but not in a manner consistent with arguments from perceived opposition. Carter's aides viewed Vietnam as a sign of national vulnerability. They did not argue from public opposition because geo-political considerations removed the option of military force from serious presidential consideration.

The Reagan Administration

The Reagan administration, by sharp contrast, was engaged militarily in several regions of the world and made frequent arguments from perceived opposition in its internal discussions. Particularly important was the administration's desire to funnel military aid to Nicaragua, an action feared according to aides by the perceived majority in the mid-1980s as leading to '*another Vietnam*' with US

forces becoming entangled in a drawn-out, internal conflict in which *both sides are viewed negatively*" (Memo, Smalley, 1985). In an attempt to gain popular support, the administration explicitly assessed the impact of the Vietnam War on public opinion. That assessment, delivered to the Secretary of State, concluded: Prior to Vietnam, American generally oscillated between attitudes favoring internationalism or isolationism. The U.S. was either involved in international affairs or it was not, and the public left the particulars up to the decision-makers. Since Vietnam, a new dimension has been added to American foreign policy attitudes: the desired level of militant or cooperative activism. American now have opinions not only on whether or not the U.S. should be involved in world affairs, but how it should be involved. Particular policy decisions are not accepted at face value (Memo, Redmon, 1988).

By emphasizing the desired involvement by the American public in determining the conduct of military affairs, the memo reinforced the role of perceived opposition in the policy formulations of the Reagan administration.

In fact, the State Department analysis concluded that perceived public opposition should form the heart of the administration's public diplomacy strategy. It did so due to the myriad of actors that the public opposed. On the one hand, the memo argued, the public opposed the Contras. The citizenry's reasons included, "Americans do not believe aiding the contras will improve chances for democracy in Nicaragua; Americans question the moral legitimacy of the contras as freedom fighters...; many Americans remain fearful that Nicaragua will lead to a Vietnam-type conflict; and in a time of funding scarcity and budget deficit, many Americans believe that there are better things to spend their money on at home" (Memo, Redmon, 1988). On the other hand, the memo indicated that Americans also opposed the Sandinistas. The reasons for opposition to the Sandinista regime included, "Nicaragua threatens Central America and the U.S.; the Sandinistas exiled Catholic Bishops from Nicaragua; there has been an increase in Soviet military aid; and Nicaragua censors and bans the press" (Memo, Redmon, 1988). The memo concluded, "With the current Iranian arms-transfer, contra fund-diversion controversy and without a viable alternative to the contras, opinions are not likely to change on this issue. The best public diplomacy in this situation is to focus attention on the abuses of the Sandinistas and overlook even discussing the contras" (Memo, Redmon, 1988). Opposition functioned as an argumentative tool by which the administration attempted to persuade the public to support its existing policy against terrorism in Nicaragua through obfuscation in the

aftermath of the Iran-contra scandal.

Perceived opposition further became an argument for strategically misrepresenting the realities of foreign policy to the American public. Newt Gingrich, the minority whip of the House of Representatives and a close political ally of the President, for example, argued that the Vietnam-Watergate era had clouded the media's ability to understand Reagan's foreign policy approach to terrorism. He wrote to Reagan's Chief of Staff Ken Dubertstein, "The American news media are still, in large part, covering Viet Nam and Watergate. That is, they're conditioned to assume their government is being deceptive and/or dishonest" (Memo, Gingrich, 1983). Within such a climate, Gingrich maintained, the administration could not effectively communicate its new vision, strategy or operational context.

Ironically, Gingrich's solution to the problem involved Reagan using calculated deception with the public. Writing at a time when the United States was involved in violent outbreaks in four places around the globe, Gingrich reasoned, "Americans must find some general wisdom and common viewpoint within which to explain the overall picture" (Memo, Gingrich, 1983). He warned, "if Reagan gets bogged down in the technical detail of each fight in each theater he begins to look like a man who has walked into a room and started to randomly pick fights with people." The consequences according to Gingrich were ominous. He concluded, "Since there is no time in American memory that we have been involved in this much violence in this many places, it will begin to sink in to many Americans that if they are separate incidents, then maybe we ought to get a less violent-prone President. After all, if he has found four different areas of tension simultaneously, maybe he really is a trouble maker" (Memo, Gingrich, 1983).

As a solution Gingrich suggested that Reagan simplify the problem by blaming the Soviet Union for all acts of terrorism. He insisted that such an approach would yield political advantages for the sitting President. He reasoned, "If in fact we are faced with Soviet trained, financed and guided terrorists, guerilla and military coups then it is Andropov rather than Reagan who is the real cause of all the problems. Then the American people can focus their anger on Andropov, the KGB, and the Soviet Union" (Memo, Gingrich, 1983).

A December 1981 report of the National Foreign Assessment Center of the CIA revealed that Gingrich's suggestion was pure fiction according to intelligence at the time. The report noted, "The actions of some terrorist groups may influence future behavior of other groups, but we see no evidence of a central coordinating

authority... The US is facing terrorists threats from several quarters which, although unconnected, will challenge the US ability to react to widely dispersed and potentially serious international terrorist attacks” (Growing Terrorist Danger, 1981). In a recent interview, Vincent Cannistraro, Reagan’s Director of National Security Council Intelligence, remembered how the administration resolved the discrepancy. He recalled, “[CIA Director] Bill Casey, had already been trying to cook the analytical books on terrorism, particularly by the pressure he had placed on the analysts to come up with an analysis that said the Soviet Union was behind these acts of terrorism”(Cannistraro, 2001).

In sum, members of the Reagan administration and their close allies in the U.S. Congress used arguments from perceived opposition primarily to garner a change in the leadership’s public diplomacy strategy. Such arguments were used to rationalize public strategies of obfuscation and dishonesty in order to maximize the chances the current administration would remain in power and would effectuate his preferred policy options.

The Bush Administration

By far, the most extensive use of arguments from perceived opposition related to the Vietnam War occurred during the Persian Gulf conflict of 1991. Echoing the conclusions of Reagan’s aides, the Bush administration’s arguments for perceived opposition focused both on whether to go to war and on how to fight in the conflict. Additionally, members of the political elite used perceived opposition to argue for certain U.S. actions in a post-war environment.

Bush administration officials used assessments of initial public support for the Vietnam War to help guide their thinking about how to frame the rationale for using U.S. troops in the Gulf. After noting that the primary reason why the public supported the Vietnam War was to stop communism, one administration analysis feared the absence of the communist motive would enhance public opposition for military intervention into the Gulf:

The present situation in the Persian Gulf does not feature the same compelling cold war motivations as earlier conflicts. The need to destroy Iraq’s nuclear and chemical capabilities, the need to protect U.S. hostages, and the removal of Saddam Hussein from power are all factors that may be able to fill the gap left by the absence of cold war labels, but not one of these justifications is as deeply rooted in American culture as the cold war psychology was in earlier conflicts (Historical Overview, no date).

Without an enemy initially capable of uniting the public behind the assumption of

commander in chief powers, the Bush administration subsequently developed a highly orchestrated campaign of vilifying the Iraqi leader. It included accounts of Iraqi soldiers removing premature babies from Kuwait incubators. As was the case with his predecessor, the public diplomacy strategy designed to unite the public once again proved false, with Amnesty International having to publicly recount its initial verification of the incubator incident due to a lack of credible witnesses (MacArthur, 1992).

Besides provided a rationale for strategic misrepresentation of the reasons to go to war, arguments from perceived opposition justified the need to collect monetary support for the war effort from America's coalition partners. Several internal memoranda related to the Gulf war stressed the public's unwillingness to pay for the costs of defending Kuwait. One narrative based on serial national surveys of public opinion concluded:

The main reservation Americans have about the war is financial, that is, when the subjects are money being sent abroad that could be used at home and the allies not paying their fair share of the costs. The public is far less likely to question the war in terms of its death toll, its triggering a wave of terrorist reprisals, or its leading to either a more aggressive or over-confident U.S. foreign policy. While the public is supportive of a U.S. military deterrent in the Middle East and joint military actions as part of the new world order, there is an insularity in American attitudes when the issue of costs is raised that keeps the public's future assessments of U.S. foreign policy in doubt (Americans Talk Issues, 1991).

Despite the fact that Vietnam is not explicitly referenced in the argument, the prior conflict functioned as the point of comparison with current public attitudes. During the Vietnam War, concerns about high casualty rates and increased terrorist attacks constrained the actions taken by the Johnson administration (Telegram, 1964). The Bush analysis argued that those concerns were less pronounced than public opposition to spending substantial U.S. funds on the war effort. Apparently mindful of the public opposition to the high costs of the war effort, Bush sent Secretary of State James Baker abroad to collect funds from coalition partners in support of the war.

Administration aides also used perceived opposition to lobby for how the Persian Gulf War should be fought. Specifically, the possibility of a non-supportive public became for the rationale for planning a short war with few casualties. The administration reviewed John Mueller's historical assessment of the Vietnam and

Korean conflicts to gauge the likely impact of casualties on public opinion. The summary provided to the Persian Gulf Working Group argued, “public support in both conflicts fell in direct relation to casualties suffered (killed, hospitalized, wounded, missing) - ‘every time American casualties increased by a factor of 10, support for the war dropped by about 15 percentage points’... Both conflicts lost their clear majority support at about the 60,000 casualties level (Historical Overview, undated). The summary reconsidered Mueller figures in light of their current war effort and concluded, “60,000 casualties today would probably include 15,000 troops killed in action” (Historical Overview, undated). The Opinion Analysis Staff of the Bureau of Public Affairs in the State Department also chose to update Mueller figures with contemporaneous polling. They reported, “majority support for the war hinges largely on confidence that it will be won in less than a year and takes the lives of fewer than 5,000 U.S. troops”(PA/Opinion Analysis, 1991). Many in the Bush administration concluded that there was perceived opposition to re-experiencing the loss of life that could accompany another Vietnam.

Such estimates must have been particularly troubling for high-level administration officials given their own estimates of likely casualties in the conflict. Worst-case scenarios presented in a private briefing of Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney and General Colin Powell in December estimated that up to 20,000 American casualties could be expected in a military confrontation in the Gulf (Woodward, 1991). Given that the predicted casualties far exceeded those considered acceptable to the public in the administration’s own analyses, it is not surprising that Bush halted the ground war against Iraq in approximately one hundred hours. Allied forces in the conflict lost six hundred and eighty-nine soldiers, a figure safely below the threshold for public backlash to the war effort.

In the immediate aftermath of the Iraqi surrender, Bush aides used arguments from perceived opposition to expand the strategies related to and the relief efforts towards Kurdish refugees. Not unlike the criticism the U.S. had experienced in the Vietnam conflict for walking away from its ally and allowing the slaughter of innocent South Vietnamese, some in the Bush administration harbored concerns that members of the international community would condemn the U.S. for abandoning Iraqi citizens who had risen up against Saddam Hussein. William Rugh of the U.S. Information Agency argued to Richard Haass and David Welch of the National Security Council, “The wide-scale perception in every country where there is public access to news of the unfolding tragedy [of the Kurdish refugees],

is that the United States is doing little or nothing to deal with the problem that many associate directly with the fruits of our military defeat of Saddam Hussein. We are seen as walking away from a human tragedy we helped to create” (Memo, Rugh, 1991). In response to the perceived opposition, Rugh advocated expanding relief efforts, maintaining rhetorical pressure on Saddam Hussein, encouraging active support of coalition partners, calling for assistance and cooperation from Muslim allies in helping with the relief effort, sponsoring a UN resolution of condemnation, implementing U.N. Security Council resolution 687 as it related to Iraqi human rights behavior, asking for private assistance to the Kurds, and expanding Voice of American programming on the topic (Memo, Rugh, 1991). Bush officials finally used arguments from perceived opposition as a rationale for why the United States should participate in joint military actions as part of an international coalition in the future. Internal analyses concluded that as a direct result of the Persian Gulf conflict, the public was less inclined to support unilateral U.S. action abroad. Noting a change in public sentiment, the summary of a series of national surveys argued,

The new world order, for most Americans, includes the legitimate use of force by the United States, if it acts in concert with other nations, where the financial costs are broadly shared. In the aftermath of the war, people have emerged very supportive of global and multi-lateral action that takes on global threats - including chemical, biological and nuclear weapons, as well as global environmental problems. Indeed, the public now wants the United Nations, rather than the United States, to take the lead role in addressing world problems. There is a modest majority for the U.S. playing a lead and more pragmatic military role as long as the costs are broadly shared (Americans Talk Issues, 1991).

By stressing public opposition to unilateral military roles for the U.S., the argument built on the Reagan administration’s analysis of a growing group of internationalists. It further set the stage for Bush’s successor, who would negotiate more bilateral security agreements than any other president in U.S. history.

In short, arguments from perceived opposition appeared to be critical factors in motivating the behavior of U.S. political elites during the Persian Gulf conflict. It warranted particular public justifications for going to war, appropriate behaviors of America’s coalition partners, proper conduct of wartime operations, and a fitting role for the U.S. in the aftermath of the armed conflict.

Conclusions

Arguments from perceived opposition, like the persistent legacy of the Vietnam War, will remain a mainstay of foreign policy deliberations amongst members of the U.S. political elite. While many in the Bush administration and in media circles publicly pronounced the Persian Gulf conflict to “have put the Vietnam War experience behind us,” Bush’s own polls reported that a majority of the public disagreed with that sentiment (Americans Talk Issues, 1991). The institutional requirements of the presidency related to commander in chief powers, coupled with the generic constraints of war rhetoric, ensure that perceived opposition will continue to function as a central argument in private discussions of U.S. terrorism policy.

The significance of studying arguments from perceived opposition has become apparent from this historical overview of three presidential administrations. Not only are such arguments influential in development of America’s foreign policy, they are similarly powerful in the development of presidential public diplomacy strategies. Given the historical relationship between arguments from perceived opposition and the use of strategic misrepresentation in public statements, scholars and members of the community alike would benefit from the explication of the argumentative form in future argumentation studies.

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