

Diversionsary Temptations: Presidential Incentives and the Political Use of Force

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation challenges the conventional notion that diversionsary use of force is an attractive option for U.S. presidents facing political difficulties. Previous empirical work found little evidence of diversion, but left open the question of why presidents do not avail themselves of that supposedly useful strategy. To address that problem, this dissertation evaluates the political gains and losses that accrue from the use of force, both absolute and relative to other actions that presidents might take, and it identifies relevant variables that predict the net benefits in a given circumstance.

Presidents do not have strong incentives for diversionsary war. Gains from force are: 1) typically modest and short lived; 2) conditional on variables not under a president's control; 3) discounted during times of political need (i.e., a "rational expectations" effect); and 4) not much larger than gains available from other, less risky actions, such as dramatic diplomatic initiatives or the de-escalation of conflicts. One notable discovery is that the use of force becomes a liability for presidents with low approval due to scandals or policy failures, but can help (slightly) presidents confronted by economic troubles.

These findings were obtained through statistical measurements of the changes in presidential approval ratings following uses of force, major diplomatic events, presidential speeches, and foreign travel by presidents, in the period 1953-2000. Historical sources and were used to identify and characterize uses of force and diplomatic events (the force data is more appropriate to the question than alternatives such as MID or ICB; the "peace event" data is wholly new). The effect of these events on presidential approval was modeled as a function of relevant variables, such as elite support, success, interests at stake, and political variables such as consumer confidence, presidential standing, and impending elections. The analysis significant advances the "rally effect" literature, both in the political relevancy and explanatory power of the variables studied, and in statistical methods to deal with event dynamics and technical problems posed by the polling data.

Further tests were conducted to determine whether presidents behave in accordance with these incentives, by modeling the frequency of presidential actions as a function of the relevant political variables. The results show that domestic political variables have only a weak influence in presidential activity, but what patterns exist are consistent with the incentive structure: uses of force become slightly more common during recessions, less common when approval is low for non-economic reasons. Likewise, "Internal Change" intervention is more frequent with popular presidents, but there are more of the well-liked "Protecting Americans" operations from presidents in trouble. Elections reduce the rate of both force and peace activity.

A rational president would rarely see force as the optimal strategy for rebuilding political support. Diversion would be attractive during recessions, when a clear opportunity to "Protect Americans" is present, and when support from the opposition party would be expected, but that combination of circumstances is unusual. In general force offers little advantage over the alternatives, and American presidents appear to heed that advice.

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Introduction

Be it thy course to busy giddy minds / with foreign quarrels

- William Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, 1598

If a woman gives you trouble, or maybe two or three...

Pick that red phone up, it's an emergency

And go to war, it's been done before, it's wag the dog!

- Mark Russell, CNN Crossfire, 1998¹

Few international relations theories have such a long pedigree as diversionary war: the notion that when faced with domestic political problems, leaders will engage their nations in foreign conflicts to distract their citizen's attention and rally them in support of the nation – and the leader. American presidents have routinely been accused of using war for personal political gain: from the War of 1812 to the invasion of Iraq in 2003, diversionary accusations accompany virtually every use of the military. It would be deeply disturbing if such charges are true, but even if they are false the cynicism the charge breeds and the excess caution it might instill are problematic enough. The accusation has such power because it is almost universally believed that regardless of whether a particular president's motives have been pure, the diversionary strategy *would* work if tried. The use

¹ Henry IV quote from Jack S. Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War: a Critique", in *Handbook of War Studies*, Manus I. Midlarsky, ed (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan press, 1989); Mark Russell from Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror* (New York: Random House, 2002), p. 358.

of force is commonly seen as a powerful, indeed, unique way to gain political support, and so we must always worry that presidents face powerful temptations wield the sword on behalf of their personal fortunes.

As universal is as the belief in the power of diversion, there is surprisingly little evidence to support that belief. Academic studies have found little evidence that U.S. presidents use military force for political purposes.² War is if anything less likely before presidential elections. Presidents with low approval ratings are less, not more likely to use the military. If diversion is so tempting, presidents have displayed admirable temperance.

Is the diversionary use of force really such an attractive strategy, however? This thesis argues that it is not: the conventional wisdom exaggerates the political power of the use of force. After measuring the political benefits of the use of force, as well as the benefits of actions other than war that presidents might use as distractions, I conclude that the benefits of the use of force are generally modest. In terms of presidential approval ratings, gains are usually modest and are not long lasting. In order to benefit at all, presidents need to find the right circumstances for intervention, and need to have the backing of Congress and media observers. Moreover, the use of force does not provide unique benefits. Presidents have almost as much to gain on average from major diplomatic activity, or even domestic policy speeches.

On the other hand, under certain circumstances military adventures would be tempting. The use of force seems especially helpful to presidents during recessions: military intervention may not distract from scandals, elections, or other political difficulties, but it does seem able to focus national attention away from poor economic performance. Large gains are possible when a particular intervention can be tied very directly to protecting American lives. These conditions do create windows where the diversionary use of force would be an attractive strategy for presidents. The attractiveness of diversion has also increased in the wake of the September 11, 2001 attacks on America, as it is now far easier to connect foreign interventions to direct threats to U.S. citizens.

² For a review of the literature, see Chapter 1, section 2.

As additional confirmation of these findings, further tests revealed that presidential behavior has been consistent with the political incentives. There is no strong relationship between political conditions and the use of force (or peace), but what relationship there is shows that the activities that would be most popular in a given situation are precisely the ones that do become more frequent under those conditions. This is exactly the pattern that would be expected if political calculations shape presidential decisions for force and other dramatic actions.

The remainder of this introduction provides an overview of the project. First the motivation for the study and its relation to the existing scholarly literature is discussed, followed by a brief description the research design, data, and methods. A summary of results is then given. Finally, the outline of the manuscript is given along with brief descriptions of each chapter..

Why study diversionary incentives?

In order to understand the temptations – or lack thereof – faced by presidents, we need to understand the potential costs and benefits of using force. The appeal of “wagging the dog” depends on the political gains that are possible from doing so – if not much benefit can be expected from launching a war, why bother? It is also important to know how the gains from the use of force compare to what might be achieved through other political strategies. If presidents can improve their standing just as much by a foreign tour full of pomp and photo ops as through airstrikes on a hapless nation, even without moral considerations one would expect a calculating executive to choose the cheaper, safer alternative.

What we need is an ability to predict what political gains would be obtained from the use of force, given the specific characteristics of that use of force and the specific political conditions of the time. It is important to know how the gains from force are affected by the conditions that create diversionary pressure in the first place. War will not be an attractive pre-election ploy even if the use of force is generally popular, for example, if the voters act as rational agents and discount obvious “October surprises”. Likewise, it is important to know how the public response to uses of force is

affected by variables that can be manipulated by presidents. A scheming executive need not draw an intervention out of a hat; if airstrikes are generally popular but the use of ground troops is not, for example, then the president would select a target that requires bombers, not boots on the ground. Similarly, we want to be able to predict the political gains of other dramatic presidential activities under those same conditions so that we can assess the relative appeal of the use of force.

Unfortunately, the international relations literature does not give us the predictive tools we need. Indeed, it has become a ritual for authors writing about diversionary war to complain that we do not know enough about the underlying mechanisms of diversion to properly specify our tests of the theory. James Meernik, for example, recently wrote that instead of focusing on the question of *when* presidents have used force, we need a better understanding of “...costs and benefits of using force in order to explain *why* presidents use force.”³

To cite some specific gaps in our knowledge, studies have come to contradictory conclusions on whether the use of force typically improves presidential approval ratings – that is, whether the so-called “rally effect” exists. As will be shown, none of the existing findings are terribly convincing given their limitations. Even less is known about the political effects of presidential actions other than the use of force, even for dramatic activities like major summits – or ending wars as opposed to starting them. Moreover, existing studies have not adequately examined the variables that a president might manipulate in order to maximize the returns from diversionary wars.

This dissertation aimed to measure the political benefits that can be obtained from the use of force, as well as from other dramatic activities that are under presidential control. Those benefits are measured in general, but also as a function of political conditions that would create diversionary pressure, such as whether the president is doing poorly in the polls or elections are pending, as well as variables that presidents could manipulate, such as the goal and the means of a military

³ James Meernik, "Domestic Politics and the Political Use of Military Force by the United States", *Political Research Quarterly*, vol. 54, no. 4 (2001), pp 889-904, p. 902. One can find similar comments ten years earlier in Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War: a Critique", or twenty five years earlier in Leo Hazelwood, "Diversion Mechanisms and Encapsulation Processes: The Domestic Conflict, Foreign Conflict Hypothesis Reconsidered", in *Sage International Yearbook of International Relations*, Pat J. McGowan, ed (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1975).

intervention. In addition to measuring these benefits, the study went on to test whether presidential behavior is consistent with presidential incentives.

The answers provided here are important for several reasons. First, there are of inherent political interest – Americans ought to know how much their presidents stand to gain through illegitimate uses of force. It appears that Americans have probably been too suspicious of their leaders – no matter how cynical presidents might be, most of the time there are simply not large gains to be had from politically motivated uses of force. Under certain conditions though – conditions that apply at the time of this writing – the diversionary use of force does become attractive. Moreover, observers should also watch for diversionary “uses of peace”: diplomatic drama can also help presidents, sometimes more than the use of force could. The signing of a bad arms control agreement or premature ending of a conflict may not be as disturbing as the thought of politically-motivated war, but still represent distortions of U.S. foreign policy.

These findings will also contribute to the academic debates on diversionary war. In fact, the results here are entirely consistent with what most studies of the U.S. have found. The only politically difficult situation in which the use of force has strong, positive effects for presidents is during economic slowdowns, and what has been found both in this thesis and in previous work is that diversionary pressure does not lead to more use of force by the U.S., except for recessions, which do see greater resort to arms. This pattern has been somewhat surprising, but the results here may explain why presidents use force when they do. This study can not prove what was or was not a motivation for particular uses of force; presidents might show restraint due to moral objections or international-level factors rather than because of the domestic incentive structure that is described here. Still, this research puts the findings of earlier studies into a proper context, and suggests other factors that ought to be explored in future research.

Design of the Study

The overall strategy of the research was to measure the political effect on presidential support from dramatic activities: the use of force, but also “peace events” (diplomacy and de-escalation of conflicts), foreign travel, and major presidential speeches. Speeches, travel, and peace are not the only things presidents might try other than war, but do represent obvious examples under presidential control and so are a good place to begin testing. Political effects were measured by constructing statistical models of presidential approval and estimating the change from a baseline level of approval (determined by economic conditions and other large scale indicators) caused by uses of force, diplomatic events, foreign travel, and major speeches.

The goal was not only to measure average effects of those events, but to understand how the public reaction was shaped by the characteristics of an event and by the political context in which it took place. To facilitate this, a new theoretical model of the diversionary process was developed. Traditionally diversionary war has been seen as exploitation of the “conflict-induced cohesion” effect – the supposed tendency of groups (or nations) to unify under external threat. I argue that the conflict-cohesion mechanism fails to explain the patterns we see, and instead propose the “media priming” model: a model based on public opinion and political communication theories. Diversion is seen as an exercise in changing the subject: focusing public attention away from presidential failings and towards dramatic, popular actions. This model does not predict that diversion will automatically succeed, however; instead it identifies a number of variables that will condition public support for presidential action – media coverage and reaction of elites, for example.

The variables identified by the media priming theory were included in the models that were estimated. That is, the magnitude of political gains (or losses) from events were specified as a function of those variables, and so the results allow us to predict how presidential approval would be affected by a prospective use of force, given the characteristics of that intervention and the political context in which it would take place.

The analysis was performed for the period 1953-2000, and included approximately 65 uses of force and 75 “peace events”. Data on uses of force came partly from existing datasets, but with significant extensions to correct some of their limitations as well as original historical data collection on variables such as Congressional reactions. The “peace event” data is original: no dataset of politically relevant peace events, such as summits, treaties, and de-escalations of conflicts existed. A variety of historical sources and contemporary media content was used to identify and characterize these events. The statistical analysis that was done included important technical advances on previous work, the details of which are in Chapter 3.

In addition to the measurement of political effects from presidential actions, the project also included testing a “repaired” version of the diversionary theory. That is, having identified which presidential actions would be most beneficial under a given set of political circumstances, it was then possible to test whether or not those actions became more frequent during the conditions that would make them popular. This was also done statistically, using event count models to measure how the frequency of different actions changed in response to political conditions that would create diversionary pressure, such as recessions or elections.

Results in Brief

The regressions that were conducted show that uses of force provide modest benefits for presidents. For example, uses of force that appear on the front page of the New York Times for two weeks (of which there were about 25 during the study period) are followed by a 6% boost in the president’s ratings, declining by half over three months. Uses of force that are any smaller (i.e., receive less coverage) have almost no effect at all. While noticeable, a 6% gain would not make up for a major scandal or recession.

The approval change from uses of force was found to vary systematically in the ways predicted by the media priming model. More coverage led to larger approval changes, for example. Congressional and press support was also highly important: Congressional reaction could mean the difference between a 10% gain or a 5% loss. The public also looks more favorably on intervention

for some goals than others. Military operations that directly protected American lives were consistently popular, while “humanitarian intervention” on average cost a president approval – and even in the best case, with strong elite support, humanitarian missions would be expected to leave approval ratings unchanged.

Other dramatic activities did not provide benefits as great as the use of force. In fact, speeches and travel hardly had any effect at all. Peace initiatives did provide approval gains on average, nearly as large but shorter-lived than the gains from uses of force. The response to peace events was affected by the same variables as uses of force: coverage, Congressional support, etc. Thus an event receiving very heavy press coverage and strong backing from Congress and commentators could lead to a 10% approval boost for a president – as was the case with Nixon’s trip to China, for example.

Although the approval increases from force or peace would be useful (at least for the larger and more supported events), White House calculations are complicated by the fact that the gains from force or peace also vary with the president’s political situation. The statistical results revealed that in general, the more a president needs a political boost, the less positive the public reaction. Uses of force are significantly less popular before elections, for example, and the approval gain from both force and peace events increases as the president’s prior approval rating increases. Uses of force actually have a negative effect when the president’s approval is low even though the economy is doing well (as might be expected due to scandals, incompetence, or other dramatic policy failures). On the other hand, the use of force grows more popular as the economy falters, and so the use of force becomes especially tempting when the economy sours.

Tests of the “repaired” diversionary theory found that presidential behavior is generally consistent with presidential incentives. The use of force becomes more common when approval is low during economic downturns, and less common when approval is low for other reasons– exactly as predicted from the measured benefits. Peace events become slightly more common during low approval / good economy periods, also as predicted. Both of these effects are modest, though, with

significant uncertainty. Diversionary patterns appear present, but are not the principal drivers of the use of force and peace initiatives. All activities became less common before presidential elections, but surprisingly, the use of force rate increases before midterms.

Plan of the Manuscript

The argument is developed through the following six chapters:

Chapter 1: The Problem of Diversionary War in American Foreign Policy

This chapter introduces the problem: what incentives do U.S. presidents face for diversionary war? After discussing the importance of the diversionary argument to academics and to politicians, the chapter reviews existing empirical studies, and then the goals and strategy for this study are described.

Chapter 2: Theory

The chapter begins an argument that the traditional conflict-cohesion model of diversionary behavior is not an adequate basis for assessing political incentives. Instead, the “media priming” model is introduced, which predicts that “rallies” can be generated by “changing the subject” with events that are visible and popular. Detailed predictions are derived for variables that should condition the public response to uses of force and other dramatic events.

Chapter 3: Methods

After reviewing and critiquing the methods used by previous studies, this chapter explains the statistical methods that are used in later chapters for measuring the benefits of dramatic actions. Specifically, a model is developed which measures the magnitude and duration of presidential approval changes resulting from events, with those events treated as

exponentially decaying shocks superimposed on an equilibrium approval level determined by macroeconomic conditions and other political variables.

Chapter 4: Political Benefits of the Use of Force

This chapter measures the political gains presidents can expect from the use of force. First, the relatively extensive “rally effect” literature is reviewed. The sources and methods used to create the use of force dataset are described. Then, the results from the regressions are presented and discussed.

Chapter 5: Political Benefits From Speeches, Travel, and Peace Events

This chapter measures the political gains presidents can expect from activities other than the use of force. Relatively little has been published about the effect of these actions, although memoirs and insider histories show that the White House has often seen peace initiatives as a source of political capital. The sources and methods used to create the speech, travel, and peace events datasets are described. Then, the results from the regressions are presented and discussed.

Chapter 6: Testing the Repaired Diversionary Theory

Using the results from chapters 4 and 5, a “repaired” version of the diversionary theory is described: presidents are assumed to select the action (if any) that will yield the greatest positive approval change given prevailing political conditions and opportunities available. Event count regressions are then used to estimate actual rates as a function of the relevant variables, and results presented.

Finally, a concluding chapter recapitulates the major findings of the thesis and discusses the broader implications of this research for U.S. politics and our understanding of international relations.