

Victory Has Many Friends

U.S. Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force, 1981-2005

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Abstract

This article analyzes U.S. public support for the use of military force in twenty-two historical episodes from the early 1980s through the Iraq war and occupation from 2003 through 2005. Although previous studies have examined particular historical cases and even some limited comparisons among cases, this article is the first to compare a large number of historical episodes in which the U.S. contemplated, threatened, or actually used military force. I also examine two issues that remain somewhat in contention in the scholarly literature: the sensitivity of the public to casualties, and the support of the public for multilateral military interventions. An important finding of the study is the continuing relevance of Bruce Jentleson's principle policy objectives framework: the objective for which military force is used is an important determinant of the base level of public support. The U.S. public supports restraining aggressive adversaries, but it is leery of involvement in civil-war situations. Although the objective of the mission strongly conditions this base-level of support, the public is also sensitive to the risk of different military actions; to the prospect of civilian or military casualties; to multilateral participation in the mission; and to the success or failure of the mission. These results suggest that support for U.S. military involvement in Iraq is unlikely to increase; indeed, given the fact of civil strife in Iraq, continuing casualties, and substantial disagreement about the prospects for success, support is likely to remain low or even decline.

