

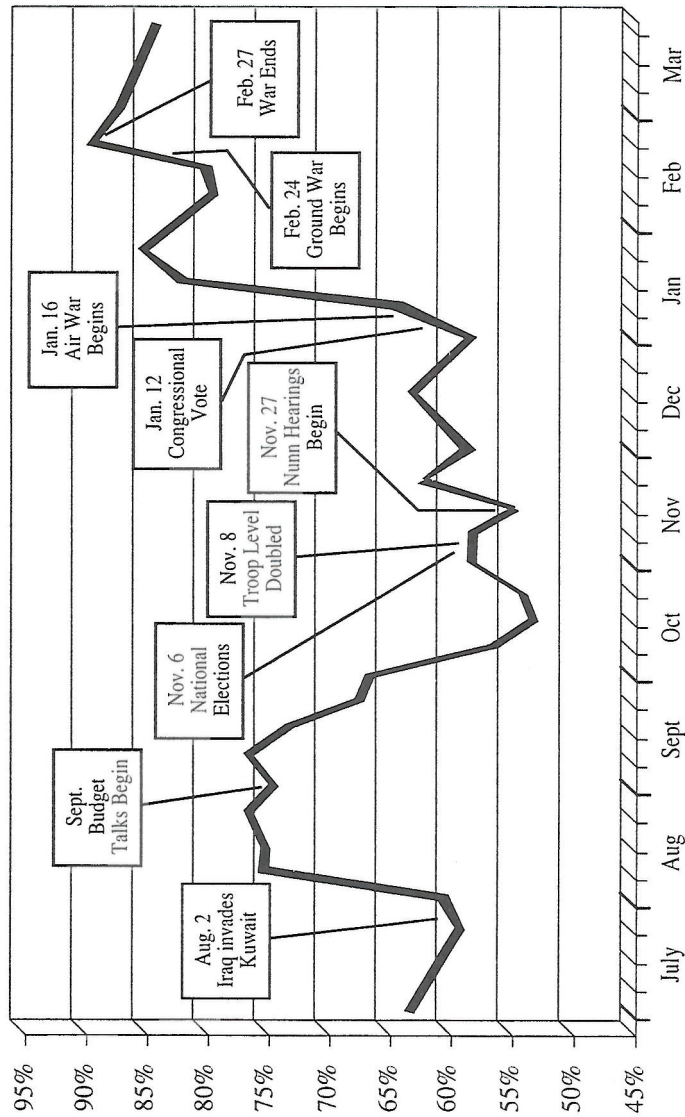
ESSAY 11.1**PUBLIC OPINION AND THE PERSIAN GULF CRISIS**

Public opinion fluctuated dramatically throughout the Persian Gulf crisis, illustrating the contradictory implications for American politics and presidential power in the making of U.S. foreign policy (see figure 11.1). Three stages evolved: public opinion was supportive during August and September, strengthening presidential power; it became divided from October to early January, thus constraining presidential power; after the war began it became supportive and reinforced presidential power once again.

Most Americans had little information about U.S. foreign policy toward Iraq and the Persian Gulf before August 2, 1990. Nevertheless, following President George Bush's decision to impose economic sanctions, send over 100,000 American troops to the region, and promote international support through the United Nations in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, the public rallied around the flag. By late August and September, President Bush's public approval ratings towered to historic levels of between 70 percent and 80 percent. Thus, before and immediately after the Iraqi invasion, public opinion had little impact on the policymaking process and, if anything, strengthened presidential power over foreign policy in the Persian Gulf.

Beginning in October, however, President Bush's approval ratings plummeted more than twenty points, bottoming around 50 percent, due to the disastrous budget negotiations between the president and the Congress to reduce the growing federal deficits, the 1990 congressional and state elections, and President Bush's subsequent announcement that he was doubling the American military presence in the Persian Gulf to over 400,000 troops, reflecting a change from a defensive strategy to an offensive one to force Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait by taking it to the "brink" of war. What appeared to be solid public support for presidential policy in the Gulf quickly evaporated; public opinion was clearly divided by December over Bush's strategy and the consequences of an increasingly likely war. It was the rise of a divided public and the drop in approval for the president's policies that acted as a catalyst for major congressional involvement—unprecedented in the heat of an international crisis—which resulted in hearings critical of presidential policy and a divided congressional vote authorizing the president to use force. Although Bush was ultimately successful in getting majority congressional support for his policy of brinksmanship, his ability to govern foreign policy was heavily challenged and badly

FIGURE 11.1
PRESIDENT BUSH'S PUBLIC APPROVAL DURING
THE PERSIAN GULF CRISIS



Source: The Gallup Organization.