

**PUBLIC OPINION AND THE PERSIAN GULF
CRISIS** *Continued*

constrained during this time as more and more members of the public criticized and questioned foreign policy developments.

Finally, after President Bush ordered American and allied troops into battle, American public opinion again rallied behind the flag and this sentiment strengthened as the Iraqi military was overwhelmed with minimal loss of American life. Not surprisingly, the quickness and ease of the American allied military victory resulted in public approval ratings reaching new heights of over 80 percent for President Bush. Such public approval gave President Bush a new lease on life to govern foreign policy, so long as public opinion remained highly supportive.

A fourth stage in public opinion would have evolved if the Persian Gulf War would have been prolonged and not gone well, resulting in thousands of American casualties as many Americans feared. Under these conditions, public dissent and opposition would have increased, weakening presidential power and possibly producing another failed presidency. This did not happen during the Persian Gulf crisis; but in the post-Vietnam War era it remains a distinct possibility in a future crisis as so many other presidents have experienced.

It is important to point out that the three stages occurred during a foreign policy crisis involving the use of American troops, a time when presidents historically dominate the political process until things go sour. This is indicative of the volatility of public opinion in the post-Vietnam War era and the contradictory impact it has on the president's ability to govern foreign policy, even during a time of international crisis. As explained by Thomas Mann, "An administration that sails against the tide of public opinion invites a more active congressional role; a President who succeeds in bringing foreign policy and public opinion into closer conformance—either by adjusting his policy or by reshaping public opinion—will be more successful in diffusing opposition on Capitol Hill."^A

It appears that President Bush, and his closest advisers, were very sensitive to public opinion throughout the crisis. At one point, for example, political journalist Bob Woodward reported that Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Colin Powell urged President Bush to hold off on waging war and to rely instead on the international economic sanctions against Iraq, taking pains to explain that the sanctions option "has merit" and "will work" in time. The sanctions option, however, was dismissed by the president with the response, "I don't

think that there's time politically for that strategy."^B Likewise, Elizabeth Drew, in her "Letter from Washington" of January 25, 1991, reported that "It became known here not long ago that John Sununu, the president's chief of staff, was telling people that a short, successful war would be pure political gold for the president—would guarantee his reelection."^C Clearly, presidents take public opinion very seriously. Although the public tends to be uninterested, uninformed, and volatile concerning international affairs, public opinion nevertheless impacts the politics of U.S. foreign policy, posing considerable opportunities and risks for the president's ability to govern.

Sources: For a general discussion in the trends of public opinion during a time of conflict, see Larry Elowitz and John W. Spanier, "Korea and Vietnam: Limited War and the American Political System," *Orbis* (Summer 1974), pp. 510–34; and John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973).

ideology refers to beliefs about the preferred ends and means of a society (for example, liberty, equality, representative government). In this respect, we are also interested in the **foreign policy views** permeating American society—that is, how Americans see the world and the preferred role the U.S. should play in international relations. The ideological and foreign policy views prevailing in American society set the broad boundaries of legitimate political discourse within which public opinion operates to influence domestic politics and the policymaking process.

In reviewing the ideological and foreign policy views of Americans, three points need to be kept in mind with respect to the types of publics involved, the nature of public beliefs, and their influence on the politics of U.S. foreign policy. First, a discussion of ideological and foreign policy views must focus on the elite public and the extent to which it is supported by the mass public, because the elite public tends to have stronger, less moderate, and more influential ideological and foreign policy beliefs than the mass public. This is consistent with an important distinction that Godfrey Hodgson makes in *America in Our Time* between the elite public as the "moral minority" and the mass public as the "pragmatic majority."²⁵ During the cold war years, for example, it was popular to conclude that most Americans were not ideological, that it was a time of the "end of ideology."²⁶ Clearly, if ideology refers to a set of values about the ends and means of a society, all people have ideological beliefs. As political scientist Robert Dahl pointed out over twenty years ago, "Americans are a highly ideological people. It is only that one does not ordinarily notice their ideology because they are, to an astonishing extent, all agreed on the same ideology."²⁷ What observers of American politics correctly pointed out is that the ideological beliefs of the mass public do not tend