Iraq, 9/11, and the War
Understanding Mass Belief in the Perceived Threat of Saddam Hussein and Support for War

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Paper presented at the 2004 Annual Meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois.

This study relies on data collected by CBS News and the New York Times, and provided by the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR). Any errors in interpretation or analysis are the responsibility of the author.

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The recent conflict with Iraq has already burgeoned a healthy debate, not only in the mass media, but also among scholars of public opinion, over the beliefs among the public that led to support for the conflict. Kull, Ramsay and Lewis (2003) argue that public support for the war in Iraq was largely driven by "misperceptions" about the Iraq conflict, which they believe were fostered by the Bush administration. This paper, however, presents an alternative view of public opinion—one in which the "misperceptions" that Kull, Ramsay and Lewis note were not truly exogenous, but rather shaped by citizens' individual political predispositions toward the president, as well as their party identification and ideology.

In particular, this paper examines the relationships between partisan and ideological predispositions, presidential support, the perceived threat of the Hussein regime, and support for the war in Iraq. By estimating a number of latent variable structural equation models,[1] I show that citizens' perceived threat of the Hussein regime was largely a function of their overall support for the president—in other words, rather than being exogenous, citizens' perceptions of the danger of the former Iraqi regime were largely driven by their political predispositions and support for the president. However, this perceived threat, in turn, rather than presidential support *per se*, affected the support for the war by citizens.

The outline of the paper is as follows: first, I briefly review the main literature on opinion formation in mass publics. Second, I turn to a discussion of the political context of the pre-war debate. I then present a theoretical model of opinionation on the Iraq conflict, and operationalize the model. A discussion of the data and methods used is followed by a presentation of the results. Finally, I present some conclusions about the nature of opinionation in mass publics.

[1] These models are sometimes referred to as LISREL models, after the first widely-available software package that estimated this class of model.

1 Theoretical Background

Traditional democratic theory, prior to the behavioral revolution in political science, generally argued that members of the public had well-formed belief systems that led to consistent and coherent opinions about politics. The advent of scientific opinion polling in the middle of the 20th century, coupled with the pioneering studies of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1944), Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee (1954), and Campbell et al. (1960), led to a radical revision of this view. In particular, Converse (1970) argued that the incoherence of belief systems by many members of the public led to a large proportion of the public expressing what he termed "non-attitudes": in essence, these citizens responded more-or-less randomly to survey questions. More sophisticated citizens' attitudes, however, were truly reflected in their stated opinions.[2]

More recent work on the survey response has refined our understanding of how citizens answer questions about politics. Zaller (1992) presents an argument for a "receive-accept-sample" or RAS model of opinionation. This model suggests that citizens have a floating pool of political predispositions from which they select when they are asked to express political opinions. Alvarez and Brehm (2002) refine this model to consider the actual distribution of the opinions that are expressed by citizens, incorporating both the effects of competing predispositions and the amount of relevant information citizens have pertaining to the issue at hand (57–58).

The Zaller RAS model also provides a compelling explanation for attitude consistency, particularly among the most politically sophisticated segments of the population; in the "ac-

[2] I follow the traditional approach of referring to predispositions or beliefs as "attitudes" and expressions of these attitudes as "opinions."

cept" stage of the model, people screen out new information that is inconsistent with their preexisting beliefs. For example, a Republican might tend to discount hypothetical evidence that increased welfare spending reduces the poverty rate, while a Democratic identifier would be unlikely to internalize new information showing a reduction in crime in a state after the adoption of a concealed-carry law. Acceptance of new information may not be governed solely by partisanship; notably, Sobel (1985) argues that people take account of the credibility of the source of information when deciding whether to make use of it, a finding replicated by Iyengar and Valentino (2000) in a study of political advertising. More generally, the process Brady and Sniderman (1985) term the "likability heuristic" appears, for many citizens, to govern issue positions based on attitudes toward political figures and institutions, particularly on less salient issues.

The salience of foreign policy issues has also been a matter of some debate in political science. Aldrich, Sullivan and Borgida (1989) produced evidence that voters clearly distinguish among presidential candidates on foreign policy issues, despite the relative lack of information about (and low salience of) foreign policy issues among the mass public. Given the great amount of attention that foreign policy has received in the mass media in the 2½ years since the 9/11 attacks, it seems reasonable to assume that at least the broad issue of terrorism would be salient to most members of the public–however, the details of Washington policy debates might well have been of less interest to the public, and in the case of the war with Iraq much of the debate centered around the details.

2 The Pre-War Debate

The buildup to the present conflict in Iraq was characterized by a lengthy domestic political debate over the merits of an invasion led by the United States. Although the status of the former Iraqi Ba'athist regime as an egregious human rights violator was not in dispute, in contrast to the U.S. military actions in the former Yugoslavia, Haiti, and Somalia in the 1990s, the public debate over a potential invasion mostly revolved around questions of national security–whether the Hussein regime posed a threat to its neighbors and regional U.S. allies, and whether that potential threat could continue to be effectively contained.

In particular, two aspects of national security policy were the focus of the U.S. debate: whether Saddam Hussein had dismantled his nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons programs in the wake of the 1991 Gulf War, and whether the Ba'athist regime was a state sponsor of terrorist groups that threatened the United States–in particular, Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda terrorist group, which was responsible for both the 1993 and 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center (and the Pentagon and Flight 93 attacks in 2001), the Khobar Towers attack in Saudi Arabia, the East Africa embassy bombings in 1998, and the attack on the U.S.S. Cole in Yemen during late 2000.

Supporters of an attack on Iraq that would depose the Hussein regime, including the Bush administration, argued that the Ba'athists had not fully complied with the inspections regime instituted as part of the 1991 Gulf War cease-fire agreement, and this non-cooperation presented a *prima facie* case that the Iraqi regime continued to pursue non-conventional weapons projects. War supporters also argued that there was apparent cooperation between the Iraqi regime and Islamist terrorist groups, including a group known as Ansar al-Islam, which was believed to be affiliated with al-Qaeda.

War opponents, on the other hand, argued that the Ba'athist regime did not possess non-conventional weapons, or was in the process of complying with the applicable U.N. Security Council resolutions on disclosure of past and current non-conventional weapon programs, or *did* possess such weapons but would be effectively be deterred from using them and passing them onto non-state actors by continued maintenance of the "no fly zones" enforced by the United States and the United Kingdom, as well as the U.N. sanctions regime. Opponents of a strike on Iraq also noted that Ansar al-Islam operated in a region of Iraq not under the control of the Baghdad regime, and that the terrorist groups operating on Iraqi soil (such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Abu Nidal organization) tended to target Israel rather than the United States. War opponents also charged that the potential invasion was a matter of "Bush family pride," motivated in part by former President Bush's failure to drive the Hussein regime from power in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War.[3] It is in this context that Americans were expected to form opinions about the then-potential conflict with Iraq.

3 A Model of Opinionation on the War

A reasonable model of opinionation for individual citizens on the conflict with Iraq would consist of four components:

- Political predispositions
- Presidential support
- Perceptions of the danger posed by Iraq

[3]There were also ancillary arguments on both sides of the debate that the "other" side had oil interests at stake; a number of nations that opposed the war were home to companies with lucrative options to exploit Iraqi oil fields after U.N. sanctions were lifted, while the United States was accused of acting in the interests of domestic oil services companies with close ties to the administration.

- Support for the war itself

We would generally expect political predispositions to affect presidential support; people who share the ideology and partisanship of the president will be more likely to support the president, *ceteris peribus*. From our discussion of the "likability heuristic" and source credibility, we would also expect that supporters of the president would be more likely to share his views on the danger posed by the Iraqi regime. And, logically, we would expect citizens who perceive Iraq as dangerous would be more likely to support an invasion to topple the Hussein regime. We might also expect that citizens who support the president might support an invasion *independent of* a perception of danger from the Hussein regime.

This model is operationalized as a latent variable structural equation model or LISREL model (Bollen 1989), with a number of observed (or manifest) variables used as indicators of the unobserved (or latent) variables.[4] The SEM approach provides a relatively parsimonious way to model relationships among unobserved variables, while at the same time producing models that correspond fairly well with our intuitive understanding of the structure of those relationships. This model is illustrated in Figure 1; in the path diagram, latent variables are shown as ovals, observed variables are shown as boxes, and causality is shown by the directionality of the arrows.[5] For example, the latent variable "Ideology" (representing political predispositions) has four indicators; changes in "Ideology" are expected to cause changes in the latent variable "PresSupp."[6]

[4]The use of SEMs in political science appears to be limited; they are more commonly used in fields such as sociology and psychology.

[5]Traditionally, path diagrams for SEMs include latent variables representing the error terms of exogenous and endogenous variables. These error terms are omitted from the diagram but are estimated as part of the fitting process. As in exploratory factor analysis, the variances of the latent variables are set to 1.0 to identify the model.

[6]The subsets of the model that consist of latent variables (factors) and their indicators are generally referred to as "confirmatory models" or "confirmatory factor models"; the subset of a model that relates factors to each other are referred to as the "structural model."

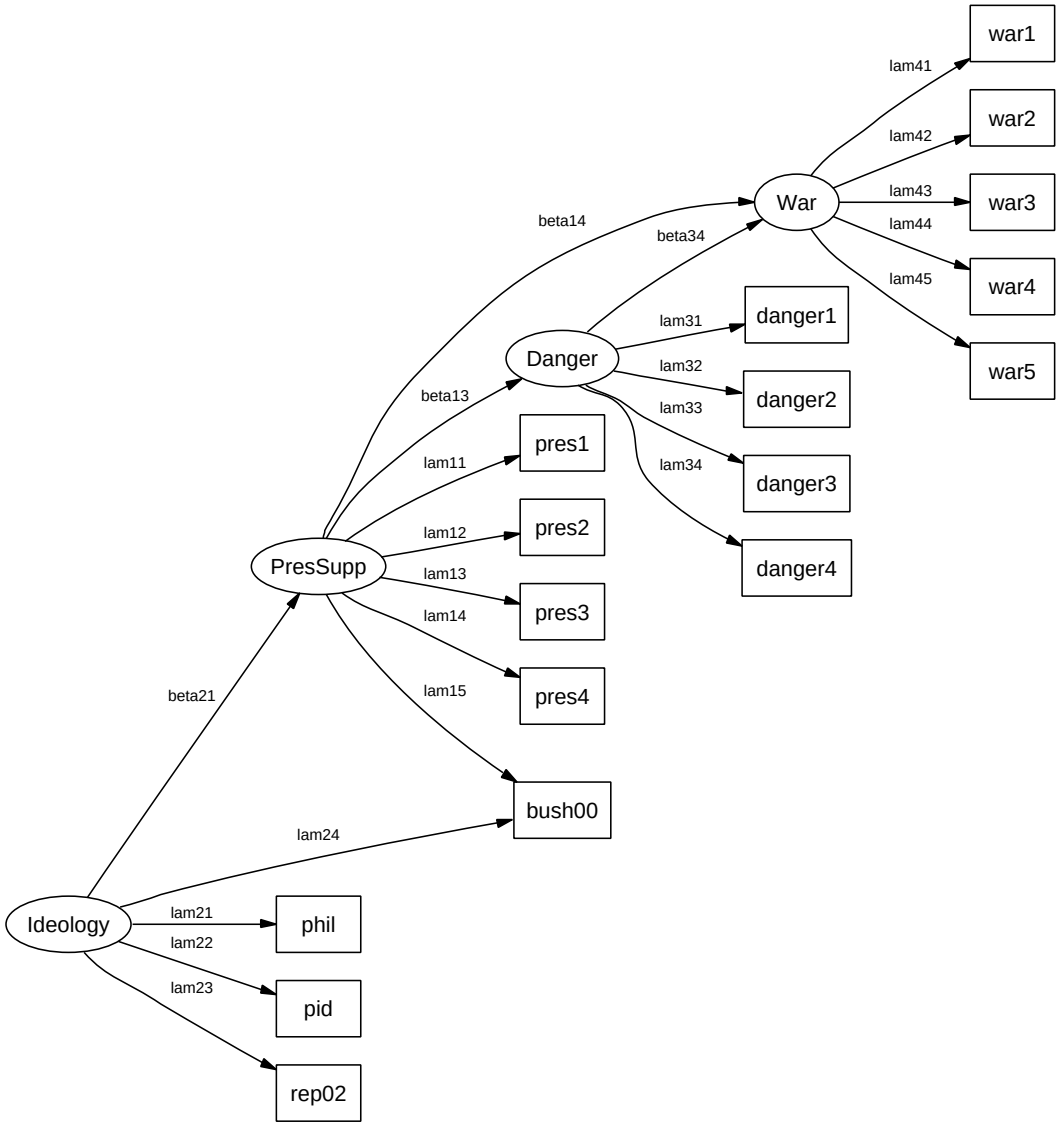

Figure 1: A structural equation model of opinionation on the conflict with Iraq.

Table 1: Indicators in the confirmatory factor models.

Factor	Indicator	Coded From
Predispositions	Political philosophy (ideology) (1-3)	`pphl`
	Party identification (1-5)	`prty` and `ptyl`
	2002 House vote (0/1)	`vt02`
	2000 Presidential vote (0/1)	`vt00`
Presidential Support	2000 Presidential vote (0/1)	`vt00`
	General job performance (0/1)	`q1`
	Foreign policy performance (0/1)	`q2`
	Economic policy performance (0/1)	`q3`
	North Korea policy performance (0/1)	`q5`
Dangerousness of Iraq	Conflict is necessary (0/1)	`q12`
	Iraq's weapons pose a threat (0-2)	`q22`
	Hussein involved in 9/11 attacks (0/1)	`q38`
	Removing Hussein will make region more stable (0-2)	`q47`
Support for the War	Approve of U.S. removing Hussein (0/1)	`q8`
	Approve of war w/o U.N. approval (0/1)	`q13`
	Favor war even if U.S. casualties (0/1)	`q33`
	Favor war even if civilian casualties (0/1)	`q34`
	Favor war even if long-term involvement (0/1)	`q35`

The indicators (or manifest variables) for each of the latent variables are listed in Table 1. Note that the indicator of having voted for President Bush in 2000 is used as an indicator for both the political predispositions and presidential support variables, as it loaded appreciably on both factors.

The political predispositions indicator is designed such that higher values reflect greater "Republicanism" or "conservatism"; the other three latent variables are structured such that higher values are associated (logically) with greater presidential support, greater belief that the Hussein regime is dangerous, and greater support for a conflict, respectively.

4 Data and Methods

The data for this analysis come from the CBS News/New York Times Monthly Poll #2, a telephone survey based on a scientific random sampling design, conducted in the United States between March 7–9, 2003, with 1,010 adult respondents (CBS News and The New York Times 2003). The relevant manifest variables were selected from the dataset, recoded as necessary, and a pairwise covariance matrix was produced among the observed variables, which was used as input to the SEM procedure, along with a scalar representation of the model in Figure 1. The models were estimated in *GNU R* 1.9.0 beta (R Development Core Team 2004) under Linux, using the `sem` package (Fox 2004).

5 Results

The results of the model illustrated in Figure 1 are presented in Table 2. As we might reasonably expect, all of the coefficients of the confirmatory models are statistically significant, suggesting that the included indicators are associated with the latent variables. The model's adjusted goodness-of-fit index (AGFI) of 0.896 suggests that the model is a reasonably good representation of the relationships among the included variables.

The relationships among the latent variables are generally as we would expect: political predispositions have a strong, positive effect on presidential evaluations; these evaluations, in turn, have a strong, positive effect on perceptions of the danger of Iraq; and, perceptions of the danger of Iraq have a strong, positive effect on support for a military conflict. However, the direct effect of presidential support on support for the war is *not* statistically significant, although there is clearly an indirect effect via the respondent's perceived danger.

Table 2: Results of the full structural equation model of opinionation.

	Estimate	Std Error	z value	
lam11	0.310208	0.0096827	32.03734	pres1 <--- PresSupp
lam12	0.302783	0.0099068	30.56319	pres2 <--- PresSupp
lam13	0.227136	0.0101492	22.37958	pres3 <--- PresSupp
lam14	0.216355	0.0102512	21.10539	pres4 <--- PresSupp
lam15	0.141604	0.0107046	13.22827	bush00 <--- PresSupp
e1	0.031148	0.0024244	12.84746	pres1 <--> pres1
e2	0.048073	0.0029280	16.41825	pres2 <--> pres2
e3	0.133295	0.0062938	21.17863	pres3 <--> pres3
e4	0.143652	0.0067077	21.41601	pres4 <--> pres4
e7	0.055671	0.0030560	18.21729	bush00 <--> bush00
lam21	0.358385	0.0220245	16.27213	phil <--- Ideology
lam22	1.501013	0.0438736	34.21219	pid <--- Ideology
lam23	0.452078	0.0126390	35.76845	rep02 <--- Ideology
lam24	0.263036	0.0151989	17.30627	bush00 <--- Ideology
e5	0.385070	0.0177371	21.70987	phil <--> phil
e6	0.674048	0.0463814	14.53272	pid <--> pid
e8	0.045922	0.0038342	11.97707	rep02 <--> rep02
lam31	0.210821	0.0113054	18.64792	danger1 <--- Danger
lam32	0.235638	0.0134994	17.45543	danger2 <--- Danger
lam33	0.116653	0.0094825	12.30193	danger3 <--- Danger
lam34	0.238237	0.0157804	15.09701	danger4 <--- Danger
e9	0.083872	0.0050706	16.54088	danger1 <--> danger1
e10	0.155940	0.0083338	18.71163	danger2 <--> danger2
e11	0.199860	0.0091283	21.89463	danger3 <--> danger3
e12	0.426158	0.0199386	21.37345	danger4 <--> danger4
lam41	0.102333	0.0176006	5.81418	war1 <--- War
lam42	0.106293	0.0183140	5.80390	war2 <--- War
lam43	0.096620	0.0169589	5.69728	war3 <--- War
lam44	0.104079	0.0182347	5.70777	war4 <--- War
lam45	0.097668	0.0170737	5.72040	war5 <--- War
e13	0.066222	0.0036355	18.21532	war1 <--> war1
e14	0.081353	0.0043394	18.74741	war2 <--> war2
e15	0.108825	0.0054938	19.80872	war3 <--> war3
e16	0.090460	0.0048599	18.61360	war4 <--> war4
e17	0.111187	0.0055332	20.09465	war5 <--> war5
beta14	0.117854	0.1631837	0.72222	War <--- PresSupp
beta13	1.114684	0.0741726	15.02825	Danger <--- PresSupp
beta21	1.083250	0.0574223	18.86463	PresSupp <--- Ideology
beta34	1.837905	0.3990158	4.60610	War <--- Danger

- Coefficients are unstandardized full-information maximum likelihood estimates. $N = 1010$.
- AGFI: 0.896; Model χ^2: 725.35 (114 d.f.)

Table 3: Results of the nested structural equation model of opinionation.

	Estimate	Std Error	z value	
lam11	0.306128	0.0096237	31.810	pres1 <--- PresSupp
lam12	0.301771	0.0098848	30.529	pres2 <--- PresSupp
lam13	0.226071	0.0101658	22.238	pres3 <--- PresSupp
lam14	0.216408	0.0102612	21.090	pres4 <--- PresSupp
lam15	0.142615	0.0106669	13.370	bush00 <--- PresSupp
e1	0.037607	0.0025854	14.546	pres1 <--> pres1
e2	0.050368	0.0029913	16.838	pres2 <--> pres2
e3	0.134886	0.0063431	21.265	pres3 <--> pres3
e4	0.144099	0.0067110	21.472	pres4 <--> pres4
e7	0.055396	0.0030405	18.219	bush00 <--> bush00
lam21	0.358641	0.0220241	16.284	phil <--- Ideology
lam22	1.500463	0.0438877	34.189	pid <--- Ideology
lam23	0.452192	0.0126386	35.779	rep02 <--- Ideology
lam24	0.262625	0.0150839	17.411	bush00 <--- Ideology
e5	0.384886	0.0177311	21.707	phil <--> phil
e6	0.675696	0.0464593	14.544	pid <--> pid
e8	0.045819	0.0038367	11.942	rep02 <--> rep02
lam31	0.183607	0.0120030	15.297	danger1 <--- Danger
lam32	0.197910	0.0134702	14.692	danger2 <--- Danger
lam33	0.097314	0.0088541	10.991	danger3 <--- Danger
lam34	0.201973	0.0151953	13.292	danger4 <--- Danger
e9	0.077088	0.0052110	14.793	danger1 <--> danger1
e10	0.162434	0.0088940	18.263	danger2 <--> danger2
e11	0.202108	0.0093192	21.687	danger3 <--> danger3
e12	0.428957	0.0205307	20.893	danger4 <--> danger4
lam41	0.190017	0.0083480	22.762	war1 <--- War
lam42	0.197592	0.0088325	22.371	war2 <--- War
lam43	0.183149	0.0091339	20.052	war3 <--- War
lam44	0.196667	0.0094613	20.786	war4 <--- War
lam45	0.183720	0.0090776	20.239	war5 <--- War
e13	0.068804	0.0038937	17.671	war1 <--> war1
e14	0.083774	0.0045972	18.223	war2 <--> war2
e15	0.105488	0.0054793	19.252	war3 <--> war3
e16	0.087608	0.0048871	17.926	war4 <--> war4
e17	0.109951	0.0055775	19.713	war5 <--> war5
beta14	1.208182	0.0699134	17.281	War <--- PresSupp
beta13	1.373484	0.1043654	13.160	Danger <--- PresSupp
beta21	1.078343	0.0570135	18.914	PresSupp <--- Ideology

- Coefficients are unstandardized full-information maximum likelihood estimates. $N = 1010$.
- AGFI: 0.860; Model χ^2: 1013.7 (115 d.f.)

To further test this effect, a second model was estimated omitting the relationship between perceived danger and support for the conflict. The results of this model are presented in Table 3. Again, the confirmatory factor models perform as expected. In the structural model, the direct effect of presidential support on support for the potential conflict becomes statistically significant; however, this effect is at the expense of the explanatory power of the model, which indicates that the correct specification includes the direct relationship between perceived danger and support for the conflict.[7]

6 Conclusions

This paper analyzed the relationship between political predispositions, presidential support, the perceived danger of Iraq to the United States and regional stability, and support for a potential conflict with Iraq. The results indicate that support for the war was primarily the result of the public's perceptions of the danger of the Iraqi regime, reinforcing the findings of Kull, Ramsay and Lewis (2003). However, this paper also indicates that those public perceptions were themselves the result of the ideological and political predispositions of the public–Republicans and supporters of the president were more likely to believe the Hussein regime posed a threat to the United States, while Democrats and those who did not support the president were less likely to believe the charges against the Hussein regime. Thus it suggests that it is problematic to discuss the effects of public "misperceptions" of the threat posed by the former Iraqi regime as the source of public support for a conflict–rather, this paper indicates

[7] Dropping the path from perceived danger to support for the conflict increased the model χ^2 by 288.311; a standard χ^2 test with one degree of freedom indicates that the model with the additional path is significantly better than the model with the path omitted. (This procedure is analogous to the Wald test for nested generalized linear models estimated by maximum likelihood, or the hierarchical F test for nested OLS models.)

that members of the public who were predisposed to support the administration "bought" the case for war (and thus were willing to support it), while those who were predisposed not to support the administration didn't consider the threat of the Hussein regime to rise to the level of requiring relatively immediate U.S. action without the support of the U.N. Security Council.

These findings suggest that the effects of the presidential "bully pulpit" are somewhat limited: while the president was able to convince a significant portion of the public to support a conflict, the portion of the public he did convince was already predisposed to support his policies anyway; indeed, the act of the president rallying support for a conflict may have caused voters who were otherwise predisposed to favor removing Saddam Hussein from power to eventually oppose military action. Particularly in this era that combines general apathy about politics among "moderate" voters with a relatively polarized (and evenly-split) electorate, as evidenced by declining turnout and the failure of the past three presidential elections to produce a popular majority in support of the winner, it appears that the presidency is more able to motivate its own base than it is able to either convert voters disposed to support the opposition or rally swing voters to its cause.

These findings also suggest that the president may have been able to motivate greater support by a conflict by appealing to Americans to support the conflict on the basis of a U.S. commitment to improving human rights in foreign countries, as the U.S. military interventions in the Balkans, Haiti, and Somalia were justified in the 1990s, rather than in terms of the military threat that the Hussein regime posed to traditional U.S. allies and the potential for non-conventional weapons proliferation to terrorist groups. Although *post hoc* justifications for the conflict have emphasized the improved human rights conditions of the Iraqi people (in addition to continued discussion of the Hussein regime's activities related to acquiring non-

conventional weapons), it is possible that emphasizing human rights and democratization might have led to greater support from traditional Democratic constituencies disposed to favor a foreign policy oriented towards promoting liberal democracy abroad.

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