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The Rhetoric of Fear and Hope
in Afghanistan

The 2009 U.S. military escalation in Afghanistan saw the Obama administration commit 17,000 troops in February, followed by another 13,000 in October, and 30,000 more in December for approximately 100,000 troops engaged in counterinsurgency operations against the Taliban. As President Obama explained following the first "surge" of troops in February, the infusion was "necessary to stabilize a deteriorating situation" that "has not received the strategic attention, direction and resources it urgently requires."[1] Although the United States had been at war in Afghanistan since shortly after the September 11 attacks, Obama made the conflict a renewed priority. The escalation was promoted in the name of defeating the Taliban and preventing al Qaeda's reemergence.

This chapter examines presidential rhetoric immediately after September 11 and reviews the problems Obama faced in later years of the conflict. I also examine Obama's efforts to mobilize public support for a surge in troops as the president embraced the rhetoric of fear in the name of fighting terror. This campaign was successful in influencing the political–media discourse in favor of Obama's surge. Dominating public discourse on Afghanistan, Obama sold the escalation based on the anxieties inducted by terrorism. The rhetoric of hope—in the administration's promise to dismantle the terrorist threat—eased public fear.

The Shock of September 11

It may be clichéd to claim that September 11 changed everything by marking the beginning of a new era for U.S. foreign policy. Certainly those attacks shocked Americans, who repeatedly witnessed news clips of

the planes striking the World Trade Center towers, watching in horror as the buildings crumbled. Disbelief soon gave way to anger and support for military retaliation. Americans expressed profound vulnerability in the wake of the attacks. A mid-September 2001 poll found that 51 percent of Americans were "very worried" or "somewhat worried" that "you or someone in your family will become a victim of a terrorist attack."[2]

Americans situated their response to September 11 within a wartime framework before Bush even made the case for intervention in Afghanistan. Polling from mid-September found that 79 percent of Americans described the attacks as "acts of war" rather than "as a crime" to be dealt with through a law enforcement approach.[3] Support for war was strong. Seventy-five percent of respondents in one post–September 11 poll agreed the United States "should take military action against a nation that knowingly allowed the terrorists who are responsible for these attacks to live in their country, even if the country played no role in the attack."[4] Public support for military intervention meant that Bush had little difficulty in selling pro-war messages.

Making the Case for War

Bush began his campaign to sell war the day after September 11. Americans' fear of the terrorism grew as the president reminded them of the very real dangers they faced. In his September 11 address, Bush announced the onset of the "war against terrorism," although no specific country was singled out for attack. He lamented, "America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world." The attacks were described as personifying pure evil and representing "the very worst of human nature." Promising a swift retaliation, Bush announced he would "make no distinction between the terrorists who committed these acts and those who harbor them."[5] Bush's promise not to distinguish between terrorists and host countries mirrored public support for military action against countries even if they did not knowingly provide shelter to terrorists. Bush appropriated the rhetoric of hope—depicting Osama bin Laden and his supporters as committed to dismantling the cherished freedoms of the American people.

The president made the case for war on September 20, 2001. Bush focused specifically on Afghanistan, al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden, and the Taliban. He established a distinction between terrorists who "practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism" and the "vast majority of Muslims

clerics" who reject al Qaeda's ideology as "a fringe movement that perverts the peaceful teachings of Islam." Bush's speech was not meant to encourage a cultural war between Christians and Muslims; the focus was on fighting terrorism.

Reactionary commentators depicted Islam as a danger to American security in later years, but such rhetoric was not as common in the aftermath of the attacks.[6] The president focused his ire on al Qaeda in Afghanistan and on "thousands of these terrorists in more than 60 countries. . . . They are recruited from their own nations and neighborhoods and brought to camps in places like Afghanistan where they are trained in the tactics of terror. They are sent back to their homes or sent to hide in countries around the world to plot evil and destruction." Bush condemned the Taliban for "repressing its own people" and "threatening people everywhere by sponsoring and sheltering and supplying terrorists. By aiding and abetting murder, the Taliban regime is committing murder." He made a number of nonnegotiable demands on the Taliban with noncompliance threatened by immediate war. The demands included the immediate delivery of "all the leaders of al Qaeda who hide in your land" and closure of all terrorist camps in Afghanistan.

Bush's speech was notable in its promise that the War on Terror would continue indefinitely. "Our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated." Bush committed the United States to "the destruction" and "defeat of the global terror network." This campaign would not end "with a decisive liberation of territory and a swift conclusion." The "course of this conflict" was "not known" and would take years, representing "a lengthy campaign unlike any other we have ever seen." This prediction was born out in the more than ten years since Bush's 2001 speech as U.S. military forces were committed to Afghanistan, Iraq, and "counterterror" predator drone strikes in numerous countries.

One of the most noteworthy comments in the September 20 speech was the ultimatum to the rest of the world on the need to unconditionally support the War on Terror. Bush demanded: "Every nation in every region now has a decision to make: either you are with us or you are with the terrorists."[7] Such language was uncompromising in creating a binary between good and evil. U.S. military campaigns across the globe must be supported with no reservations by allied countries, lest they be labeled supporters of terrorism. Bush's warning allowed no room for allies to support the goal of fighting terrorism, while resisting specific military campaigns deemed incompatible with that goal.

Bush ordered military strikes on Afghanistan following the Taliban's noncompliance with U.S. demands. The U.S. attack, which began on October 7, 2001, led to the overthrow of the Taliban and the scattering of al Qaeda throughout the region. While bin Laden was not captured, al Qaeda was no longer able to use Afghanistan as a base of operations, and many of its members fled to neighboring Pakistan. The Taliban became an insurgent group in its own country as Northern Alliance warlords moved into and took over the capital city of Kabul by mid-November. By December, the Pentagon announced that the Taliban was defeated, although the war against Taliban forces continued.[8]

Journalists Embrace the War on Terror

Following the shock of September 11, journalists were sympathetic to war. Editorials and coverage favored the military response Bush supported. Echoing the president, the media amplified the rhetoric of fear and hope— fear of terrorism and hope that the United States would eliminate those threats. The rhetoric of hope included promises that American democracy would persevere with the defeat of terrorist groups. The president did not construct public fear; it already existed after September 11. The media, however, amplified public fears of terrorism after September 11. Presidential rhetoric produced even greater support for war than already existed. Media coverage amplified hope that the president was up to the task of leading the country during a time of anxiety.

Major newspaper editorials announced the need to support the president. The editors of the *New York Times* (*Times*) declared on September 15: "For now, at least, the one state where American military power might be effectively used is Afghanistan, where the Taliban-led government is host to Osama bin Laden."[9] Neutralizing bin Laden "would be no easy task," but the military campaign was needed "to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base and to weaken the military capability of that country's ruling Taliban movement."[10] The *Washington Post* (*Post*) editors declared: "military force must certainly play a role in the coming campaign, and Afghanistan now looks like one place where it may be needed. The United States can no longer allow Osama bin Laden to operate there—much less his training camps for aspiring terrorists." Both newspapers stood behind the invasion of Afghanistan by echoing the president's rhetoric of fear and hope.

Media content was sympathetic to military action. Headlines in the *Post* before the war were four times more likely to emphasize military

preparations over efforts to negotiate with the Taliban and extradite bin Laden. Discussion of military action appeared six times as often in headlines as did references to allied opposition to war.[11] Reporting after September 11 promoted war as the proper response to the attacks, as opposed to treating the atrocity as a criminal or law-and-order issue.[12] Newspapers reported that the United States was at war even before the onset of the Afghanistan campaign. American media discussed terrorist attacks on foreign soil (for example the 1998 attacks on the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania) from a "crime" or "disaster" framework, whereas war was presumed inevitable after September 11.[13] Television coverage emphasized a war frame twice as often as a law-and-order frame.[14]

Support for a military response was justified by appropriating the rhetoric of hope—with references to "American exceptionalism" and the United States' supposedly unique efforts to fight terrorism. Editorials embraced American exceptionalism through moral proclamations of "U.S. virtue" and "condemnations of evil enemies." Editorials commonly referenced evil, corruption, and state-sponsored terrorism in reference to the Taliban's housing of al Qaeda.[15]

Little attention was devoted to the human costs of war. *Times* headlines after the invasion through the overthrow of the Taliban were three times more likely to discuss military progress than to address humanitarian issues resulting from the bombing campaign. Headlines emphasizing military progress outnumbered those referencing Afghan civilian deaths by 18:1.[16] On CNN, 38 percent of military coverage emphasized "the technology of the battle" and 62 percent focused on "general military activity," whereas 17 percent discussed civilian casualties.[17] Few journalists emphasized humanitarian concerns because the rhetoric of fear and hope took center stage.

Patriotic pressures encouraged the suppression of humanitarian concerns. Editors instructed reporters to avoid narratives emphasizing Afghan suffering and to highlight American hardship following September 11. CNN Chair Walter Isaacson ordered reporters "to balance images of civilian devastation in Afghan cities with reminders that the Taliban harbors murderous terrorists. . . . [It] seems too perverse to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan." He reminded reporters not to "forget it is that country's leaders who are responsible for the situation Afghanistan is now in." Rick Davis, the head of standards and practices at CNN, reiterated Isaacson's concerns: "Military actions are in response to a terrorist attack that killed close to 5,000 innocent people in the U.S. . . . The Pentagon has repeatedly stressed that it is trying to minimize

civilian casualties in Afghanistan, even as the Taliban regime continues to harbor terrorists who are connected to the September 11."[18] Nationalistic pressures pushed coverage toward emphasizing military progress. Davis's comments suggest that reporters were deferring to official sources at the Pentagon on humanitarian issues. In the ten largest U.S. newspapers, from the day after September 11 through the onset of war, no editorial claimed that military intervention was inappropriate and none assumed that the intervention would fail. Official sources were consulted almost exclusively, while nonofficial sources were ignored or ridiculed.[19]
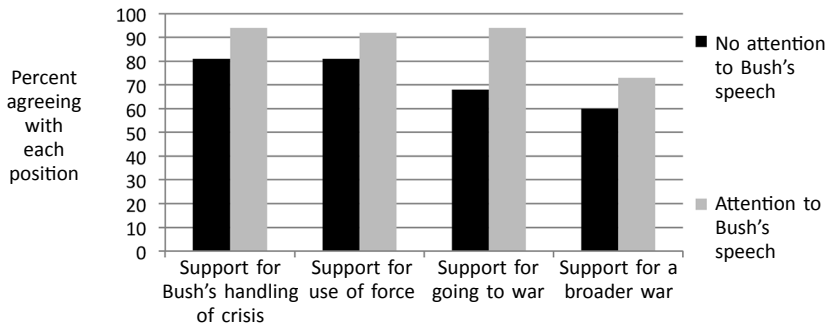
Polling after September 11 found that most Americans were interested in antiwar views; but those perspectives were rare in the media.[20] In line with public opinion, new stories were more likely to interpret September 11 as an act of war, rather than a criminal, law-and-order-based issue.[21] Both reporters and the public saw the attacks as targeting the United States because of its "democracy and freedom" and "our values and way of life."[22] Journalists and the public supported the use of force in Afghanistan.[23] Focusing on the strong overlap between public and media support for war suggests that the media reflected the public's interests and needs. However, public interest in antiwar views raises the question of whether support for war would have been as strong if alternatives to war were explored in the media.

Public Opinion

Political officials and media amplified previous public fears of terrorism and support for war. Much of Bush's success in embellishing support for war revolved around his September 20 speech. Surveys following the speech found that the vast majority of Americans followed it, and most reacted positively.[24] Of those who followed the speech, 81 percent reacted very favorably, with another 14 percent responding somewhat favorably. Just 3 percent responded in a neutral, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable way.[25] Eighty percent of Americans felt the president's speech made them feel "more confident in this country's ability to deal with this crisis."[26]

Attention to the speech was associated with growing support for Bush's policy agenda. Figure 1.1 suggests that support for the president grew as attention to Bush's rhetoric increased. Those paying attention were significantly more likely to support Bush's handling of September 11, to support the using force against terrorists, to support the Afghan war,

Figure 1.1. Presidential Rhetoric and Support for Bush's War on Terror (September 2001)

and to support Bush's calls for a broader War on Terror.[27] In summary, presidential rhetoric helped increase war enthusiasm among an already supportive public.

The administration heightened public fear of terrorism. The media also influenced public opinion. Drawing from the October 2001 monthly poll on September 11, figure 1.2 indicates that public attention to political–media discourse produced greater concerns with the threat of terrorist attacks and greater satisfaction that nonviolent alternatives to war were sufficiently explored in national discourse. These relationships were statistically significant after controlling for other factors such as respondents' sex, race, education, age, income, ideology, and political party.[28] Figure 1.3 demonstrates that most Americans were closely following news on the Afghan war. At least 80 percent of Americans reported following news on the U.S. military effort between October 2001 and February 2002 either "very closely" or "fairly closely." From 2001 to 2002, the public strongly favored military action.[29] Figure 1.4 suggests that most Americans approved of military action to fight terrorism, supported the Afghanistan war, and believed the war was going well.[30]

Attention to political–media discourse was significantly associated with increased concern over terrorist threats and with satisfaction that nonviolent alternatives were sufficiently explored. As shown in figure 1.5, public opinion surveys from November 2001 and January 2002 suggest that attention to political–media discourse on Afghanistan produced increased enthusiasm for war. Those paying closer attention to political–

Figure 1.2. Public Attitudes on Terror Threats and Alternatives to War (October 2001)
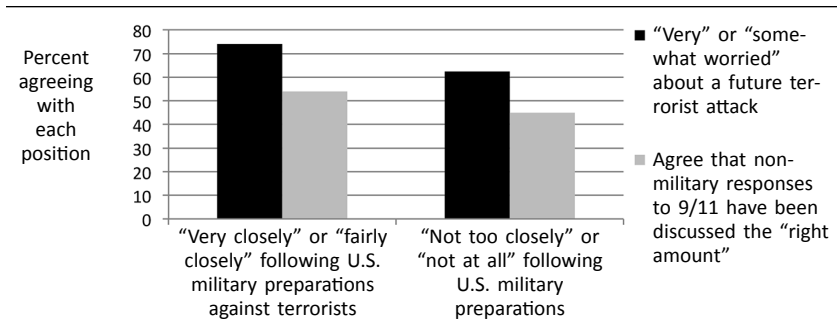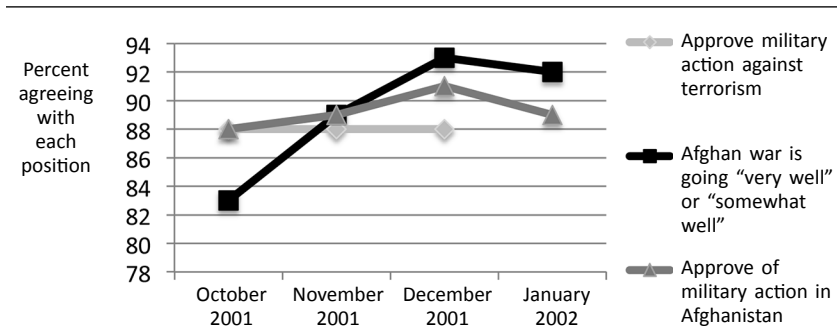

Source: Pew Research Center Survey (October 2001).

Figure 1.3. Public Attention to War in Afghanistan (October 2001–February 2002)
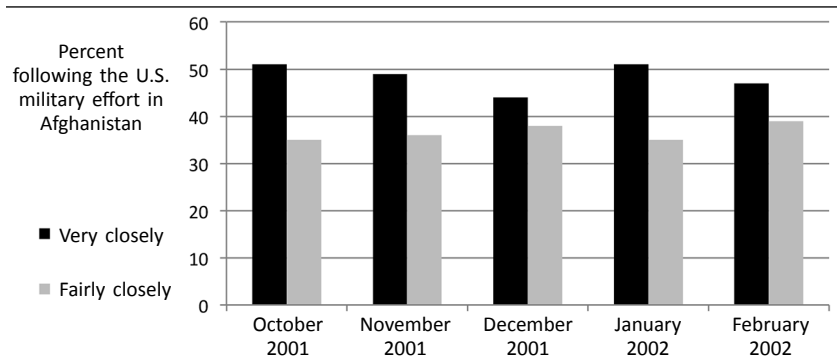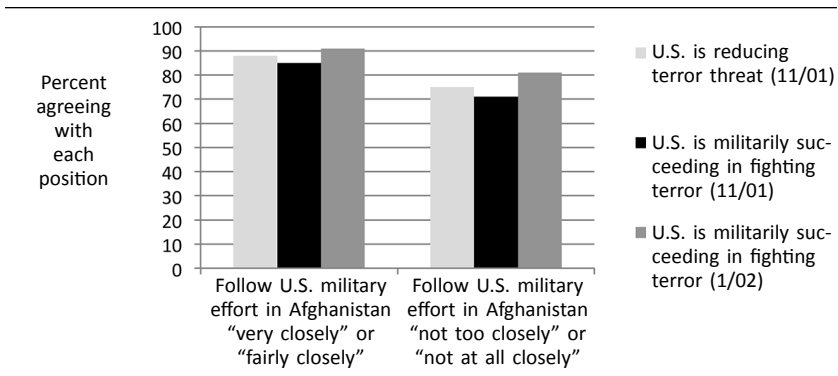

Source: Pew surveys.

Figure 1.4. Public Support for War after September 11 (October 2001–January 2002)

Sources: CBS, *New York Times*, *Newsweek* surveys.

Figure 1.5. Political-Media Effects on Public Opinion of War on Terror (November 2001–January 2002)

Source: Pew surveys.

media discourse were more likely to feel that U.S. efforts fighting terrorism were succeeding. War support grew by 10 percentage points or more across the questions in figure 1.5 for those following political–media discourse. The relationships in figure 1.5 are statistically significant after controlling for respondents' sex, race, age, education, income, ideology, and political party.[31]

Conclusions for the 2001 Afghan Conflict

Americans supported the Afghanistan war even without sympathetic media coverage. The public fear of al Qaeda terrorism by itself was enough to justify mass support for war. Outside of that preexisting support, Bush succeeded in enhancing public fear and hope through his September 20, 2001, speech, and through positive media messages. The power of the president and media to cultivate war support stands in contrast to the failure of the president to maintain support in early to mid-2009. That failure is explored below.

Out of Control: Afghanistan in 2009

For much of the 2000s, Afghanistan was the forgotten war, with public attention focused on Iraq. Reporters neglected the war as casualties in

Iraq grew. Despite massive coverage of Afghanistan in late 2001 and early 2002, the conflict fell out of the headlines and public mind by mid- to late 2002 onward.[32] It was not until the 2008 election that Obama redirected attention toward the forgotten war, promising to escalate the conflict to defeat the Taliban and prevent al Qaeda's reemergence. Once American military casualties grew noticeably in 2009, media attention was redirected to Afghanistan.

By 2009, Obama was facing increased instability in Afghanistan with the resurgence of Taliban attacks on U.S. forces. That year saw the largest number of Americans killed—317—up to that point.[33] In light of these casualties, Obama made Afghanistan the central front in the War on Ter- ror.[34] U.S. military and Afghan civilian deaths increased significantly during 2008 and 2009. As the *Guardian* reported in January 2009, North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) statistics suggested a 31 percent increase in violence during 2008, with approximately 7,000 "violent incidents."[35] U.S. coalition deaths grew between 2007 and 2008 by 32 percent, while Afghan deaths increased by nearly 40 percent.[36] One NATO official explained of the spiraling violence: "We have seen a tactical shift with the insurgents using roadside bombs and similar tactics against Western troops while attacking local forces, such as policemen or elders, more conventionally."[37] Violence levels remained high, with a 14 percent growth in Afghan deaths from 2008 to 2009 and 105 percent growth in American deaths.[38]

Growing violence threatened the Afghan government with the Tali- ban military campaign to overthrow the country's political system. Two days prior to the August 2009 presidential election, the Taliban stepped up suicide bombings and rocket attacks against the government. As the *Times* reported: "The attacks, aimed at the heart of the capital and the workplace of President Hamid Karzai, provided yet another indication of the insurgents' determination to keep people away from the polls and undermine Thursday's election."[39]

Accompanying the introduction of tens of thousands more U.S. troops into Afghanistan was General David Petraeus's warning that the counterinsurgency campaign would not produce an immediate decline in violence. Petraeus predicted short-term growth in violence because "an expected [Taliban] backlash in the spring and summer [of 2010] means officials and the public should wait until December 2010 to evalu- ate progress of the U.S. military strategy."[40] Despite predictions of grow- ing violence, Obama also promised an eventual decline in violence in Afghanistan.

Growing Antiwar Sentiment

Early to mid–2009 marked a significant change in public opinion against the war. In January Americans were split, 45 percent to 45 percent, on whether the war in Afghanistan was going "very" or "fairly well" on the one hand, and "not too well" or "not at all well" on the other.[41] In February, 47 percent supported the war, while 51 percent opposed it.[42] Public opinion in early 2009 was at a tipping point; a majority could have become hostile to or supportive of the war. As figure 1.6 suggests, throughout 2009, support for the conflict declined across many questions. In all questions, support fell from more than 50 percent from early to mid–2009 to less than majority support by October.[43]

Why did Americans begin to oppose war in 2009? Polls from years prior found that slight majorities opposed the conflict at various times in the past (for example, in January 2007 and July 2008), but it was not until 2009 that polls demonstrated month-to-month majority opposition.[44]

As demonstrated by figure 1.7, a majority of Americans were closely following the conflict in Afghanistan in every one of six Pew Research Center surveys conducted during 2009.[45] Attention to Afghanistan meant that news coverage carried the potential to change attitudes in either a

Figure 1.6. Declining Support for War (December 2008–November 2009)
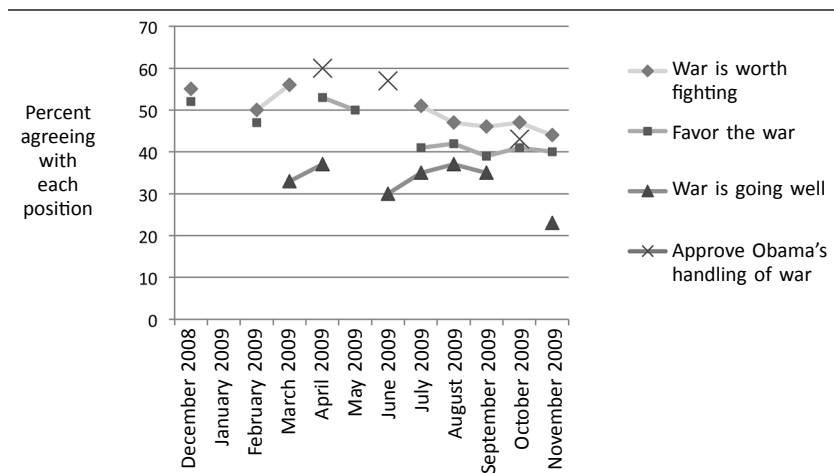
Sources: *ABC/Washington Post*, CNN/ORC, CBS/*New York Times*, and Marist College surveys.

Figure 1.7. Public Attention to Afghanistan (March–December 2009)
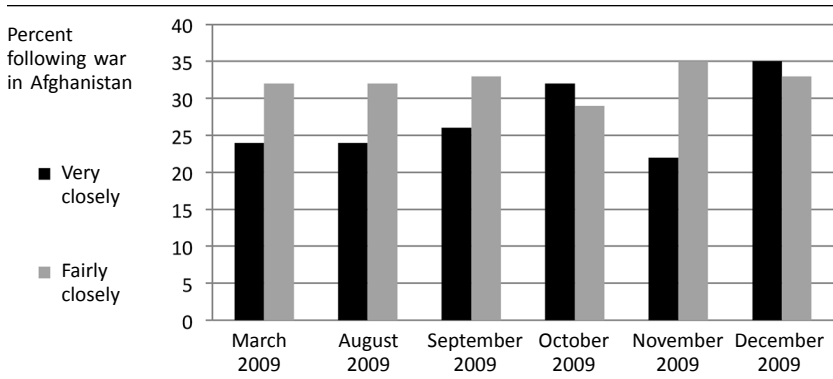
supportive or antagonistic direction, depending on what information was conveyed in reports. Increasingly negative information, however, was most common as coverage of American casualties grew significantly.

Public attention to Afghanistan was associated with growing opposition to war as U.S. casualties increased. Figure 1.8 documents the relationship between growing casualties and opposition. A modest decline in casualties was accompanied by a reduction in coverage of casualties from February to April 2009. The decline in coverage corresponds with a decline in opposition to the war between March and May. A second trend, shown in figure 1.8, is the growth in casualties and coverage of casualties, from less than ten deaths per month in April to nearly sixty per month by October.[46] Journalists responded by reporting casualty stories more frequently. Public opinion moved in a negative direction; war opposition increased from less than 50 percent of Americans in March to nearly 60 percent by November.

Journalists recognized that growing casualties threatened the war's credibility. For example, the *Times* editorialized in August 2009 that it was "understandable that polls show that many Americans are tiring of the eight–year-old war" when military officers were warning that the situation in Afghanistan was "serious" and "deteriorating."[47] The *Post* editors complained a month later that "U.S. casualties this summer . . . meant that Mr. Obama will probably come under considerable pressure to deny the additional troops [he sought] and change course."[48] In short, both newspapers acknowledged that Americans were displeased with growing casualties.

Figure 1.8. The Interplay between Casualties, Reporting, and War Opposition, Afghanistan (2009)
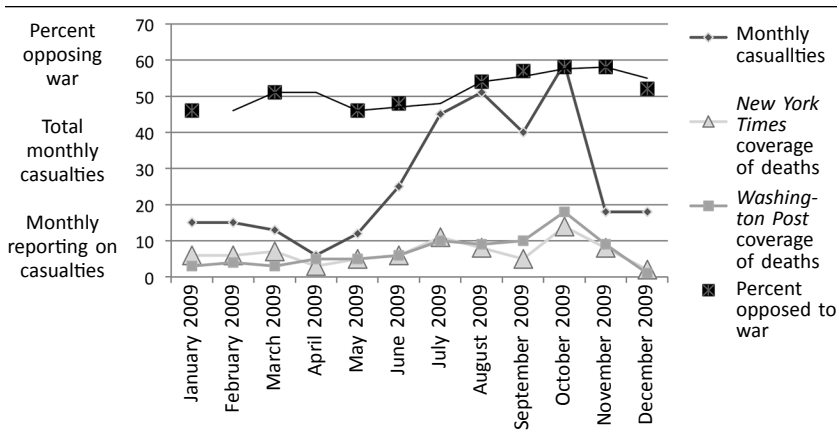
Sources: LexisNexis Academic Database, iCasualties, and CNN/ORC surveys.

Obama's Escalation and the Evolution of Dissent

Antiwar dissent grew significantly during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. At first, the September 11 terrorist attacks produced massive public support for President Bush, who enjoyed a 90 percent approval rating.[49] Americans hoped that Bush would punish those responsible for the September 11 attacks. Over time, however, support for the president declined. Most Americans disapproved of Bush's handling of the Iraq war by mid-2004.[50] Majorities concluded the Iraq war was not worth the costs by late 2004. Majority support for withdrawing "a large number" of troops emerged in early 2004, and majority support for an overall withdrawal of troops was evident by mid- to late 2005.[51] In Afghanistan, the first signs of majority opposition emerged in 2007 and 2008, and sustained majority opposition was evident by mid- to late 2009.

Antiwar dissent has evolved over time. Identically worded questions from both periods suggest that opposition to war emerged more quickly in the Iraq war than during the Vietnam War. As Gallup concluded, "a majority of Americans began to call Iraq a 'mistake' within about a year and three months of its beginning, while it took over three years for a majority to call Vietnam a mistake."[52] Public disillusionment with government grew dramatically after the emergence of the Pentagon Papers, demonstrating that U.S. leaders misled the public about the Vietnam War

and the Watergate scandal. Figure 1.9 reveals that a strong majority of Americans in the early to mid–1960s agreed that government was "run for the benefit of all" and that they could "trust government to do what's right most of the time," but that rating fell to a low of nearly 20 percent for both questions by 1980.[53] Public trust grew again after September 11, although it later fell.

Dalton questions whether the Pentagon Papers and Watergate scandal produced the distrust in government that characterizes the modern era.[54] He identifies similar declines in public trust in other first world countries as evidence that antigovernment sentiment is not localized to American society. Dalton's findings need not be taken to suggest that political events are unimportant in explaining why Americans oppose war. Scholars draw attention to the "Vietnam Syndrome," suggesting that Americans oppose wars with no end in sight and defined by growing casualties.[55] Americans seem increasingly unwilling to grant presidents wide latitude in pursuing foreign conflicts following Vietnam.

President George H. W. Bush recognized the Vietnam Syndrome prior to the 1991 Gulf War. Bush adhered to the "Powell Doctrine," which was based on the short-term use of overwhelming force and a concrete timetable for drawing down military operations. The Powell Doctrine stressed the importance of "a clear exit strategy" articulated "right from the beginning," with use of force "a last resort."[56] Bush concluded in 1991: "I don't think that support [for war] would last if it were a drawn-out conflagration. I think support would erode, as it did in Vietnam."

Figure 1.9. Public Trust in Government over Time (1964–2008)
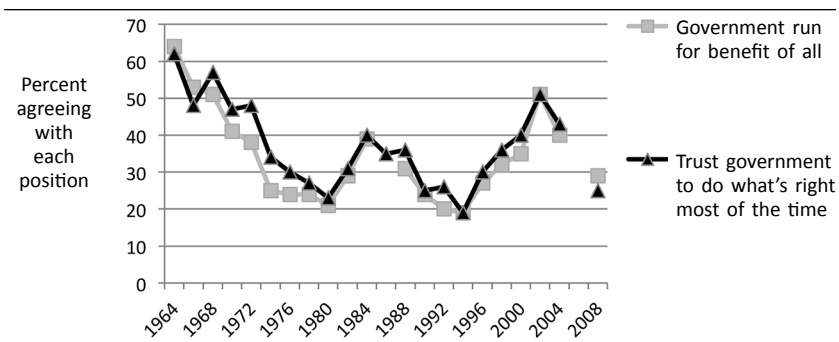
Source: American National Election Study surveys.

The Vietnam Syndrome influenced George H. W. Bush's foreign policy because he did not seek a military occupation of Iraq. In contrast, George W. Bush's occupation was based on the rejection of comparisons between Vietnam and Iraq.[57] Bush was unconcerned with antiwar opposition, sending an additional 30,000 troops in 2007 in the "surge" and promising to reduce Iraqi sectarian violence.

By ignoring public opposition, Bush damaged his presidential legacy. By early 2009 Bush's approval rating on Iraq fell to its lowest level ever—34 percent, which represented a 44-percentage point decline from Bush's 78 percent approval rating in April 2003.[58] Bush's overall approval rating reached a low of 22 percent in early 2009, which CBS reported left him "one of the most unpopular departing presidents in history."[59] Obama appeared quite concerned about the Afghan war and his presidential legacy following Bush's experience in Iraq. Military planners under Obama were aware of the role casualties play in stoking opposition to war. Associated Press reporting about growing casualties: "Pressure from the public and opposition [to] politicians is growing as soldiers' bodies return home. . . . Europeans and Canadians are growing weary of the war—or at least their involvement in combat operations."[60]

Obama voiced concerns about military casualties in the run-up to the December 2009 escalation in Afghanistan. *Times* reporting highlighted Obama's discussion with foreign policy advisors about "the human toll as he wrestled with what to do about the eight-year-old war. . . . He had mentioned to them his visits to wounded soldiers at the Army hospital in Washington, explaining that 'I don't want to be going to Walter Reed for another eight years.'" Obama also voiced concern with casualties in his December 2009 Afghanistan speech to Americans: "As your Commander-in-Chief, I owe you a mission that is clearly defined." Obama promised an eighteen-month timeline, after which withdrawal of troops would begin. Obama recognized Americans' sensitivity to mounting casualties:

> We have been at war for eight years, at enormous cost in lives and resources. Most of all, I know that this decision asks even more of you—a military that, along with your families, has already borne the heaviest of all burdens. As president, I have signed a letter of condolence to the family of each American who gives their life in these wars. I have read the letters from the parents and spouses of those who deployed. I have visited our courageous wounded warriors at Walter Reed [Hospital]. I have traveled to Dover to meet the flag-draped caskets of

> 18 Americans returning home to their final resting place. I see
> firsthand the terrible wages of war. If I did not think that the
> security of the United States and the safety of the American
> people were at stake in Afghanistan, I would gladly order every
> single one of our troops home tomorrow.[61]

Obama's comments reveal an awareness of how casualties foster resent-
ment toward war.

The Afghan war witnessed a progression of the public culture of dissent.
Obama's December 2009 speech represented a historical landmark. In no
other war in American history did a U.S. president escalate a military
occupation while simultaneously promising a drawdown of troops along a
specific timeline. Promised troop cuts stood in contrast to Bush's 2007 Iraq
surge. Bush's surge was unaccompanied by any plan for removing troops.
Bush explained in 2008 that withdrawal would only be dictated by assess-
ments of war progress. As the *Times* reported, "any decision depended on
security and the stability of the Iraqi government."[62] Bush did announce a
plan for withdrawal in 2008 as part of a U.S.-Iraqi Status of Forces Agree-
ment (SOFA), but that agreement was the product of pressures from the
Iraqi government to declare a withdrawal date. The administration never
intended to leave Iraq in 2011 and hoped to pressure Iraq to reconsider
the withdrawal agreement.[63]

Obama's promised withdrawal in 2011 suggested that Americans
were increasingly unwilling to tolerate conflicts with growing human
costs. The deaths of a few dozen U.S. soldiers 2009 increased opposition
to Obama's war. Out of all the possible dates, why did Obama set a time-
table for withdrawal beginning in July 2011? Furthermore, why seemingly
contradict that timetable, as Secretary of Defense Robert Gates did, by
claiming after Obama's December 2009 speech that withdrawal would be
determined by "conditions on the ground" in Afghanistan? These contrary
positions provided the administration a flexible withdrawal timetable that
allowed Obama to react to public opinion and changing conditions in
Washington and Afghanistan in time for the 2012 election. If the war was
publicly perceived as hurting Obama's reelection chances, discussion of
troop reductions could be entertained and even accelerated, with Demo-
crats portraying themselves as the "antiwar" party. Antiwar posturing was
central to the 2012 election because the administration claimed a com-
mitment to simultaneously fighting terrorism and beginning an orderly
withdrawal.[64] This antiwar image contrasted with the Romney campaign,
which supported continued occupation.[65]

Obama's declared support for withdrawal, and his qualification that the timeline would be determined by conditions on the ground, provided the president with another advantage. If Republicans succeeded during the 2012 election in convincing Americans of the need to remain in Afghanistan, Democrats could continue the occupation without fear of public backlash. To avoid being seen as weak on national security, Democrats could "out-hawk" Republicans by continuing or escalating the war as necessary due to unfolding "conditions on the ground."

2008 Election Rhetoric

In the 2008 election Obama depicted Afghanistan as the neglected war and framed Iraq as a diversion from the War on Terror. Obama warned in July 2008: "If another attack on our homeland comes, it will likely come from the same region where September 11 was planned . . . and yet today, we have five times more troops in Iraq than Afghanistan."[66] Speaking of the "strategic consequences of Iraq and its dominance of our foreign policy, Obama lamented that the occupation "distracts us from every threat that we face. . . . This war diminishes our security, our standing in the world, our military, our economy, and the resources that we need to confront the challenges of the twenty-first century. By any measure, our single-minded and open-ended focus on Iraq is not a sound strategy for keeping America safe."[67] Obama dismissed a war "that had absolutely nothing to do with the September 11 attacks," a point widely recognized following the Iraq invasion.[68]

Obama's opposition to the Iraq war was based on concern for the U.S. reputation abroad, which was tarnished by Bush's disinterest in world opinion. Bush's warning to other countries that "either you are with us or you are with the terrorists" in the fight against terror suggested contempt for any disagreement with U.S. policy.[69] Obama's antiwar rhetoric resonated with audiences and voters who were displeased with Bush's polarizing rhetoric. Obama's embracing "hope" and "change" at a time when citizens were distraught with Bush for escalating an unpopular war became the hallmark of his campaign.

In July 2008, Obama presented his vision for the "War on Terror." Promising to "lead this country in a new direction," Obama vowed he would reconcile with American allies in light of U.S. alienation from many countries following Bush's polarizing rhetoric. Obama promised he would remove "combat brigades" from Iraq within sixteen months of

taking office, leaving only a "residual force" for "targeting any remnants of al Qaeda," "training and supporting Iraq's security forces," and "protecting our service members and diplomats." For Afghanistan, Obama would "make the fight against al Qaeda and the Taliban" the "top priority" by sending "at least two additional combat brigades to Afghanistan" to "focus on training Afghan security forces and supporting an Afghan judiciary." They would "take out terrorist camps" and "crack down on cross-border insurgents." A renewed financial commitment to the Afghan war was necessary, Obama argued, to provide for more troops and to secure funding for investments (in which he promised more than $1 billion) to "help Afghans grow their economy from the bottom up."[70] Obama's focus was on security concerns in Afghanistan and Pakistan; humanitarian issues and economic growth were secondary considerations. As president, Obama continued to stress that the military dimension of the campaign took precedence over nation-building.[71]

The December Surge

Obama's campaign to sell military escalation in Afghanistan was advanced in an unorthodox way in September 2009 when General Stanley McChrystal publicly pressured the president for a troop increase. The national discussion on escalation culminated in December 2009 when Obama made the case for the addition of 30,000 U.S. troops. The McChrystal controversy, and Obama's addition of 17,000 troops in October 2009, sent a message to the media that the United States was set on escalating the war.[72] Troop increases occurred in February and October, but were *not* accompanied by a presidential campaign to sell the war. The rhetorical campaign would not take place until December 2009.

In September 2009, the *Post* broke a story about General McChrystal's sixty-six–page confidential assessment to the Obama administration warning of "mission failure" in Afghanistan.[73] McChrystal concluded: "Failure to gain the initiative and reverse insurgent momentum in the near-term (next 12 months) . . . risks an outcome where defeating the insurgency is no longer possible." The *Post* reported that Obama indicated no decision would be made about sending more troops until he had "absolute clarity about what the strategy is going to be."[74] McChrystal's assessment was leaked to the media and was not a formal part of Obama's campaign to sell escalation. Still, the leaked report represents a challenge to the administration that is based more on strategy than principle. Obama

promised to add troops in Afghanistan when he was running for president and did so throughout 2009. The administration's deliberations in late 2009 were over how many *more* troops to add and how long they would remain.

As the *Post* reported, Obama and his advisors spent two months after McChrystal's report was released strategizing on Afghanistan before announcing the December surge. The *Post* reported by early November that Obama was faced a choice between a shorter and longer period for adding troops: "On this day, Nov. 11, the president scanned the choices with a trace of irritation. At a meeting more than two weeks earlier, he had asked for a plan to deploy and pull out troops quickly—a 'surge' similar to the one that his Republican predecessor had executed in Iraq, but with a fixed date to begin withdrawals. What was in front of Obama—scenarios in which it took too long to get in and too long to get out—was not what he wanted." Reportedly, Obama's main problems with McChrystal's escalation proposal were that it added troops too slowly, it added more troops than the president preferred, and it did not include a withdrawal timeline.[75]

Obama's Speech at West Point Military Academy

Obama's December speech at West Point Military Academy was the focal point in the effort to sell the surge. Obama used the rhetoric of fear to defend the initiative. Whereas Bush's rhetoric focused on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and ties to al Qaeda, the Afghan context was different. No one accused the Taliban of providing WMDs to al Qaeda. Rather, Obama claimed the need to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for al Qaeda, to confront the Taliban, and to disrupt al Qaeda's base of operations. These goals represented the core of the campaign of hope, with Obama promising to protect American lives from the threat of terrorism.

Obama's Afghanistan speech was similar to Bush's rhetoric following September 11 in claiming a reluctant commitment to war. Obama announced, "We did not ask for this fight. On September 11, 2001, nineteen men hijacked four airplanes and used them to murder nearly 3,000 people. They struck our military and economic nerve centers. They took the lives of innocent men, women, and children without regard to their faith or race or station." The reference to September 11 was meant to emphasize the fight against al Qaeda, which Obama suggested could become resurgent without renewed action. Attempts to link terrorism to

the surge were controversial in light of the 2009 finding that al Qaeda no longer operated in Afghanistan. Obama seemed to concede this point in his speech, stating that "al Qaeda's base of operations *was* in Afghanistan, where they were harbored by the Taliban" (emphasis added). Acknowledging the displacement of al Qaeda from Afghanistan, Obama discussed the effects of the 2001 U.S. military operations: "within a matter of months, al Qaeda was scattered and many of its operatives were killed. The Taliban was driven from power and pushed back on its heels." However, Obama framed the surge as necessary to limit al Qaeda's influence by rolling back the growth of Taliban violence against the Afghan government: "After escaping across the border into Pakistan in 2001 and 2002, al Qaeda's leadership established a safe-haven there. Over the last several years, the Taliban has maintained common cause with al Qaeda, as they both seek an overthrow of the Afghan government. Gradually, the Taliban has begun to take control over swaths of Afghanistan, while engaging in increasingly brazen and devastating acts of terrorism against the Pakistani people."

Obama appropriated the rhetoric of hope to frame U.S. military operations as vital to protecting U.S. security. Depicting Afghanistan and Pakistan as the "epicenter of the violent extremism practiced by al Qaeda," he warned that "new attacks are being plotted as I speak. This is no idle danger; no hypothetical threat." A failure to act meant that the dangers "will only grow if the region slides backwards, and al Qaeda can operate with impunity. We must keep the pressure on al Qaeda, and to do that, we must increase the stability and capacity of our partners in the region." Obama asserted a direct connection between the Afghanistan war and terrorist threats on U.S. soil, announcing that "in the last few months alone, we have apprehended extremists within our borders who were sent here from the border region of Afghanistan and Pakistan to commit new acts of terror."

Obama did not frame Taliban violence against the Afghan government as an immediate threat, but as an emerging one. "There is no imminent threat of the government being overthrown, but the Taliban has gained momentum. Al Qaeda has not re-emerged in Afghanistan in the same numbers as before September 11, but they retain their safe-havens along the border." Obama's reference to al Qaeda's failed reemergence "in the same numbers as before September 11" left something to the imagination. The comment seemed to imply that al Qaeda retained a significant presence in Afghanistan, although the size of this threat was unaddressed. At the very least, this ambiguous framing suggested al Qaeda retained a presence that could grow if the United States did not further intervene. Obama's