

# The Defensive Surge: Psychological Reasons for Why Leaders Double Down on Failing Wars

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## Abstract

*Why do leaders double down on wars and other unpopular foreign policies that the public opposes? Criticism of costly wars creates a dilemma for decision-makers as both maintaining and changing existing strategies have negative consequences for their prospect of remaining in office. To resolve this dilemma, leaders may opt to 'gamble for resurrection' to achieve victory. While valid, existing arguments that adopt the rationalist approach about the preference of leaders and the informative function of polls rely on narrow assumptions about decision-making. Psychological mechanisms broaden our understanding of how difficult policy choices are made. Specifically, this article contends that the psychological pressures created by the public's negative assessments of the competence of leaders constitute a threat to leaders' self-esteem, which, in turn, triggers psychological defensive mechanisms. Common defensive mechanisms, including reaction formation, isolation, and denial, make it more likely that leaders commit further to failing wars and unsuccessful foreign policies. These mechanisms are substantiated through an analysis of the Bush administration's Surge in Iraq in 2007. The article contributes to the literature by highlighting additional pathways through which public opinion impacts foreign policy decision-making, not only through electoral consequences but also through implicit signals regarding the public's views on leaders' ability to lead.*

**Keywords:** *Foreign policy decision-making, Surge in Iraq, Gambling for resurrection, Political psychology, Public opinion*

## Introduction

On January 10, 2007, President George W. Bush announced the “New Way Forward” and argued that the new strategy would succeed in establishing “a unified, democratic Iraq that can govern itself, defend itself, and sustain itself, and is an ally in the War on Terror.”<sup>1)</sup> The decision, commonly known as the Surge in Iraq, included the deployment of more than 20,000 additional US troops and was one of the most controversial foreign policy decisions of the President’s second term in office. Many believed it to be an ill-advised strategy. Not long after it was announced, Congress passed a nonbinding resolution that denounced the decision while the majority of the public similarly opposed the Surge.<sup>2)</sup> Given such widespread opposition against the Iraq war and the Surge, why did President Bush nevertheless double down and commit more resources instead of withdrawing from a conflict that the country had become disillusioned with?

Long and costly conflicts, as well as unpopular foreign policies more broadly, pose a dilemma for leaders. Growing opposition against wars as a result of accumulating human and economic costs incentivizes leaders to terminate conflicts, especially in democratic countries.<sup>3)</sup> But doing so may result in defeat, or at least the perception of defeat, which also adversely affects leaders’ prospects of remaining in office.<sup>4)</sup> Faced with this conundrum, leaders may choose to “gamble for resurrection” by doubling down to obtain victory.<sup>5)</sup>

This explanation relies on rationalist assumptions about leaders’ preferences to

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- 1) The White House, “Fact Sheet: The New Way Forward in Iraq”, January 10, 2007, available at <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2007/01/20070110-3.html> (accessed on March 23, 2021).
  - 2) David Stout, “House Passes Iraq Resolution with 17 Votes from G.O.P.,” *The New York Times*, February 16, 2007; Frank Newport, “Public Opposes Troop Surge by 61% to 36% Margin,” *Gallup News Service*, January 9, 2007; Dana Blanton, “FOX News Poll: Most Think Troops Surge is Bush’s Last Chance in Iraq,” *Fox News*, January 18, 2007.
  - 3) Hein E. Goemans, *War and Punishment: The Causes of War Termination and the First World War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012); Elizabeth A. Stanley, *Paths to Peace: Domestic Coalition Shifts, War Termination and the Korean War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).
  - 4) Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, Randolph M. Siverson, and Gary Woller, “War and the Fate of Regimes: A Comparative Analysis,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 86, No. 3 (1992), pp. 638-646; Sarah E. Croco and Jessica L. P. Weeks, “War Outcomes and Leader Tenure,” *World Politics*, Vol. 68, No. 4 (2016), pp. 577-607; Alexandre Debs and Hein E. Goemans, “Regime Type, the Fate of Leaders, and War,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (2010), pp. 430-445.
  - 5) George W. Downs and David M. Rocke, “Conflict, Agency, and Gambling for Resurrection: The Principal-Agent Problem goes to War,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (1994), pp. 362-380; Sarah E. Croco, “The Decider’s Dilemma: Leader Culpability, War Outcomes, and Domestic Punishment,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 105, No. 3 (2011), pp. 457-477.

stay in power and the informative aspect of polling as an indicator of how the electorate will likely vote in future elections. In contrast, this article explores whether psychological mechanisms caused by negative reviews of leadership also affect decision-making. In addition to foreshadowing election results, public opinion also conveys the public's evaluation of the leadership, judgment, and overall competence of their leaders.<sup>6)</sup>

This article argues that this latter aspect, in particular, makes it less likely for leaders to withdraw from wars and end unpopular foreign policy initiatives because doing so is perceived as a tacit acknowledgment of the public's beliefs about his or her ineptitude. Furthermore, questions about one's ability to lead in the form of polling data threaten a leader's self-esteem, which consequently triggers psychological defensive mechanisms. Common responses such as reaction formation, isolation, and denial add to the likelihood that leaders will double down and "gamble for resurrection".

### **To Terminate or Escalate and the 'Decider's Dilemma'**

While public opinion influences a wide range of foreign policy decisions such as trade,<sup>7)</sup> immigration policy,<sup>8)</sup> and climate change,<sup>9)</sup> the decision to use force has perhaps received the most attention. Two arguments on the subject are widely accepted. First, protracted conflicts erode public support for military action as the costs of war accumulate over time. This was one of the primary lessons of US involvement in the Korean and Vietnam Wars.<sup>10)</sup> Factors such as the public's perception about the necessity and righteousness of military interventions, success on the ground, and elites' ability to frame and provide cues for the public mitigate the degree to which initial support garnered through the rally 'round the flag effect

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6) Michael A. Bailey and Clyde Wilcox, "A Two-Way Street on Iraq: On the Interaction of Citizen Policy Preferences and Presidential Approval," *American Politics Research*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (2016), pp. 3-27.

7) Alexandra Guisinger, "Determining Trade Policy: Do Voters hold Politicians Accountable?" *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 3 (2009), pp. 533-557; Daniel Y. Kono, "Does Public Opinion affect Trade Policy?" *Business and Politics*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2008): 1-19.

8) Gallya Lahav, "Public Opinion toward Immigration in the European Union: Does it Matter?" *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 10 (2004), pp. 1151-1183; Jack Citrin, et al. "Public Opinion toward Immigration Reform: The Role of Economic Motivations," *The Journal of Politics*, Vol. 59, No. 3 (1997), pp. 858-881.

9) Sara L. Wiest, Leigh Raymond, and Rosalee A. Clawson, "Framing, Partisan Predispositions, and Public Opinion on Climate Change," *Global environmental change*, Vol. 31 (2015), pp. 187-198.

10) John E. Mueller, "Trends in Popular Support for the Wars in Korea and Vietnam," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (1971), pp. 358-375.

devolves into opposition.<sup>11)</sup> Nonetheless, “aggregate support for foreign military operations declines as casualties rise” under most conditions.<sup>12)</sup>

Second, war outcomes substantially impact leaders’ tenure. Because “governments are held responsible for jeopardizing the well-being of citizens,” defeat in war harms leaders’ prospect of remaining in office.<sup>13)</sup> This logic applies to both democratic and non-democratic leaders. Even though autocrats may placate their electorate and soften the fallout, they are still thought to be sensitive to war outcomes since their removal from office is likely to be more hazardous, even if it is less likely.<sup>14)</sup>

These political consequences create “the decider’s dilemma.”<sup>15)</sup> On the one hand, leaders may choose to terminate the war and comply with the wishes of the public to minimize “the distance between their policy and the policy preferences of voters”, thereby improving their chances of reelection.<sup>16)</sup> But early withdrawal from wars is likely to be construed as defeat, harming their prospect of maintaining power. On the other hand, leaders may continue to fight in the hopes of achieving victory. But this exposes them to continued criticism and calls for democratic responsiveness. Neither option guarantees victory on the battleground or in voting booths.

The ‘gambling for resurrection’ hypothesis argues that rational leaders resolve this dilemma by doubling down and even committing additional resources into protracted and unpopular wars. Using game theory models, Downs and Rocke first

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11) Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, “Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (2005/2006), pp. 7-46; Christopher Gelpi, Jason Reifler, and Peter D. Feaver, “Iraq the Vote: Retrospective and Prospective Foreign Policy Judgments on Candidate Choice and Casualty Tolerance,” *Political Behavior*, Vol. 29 (2007), pp. 151-174; Richard C. Eichenberg, “Victory has many Friends: US Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force, 1981–2005,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 1 (2005), pp. 140-177.

12) Patricia L. Sullivan, “Sustaining the Fight: A Cross-Sectional Time-Series Analysis of Public Support for Ongoing Military Interventions,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (2008), p. 114.

13) Bueno De Mesquita, Siverson, and Woller, “War and the Fate of Regimes,” p. 638. Also see, Croco and Weeks, “War Outcomes and Leader Tenure”; Debs and Goemans, “Regime Type, the Fate of Leaders, and War.”

14) Giacomo Chiozza and Hein E. Goemans, “International Conflict and the Tenure of Leaders: Is War Still “Ex Post” Inefficient?” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 48, No. 3 (2004), pp. 604-619; Jessica L. Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve,” *International Organization*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (2008), pp. 35-64.

15) Croco, “The Decider’s Dilemma.”

16) Lawrence R. Jacobs and Benjamin I. Page, “Who Influences US Foreign Policy?” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (2005), p. 109. Also see, Brandice Canes-Wrone, “From Mass Preferences to Policy,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 18 (2015), pp. 147-165; Matthew Baum, “How Public Opinion Constrains the Use of Force: The Case of Operation Restore Hope,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (2004), pp. 187-226.

explored the idea that escalation is preferred in situations where “removal may be all but inevitable if the executive makes peace.”<sup>17)</sup> Based on this logic, Croco argues that culpable leaders should always opt to keep fighting because they face punishment if they lose “regardless of the additional resources invested in the war.”<sup>18)</sup>

### **Additional Causes of the Gamble: The Role of Psychological Defensive Mechanisms**

The arguments summarized above have shown that increasing opposition against costly wars and the political consequences of defeat create a dilemma for leaders. The rationalist approach, while valid, may be inconclusive in some cases as both the decision to continue fighting and the decision to terminate the war have negative electoral consequences. The ‘gambling for resurrection’ hypothesis resolves the tension but relies on assumptions about leaders’ perceptions. For example, leaders may hold different beliefs about whether the “removal threshold” has been crossed despite being provided identical information.<sup>19)</sup> Moreover, the hypothesis assumes leaders to be optimistic about the likelihood of success of their gamble, even though their strategy has failed so far.

These aspects of the ‘gambling for resurrection’ hypothesis, and the rationalist approach in general, suggest the need to incorporate psychological approaches into the analysis. This contribution has been central to the recent behavioral revolution in international relations. Compared to earlier studies that focused on explaining deviations from rational behavior, psychological approaches are increasingly being utilized to complement existing rationalist arguments by adding mental pathways that result in the same outcome through supplementary mechanisms.<sup>20)</sup>

From this perspective, I explore the psychological impact of the public’s opposition against foreign policy decisions, including war and conflicts abroad, and how it might influence leaders’ choices as an ancillary piece of the overall puzzle. The rationalist approach concentrates on the informative nature of polling as an indicator of how the public is expected to vote in future elections. However, polls also send a clear signal about how the nation views the leadership, judgment, and overall competence of its leaders. The public’s perceptions of presidential leadership “have implications for presidents ... above and beyond the effects of job approva

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17) Downs and Rocke, “Conflict, Agency, and Gambling for Resurrection,” p. 375.

18) Croco, “The Decider’s Dilemma,” p. 461.

19) Downs and Rocke, “Conflict, Agency, and Gambling for Resurrection,” p. 375.

20) Hafner-Burton, et al., “The Behavioral Revolution and International Relations”; Alex Weisiger, “Rationality and the Limits of Psychology in Explaining Interstate War Duration,” *Polity*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (2018), pp. 215-224.

l”<sup>21)</sup> that are inherently personal; “the pain of the rebuff to his self-image forces deep introspection.”<sup>22)</sup>

I contend that the public’s beliefs about leaders’ incompetence conveyed through polling result in the decision to double down through two psychological mechanisms. First, leaders become less likely to terminate a conflict because doing so is perceived as confirming the public’s perception of their incompetence. In addition to conforming to the preferences of the public, it would also be an implicit admission of failure and ineptitude, a message that leaders will likely perceive as sealing their own political fate. This element essentially means that the removal threshold is crossed psychologically as anything but a complete victory is thought to result in the loss of power.

Second, leaders are also more likely to double down on their foreign policy because criticism of their capacity to lead constitutes psychological threats to their self-esteem that trigger defensive mechanisms. The preservation and protection of one’s self-esteem is a fundamental motive that can lead to various adaptations, responses, and biases. Defensive mechanisms are a category of these psychological reactions, defined as mechanisms or processes “to defend itself against the threatening implications of internal or external events that clearly violate preferred views of oneself.”<sup>23)</sup> Defensive mechanisms are unconscious but direct psychological adaptations that tend to reject the threat rather than accommodate it.<sup>24)</sup> In the case of leaders in charge of unpopular wars, these mechanisms compel leaders to want to prove the public wrong by doubling down on their efforts.

Among the various defense mechanisms, reaction formation, isolation, and denial have been confirmed the most by studies in psychology.<sup>25)</sup> Reaction

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21) Jeffrey E. Cohen, *Presidential Leadership in Public Opinion* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 20.

22) Dick Morris, *Behind the Oval Office: Winning the Presidency in the Nineties* (NY: Random House, 1997), p. 11.

23) Roy F. Baumeister, Karen Dale, and Kristin L. Sommer, “Freudian Defense Mechanisms and Empirical Findings in Modern Social Psychology: Reaction Formation, Projection, Displacement, Undoing, Isolation, Sublimation, and Denial,” *Journal of Personality*, Vol. 66, No. 6 (1998), pp. 1082; Phebe Cramer, “Defensiveness and Defense Mechanisms,” *Journal of Personality*, Vol. 66, No. 6 (1998), pp. 879-894.

24) In contrast, self-affirmation refers to efforts to essentially “[explain] ourselves to ourselves” to justify our behavior as “adaptively and morally adequate”. Meanwhile, coping mechanisms, though similar to defensive mechanisms, “involve a conscious, purposeful effort.” All three types of responses are psychological efforts to “relieve stress and perceived adversity.” Claude M. Steele, “The Psychology of Self-Affirmation: Sustaining the Integrity of the Self,” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, Vol. 21 (1988), p. 266; Phebe Cramer, “Coping and Defense Mechanisms: What’s the Difference?” *Journal of Personality*, Vol. 66, No. 6 (1998), p. 921.

25) Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer, “Freudian Defense Mechanisms and Empirical Findings in Modern Social Psychology.” The authors also review four other types of defensive

formation occurs when individuals accused of displaying a socially unacceptable trait respond by deliberately exhibiting opposite characteristics.<sup>26)</sup> Second, isolation involves “creating a mental gap or barrier between some threatening cognition and other thoughts and feelings.”<sup>27)</sup> Lastly, denial refers to the “refusal to face certain facts.”<sup>28)</sup>

These mechanisms increase the likelihood that leaders double down rather than withdraw from unpopular wars. Faced with public opposition, reaction formation causes leaders to visibly demonstrate their willingness to comply with the public’s demands. But such gestures are likely to be superficial and not result in substantial changes in policy as behavior due to reaction formation is often “exaggerated, compulsive, and inflexible.”<sup>29)</sup> Meanwhile, leaders will engage in isolation by presenting the decision to double down as an entirely new strategy that is unrelated to past failures. Lastly, denial causes leaders to ignore or downplay existing problems and instead focus on relative successes that contribute to their optimistic assessments of doubling down.

In sum, I argue that the psychological pressures precipitated by public opposition against conflicts abroad make leaders more likely to ‘gamble.’ Leaders become more reluctant to terminate wars as they fear that it will only confirm the public’s belief about their own incompetence. Meanwhile, defensive mechanisms triggered by perceived threats to leaders’ self-esteem make them more likely to double down on their foreign policy. These mechanisms do not occur in a vacuum but rather co-exist and interact with rational motivations in a way that makes one outcome more likely than the other, thus complementing arguments for why leaders double down on unpopular decisions.

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mechanisms that were originally mentioned by Freud: projection, displacement, undoing, and sublimation. They conclude, however, that the three mechanisms above appear “to be the best supported mechanisms that normal people have been shown to use to protect their self-concepts against threats.” p. 1113.

26) Ibid, 1085. A commonly cited example is how people often over-compensate when accused of being racist. For example, see, Donald G. Dutton and Robert A. Lake, “Threat of Own Prejudice and Reverse Discrimination in Interracial Situations,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (1973), pp. 94-100.

27) Baumeister, Dale, and Sommer, “Freudian Defense Mechanisms and Empirical Findings in Modern Social Psychology,” 1099. The authors offer the example of an individual switching the conversation to a different topic when they become uncomfortable.

28) Ibid, 1107. Denial has received the most attention in international relations and materializes when states and leaders “pretend that an event will not happen or avoid the value trade-offs required in deciding between mutually exclusive options.” Rose McDermott, *Political Psychology in International Relations* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2004), p. 172.

29) Neel Burton, “Why People are so often the Opposite of What they Appear,” *Psychology Today*, available at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hidden-and-see/201203/why-people-are-so-often-the-opposite-what-they-appear> (accessed on March 20, 2021).

## Verifying the Mechanisms: The Surge in Iraq in 2007

This section process-traces how the decision to surge troops in Iraq was reached in 2007. The case study seeks to demonstrate the existence of the mechanisms outlined above and the impact they had on President Bush's decision-making. To reiterate, the main argument of this study predicts that the psychological pressures generated by the public's negative assessment of the President's leadership and ability to manage the war in Iraq triggered defensive mechanisms that contributed to the decision to implement the Surge. The following section first describes the decision-making process chronologically, and the subsequent section analyzes how President Bush internalized negative polling information in ways that triggered defensive mechanisms that contributed to the decision to Surge in Iraq.

### *The Need for a New Strategy in Iraq Grows in 2006*

By most accounts, the story of the Surge begins in earnest in mid-2006.<sup>30)</sup> Concerns about the situation in Iraq had been growing despite some progress made the previous year through national elections and the approval of a new constitution.<sup>31)</sup> Cautious optimism was shattered, however, by the terrorist attack at the golden dome Mosque in Samarra in February 2006. The Bush administration remained hopeful that stability could be sustained; there was even the sense that "they'd dodged a bullet" when the Shia population did not immediately react.<sup>32)</sup> But the bombing would be a prelude to the violence in Baghdad that worsened later that summer, which forced the Bush administration to fundamentally revisit its strategy in Iraq.

In the Spring, the White House continued to emphasize publicly that progress was being made and that it would maintain its strategy in Iraq. But behind the scenes, President Bush began telling his closest advisers that he thought the administration needed "to take another look at the whole strategy."<sup>33)</sup> By May, civilian officials

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30) Feaver asserts that it began earlier in the Fall of 2005, but there is no indication that the administration was seeking to revise its strategy before the Samarra bombing. Rather, the administration was focused on buying time to ensure that their stand-up/stand-down strategy work by bolstering public and elite support for the "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq (NSVI)" White Paper published in late 2005. Peter D. Feaver, "The Right to be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (2011), pp. 99-100..

31) US State Department, "Iraqi Elections: January 30, 2005," January 25, 2005, available at <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/scp/2005/41206.htm> (accessed on April 20, 2021); CNN, "Milestone elections begin in Iraq," *CNN*, January 31, 2005, available at <https://edition.cnn.com/2005/WORLD/meast/01/29/iraq.main/> (accessed on April 20, 2021).

32) Frederic W. Barnes, "How Bush Decided on the Surge," *Weekly Standard*, February 4, 2008.

33) George W. Bush, *Decision Points* (NY: Crown Publishers, 2010), p. 364; Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (NY: Doubleday, 2014), p.459.

within the National Security Council (NSC) were in agreement that a top-down reassessment of US strategy was necessary.<sup>34)</sup> One early attempt at reevaluating Iraq policy was an “unusual” meeting at Camp David between administration officials and outside experts on June 12 arranged by the National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley.<sup>35)</sup>

Hadley had hoped the meeting would jump-start the review process by discussing a wide range of recommendations proposed by the participants.<sup>36)</sup> It failed to do so, however, and instead served as cover for President Bush’s surprise trip to Iraq the following day. The president had been encouraged by recent good news, including the death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi earlier that month, which had “reenergized the president’s commitment to the existing strategy in Iraq.”<sup>37)</sup> Observers later recalled that the Camp David meeting was a missed opportunity that delayed the White House’s assessment of its strategy in Iraq.<sup>38)</sup>

The situation particularly in Baghdad continued to deteriorate throughout the Summer, and by the Fall various branches of government had launched separate reviews of the war.<sup>39)</sup> Within the NSC, Deputy National Security Advisor Meghan O’Sullivan led an internal review and later wrote a memo that discussed the various options available.<sup>40)</sup> Senior Director for Defense Policy and Arms Control William Luti conducted a study in which he recommended a “surge” in US forces to “enhance security in Baghdad and other insurgent hotspots.”<sup>41)</sup> The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), headed by Chairman General Peter Pace, convened the “Council of Colonels” to likewise review the situation and assess whether the strategy in Iraq was working.<sup>42)</sup> The State Department also began formulating a revised strategy that focused on increasing US diplomatic efforts and outreach in the region.<sup>43)</sup>

At the same time, opinions outside the administration were also becoming more vocal. Jack Keane, a retired Army General, had been trying to change the military

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34) Feaver, “The Right to be Right,” p. 101.

35) Ibid.

36) Jean E. Smith, *Bush* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016), p. 495; Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 463; Thomas E. Ricks, *The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008* (NY: Penguin, 2009), pp. 42-45.

37) Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 44.

38) Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 467; Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 44; Feaver, “The Right to be Right,” p. 101.

39) The Battle of Baghdad began in July. The twelve-month period from mid-2006 to mid-2007 would prove to be “the bloodiest 12 months that American troops had seen thus far in the war, with 1,105 killed.” Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 45.

40) Bob Woodward, *The War Within, A Secret White House History 2006-2008* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2008), pp. 191-192; Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 487; Feaver, “The Right to be Right,” p. 102.

41) Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 170; Feaver, “The Right to be Right,” p. 103.

42) Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 90; Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 159; Feaver, “The Right to be Right,” p. 102.

43) Feaver, “The Right to be Right,” pp. 104-105.

strategy in Iraq outside the chain of command since the Summer. He later expressed his concerns directly to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and General Pace in mid-September.<sup>44)</sup> He also frequently conversed with General Ray Odierno, who was the “sole senior official in the active-duty military speaking out for an increase in troops” in Iraq.<sup>45)</sup>

Reviews within the Bush administration coalesced in early November after the 2006 Midterm elections and the resignation of Secretary Rumsfeld. President Bush ordered NSC Deputy Advisor J.D. Crouch to begin a formal White House review on November 10.<sup>46)</sup> Over the following two weeks, US officials involved in the process discussed various options, which were then presented to the President at an NSC meeting held on November 26. At the meeting, Crouch stated that the ultimate goal remained the accelerated “transfer of security responsibility to the Iraqis.” But the White House review had determined that while it was previously assumed that political progress in Iraq would lead to greater stability, it now appears that “political and economic progress is unlikely absent a basic level of security.”<sup>47)</sup>

Members of the NSC, including Hadley, O’Sullivan, and Luti, concluded that this required a “significant surge in US forces.”<sup>48)</sup> But though it was presented as the “emerging consensus,” others viewed the idea of deploying additional American troops with considerable skepticism.<sup>49)</sup> Instead, officials including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and General Pace suggested minor revisions to the existing strategy and advocated for a gradual drawdown of US troops from Iraq. Their views closely resembled the findings of the Iraq Study Group (ISG), which had been commissioned by Congress in March. The ISG report, published on December 6, sought to encourage President Bush to withdraw from the war in Iraq.<sup>50)</sup>

Though President Bush had left the NSC meeting on November 26 undecided, numerous sources suggest that he was leaning towards the Surge by this time.<sup>51)</sup> Less than a week after the ISG report was released, he met with outside experts at the White House on December 11. The group included General Keane, who had attended a three-day conference at the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) a couple

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44) Ricks, *The Gamble*, pp. 88-89; Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 131-133; Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 488.

45) Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 91.

46) Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 207; Baker, *Days of Fire*, pp. 508-510; Feaver, “The Right to be Right,” p. 103.

47) Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 511.

48) Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 245.

49) Ibid; Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 512. “Emerging Consensus” was the title of Crouch’s memo presented at the NSC meeting.

50) Smith, *Bush*, p. 533; Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 264-265.

51) One such indication was the behavior of Hadley who, throughout the formal White House review process in November, insisted strongly that the option of a surge of forces must be included. Woodward notes that “when Hadley spoke emphatically, he was a pure transmission belt for Bush’s views.” Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 235.

of days earlier where the Surge option was discussed in detail. He advocated for a surge in US troops in order to implement a transition to a counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq. This further persuaded the President of the need for more US servicemen in Iraq.

President Bush met with the JCS at the Pentagon on December 13. Military leaders, including General Pace, Commander of Multi-National Force-Iraq (MNF-I) General Casey, and Commander of Central Command (CENTCOM) General John Abizaid had opposed the idea due to concerns that additional deployments would dangerously overextend the military. Understanding that he needed the support of the military, President Bush proposed that he would ask Congress to “increase the size of the Army and the Marine Corps” to alleviate the pressure of surging troops to Iraq.<sup>52)</sup> The White House and the Pentagon spent the remainder of the year finalizing the size of the Surge, and President Bush appointed General David Petraeus, who had just finished rewriting the US Army Field Manual on counterinsurgency, as the next MNF-I Commander.<sup>53)</sup> With the pieces in place, President Bush announced the Surge in early January the following year.

### ***Public Opposition against the War and the Impact of Defensive Mechanisms on the Surge Decision***

In his memoir, President Bush admits that the summer of 2006 “was the worst period of his presidency.”<sup>54)</sup> The deteriorating situation in Iraq was wearing on the president. When informed that US special forces had killed Zarqawi in early June, for example, President Bush replied that “he wasn’t sure how to take good news anymore.”<sup>55)</sup> Stephen Biddle, who attended the White House meeting on December 11, similarly recalled how the President “seemed on the verge of clinical depression.” “Everything suggested weight;” he remembered, “the tone was very somber.”<sup>56)</sup>

Broad opposition against the war in Iraq among both the public and the elite was obviously a key factor. Less than a third of Americans approved of President Bush’s management of the war, while only 20 percent thought it could be won.<sup>57)</sup> In April, retired US military officers, some of whom were veterans of the Iraq war, voiced their concerns about how war efforts were being handled and openly challenged Secretary Rumsfeld’s leadership through the unprecedented “Revolt of the

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52) Previously, the Bush administration had advocated for a ‘leaner military’. Smith, *Bush*, pp. 541-542; Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 288-289.

53) Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 121; Woodward, *The War Within*, pp. 307-309.

54) Bush, *Decision Points*, p. 367.

55) Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 465.

56) *Ibid*, p. 517.

57) CNN, “Iraq drives Bush's Rating to new low,” *CNN*, March 14, 2006; Smith, *Bush*, p. 488.

Generals.”<sup>58</sup>) The Republican Party’s “thumpin” loss in the November Midterm elections, therefore, came as no surprise. Exit polls showed that 36 percent of voters cast their ballots to oppose the President, while 57 percent of the voting population disapproved of the performance.<sup>59</sup>)

The American people were sending a clear signal that they wanted the Bush administration to withdraw from the war in Iraq to prevent further losses. But criticism of the war and the pressure of the Midterm elections made it less likely that the White House would withdraw troops or make any substantial changes to its existing strategy. This was because doing so was perceived by President Bush and his administration as an admission of its own shortcomings.

The decision to replace Secretary Rumsfeld is a good example. After the Revolt of the Generals, Rumsfeld had become “a potent symbol of intransigence” within the Bush administration.<sup>60</sup>) Officials within the Republican Party preferred replacing him before the elections as they believed it would have demonstrated to the public the administration’s willingness to respond to their concerns. But the White House concluded that it would be equally damaging to replace the embattled Secretary before the Midterms as it would be a tacit acknowledgment of the administration’s inability to effectively manage the war; it would have shown “how far off course his presidency had drifted.”<sup>61</sup>)

When Secretary Rumsfeld’s resignation was announced just a couple of days after the elections, Republicans in Congress were “spitting mad,” convinced that the timing of the decision had cost them the majority.<sup>62</sup>) But the decision illustrated the White House’s focus on exhibiting confidence and competence. The electoral concerns aside, the concerted effort to project this image was strongly influenced by criticism of the war that increasingly focused on Bush’s leadership. Pundits openly questioned the President’s ability to lead, with television news segments debating whether “George Bush’s mental weakness” was “damaging America’s credibility at home and abroad.”<sup>63</sup>)

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58) Editorial, “The Generals’ Revolt,” *The Washington Post*, April 18, 2006; David S. Cloud, Eric Schmidt, and Thom Shanker, “Rumsfeld Faces Growing Revolt by Retired Generals,” *The New York Times*, April 13, 2006.

59) Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 509; Peter Baker, “Rove Remains Steadfast in the Face of Criticism,” *The Washington Post*, November 12, 2006; CNN, “Exit Polls,” CNN, available at [www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/pages/results/states/US/H/00/epolls.0.html](http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2006/pages/results/states/US/H/00/epolls.0.html) (accessed on April 20, 2021).

60) Robert Draper, *Dead Certain: The Presidency of George W. Bush* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2007), p. 398.

61) Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 453, p. 481.

62) *Ibid*, 502. There were, of course, other factors to consider, most notably that President Bush only interviewed Rumsfeld’s successor, Robert Gates, on November 5, just a few days before the elections. Nonetheless, the White House had ample time to consider candidates and declined to do so due to the message it would convey.

President Bush became agitated with this perception. A question about the Revolt of the Generals in April drew an “irritated” response from a “peeved” President Bush who defiantly answered that he was the decider who “decided what is best.”<sup>64</sup> He frequently bickered with reporters over his use of phrases such as “stay the course” and “winning” to describe the war in Iraq.<sup>65</sup> Fundamentally, he was frustrated why the public failed to see the importance of the war with the clarity that he did; “I am in disbelief that people don’t take these problems seriously,” the President privately complained.<sup>66</sup> Criticism of the war only seemed to reinforce his belief that it was his “sheer force of will that was holding the line between winning and losing the war” that “everybody else was ready to abandon.”<sup>67</sup>

Widespread distrust of his judgment thus appeared to threaten his self-esteem. This, in turn, seems to have triggered psychological defensive mechanisms that affected the President’s decision-making and specifically contributed to the Surge decision. Reaction formation can be found most notably in his interactions with the ISG. President Bush’s promise to cooperate with the bipartisan group proved to merely be a rhetorical tool to demonstrate his willingness to listen to outside counsel and adopt change. Members of the ISG quickly realized that the President was not seeking advice and was instead more interested in persuading the group of his view of the war.<sup>68</sup> The group’s report was understood to be “dead on arrival.”<sup>69</sup>

Even after it decided to deploy additional troops to Iraq, the White House made both public and private efforts to show that it was not rejecting the ISG’s recommendations. For example, Hadley deliberately described the new strategy as “Baker-Hamilton plus a surge,” referring to a section of the ISG report that mentioned the feasibility of “a short-term redeployment or surge of American combat forces to stabilize Baghdad.”<sup>70</sup> But members of the ISG lamented that the “heart and soul” of the group’s report were not being fulfilled.<sup>71</sup> Similarly, the administration stressed that the public’s concerns were being sincerely addressed in response to criticism that it was being overly stubborn and unresponsive.

Isolation made the Surge option more attractive as it helped the Bush administration focus on certain aspects of the war that had been more successful than others. The administration would hang on to certain political developments such as

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63) Ibid, pp. 478-479.

64) Ricks, *The Gamble*, p. 40; Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 453.

65) Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 494, p. 503.

66) Ibid, p. 496.

67) Ibid, p. 507.

68) Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 214; Smith, *Bush*, p. 528.

69) Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey with General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 51.

70) Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 314; Baker, *Days of Fire*, p. 514.

71) Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 314.

the election of the interim government in Baghdad, the ratification of the new constitution, and the election of a permanent government. While offering a sense of hope, fixation on the next milestone that seemed achievable led to optimism that made it hard to think about the war in a more comprehensive manner.

Especially regarding the Surge and the transition to counterinsurgency tactics, the US military's experiences in Tal Afar in 2005 were pivotal, and the example of Colonel H. R. McMaster and his troops was a crucial foundation of the 'New Way Forward.'<sup>72</sup> What was ironic about the episode, however, was that it was the result of a "free-lanced, almost rebellious undertaking by one Army colonel and his unit."<sup>73</sup> Focusing on the positive outcomes in isolation rather than the broader context in which it transpired bred optimism that a Surge would succeed.

Lastly, it has been well established that President Bush was in deep denial about the state of Iraq and the ongoing war. This applied to a wide range of issues including criticism over whether the initial decision to invade Iraq was appropriate given the absence of weapons of mass destruction and public outcry over the use of torture or advanced interrogation techniques.<sup>74</sup> These issues notwithstanding, it has also been extensively documented that the president was reluctant to hear reports that the war was being lost, and that he refused to believe these reports.<sup>75</sup>

Collectively, the continued public scrutiny of the war in Iraq, expressed doubts about his administration's ability to lead, the outcome of the Midterm elections, and the ISG report published in early December strongly suggested that the only option available to President Bush was to end the war. But President Bush refused to accept. Rather than consider withdrawal as a possible solution, he flatly rejected it as defeat. This caused him to consider only ways in which the war could be won, and his focus contributed to the conclusion that the Surge, coupled with the transition to a counterinsurgency strategy, was not only viable but also effective. Thus, while President Bush and his advisors understood the political risks involved, the decision was not much of a 'gamble' but rather the new and 'right' way forward.

## Conclusion

How do leaders resolve the electoral dilemma they face when the public turns against costly wars and other unpopular foreign policies? This article has demonstrated that psychological mechanisms play an important role in the

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72) Jay B. Baker, "Tal Afar 2005: Laying the Counterinsurgency Groundwork," *Army*, Vol. 59, No. 6 (2009), pp. 61-68.

73) Woodward, *The War Within*, p. 38.

74) Bob Woodward, *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2006).

75) Stephen B. Dyson, "George W. Bush, the Surge, and Presidential Leadership," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 125, No. 4 (2010/2011), p. 576.

decision-making process. In addition to providing information about the electoral consequences of their actions and decisions, polls are indicative of the public's beliefs about the competence and judgment of leaders. These signals generate two psychological mechanisms. On the one hand, it makes it less likely for leaders to withdraw from costly wars as doing so is perceived to be a tacit acknowledgment of the public's criticism of leadership. Moreover, doubts about the competence of leaders constitute threats to their self-esteem. This triggers defensive mechanisms such as reaction formation, isolation, and denial, all of which increase the likelihood that doubling down is the right and effective option.

The empirical section has shown that these mechanisms played an influential role in the Bush administration's decision-making process in 2006 that led to the Surge in Iraq. In addition to the mechanisms described above, notable is the timing of the decision and how it was concluded in a relatively short period of time in the Winter. The midterm elections prevented meaningful reviews of the war in Iraq due to fear that any indication that the Bush administration was considering change would expose the White House's own concerns about the war, implicitly admit their mistakes, and confirm the public's doubts about leadership. Losing the elections not only appeared to relieve President Bush from such pressure but also made him more determined to show that trying to win the war by committing additional troops and resources was the right thing to do and likely to achieve success. While there were other factors at play, these psychological pressures contributed to the substance and process of the decision-making towards the surge.

Long and costly wars, and unpopular foreign policies that they represent, are problematic for leaders as it diminishes their chances of staying in office. The psychological approach adopted in this study contributes to the field's understanding of why decision-makers maintain and double down on existing policies by proposing additional mechanisms through which decisions are made. This is not intended to replace existing arguments that rely on rationalist assumptions but rather complement them to provide a more comprehensive account of leaders' choices.

Specifically, this article contributes to the literature by highlighting alternative mechanisms through which public opinion impacts foreign policy. Most work on this topic focuses on political accountability and rationalist assumptions about how leaders interpret polling information. In contrast, this study explores the psychological impact of public opinion on decision-making and how leaders internalize the messages conveyed by the public through polls. Incorporating insights from both rationalist and psychological approaches is an important endeavor that enriches our understanding of key decisions and outcomes. Empirically, this article reviews the policy deliberations in 2006 that led to the Surge decision to describe how the US strategy in Iraq evolved.

Despite these contributions, several aspects of the claims made in this article require additional research. As more information on the Iraq war and the Bush

administration is released, the decision-making process described in this article needs to be updated and verified. There is also a compelling need to compare the case with President Obama's similar Surge in Afghanistan in 2009. Future research that investigates whether similar pressures existed in the Obama administration should further confirm the existence and importance of psychological effects. If they were absent, the comparison between the cases should render a more detailed description of the conditions under which defensive mechanisms are triggered and how leaders respond to threats against self-esteem differently.

Further research could also explore to what extent the psychological framework introduced here can be generalized. While this article has specifically focused on war duration, I have suggested that the underlying logic can also be applied to other areas of foreign policy. Given this, it is necessary to examine whether the nature of opposition against ongoing wars is different from criticism of other initiatives, and particularly whether it fosters similar pressures that induce similar psychological responses. Empirically, future research will need to also compare the Obama administration's decision to deploy additional troops to Afghanistan in order to further confirm and detail the psychological pressures that compel leaders to double down.

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