

**The Symbolic Management of Performance:
Public Opinion and Attention to Performance in a Public Arena During the Iraq War**

Pino G. Audia
Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College
pino.audia@dartmouth.edu

Mary Kate Stimmler
Google Inc.
marykate@google.com

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Abstract

Extending research on the symbolic management of performance, this study examines the relationship between public opinion and attention to performance in a public arena in the context of the second Iraq war. Analyses of press briefings by Pentagon officials reveal that favorable public opinion for the war increases attention to performance and moderates the influence of U.S. casualties on attention to performance. Whereas favorable public opinion is associated with high levels of attention that are unaffected by variations in U.S. casualties, unfavorable public opinion greatly magnifies the negative influence of U.S. casualties on attention. In addition, lesser attention to performance in press briefings is related to decreases in U.S. troop levels. Implications of these results for organizational research on the symbolic management of performance and public opinion are discussed.

The manner in which organizations communicate their performance to outsiders is often viewed as a symbolic activity aimed at maintaining a favorable image (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Pfeffer, 1981). Much of the available evidence on the symbolic management of performance uncovers tactics deployed in response to crises that threaten external support (Sutton and Callahan, 1987; Marcus and Goodman, 1991; Elsbach, 1994). The symbolic management of performance, however, just like other forms of symbolic management (Westphal and Zajac, 1998; Fiss and Zajac, 2006), can also occur in the absence of problematic situations and take the form of anticipatory tactics used to either avert negative perceptions or to encourage positive perceptions (Elsbach, Sutton, and Principe, 1998). For example, start-ups that do not yet have a proven track record substitute in their communication to outsiders performance metrics such as revenues with less conventional achievements such as partially completed products (Zott and Huy, 2007) or affiliations with renowned individuals and organizations (Lounsbury and Glynn, 2000). Similarly, established firms interpret negative performance in favorable ways (Staw, McKehnie, and Puffer, 1983) and governments provide interpretations that transform perceived failure into perceived success (Sutton and Kramer, 1990).

This paper seeks to extend the literature on the symbolic management of performance by focusing on one such anticipatory tactic - the extent to which organizational members talk about performance in a public setting. When it is still unclear whether a crisis will unfold, one of the ways in which organizational members may seek to manage external perceptions is by varying the extent to which they give attention to performance in a public setting. Inattention to performance may be particularly acute when organizations perceive external pressures that place their course of action in doubt. In the rest of this paper we refer to the extent to which organizational members talk about performance in public as attention to performance in a public arena, and we seek to extend previous work by examining the relationship between attention to performance in a public arena and public opinion. Public opinion is a

pervasive feature of modern society that has been shown to impact policy changes (Page and Shapiro, 1983; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson, 1995; Soule and King, 2006) but whose influence on organizational processes such as those pertaining to the symbolic management of performance has received limited attention. Drawing on insights from the literature on accountability (Scott and Lyman, 1968; Tetlock, 1992; Lerner and Tetlock, 1999; Morris and Moore, 2000), which suggests that audiences, such as the public, may influence organizational members' cognitions and behaviors, we suggest and show that, when public opinion is unsupportive of organizational action, organizational members seek to maintain external support by giving less attention to performance in a public arena. We also propose and find that favorable public opinion dampens self-enhancing tendencies to give less attention to performance when performance is poor.

The empirical setting is the second Iraq War, from its inception in March 2003 to December 2006. We chose this setting for two main reasons. First, a considerable body of work in political science indicates that wars are highly salient policy events around which the public forms well-defined views (Gelb, 1972; Page and Shapiro, 1983; Klarevas, 2002). This literature also shows that military decision makers adjust their policies in response to varying levels of public support but it has not directly examined the effect of public opinion on attention to war performance in public arenas. Second, the fast pace at which modern war operations are conducted combined with strong public interest in war events created a context in which military leaders continuously reported on the progress of the second Iraq war. Consistent with Ginzel, Kramer, and Sutton's (1993) observation that press conferences are an important venue that provides organizational members opportunities for impression management, we use Pentagon press briefings to detect attention to war performance on a bi-weekly basis. Through opinion polls about the war and Pentagon press briefings, we are able to examine the relationship between public opinion about the war and Pentagon officials' attention to war performance in a public arena.

This paper seeks to make several contributions. First, besides adding inattention to performance in public arenas to the range of tactics considered in symbolic management research, this study contributes to that body of work by deepening understanding of the role of audiences. Previous empirical studies portray audiences primarily as the targets of symbolic management tactics and shed light on which tactics audiences accept or question (e.g., Elsbach and Sutton, 1992; Elsbach, 1994) . We complement that empirical work by examining when a key audience such as public opinion prompts the use of symbolic management. Second, this study contributes new theory regarding the micro level processes underlying the symbolic management of performance by integrating insights on accountability (Lerner and Tetlock, 1999) and complementary ideas from social psychological research on self-enhancement (Jordan and Audia, 2012). Specifically, these literatures help distinguish the influences that audiences' support and performance have on the propensity to engage in symbolic management. While poor performance is often viewed as a factor prompting defensiveness and use of symbolic management tactics, our analysis suggests that audiences' support may buffer organizational members from the perceptions of threat often associated with weak performance. Third, this study extends research that documents the impact of public opinion on policy changes by offering a closer look at the processes that may precede policy changes. Our findings suggest that the policy changes prompted by public opposition to the war were preceded by a protracted period of resistance on the part of Pentagon officials. Fourth, by applying insights from contemporary organizational research to the study of political and military contexts, this study seeks to revive interest among organizational theorists for settings that are generally the province of political scientists.

Because this paper hinges on a macro-micro link between public opinion and attention to performance in public arenas, it is helpful to start our analysis by providing an overview of the literature on the relationship between public opinion and policy changes. This serves also as an introduction to the study of public

opinion - a feature of the environment that has received limited consideration in studies of organizations.

PUBLIC OPINION, POLICY CHANGES, AND ATTENTION TO PERFORMANCE IN A PUBLIC ARENA

Political scientists have long viewed public opinion as an important factor conditioning the choices of policy makers. Much of their work draws on democratic theory, which holds that elected officials are responsive to the opinions attributed to the public because they fear that non-responsiveness may mean defeat in the next election (Dahl, 1956; Downs, 1957; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson, 1995).

Illustrative of this literature is Page and Shapiro's (1983) comprehensive analysis of Americans' opinions on issues such as taxation, public spending, civil liberties, civil rights, abortion, and military action.

Their analysis shows that public opinion impacts policy and that this relationship is conditioned by the extent to which the public has well-defined opinions on the issues at stake. Public opinion on issues such as civil rights, for example, has a stronger association with policy change than public opinion on issues such as national security because the public tends to have more well defined views (e.g., fewer people respond "I don't know" to polls) on civil rights than on national security.

Importantly, the effect of public opinion is not confined to elected officials. A study of Supreme Court justices (Mishler and Sheehan, 1996) shows that public opinion influences even officials who by virtue of their lifelong appointment are protected from electoral pressures. This suggests that responsiveness to public opinion may stem not only from a desire to increase the chances of re-election but also from a desire to secure the approval of the public. Paraphrasing Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson (1995: 543), when public sentiment shifts, actors who depend on public support sense the shift, and, if the shift is on issues about which the public has well defined views, then they alter their views and deliberations on those issues.

Interest in the impact of public opinion has been less sustained among sociologists (Burstein, 1998;

Manza and Brooks, 2012), but in recent years research on social movements has started to integrate the influence of public opinion into models of policy change. Soule and King (2006), for example, in their analysis of state-level ratification of the equal rights amendment, found that favorable public opinion was positively related to bill introduction and bill ratification and that the effect on ratification was stronger. Consistent with democratic theory, they note that legislators appeared more likely to complete a legislative process kick-started by social movements when they perceived that the cost of inaction may be failure in the next election.

Public opinion and wars. Public opinion's influence on policymakers extends to issues surrounding foreign policy and is especially palpable when nations go to war. Gelb (1972) documented how public opposition to the Vietnam War imposed limits on Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, especially with regard to how the air campaign and ground war were carried out. Drawing on her analysis of the Vietnam War, Gelb introduced the notion of public opinion as the *essential domino* of American foreign policy, which later became an integral component of the so-called Weinberger's doctrine (e.g., Klarevas, 2002). Caspar Weinberger, Reagan's Secretary of Defense, articulated six criteria that must be considered in deciding whether to use military force. One of the criteria is that the operation must have the support of the American people. The influence that this doctrine has had on foreign policy has led analysts to suggest that, besides constraining military action when a war is being fought, the prospect of public opposition to a war serves also as a deterrent to military intervention (Luttak, 1994; Record, 2007). The next step in our analysis is to broaden the analysis of the potential effect of public opinion beyond policy change to the allocation of attention to performance in a public arena. Specifically, our focus is on public opinion about wars and its effect on attention to war performance in a public arena.

Public opinion and attention to performance. To consider the potential impact of public opinion on the symbolic management of performance, we draw on the social psychological literature on accountability. By this theoretical perspective, feeling an obligation to explain or justify one's conduct to some significant other affects how individuals think and behave (Scott & Lyman, 1968; Tetlock, 1992). This theory applies well to our setting because, as the political science literature discussed above suggests, military officials view the public as a key audience to whom they are accountable. A key distinction in the literature on accountability is that between pre-decision and post-decision accountability (Lerner & Tetlock, 1999). Perceptions of being accountable to an audience prior to making a decision or forming an opinion are generally associated with openness to others' viewpoints. When the audience's views are known, individuals often display an inclination to conform to those views (Tetlock, 1983; Tetlock, Skitka, and Boettger, 1989). For example, Hoffman and Ocasio (2001) find that public media coverage that highlights the responsibility of chemical firms in events that harm the environment prompts greater acknowledgment among chemical firms of their role in such events. Similarly, Jensen (2006) reports that accountability to audiences critical of relations with firms that have violated the law increases firms' propensity to dissolve relations with such compromised partners.

In the context of wars, as we noted above, public opposition to military action makes elected officials and military leaders reluctant to use military intervention as a means to resolve international conflicts (Luttak, 1994; Record, 2007). When the audiences' views are unknown and conformity is not an option, individuals engage in pre-emptive self-criticism whereby they form more complex judgments, take more time to process available evidence, and are more inclined to consider multiple perspectives on the issue (Tetlock, 1983; Koonce, Anderson, and Marchant, 1995; Mero and Motowidlo, 1995; Carnaghi and Yzerby, 2006). In doing so, they try to secure support by anticipating all possible audiences' objections.

Research on accountability suggests that this openness cedes the way to defensiveness when individuals have irrevocably committed themselves to a course of action, such as the decision to go to war, and audiences are perceived to be critical of their views and actions (Tetlock, Skitka, and Boettger, 1989; Lerner and Tetlock, 1999). In such circumstances, studies find that individuals engage in “defensive bolstering,” a tendency to generate thoughts that justify the original commitments. Instead of acknowledging mistakes they may have made, they form more rigidly defensive views (Morris and Moore, 2000) and have a hard time writing off sunk costs (Fox and Staw, 1979; Simonson and Staw, 1982). Evidence of defensive bolstering in response to post-decision accountability pressures comes from studies that examine individuals’ private cognitions (i.e. cognitions in the absence of a public arena in which individuals communicate their thoughts to others; Tetlock, et al., 1989; Morris and Moore, 2000) but also from work that examines individuals’ communications to outsiders (Fox and Staw, 1979). These studies suggest that both an intra-psychic framework and an impression management framework are compatible with this prediction.

The literature on accountability has given less consideration to the effect of post-decision accountability on attention to performance in a public arena, but research on the symbolic management of organizations refers to inattention to performance as a tactic organizational members use to maintain external support. Pfeffer (1981: p. 29) suggests that “one of the interesting aspects of many organizations is the efforts undertaken to systematically avoid assessment, especially assessment of outcomes that are of potential interest to various groups or individuals in contact with the organizations.” One way in which organizations avoid assessment, Pfeffer notes, is by avoiding communicating to outsiders performance data that may have potentially damaging effects on external support. To illustrate this tactic, he uses the examples of hospitals reluctant to communicate to outsiders mortality and morbidity figures, schools reluctant to communicate to outsiders test score on standardized tests, and public companies opposing disclosures of adverse legal

actions. Consistent with Pfeffer's conjectures, Sutton and Callahan's (1987) case analysis of failing firms found evidence of concealment of performance information to creditors and other stakeholders. Similarly, Abrahamson and Park's (1994) study of letters to shareholders found lesser disclosure of organizational outcomes when the proportion of shares held by institutional investors is larger.

Drawing on this literature, we suggest that inattention to performance in a public arena, much like other anticipatory symbolic management tactics (Elsbach et al., 1998), may be a tactic organizational members adopt in an attempt to preserve the support of critical audiences to which they perceive themselves to be accountable. In the context of the second Iraq war, Pentagon officials may have responded to public opposition to the war by giving less attention to war performance.

Formulating our first hypothesis requires specifying which dimension of war Pentagon officials focused on, since war performance is a multi-dimensional construct. Three key dimensions of war performance are: combat, reconstruction, and rebuilding government (Schadlow, 2003). In our data analyses we recorded attention to these three dimensions and below we report results regarding all of them. The primary focus of our analysis, however, is combat performance because, as we explain in greater detail in the methods section, this was the most salient dimension during our observation period that extends from March 2003 to December 2006.

Hypothesis 1: The weaker the public support for the war, the lesser the attention Pentagon officials gave in a public arena to combat performance.

Weak performance and attention to performance. To isolate the potential influence of public opinion on inattention to performance in a public arena, it is helpful to distinguish it from the influence of weak

performance. Indeed several studies suggest that the defensiveness that prompts inattention to performance may simply stem from perceptions of threat associated with weak performance (Elsbach and Kramer, 1994; Audia and Brion, 2007; Park, Westphal, and Stern, 2011; KC, Staats, and Gino, 2013). Self-enhancement or people's desire to see themselves in a positive light is often seen as a key driver of such an effect (Sedikides and Strube, 1997; Jordan and Audia, 2012). Weak performance is thought to create a discrepancy between an individual's positive self-image and perceptions of reality. Then, motivated by the desire to see themselves in a positive light, people seek to eliminate this discrepancy by giving little consideration to information pointing to weak performance.

Evidence of defensive responses to weak performance comes from studies that show that organizational members are reluctant to make changes in response to poor performance. Audia and Brion (2007) report such a pattern in both an experimental setting and in the context of the hard disk drive industry. Likewise, Park, Westphal, and Stern (2011) find that CEOs' propensity to self-enhance is associated with a reduced tendency to make changes in response to low performance. KC, Staats, and Gino (2013) also find that surgeons learn more from their own successes and the failures of others than from their own failures. Studies also yield evidence of inattention to performance when performance is weak. Elsbach and Kramer (1996) report that business schools divert attention away from their national rank when their rank fails to meet their expectations and Audia and Brion (2007) report that individuals shift their attention away from a primary performance indicator when their performance on that indicator falls below an aspiration level.

Research on performance feedback acknowledges that weak performance may also prompt greater attention to performance (Cyert and March, 1963; Greve, 2003), but under certain conditions self-enhancing defensive responses that induce inattention to performance may prevail (Jordan and Audia,

2012). Defensiveness in response to low performance likely is more pronounced in a public setting because concerns for maintaining a positive self-image are generally stronger when individuals perceive themselves to be under public scrutiny (Northcraft and Ashford, 1990; Ashford and Northcraft, 1992). Self-enhancement is also accentuated by task complexity because complex tasks give decision makers greater latitude to divert attention away from weak performance (Jordan and Audia, 2012). The context we are examining in this study is one in which self-enhancing tendencies are likely to influence the allocation of attention to performance because press briefings expose Pentagon officials to outside scrutiny. Furthermore, wars are complex tasks whose progress can be plausibly assessed in a variety of ways.

Although a variety of metrics are potentially relevant to the measurement of combat performance (e.g., towns taken, civilian deaths, patrols completed), political scientists generally view the number of U.S. troops lost in combat as a key metric of combat performance (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, 2005; Karol and Edward, 2007). Combat operations are not successfully completed and reconstruction and rebuilding do not become the primary concern of war operations until public order is established (e.g., Woodward, 2006). That typically occurs when losses of the army controlling the territory decline and ultimately become negligible. During combat, however, a greater number of losses of U.S. troops may often be a noisy indicator of combat deterioration because they may, for example, result from victories on the battlefield. In the case of the second Iraq war, fatalities caused by improvised explosive devices and car bombs (IEDs) were less ambiguous indicators of combat performance because they were typically not associated with enemy losses.

Hypothesis 2: The greater the number of fatalities of U.S. troops caused by IEDs, the lesser the attention Pentagon officials gave in a public arena to combat performance.

Public opinion as a buffer. Although weak performance may prompt declines in attention to performance in a public arena, its effect may be conditioned by the context within which assessments of performance are formed. The same level of weak performance may take on different meaning - it may be more or less threatening - depending on organizational members' perceptions of other conditions that may impact their perceptions of threat (Jordan and Audia, 2012). Guler (2007), for example, found that high status venture capital firms felt less pressure to continue with investments that may not have been generating the desired results than low status venture capital firms, presumably because their favorable position in the industry buffered them from external sanctions. Similarly, King (2008) found that firms that had stronger reputation were less responsive to boycotts.

Analogously, research linking accountability pressures to self-enhancing cognitions and behaviors suggests that stronger evaluative pressures from audiences prompt stronger self-enhancing responses to poor performance than weaker evaluative pressures (Lerner and Tetlock, 1999; Jordan and Audia, 2012). Morris and Moore (2000) compared the verbal accounts of near accidents of pilots employed by commercial airlines and pilots who flew private planes and found that commercial airline pilots, who were accountable to audiences who could influence their professional fates, interpreted the incidents in more self-serving, defensive terms than pilots who were flying private planes. Conversely, Sedikides et al. (2002) found in an experimental setting that accountability to an audience whose evaluation did not affect an individual's future encouraged reflection on potential performance weaknesses.

Drawing on these studies, we suggest that, when combat performance is weak, public opposition to the war may exacerbate Pentagon officials' defensiveness and increase their inattention to combat performance in a public arena. Conversely, a supportive public opinion may reduce defensiveness and

inattention to performance in response to weak combat performance because it serves as a buffer from the sanctions that would otherwise be associated with acknowledgment of weak performance.

Hypothesis 3: The stronger the public support for the war, the weaker the negative association between fatalities of U.S. troops caused by IEDs and attention Pentagon officials gave in a public arena to combat performance.

METHOD

Data

Multinational forces, led by the United States under the administration of George W. Bush, started the second Iraq war on March 20, 2003, as a response to the threat posed by Iraq's failure to unconditionally comply with United Nations weapons inspections. A month after the beginning of the invasion, the Pentagon reported that combat operations had ended and that the reconstruction phase had begun (Copson, 2003; DePalma, 2003). That assessment, made widely known to the public by Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech on U.S. aircraft carrier Abraham Lincoln, turned out to be premature. When attacks against U.S. armed forces accelerated during the summer of 2003, the Pentagon reconsidered its earlier evaluation and admitted that the war was still on (Department of Defense, July 16 2003).

The situation continued to deteriorate during the first year. In October 2003, for example, the press reported that U.S. soldiers came under attack more than 100 times a week across Iraq (Berenson, 2003). As the first year of war operations ended, insurgents gained control of several cities, and a Washington Post journalist offered a bleak assessment, reporting that "more than 600 members of the American military have died in fighting since the coalition invaded Iraq and another 3,400 have been wounded" (Cordesman, 2004). Military operations continued to spiral out of control in the second and third years of the war, leading

the Iraq Study Group co-chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker to conclude in December 2006 that “the situation is grave and deteriorating”.

We examine how Pentagon officials allocated attention to war performance between March 2003 and December 2006, the period that coincides with Donald Rumsfeld’s tenure as Secretary of Defense overseeing the war. Focusing on Rumsfeld’s tenure allows us to avoid measuring how those who came after the decision to engage in the war questioned those initial decisions. When outcomes on the battlefield reflect actions taken by others, even catastrophically low levels of public support may not be sufficient to constitute a threat to policy makers. As Levitt and March (1988: 325) point out, “new leaders are inclined to define previous outcomes more negatively than are the leaders who preceded them.” Although our analysis focuses on the shared interpretations of outcomes of Pentagon officials – defined as the Secretary of Defense and high ranking military generals – the appointment of a new Secretary of Defense likely altered the way the entire organization viewed war operations.

Our data source is Pentagon press briefings, which provide on-the-record indications of the views of the Pentagon. During our observation period, briefings were typically held on a bi-weekly basis and were the main vehicle by which the Secretary of Defense and military leaders disseminated information about war developments. For each speech, we coded only the introductory section in which Pentagon officials gave updates on the war in Iraq before taking any questions from the press, because it was in this preliminary part of each briefing, rather than during the later question-and-answer sessions with the press, that Pentagon officials had the option of choosing the extent to which they talked about war performance.

Coding procedure

To detect attention to performance, two research assistants, who were unaware of the hypotheses being

tested, coded each of the 182 speeches included in our analysis. We instructed the coders to code any statement that gave the reader a sense of progress, failure to progress, or desire to progress during the war. We excluded from consideration references to the war in Afghanistan, the general performance of the U.S. military, or oblique references to the international war on terror. The speeches were coded in a randomized order. To develop the coding framework, coders examined 20 randomly selected speeches. Examining speeches in batches of three, the coders added any newly found types of performance metrics to the coding framework. This procedure generated 32 performance metrics, which ranged from “ending terrorism,” and “disarming Iraq,” to “rebuilding Iraq’s government” and “autonomy for Iraq.”

As could be expected, coding the speeches of Pentagon officials involved dealing with more ambiguities than many other kinds of discourse. One of the most persistent issues was the level of abstraction used. Although sometimes the performance measurement used was quite clear (e.g. “Yesterday four American marines... were killed”), at other times performance measurement was more abstract (“This tiny minority of thugs is growing weaker”). The codes developed also reflect this variance in abstraction (e.g. U.S. and allies killed and strength of enemy, respectively). Performance metrics also varied in the frequency with which they were used. “Security” was used in 78 speeches; “killing enemy leadership” was used in only 5. The performance metrics also related to broad outcome goals (“freedom and liberty”) and specific process goals (“kill enemies”).

Of the 32 performance metrics identified by the coders, 22 were used by Pentagon officials at least three times and are included in our analysis (Table 1). Krippendorff’s alpha for inter-rater reliability at the speech level was .68. When coders did not agree about a performance metric appearing in a speech, we coded that metric as not appearing in that speech. This produced a conservative measure for the use of a performance metric. We then scaled up codes to the month-level of analysis. If any speech during a

particular month included a particular performance metric, then we coded that performance metric as 1 for that month, and if no speech during that month included a particular performance measurement, then we coded that performance metric as 0 for that month.

Insert Table1 here

As Table 1 reveals, the performance metrics to which Pentagon officials referred in their speeches fell into three broad aspects of military performance: combat, reconstruction, and rebuilding government. The emergence in our coding framework of these three distinct areas of performance is consistent with the Iraq Index published by the Brookings Institution (www.brookings.edu) and the view that war progress often follows a natural sequence (Schadlow, 2003: 85): Upon entering the country, the military effort focuses primarily on combat operations and then, after displacing the regime, greater attention is given to rebuilding the country's infrastructure and its government.

Preliminary analysis

An initial look at our data suggests that press briefings by Pentagon officials aligned with this expectation—moving from a predominant focus on combat to increasing levels of attention directed to reconstruction and rebuilding government. In Figure 1, which shows the percentage of performance metrics used by Pentagon officials related to one of these three performance category in each given year, we see that in the first year the focus was primarily on combat. Combat continued to be relevant through the four-year period. However, in relation to other metrics used, it began to lose its dominant position. In the remaining years, increasing attention was allocated to reconstruction and rebuilding government, even though there was still substantial attention allocated to combat, and rebuilding government showed an early peak of attention in the second year.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 here

At first glance, this progression seems to suggest that having obtained one set of objectives (e.g., removing Hussein from power using military force), Pentagon officials then turned their attention to the next logical set of issues (e.g., repairing the damage from the military effort and setting up a new government). The war's progression, however, casts doubt on this interpretation. As Figure 2 clearly shows, U.S. casualties in the second year of the war were nearly double those in the first year, while, as we have seen in Figure 1, the attention given to combat actually declined as a percentage of all attention given to performance. These trends suggest a negative relationship between combat performance and attention in a public arena: the worse a noteworthy situation is, the more likely a policy maker is to ignore it.

Variables and hypotheses testing

Dependent variable. We chose to focus on attention to combat performance because during our observation period combat operations were the primary concern for troops on the ground, the public, media analysts, U.S. military leaders, and U.S. allies (e.g., Ricks, 2006; Woodward, 2006). As we noted above, U.S. military leaders expected a rapid completion of combat operations, but an increasing number of insurgents' attacks in June and July of 2003 led them to the realization and admission in July 2003 that combat operations had not ended. Combat continued to be a critical concern beyond our observation period. For example, the so-called "surge" strategy, which entailed sending additional U.S. troops to Iraq to increase control of the territory, was announced in January 2007. The dependent variable in our empirical tests of Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 is the probability that any combat metric identified by the coders was included in a month's briefings. In supplemental analyses we report the results of analyses in which the dependent variable is aggregate attention to combat performance measured by the count of combat

metrics that received attention in a given month's press briefings as well as the results of analyses in which the dependent variables are attention to performance metrics related to reconstruction and rebuilding government.

Independent variables. To measure public support we used public opinion polls conducted by ABC. The survey asked: "All in all, considering the costs to the United States versus the benefits to the United States, do you think the war with Iraq is worth fighting, or not?" The sample of respondents was random, nationwide, and typically had a 4.5-point error margin. Our measure includes the percentage of individuals who said they felt "somewhat" or "strongly" that the war was worth fighting. The highest approval rating for the war during the time frame of this study was in April 2003, just after the war began, when 73 percent of respondents felt the war was worth fighting. The lowest, 37 percent, was in October 2006. The survey, conducted by telephone 38 times between March 2003 and December 2006, usually had about 500 respondents. For the months in which we had missing values, we used interpolated values.

The measure of performance is U.S. casualties caused by car bombs, improvised explosive devices, mortar attacks, and helicopter losses. We refer to these as casualties caused by IEDs. We focus on these types of casualties because they became associated with the guerrilla strategy pursued by the insurgents. IEDs, in particular, exposed the vulnerability of the U.S. military because they were difficult to locate and could be activated wirelessly. Their importance in combat operations was highlighted in the report of this CBS correspondent (CBS News: Evening News, May 17 2004): "U.S. soldiers went to Iraq braced for weapons of mass destruction. Instead, they faced a deadly onslaught of roadside bombs, or IEDs as the military calls them, shorthand for improvised explosive devices. They have killed more Americans than any other weapon in Iraq." The sense of vulnerability created by IEDs is palpable also in the words of a sergeant who admitted that "we were all very fearful of the thought of being blown up, disfigured by these bombs. But there's

nothing we could do” (ABC News: Nightline, January 30 2006). These casualties accounted for more than fifty percent of all U.S. deaths incurred in the Iraq War. Below we also report the results of analysis in which we include other types of casualties. The Department of Defense and the Directorate for Information Operations and Reports are the sources of information regarding U.S. casualties. Because this variable is a count of troops killed, higher values indicate weaker performance. Note also that in supplemental analyses not reported here we obtained the same results when we computed U.S. casualties as a percentage of U.S. troops. One could imagine that casualties are highly dependent on the number of U.S. troops in the battlefield.

Control variables. On average 4.51 speeches were coded for each month, and 52% of these speeches were given by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. To control for the possibility that the attention allocation patterns emerging in the data were greatly affected by Rumsfeld’s personal characteristics, we include in our analyses the percentage of briefings in which Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld spoke during any particular month. Because domestic policy issues such as those revolving economic growth may affect attention to the Iraq war, we also control for the U.S. unemployment rate recorded by the Bureau of Labor Statistics on a monthly basis. Additionally, we controlled for temporal influences by including year-fixed effects.

Analyses. To test Hypothesis 1, 2, and 3 we used logistic regressions where the dependent variable is the probability that any given combat performance metric is mentioned in the press briefings held in any given month. The level of analysis is the combat-performance-metric-month (14 performance metrics X 46 months = 644 performance metrics months). As we noted above, performance metrics identified by coders varied in terms of abstraction and frequency. In order to control for this variance, these models include combat metrics fixed effects.

Insert Tables 2 and 3 here

RESULTS

Table 3 displays the results of the logistic regression. A look at the control variables reveals that Rumsfeld's personal involvement in the press briefing did not alter attention to performance. Unemployment, however, displays significant coefficients across the different models: higher unemployment was associated with a decline in attention to combat performance. In Model 2 we see that the coefficient of public support for the war is positive and significant. Greater public support was associated with increases in decision makers' attention to combat performance. Therefore Hypothesis 1 received support. In Model 2 we also see that the coefficient of IED casualties is negative and significant. Performance deteriorations evidenced by higher levels of IED casualties were associated with Pentagon officials' decreased attention to combat performance, as predicted in Hypothesis 2. Finally, in Model 3 the interaction term between public approval of the war and IED casualties reveals a significant and positive coefficient whereas the coefficient for public support for the war remains positive and significant and the coefficient for IED casualties remains negative and significant.

Given the strong significant effect of unemployment, one may wonder whether the coefficients of the independent variables are in any way affected by the inclusion of this control variable. For this reason in Model 4 we exclude the control variables. The results remain unchanged. As we show in greater detail below, through a graphical representation of the interaction, together these results suggest that public support attenuates Pentagon officials' tendency to decrease attention to performance when performance is weak. This evidence therefore lends support to Hypothesis 3.

Insert Figure 3 here

Figure 3 helps us interpret and quantify the impact that public support for the war and IED casualties have on attention to combat performance. The values in the graph are the sum of the effects of IED casualties, public support for the war, and the interaction term. To compute these values we use the coefficients in Model 3. Two observations stand out. First, at the highest level of public support for the war the probability that combat performance receives attention is approximately 98% and is unaffected by variations in IED casualties. Strong public support appears to eliminate any concern regarding the potential negative impact of deteriorating performance. Attention to performance is sustained regardless of whether performance is strong or weak. Second, decision makers' declines in attention to combat performance as a function of increases in IED casualties more than double in strength when we compare their reactions to IED casualties at the median value of war support to their reactions to IED casualties at the lowest level of public support for the war. Concretely, at the median value of public support, an increase of a standard deviation of IED casualties from the median reduces the probability of giving attention to any combat metric by 11%, whereas at the lowest level of public support for the war the same increase reduces the probability by 27%, a 16% difference. Weak public support magnifies the propensity to allocate attention to performance in a self-enhancing way.

While we have posited a causal relationship where the arrow goes from public support for the war to attention to combat performance, one can easily conceive of a relationship in which the arrow goes in the other direction. We consider this potential endogeneity by using an instrumental variable approach in which a variable unrelated to the outcome variable is used as a predictor (instrument) of the explanatory

variable suspected to be a source of endogeneity. After regressing the endogenous explanatory variable on the instrument and the exogenous variables, the predictions from that model are included as an explanatory variable in the main model. Our instrument is the monthly volume of media coverage of the Iraq War as evidenced by the minutes of the weeknight news broadcasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC news dedicated to coverage of the Iraq war (i.e., invasion, occupation, insurgency). Although media coverage is independent from whether news is positive or negative, it has been found to be positively linked to public support for the war, presumably because it increases the salience of the war among members of the public (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, 2005).

The source of data regarding media coverage is Andrew Tyndall, producer of the Tyndall Report (<http://www.tyndallreport.com>), who generously made available monthly data regarding two distinct indicators: media coverage of combat during the Iraq War and media coverage of the Iraq War (combat included). Whereas media coverage of combat displays a small but significant correlation with attention to combat, media coverage of the Iraq War has a positive but not significant correlation with attention to combat ($r = .037$, ns). We therefore use media coverage of the Iraq War as the instrument variable. The average media coverage was 226 minutes with a minimum value of 49 minutes in July 2006 and a maximum value of 710 in March 2003.

Model 5 in Table 3 reports the results of the instrumental variable probit obtained using the Newey's two-step estimator available in the ivprobit program in Stata 13. The Wald test of exogeneity is significant at the $p < .05$ level. This suggests that there is sufficient information in the model to reject the null that there is no endogeneity and that the instrumental variable approach is desirable. Results of the first stage model (not shown here) reveal an R-squared of 0.77 and a positive and significant coefficient for media coverage. More importantly, the coefficients of the second stage model in Model 5, in which public support for the war is replaced by the predicted values of the first stage model, reveal the same pattern of results that

emerged in the logistic regressions. These results remain unchanged when we remove the control variables in Model 6.

Insert Tables 4, 5, 6, and 7 here

We conducted two robustness checks of the analyses performed to test Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3. First, in Table 4 we include in both the logistic regressions and the instrumental variable probit models other types of U.S. casualties: U.S. casualties caused by “friendly” fire and U.S. casualties caused by direct confrontations and sniper attacks. The results of these additional models show that the main results remain unchanged. In addition, we also see that these other types of U.S. casualties are not significantly associated with attention to combat, presumably because they are less salient indicators of combat performance.

Second, we examined the impact of the independent variables on aggregate attention to combat in any given month. While the logistic regressions reported in Table 3 estimate the association of the independent variables with the probability that any combat metric receives attention in any given month, in Table 6 we report analyses where the dependent variable is the count of combat metrics that receive attention in a given month’s press briefings. On average 3.34 combat metrics receive attention (See Table 5 for descriptives and correlations). The minimum value is zero and occurs in four months. The maximum value is 10 and occurs in April 2003. For these analyses we use Poisson regressions, which are recommended to estimate models in which the dependent variable is a count variable. We include the same control variables we used in the logistic regressions as well as year fixed effects. It is reassuring to see that the pattern of the results displayed in Models 1, 2, 3 replicates the results of the logistic regressions. The coefficients of public support for the war, IEDs casualties, and the interaction between

public support and IEDs casualties are all in the predicted direction and generally significant. Significance levels are weaker than in the logistic regressions, but this is to be expected given the smaller sample size.

We are also able to explore whether inattention to combat performance may be replaced by attention to other war performance metrics such as those pertaining to reconstruction and rebuilding government.

The results reported in Table 7 do not support this scenario. Rather, they suggest that decreased attention to combat performance went hand in hand with decreased attention to reconstruction and rebuilding government metrics. This is not surprising because in their press briefings Pentagon officials can replace attention to combat performance with attention to a wide range of topics (e.g., war in Afghanistan, the general performance of the U.S. military, the war on terror).

In our final supplemental analyses, we explore whether attention to combat performance in the press briefings was in any way related to U.S. troop levels. Detailed accounts of the handling of the Iraq War by U.S. military leaders suggest that decisions about troops levels were “a key issue and point of contention” (Woodward, 2006: 256). The war started on the premise that it could be won quickly with the use of a relatively small number of U.S. troops but additional troops were sent during our observation period.

Although the “surge” took place in January 2007, during our observation period U.S. troop levels fluctuated between 115,000 and 160,000. A significant relationship between attention to combat performance and the number of U.S. troops, whether positive or negative, might be indicative that what was said in public was somehow related to internal deliberations regarding combat operations. Conversely, the lack of a significant relationship would be consistent with the possibility that what was said in public was disconnected from internal decisions. The data source for the number of U.S. troops is the Iraq Index published by the Brookings Institute.

Results of the ordinary least square regressions are reported in Models 4 through 7 in Table 6.

Independent and control variables are lagged by one month. We see in Model 4 that the unemployment rate is not significantly related to U.S. troop levels, but the percentage of speeches given by Rumsfeld reveals a significant and negative association with troop levels. Perhaps the negative coefficient indicates that Rumsfeld's greater involvement in press briefings corresponded with greater intensity in his pursuit of the 'small force' approach - the view that greater use of technology and special operations could compensate for the use of a larger military force (Record, 2007: 87).

After controlling for unemployment and Rumsfeld's involvement in press briefings and removing variance captured by the year fixed effects, we see in Model 5 that aggregate attention to combat has a positive and significant coefficient. The coefficient of attention to combat implies that a decrease of a standard deviation of aggregate attention to combat is associated with a 2.6% decrease in U.S. troop levels. Model 6 and 7 reveal that the significant relationship between attention to combat and troop levels persists when we exclude the control variables and when we include IEDs casualties. Based on these exploratory analyses, it appears that in this setting the symbolic management of performance presumably aimed at maintaining external support may have had some relationship also to the actions Pentagon officials took.

DISCUSSION

Organizations symbolically manage performance by employing a wide range of tactics including excuses, denials, acknowledgments, and favorable interpretations. In this study we focused on a tactic that has received limited consideration in previous empirical research – the extent to which organizations give attention to performance in a public arena. Early theoretical work referred to the selective release of performance information as an important manifestation of symbolic management (Meyer and Rowan, 1979; Pfeffer, 1981), but analyses of attention and inattention to performance in public arenas have been rare.

Instead of examining the use of this tactic in response to a crisis, we focused on a context in which it was unclear whether a crisis would materialize. This enabled us to examine whether inattention to performance was used as an anticipatory tactic aimed at preventing negative external perceptions. Our main findings were that both unfavorable public opinion and weak performance decreased attention to performance in a public arena. In addition, favorable public opinion dampened the influence of weak performance, thus serving as a buffer. Weak performance, which is often seen as a condition initiating symbolic management activity (Staw et al., 1983; Ginzel et al., 1993), may not by itself be sufficient to fully capture the perceptions of threat that prompt organizational members to decrease attention to performance in a public arena.

Besides yielding evidence about inattention to performance in a public arena, our study extends the symbolic management literature by pointing to the important role of a key audience – public opinion. Research on symbolic management recognizes the key role played by audiences, both as targets of symbolic management tactics and as forces that prompt managers' use of symbolic management activities (Ginzel et al., 1993; Fiss and Zajac, 2008). Yet empirical evidence regarding the influence of audiences, such as the public, on symbolic management is limited. Theoretically, by integrating insights from the social psychological literatures on accountability and self-enhancement, our analysis suggests that an audience's degree of external support creates a context within which organizational members form perceptions of threat to the organization's image. Our findings suggests that it is within this context that weak performance is assessed by organizational members to be either a serious threat that calls for the symbolic management of external perceptions or a mere data point with negligible external repercussions.

Our findings also extend research that examines the influence of public opinion on policy changes by offering a closer look at the processes that may precede policy changes. Political scientists interpret the impact that public opinion at time t has on policy at time $t+1$ as evidence of policy makers' responsiveness

to the opinions of the public (e.g., Page and Shapiro, 1983). The manner in which policy makers respond to public pressures before they decide to change their policies is naturally not a main area of concern in longitudinal studies that examine the effect of public opinion on policy adoption. Our analysis of Pentagon press briefings during the Iraq war suggests that policy changes may be preceded by protracted periods of resistance marked by inattention to issues that concern the public. Public opposition to the Iraq war contributed to several policy changes, including the resignation of the Secretary of Defense, Donald Rumsfeld, and the adoption of a new military strategy, the so-called “surge.” But these changes were not immediate. In the three years between the summer of 2003 and the end of 2006, public opposition to the war tended to be associated with Pentagon officials’ decreased attention to combat performance, even in the face of increasing losses of U.S. troops.

Whether these protracted periods of resistance to outside pressures reverberated internally is unclear. Our supplemental analyses exploring the link between attention to performance in press briefings and the number of U.S. troops revealed that attention in public may have been related to internal deliberations but, without access to internal documents that could help us identify what was said in internal meetings, we regard this evidence only as suggestive. Additional work is needed to establish whether and when attention to performance in a public arena impacts internal deliberations.

The uniqueness of our empirical setting may limit the generalizability of our findings to other contexts. Because wars involve death, destruction, and the fate of nations, it is hard to dispute that they subject policy makers to high levels of external pressures uncommon in other settings. It is therefore plausible that the effect of public opinion on attention to performance in a public arena emerging in our data may be less potent in other settings. Although the empirical literature on accountability suggests that our findings may generalize to other settings (e.g., Tetlock et al., 1989; Simonson and Staw, 1992; Morris and Moore,

2000), this is a limitation that we hope to address in future work. In addition, it is important to exercise caution in generalizing our findings to other symbolic management tactics. Inattention to performance is just one of the symbolic management tactics organizations use to influence external perceptions. Evidence of attention to performance in Pentagon press briefings is not necessarily evidence of absence of symbolic management. Pentagon officials may have used other symbolic management tactics while talking in public about performance.

Applying insights from research on the symbolic management of organizations to the study of the Iraq War is also a reminder that organizational theory may have much to offer to the analysis of government and military contexts. After Graham Allison published *Essence of Decision* in 1971, political scientists used concepts from Cyert and March's *Behavioral Theory of the Firm* to examine policy processes and political decision making. Organizational research on symbolic management may present similar opportunities. Political scientists recognize that the management of external perceptions by the government is a key activity in the conduct of a war. Much of that work focuses on how governments secure the necessary support to initiate a war. Once a war is initiated, less emphasis is given to how government and military officials communicate about war progress and to the conditions that influence their transparency. Organizational research on symbolic management may be a valuable complement because it offers a more fine grained understanding of the manner in which the management of external perceptions occurs and of the factors that prompt the use of different tactics.

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Table1: Performance metrics used in Pentagon Press briefings

| | |
|-----------------------|---------------------------|
| Combat | End Saddam's regime |
| | Capture leaders |
| | Kill leaders |
| | Capture enemies |
| | Kill enemies |
| | Strength of Enemy |
| | Disarming Iraq |
| | Violence |
| | Attacks by enemy |
| | US and allies' wounded |
| | US and allies' casualties |
| | Strength of US and allies |
| | Mistakes |
| | US and Allies weapon use |
| Reconstruction | Security |
| | Reconstruction |
| | Quality of life |
| | Economy |
| | Foreign aid |
| Rebuilding government | Autonomy for Iraq |
| | Rebuilding government |
| | Liberty/Freedom |

Table 2: Descriptives and correlations for analyses of attention to combat metrics

| | Mean | Std. Dev. | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. |
|-------------------------------|--------|-----------|-------|--------|--------|---------|
| 1. Attention to combat metric | .239 | .426 | | | | |
| 2. Rumsfeld's speeches | .528 | .357 | .015 | | | |
| 3. Unemployment rate | 5.282 | .534 | .083* | .641* | | |
| 4. IED Casualties | 30.652 | 16.309 | -.12* | -.445* | -.702* | |
| 5. Public support for the war | 48.347 | 8.707 | .176* | .461* | .746* | -.569** |

N=644; *<.05

Table 3: Models of attention to combat metrics

| | Logistic Regressions | | | | Instrumental Variable Probit | |
|---------------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------------------|-------------------|
| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. |
| Public support for the war | | .042* (.019) | .054** (.02) | .041* (.019) | .079** (.028) | .104** (.033) |
| IED Casualties | | -.026** (.011) | -.144** (.054) | -.136** (.054) | -.117** (.038) | -.148** (.042) |
| Public support X IED Casualties | | | .002* (.001) | .002** (.001) | .002** (.000) | .003** (.001) |
| Rumsfeld's speeches | -.212 (.388) | -.33 (.395) | -.326 (.397) | | -.25 (.234) | |
| U.S. unemployment rate | -2.802** (.739) | -3.936** (.867) | -3.864** (.881) | | -2.304** (.506) | |
| Year fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Combat metric fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Log likelihood | -294.59 | -289.77 | -287.32 | -298.46 | | |
| Chi Square | 119.3 | 128.95 | 133.85 | 111.57 | 110.13 | 95.55 |
| Wald test of exogeneity | | | | | 3.87 | 7.81 |
| N | 644 | 644 | 644 | 644 | 644 | 644 |

* < .05; ** p < .01; (one tailed tests)

Note: The instrument variable is a continuous measure of media coverage of the Iraq War

Table 4: Models of attention to combat metrics including all types of casualties

| | Logistic Regression | Instrumental Variable Probit |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|------------------------------|
| Public support for the war | .048* (.021) | .082** (.035) |
| IED Casualties | -.124* (.057) | -.116** (.045) |
| Public support X IED Casualties | .002* (.001) | .002* (.001) |
| Rumsfeld's speeches | -.301 (.402) | -.219 (.238) |
| U.S. unemployment rate | -3.781** (.948) | -2.446** (.58) |
| Non-hostile casualties | .015 (.027) | .013 (.016) |
| Other hostile casualties | .006 (.007) | .001 (.004) |
| Year fixed effects | Yes | Yes |
| Combat metric fixed effects | Yes | Yes |
| Log likelihood | -286.7 | |
| Chi Square | 135.09 | 109.38 |
| Wald test of exogeneity | | 2.9 |
| N | 644 | 644 |

* < .05; ** p < .01; (one tailed tests)

Note: The instrument variable is a continuous measure of media coverage of the Iraq War

Table 5: Descriptives and correlations for analysis of aggregate attention to combat

| | Mean | Std. Dev. | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. |
|-------------------------------|--------|-----------|--------|--------|--------|---------|
| 1. Aggregate attention to | 3.347 | 2.359 | | | | |
| 2. Rumsfeld's speeches | .528 | .361 | .041 | | | |
| 3. Unemployment rate | 5.282 | .54 | .212 | .641* | | |
| 4. IED Casualties | 30.652 | 16.476 | -.307* | -.445* | -.702* | |
| 5. Public support for the war | 48.347 | 8.796 | .451* | .461* | .746* | -.569** |

N=46; *<.05

Table 6: Models of aggregate attention to combat and U.S. troops

| | Poisson Regressions of Aggregate Attention to Combat | | | OLS of U.S. Troops | | | |
|---------------------------------|---|--------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|
| | 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. |
| Public support for the war | | .022* (.013) | .020 (.014) | | | | |
| IED Casualties | | -.074* (.039) | -.079* (.041) | | | -.000 (.001) | -.001 (.001) |
| Public support X IED Casualties | | .001† (.000) | .001* (.000) | | | | |
| Rumsfeld's speeches | -.177 (.305) | -.186 (.312) | | -.066* (.036) | -.062* (.034) | -.063* (.035) | |
| Unemployment rate | -1.654** (.549) | -2.226** (.661) | | .061 (.068) | .133* (.071) | .113 (.083) | |
| Aggregate attention to combat | | | | | .012* (.005) | .011* (.005) | .009* (.004) |
| Year fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Log likelihood | -90.37 | -86.51 | -92.89 | | | | |
| Chi Square | 27.89 | 35.61 | 22.83 | | | | |
| F | | | | 2.3 | 3.1 | 2.64 | 2.59 |
| R Square | | | | .22 | .32 | .32 | .24 |
| N | 46 | 46 | 46 | 46 | 46 | 46 | 46 |

† < .1; * < .05; ** p < .01; (one tailed tests)

Table 7: Logistic regressions of attention to reconstruction and rebuilding government metrics

| | 1. | 2. | 3. |
|---------------------------------|--------------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Public support for the war | | .029 (.025) | .046* (.027) |
| IED Casualties | | .021† (.013) | -.151* (.07) |
| Public support X IED Casualties | | | .002* (.001) |
| Rumsfeld's speeches | -.952* (.496) | -1.049* (.503) | -1.063* (.508) |
| U.S. unemployment rate | -2.384** (.927) | -3.267** (1.079) | -3.16** (1.094) |
| Year fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Combat metric fixed effects | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Log likelihood | -183.78 | -182.08 | -180.28 |
| Chi Square | 112.79 | 116.18 | 119.8 |
| N | 368 | 368 | 368 |

† < .1; * < .05; ** p < .01; (one tailed tests)

Figure1: Proportion of different categories of performance metrics in Pentagon Press Briefings

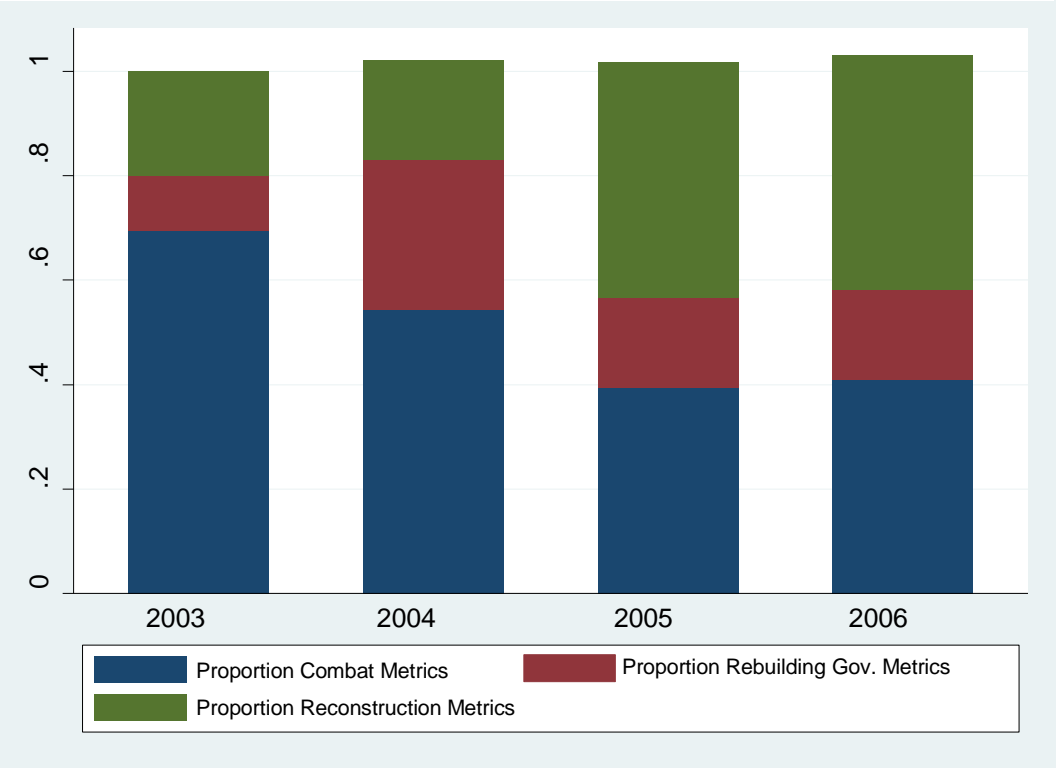


Figure 2: U.S. casualties, March 2003-December 2006

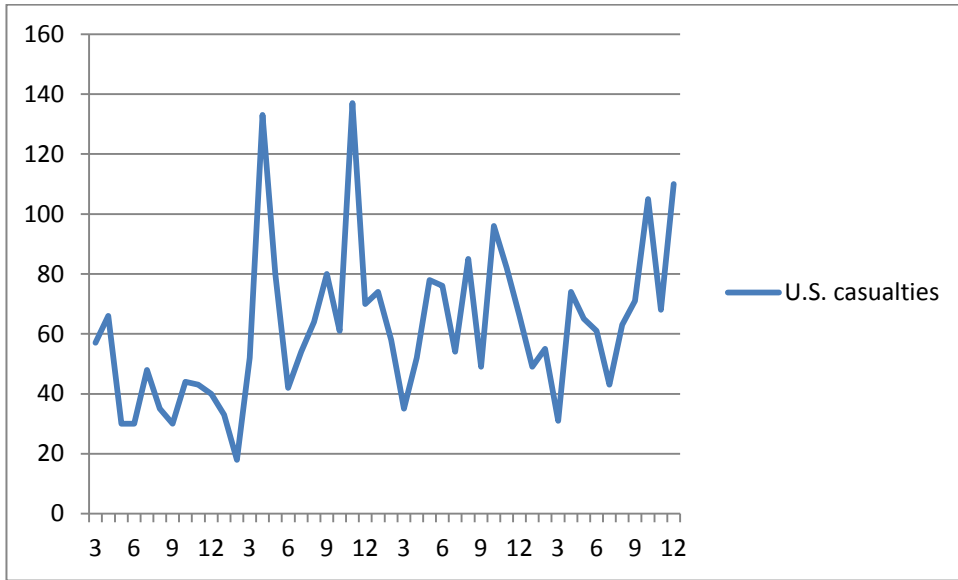


Figure 3: Attention to combat metric as a function of IED casualties and public support for the war

