THE SOUND OF THE GUNS

Is There a Congressional Rally Effect after U.S. Military Action?

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This article examines whether, during the 1946-1982 time period, presidents achieve more success in Congress on important international issues in the wake of dramatic military operations. The analysis shows that, at least for a short period of time after visible uses of U.S. military force, a president will generally have a greater chance of congressional support on key international issues.

Since the emergence of the United States as a global power, and its involvement in the cold war, presidents have ordered our military forces into a number of dramatic and dangerous situations. Typically, the public has responded to these actions with a show of support for the president. Should we expect a similar reaction by Congress? That is, is the dramatic involvement of U.S. military forces associated within increasing levels of congressional support for the president on key international votes?

I explore this question by examining key congressional votes on international issues during the 1946-1982 time period, and determining whether presidential success is linked to visible uses of the U.S. military. I begin with a discussion of why presidential success in Congress may be heightened after U.S. military action, and follow this by operationalizing and testing this hypothesis.

Author's Note: My thanks to Professor Rick Wilson, the editor, and the reviewers for their suggestions. However, any errors are by responsibility.

AMERICAN POLITICS QUARTERLY, Vol. 15 No. 2, April 1987 223-237
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THE LINK FROM MILITARY ACTION TO CONGRESSIONAL VOTES FOR THE PRESIDENT'S POSITION

The expectation that Congress is more amenable to the president's wishes in foreign affairs is implied by several branches of the academic literature. The most well-known set of studies follows from the "Two Presidencies" thesis of Wildavsky:

The President's normal problem with domestic policy is to get congressional support for the programs he prefers. In foreign affairs, in contrast, he can almost always get support for policies he believes will protect the nation—but his problem is to find a viable policy [Wildavsky, 1966: 7].

Although the research into this thesis is generally supportive of such a relationship (see Peppers, 1975; Sigelman, 1979, 1981; LeLoup and Shull, 1979; Edwards, 1980; Shull and LeLoup, 1981; and Cohen, 1982), its relevance to the present study is only indirect. Wildavsky would lead us to expect that the president can find support in Congress for votes on important international issues. But nothing in his thesis directly implies that the level of support should rise in the wake of dramatic U.S. military actions.¹

A second body of literature that bears on the subject links dramatic events to presidential popularity in the general public. The classic research on the subject was done by Mueller (1973). He showed that in the wake of dramatic events (or as he called them, rally points), a president's popularity tends to experience a short-term rise. Later work by others (MacKuen, 1983; Brody, 1983) refines and reinforces his basic findings.

CONGRESSIONAL SUPPORT FOR PRESIDENTIAL ACTION

Based on these bodies of literature, we can expect that Congress will support the president when he orders a dramatic military action. First, members of Congress can be expected to experience the same feelings of patriotism and support for the

president as the general public in times of high drama.

Further, even if members of Congress are not caught up by their own feelings of patriotism, there are several reasons why they may be reluctant to speak or act against the president. First of all, since the general public will rise to support the president, any opposition by a member of Congress will be at odds with the feelings of her or his constituents. Second, opposition will be made even more difficult because in a fast-moving military situation, the executive branch will have a near-monopoly of information on the events. Without some concrete evidence to buttress congressional opposition, it is difficult to justify swimming against the tide of popular support (Brody, 1983).

CONGRESSIONAL VOTING SUPPORT FOR THE PRESIDENT'S POSITION

We can expect both primary and secondary linkage between the use of the military and congressional support for presidential positions on important votes on international issues. Primary linkage will occur if the bill(s) under consideration are tied to the dramatic event that has just occurred. Since Congress is likely to support the president's decision to use military force, it is also likely to go along with legislation that deals with the same issue or problem. This suggests that the president and his supporters can be expected to try to link the issues behind an important vote to the use of the U.S. military in order to take maximum advantage of the president's surge in popularity and the widespread support for the action.

Even though a vote may not be directly related to the recent military action, a secondary linkage between the two may still occur. Members of Congress will be reluctant to vote against a president who is experiencing the surge in popularity that typically occurs after a dramatic action. A significant portion of the general public does not usually pay close attention to foreign events. An additional segment that does pay attention to events does not have a coherent belief system that would allow them to discriminate between issues that are related to one another and

those that are not (Hughes, 1978: 23-25). Consequently, a large number of people may project a link between the recent use of the military and an important vote on an international issue, even if there is no logical reason to make this connection. The result is that members of Congress may fear retribution from their constituents if they fail to support the president on an international issue.

SUMMARIZING THE LINKS

To recapitulate, there is a well-known link between dramatic actions, such as the use of military forces, and rises in popular support for the president. But although Congress is likely to support the president on foreign-policy matters, there has been no systematic attempt to determine if these military actions lead to changes in congressional voting tendencies. It is my contention that congressional support for the president's actions can be expected to carry over to increased support for the president's position on international legislative matters. In the next section, I turn to converting these arguments into a hypothesis that can be tested against key international votes in Congress.

HYPOTHESIS AND OPERATIONALIZATION

THE HYPOTHESIS

The discussion above shows why it is reasonable to expect that there is a relationship between certain kinds of U.S. military involvement and presidential success in Congress. But is it more than a reasonable expectation; does it also predict actual behavior in Congress? In order to answer this question, I present the following hypothesis:

In the wake of a visible use of military force by the United States, the president will have an increased chance of winning important votes on international issues in Congress.

A visible use of military force occurs when components of a nation's uniformed military are deployed in such a manner that sporadic combat occurs, or is a distinct possibility. Such uses cannot occur in the context of an ongoing war involvement. Recalling that the rally effect occurs because citizens support their president when the national interest is threatened, visible use of military force is a good indicator of these situations for two reasons. First, the actions themselves carry a certain amount of risk of combat, which would entail both immediate costs and the prospect of higher levels of involvement. Second, a president is likely to commit U.S. forces to undertake these actions only in situations that are already serious, and threatening to become worse.

The hypothesis is confined to important votes on international issues. International issues allow both the primary and secondary linkage from the military action that was described earlier. It is very unlikely that either form of linkage could be made to a domestic issue, so no congressional rally effect is expected on these votes. Votes that deal with important issues will be of great interest to the president. He is likely to try to influence the outcome of the vote, and is more apt to face opposition in Congress than would be the case on some minor issue. Consequently, his success on these issues is a better measure of his ability to generate support than his success on all votes.

The hypothesis will be broken down into two questions. The first is whether there is a short-term impact of visible use of military force on congressional voting behavior. The short-term will be defined as a period of 30 days after the use of force. The second question is how long the effect lasts. To answer this question, congressional voting for a total of four months after a visible use of force will be examined. My expectation is that there will be a short-term rise in the president's success, but that this rise will not last for long, and we should observe a fall off back to the normal rate of presidential success in Congress.

Two control variables will be introduced into the analysis to provide a check on the findings, and protect against making misleading inferences. The first variable is the chamber of

Congress. The House and the Senate differ in a number of characteristics; for example, the term of office in the House is only one-third that of the Senate, and the Senate has more formal responsibility for foreign policy. It is not clear whether this should lead to a difference in congressional response, but it seems a sensible precaution to check. The second control variable is the Vietnam war. Both formally and informally, many observers have asserted that the U.S. involvement in the Vietnam war led to a more active and independent congressional presence in the formulation of foreign policy. This would lead us to expect that a congressional rally effect would become muted (perhaps even disappear) after the United States became involved in that war.

OPERATIONALIZATION

Important Votes on International Issues

Important votes on international issues will be operationalized using international key votes as identified by *Congressional Quarterly*. Key votes are determined by their researchers in a two-step process. First, a set of issues are selected that are considered important. Second, a limited number of votes (usually one) on each issue are chosen as the key vote(s). The criteria for selection of issues and votes are as follows:

Selection of Issues: An issue is judged to the extent it represents one or more of the following:

- A matter of major controversy.
- A test of Presidential or political power.
- A decision of potentially great impact on the nation and lives of Americans.

Selection of Votes: For each group of related votes on an issue, one key vote is usually chosen. This is the vote, in the opinion of the *Congressional Quarterly* editors, that was important in determining the outcome. [Congressional Quarterly Almanac, 1983: 3-C].

Some researchers have argued against the use of these key votes. It relies on the judgment of *Congressional Quarterly*

researchers, and although they have experience in making these judgments, very little in the way of specifics on the coding decisions is revealed in their published material. I can only say that the short summaries of the key votes provided in the editions of the Almanac give no reason to question the ability of *CQ* to make these decisions. Shull and LeLoup (1981) argue that even if the work is done well, the selected votes are atypical and not representative of congressional behavior as a whole. However, given the purpose of this study, I agree with Sigelman (1979: 118) who says that key votes are a good object for analysis because they exclude "noncontroversial and largely inconsequential issues."

I selected all key votes from 1946 through 1982 on which the president was recorded as taking a position. From this pool of votes, I selected only those on international (foreign or defense) issues. This categorization was based on my reading of the key votes summaries provided by *Congressional Quarterly*. Obviously, the determination represents a single person's judgment on a bill's content. However, in all but a few cases, the choice was obvious from the summary. This procedure produced a total of 127 international key votes during the 1946-1982 time period.

VISIBLE USE OF MILITARY FORCE

Earlier, visible use of military force was defined as a situation in which components of a nation's uniformed military are deployed in such a manner that sporadic combat occurs, or is a distinct possibility. The definition excludes uses that occur as part of an ongoing war involvement. Data for this indicator are constructed from Blechman and Kaplan's (1978) study of the political use of the U.S. military for the 1946-1976 time period, as updated by Stoll (1984) for the years 1977-1982. As defined by Blechman and Kaplan (1978: 12-16), a political use of the armed forces occurs when a physical change in the disposition of some elements of the military is used to influence a foreign actor.²

Not all of the types of actions coded in this data set involve combat or a reasonable chance of it. Based on a scaling of these

actions done by Stoll (1984), five types of military activity from the data set are taken as indicators of visible use of military force:

- (1) Establishment of a selective or complete blockade
- (2) Interposition of military forces between two foreign actors
- (3) Emplacement of ground forces
- (4) Patrol, reconnaissance, or surveillance
- (5) Use of firepower or other violent action

Restricting our attention to just these types of action produces a total of 81 visible uses of force during the time period under study.

It is worth reiterating the rationale for using visible use of military force. Times in which U.S. military forces are used in the dramatic ways listed above, are likely to be part of serious international situations. It is in these situations that the public and Congress are most likely to "rally" around the president.

TIME PERIOD AND CONTROL VARIABLES

The remaining operationalizations are quite straightforward. Each vote is coded for the length of time between the most recent visible use of force, and the day Congress acts on the bill. The categories for length of time are: (a) 30 days or less, (b) 31-60 days, (c) 61-90 days, (d) 91-120 days, and (e) no recent visible use of force. This coding is used to create four dummy variables for use in a probit equation.

Of the two remaining variables, chamber of Congress is simple to code. The post-Vietnam period is 1967-1982. The 1967 breakpoint is used for several reasons. First, it follows the first congressional election to take place after the American troop commitment to Vietnam, and is the first time members of Congress could run on an anti-Vietnam platform. A second (although minor) reason for this breakpoint is that it produces a relatively even partitioning of years into the pre and post time periods. Finally, an examination of presidential success on both international and domestic key votes indicates that signs of a Vietnam effect on presidential success in Congress first appeared in the Johnson administration.³

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

To determine both the existence of a congressional rally effect and its duration, I use probit analysis to estimate the probability of presidential success on international key votes.⁴ Entered into the estimation will be a group of control variables, as well as a series of variables representing the impact of visible use of force for four months after the event.

The control variables are used to reduce the possibility that any apparent relationship between use of force and success is due to the impact of other factors. While this is a reasonable precaution, a consequence of this research strategy is that the overall fit of the equation is not of great interest. It will contain the impact of the control variables, as well as those that are of substantive interest. As a result, the discussion will focus on the coefficient values and significance levels of the four substantive variables.

The first control variable in the equation is the overall international key-vote success rate for each president. To illustrate, President Kennedy won 80% of all the international key votes during his administration; this 80% figure will be included in all predictions for the Kennedy administration.⁵

Two dummy variables, and a third variable representing their interaction, will also be included as control variables. One dummy variable is coded for the impact of the Vietnam war (coded 1 if the year is 1967-1982, and 0 otherwise), and a second for house of Congress (coded 1 for a Senate vote, and 0 for a House vote). Finally, to control for a possible interaction between these two variables, a third control variable is created by multiplying the Senate and post-Vietnam variables together.

Four dummy variables are used to represent the effects of visible uses of force on the probability of presidential success, based on the coding for length of time since the last use occurred. Each dummy represents the effects of a 30-day time period: The first variable is coded 1 if the vote occurred within 30 days of the use of force, the second is coded 1 if the vote occurred between 31 and 60 days of the use, the third is coded 1 for votes between 61 and 90 days of the use, and the fourth for 91 to 120 days after the use.

The results of the probit analysis are displayed in Table 1. Ignoring the constant, the variable with the biggest impact on success (as measured by the significance level of the coefficient) is the overall chance of winning for each president. But the variable with the second greatest impact is the dummy for the first month after a visible use of force. None of the remaining variables has a significance level consistent with a large impact on the probability of a president winning a key vote.

Although the impact of the first time dummy is significant, the coefficients for the second through fourth months after a visible use of force indicate that the rally effect, as hypothesized, dies out rather quickly. Only the significance level for the second month (.14) is indicative of any sort of effect, and it is a negative one.

The multivariate estimation of the probit analysis allows us to control for the effects of a number of variables, giving us a higher degree of confidence that the short-term rally effect is a real phenomena, and not the coincidental by-product of other factors. There is a second advantage to this analysis, which will be exploited in the next section: We can construct predicted probabilities for a variety of situations to gain a better understanding of the nature and magnitude of the congressional rally effect.

DISCUSSION

The statistical analysis clearly shows that in the first 30 days after a visible use of force by the United States, the president is more likely to win key international votes than at other times. After the initial 30-day burst of support for the president, the effect drops off and disappears. There is some variability to the rally effect. The positive coefficient for the Senate indicates that it is stronger in the smaller chamber. In fact, an inspection of the individual key Senate votes reveals that from 1946 through 1982, no president lost a key international vote in the first 30 days after the visible use of force.

To better gauge the effect, I have calculated the predicted probabilities of success for each president. These calculations

TABLE 1
 Probit Analysis Predicting Probability of Presidential Success

Variable	Coefficient	T-Value	Sig.
Overall Chance of Winning	3.881	3.08	.001
Post-Vietnam Year	.129	.32	.38
Senate Vote	.381	.77	.22
(Senate)(Post-Vietnam Year)	.127	.22	.41
One Month After Use	.749	1.77	.04
Two Months After Use	-.426	-1.09	.14
Three Months After Use	-.198	-.48	.31
Four Months After Use	.348	.52	.30
Constant	-2.524	-2.39	.01
N = 127. R-square = .21			

take into account the impact of the control variables (a president's overall chance of success on a key international vote, the chamber of Congress, the post-Vietnam period, and the interaction between the latter two variables). To make these effects clearer, separate calculations are made for the House and the Senate, and calculations for President Johnson are made for both the pre- and post-Vietnam eras. The other presidents have the post-Vietnam variable included or excluded depending on its value during their term of office. Finally, predicted probabilities are calculated for "normal" times (votes taken outside the 120-day postuse time period), and for the 30-day period after a visible use of force.

I emphasize that these probabilities, which are displayed in Table 2, are those predicted from the probit analysis. In effect, I assume that the model is a correct (or nearly correct) specification of the relationship. Given that the R^2 is a reasonable one for a probit equation, and about three-quarters of the votes are correctly classified, this procedure is a good way to specify the predicted impact of the congressional rally effect.

With the exception of Ford, all presidents are predicted as winning a high proportion of key votes in normal times.⁶ But despite this, the average increase in predicted chance of success (including both Johnson's pre- and post-Vietnam predictions) is 16%. The only small predicted increases (below .10) occur when a president has a very high chance of winning anyway (both houses for Eisenhower, Johnson's post-Vietnam period in the Senate, and Carter in the Senate).

As further evidence of the effect, consider the predictions for Ford. In "normal" times, he is predicted as winning just over one-quarter of key international votes in the House, and just under one-half of these votes in the Senate. In the first 30 days after a visible use of force, the predicted chance of success rises to 57% and 75%, respectively. This is a substantial increase.

CONCLUSION

From time to time, in the wake of dramatic foreign events, observers have speculated on the impact of these happenings on congressional behavior. This article has examined the link between one type of event, visible use of military force, and presidential success on key international votes. The statistical evidence presented here clearly points to a significant, but short-run increase in the president's chances of obtaining important legislation on international issues after he commits elements of the U.S. military to operations that place them at risk of combat.

The effect is strongest in the Senate, where the president is invincible on international key votes during the 30 days after a visible use of U.S. forces. Predicted probabilities indicate that

TABLE 2
Selected Predicted Probabilities from Probit Analysis

President	House	No Visible Use	Within 30 Days of Use
Truman	House	.67	.88 (+.21)
	Senate	.80	.94 (+.14)
Eisen- hower	House	.91	.98 (+.07)
	Senate	.96	.99 (+.03)
Kennedy	House	.72	.91 (+.19)
	Senate	.83	.96 (+.13)
Johnson Pre-Viet	House	.70	.90 (+.20)
	Senate	.82	.95 (+.13)
Johnson Post-Viet	House	.74	.92 (+.18)
	Senate	.88	.97 (+.09)
Nixon Post-Viet	House	.59	.84 (+.25)
	Senate	.77	.93 (+.16)
Ford Post-Viet	House	.28	.57 (+.29)
	Senate	.47	.75 (+.28)
Carter Post-Viet	House	.78	.94 (+.16)
	Senate	.90	.98 (+.08)
Reagan Post-Viet	House	.63	.86 (+.23)
	Senate	.80	.94 (+.14)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses are increases in probabilities within 30 days of visible use of force.

unless a president already has a very high chance of winning a key international vote, he can increase his chances of winning substantially during this time period.

In short, the evidence presented in this article indicates that although Congress is likely to follow the president's lead in foreign matters at any time, Congress, like the general public, is susceptible to a rally effect in the aftermath of some types of dramatic foreign events.

NOTES

1. It could be argued that in the wake of such U.S. actions, a president would be more likely to find issues in Congress that represent policies he believes will "protect the nation."

In this sense, the "Two Presidencies" thesis may predict a link between military action and presidential success. But this is clearly straining the meaning of Wildavsky's statement.

2. More particularly,

[a] political use of the armed forces occurs when physical actions are taken by one or more components of the uniformed military services as part of a deliberate attempt by the national authorities to influence, or to be prepared to influence, specific behavior of individuals in another nation without engaging in a continuous contest of violence . . . a political use of the armed forces was inferred to have taken place if five elements were present in the situation . . .

1. A physical change in the disposition . . . of at least a part of the armed forces had to occur . . .

2. Behind this activity there had to have been a certain consciousness of purpose . . .

3. Decision makers must have sought to attain their objectives by gaining influence in the target state, not by physically imposing the U.S. will . . .

4. Decision makers must have sought to avoid a significant contest of violence . . .

5. Some specific behavior had to have been desired of the target actors [Blechman and Kaplan, 1978: 12-16].

3. Data analysis was also conducted using 1973 as the first year of the post-Vietnam period (this is the periodization used by Sigelman, 1979), and resulted in little change from the findings reported in this article. In the analysis of domestic and international key votes mentioned in the text, slightly different results were found in the House and in the Senate. In the House, presidents in the Vietnam era (Johnson, Nixon, and Ford) have less success on international key votes than on domestic key votes, while the rest (Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Carter, and Reagan) had a higher rate of success on international key votes. In the Senate, all presidents have a higher success rate on international than on domestic key votes. This difference reinforces the decision to control for each House of Congress.

4. A dichotomized measure of presidential success was used because this provides the most straightforward measure of the outcome. Future analysis may alter this variable to provide a finer measure of success, such as the percentage of a house supporting the president's position, or measuring the change from a prespecified "normal" level of support.

5. Overall success on key international votes was used as control variable because it presents the closest parallel with the dependent variable (see the text for a discussion of why key votes are better than all votes for this analysis). However, it does not take into account any changes in the makeup of Congress during a president's term. These same data were reanalyzed using the following alternatives for the control variable: (a) the president's overall success in Congress (that is, success on all votes in which the president took a position) on a year-by-year basis, (b) the percent of the house of Congress that are member's of the president's party, and (c) both of these variables. The results of these analyses were similar to those reported here.

6. Overall, the president wins 70% of all key international votes in the House, and 78% of these votes in the Senate.

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