The American public has become increasingly averse to U.S. military involvement in international crises following the end of the Iraq War in 2011. In contrast, within two years of the end of the first Gulf war, seventy percent of those surveyed reported that they would support renewed military involvement in the region.\(^1\) A decade after the war ended, this desire for further engagement to achieve U.S. goals remained the majority-held opinion.\(^2\) The significant differences in troop involvement, resource expenditure, conflict duration and outcome between the first and second wars shaped the different strategies of each administration in foreign crises. Specifically, the length of military involvement, the preemptory support from Congress and international institutions and the accomplishment of goals clearly defined prior to engagement characterized the Persian Gulf War and framed the context of successful military engagement in future foreign crises for the American public. The features of the first Gulf war set standards for the American people that limited their support for subsequent administrations and dictated how those administrations engaged in international conflicts.

The Persian Gulf War stemmed from international efforts to quickly halt Iraqi military aggression and protect Kuwaiti sovereignty. On August 2, 1990, over 100,000 Iraqi troops and

---


\(^2\) Ibid.
700 tanks invaded Kuwait under the order of Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi forces set up roadblocks and cut the capital off from outside communication, quickly establishing a provisional government under Hussein. Within hours of the attack, however, the UN Security Council gathered and adopted Resolution 660, which condemned the invasion and called for an immediate withdrawal. The international response was surprisingly unified in its disapproval of Iraq’s actions; for example, the UN Security Council passed its resolution unanimously and Russia suspended the delivery of all arms to Iraq. For President George H. W. Bush, the strong reaction of the international community as well as the UN resolution provided political cover for him to involve the United States in the developing crisis in Kuwait. Yet many Arab countries did not join the global response. Kuwait owned much of Iraq’s debt and, a few weeks prior to the August 2 invasion, Iraq had moved over 34,000 troops into the Iraqi border near Kuwait. The Arab League appointed the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak as the mediator between Iraq and Kuwait. Because Arab countries were previously managing the Iraq-Kuwait dispute and because public support for Hussein existed in Syria, Jordan and Arab populations in North Africa, some leaders called for an “Arab solution” to the emerging crisis. Iraqi sympathizers and supporters of an “Arab solution” were for the majority driven by economic concerns and opposition to Kuwait’s ruling family. In contrast, the group of reproachful countries considered the dangerous precedent Hussein’s actions would set if left unanswered. The global community had

---

8 Ibid.
an opportunity to set its own precedent of international cooperation by a swift show of force
against Hussein – the unanimous UN resolution was the first step in this demonstration.⁹

The United States government framed for the American people the nation’s interests in
intervening in Iraq. When President Bush announced on August 8 the United States’ goals in
Iraq, he included the following:

The unconditional withdrawal of all Iraqi forces from Kuwait; the restoration of
Kuwait’s legitimate government in place of the puppet regime put in place by
Iraq; the protection of the security and stability of the region; the protection of the
lives of Americans abroad.¹⁰

Another significant motivation for United States involvement in the conflict was Bush’s
underlying hope for a “new world order” in the post-Cold War era.¹¹ The Iraqi invasion
undermined this cooperative worldview; thus, Bush announced to the public that he was drawing
“a line in the sand” and Hussein’s aggression had crossed that line.¹² American journalists and
prominent foreign policy figures postulated that Iraq’s use of chemical weapons and its budding
nuclear weapons program helped push it over that line as well. Although these factors could
certainly disrupt Bush’s post-Cold War world order, they did not dictate the U.S. response to the
crisis and the President maintained that the use of American military force must remain within

---

¹⁰ Yetiv, 16.
¹¹ Ibid.
the authorization of the UN Security Council. The result was Operation Desert Shield and the immediate deployment of forces from a twenty-eight-member alliance including the United States, Britain, France, the Arab Gulf states and many others. Bush had put considerable effort into garnering the support of U.S. allies and international institutions before initiating military action. The significant difference in public opinion regarding American armed involvement in Kuwait following the UN authorization to employ any means necessary to expel Iraq reflected the achievements of the Bush administration’s campaign. Though the American people remained reluctant to go to war and embroil the U.S. in the conflicts of the Persian Gulf, after the UN Security Council passed the authorizing resolution, the percentage of those favoring war increased by sixteen points and the percentage opposing war decreased by nine. In the eyes of the public, international consensus legitimized the use of force to protect state sovereignty. The UN resolution framed involvement in the conflict as an international effort to enforce broad principles and maintain a precedent that was in the national security interest of the United States instead of as a crisis beyond the scope of American concern.

The administration continued to garner support for its actions through each phase of the conflict. With the allied forces continuing to struggle to push Iraqi occupiers out of Kuwait, Bush wanted to begin an American offensive military operation in addition to the economic sanctions already being imposed on Iraq by the United States. In November, the administration made the somewhat controversial decision to drastically increase the number of American troops deployed with coalition forces, thus setting the stage for Bush’s developing military strategy, Operation

14 Yetiv, 17.  
Desert Storm. He did not, however, want to proceed without a congressional authorization of the use of force. At the time, government was divided and Democrats controlled Congress. Much debate occurred in both chambers over the President’s resolution and the potential ramifications of entering into a war in the Middle East. The country’s experience in the Vietnam War framed many of the issues raised both by supporters and by those opposing the authorization; in fact, Bush’s plea to lawmakers paralleled President Johnson’s appeal to Congress, “to join in affirming the national determination that all such attacks will be met, and that the United States will continue in its basic policy of assisting the free nations of the area to defend their freedom.” Like Johnson, Bush asked for approval of the use of military force in order to present a unified national voice and to give greater weight to the executive decisions already made. Although Democratic leadership and many potential Democratic presidential candidates opposed authorization, both chambers voted in favor of the law in what one journalist described as, “the most explicit authorization of war by Congress since the Tonkin Gulf Resolution approved U.S. military involvement in Vietnam in 1964.” There was much bipartisan support for a U.S. attack on Iraq, but even those voting for authorization did so with the understanding the president would not commit the United States to a protracted war over an

---

16 Yetiv, 17.
17 Ibid, 18.
issue that already divided the public. Bush received congressional backing of his ultimatum demanding Iraq’s withdrawal from Kuwait and three days later, on January 16, 1991, the United States initiated Operation Desert Storm. The day after the bombing began, *The New York Times* reported that eighty-six percent of the public approved of Bush’s performance and that seventy-nine percent of the public believed the United States rightfully attacked Iraq. Even with the success of the bombing campaigns and low casualty levels early in the conflict, Americans remained reluctant to commit considerable forces on land. When Bush upheld his deadline for Hussein’s withdrawal and launched a ground war on February 23, however, the public demonstrated another rally effect and eighty-four percent of Americans supported the president’s decision. As Iraqi forces neared collapse, Bush declared a cease-fire on February 28 and coalition representatives and Iraqi participants negotiated the terms on March 21. Adhering to the parameters of the UN authorization, Bush did not advance the American campaign into Iraqi territory nor did the United States call for Hussein’s removal in the cease-fire agreement.

The President’s decision to ask for Congressional approval and to limit the American campaign to the ousting of Hussein’s forces from Kuwait significantly affected the public attitude toward the United States’ military involvement in Iraq and future involvement in international crises. The administration portrayed the war as a decisive victory because it achieved the official goals for employing military force in the conflict laid out by the President.

---

22 Yetiv, 32.
and the UN. Thus, the government framed the concept of military victory for the public in this context. Moreover, the limited number of American casualties and the extreme brevity of the ground assault met the American public’s desires for limited engagement and fostered the Gulf War’s image as the model of a successful military campaign. Instead of encouraging American involvement in other international crises, however, the swift success of the Gulf War narrowed the public willingness to commit to lengthy involvement in conflicts or to act unilaterally and without the authority or physical support of the international community. For example, the United States’ delayed involvement in the crisis in the Balkans during the 1990s reflected this phenomenon. Starting in 1989, the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic began limiting the political freedoms of Kosovar Albanians and in 1992 civil war broke out in Bosnia. Bush first threatened Milosevic with unilateral armed interference in December of 1992 and NATO followed with threats of air strikes in 1993. Almost a year later, NATO carried out its first air strikes, protecting UN forces from Serbian aggression in a UN “safe zone.” The United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany Italy and Russia formed a “Contact Group” to broker a peace settlement between the Bosnian Serb forces and Kosovar Albanians. Despite the Contact Group’s repeated failures to produce a firm agreement, the Clinton administration continued to pursue diplomatic solutions to the crisis while the UN passed resolution 1160 imposing economic sanctions on Serbia. Even after the UN passed a resolution in 1998 authorizing additional measures if the Serbian forces refused to comply with a cease-fire and although sixty percent of respondents supported American participation in the NATO air strikes, a minority of

the public approved of the United States sending in ground troops. Among their concerns, individuals cited potential American casualties, financial costs and the likelihood of a long-term commitment. These worries eclipsed the condemnation of Serbian aggression coming from other countries. The United States did not lead the international community in responding to the crisis in Kosovo as it had in Kuwait and the UN did not clearly authorize military intervention in the region. Moreover, seventy-two percent of Americans believed it was very important Clinton get approval from Congress before sending ground troops to Kosovo. The public demanded Clinton follow the same precedent set by Bush for deploying forces on land. Although Congress did not pass legislation authorizing the Clinton administration to conduct a war, the legislature voted to allow the President to conduct military operations in cooperation with NATO and voted to fund those operations. Another similarity between the conflict in Kuwait and that in Kosovo was the factor which elicited support for military action from Americans – national sovereignty. Of those who supported the use of ground troops in the Balkans, sixty-seven percent explained their position in light of the United States’ moral obligation to help the Kosovar refugees return to their homeland and live autonomously. The rights of the Kuwaiti people and the unwarranted Iraqi aggression against them played a significant role in rallying public support for the war in the Persian Gulf. Without the additional economic and strategic interests of oil and international nuclear norms that influenced the Persian Gulf War, the conflict in Kosovo was largely humanitarian. There was greater ambiguity in the objectives of armed intervention in

30 Ibid.
such a conflict, thus increasing public division and delaying U.S. involvement. The clearly framed, not necessarily well formed or genuine, goals of the Bush administration and its process for achieving those goals in Kuwait shaped the American people’s expectations of how the United States should proceed in foreign conflicts.

In the years following the Persian Gulf War, public support for further military action to remove Saddam Hussein from power fluctuated, but remained positive. Iraq’s failure to faithfully comply with the terms of the cease-fire agreement, including Iraqi authorities’ obstruction of UN weapons inspectors and the government’s involvement in a terrorist plot to assassinate President Bush in 1993, perpetuated tensions with the coalition governments and incensed the American public. The continuing problems caused by the authoritarian regime in Iraq fostered support for Bush’s concept of a new world order, in which the United States, having successfully waged a brief and targeted military campaign, would implement diplomatic and economic policies to foster peace and stability in the Persian Gulf region. Bush and later Clinton, however, found that maintaining such influence was not feasible in a country whose leader had few incentives to obey the United States. On March 3, 1998, the UN Security Council unanimously passed a resolution warning the Iraqi government that, “any violation [of the weapons inspection agreement or other pertinent resolutions] would have severest consequences


for Iraq.” European and regional Arab allies, however, for the most part opposed using military force to uphold the resolution. The phrase “severest consequences” lacked the same authority as “any means necessary” – there was no room for debate over the scope of the latter. In October, the United States Congress passed the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998, which authorized Clinton to provide $97 million in military training, supplies and assistance to Iraqi opposition groups. After Hussein announced he would cease compliance with UN weapons inspections altogether, the Clinton administration with the support of the U.K. determined that a bombing campaign was the more appropriate of “consequences” than just supplies and radio propaganda. Such action served the dual purpose of destroying weapons development infrastructure as well as demonstrating to the world that governments that violate international agreements must face the consequences of and possibly punishment for their actions. On the evening of the launching of Operation Desert Fox, seventy-four percent of the public approved the air attack in light of Iraq’s failure to comply with the UN settlement. Congressional support for engagement in Iraq and the steady progression of actions taken by the administration, not immediately deferring to military strikes, earned the public’s support for Clinton and Operation Desert Fox. A new foreign policy strategy for the region called containment-plus emerged from the four day bombing campaign. It included traditional features of a policy of containment, such as severe economic

---

36 Ibid, 22.
sanctions, but also relied on U.S. force and covert action, a reflection of the difficulty of effecting change in the authoritarian nation. Operation Desert Fox, like Operation Desert Storm, was another brief campaign that did not oust Hussein. Both Clinton and Bush, however, expected the U.S. military action to weaken the Iraqi government and set in motion political unrest that might eventually force Hussein from power. The public supported this strategy in the Persian Gulf, which the Clinton administration formally labeled and to which the Bush administration had largely adhered. Limited military engagement followed by economic and diplomatic efforts at containment characterized the United States’ official involvement in crises in the Persian Gulf until 2003.

Immediately following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, President George W. Bush tasked his advisors with identifying connections between the incidents and Saddam Hussein.40 Bush, his foreign policy staff, the Defense Secretary and military officials began planning an attack on Iraq without any clearly defined reason to do so; they proactively sought information to support their suspicions instead of interpreting information as agencies uncovered it.41 Federal intelligence agencies and administration advisors disagreed over the reliability of evidence of Iraq’s ties to Al Qaeda and Hussein’s possession of weapons of mass destruction. Yet White House spokespeople increasingly promulgated the controversial information in order to justify the President’s desire to remove Saddam Hussein

Public opinion was very divided over the United States’ involvement in Iraq, but did not play a major role in the initiation of hostilities under the Bush administration. The night of the initial assaults, Bush delivered a televised address to the public roughly two hours after the expiration of an ultimatum demanding Hussein leave Iraq. Bush claimed that thirty-five nations supported the United States in its attack. The UN Security Council, however, did not explicitly authorize the U.S.-British invasion of Iraq and, in Resolution 1441, the Council declared that the UN, “Decide[d] to remain seized of the matter.” Although the public in the United States supported possible military action, only three in ten Americans polled in November 2002 said they would support a war with Iraq without specific UN authorization for such action. Prior to the invasion, public polling consistently found that the support of the majority of those in favor

---

43 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
of military action in Iraq was contingent on allied and UN support; Americans did not want to get involved in Iraq unilaterally. Public polling also demonstrated, however, that, although a large majority of Americans preferred multilateral views of foreign policy, individuals significantly overestimated public preference of unilateral views. This misperception that more Americans support unilateral foreign policies increased the likelihood that respondents would support the shift to a preemptive foreign policy strategy and the invasion of Iraq without UN approval if they believed the administration’s policies reflected public opinion. It is worth noting that even the American people limited their support for foreign policies based on the perception of public opinion. Ultimately, at least thirty nations, referred to by Powell as the “coalition of the willing,” joined the United States politically and militarily in its initial attacks against Iraq. Polls taken immediately after hostilities began revealed a sharp increase in American support for the government and its leaders; the official commencement of the Iraq War triggered the “rally around the flag” phenomenon. From the beginning of March until three days after the invasion, support for sending troops into Iraq rose by thirteen percentage points. There was also a twenty-four-point increase in the percentage of Americans reporting that, “[They are satisfied] with the position of the United States in the world today.”

48 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
military during initial armed conflict and not widespread support for a war to remove Hussein from power. The public did not overwhelmingly favor intervention in Iraq and support for the war steadily declined after initial engagement. What began as a campaign with distinct goals – to eliminate Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction stockpile and capabilities and to topple Hussein – quickly devolved into an indefinite engagement in the Persian Gulf. According to a survey taken immediately following the conclusion of major fighting in Iraq, a majority of the public believed that the United States has a responsibility to help other countries rid themselves of dictators. Yet fifty-three percent of Americans also believed that the actions in Iraq would not encourage political and economic reform in other Middle Eastern countries.55 Although Americans held traditional ideological views about the United States’ international role in the abstract, they were wary of the obstacles facing the country in reality and reluctant to take risks. This attitude has increasingly influenced the duration and scope of American involvement in conflicts abroad.

Pundits have observed a shift in foreign policy under the Obama administration towards a doctrine referred to as “offshore balancing.”56 In the context of the Middle East, this strategy includes the literal movement of American forces offshore and a focus on sea and air operations through the use of drones and the expansion of bases. Although the U.S. military has been building its air presence in the Arabian Peninsula and its naval presence in East Asia, the administration has also bolstered the resources of its allies in those regions. For example, in order to offset growing Iranian power, the United States equipped Saudi Arabia and other nations


with improved technology and military aid in 2010.\textsuperscript{57} The execution of this new foreign strategy reflects the public attitude toward American involvement in the Middle East after spending seven years engaged in Iraq militarily and almost two decades of military investment in the Persian Gulf. In 2006, three years into the Iraq War, Americans believed by a thirteen point majority that, “the best way to reduce the threat of terrorist attacks on the U.S. is to decrease, not increase, America’s military presence overseas.”\textsuperscript{58} Two years later, fifty-four percent of respondents in a national survey said that the United States made the wrong decision by using military force in Iraq.\textsuperscript{59} When President Obama announced his decision to withdraw all U.S. forces from Iraq in 2011, seventy-eight percent of Americans supported the decision; sixty-two percent of the public claimed that, in a cost-benefit analysis, the war in Iraq had not been worth fighting.\textsuperscript{60} Whereas at the conclusion of the Persian Gulf War the public considered the conflict a victory for the United States, when the last combat troops left Iraq only thirty-one percent of the public described the outcome in the Iraq War as a victory for the United States.\textsuperscript{61} The lack of a clear set of achieved goals or the image of definitive success and the war’s indefinite nature sullied for the American public the idea of future involvement in the region. As journalist David Remnick described it,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[57] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
Obama’s foreign policy has been “a reaction to the reaction.” The Iraq War and public attitudes toward it have framed each international crisis since Obama assumed office.

Through its actions in the Pacific, the Obama administration has demonstrated its preference for engaging diplomatically in relatively stable regions as opposed to leading the international response to crises. Recently, the White House formed an agreement with the Philippines, giving the United States Navy access to its former Subic Bay base. This settlement demonstrates Obama’s professed “pivot” towards East Asia – a facet of the broader strategy of offshore balancing. Former National Security Adviser Tom Donilon characterized the shift in United States priorities to the region as stemming from the administration’s determination that, “the futures of the United States and Asia are increasingly linked.” East Asia hosts the world’s fastest growing economies, is home to a majority of the global population and contains disputed territories in which the United States has a vested interest. The decision by Obama to reexamine the country’s priorities and increase the attention paid to East Asia, however, is not a complete denial of the national interest in the Middle East or in Africa. Consequently, the administration exchanged the term “pivot” for “rebalancing” when referring to its new foreign policy strategy.

How the United States initially reacted to the Syrian civil war illustrated the effect of public opinion on the administration’s rebalancing of priorities. The fighting in Syria continued for...

---

64 Ibid.
almost two years without American military intervention, but not for a lack of public awareness. Although seventy-one percent of Americans were following the conflict, fifty-one percent opposed military involvement. 68 After the White House revealed that the Syrian government used chemical weapons on civilians, opposition to U.S. military action decreased by a seventeen point margin; it remained, however, significantly higher than opposition to participation in other Middle Eastern conflicts since 2001.69 Despite his previous assertive rhetoric, Obama, cognizant of public attitudes, submitted a proposal to Congress instead of exercising executive authority for a military strike after the revelations regarding chemical weapons. Realizing he lacked support from a majority of lawmakers and their conflicted constituents, however, Obama asked the Senate to delay its vote and instead pursued diplomatic avenues with Russia. Whereas the first Bush and Clinton received Congressional approval for their military operations in the Middle East, Obama never received explicit support from the legislature for military intervention in the Syrian conflict. Thus, he employed the strategies of offshore balancing. The administration’s shift in policy from endorsing military action to utilizing international institutions preempted the lack of public support for American intervention in an international crisis.

Without public support or congressional approval for unilateral action, neither Clinton nor Obama successfully initiated military action in a foreign conflict. Both presidents repeatedly followed the example set by George H.W. Bush in Iraq by asking for congressional authorization to engage in hostilities, yet each remained limited by the support of the public and the international community. George W. Bush deviated from this tradition when he began the Iraq War without international support and without a publicized, clearly defined plan of action for

69 Ibid.
involvement. The resulting failures of this approach only cemented for the public the superiority of limited, broadly supported military engagement. Ultimately, the events of the first Gulf war set a precedent for the process of intervention in international conflicts that has limited the foreign policy of subsequent administrations and skewed public attitudes on successful military campaigns.