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Listening to the Generals

*How Military Advice Affects Public Support
for the Use of Force*

By Jim Golby, Kyle Dropp and Peter Feaver



Center for a
New American
Security

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YouGov administered the survey via Internet and conducted interviews with 5,500 Americans between May 31, 2012 and July 28, 2012. The 5,500 interviews in our database are a sample matched on gender, age, race, education, party identification, ideology and political interest to be representative of the general population, as determined by the 2007 American Community Survey.

Cover Image

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Mark A. Welsh delivers his keynote speech at the opening of the Air Force Association's Aerospace and Technology Exposition in Orlando, Fla., February 21, 2013.

SCOTT M. ASH/U.S. Air Force photo

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	Executive Summary	5
II.	Introduction	6
III.	The Democracy Paradox and the Military Voice	8
IV.	Surveying the Public on Military Endorsements	10
V.	Survey Results	11
VI.	Why Do Military Endorsements Work?	18
VII.	Conclusion: Does It Matter Whether Military Endorsements Work?	20

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LISTENING TO THE GENERALS:
HOW MILITARY ADVICE AFFECTS
PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE USE OF FORCE

By Jim Golby, Kyle Dropp and Peter Feaver

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Policymakers go to great lengths to persuade the American public about the wisdom of proposed uses of force they believe necessary and the folly of others they deem unnecessary. This report examines whether public statements from senior military officers help persuade the American public to support or oppose a proposed use of force. The results of our recent national survey show that military opposition reduces public support for the use of force abroad by 7 percentage points, whereas military support increases overall public support by 3 percentage points. These military cues are most influential among Republican respondents. Furthermore, military influence on public opinion is greatest when it opposes (rather than supports) interventions abroad.

This suggests that there is a significant incentive for political leaders to get public endorsements from senior military leaders and that this could lead to a problematic politicization of the military. More generally, the public regularly exhibits less trust in institutions that it considers partisan; thus, the current high levels of public trust in military professionalism could gradually be replaced by a sense that the military is just another political interest group. Efforts by administrations to suppress *public* candor about military views on the use of force could easily result in the suppression of *private* candor, thereby eroding the quality of internal deliberations.

Some analysts might call for a norm that keeps military opinions on the use of force out of the public domain, but such a norm would be very difficult to cultivate. Congress has a constitutionally mandated role in decisions about the use of force, and it has as much right as the executive branch to hear military advice on the issue. It is also reasonable for the public to be influenced by expert military opinions on the use of force and to seek out those opinions. Ironically, increased Congressional oversight through more frequent public testimonies by senior military officers may be one way to reduce some of the most detrimental aspects of military opinions while maintaining the benefits to participatory democracy.

II. INTRODUCTION

In the spring of 2011, American policymakers were deeply divided over how to respond to the growing crisis in Libya. Insurgents based in the eastern part of Libya threatened the regime of longtime leader Moammar Gadhafi, who, in turn, threatened to unleash the full force of the Libyan arsenal on the insurgent strongholds, potentially resulting in tens of thousands of civilian casualties. As the options were being debated, however, news reports mentioned the skepticism of an important player: U.S. military leaders, who would be called on to implement any intervention. According to one report, “The American military is also privately skeptical of humanitarian gestures that put the lives of troops at risk for the cause of the moment, while being of only tenuous national interest.”¹ President Barack Obama was initially hesitant about intervening directly, although he was eventually persuaded to do so by his aides and by the more hawkish French and British leaders. On March 28, 2011, he spoke directly to the American people about his decision to intervene in the hope of persuading them to support his choice.²

Although the media initially suggested that senior members of the military were skeptical of intervention, no senior officers publicly opposed or supported the mission in Libya. And once the president decided to use military force, military officers lined up and supported the mission, or at least kept quiet about their doubts. However, senior military officers do not always remain silent about their opposition to – or their support of – a potential military operation abroad. For example, General Colin Powell’s doubts about intervention in Bosnia were pervasive during the policy debate in 1992 and 1993, and General David Petraeus’ support of the 2007 surge in Iraq dominated news coverage for days. What if the military’s reported private doubts about intervention in Libya had been expressed more publicly? What effect might that have had on public support?

Policymakers go to great lengths to persuade the American public about the wisdom of proposed uses of force they believe necessary and the folly of others they deem unnecessary. Although the public is likely to rally around the flag and support military action once undertaken,³ policymakers understand that such public support will be more robust if a mission is popular in advance, if other domestic elites concur and if the action enjoys international support.⁴

The views of senior military officers could be especially influential in shaping opinion because military leaders have distinctive professional expertise and would implement any military action.

The views of senior military officers could be especially influential in shaping opinion because military leaders have distinctive professional expertise and would implement any military action. Policymakers and the media seem to believe that military endorsements – that is, public expressions of military support or opposition – are crucial for public support. The views of the military about proposed uses of force are a prominent theme in the coverage of foreign policy debates, and presidential administrations have highlighted the support of the military – if they have it – for military ventures. Either intentionally or inadvertently, senior military officers are often involved in public debates about how and when to use military force. In 2007, for example,

Petraeus urged support for the surge of troops in Iraq during Congressional testimony,⁵ and in the spring of 2012, General Martin Dempsey's comments about Iran were highlighted in the Republican primary debates.⁶

Political scientists have closely examined public opinion on foreign policy⁷ and how elite views might influence the masses.⁸ There is also well-established work describing the nature of elite military opinion and differences between civilian and elite views on the use of force.⁹ Surprisingly, however, there is little systematic work on how the views of the military might influence the views of civilians. This report helps fill that gap.

We administered a large, national survey in which respondents saw the military's views regarding possible uses of force and were thus encouraged to factor that information into their own decisions about whether to support or oppose military action abroad. Our scenarios examine support for U.S. involvement in Iran and Syria, along with responses to two hypothetical situations: a humanitarian crisis and a failed terrorist attack.

III. THE DEMOCRACY PARADOX AND THE MILITARY VOICE

Public support is a crucial pillar of foreign policy – as President Bill Clinton put it, “the United States cannot long sustain a commitment without the support of the public”¹⁰ – yet Americans pay minimal attention to, and are minimally informed about, foreign policy.¹¹ Although 55 percent of Americans say they follow national news “most of the time,” just 39 percent say the same about international news.¹² And even attentive Americans might struggle to evaluate leaders’ claims about foreign policy, as intelligence and details of complex military operations are classified.¹³ How might public support form and evolve when the public has little time and inclination to adequately follow, let alone master, the complex issues involved in a possible military venture abroad?

Large informational asymmetries exist between citizens and foreign policy elites such as the president, Congressional leaders, leaders of international organizations and military officers. Compared with such elites, the average citizen simply does not know as much information relevant to a particular decision about the use of force.¹⁴ Senior military officers, for instance, spend long careers developing expert knowledge regarding military strategy and have direct access to classified information concerning the military capabilities of American forces and potential threats. When people have low levels of knowledge or motivation, they make decisions based on informational short cuts and heuristics – rules of thumb that help them sort through complex issues without mastering all of the details.¹⁵ One such heuristic is relying on expert advice, and when it comes to the use of force, the public may consider senior military officers to be experts.

In other words, military endorsements might help the public form opinions on the wisdom of certain courses of action. By tradition, the military is

supposed to advise – but ultimately defer to – civilian leaders on strategic questions such as whether to initiate the use of force. However, the public may value the military perspective as a vital input into its own judgments. The military may thus be able to influence strategic policy in two ways: by directly advising leaders and by indirectly shaping the political context in which decisions are made.

Military influence may affect public views about the use of force in four additional ways. First, those who trust the military are likely to be more influenced by military opinion than those who do not trust the military. In general, an individual who trusts a source is more willing to accept the source’s views as reliable and correct.¹⁶ Because the military is the most respected public institution in America, with 75 percent of American adults reporting “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of confidence in the military,¹⁷ senior military leaders may be an especially trusted source on foreign policy matters, especially those relating to the use of force. Therefore, a positive military endorsement should increase overall support for the use of force abroad, whereas military opposition should reduce that support.

Second, confidence in the military may itself be a function of partisan factors. Despite high overall public confidence ratings in the military, a marked gap emerges when the public is disaggregated by party – 92 percent of Republicans have confidence in the military, compared with only 64 percent of Democrats.¹⁸ Partisanship also shapes how the public views other sources of information and how the public responds to cues from the military. People trust cues that come from like-minded partisan cue-givers: Democrats are more influenced by Democratic elite voices, and Republicans are more influenced by Republican elite voices.¹⁹ Moreover, Republicans and Democrats perceive foreign policy issues in vastly different ways,²⁰ and this divide may cause the two groups to look for different sorts of cues from the military.

Senior military officers overwhelmingly identify as Republicans and conservatives,²¹ and evidence suggests that the American public still views the military primarily as conservative and Republican.²² For example, four times as many Americans said that most members of the military are Republicans than said that most members are Democrats (39 percent to 9 percent).²³ Moreover, when evaluating presidential policies, people look for cues based on whether they already support the president or have reason to doubt his judgment. Thus, when President George W. Bush held office, individual Republicans may have been inclined to give him the benefit of the doubt, whereas individual Democrats may have sought second opinions from other experts. The opposite may be occurring now that Obama is in office.²⁴

Third, a surprising opinion may have a bigger impact than an opinion that simply conforms to what is expected.²⁵ That is, when cue-givers appear to play against type, the cue may be more influential than when cue-givers simply say what everyone expects them to say. For instance, unexpected endorsements for the use of force from the U.N. Security Council carry more weight with the public than endorsements that were expected.²⁶ Individuals who expect the military to support the use of force may be more influenced by military opposition, whereas individuals who expect the military to oppose the use of force may be more influenced by military support.

This factor may interact with partisanship. Conservatives and Republicans are much more likely to support missions involving “realpolitik” goals but less likely to support “humanitarian goals,” whereas liberals and Democrats are likely to support “cooperative internationalist” and “humanitarian” goals.²⁷ Because the American public generally perceives senior members of the military to be conservative and Republican, military support for intervening in a humanitarian crisis will be more surprising and informative than

support for intervening in a realpolitik mission, especially among Democrats. Similarly, military opposition to intervention in a humanitarian crisis will be less informative than opposition to intervention for realpolitik goals.

Fourth and relatedly, there may be a status quo bias in favor of doing nothing (and thus against the use of force), and this could be reinforced by an elite consensus that favors or opposes a military operation.²⁸ Given the uncertainties and high costs associated with military interventions, the public may want to see near-unanimous support from experts before supporting the use of force. In this case, military opposition might have a pronounced negative impact, undermining public confidence in the wisdom of the venture more than affirmations of support would bolster public confidence.

IV. SURVEYING THE PUBLIC ON MILITARY ENDORSEMENTS

We conducted a controlled, randomized survey of a nationally representative sample of 5,500 adult Americans during the summer of 2012.²⁹ We asked respondents a range of questions on politics and public affairs and tested whether statements by elite military leaders affected public policy views. Some of the respondents (~1,800), called the control group, viewed the following four scenarios without any additional information:

1. Iran: “As you may know, U.S. officials have considered initiating military action to destroy Iran’s ability to make nuclear weapons if Iran continues with its nuclear research and is close to developing a nuclear weapon. The U.S. should initiate military action against Iran.”
2. Syria: “As you may know, there has been civil unrest in Syria, where antigovernment groups have been fighting to overthrow the current regime led by President Bashar al-Assad. The U.S. and its allies are considering bombing Syrian military forces to protect antigovernment groups. The United States and its allies should bomb Syrian military forces to protect antigovernment groups.”
3. Terrorism: “Consider the following hypothetical situation. The U.S. government has identified and stopped a major terrorist attack on the mainland. A foreign government that had not previously supported terrorism helped to plan this operation. The U.S. is considering initiating sustained military operations against this foreign government to prevent future attacks. The United States should initiate sustained military operations against this foreign government to prevent future attacks.”
4. Humanitarian: “Consider a country whose citizens have begun to protest against the ruling dictator who has committed large-scale atrocities

against his own people. The country’s military is weak, and the U.S. could intervene to prevent further humanitarian atrocities without suffering many casualties. The U.S. military should intervene to prevent further humanitarian atrocities.”

Two other randomly assigned groups (~1,800 participants in each), called treatment groups, viewed a version of the scenarios containing an additional sentence indicating that the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the regional combatant commander either supported or opposed the use of force abroad: “According to recent reports, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and regional combatant commander [support/oppose] military action against [Iran / the Syrian government / this military operation].”³⁰ The form of military endorsement we test, therefore, is an explicit, but unsourced, report of the views of the relevant senior military leaders.³¹

We asked about a range of missions because public support for a proposed use of force varies greatly depending on the type of mission.³² In our survey, the Iran and Terrorism scenarios fit the “realpolitik” category, whereas intervening in Syria or intervening to stop atrocities by a hypothetical dictator correspond with the “humanitarian” category.

V. SURVEY RESULTS

Military Opposition Counts a Lot; Military Support Counts Less

Military opposition exerts a large, statistically significant negative effect on support for interventions abroad (see Table 1). Compared with no military endorsement, military opposition reduces support by between 6 and 8 percentage points in each of the four scenarios. In the Terrorism scenario, for example, 46 percent of those in the control group supported a bombing campaign, whereas only 38 percent of those in the opposition group did – an effect of 8 percentage points. Given the large sample sizes, even small shifts in opinion are statistically meaningful.

Military support for using force abroad has a more modest effect. A positive military endorsement increases overall support by at most 3 percentage points compared with the control group, and the difference between the support

treatment group and control group is statistically significant in three out of the four scenarios (in all but the Iran scenario).

Respondents' opinions were slightly more malleable in the two hypothetical scenarios (Terrorism and Humanitarian) than in the two real-world foreign policy scenarios (Syria and Iran). In fact, endorsements have the weakest effect in the best-known scenario, Iran. Even then, however, military opposition to attacks in Iran decreased public support for military action by 8 percentage points.

Table 2 shows the measure of net support for each scenario – the percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree minus the percentage who disagree or strongly disagree. The military exerts the most influence when it offers a negative signal about a proposed intervention. On average, a negative signal depresses net support by 15 percentage points (from +6 to -9), whereas a positive military signal increases net support by only about 4 points.

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE WITH USE OF FORCE

	Iran	Syria	Terrorism	Humanitarian	Overall
Oppose Signal	33	17	38	33	30
No Signal	41	24	46	39	37
Support Signal	41	27	51	44	40

TABLE 2: NET SUPPORT FOR EACH SCENARIO

	Iran	Syria	Terrorism	Humanitarian	Overall
Oppose Signal	-5	-34	+6	-3	-9
No Signal	+9	-17	+22	+12	+6
Support Signal	+8	-11	+29	+18	+10

Note: Net support is the percentage of respondents who agree or strongly agree with the use of force minus the percentage of respondents who disagree or strongly disagree with the use of force.

Compared with the control group, net support in the opposition treatment group declines 17 percentage points (from -17 to -34) in the Syria scenario, 16 points (from +22 to +6) in the Terrorism scenario, 15 percentage points (from +12 to -3) in the Humanitarian scenario and 14 points (from +9 to -5) in the Iran scenario. Indeed, the move from military support to military opposition causes support for use of force in the Iran and Humanitarian scenarios to change from a plurality in favor to a plurality against.

These results are roughly similar to results from previous research on the effects of other kinds of endorsements. For instance, priming the public with information about support or opposition from the U.N. and NATO produced 20- to 30-point swings in either direction.³³ Likewise, partisan-cued differences on public attitudes during the Korean

War and other actual uses of force showed similar, or larger, swings.³⁴ Other scholars found 15- to 20-point swings within political parties when they presented respondents with partisan cues for hypothetical scenarios in Iraq, Eritrea and Liberia.³⁵

Party Identification Filters Military Endorsements

We then divided the survey responses by party identification: pure independents, Republicans (including leaners) or Democrats (including leaners).³⁶

Overall, cues from senior military leaders exert the largest impact on Republican respondents. As shown in the right-most column of Table 3, which pools the findings from the four scenarios, the support signal increases support for use of force abroad by 4 percentage points among Republicans,

TABLE 3: PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE WITH USE OF FORCE BY PARTY IDENTIFICATION

	Iran	Syria	Terrorism	Humanitarian	Overall
Democrats					
Oppose Signal	21	17	33	34	26
No Signal	26	24	35	39	31
Support Signal	28	25	39	47	34
Republicans					
Oppose Signal	49	19	48	33	38
No Signal	60	27	61	44	48
Support Signal	62	33	69	46	52
Independents					
Oppose Signal	25	11	33	27	24
No Signal	33	16	41	26	30
Support Signal	33	14	42	34	30

Source: Center for a New American Security

and the opposition signal reduces Republicans' support by 10 percentage points, a total swing of 14 points. Among Democrats, the support signal increases support by 3 points, and the opposition signal reduces support by about 5 points, a total swing of 8 points. Finally, independents are no more likely to support interventions abroad when they receive the support signal; however, the opposition signal reduces their support by 6 percentage points, a total swing of 6 points.

Across all four scenarios, Republicans are more likely than either Democrats or independents to support military action. As expected, Republicans support the “realpolitik” Iran and Terrorism scenarios at especially high rates; clear majorities of Republicans support these scenarios whether or not they are told of military support. However, Republican support for the use of force in the Terrorism scenario drops below the majority threshold when Republicans are told that military leaders oppose the operation.

Republican respondents are less likely to support “humanitarian” military action in the Syria and Humanitarian scenarios, although Democrats and Republicans support these operations at very similar rates overall. Independent respondents appear to have moderate views on the realpolitik questions, with responses between those of Democrats and Republicans, but they have dovish views on the Syria and Humanitarian scenarios.

For each scenario, signals from military elites generally influence Republican respondents more than independent and Democratic respondents (Figure 1). For Republicans, an opposition signal from military leaders causes statistically significant decreases in support in all four scenarios compared with the Republicans in the control group. These shifts are approximately 10 percentage points on average, compared with shifts of less than 5 percentage points for Democrats and 6 percentage points for independents. Nevertheless, the pooled

effects for the opposition signal are statistically significant for each group.

In two of the four scenarios, Republicans who receive the support signal are significantly more likely to support the use of force compared to those who receive the oppose signal. Among Republicans, the support signal increases support by 8 percentage points compared with the control group in the Terrorism scenario and by 6 percentage points in the Syria scenario. In the Humanitarian scenario, military support leads to statistically significant increases in support among both independents and Democrats: For both groups, the support signal led to an 8-percentage-point increase in support for the use of force compared with the control group.

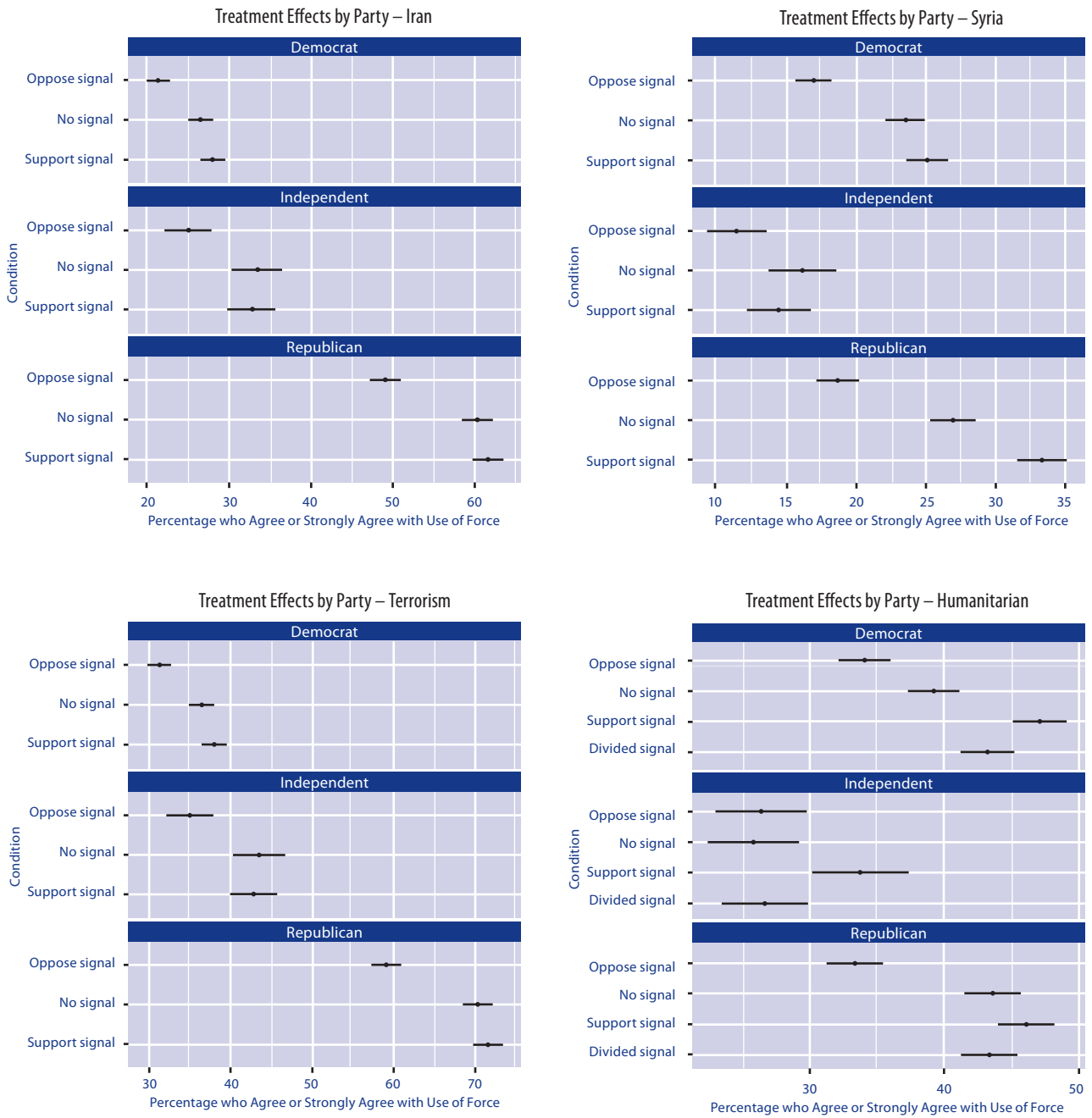
Pooled across all four scenarios, a support signal from military leaders causes a 4-percentage-point increase among Democrats, a 3-percentage-point increase among Republicans and no change among independents. Nevertheless, none of these changes are statistically significant in any of the three partisan categories.

Partisan differences do appear to play a critical role in shaping the circumstances under which a respondent will respond to an elite military cue. Republicans are particularly likely to be influenced by senior military officers on decisions about the use of force, especially on matters related to terrorism and national defense. It also is clear that Democrats and independents are influenced by the advice of military leaders when they oppose the use of force, but these signals are less influential than they are among Republicans.

Factors Beyond Party Identification Affect the Influence of Military Endorsements

Factors other than party identification also appear to be important in determining the size and direction of the treatment effects. First, the saliency of an issue reduces the size of the treatment effects.

FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE WITH USE OF FORCE FOR THE FOUR SCENARIOS



Source: Center for a New American Security

The influence of military leaders on the Iran scenario, a prominent current foreign policy case, is smaller than their influence on the Syria scenario, which was a developing crisis when we conducted our survey in July 2012. In the Iran scenario, the support signal has virtually no effect. The signals have a much greater effect in the Humanitarian and Terrorism scenarios, where, by virtue of being hypothetical, respondents do not have fixed views.

Second, the ideological bent of the proposed scenario affects the size and direction of the signals' effects. In the Humanitarian scenario, which may appeal more to Democrats or cooperative internationalists, the support signal shifts Democratic views significantly but has no effect on Republicans. Consistent with our expectations, military support for the Iran and Terrorism scenarios did not influence Democrats. However, somewhat surprisingly, military support for the Syria scenario did not lead to a statistically significant increase in support among Democrats. There are several possible reasons for this. Perhaps Democrats' views are already somewhat crystallized on this topic. Additionally, although Syria clearly involves many serious humanitarian issues, there are other strategic and economic interests at stake in the region, and respondents may not think of this crisis primarily as a humanitarian issue. Moreover, our choice of the phrase "antigovernment groups" may prime respondents not to think of this situation in purely humanitarian terms. Finally, recent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan may have colored respondents' views of operations in this particular region of the world.

Veterans Generally Do Not Respond More Dramatically than Nonveterans to Military Cues

Table 4 presents the survey results divided by veteran status. In general, the survey shows only limited evidence that veterans are more likely than non-veterans to respond to elite military cues.

Veterans are not statistically more likely than nonveterans to respond to support cues in any of the four scenarios. When they receive opposition cues, however, veterans are slightly

less likely to support the use of force than nonveterans. Across all four scenarios, veterans who receive an opposition signal are 10 percentage points less likely to support the use of force compared with the control group. In contrast, the corresponding change for nonveterans is 7 percentage points. Nevertheless, the difference between veterans and nonveterans is only significant for the Syria and Terrorism scenarios. The opposition

signal decreases support among veterans by 11 percentage points for Syria and 14 percentage points for the Terrorism scenario, compared with declines of 6 and 7 percentage points, respectively, for nonveterans. These limited treatment effects among veterans as compared with nonveterans are consistent with the argument that an individual's partisan identification shapes foreign policy beliefs more than veteran status does.³⁷

TABLE 4: PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE WITH USE OF FORCE BY VETERAN STATUS (COMPARED WITH THE NO SIGNALS GROUP)

	Iran		Syria		Terrorism		Humanitarian	
	Sup.	Opp.	Sup.	Opp.	Sup.	Opp.	Sup.	Opp.
Veterans	0	-9	+3	-11	+5	-14	+7	-7
Nonveterans	0	-7	+4	-6	+4	-7	+5	-7

Source: Center for a New American Security

Democratic veterans behave differently from Republican veterans, however (Table 5). Among Republicans, we did not find any statistically significant differences in the effects of the signals on veterans compared with nonveterans. Democratic veterans, however, were much more likely to respond to opposition signals than Democratic nonveterans. The average effect of the opposition signal on Democratic veterans was -11 percentage points, compared with only -4 percentage

points for Democratic nonveterans. These opposition effects were especially large for the Syria, Terrorism and Humanitarian scenarios, with shifts of -10, -18 and -13 percentage points, respectively, for Democratic veterans, compared with shifts of -6, -1 and -4 percentage points for nonveteran Democrats. Veterans who identified as independents showed similar effects from the opposition signal in the Syria and Terrorism scenarios, but not in the Humanitarian scenario.

One possible explanation for the large bump among Democratic veterans is that these respondents might see such a cue by military leaders as both surprising and trustworthy. Democratic veterans tend to be more moderate than Democratic nonveterans;³⁸ under most circumstances, they self-selected into the military despite widespread beliefs that the military is a conservative institution. Consequently, a cue from senior military leaders in support of such an operation might be considered particularly informative.

TABLE 5: PERCENTAGE OF DEMOCRATIC RESPONDENTS WHO AGREE OR STRONGLY AGREE WITH USE OF FORCE BY VETERAN STATUS

Veterans	Iran	Syria	Terrorism	Humanitarian	Overall
Oppose Signal	27	20	30	25	26
No Signal	30	30	48	38	37
Support Signal	35	31	47	53	42
Nonveterans					
Oppose Signal	20	26	33	35	26
No Signal	26	23	34	39	30
Support Signal	27	24	38	46	34

Source: Center for a New American Security

VI. WHY DO MILITARY ENDORSEMENTS WORK?

These results also help identify the causal mechanism through which military endorsements seem to influence public opinion. As discussed earlier, military endorsements (positive or negative) might work for any number of reasons: Perhaps they operate simply as reinforcements, perhaps the public has special confidence in the military, perhaps the public responds especially strongly to surprising endorsements or perhaps people who are skeptical about the president or certain kinds of missions want a second opinion before they decide whether to support the use of force. It also is possible that certain groups – partisans, for example – are more likely to listen to military statements because they believe that senior military leaders share their views.

Our results offer some support for the “surprise” explanation – particularly the marked boost in support among independents and Democrats when told that the military supported a humanitarian intervention. After witnessing several decades of military reluctance to intervene in humanitarian crises, the public may view military leaders as reflexively skeptical of humanitarian interventions and thus view military support as particularly informative.

Our results also offer some support for the “second opinion” explanation, the idea that people who distrust the president may be likely to seek outside validation of a presidential decision on the use of force. In our sample, Republicans obviously fit this category. Thus, the relatively strong Republican response to military endorsements, both positive and negative, seems to be an example of skeptics seeking outside validation. However, Republican respondents in the control group showed a high level of support for the use of force in each of our four scenarios, which does not seem consistent with the second-opinion hypothesis. We would

expect their support to be lower if they were basing their opinions on their faith in President Obama’s decisionmaking.³⁹ This evidence also is consistent with an explanation in which Republicans listen to military endorsements because they believe that the military shares their beliefs about foreign policy and Democrats and independents do not listen because they think that military preferences diverge from their own. Military opposition caused

After witnessing several decades of military reluctance to intervene in humanitarian crises, the public may view military leaders as reflexively skeptical of humanitarian interventions and thus view military support as particularly informative.

statistically significant decreases in Republican support in all four scenarios, and military support led to statistically significant increases in support in the Syria and Terrorism scenarios, although not in the Iran or Humanitarian scenarios.

The somewhat anomalous result of Democrats responding markedly, and Republicans *not* responding, to a military endorsement in the Humanitarian scenario may help to adjudicate among these three explanations. Democrats should not need a second opinion on Obama, and yet they respond to the support signal for a humanitarian operation. Republicans should be just as surprised by news of military support for a humanitarian

intervention, and yet that news does not shift them much. Perhaps the inclination of the Republican control group against such interventions is so strong that a military endorsement – particularly the modest one in our signal – is not sufficient to change the calculus.

A more concerning possibility is that Republicans may view the military as “one of their own” – sharing like-minded views on how and when to use force. Republican responses might be analogous to the way the public responds to cues from party leaders. When Republicans see the military going against presumed type to support a humanitarian operation, it might be so surprising that it is taken as a sign of presidential dominance (i.e., the president intimidated military leaders into supporting the operation). If this is the pathway of influence, it suggests that the public perceives a fairly high degree of politicization of the military.

Our survey did uncover other evidence that the public believes the military to be politicized. Approximately 59 percent of respondents said that most members of the military belonged to a political party. Interestingly, however, perceptions of military partisanship differed significantly among partisan respondents. Only 38 percent of Democratic respondents believed that most members of the military belonged to the Republican party, whereas 59 percent of Republican respondents believed that most members of the military identified with the Republican party. Another 50 percent of Democrats responded that “the military has about equal numbers of Democrats and Republicans.” In contrast, only 39 percent of Republicans thought the military had an equal balance of partisans. And very few respondents said that most members of the military identified as Democrats (12 percent of Democrats and 3 percent of Republicans).⁴⁰

We also found that the effects of the support signal were much larger (a 5-percentage-point shift

overall) for Republicans who believed that most members of the military were Republican, whereas there was no effect on Republicans who thought the military consisted of an equal number of partisans. The opposition signal led to slightly smaller shifts among Republicans who believed that most members of the military were Republican than among Republicans who thought the military had a partisan balance, although the difference was not statistically significant. However, perceptions of military partisanship did not appear to have a similar effect on Democrats’ responsiveness to military endorsements.

VII. CONCLUSION: DOES IT MATTER WHETHER MILITARY ENDORSEMENTS WORK?

Public views on the use of force abroad are susceptible to elite influence because of Americans' relative lack of interest in foreign affairs, the information asymmetries between citizens and military leaders and the complex nature of foreign policy. Overall, we find that military opposition reduces public support for use of force abroad by 7 percentage points, whereas military support increases overall public support by 3 percentage points. These cues are most influential among Republican respondents. Furthermore, the military's influence on public opinion is greatest when it opposes (rather than supports) interventions abroad.

What These Findings Mean for Policymakers and Military Professionalism

Beyond the intrinsic value of military advice, then, policymakers have good political reasons to be concerned about military opinion regarding the use of force. Policymakers must work to build public support for any such use, and positive military endorsements can be a powerful aid – and, as this survey shows, military opposition can be an even more powerful hindrance – to forging public support.

These findings, although newly documented, should not surprise the policymaking community. Political leaders have long understood the desirability of having the military brass endorse uses of force they wish to implement and condemn uses of force they wish to avoid. President George W. Bush went to extraordinary lengths to work with his military advisors until they were comfortable endorsing his preferred surge option in Iraq during the 2006-2007 review.⁴¹ Previous administrations wrestled with exactly the same issue, as when the Clinton administration sought to counter the doubts sown by General Powell's opposition to air strikes in Bosnia.⁴² And, of course, President

Obama has quite publicly sought to highlight cases when the generals agreed with his decisions regarding the use of force in Iraq and Afghanistan and to keep their views out of the limelight when they did not.⁴³

Our results suggest that there is a significant incentive for political leaders to get public endorsements from senior military leaders, which necessarily increases the bargaining power of senior military leaders vis-à-vis their elected civilian leaders. Military commanders might be able to threaten – or even simply insinuate – that they would withhold their support for, or voice skepticism about, a particular military mission unless civilian leaders promised to give in on demands related to troop levels, scope or duration of the mission, restrictions on the rules of engagement or autonomy in carrying out the task. If senior officers were to engage in this type of behavior, they could exert significant policy influence that would undermine the legitimate ability of elected political leaders to make policy decisions.

Our survey also suggests that there is an even larger incentive for opponents of a particular military scenario to court generals and admirals to speak out against an administration's proposed policy, particularly through Congressional testimony. This might serve to enhance military influence on policy matters and is particularly likely to provide individual military officers with the opportunity to use their positions for personal or institutional gain. In this case, senior officers opposing a potential use of force would not be able to negotiate over demands directly related to the potential mission. Instead, they would have leverage to link their public dissent to support from political leaders for other defense budget or policy priorities, or to implicit promises of assistance for their own careers, either on active duty or after they retire. Even if this worst-case scenario is not happening (and we are doubtful that it is), the more that military officers insert themselves

publicly into these kinds of discussions, the more that people – especially those who disagree with the positions they take – will suspect ulterior motives. Such behavior, real or perceived, by political leaders and senior military officers could, over time, severely undermine the nonpartisan tradition of the military and damage public trust in the military as an institution.⁴⁴

The more that military officers insert themselves publicly into these kinds of discussions, the more that people – especially those who disagree with the positions they take – will suspect ulterior motives. Such behavior, real or perceived, by political leaders and senior military officers could, over time, severely undermine the nonpartisan tradition of the military and damage public trust in the military as an institution.

In fact, some civil-military experts worry that any public airing of military advice has the effect of politicizing the military. Thus, it could ultimately erode public trust in the institution and undermine the effectiveness of the private and candid advice

that everyone agrees the military should give to policymakers.⁴⁵ Public military advice could enmesh the military in the bruising political fight over policy, with supporters of a policy inveighing against military opponents and opponents of the policy inveighing against military supporters. Because such policy fights are inevitably viewed through partisan lenses, the military institution itself could increasingly appear to have a partisan identity. Although our survey suggests that – at least in the short term – some partisans actually may find “politicized” military advice more informative, independents and opposing partisans likely would find the same advice less informative and less trustworthy. As a result, increased partisanship among military leaders might beget increased politicization if certain segments of society become less likely to join – or have their children join – a military that they do not trust. More generally, the public also regularly exhibits less trust in institutions that it considers partisan; thus, the current high levels of public trust in military professionalism could be replaced over time by a sense that the military is just another political interest group.

Likewise, efforts by administrations to suppress *public* candor about military views on the use of force could easily result in the suppression of *private* candor, thereby eroding the quality of internal deliberations. Eventually, appointments to senior military positions could be driven not by professional merit but by perceived harmony with prevailing political and policy sentiment, further undermining military professionalism.⁴⁶ In the extreme case, a military institution that is overly involved in the domestic politics of war is an institution that threatens civilian prerogatives to decide such matters and challenges the bedrock principle of civilian control. Some analysts worry that the military’s indirect influence over public opinion is intrinsically wrong and could usher in a militarism that the American republic has long sought to avoid (and that President Dwight D. Eisenhower warned

was becoming a reality at the height of the Cold War).⁴⁷ Although our findings are consistent with previous claims that the military is more likely to block potential uses of force than it is to impose them on unwilling civilian leaders,⁴⁸ we do find evidence that senior military officers can increase public support for the use of military force.

How to Mitigate These Concerns

For these reasons, some might call for a norm that keeps military opinion on the use of force out of the public domain – available neither as a cue for public opinion nor as a temptation to involvement in politics. We ourselves called for such a norm in the related issue of veteran partisan endorsements in presidential campaigns.⁴⁹ In this case, however, we think it would be very difficult to try to cultivate a taboo against military endorsements regarding the use of force. Congress has a constitutionally mandated role in decisions about using force, and Congress has as much right as the executive branch to hear military advice on the issue. On the most sensitive matters, Congress could hear such advice in closed session, but generic judgments about the use of force would inevitably leak into the public sphere. There does not seem to be any way for Congress to fulfill its constitutional duties without hearing candid military opinion on such matters, nor any way for Congress to hear that opinion without the free press, and therefore the public, hearing these same opinions. Moreover, it is reasonable for the public to be influenced by expert military opinion on the use of force and, therefore, to want to be influenced and to seek out those views.

Ironically, increased Congressional oversight through more frequent public testimonies by senior military officers may be one way to reduce some of the most detrimental aspects of this practice while maintaining the benefits to participatory democracy. Increased opportunities for senior military officers to share their views under oath, publicly and on the record, could decrease

the impact – and possibly even the likelihood – of leaks or particularly extreme statements of support or opposition by senior military officers. At the same time, these settings might encourage measured and qualified advice that could inform policy debates while providing an opportunity for senior military officers to provide their expert assessments to Congress and the American people.

We also encourage continued discussions and training during professional military education programs that focus on the importance of nonpartisanship, unbiased advice and civilian primacy on decisions of whether to use force.⁵⁰

Suggestions for Future Research

In the Humanitarian scenario, we tested a new condition that we plan to explore in future research: telling respondents that military leaders are divided in their opinion about the wisdom of the action, with one prominent military leader in support of action and the other opposed. This divided signal did not have a statistically significant effect, suggesting that disagreement among generals neutralizes the effects of positive endorsements. If this is the case, political opponents of proposed military ventures have ample incentive to engage in dueling endorsements, recruiting expert military opinion against the use of force. Such competitive list-generating is already a staple of any high-profile foreign policy debate in the American system. The net result may simply be a cacophony of competing military voices. The findings presented here deal with isolated – and hence more artificial – conditions in which survey participants heard only one opinion. Future research could tease out how the real-world cacophony of competing sides, each vying to influence the public by highlighting the views of sympathetic military officers, affects public opinion.

Likewise, different forms of military endorsements may have different effects on the politicization of the military and the potential damage to the

military as an institution. Congressional testimony under oath may differ in influence from strategic leaks or public statements to the media. Public support or opposition also may come in a more nuanced manner, ranging from comments about casualties and risk avoidance to calls for much larger troop commitments to outright opposition. Likewise, endorsements or opposition from senior retired officers may not have the same impact as similar public statements from active-duty leaders. Although our survey did not differentiate among these myriad conditions, future research could attempt to disaggregate these effects to examine whether the public views certain methods of military endorsement as more legitimate or less damaging to trust in the military, whether endorsements from retired officers carry similar weight or even whether conflicting endorsements from across the active and retired communities affect the results. Further research also could assess whether different types of endorsements have different effects on public views about the use of force or interact with different scenarios in systematic ways. It could even directly compare endorsements across different “second opinion” providers, such as the military, Congress and international or multilateral institutions. Although the general public may not differentiate quite so finely as these proposed questions would test, opinion leaders likely do, and so future research could also explore differences between the general public and elites in response to military endorsements.

Finally, future research could study a broader set of scenarios involving the use of force and coercive diplomacy, including imposing sanctions, defending an ally or enforcing a blockade. Military influence on public opinion may vary depending on whether or not the public perceives the military to have unique information or expertise on the decision at hand.

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23. In our post-test questionnaire item including 5,500 respondents, 53 percent said the military has about equal numbers of Republicans and Democrats, 39 percent said most members are Republicans and 9 percent said most members are Democrats.
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29. We conducted the survey during an election season when there was a clear electoral choice for the voters to consider. Surveying off the electoral cycle would introduce too many uncertainties about the candidates and render the survey experiment wildly implausible; who, for instance, would believe that a 2016 candidate, even if recognizable to the public, already has the backing of senior retired military officers? Surveying during the actual election season increases the likelihood of tapping into real effects that might matter in a real election. It is possible, however, that this biases our results against finding that a military endorsement matters. Perhaps in off-election cycles, when there is even less information about candidates available, the public is even more susceptible to elite cues.
30. Respondents were assigned to the treatment groups randomly, resulting in a survey experiment with both a "between-subjects" and a "within-subjects" design. We randomized the order in which respondents saw the vignettes and asked respondents a series of questions between treatments to reduce the potential for biased treatment effects. Two of our scenarios, Iran and Syria, contained deception. We varied whether the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a regional combatant commander support or oppose the use of force abroad, regardless of the military leaders' actual stance on the interventions. We did not explicitly say that these leaders support or oppose military action – we referenced "recent reports" indicating their views.
31. Our description of the military endorsement – "according to recent reports" – is deliberately circumscribed. We did not specify the media authority (e.g., *The New York Times* or the Drudge Report) because that would contaminate our experiment with separate issues of trust: Respondents may find one news source more authoritative than another. Nor did we embellish the statements with fuller accounts of the sort that accompany actual endorsements during contentious policymaking debates (e.g., "General So-and-So indicated that striking Iran would only delay the program by a few

months and would risk a wider regional conflagration...”) because that would needlessly increase any deception.

32. We chose these scenarios because they had the advantage of plausibility. At the time of our survey, these possible uses of force, or fairly similar ones, were sufficiently salient in the public debate over American foreign policy for our survey respondents to believe that an intervention along these lines was possible, perhaps even likely, in the near to medium term. One disadvantage is that they are oriented toward the Middle East; two are explicitly Middle-East-focused, and the Terrorism scenario probably triggers Middle East locations in the public mind. Only the Humanitarian scenario is not region-specific, especially because there are opportunities for such interventions in sub-Saharan Africa and perhaps Asia. Of course, the broader Middle East (extending to Afghanistan) is where the United States has intervened militarily without pause for the past decade, and so it is natural to test public attitudes about the use of force with respect to that region. However, future research could use scenarios pegged to other regions and assess whether there are region-specific limitations in our findings.

33. Greico, Gelpi, Reifler and Feaver, “Let’s Get a Second Opinion.”

34. Larson, “Casualties and Consensus.”

35. Howell and Kriner, *Political Elites and Public Support for War*.

36. “Leaners” are respondents who initially claim not to have a partisan affiliation but then, when asked, indicate that they lean in the direction of one party or the other. “Pure independents” are those who claim no affiliation and claim not to lean in any direction.

37. Golby, “Duty, Honor, Party?”

38. *Ibid.*

39. We also compared the size of treatment effects among Democrats who reported high levels of confidence in the military with the treatment effects among Republicans who did the same. Effect sizes were not statistically different for support endorsements or for opposition endorsements, although Republican shifts were slightly larger than Democratic shifts in both cases. Because the treatment effects among Republican respondents were not statistically different than the treatment effects among Democratic respondents when we controlled for similar levels of confidence, however, this evidence does not seem completely consistent with the “second opinion” hypothesis.

40. These percentages only include information from respondents who believe that most members of the military belong to a political party.

41. Peter Feaver, “The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision,” *International Security*, 35 no. 4 (Spring 2011), 87-125.

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44. Jason Dempsey calls this long-understood problem the “paradox of prestige.” The more confidence that the public places in the military, the greater the temptation for senior officers to take advantage of it for their own – or the institution’s – gain. See Dempsey, *Our Army*.

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50. The ethical frameworks laid out by Don Snider and Risa Brooks represent two possible starting points for discussions within the senior officer corps itself. Don Snider, “Dissent and Strategic Leadership of the Military Professions,” *Orbis*, 52 no. 2 (Spring 2008), 256-277; and Brooks, “Militaries and Political Activity in Democracies.”

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