

Wednesday, September 19, 2012

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## Politicians, the press, and foreign policy: What to read

Posted By [Stephen M. Walt](#) ■ Wednesday, February 10, 2010 - 10:28 AM ■  [Share](#)

“ The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails. ”

— William Arthur Ward

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Stephen M. Walt is the Robert and Renée Belfer professor of international relations at Harvard University.

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Over the past few years, media critics like Glenn Greenwald, Mark Danner, and Michael Massing have exposed some of the sloppiness, incestuousness, and group-think that routinely afflicts mainstream media coverage of world events, especially in the realm of foreign policy and national security. Even "faux news" outlets like Jon Stewart's *Daily Show* have contributed to greater awareness of media failings, mostly by pointing out biases and inconsistencies in a ruthlessly funny fashion.

Yet no matter how useful such critiques are, they need to be complemented by more systematic scholarly studies of the complex relationship between media coverage, public opinion, and actual foreign policy decisions. On that topic, my colleague Matthew Baum and his co-author, Tim Groeling of UCLA, have recently published an excellent book entitled *War Stories: The Causes and Consequences of Public Views on War* (Princeton University Press). Drawing on a wide array of empirical evidence (including opinion surveys, media content, and foreign policy decisions), they argue that the interaction between elites, media, and public opinion is a three-way process in which each group's behavior is essentially strategic. Politicians try to use media to advance their aims; the media picks stories in order to maximize audience (or in some cases, to advance an ideological agenda), and therefore tend to favor stories that are novel or surprising (like when a prominent senator criticizes a president from his own party). Similarly, the public does not just consume the news passively; readers and viewers use various cues to gauge the credibility of different sources.

The book examines a dizzying array of hypotheses, and I can't do justice to all of their findings in a short blog post. Among their more interesting findings are **1)** the tendency for media coverage to over-represent negative evaluations of presidential performance, more so when they come from figures in the president's party, and especially when the president's party also controls the Congress **2)** the so-called "rally 'round the flag" effect is not very powerful, and there is "little evidence that president can consistently anticipate substantial rallies when they use force abroad, especially during unified government," **3)** coverage of conflicts and wars "tends to track elite rhetoric more closely in the relatively early stages of a conflict, while tracking reality more closely if a conflict persists," but "consumers become relatively less susceptible to the influence of elite rhetoric regarding a conflict ... as they gather more information ... [and] grow less responsive to new information, particularly when it conflicts with their prior beliefs."

They also present evidence suggesting that the rise of new media (including the blogosphere) is increasing audience fragmentation and self-selection (i.e., citizens tend to consume news and opinions that are consistent with their prior beliefs), and they speculate that this tendency may give elites "a greater capacity to manipulate public opinion regarding foreign policy over time, especially among their fellow partisans, and to sustain such manipulations for longer periods of time."

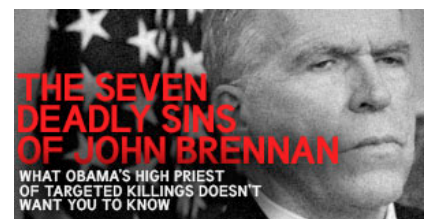
Among other things, this tendency poses a real challenge to anyone who hopes to advance a genuinely "bipartisan" approach to foreign policy. If we're all consuming different sources of "information," we will

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**PETER N W**

7:29 PM ET

February 10, 2010

**Must reading**

Snarky tone aside, if Prof Walt really would read The Corner from time to time (and the rest of National Review's website) I think that would be a good thing. You can't and won't change people's minds if all you do is preach to the choir!

**KAILASHS**

10:31 PM ET

February 10, 2010

**great empirical data but unsatisfying at the end**

Although the argument in the book is not exactly new (this has been in the Marxist wheelhouse since at least 1848 and arguments about how mass media can easily turn from liberating information to large-scale mass manipulation has been around since the 1930s), the book provides great empirical data and makes a lock-and-key case against the propagandists who try and rail accusations against its proponents (I think Dr. Walt knows better than most of us what it's like to be irrationally railed at for arguing media bias toward Israel).

My problem is that the book does not embed this in a deeper theory of why it occurs. That is, how incentives and the content of manipulation emerges in the first place.

On this point, I disagree with your claim that elite manipulation is what "poses a real challenge to anyone who hopes to advance a genuinely "bipartisan" approach to foreign policy." On the contrary, it is the rise of a bipartisan consensus on basically all of the important foreign policy issues in America that has led the media to mindlessly bring out elite opinion as truth. (Is there any serious disagreements among the liberal and conservative elite beyond the Culture Wars. NATO yes. Economics definitely. Middle East ditto.). Importantly, the empirical trend of bipartisan consensus is not an amorphous center but a steady rightward drift in foreign policy.

Elite manipulation is so effective because consensus de-moralizes Americans so that, outside right-wing populism, all there is are disheartened apathetic Americans who are pissed off but don't know what to do about it.

At the risk of being unpopular, seriously challenging the intellectual regression in modern media should take a page from The Daily Show and should not be afraid of being a partisan and making democracy an agonistic competition instead of a consensus.

**TILAK**

8:50 AM ET

February 12, 2010

**Walt and Mearsheimer**

As an academic in the same field I have great respect for the work of Walt and Mearsheimer. Their intervention on US foreign policy towards the Middle East and Israeli influence over it is courageous, but not necessarily either correct or the whole story.

It is certainly true that no country should allow its foreign policy to be unduly influenced by a lobby, but that does not conclusively demonstrate the extent of the JCPA's impact on it compared to autonomous establishment motivation.

On a larger question, Jews and Israelis may be forgiven for feeling that in relation to their long and bitter history of persecution any wrongful conduct of the past two generations was imposed on them. Unfortunately, the price is changing oneself beyond recognition, abandoning an unprecedented tradition of moral sensibility and opposition to against injustice. And a growing moral insensitivity in its place. But large populations did move after WW2 and there the matter more or less ended, whatever the underlying injustice.

Perhaps due acknowledgement of injustices inflicted and a global effort at serious compensation and permanent resettlement might be a step towards resolving an impossible situation.

A Shia dominated Iraq is not necessarily disaster for Israel, despite the deplorable invasion and its horrendous human and material cost to the Iraqi people. If the Iranian clerical dictatorship collapses there is a strong likelihood of the installation of a pro-Western regime, almost certainly far less hostile towards Israel. And a powerful Shia presence in the region will likely curb Sunni Arab political aspirations. The US will also have to cease backing dictatorial religious conservatives and allow Arabs to embrace modernity. But that seems an unlikely scenario.

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