

Blame Dynamics and Audience Cost Theory

Austin Carson
Ohio State University

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Abstract: The power of audience costs to tie a leader's hands relies on a reliable punishment mechanism. Punishment by an audience, in turn, requires two related but distinct judgments by the audience: 1) a policy preference against breaking a commitment; 2) an appraisal that the leader is blameworthy for the broken commitment. We know a good deal about the first but little about the second. Both formal models (e.g. Fearon 1994) and empirical tests (e.g. Tomz 2007) assume away or confound this second stage, yet modern democratic politics offers many cases where policy reversals and failures have not damaged a national leader. This paper presents findings from a survey experiment conducted on a nationally representative sample that specifically investigates blame dynamics in public commitment scenarios associated with audience cost theory. Domestic blame targets appear to be largely ineffective while embedding a public commitment in a multilateral context permits leaders to re-direct blame when backing down and suffer almost no audience costs. The paper then uses psychological and legal theories of blame appraisal to explain this difference and develops a surprising implication: rather than boosting the credibility of military threats and uses of force, multilateralism may multiply potential blame targets and loosen rather than tighten the hands of leaders issuing public promises.

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Whether it's called spin, controlling the narrative, impression management, public relations, or framing, practitioners of the day-to-day art of politics will readily agree that politics is a continual tug-of-war to shape how audiences perceive events and outcomes. Perception is everything. These tactics are used to manage the effect of both positive and negative events, buffing policy successes to a shiny luster and delicately controlling damage when policies go wrong. The latter was on display in 1951 when the British government successfully extricated itself from a series of public commitments threatening the use of force. The Iranian Prime Minister Mossadeq had just nationalized the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, threatening a critical source of petroleum and the British strategic position in the region. Through rhetoric and military mobilization, the British government initially committed itself publicly to resisting the seizure of the company's assets with coercive force. However, its close ally, the United States, was not nearly so enthusiastic about a war with potential Cold War implications. Faced with the likelihood of having to act without its closest ally, the British cabinet reversed course and conceded to the Iranian takeover of the oil company. Yet rather than suffer a domestic revolt over weakness in the face of nationalist treachery in the Middle East, the cabinet emerged largely unscathed. Kenneth Schultz concludes the leaders did not fear domestic audience costs in this case because "blame could be shifted across the Atlantic" to the United States. British leaders cut the knot they had created to tie their own hands by blaming American reluctance to act, evading the bulk of domestic criticism for an otherwise deeply unpopular reversal.¹

Audience cost theory describes a set of empirical scenarios where damage control, including through the strategic manipulation of blame, could play a critical role in the fate of political leaders. Yet the theory as originally specified and subsequently applied throughout has all but

¹ Recounted in Schultz 2001, 42-44.

ignored the ambiguity that often surrounds attributing responsibility for broken political promises. Of course, leaders issuing political commitments do not do so with omniscience or omnipotence and one assumes audiences sometimes consider this. I therefore argue that the threat of punishment which gives a leader's public commitments greater credibility relies not only on a preference for consistency or threat fulfillment but also a blame assessment holding that particular leader responsible for any broken promise. It is the *joint* presence of a negative preference and responsibility assessment which forms the motivational basis for audience costs. While several leading audience cost scholars have noted the potential importance of this blame attribution step, none have evaluated its importance to date.²

This paper therefore offers a first analysis of the operation of blame in audience cost scenarios to extend and deepen the discipline's understanding of the credibility of public commitments. After introducing a simple conceptual model of the audience appraisal process, the paper summarizes findings from a survey experiment administered to a nationally representative sample in which respondents evaluate a hypothetical audience cost scenario with features designed to test for variation and impact of blame attribution. The core finding is that there is both promise and peril for leaders issuing commitments in the public eye. Passing the buck to other domestic political actors, like a legislature, appears to be a surprisingly ineffective way to avoid audience costs in a military crisis scenario. On the other hand, dispersing blame overseas to allies in the context of interdependent, multilateral policy actions appears extremely effective in minimizing damage should a leader back down from a military threat. After probing the robustness of this finding, I offer a potential explanation for this variation in blame mitigation effectiveness. I also develop an important implication: if multilateral commitments multiply effective blame targets, they

² Ibid.; Tomz 2007.

serve to loosen rather than tighten the hands of those making commitments with allies. This suggests an important and under-recognized effect of conducting foreign policy multilaterally which runs counter to the conventional view that such joint action presents a more credible, united front with greater legitimacy. Instead, embedding political promises in a multilateral process weakens commitments of individual leaders by permitting greater opportunities for harnessing blame dynamics in audience cost scenarios to avoid political punishment.

Blame and audience costs: a conceptual model and current literature

Audience cost theory began by treating the question of blame by assumption. It is important to acknowledge this was done with good reason. Fearon originally developed the audience cost commitment mechanism in a context which made political ambiguity and the blame dynamics which it produces largely irrelevant.³ His model is based on a scenario which involves two states locked in a Cuban Missile Crisis-type military crisis, where a unilateral threat is issued by a singularly focused head of state directing a superpower's military capability with exclusive executive authority. This is a startlingly easy case for assessing credit or blame: one actor heading the state at the apex of power in the international system issues a threat and decides whether to fulfill it. In the case of a leader backing down, audiences were understandably modeled to skip the step of "Who to blame?" and move quickly to "When and how can we punish?"

Yet despite innocent origins, the assumption that audiences straightforwardly blame the current head of state for breaking commitments has become increasingly untenable as the popularity of audience cost theory has produced applications to domains ranging from decades-long monetary

³ Fearon 1994.

commitments to international peacekeeping; from civil war peace agreements to environmental treaties.⁴ In the process, many of the contextual factors which make responsibility attribution so straight forward in Fearon's original scenario often no longer apply. For example, public commitments by heads of state may carry across term limits; are inherited by new leaders; often made in multilateral forums; often promise joint collaborative state action rather than simply unilateral action; and frequently include promises whose fulfillment requires supportive action by domestic institutions including legislatures, judicial bodies, and subnational governments.⁵ Each of these possibilities introduces ambiguity in whom an audience designates as causally responsible and, consequently, additional room for manipulability in the perception of blame.

What happens when audiences assess the performance of a leader during audience cost scenarios? Unpacking the mechanics to better understand the sanctioning process at the center of this oft-used commitment mechanism has been the goal of several recent studies. For example, studies on the role of information and collective action in audience cost scenarios have drawn attention to the observability of leader movements and the importance of coordination costs for groups hoping to punish the leader.⁶ The focus in this paper will differ, choosing instead to develop a more precise understanding of what is happening "in-the-head" of audiences appraising political promises. Thus, this conceptual model builds on rather than refutes other recent efforts to more precisely understand the operation of domestic political monitoring and how it impacts the credibility of public commitments.

⁴ See list of applications in Slantchev 2006, 446.

⁵ On inherited wars and audience costs, see Croco n.d.; on Congress and audience costs and blame dynamics, see Schultz 2003; the literature on fragmented governance and its implications for international law is large, but see Farber 1997 for an example highlighting subnational government issues.

⁶ Weeks 2008; Brown and Marcum forthcoming.

I conceptualize the public commitments which are the basis of audience costs as different forms of a political promise. Whether mobilizing troops to signal military threat or signing a treaty to signal an intention to comply, audience costs only arise when a political leader issues a public promise for future action which, should the promise go unfulfilled, will be the basis of political punishment. What is the audience doing in this punishment process? Conceptualized in terms of promises, analogous situations in everyday life suggest knowing the audience's preference is not sufficient. For example, if a friend breaks a promise to join me for dinner one night, I may attempt to interpret the events to form a basic appraisal of my friend's performance. Perhaps I angrily finish my dinner alone and forswear doing him favors for the near future. Perhaps I shrug and move on. Most people evaluating a broken promise form their judgment based on a basic preference ("Do I prefer my friend's company for dinner? Do I prefer friends whose words can be trusted?") *and* their assessment of a variety of circumstantial questions regarding how blameworthy the promise breaker is for that outcome. Perhaps their spouse had a bad day, weather and traffic intervened, they mistakenly marked the wrong week on their calendar, or they simply couldn't find the restaurant. Thus, it seems, a responsibility judgment joins any preference before a negative appraisal of a given actor's behavior in the context of a promise is formed.⁷

Theories of blame in studies in psychology, philosophy, and the law have classified these kinds of contextual factors influencing perceived blameworthiness into two basic categories. First are factors influencing perceived agency or causal efficacy. These are factors which influence the degree to which the actor breaking the promise is perceived as causally in control of the

⁷ This is not an absolute rule and may vary by personality or situation. For example, some observers may be more inclined to excuse broken promises based on spousal considerations than others. My claim is simply that most people most of the time assess situations like this in these terms.

outcome. Outside powers, animate and inanimate, may intervene between a promise and fulfillment which remove the actor's ability to causally influence fulfillment; in the dinner scenario, this may include everything from the weather to a flat tire to a drunk driver.⁸ Second are factors which influence perceived intentionality, or the degree to which an appraiser views the actor in question to have knowingly broken a promise. We do not blame a seizure victim for knocking over a glass of water though they clearly had causal efficacy in pushing it off a table. Similarly, the distinction in judging legal responsibility between manslaughter and murder hinges on *mens rea*, or the premeditated and intentional use of deadly violence.⁹

In the case of politics, blame for breaking a public commitment may be mitigated by factors in either category mentioned above. Political actors know this and their blame avoidance strategies frequently draw on one or both. For example, a leader may plausibly claim a lack of intentionality if subordinates acted without consultation (i.e. Reagan's defense in Iran-Contra) or a lack of control if actors necessary for fulfilling a promise refuse to cooperate (i.e. both the North Korean and American explanations for withdrawing from the Agreed Framework). Work in American politics and public policy has found important variability in blame attribution patterns when studying reactions to the national, state, and local government responses to Hurricane Katrina; procedures in bureaucracy; uses of presidential commissions; politics in divided government; and the dismissal of presidential cabinet members.¹⁰ Research on public blame assessments in South Africa in reaction to the narratives produced in truth and

⁸ Shaver 1985; Weiner 1995; Otsuka 1998; Lavin 2008.

⁹ Shaver 1985; Scott and Lyman 1968; Malle and Nelson 2003; Lavin 2008.

¹⁰ For general treatments, see Weaver 1986 and McGraw 1991. On Hurricane Katrina, see Malhotra and Kuo 2008 and a special issue of the journal *Publius*, especially Gomez and Wilson 2008; Maestas et al. 2008; Schneider 2008. On bureaucracy, Hood 2010; presidential commissions, Kitts 2006; divide government, Groseclose and McCarty 2001; on presidential subordinates, Ellis 1994.

reconciliation commissions explore similar dynamics.¹¹ One important distinction drawn by several studies of blame regards the role of rhetoric from the actor being judged (“accounts”). The promise-breaking friend may not specifically offer a defense of the broken dinner plan but still be the beneficiary of blame mitigation. Thus, known situational considerations can, on their own, mitigate an appraiser’s blame assessment; or, such considerations can be integrated into an explanation by the actor to provide additional leverage.¹²

Each of the two categories of factors influencing blame assessments offers a variety of potential blame-mitigating mechanisms, be it through dispersion, redirection, or simple denial of blame. Preferences about the outcome may not change but, depending on the audience’s judgment of a particular leader’s blameworthiness, overall approval or disapproval change. In short, blame assessment operates in an analytically distinct manner from the preference question.¹³ On the latter, evidence for audience costs and preferences is already in. Survey experiments to date have been used to establish that publics generally prefer promise fulfillment, variously described as “publics favor strength,” “publics favor consistency,” “publics favor law following,” or other similar such formulations.¹⁴ To whom this preference should be directed simply has not been systematically investigated.

Though not the object of specific inquiry, the potential significance of blame dynamics in audience costs has been acknowledged. Schultz’s explanation of the difficulty of observing

¹¹ Gibson and Gouws 1999.

¹² Scott and Lyman 1968; McGraw 1991.

¹³ Though analytically distinct, the same feature or statement may influence both preferences and blame assessment. This is not always the case and must be evaluated in context.

¹⁴ On the question of why audiences prefer to punish the leader and ambiguity in Fearon’s original formulation, see Smith 1998. On the survey experiment findings, see Tomz 2007; Trager and Vavreck forthcoming.

audience costs in execution was already mentioned: British leaders backing down from a military threat towards Iran were able to avoid domestic political punishment from the electorate by highlighting the unwillingness of the US to back up fulfillment of the threat.¹⁵ Tomz also notes blame could play a role in moderating the magnitude of audience costs. He suggests the possibility of institutional effects where commitments made by leaders in political systems with shared foreign policy powers may be less credible due to the possibility of shifting blame to other domestic institutions in the event of a broken promise.¹⁶ Guisinger and Smith also note that “fluctuations in political accountability” may influence whether a leader is perceived to be vulnerable to audience costs.¹⁷

As applications of audience cost theory into domains beyond the relatively rare acute military crisis have grown, the time seems right to turn specific analytic attention to the question of how costly public commitments tend to be in the presence of blame-related ambiguity.

Data and experimental design

To assess blame dynamics in audience cost scenarios, I developed a randomized survey experiment which specifically focused on factors which were hypothesized to potentially influence blame assessments. After being shown a hypothetical foreign policy scenario, survey respondents were asked questions to measure their assessment of blame and overall leadership

¹⁵ Schultz 2001. This case seems to more clearly illustrate the theory presented here than Schultz’s own. Rather than showing leaders abstain from making public threats due to the high likelihood of suffering costs if broken, this case seems to show leaders can issue threats without an abundance of hesitation provided they can direct blame overseas to escape punishment.

¹⁶ Tomz 2009, 9.

¹⁷ Guisinger and Smith 2002: ““Of course, in reality, nations do back down... In other cases, fluctuations in political accountability, even within democratic systems, make retreat more likely. In the United States, a second-term president might be concerned with a loss of power, prestige, or party reputation but not the specific loss of office-holding benefits.” See also Croco n.d. on culpability across leader tenure.

performance. The experiment was embedded in the KN/Quickview omnibus online survey administered by the survey research firm Knowledge Networks. A representative sample of the U.S. population aged 18 and over was drawn from the standing Knowledge Network survey respondent panel. The panels participating members are recruited via combined random-digit dialing and address-based sampling to ensure maximum coverage.¹⁸ The survey was administered in July 2010 and included 1,020 respondents in the final tally.¹⁹ The data were adjusted by Knowledge Networks for known survey error sources like over-sampling using weights.²⁰

The experimental design required the total sample be evenly divided and randomly assigned to a series of treatment groups. Each respondent received one and only one vignette describing a foreign policy crisis and, after reviewing the facts of the situation, was asked to respond to questions appraisal of the U.S. president's performance. In all scenarios, the respondent reads about a scenario in which the U.S. president is reacting to a possible invasion of another state by a foreign government; in all but one, the president issues a warning that an invasion will not be tolerated but ultimately does not back up the threat. For purposes of comparability of findings, each vignette was designed to parallel the language and setup used in prior survey experimental designs evaluating audience costs, particularly Tomz (2007) and Trager and Vavreck (forthcoming). The innovations in this survey experiment were to: first, include a question for each respondent which assessed the share of blame which the president should hold; and, second,

¹⁸ Knowledge Network's panel recruitment methodology combines phone-based and address-based sampling procedures to avoid bias from excluding cell-phone only households. The panel also includes both online and offline populations, providing equipment and internet service to those in the latter category.

¹⁹ A total of 1,818 panelist were solicited for the survey with a completion rate of 56%. Email reminders to non-responders were sent on day three of the field period. Tables below may not include all 1,020 respondents due to several treatment conditions being ignored for purposes of brevity and relevance.

²⁰ Specifics on weight adjustments were provided by Knowledge Networks and are available from the author on request.

including a set of vignette manipulations to explore what kind of situational factors and presidential rhetoric influences blame appraisal overall approval of the leader's performance.²¹ Each respondent was asked whether they approved or disapproved of how the president handled the situation in addition to the blame appraisal question.²² Given successful randomization, tracking the variation in average blame assessment and approval rating for each treatment group offers the possibility to make inferences about the role variation in the situational features influences blame appraisal and, in turn, changes in blame appraisal influences the assessment of leader performance under audience cost scenarios.²³ The approval question options were simply "approve" and "disapprove" while the blame assessment of the president was based on a seven-point scale with endpoints "all of the blame" and "none of the blame."²⁴

The specific treatment groups are summarized in Table 1 while sample vignettes appear in Appendix A. Two baseline comparison groups are listed first in the table.²⁵ The first baseline group was shown a vignette describing the president abstaining from issuing a threat in the first place, declaring that the U.S. reaction to the massing of troops was to stay out. This condition serves as the ultimate reference point for measuring the magnitude of audience costs, as it describes a situation in which no public commitment and no intervention are made. Prior findings have found significantly higher presidential approval in this scenario compared to any scenario involving a threat and then backing down ("backdown").²⁶ The second baseline group

²¹ One treatment group, the "stay out" scenario in which the president does not issue a threat in the first place, did not receive a blame appraisal question because there was no broken promise for which to evaluate blame.

²² The question order for these two was randomly determined for each respondent, guarding against possible order effects produced by soliciting a blame or approval reaction before the other.

²³ Randomization / balance checks. <<To be done>>

²⁴ Question wording is in Appendix A.

²⁵ I do not refer to any group with the language of "control" because even the baseline groups are meaningfully "treated" with an informational manipulation.

²⁶ See Tomz 2007; Vavreck and Trager forthcoming.

was shown the simplest version of a backdown scenario: the vignette described the president publicly declaring the U.S. would not tolerate an invasion but, after the U.S. threat is ignored, chose not to use military force to back up the threat. No explanation is provided for the backdown and no other political actors are mentioned besides the president. These two vignettes replicate the original design in Tomz (2007) and, as shown in Table 2, the comparison between them produces similar findings that survey respondents assess presidential performance much more harshly in a backdown scenario than in a scenario where the president never issues the public threat in the first place.

<<Table 1 here>>

<<Table 2 here>>

The central research questions are as follows: How robust is this original finding in the face of changes in the scenario which may complicate the blame assessment of the leader? Will the costliness of backing down from a threat decline or even disappear if the respondent is cued to consider shared responsibility and/or limited ability to causally control threat fulfillment? Will any change depend on the source of blame mitigation or operate consistently across sources? As noted before, political leaders seem unlikely to adopt such a politically costly action as silently and stoically as presented in past research. Moreover, even without attempted mitigating account, political promises are made in complicated situations and audiences may adjust their assessment regardless of a leader's explanation. To assess these questions, manipulations were included for the remaining treatment groups that were hypothesized to influence blame and job performance appraisal.

Out of the many potential options, I chose to focus the analysis on three potential sources of blame mitigation: weather, a legislative body (in this case, Congress), and allies. In the weather condition, respondents were shown the baseline “backdown” vignette but were also informed that the president provided an account for the choice not to use force based on unfavorable seasonal weather conditions. In the two Congress conditions, respondents were shown the baseline “backdown” vignette but were either subtly cued to consider the role Congress may have played or explicitly informed that the president explained his/her choice not to use force based on opposition in Congress.²⁷ In the two allies conditions, respondents were informed that the president had issued a threat on behalf of the international community and consulted with allies regarding the crisis. After the threat is ignored, the president chooses not to use military force to back up the threat. In one condition, this is all the respondent was told. In a second version, the president also gives an account for backing down that allies did not support use of military force. See Appendix A for sample text.

These manipulations draw on a reasonably diverse and realistic set of scenario features which could complicate the appraisal of the president’s performance. Of course, they do not exhaust all potentially interesting sources of blame dispersion like blaming previous leaders (i.e. “Bush’s war” for Obama) or presidential subordinates (i.e. Oliver North and Iran-Contra). Still, these conditions allow a useful first examination of the research question. For example, the weather condition offers a realistic issue that influenced the timing and overall feasibility of using American military force as in the 2003 invasion of Iraq; yet the expectation is not high that

²⁷ The subtle cue condition merely mentions the Congress along with the president in the sentence which informs the respondent of no use of military force. This was meant to mirror the “mere mention” experimental designs in the study of American race and politics.

weather alone can protect against accusations of political weakness (like Milli Vanilli, political leaders rarely “blame it on the rain” and survive with careers intact). In addition, the weather condition is a non-agentic blame target: rather than minimizing the costs of backdown by citing other actors (presumably with strategic motives of their own), this condition permits the leader to cite a truly “exogenous” factor which reduces his/her control. The Congress conditions are one way to investigate the possibility of domestic blame shifting in crisis scenarios; moreover, Congress in theory shares powers in decisions to use military force (though not in threatening it) and “blame games” between the executive and legislative branches have already yielded fruit in studies of domestic policy. The allies conditions are an important first cut at the unique potential for overseas sources of blame dispersion or scapegoating. These correspond to the British case mentioned in the opening and the counterfactual case in which the US blamed Turkey for backing off threats against Hussein in 2003. Even more important, the allies conditions are especially appealing since so many applications of audience cost theory outside high military crises involve multilateral commitments and fulfillment. Thus, the logistics and desirability of promise fulfillment are often partially a function of whether other sovereign states have themselves consented to action and/or taken their own action.

Findings

Comparing respondent answers across and within condition suggests two basic findings: blame assignment appears to reliably influence the magnitude of audience costs but moving blame away from the president appears surprisingly difficult. Neither invoking logistical military constraints from weather complications nor pointing the finger to a reluctant Congress appears to significantly alter blame assessments or mitigate overall approval. In both cases, the president

suffers largely similar audience costs in this pre-war crisis context. Yet when the president is able to invoke constraints imposed by other allied states as part of a multilateral rather than unilateral threat scenario, statistically and substantively significant reductions in blame assessment and disapproval result. The ultimate implication of these latter changes is so strong in one condition that the audience costs from backing down from a threat decline to nearly zero.

Analyzing variations across treatment conditions provides the best method of evaluation. The first important question to assess is whether blame for a president's backdown from a threat changes depending on condition. The reference point for this test is the baseline "no excuses" condition in which the president backs down from the threat with no mitigating circumstances or account. The null hypothesis is that situational factors like weather, Congressional opinion, and allied enthusiasm are irrelevant to the judgment of a leader's blameworthiness for failing to follow through on his/her initial promise. Results from a one-way analysis of variance comparing the mean blame rating across experimental conditions provides initial evidence that blame is, in fact, malleable ($F=5.436$, $df=7$, $p < 0.000$). More specific, treatment-by-treatment estimates of the significance of blame rating differences across conditions appear in Figure 1. The figure shows a box plot of the mean blame assessment across six relevant conditions. The clear trend is downwards moving left to right, suggesting respondents evaluating the allies vignette in particular tend to attribute less blame to the president for backing down. Table 3 provides a quantitative summary of the statistical significance of blame ratings for each condition using the original backdown scenario as reference point. On the one hand, the second row shows that the difference in blame ratings for the weather and Congress conditions do not differ significantly from the blame assessment in the original backdown version. On the other

hand, the difference between the average original backdown blame assessment and the average assessment in the two allies conditions are both highly significant ($p < 0.01$).

<<Figure 1 here>>

<<Table 3 here>>

Does the overall approval of the president's handling of this crisis change across conditions, and if so, do these changes track with the changes (or not) in blame assessment? The reference point for this test is again the original backdown condition in which no mitigating circumstances are mentioned in the vignette (65% approve, 34% disapprove). If there are significant differences between this baseline and various conditions, and these differences are consistent with the blame dynamics just reviewed, it seems plausible a good portion of observed differences in the overall performance assessment are due to vignette differences that alter blame assessment. Based on analysis above, we would expect no significant difference in approval/disapproval in the weather and Congress conditions. For the allies conditions, however, we expect differences in approval/disapproval. This pattern is indeed the case. Figure 2 shows clear differences in overall approval/disapproval of presidential performance depending on condition. The lighter (green) shade indicates the number of respondents in each treatment group that disapprove of the president's handling of the situation while the darker (blue) indicates those that approve. Whiskers straddling each bar indicate 95% confidence intervals. Using the original backdown treatment group as the baseline, most conditions have overlapping confidence intervals (within approve/disapprove cluster) suggesting the differences in approve/disapprove proportions between conditions are not statistically distinguishable from that which might arise from chance.

However, the two allies conditions appear to include statistically significant differences.

Compared to the original backdown scenario, respondents in the allies conditions that included a presidential account in particular show marked differences in the number approving and disapproving.

<<Figure 2 here>>

Table 4 presents the same data numerically in a contingency table, with Pearson's chi-square tests estimating the statistical significance of the differences in proportion of approve/disapprove between conditions. While the condition with a presidential account citing Congress opposition meets a more generous standard of significance (p -value between 0.05 and 0.10), both allies conditions reach even conservative thresholds of significance ($p < 0.01$).

<<Table 4 here>>

The data so far suggest the allies conditions move blame evaluation differently than the others and in a way which results in important changes in the overall approval of the leader. Yet this finding, while interesting, does not mean much if the reduction in costs to a leader are substantively minimal. Stated another way, unless the reduction in audience costs brings it within range of the scenario in which the president makes no threat in the first place, going public still adds risk and thus serves as a commitment mechanism even with some blame mitigation. To evaluate this, we must compare the approval rating of the president in the allies scenarios to the approval rating when the president does not make a threat ("Stay out" condition). Recall that previous experimental evidence of audience costs by Tomz (2007) was based on the

substantially lower approval for presidents who threaten and then backdown rather than never making the public threat in the first place (Table 2).²⁸

Using the “stay out” condition as a baseline, Table 5 calculates the changes in approval rating for three conditions: the original backdown scenario and both allies scenarios.²⁹ As seen before, the original backdown scenario produces a very large reduction in approvals and increasing in disapprovals compared to the president simply refusing to issue a commitment/threat (in the 30% range). The allies scenario with no presidential account has a less devastating effect, suggesting simply issuing the threat in the terms of the international community and with consultation of allies mitigates *but does not eliminate* the audience costs associated with “going public.” Indeed, a statistically significant twenty point penalty is still paid for not sending troops even when embedded in internationalized terms and with consultation of allies. The third and final scenario, however, changes the outcome profoundly. When a president issues a threat in a multilateral context *and* cites reluctance of an ally to participate, the president is spared nearly all audience costs. In statistical terms, the approval/disapproval proportions between the two conditions are indistinguishable: the presidential performance figures are so similar that random chance could produce greater differences than that which is observed between staying out and backing down in a multilateral context with an overseas ally as scapegoat.

<<Table 5 here>>

²⁸ Other conditions are omitted for lack of statistical significance, making substantive significance

²⁹ Other conditions did not result in statistically significant differences in approval rating and are therefore excluded for purposes of brevity

This finding returns the analysis to a final question: what role are the presidential statements playing? Based on approval rating differences just reviewed, the answer in the allied context is “a significant role.” The two allied conditions differ only in the inclusion of a presidential account citing ally reluctance. When evaluated in terms of the blame assessment measure, the same pattern emerges. Accounts matter for the allied conditions but not when directing blame to Congress. Table 6 presents two paired comparisons between conditions in which the only difference is the presence or absence of a presidential account which attempts to explain a broken commitment in terms of other actors. The mean blame assessment between these does not reach statistical significance for the Congress scenario ($p = 0.775$) but does reach statistical significance at the somewhat liberal standard of $p < 0.10$ ($p = 0.068$).

<<Table 6 here>>

Explaining blame dynamics in audience cost scenarios

Why are some attempts to mitigate audience costs by dispersing or re-directing blame successful and some not? Why might strategies that cite leadership constraints imposed by rival domestic institutions or seasonal weather conditions be so fruitless? Why, on the other hand, can a leader spare him/herself much of the blame and nearly all performance penalties by issuing a threat in a multilateral context and invoking the dissent of allies?

Recalling the prior discussion of theories of blame assessment, the difference between the effects of these conditions is somewhat puzzling, given that all three seem to dilute the promise-breaker’s agency or causal efficacy. My own expectation prior to gathering and analyzing the

data was that a recalcitrant domestic institution would be an extremely fruitful way for a leader to evade responsibility for military weakness. This expectation was substantially mistaken. Yet threats embedded in a multilateral context seem a very feasible way minimize costs or even eliminate them, should the opportunity to blame reluctant allies present itself. Explaining this difference begs for a theoretical explanation for why some tactics work and some fail in crisis-like foreign policy scenarios.

The finding regarding the powerful shielding effect of external rather than domestic actors finds corroboration in a recent study using observational data to evaluate the use of third party arbitration in territorial disputes. Allee and Huth (2006) find that leaders bargaining to resolve a territorial dispute often expect they will need to make concessions that will be costly at home. Their analysis shows the likelihood to accede to outside legal arbitration is correlated with domestic vulnerability, controlling for other potential explanatory factors. Their explanation for this regularity is that a legal ruling from an outside entity gives domestic political cover to the leader, offering a justification which at least perceptually removes causal control over the outcome and therefore spares him/her of the audience costs which would normally accompany the retreat from a commitment to defend the territorial status quo. The result of politically naked concessions without the convenience of an overseas blame target?

Perhaps the biggest potential cost is that responsibility for making negotiated concessions is squarely attributable to government leaders. If the executive makes concessions that are unpopular, or a negotiated agreement fails, the executive is solely to blame for the decision to offer such concessions to the adversary.

Given the salience of many international disputes, it will be apparent to interested domestic actors who made the potentially controversial decision to offer concessions to the adversary.³⁰

While developed to explain a legal process, such findings support the intuition that the international domain may offer more feasible mechanisms for blame avoidance. In the case of arbitration, this may be due in part to the veneer of legal legitimacy granted by the judgment. In part, however, the “political cover” also seems a function of the way independent legal panels, and states themselves, possess a sovereign equality and independence which is not present in the domestic sphere. In contrast with the constant tug-of-war between the legislative and executive, respondents may have evaluated the constraints created by reluctant allies as a practical *fait accompli*, largely independent of the causal control of the president. Given the theories of blame appraisal cited above, this would seem to imply a reduction in appraised presidential responsibility and, consequently, fewer cases of disapproval.

In general, Congressional opposition surely imposes limits on the ability of a leader to causally ensure the fulfillment of a political promise. Yet the unique context of a pre-war crisis may influence the feasibility of blame avoidance via the legislative branch. Scholars analyzing the balance of power between the executive and legislative branches in American foreign policy often note the especially minor role Congress plays – *and is expected by the public to play* – in crisis scenarios.³¹ On questions of immediate national security and diplomatic decisions regarding war and peace, American voters tend to defer to the leadership of the head of state in particular; a corollary of this “rally ‘round the flag” effect might be the expectation that the

³⁰ Ibid, 223-4.

³¹ See, for example, Ripley & Lindsay, 19.

president rise above domestic constraints.³² Respondents may have reacted skeptically to the suggestion that the president be excused for weakness because of Congressional opposition, given the role the president is expected to play vis-à-vis other domestic institutions in such cases.

This particular explanation for the way the president's unique role during military crises influences blame assessment finds some support in theories of blame in other contexts. One cross-cultural study of blame assessment in particular notes that beyond foresight and causal efficacy, blame is a judgment which is strongly influenced by socially constructed and shared ideas of roles. After a negative outcome occurs, blame is based in part on the set of actors who not only knew and could affect the outcome but also were in a position of socially perceived authority to do so.³³ For example, suppose four people watch a child drown, one of them being a lifeguard; each of the four had foresight and causal efficacy to act to at least try to save the child. Blame for not saving the child would, for many observers, be much higher for the person with lifeguard trunks on both because of their socially designated role. Thus, if a crisis is thought to demand the president play a role which transcends domestic politics and acts decisively in the national interest, respondents may dismiss accounts citing Congressional constraints but still acknowledge constraints imposed by outside actors.³⁴

The inability to avoid punishment via seasonal weather conditions requires explanation as well. There is no doubt that seasonal weather conditions are independent of the causal control of the president; in this sense, we should expect diminished blame assessment for the president. Yet

³² On the rally effect, see Mueller 1973.

³³ Sanders et al. 1996.

³⁴ This role expectation would seemingly not apply to foreign actors. It seems more likely that the president has the expected role of acting above all domestic rivals rather than the expectation of acting with god-like omnipotence.

there were no findings of a significant change in blame assessment or approval/disapproval. Perhaps respondents did not believe seasonal weather presents a sufficient constraint on using military force. Given the vague nature of the threat itself, such a reaction is completely reasonable: using force to fulfill the threat via cruise missile strike or small special operations mission would not be affected by seasonal weather in the same way as a full-scale expeditionary invasion in the Iraqi desert. Perhaps weather is an acceptable excuse for dinner plans but not political-military crises.

Thus, while the reluctance of an ally may have been perceived as a realistic obstacle that constrained the president's ability to fulfill an earlier promise, citing Congressional opposition and the weather appear to have failed to divert blame for reasons of role and causal efficacy. While additional research would be necessary to further test the explanations offered here, the variation in treatment effects does seem to follow logics consistent with theories of blame.

Implications

The results of the survey experiment show that while blame assessment is an important component of the appraisal of political promises, controlling the blame assessment process is no easy matter. While this study represents a first attempt to investigate the overall question of blame in accountability scenarios like that in audience cost models, it does suggest one powerful opportunity to minimize the risks usually associated with "going public." Specifically, embedding promises in multilateral processes appears to offer political leaders surprisingly significant room for maneuver. In the event that a military threat is not fulfilled, it is far less damaging if the original commitment was made such that promise fulfillment can be portrayed as

requiring, and indeed hindered by, the joint action of multiple states. Such a condition permits leaders on all sides to disperse or even evade the negative costs from breaking promises by blaming the actions of other states, even allies.

This finding takes on additional significance in light of the frequency of multilateral uses of force in the post-Cold War international system. In the Persian Gulf in 1991, Somalia in 1993, Bosnia and Kosovo in the mid-1990s, and Afghanistan and Iraq in the 2000s, the U.S. has embedded most uses of force in formal institutions (United Nations; NATO) or informal multilateral coalitions. This preference for a multilateral approach to using force has had diplomatic, political, and military appeal. Recent IR scholarship, for one, describes the benefits from multilateral rather than unilateral threats/uses of force in the form of sending more credible information to targets and foreign audiences, endowing military force with additional legitimacy, and spreading the burden of post-conflict operations.³⁵ Theories of alliances also suggest the simple aggregation of capabilities in a multilateral use of force often could provide additional deterrent credibility, helping states deter where self-reliance would be insufficient.³⁶ Saddam Hussein in 1990-1991 facing down the coercive will of the international community, for example, seemed to be staring at a far more formidable opponent than the U.S. or any other power could present on its own.

³⁵ These have focused on the role of international organizations in particular: Thompson 2006; Kreps 2010.

³⁶ The dividing line between alliance-based coordinated military-strategic decisions and multilateral uses of force fairly unclear; thus insights from alliance theory are useful to generate hypotheses about the costs and benefits of coordinated joint action. There are many who note that alliances offer aggregated capabilities and additional deterrence; for example, see Waltz 1979 and Snyder 1997.

Still, Hussein did not withdraw in the face of such a threat.³⁷ When combined with the case of British blame shifting to its American ally during the Iran oil nationalization crisis, these anecdotes suggests the empirical and theoretical utility in evaluating potential downsides to multilateral uses of force.³⁸ The blame dynamic isolated here offers one under-explored reason that multilateralism may diminish rather than bolster the credibility of threats to use force. In particular, the survey experiment results suggest leaders who issue joint public threats requiring coordinated military action simultaneously gain and lose flexibility: on one level, they lose flexibility by tying their policy's fate to the whims of allies and their constituents; on another level, they gain flexibility by multiplying the set of feasible blame targets should the situation go awry. In contrast, public threats to use force made unilaterally – as in the original Fearon context and that of some future Cuban Missile Crisis – create a potent threat of audience costs by depriving leaders of any feasible target for blame dispersion should backing down be necessary.³⁹ Those same commitments made as part of a more diffuse collective give each individual leader the opportunity to blame others or potentially blame “everyone and therefore no one.”

Beyond the special case of military crises, the findings from this study suggest an important cautionary note for the many uses of audience cost theory beyond coercive diplomacy. The deceptive simplicity of blame in the original Fearon context is misleading: in more cases than

³⁷ It is of course dangerous academic business to attempt to ascribe motivations to this particular case; the decisions of Hussein vis-à-vis international coercion since 1990 are notoriously difficult to tease apart. It merely raises the question of why multilateral threats/uses of force are not more effective.

³⁸ Other authors have noted downsides like a lack of timeliness and, from the alliance literature, the risk of being entangled in the security interests of partners. See Snyder 1997.

³⁹ I have assumed backing down must itself be observable and public. This is not always the case. The Cuban Missile Crisis in particular shows that even though Kennedy's public performance simplified any blame game, his use of secret rather than public concessions permitted him to avoid audience costs even in this extreme case. See Brown and Marcum forthcoming.

not, less powerful states are making promises over longer periods of time which require the active cooperation of other sovereign actors (above, parallel, and below the leader). Outside the military force domain, promises to comply with treaties or provide peacekeeping are notoriously interdependent obligations. When a president backs out of a trade agreement or a prime minister cancels a contribution to peacekeeping, the assessment of blame by various audiences may focus on previous leaders, rival domestic political institutions, other cooperative partners, or others. In general, applications of audience cost theory to empirical domains with significant “fulfillment interdependence” require far more care in attending to the way in which joint action influences the credibility thought to be created by publicly committing to a course of action.

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Table 1. Summary of treatment groups

Condition names		Description of condition
Baseline		
	Stay out	President does not issue threat
	Backdown (original)	President issues threat, backs down
Weather		President issue threat, backs down, accounts with weather
Congress		
	Mentioned	President issues threat, backs down, Congress mentioned
	With account	President issues threat, backs down, accounts with Congressional opposition
Allies		
	Mentioned	President issues threat, backs down, ally consultation mentioned
	With account	President issues threat, backs down, accounts with allied opposition

Table 2. Levels of approval/disapproval for presidential performance by condition. Replication of audience cost finding in Tomz (2007)

	“Stay out” - “Backdown (original)” = Audience cost		
Approve	65%	28%	35%***
Disapprove	34%	73%	-39%***
N=	100	102	

Note: audience costs are the size of the increase (decrease) in disapproval (approval) observed in groups given the “Backdown (original)” treatment rather than the “Stay out” treatment. Refusal responses excluded. May not add to 100% due to refusal exclusion and/or rounding error.

*** Significant difference at $p < .01$ using Pearson chi-square test

** Significant difference at $p < 0.05$ using Pearson chi-square test

* Significant difference at $p < 0.10$ using Pearson chi-square test

Figure 1. Box plot of average blame assessment across six “backdown” conditions

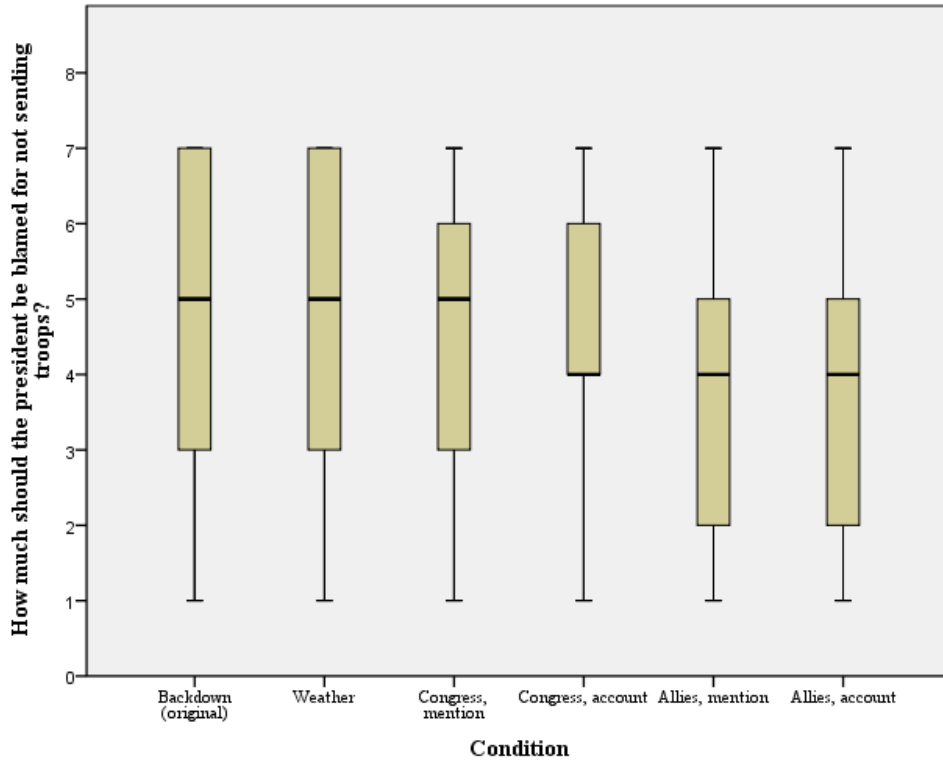


Table 3. Average blame assessment for president by condition

	Backdown (original)	Weather	Congress, mentioned	Congress, with account	Allies, mentioned	Allies, with account
Blame assessment	4.67	4.64	4.48	4.55	3.93	3.48
<i>p</i> -value	n/a	0.893	0.458	0.642	0.004	0.000
N =	101	102	126	121	120	120

Note: the *p*-values are for pairwise comparisons of the mean blame rating between each condition and the baseline (Backdown, original) using Fisher’s least significant difference (LSD) test. An initial one-way analysis of variance was also conducted to test the hypothesis that the family of means (all conditions) is equal (see text).

Figure 2. Approval / disapproval responses by condition

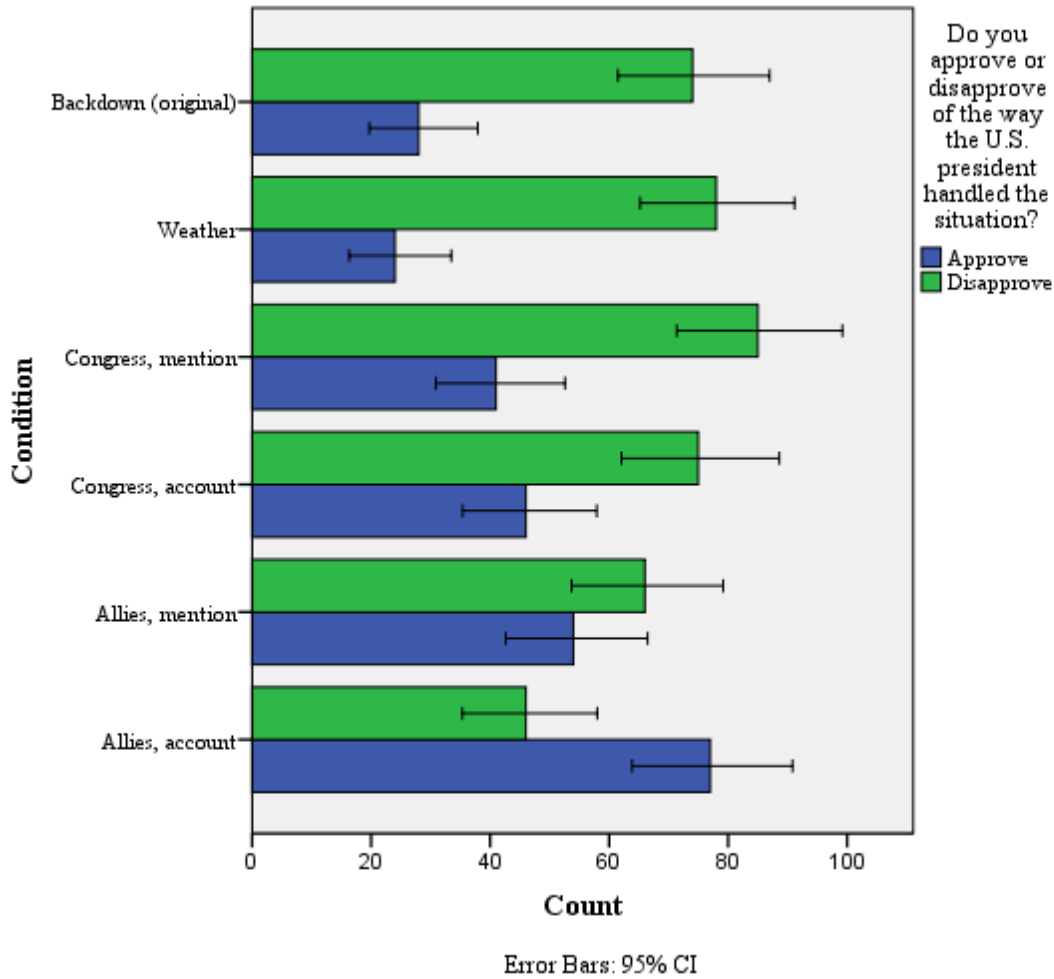


Table 4. Frequency distribution of approval/disapproval by condition

	Backdown (original)	Weather	Congress, mentioned	Congress, with account	Allies, mentioned	Allies, with account	Total
Approve	28	24	41	46*	54***	77***	270
Disapprove	74	78	85	75*	66***	46***	424
N =	102	102	126	121	120	123	694

Note: statistical significance tests evaluate whether a difference in the proportion of approve/disapprove in a given condition (to the right of double bar) is greater than what random chance would predict when compared to the proportion of approve/disapprove in the original backdown condition (left of double bar).

*** Significant difference at $p < .01$ using Pearson chi-square test

** Significant difference at $p < 0.05$ using Pearson chi-square test

* Significant difference at $p < 0.10$ using Pearson chi-square test

Table 5. Levels of approval/disapproval for presidential performance by condition. Original backdown vs. allies conditions

	“Stay out” - “Backdown (original)” = Audience cost		
Approve	65%	28%	35%***
Disapprove	34%	73%	-39%***
N=	100	102	
	“Stay out” - “Allies, mentioned” = Audience cost		
Approve	65%	44%	20%***
Disapprove	34%	54%	-20%***
N=	100	122	
	“Stay out” - “Allies, with account” = Audience cost		
Approve	65%	63%	2%
Disapprove	34%	37%	-3%
N=	100	102	

Note: audience costs are the size of the increase (decrease) in disapproval (approval) when given the treatment groups in the middle column rather than the “Stay out” treatment. Refusal responses excluded. May not add to 100% due to refusal exclusion and/or rounding. Statistical significance measurement refers to whether the difference in approve/disapprove proportions between the middle column conditions and “Stay out” are greater than that which chance would predict.

*** Significant difference at $p < .01$ using Pearson chi-square test

** Significant difference at $p < .05$ using Pearson chi-square test

* Significant difference at $p < .10$ using Pearson chi-square test

Table 6. Average blame assessment for president by condition (Congress & presidential account)

	Blame assessment	<i>p</i> -value
Congress, mentioned	4.48	n/a
Congress, with account	4.55	0.775

Average blame assessment for president by condition (allies & presidential account)

	Blame assessment	<i>p</i> -value
Allies, mentioned	3.93	n/a
Allies, with account	3.48	0.068

Note: calculations based on the same one-way analysis of variance in Table 3, the *p*-values here are for pairwise comparisons of the mean blame rating between the two conditions, with and without a presidential account, using Fisher’s least significant difference (LSD) test.

Appendix A: Selected text examples

All respondents saw the following vignette introduction:

“The following questions are about U.S. relations with other countries around the world. You will first read about a situation our country has faced many times in the past and will probably face again in the future. Different leaders have handled the situation in different ways. We will describe one approach U.S. leaders have taken and ask about your reaction to it.”

All respondents were asked the following questions, after hearing a fictional vignette, regarding their reaction to the president’s handling of the scenario (order of questions reversed for half the sample):

“Do you approve or disapprove of the way the U.S. president handled the situation?

1. Approve
2. Disapprove”

“In the scenario you read, the president warned the aggressive government not to invade but, in the end, did not send troops. How much should the president be blamed for this, in your opinion?

Answer using a scale from 1-7, with “1” meaning the president deserves none of the blame, “4” meaning a medium amount of blame, and “7” meaning all of the blame.”⁴⁰

Respondents assigned to the “Stay out” treatment group received the following vignette text:

“The Situation

Newspapers reported that a foreign government had gathered troops near its border, threatening to take over a neighboring country. The U.S. president said that the U.S. would stay out of any conflict in the region. One week later, the foreign government invaded the country. The U.S. president did not send troops and the attacking government successfully took over its neighbor.

Summary

- A potential crisis arose overseas
- The president declared the U.S. would stay out
- The foreign government invaded and defeated its neighbor
- The president did not send troops”

Respondents assigned to the “Backdown (original)” treatment group received the following vignette text:

“The Situation

Newspapers reported that a foreign government had gathered troops near its border, threatening to take over a neighboring country. The U.S. president warned that the U.S. would not tolerate an

⁴⁰ Respondents in the “Stay out” condition were not asked the blame question because the leader did not engage in any form of backing down.

invasion of the neighbor. One week later, the foreign government invaded the country. The U.S. president did not send troops and the attacking government successfully took over its neighbor.

Summary

- A potential crisis arose overseas
- The president warned against invasion
- The foreign government invaded and defeated its neighbor
- The president did not send troops”

Respondents assigned to the “Congress \ With account” treatment group received the following vignette text:

“The Situation

Newspapers reported that a foreign government had gathered troops near its border, threatening to take over a neighboring country. The U.S. president warned that the U.S. would not tolerate any invasion of the neighbor. One week later, the foreign government invaded the country. The U.S. president and Congress did not send troops and the attacking government successfully took over its neighbor. The president explained that the failure to act was because of a lack of support in Congress for sending troops abroad.

Summary

- A potential crisis arose overseas
- The president warned against invasion
- The foreign government invaded and defeated its neighbor
- The president and Congress did not send troops
- The president explained that opposition in Congress was an important reason”

Respondents assigned to the “Allies \ Mention” treatment group received the following vignette text:

“The Situation

Newspapers reported that a foreign government had gathered troops near its border, threatening to take over a neighboring country. The U.S. president warned that the international community would not tolerate any invasion of the neighbor. American diplomats then met with allies in the region to talk about whether the U.S. could use military bases on their land if force had to be used. One week later, the foreign government invaded. The U.S. president did not send troops and the attacking government successfully took over its neighbor.

Summary

- A potential crisis arose overseas
- The president warned against invasion
- American diplomats met with allies in the region about use of military bases
- The foreign government invaded and defeated its neighbor
- The president did not send troops”

Respondents assigned to the “Allies \ With account” treatment group received the following vignette text:

“The Situation

Newspapers reported that a foreign government had gathered troops near its border, threatening to take over a neighboring country. The U.S. president warned that the international community would not tolerate any invasion of the neighbor. American diplomats then met with allies in the region to talk about whether the U.S. could use military bases on their land if force had to be used. One week later, the foreign government invaded. The U.S. president did not send troops and the attacking government successfully took over its neighbor. The president explained that the failure to act was because allies in the region did not support use of their territory for American military operations.

Summary

- A potential crisis arose overseas
- The president warned against invasion
- The foreign government invaded and defeated its neighbor
- The president did not send troops
- The president explained that lack of permission to use military bases on allied soil was an important reason”