

# Marking Success, Criticizing Failure, and Rooting for ‘Our’ Side: The Tone of American War News from Verdun to Baghdad

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## Abstract

This paper compares the evaluative tone of *New York Times* war reporting from World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War to shed light on the relationship between public support for war, casualties, and the negativity of war news. We find that uncritical and patriotic war coverage was the exception rather than the norm even during the two world wars. Enemies are rarely vilified, and the moral virtues of “our side” are rarely praised. Instead, the morality of American involvement increasingly has been called into question over the past century, with levels of moral criticism peaking during the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. We also find that cues about the chances of eventual victory are closely shaped by events on the battlefield rather than the spin emanating from politicians on the home front. This paper also reveals for the first time how casualty rates influence the tone of war news, with counterintuitive results: we find that the evaluative tone of war news tends to be unrelated to American casualty rates, a finding that holds regardless of whether casualties are counted as cumulative deaths or marginal deaths, logged or unlogged. If the tone of war news remains unchanged as casualties rise and fall, then something other than mounting war deaths is likely to be responsible for observed dynamics in public support for the war.

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When asked why Americans are losing confidence in the current Iraq War, politicians and ordinary citizens are quick to blame the news media: too much emphasis on the negative, too little focus on positive developments like new hospitals and re-opened schools. This presumed relationship between public support for war and the tone of war news is believed to hold not just for Iraq, but for major wars in general. Many believe that the United States lost the Vietnam War on television, where uncensored images of American casualties, atrocities against civilians, and widespread domestic protest were thought to have turned the American public against the war (e.g., Barkin 2003; Zelizer 2004). Likewise, widespread popular support for the First and Second World Wars is often presumed to have been maintained by strict censorship policies that filtered negative news about war efforts (e.g., Knightley 2004; Roeder 1993; Carruthers 2000).

Despite this popular belief about the importance of negativity in war news, academic research on public support for war has rarely examined the content of news coverage, even though this literature presumes that information flows about wars are primary determinants of public support for wars. Over the past 40 years, a growing consensus among academic studies suggests that public support for war can be understood as a rational calculus derived from perceptions of a war's benefits, costs, chances of eventual victory, and by the degree of elite consensus about the war's merits. Since these perceptions are shaped largely through news coverage, the evaluative tone of war news probably affects all four. Positive news can highlight a war's benefits, negative news can magnify its costs, and cues about the chances of eventual success can influence the entire cost-benefit calculus. The balance of elite opinion becomes known through media coverage, and coverage of dissenting officials may have a powerful effect on public support for war, regardless of how unrepresentative those views may be of the actual climate of elite opinion. In short, if the prevailing cost-benefit view of war support is correct, then the evaluative tone of news should be a powerful factor shaping levels of public support for war.

Yet the evaluative tone of news has never before been studied across multiple wars over long spans of time. We know almost nothing about how the tone of war reporting has changed across or within wars spanning the last 100 years, or how news tone might be related to changes in popular support for American wars. The view that popular wars like World War I and World War II enjoyed positive news coverage while unpopular wars like Vietnam and Iraq were weighted down by negative reporting persists despite evidence to the contrary<sup>1</sup> and in the absence of any content analysis data for comparing the tone of war news across these major conflicts. No comparative analysis of this sort has ever been undertaken. Moreover, to our knowledge no quantitative content analysis of news coverage given to World War I, World War II, or the Korean War has ever been published.<sup>2</sup> This means that what little we know with certainty about war news comes almost entirely from recent conflicts, and mostly from smaller-scale conflicts that proved in time to be unpopular.

This paper seeks to fill this gap in our understanding by comparing the tone of *New York Times* war reporting from World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War. Our methodological approach sheds new light on macro-level changes in news coverage of wars during the past 100 years as well as micro-level changes in the tone of war news over the course of each conflict. Within each war, we trace the use of inclusive, first-person plural language to describe the actions of American military forces and those of allied nations. We also track evaluations about the morality of American involvement in the war, and cues about the chances of eventual victory.

This approach yields several important findings relevant to ongoing theoretical debates over what moves public support for war. Uncritical and patriotic war coverage was the exception rather

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<sup>1</sup> For example, newspaper and television coverage of the Vietnam War tended to support American involvement and to downplay reports of casualties or atrocities committed by U.S. forces (Bailey 1976; Hallin 1986; Patterson 1984), while the Roosevelt administration actively pushed news outlets to publish graphic coverage of American dead and wounded in the later stages of World War II (Casey 2001; Moeller 1989; Roeder 1993).

<sup>2</sup> One study content-analyzed editorials from four newspapers about the president's State of the Union addresses between 1908 and 1950 (Legro 2000). This study's focus on media cues about the wisdom of international involvement is relevant to both World War I and World War II, but the study analyzed no news reporting about these wars.

than the norm even during the two world wars. Enemies are rarely vilified, and the moral virtues of “our side” are rarely praised. Instead, the morality of American involvement increasingly has been called into question over the past century, with levels of moral criticism peaking during the wars in Vietnam and Iraq. We also find that cues about the chances of eventual victory are closely tied to events on the battlefield rather than the spin emanating from politicians on the home front.

This paper also reveals for the first time how casualty rates influence the tone of war news. Many scholars use observable data about war casualties as a sort of proxy for unobserved negativity in war coverage. Rising numbers of casualties are thought to predict declining levels of war support because casualties logically should provide negative information about the war: by increasing a war’s costs, casualties should diminish the value of a war’s likely benefits. But no previous study has tested this assumption by estimating the relationship between casualty rates and the tone of war news. Our analysis does, with counterintuitive results: we find that the evaluative tone of war news tends to be unrelated to American casualty rates. If the tone of war news remains unchanged as casualties rise and fall, then the observed dynamics in public support for war is likely to be influenced by something other than mounting war deaths.

### **What Drives Public Support for War?**

Although the dynamics of public support for war were occasionally studied in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s (e.g., Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield 1949; Cantril 1944, 1948; Campbell et al. 1965; Verba and Brody 1970; Verba et al. 1967), sustained inquiry on these questions would arise only after the Vietnam War with the publication of John Mueller’s influential (1973) *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (see also Mueller 1970; 1971). Mueller argued that public support for the Korean and Vietnam wars was largely a function of cumulative casualty rates: as casualties went up, support went down. Although a broader range of factors is now understood to shape public support for war, and while current scholarship suggests that marginal rather than cumulative casualties are more important in shaping public support for war (Gartner and Segura 1998; Gartner, Segura, and

Wilkening 1997; Gartner 2008; although see Mueller 2005; Eichenberg, Stoll, and Lebo 2006), scholarship following Mueller's book continues to see casualties as one of several important influences on war support.

Whereas the early focus on casualties tried to account for declines in support as a war progressed, a second wave of scholarship in the 1990s tried to explain variation in the initial support levels for military crises. This work revealed that the American public was sensitive to the potential benefits of war, and that Americans seemed "pretty prudent" by offering greater support for military action when the stakes were higher and the goals more tractable (Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton 1998). A wide range of studies has confirmed public sensitivity to the potential benefits of wars, principally as they relate to American strategic interests, and often when framed as the risks of inaction (e.g., Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; Oneal, Lian, and Joyner 1996; Feaver and Gelpi 2004; Klarevas 2002; Larson 1996; Larson and Savych 2005; Mueller 2005; Gelpi and Mueller 2006; Burk 1999; Russett and Nincic 1976). When combined with the earlier emphasis on casualty sensitivity, this new wave of research gave rise to what many describe as a "rational calculus" or "cost-benefit" view of war support (e.g., Berinsky 2007; Eichenberg 2005). War costs are typically defined as the number of casualties among friendly forces, undoubtedly the most visible costs of war for ordinary citizens (Lorell and Kelley 1985). In this sense, notes Christopher Gelpi (Gelpi and Mueller 2006: 139), the mass public's "casualty sensitivity may be thought of as price sensitivity to the human cost of war."

The most recent work to emerge from this cost-benefit paradigm suggests that the perceived likelihood of winning a war may have a greater influence on public support than any aversion to casualties (e.g., Feaver and Gelpi 2004; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005; Johnson and Tierney 2006; Kull and Ramsay 2001). No benefits will accrue to the loser, no matter how lofty the war's goals. Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler (2005: 16) argue that "the critical belief . . . is the expectation of eventual future success, not necessarily assessments of how the war is going right now or most recently".

Current scholarship strongly suggests that policy objectives and the perceived likelihood of eventual victory are the main engines driving aggregate support for war (e.g., Eichenberg 2005; Larson 1996; Larson and Savych 2005), although disagreement remains on whether success is the most important factor (Feaver and Gelpi 2004; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005: 16; Gelpi and Mueller 2006; Kull and Ramsay 2001; Johnson and Tierney 2006) or whether perceptions of success are themselves influenced by casualty rates, support levels, and key events (Voetin and Brewer 2006; Berinsky 2007; Berinsky and Druckman 2007).

This cost-benefit view of public support for war is consistent with much of what we know about support dynamics. Unless the goals of a mission change, the benefits of a war can be considered a static element in the support calculus. Of course, new justifications for war might be introduced during a conflict, so it is possible that the perceived benefits of a war could change as different rationales are presented to justify it. But combat casualties and the perceived chances of victory are the main elements of the calculus that should change over time, and it follows that within this paradigm, the dynamics in public support for war should be driven largely by these components of the calculus.

Besides information about costs, benefits, and the likely outcome of wars, the other prominent factor known to influence the dynamics of public support for war is the degree of domestic elite consensus supporting a military action. Public support for a conflict is usually high when elected officials unite behind a war effort, but public support falls when government leaders divide over the war's merits (Brody 1991, 1994; Zaller 1991, 1992, 1993; Berinsky 2007, In preparation). Some scholars see the role of elite consensus as a moderating factor within the rational calculus paradigm (Larson 1996; Larson and Savych 2005). But the provision of elite cues can also be seen as an alternative explanation to the cost-benefit view (Berinsky 2007, In preparation), particularly since ordinary citizens consistently misperceive casualty levels (Cobb 2007; Voetin and Brewer 2006; Berinsky In preparation) and may possess only a vague sense of the war's aims. From this

perspective, the dynamics of public support for war are largely a collective response to elite cues about a war rather than personal assessments of the costs, benefits, or likely success of a conflict.

The striking thing about these standard explanations is how they all presume that information about the war is carried to the mass public through news media. Yet news coverage of war—perhaps the central moderator of all the key factors thought to influence war support—is itself rarely studied in a systematic way. Instead, most empirical research on support for war uses an input-output approach that correlates objective measures like casualty rates with survey results on war support. News transmission is assumed rather than observed. Not only has the evaluative tone of war reporting rarely been studied, it has never been compared across major wars in ways that could clarify whether the tone of war news is positively correlated with the standard variables thought to predict war support. If it is not, then conclusions about the dynamics of war support arising from the last 40 years of academic research on this topic would have to be reconsidered.

### **The Evaluative Tone of War News**

News reports convey information about the costs and benefits of war, but news media also play wartime roles of score-keeper, chief interpreter of the war's purpose, and moral conscience of the nation. In this sense, news reporting creates independent evidence about the merits and likely outcomes of wars in the process of reporting military conflicts. Many have questioned whether war news is an accurate reflection of what is actually happening on the field of battle (e.g., Voetin and Brewer 2006: 827). This concern is appropriately leveled, since aside from news reports of casualties incurred and battles fought, there are no other obvious metrics against which ordinary citizens might gauge the potential for victory (Gartner and Myers 1995; Aday 2007). Recent work on framing effects in war news demonstrates that support for military interventions can be influenced by the “story” told about casualties and the reasons for going to war, even when the facts are unchanged (Boettcher and Cobb 2006; Berinsky and Kinder 2006). How the news covers war therefore becomes a critical variable in its own right.

Popular interest in this topic has led to a vast qualitative literature making claims about the content of war news, but these claims tend to be based on secondary analysis of governmental spin strategies or the post-war memoirs of propagandists and combat journalists rather than on any systematic study of news content (e.g., Knightley 2004; Mott 1962; Moeller 1989; Dower 1986; Carruthers 2000).<sup>3</sup> Political scientists and communication researchers rarely engage in any direct study of news coverage about war, probably because of the difficulties involved in doing systematic content analysis research over long spans of time. Instead, scholarly analysis tends to infer news effects from patterns in cross-sectional or longitudinal measures of surveyed war support (e.g., Berinsky In preparation; Zaller 1992, 1993). As a result, surprisingly few quantitative studies have been done on the content of war news.

Until recently most of the content analysis of news about major military conflicts was limited to the Vietnam War (Bailey 1976; Hallin 1984, 1986; Patterson 1984; Zaller 1992; MacKuen and Coombs 1981; Hofstetter 1976) and the 1990-1 Persian Gulf Crisis (e.g., Althaus 2003; Entman and Page 1994; Iyengar and Simon 1994). Although a new wave of studies is emerging on the Iraq war (e.g., Aday, Livingston, and Hebert 2005; Haigh et al. 2006; Pfau et al. 2004; Robinson and Goddard 2006), significant gaps remain in our knowledge of war news. We are aware of only one content analysis project that has applied the same coding scheme to assess news coverage across the full span of more than one major war (Baum and Groeling 2007, 2005; Baum 2003),<sup>4</sup> although two additional studies have systematically analyzed news coverage sampled from selected national security crises

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<sup>3</sup> A smaller number of qualitative studies relies on direct analysis of primary texts in the form of photographs, film, or print news coverage (e.g., Braestrup 1983; Landers 2004; Roeder 1993; Sorlin 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, a few additional studies are notable standouts. A recent paper applied the same coding scheme to analyze the tone of a year's worth of news about wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Aday 2007). One study analyzed the tone of war news from the first week of involvement in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan, and Iraq wars (Pfau et al. 2004). However, the lack of comparability across the first weeks of these three wars limited the contribution that this analysis could make in assessing differences in news tone. Another study analyzed sourcing patterns and the topical agenda of newspaper coverage of the Vietnam and the Persian Gulf wars, but drew no conclusions about news tone or other aspects of war coverage (Barber and Weir 2002). A fourth compared the content of newspaper images from the Persian Gulf and Iraq wars (King and Lester 2005).

that took place over several decades (Mermin 1999; Zaller and Chiu 2000). Only one of those studies considered fragments of news coverage from before the late 1970s (Zaller and Chiu 2000), which means that most of what we know about war news comes from analysis of smaller-scale conflicts in the post-Vietnam era. Despite a growing interest in studying news coverage of wars, to our knowledge no one has ever done a systematic content analysis of war news from World War I, World War II, or the Korean War.<sup>5</sup>

Studies of news content from Vietnam to the present nonetheless suggest four expectations about the evaluative tone of war news. First, news media rarely offer independent criticism of the policy objectives for military conflicts (Althaus 2003; Entman 2003; Hallin 1986; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Mermin 1996, 1999; Robinson and Goddard 2006; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007; Coe et al. 2004; Domke et al. 2006). When war objectives are criticized, the source of opposition is usually public officials in high office (Hallin 1986; Entman 2003; Bennett 1990, 1996; Zaller and Chiu 1996; Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston 2007), since coverage of war protests tends to undermine rather than enhance the credibility of protestors (e.g., Gitlin 1980; Hallin 1986).<sup>6</sup> Although journalists may frame news of a military intervention in ways that subtly question its aims (Althaus 2003; Hallin 1994), American reporters are unlikely to criticize outright the goals and justifications for military action independently of legitimate voices in government circles.

Second, although journalists rarely critique the reasons for going to war, they often question whether military force will be effective for achieving policy goals. Framing war developments in the context of how they might affect the chances of victory not only heightens the story's drama, but also makes for an easy story to report (e.g., Althaus 2003; Entman and Page 1994; Mermin 1999; Entman

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<sup>5</sup> The closest approximation is a rudimentary analysis of the topical agenda of American newsreel coverage during World War II (Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952), but these data were not collected using the conventional methods of modern content analysis.

<sup>6</sup> This negative coverage of war protests might help explain why opinion surveys during the Vietnam War showed that protests were seen as unappealing and unpersuasive even among those opposed to American involvement in Southeast Asia (Schreiber 1976; Schuman 1972).

2003). Given the important role that expectations of victory now occupy in the literature on public support for war, this tendency could have important consequences for public support of a conflict. Although perceptions of eventual success have become a central variable in the support for war literature, to our knowledge only one quantitative analysis has ever analyzed a broad range of media cues about a war's likely outcome. This case study of Vietnam War news (Hallin 1984, 1986) concludes that television coverage changed after the Tet Offensive in 1968, with post-Tet reports describing fewer battles as victories and more battles as inconclusive than was the case before the offensive. How news reporting constructed expectations of victory in wars before or since is unknown.

Third, circumstantial evidence suggests that news coverage of war became more negative over the last 100 years. One reason is changes in the norms, structure, and economic incentives of the news industry over this period. These changes nurtured a style of political coverage that produced longer, more analytical, and more non-local reporting over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Barnhurst n.d., 2005; Barnhurst and Nerone 2001). Many scholars conclude that news of politics also became more negative over the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (e.g., Patterson 1993; Cohen 2004). This increase in negativity was ushered in with changes in journalistic culture following the Vietnam and Watergate eras, as reporters grew more skeptical of government claims and more adversarial in their stance toward official sources (e.g., Schudson and Tifft 2005). Another reason to expect increasing negativity in news of war is changes in the type of wars fought over the last 100 years. America entered the first and second world wars after being attacked by nations engaged in wars of conquest. As a consequence, news coverage of those wars is widely thought to have been patriotic and even enthusiastic in support of American military involvement (e.g., Lasswell 1927; Lippmann 1922; Roeder 1993). In contrast, despite attempts by two presidents to frame Vietnam and Iraq as necessary responses to provocation, American involvement in these wars was less clearly a reaction to external

threats. With the moral purpose of America's involvement open to question, flag-waving coverage should have been the exception rather than the rule in these later conflicts.

Fourth, the tone of war news should be influenced by the censorship systems and strategic communication efforts used by governments in time of war. The degree of governmental control over wartime information has varied greatly across major conflicts of the past century. Strict censorship systems imposed on the American press during World War I, World War II, and most of the Korean War are widely believed to have limited the amount of negative news coverage coming from the field of battle (e.g., Prochnau 2005; Carruthers 2000; Knightley 2004). Many observers also believe that the lack of formal censorship during the Vietnam War allowed negative coverage to dominate news from the front lines, at least in the war's later stages. A similar complaint is often levied against news coverage of the Iraq war, which undergoes no formal censorship or security review process.

### **Tracing the Tone of War News**

To explore the tone of war coverage over time, we analyzed the content of war stories printed in the *New York Times* during World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the War in Iraq. Only a few newspapers are available in electronic form going back as far as World War I, and among those in the ProQuest Historical Newspapers series only the *Times* also has a published index that could be used to determine authoritatively which stories were war-related.<sup>7</sup> Since the population of war stories could not be determined in advance, we randomly sampled days of news coverage within each war and coded all war-related stories published on those days.

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<sup>7</sup> Relying on the *Times* has its disadvantages—for one, we found that its war coverage seemed to be more subdued than comparable reporting in regional publications like the *Chicago Tribune*—but the lack of story indices for the alternative publications required us to focus solely on the *Times*.

### *Sampling Procedure*

Because newspaper content varies systematically by day of the week, we followed standard sampling procedures for daily newspapers (Riffe, Aust, and Lacy 1993; Riffe, Lacy, and Fico 1998: 97-101) and randomly sampled one constructed week of coverage for each year of a war. But in order to track changes in war coverage over the course of a war, we stratified these constructed weeks by elapsed months within each war. Because we were interested in tracking the development of news coverage both within and across wars, our choice to sample roughly every 60<sup>th</sup> day of each war produced larger subsamples for longer wars.<sup>8</sup>

With this final sample in hand, we then identified all war-related stories published on each sampled day. We used the *New York Times Index* to identify war stories within the major topical categories listed for each war and cross-referencing index entries within the categories and their many subheadings to identify all war stories appearing on the relevant days.<sup>9</sup> Once enumerated, we

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<sup>8</sup> The process began by randomly sampling a constructed week of news coverage for every month of each war. We then selected every 15<sup>th</sup> day from this initial sample to reduce the number of days for which news data would be coded. Systematically reducing the initial random sample in this way produced a final sample of 154 days that includes one day of news coverage from every two-month segment of each war. This final sample is balanced by day of the week within years and across wars, and is also evenly spaced in time from the beginning to end of each war with an average of 61 days between sampled days of coverage. Our sample includes 26 days from World War I (which ran from August 1, 1914 to November 11, 1918), 32 days from World War II (September 1, 1939 to September 2, 1945), 18 days from the Korean War (June 25, 1950 to July 25, 1953), 49 days from the Vietnam War (considered to have begun with the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, passed on August 7, 1964, and to have ended on March 29, 1973, the day the last American combat troops left South Vietnam), and 29 days from the Iraq War (March 19, 2003 through September 30, 2006, the date we began collecting data for this project).

<sup>9</sup> Stories about World War I were found under the heading “European War.” During World War II, war stories published in the years between 1939 and 1942 were indexed under “European War,” while war stories published

coded newspaper content using full-text, scanned images of news stories obtained from ProQuest's Historical Database of the *New York Times*. All war-related content was included in the analysis, including editorials and opinion columns, but excluding letters to the editor since the *Times Index* only began listing all letters to the editor in the mid-1980s (Althaus, Edy, and Phalen 2001). This procedure identified a total of 2,671 war stories published in the 154 days of the final sample.<sup>10</sup>

### *Measuring Evaluative Tone*

Evaluative tone in news coverage is found in multiple dimensions of discourse and often consists of subtle cues rather than overt statements. It is, therefore, one of the most difficult concepts to analyze reliably. Instead of trying to capture these multiple facets of a war story in a single summary judgment on each article, we sought to maximize conceptual clarity as well as intercoder reliability by coding three discrete types of evaluative tone likely to influence public support for war: using first-person plural language to describe the actions of American or allied military forces,

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between 1943 and 1945 were indexed under "World War II". Korean War stories were indexed under "Korea (S)" in 1950 and under "Korean War" in later years. Vietnam War stories were consistently indexed under the "Vietnam" for the duration of that conflict. To give an idea of how complex was the unitizing task, the "World War II" category in 1945 included more than 200 pages of index entries and dozens of subcategories. Since index entries are organized chronologically under each subcategory heading, every one of these subcategories had to be hand-searched for stories appearing on each of the sampled days from this year.

<sup>10</sup> These were distributed as follows: 376 stories from World War I, averaging 14.5 war stories per sampled day (min = 2, max = 26); 1,159 stories from World War II, averaging 36.2 stories per day (min = 9, max = 61); 214 stories from the Korean War, averaging 11.9 stories per day (min = 4, max = 22); 509 stories from the Vietnam War, averaging 10.4 stories per day (min = 3, max = 26); and 413 stories from the Iraq War, averaging 14.2 stories per day (min = 3, max = 56).

judging the moral stance of combatants, and anticipating the eventual outcome of the conflict.<sup>11</sup>

Details on the construction of these tone measures are provided in a coding appendix available upon request from the first author. After introducing each of the variables, we discuss intercoder reliability and other safeguards designed to ensure the validity of the coding data.

*Personalizing the Conflict.* International relations scholars have long suggested that public support for war may be a collective response to an external threat. Drawing on the ingroup-outgroup hypothesis popularized by Coser (1956) and tracing back to 1908 work by Simmel (1955), an extensive empirical literature confirms that external threats to an established group tend to promote internal cohesion among the group's members (for reviews, see Hewstone, Rubin, and Willis 2002; Kelman 2006; Levy 1989; Stein 1976). Recent studies have further suggested that exposure to war news should tend to prime these group identities in ways that increase public support for war (Althaus and Coe 2007; Kam and Kinder 2007; Federico, Golec, and Dial 2005; Huddy 2003). We therefore coded whenever news reports used first-person pronouns (e.g., "us", "we", and "our") to describe friendly military forces or their actions.

*Judging Right from Wrong.* A second aspect of evaluative tone tracks news judgments about the moral stance of friendly and enemy forces. Such judgments provide important cues about the appropriateness of American involvement in a war. Since the standard survey questions used to represent public support for war ask whether a war has been "worth fighting," whether the United States "made a mistake" in getting involved, and whether the US "did the right thing" by joining a

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<sup>11</sup> All tone measures were coded from the headlines and lead paragraphs of war stories. Although lead paragraphs and headlines do not mirror every important aspect of full-text coverage (Althaus, Edy, and Phalen 2001), in this case the journalistic habit of writing in the inverted-pyramid style worked to the researchers' advantage. Headlines and lead paragraphs are designed to distil the story's overall frame and most important points, the two main features we were attempting to capture.

conflict (e.g., Mueller 1973; Mueller 1994), news judgments about the moral standing of combatants' goals and actions should be closely related to levels of public support for American involvement. Coders judged whether each news story implied that the actions or moral stance of enemy forces was "truly evil," "wrong or misguided," "neutral," "right or appropriate," or "truly good." The same judgment was made about the actions or moral stance of the US and its allies. We collapsed the outer categories during data analysis to yield three-point evaluations, with "neutral" as the midpoint. Since judgments about the motives of combatants were difficult to distinguish from judgments about the moral consequences of combatants' actions, these variables capture both types of evaluations.

*Anticipating the Winner.* The perceived likelihood of eventual victory is a central variable in the war support literature, but operationalizing this concept from news discourse proved challenging because of its potential relevance to a wide range of cues signaling the progress of a war. Five coding categories were developed to capture different types of information relevant to the likely outcome of a war: the apparent military power of enemy forces, the apparent military power of allied forces, a measure of which side had the military initiative, a measure assessing which side was likely to win the war, and a measure of whether the story contained mostly good news or bad news for the US and its allies. Separate coding variables were collected using these five measures, but a principal components analysis later revealed a single factor solution with strong loads for all five items (Eigenvalue = 2.86). As a consequence, we scaled all five variables to a common metric (after reverse-coding the enemy strength variable) and averaged them into an aggregated estimate of the war's likely outcome (Cronbach's alpha = .81). This combined measure of the war's anticipated result runs from -1 to 1, with negative values representing an anticipated defeat and positive values indicating a likely victory.

Five coders carried out the content analysis after extensive training and reliability testing. Two preliminary reliability tests using more than 100 stories each were conducted as part of the coder training. The content codebook was refined after each preliminary test to clarify discrepancies in the

way coders applied definitions. A third and final reliability test of 161 stories confirmed that coders were applying the protocol with acceptable levels of agreement and chance-corrected intercoder reliability. For every content variable in the analysis, we calculated either the average and minimum levels of pairwise agreement or the average and minimum pairwise correlations across all combinations of our five coders using PRAM reliability testing software (Neuendorf 2002). Average pairwise agreement across coders ranged from 95% to 86%, and minimum pairwise agreement ranged from 93% to 74%. The likelihood of eventual victory measure had an average pairwise correlation of .80 across coders, and a minimum pairwise correlation of .70. Besides measures of “raw” agreement, we also calculated intercoder reliability statistics, which represent the percent agreement above what can be expected by chance (see the appendix for detailing agreement and intercoder reliability measures for each content variable). For nominal and ordinal variables, the measures of minimum pairwise agreement were used to calculate Brennan and Prediger’s kappa (Brennan and Prediger 1981), which subtracts a chance agreement term based on the number of coding categories in the content variable being tested. We also calculated Krippendorff’s alpha (Krippendorff 2004), which corrects for multiple sources of chance agreement within a covariance framework across multiple coders.<sup>12</sup> All content variables used in this analysis achieved acceptable levels of intercoder reliability, achieving at least a .70 level of reliability with either kappa or alpha, as appropriate.

To maximize the validity of the content analysis data, we not only tested for chance-corrected intercoder reliability prior to data collection but also randomized the assignment of coders to stories during data collection. Coders were assigned to every fifth story in sequence within each war to ensure that any remaining coding error would distribute randomly across sampled days and that any

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<sup>12</sup> To calculate Krippendorff’s alpha, we used the “kalphav2\_0.sps” SPSS macro developed by Andrew Hayes at Ohio State University.

single day's coding was done by more than one person. As a result, war coverage in 144 of 154 sampled days was analyzed by all five coders (the remaining 10 days had fewer than five war stories to code). Coders were also assigned to begin their analysis in different wars and to proceed in chronological order so that any idiosyncratic errors would distribute evenly across wars. For instance, Coder 1 was assigned to begin with Iraq and then proceed to World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam; while Coder 2 began with World War I; Coder 3 began with World War II; and so on. This additional validity check ensures that trends within and across wars are not merely artifacts of the coder assignment process.

### Findings

Before discussing each of the tone measures separately, it is important to clarify that they measure distinctive aspects of war news. The use of personalized language to couch the war in terms of “our” side correlates at  $+0.06$  ( $p < .01$ ) with likelihood of eventual victory at the story level, but has no significant correlation with any other tone variable. Moral judgments of enemies and the U.S. or its allies are only modestly correlated within individual stories ( $p = -.09$  ( $p < .01$ )). Cues about the likelihood of victory and moral judgments about the U.S. or its allies are correlated within individual stories at just  $+0.15$  ( $p < .01$ ). No other correlation between measures achieved conventional levels of significance. In sum, across the five wars these four measures of evaluative tone are usually independent of one another within individual stories.

#### *Personalization*

The journalistic use of first-person plural language to describe the actions or intentions of friendly forces has been a common feature of war reporting over the last 100 years. Figure 1 shows the percentage of stories in each war that used first-person language in this way. Use of “our side” language was never common in *New York Times* reporting, but it was more prevalent in World War I than in other wars. Oneway ANOVA reveals that the differences between wars are statistically significant ( $F [4, 2666] = 5.59, p < .001$ ), but post-hoc contrasts clarify that this relationship is driven

by the prevalence of inclusive language during World War I against the more sedate coverage in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. Although both world wars are remembered for their degree of patriotic fervor, this analysis reveals that World War I is the only standout. Among the four conflicts that followed the “Great War”, there are no statistically significant differences in the use of first-person plural descriptors to label friendly forces engaged in battle. Post-hoc contrasts also reveal the surprising finding that there was just as much “our side” language in coverage of Iraq as in World War I. However, as will be made clear below, the tone of “our side” language took a very different form in Iraq.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Personalizing the actions of allied military forces varied not only across wars but also within wars. Two important trends stand out in Figure 2, which shows the average percentage of war stories using “our side” language within each sampled day. To clarify trends in this and later figures like it, lowess smoothing is used to provide a running average of tendencies across the sampled days. First, the journalistic use of personalizing pronouns was unchanged by American entry into either World War I ( $t [374] = -0.56, p = .58$ ) or World War II ( $t [1157] = -1.16, p = .25$ ). Further analysis revealed that “our side” language was used to describe American stances toward those wars even before the U.S. became directly involved, since neutrality was “our” official position before American was drawn into either conflict. Moreover, Figure 2 shows that use of collective pronouns in war news does not surge at the beginning of wars. Although the “rally ‘round the flag” literature (e.g., Baum 2002; Baum and Groeling 2005; Brody 1991; ONeal and Bryan 1995; Parker 1995; Baker and ONeal 2001) often suggests that patriotic rhetoric should tend to be prevalent at the start of wars, the patterns in Figure 2 show no such tendency in the use of inclusive language to define sides in any of the five major wars of the past 100 years.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Second, Figure 2 shows that personalizing language was used differently during the world wars than in later conflicts. During the two world wars, personalizing “our side” tended to happen in small amounts on most of the sampled days: 73% of sampled days in World War I included stories that used “our side” language, as did 69% of sampled days in World War II. But in the three most recent wars, personalizing language tended to be concentrated into specific periods of the war: first-person pronouns were used to describe friendly forces in only 33% of sampled days during the Korean War, 22% of days in the Vietnam sample, and 41% of days in the Iraq sample. In these later wars, a smaller number of days contained a higher concentration of personalizing language. Across the five wars, the day containing the most widespread use of “our side” language—in which 40% of war stories personalized the war—came not from World War I but from the Iraq War, and occurred at the close of the presidential campaign in early November 2004. This tendency suggests that while personalizing the fight used to be a common trope in American journalism, and perhaps was distinctive to journalism in “total wars” (Carruthers 2000), use of such language after World War II seems to be limited to periods of intense public debate about the direction or conduct of wars.

#### *Moral Judgments about the Combatants*

The *New York Times* is nicknamed the “gray lady” of American journalism for its traditional emphasis on separating facts from opinions, and it is unsurprising that the vast majority of stories published by the *Times* about each of the five major wars contained no moral judgments about the combatants. Yet *New York Times* reporters have become more likely to criticize the U.S. and its allies over time. Figure 3 compares the percentage of stories from each war that draw moral judgments about the actions of friendly and enemy combatants. The top half of each graph shows the percentage of stories that draw positive judgments about the combatant, and the bottom half shows the percent of stories that suggest negative judgments about the combatant. Summing these two measures together for each war yields the total percent of stories making any kind of moral judgment about the combatant, with the remainder scored as providing neutral coverage.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Looking first at the top chart in Figure 3, the percentage of positive war stories about America and its allies shows a slight decline across the five wars. Although a oneway ANOVA confirms significant differences in the mean percentage of positive stories across wars ( $F [4, 2666] = 2.85, p < .05$ ), post-hoc contrasts show that only the difference between Iraq and each of the two world wars approaches even marginal levels of significance. But while levels of positive coverage about friendly combatants have changed only a little across the five wars, levels of negative coverage jumped fourfold from Korea to Vietnam and remained at that heightened level during the Iraq War. Whereas moral judgments about friendly combatants were lopsidedly positive during World War I, World War II, and the Korean War, those judgments became overwhelmingly negative during Vietnam and the Iraq War. Not only negative, but loudly so: the total number of stories offering negative moral judgments about friendly combatants jumped from less than 5% of war stories during the world wars and Korea to around 20% during Vietnam and the Iraq War ( $F [4, 2666] = 65.98, p < .001$ ). In terms of negative coverage about America's role in a modern military conflict, Figure 3 shows that Vietnam remains the most criticized war on record, although this level of criticism is statistically indistinguishable from that accompanying U.S. involvement in the Iraq War.

In contrast to growing levels of negativity about America's involvement in war, the bottom chart in Figure 3 reveals that there has been no parallel trend in the prevalence of moral judgments about enemies over the last 100 years. Enemies are almost never praised, but at the same time they are rarely demonized (at least in the *Times*). In contrast to the boasts of wartime propagandists (e.g., Lasswell 1927) and inferences sometimes drawn by historians (e.g., Dower 1986), criticism of enemy leaders or military forces was not a common feature of war news during either World War I or World War II, nor has it been in wars since. Perhaps this is because criticism of America's enemies is a given, and therefore not newsworthy under conventional norms of American journalism (e.g., Gans 1979; Hallin 1986). Although there is no trend in these judgments, oneway ANOVA shows a

significant difference across wars ( $F [4, 2666] = 3.09, p < .05$ ), with post-hoc contrasts confirming significantly less criticism of the enemy during Vietnam than during either World War I or the Korean War.

Not only did criticism of the U.S. and its allies increase while criticism of enemy combatants followed no clear trend, but moral judgments about friendly combatants have become increasingly prevalent in stories that use first-person plurals to characterize American involvement. Stories that use first person language are consistently more likely to feature some kind of moral judgment, but just because a story uses “our side” language doesn’t mean the story is a positive one. The top half of Figure 4 shows the percentage of “our side” stories within each war that make positive judgments about the U.S. or its allies, and the bottom half shows the percent of “our side” stories that make negative judgments. Recalling that the overall prevalence of “our side” language was essentially the same in every war after World War I, Figure 4 shows that stories using personalizing language to describe U.S. involvement in wars have changed from boosting to criticizing that involvement. And whereas the levels of negative judgments about the United States and its allies approached 20% of war stories during Vietnam and Iraq (see Figure 3), within the subset of stories that personalize U.S. involvement, this level of criticism jumps to 31% in Vietnam and 36% in Iraq. This difference between Iraq and Vietnam is not statistically significant, and we can conclude with confidence only that the moral stance of the U.S. in both conflicts was cast in a much more negative light than in earlier wars.

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

It was expected that war coverage should have grown more critical of U.S. involvement over time. An unexpected finding is that average levels of praise and criticism tend to be fairly stable from the beginning to the end of each war. Although it might seem that moral judgments of the U.S. and its allies should tend to grow less positive over time within each war, this is not usually the case. Figure 5 shows the daily average of moral judgments about friendly combatants within each war. At

the level of individual stories, criticism of friendly combatants is scored  $-1$ , praise of friendly combatants is scored  $+1$ , and neutral or evenly balanced coverage gets a value of  $0$ . Averaging all war stories in a sampled day truncates the daily variance of these scores, so the range of each war's trend is limited to  $-0.5$  and  $+0.5$  in Figure 5. The absolute meaning of any daily value is less important than its distance from and direction relative to perfectly neutral coverage, indicated with a gray line at the midpoint of each chart's Y-axis.

INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

In none of the wars is the average moral stance of friendly combatants significantly correlated with elapsed time in the conflict. Likewise, the entry of America into ongoing world wars had little effect on moral judgments of the U.S. or its allies. War stories appearing after America entered World War I were only marginally more positive toward the Entente Powers ( $t [374] = -1.89, p = .06$ ), and there was no significant difference in moral judgments about the Allies in World War II after the Pearl Harbor attack ( $t [1157] = -1.08, p = .28$ ). This is surprising in light of Berinsky's (2007) finding that elite dissensus over the war disappeared by mid-1942, and suggests that elite consensus may have less bearing on moral evaluations in war news than is commonly thought. Events surely matter, as suggested by a temporary surge in the moral standing of allied powers during the battle of Verdun in early 1916, in the rapid drop in positive coverage following the disastrous military setbacks of the early months of the Korean War, and in the criticism of U.S. efforts around the time of the Tet Offensive in early 1968.<sup>13</sup> But comparing the Vietnam trend before and after the 1968 Tet Offensive reveals that even Tet produced no durable change in moral evaluations of the United States and South Vietnam ( $t [507] = 1.61, p = .11$ ). Although the Tet Offensive precipitated a major erosion of elite consensus about the war in Vietnam, the tone of *Times*

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<sup>13</sup> Curiously, the temporary loss of American moral standing experienced in early 1968 is not merely a consequence of Tet: the low point in that year is registered on January 21<sup>st</sup>, nine days before the offensive began.

coverage appears largely unaffected by this change in elite opinion. Instead, the shift in cues about likely victory in Vietnam appears to have taken place much earlier, in late 1965 and early 1966.<sup>14</sup> In short, Figure 5 reveals that major events within wars seem to have no lasting effect on the course of praise or criticism toward friendly combatants. This evidence suggests that news media judge at the outset whether the U.S. position is right or wrong, and to what degree. They seem to alter that judgment only temporarily as the war progresses.

This tendency holds even more for enemies than for allies, as Figure 6 shows. Most war stories frame enemies in relatively neutral terms, and contrary to the possibility that enemies become more despised as a conflict drags on, no war shows a significant correlation between judgments about the enemy and the passage of time.<sup>15</sup> Enemies can become temporarily demonized, as occurred at the start of the Korean War, the second half of 1952, in early 1916, and soon after the entry of the United States into World War I. But strong criticism of enemies tends to occur occasionally rather than consistently. Moral evaluations of the enemy were unaffected by America's entry into World War I ( $t [374] = 0.34, p = .73$ ) or World War II ( $t [1157] = -0.30, p = .76$ ). Even strategic efforts to demonize the enemy seem to have little impact on *New York Times* coverage. For example, the U.S. government undertook a campaign to systematically demonize the Germans after America entered World War I (Lasswell 1927). Figure 6 shows the apparent results of this campaign, or perhaps merely of spontaneous jingoism following America's declaration of war, but this negative stance toward the Germans lasted for only a few months. From late 1917 until the end of the war, the moral

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<sup>14</sup> For the Vietnam War, the overall correlation between moral evaluations of U.S. involvement and elapsed time is  $-.17$  ( $p = .24, n = 49$ ). Within the 1966-1973 period that correlation is  $-.28$  ( $p = .08, n = 41$ ) while before 1966 the correlation is  $+.52$  ( $p = .18, n = 9$ ).

<sup>15</sup> However, at the level of individual stories elapsed time has a slight positive correlation with judgments of enemy morality for Vietnam ( $r = +.08, p = .09$ ) and Iraq ( $r = +.10, p = .03$ ).

stance of the Germans is slightly below pure neutral, the same as it was in 1916 when America was still officially a neutral power.

INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

A final pattern of consequence can be seen by comparing the trends in Figures 5 and 6. From World War I through the Korean War, enemies were consistently judged more harshly than allies. But starting in Vietnam and continuing through the Iraq War, allies were usually criticized more than enemies. Particularly in Vietnam, few moral judgments were made about enemy forces, but the U.S. and South Vietnamese governments were often harshly criticized for their involvement in the war. The same relationship can be seen in Figure 3, but Figures 5 and 6 clarify that although moral evaluations of enemy and friendly actors are negatively related within individual news stories for every conflict save Vietnam, the trends in those moral evaluations over the course of each war tend to be statistically independent from one another.<sup>16</sup> Only in World War I does the negative correlation between daily average moral judgments of enemies and allies reach conventional levels of significance.

#### *Likelihood of Victory*

Our final measure of evaluative tone is the aggregated variable assessing likelihood of victory. Like the moral judgment variables, this measure of tone ranges from +1 for predictions of certain victory to -1 for predictions of certain defeat, with 0 representing the point of neutrality or uncertainty over possible outcomes. Comparing first across wars, Figure 7 shows the average

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<sup>16</sup> The story-level correlation between moral judgments of enemies and the U.S. or its allies is  $-.20$  ( $p < .01$ ) for World War I,  $-.07$  ( $p < .05$ ) for World War Two,  $-.16$  ( $p < .05$ ) for the Korean War,  $-.03$  ( $p = .52$ ) for the Vietnam War, and  $-.16$  ( $p < .01$ ) for the Iraq War. The daily correlations between these moral judgments is  $-.43$  ( $p < .05$ ) for World War I,  $-.12$  ( $p = .50$ ) for World War Two,  $-.35$  ( $p = .15$ ) for the Korean War,  $+.02$  ( $p = .90$ ) for the Vietnam War, and  $-.31$  ( $p = .11$ ) for the Iraq War.

likelihood of victory score from news about each conflict. Averaging these scores within wars truncates the range of mean values, so this figure ranges from only  $-.10$  to  $+.10$ . Figure 7 reveals that the average *New York Times* story suggested victory was likely in both of the world wars, victory was somewhat likely in the Korean War, and that victory was somewhat unlikely in Vietnam and Iraq. These means are significantly different among wars ( $F [4, 2666] = 24.50, p < .001$ ), with post-hoc contrasts confirming significant differences between each of the two world wars on the one hand and each of the three later wars on the other. There are no significant between-group differences among the three later wars.

INSERT FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE

Judging only from the pattern in Figure 7, it is difficult to tell whether this pattern results from the changing nature of war or the changing nature of journalism. Decisive outcomes (one way or the other) were expected for the two world wars but proved elusive when the Korean War ground to a stalemate in 1951 at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. The hope for decisive outcomes was similarly dashed by the uncertain nature of counter-insurgency campaigns in Vietnam and the later stages of Iraq. On the other hand, we have seen that judgments about the moral stance of “our side” grew lopsidedly negative over the past 100 years, and it seems plausible that war coverage also might have grown more pessimistic during the same period. Clarifying which of these possibilities is the more likely explanation requires disaggregating the data to reveal over-time trends within wars.

Figure 8 shows that cues provided at the start of each conflict about the war’s likely outcome were evenly balanced for World War I and Korea, but slightly pessimistic for World War II and somewhat pessimistic for Vietnam. Only in the case of Iraq did news coverage start out somewhat optimistic about the likelihood of victory. These wars differ not only in the likelihood of victory signaled at the outset of combat, but how those evaluations changed over time. Signals about the chances of eventual victory fluctuated over time in all of the wars, except that the ups and downs were more muted in World War II than the other conflicts. Despite these fluctuations, daily signals

about the chances of victory grew more positive with time during World War I ( $r = +.56, p < .01$ ) and especially during World War II ( $r = +.86, p < .01$ ). In contrast, daily signals about the likelihood of winning were significantly correlated with time in none of the three more recent wars. Signals about the chances of winning remained relatively uncertain in Korea, slightly pessimistic in Vietnam after mid-1967, and generally pessimistic in Iraq after the end of the war's invasion phase in May 2003.

INSERT FIGURE 8 ABOUT HERE

That the most recent war should start out with the most optimistic coverage suggests that the nature of war rather than the nature of journalism accounts for the differences in cues about likely victory across these conflicts. This conclusion is supported by the relationships between news signals about the chances of victory and events taking place on the ground during each of these wars. Although some historians suggest that Germany's superior propaganda operation and its openness to neutral reporters skewed American coverage of the early stages of World War I in a pro-German direction (e.g., Knightley 2004), our analysis reveals a consistent pro-Entente bias in signals about the likely outcome of the war. Increasingly optimistic coverage in mid-1915 occurs around the time that allied forces defeated the German offensive at Ypres, and again in the second half of 1916, during the allied offensive in the Somme. News from the front then grows uncertain in 1917 before slowly gaining in optimism in late 1917 and early 1918 as American forces enter combat on the Western Front. The turn from guarded hope to outright exuberance occurs only in the final month of the war, when Entente forces suddenly and decisively break through German lines to bring the stalemated war to a rapid close.

Changing signals about likely victory in the other wars are similarly tied to events on the field. Although Berinsky's (2007) analysis of Congressional opinion during World War II shows a rapid emergence of elite consensus following the Pearl Harbor attack at the end of 1941, Figure 8 shows that war news during World War II only becomes consistently hopeful after mid-January 1943, more

than a year after America entered the war and only after a triple sign of falling Axis fortunes: the successful allied invasion of North Africa in late 1942, the Russian victory at Stalingrad, which was officially declared on February 2, 1943, and the American declaration of victory at Guadalcanal on February 7, 1943. These events represented the first American offensives in the Pacific and European theaters, as well as the first decisive defeat of Nazi forces. It is interesting to note that the guardedly optimistic cues about the likelihood of victory did not vary by much after early 1943, even after the June 1944 D-Day invasion and the obvious collapse of the Nazi regime in early 1945 following the German defeat in the Battle of the Bulge.

Likewise, news about the Korean War grows somewhat pessimistic during the long retreat of U.N. forces from North Korea in December 1950, then optimistic in early March 1951 after a successful United Nations counteroffensive that brought American forces back up to the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel by mid-July 1951. At this point the stalled offensive brings news coverage into a slightly pessimistic outlook on the war's probable outcome. Additional optimism comes in early July 1952, shortly after the largest U.N. air offensive of the war and around the time of Dwight Eisenhower's nomination to become the Republican candidate for president. This slightly optimistic outlook continues until right before the very end, when the armistice agreement finalizes the war as a draw. In Vietnam and Iraq, cues about the chances of eventual success are relatively stable after the early stages of each war. During the Vietnam War there is a notable change in *Times* coverage in 1967. Up to that point, war coverage of Vietnam had been relatively neutral, at times slightly optimistic. But starting in late September 1967 and continuing through January 21, 1968, cues about the likelihood of victory turn slightly pessimistic. They remain at that level from the onset of the Tet Offensive on January 30 until mid-May 1968, after the major battles associated with Tet had been concluded and cues about likely victory were once again on the borderline between pessimism and optimism. During the Iraq War, an initial sense of optimism in *Times* coverage turned somewhat pessimistic by June 2003 before gradually becoming more neutral through early 2006.

In summary, cues embedded in war news about the likelihood of victory tended to track actual progress in these wars. Only World War II shows evidence of a major turning point in cues about eventual success. In every other case except the closing weeks of World War I, signals about likely outcomes tended to be uncertain and restrained, reflecting the course of current events on the battlefield.

#### *Evaluative Tone and American Casualties*

Because American battle casualties are such a visible cost of war, and since casualty numbers are regularly reported and easily obtained, research on public support for war has relied heavily on casualty data for modeling the dynamics of war support. Support goes down as casualties rise (e.g., Eichenberg 2005; Mueller 1973), presumably because rising casualties produce negative news about the war. This presumed connection between casualty rates and the tone of news coverage never before has been tested.

We calculated the cumulative number of Americans killed in action for every sampled day of news coverage. We also calculated marginal numbers of American deaths incurred in the 30-, 60-, 90-, and 120-day periods leading up to each sampled day of news coverage. Doing so required us to collect data on dynamic casualty levels during the two world wars that, to our knowledge, had never before been available to researchers (details on data sources and procedures are available in the appendix). After studying the relationships between casualties and news tone using a variety of models, regression methods, and lag structures, we concluded that the main conclusions from this analysis were so consistent across alternate specifications that they could be most clearly summarized with a simple table of correlations.

Table 1 shows, for each war, correlations between the four measures of tone from each story and the cumulative number of American battle deaths on the date of each story's publication. In none of the wars is there any significant correlation between casualty rates and the use of personalizing language or moral judgments about friendly combatants. Moral judgments about

enemies are significantly correlated with American deaths only in the Korean War, but this small relationship is likely an artifact of timing: as shown in Figure 6, moral judgments about enemy combatants tended to become less negative as the war progressed. The result in Table 1—that evaluations of the enemy become less negative during the Korean War as American casualties mount—is most likely a coincidence stemming from the high correlations between cumulative casualties and the passage of time. American battle deaths are significantly related to cues about the likelihood of victory in three wars, but these relationships also seem to be artifacts of time. During both of the world wars, news coverage became more optimistic about the chances of eventual success as American casualties went up, but the cause is less likely casualties themselves than the fact that casualties fell heaviest toward the end of both world wars. Casualty rates had no significant relationship with cues about victory for either the Korean or Vietnam wars. Only for the Iraq War do we find the expected relationship, with prospects for victory dimming as casualties rise. Yet Figure 8 shows that the increasing pessimism in news coverage of Iraq was no linear function of casualties but rather an immediate response to the start of the insurgency in the summer of 2003, when American forces had incurred fewer than 300 battle deaths. And even if this modest correlation were somehow a product of casualty rates, casualties would account for less than five percent of variance in cues about eventual success. Table 1 reveals a consistent finding: the tone of war news is essentially unrelated to American casualty levels. Further analysis confirms that this finding holds when these relationships are examined at the level of days rather than individual stories, and regardless of whether casualties are measured as cumulative deaths, logged cumulative deaths, or marginal deaths incurred during the previous four months.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The same general pattern of results is found when using logged cumulative casualties, except that moral judgments of enemies in World War I become marginally significant ( $r = .14, p < .10$ ). The same conclusions also hold when marginal casualty rates are used in place of cumulative casualties. Analysis of 120-day marginal casualty

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The implication is that if casualty rates have a bearing on public support for war, then they would somehow have to shape public opinion without altering the tone of war news. Information about casualty rates might have a direct bearing on cost-benefit calculations without affecting the tone of war news, but such a relationship seems highly unlikely to affect aggregate support rates because most Americans, most of the time, hold inaccurate perceptions about current casualty rates (Berinsky 2007, In preparation; Boettcher and Cobb 2006; Cobb 2007), and because only a small fraction of Americans attend to the latest developments in ongoing wars (Althaus 2002, 2007).

### Conclusions

Research on political phenomena often moves quickly past description to delve into questions on causation and covariation. This may happen because the contours of the phenomena are self-evident: we already know the number of states that engage in militarized conflicts, or the percentage of the popular vote going to one candidate over another. But sometimes the move past description happens even when the relevant phenomenon remains unseen. In the case of research on public support for war, causal analysis has proceeded over the past four decades without a clear sense of how wars are communicated to publics.

If scholars are to understand public support for war, we need first to understand how the media cover war. Lacking any systematic or comprehensive analysis of war reporting across multiple conflicts, previous scholarship often relied on untested assumptions about the nature of war news. One of the goals of this paper was to provide a more comprehensive description of the tone and content of war stories. In contrast to previous studies of war news that had focused on coverage of a single conflict, our analysis also sought to leverage variation in censorship policies, military

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periods reveals the same set of relationships except that the correlation between casualties and moral judgments of friendly combatants becomes negative as well as marginally significant in the Korean War ( $r = -.12, p < .10$ ).

successes, and the nature of combat found in the five major wars fought by the United States over the past century. This comparative perspective offers an unusual opportunity to identify general tendencies in news coverage of wars.

Our findings indicate that the particular circumstances of individual conflicts seem to have far more impact on the evaluative tone of war news than does censorship, levels of elite consensus, or casualty rates. There is a popular notion that war coverage in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was patriotic and hopeful, but critical and harsh during Vietnam and Iraq. Our results do indicate a sharp rise in moral criticism in coverage of American involvement in Iraq and Vietnam. One could argue whether U.S. actions in these conflicts inspired more moral concern, or whether the press simply became more open to questioning military actions. There seems little doubt, though, from these results that the press questions the moral fitness of U.S. military actions more today than it did earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On the other hand, there is little indication that the nature of media coverage has changed when it comes to covering the progress of wars. We find that the tone of war coverage closely mirrors the circumstances of war. The *Times* did not start predicting Allied victories in the first and second world wars until after the Allies actually achieved battlefield successes. The nature of fighting during these conflicts allowed victory and defeat to be measured against the results of great battles, and the ceding or holding of territory. Coverage of Korea grew optimistic following battlefield successes and pessimistic during periods of setback in the fighting. By contrast, the relative absence of measurable progress on the battlefields of Vietnam and Iraq translated into greater uncertainty in news coverage about the eventual outcomes of those wars. In the case of Iraq, early optimism in the invasion phase turned to pessimism with mounting evidence of an organized insurgency.

This last point has implications for the effectiveness of governmental attempts to influence news coverage about wars. There can be little doubt that political and military leaders seek to shape

media coverage, and through it, public opinion. However, our historical analysis suggests that there may be little the government can do to “spin” away bad news about war. Consider the cases of Iraq and World War II. World War II enjoyed high levels of elite and popular support combined with strict news censorship from the outset of the war, whereas popular and elite opinion about Iraq became sharply divided and even “embedded” reporters faced no formal censorship from the military. Yet coverage from both wars reflected reality on the ground despite the differing censorship policies, divergent levels of popular support, and sophisticated efforts by Presidents Roosevelt and Bush to shape news reports about the war. When the U.S. and its allies were winning on the ground, coverage was upbeat; but when enemy forces had the momentum, coverage became less sanguine.

Despite enormous propaganda pushes and efforts to shape war reporting, these patterns suggest that the government was curiously incapable of convincing the media that the U.S. is winning without evidence of success. Winning the public relations war therefore seems to hinge on winning the actual war: actions speak louder than words when it comes to shaping the evaluative tone of war news. If these findings carry over to other policy areas, the purported ability of government leaders to shape media coverage and thereby influence public opinion may need to be re-evaluated. The implication of our research is that spinning events to affect public opinion indirectly through media coverage is a poor strategy at best, and that government propaganda efforts may have to rely on direct persuasion campaigns.

Although the tone of war news seemed to closely follow events on the ground, we found no evidence of a consistent relationship between American casualties and the tone of war news. The decisions made by *Times* journalists to personalize wars in ways that emphasized collective identification with the conflict, to praise or criticize the moral standing or “our” side, and to suggest whether the war is being won or lost appeared to have been made without regard to the number of recent or cumulative American deaths resulting from a war. This finding calls into question much of what previous research has suggested regarding the importance of casualty rates as determinants

of public support for war (e.g., Gartner 2008; Mueller 2005; Eichenberg, Stoll, and Lebo 2006). That the tone of war news was similarly unaffected by patterns of elite dissensus raises important questions about the mechanisms by which diverging elite opinions become translated into diminished levels of public support (e.g., Berinsky 2007; Larson 1996; Zaller 1992). Likewise, explanations offered by previous scholarship on the apparent relationships between war support and perceptions about eventual victory (e.g., Feaver and Gelpi 2004; Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005; Johnson and Tierney 2006) may need to be revised in light of the close relationship found here between cues about the likelihood of victory and actual battlefield successes. Our findings cannot adjudicate these controversies, but only point to the pressing need for scholarship in this area to more directly consider the mechanisms and information flows presumed to be shaping public opinion about war.

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## Appendix

### *Casualty Data*

Data for the Korean War casualties come from the Korean Combat Casualty File, 1950-57, while those for the Vietnam War come from the Southeast Asia Combat Area Casualties File. Casualty data for the Iraq War come from validated Department of Defense data compiled by the Iraq Coalition Casualty Count web site ([www.icasualties.org](http://www.icasualties.org)). Determining casualty rates for the two world wars proved challenging.

To our knowledge, no trend data on World War I casualties have ever been collected, and for World War II only the U.S. Army reported casualty statistics in monthly summaries that could be traced over time (United States Adjutant General's Office 1953). To fill these gaps, we recovered casualty reports published in the *New York Times* during both world wars. For World War II, we found 54 casualty reports that included totals for both the Army and Navy that appeared in the *Times* between December 7, 1941, and August 23, 1945, which contained the last reported casualties through VJ Day on August 15. These reports were spaced an average of 25 days apart, and from them we interpolated daily casualty totals using the “ipolate” routine in Stata 9.0. Although daily measures of cumulative American KIAs interpolated from the official Army statistics correlate at .993 with the combined Army and Navy cumulative KIAs interpolated from the *New York Times* reports, we use the *Times* data for two reasons: early casualties in World War II came disproportionately from the Navy, and Army casualty rates diminished substantially as the European campaign wound down in 1945, while Marines (considered a branch of the Navy) and Naval forces continued to suffer heavy casualties through VJ Day.

For World War I, we found that General Pershing's official reports of American casualties were published almost daily in the *New York Times*. A total of 158 casualty reports were published between October 20, 1917—when the first American casualty of the war was announced—and November 11, 1918. The long delays between when casualties were incurred and when they were

publicly reported meant that by war's end, the American public was aware of only 22,116 of the 53,513 combat deaths among American military forces.<sup>18</sup> About half of the known combat deaths were reported during the last six weeks of the war. We used the same interpolation procedure to produce daily estimates of known combat deaths.

### *Intercoder Reliability*

Although a wide range of standard tests for intercoder reliability has been developed for comparing the ratings of two coders, no standard approach has been widely adopted for use with more than two coders (Krippendorff 2004; Neuendorf 2002; Lombard, Snyder-Duch, and Bracken 2002; Krippendorff 2004). The main difficulty lies in calculating levels of agreement in multicoder situations. A common solution is to average the levels of agreement across every possible pair of coders, and then calculate a kappa statistic from the average agreement. However, if the average agreement across coders obscures a high level of disagreement between any pair of coders, this approach will mistakenly suggest an inappropriately high level of intercoder reliability. We therefore adopt a more conservative approach by reporting the lowest level of agreement among all possible pairings of the five coders. We use this minimum pairwise agreement as our measure of "raw" intercoder agreement, calculated across all combinations of the five coders using PRAM reliability testing software (Neuendorf 2002).

A second area of controversy concerns how to determine the percentage of raw agreement that is due to chance alone. Different intercoder reliability statistics yield different values depending on how each calculates chance agreement, and there exists no agreed-upon set of minimum reliability thresholds for any of these statistics (Neuendorf 2002: 143-4). Given this state of flux in the literature, we follow the recommendations of Lombard et al (2002) and Neuendorf (2002) by

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<sup>18</sup> The last of General Pershing's casualty reports was published in early August 1919, with the final casualty figures published in the *Times* on February 8, 1920.

reporting more than one chance-corrected statistic in addition to average and minimum pairwise agreement for each content variable.

Only three commonly-used measures of intercoder reliability can be calculated for multicoder data, and given the shortcomings of Cohen's kappa in this context (Krippendorff 2004, 2004), we report both of the other two statistics that can be calculated across more than two coders. Brennan and Prediger's (1981) kappa subtracts a chance agreement term based only on the number of coding categories in the content variable being tested. Ranging from +1 to -1, Brennan and Prediger's kappa is a linear function that takes a value of zero when raw agreement is the same as the chance of randomly selecting any one of the coding categories. Its main advantage—a less restrictive definition of chance agreement than most intercoder reliability statistics—is also its main disadvantage, as this statistic is insensitive to other sources of reliability error other than the number of categories in the coding variable. We calculate Brennan and Prediger's kappa from the more conservative minimum pairwise agreement than from the higher but potentially misleading average pairwise agreement.

Krippendorff's alpha (Krippendorff 2004; Hayes and Krippendorff 2007) is a less-widely used statistic that has an especially broad definition of chance agreement. This expansive view of chance agreement makes it one of the strictest—many would say overly strict—reliability measures available, but it is the only multicoder statistic that can be used for interval-level content variables. Its main advantage is its sensitivity to a wide range of potential sources of chance agreement. Its main disadvantage for purposes of our analysis is its assumption that skewed distributions of the content variables are a sign of chance rather than “real” agreement. This is a desirable property when the population values of a variable are known and those probabilities are likely to influence the coding task, as in the case of diagnosing mental disorders. But this strength becomes a severe liability when the population is unknown (as in the case of most content analyses of news reports) and the coding scheme produces variables with highly skewed distributions, as is common for dichotomous variables recording the presence of “rare” types of content. For example, in one of our content

variables (not used here) six coder pairs scored perfect agreement and the other five coder pairs disagreed on a single case out of 161 stories in the reliability sample. Despite a minimum pairwise agreement of 98.7% and a Brennan and Prediger's kappa of .974, this variable was assigned a Krippendorff's alpha of  $-.001$ , suggesting a completely random coding process. The reason is that in nearly all cases, the five coders agreed with each other that the content category was not found in the sampled stories. Where this would normally be taken as a strong sign of intercoder reliability, the calculation of Krippendorff's alpha mistakenly assumes that this nearly perfect agreement must have resulted from known information about the extreme skew of this content variable. The solution to this weakness of alpha is to interpret alpha in light of raw agreement levels. In cases where a variable has an acceptable level of raw agreement but low alpha, alpha warns that high agreement has been achieved on the basis of limited variation in the underlying content categories (Krippendorff 2004).<sup>19</sup> This is a useful flag for signaling caution when interpreting raw agreement scores, but it does not mean that the variable is unreliable. In no case should either alpha or kappa be misinterpreted as a measure of raw agreement. The meaning of any intercoder reliability statistic depends largely on the underlying distributional tendencies of the data, and must be properly interpreted in light of the raw agreement score, the number of possible coding categories, and the prevalence of any one category in the marginal distribution of the variable in question (Krippendorff 2004, 2004).

The lesson to be taken away is that no measure of intercoder reliability can be interpreted in isolation, and each must be rigorously tested and judged in light of the underlying data. We report both kappa and alpha, but in light of the limitations of each, we require that only one yields

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<sup>19</sup> The complexity of alpha's calculation is such that the same result could occur when there are insufficient cases in the reliability sample to be confident of the raw agreement score. However, this modifier to alpha's calculation essentially disappears as the number of cases in the reliability sample rises above 100, as is the case in our reliability sample (n=161).

acceptable levels of intercoder reliability for any given variable. For nominal or ordinal variables with higher levels of raw agreement that indicate highly skewed content categories, we use kappa to determine reliability. For variables with lower (but still acceptable) levels of raw agreement, alpha's distributional constraints tend to disappear and it comes a relatively superior measure of reliability. We use alpha exclusively for interval-level variables: in such cases meaningful measures of raw agreement or kappa cannot be calculated. For interval-level variables, alpha is clearly superior to other chance-corrected measures of covariance such as Lin's concordance correlation coefficient (see Neuendorf 2002: 153).

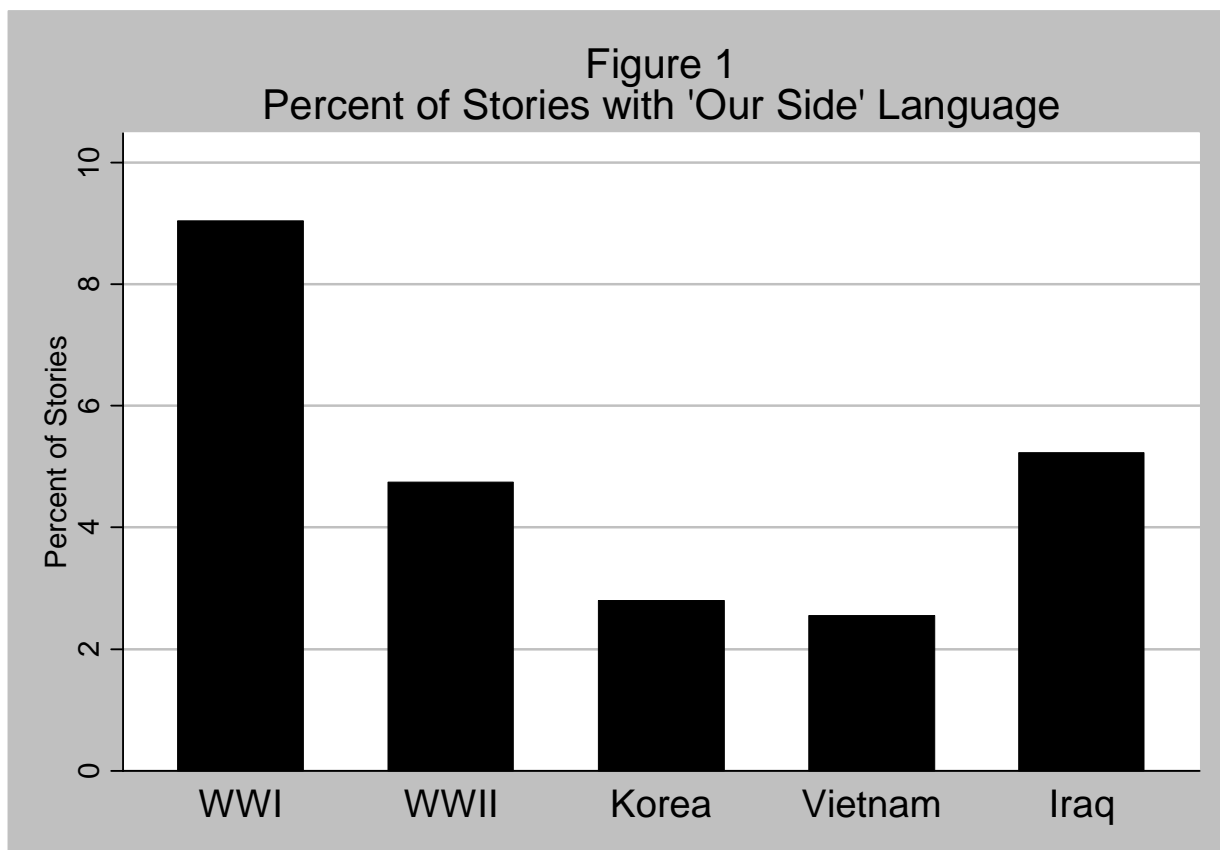
**Table A1: Intercoder Reliability Statistics for Content Variables Used in the Analysis**

	Type (# of Categories)	Average Pairwise Agreement/Correlation	Minimum Pairwise Agreement/Correlation	Brennan and Prediger's kappa <sup>a</sup>	Krippendorff's alpha <sup>b</sup>
"Our Side" Language	Nominal (2)	94.9%	93.2%	.864	.382
Supports US Moral Position	Nominal (2)	94.4%	92.5%	.850	.460
Criticizes US Moral Position	Nominal (2)	91.6%	88.2%	.764	.292
Moral Judgments of US/Allies	Ordinal (3)	86.0%	82.0%	.731	.406
Supports Enemy Moral Position	Nominal (2)	99.1%	98.1%	.962	.122
Criticizes Enemy Moral Position	Nominal (2)	90.1%	87.6%	.752	.291
Moral Judgments of Enemies	Ordinal (3)	89.3%	85.7%	.787	.281
Likelihood of Victory	Interval	.797	.704	...	.771

<sup>a</sup> Intercoder reliability calculated from minimum pairwise agreement

<sup>b</sup> Intercoder reliability measured as chance-corrected covariance

Note: Each cell reports results based on the 161 stories that were included in the final reliability test.



### Figure 2 Percent of Stories Personalizing 'Our Side'

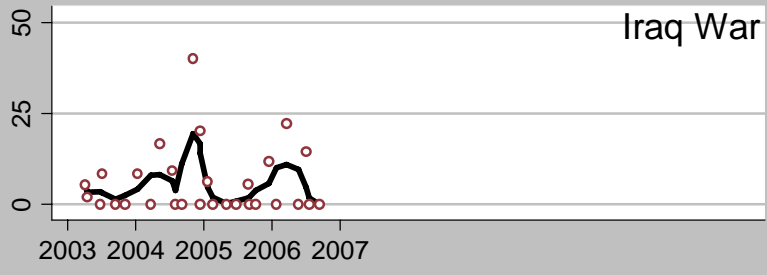
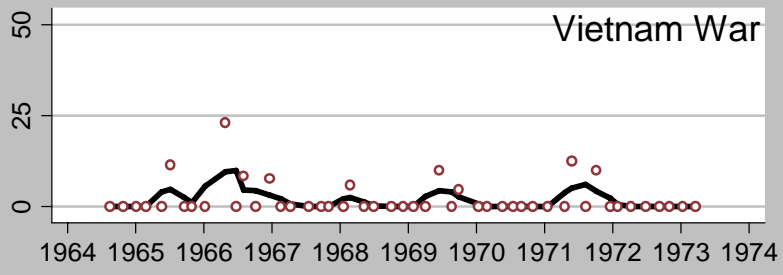
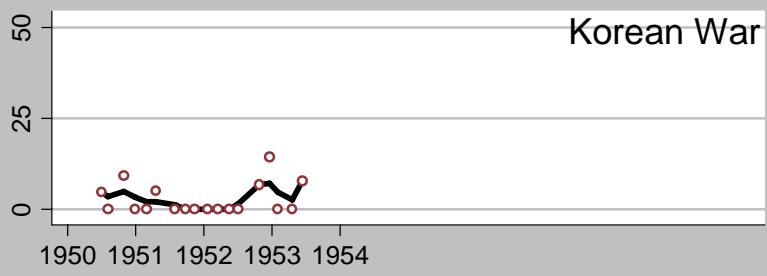
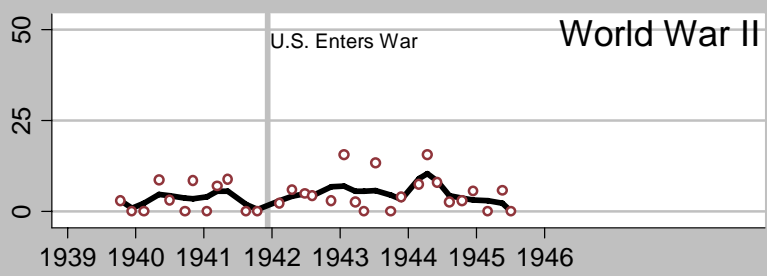
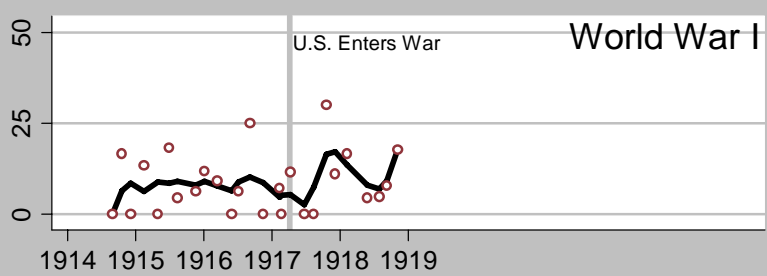
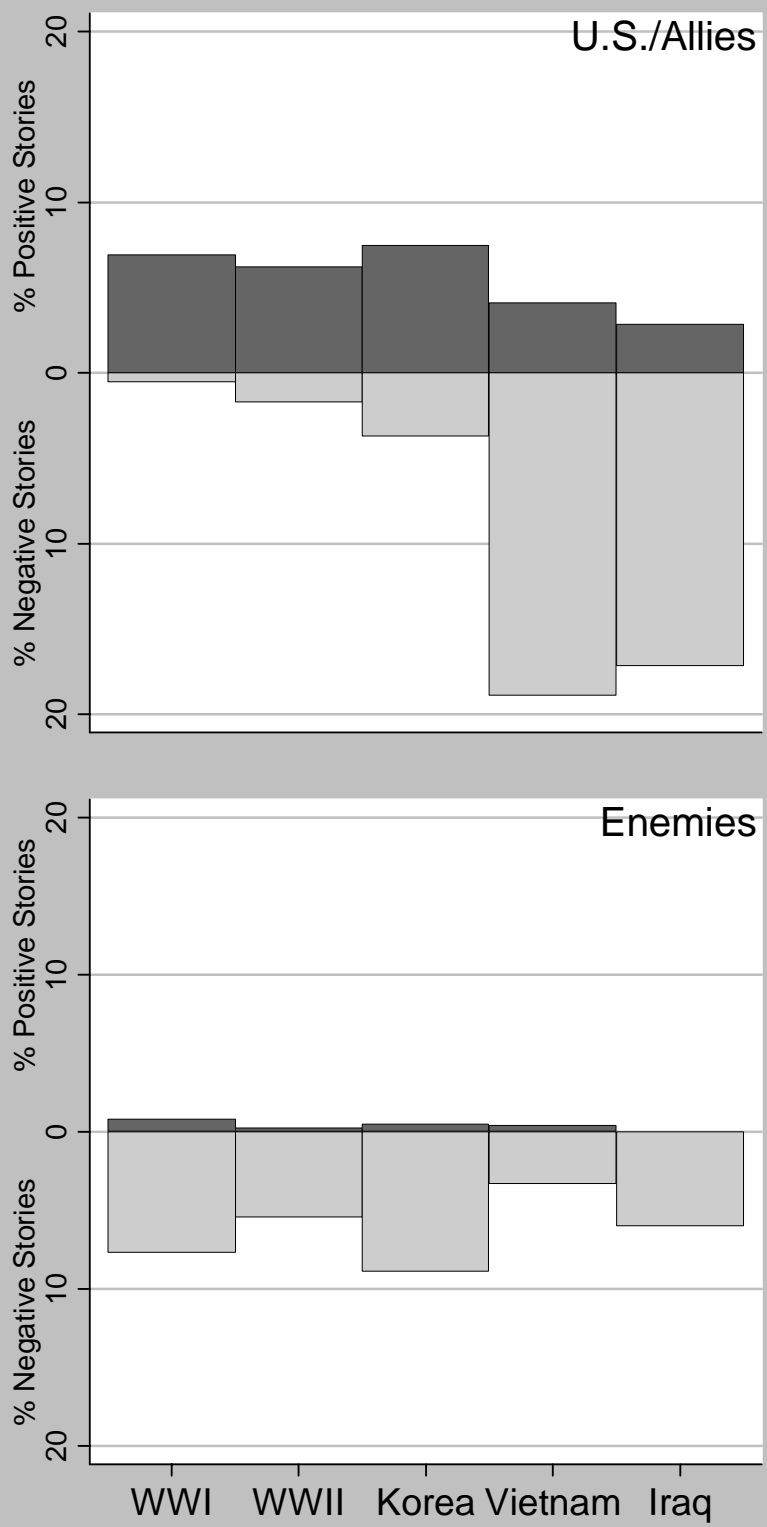
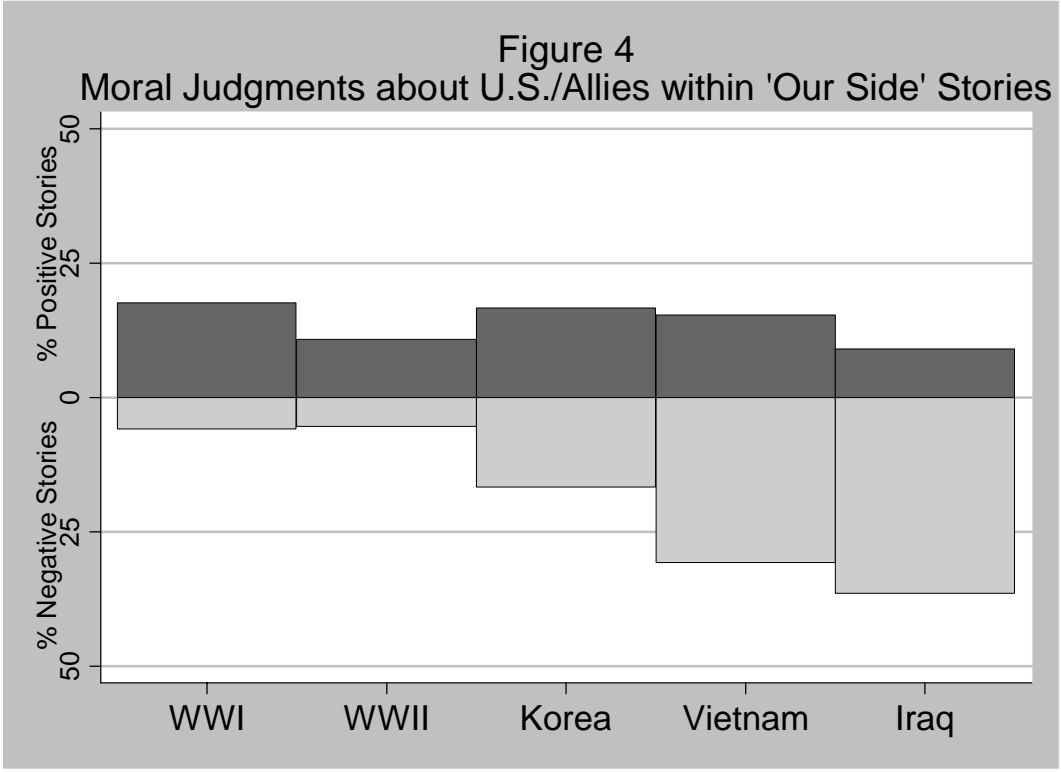
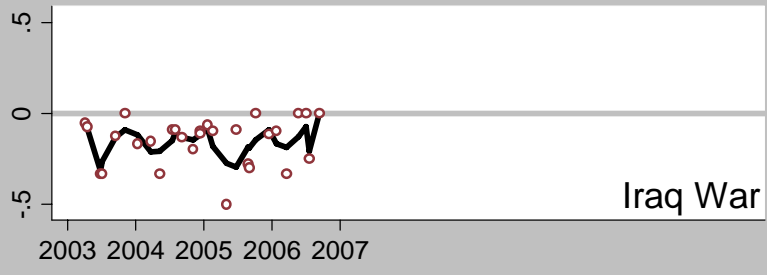
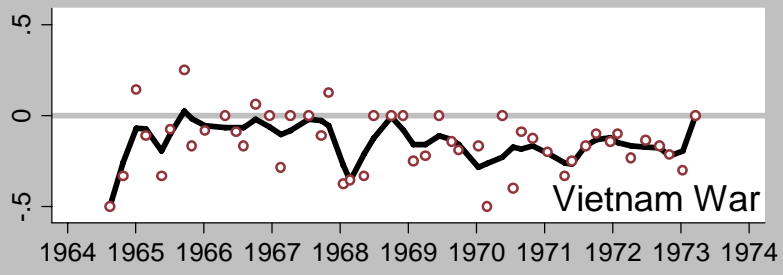
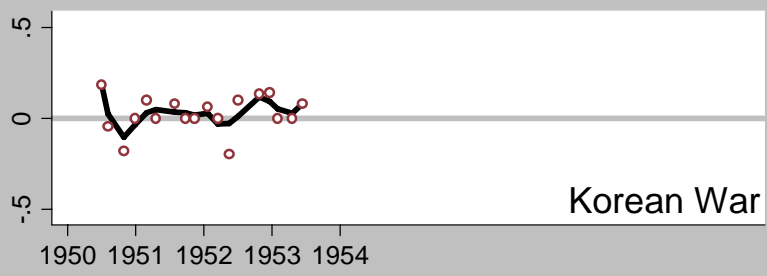
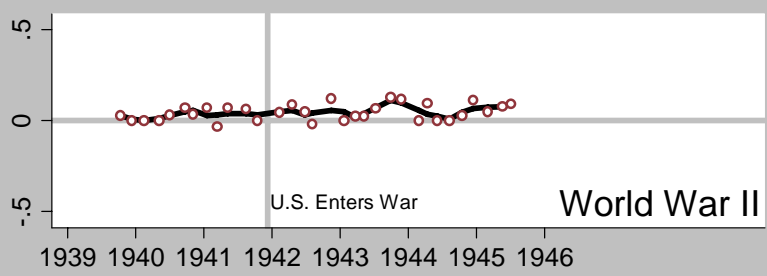
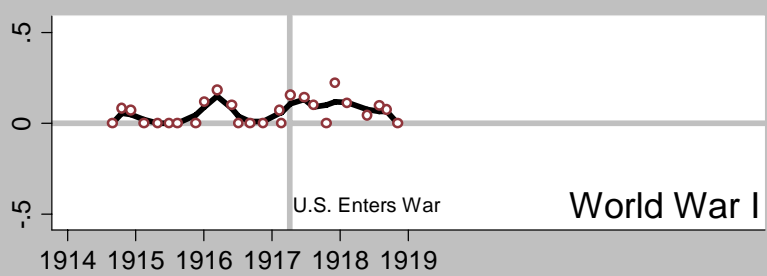


Figure 3  
Moral Judgments about Combatants by War

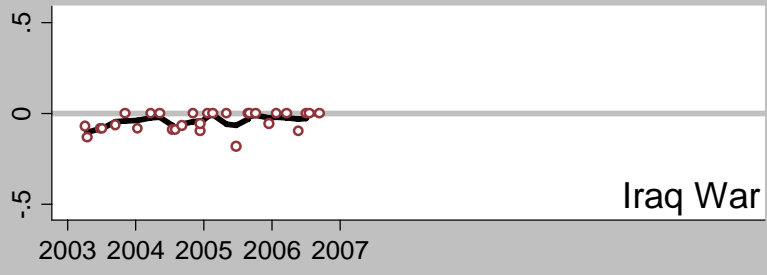
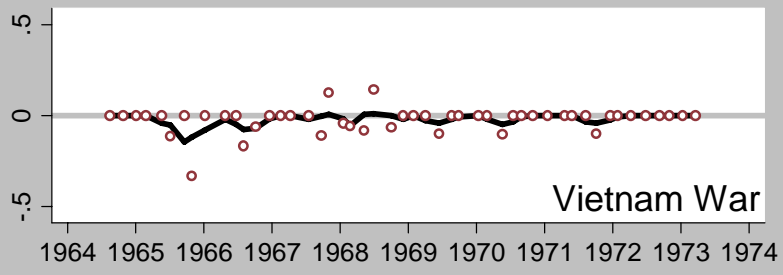
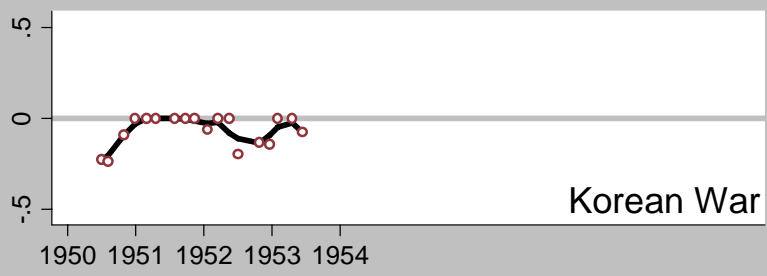
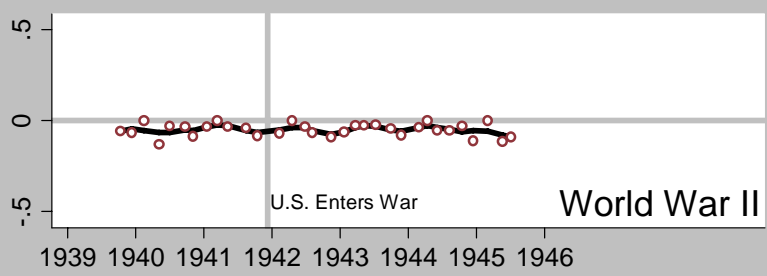
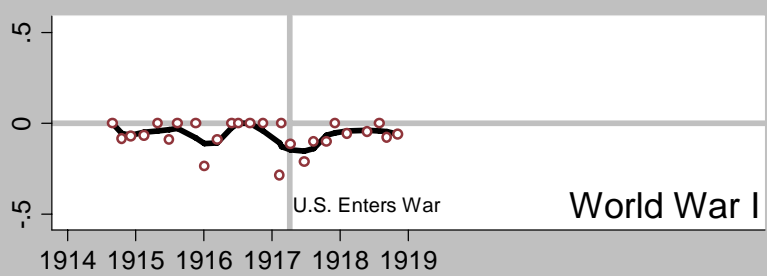


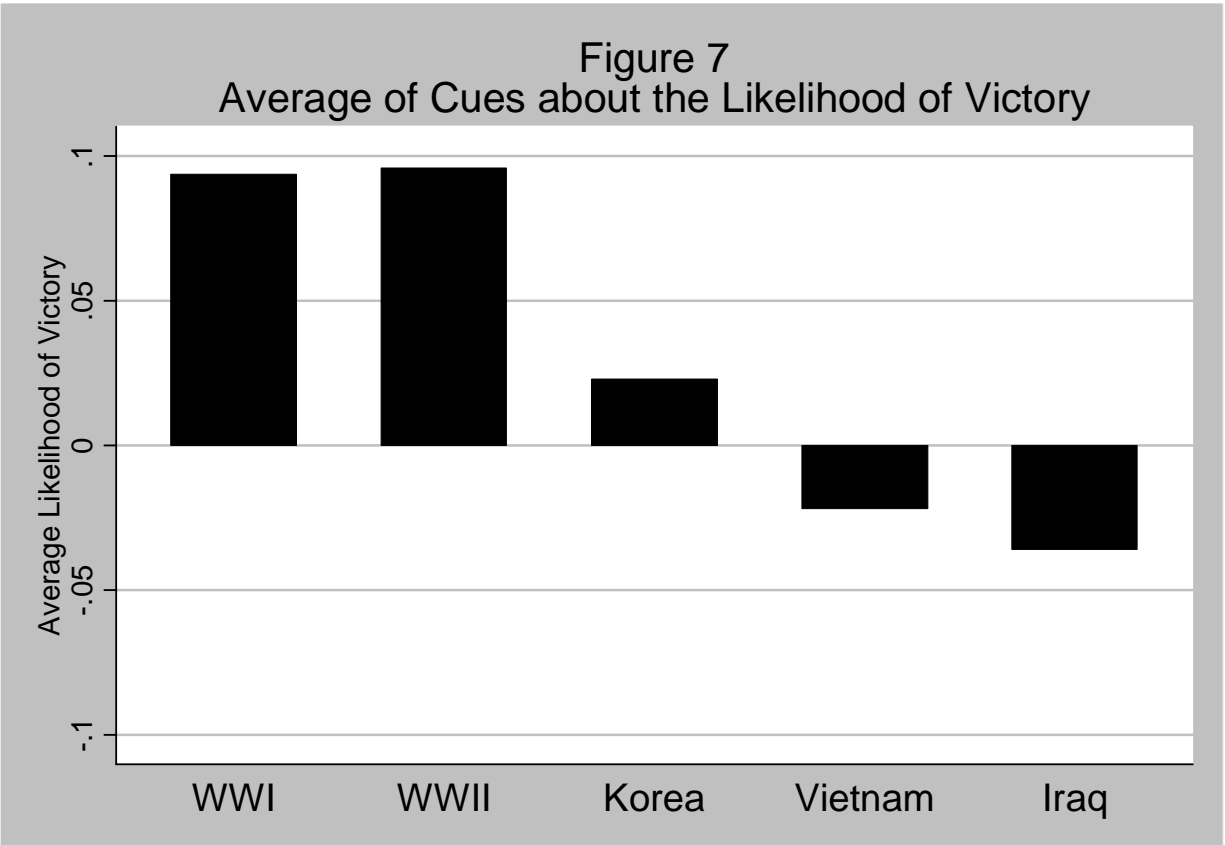


### Figure 5 Daily Average Moral Stance of U.S./Allies

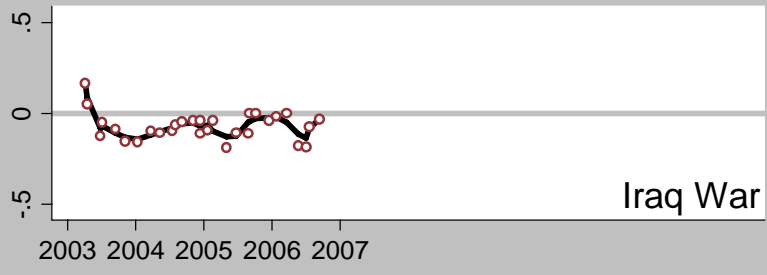
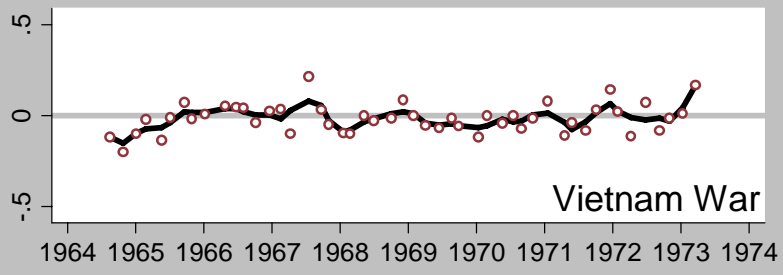
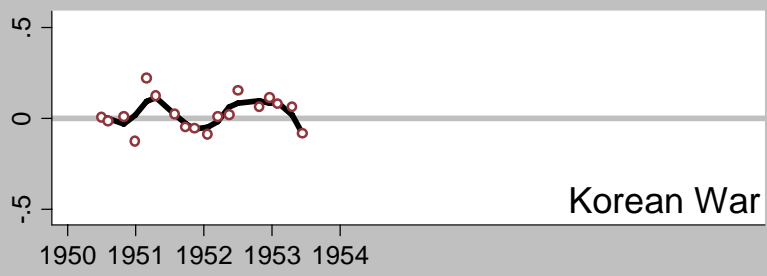
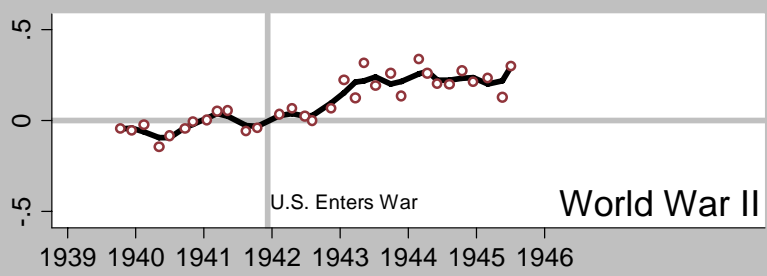
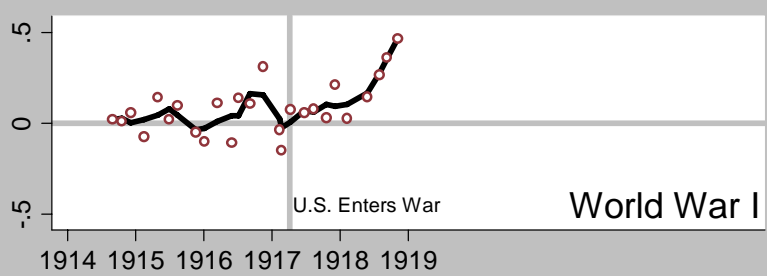


### Figure 6 Daily Average Moral Stance of Enemy





### Figure 8 Daily Average Likelihood of Victory



**Table 1**  
**Correlations Between Story-Level News Tone and Cumulative American Deaths**

	Use of "Our Side" Language	Moral Judgments of US/Allies	Moral Judgments of Enemies	Likelihood of Victory	N =
World War I	.06	-.12	.04	.37**	160
World War II	-.04	.04	-.06	.10**	737
Korean War	.01	.02	.18**	.03	214
Vietnam War	-.08†	-.06	.07	-.00	509
Iraq War	.04	-.04	.09†	-.21**	413

†  $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$

Note: cells contain Pearson correlation coefficients. Correlations measure the relationship between cumulative American KIA and each of the tone variables. Cases are restricted to periods in which the U.S. was an active combatant.