

Government's Little Helper: U.S. Press Coverage of Foreign Policy Crises, 1945–1991

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This article examines the implicit rules by which reporters determined the slant of news coverage of U.S. foreign policy crises from 1945 to 1991. The single most important rule was that reporters, as Lance Bennett has maintained, tended to "index" their coverage to reflect the range of views that exists within the government. A series of narrower and more situational rules also appeared to hold, such as a tendency of reporters to be more hawkish than official sources when the United States faced a communist foe and more dovish when the United States suffered a military setback.

Keywords congressional foreign policy opinions, content analysis, foreign policy crises, indexing hypothesis, mass media, presidential foreign policy opinion, press crisis coverage, press rules

It is a truism that journalists find it difficult to report critically on government activity during foreign policy crises. They must contend not only with officials who strain to control the news, but with fear that tough reporting will undermine the government's ability to deal with the crisis. As a result, journalists often simply "rally round the flag" and whatever policy the government favors.

Yet journalists do not invariably support government foreign policy in times of crisis. Perhaps the most notable case of a journalistic "failure to rally" occurred during the Tet offensive in the Vietnam War, when reporters quickly concluded and began to report that Viet Cong attacks represented a failure of American policy. In several other cases—for example, the Angola crisis during the Ford administration—press support for government policy has been notably restrained.

The aim of this article is to explain both the general tendency of the press to support the government during foreign policy crises and exceptions to this tendency. Most of the inquiry is organized around Lance Bennett's (1990) theory of press indexing, which holds that reporters "index" the slant of their coverage to reflect the range of opinion that exists within the government. For the rest,

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the article investigates a series of situational factors, such as whether the United States is facing a communist foe, that might also affect the slant of press coverage.

On the basis of a study of 35 foreign policy crises from the Soviet takeover of Poland in 1945 to the Gulf War in 1991, we find strong evidence that reporters do, as Bennett suggested, appear to wax hawkish and wane dovish as official sources lead them to do. At the same time, reporters inject some of their own views into their coverage, particularly when communism is involved or the United States has suffered a military setback.

Theoretical Background

A standard finding in studies of the press is that reporters regard as newsworthy that which their "legitimate" or "official" sources say is newsworthy (Cohen, 1963). The dependence of reporters on official sources is so great that, as Leon Sigal (1973, p. 69) put it:

Even when the journalist is in a position to observe an event directly, he remains reluctant to offer interpretations of his own, preferring instead to rely on his news sources. For the reporter, in short, most news is not what has happened, but what someone says has happened.

An editor of one of the national newsweekly magazines was even more blunt: "We don't deal in facts," he said, "but in attributed opinions" (cited in Gans, 1980, p. 130). David Halberstam (1979, pp. 517–518) explained the dependency of foreign policy reporters on their sources during the Vietnam War as follows:

. . . they had come to journalism through the traditional routes, they had written the requisite police stories and chased fire engines and they had done all that a bit better than their peers, moving ahead in their profession, and they had finally come to Washington. If after their arrival in Washington they wrote stories about foreign policy, they did not dare inject their own viewpoints, of which they had none, or their own expertise, of which they also had none. Rather they relied almost exclusively on what some American or possibly British official told them at a briefing or at lunch. The closer journalists came to great issues, the more vulnerable they felt.

As this and other evidence suggests, dependence on sources goes beyond the need to have someone to quote; it is one of the most ingrained features of modern journalism (Althaus et al., 1994; Hallin, 1984; Mermin, in press).

On both theoretical and empirical grounds, one of the most important studies of press dependence on sources is Bennett's (1990) study of coverage of U.S. policy toward Nicaragua. Taking as given the general proposition that journalists are heavily dependent on sources, he deduced that variation in coverage across time should depend on variations in the opinions of "prominent officials and institutional power blocs" (pp. 106–107).

This theoretical deduction, though long implicit in the scholarly literature on the press and foreign policy, had never been drawn explicitly or tested systematically. Nor was it obvious that it could survive testing. Journalists might, for ex-

ample, have used officials as sources but either done so selectively or distorted their views so as to produce the results that journalists rather than sources wanted.

To test what he called the "indexing hypothesis," Bennett used stories in the *New York Times* on U.S. policy making in Nicaragua from 1983 to 1986, as abstracted in the *Times Index*. Coders were asked to rate the degree to which articles appearing on the "op-ed" page of the *Times* agreed or disagreed with the administration's policies on Nicaragua, which were generally hawkish throughout the period of the study. The coders were also asked to rate the extent to which, according to information contained in the abstracts, members of Congress agreed or disagreed with the administration's hawkish policies.

Dividing coder ratings of article content and congressional opinion into 17 discrete time periods, Bennett found that the correlations between the two sets of ratings were between .63 and .76. Thus, the *New York Times* did, as hypothesized, appear to "index" its editorial coverage of this issue to the range of opinion within the government.

Bennett's study is not above criticism. One concern is that it failed to develop a measure of congressional opinion that was independent of what the *Times* claimed it was. Thus if, for example, the *Times* gave a distorted impression of congressional opinion so as to make it seem consistent with its own editorial slant, it would create the impression that the *Times* was following the views of Congress even though it was not.

Another insidious possibility is that members of Congress follow the editorial line of the *New York Times*, or the media more generally, rather than vice versa. If members of Congress regarded media opinion as a rough proxy for public opinion, and if, as is often suggested (e.g., Arnold, 1990), members are more concerned about reelection than about promoting their own views of public policy, they might find it safest simply to follow press opinion. The possibility that public officials rather than reporters are the real followers cannot be ruled out from the straightforward correlation Bennett reported.

Finally, Bennett's study limited its analysis to a single, possibly idiosyncratic issue. The study was thus unable to investigate other factors that might either disrupt press indexing or affect the slant of press coverage independently, such as the nature of the crisis, the type of foreign adversary, or the time period.

In this study, then, we take a fresh look at the relationship between press slant and government opinion, retesting Bennett's hypothesis and adding a few of our own.

Design and Methods of Study

Overview of Research

The study is organized as an effort to explain variations in the hawkishness or dovishness of coverage of foreign policy crises. Following Bennett, we hypothesize that the degree of press hawkishness will depend on the degree of hawkishness in the government. What exactly constitutes hawkishness or dovishness is relative to each crisis. In one crisis, doves may want to rely on diplomacy while hawks favor military aid; whereas in another crisis the doves may favor military aid and the hawks may favor the introduction of U.S. troops. What we will be examining, thus, is support for policies that are, within the context of each particular foreign policy crisis, supportive of military assertiveness.

Selection of Cases

For purposes of this study, a U.S. foreign policy crisis is an emergency situation in which the United States uses, threatens to use, or considers using military force or aid as a means of pursuing its foreign policy objectives. Major escalations of force within an ongoing conflict are also considered foreign policy crises.

U.S. foreign policy crises are sufficiently rare that it is feasible to examine the entire universe of them. For an unbiased compendium of events that might qualify as foreign policy crises, we turned to the 12th edition of John Spanier's *American Foreign Policy Since World War II* (1992), which contains a list of "Selected Principal Events" in U.S. foreign policy from 1945 to 1991. Some of Spanier's events have nothing to do with crises, as, for example, "Reagan denounces Soviet Union as 'Evil Empire.'" Others, however, fall within our definition of crisis, such as "Soviets blockade . . . West Berlin and the Western airlift starts," or "The United States attacks Libya for terrorist attacks." From Spanier's list, we selected 39 cases that met our definition of a foreign policy crisis. They include not only historically important events, such as the Korean and Vietnam Wars, but also many smaller-scale incidents, such as the invasion of Grenada and the U.S. peace keeping operations in Lebanon. The cases we selected also include multiple references to some ongoing crises, especially the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Despite some unavoidable arbitrariness, we believe that this list of crises is a fair representation of all U.S. foreign policy crises in the period 1945 to 1991. The list is shown in Appendix A.

Because Spanier did not provide specific dates for events, and because some developed over a period of weeks or months rather than on a single day, we had to assign plausible dates to each event. This information is available upon request.

Measurement of "Official" Opinion

Like Bennett, we will use congressional opinion as the primary indicator of the official views that reporters are hypothesized to reflect in their coverage. In so doing, we do not assume that Congress is the only, or even the most important, source of the official views that the reporters attempt to reflect. We assume only that, owing to the openness and ideological diversity of Congress, congressional opinion is likely to be roughly representative of official opinion more generally. The great advantage of congressional opinion for purposes of this study is that, thanks to the *Congressional Record*, it is far easier to measure than other forms of official opinion, thus making it possible to test the indexing hypothesis in a wide variety of cases.

To assure unbiased measurement, we determined to measure congressional opinion independently of media coverage of it. In 11 of the crises Spanier identifies, we were able to find votes in which members of Congress expressed themselves on the issue at hand. Congressional votes on the Vandenberg Resolution during the Czechoslovakia crisis of 1948, on the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in 1964, and on the Gulf War resolution in 1991 are examples of such cases. In 22 other cases, we used speeches made on the floor of the House or Senate as indicators of congressional opinion. As shown below, the two indicators of congressional opinion produced almost identical empirical results.

In three cases, Congress was out of session during the crisis, leaving us no way to gauge its opinion except by relying on the media, which we declined to do. Hence, these cases were lost from the analysis. A fourth case, a reference by Spanier to several terrorist incidents in 1985, was also dropped because we felt it was not sufficiently distinct from the Libya bombing of 1986, which we did include in the sample.¹

In two final cases, Congress was in session and capable of expressing an opinion, but did not do so. Not a single speech was given. These two cases, as it happened, were among the most important in the whole set--the Soviet takeover of Eastern Europe after World War II, and President Kennedy's decision to send U.S. military advisers to Vietnam in 1961. The more closely we examined these cases, the more determined we became not to permit them to fall out of the analysis.

Spanier lists the Soviet occupation of Eastern Europe, which involved several countries, as one event. Occupation occurred in the closing year of World War II, at a time when American diplomats were struggling behind the scenes to maintain Soviet cooperation with U.S. plans for the postwar period. We focused on the Polish case, where there was some activity in Congress. Two resolutions objecting to the Soviet takeover were introduced by Polish American members of Congress, but for reasons impossible for us to ascertain, no vote was taken on them (Lukas, 1978).

There was even less overt congressional reaction to President Kennedy's decision to send military advisers to Vietnam. The decision, taken in the context of the Berlin Wall crisis of 1961, was not officially announced. Nonetheless, press reports at the time indicate that an American commitment of military personnel was an open secret on the streets of Saigon, where American military forces were moving in and U.S. warships were taking up positions offshore. As other evidence also indicates, Congress was not kept in the dark about the American troop buildup in Vietnam (*Newsweek*, November 27, 1961).

In view of the fact that Congress was aware of events in each case but chose not to react, it seems appropriate to regard its nonaction as tacit support for administration policy. Hence in the analysis that follows, we code Congress as supporting a dovish policy in 1945 and a hawkish policy in 1961 (Goldberg, 1979). These coding decisions, as we show below, do not greatly affect the results. Altogether, then, we were able to measure congressional opinion for 35 cases: 11 by means of roll call votes, 22 by means of floor speeches, and 2 by imputing opinions to Congress when it acquiesced in major executive decisions.

For 22 cases, Dennis Chiu coded speeches from the *Congressional Record*. He tried to code as many as 25 speeches per case, but was often unable to find that many within close temporal proximity to the crisis. On average, he found 15 codable speeches per case, with a standard deviation of 7. No reliability analysis was performed, because identifying individual congressional speeches as hawkish or dovish in overall thrust seemed straightforward.

Measurement of Media Coverage

Our analysis is based on stories appearing in *Time* and *Newsweek*. The advantage of using news magazines is that, although all media slant the news, magazines are self-consciously interpretive and hence make less effort to disguise their slant. Even so, their stories contained few explicit statements of opinion; in most cases, they

conveyed opinion implicitly, by what they chose to cover or ignore and by the tone of coverage.

Three student coders were employed to rate the news magazine data. Two of the students, one graduate and one undergraduate, had extensive prior coding experience; the third, a graduate student, had none. All three specialized in American politics and were familiar with American history in the postwar period. To avoid biasing the coders, we provided them no "training" in their coding task, choosing instead to instruct them by means of a written communication. Except for some verbal instruction in the physical details of record keeping and some brief and innocuous progress checks, a one-page written communication was the only instruction the coders received from us. We include the written instructions as Appendix B of this article.²

As in the case of congressional opinion, we wished to capture the extent to which news magazine coverage was hawkish or dovish. The unit of analysis was the paragraph, which could be rated hawkish, dovish, neutral, or (rarely) both hawkish and dovish. We based the content analysis on 25 paragraphs per crisis, where the paragraphs were taken from the beginning of each magazine's main story and were divided as evenly as possible between the two magazines. Dates of the magazines used are available upon request.

Following are two sample paragraphs. The first was rated hawkish and the second dovish:

Led by tanks with 90-mm. cannon and armored troop carriers, the 2nd Battalion of the 6th U.S. Marines . . . moved cautiously into the war-torn capital of the Dominican Republic. As the columns churned down Avenida Independencia . . . people suddenly appeared in the windows and doorways. Some waved. Others stared. A few spoke. "I wish the Americans would take us over," muttered a woman. A man nearby sighed and nodded. (*Time*, May 7, 1956, p. 28)

The face of [the Batista] dictatorship in Cuba was the padlock on Havana University, the bodies dumped on street corners by casual police terrorists, the arrogant functionaries gathering fortunes from gambling, prostitution and a leaky public till. In disgust and shame, a nervy band of rural guerrillas [led by Castro] . . . started a bloody civil war that cost more than \$100 million and took 8,000 lives. Last week, they smashed General Fulgencio Batista's dictatorship. (*Time*, January 12, 1959, p. 82)

As these examples make clear, the press slant we seek to capture has little to do with either official sources or direct statements of opinion. It consists mainly of images that, as they accumulate over the course of a story, may induce a reader to feel more or less supportive of hawkish policies. Because of the inherent difficulty of deciphering the contemporary meaning of such images, we felt it necessary to use three coders.

For each crisis and coder, we computed the following measure of hawkishness:

$$\frac{\# \text{ hawkish paragraphs} - \# \text{ dovish paragraphs}}{\# \text{ hawkish paragraphs} + \# \text{ dovish paragraphs} + \# \text{ neutral paragraphs}}$$

Each coder's scores correlated with the scores of the other coders at the level of .75, with none of the coders standing out from the others as especially good or bad.³ When combined, the three sets of ratings produced a scale with an alpha reliability of .87.

The theoretical range of the media scale is from -1.0 to +1.0, with 0 as the midpoint. To facilitate interpretation of the results, however, the scale was recoded to a theoretical range of 0 to 1, with .50 as the neutral point. The actual range of ratings on the recoded scale was from .15 to .92, with a mean of .60 and a standard deviation of .21.⁴

Empirical Results

Congressional Opinion and Media Coverage

In Bennett's test of the indexing hypothesis, the correlation between opinions expressed on the op-ed page of the *New York Times* and congressional opinion was found to be .63 in one test and .76 in a related one. In our study, the correlation between thrust of news content and congressional opinion was .63 ($t = 4.7$, $df = 34$, $p < .0001$). If we restrict the analysis to the subset of cases for which we have the best measures of congressional opinion—either roll call votes or 10 or more floor speeches—the correlation rises slightly to .65. Corrected for the reliability of the media scale, this correlation is about .70. This means that an increase of 1 SD in the hawkishness of congressional opinion is association with an average increase of .70 SD in the hawkishness of press coverage of the given crisis. This is obviously a strong relationship—and, even so, it may still understate the real strength of the relationship between press slant and congressional opinion. This is because 25 paragraphs per crisis, even if coded with perfect reliability, would still be an imperfect indicator of overall news coverage, which consists of thousands of newspaper paragraphs and electronic sound bites. Floor speeches and even votes, no matter how accurately measured, are likewise imperfect indicators of congressional opinion. For example, the percentage of members of Congress who support a floor resolution will depend, *independently of the actual degree of hawkishness of congressional opinion*, on how toughly or dovishly worded the resolution is.

Altogether, then, our results corroborate Bennett's notion of press indexing. The corroboration is all the more notable in light of the radical differences in the design of the two studies, notably, our focus on multiple crises over a 46-year period rather than a single crisis period, and our examination of news coverage rather than editorial coverage. The considerable range of cases in our study, however, raises an obvious question: Does the relationship between congressional opinion and press slant hold as well in all time periods and types of situations? Or does it hold only in certain kinds of cases?

To answer these questions, we have broken the data into subsets, exploring the press–Congress relation within each. Because for this type of investigation the correlation coefficient is notoriously unreliable, we report the results in the form of unstandardized coefficients for regressions in which the independent variable is congressional hawkishness and the dependent variable is press hawkishness. Typical results follow:

	Regression Coefficient
Whole sample ($n = 35$)	.46
Time period	
Pre-Tet offensive ($n = 17$)	.40
Post-Tet offensive ($n = 18$)	.44
Area of world	
Americas ($n = 6$)	.22
Asia ⁵ ($n = 14$)	1.00
Europe ($n = 5$)	1.70
Middle East ($n = 9$)	.38
Type of adversary	
Communist ($n = 26$)	.52
Noncommunist ($n = 9$)	.20

Given the very small sample sizes on which these results are based, one should pay little attention to particular coefficients. Rather, one should notice only the overall pattern of results, which is that the relationship between congressional opinion and press slant reflects a broad tendency within the data set as a whole.

Who Is Leading Whom?

Our interpretation of the co-variation between press and congressional opinion is that, in Bennett's terms, reporters "index" coverage to the range of opinion that exists in the government. This interpretation comes from outside the data—from prior studies that stress, on the basis of qualitative observation, the dependence of reporters on sources. As far as the data alone are concerned, there is nothing that either supports or refutes this interpretation. The empirical results are equally consistent with the thesis of press dependence on Congress, with a thesis of congressional dependence on the press, and with a thesis that some "third factor" causes both press slant and congressional opinion, thereby inducing a spurious correlation between them (but see Mermin, *in press*).

The data we have collected have only limited value for assessing causal issues of this kind.⁶ They do, however, permit some exploration. Let us consider, first of all, the hypothesis of "reverse indexing," that is, that congressional opinion follows press slant rather than vice versa. That argument may be developed as follows. By the tone of its coverage, the press frames foreign policy crises for both the public and politicians. Members of Congress have no strong reason to dispute these frames, and because many care only about reelection, they may seek safety in going along with the press slant.

Although this argument imputes a great deal of power to the press, it has an element of plausibility. Risk avoidance is, according to literature on congressional behavior, a constant feature of legislative life (Arnold, 1990; Jacobson, 1993). In a recent analysis of how members of Congress decided to vote on the Gulf War resolution, Zaller (1994, pp. 261–262) found that many members wanted to avoid voting on the issue altogether. As he wrote:

Some legislators . . . were eager to play the role of partisan gladiators. But the majority of members were more hesitant. They would get little credit no matter how the war turned out, but might face retribution if they either opposed a successful war or supported a disastrous one. In this situation, many members saw no reason to commit themselves to a position any sooner than necessary, and a few . . . wanted to avoid taking a position even at the very end.

One would expect risk-averse members of Congress to maintain low profiles in foreign crises, waiting for the dust to settle before putting themselves on record. They would make few speeches and would reveal their positions only when forced to do so on a vote. Hence, if there is any inflation of the press–Congress association arising from a tendency of members of Congress to echo press opinion, it should be at its maximum on votes, where the risk-averse are most heavily represented. By parallel reasoning, we would expect representatives who volunteer public positions in floor speeches in the midst of foreign policy crises to be among the more risk-accepting members of Congress—“partisan gladiators” with respect to the issue at hand. When they speak out, one would expect to find them expressing their own ideologies and convictions. Hence, whatever press–Congress association exists in such cases would be hard to explain on the grounds that congressional opinion was simply following the lead of the press.

To test this line of argument, we divided the data according to whether congressional opinion was measured by speeches or votes (excluding the two cases in which it was measured by means of imputation). What we found is that the strength of the press–Congress association was slightly stronger when opinion was measured by means of floor speeches ($b = .52$) than by means of votes ($b = .41$). This difference, though not close to statistical significance (two-sided p value = .53), is exactly the opposite of what we should have found if the press–Congress association were driven by risk-averse members of Congress who, when forced by a vote to express themselves, simply echoed the press line.⁷

A recent article by Althaus, Edy, and Phalen (1994) suggested an additional test. In a study of the 1986 bombing of Libya and related incidents, these authors found that, particularly in the Senate, speeches for or against the bombing of Libya bore little relation to the Senators' electoral vulnerability, but a strong relation to the members' ideological orientation. As the authors concluded with evident surprise, many Senators seemed to be “genuine iconoclasts who said what they thought regardless of the consequences” (p. 31).

In light of this conclusion, we examined the association between congressional opinion and press slant for 26 cases in which we could measure congressional opinion from the speeches or votes of Senators alone. The press–Congress correlation for these cases was .68, or slightly higher than in the data set as a whole. If we accept that Senators are more iconoclastic—and hence independent-minded—than members of the House, this constitutes another reason for believing that the association between congressional opinion and press slant is not due to risk-averse politicians.

Neither of these tests is definitive, but together they complement the qualitative literature and its emphasis on the dependency of the press on official opinion.

Indexing Coverage to Presidential Policy

We have focused on Congress as the source of press slant primarily because, as noted earlier, congressional opinion is easier to measure than other forms of official opinion. We can, however, say a little about one other source of press slant, namely, the President. For our 35 cases, the President was hawkish in the vast majority. This is no accident: If the President were dovish, there might be no question of using military force and hence no foreign policy crisis, by our definition of the term. There were, however, five cases in which we considered that a crisis existed even though the President was dovish. These were the Soviet takeover of Poland and Eastern Europe, which the administration might have contested but did not; Truman's firing of the hawkish General Douglas MacArthur in 1951; the fall of Dienbienphu in 1954, when serious consideration was given to U.S. intervention; Castro's takeover of Cuba in 1959, which, contrary to the view of the administration, some in Congress wanted to resist; and the fall of South Vietnam, where the President ordered U.S. personnel to clear out of harm's way.⁸

On the basis of these classifications, we created a 0–1 dummy variable for presidential hawkishness and entered it in a regression, along with congressional hawkishness, to explain media hawkishness. The results are shown in column 2 of Table 1. As can be seen, both presidential and congressional hawkishness affect media hawkishness, but congressional opinion seems the stronger influence. (Because both independent variables have the same range, the magnitudes of their coefficients may be compared.) We are, however, reluctant to conclude from this test that congressional influence is really stronger. In light of our limited capacity to measure presidential opinion, the most that can be safely said is that both institutions affect press slant.

Indexing Coverage to a Common Culture?

Throughout this analysis, we have assumed that if any two actors take the same "slant" on a crisis, it must be because one has influenced the other. But there is another possibility: that members of Congress, Presidents, and reporters are all members

Table 1
Models of media hawkishness

	I	II
Congress opinion (range 0–1)	.46 (.10)	.39 (.10)
Executive branch (0–1)	—	.14 (.08)
Intercept	.27	.19
Adjusted r^2	.38	.42
N of cases	35	35

Note: Dependent variable is hawkishness of newsmagazine coverage; standard errors are shown in parentheses.

of the same political culture, and so tend to have the same culturally conditioned response to events.

This view is hard to dismiss out of hand. Consider the fall of Saigon in 1975. After more than 10 years of struggle in Vietnam, it seems unlikely that many Americans—in the press, the government, or the public—would need cues from others to conclude that this was *not* the time for a renewal of American hawkishness in South Vietnam. Or consider the Soviet downing of Korean Airlines Flight 007 in 1983. How could anyone be other than shocked and outraged by this event? If reporters, Presidents, and members of Congress had the same internally generated reactions—essentially dovish to the first event and hawkish to the second—it could produce the pattern of associations we have found in the data even if no one had influenced anyone else.

The contention that all members of a culture have the same culturally conditioned response to events is difficult to defeat, because it posits a universally present factor that is fully capable, at least in principle, of explaining all of the findings we have presented. Even the most ardent exponent of the power of culture, however, would have to concede that there are some aspects of the always-changing international situation for which culture does not provide clear cues. Within our data set, we have identified the following cases for which, we believe, the influence of common U.S. culture would be minimal:

The firing of General MacArthur by President Truman
 The decision on whether to intervene in Indochina in 1954
 The Marine peace-keeping missions to Lebanon in 1958 and 1982
 The takeover of Cuba by the forces of Fidel Castro
 The question of U.S. intervention in Angola
 The Soviet invasion of its former satellite nation, Afghanistan
 The question of U.S. involvement in Nicaragua
 The decision to put oil tankers under U.S. protection during the Iran-Iraq war
 The congressional vote to launch the Gulf War

The effect of congressional opinion on press slant in these cases is, as it turns out, almost identical to that in the data set as a whole. Also, the elimination of any one of the nine cases leaves the results substantially unchanged. Finally, the pattern holds when the nine cases are split into groups according to whether communism was involved or not.

Other Press Rules

Up to this point we have focused on Bennett's indexing rule. We turn now to an entirely different subject, namely, whether the press has values or prejudices of its own that affect coverage independently of the views of officialdom. We devised several hypotheses concerning the effects of press prejudices, as follows:

- The press will be *less* hawkish in situations when the United States uses forces against a militarily weak foe than in other cases. Our reasoning was that weaker foes will induce less martial excitement and hence less hawkishness. Cases so classified are the Bay of Pigs, the Dominican Republic, the *Mayaguez*, Grenada, Libya, and Panama.

- The press will be *less* hawkish, all else equal, in reporting military setbacks or defeats than in other cases. Our reasoning was that military setbacks encourage critical rethinking of military commitments and hence less hawkishness. Cases classified as setbacks are the Chinese entry into the Korean War, the Bay of Pigs, the Tet offensive, the fall of Saigon, the failed Iranian hostage rescue attempt, and the terrorist bombing of Marine barracks in Lebanon.
- The press will be *less* hawkish, all else equal, in situations of "continuing crisis," that is, situations, such as the Tet offensive in Vietnam, in which one or more crisis points have already occurred. Our reasoning was that "continuing crises" indicate lack of policy success, which is likely to engender rethinking of the commitment to force.
- The press will be *more* hawkish, all else equal, when the U.S. foe is associated with communism. Our reasoning was that the press tends to be reflexively anticommunist.
- The press will be *more* hawkish, all else equal, at the onset of military conflict. Our reasoning was that the press tends to depict the onset of fighting in sensationalist terms, which may tend to give coverage a hawkish tone. These cases are the start of the Korean War, the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the Dominican Republic invasion in 1965, the *Mayaguez* incident in 1975, the Iranian hostage rescue attempt, the Grenada invasion, the Libya bombing, the invasion of Panama, and the Gulf War.
- The press will be *more* hawkish, all else equal, in major wars (Korea, Vietnam, Gulf) than in other types of crises. Our reasoning was that it is more difficult to be critical when large-scale fighting is involved than in lesser crises.

What exactly should be counted as cases of "continuing crisis" requires judgment. For example, was the Berlin Wall crisis of 1961 a continuation of the 1948 crisis or a separate event? Were the 1954 and 1961 crises associated with Vietnam the first and second crises in a series that included the Vietnam War, or separate events? In each of these cases, we judged them as separate events. The crises that we judged as "continuation crises," then, were the Chinese entry into Korea and the firing of MacArthur; the Vietnam escalations of 1965 and 1972, the Tet offensive, the Cambodian invasion, and the fall of Saigon; the failed Iranian hostage rescue; the bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon; and the congressional vote on the Gulf War.

Four tests of these hypotheses are shown in Table 2. In column 1, the dependent variable is the average of the media scores of all three coders, which is the measure used in the article so far. In columns 2–4, the dependent variables are the ratings of each coder alone. Thus we have three independent tests and one that is dependent on the other three. The purpose of multiple tests is to assess the stability of the overall results.

Let us look first at the effects of congressional and presidential opinion. In the overall results, congressional and presidential opinion have effects that easily achieve statistical significance (t ratios are 3.40 and 2.34). However, these impacts look a bit ragged when examined separately by coder: When coder 1's media scores are used as the dependent variable, Congress has a big effect on the press but the President does not; when coder 2's scores are used, Congress has a small effect and the President a big one; and when coder 3's scores are used, both have signifi-

Table 2
Models of media hawkishness

	All coders	Coder 1	Coder 2	Coder 3
Congress opinion (range 0–1)	.30 (.09)	.22 (.09)	.14 (.13)	.54 (.12)
Executive branch (0–1)	.16 (.07)	.02 (.07)	.25 (.10)	.21 (.09)
Full war (0–1)	.03 (.09)	.01 (.09)	.00 (.12)	.09 (.11)
Start fighting (0–1)	.07 (.06)	.10 (.06)	.07 (.08)	.04 (.08)
Communist foe (0–1)	.11 (.06)	.12 (.06)	.10 (.08)	.10 (.08)
Setback or defeat (0–1)	-.17 (.06)	-.13 (.06)	-.22 (.09)	-.16 (.09)
Continuation crisis (0–1)	-.16 (.09)	-.10 (.10)	-.16 (.13)	-.23 (.12)
Minor use of force (0–1)	-.16 (.07)	-.18 (.07)	-.11 (.10)	-.21 (.09)
Year (scaled to 0–1 range)	-.07 (.09)	-.01 (.10)	-.17 (.14)	-.02 (.13)
Intercept	.27	.39	.35	.08
Adjusted r^2	.72	.47	.55	.72
<i>N</i> of cases	35	35	35	35

Note: Dependent variable, which has a range of .15 to .92 when averaged across all coders, is hawkishness of news magazine coverage; standard errors are shown in parentheses.

cant effects. Although these results are more variable than one might wish, they appear to be within the range of chance instability that lurks in small data sets, and, as such, no threat to our analysis. So long as the overall results are reflected to some degree in all subsets of the data, they can be accepted as the best single estimate of actual effects.⁹

The primary purpose of the multiple tests was to assess the stability of the six dummy variables, which were created after preliminary exploration of the data and could therefore represent "overfitting" of the data. Here the results are, happily, more consistent across coders. Communist foe, Continuation crisis, Setback, and Minor force all have comparable effects in all four estimates. The effects, moreover, are fairly large, running from about .5 SD on the media scale to about .75 SD. Start of fighting and War have consistently smaller effects in all tests. The addition of the

six situational dummies nearly doubles the *r*-square for the model while cutting only modestly into the estimated effects of congressional opinion and executive position, as reported in Table 1. This indicates that the effects of the dummies are mainly new effects that are "over and above" the effects of indexing, as described earlier. As such, the effects of the dummies represent the press's unique contribution to the slant of coverage. The press, thus, is not wholly a creature of officialdom. In a variety of situations—most notably, those in which there was a communist foe, a continuing crisis, or a setback—it can strike out in its own direction.

The combined effect of all variables in the model can be quite large. Consider the difference between press coverage of the Gulf of Tonkin incident, which was overwhelmingly hawkish, and coverage of the Tet offensive, which ran in a dovish direction. (The raw media scores were .88 and .31 on a 0–1 scale with an SD of .21.) The House vote on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1964 was 388–0, or 100 percent hawkish, while congressional speeches made at the time of the Tet offensive were only 16 percent hawkish. Given this shift in congressional opinion, press coverage of Tet is expected to be about 1.2 SDs less hawkish than it had been during the Tonkin crisis.¹⁰ Several situational factors also come into play: In contrast to the Tonkin incident, the Tet offensive was a "setback," a "continuation crisis," and part of a War; also the Tonkin incident, but not Tet, was an instance of Start of Fighting. From the coefficients in Table 2, it can be calculated that these factors should make coverage of Tet an additional 1.75 SDs less hawkish than it had been at the time of the Tonkin crisis.¹¹ Thus, our expectation is that press coverage will become 2.95 SDs more dovish at the time of the Tet offensive, which is fairly close to the actual swing (2.70 SDs). The swing could, moreover, have been greater, except that the President remained hawkish and the foe remained communist, both of which lead to more hawkish coverage.

These results show that the dramatic swing toward dovishness in press coverage of Tet—a swing that has been widely noted and is often considered anomalous (e.g., Braestrup, 1979)—was not anomalous at all, but rather typical of the way the press behaves in situations of ebbing congressional hawkishness, military setback, and continuing crisis. The results show further that situational factors, when they occur in combination, can be an even more important determinant of press slant than indexing.

Finally, a brief note on temporal trends in media hawkishness: As can be seen in Table 2, there is little evidence of coverage becoming either more or less hawkish over time. This is slightly misleading, in that the zero-order correlation between media hawkishness and time is $-.25$ ($p = .07$), indicating a trend toward less hawkishness. However, most of this correlation is due to the fact that the United States has been less likely in recent years to face communist foes.

Amount of Press Coverage

We did not measure variation in overall amount of media coverage of crises because we had no reason to believe it would be important. All crises, we assumed, would be covered heavily. This assumption turned out to be wrong. Although most were, two were hardly covered at all. These were the Soviet takeover of Poland in 1945 and the American buildup in Vietnam in 1961. The best we could do for these crises were pairs of magazine issues containing a total of 6 paragraphs and 10 paragraphs, respectively. Because of its intrinsic interest, we reprint a part of this

coverage, a *Time* report that the Soviet Union had unilaterally taken a major province from Germany and annexed it to Poland. We show the whole story, including the headline:

POLAND

Major Development

Tass, the official Soviet news agency, last week noted a major development: Major General Alexander Zawadzki, former political commissar of the Soviet-trained Polish Army, has been appointed Governor General of Silesia, thus officially expanding the new Poland as far as the Oder River.

(*Time*, March 19, 1945, p. 38)

This case vindicates our determination, as noted earlier, not to drop cases because of the difficulty of measuring congressional opinion, for, as it appears from this case, the press may downplay crises which congressional elites are unwilling to address—even when, as *Time* admitted by its headline on the bulletin on the latest partition of Poland, the story was a “major development.” The press, in other words, may index not only the slant but the amount of its coverage to the balance of opinion within the government.

Conclusion: Rules Versus News

This article has presented strong evidence of an important association between the slant of press coverage of foreign policy crises and the positions taken by officials within the government, notably, members of Congress and the President. How exactly this empirical association should be interpreted is not self-evident. Our interpretation, based on qualitative studies of how journalists behave and patterns that exist within the data, is that the association exists because reporters follow the lead of government officials in deciding whether to slant news in a hawkish or dovish direction. As Bennett has put it, reporters “index” their coverage to the range of opinion that exists within the government.

This article also turned up evidence that press slant is independently affected by the nature of foreign policy crises—whether the foe is communist, whether the United States has suffered a setback, among other factors. Because our investigation of these situational factors was exploratory and inductive, we cannot be confident that we have identified the right list of factors. It nonetheless seems likely that situational factors of some sort affect press slant about as much as indexing does, and that these situational effects represent journalists’ autonomous contribution to coverage of foreign policy crises. The situational determinants of press slant seem a very important topic for further investigation.

In the remaining space, we wish to raise three caveats. The first is that our findings refer to foreign policy crises, events which, by definition, are emergencies. Press behavior in nonemergency situations—including situations that develop after the first peak of a crisis has passed but before the threat that led to the crisis has been resolved—may be governed by different rules. It may be, for example, that the press indexes its coverage to the views of different actors at different points in a crisis: to the President at the first emergence of crisis, to the Congress as events begin to settle down, and to the opinions of nonpoliticians, such as experts or the public at large, in cases in which the crisis persists over a long period of time.

Alternatively, the press may develop group norms—or, less charitably, “pack mentalities”—as crises wear on, allocating coverage on the basis of autonomously developed conceptions of newsworthiness. What we have called “situational factors” may be manifestations of such pack mentalities.

We have no doubt that the press is as rule-bound in nonemergency events as in its coverage of emergency events; we suspect, however, that the rules may be different.

The second caveat concerns the precise mechanism that underlies press indexing, a matter that our data have not permitted us to investigate. One mechanism is suggested by a journalist’s statement, cited earlier, that “We don’t deal in facts, but in attributed opinions.” What drives indexing, in this view, is the pervasive and direct dependence of journalists on sources for everything they report. Bennett’s formulation of the indexing hypothesis is close to this view.

Another possibility is that journalists may consider information newsworthy in proportion to its capacity to foretell or affect future events. This idea was first proposed by Entman and Page (1994), who found that in Senate hearings on the Gulf War, reporters paid disproportionate attention to the statements of Bush administration officials, apparently because, far more than other witnesses at the hearings, these officials were in a position to determine whether the United States went to war or not. A tendency by reporters to highlight information that they thought would foretell future events could have broad implications for how they do their job. If, for example, government decision makers were convinced that Vietnam must be saved from communism, journalists might report everything they could find about whether Vietnam was likely to fall to communism, since this information would affect whether U.S. intervention occurred. They might ignore information that policy makers regarded as irrelevant, such as whether Vietnam was embroiled in a civil war, since this information would not affect what policy makers would do. But if one half of officialdom were concerned about a communist takeover and the other half believed that South Vietnam was embroiled in a civil war, journalists would report information relevant to both frames, since both might affect U.S. willingness to continue its military commitment.

The first of these mechanisms might be called “source indexing,” the second “power indexing.” Either could account for the general patterns we have found in the data.

The study by Althaus et al. included in this issue tends to support the notion of power indexing. From the more fine-grained analysis that is possible in a single case study, these authors found that, during the Libya crisis in 1986, reporters for the *New York Times* did a poor job of reflecting the political thrust and specific content of congressional opinion. Among other things, the *Times* neglected to report on esoteric policy options favored by members of Congress but not taken seriously by the administration. It gave disproportionate attention to any congressional discussion of the War Powers Act, which might become the basis for congressional action if Congress were to act. Also, the *Times* gave much more attention to the pronouncements of foreign governments, which constrained the administration’s capacity to act against Libya, than to pronouncements by members of Congress, who had little capacity to constrain administration action. In short, *Times* reporters seemed to engage in power indexing rather than source indexing.

Evidence from another domain of politics, presidential primary elections, also supports the notion of power indexing. In presidential primaries, reporters routinely

ignore candidates whom they regard as losers, focusing instead on candidates they view as politically viable. The notion that all bonafide candidates should get equal coverage, as suggested by a rule of source indexing, does not seem to exert the slightest pull on reporters' consciences (Zaller, in press).

Other conceptions of indexing are possible as well. The point of this caveat is to underscore what remains to be learned about how exactly indexing works.

The third caveat, which is the most difficult to evaluate, is best introduced by means of hypothetical examples. Suppose that a president faces two issues, either of which he may escalate into a crisis. Fearing that the press and Congress would oppose hawkish initiatives on issue 1, the president chooses to escalate on issue 2 instead, where he correctly anticipates greater press and congressional support. By this action, the president assures that later observers (like us) will both fail to study issue 1 (because it never became a crisis) and misleadingly conclude from study of issue 2 that the press and Congress reflexively follow the President's lead in foreign policy crises.

The problem, generally stated, is that the process by which potential crises are converted to actual crises may lead to biased conclusions about the relationship between press and government. This problem came up several times in our research. One case was the seizure of the *U.S.S. Pueblo* and its crew by North Korea in 1968, an event that President Johnson chose to deemphasize, perhaps because he feared that, in the midst of the Vietnam War, the press or Congress or both would not follow him into another crisis. Reflecting this deemphasis, Spanier failed to include the *Pueblo* incident on his list of principal U.S. foreign policy events, thus preventing us from counting it as a crisis (despite our inclination to do so). Thus, a potential crisis in which other elites might have failed to follow presidential leadership failed to become an actual crisis. In contrast, consider the Gulf War, which did make Spanier's list. This was a crisis that could easily have been a noncrisis, except that President Bush chose to make it one. Although we have no evidence on this point—and, in the nature of things, are unlikely ever to have evidence—it seems likely that Bush would not have chosen to go to war against Iraq unless he had anticipated that he could mobilize adequate congressional and press support for doing so. From these two obviously speculative accounts, it seems plausible that the likelihood of mobilizing press support may be a positive factor in whether crises occur.

It is hard to say exactly how serious this endogeneity problem is. On the one hand, the pressures of *real politick* may be so strong that presidents and other government decision makers typically ignore the press in deciding what to do, and yet there may be media-conscious decision makers who shy away from commitments that afford the press too many opportunities for potshots and second-guessing.

These caveats indicate that this study has only scratched the surface of a difficult problem. Our central finding—the existence of an association between government opinion and the slant of press coverage of foreign policy crises—is nonetheless a tantalizing empirical generalization.

Appendix A: List of Foreign Policy Crises

1. 1945 Soviet military forces occupy eastern Europe.
2. 1946 United States confronts the Soviet Union over Iran.

3. 1947 Truman Doctrine commits the United States to assist Greece and Turkey.
4. 1948 Soviet coup d'état takes place in Czechoslovakia.
5. 1948 Soviets blockade all ground traffic from West Germany to West Berlin.
6. 1950 North Korea attacks South Korea by crossing the Thirty-Eighth Parallel.
7. 1950 Communist China intervenes in Korean War.
8. 1951 Truman fires General Douglas MacArthur.
9. 1954 France is defeated at Dienbienphu in Indochina.
10. 1956 Suez War breaks out after Israel attacks Egypt. Omitted.
11. 1958 United States lands Marines in Lebanon.
12. 1959 Castro seizes power in Cuba.
13. 1961 Kennedy launches abortive Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.
14. 1961 Kennedy sends first military advisers to South Vietnam.
15. 1961 Soviets build Berlin Wall.
16. 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis. Omitted.
17. 1964 Congress passes Gulf of Tonkin resolution.
18. 1965 United States starts bombing North Vietnam and sends American land forces.
19. 1965 United States intervenes in the Dominican Republic.
20. 1968 Tet offensive in South Vietnam.
21. 1970 U.S. invasion of Cambodia.
22. 1972 North Vietnam invades South and Nixon retaliates by expanding air war.
23. 1975 South Vietnam collapses and a unified communist Vietnam is established.
24. 1975 Cambodians seize U.S. merchant ship *Mayaguez*.
25. 1976 Soviet-Cuban forces in Angola win victory for Marxist-led faction.
26. 1979 U.S. Embassy in Tehran seized and employees held hostage by militants.
27. 1979 Soviets send 80,000 troops into Afghanistan.
28. 1980 U.S. mission to rescue hostages in Tehran ends in disaster.
29. 1982 U.S. Marines are sent into Beirut.
30. 1983 Two hundred forty-one marines killed in suicide truck-bomb attack in Beirut.
31. 1983 Soviet Union shoots down Korean 747 jetliner with 269 passengers aboard.
32. 1983 Invasion of Grenada.
33. 1984 Congress cuts off all military assistance to the Contras in Nicaragua.
34. 1985 Various Arab terrorist actions in Europe. Omitted.
35. 1986 The United States attacks Lybia for terrorist acts.
36. 1987 The United States reflags and escorts Kuwaiti oil tankers in the Persian Gulf.
37. 1989 Invasion of Panama.
38. 1990 U.S. sends troops to Persian Gulf. Omitted.
39. 1991 Persian Gulf War.

Appendix B: Instructions to Coders

For each assigned paragraph of each news story, your task is to answer this question:

WOULD AN ORDINARY MIDDLE-OF-THE-ROAD AMERICAN READING THIS PARAGRAPH IN ITS ORIGINAL CONTEXT HAVE BEEN INDUCED TO TAKE A MORE HAWKISH OR A MORE DOVISH VIEW OF THE FOREIGN CRISIS DESCRIBED IN THE STORY?

Hawkish and dovish should be understood in their colloquial senses, that is, more inclined or less inclined to use some form of military force (including military aid to an ally), rather than purely diplomatic means, to resolve a given crisis.

Throughout the content coding, you should allow for the possibility that the same information or facts could have different actual meanings in different contexts. Reports of U.S. deaths or battlefield defeats, for example, could be framed so as to indicate that U.S. honor or national security require a military threat or response; but they could also be framed so as to suggest that threats or further fighting would be hopeless. Detailed descriptions of military operations or troop movements could contain an element of ridicule, in which case they should be coded dovish, or they could be imbued with a tone of martial expectancy, in which case they would be hawkish. The description of an enemy's skill or strength, or the weakness of the U.S., might suggest the senselessness of military action, or it might excite greater resolve or a more vigorous military response by the U.S. In all such cases, ratings should depend on your judgment of how an ordinary reader, in the context of his or her times, would tend to read the paragraph.

Try to rate each paragraph for a predominant message. In some cases, however, a paragraph may contain sharp inducements toward both hawkishness and dovishness; such paragraphs should be rated as having both hawkish and dovish content. In other cases, a paragraph may have no implications for either hawkishness or dovishness, in which case it should be rated as neutral. Some paragraphs, however, might be neutral if rated as stand-alone units, but yet contribute to the development of a point that, in its eventual implication, is hawkish or dovish; such paragraphs should be rated for the larger theme to which they contribute. (This implies that some paragraphs may have to be coded in light of the paragraphs that follow them.)

Among the contextual factors to which you may pay attention are the photographs, illustrations, and headlines that accompany the story. Do not code these contextual factors as such; nor should you consider them as "biases" that invariably color all associated verbiage. But when the meaning of an otherwise ambiguous passage takes on a reasonably distinct coloration when viewed in light of the associated pictures or headlines, your coding should aim to capture the actual effect of the communication.

In sum, your task is to capture, on a paragraph by paragraph basis, the hawkish or dovish slant of each story as it would tend to affect an ordinary, contemporaneous reader.

Notes

1. This decision was made without examining media coverage of the terrorist acts.
2. From prior experience, the senior author felt that he could "train" coders to pro-

duce significantly higher levels of agreement. Such training, however, often consists of giving coders clear rules for handling certain kinds of inherently ambiguous data. In applying these rules rigidly, coders can boost intercoder reliability without necessarily doing a better job of capturing the actual content; in this way, rigid use of rules can create high reliability at the expense of the actual validity of ratings.

3. The ratings of coder 1 correlated with those of coders 2 and 3 at the level of .73 and .75. The ratings of coders 2 and 3 correlated at the level of .77.

4. The means of the individual coders were .59, .57, and .62; the standard deviations (SDs) were .15, .24, and .29. The low SD for coder 1 reflects his reluctance to assign nonneutral codes in the absence of a strong slant; yet, despite this threshold difference, coder 1's relative ranking of crises correlated well with rankings of the other coders, as shown in the previous note.

5. We include Afghanistan in Asia but exclude all Middle Eastern states.

6. In designing this study, we considered collecting media data just before and after measurement of congressional opinion, so as to establish causal precedence. This did not prove feasible, however. In some cases, events moved so quickly—as in the start of the Korean War—that it was impossible to measure media content before Congress had reacted. In other cases, the pattern of media and congressional opinion had been stable for so long before we made our measurements—as in, for example, the fall of Saigon in 1975—that it made no sense to pretend that one had actually preceded the other by a significant amount of time. Hence we abandoned this approach.

7. The simple correlations are .67 for votes and .64 for speeches.

8. Although President Reagan withdrew the Marines from Lebanon shortly after their barracks were bombed, his initial response was vaguely hawkish.

9. If, incidentally, the media scores of coders 2 and 3 are combined, congressional and presidential opinion have significant effects (*b*'s of .18 and .14; *t* ratios of 1.89 and 1.83, respectively). Coder 1 is the graduate student without coding experience; coder 3 is an undergraduate (Mark Hunt) who has worked with Zaller on other projects. It is interesting that intercoder reliability statistics, as reported in note 8, contain no hint that findings would differ so strongly by coder.

10. The coefficient for the effect of congressional opinion is .30; given that $.30 \times (1.00 - .16) = .25$, we expect media hawkishness to be .25 units lower. Since the SD of media hawkishness is .21, this amounts to 1.2 SDs.

11. The calculation is $[-.17 - .16 + .03 - (+.07)]/.21$, which equals -1.76 SDs.

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