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The Domestic Politics of Contra Aid: Public Opinion, Congress, and the President

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The Domestic Politics of Contra Aid: Public Opinion, Congress, and the President

Abstract
The domestic politics of contra aid during the Reagan administration is a story of both success and failure. It is a story of success in that public preferences on the issue were mirrored in congressional behavior and ultimately constrained presidential action in a manner roughly consistent with the expectations of democratic theory. It is story of failure in that the president of the United States fought a long political battle against a determined domestic opposition and came up short. That fact distinguishes this case from most other presidential foreign policy initiatives. Truman enjoyed overwhelming support for his opposition to communism in Southeastern Europe, as did Eisenhower for his posture toward the spread of communism in the Middle East, Johnson initially for the use of military force against communist forces in Indochina, and Carter for his pledge to protect the Persian Gulf region from Soviet intrusion. Even Kennedy's failed efforts against Castro's Cuba won him applause at the time. But Ronald Reagan failed in his attempt to persuade Congress and the American people that the threat of communism in Central America required the same determination abroad and support at home that his predecessors had enjoyed in arguably analogous situations.

Disciplines
American Politics | Other Political Science | Social Influence and Political Communication

Comments
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Reagan came to Washington determined to exorcise the ghost of Vietnam, but his efforts to deal harshly with the Sandinista regime ultimately fell victim to the enduring effects of the tragic conflict in
Southeast Asia. Before Vietnam, the United States enjoyed a broad-based consensus about the nation’s appropriate world role (Chace 1978; Wittkopf 1990; Wittkopf and McCormick 1990a). Since Vietnam, foreign policy has been the subject of often bitter partisan and ideological dispute—arguably to its detriment (Destler, Gelb, and Lake 1984). On no issue was that rancor more in evidence than on the Reagan administration’s policies toward Nicaragua.

Whether the outcome of the politics of contra aid is viewed as a success or a failure—the choice of terms will itself doubtless be colored by partisan and ideological considerations—a more thoroughgoing examination of the issue can contribute to a richer understanding of how public opinion affects American foreign policy. At issue is how the domestic politics of contra aid in the post-Vietnam environment militated against realization of the administration’s preferred policies.

The climate of opinion aptly captures the theoretical importance of the so-called Vietnam syndrome. Both concepts figure prominently in the subsequent analyses. The latter refers to the introspection prevalent in the United States since the early 1970s that discouraged interventionist behavior generally and the prolonged use of military forces abroad. The former refers to the foreign policy decision-making environment that “by creating in the policy-maker an impression of a public attitude or attitudes, or by becoming part of the environment and cultural milieu that help to shape his own thinking, may consciously affect his official behavior” (Cohen 1957, 29). The climate of opinion concept also refers to what decision makers “[perceive] to be operative as latent public attitudes or as manifest but unstructured majorities” (Rosenau 1961, 23). Policymakers frequently seek to create a climate of opinion “more favorable to their contemplated policy, hoping in this way to affect the perceptions of other decision-makers who are either opposed to the projected proposal or not yet persuaded of its wisdom” (Rosenau 1961, 24). Thus the climate of opinion may permeate the decision process through various routes, including top-down channels from decision makers to opinion makers, bottom-up channels from opinion makers to decision makers, and intermediate channels as well (Rosenau 1961, 19–26). All of these apply to the Vietnam syndrome as that term has been used variously by policymakers, journalists, and academics. The precise mechanism whereby internalization of the climate of opinion occurs and is transmitted into the policy process admittedly remains problematic (Cohen 1972). Still, the concept usefully draws attention to the reasons why political leaders, the mass media, and interest groups engage in efforts to shape public opinion.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how the post-Vietnam cli-
mate of opinion affected the desire of the Reagan administration to provide aid to the Nicaraguan contras. The inquiry focuses attention on several questions central to democratic theory and practice: What is the nature of public opinion regarding foreign policy issues? What accounts for the consistency of public opinion on the issue of contra aid? What were the sources of public opinion on contra aid? Did Congress reflect public attitudes? What was the relationship between Reagan's popularity and the popularity of his policies? Ultimately, the question is whether public opinion constrained the president, preventing him from doing what he otherwise would have preferred.

The examination begins with the structure of mass foreign policy beliefs that emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War and how attitudes toward Central American policy were both a part of and a victim of the climate of opinion about the nation's appropriate world role engendered by that war.

**PUBLIC OPINION AND FOREIGN POLICY: THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

Conventional wisdom holds that the American people are incapable of holding consistent and stable foreign policy attitudes. The viewpoint can be traced in part to Gabriel Almond's influential book, *The American People and Foreign Policy* (1950; also Converse 1964), which ascribed a "moodishness" to the American people about foreign policy issues that grew naturally out of their relative indifference to foreign policy except in times of crisis and peril. Almond (1950, 53) argued that "the characteristic response to questions of foreign policy is one of indifference. A foreign policy crisis, short of the immediate threat of war, may transform indifference to vague apprehension, to fatalism, to anger; but the reaction is still a mood, a superficial and fluctuating response."

The reasons for this unflattering description and the inference that public opinion is largely irrelevant to the making of American foreign policy can be traced to the well-established beliefs that the American people are, relative speaking, uninterested in and ill-informed about foreign policy, and that they have a corresponding penchant to evince unstable foreign policy attitudes highly susceptible to manipulation by political elites.

There is no doubt that the mass of the American people typically lack interest in and knowledge about foreign policy, but these characteristics are largely irrelevant to whether the American people are able,
in the aggregate, to hold *politically relevant foreign policy beliefs*. Over two decades ago, V. O. Key put it best in his discussion of the "context" of public opinion and how it can affect governmental action:

That context is not a rigid matrix that fixes a precise form for government action. Nor is it unchangeable. It consists of opinion irregularly distributed among the people and of varying intensity, of attitudes of differing convertibility into votes, and of sentiments not always readily capable of appraisal. Yet that context, as it is perceived by those responsible for action, conditions many of the acts of those who must make what we may call "opinion-related decision." The opinion context may affect the substance of action, the form of action, or the manner of action. (Key 1961, 423)

Almond’s "mood theory" has not gone unchallenged. Drawing on poll data from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, William Caspary (1970, 546) demonstrated that the American people possess a "*strong and stable 'permissive mood' toward international involvement*" and that "such a mood provides a blank check for foreign policy adventures, not just a responsible support for international organization, genuine foreign assistance, and basic defense measures." In short, the "mood" of the American people is not nearly as unstable and quixotic as Almond implied, although historically it hardly served as an effective check on policymakers.

More recently analysts have drawn on social cognition theory to explain how foreign policy opinions can be structured and maintained even in the face of a paucity of information. Jon Hurwitz and Mark Peffley (1987), for example, argue that individuals utilize "heuristics," or information shortcuts, to make political judgments and to relate preferences toward specific foreign policy issues to general attitudes. Thus, paradoxically, ordinary citizens hold coherent attitude structures *because* they lack detailed knowledge about foreign policy: "individuals organize information because such organization helps to simplify the world. Thus, a paucity of information does not *impede* structure and consistency; on the contrary, it *motivates* the development and employment of structure. Thus, ... individuals [attempt] to cope with an extraordinarily confusing world (with limited resources to pay information costs) by structuring views about specific foreign policies according to their more general and abstract beliefs" (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987, 1114).

In the particular case of contra aid, many Americans lacked even elementary knowledge about some of the specifics pertaining to U.S. policies in Central American during the Reagan presidency (Ameri-
The Domestic Politics of Contra Aid

cans Talk Security 1989, 299–300; Ladd 1983, 21; Ladd 1987, 23; LeoGrande 1990; Sobel 1989, 120). But they were nonetheless firm and unwavering in their convictions about whether American troops should be sent to fight in the region and about the wisdom of pursuing policies they feared might result in that eventuality. From the point of view of policymakers in Washington, these convictions are the important, politically relevant data. The story of contra aid thus becomes part of a growing body of knowledge that demonstrates the ability of the American people to embrace and maintain stable and politically relevant foreign policy attitudes important to an understanding of the domestic sources of American foreign policy (see also Graham 1988; Hurwitz and Peffley 1987, 1990; Shapiro and Page 1988; Wittkopf 1990). That insight is important in placing the struggle over contra aid within the larger context of the changes in mass foreign policy beliefs that occurred in the wake of Vietnam.

AFTER VIETNAM: THE DOMESTIC CLIMATE OF FOREIGN POLICY OPINION

The belief that politics stops at the water’s edge has perhaps always been more myth than reality (McCormick and Wittkopf 1990), but the extent to which foreign policy has become the object of often bitter partisan and ideological dispute since Vietnam compared with the consensual beliefs seemingly so self-evident in the 1950s and 1960s has evoked widespread commentary among scholars, journalists, and policymakers. As Zbigniew Brzezinski observed in commenting on the breakdown of the Cold War consensus:

Our foreign policy became increasingly the object of contestation, of sharp cleavage, and even of some reversal of traditional political commitments. The Democratic Party, the party of internationalism, became increasingly prone to the appeal of neo-isolationism. And the Republican Party, the party of isolationism, became increasingly prone to the appeal of militant interventionism. And both parties increasingly found their center of gravity shifting to the extreme, thereby further polarizing our public opinion. (Brzezinski 1984, 15–16)

In the years following World War II isolationism gave way to internationalism as the dominant philosophy undergirding American foreign policy. Internationalism implied conflict as well as cooperation with other nations. The United States sought cooperation with other nations but would resort to intervention, including force, if necessary.
The arrows and olive branch in the eagle's talons in the great seal of the United States provide a fitting symbol of the duality of internationalism. As isolationism gradually, sometimes fitfully, gave way, a fundamental consensus emerged about the nation's world role that came to be reflected in the themes of globalism, anticommunism, containment, military might, and interventionism (Kegley and Wittkopf 1991). Domestic discord was often evident, but the foreign policy consensus muted differences at home as the nation pursued its mission abroad.

A number of developments during the 1970s contributed to the breakdown of the foreign policy consensus of the Cold War years. The Vietnam trauma was the primary catalyst, but it was reinforced by the onset of détente with the Soviet Union and the Watergate episode. Together they challenged the assumptions on which the consensus had been built, including the beliefs that American military power by itself could achieve the objectives of American foreign policy; that containment was the cornerstone of American foreign policy; that American political institutions were uniquely virtuous; and that a presidency preeminent in foreign policy was necessary to cope with the challenges of a hostile world. The Cold War foreign policy consensus thus dissipated as the American people became divided not only over the question of whether the United States should be involved in world affairs—which traditionally had divided them along internationalist-isolationist lines—but also how it ought to be involved—which now raised questions about the ends of American foreign policy as well as its means.

As differences about ends and means emerged, support for internationalism, which for two decades had sustained an active U.S. role in world affairs, began to manifest different faces. One is captured in the phrase cooperative internationalism, the other in militant internationalism (Wittkopf 1990). Attitudes toward communism, the use of American troops abroad, and relations with the Soviet Union distinguish proponents and opponents of the alternative forms of internationalism. They in turn give rise to four distinct foreign policy belief systems: internationalists, isolationists, accommodationists, and hardliners. Consistent with traditional views of Americans' attitudes toward the role of the United States in world affairs, internationalists are those who support active American involvement in international affairs, favoring a combination of conciliatory and conflict strategies reminiscent of the pre-Vietnam internationalist foreign policy paradigm. Isolationists, on the other hand, oppose both types of international involvement, as expected. The two remaining groups, appropriately regarded as selective internationalists, are newly emergent in the 1970s. Accommodationists embrace the tenets of cooperative internationalism but reject the elements implicit
in militant internationalism, while hardliners manifest just the opposite beliefs.

The preferences of accommodationists and hardliners are closely correlated with liberal and conservative political ideologies and with the lessons drawn from the Vietnam experience (Holsti and Rosenau 1984; Wittkopf 1990). As a result, the post-Vietnam climate of opinion has often evoked sharply divergent domestic responses to issues related to the involvement of the United States in the affairs of others and especially toward the use of troops abroad. This fact provides important insight into the domestic discord that marked the Reagan administration’s Central American policies from early in 1981 until it left office eight years later.

THE CONTOURS OF PUBLIC OPINION TOWARD CONTRA AID

The divided character of public opinion in the post-Vietnam era which the Reagan administration faced was exacerbated by the fact that a Republican president confronted a Democrat-controlled and often recalcitrant House of Representatives. To win congressional approval for aid to the anti-Sandinista forces in Central America, on several occasions President Reagan appealed his case to the American people directly, going over the heads of Congress in nationally televised speeches, radio broadcasts, and appeals to various organizations. The imagery evoked by the Great Communicator called upon some of the most centrist values in the nation’s foreign policy experience. The contras were variously described as “freedom fighters” and “our brothers,” while those opposing aid to the insurgents were labeled “new isolationists,” who, by pretending that “the strategic threat” in Nicaragua will go away, “are courting disaster and history will hold them accountable.” The president and other top administration officials described the “strategic threat” as “another Cuba”; “a privileged sanctuary for terrorists and subversives just two days driving time from Harlingen, Texas”; “a permanent staging ground for terrorism . . . just three hours by air from the U.S. border.” Ultimately, the president asked rhetorically in a nationally televised speech on March 16, 1986, in what was part of an intensive campaign to win approval for $100 million in contra aid, “Will we give the Nicaraguan democratic resistance the means to re-capture their betrayed revolution, or will we turn our backs and ignore the malignancy in Managua until it spreads and becomes a mortal threat to the entire New World?”
The monies involved were comparatively trivial, but Congress remained reluctant, and the American people were not moved. When asked in an ABC News/Washington Post survey in March 1986 whether they approved of the refusal by the House to provide the $100 million Reagan had sought, 60 percent said yes. The proportion was nearly identical to other surveys that had asked related questions. In July 1985, 63 percent of those polled by the Louis Harris organization responded that they sided with Congress in its dispute with the president about sending military aid to the contra rebels, as did 61 percent in a January 1987 Harris poll. In this sense Congress, and particularly the House, where the specter of “another Vietnam” was repeatedly invoked, seemed to respond to and reflect public preferences in the tug-of-war over contra aid (a point examined in more detail below).

Public opinion was also remarkably stable and consistent over the course of the long-simmering executive-legislative conflict (see Table 4-12). In an August 1983 Harris survey, roughly two-thirds of the American people expressed opposition to “arming and supporting the rebels in Nicaragua who are trying to overthrow the Sandinista government in that country.” Three years later, in a June 1986 ABC News/Washington Post survey, 62 percent opposed “granting military and other aid to the Nicaraguan rebels known as the ‘contras.’” In these and other surveys, the American people demonstrated a remarkably consistent and predictable foreign policy posture (cf. Ladd 1983, 1987).

Two of the surveys used to document the cooperative (CI) and militant internationalism (MI) dimensions described above (see endnote 3), one conducted in 1982 and the other in 1986, contain several questions about Central America that illustrate graphically how Americans’ divergent foreign policy beliefs related to Reagan administration policy options. The questions had to do with how threatening to the United States a communist El Salvador would be and whether support would be forthcoming for the use of U.S. troops in El Salvador if its government were about to be defeated by leftist rebels, if Nicaragua permitted the Soviet Union to set up a missile base in Nicaragua, or if Nicaragua invade Honduras in an effort to destroy contra bases there. In all of these cases the questions were used to construct the CI/MI dimensions; thus, the responses to them are not independent of the classification scheme, but they give some sense of how Americans’ foreign policy beliefs affected their attitudes toward Central America, as shown in Table 5-1. Roughly equal proportions of respondents fell in each belief category.
Table 5-1
The Relationship between Foreign Policy Beliefs and Attitudes toward Policy Options in Central America

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Internationalists</th>
<th>Accommodationists</th>
<th>Hardliners</th>
<th>Isolationists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Believing a Communist El Salvador Would Be Somewhat or a Great Threat to the United States</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>92</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Supporting the Use of Troops in El Salvador</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage Supporting the Use of Troops against Nicaragua in 1986</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If missile base</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If Honduras invaded</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is striking is how widely divergent accommodationists and hardliners are on these issues, a difference that lies at the heart of the anticommunist, interventionist thrust characteristic of post-World War II American foreign policy. By a two-to-one margin, hardliners attached considerably greater salience to a communist El Salvador than did accommodationists; by a four- or five-to-one margin they would have supported the use of troops in El Salvador; and by a five-to-one margin they would have supported the use of troops against Nicaragua in the event it invaded Honduras.

Similar disparities are evident in attitudes toward Reagan administration policies (items not used to construct the CI and MI dimensions). In 1982, for example, 30 percent of the hardliners evaluated the administration's handling of the conflict in El Salvador as good or excellent compared with 15 percent of the accommodationists. Similarly, in 1986 hardliners rated the administration's efforts to topple the Nicaraguan government as good or excellent by a 37 to 13 percent margin compared with the accommodationists. Hardliners in that year also supported the use of economic and military aid as instruments of the Reagan Doctrine by a three-to-one margin over accommodationists. Thus it is reasonable to infer that support for contra aid would be greatest among those imbued with hard-line foreign policy values and least among those who embrace accommodationist beliefs. Inasmuch as the issue
was often perceived not as a matter of aiding another nation but as an interventionist issue, isolationists and a sizable proportion of internationalists could be expected to have coalesced with accommodationists to create the mass political coalition of contra aid opponents that so persistently dogged the president's efforts.6

SOURCES OF OPINION ON CONTRA AID

The foregoing evidence demonstrates that the Reagan administration's controversial policy of support for the contra rebels fueled perhaps latent but still intensely partisan and ideological divisions among the American people and in Congress. Thus the political battle over contra aid is a striking illustration of the absence of a national consensus on the ends and means of American foreign policy evident throughout the 1970s and 1980s. It also illustrates the patterned nature of American foreign policy opinion. Policy divisions over contra aid found expression in Americans' partisan attachments and ideological predispositions, their retrospective attitudes about the Vietnam War and interventionism, and their trust in American political leaders.

PARTISANSHIP, IDEOLOGY, AND SUPPORT FOR CONTRA AID

The sharply partisan and ideological character of domestic contention over the issue of contra aid is evident from the political configuration of the administration's supporters within the mass public. If differences between Republican and Democrat supporters on the survey items used in Tables 4-15 and 5-2 were shown, they would range from as little as 9 percent in September 1983 on the issue of arming and supporting rebels seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government to as much as 35 percent in January 1987 on the question of sending military aid to the contras with 21 percent as the average. Similar ranges are evident between liberals and conservatives, where the average split is 19 percent. More important than these numbers is the story they tell of persistent, predictable differences in the American polity through time and across divergent circumstances—and despite persistent presidential efforts to build consensual support for the administration's preferred policies.

The outlines of the battle for public opinion were set early in the administration's first term, when El Salvador, not Nicaragua, was the
### Table 5-2
#### Public Support for Contra Aid, 1985–87

#### I. Military aid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Disapprove (Favor Reagan)</th>
<th>Approve (Oppose Reagan)</th>
<th>Not sure/both/neither don’t know/no opinion</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.1</td>
<td>5/85</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1,256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.2</td>
<td>3/86</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1,204</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.3</td>
<td>7/85</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>1,252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.4</td>
<td>1/87</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>1,249</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### II. Nonmilitary aid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Favor</th>
<th>Oppose</th>
<th>Not sure/no opinion/don’t know</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>II.1</td>
<td>5/85</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1,257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.2</td>
<td>7/85</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1,244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.3</td>
<td>4/86</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>1,254</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### III. Military and nonmilitary aid

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Favor</th>
<th>Oppose</th>
<th>Not sure/no opinion/don’t know</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>III.1</td>
<td>4/86</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>1,254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.2</td>
<td>6/86</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>1,564</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.3</td>
<td>10/86</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>1,207</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### I. Military aid

1.1: Do you favor or oppose the United States sending $14 million in military aid to the rebels in Nicaragua? (Harris).

1.2: The House of Representatives has refused Reagan’s request for $100 million in military aid to the contras in Nicaragua. Do you approve or disapprove of the action by the House? (ABC News/Washington Post).

1.3: Recently President Reagan has had some serious disagreements with Congress. Now who do you think was more right—Reagan or Congress—in their differences over . . . sending military aid to the contra rebels in Nicaragua, which is favored by Reagan but opposed by Congress? (Harris).

1.4: If you had a say, who do you think will be more right—Reagan or the Congress—in their difference over . . . sending military aid to the contra rebels in Nicaragua, which is favored by Reagan but opposed by Congress? (Harris).

#### II. Nonmilitary aid

II.1 Do you favor or oppose the United States sending $14 million in nonmilitary aid to the rebels and other groups who are opposed to the Sandinista government in Nicaragua? (Harris).

II.2: Who do you think was more right—Reagan or Congress—in their differences over . . . sending nonmilitary aid to the contras in Nicaragua, which is favored by Reagan but opposed by Congress? [Note: affirmative equated with Reagan] (Harris).

II.3: Do you favor or oppose the United States sending just $30 million in nonmilitary aid to the contra rebels in Nicaragua? (Harris).
III. Military and nonmilitary aid

III.1: Do you favor or oppose the United States sending $100 million in military and nonmilitary aid to the contra rebels in Nicaragua? (Harris).

III.2: Congress has authorized that $100 million in military and nonmilitary aid should be sent by the United States to the rebels fighting against the government in Nicaragua. Do you favor or oppose sending that aid to the rebels in Nicaragua? (Harris).

III.3: Do you generally favor or oppose the United States granting military and other aid to the Nicaraguan rebels known as the “contras”? (ABC News/Washington Post).

policy focus. In March 1981, less than two months after Reagan’s inauguration, a Harris poll found that only 44 percent of the respondents favored sending military advisers to El Salvador and that less than 30 percent favored sending either economic or military aid. The questions were repeated a year later, but, surprisingly given the typical penchant of the public to acquiesce to governmental initiatives, the support levels for all three actually declined. Then, still another year later, in April 1983, when the question about sending military advisers to El Salvador was repeated and two others on economic aid were asked, the levels of support and opposition returned to what they had been in 1981. Moreover, the responses to many of these questions elicited the same partisan and ideological differences that would later characterize the contra aid issue, illustrating once again that Reagan’s policies enjoyed their greatest support among Republicans and conservatives.

PARTISANSHIP, IDEOLOGY, AND SUPPORT FOR INTERVENTIONISM

These partisan and philosophical differences track the differences between hardliners and accommodationists described earlier, who diverge sharply in their assessments about the utility of interventionism as an instrument of policy and particularly on the utility of military force. Concern for whether and under what conditions the American people will support the use of force in pursuit of foreign policy objectives is an enduring consequence of the Vietnam War. In a speech on “The Uses of Military Power” in November 1984, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger, drawing on the lessons of Vietnam and Korea, suggested that U.S. military forces should be committed to combat only when vital interests are at stake, when the political and military objectives are clearly defined, when the United States has “the clear
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intention of winning," and when the support of Congress and the American people is assured (Halloran 1984, A5). Clearly these are difficult requirements to meet, but the restrictions seem to fit the public mood.

The invasion of Grenada in October 1983 arguably fit these conditions. Certainly it was popular. A Harris poll shortly after the invasion showed, for example, that, by a 73–27 percent split, respondents believed Reagan was right to invade the tiny island. The responses track historical patterns, which show that presidents can generally count on the American people to rally round the flag in times of crisis and peril.

Was the lesson of Grenada that the American people would support the use of troops in Central America? The March 1983 Harris poll cited above asked respondents if they would support sending troops to El Salvador. Only 26 percent said they would. Eight months later, in the October poll by Harris following the invasion of Grenada, respondents were asked if they favored “continuing the same policy we followed in Grenada of sending in troops to overthrow other unfriendly governments in the Caribbean, Central America, and South America.” By a 37–54 split the answer was “no.” Moreover, even on the Grenada issue marked differences were evident in the opinions of partisan identifiers and those of different ideological persuasions. Whereas 88 percent of the Republicans surveyed supported the invasion, only 65 percent of the Democrats did. And whereas more than four-fifths of those who regarded themselves as conservatives supported the invasion, only half of the liberals did.

As noted earlier, fear of another Vietnam and disagreements about its lessons figure prominently in the differences evident in the foreign policy beliefs of the American people. Retrospective judgments about the war also affect the willingness of the American people to support the use of troops elsewhere. Beginning in 1974, each of the quadrennial Gallup polls sponsored by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (see note 3 here) asked respondents how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the proposition that “The Vietnam War was more than a mistake, it was fundamentally wrong and immoral.” They were also asked about circumstances in which the United States might use troops abroad. Although there is no one-to-one correspondence between the two, the responses tend to be related systematically (Wittkopf 1990a 176).

The Democratic majority in the House, led by House Speaker Tip O’Neill, repeatedly drew on the Vietnam analogy in its opposition to Reagan’s contra aid policies. In O’Neill’s words, “I see us becoming
engaged, step-by-step, in a military situation that brings our boys di-
rectly into fighting” (Roberts 1986b, A12). Evidence that the Ameri-
can people shared that fear is compelling, if not conclusive. Sixty-one
percent of the respondents in the March 1981 Harris poll responded
that El Salvador could become another Vietnam, and the proportion
grew to 72 percent a year later. Similarly, in August 1983, when Harris
added Nicaragua to El Salvador in the question that asked whether
“U.S. involvement . . . looks too much as though it could turn out to
be another Vietnam for this country,” 66 percent again said yes. Harris
also asked in May 1985 and again in April and October 1986, “How
concerned are you that U.S. military involvement in Nicaragua will
get to the point where American soldiers will end up fighting in that
country?” In each case four-fifths responded that they were somewhat
or very concerned. The same proportion indicated in a 1986 Gallup
poll that U.S. military aid to Central America would likely result in
U.S. military involvement there. However, when asked in a March 1985
ABC News poll if “the United States is heading for the same kind of
involvement in Central America as it had in the Vietnam war or [if] . . .
the United States will avoid that kind of involvement this time,”
two-thirds opted for the latter view (see Sobel 1989).
Not in doubt is the close association between support for contra aid
and dispositions toward these Vietnam-related ideas. Table 5-3 reports
many of them, including questions about Vietnam from the ABC News/
Washington Post surveys in February and March 1985. These asked
whether the United States should have become involved in Vietnam;
whether the United States should have avoided the sending of troops
or, instead, have “gone all out to win”; and whether American troops
fought in a worthwhile cause. In all of the cases support for contra aid
is related systematically to these questions in a manner consistent with
the hard-line foreign policy belief system described above, or with what
Brzezinski (1984) describes as “militant interventionism.”
Support for contra aid was also linked in the public psyche to per-
ceptions of the threat Central America faced.7 Once more, by a three-
to-one margin, those who in August 1983 thought several Central American
countries “could end up going over to the Communist camp” as a result
of Soviet and Cuban support of Nicaragua and the guerrillas in El Salvador
supported U.S. efforts to arm and support “the rebels in Nicaragua who
are trying to overthrow the Sandinista government.” Even wider mar-
gins are evident on the question of whether Nicaragua was a major
security threat and the support accorded overthrow of the Nicaraguan
government. In March 1986, for example, 60 percent of those who saw
Table 5-3
Support for Anti-Sandinista Policies and Attitudes Regarding the Vietnam Analogy and the Vietnam War, 1982–86

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>El Salvador and Nicaragua Another Vietnam&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arm and support rebels seeking</td>
<td>overthrew of government&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.1 8/83</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Involvement in Central America as in Vietnam&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overthrew government&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Same kind</td>
<td>Will avoid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.2 3/85</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Will End with American Soldiers Fighting There<sup>d</sup> | | |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Military aid<sup>a</sup> | Very concerned | Somewhat concerned | Not very concerned | Not at all concerned |
| III.1 5/85 | 18% | 24% | 47% | 51% |
| Nonmilitary aid<sup>a</sup> | | | | |
| IV.1 5/85 | 35% | 44% | 60% | 63% |
| IV.3 4/86 | 37% | 51% | 46% | 30% |
| Military and nonmilitary aid<sup>a</sup> | | | | |
| V.1 4/86 | 26% | 38% | 65% | 57% |
| V.3 10/86 | 23% | 34% | 60% | 68% |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Military Involvement in Vietnam&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overthrew government&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Should not have</td>
<td>Should have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.2 3/85</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use of Force in Vietnam</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overthrew government&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Avoid sending troops&lt;sup&gt;f&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>All out to win&lt;sup&gt;f&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.1 2/85</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.2 3/85</td>
<td>More force&lt;sup&gt;g&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Less force&lt;sup&gt;g&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>American Cause in Vietnam&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overthrew government&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Worthwhile</td>
<td>Not worthwhile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.1 2/85</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.2 3/85</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Should the United States be involved in trying to overthrow the government of Nicaragua, or not? (ABC News/Washington Post).

<sup>b</sup>U.S. involvement in El Salvador and Nicaragua looks too much as though it could turn out to be another Vietnam for this country.

<sup>c</sup>Do you think the United States is heading for the same kind of involvement in Central America as it had in the Vietnam war, or do you think the United States will avoid that kind of involvement this time?

<sup>d</sup>How concerned are you that U.S. military involvement in Nicaragua will get to the point where American soldiers will end up fighting in that country?

<sup>e</sup>Some people think we should not have become militarily involved in Vietnam, while others think we should have. What is your opinion?

<sup>f</sup>Should we have used more military force, less military force, or did we use about the right amount [in Vietnam]?

<sup>g</sup>Looking back, do you think the United States should have avoided sending any fighting troops to Vietnam, or do you think the United States should have sent troops but gone all out to win the war here?

<sup>h</sup>Overall, would you say the American troops in Vietnam fought in a worthwhile cause or not?
Part Two, Chapter Five

Nicaragua as a major security threat to the United States sided with the president on the decision of the House to refuse a $100 million aid request, compared with only 18 percent of those who thought Nicaragua was not a threat. Overarching these differences is the fact that overall the president enjoyed the support of only 28 percent of the respondents, a reflection of the fact that the administration’s Nicaraguan policies never enjoyed majority support among the American people despite widespread public concern for the encroachment of communism and Soviet influence in Central America.

TRUST IN LEADERSHIP AND SUPPORT FOR CONTRA AID

The trust that Americans place in their leaders was buffeted by the Vietnam War and in turn found expression in the contra aid issue. A widespread decline in public confidence in American institutions and leaders has long been evident (Lipset and Schneider 1983, 1987; Lipset 1985). President Carter drew attention to the trends in his 1979 “malaise” speech in which he spoke of “a fundamental threat to American democracy” and a “crisis of confidence” reflected in “a growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media and other institutions.” Among the trends was a declining sense of political efficacy and a general feeling of despair, alienation, and powerlessness about the future. Ronald Reagan helped to rebuild public confidence in political leaders, but it was dealt another blow by the revelations of the Iran-contra affair (Lipset and Schneider 1987), which once more raised concerns about the abuse of power in the name of national security.

In early 1985, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of the fall of Saigon, ABC News/Washington Post asked a series of questions related to the behavior of political leaders during the Vietnam War and of respondents’ trust in them since. Sixty-one percent indicated they believed that both Johnson and Nixon “often tried to mislead” the American people about the Vietnam War, and two-thirds responded that the way the war was handled tended to make them “personally distrustful of our leaders in Washington at the time.” Just over half also indicated that they trusted leaders today about the same as they did during the war itself (10 percent trusted them less). In the same survey, over two-thirds opposed efforts to overthrow the government in Nicaragua, but 59 percent expressed the view that “Reagan . . . wants the United States to be involved in overthrowing the government of Nicaragua.” Not
surprisingly, a systematic examination of responses to these questions and others related to Central America reveals a close connection between Americans’ support for contra aid, the trust they reposed in their political leaders, and the credibility they accorded leaders’ national security proselytism.

**CONGRESS AND CONTRA AID: A REFLECTION OF THE COLLECTIVE PREFERENCE?**

Differences of opinion about the representative role of members of Congress are as old as the Republic. The classic distinction turns on whether the people’s representatives are to act as delegates directly responsive to constituency opinions or as trustees who, as argued by the English political theorist Edmund Burke, are to determine what the interests of the people are. James Madison underscored its relevance to members of Congress in *Federalist 10* (Madison et al. 1937, 59), where he urged that members of Congress should be “least likely to sacrifice” the national interest to “local prejudice.”

Some issues of foreign policy have direct effects on constituency interests, but most do not. The representative function of Congress in foreign policy-making may therefore be appropriately regarded as one that promotes the collective preferences of the nation rather than a narrower local interest, much as Madison had urged. Even here, however, care must be taken not to distinguish too sharply between the delegate and trustee roles. “When members vote their own beliefs, they tend to be voting the beliefs of their constituencies. That members’ attitudes sometimes conflict with those of their constituencies, and that in those instances they tend to vote against their constituencies, should not obscure the fact that most of the time their attitudes do not conflict with those of their constituencies and they, therefore, vote as their constituencies want them to. Members don’t have to adopt the positions of their constituencies; they, however, often choose to adopt them” (Bernstein 1989, 102).

Presidents’ repeated calls for bipartisanship in foreign policy is effectively an appeal to the collective interest buttressed by the argument that the nation’s foreign and security policy interests are too important to be held hostage to partisan and ideological dispute. The historical record indicates that bipartisan foreign policy voting has declined in recent years compared with the earlier postwar era, and
that partisan and ideological voting, while always evident, has become more pronounced due to the absence of the moderating effects of bipartisanship (McCormick and Wittkopf 1990). Moreover, the extent of partisan voting in Congress generally has tended upward in recent years.

The president’s role as the nation’s chief legislative officer contributes to partisan voting, inasmuch as members of the president’s party take cues from him (Clausen 1973). The decline in bipartisan foreign policy voting in recent years can be linked to the growing importance of these partisan cues in an environment characterized by the absence of a foreign policy consensus. As the Reagan administration’s policies toward Nicaragua likewise failed to enjoy widespread agreement about the collective interest at stake, which would otherwise lead to bipartisanship, partisan and ideological voting should have been expected. This was indeed the case: in effect, members of Congress, whether acting as trustees or delegates, expressed the will of the American people as reflected in mass opinion on the issue of contra aid.

Between 1983 and 1988, Congress took 77 recorded votes on contra aid on which the president took a stand, 32 in the House and 45 in the Senate. The impact of partisanship and ideology in shaping the outcome of these votes—which would be expected given the contours of public opinion—can be determined by classifying members of Congress into their appropriate partisan and ideological groups and then comparing the average proportion of propresidential contra aid votes across each of the groups. Using a simple analysis-of-variance (ANOVA) procedure, the results for the House are shown in Table 5-4 (those for the Senate are similar). They indicate that, in the 98th Congress, and regardless of ideology, Republicans supported the president’s position on 52 percent of the contra aid votes compared with 45 percent among the Democrats. Among the ideological clusters, conservatives (regardless of party) supported the president on 94 percent of the contra aid votes, whereas liberals supported his position on only 5 percent of the votes. The substantive message is striking: collectively partisanship and ideology are exceedingly potent explanations of congressional behavior on the issue, and they are remarkably stable explanations across congresses, much as public opinion was stable across time.

Effectively, ideology matters more than party. While party differences typically account for a 10 to 20 percentage-point disparity in the (average) support that members of Congress gave the president on contra aid issues, ideology accounts for differences (on the average) of 40 percent and more. In the 99th House, for example, Democrats supported Reagan 42 percent of the time, whereas Republicans supported him 60 percent of the time. But liberals (after controlling for the effects of party) supported him only 12 percent of the time, whereas
Table 5-4
Multivariate ANOVA and Multiple Classification Analyses of the Relationship between House Support for the President's Position on Contra Aid Votes and Partisanship and Ideology, 1983–88

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of variation</th>
<th>98th Congress Mean (beta)</th>
<th>99th Congress Mean (beta)</th>
<th>100th Congress Mean (beta)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>62.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>264</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>45.4</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>50.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.07)*</td>
<td>(0.20)**</td>
<td>(0.21)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political ideology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>164</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>93.6</td>
<td>85.4</td>
<td>76.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>48.4</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>64.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>176</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>32.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.86)**</td>
<td>(0.76)**</td>
<td>(0.72)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(R^2)</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td>0.86</td>
<td>0.79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: Cell entries are mean foreign policy support scores.

*Significant at \(p < 0.05\).
**Significant at \(p < 0.01\).

Conservatives supported him 85 percent of the time. The beta (standardized regression) coefficients reflect these sharp differences by showing that ideology is, on the average, five times as powerful as partisanship in explaining congressional voting behavior on the issue of contra aid (which is true in the Senate as well as the House).

**PRESIDENTIAL PERFORMANCE AND POPULAR POLICY SUPPORT**

The once conventional wisdom about the nature of public opinion regarding foreign policy implies that the opinion-policy linkage is a top-down process, with an uninterested, ill-informed public inevitably subject to manipulation by elites in the sense that leaders are able to create public support for their policy initiatives where none existed previously. As suggested earlier, there is now considerable evidence that refutes those views. The American people are able to maintain
coherent, consistent, and politically relevant foreign policy attitudes and beliefs. Accordingly, the opinion-policy nexus is better conceptualized as reciprocal. Still, what continues to elude scholarship is how these reciprocal ties manifest themselves in the policy-making process. Clearly leadership matters, as conventional wisdom suggests, but public opinion also places some limits on what is acceptable behavior on the part of policymakers, elastic though they may be. Evaluations of the president’s job performance by the American people provides insight into the linkage process.

Research on presidential popularity suggests that 1) the public’s evaluation of presidential performance is significantly affected by the state of the nation’s economy and by dramatic political events, both foreign and domestic, and 2) presidents care about their popularity with the American people because it affects their ability to work their will with others involved in the policy process.11 As Richard Neustadt observes in his classic study, Presidential Power (1980, 64), “The Washingtonians who watch a President have more to think about than his professional reputation. They also have to think about his standing with the public outside of Washington. They have to gauge his popular prestige. Because they think about it, public standing is a source of influence for him” (see also Kernell 1986). In short, the more popular a president is, the more likely he is to accomplish his political agenda. This is the essence of what Dennis M. Simon and Charles W. Ostrom (1988) call “the politics of prestige.”

The effects of presidential popularity on American foreign policy performance are explored by Ostrom and Brian L. Job (1986), who conclude that popular presidents have a greater proclivity to engage in the use of force short of war because higher popularity levels “free” them from the domestic constraints that would otherwise inhibit resort to force. The impact of foreign policy behavior on presidential popularity, on the other hand, is examined by Ostrom and Simon (1985), whose analysis invites the conclusion that, historically, the American public has rewarded a confrontational foreign and military policy by showing that threats, the actual use of military force, and talking tough to the Soviets won presidents popular approval, whereas cooperating with the Soviets typically cost them. Specific foreign policy events also frequently act as approval- or disapproval-enhancing phenomena (Marra, Ostrom, and Simon 1990; Ostrom and Simon 1989), as in the case of the Bay of Pigs fiasco during Kennedy’s administration or the Iran-contra revelations during Reagan’s.

Although the research on presidential popularity is rich and extensive, most is based on analyses of aggregate statistical data. Cross-
sectional studies that assess the impact individual beliefs exert on evaluations of presidential performance or that otherwise trace the dynamics of subgroup evaluations of and reactions to presidential performance are rare (cf. Hurwitz, Peffley, and Raymond 1989; Krosnick and Kinder 1990). The remainder of this paper seeks to combine the insights of aggregate-level studies of presidential popularity with the advantages of individual-level analysis to assess the impact that Americans’ opinions regarding Central American policies had on their assessments of Reagan’s job performance. The analysis rests on the assumption that a president’s popularity serves as a transmission belt linking the prevailing climate of opinion to the larger political process by affecting the ability of the president to accomplish his political agenda. Thus the approach posits that the relationship between opinion and policy is an indirect one. It also recognizes the reciprocal nature of the opinion-policy nexus; other things being equal, popular presidents are more likely to win support for specific policies than are unpopular presidents.

LEADERS AND THE LED

The hypothesis that the opinion-policy nexus is reciprocal implies that presidents are able to persuade and to be persuaded. The act of persuasion is central to the role of the president, who not only gives Congress cues about important issues of public policy but whose leadership function vis-à-vis the American people is also an act of cue-giving.

What is noteworthy about the story of contra aid is that presidential leadership did not—in the aggregate—have its intended effect. There is evidence of some increase in popular support for Reagan’s policies over the many years of struggle (Sobel 1989; Lockerbie and Borrelli 1990), but the most striking fact is how little the president’s efforts on this issue mattered. It is all the more so because of Reagan’s popular image as “the Great Communicator” combined with evidence that he, like his predecessors, was able to use political drama to affect opinion in his direction (MacKuen 1983; Ostrom and Simon 1989; see also Lanoue 1989).

At the individual level, however, Reagan’s personal popularity and the popularity of his programs were closely correlated. This is evident from the data in Table 5-5, which show an unambiguous link between positive evaluations of Reagan’s job performance and support for his policies on contra aid. The evidence is especially striking in the case
Table 5-5
The Relationship between Support for Anti-Sandinista Policies and Evaluations of Reagan’s Presidential Performance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reagan Job Performance</th>
<th>Excellent/ approve strongly</th>
<th>Good/ approve</th>
<th>Fair/ disapprove</th>
<th>Poor/ disapprove strongly</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. Arm and support rebels seeking overthrow of government(^a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.1 8/83</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.2 9/83</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.3 1/84</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Overthrow government(^a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.1 2/85</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.2 3/85</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.3 3/86</td>
<td>57%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Military aid(^a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.1 5/85</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.2 3/86</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.4 1/87</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Nonmilitary aid(^a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.1 5/85</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.3 4/86</td>
<td>56%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Military and nonmilitary aid(^a)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.1 4/86</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.2 6/86</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.3 10/86</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)See Table 5-2 for question wording.

of the three questions in 1986 having to do with support for military and nonmilitary aid to the contras. The message is clear: Reagan’s popularity and the popularity of his policies were inextricably intertwined.\(^{12}\)

Partisanship and ideology, as noted earlier, were part of the complex mixture affecting public attitudes toward the president and contra aid: If you were a Republican or conservative, you were also more likely to support both Reagan and his policies. Table 5-6 sorts out the com-
Table 5-6
Multivariate ANOVA and Multiple Classification Analyses of the Relationship between Support for $100 Million in Military and Nonmilitary Aid to the Contras and Evaluations of Reagan’s Job Performance, Partisanship, and Ideology, 1986

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of variation</th>
<th>April 1986&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>October 1986&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mean (beta)</td>
<td>Mean (beta)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1,116</td>
<td>1,014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reagan job performance</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td>1.65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellent</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.32</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>456</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.65</td>
<td>1.66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fair</td>
<td>226</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.81</td>
<td>1.82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.41)**</td>
<td>(0.33)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.62</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>336</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.60</td>
<td>1.63</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>404</td>
<td>406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.08)*</td>
<td>(0.07)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political philosophy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>429</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.58</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>688</td>
<td>427</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.62</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.69</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.14)**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R²</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell entries are categoric means. Responses to the aid questions range from favor (coded 1) to oppose (coded 2).

<sup>a</sup>Do you favor or oppose sending $100 million in military and nonmilitary aid to the contra rebels in Nicaragua?
<sup>b</sup>Congress has authorized that $100 million in military and nonmilitary aid be sent to the rebels fighting the government in Nicaragua. Do you favor or oppose sending that aid?

*Significant at p < 0.05.
**Significant at p < 0.01.

The combined impact of these complementary explanations of public support for contra aid using two 1986 surveys and the same ANOVA procedures used earlier to explore the impact of partisanship and ideology on congressional voting behavior. In one survey, that of April 1986, the empirical results indicate that support for Reagan was the most important factor in explaining public support for contra aid (as determined by the magnitude of the beta coefficients), followed at some distance
by partisanship. In the other, of October 1986, partisanship and ideology were both important, but again at some distance from the president’s popularity as an explanation. Clearly, then, leadership affects policy popularity, even though in the case of contra aid it was insufficient to carry the day.\textsuperscript{13}

\textbf{FOREIGN POLICY ATTITUDES AND PRESIDENTIAL POPULARITY}

Are presidents able to be persuaded as well as persuade? Theory and evidence both say yes. Table 5-7, for example, examines the correlates of Reagan’s job performance as measured in two ABC News/Washington Post surveys. Drawing on the insights of aggregate analyses of presidential popularity, respondents’ evaluation of the direction of the economy was used as one of the predictors. As expected, it turns out to be quite important, even rivaling partisanship as an explanation of Reagan’s popularity. But importantly, attitudes toward contra aid also make a significant contribution.\textsuperscript{14}

The evidence in Tables 5-6 and 5-7 reinforces the point that support for political leaders and their policies are closely intertwined, but it does not clarify the causal mechanism. Did those who approved of Reagan’s job performance do so because they liked his policies, or did the fact that they approved of his performance also cause them to approve of what he wanted to do? Complex analytical procedures and exceptionally rich data are necessary before the correct causal inferences can be made. Still, theory leads to the hypothesis that attitudes toward policies more often shape attitudes toward leaders than vice versa. Because individuals’ opinions regarding specific foreign policy issues are lodged within logically antecedent belief systems that enable individuals to order perceptions into meaningful guides to behavior, beliefs about foreign policy should be related systematically to preferences regarding particular policies. They should also predict evaluations of presidential performance and, in the context of a reciprocal relationship between opinion and policy, act as filters in sorting and screening presidential efforts to persuade.\textsuperscript{15} Because beliefs are not easily changed, presidential policy initiatives at variance with established beliefs—as the Reagan administration’s policies toward Nicaragua were—will encounter resistance.

\textbf{SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS}

The Reagan administration’s Central American policies were played
Table 5-7
Multivariate ANOVA and Multiple Classification Analyses of the Relationship between Evaluations of Reagan’s Job Performance and Attitudes toward Nicaragua Policy, Evaluations of the Economy, Partisanship, and Ideology, 1985 and 1986

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source of variation</th>
<th>February 1985 Mean (beta)</th>
<th>June 1986 Mean (beta)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$N$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overthrow government/contra aid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favor</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>1.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oppose</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>2.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.10)</td>
<td>(0.17)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction of economy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>1.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Same</td>
<td>2.29</td>
<td>2.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worse</td>
<td>2.98</td>
<td>2.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.41)</td>
<td>(0.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Party identification</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republican</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>2.25</td>
<td>2.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democrat</td>
<td>2.68</td>
<td>2.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.35)</td>
<td>(0.34)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political philosophy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>2.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>2.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.11)</td>
<td>(0.12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>0.41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cell entries are categoric means. Evaluations of Reagan range from excellent (coded 1) to poor (coded 4). All differences between or among them are statistically significant at $p < 0.01$.

*Should the United States be involved in trying to overthrow the government of Nicaragua or not?*

*bDo you generally favor or oppose the United States granting military and other aid to the Nicaraguan rebels known as the “contras”?*

out in a variety of settings. With the defeat of Daniel Ortega in the Nicaraguan presidential elections in February 1990, supporters of those policies could claim a measure of victory. But a retrospective judg-
ment on the battle over contra aid at home leaves little doubt that the president failed to win the support he sought, despite the expenditure of considerable presidential capital. This analysis of the climate of opinion in which the battle was waged, as well as the more immediate political environment toward which that climate of opinion contributed, yields important insight into the role that public opinion plays in shaping American foreign policy.

First, it is clear that foreign policy beliefs today are more coherent and predictable than many analysts have heretofore suggested. The Vietnam War caused a breakdown of the Cold War internationalist consensus, and its residue, particularly as it relates to public attitudes toward the use of force and interventionism, remains a potent force in the American polity. The consequence is that the mass public is now inclined toward selective internationalism. Put differently, the case of contra aid is both a product and an illustration of the impact of the Vietnam syndrome. The time-worn aphorism that politics stops at the water's edge no longer applies, as the apparent intensification of partisan and ideological differences long evident on domestic political issues increasingly color foreign policy issues as well. The pronounced differences on attitudes toward contra aid among various partisan identifiers and ideological groups bears this out. Internationalism now wears two faces, a militant one and a cooperative one, and the public mood, once thought to be fickle and unstable, has crystallized and is firmly anchored.16

Second, public opinion mattered in the domestic battle over contra aid. In a very real sense congressional behavior mirrored the attitudes consistently expressed by the public on the issue. In the aggregate, members of Congress transmitted the collective preferences of the American people into the policy-making process almost as though they were instructed delegates, and despite the fact that their behavior was at variance with the preferences of a generally popular president. More abstractly, members of Congress expressed the dominant, anti-interventionist climate of opinion evident since American withdrawal from Vietnam which dogged an administration determined, if left to its own devices, to do more. In this way the climate of opinion constrained the policy options available to the administration to cope with the Sandinistas and motivated Congress, as a body, to moderate the administration's policy preferences.

This is not to say that public preferences were effectively expressed in each case that the Congress confronted. After all, Congress did provide
some funding, and public opinion on this issue, like others, served as a poor guide to the precise course of action on specific issues that policymakers typically face daily. But the fact that the public embraced a consistent and predictable disposition toward noninvolvement over a prolonged period doubtless assisted the Congress as it considered specific requests for various levels and types of funding. Thus, while the causal linkage is unclear, we can assert that Congress represented the collective preference expressed in public attitudes.

Third, public opinion also mattered in that it affected evaluations of the president. The relationship between policy and opinion has long been thought of as a top-down process, with public attitudes easily manipulated by elites. In fact, however, the American people maintain coherent foreign policy beliefs which affect their evaluations of policies and policymakers alike and undermine the leader-driven, top-down process of opinionation. The nexus between policy and opinion is therefore better conceptualized as reciprocal. We posit that the causal linkage from opinion to policy is an indirect one mediated through evaluations of presidential performance. Presidents care about their standing with the American people because it affects presidents’ ability to work their will with others, notably members of Congress. Because they care, the American people are able to affect presidents’ policies and behavior. In this way public opinion comes to play an important, albeit indirect, role in shaping the nation’s conduct abroad. In the specific case of contra aid, the climate of opinion militated against the Reagan administration’s preferences for a more assertive policy.

Public opinion was clearly opposed to contra aid throughout the Reagan presidency. It was also divided about the wisdom of militant interventionism generally, and of intervention in Central America in particular. Reagan’s strongest supporters were among the strongest proponents of involvement; conversely, his strongest detractors were least supportive of the range of available interventionist strategies. How much those factors directly affected policy choices contemplated by the White House remains to be determined, but this was hardly an environment ripe for policy consensus. This is so because divisions over the interventionist thrust characteristic of post-World War II American foreign policy lie at the core of the breakdown of the Cold War foreign policy consensus and are now deeply embedded in the domestic climate of opinion about America’s world role. At the aggregate level Reagan generally enjoyed widespread popular support, but the sources of that support closely tracked partisan and ideological lines. Reagan’s policy preferences regarding Nicaragua tended to exacerbate rather than ameliorate these
divisions, and his popularity in the domestic political system as a whole doubtless suffered as a result. Thus the story of contra aid is a story of policy failure in that the president failed to alter the dominant climate of opinion and thus failed to realize domestic support for his objectives. But it is also a story of success in that the American people effectively constrained the range of the president’s viable policy choices.

NOTES

The authors thank Diana McDuffee and the staff of the Institute for Research in Social Science at the University of North Carolina and the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research for making available the data analyzed in the paper, and Mary Angela Schauf for helping with the data analysis. The research was made possible in part by a grant from the Center for Life Course and Population Studies at Louisiana State University.

1. This chapter uses the term “contra aid” in a generic sense to refer to all efforts by the Reagan administration to support the insurgents opposed to the Sandinista regime and otherwise to bring pressure to bear on the regime. The term refers to five ways in which public opinion questions were formulated: namely, efforts by the United States to 1) arm and 2) support the rebels seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government; U.S. involvement in 3) trying to overthrow the government in Nicaragua; and sending 4) military and/or 5) nonmilitary aid to the contras. Technically the Reagan administration never embraced overthrow of the Sandinista regime as official policy, although it came close to doing so on several occasions. Furthermore, a number of specific actions, such as CIA-backed efforts to mine the harbors of Nicaragua and to supply arms to the contras at the time the Boland amendment restrictions were operative, could have been interpreted in the public eye as efforts to overthrow the government.

2. The analytical utility of the concept has been demonstrated by Cohen (1957) and Lepper (1971).

3. The cooperative (CI) and militant internationalism (MI) constructs were first derived from the quadrennial studies of mass foreign policy attitudes sponsored by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations (CCFR) beginning in late 1974. See Rielly (1975, 1979, 1983, 1987) for discussions of the CCFR surveys and Maggiotto and Wittkopf (1981), Wittkopf (1981, 1986, 1987, 1990a), and Wittkopf and Maggiotto (1983a, 1983b) for discussions of the CI/MI construct as it evolved through various iterations of these surveys. Additional evidence for cooperative and militant internationalism as dominant modes of thinking about foreign policy can be found in Hinckley (1988a) and Holsti and Rosenau (1988, 1990).

4. Reagan used the phrases “our brothers” and “freedom fighters” on numerous occasions and often referred to Cuba. The term “new isolationists” was used in a nationwide address on May 9, 1984, while the “history will hold them accountable” judgment was contained in his remarks before Jewish
leaders at a White House briefing on March 5, 1986. These same remarks also included the reference to Khadafy and the Ayatollah, while the reference to Harlingen, Texas, was contained in Reagan's remarks to contra supporters at the White House on March 3, 1986. The official documents containing the quotations from the president cited in this paragraph can be found in Public Papers of the President of the United States: Ronald Reagan (1988).

5. According to the Congressional Research Service (Copson 1988, 4), U.S. contra aid from 1981 through 1984 was estimated to be $72 million, $62 million of which was provided by Congress and $10 million of which came from CIA discretionary funds (cf. Serafino 1989). In the period from 1985 to early 1988, Congress provided $130 million, and contributions to the contras from private sources were estimated to have been as high as $25 million. In addition, the congressional committees investigating the Iran-contra affair reported that $3.8 million of the $16 million in profits from the sale of arms to Iran was diverted to the contras (U.S. Congress 1987a, 307, 436; Sobel 1993, 7).

6. Differences among elites are equally striking. Using a somewhat different methodology to delineate the fourfold belief system typology based on the CI/MI construct described above, Holsti and Rosenau (1990, 114) found that more than 80 percent of the hardliners in their 1984 sample of American leaders agreed with the Reagan administration's policy of supporting the contras, but that only 14 percent of the accommodationists did so. Similar proportions characterized the differences among elites on the issue of sending military advisers to El Salvador (which the Reagan administration did in 1981).

7. In April 1988 the Americans Talk Security (1989, 292) project asked about the problems facing Central American countries. Illegal drug trafficking was deemed "very serious" by 87 percent of the respondents, followed by poverty (81 percent), government corruption (73 percent), military-run governments (57 percent), communism (55 percent), and U.S. interference in their affairs (34 percent). Earlier, in April 1984, a CBS News/New York Times survey asked: "Which do you think has more to do with the political unrest in Central America—is it more because of influence by Communists, or is it more because the people are very poor?" The communists and poverty came in about the same (38 versus 37 percent), and 10 percent of the respondents ascribed the causes to the two sources equally (15 percent had no opinion).

8. In an Americans Talk Security (1989, 175) survey in December 1988, 70 percent of those interviewed agreed with the proposition that "The Vietnam War showed the American people that U.S. officials who are deeply involved in conducting the war cannot be trusted to give reliable information to the public."

9. Ideology was measured by grouping members of Congress into one of three ideological categories—conservative, moderate, or liberal—on the basis of their voting record as rated by the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). The members within each group for each administration were determined by pooling the data for the relevant Congresses for each president. The categories themselves were derived as follows. First, a mean ADA score was calculated for each chamber and each Congress. Conservatives were then
defined as those members whose ADA scores were more than half a standard deviation below the mean for each chamber and Congress; moderates as those whose ADA scores were equal to or within half a standard deviation above or below the mean; and liberals as those whose ADA scores were more than half a standard deviation above the mean.

10. The legislative-executive battle over El Salvador was a precursor to the contra aid battle, much as public opinion on contra aid was anticipated by public opinion toward El Salvador. Senator Jesse Helms (R., N.C.) proposed an amendment to the foreign aid authorization bill in 1981 that was effectively a vote on military aid to El Salvador. Similarly, he proposed an amendment to a continuing appropriations bill in 1982 that also was an El Salvador aid vote. Both were supported by margins of 75 to 80 percent by Republicans but by less than 10 to 36 percent by Democrats. Both were also supported overwhelmingly by conservatives and opposed overwhelmingly by liberals.


12. That conclusion is supported by other evidence. For example, the October 1983 Harris poll taken shortly after the invasion of Grenada found that more than 90 percent of those who rated Reagan’s overall handling of the presidency as good or excellent supported the invasion, but only half of those who rated his performance as poor to fair supported it.

13. Questions from three of the Harris surveys used elsewhere in this paper that asked respondents to react to a range of Central American policy options were used to create more general attitude scales reasonably interpreted as measuring attitudes toward intervention in Central America. These were used together with partisanship and ideology in a dummy variable regression model as an alternative way to examine the impact of foreign policy beliefs on Reagan’s popularity. The results demonstrate that those more strongly oriented toward intervention in Central America were also more likely to evaluate Reagan positively, even after controlling for their political orientations. This fits with other evidence in this paper and reinforces the general notion that Reagan drew his greatest foreign policy support from those inclined toward militant interventionism. The reverse side, of course, is that those opposed to intervention in Central America—which we can assume to be a predisposition firmly in place before Reagan’s election—were inclined to give Reagan low marks on his job performance. It was this unfavorable side of the political
environment, sustained by the post-Vietnam climate of opinion, that worked against realization of the administration's policy preferences.

14. The interaction between party and contra aid is significant at \( p < 0.05 \) in the model for 1986. For the other model the interaction between party and the economy variable and between party and ideology is significant at \( p \leq 0.01 \).

15. See Wittkopf (1990) for an examination of the relationship between foreign policy beliefs and attitudes toward particular foreign policy issues and popular evaluations of political leaders.

16. Whether the bifurcation of the internationalist attitudes of the American people will persist in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf crisis and war of 1990–91 remains to be seen. For some preliminary evidence that suggests it will, see Wittkopf (1994, forthcoming).