Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics

The “Rally-'Round-the-Flag” Phenomenon and the Diversionary Use of Force

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Subject: World Politics Online Publication Date: Jun 2017
DOI: 10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.518

Summary and Keywords

The observation that groups unify in the face of common threats is long-standing. At the level of the nation-state, this is called the “rally-'round-the-flag” phenomenon. In the case of the United States, the rally phenomenon is measured as a surge of public approval for the president when the nation is involved in an international crisis.

Two hypotheses have been offered for why this surge of support occurs: (1) *patriotism*, as individuals respond to a threat by identifying with an in-group, in this case the nation and its president; and (2) *opinion leadership*, as the information environment changes because opposition leaders fall silent or support the president during a crisis and a portion of the public follows those elite partisan cues.

Through three waves of scholarship, empirical evidence has cumulated about whether, when, why, and how much people rally in response to international crises (although much of the evidence is based on dynamics within the United States). The public’s reaction to a crisis is not automatic; sometimes public approval for the president goes up; other times the president’s approval ratings go down. A positive rally effect is associated with a variety of conditions, such as how prominently the event is reported, whether the White House actively frames the issue, the amount of criticism from opposition elites, and whether the country is at war or has recently concluded a war. The sizes of such rallies are variable, but on average, rallies in response to the deployment of force or international crises are small. Only wars (or other spectacular events like a large-scale terrorist attack) consistently provoke sizable rallies and these big events elicit an emotional reaction from citizens and a self-identification with the nation. Both hypotheses —patriotism and opinion leadership—are helpful in explaining why rallies occur and why they taper off over time.

The “diversionary theory of war” or the “diversionary use of force” is, for obvious reasons, a companion literature to the scholarship on rally effects. The logic is simple: if the public rallies around its leader in the face of external threats, then the possibility exists that politicians will intentionally create crises or deploy military forces or start wars to enhance their own political fortunes. Scholars have spent much effort trying to locate patterns of diversionary behavior by American presidents and other world leaders with inconsistent and inconclusive results.

But the cumulative findings from the rally-'round-the-flag scholarship show that leaders can’t expect much of a public rally from any but the most spectacular of international crises, such as full-scale war. These findings from the rally literature help to explain the lack of consistent empirical support for diversionary theory.

date: 10 July 2017

Keywords: empirical international relations theory, rally round the flag, diversionary theory of war, diversionary use of force, in-group, patriotism, national identification, group identities, 9/11, leadership cues

Introduction

> [A] differentiation arises between ourselves, the we-group, or in-group, and everybody else, or the other-groups, out-groups … The relation of comradeship and peace in the we-group and that of hostility and war towards other-groups are correlative to each other. The exigencies of war with outsiders are what make peace inside.
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> —Sumner, 1906, p. 12; quoted in Stein, 1976, p. 143
>
> Be it thy course, to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels.
>
> —Shakespeare, *Henry IV*, act 4, scene 3; quoted in Levy, 1989, p. 259

The idea that people unite when facing a common threat is commonplace and long-standing.[1] We observe, for example, that leaders sometimes enjoy a surge of support from their citizens when the country confronts a foreign crisis or enters a war. Such surges are known as the “rally-'round-the-flag” phenomenon. This review aims to show that, over time, the state of knowledge has cumulated about whether, when, why, and how much citizens “rally” in response to such events.

Now take the next logical baby step: leaders might intentionally provoke foreign crises for their own political gain. The “wag the dog” narrative is simple and intuitive. The story line shows up in fiction, as early as Shakespeare, in contemporary newspaper op-eds questioning politicians’ motives, and in academic theory dating back more than a half-century. Scholars have tried, and tried again, to empirically demonstrate the truth of such cynical behavior on the part of leaders, whether labeled as “diversionary use of force” or the “diversionary theory of war.”

Ironically, much of the intrigue about the rally-'round-the-flag phenomenon is tied to this suspicion that leaders intentionally incite rallies for political gain. Yet the cumulative evidence from empirical work on the rally effect suggests that leaders have few incentives to do so. This review will conclude with a few observations about the paucity of cumulative empirical knowledge within this companion theory about the diversionary use of force.

date: 10 July 2017

What We Know About the Rally-'Round-the-Flag Phenomenon

What do we know about the rally-'round-the-flag phenomenon? Can an American president, for example, expect an automatic surge of support every time he deploys military units abroad? When presidential approval ratings spike in response to an international crisis, is this a patriotic reflex by the public?[2] Or is the surge of support caused by a change in the information environment, as criticism by other political elites is temporarily suppressed? Under what conditions will people unify to such an extent that the president’s political fortunes are significantly benefited?

The academic literature on this topic—which is disproportionately focused on the United States—has evolved over time, making corrections along the way in our understanding of how and why rallies occur and how politically significant they are. A key feature in the development of knowledge on this topic has to do with case selection. Early studies—which incorporated different types of dramatic international events ranging from military action to diplomatic initiatives to superpower summits—have been criticized for a selectivity bias toward well-known historical episodes (see Newman & Forcehimes, 2010, p. 145). Later studies used more comprehensive data sets that had been independently constructed (including either all U.S. deployments of military force short of kinetic engagement or all international crises involving the United States). Finally, the in-depth evaluation of one extraordinary event, namely, the American public’s reaction to the attacks on September 11, 2001, helped bring more nuance to our understanding of the rally phenomenon.

Early Scholarship

Scholars in the first wave of rally phenomenon investigations attributed it to patriotism but, frankly, in an off-handed fashion, without looking much deeper into the psychological or social dynamics involved. To be fair, these scholars were only tangentially interested in the rally phenomenon; they were more focused on understanding the variety of factors that affect presidential popularity over time. Short-term rallies of support in response to international events were just one of these factors.

John Mueller (1970) is credited with first specifying a rally event as “1) international and 2) involv[ing] the United States and particularly the president directly; … 3) specific, dramatic, and sharply focused”(p. 21).[3] The public response was seen as short-term patriotic boosts of support that “interrupt” a president’s “general decline of popularity.” Notably, Mueller distinguishes these favorable surges in support in response to dramatic international happenings from the deleterious effect of an ongoing war, with the latter adding “an additional loss” to the natural decline in presidential popularity (p. 25).

In these early accounts, scholars described the increase in public approval of the president as an automatic patriotic reflex. Polsby (1964), for example, observed that “[i]nvariably, the popular response to a President during international crisis is favorable, regardless of the wisdom of the policies he pursues” (p. 25, quoted in Mueller, 1970, p. 21). Waltz (1967) mused: “The first effect of an international crisis is to increase the President’s popular standing. One may wonder if this is so only when the response of the President is firm or he otherwise gives the impression of being able to deal with the situation effectively … It is, in fact, not necessary to add such qualifications to the statement” (p. 272, quoted in Lian & Oneal, 1993, p. 279). Lee (1977) articulated this hypothesis explicitly: “[T]he president becomes the focus of national attention in times of crisis … symbolizing national unity and power … The average man’s reaction will include a feeling of patriotism in supporting presidential action” (p. 253).[4]

Further, first-wave scholars saw the public reaction to dramatic international events as having a significant and positive—albeit short-lived—effect on presidential approval ratings (MacKuen, 1983; Mueller 1970). Lee (1977), for example, observed that “a President *can count on an increased popularity after a salient international event*, but he cannot expect it to last for very long” (p. 256, emphasis added).[5] Ostrom and Simon (1985) agreed: “Our results indicate that summitry as well as sabre rattling can be expected to enhance the president’s public support” (p. 356).

Military actions, in particular, were thought to boost a president’s ratings. MacKuen (1983) observed that a “direct and forceful action” can be expected “to yield a more substantial (6.69 point) shift in judgement” (pp. 188–189). He stated that “on the whole, presidents can improve their standing by wrapping themselves in the flag” (p. 188).[6] Scholars began to argue that American presidents had rational incentives to routinely use military force for their own domestic political benefit (e.g., Ostrom & Job, 1986; see also Hess & Orphanides, 1995).

As Oneal and Bryan (1995) summed up this early research, “most previous research indicates that involvement in crises and other dramatic international events increases a president’s approval rating in public opinion polls by 5 to 7 percentage points. The selection of cases has, however, been a persistent concern” (p. 381). The second wave of researchers, critical that the first-wave scholars had unwittingly cherry-picked high-profile cases, were more conscientious about employing independently generated data sets.

A Second Wave: Casting Doubt on Patriotism and the Political Significance of the Rally Effect

In the second wave, scholars investigated the rally phenomenon in its own right. In general, second-wave scholarship: (a) emphasized the variability in the public’s reaction to international crises, sometimes supportive of the president but often not; (b) discovered the small amount, on average, in the extent to which public opinion moves; (c) explained these movements in public opinion as a response to a changed informational environment and partisan leadership cues; and (d) concluded that presidents have little incentive to incite crises for political benefit.

To begin with, second-wave scholarship challenged the idea that rally events are “special moments” of patriotism. Brody (1984) and Brody and Shapiro (1991, pp. 61–63)[7] highlighted how similar types of international events—say, the capture of an American vessel and crew by North Korea and, later, a vessel and crew seized by Cambodia—could elicit a variable public response in terms of approval ratings for the president, with a decline of support in one instance and a surge in the other.[8] “This difference,” Brody (1984) surmised, “undermines the claim that the public always rallies behind the president out of some sort of reflexive patriotic response” (p. 42).

Instead, Brody (1984) hypothesized that “the key contextual element is the nature of the media information available to the public” (p. 42) and, more specifically, “the volume of criticism” voiced in the media about the president (Brody & Shapiro, 1991, p. 56). The scenario unfolds as follows: when a crisis happens suddenly, the president has a monopoly on information; in this context, opposition leaders have an incentive to “remain silent or to be vaguely supportive.” Reporters, whose journalistic norms and routines lead them to reflect the debate among officials in Washington, highlight only the administration’s narrative when critics fall silent; this creates an “unusually uncritical mix of news about presidential performance” and sends a signal to the public that the president is doing his job well. Finally, the public responds by temporarily increasing its approval of the job performance by the president (Brody & Shapiro, 1991, p. 64). If, however, the opposition leadership within Congress remains critical of the president despite the crisis, then the media coverage will also be critical, and the public will follow its normal partisan leadership cues with no positive rally effect. The public’s assessment of presidential performance might even become more unfavorable. Notably, this explanation dovetails with the academic theories on leadership cues (e.g., Zaller, 1992) and on how the mainstream media “indexes” the Washington debate that occurs among government officials (e.g., Bennett, 1990; Hallin, 1984; Sigal, 1973; Zaller & Chiu, 1996; see also Entman, 2004).

This “opinion leadership” explanation gained dominance among scholars. Baker and Oneal (2001), for example, found that “when the White House makes an effort to draw attention to a dispute, the likelihood of a rally increases, suggesting that the public is responding to the cues it receives from important political leaders such as the president

and prominent members of the opposition party” (p. 682). They conclude—again largely because the public does not automatically respond favorably to all crises—that “the patriotism explanation for the rally effect does not appear to be well founded” (p. 682). “The most widely accepted explanation for the rally-round-the-flag phenomenon,” Groeling and Baum (2008) declared, “is a relative absence of elite criticism during the initial stages of foreign crises” (p. 1065).[9]

Beyond theorizing about why rallies occur, second-wave scholars also cast doubt on the political benefits accruing to a president as a result of the nation’s involvement in international crises. As mentioned earlier, the second-wave scholars criticized first-wave scholars for deficiencies in how they selected their cases, saying the first wavers had a bias toward well-known and prominently reported crises. Taking more rigor in case selection, Lian and Oneal (1993), for example, used a dataset originally compiled by Blechman and Kaplan (1978), and updated by Zelikow (1987), which included all cases when the United States deployed the military but did not engage in combat. These are “political uses of force.” When Lian and Oneal (1993) analyzed “all major uses of force [read deployment of military forces without kinetic engagement] from 1950 through 1984,”[10] they found that the “mean change in the president’s approval rating is 0% … Even well-publicized uses of force during a crisis boost the president’s standing only 2%–3% on average” (p. 277).

Importantly, this small-average-rally-effect finding is replicated with other data sets that include crises where military force is actually used. Oneal and Bryan (1995, p. 382) studied crises from 1950 to 1985 using cases identified by the International Crisis Behavior Project; they found an average rally of only 1.4 percent for 41 crises.[11] Baker and Oneal (2001) analyzed cases between 1933 and 1992 drawn from the militarized interstate disputes (MID) data and found “the rally effect is neither as sizable nor as certain as anecdotal accounts would contend” (p. 682).[12] They found that “militarized disputes that occur during a time of crisis”—but not during an ongoing war—“yield rallies of about 3.5 percentage points on average” (p. 682). “When an independently selected collection of rally events is employed to ensure against selection bias,” they conclude, “rallies are minor … Under the most favorable circumstances, a president cannot expect a rally greater than 5 percentage points, with considerable uncertainty regarding this figure. Given the risks involved, this seems insufficiently large to motivate presidents to act irresponsibly” (p. 681).

Second-wave studies also model the conditions wherein rallies (albeit modest on average) were likely or not likely to occur.[13] They found that the prominence of reporting about the event is key (Lian & Oneal, 1993, p. 294; Oneal & Bryan, 1995, p. 394). Both “White House statements and bipartisan support for the administration’s policies” are associated with higher rallies (Baker & Oneal, 2001, p. 661). The forceful manner with which the president responds (James & Rioux, 1998, p. 800) and the nature and purpose of the military action (Jentleson, 1992; Jentleson & Britton, 1998; Murray, 2006; Russett & Nincic, 1976) also matter. Presidents are more likely to benefit from the use of military force that is framed as

defensive or as restraining international aggressors. One robust and long-standing empirical finding is that the public is unlikely to respond favorably to new crises and uses of force when the nation is already at war (Baker & Oneal, 2001; Lian & Oneal, 1993; Mueller, 1970; Oneal & Bryan, 1995; Ostrom & Job, 1986).

A few empirical findings did not fit well with the general themes from second-wave research but are important to reflect upon in light of later scholarship. First, Baker and Oneal (2001) noticed a category of events that do provoke significant rallies: “[O]nly those rare instances—just 2% of the cases—in which the president leads the nation into a full-scale war consistently resulted in sizable rallies” (p. 671). This finding raises the question about whether a different psychological and societal dynamic might be involved in these rare instances when the country faces a serious external threat and potentially high domestic costs. Along these lines, Parker (1995) found a pattern in the public response to the Persian Gulf War not easily explained by the opinion-leadership model. The rally, she found, is not just a surge of approval for the president, but includes systemwide feelings of allegiance: it causes a change in the public’s approval of Congress, its trust in government, and even its opinions about the economy. Such a government-wide response by the public looks a lot like patriotism.

Post-9/11: Not All Rallies Are Alike; Patriotism and Emotion Revisited

It was the outsized public reaction to the attacks on September 11, 2001, that revived the patriotism explanation for the rally-'round-the-flag phenomenon, at least for certain high-profile, threatening events that affect the whole nation. The burst of patriotism within the United States following the terrorist attacks was palpable. The public response was a replay—but on a bigger scale—of what Parker (1995) found in the public’s reaction during the Persian Gulf War in 1991; the public again exhibited a surge of allegiance to the nation, its president, and its institutions (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003, p. 40).[14]

The role of patriotism in response to widely perceived external threats came back into focus, this time with scholars (a) rediscovering sociological and psychological explanations for why people unite in times of serious threat; (b) highlighting that different events can provoke varied public emotional responses and therefore different causal explanations, or, in other words, that rally events are heterogeneous[15]; and (c) arguing that the two hypotheses about why rallies occur—patriotism and opinion leadership—are not mutually exclusive.

To be blunt, the societal dynamics after 9/11 belied the overly simplistic treatment of patriotism by second-wave scholarship. As noted, earlier scholars had rejected patriotism as the source of public rallies because similar events elicited different responses. If patriotism underlay these jumps in public approval for the president, they reasoned, the public should respond automatically and favorably every time. But, as the response to 9/11 made clear, not all crises or conflicts provide an equal stimulus or level of emotion. The average American citizen will respond differently to a short-term, low-cost military

action or show of force that is out of mind as soon as it leaves the front pages (e.g., a retaliatory air strike or a strategic deployment of aircraft carriers) than to a surprise attack that kills thousands of civilians, collapses skyscrapers, and sets the Pentagon ablaze. Oddly, it took this one extreme event to recapture the early insight that it is serious collective threats—“an outside threat” which is seen “as a menace to the whole group”—that can cause significant internal unification (Coser, 1956)[16] and that people tend to react to such threats by identifying with in-groups and vilifying out-groups (Sherif, 1966; Tajfel et al., 1971).

The post-9/11 scholarship rediscovered these relevant theoretical foundations. Kam and Kinder (2007), for example, found a link between 9/11 and the “activation of ethnocentrism” (p. 336). Gibler, Hutchinson, and Miller (2012), in a cross-national study, found that certain types of external threat—territorial conflict, in particular—elicit national identification. Ariely (2016) found that countries which experience “terror or casualties from external conflicts … exhibit higher levels of national pride” (p.1). Lai and Reiter (2005), analyzing the rally-'round-the-flag phenomenon in Britain, found that “rallies are most likely when there is an intense and direct threat to the national interest” (p. 255). Scholars argued that in certain contexts, such as a national emergency or a war, or a conflict over territory, the idea of the nation comes to the fore, and people begin to identify with the national group; when the sense of threat dies down, a different group referent may take over, such as partisan affiliation, and an individual may again identify with their party positions (Kam & Ramos, 2008, pp. 621–622; see also Gibler, Hutchinson, & Miller, 2012, p. 1658). As Gibler et al. (2012) observe, “The social context provided by external stimuli determines which group identities are relevant to the individual and, consequently, affects who and how the individual views as out-groups” (p. 1658). Emotions matter too. Threatening events like 9/11 provoke feelings of superiority for an in-group and contempt for an out-group (Kam & Kinder, 2007); citizens feel anger and look to the president, or more specifically their commander-in-chief, to respond to a transgressor (Lambert, Schott, & Scherer, 2011; see also Huddy & Feldman, 2011). The United States has deployed military forces hundreds of times, participated in armed conflicts of various intensities, and faced numerous international crises, but only a few of these instances would be expected to elicit such a strong public response as to result in significant internal unification.

Third-wave scholars also see the patriotism and opinion-leadership hypotheses as not being mutually exclusive. Indeed, in times of full-scale war or severe crisis, the patriotic response of the public actually helps to explain why opposition leaders, and even the media, refrain from criticism—they fear the public blowback that might result from criticisms of the president (Hetherington & Nelson, 2003, p. 38). As Kam and Ramos (2008, pp. 621–622; see also Brody, 2003, p. 12) explain, patriotism is important in the initial reaction to an event such as 9/11, as individuals shift their self-identification to be with the nation; but over time, as the threat recedes, individuals shift back to their partisan identities. In this second phase, an increase in cues from partisan leaders heard through the media help to explain the decay of the rally over time. “Although the opinion

leadership school seems less persuasive than patriotism school in accounting for the *origins* of rally effects,” Hetherington and Nelson (2003) observe, “it goes a long way toward explaining the *duration* of rallies once they occur” (p. 38). Likewise, Colaresi (2007) incorporates aspects of both explanations, arguing that if there is reason to suspect a president of creating a crisis for personal benefit (i.e., if the president is losing popularity, facing a scandal, or nearing an election), then the public is likely to be skeptical of his motives and less likely to rally. This does not mean that patriotism is unimportant, only that patriotism is “not blind” (p. 131). People can be both patriotic and discerning.

Overall, the post-9/11 scholarship helps clarify a distinction that needs to be made between the “diversionary use of force”—which includes the deployment of military forces short of war or low-level conflicts—and the “diversionary theory of war”—which would seem to refer to much more intense international conflict. And looking back at the roots of the external-conflict-creates-internal-cohesion hypothesis, a threatening episode with magnitude seems implied, not minor military events or smaller international crises. Again, Coser (1956) stated the conditions for unification: “as long as the outside threat *is perceived to concern the entire group* … conflict has an integrative rather than a disruptive effect” (p. 94, emphasis added). To capture the attention and generate concern of the whole nation requires a big event. As 9/11 highlighted, such extreme events can cause internal cohesion and produce a politically meaningful rally.

A Comment on the Diversionary Use of Force and the Diversionary Theory of War

The idea that leaders might intentionally create conflicts with other nations to divert their citizens’ attention away from domestic problems and to gain political support for themselves is intuitively compelling. As the rally-'round-the-flag scholarship shows, however, leaders can’t expect much of a public rally from any but the most spectacular of international crises, such as full-scale war. But to instigate a major conflict, one that affects the whole country, obviously carries its own risks. Ongoing war with casualties can soon become corrosive to a president’s popularity (Eichenberg, 2005; Larson, 1996; Mueller, 1970, 1973; Ostrom & Job, 1986), as was seen with George W. Bush and the Iraq War. The effects of short popular wars do not necessarily have staying power to carry the next election, as was seen with George H. W. Bush’s failure to win re-election after the Persian Gulf War (see also Chiozza & Goemans, 2004). So if manageable conflicts short of war result in small, fleeting, unreliable rallies, while larger-scale conflicts will provoke an initial rally but are uncontrollable and potentially damaging in the long term, then there is little incentive for the president to create crises for political gain.

Hence it is not surprising that the empirical evidence gained after scores of studies about whether leaders engage in diversionary behavior is so mixed, contradictory, and inconclusive. Clearly, it is not for want of trying.[17]

Focusing on American presidents, scholars have tried and then tried again to find consistent evidence that domestic political considerations routinely inspire presidential decisions to deploy force, but without clear cumulative results (e.g., Gowa, 1998; Meernik, 2001; Meernik &Waterman, 1996; Mitchell & Moore, 2002). Some scholars have found a connection to presidents’ approval ratings (DeRouen, 1995; Foster & Palmer, 2006; James & Oneal, 1991; Ostrom & Job, 1986), while others have not (DeRouen, 2000; Howell & Pevehouse, 2005; Mitchell & Moore, 2002; Moore & Lanoue, 2003). Some have linked conflict initiation with the electoral calendar (e.g., Hess & Orphanides, 1995); but other scholars dispute this connection (DeRouen, 2000; Gowa, 1998; Howell & Pevehouse, 2005; Moore & Lanoue, 2003). With more consistency, scholars find a connection with a troubled economy (DeRouen, 2000; Fordham, 1998; Howell & Pevehouse, 2005; James & Oneal, 1991); but even here, others do not (DeRouen, 1995; Gowa, 1998). Case studies, too, fail to offer compelling accounts of American presidents deploying force to divert the public’s attention from domestic troubles (Blomdahl, 2016; Hendrickson, 2002; Hall, Hendrickson, & Polak, 2013; see also Cramer, 2006). Of course, American presidents *do* take advantage of the media opportunity once a conflict is initiated to cultivate an image of strength and competence.

The conclusion that the diversionary use of force is an outright “myth” (Meernik & Waterman, 1996)—if interpreted to mean that diversion *never* happens—might be too strong; instead, it might be rare. This proposition gains credence when you stop to think (a) that leaders would need a plausible international opportunity to intentionally cause a diversionary conflict (Meernik, 1994) or risk appearing politically motivated, which would only worsen their political fortunes (Colaresi, 2007; Lian & Oneal, 1993, p. 278); (b) that other domestic actors (such as the opposition party in Congress in the U.S. case) may constrain executive decisions about the use of military force, particularly if it is a full-scale war requiring authorization and funding (Howell & Pevehouse, 2005); (c) that it takes an actual war—or alternative spectacular event that affects the whole country—to achieve much internal cohesion; (d) that leaders have less extreme options available to address domestic problems or to distract attention; (e) that given the risks of war, a leader’s domestic situation would need to be desperate; and (f) that even then, only certain personality types—certainly not all leaders—would involve the country in a crisis and send citizens into harm’s way for their own political gain (Foster & Keller, 2010, 2014).

Conclusion

The rally-'round-the-flag scholarship has cumulated empirical evidence over time, at least for the United States. We know that rallies do accompany international crises (e.g., DeRouen, 2000, 326; James & Rioux, 1998; see also Tir & Singh, 2013). A positive rally effect is associated with a variety of conditions, such as how prominently the event is reported, whether the White House actively frames the issue, the amount of criticism from opposition elites, and whether the country is at war or has recently concluded a war. The sizes of such rallies are variable, but on average, rallies in response to the deployment of force or international crises are small (Baker & Oneal, 2001; James & Rioux, 1998; Lian & Oneal, 1993; Oneal & Bryan, 1995). Only wars (or other spectacular events like a large-scale terrorist attack) consistently provoke sizable rallies (Baker & Oneal, 2001, p. 671; see also Lai & Reiter, 2005; Rogov, 2016) and these big events elicit an emotional reaction from citizens (Lambert, Schott, & Scherer, 2010) and a self-identification with the nation (Kam & Ramos, 2008; Parker, 1995; Rogov, 2016). Both of the most common hypotheses—patriotism and opinion leadership—are helpful in explaining why rallies occur and why they taper off over time.

Overall, the evidence about the rally-'round-the-flag phenomenon that has accreted over time helps to explain why its companion theory, the diversionary use of force, has not fared as well.

Acknowledgments

Thanks are due to Nora Khatcherian and Kate Schaefer for excellent research assistance.

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Notes:

(1.) One famous use of this logic was by President Reagan in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly on September 21, 1987: “In our obsession with antagonisms of the moment, we often forget how much unites all the members of humanity. Perhaps we need some outside, universal threat to make us recognize this common bond. I occasionally think how quickly our differences worldwide would vanish if we were facing an alien threat from outside this world.”

(2.) One subtheme in the rally literature focuses on disaggregating the public response by partisanship (see Baum, 2002; Behr, 2006; Callaghan & Virtanen, 1993; Edwards & Swenson, 1997; Norrander & Wilcox, 1993; Sigelman & Conover, 1981). This topic is beyond the scope of this review.

(3.) Mueller (1970) incorporates six categories of cases, including sudden military interventions (e.g., the Korean War or Bay of Pigs); major military developments during war (e.g., China’s intervention in Korea); major diplomatic developments (e.g., the Cuban Missile Crisis or the Truman Doctrine); and technological challenges (e.g., Sputnik); summit meetings between the president and head of the Soviet Union; and, controversially, even the honeymoon period at the start of an administration.

(4.) Lee (1977, p. 253) offers another hypothesis as well: that the rally of approval could be a response to the unusual information environment wherein only the president has information about what is happening so others give him “the benefit of the doubt” until the situation becomes clearer.

(5.) Lee (1977, p. 253) characterizes the events that cause rallies as follows: outbreak of war or military crises that call for the actual or potential use of troops; the end of war or resolution of an international conflict; summit meetings; salient new initiatives; international setbacks; and events directly involving the president, such as assassination attempts.

(6.) MacKuen (1983, pp. 188–189) does acknowledge that it will not be easy for a president to set out to improve his standing because many events, such as summit

meetings, yield small returns and fade quickly, and uses of force yield responses that are not always positive.

(7.) Brody and Shapiro (1991) reduce the types of events suggested by Mueller down to three: “sudden American interventions,” “major diplomatic developments,” and “dramatic technological developments” (p. 60).

(8.) When the intelligence ship *Pueblo* was captured by North Korea in 1968, President Johnson’s poll numbers dropped by 7 percentage points. But when the freighter *Mayaguez* was captured by Cambodia in 1975, President Ford gained 11 points after an ill-fated rescue attempt and the bombing of the Cambodian mainland (Brody & Shapiro, 1991, pp. 61–62).

(9.) Baum and Groeling (2005) and Groeling and Baum (2008) focus on the dynamics of that process, illustrating a messier and more nuanced account about the extent to which the opposition elite remains silent during crises and the extent to which the media mirrors the actual official debate in Washington.

(10.) Major uses of force in this data set involve “a strategic nuclear unit, two or more aircraft carrier task groups, more than a battalion of ground forces, or one or more combat wings” (Lian & Oneal, 1993, p. 280).

(11.) “A foreign policy crisis meets three criteria: National decision makers perceive a threat to basic values, are aware there is a finite time for response, and believe there is a high probability of involvement in military hostilities” (Oneal & Bryan, 1995, p. 381).

(12.) The Correlates of War project defines an MID as “a set of interactions between and among states involving threats to use military force, displays of military force or actual uses of military force” (Gochman & Moaz, 1984, p. 587; cited in Baker & Oneal, 2001, p. 669). For a critique of the MID data, see Fordham and Sarver (2001).

(13.) For example, Lian and Oneal (1993) concluded that “a favorable response by the general public to a use of force is more likely when the United States is involved in a severe crisis and the president’s actions are prominently reported. In addition, a president’s popularity is more apt to be boosted when the country is not at war or fatigued by war, when his popularity is low initially, and when there is bipartisan support for his actions” (p. 294).

(14.) Rogov (2016, p. 34) discusses a similar response in Russia in reaction to the Russian annexation of Crimea.

(15.) This word as applied to rallies was first used by Lai and Reiter (2005, p. 255).

(16.) The quotes are from Stein’s (1976, p. 145) discussion of Coser (1956). See also Levy (1989).

(17.) Scholars seem to be looking for diversionary tendencies in increasingly narrow and specific contexts (e.g., Brule & Hwang, 2010; Levy & Vakili, 1992).

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