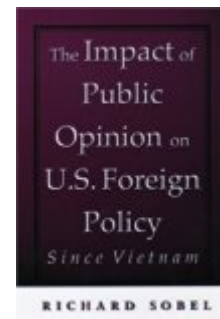


Richard Sobel. *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy Since Vietnam: Constraining the Colossus.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. xii + 276 pp. \$49.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-510527-8.



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The Public Rules

In *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy Since Vietnam*, Richard Sobel, a Harvard political scientist and a research associate at the Roper Center, makes a strong case for the power of the people. He finds that "public opinion constrains, but does not set, American foreign intervention policy" and that it "set the limits" (p. 5) for policymakers in four key cases from 1964 to 1995.

The four cases, which comprise the bulk of his monograph, are the Vietnam War, U.S. support for the Contras in Nicaragua, the Gulf War, and the Bosnian crisis. (With one-fifth of the text devoted to Vietnam, the phrase "since Vietnam" in his title is curious). In each case, he selects several "benchmarks" such as, in Vietnam, the Gulf of Tonkin incident, the Tet Offensive, the 1 November 1969 ultimatum, and the invasion of Cambodia, and then attempts to determine how the public influenced the decision makers as they selected from a variety of policy options at each turning point. He bases his analyses on what they said about the public, polls, and Congress in the con-

temporary public record, memoirs, and interviews. Among those he interviewed were Dean Rusk, George Shultz, Robert S. McNamara, Clark Clifford, and Melvin Laird. In each case, he examines the reactions to the public of the president and his secretaries of state and defense, along with two assistant secretaries, a pollster and four congressmen in the Nicaraguan case, and only one national security advisor, Henry Kissinger. It might have been useful as well to look at such important players as national security advisors Walt Rostow, John Poindexter, Robert McFarlane, Brent Scowcroft, and Anthony Lake. It is difficult to imagine that William Perry played as important a part in developing Bosnian policy as did Lake in the Clinton White House.

It has never been easy to pin down how the public influences a specific foreign policy. Most presidents and their aides are on record claiming that when it comes to national security policy they do what they know is in the best interests of the nation. It would be unseemly of them, they maintain, to consider their own domestic political concerns in a time of international crisis. But they

do take such factors into account, of course, even if they are reluctant to admit it. Thus, when all of the individuals in Sobel's study acknowledge the importance of the public's attitudes at least some of the time in affecting their specific policies, one must accept their statements with care. For example, when, in his memoirs, Richard Nixon blamed the Moratorium demonstrations of 15 October 1969 for making it impossible for him to call Hanoi's bluff when it did not respond to his ultimatum by 1 November, he may have been looking for a scapegoat. To be sure, the astounding rejuvenation of the antiwar movement affected him but he was worried as well about possible reactions from the Chinese, the Russians, and his allies and, moreover, had received pessimistic reports from his military planners about the efficacy of any plausible "savage blow." Similarly, the author takes at face value Bill Clinton's assertion that he did not consider polls when constructing Bosnian policy.

Nonetheless, looking at the four cases, Sobel can show presidents and their colleagues saying either during the period in question or in interviews later that they felt constrained at times by the public's general disinclination to support foreign intervention, particularly from 1967 to 1988, a twenty-one-year period marked by introversion comparable to that of the twenty-two-year period from 1918 to 1940. Sobel accepts Frank Klingberg's cyclical approach, which also sees two suspiciously neat matching periods of extroversion, from 1891 to 1918 and from 1940 to 1967. We are currently in a period of extroversion, reflected in public support shown for the Gulf War and for humanitarian intervention in Bosnia. On the latter, Sobel sees a rare case of the public more willing to intervene than Presidents Bush and Clinton, although both were concerned about how that same public would react once the United States became bogged down in a dangerous and endless mission. During the earlier period of introversion, the author demonstrates how even a great communicator like Ronald Reagan was unable to con-

vince his fellow citizens to support overt interventionist policies in Nicaragua.

The author has a better handle on his three later cases than on Vietnam. He has written articles on the Bosnian intervention and edited *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Controversy over Contra Aid* (1993). Although he apparently had the aid in the preparation of this book of thirty-seven research assistants and interns, the historical narrative in the Vietnam section is a bit careless. In 1964, Johnson did not decide to take on the guise of a dove because Goldwater was a hawk (p. 63), the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution did not "legitimize the plans for escalation" (p. 64), My Lai had nothing to do with the Tet decision (p. 55), Johnson did not tell the nation on 31 March 1968 that he was sending 45,000 more troops to Vietnam (p. 79), his announcement of the October 1968 halt in the bombing was not simply to help Hubert Humphrey win the election (p. 56), Nixon did not promise victory in the campaign (p. 79), and the capture of COSVN was not the main reason for the invasion of Cambodia (p. 85). Further, Sobel repeats the same quotes from Robert Dallek on pp. 55 and 65 and the same material from that author on pp. 56 and 68.

But the historical narrative is not the central issue for most political scientists. The author and his team have scoured the relevant non-archival sources for his decision makers' most significant comments about how they took into account the public's opinions. If anything, he worries a bit that the presidents' fear of public hostility to legitimate interventions may be a problem, with the solution revolving around better leadership in times of crisis. Here George Bush is a model as he carefully and consciously developed public support for his policies over the sixth-month period from the invasion of Kuwait to the start of the Gulf War, unaware that he was operating in a period of extroversion that began in 1988. For those worried about the Bush II administration's interventionist proclivities, according to the author,

during Bush I, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney appeared to be an extremely cautious fellow, concerned about getting the public behind any major operation before moving forward.

Overall, Sobel does a fine job cataloguing all of the times his characters talked contemporaneously and after the fact about how public opinion affected their decision making. This is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the role the public has played in affecting foreign policies in the recent past. But as is the case in all studies of decision makers, one must evaluate with care their own public and private explanations for their actions, particularly in a democracy where they know one is supposed to always pay at least lip service to the voice of the people.

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