Public Opinion and Foreign Policy during the Bosnian Crisis: A Comparative Perspective

This is an important book for several reasons. It is important because it treats in detail public and governmental reactions in eight democratic nations to the first extended post-Cold War crisis, the conflict in Bosnia that erupted in warfare in the summer of 1992 and continued at least until the signing of the Dayton Peace Accords in November 1995. It is important because, with the possible exception of the chapter on U.S. attitudes and policy, all the essays in the book are persuasively argued, permitting readers to build on earlier essays as they proceed through the book to deepen their understanding of the complex relationships between public opinion and foreign policy in nations with different histories and political cultures. And it is important because the distinguished scholars who edited the volume, Richard Sobel and Eric Shiraev, have contributed an excellent concluding chapter that advances our understanding of how public opinion, broadly conceived, influences the making of foreign policy. This chapter—and perhaps some of the earlier ones as well—should be required reading in courses (or sections of courses) that examine domestic influences on the making of foreign policy.

Drawing upon the case studies and upon a half-century of research by other scholars, the concluding chapter offers a nuanced, persuasive analysis of the "links" (p. 284) between public opinion and foreign policy. It is not possible in a short summary to do justice to the authors’ argument. The following quotation is suggestive: "The impact of public opinion on policy is context-dependent and conditioned by mediating variables ... such as the context of the international problem under consideration; the nature of the proposed policy; the effectiveness of the communication among elites; elite awareness of the public opinion and the perceived level of public support for the policy; and [the] structure and timing of decision making" (p. 284). Among several other mediating factors mentioned are "the structure of domestic political institutions," "media coverage of international events," and "a relatively stable system of values developed through socialization" (p. 284). In other words, how public opinion af-
ffects foreign policy differs from issue to issue and from nation to nation; it "is indispensably linked to the country's political system" (p. 289).

An important concept for Sobel and Shiraev is "policy climate," which they define as "a set of beliefs about what the country and the government should or should not do on the international level and, in particular, in case of an international conflict" (p. 284). Two tables help greatly to elucidate their ideas: "A Multiaxial Assessment of Policy Climate in Mediating Opinion-Policy Connections" (p. 286) and "A Comparative Analysis of Policy Climate in National Cases" (pp. 287-288). The latter table pulls together, for comparison and contrast, many of the points made in the individual chapters on the eight nations analyzed in the book.

Employing a useful metaphor, the authors argue that "the corridor between opinion and policy resembles a multilevel highway intersection, not a narrow one-way street. The links are interactive and reciprocal rather than unidirectional and linear" (p. 303). A conclusion regarding policy toward Bosnia is equally perceptive: "On the whole, in Bosnia, many governments aimed at conducting a relatively 'play-it-safe,' low-risk, and low-cost foreign policy line" (p. 291). Based on my reading of the book, I believe that the public's uncertainty in most countries about exactly what course their governments should pursue helps to explain why officials typically adopted a cautious approach. The concluding chapter admirably fulfills the authors' promise in the introduction to "summarize the evidence in the book according to an approach for comparative study of opinion-policy links" (pp. xiv-xv).

As suggested above, the least persuasive of the substantive chapters is probably Steven Kull and Clay Ramsay's "U.S. Public Opinion on Intervention in Bosnia" (pp. 69-106). I include "probably" because, as a student of U.S. public opinion and foreign policy, I feel better qualified to assess the merits of Kull and Ramsay's essay than I do the seven chapters on other nations.

Kull and Ramsay argue that "the majority of Americans, from the beginning of the war to the present, have shown a desire to take some action in Bosnia" (p. 69). They also note that "Americans have not felt compelled to be involved in Bosnia" (p. 95) and thus that they "feel that they can place conditions on their support" (p. 70). The authors criticize the media for "asserting that the public was overwhelmingly opposed to U.S. intervention in Bosnia" (p. 69), and criticize the Clinton administration for using perceived public opposition as an excuse for not taking more forceful action (p. 101).

I agree that there was considerable public support for intervention in response to at least some questions, but only (as the authors note) as part of a multilateral coalition. But I disagree that support for intervention was as strong as the authors suggest it was. To make their case for a "majority position" favoring intervention (p. 69), the authors cite (among many sources) what I consider to be highly leading questions asked in focus groups (e.g., pp. 71 and 72). And they largely ignore what I see as much more objective questions asked by the Gallup organization. A Gallup poll in April 1993, for example, showed 30 percent supporting U.S. air strikes against Serbian forces, whereas 62 percent responded that "we should not get militarily involved." A Gallup poll in October 1993 asked whether, if a peace agreement was reached in Bosnia, the United States should contribute 20,000 troops to a U.N. peacekeeping force. Here was a chance to express support for multilateralism; yet 52 percent opposed sending the troops, while only 40 percent supported that action. No wonder the news media frequently cited a lack of public support for intervention and President Clinton, eagerly desiring to be reelected in 1996, generally pursued a cautious policy.

The other substantive chapters are worth reading not only for their analyses of the impact of public opinion (broadly conceived) on governmental policies toward Bosnia, but also as insight-
ful introductions to the political cultures and "policy climates" in the 1990s in seven important democratic nations. I learned much from reading these chapters and found the arguments highly convincing overall.

In Canada, Erin Carriere, Marc O'Reilly, and Richard Vengroff argue, there was strong public and governmental support for participation in international peacekeeping, which helps to explain why "Canadian troops were among the first to touch down in the former Yugoslavia in 1992" (p. 1). The authors do an excellent job of showing how Canadian support for peacekeeping grew out of the nation's internationalist public culture and Canadians' efforts to distinguish themselves in a positive way from their more powerful and war-like southern neighbor.

In Britain, Robert J. Wybrow concludes, "the British public were in favor of British troops being used in Bosnia, particularly when they appeared to be doing 'something useful,' such as protecting the aid convoys or in a peacekeeping role.... It is equally apparent that government officials ... felt that they were being pressured by the media into actions that they felt were ... premature and risky" (pp. 66-67).

In France, Marc Morje Howard and Lise Morje Howard argue, the public (including many influential intellectuals centered in Paris) strongly supported military intervention on the side of the Bosnian Muslims from 1992 forward, whereas high officials were reluctant to sever France's historic ties to Yugoslavia/Serbia. As in Britain, the media was "essential in terms of compelling the policymakers to take a stand, reach a decision, and sometimes even change their policies on Bosnia" (p. 130). The authors demonstrate that "the gap between French policy and public opinion, initially quite wide, gradually narrowed over time, as the government's policy shifted in the direction of public opinion" (p. 107).

In Russia, in contrast, "public opinion failed to become an important factor shaping foreign policy, despite Russia's struggle to develop democracy" (p. 135). Eric Shiraev and Deone Terrio argue that most Russians "had low interest in the conflict" (p. 142) and wanted above all to keep the nation out of war. Elites in Moscow thus dominated the debates over policy, with President Boris Yeltsin typically setting the nation's course without effective legislative input. But there were glimmerings of true democracy, for "in the end the government did not ignore or shut down critics, but instead inched toward their positions" (p. 167).

Paolo Bellucci and Pierangelo Isernia are critical of Italian officials' ignoring of pro-interventionist public opinion: "we found on the one hand a strong and quite steady support for a more active armed involvement of Italian troops in Bosnia and on the other hand an extreme reluctance of [the] Italian government to even consider and openly discuss such an involvement" (p. 206). This well-argued chapter is marred by numerous stylistic errors--understandable for authors whose native language is not English--that the editors should have made more effort to correct.

The public in the Netherlands, Philip Everts argues, "generally felt that the international community should intervene, but it was uncertain how or what should be done and what would be the likely consequences.... [P]ublic opinion was divided, but in the sense of ambivalence rather than polarization" (p. 225). An example of divisions was the relatively influential peace movement, "with some sticking to a commitment to nonviolent resolution and others pleading for military intervention, if only out of despair" (p. 242). Everts criticizes many politicians' "unwillingness to run risks" in support of more forceful action (p. 246).

In Germany, Karin Johnston contends, the public gradually became more supportive of the nation's military involvement in peacekeeping operations in Bosnia: "ethnic cleansing and other atrocities seen in news broadcasts" undercut sup-
port for pacifism "and contributed to a shift in attitudes toward an acceptance in principle for military interventions in clearly defined circumstances (such as genocide) within a collective security context" (p. 264). In an especially well-organized and insightful chapter that emphasizes “the reciprocity between public opinion and policymaking” (p. 251), Johnston argues that “the relationship between public opinion and foreign policymaking in Germany is influenced by the interaction of three factors: external events, domestic institutional structures (party system), and the political culture (civilian power, historical memory)” (p. 254). She is especially insightful on how attitudes toward NATO and policy toward Bosnia in the former East Germany differed from those in the former West Germany.

Several of the chapters in the book (including Johnston's) rightly emphasize the importance of media images of war and "ethnic cleansing" in Bosnia in shifting public opinion and governmental policy toward military intervention on behalf of the Bosnia's Muslims. I believe that substantial, persistent concerns about human rights, especially on the political left, also played a key role—one that is neglected more than it should be, I believe, in several of the essays.

Overall, however, this is an excellent book, one that belongs on a short list of indispensable recent books on public opinion and foreign policy, including (among others) Douglas C. Foyle, Counting the Public In: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Foreign Policy (1999); Richard Sobel, The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy since Vietnam (2001); and Brigitte L. Nacos, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Pierangelo Isernia, eds., Decision-making in a Glass House: Mass Media, Public Opinion, and American and European Foreign Policy in the 21st Century (2000). As these and other books and articles demonstrate, scholarship on the links between public opinion and policymaking has advanced greatly during the thirty years since the publication of Bernard C. Cohen's path-breaking but far too narrowly focused book, The Public's Impact on Foreign Policy (1973).