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Academic Considerations on the Electoral Costs of Wars of Choice in the United States: The Case Studies of Iran and the First Gulf War.

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Abstract:

This article examines the relationship between electoral cycles and the use of military force in the United States, focusing on so-called "wars of choice." Building on a theoretical framework that combines the rally 'round the flag effect, diversionary war theory, and the literature on the electoral costs of prolonged conflicts, the study analyses how domestic political dynamics and electoral competition influence presidential decisions regarding the use of force.

The article argues that while U.S. presidents do not systematically resort to war for electoral purposes, domestic political considerations shape the timing, intensity, and framing of military interventions. International crises may generate temporary increases in presidential approval, particularly when elite consensus exists and the conflict is perceived as necessary or successful. However, empirical evidence shows that these benefits tend to be short-lived and that prolonged wars usually lead to political erosion, especially when casualties and economic costs rise.

To illustrate these dynamics, the article analyzes two contrasting case studies. First, the conflict between the United States and Iran is examined as a contemporary example that highlights the tensions between military strategy, official doctrine, and electoral politics. Second, the 1991 Gulf War is presented as a paradigmatic case of a successful war of choice that strengthened presidential leadership due to its operational speed, limited objectives, low casualty levels, and broad international legitimacy.

The study concludes that in democratic systems the political sustainability of military conflicts depends less on military superiority than on the government's ability to maintain public support. When wars become prolonged and impose significant economic or human costs, they can turn into an electoral liability for the incumbent administration, confirming that the political dimension is a decisive factor in the evolution and outcome of contemporary wars.

Keywords:

Wars of choice, rally 'round the flag, diversionary war theory, U.S. foreign policy, public opinion, electoral costs of war, Gulf War (1991), US–Iran conflict

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Introduction

In the field of International Relations, the bidirectional relationship and influence that "wars of choice" [1] exert between foreign policy and domestic politics constitute one of the most recurrent debates within this academic domain. In the case of the United States, this issue acquires particular prominence due to the president's inherent responsibility as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces. This is compounded by the significant role played by public opinion and the influence that armed conflicts—especially those not strictly driven by necessity[2], have on electoral behaviour. From the Vietnam War to the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, numerous analysts have raised a recurring question:

Can the electoral calendar influence the decisions of U.S. presidents to initiate, escalate, or avoid military interventions? How do these types of conflicts influence the American electorate?

The academic literature has addressed this question from several theoretical perspectives. Among the most influential are the *rally 'round the flag* effect[3], *diversionary war theory*[4], and studies examining the political costs of prolonged wars. Although none of these theories argues that presidents systematically resort to war in order to win elections, they do coincide in highlighting that electoral incentives influence the types of military force that are considered politically advantageous, as well as the political costs that arise when wars compel governments to end conflicts or withdraw.

The objective of this article is to examine the relationship between elections and the use of force in the United States, its influence on the electorate, and to apply this analytical framework to the current conflict with Iran as well as to a past case, the First Gulf War. Both cases serve as illustrative studies of the tensions between strategic calculation, military logic, and domestic political dynamics.

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[1] A war of choice is an armed conflict that a state decides to initiate in the absence of an imminent or direct existential threat, but rather as the result of a voluntary strategic decision aimed at obtaining long-term political, geopolitical, economic, or security advantages.

[2] In contrast to wars of choice, a war of necessity is an armed conflict that a state is compelled to undertake in response to a direct, imminent, and serious threat to its survival, territorial integrity, or sovereignty, when no viable alternatives other than the use of force remain.

[3] J. E. Mueller, War, Presidents, and Public Opinion. New York: Wiley, 1973.

[4] J. S. Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique," in Handbook of War Studies, M. I. Midlarsky, Ed. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989, pp. 259–288.

The "*Rally 'Round the Flag*" Effect and Presidential Foreign Policy

One of the most influential concepts used to analyse the relationship between international crises and public opinion is the so-called *rally 'round the flag effect*. The term was introduced by John E. Mueller[5], who observed that during moments of crisis or military confrontation, presidential approval ratings in the United States tend to increase temporarily. The explanation lies in the fact that, when facing an external threat, the president is perceived as a symbol of national unity and leadership, generating a momentary convergence of public support around his figure.

Subsequent research qualified this idea by showing that the rally effect does not automatically occur in every crisis. Richard Brody[6] demonstrated that its intensity depends largely on the degree of consensus among political elites and on the media framing of the conflict. When the opposition refrains from criticizing the president and the media present the event as a threat to national security, public support tends to rise. Conversely, when partisan divisions exist from the outset, the rally effect tends to be far more limited.

Other studies have highlighted the role of the informational environment. Matthew A. Baum[7] argues that, in the early phases of a crisis, media outlets often adopt a relatively homogeneous and patriotic narrative, which facilitates an increase in presidential support. However, as the conflict continues and critical interpretations emerge, media coverage becomes more diverse and public support begins to erode.

The literature also emphasizes that the relationship between military casualties and support for war largely depends on perceptions of strategic success. Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler[8] argue that citizens are willing to tolerate high human costs when they believe that the war is moving toward a clear victory. By contrast, when the conflict appears stalemated or lacks clearly defined objectives, public support declines rapidly.

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[5] J. S. Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique," in Handbook of War Studies, M. I. Midlarsky, Ed. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989, pp. 259–288.
[6] R. A. Brody, Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion, and Public Support. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
[7] M. A. Baum, "The Constituent Foundations of the Rally-Round-the-Flag Phenomenon," International Studies Quarterly, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 263–298, 2002.
8 C. Gelpi, P. D. Feaver y J. Reifler, Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

Overall, empirical studies agree that the *rally 'round the flag effect* tends to be intense but short-lived. The increases in popularity associated with international crises generally disappear within weeks or months if they are not reinforced by visible strategic achievements. Over time, the effect gradually dissipates. Thus, although external crises may initially strengthen executive authority, the ability to sustain that support depends on the legitimacy of the intervention, the perceived effectiveness of the strategy, and the costs imposed on society in terms of time, financial resources, and human losses.

Ultimately, the literature on the *rally 'round the flag effect* reveals a structural tension inherent in democratic systems: international crises may temporarily reinforce presidential leadership, but they rarely provide a lasting political advantage unless they are accompanied by clear strategic outcomes.

The Diversionary War Hypothesis and the Domestic Instrumentalization of the Use of Force

Another important explanation for analysing the relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy is the so-called *diversionary war theory*. This perspective argues that political leaders, particularly in democracies where they depend on public opinion and electoral competition, may be incentivized to resort to the use of force abroad when they face significant internal difficulties. Declines in presidential approval, economic crises, political scandals, or institutional deadlock can create incentives to shift public attention toward an external threat and temporarily reinforce national cohesion around political leadership[9].

In theoretical terms, the diversionary logic assumes that when a leader perceives a deterioration in his or her domestic position, he or she may attempt to alter the political agenda by shifting the focus of public debate from domestic problems to the international arena. As Levy[10] notes, this theory does not imply that conflicts are artificially created or that domestic politics replaces geopolitics; rather, it suggests that under certain

[9] J. S. Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique," in Handbook of War Studies, M. I. Midlarsky, Ed. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989, pp. 259–288.
K. De Rouen Jr., "The Indirect Link: Politics, the Economy, and the Use of Force," Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 671–695, 1995.
[10] J. S. Levy, "The Diversionary Theory of War: A Critique," in Handbook of War Studies, M. I. Midlarsky, Ed. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989, pp. 259–288.

circumstances leaders may consider the use of force a politically rational tool for improving their domestic standing.

This logic is partially connected to the well-known *rally 'round the flag* effect, although the two concepts should not be confused. Whereas the rally effect describes the increase in presidential support following an international crisis, diversionary war theory seeks to explain why a leader might have incentives to initiate or intensify a conflict in response to domestic political needs.

In the United States, this hypothesis has generated considerable empirical debate. Some studies suggest that presidents may show a greater propensity to resort to limited uses of force when they experience moments of domestic political vulnerability. Ostrom and Job[11] argue that decisions regarding the use of force cannot be understood solely through strategic variables but must also be analysed in light of the domestic political context. From this perspective, limited military operations—such as targeted bombings or retaliatory strikes—can be politically attractive because they project leadership without immediately incurring the high political costs associated with prolonged wars. Similarly, De Rouen[12] emphasizes that economic difficulties may increase incentives to adopt a more active or coercive foreign policy.

Nevertheless, a significant portion of the literature questions the empirical robustness of this theory. Meernik and Waterman[13] conclude that the available evidence does not support the claim that U.S. presidents systematically use force for diversionary purposes. The main methodological challenge lies in demonstrating that the motivation behind a military intervention was to divert attention from domestic problems rather than to respond to genuine threats or strategic calculations.

Consequently, more recent studies have adopted a less dogmatic position. Domestic politics rarely explains the decision to intervene militarily on its own, but it may influence the timing, intensity, and political framing of the use of force. In this sense, rather than

[11] C. W. Ostrom Jr. and B. L. Job, "The President and the Political Use of Force," American Political Science Review, vol. 80, no. 2, pp. 541–566, 1986.
[12] K. DeRouen Jr., "The Indirect Link: Politics, the Economy, and the Use of Force," Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 39, no. 4, pp. 671–695, 1995
[13] J. Meernik and P. Waterman, "The Myth of the Diversionary Use of Force by American Presidents," Political Research Quarterly, vol. 49, no. 3, pp. 573–590, 1996.

searching for pure cases of diversionary war, it is more useful to analyze how leaders incorporate domestic variables into their broader strategic calculations.

Ultimately, the main contribution of diversionary war theory has been to highlight that foreign policy and domestic politics belong to the same decision-making arena, with each conditioning the other. In democratic systems, wars of choice are not only strategic or military phenomena but also actions deeply shaped by electoral calculations, public perceptions, and dynamics of internal political legitimation. Consequently, the decision to undertake such wars may also serve as a means of redirecting public attention away from other domestic problems.

The Electoral Cost of Protracted Wars

Although military interventions may generate initial political benefits, as previously noted, a substantial body of literature shows that wars that become prolonged over time tend to erode public support and generate electoral fatigue for the governing party[14]. Unlike the initial mobilization that often occurs in response to an external threat, prolonged conflicts frequently expose governments to dynamics of social fatigue, increasing human and economic costs, and growing political scrutiny.

The historical experience of the United States clearly illustrates this pattern. During the Vietnam War, the initial support for the military effort gradually declined as casualties increased and the difficulty of achieving a clear victory became evident. This deterioration in public perceptions of the conflict was accompanied by a significant drop in presidential approval and a weakening of the Johnson[15] administration's political position.

A similar dynamic was observed decades later in Iraq and Afghanistan. The intervention in Iraq in 2003 initially enjoyed broad public support, but this backing diminished as the conflict evolved into a prolonged insurgency with a steady stream of casualties. In this context, Kriner and Shen[16] demonstrated that the number of U.S. military casualties in Iraq had a statistically significant negative impact on electoral support for Republican

[14] J. E. Mueller, War, Presidents, and Public Opinion. New York: Wiley, 1973.
[15] B. Russett, *Controlling the Sword: The Democratic Governance of National Security*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990.
[16] D. L. Kriner and F. X. Shen, "Iraq Casualties and the 2006 Senate Elections," Legislative Studies Quarterly, vol. 32, no. 4, pp. 507–530, 2007.

candidates in the 2006 congressional elections, particularly in districts where the human losses were more visible.

However, the relationship between military casualties and public support is more complex than purely quantitative explanations of wars of choice might suggest. Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler[17] argue that public tolerance for the costs of war depends largely on perceptions of strategic progress. When citizens believe that the conflict is moving toward a clear victory or that its objectives are well defined, support may be maintained even in the face of significant costs. Conversely, when the war is perceived as stagnant or lacking a coherent strategy, public backing declines rapidly.

This phenomenon reflects what Bruce Russett termed the "democratic dilemma of war"[18]. Democracies possess the capacity to initiate armed conflicts, but they must maintain public support in order to sustain them over time. As a result, prolonged conflicts generate a tension between military logic—which requires time and persistence—and political logic, which demands visible results and socially acceptable costs.

From this perspective, the electoral cost of prolonged wars can be understood as an expression of the democratic mechanism of accountability. Citizens retrospectively evaluate the management of the conflict and reward success or punish failure at the ballot box. Consequently, although military interventions may initially produce political gains, their prolongation often reverses this dynamic and transforms war into a source of political erosion. In this sense, many analysts have argued that democracies—particularly those that are hegemonic powers—rarely lose wars because of insufficient military capacity, but rather because of the erosion of domestic political support that accompanies protracted conflicts.

Presidential Elections and Midterms: Differentiated Electoral Dynamics

The electoral impact of armed conflicts in the United States is not uniform and varies significantly depending on the type of election and the timing within the political cycle.

[17] C. Gelpi, P. D. Feaver and J. Reifler, Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.
[18] B. Russett, Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

The literature on foreign policy and electoral behaviour has shown that wars can influence presidential elections and midterm legislative elections in different ways, due to institutional differences, partisan dynamics, and patterns of voter behaviour. In general terms, while presidential elections tend to amplify the effect of the president's individual leadership as Commander in Chief, midterm elections usually function as mechanisms for evaluating government performance, where the costs of war can more easily translate into electoral punishment for the governing party[19].

In presidential elections, the impact of foreign policy and armed conflicts is closely linked to perceptions of presidential leadership. The U.S. Constitution grants the president broad prerogatives in foreign policy and defence, reinforcing the centrality of the presidential figure during international crises. In this context, a successful military operation can strengthen the president's leadership image and consolidate his reputation as a guarantor of national security. The literature suggests that voters tend to evaluate the president based on his ability to exercise authority and project firmness on the international stage, particularly during moments of strategic uncertainty[20].

Historically, several episodes illustrate how military success can translate into electoral benefits. The rapid victory in the 1991 Gulf War produced a substantial increase in the approval ratings of President George H. W. Bush, although this political capital ultimately did not translate into his re-election due to domestic economic factors[21]. Similarly, certain limited interventions - such as air operations or short-duration missions- have allowed presidents to project leadership without assuming the political risks associated with prolonged wars. In such cases, the role of Commander in Chief acquires a symbolic dimension by reinforcing the narrative of executive authority and decisiveness.

However, the relationship between armed conflict and electoral support is highly contingent. When a war becomes prolonged or begins to be perceived as a strategic failure, the conflict may turn into a significant electoral burden. The Vietnam War provides one of the most illustrative examples of this dynamic. As the conflict intensified and the

[19] B. Lian y J. R. Oneal, "Presidents, the Use of Military Force, and Public Opinion," Journal of Conflict Resolution, vol. 37, no. 2, pp. 277–300, 1993.
M. Fiorina, *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981.
[20] R. A. Brody, *Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion, and Public Support*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
[21] M. S. Lewis-Beck y M. Stegmaier, "Economic Determinants of Electoral Outcomes," *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 3, pp. 183–219, 2000

number of casualties increased, public support for the intervention deteriorated rapidly. This political erosion severely affected Lyndon B. Johnson's administration, to the point that the president ultimately decided not to seek re-election in 1968. The Vietnam case demonstrated that in democratic systems, support for war largely depends on perceptions of progress and the clarity of strategic objectives[22].

A similar pattern was observed decades later during the presidency of George W. Bush. Although the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003 generated a significant increase in presidential approval ratings, the prolonged nature of the conflict and the rise in insurgent violence gradually eroded that support. Over time, the war shifted from being perceived as a demonstration of military power to becoming a costly and strategically uncertain conflict, contributing to the deterioration of both the president's political position and that of the Republican Party.

Midterm legislative elections present different electoral dynamics. Historically, the party occupying the White House tends to lose seats in Congress during these elections, a phenomenon that the literature explains through factors such as differential voter mobilization, backlash against the governing party, and the institutional logic of balancing powers within the political system[23].

In this context, an unpopular war can significantly amplify that electoral punishment. The empirical research of Kriner and Shen demonstrates that armed conflicts can have direct effects on legislative election outcomes. Analysing the 2006 Senate elections, the authors found that districts with higher rates of military casualties in Iraq experienced a significant decline in electoral support for Republican candidates. This result suggests that the human costs of war can translate into tangible electoral punishment for the governing party, particularly when citizens perceive the conflict as lacking a clear strategy or prospects for success[24].

Ultimately, the literature suggests that armed conflicts interact with the electoral cycle in complex ways. Military operations may generate short-term political benefits, especially

[22] G. C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950–1975*, 5th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2013.
[23] J. M. Campbell, *The American Campaign: U.S. Presidential Campaigns and the National Vote*. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000.
[24] D. L. Kriner and F. L. Shen, "Iraq Casualties and the 2006 Senate Elections," *Legislative Studies Quarterly*, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 507–530, Nov. 2009.

in presidential contexts where the leadership role of the Commander in Chief is central. However, when conflicts become prolonged or impose significant costs, electoral dynamics tend to reverse, transforming war into a source of political vulnerability.

This pattern reflects a structural characteristic of contemporary democracies: while the authority to go to war rests with the executive, the political sustainability of those conflicts ultimately depends on the electoral judgment of citizens.

The War with Iran as a contemporary case study in Light of Academic Approaches and the Current NSS and NDS

The ongoing conflict between the United States, Israel, and Iran constitutes a particularly revealing case for examining the interaction between military strategy, asymmetric conflict, and political electoral dynamics in democratic systems. Since the beginning of the military campaign in 2026, operations have been characterized by a strategy relying exclusively on-air operations and precision missile strikes aimed at degrading Iranian military capabilities, reducing its strategic infrastructure, and weakening the regime's command and control centres. This strategy, aligned with the ideas of Douhet -who argued that the most effective strategy was to employ airpower to attack the enemy's vital centres (cities, industry, and civilian morale) through massive bombing in order to break its will to fight[25]- follows a classic pattern of contemporary campaigns conducted by technologically superior powers. Such powers seek to achieve strategic advantages through air superiority, advanced intelligence, and precision strikes against critical targets.

However, the analytical interest of the Iranian case does not lie solely in its operational dimension but also in the strategic inconsistency it introduces with respect to the strategic framework officially proclaimed by the U.S. administration itself. The National Security Strategy[26] (NSS) of 2025 explicitly rejects the logic of global intervention and states that "the days when the United States single-handedly sustained the world order like Atlas are over," advocating instead a model of burden-sharing and burden-shifting, in which allies "must assume primary responsibility for their own regions." The same document adds

[25] G. Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, trans. D. Ferrari. Washington, DC: Office of Air Force History, 1983

[26] The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., USA, 2025.

that strategic clarity requires avoiding the "overextension and diffuse objectives" that, according to the White House, undermined previous efforts. In similar terms, the strategy insists that many external disputes had been "peripheral and irrelevant" to U.S. national interests.

This same logic is reinforced in the National Defense Strategy[27] (NDS) of 2026. The document identifies the defence of the homeland, the projection of influence in the Western Hemisphere, and above all the deterrence of China in the Indo-Pacific as the central pillars of U.S. strategic effort. The NDS explicitly states that the Department of Defense must prioritize "the defence of sovereign territory," while emphasizing that allies must assume primary responsibility for their own defence in Europe, the Middle East, and the Korean Peninsula, with U.S. support remaining "critical but limited." In the specific case of the Middle East, the strategy does not propose a new architecture of direct intervention led by Washington, but rather the empowerment of regional allies, Israel and the Gulf partners, so that they assume the principal burden of deterrence against Iran and its proxies.

From this perspective, the intervention against Iran introduces an evident strategic tension. This is not only because Iran lacks relevance for U.S. security by failing to represent an immediate existential threat to the United States - as many American scholars such as John Mearsheimer[28] have argued, but also because a military operation of this nature deviates, at least partially, from the doctrinal principle according to which Washington should avoid new large-scale campaigns in the Middle East and concentrate political, military, and industrial resources on priorities considered more important, particularly the Western Hemisphere[29] and the Indo-Pacific. The NDS itself criticizes the wars of previous administrations aimed at "toppling regimes and building nations on the other side of the world," while the NSS insists on reducing global commitments not directly linked to national interests. Consequently, the longer the Iranian campaign lasts and the more resources it requires, the more visible the contradiction becomes between practice and the officially declared strategic design.

[27] U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., USA, 2026.
[28] J. J. Mearsheimer, "War on Iran and the Folly of Regime Change," Boston Review, 1 Mar. 2026
[29] El corolario Trump a la doctrina Monroe así lo pone de manifiesto

This doctrinal contradiction is compounded by a significant political–electoral dissonance with the administration's MAGA electoral base. The official White House website itself presents Trump's second term as a project aimed at "ending endless wars," reorienting the priorities of the new administration and defining the foreign policy of the State Department explicitly in terms of "America First." In other words, the administration's political identity was built to a large extent on the promise of abandoning costly global interventions, containing expansive liberal internationalism, and refocusing U.S. external action on prosperity, border security, and the material well-being of American citizens.

For this very reason, the war with Iran carries a greater potential electoral cost than other episodes of limited use of force. If the operation had remained a brief punitive action with strictly limited objectives, it could have fit within the narrative of firmness without compromising the core of the "America First" message. However, the evolution of the conflict—lasting longer than initially expected—the disruption of the Strait of Hormuz, the rise of Brent crude above $100 per barrel, and the need for Washington to request military support from third countries to reopen maritime traffic project the image of an administration trapped in a new regional crisis that is costly, uncertain, and difficult to reconcile with the promise of "ending endless wars."

From the perspective of the literature on asymmetric conflicts, this development is not surprising. Although the United States and its allies maintain clear technological and military superiority, Iran possesses indirect instruments capable of compensating for that disadvantage. It is engaged in a war of survival in which maintaining the regime is the primary objective, and therefore adopts a strategy aimed at extending pain and suffering across the region and globally. The pressure exerted on the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly one-fifth of the world's oil supply passes, constitutes the clearest example of this strategy. By shifting the centre of gravity of the conflict toward the energy and financial domains, Tehran transforms its relative military weakness into a capacity for indirect coercion against Western societies. The objective is not to defeat the United States militarily but to increase the economic and political costs of the war to the point of eroding the willingness to sustain it.

This shift of the conflict toward the economic domain has particular relevance from a domestic perspective, as the academic literature warns. Historical experience in the United States shows that distant wars and military interventions - particularly wars of

choice- become politically toxic when they cease to be perceived as remote strategic episodes and begin to translate into tangible costs for the average voter, such as energy inflation, declining purchasing power[30], market disruptions, or a sense that the conflict lacks a clear exit strategy. In this sense, the war with Iran threatens to reverse the logic of the rally effect, transforming it into a source of electoral punishment if voters associate the conflict with rising economic costs.

Indeed, there are already indications that this contradiction is beginning to produce political repercussions within segments of the Trump electoral coalition. Recent reports suggest growing disaffection among younger voters and among groups that were attracted in 2024 by a mixture of economic promises and opposition to new wars, some of whom now claim to feel betrayed by the intervention in Iran and its effects on the cost of living. Although it would be premature to draw definitive conclusions, these signals are consistent with the literature suggesting that prolonged conflicts generate particularly severe political costs when they contradict the political identity on which a leader was elected.

Moreover, prolonged conflicts also generate reputational and diplomatic risks that may intensify this potential political erosion. The reluctance of several allies to become militarily involved in reopening the Strait of Hormuz suggests that Washington faces not only material costs but also limits in terms of legitimacy and coalition support. This reinforces the central paradox of the case: how an intervention designed to demonstrate strength, restore credibility, and neutralize a threat may ultimately expose the structural vulnerabilities of a democracy that had pledged in its NSS to reduce its exposure to the Middle East and concentrate on priorities more closely aligned with national interests.

Ultimately, the conflict with Iran illustrates with particular clarity the academic approaches to U.S. wars of choice. While the military operation might initially have produced an increase in approval ratings for the administration ahead of the midterm elections in November of this year if the campaign had been successful, its prolongation and excessive costs could produce highly negative consequences for the administration's electoral support. Furthermore, if the NSS and NDS had advocated a United States that was less overextended, more selective in its use of force, focused on the Western

[30] Urbán, M. (2026, 12 de marzo). Bombas sobre Irán, grietas en el trumpismo. *Público*. https://www.publico.es/opinion/columnas/bombas-sobre-iran-grietas-trumpismo.html

Hemisphere and the Indo-Pacific, and supportive of allies assuming the primary burden in their respective regions, the intervention in Iran represents a deviation with potential domestic consequences. The longer the war lasts, the greater its economic costs, and the further it moves away from the promise of "ending endless wars," the more likely it becomes that the Iranian case will cease to be perceived as a demonstration of leadership and instead be interpreted as an example of strategic inconsistency and electoral vulnerability.

The First Gulf War: The Perfect case of success

A paradigmatic example of a war of choice that produced a significant reinforcement of presidential leadership was the U.S. intervention in the 1991 Gulf War under the presidency of George H. W. Bush. The political success of this operation can largely be explained by the convergence of several strategic and operational factors that the literature identifies as optimal conditions for generating political benefits from the use of force.

First, the campaign was extraordinarily rapid and decisive. Following an initial phase of massive aerial bombardment (Operation Desert Storm), the ground offensive was resolved in barely one hundred hours. This avoided the prolongation of the conflict and significantly reduced the risk of political erosion associated with the time factor[31].

Second, the political and military objectives were deliberately limited and clearly defined. The Bush administration chose to restore Kuwait's sovereignty without advancing toward Baghdad or pursuing regime change in Iraq. This decision allowed means and strategic ends to be aligned, avoided the trap of overextension, and facilitated a clear perception of victory[32].

Moreover, U.S. casualties were relatively limited - 48 combat deaths- which helped minimize the perceived human cost for public opinion and sustain domestic support, in

[31] M. R. Gordon and B. E. Trainor, The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf. Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1995.
[32] L. Freedman and E. Karsh, The Gulf Conflict 1990–1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.

line with the literature that links societal tolerance for casualties to perceptions of strategic success[33].

In addition, the operation benefited from a broad international coalition composed of more than thirty countries and from strong legal backing derived from United Nations Security Council resolutions, particularly Resolution 678. This reinforced the international legitimacy of the intervention and reduced reputational costs for Washington[34].

Finally, the combination of these factors activated a powerful *rally 'round the flag effect*, raising President Bush's approval ratings to approximately 89 percent, confirming Mueller's findings regarding the temporary increase in presidential support during international crises perceived as successful[35].

Taken together, this case illustrates how operational speed, clarity of objectives, limited human costs, international legitimacy, and the perception of victory constitute key variables that allow a war of choice to translate into short-term political benefits for the executive.

Conclusions

The analysis shows that the relationship between elections and the use of force in the United States is complex and often does not follow a strictly academic logic. Presidents do not systematically resort to war for electoral purposes, but they operate within a political environment in which the electoral calendar, public opinion, and partisan competition significantly influence the way military interventions are conceived and executed. In this context, certain forms of the use of force—rapid, limited, and with a strong symbolic value—tend to be politically more attractive than prolonged and costly wars.

The literature on the *rally 'round the flag* effect confirms that international crises can temporarily reinforce presidential authority. However, this increase in support is usually short-lived and depends on factors such as elite consensus, media framing of the conflict,

[33] C. Gelpi, P. D. Feaver, and J. Reifler, Paying the Human Costs of War: American Public Opinion and Casualties in Military Conflicts. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009.
[34] United Nations Security Council, Resolution 678 (1990), S/RES/678, 29 Nov. 1990.
[35] J. E. Mueller, War, Presidents, and Public Opinion. New York: Wiley, 1973.

and above all the perception of strategic success. When these conditions disappear or the conflict becomes prolonged, the rally effect tends to fade and public support may erode rapidly.

Similarly, the debate surrounding *diversionary war theory* highlights that domestic politics alone does not explain the decision to intervene militarily, but it may influence the timing, intensity, and political framing of the use of force. Foreign policy, particularly in highly mediatized democracies such as the United States, cannot be understood independently of electoral incentives and the dynamics of public opinion.

The decisive variable for understanding the political translation of an armed conflict is often time. Democracies may initially reward firmness and leadership during moments of crisis, but they tend to punish long, ambiguous, and costly wars. As casualties increase, economic costs rise, and strategic uncertainty deepens, war can become a political liability for the government. In this sense, the electoral cost of protracted wars constitutes one of the most consistent findings in the literature on public opinion and foreign policy.

The case of the war with Iran illustrates these dynamics with particular clarity. Although the United States maintains clear military and technological superiority, Iran has demonstrated the capacity to shift the conflict into arenas where the political impact may be greater, particularly in the economic and energy domains. Pressure on the Strait of Hormuz and the volatility of oil markets have contributed to a significant increase in crude oil prices, which has direct consequences for energy inflation and the cost of living in Western economies.

In the United States, rising prices for basic goods - especially gasoline and energy - may have significant political consequences. Historical experience shows that foreign conflicts acquire a particularly sensitive electoral dimension when they affect the everyday economic well-being of citizens. A sustained increase in fuel prices or the cost of living can erode social support for the war and negatively affect public perceptions of the government's management of the conflict. This dynamic becomes especially significant when it contradicts campaign promises emphasizing the need to avoid costly new wars and to prioritize domestic economic prosperity.

Consequently, the Iranian case once again demonstrates that military operations designed to project strength, restore strategic credibility, and assert international

leadership can become a source of political vulnerability if the adversary succeeds in prolonging the conflict and increasing its economic and social costs. In this sense, the gap between tactical military superiority and strategic political sustainability becomes one of the central factors for understanding the evolution of contemporary conflicts.

The contrast between different historical cases allows these dynamics to be understood more clearly. The 1991 Gulf War constitutes a paradigmatic example of a war of choice that produced a clear reinforcement of presidential leadership. The speed and decisiveness of the campaign, the limited definition of its objectives -focused on the liberation of Kuwait without pursuing regime change in Baghdad- the low level of U.S. casualties, the broad international coalition, and the legitimacy provided by the United Nations generated an unequivocal perception of success. This combination of factors activated a powerful rally effect, significantly increasing President George H. W. Bush's approval ratings. The case illustrates that when war is brief, limited, legitimate, and perceived as victorious, it can translate into substantial political benefits for the executive, at least in the short term.

Ultimately, the analysis suggests that democracies rarely fail in war due to a lack of military capability, but rather because of the progressive erosion of domestic political support. This element inevitably leads us to Clausewitz's trinity[36], in which the people, the armed forces, and the government must remain aligned and synchronized in their efforts for success in war. The key does not lie solely in winning operational battles, but in sustaining the political legitimacy of the intervention over time. In this sense, the comparison between the 1991 Gulf War and the current conflict with Iran reveals a central lesson: in liberal democracies, it is not enough to win individual battles; it is essential to sustain the war effort without allowing it to become politically unsustainable as time, economic costs, and the erosion of public support transform it into electoral fatigue that may ultimately lead to the loss of the war itself.

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[36] War is a trinity composed of the primordial violence of the people, the play of chance and probability embodied in the army, and the political reason of the government. These three elements -people, army, and government- interacting constantly, shaping the dynamic and changing nature of war.