

Lessons for Obama in study of Bush efforts to 'frame' Iraq war

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Wartime leaders have long sought to sway public opinion by "framing" bad news from the frontlines. They present inconvenient facts in an altered format in order to generate support for their policies. A new study from North Carolina State University shows that Bush administration attempts to "frame" casualties from the Iraq War bolstered support for the war effort among certain members of the U.S. public, but also produced a backlash that led to decreased tolerance for additional casualties and war spending among others.

"By 2006, supporters of the [war](#) in Iraq were making the argument that the casualties and financial costs of the war justified 'staying the course' so that these sacrifices 'should not have been made in vain,'" says Dr. Bill Boettcher, an associate professor of [political science](#) at NC State and co-author of the study. "This argument, called an 'investment frame' because it presents the casualties as investments in the war that can be 'made good' through victory, was used to shore up public support for continuing the war. Investment frames attempt to turn the loss of 'blood and treasure' from a liability into an asset. We performed this study to see whether Bush's strategy for influencing public opinion was effective at a time when attitudes about the Iraq War had hardened considerably."

Boettcher and fellow researcher Dr. Michael Cobb, also an associate professor of political science at NC State, polled a nationally representative sample of more than 1,300 Americans in September 2006 to gauge overall support for the war effort. They asked a subset of the participants how many more casualties and how much more spending

they were willing to tolerate. They asked the same question of a separate subset of participants, after presenting the following investment frame: "Some people say we need to stay and complete the mission in Iraq to honor the dead and make sure they did not die in vain."

The researchers found that the investment frame only produced a positive response among those study participants who supported the initial decision to go to war in Iraq. These participants' tolerance for additional casualties and war spending was significantly higher than the casualty and war spending tolerance of participants in a control group that were not exposed to the frame.

However, there was a backlash among people who did not support the initial decision to go to war. They were significantly less tolerant of further casualties and spending after receiving the investment frame when compared to the control group. "This shows that the investment frame is effective when preaching to the converted," Boettcher says. "The downside is that, if other groups hear you preaching to the converted, it drives them away - making it a dubious tool for broadening public support."

The authors note that this study has significant implications for Obama administration efforts to maintain public support for the war in Afghanistan. "As casualties mount in Afghanistan, Obama would be wise to avoid the questionable information strategies associated with the [Bush administration](#) and the Iraq War," Cobb says.

Source: North Carolina State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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