

## Presidential Saber Rattling

### *Causes and Consequences*

The Founders of the American republic believed presidents should be wise and virtuous statesmen consistently advocating community interests when conducting American foreign policy. Yet the most common theoretical model used today for explaining the behavior of politicians is grounded in self-interest rather than community interest. This book investigates whether past presidents acted as noble statesmen or were driven by such self-interested motivations as reelection, passion, partisanship, media frenzy, and increasing domestic support. The book also examines the consequences for the nation of presidential behavior driven by self-interest. Between 1945 and 2008, presidents issued 4,269 threats to 19 countries; Professor B. Dan Wood evaluates the causes and consequences of these threats, revealing the nature of presidential foreign policy representation and its consistency with the Founding Fathers' intentions.

B. Dan Wood is Professor and Director of the American Politics Program at Texas A&M University. He is the author of *The Myth of Presidential Representation* (Cambridge 2009) and *The Politics of Economic Leadership: The Causes and Consequences of Presidential Rhetoric* (2007) and coauthor of *Bureaucratic Dynamics: The Role of Bureaucracy in a Democracy* (1994).

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*To Nathaniel David and Rebekah Joy Wood*

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## Preface

This book is about the causes and consequences of presidential threats toward other nations. Of course, history is replete with leaders who threatened other nations in self-defense or out of ambition, passion, revenge, desire for personal glory, partisan compacts, and avarice. Egyptian Pharaoh Seti I threatened and made war on the Hittites in 1298 B.C. in defense of their persistent incursions into Egyptian territory. Persian King Xerxes I threatened and made war against the Greeks in 483 B.C. out of revenge for their interference in the Ionian revolt. Many Roman rulers starting around 800 B.C., and lasting for more than 1,200 years, threatened and made war to extract wealth from surrounding territories. Duke William of Normandy, coveting the throne of England, threatened and defeated English King Harold in 1066, leading to the Norman conquest of England. And King George III threatened American colonists starting in 1774 through a series of Coercive Acts that ultimately resulted in the American Revolution.

Keenly aware of history, the Founders of the American Republic had a very different vision for how presidents would behave while conducting American foreign policy. They believed that presidents should use their foreign policy tools only to achieve *just* foreign policy goals. Presidents should be motivated *solely* by the community interest, rather than self-interest. They should be wise and virtuous leaders, divorced from their passions and personal considerations. Presidents should be beyond the partisan fray and oblivious to media frenzies. Because American presidents reside in a democratic system, they should be attentive to public opinion, but they should not be enslaved by it. In other words, the Founders believed in a “statesman” ideal of presidential foreign policy representation.

As with ancient rulers, modern presidents have often used threats as a tool of American foreign policy. From 1945 through 2008, presidents issued a total

of 4,269 distinct threats. Of these, 3,163 were of a general nature directed at no particular country or group. The remaining 1,106 were specific and targeted toward particular countries or groups. There were 508 threats seemingly intended to deter, 398 presidential threats of economic or political sanction, and 200 threats of military action. The targets of presidential threats since World War II have included nineteen countries, as well as various terrorist organizations.

A primary purpose of this book is to evaluate whether modern presidents have lived up to the “statesman” ideal when making threats. Presidential saber rattling is taken as an object of scientific analysis for the purpose of studying the nature of presidential foreign policy representation. Accordingly, this study poses the following research questions. Are the causes of presidential saber rattling rooted primarily in external threats to the nation, or do presidential threats also derive from domestic factors? Do presidents divorce themselves from their passions, partisanship, public opinion, and domestic politics when making threats, or does presidential saber rattling derive from factors such as reelection incentives, partisanship, media frenzies, approval ratings, economic performance, or other factors that might suggest self-interested motivations?

Another purpose of this book is to evaluate the domestic and foreign policy consequences of presidential saber rattling. Domestically, do presidents benefit from making foreign policy threats? If so, how do they benefit, and for how long? Are there unanticipated consequences of presidential saber rattling? For example, do presidential threats affect consumer confidence and economic behavior, thereby affecting U.S. economic performance? With respect to foreign policy, how do those being threatened typically react to presidential threats? Do they bow to the overwhelming power and resources of the U.S. president, or do they fail to respond, or even react negatively to presidential threats? More generally, are public presidential threats toward other nations an effective tool of American foreign policy?

This book addresses all of these research questions through analysis of empirical data. The “take away” themes are the following: (1) Modern presidents are not the pure “statesmen” representatives envisioned by the Founders but are driven by a variety of domestic factors, including reelection, partisanship, and media frenzies. (2) Presidents benefit domestically from their threats through increased public approval, especially among opposing partisans and independents. However, presidential threats also adversely affect the economy. (3) Presidential threats toward other nations are largely ineffective in producing compliance with U.S. interests and often have the undesirable effect of provoking foreign adversaries.

The research reported in this book was initiated in the fall of 2006, with various conference papers delivered in 2007, 2009, and 2011. As with any project of this duration, there are many to whom I am indebted. My work

*Preface*

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has always centered on issues of representation and responsiveness for various political institutions. However, Jeffrey Cohen (Fordham University) pointed out to me that little work had previously been done on foreign policy representation. Jeff also commented on various conference papers that later became chapters in this book.

The chapter on the domestic consequences of presidential saber rattling benefited from data on presidential approval broken down by partisanship provided by Matthew Lebo (State University of New York at Stony Brook) and updated by Jeffrey Cohen. The chapter on the foreign policy consequences of presidential saber rattling benefited from comments by participants at the 2011 European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions Workshop on Political Institutions and Political Violence in St. Gallen, Switzerland. Kristian Gleditsch (University of Essex), Simon Hug (University of Geneva), Matthew Wilson (Penn State University), and Pippa Norris (Harvard University) were especially helpful.

I am also indebted to those who provided research assistance for this project. The data on presidential saber rattling were initially machine-coded using PERL. However, validation of these machine-coded data required considerable human effort. The bulk of the human effort was supplied by Han Soo Lee, Stephen Huss, and Clayton Webb. Note that a more extended treatment of the results reported in Chapter 5 concerning the economic consequences of presidential saber rattling are reported in the *American Journal of Political Science* (Wood 2009b). I also thank three anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments, most of which are implemented in the final manuscript.

In the interest of future research, I encourage replication of the work reported here, as well as further application of the data. Thus, all of the data on presidential saber rattling reported in the empirical parts of the book are available on my Web site at Texas A&M University. The Web address is currently <http://people.tamu.edu/~b-wood>. However, a Google search for my name should always find the data.

Robert Dreesen of Cambridge University Press was helpful in advising me on how to pitch the manuscript. He encouraged me to write in a style that would be inclusive of readers at all levels. Accordingly, I have focused on substance rather than minor technical issues that might excite those in the methodological community. I hope the materials in this book are not so complex as to deter serious readers. If so, then Robert deserves some credit. He was a pleasure to work with as an editor, especially in securing expert reviewers and facilitating the review and acceptance process.

Financially, this research was supported by Texas A&M University through a College of Liberal Arts Cornerstone Fellowship from 2007 through 2011. I thank former Dean Charles A. Johnson for recognizing the importance of rewarding faculty scholarship. I am also deeply appreciative of my department and university for their supportive intellectual environment.

Finally, I thank those closest to me for their understanding and support for my career and research. My wife Patricia continues to help me in every possible way. I dedicate this book to our two grandchildren, Nathaniel David and Rebekah Joy Wood. If I had known how much fun it is to have grandchildren, I would have had them first.