THE FOREIGN POLICY CONSEQUENCES OF U.S. PRESIDENTIAL SABER RATTLING

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ABSTRACT

U.S. president’s often make threats toward other nations, seemingly as a tool for projecting American foreign policy interests. However, scholars know little about the consequences of these threats either domestically or internationally. Monthly time series measures of presidential saber rattling directed toward Iraq, Iran, and North Korea are constructed from January 1990 to January 2008. Analogous measures for cooperation/conflict directed toward the U.S. are also constructed, as well as terrorism and potential domestic influences. Using case studies and statistical analyses, the results suggest that U.S. presidential saber rattling is counter-productive, producing less cooperation and more conflict. The results suggest the need to reassess the efficacy of presidential threats as a tool of U.S. foreign policy.
THE FOREIGN POLICY CONSEQUENCES OF U.S. PRESIDENTIAL SABER RATTLING

Does U.S. presidential saber rattling increase cooperation or reduce conflict with other nations? In recent times, American presidents have sought to diminish other nations’ support for terrorism. Does their saber rattling diminish the frequency of terrorist acts or other nations’ support for terrorism? More generally, does U.S. presidential saber rattling produce a world friendlier to American interests? Or, does it have the opposite effect? These are the core research questions of this study.

Intense U.S. presidential saber rattling toward weaker adversaries is a relatively recent phenomenon. At the turn of the twentieth century, presidents commonly pursued a foreign policy of “speak softly and carry a big stick.” (Roosevelt 1901) Prior to World War II, American foreign policy was isolationist, not attempting to interfere in the affairs of other nations. Further, as shown below, until the late-1980s presidents did not commonly threaten other nations unless there was an impending or ongoing war. However, recent presidents have been more likely to threaten other nations without a war. Saber rattling has become a prevalent tool of U.S. foreign policy. Yet, little is known about consequences of this shift.

What is saber rattling? The term is used here to imply public threats made by the U.S. president toward specific nations. This differs from more general saber rattling in which presidents avow their opposition to such concepts as fascism or communism. Rather, the threats studied here are targeted toward particular nations, often with implications of specific action. As measured here, saber rattling can range from relatively broad statements of an aggressive tone toward a particular nation to more specific threats of economic, political, or military sanction. As the nation’s chief foreign policy leader, presidents often employ threatening rhetoric seemingly as a tool to alter the behavior of foreign adversaries. However, saber rattling may also be symbolic with domestic motivations and
implications (e.g., see Wood 2009a, 2009b). In either case, it is important to understand the causes and consequences of presidential saber rattling for U.S. relations with other nations.

In studying the foreign policy consequences of presidential saber rattling, the analysis in this study is restricted to U.S. relations with three adversaries, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, after 1990. These nations have been persistent U.S. adversaries over various time frames. By examining relations for these three critical cases, I seek to generalize more broadly about the foreign policy consequences of presidential saber rattling.

Monthly time series measures are developed of presidential saber rattling running from 1990 through 2008 using Public Papers of the Presidents. In doing so, a combination of machine and human coding is used to evaluate every hostile sentence spoken by the president within this time frame. In measuring cooperation and conflict from other nations directed toward the U.S., a corresponding time series is developed using the Integrated Data for Events Analysis (IDEA) database which is described fully in Bond, Bond, Oh, Jenkins, and Taylor (2003). On the assumption that recent presidential saber rattling may also result from presidents associating other nations with global terrorism, the analyses also include variables to capture terrorist acts directed toward the U.S. All statistical analyses also include measures of domestic incentives, including the president’s public support, economic performance, and the presence of scandal, to capture the notion that presidential saber rattling may actually be symbolic and intended for domestic audiences. Statistical controls are also included for the presence of war and stylistic differences across presidencies.

In the next section the theoretical foundations of the research project are discussed. This section is followed by a discussion of measurement. Succeeding sections present research findings for saber rattling toward Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, respectively. A concluding section summarizes the findings about the causes and consequences of presidential saber rattling, and their implications for U.S. foreign policy.
Why Should Presidential Threats Matter to Foreign Policy Outcomes?

*The International System*

Realist and neo-realist theories of foreign policy (e.g., Waltz 1979) hold that threats by one nation toward another are primarily a manifestation of the international system. The international system is a hostile environment, with nations competing for power and benefits. More power implies more control of resources and economic advantages for a nation’s citizens. Weakness implies potential exploitation by stronger powers and economic disadvantages. Threats reflect the relative power of nations, and power determines the likelihood of success for those threats.

Within this framework, hegemonic states hold a strong preference for dominance (Mearsheimer 2001). As a result, their foreign policy behavior tends toward coercion (George 2009). In contrast, weaker states are not in a position to use coercion. They must do what they can to survive in a hostile international environment. Thus, realist theory predicts that a nation’s foreign policy behavior and the outcomes of that behavior are primarily determined by power relations in the international system.

Threats are less likely, and less likely to succeed in a system of power equals. Relations between adversarial nations in a system of power equals depend on maintaining a balance of power, rather than political, economic, or military threats. Power equals have little incentive to fight, because the cost of doing so is high for both parties. Among equal adversaries coercive foreign policy strategies are less likely to be successful, because effective coercion requires greater power than one’s adversary. Thus, public threats by leaders in a system of power equals would not be a common foreign policy strategy.

Threats are more likely, and more likely to succeed in systems where power is distributed unequally. Nations that are power dominant relative to a set of weaker nations have greater incentive to pursue coercive strategies. Their economic and military power is greater, so they are more likely to
prevail in application of sanctions or war. As a result, coercive strategies are viewed as more credible. Threats perceived as credible are seen as dangerous by the targets of those threats. Therefore, realist theory would predict that weaker nations are more likely to be coerced and comply in such systems.

Some Preliminary Evidence

The measure of presidential saber rattling (to be described below) offers tentative support for realist theory. Figure 1 graphs the intensity of presidential saber rattling toward specific nations from 1945 through 2008. Each nation is represented by a different line color on the graph. The vertical axis plots a count of presidential saber rattling sentences directed toward each nation during each month.

Figure 1 shows a clear break in the intensity of presidential saber rattling starting in the late 1980s (i.e., near the end of the Cold War). Visual examination of the pre-late 1980s data shows that the only periods of intense presidential saber rattling were during the Korean and Vietnam Wars. Of course, it makes intuitive sense that presidents would make hostile remarks toward an adversary during times of war. Excluding these periods, the figure shows that presidents made few threatening remarks toward specific nations, with a few notable exceptions.

President Carter directed significant threatening rhetoric toward Iran during the 1979-1980 hostage crisis, and toward the Soviet Union following their invasion of Afghanistan. President Reagan was also quite threatening toward Libya during the Libyan bombing crisis, and toward the Soviet Union early and late in his administration. Excluding periods of war and these later exceptions, the period from 1945 through the late-1980s was characterized by relatively docile presidential rhetoric.
In contrast, the period from the late-1980s through 2008 was characterized by increasingly intense presidential saber rattling directed toward a multiplicity of nations. The most obvious of these were Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, the objects of later analysis. Of course, these nations also directed significant hostility toward the U.S. during this period. They have also been classified by the U.S. State Department as sponsors of global terrorism. Thus, the rise of presidential saber rattling during and after the 1980s might be linked to hostile relations with various nations. It might also have been due to their alleged support for terrorist activities.

The demise of a bipolar international system in which power was relatively balanced between two adversaries was followed by a subsequent increase in presidential hostility toward a multiplicity of weaker nations. Realist theory might argue that the change in U.S. foreign policy after the late-1980s was an effort to consolidate its power as hegemon relative to a weaker set of nations. Further, it might also be argued that altered presidential behavior was a rational response to a fundamental change in the international system. Conflict directed toward the U.S. from multiple adversaries and the rise of global terrorism basically forced presidents to become more threatening. In either case, presidents could be seen as responding to an altered foreign policy environment after the late-1980s.

**Threat Credibility**

Realist explanations are an often used framework for understanding when leaders are likely to make threats, as well as their relative probability of success. In this regard, the concept of “threat credibility” has become important to evaluating their probability of success. Threats should more successful when they are perceived by the target country as more credible.

Of course, the relative power of two adversarial countries is one element of threat credibility. Threats by powerful nations toward weaker nations are more credible than threats by weaker nations toward more powerful nations. Powerful nations have the military and economic resources to follow through with their threats. In contrast, weaker nations lack such attributes as would make their
threats credible. As a result, weaker nations are less likely to threaten, and when they do there is a lower probability of success.

Threats should also be perceived as more credible when the leader making the threat is in a stronger position domestically. For example, Wood (2009a) showed that presidents can bolster their domestic support, both over the short- and long-term, by making public threats. Presidential approval ratings increase as a result of such threats. The resulting increases in domestic support should, in turn, make presidential threats appear more credible to the target country. Such domestic changes should increase the probability that a threat will be successful.

Similarly, perceptions of unity can also increase perceptions of strength. For example, the statistical analyses in Wood (2009a) showed that the Out-Party group rallies more toward the president when threats are made toward foreign actors. This Out-Party rally effect should produce an increased sense of unity, again making presidential threats seem more credible, and increasing the probability of success.

Economic factors may also affect perceptions of strength to foreign adversaries. A strong economy places the president in a better position to follow through with threats. In contrast, a nation in recession, economic decline, or scandal will be perceived by the target country as weak and unable to pursue economic or military action. Thus, a variety of domestic factors should bolster presidential credibility, and therefore the probability that threats will be successful.

**Audience Costs and Threat Credibility**

Many international relations scholars have also argued that threats should be perceived as more credible when leaders “go public.” For example, Fearon (1994) draws on work by Schelling (1960) to argue that foreign policy success depends critically on making public foreign policy commitments. Public commitments “tie the hands” of a nation’s leaders, and may have domestic audience costs if leaders fail to follow through. Thus, presidential saber rattling which threatens economic, political,
or military sanctions should be viewed by target nations as commitments toward future action. Here it should be noted that presidential saber rattling as measured here is, by definition, public. Therefore, such threats should be particularly credible to foreign actors.

Further, Fearon theorizes that leaders of democratic nations such as the U.S. are more successful at generating audience costs through public threats than leaders of autocratic regimes (such as the former Iraq, Iran, and North Korea). Democratic leaders depend more on their domestic audience and elections for continuation in office. If they fail to follow through with their threats, democratic leaders face potential punishment through lost support and regime turnover. In contrast, Fearon posits that leaders of autocratic nations face fewer adverse consequences. Their continuation in office depends less on popular support and more on raw power. Fearon’s analysis, therefore, suggests that democratic leaders should be able to signal their intentions more credibly and clearly than leaders of autocracies.

However, others suggest that Fearon underestimates the audience costs associated with autocratic regimes. Weeks (2008) contends that Fearon’s analysis pertains more to stereotypical autocrats such as Saddam Hussein or Kim Jong Il who could easily crush domestic rivals or co-opt political institutions. Such leaders face few adverse consequences whatever their actions in the face of external threats. Weeks argues further that a theory of audience costs should also take into account that authoritarian leaders require the support of domestic elites who act as audiences much in the same way that an electorate does in a democracy. According to Weeks, the critical questions for generating credibility are whether the relevant elites can and will coordinate to sanction a leader, and whether the potential for sanctioning is visible to external decision makers. When these attributes are present, Weeks theorizes that democracies have no advantage over autocracies in generating audience costs and producing the perception of credible commitment.
Further, while autocrats may not be critically dependent on popular support for continuation in office, they do fear the consequences of being perceived as weak. Such perceptions can embolden the opposition, leading to civil unrest, organized opposition, and potential regime failure. Internationally, perceptions of weakness may diminish regime legitimacy. Autocratic leaders often depend on support from other nations to bolster their internal authority. A loss of international support can produce isolation, and fewer resources for remaining in power. Thus, under Weeks’ framework democracies may be no more successful than autocracies in getting the other nation to back down.

The concept of domestic audience costs has now become central to international relations scholarship (e.g., see Fearon 1994; Fearon 1997; Smith 1998; Partell and Palmer 1999; Dorussen and Mo 2001; Schultz 1998, 2001a, 2001b; Gelpi and Griesdorf 2001; Ramsay 2004; Leventoğlu and Tarar 2005; Tomz 2007; Kurizaki 2007; Weeks 2008; Tarar and Leventoğlu 2009). Models of international conflict and cooperation now commonly assume that leaders suffer domestic audience costs if they issue threats publicly and fail to follow through. Citizens punish leaders who back down relative to leaders who never commit in the first place. The presence of audience costs and the associated prospect of losing domestic support should discourage leaders from pursuing empty threats and promises.¹ However, when democratic leaders do make public threats, the associated audience costs should make those threats especially credible.

More specific to the U.S. case, threats toward American adversaries can come from lower level officials or through private channels. Some are released through the new media or diplomacy. However, presidential saber rattling by definition entails threats made *publicly*. Because such threats

¹ Of course, presidents may prefer to “stay private” by conducting foreign policy out of the public eye (Baum 2004).
come from the president, democratic leader of the free world, they are often highly publicized. As a result, public threats from the American president should be viewed as highly credible. According to the theory of audience costs, then, such threats should be an especially effective tool for altering the behavior of foreign adversaries.

A Critique of Audience Cost Theory

While prominent in the field of international relations, the theory of audience costs has not been verified empirically. Indeed, there are a number of problems in evaluating the theory.

Audience cost theory posits that leaders’ public threats toward other nations should have more credibility than their private threats. However, private threats are by definition unobservable, or they would not be called private. Therefore, it is impossible to evaluate which type of threat, public or private, has more credibility with foreign leaders. Scholars can construct arguments in either direction. For example, Kurizaki (2007) constructed a game showing that private threats can be equally compelling relative to public threats. Still, neither argument is falsifiable, because data does not exist on private threats.

There is also a psychological dimension to audience cost theory which, again, cannot be tested. The theory posits that public threats have more credibility with the leaders of threatened countries. Yet, the perception of threat credibility by foreign leaders is not an observable phenomenon. One can only observe the behavior of foreign actors. Perception of threat credibility is a psychological concept which requires psychological evidence to verify. Again, such evidence is not commonly available to international relations scholars.

Additionally, audience cost theory posits that leaders making threats will suffer losses at home if they do not follow through with their threats. This part of the theory might be testable with the right kind of data (e.g., see Tomz 2007). Such a test would need to focus on individual threats as the unit
of analysis. Then, the analyst might observe public responses when leaders fail to follow through with their threats. However, this type of analysis is again problematic in at least three respects.

First, there is a strategic selection bias problem which is widely recognized by international relations scholars (e.g., see Schultz 2001b; Tomz 2007). If leaders anticipate that domestic audiences will react harshly to their backing down after making a public threat, then leaders will not take that path in the first place. Thus, strategic behavior by leaders leaves little or no opportunity ever to observe a public backlash.

Second, there is a measurement problem associated with the concept of “following through” with threats. When would one know if a leader had failed to follow through with a threat? Is a failure to follow through just a matter of sufficient time passing to deem the threat empty? Is a failure to follow through an explicit repudiation of the threat. If the first interpretation, then there is a problem in recognizing the stimulus timing; if the second interpretation, then there it would be very difficult ever to observe the stimulus, since strategic U.S. presidents would rarely repudiate a prior threat.

Third, there is also a data problem in gauging public responses to an empty threat. How does one go about measuring public responses, given that public opinion data relative to particular threats is sporadic at best? Such data is largely unavailable to empirical researchers. From these arguments we must conclude that public responses to presidents who fail to follow through with their threats will remain largely unobserved and unobservable.

Another nuance is that there are actually two audiences to consider when leaders make threats toward other nations: the leader’s own domestic audience, and the audience associated with the nation being threatened. Domestic audiences tend to view strong leaders who seem to be protecting national interests favorably. As demonstrated in Wood (2009a), presidential approval ratings go up when presidents project this image. Similarly, foreign leaders may also gain in domestic strength by
standing firm. Foreign audiences may also react negatively to being threatened. Thus, “rally effects” in the targeted nation, such as occurs in the U.S., may reduce the effectiveness of external threats.

As a result of these various difficulties, the audience cost literature has focused on “story-telling” about leaders who face high audience costs generating credible commitments, which in turn affect the behavior of foreign adversaries. However, we can easily tell an opposing story. U.S. presidents have often paid a high price for actually following through with their threats. President Carter lost significant support from important constituencies by following through on his threat to impose economic sanctions on the Soviet Union after their invasion of Afghanistan. Many U.S. farmers were angry that they had to pay the price of Carter’s foreign policy. Further, three American presidents (Truman, Johnson, and George W. Bush) suffered significant loss of long-term public support for involving the nation in protracted military interventions. These actions became increasingly unpopular with domestic audiences due to perceptions of needless lives lost and diverted economic resources.

For all of these reasons, audience cost theory has remained largely untested and unconfirmed by international relations scholars (but see Schultz 2001a; Gelpi and Griesdorf 2001; Tomz 2007). The theory will remain largely untested here. However, we will gain a sense from the analyses below of whether public threats by the democratically elected U.S. president toward a weaker autocratic adversary are generally successful.

*Formalizing a Theory Graphically*

Realist theory and the associated concepts of power and threat credibility may or may not useful for understanding why presidents make threats toward foreign adversaries, and their relative probability of success. Regardless, it is useful to formalize the hypothesized relationships. Thus, Figure 2 operationalizes many of the concepts from the preceding discussion in path diagram form.
The arrows indicate hypotheses about potential relationships among presidential saber rattling, domestic support for the president, and cooperation/conflict from foreign actors. The core of the theory is the three nodes in boldface type. The double-headed arrows for these three linkages indicate the possibility of two-way relations between each pair of variables. Some of these linkages were discussed and evaluated in Wood (2009a, 2011). Those analyses showed that presidential saber rattling is strongly determined by elections, war, political drama (e.g., terrorist actions), and may also relate to domestic support and economic variables. The president’s domestic support is strongly determined by economic variables, foreign and domestic political drama, as well as presidential saber rattling.

The single-headed arrows in Figure 2 running from economic variables and terrorist actions to cooperation/conflict with foreign actors represent two hypotheses. First, a stronger U.S. economy should produce perceptions of American strength. Under this condition, those being threatened should be more cooperative and less hostile toward U.S. interests. Threat credibility is higher when the U.S. has the economic power to follow through with its threats. Therefore, foreign adversaries should be more cooperative and less conflictual during periods when the U.S. economy is strong.

Second, terrorist actions directed toward U.S. interests may produce more or less cooperation/conflict from the target nation. If the target nation is supportive of terrorist acts, then we should see less cooperation and more conflict toward the U.S. If the target nation is unsupportive of terrorist acts, then the relation should either be neutral or run in the opposite direction. In either case, this linkage can provide a sense of whether the target nation is sympathetic of terrorist actions.
The double-headed arrows running between presidential saber rattling, domestic support, and cooperation/conflict from foreign actors represent the core of the theory. Wood (2009a, 2011) considered in some detail the double-headed arrow between presidential saber rattling and domestic support for the president. The analyses there showed that presidents benefit from saber rattling through increased domestic support. However, the analyses showed little evidence that the relation runs in the opposite direction. Nevertheless, we shall continue to evaluate these relations as potentially two-way.

Consider now the double-headed arrow between domestic support for the president and cooperation/conflict with foreign actors. In the vertical up direction, the hypothesis is that decreased cooperation and increased conflict with a foreign adversary should produce greater support for the president. In other words, when a nation such as Iraq becomes increasingly hostile, the president should benefit through increased domestic support. In the vertical down direction, the hypothesis is that greater domestic support for the president should increase the president’s credibility. Greater presidential credibility should, in turn, produce a higher probability that presidential threats will be successful.

Finally, consider the double-headed arrow running between presidential saber rattling and cooperation/conflict with foreign actors. These linkages represent the primary hypotheses for this study. In the upward direction, the hypothesis is that presidential saber rattling should respond to changing levels of cooperation and conflict by the target nation. Decreased cooperation and increased conflict should result in increased presidential saber rattling through time.

In the downward direction, if the preceding theories are correct about how relative power, threat credibility, and audience costs affect threat success, then saber rattling by the U.S. president (i.e., by a strong democratic leader with high audience costs) should systematically affect cooperation/conflict with the targets of those threats (i.e., weaker autocratic leaders with lower
audience costs). More generally, it is through this linkage that we should be able to determine whether increased presidential threats since the 1980s have been a useful foreign policy strategy.

**Measuring the Research Concepts**

*Presidential Saber Rattling*

A key variable in the analysis below is that measuring presidential saber rattling. Constructing the measure of presidential saber rattling involved extracting and coding all foreign policy statements from *Public Papers of the Presidents* from January 1990 through January 2008. First, an electronic file was created that contained the entire *Public Papers of the Presidents*. PERL (Practical Extraction and Report Language) was then used to extract from the *Public Papers* every sentence relating to foreign policy spoken by the president over this period. Keyword searches were used to identify the foreign policy statements. The entire list of 261 keywords and phrases included country names,

\[\text{2 The *Public Papers* is a comprehensive record of all public remarks, spoken or written, by the president for every day of each presidential administration. A CD-Rom was obtained from Western Standard Publishing Company that contained the complete text of the *Public Papers* through 1999. The text from this CD-Rom was extracted into a single ASCII file. This file was then appended to the present by downloading the *Weekly Compilation of Presidential Documents* from http://www.OriginalSources.com .}

\[\text{3 PERL is a public domain open access code software package for logical manipulation of text. It is a high-level programming language deriving from the ubiquitous C programming language and to a lesser extent from sed, awk, the Unix shell, and at least a dozen other tools and languages. See http://www.perl.com for a complete description, example applications, as well as free access to the program and source code.}
organizational acronyms, international leaders, and words generally associated with U.S. foreign policy.

Having identified the president’s foreign policy statements electronically, the task was then to identify those involving presidential saber rattling. This involved a combination of both machine and human coding. First, PERL was used again to tentatively identify the sentences involving hostile presidential rhetoric. Using PERL, every unique word in the foreign policy sentence file was listed. Human coders then identified keywords and phrases commonly used by the president when engaging in saber rattling. Around 120 words and phrases were identified and validated as saber rattling relevant through manual keyword searches in the foreign policy sentences file. PERL was then used again to extract a new sentence file containing potential instances of presidential saber rattling. However, in recognition that machine coding techniques are fallible, human coders were again used to validate the results.4

Three types of presidential saber rattling were identified using the combination of machine and human coding. 1) General aggressive talk not directed toward any particular nation, 2) Aggressive talk directed toward specific nations, but which threatened no particular action, 3) Aggressive talk directed toward specific nations, but which threatened political, economic, or military action. The analyses reported below employ only the latter two types of saber rattling. This is because this study

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4 One might also reasonably ask about reliability. Reliability concerns whether or not coders (machine and human) coded each sentence the same way a high proportion of the time. Of course, machines are quite adept at repetitive operations, and made even more reliable when humans check their work. Three human coders were used to validate the machine coding. Periodically, they were required to check one another’s work. These checks showed an average 0.96 correlation across human coders in their validation decisions.
is concerned more with threats toward specific nations, rather than treats that are general and perhaps directed toward a domestic audience.

The coded saber rattling sentences were aggregated into monthly counts of for each target nation. The resulting time series for all nations were shown above in Figure 1. The time series for saber rattling directed toward Iraq, Iran, and North Korea are used in the analyses below.

**Measuring Domestic Incentives for Presidential Saber Rattling**

Domestic incentives for presidential saber rattling are measured using four variables. These variables are, respectively, the president’s public support, U.S. economic performance, the presence/absence of a major scandal, and indicators for each respective presidential administration.

The president’s public support was operationalized using a monthly time series of public approval of the president’s job performance. Specifically, the survey marginal percentages were recorded from the general Gallup approval question “Do you approve or disapprove of the way [president’s name] is handling his job as president?” The Gallup survey organization has asked this question at least monthly since 1978. Many times they asked it multiple times in the same month. This potential complication was addressed using the procedure and software WCALC developed by Stimson (1991). The software produced a recursively smoothed monthly time series for the approval measure running from 1990 through 2007. Public approval is lagged one month to avoid potential problems of two-way causality.

U.S. economic performance was measured using the monthly percent change in the Conference Board’s Composite Index of Coincident Indicators. This is an index constructed from four time series chosen by the Conference Board because they are consistently in step with the current state of
the U.S. economy. The four time series comprising the Coincident Index are employment, personal income, industrial production, and manufacturing/trade sales in 1996 dollars. Using the Coincident Index provides a better measure of current economic performance than often used individual time series such as Gross Domestic Product (which is released only quarterly and often revised), or unemployment and inflation (which are lagging indicators). According to the Conference Board (2001, 13), the Coincident Index is a “broad series that measures aggregate economic activity; thus they define the business cycle.” The Coincident Index was also lagged by one month, again to avoid potential problems of two-way causality.

The presence/absence of a scandal was measured as an indicator variable on the theory that presidents engage in saber rattling during such periods to divert attention away from their domestic troubles. The only major White House scandal during this period was that involving President Clinton, Monica Lewinsky, and the impeachment (1998:01-1999:02). An indicator switched on during this period was entered exogenously into all analyses.

Finally, indicators were included for each presidency covered by the analysis. The rationale is that presidents differ in style, such that some are more prone toward saber rattling than others. In

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5 The Conference Board is a global, independent research organization working in the public interest, which is widely regarded as an objective source of economic and business knowledge. Their research department publishes three widely used indices for gauging the U.S. economy: the Index of Lagging Indicators (for gauging the economic past), the Index of Leading Indicators (for forecasting the economic future), and the Index of Coincident Indicators (for gauging the current economy).

6 Wood (2009b) shows that presidential saber rattling affects a variety of economic outcomes, including current economic performance. Therefore, it is important to lag the economic variable to avoid reverse causality.
particular, President George W. Bush was known for “cowboy” diplomacy, and may have been more hostile than other presidents toward the countries included in the analysis. Additionally, presidential approval varies systematically across presidencies. It may also be that the propensity of terrorists and countries to target the U.S. depends on who is president. Therefore, it is appropriate to control for these potential shifts across different presidential administrations.

*Measuring Foreign Policy Incentives for Presidential Saber Rattling*

Foreign policy incentives to presidential saber rattling include the presence of war, terrorist actions, and cooperation/conflict from Iraq, Iran, and North Korea directed toward the U.S.

The presence of war is measured using an indicator variable switched on for the Persian Gulf War (1990:07-1991:01), U.S. invasion of Afghanistan (2001:9-2001:11), and U.S. invasion of Iraq (2003:2-2003:4). The rationale for ending the measures for the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq after November 2001 and April 2003, respectively, is that the U.S. from those points on became an occupation force. Presidential saber rattling toward these two countries effectively ceased after the successful invasions. Therefore, even though hostilities continued, presidential remarks were directed at the respective insurgencies, rather than at the countries themselves.

Terrorist actions are measured using three separate variables. First, terrorist attacks against U.S. interests were extracted from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (Accessed on February 7, 2010). The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) makes these data available via an online interface at [http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/](http://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/). The GTD is an open-source database which includes information on terrorist events around the world from 1970 through present. The GTD includes data on domestic as well as transnational and international terrorist incidents that have occurred during this time frame and includes more than 80,000 cases. Terrorist acts against U.S. interests in Latin America and non-Islamic Africa are excluded, because
these are not relevant to the nations under investigation. All extracted events occurred between 1990 and 2008, and were again aggregated into monthly time series counts for statistical analysis.

Figure 3 contains a graph of the terrorism time series. Visual inspection of the graph suggests that the number of terrorist actions increased during and for a period after the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Observe also the increase in the frequency of terrorist actions following September 11th and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. These ocular indications suggest that war and presidential saber rattling may cause terrorist actions. We shall evaluate this possibility below through statistical analysis.

Of course, not all terrorist events are created equal. Therefore, the most important terrorist events are captured with two other variables in the analyses below. First, the most important terrorist events were identified, excluding September 11th. These include the first World Trade Center bombing (1993:02), the Saudi Riyadh bombing (1995:11), the Saudi Khobar Towers bombing (1996:06), the African embassy bombings (1998:08), and the U.S.S. Cole bombing (2000:10). An indicator variable was created to capture these five events and labeled “Big Terror” in the analyses below. An indicator variable was also included for September 11th (2001:09) because of its overarching importance.

Cooperation/conflict from foreign actors in Figure 2 was measured using machine-coded events data developed commercially by Virtual Research Associates (VRA). The VRA data use lead sentences from Reuters Business Briefings to code the actions of one state toward another. These actions are then categorized using a framework laid out in the Integrated Data for Events Analysis.

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7 I used the website http://www.spiritus-temporis.com/ as an initial filter, and then validated the major terrorist events list against other U.S. foreign policy chronologies.

8 For a more detailed discussion of the data see Bond et al. (2003).
(IDEA) coding manual, which again was developed by VRA. A summary of the event frames used to code the data is given in the appendix. These categories are then coded into Goldstein (1992) cooperation and conflict scores which range from 8.3 to -10. Cooperative actions are scored positively, with a weight assigned to reflect the relative degree of cooperation. In contrast, extremely aggressive acts, such as an armed attack, are coded negatively and weighted more heavily than rhetorical statements by political leaders. The cooperation/conflict measure is defined as the sum of all Goldstein scores for all events between the different states for a particular month. From the list of cooperative and hostile acts directed toward the U.S., only those initiated by the states of interest for this paper are extracted – Iraq, Iran, and North Korea.

The measure for cooperation/conflict from foreign actors is restricted to the period from 1990 to 2008. This restriction is imposed for two reasons. First, the VRA database for the cooperation/conflict measure was unavailable prior to 1990 and after January 2008. Second, this restricted time frame is reasonably consistent with the theory we need to evaluate. As noted above, presidential bellicosity toward weaker adversaries increased starting in the late-1980s. Thus, the period from 1990 onward captures most of the relevant period.

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9 The IDEA coding framework is an extension and a refinement of, and congruent with the World Event/Interaction Survey or WEIS. Like WEIS, IDEA is nominally scaled. The congruence with WEIS is in the WEIS "cue" categories numbered 1-22. The extension of WEIS is the addition of additional event categories beginning with number 23, and extending (with breaks) to 99. According VRA, IDEA event forms represent the lowest level of specificity that machine coding can accomplish with precision at least equal to large-scale human coding exercises. Equivalent events for the major ordinally-scaled alternative framework, COPDAB, are generated using a weight applied to each nominal event form as in Goldstein (1992).
The resulting cooperation/conflict time series capture 308 positively coded cooperative events from Iraq (121), Iran (39) and North Korea (148). There were 587 negatively coded conflict events from Iraq (365), Iran (104), and North Korea (118). Observe that there is roughly three times more conflict than cooperation associated with Iraq. There are about 2.5 more conflict than cooperative events associated with Iran. However, the number of cooperative events associated with North Korea exceeds the number of conflict events.

**Evaluating the Foreign Policy Consequences of Presidential Saber Rattling**

*Case Study Evidence: Iraq*

As a preliminary to statistical analyses, it is useful to visually examine and study the time series plots of cooperation and conflict from Iraq, Iran, and North Korea. Presidential saber rattling toward these three countries is also superimposed onto the plots. During the period from 1990 to 2008, presidents made 233 public threats toward Iraq, 105 public threats toward Iran, and 43 public threats toward North Korea. Obviously, relations were much more intense with Iraq relative to Iran and North Korea.

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**INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE**

Figure 4 contains the time series plot for Iraq. The vertical line corresponds with the month of the September 11th terror attacks. Examination of the cooperation/conflict time series (dashed line) shows that during the entire period of analysis Iraq directed significantly more conflict than cooperation toward the U.S. During this same period, the U.S. president directed significant amounts of saber rattling toward Iraq (solid line). The most intense periods of presidential saber rattling were between 1991 and 1999, and immediately prior to the 2003 Iraq invasion. Presidential threats effectively ceased after the successful 2003 invasion.
More specifically, during the two-month buildup to the Persian Gulf War, President George H.W. Bush made numerous threats toward Iraq. Obviously he wanted to persuade Saddam Hussein to withdraw his forces from Kuwait to avoid military action. However, presidential threats were not successful, and the Persian Gulf War commenced in August 1990.

In April 1991, as part of the permanent cease-fire agreement ending the war, the U.N. Security Council ordered Iraq to eliminate, under international supervision, its biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons programs, as well as its ballistic missiles that could reach Israel and other countries. Economic sanctions imposed on Iraq by the Security Council in 1990 after its invasion of Kuwait were to remain in place until Iraq had fully complied with these requirements (Arms Control Association 2011b).

Saddam Hussein agreed to these conditions. However, between 1991 and 1999 Iraq deceived, obstructed, and threatened U.N. inspectors seeking to verify the dismantling of its banned programs. A systematic Iraqi effort to deceive and conceal began almost immediately when Baghdad lied about its existing programs in the initial declarations. Iraq continued to frustrate U.N. inspectors until late 1998 when they withdrew from Iraq just hours before the United States and the United Kingdom launched three days of military strikes. After that time, Iraq permitted limited inspections of declared nuclear sites, but did not allow more intrusive inspections to verify that it had lived up to its commitments (Arms Control Association 2011b). Thus, as shown in Figure 4, from 1991 to 1999 the relative intensity of presidential threats toward Iraq was high as presidents attempted to force Iraqi compliance with U.N. requirements.

Between 1999 and 2002 the intensity of presidential saber rattling moved sharply lower. Interestingly, during this same time frame Iraq directed increased conflict toward the U.S. Perhaps Saddam Hussein was emboldened during this period by his success at thwarting U.N. inspections
and U.S. efforts at enforcing compliance. For whatever reason, the Iraqi dictator seemed to be thumbing his nose at the U.S.

Figure 4 also suggests that conflict from Iraq toward the U.S. increased again after the September 11th terror attacks (albeit marginally). This change may suggest Iraqi satisfaction with the attacks on their arch-enemy. What is also clear from Figure 4 is that the increase in Iraq conflict toward the U.S. during this period was not due to increased presidential saber rattling. There was no corresponding increase in the intensity of presidential threats toward Iraq. Rather, the president’s ire was directed more toward Afghanistan, pursuing al-Qaeda, and constructing a war on terror.

However, presidential attention ultimately returned to Iraq in 2002 when President George W. Bush labeled Iraq part of an “axis of evil,” along with Iran and North Korea, in his State of the Union Address (Public Papers of the Presidents, January 29, 2002). The president’s speech was the beginning of a stream of administration statements on the dangers posed by Iraq, many of which advocated the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. On September 12, 2002, amid increasing speculation that the U.S. was preparing to invade Iraq, President Bush delivered a speech to the U.N. General Assembly calling on the organization to enforce its resolutions for disarming Iraq. The president strongly implied that if the U.N. did not act, then the United States would (Public Papers of the Presidents, September 12, 2002). After the president’s speech, the level of Iraqi conflict directed toward the U.S. increased sharply.

The Bush administration continued to press the U.N. for a new resolution calling for Iraq to give weapons inspectors complete access and authorizing the use of force for non-compliance. After considerable debate, the U.N. Security Council adopted a compromise resolution, Resolution 1441. However, Resolution 1441 did not unequivocally authorize the use of force. However, in October 2002 the U.S. Congress passed a “Joint Resolution to Authorize the Use of United States Armed Forces Against Iraq” (P.L. 107-243). This resolution authorized the President to “use any means
necessary” against Iraq. By January 2003, 64% of Americans supported taking military action to remove Saddam Hussein from power. However, about the same percentage wanted the president to find a diplomatic solution prior to taking military action (Cosgrove-Mather 2003). In February 2003, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell again addressed the United Nations Security Council, continuing administration efforts to gain U.N. authorization for an invasion (Powell, February 5, 2003). Powell presented evidence alleging that Iraq was actively producing chemical and biological weapons and had ties to al-Qaeda. As a follow-up to Powell’s presentation, the United States, United Kingdom, Poland, Italy, Australia, Denmark, Japan, and Spain proposed a resolution authorizing the use of force in Iraq. However, NATO members Canada, France, and Germany, together with Russia, strongly urged continued diplomacy. Facing a losing vote at the U.N., as well as a likely veto from France and Russia, the resolution was eventually withdrawn (Arms Control Association 2011b).

Finally, in March 2003 the administration began preparing the nation for an invasion of Iraq with various public relations and military moves. On March 17, 2003 President Bush addressed the nation and demanded that Saddam Hussein and his two sons, Uday and Qusay, surrender and leave Iraq, giving them a 48-hour deadline (Public Papers of the Presidents, March 17, 2003). About 90 minutes after the deadline expired on March 19th, the U.S. began bombing Iraq. Presidential threats had failed to secure the desired foreign policy outcome, and the Iraq War commenced at this point (Arms Control Association 2011b).

Case Study Evidence: Iran

The data show that relations with Iran were far less intense than with Iraq, but suggest a similar failure of presidential threats in achieving desirable outcomes. Figure 5 contains the time series plot for Iranian cooperation and conflict (dashed line). Again, presidential saber rattling toward Iran is superimposed onto the plot (solid line), and there is a vertical line for September 11th.
As background, it is important to note that following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and hostage-taking, Iran was continuously viewed as an American adversary. In January 1984 the U.S. State Department declared it a state sponsor of terrorism. Under this designation, the president can restrict or require special licensing of sales of certain items to such countries. Arms exports and “dual use” technologies, which have both civil and military applications, are also restricted.

Visual examination of the plot from 1990 through the Clinton administration again shows a pattern of increased Iranian conflict directed toward the U.S. at the same time the president was making threats. President George H.W. Bush made no public threats toward Iran, perhaps because he was preoccupied with the Persian Gulf War. However, President Clinton made numerous threats toward Iran. However, the intensity of his threats were not close to what we observed above toward Iraq.

On March 15, 1995, President Clinton issued Executive Order 12957 declaring “that the actions and policies of the Government of Iran constitute an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States…” (Public Papers of the Presidents, March 15, 1995) Sanctions were imposed prohibiting American companies and their foreign subsidiaries from doing business with Iran, in addition to any financing or development of its oil and gas sector. The following year, the president signed the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (H.R. 3107), which imposed an embargo against non-American companies investing more than $20 million per year in Iran’s oil and gas sector.

However, the 1998 Iranian election resulted in a reformist president, which opened new prospects for rapprochement. Shortly after taking office, new President Mohammed Khatami called for a “dialogue among civilizations” (Amanpour 1998). President Clinton responded to the Iranian
initiative by toning down his threatening remarks. On March 17, 2000, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright delivered a speech apologizing for America's role in the 1953 overthrow of Mohammed Mossadeq (a democratically elected prime minister who threatened to nationalize Iran's oil fields). The Secretary acknowledged that the coup d'état, which installed the Shah, “was clearly a setback for Iran's political development.” (Albright 2000) Consistent with this more conciliatory tone, the Clinton administration partially lifted sanctions on Iran (but not oil and gas). Nevertheless, theocratic leaders in Tehran responded with a denunciation of the American goodwill initiatives.

At the start of the George W. Bush administration, Figure 5 shows that the level of conflict from Iran increased sharply. President Bush renewed President Clinton’s 1995 executive order imposing sanctions on Iran (Public Papers of the Presidents, March 13, 2001). President Bush’s executive order again asserted that Iran is a threat to U.S. national security, foreign policy, and economy as a result of Iranian support for international terrorism, efforts to undermine the Middle East peace process, and efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction. In addition, President Bush also signed an extension of the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act of 1995. From these early presidential actions forward, relations with Iran deteriorated.

Figure 5 shows that the Iranian response was rapid, with a step-increase in Iranian conflict after the president’s actions. Interestingly, the September 11th terrorist attacks also correspond closely with another sharp increase in Iranian conflict directed toward the U.S. Again, we might speculate that this increase was due to Iranian support for the terrorist actions. However, as with Iraq above, it is also clear that Iranian behavior was not a result of increased presidential saber rattling. Between September 11, 2001 and January 2002, the president issued no threatening remarks. As suggested above, the president was more concerned during this period with Afghanistan, al-Qaeda, and initiating a war on terror.
However, the president’s 2002 State of the Union message resumed presidential hostility, with Iran identified as part of an “axis of evil” (along with Iraq and North Korea) (Public Papers of the Presidents, January 29, 2002). Presidential attention turned more intensely toward Iran after the March 19, 2003 invasion of Iraq, as it became increasingly evident that Iran was aiding the insurgency and obstructing reconstruction efforts. It increasingly through time trained, armed, and aided Shia militants in Iraq, and later the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Intermingled with these concerns for Iran’s interference in Iraq and Afghanistan was concern over its ongoing nuclear program. In October 2003, European Union foreign ministers and Iranian officials in Tehran issued a statement in which Iran agreed to cooperate fully with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and voluntarily suspend all uranium enrichment activities. However, the election of a theocratically supported president in 2005 altered this cooperation. After he took office, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad promptly accused Iranian diplomats who had negotiated the agreement of treason, and restarted Iran’s nuclear activities. Since this time the Iranian regime has gradually expanded its nuclear activities, regardless of presidential threats and increasing U.S. sanctions. Thus, similar to the Iraq case study above, the qualitative evidence for Iran suggests that presidential threats were unsuccessful in achieving American foreign policy goals.

Case Study Evidence: North Korea

Figure 6 contains the time series plot for cooperation and conflict from North Korea directed toward the U.S. (dashed line). As noted earlier, the number of cooperative events from North Korea toward the U.S. (148) exceeded the number of conflict events (118). This ratio implies a more complex relationship than with the other two nations. Again, presidential saber rattling toward North Korea is superimposed onto the plot (solid line). Visual examination shows that presidential saber rattling toward North Korea was sparse relative to Iraq and Iran, especially before 2001. There is no line representing September 11th, because there is no reason to believe this event affected U.S.
relations with North Korea. Instead, text has been added to identify the events associated with the largest spikes in the two time series.

Unlike for Iraq and Iran above, a single major issue divided the U.S. and North Korea from 1990 to 2008, North Korea’s pursuit of nuclear weapons and delivery systems. As background, it is important to note that North Korea signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NNPT) in December 1985. However, it did not complete a safeguards agreement until after the U.S. withdrew its nuclear weapons from South Korea in September 1991 (Arms Control Association 2011a).

North Korea’s signing of the NNPT and safeguards agreement did not, however, end conflict over its nuclear program. In March and again in June 1992, President George H.W. Bush imposed sanctions on North Korean companies for exporting missile technology to other countries. In September 1992 IAEA inspectors reported discrepancies in North Korea’s initial report on its nuclear activities and asked for clarifications. In February 1993 the IAEA demanded inspections of North Korean sites storing nuclear wastes, under the suspicion that North Korea was cheating on its commitments under the NNPT. After the IAEA inspection demands, North Korea announced its intention to withdraw from the NNPT within three months (Arms Control Association 2011a).

However, after talks with the Clinton administration in June 1993, North Korea announced that it was reversing its decision to withdraw from the NNPT. At the same time, the U.S. promised not to use threats or force, including nuclear weapons. In spite of North Korea’s alleged adherence to the NNPT, U.S. intelligence agencies reported in late 1993 that North Korea had extracted enough plutonium to produce one or two nuclear weapons. Then, in June 1994 North Korea announced that it was withdrawing from the IAEA (a move distinct from withdrawing from the NNPT), meaning that inspectors would no longer be allowed into its nuclear facilities. At this point, former
President Carter was sent by President Clinton to negotiate a deal with North Korea in which it agreed to freeze its nuclear programs and resume high level talks (Arms Control Association 2011a).

Flowing from these talks in October 1994 was an “agreed framework” in which North Korea consented to eliminate its nuclear weapons programs in exchange for normalized diplomatic and economic relations with the U.S., as well as help with proliferation resistant nuclear reactors. Figure 6 shows a large spike in North Korean cooperation at the time of the “agreed framework.”

The period from 1994 through 2001 was characterized by continuing back and forth over North Korea’s missile program and whether the two countries were living up to their mutual commitments under the “agreed framework.” Throughout this period North Korea tested new missiles and exported missile technology to other countries, including Iran. At the same time, the United States was imposing sanctions for these activities and limiting the flow of economic aid to North Korea. As a result, the North Koreans claimed that the U.S. was not living up to its commitments to provide economic assistance and technological support for its peaceful nuclear programs under the “agreed framework.” (Arms Control Association 2011a)

However, between 1990 and 2001 Presidents George H.W. Bush and Clinton made only 7 public threats toward North Korea. This period could be seen as one of negotiation based on mutually strategic interests. In contrast, between 2001 and 2008, President George W. Bush made 36 public threats toward North Korea. While this number of hostile presidential remarks toward North Korea was small relative to those directed toward Iraq and Iran, the shift of the Bush administration marks an important change in the tone of relations between the two countries.

On March 7, 2001, prior to meeting with the South Korean president, President Bush stated that “any negotiation [with North Korea] would require complete verification of the terms of a potential agreement.” (Public Papers of the Presidents, March 7, 2001) Six days later, North Korea, reacted to the president’s new tone by cancelling ministerial-level talks with Seoul. Two days after that, the state
news agency reported that Korea threatened to “take thousand-fold revenge” on the United States “and its black-hearted intention to torpedo the dialogue between north and south.” It also called Washington’s new policies “hostile” and noted that North Korea remains “fully prepared for both dialogue and war.” (cited in Arms Control Association 2011a)

Continuing his hostility toward North Korea, President Bush singled them out again in his 2002 State of the Union address for “arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens.” (Public Papers of the Presidents, January 29, 2002) As noted above, he also characterized North Korea, along with Iraq and Iran, as part of an “axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.”

In October 2002, the U.S. announced that North Korea had admitted to American diplomats that it had a clandestine program to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons (Arms Control Association 2011a). In response, North Korea officially withdrew from the NNPT in January 2003. Accordingly, Figure 6 shows a large spike in North Korean conflict events associated with its withdrawal from the treaty. This event sent shockwaves throughout the East Asian and Pacific region, ultimately resulting in the first round of six-party talks between the two Koreas, China, Japan, Russia, and the United States. These talks continued periodically between 2003 and 2006, but with little success. As shown in Figure 6, the initial six-party talks produced a wave of North Korean cooperation acts toward the U.S. However, these cooperation acts were largely symbolic as North Korea continued its provocative behavior and pursuit of nuclear weapons (Arms Control Association 2011a).

In July 2006, North Korea test fired seven ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan. The U.S. State Department described the launches as “provocative.” Japan and South Korea punished North Korea for the tests, with Tokyo imposing sanctions and Seoul halting agricultural assistance. The U.N. Security Council adopted Resolution 1695 which condemned North Korea’s missile launches and called for a resumption of the six-party talks (Arms Control Association 2011a).
The six-party talks resumed. However, North Korea conducted its first underground nuclear test on October 9, 2006. North Korea’s Foreign Ministry stated that the “test was entirely attributable to the U.S. nuclear threat, sanctions, and pressure.” North Korea “was compelled to substantially prove its possession of nukes to protect its sovereignty.” The statement also indicated that North Korea might conduct further tests if the United States increased pressure (Korean Central News Agency October 11, 2006). Such pressure did in fact occur, both from the United States and the international community.

North Korea now possesses nuclear weapons and the means to deliver them. Thus, threats and hostile presidential rhetoric toward North Korea were no more successful than the earlier pacific approach employed by the Clinton administration in altering North Korean behavior. As with Iraq and Iran, presidential saber rattling failed as a foreign policy strategy.

**Multivariate Regression Analyses**

The preceding qualitative analyses suggest that modern presidential saber rattling is an ineffective policy tool. However, we should also conduct statistical analyses to justify drawing this conclusion. Toward this end, three autoregressive regressions were run to partially capture the relations shown in Figure 2. Specifically, the dependent variables in these regressions were the Goldstein (1992) weighted cooperation/conflict time series shown in Figures 4 through 6. A lagged dependent variable was included in the analyses to capture the inertial nature of cooperation and conflict toward the U.S. The independent variables in these analyses capture the theoretical nodes impinging on the cooperation/conflict node in Figure 2.

Specifically, variables are included for the president’s domestic support, economic performance, war, and scandal. Indicators are included for the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations. However, the primary independent variables of interest are the measures discussed above for terrorist actions toward U.S. interests and presidential saber rattling toward Iraq, Iran, and North
Korea. If the preceding qualitative discussion is correct, then we should see consistent coefficients for these variables.

Table 1 contains the coefficients and t-statistics from the three autoregressive regressions. Consider first the lagged dependent variables in the first row. These coefficients are positive and statistically significant for Iraq and Iran, but not for North Korea. They show that cooperation and conflict from Iraq and Iran was somewhat inertial, driven by past cooperation and conflict. Of course, Figures 4 and 5 above show that these results are primarily due to continuing conflict, rather than cooperation.

Contrary to predictions from realist theory, strong domestic support for the president and a sound economy do not produce more cooperation and less conflict with the United States. In the sixth and seventh rows of Table 1, these relationships are either not statistically significant or in the wrong direction. Indeed, the statistically significant relation between domestic support for the president and Iranian cooperation/conflict is negative, indicating more conflict with Iran when the president is domestically strong. The coefficients for scandal for Iraq and North Korea in the eighth row are non-significant. However, again for Iran there is a marginally significant negative relationship between presidential scandal and cooperation/conflict. The scandal coefficient shows that the Iranians seized on presidential weakness (i.e., the Clinton impeachment) to engage in more conflict with the United States.

Controlling for individual presidencies, the coefficient for war (in Afghanistan and Iraq) is not a statistically significant predictor of cooperation/conflict from any of the three countries. However, the indicators for the Clinton and George W. Bush presidencies show that the three countries reacted differently to each president. Iran reacted with increased conflict toward the Clinton
presidency, relative to the George H.W. Bush presidency. Interestingly, all three countries reacted with increased conflict toward the George W. Bush presidency. Qualitatively, we know that George W. Bush adopted a more confrontational style relative to earlier presidents. Thus, the statistical analyses show that his bellicose presidential style was met with increased conflict from Iraq and Iran, and marginally increased conflict from North Korea. The change in cooperation/conflict from North Korea is not statistically significant at conventional levels, but certainly suggestive of greater hostility. Of course, these findings are consistent with the preceding qualitative discussions.

The coefficients for terrorist actions reported in the second through fourth rows of Table 1 are generally not significant. However, the strongly significant negative coefficient in the fourth row for the Iranian response to September 11th is consistent with the sharp negative break shown in Figure 5. Iran became considerably more bellicose toward the United States after the September 11th terrorist attacks. The estimated coefficient shows that following this event it directed roughly thirteen more conflict units on the Goldstein scale per month toward the U.S. Further, while September 11th did not produce a statistically significant increase in Iraqi conflict, as suggested by the preceding discussion surrounding Figure 4, the coefficient for this variable is substantively large. It suggests that following this event Iraq directed about five more conflict units on the Goldstein scale per month toward the U.S.

Finally, consider how presidential saber rattling toward each of the three countries affected cooperation and conflict toward the U.S. The coefficients in the fifth row of Table 1 show that, contrary to what would be predicted by realist theory, presidential threats produced no increased cooperation or reduced conflict from any of the three weaker countries. The coefficients for Iran and North Korea are not statistically significant, suggesting no response at all to presidential threats. In contrast, the coefficient for Iraq is large, statistically significant, but negative. In other words, the Iraqis increased their level of conflict in response to hostile presidential remarks. Specifically, each
instance of a presidential threat toward Iraq produced a decline of roughly 2.56 units on the Goldstein scale. Given a mean of about 1.08 presidential threats toward Iraq per month and a standard deviation of about 2.40 threats per month, this coefficient suggests that on average presidential threats produced an increase of about 2.76 units in Iraqi conflict toward the U.S. with a standard deviation of about 6.14 units. Thus, presidential saber rattling toward Iraq was not only ineffective, but produced a foreign policy result that was highly undesirable.

A Near-VAR Analysis of Presidential Saber Rattling Toward Iraq

The preceding qualitative and quantitative analyses for Iraq suggest that we should further investigate the dynamics of how presidential threats affected Iraqi cooperation and conflict toward the U.S. Accordingly, a Near-VAR analysis was conducted for Iraq. The two estimated equations explaining presidential saber rattling and domestic support were the same as those reported in Wood (2009a, 2011). The equation for Iraqi cooperation/conflict is the same as that reported above in Table 1, except that feedback is allowed and four lags of cooperation/conflict with Iraq are included in each equation. Also, a new terror index is constructed for a separate terror equation in the Near-VAR analysis. The reformulated terror variable is comprised of a weighted sum of the three variables discussed above for Table 1. Including the terror index endogenously enables the possibility that terrorist organizations may have responded to sponsoring regime leaders, as well as hostile actions toward those leaders by the U.S. president.

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10 The index is constructed as follows. The terror variable drawn from the GTD is added to two standard deviations times the “big terror” indicator discussed earlier, and three standard deviations times the “September 11th” indicator. This weighting scheme is purely arbitrary, but does enable treating terror as an endogenous factor which captures diversely important terrorist acts in a single variable. The precise weighting scheme used does not affect the reported results.
Figure 7 graphs the impulse responses from the Near-VAR analysis for Iraq. Consider first the responses to terrorist acts in the first row. A one standard error increase in the index of terrorist acts (row one, column one) produces no statistically significant change in presidential saber rattling toward Iraq (row one, column two). This non-finding is consistent with the evidence reported above in Figures 4 through 6 for September 11th. Presidents typically directed public threats toward terrorists and other countries in the aftermath of terror attacks, rather than the three countries alleged to be their state sponsors.

The response in presidential approval (row one, column two) shows that presidents benefited from terrorist acts through increased approval. A one standard error simulated shock in the index of terrorist actions produces roughly a 1.25 percent average increase in presidential approval. This increased presidential approval due to terrorist acts typically lasts for about three months.

Finally, there is a small, but statistically significant negative response of Iraqi cooperation/conflict (row one, column four) to terrorist actions. This negative movement confirms the qualitative evidence reported above, but belies the non-significant responses to the three terror variables in Table 1. The Iraqi regime apparently cheered terrorism by increasing their level of conflict toward the U.S. after terrorist acts (albeit marginally).

Now consider the responses for presidential approval in the third row of graphs in Figure 7. Consistent with the analyses in Wood (2009a; 2011, chapter 4), a one standard error increase in the president’s approval ratings (row three, column three) produces a small decline in the presidential propensity to make target-specific threats (row three, column 2). Conversely, lower presidential approval ratings produce more presidential threats.

Increased presidential approval has no effect on the index of terrorist actions (row three, column one). However, increased presidential approval does marginally impact cooperation and conflict from Iraq directed toward the U.S. (row three, column four). Similar to the analysis for Iran above,
the response of Iraqi cooperation/conflict shows a barely significant increase in conflict, but the duration of this effect is very short.

Next, consider the responses to cooperation/conflict from Iraq from the other three variables. A one standard error increase in Iraqi cooperation/conflict (row four, column four) produces no significant change in terrorist actions (row four, column one) or presidential saber rattling (row four, column two). However, increased Iraqi cooperation or reduced conflict produces higher presidential approval ratings over a sustained period. In other words, presidents benefit domestically when relations with Iraq become more amicable.

Finally, consider the most important theoretical variable in the Near-VAR analysis, presidential saber rattling toward Iraq. The impulse responses show that a one standard error increase in presidential saber rattling toward Iraq (row two, column two) produces significantly higher presidential approval ratings over an extended period (row two, column three). This prolonged increase is highly consistent with the statistical results reported in Wood (2009a; 2011, chapter 5). It provides additional confirmation presidents benefit domestically by making threats toward other countries.

Of course, while presidents are benefitting domestically from their threats, they are also making relations worse with foreign actors. In particular, presidential threats toward Iraq significantly increased Iraqi conflict toward the U.S. A one standard error shock in presidential saber rattling produced a decline of roughly seven units on the Goldstein scale. The magnitude of this effect is large, suggesting that American presidents were major contributors to the foreign policy failures leading to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in March 2003.
Conclusions

The preceding analyses yield a coherent image for answering the questions posed at the start of this research report. They also yield insight about the efficacy of theories of international relations for understanding U.S. interactions with weaker adversaries.

Does presidential saber rattling increase cooperation or reduce conflict with other nations? The answer to this introductory question is a definitive no. Hostile presidential rhetoric toward Iran and North Korea produced no meaningful response from these countries. At the same time presidents were directing threats toward Iran, it was reciprocating with increased conflict toward the U.S.

North Korean cooperation and conflict was largely independent of presidential threats, exhibiting a random pattern. Ultimately, North Korea developed nuclear capabilities, probably because it viewed the United States as a continuing threat. Consistent with the case study evidence, the statistical analyses in this chapter showed no systematic relationship between presidential threats and the behavior of these two countries. Thus, presidential threats were an ineffective tool for altering their behavior.

Further, hostile presidential rhetoric toward Iraq actually reduced cooperation and increased conflict with that nation. As U.S. presidents became increasingly belligerent, Saddam Hussein became increasingly hostile toward U.S. interests. The statistical analysis for Iraq revealed that this negative reaction to presidential threats was large and statistically significant. The impulse response analysis traced out the dynamics of the various responses, again confirming that presidential threats produced a negative Iraqi reaction. Thus, presidential saber rattling was actually counter-productive in the Iraqi case.

These results are inconsistent with predictions from realist theory. According to this theory, stronger nations should be able to effectively coerce weaker nations in an international system where behavior is determined by power and threat credibility. The president’s domestic strength, captured
through presidential approval ratings and economic performance, should have increased the credibility of presidential threats. However, these factors had no systematic positive effect on adversary behavior. Further, according to audience cost theory, the democratic leader of the free world should have been able to credibly threaten the three autocratic and weaker adversaries. However, presidential threats toward Iraq, Iran, and North Korea were ineffective. Thus, common theories of international relations are not satisfactory instruments for predicting outcomes in the international system.

An exclamation point is added to these conclusions by considering cooperation and conflict relative to specific presidencies. George W. Bush was well-known for his “cowboy” diplomacy, and hostile rhetoric toward American adversaries. Consistent with this assessment, the graphical analyses showed that the largest spikes in presidential bellicosity toward Iraq, Iran, and North Korea occurred during the George W. Bush administration. In turn, the statistical analyses in Table 1 show that all three nations directed significantly more conflict toward the U.S. during the Bush presidency. This result again implies that hostile presidential rhetoric toward weaker adversaries is counterproductive.

Does presidential saber rattling or an absence thereof diminish the frequency of terrorist acts or other nations’ support for terrorist acts? Again, the answer to this introductory question is a definitive no. Iraqi and Iranian conflict actually increased after the September 11th terror attacks. This period was not characterized by increased presidential threats toward these countries. Further, the Near-VAR analysis for Iraq confirmed a more general increase in conflict from Iraq in response to terrorist acts. We might speculate that these negative responses reflected these nation’s support for terrorism. Regardless, presidential saber rattling had no effect on the incidence of terrorist attacks.

More substantively, the results from this study suggest that U.S. foreign policy strategies since the late 1980s should be reconsidered. The strategy of “going public” with threats and intimidation...
of weaker adversaries clearly does not work. Threats and intimidation toward weaker nations often evoke negative, not positive responses, both from targeted leaders and their domestic audiences. Under this circumstance it might make more sense for presidents to “stay private,” while working quietly behind the scenes to accomplish American foreign policy goals.

Alternatively, consider a brief study in contrasts for U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. followed a punitive strategy toward Iraq after the Persian Gulf War. This approach was similar to allied foreign policy toward Germany after World War I. Punitive economic and political actions toward Germany ultimately led to its alienation and World War II. Similarly, the punitive strategy toward Iraq following the Persian Gulf War ultimately led to the 2003 Iraq invasion.

However, there is a contrasting approach. Following World War II, the U.S. pursued a policy of rebuilding former adversaries Germany and Japan, ultimately turning them into our strongest allies. Such a strategy might also have been possible after the 1991 Persian Gulf War or the Iranian revolution. Similarly, we might have built-up North Korea with aid, rather than driving them toward isolation and starvation. This study in contrasts suggests an alternative approach to improving U.S. relations around the world. The carrot is probably a stronger tool than the stick in producing cooperation with U.S. interests.
FIGURE 2: Targets of Country-Specific Presidential Saber Rattling
Figure 2: Potential Paths of Influence between Presidential Saber Rattling, Domestic Support for the President, and Cooperation/Conflict with Foreign Actors
FIGURE 4: Iraq Cooperation/Conflict

Conflict/Cooperation

1991 1993 1995 1997 1999 2001 2003 2005 2007

Saber Rattling  Cooperation/Conflict
FIGURE 6: North Korea Cooperation/Conflict

- Agreed Framework
- Six-Party Talks
- Nuclear Test
- Withdraws NNPT
- Missile Launches

Conflict/Cooperation

1991 1993 1995 1997 1999 2001 2003 2005 2007

Saber Rattling

Cooperation/Conflict
### TABLE 1: Presidential Saber Rattling and Cooperation/Conflict with Foreign Actors

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<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>North Korea Relations</th>
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<td>(0.55)</td>
<td>(0.24)</td>
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<td>-5.18</td>
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<td>Domestic Support(_{t-1})</td>
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<td>-0.06</td>
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<td>(-1.82)</td>
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<td>(0.05)</td>
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<td>George W. Bush</td>
<td>-12.81</td>
<td>-1.86</td>
<td>-2.91</td>
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<td>3.85</td>
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<td>(2.98)</td>
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### Diagnostics

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<th>Dependent Variable</th>
<th>North Korea Relations</th>
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<td>N</td>
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<td>(\sigma^2_e)</td>
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<td>2.45</td>
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<td>Adjusted (R^2)</td>
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Note: The numbers in the table are coefficients and t-statistics from regressions of Iraq, Iran, and North Korean Relations on the variables indicated in the left column.
FIGURE 7: Impulse Responses for Saber Rattling-Iraq Relations Near-VAR

Response of:

Terror | Saber Rattling | Approval | Iraq Relations

Shock to:

Terror | Saber Rattling | Approval | Iraq Relations
APPENDIX

The event forms for the cooperation and conflict data on Iraq, Iran, and North Korea extracted from the Integrated Data for Events Analysis (IDEA) database are listed below.

**COOPERATION**

<AGAC> Agree or accept – Accept invitations and proposals, not otherwise specified.

<ASSR> Assure – Assure or reassure that some promised or ongoing support or positive interest will continue.

<CLAR> Acknowledge responsibility – Non-apologetically admit an error or wrongdoing, retract a statement without expression of remorse, or claim responsibility.

<COLL> Collaborate – Form alliance, or associate with, merge, join, accompany, and coordinate activities; includes extraditions.

<EEAI> Extend economic aid – Extending (must include the delivery) monetary aid and financial guarantees, grants, gifts and credit. The reported receipt of such aid constitutes an extend aid event with actors reversed.

<EHAI> Extend humanitarian aid – Extending non-military / non-economic assistance, including civil training, development assistance, education & training. The reported receipt of such aid constitutes an extend aid event with actors reversed.

<EMAI> Extend military aid – Extending military and police assistance, including arms and personnel, includes both military and police peacekeeping. The reported receipt of such aid constitutes an extend aid event with actors reversed.

<GASY> Grant asylum – Grant asylum. The source of this interaction is the "protector" and the target of the interaction is the "protectee."

<IMPR> Improve relations – Begin, improve or resume an activity or relations, extend diplomatic or other formal recognition.

<NEG0> Engage in negotiation – Negotiate with other parties on particular issues.

<OCON> Optimistic comment – Comment on situation that is explicitly characterized as optimistic.

<OPEN> Disclose information – Publicly reveal personal or sensitive information, to "out" someone.

<PTMN> Offer to Negotiate – "Propose or put forth plans to meet, negotiate or discuss a situation or an issue."

<PTRU> Offer peace proposal – Offer incentives for peace, suggest talks, propose resolution.

<RELE> Release or return – Return, release, not otherwise specified

<RRPE> Return, release person(s) – Release people from detention, arrest or abduction.

<SOLS> Solicit support – Request political support or solicit political influence, including electoral campaigning and lobbying.

<YIEL> Yield – All yielding not otherwise specified.

<YORD> Yield to order – Surrender, yield to order, submit to arrest, cede power.

**CONFLICT**

<AERI> Missile Attack – Launching of intermediate to long-range conventional ballistic missiles and aerial dropping of conventional explosive devices or bombs.

<BLAM> Criticize or denounce – Blame, find fault, censure, rebuke, "whistle blowing," vilify, defame, denigrate, condemn and name-calling.

<BREL> Break relations – Formal severance of ties, including declarations of independence, divorce and protest resignations.

<CALL> Call for action – Urge others to mobilize politically and calls for social action.

<CBIO> Chem-bio attack – Use of chemical or biological weapons.

<CLAS> Armed battle – Initiation of armed hostilities or engagement between two or more armed forces, includes truce violation s(use as default for war and battles).
| <DWAR> | Declare war – Formal or official statement that a state of war exists. |
| <FCOM> | Formally complain – Written and institutionalized protests and appeals, and all petition drives and recalls. |
| <FORC> | Force use - All uses of physical force not otherwise specified. Includes material property destruction, acts of physical sabotage, and other acts of material damage not otherwise specified. |
| <GRPG> | Artillery attack – Use of short to intermediate range tank-mounted, ship-based or field guns and cannons, mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. |
| <INCC> | Security alert - The release of information relevant to citizen safety, generally initiated at the national level. This includes the issuing of Amber alerts, raising of the Terror Threat Level, precautionary evacuations of embassies, buildings, personnel, and the like. This also relates to the discovery of any ams or dangerous situations (e.g., discovery of unexploded ordnance). |
| <MOBL> | Armed force activation – Activation of all or part of previously inactive armed forces. |
| <MTHR> | Armed force threats – All threats to use armed force. |
| <NMFT> | Other physical force threats – All threats to use non-armed, physical force. |
| <PASS> | Physical assault – All uses of non-armed physical force in assaults against people not otherwise specified. |
| <PEXE> | Small arms attack – Shooting of small arms, light weapons and small explosives, including the use of all handguns, light machine guns, rifles and hand grenades. |
| <RAID> | Armed actions – Ambiguous initiation of the use of armed forces to fire upon another armed force, population or territory. |
| <RALL> | Refuse to allow – Disagree or object, refuse to allow or acknowledge, restrict or suspend liberties. |
| <RPMD> | Reject proposal to meet – Refuse to meet, discuss, or negotiate. |
| <TATT> | Threaten forceful attack – Explicit threat to use armed forces in an attack or invasion. |
| <TCBR> | Threaten biological or chemical attack – Explicit threat to use biological or chemical weapon against armed forces, a population or territory. |
| <THEN> | Threaten to halt negotiations – Threaten to halt unmediated discussions, negotiations, or meetings. |
| <THRT> | Threaten – All threats, coercive warnings not otherwise specified. |
| <TSAN> | Sanctions threat – Threats of non-military, non-physical force social, economic and political sanctions. |
REFERENCES


———. 2011. *Presidential Saber Rattling*. College Station, TX.