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The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force

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Abstract

This article identifies a “post post-Vietnam” pattern in recent American public opinion on the use of military force. Data is drawn from eight cases of limited military force in the 1980s and the 1990–91 Persian Gulf war. Although other factors enter in, particularly the “halo effect” of quick-

strike successes, the variations in public support are best explained by differences in principal policy objectives between force used to coerce *foreign policy restraint* by an aggressor state, and force used to influence or impose *internal political change* within another state. Distinctions are made both among and within the cases, showing the American public to have been much more supportive of the use of force when the principal objective was to restrain rather than remake governments. These findings have theoretical implications for the analysis of public opinion, prescriptive implications for U.S. foreign policy strategy, and normative implications for views of the role of the public in the foreign policy process.

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