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**Peter Liberman and Linda Skitka. "Vicarious Retribution in US Public Support for War against Iraq." *Security Studies* 28:2 (2019): 189-215.**

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Sixteen years after the beginning of the Iraq War, American public support for the war remains a puzzle. Why would the public, scarred by the 9/11 terrorist attacks and overwhelmingly supportive of sending troops to Afghanistan to capture al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and fight terrorism,<sup>1</sup> be willing to use military force on a different country, one not directly involved in attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon? The 9/11 attacks psychologically shook the public<sup>2</sup> and reshaped politics and society in the U.S., perhaps no more so than by involving the U.S. in two overseas wars that continue today. American support for wars is generally contingent<sup>3</sup>; Americans are more supportive of war when the war is expected to be short with few casualties, when military force is multilateral, and when the aim is military restraint rather than humanitarian. In times of crisis, the public does "rally around the flag," increasing their support for the president and giving him more room to maneuver on foreign policy, an area where presidents already have an

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<sup>1</sup> ABC News/Washington Post., "Usabcwp.091301.R08," in *ABC News/Washington Post Poll, Sep, 2001 [survey question]* (Ithaca: Cornell University, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Linda Skitka, Christopher W. Bauman, and Elizabeth Mullen, "Political Tolerance and Coming to Psychological Closure Following the September 11, 2001, Terrorist Attacks: An Integrative Approach," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 30:6 (2004): 743-756; William E. Schlenger et al., "Psychological Reactions to Terrorist Attacks: Findings from the National Study of Americans' Reactions to September 11," *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association* 288:5 (2002) 581-588.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly* 36:1(1992) 49-73; Richard Sobel, "Trends: United States Intervention in Bosnia," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 62:3 (1998) 250-278; Louis Klarevas, "The "Essential Domino" of Military Operations: American Public Opinion and the Use of Force," *International Studies Perspectives* 3:4 (2002) 417-437; Richard C Eichenberg, "Victory Has Many Friends: Us Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force, 1981-2005," *International Security* 30:1 (2005) 140-177. ABC News, "Usabcwp.081202.R04," ed. ABC News/Washington Post (Ithaca: Cornell University, Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, iPOLL 2002).

advantage.<sup>4</sup> Americans may be supportive of realist foreign policy,<sup>5</sup> but even if we allow for the framing of the war in Iraq as being in part of the War on Terror<sup>6</sup> and in the U.S. national interest George W. Bush administrations, we cannot fully explain why the public was supportive of the war as early as January 2002, as the authors document (3).

To answer the puzzle of why the American public supported a pre-emptive war in Iraq, Peter Liberman and Linda Skitka offer a novel theory of *vicarious retribution*. They argue that the 9/11 terrorist attacks created a sense of anger and a desire for vengeance in the American public and that this vengeance was mediated by dislike of Arabs and Muslims. The collective anger that Americans felt meant that the public was willing to avenge the wrongs of 9/11 not only on the perpetrators of the attack itself, but also on Iraq, which was symbolic of the broader category of Arab and Muslim countries. This article is an interesting and original contribution to the literature on war support generally and support for the Iraq War specifically. It helps explain why the Bush administration was able to link an Islamic fundamentalist terrorist organization with a country that was not involved in the attack directly, did not provide a safe haven for the group, as Afghanistan had, and was not the home country for most of the terrorists, as Saudi Arabia was.

As an emotion, anger occurs when an individual perceives that there is a wrong being done and can identify a culprit who can be blamed for that wrong. Anger increases a desire to punish<sup>7</sup> those people or groups who are responsible for the acts and leads to a more optimistic view of risk, including the risk of military action. That does not mean that anger is always correctly attached to the actual perpetrators or proportionate to the

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<sup>4</sup> John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973); Richard A. Brody, *Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion, and Public Support* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991); Brandice Canes-Wrone, *Who Leads Whom?: Presidents, Policy, and the Public*, Studies in Communication, Media, and Public Opinion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Brandice Canes-Wrone, William G. Howell, and David E. Lewis, "Toward a Broader Understanding of Presidential Power: A Reevaluation of the Two Presidencies Thesis," *Journal of Politics* 70:1 (2008) 1-16.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel W Drezner, "The Realist Tradition in American Public Opinion," *Perspectives on Politics* 6:1 (2008): 51-70.

<sup>6</sup> Amy Gershkoff and Shana Kushner, "Shaping Public Opinion: The 9/11-Iraq Connection in the Bush Administration's Rhetoric," *Perspectives on Politics* 3:3 (September 2005): 525-537.

<sup>7</sup> Kerstin Fisk, Jennifer L Merolla, and Jennifer M Ramos, "Emotions, Terrorist Threat, and Drones: Anger Drives Support for Drone Strikes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63:4 (2018): 976-1000; Leonie Huddy, Stanley Feldman, and Erin Cassese, "On the Distinct Political Effects of Anxiety and Anger," in W. Russell Neuman, George Marcus, Ann Crigler, and Michael MacKuen (eds.), *The Affect Effect: Dynamics of Emotion in Political Thinking and Behavior* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007): 202-230; Thomas Zeitzoff, "Anger, Exposure to Violence, and Intragroup Conflict: A "Lab in the Field" Experiment in Southern Israel," *Political Psychology* 35:3 (2014): 309-335; Jonathan Renshon and Jennifer Lerner, "The Role of Emotions in Foreign Policy Decision Making," in Daniel J. Christie, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Peace Psychology* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012): 313-317; Ted Brader, ed. Adam Berinsky "Emotional Foundations of Democratic Citizenship," in *New Directions in American Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2011): 193-216.

original crime. Anger can lead to excessive or misdirected punishment,<sup>8</sup> and offenses toward one's ingroup are especially likely to arouse anger toward out-groups. People can favor punishment for the sake of justice or to increase their own security, and they can also do so simply to make an offender pay.<sup>9</sup>

Liberman and Skitka argue that, in the case of the Iraq War, anger led not only to a desire for ordinary retribution, or the punishment of the direct perpetrators of a crime, but also to vicarious retribution. Vicarious retribution involves targeting and punishing people not involved in the crime but who share an identity with the person or group who committed the original crime.<sup>10</sup> Support for vicarious retribution is higher when a group is perceived as homogenous, cohesive, or both,<sup>11</sup> which may be more likely when the perpetrator is a member of an out-group, as in the 9/11 attacks. These perceptions of entitativity are key to understanding both how anger over one act, terrorism, can be transferred to a different set of actors. If people believe that Arabs or Muslims are like each other, then it is easier to justify punishing one country as an extension of the fight against terrorism. These perceptions of entitativity are often inaccurate, even among policymakers and can be caused by a misunderstanding of group boundaries, misinformation about the group, social cues from other group members, or media portrayals of Muslims and Arabs as undifferentiated and prone to terrorism.<sup>12</sup>

To test their vicarious retribution theory, the authors rely on a two-wave panel survey of 685 adult respondents collected by Knowledge Networks. In the first wave, data was collected from 14 September 14-2 October 2001. The second wave of surveys occurred from 28 December 2001 to 14 January 2002, with 605 respondents. To measure support for the Iraq War, the authors use a question from the second wave that asked whether the war on terrorism should be expanded to Iraq and any other country suspected of harboring

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<sup>8</sup> Jennifer S Lerner and Larissa Z Tiedens, "Portrait of the Angry Decision Maker: How Appraisal Tendencies Shape Anger's Influence on Cognition," *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 19:2 (2006): 115-137.

<sup>9</sup> John M Darley and Thane S Pittman, "The Psychology of Compensatory and Retributive Justice," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 7:4 (2003): 324-336.

<sup>10</sup> Eduardo A Vasquez et al., "Any of Them Will Do: In-Group Identification, out-Group Entitativity, and Gang Membership as Predictors of Group-Based Retribution," *Aggressive Behavior* 41:3 (2015) 242-252; Brian Lickel et al., "Vicarious Retribution: The Role of Collective Blame in Intergroup Aggression," *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10:4 (2006): 372-390.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Liberman and Linda J Skitka, "Vicarious Retribution in US Public Support for War against Iraq," *Security Studies* (2019), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics: New Edition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Joshua D Kertzer and Thomas Zeitzoff, "A Bottom-up Theory of Public Opinion About Foreign Policy," *American Journal of Political Science* 61:3 (2017). Erin Kearns, Allison Betus, and Anthony Lemieux, "Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?," *Justice Quarterly* 36:6 (2019): 985-1022; Kerem Ozan Kalkan, Geoffrey C Layman, and Eric M Uslaner, "'Bands of Others'? Attitudes toward Muslims in Contemporary American Society," *The Journal of Politics* 71:3 (2009): 847-862; Brigitte Lebens Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna, *Fueling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage, and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); John Sides and Kimberly Gross, "Stereotypes of Muslims and Support for the War on Terror," *The Journal of Politics* 75:3 (2013): 583-598. Pippa Norris, Montague Kern, and Marion R. Just, *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government, and the Public* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

terrorists. Seventy percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with expanding the war to include Iraq. To measure Arab-Muslim entitativity, the authors use items that ask whether respondents' feelings had improved or worsened toward "Palestinians," "people who live in Islamic or Middle Eastern countries," and "Arab Americans" since 9/11. These measures of qualitatively different and separate groups all scaled together, providing evidence of a high degree of entitativity within the public. To capture anger, the authors relied on a set of questions from the September wave that asked people how strongly they felt outrage, anger, hatred, and a desire to fight back when they first learned of the 9/11 attacks. The public expressed a high degree of anger and a desire for fighting back in both waves of the study, with upwards of 70 percent of respondents saying they were outraged in September and 60 percent expressing anger. The models also controlled for perceptions of the threat of future terrorism, asking how worried respondents were about future terrorism, getting infected with anthrax and other types of bioterrorism as well as respondents' fears including how frightened and vulnerable they felt when thinking about 9/11.<sup>13</sup>

Using this survey data, the authors show that the interaction of anger at the attacks and anti-Arab attitudes significantly increased support for the Iraq war. Among those who were high in anti-Arab views, moving from the 10<sup>th</sup> percentile of anger to the 90<sup>th</sup> percentile increased the probability that a respondent strongly supported the Iraq War in January 2002 from about 40% to almost certain support at 80%. For respondents with views about Arabs that were more positive, anger did not significantly increase their support for the war. Concern about future terrorism also increased support for the Iraq War among those high in anti-Arab sentiment while fear lowered support.<sup>14</sup> Anger directly increased hawkish foreign policy, but it also acted to make respondents more negative toward Arab groups, which in turn influenced war attitudes. This means that anger at the 9/11 attacks both had a direct effect on war support and an indirect effect on support by increasing hostility toward not only al-Qaeda itself but also groups that were (unfairly) perceived to be "fellow travelers."<sup>15</sup> The authors argue that it is not simply the case that long-standing prejudices toward Arab groups rather than anger provoked by the terrorist attacks themselves increased war support. They argue that anger was widespread after the attacks, not confined to only those high in ethnocentrism or prejudiced individuals, and anti-Arab sentiment became more strongly related to anger over the two waves of the survey.

No one article can cover everything, but this theory and the evidence raise a few questions. I would have liked to hear more about how media coverage and elite cues helped Americans make the connection between groups and how to punish them. If anger leads to more biased perceptions of group entitativity, then it is still necessary to figure out which groups become the targets, and this seems to involve the role that elites and the media play more broadly.<sup>16</sup> The authors do discuss elite cues as an alternative factor to consider but say that

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<sup>13</sup> Leonie Huddy et al., "Threat, Anxiety, and Support of Antiterrorism Policies," *American Journal of Political Science* 49:3 (2005): 593-608.

<sup>14</sup> Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy, and George Marcus, ed. Pippa Norris, Montague Kern, and Marion R. Just *Going to War in Iraq: When Citizens and the Press Matter* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

<sup>15</sup> Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner, "'Bands of Others'? Attitudes toward Muslims in Contemporary American Society."; Nazita Lajevardi and Kassra AR Oskooii, "Old-Fashioned Racism, Contemporary Islamophobia, and the Isolation of Muslim Americans in the Age of Trump," *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and Politics* 3:1 (2018): 112-152.

<sup>16</sup> Seth Bradshaw and Kate Kenski, "Social Identity and Group Emotion: Media Effects and Support for Military Intervention," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 2535-2555.

elite cues cannot explain why Americans made the connection between anger and Iraq as early as January 2002, prior to Bush's speeches first mentioning Iraq. Yet, elites and the media would seem to be a necessary component to help respondents make the connections between their emotions and war because they set the agenda for those connections. Why did angry Americans want to lash out at Iraq in particular, rather than Saudi Arabia, where many of the attackers themselves came from?<sup>17</sup> The American media spent a great deal of time villainizing Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and Iraq during the Persian Gulf War (1990-1991)<sup>18</sup> and largely accepted the presidential administration's arguments for military action, a role they would reprise in the later Iraq War in 2002-2003.<sup>19</sup> Americans increased their news consumption after 9/11, the media focused heavily on terrorism, and the public already had Saddam Hussein as a villain in the narrative as news coverage began to quickly focus on Iraq.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, I wondered how social identities moderated the effect of anger on attitudes. First, what is the role of partisanship? Do different parties have different levels of anger, hold more prejudice toward Arab groups or are more willing to make the connection between anger and hawkish foreign policy?<sup>21</sup> In addition, does anger affect Americans of different races and ethnicities similarly? African Americans and Latinos were more sensitive to civil liberties violations after 9/11<sup>22</sup> and have higher levels of group level empathy toward other minority groups, which makes them less likely to support national security/civil liberties trade-offs.<sup>23</sup> Even if

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<sup>17</sup> Robert M. Entman, "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame after 9/11," *Political Communication* 20:4 (2003): 415-432.

<sup>18</sup> Douglas Kellner, *The Persian Gulf TV War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1992); W Lance Bennett and David L Paletz, *Taken by Storm: The Media, Public Opinion, and Us Foreign Policy in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence, and Steven Livingston, *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media from Iraq to Katrina*, Studies in Communication, Media, and Public Opinion (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> Scott L Althaus and Devon M Largio, "When Osama Became Saddam: Origins and Consequences of the Change in America's Public Enemy# 1," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 37:4 (2004): 795-799; Scott L. Althaus, "American News Consumption During Times of National Crisis," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 35:3 (2002): 517-521; Feldman, Huddy, and Marcus, *Going to War in Iraq: When Citizens and the Press Matter*.

<sup>21</sup> See Adam Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Darren W. Davis, *Negative Liberty: Public Opinion and the Terrorist Attacks on America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007); Darren W. Davis and Brian D. Silver, "Civil Liberties vs. Security: Public Opinion in the Context of the Terrorist Attacks on America," *American Journal of Political Science* 48:1 (2004): 28-46.

<sup>23</sup> Cigdem V Sirin, José D Villalobos, and Nicholas A Valentino, "Group Empathy Theory: The Effect of Group Empathy on US Intergroup Attitudes and Behavior in the Context of Immigration Threats," *The Journal of Politics* 78:3 (2016): 893-908.

these groups were equally angry as whites, was their anger translated into the same type of hawkish foreign policy if they had different levels of power and positions in society?<sup>24</sup>

This article provides new evidence that Americans' anger at the 9/11 attacks drove their support for military action in Iraq as early as January 2002, particularly among those people whose views of Arab groups had significantly worsened because of the attacks. In other words, the desire for retribution made an angry American public open to support attacks on a country that was not involved in 9/11 and did not need to be misinformed to do so. It needed only to be angry and prejudiced toward Arabs.

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<sup>24</sup> Leonie Huddy, "Group Identity and Political Cohesion," *Emerging Trends in the Social and Behavioral Sciences: An Interdisciplinary, Searchable, and Linkable Resource* (New York: Wiley, 2015): 1-14; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118900772>.