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The War on Terror and the Victory Trap

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Presidents Bush, Obama, and Trump have all used the language of "victory" and "defeat" in the War on Terror despite its ambiguous outcomes. This paper develops the concept of a "victory trap" to explain this phenomenon and its political consequences. On the one hand, the electoral consequences of "losing" wars lead presidents to make claims about "winning" and eventual "victory." On the other hand, strategic realities and public reluctance to bear the costs of total victory result in policymakers facing criticism for being unable to produce results proportionate to their rhetoric. As such, whilst scholarship is clear on the effects of both "losing" and "winning" wars, this paper provides the first exploration of how these dual dynamics play out in practice. In arguing that policymakers are oftentimes politically "trapped," this paper suggests the limits of a range of scholarship on effective (foreign) policy-related messaging that points toward ambiguity or accuracy.

Les présidents George W. Bush, Barack Obama et Donald Trump ont tous employé le langage de la ≪ victoire ≫ et de la ≪ défaite ≫ dans la guerre contre le terrorisme, malgré ses résultats ambigus. Cet article développe le concept de ≪ piège de la victoire ≫ pour expliquer ce phénomène et ses conséquences politiques. D'une part, les conséquences électorales du fait de ≪ perdre ≫ une guerre poussent les dirigeants à affirmer ≪ avoir gagné ≫ et, pour finir, à revendiquer une ≪ victoire ≫. D'autre part, à cause des réalités stratégiques et de la réticence de la population quand il s'agit d'assumer le coût de la victoire totale, les législateurs sont confrontés à des critiques quand ils se montrent incapables de produire des résultats à la hauteur de leur rhétorique. Par conséquent, bien que la recherche se prononce clairement sur les effets du fait de ≪ perdre ≫ ou de ≪ gagner ≫ une guerre, cet article propose le premier examen de l'expression de cette double dynamique en pratique. En affirmant que les législateurs se retrouvent souvent ≪ piégés ≫ politiquement, cet article suggère l'existence de limites pour un éventail de travaux de recherche relatifs à la communication efficace en matière de politique (étrangère) qui indiquent des ambiguïtés ou des inexactitudes.

Los presidentes Bush, Obama y Trump han utilizado un lenguaje que incluye las palabras ≪victoria≫ y ≪derrota≫ dentro del contexto de la Guerra contra el Terrorismo, a pesar de los ambiguos resultados obtenidos. Este artículo desarrolla el concepto de ≪trampa de la victoria≫ con el fin de explicar tanto este fenómeno como sus consecuencias políticas. Por un lado, las consecuencias electorales que puede tener el hecho de ≪perder≫ guerras provoca que los presidentes hagan afirmaciones sobre ≪ganar≫ y una eventual ≪victoria≫. Por otro lado, las realidades estratégicas y la reticencia pública a asumir los costes de la victoria total hacen que los responsables de la formulación de políticas tengan que enfrentarse a críticas por no ser capaces de producir resultados proporcionales a su retórica. Por lo tanto, si bien los estudios académicos son claros sobre los efectos de ≪perder≫ y de ≪ganar≫ guerras,

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este artículo proporciona un primer análisis de cómo se desarrollan estas dinámicas duales en la práctica. El artículo sugiere, usando el argumento de que los responsables de la formulación de políticas se encuentran, con frecuencia, políticamente ≪atrapados≫, los límites de una serie de estudios sobre mensajes efectivos relacionados con la política (exterior) que apuntan hacia la ambigüedad o hacia la precisión.

Introduction

Even though American presidents and their administration's strategy documents have recognized that militarily "defeating" transnational terrorist organizations is unlikely at best, the three presidents to have been commander-in-chief for a full term during the War on Terror have all, to varying degrees, adopted the "emphatic, decisive, [and] conclusive" language of "victory" when discussing the endpoint of this conflict (O'Driscoll 2020, 4–5). For example, in September 2001, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (2001) observed that "the idea of eliminating" terrorism "from the face of the earth is setting a threshold that's too high." This was later confirmed by the 2002 *National Strategy for Homeland Security*, which stated that "we have to accept some level of terrorist risk as a permanent condition" (Office of Homeland Security 2002, 2). And yet, even as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq went awry, George W. Bush stated seven times between October 2005 and July 2006 that "we will never accept anything less than complete victory" over transnational terrorist organizations.[1] As the paper shows, the same pattern has been evident in the Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations.

This paper develops the novel concept of the "victory trap" to explore why the presidents of the War on Terror have used the unrealistically decisive language of "victory" and the political consequences of this type of rhetoric. The trap consists of two related components. First, because of the electoral consequences of "losing" wars and popular conceptions of how wars should end, presidents feel obliged to remain in conflicts to avoid military "defeats" and make claims about success and eventual "victory" even if they do not believe in the accuracy of these statements. Secondly, because of strategic realities and the lack of willingness of the American public to bear the costs of war commensurate with achieving the culturally appropriate idea of total victory, policymakers are criticized for being unable to produce results proportionate to their previous rhetoric. In that way, the victory trap relates to both policy and politics, explaining both the longevity of American conflicts and the political costs associated with them. Though certain stages of the electoral cycle and personal beliefs of presidents may embolden them to try and circumnavigate the electoral pressures of the victory trap (Foyle 1999; Payne 2023), the evidence in this paper points toward the recurring political problems in attempting to escape the catch-22 situation they find themselves in.

Grounded in academic literature and the experience of US policymakers during the Vietnam War concerning the effects of "winning" and "losing" wars in American politics, the first section of the paper develops the concept of the victory trap and delineates how this differs from other accounts of elite rhetoric and credibility.

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[1] As per the "all of these terms" search function on The American Presidency Project (n.d.) website.

Analyzing key speeches,[2] memoirs, insider journalist accounts, newspaper articles, and opinion polls on (counter)terrorism from 2001 to 2021, the rest of the paper demonstrates the utility of the victory trap concept in the context of the War on Terror, primarily focusing on the broader conflict against transnational terrorist organizations beyond the conflict zones in Afghanistan and Iraq. This broader conflict is a hard case for demonstrating the political importance of "victory," as it "is a fantasy" to believe that this broader conflict can "end in total victory, meaning complete military success followed by total elimination of the terrorist threat" (Cronin 2014, 189). Yet, because of the political pressures of not "losing" wars, the final three sections of the paper show how Bush, Obama, and Trump all felt obliged to use the language of "victory" and "defeat." Working chronologically, the paper demonstrates the dual challenges of the victory trap, as presidents were criticized for being either unable to produce results commensurate with their previous rhetoric or for abandoning the culturally salient ideas about total victory in American warfighting. The conclusion briefly examines the unsuccessful efforts of the Biden administration to avoid the victory trap with the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021.

As such, the paper explores and advances several strands of literature on foreign policy messaging and the electoral politics of war. The paper furthers our understanding of the electoral effects of identity-based discussions concerning "victory" (see Hall 2022; Hom and Campbell 2022) by uniquely bringing together the literature on the electoral effects of "winning" and "losing" wars. It also contributes to the influential scholarship on the importance of perceived success in public support for war by exploring how this dynamic plays out in practice (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005, 2009). In both ways then, the paper's analysis of elite rhetoric sits at the interaction of foreign and domestic spheres that Foreign Policy Analysis focuses upon (Hudson 2005). The idea that policymakers are politically "trapped" in the context of war suggests the limits of a range of relevant political science and International Relations scholarship on (foreign) policy-related messaging, such as the importance of offering accurate predictions (Huff and Schub 2018), the ability of policymakers to "sell" war (Jackson 2005; Casey 2008; Holland 2012), the value of "flip-flopping" when appropriate (Karol 2009; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Croco and Gartner 2014; Croco 2016; McDonald, Croco, and Turitto 2019), or simply remaining as ambiguous as possible (Tomz and Van Houweling 2009; Meibauer 2021). Instead, the paper supports claims concerning how electoral pressures may create incentives for presidents to mislead the public, hence bringing the literature on the effectiveness of democracies in wars into question (Payne 2023, 236).

Public Opinion, War, and The Victory Trap

As epitomized by Mueller's (1973, 2005) works, scholars of public opinion have stressed the importance of US casualties concerning levels of war support amongst the American public. Even those who dispute the significance of casualties in explaining levels of war support "typically credit it with having some role in dampening support for war," as casualties transform foreign policy issues into domestic ones by bringing home the costs of war (Walsh and Schulzke 2018, 31, 59). Another key factor identified in the literature is the perceived success of military operations in determining public support; to varying extents, all the significant accounts of public opinion and war since Mueller's seminal work have emphasized this (inter alia, Larson 1996; Jentleson and Britton 1998; Eichenberg 2005). Feaver, Gelpi, and

[2]The speeches used here form part of an extensive dataset sourced from the American Presidency Project for a broader research project concerning winnability in the War on Terror, which includes presidential speeches referring to key concepts ("Iraq," "Afghanistan," "Syria," "al-Qaeda,"* "ISIS,"* "victory," "defeat," "win," "winning," "lose," and "losing") in conjunction with the words "terror," "terrorist," and "terrorism." *Including variations in spelling and naming variations.

Reifler (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005, 2009, 39, 54) have been the primary proponents of this theory, pointing to how expectations of "eventual future success" can explain why public opinion has "continue[d] to support [some] military operations even when they come with a relatively high human cost." As explored further below, given that the "key explanatory variable" in this theory of public support for war is "the extent to which they [the public] believe that the United States will emerge victorious," there is an incentive for policymakers to devote energy to influencing perceptions surrounding the likelihood of future success (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2009, 25 in Steele and Campbell 2021, 58). This broadly aligns with accounts that stress the importance of government rhetoric or elite consensus in public opinion formation (inter alia, Zaller 1992; Jackson 2005; Berinsky 2009; Holland 2012). To summarize, research on American public opinion and war suggests that a significant number of casualties will only be tolerated when the conditions are suited to convincing the electorate of the chances of future success and then achieving as much. This consensus sets important boundaries for presidents in the context of the victory trap.

The political importance of "winning" (or not "losing") in war is a point of consensus. As a natural corollary of the idea that success determines levels of war support, selectorate theory proponents have shown there to be a strong correlation between losing a war in a democracy and the chances of losing office (Bueno de Mesquita and Siverson 1995, 852). The relationship between military defeats and leadership change has been confirmed by specific studies on the impact of wars on US elections (inter alia, Cotton 1986, 616; Stevens 2015, 477), but has also been shown to occur in non-democracies (Weeks 2014). After all, "losing" not only undermines a state's international reputation but means that financial and human sacrifices are perceived to have been made in vain.[3] Whilst the primary consequence of "losing" wars relates to leader tenure, perceptions of failure can have a broad range of domestic effects: it can become a self-fulfilling prophecy by affecting public opinion and funding (Johnson and Tierney 2006, 15), hamper the ability of governments to pass their domestic agenda or damage an entire party's long-term electoral chances (Ellsberg 1971, 223, 245–46). Because of its electoral significance, scholars have claimed that a fear of being perceived to be "losing" a war has acted as a generative force in US politics and policymaking (Ellsberg 1971, 252; Gelb 1971, 140; Gelb and Betts 1979, 24; Zaller 1994, 250, 2003; Johnson and Tierney 2006, 13; Saunders 2015, 486).

The Vietnam War is an exemplary case in this regard. Torn between the contradictory rules of not starting a land war in Asia (due to the human costs of the Korean War) and not "losing" South Vietnam to communism (due to the political costs of the "loss" of China to communism in 1949), Ellsberg (1971, 253) characterized American policymakers as perceiving themselves to be in the "Indochina bind." Gelb and Betts (1979, 13) likewise referred to how presidents "acted as if they were trapped no matter what they did." John F. Kennedy observed that "we don't have a prayer of staying in Vietnam" because the Vietnamese population "hate[s] us" and because of "how quickly everybody's courage goes when the blood starts to flow" (Zaller 2003). But, Kennedy also claimed that he could not "give up a piece of territory like that . . . and then get the American people to re-elect me" because he would "be damned everywhere as a Communist appeaser" (Ellsberg 1971, 249; Zaller 2003). Accordingly, in 1963 Kennedy argued for the wisdom of withdrawing American troops from South Vietnam, but only after his re-election in 1964 (Ellsberg 1971, 248).

Similarly, whilst Johnson feared the costs of escalation ("you get a few [soldiers] . . . killed . . . The Republicans are going to make a political issue out of it, every one

[3]This final point can be seen in Obama's highlighting of previous US casualties to justify continued military intervention in Afghanistan (McCrisken 2012, 993).

of them"; Zaller 2003), he made it clear that he was "not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went," later claiming that the "loss" of China would have been "chickenshit compared with what might happen if we lost Vietnam" (Kearns Goodwin 1991, 252–53). In particular, Johnson feared that defeat in Vietnam would have made his Great Society legislative agenda unachievable. As the president later put it,

> If I left the woman I really loved—the Great Society … to get involved with that bitch of a war on the other side of the world, then I would lose everything at home… But if I left that war and let the Communists take over South Vietnam, then I would be seen as a coward and my nation would be seen as an appeaser (Kearns Goodwin 1991, 266).

To navigate this perceived bind, rather than adopting the policies that promised decisive victory or involved admitting defeat, US policymakers consistently opted for the middling position of "Option C" which aimed to ensure South Vietnam's survival without antagonizing involvement from the Soviet Union or the People's Republic of China (Zakaria 2016). Strikingly, the escalatory decisions after 1965 were not made under false pretenses of success in South Vietnam but rather with a focus on avoiding defeat and the domestic political repercussions of this (Ellsberg 1971, 221; Gelb 1971, 152; Gelb and Betts 1979, 2–3, 319–20). Recognizing how "our American people, when we get in any contest of any kind . . . want it decided and decided quickly," Johnson (along with the other US administrations during the Vietnam War) was eager to emphasize the progress being made in Vietnam to prevent the political consequences of "losing" (Berman 1989, 115).

Most notably, the Johnson administration launched the so-called "progress offensive" after the emergence of the "stalemate" trope in August 1967 and accompanying record low approval ratings for the war (Pach 2010, 171, 183–84). As part of this government-wide public relations campaign, General William Westmoreland was flown back to the US and infamously proclaimed that "we have reached an important point when the end begins to come into view" (Pach 2010, 186). The "progress offensive" explains the seemingly counterintuitive effects that the Tet Offensive—a military success for the United States—had on American public opinion, for it appeared to go against the recent pronouncements of the Johnson administration. As Secretary of State Dean Rusk observed, "the element of hope has been taken away by the Tet Offensive" and that the American people did not "think there is likely to be an end"; victory was now deemed unattainable (Pach 2010, 189). As has been well documented, this crisis of confidence in the Vietnam War led to Johnson's decision to not re-run for the presidency (Cotton 1986, 631). Accordingly, the Vietnam War aptly demonstrates the victory trap concept introduced above: presidents felt obliged to keep American troops in Vietnam to avoid "losing," but could not commit sufficient resources to achieve promised results, resulting in decreased levels of war support and political credibility more broadly. Like other "traps" outlined in the study of US foreign policy (McCrisken 2012; Michaels 2013), there is a clear relationship between rhetoric and policy, as policymakers effectively back themselves into a corner with their previous statements.

Hence, the victory trap concept runs contrary to three different sets of arguments regarding leaders' rhetoric and credibility. First, Huff and Schub's (2018) research suggests that leaders have incentives to offer realistic predictions concerning conflict duration. This is because failing to achieve promised results can lead to decreased levels of war support "due to negative evaluations of the leader themselves" (Huff and Schub 2018, 397) and therefore also damaging perceptions of elites' credibility necessary for future legitimation efforts (Johnson and Tierney 2006, 73). After all, should leaders switch their predictions mid-conflict, a vast literature (including audience cost theory) suggests that leaders will be punished for looking incompetent (Fearon 1994; Tomz 2007; Weeks 2008). A second set of arguments has

questioned the prevailing wisdom regarding "flip-flopping," instead claiming that the key determinant of support is whether the new policy or policy pronouncement aligns with current public opinion (Karol 2009; Levendusky and Horowitz 2012; Croco and Gartner 2014; Croco 2016; McDonald, Croco, and Turitto 2019). In response to both these accounts, a third approach stresses the incentives for leaders to use ambiguous rhetoric to prevent the potentially negative effects outlined above (Tomz and Van Houweling 2009; Meibauer 2021). Instead, the victory trap suggests that presidents will use the decisive language of "victory" regardless of their understanding of the strategic situation.

One might contend that the victory trap and its emphasis on avoiding "losing" uniquely reflects the domestic pressures of anticommunism of the Cold War era toward Democratic presidents (see, for example, Craig and Logevall 2009). However, the pressures of "losing" transcended partisanship: Richard Nixon referred to how his administration would "lose the country if we lose the war" in Vietnam (Payne 2023, 138). Nixon's attempts to maneuver the electoral costs of war illustrate that all leaders are likely to be subject to some criticism for any war termination short of victory (Cochran 2018, 209), hence the general findings concerning why losing wars has an impact on leader tenure. As White House Press Secretary Tony Snow (2006) put it in October 2006: "victory was the only exit strategy after the Civil War, and after World War I, and World War II . . . in a time of war, that is the exit strategy." Alternative perspectives might point to how American "victory culture" largely collapsed because of the Vietnam War (Engelhardt 2007), or that "victory" is a form of ambiguous "bullshit" that holds different meanings to distinct audiences (Meibauer 2021). What is striking, however, is the particular ideal of "victory" in US political discourse that has preceded and outlasted the Cold War period (Hall 2022). For example, Martel (2011, 144) refers to how the War of 1812 added to the already existing idea that the United States "possessed a distinctive political and culture—thereby reaffirming the U.S. decision to pursue decisive victories." This could be seen in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's (1941) response to the Pearl Harbor attacks, as he affirmed to Congress that "the American people in their righteous might will win through to absolute victory." The importance of "victory" was consolidated by World War II and became, as Bush (2000) later argued, one of the main "lessons of Vietnam . . . the goal [of war] must be clear, and the victory must be overwhelming." In sum, the popular conception of "victory" in the United States is a maximalist one, namely a "decisive," "absolute," and "overwhelming" defeat of enemy forces (Weigley 1973; Record 2006).

However, this conception of war is at odds with twenty-first-century conflict which is regarded as generally "unseen, ambiguous, and anything but victorious" (Hom and Campbell 2022, 605). War Studies scholars have argued that the concept of "total victory" is "an outmoded concept" and a "pipe-dream" in contemporary conflict (Johnson and Tierney 2006; Coker 2009, 5). This is especially apparent in the broader War on Terror against transnational terrorist organizations that transcend the national boundaries traditionally associated with interstate war. As the 2008 *National Defense Strategy* summarized, the conflict was best understood as "long-term, episodic, and multi-dimensional," making it "more complex and diverse than the Cold War" (Department of Defense 2008, 8). Even within the central war zones of Afghanistan and Iraq, former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates (2014, 469) reflected how "the best possible outcome would not look to most Americans like winning or a victory." Thus, presidents must handle the conflicting pressures between desires for a particular conception of "victory" and the realities of twenty-first-century warfare.

Another challenge for policymakers is the second component of the "Vietnam Syndrome": that the impact of war on the American public must be limited (Simons 1998, 24–25; Johnson and Tierney 2006; Hall 2022, 14–15; Martel 2011, 154–55).

Then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William Crowe detailed the demands of the American public in 1989:

> every time I face the problem of having to deploy [troops] in … third world contingencies, instabilities, what the American public wants is for the U.S. military to *dominate the situation*, to do it quickly, to do it *without loss of life*, to do it without any peripheral damage, and then not to interrupt what's going on in the United States or affect the quality of our own lives (Buley 2008, 64, emphasis added).

Much like inconsistent demands from opinion polls where the American public desires lower taxes and higher levels of government service along with a balanced budget, Zaller (2003) argued that US public opinion wants "to have its cake and eat it too" when it comes to the use of military force, thus reinforcing the conflicting demands of the victory trap. Indeed, all three administrations studied here have reduced US military casualties when pursuing minimalist risk-management approaches instead of total military victory (Coker 2009). The Rumsfeld Doctrine reduced the reliance on US ground troops by emphasizing precision weapons and flexible force arrangements (Buley 2008, 107; Lewis 2012, 408; Casey 2014, 214), whilst both the Obama and Trump administrations embraced a similar logic with a "remote" counterterrorism playbook centered around lethal drones, special operations forces, and local forces (Hall 2021b). Unable to realistically achieve "victory," "losing" via withdrawal only seems politically viable for presidents when they feel less vulnerable to the pressures of public opinion due to personal beliefs or timings in the electoral cycle, as detailed below. The rest of the paper demonstrates the utility of the victory trap by analyzing how it manifested itself in the War on Terror.

The War on Terror and The Victory Trap

George W. Bush and the Pursuit of "Freedom's Victory"

In line with the accounts reviewed above that emphasize the importance of accurate messaging to ensure policymaker credibility, Bush's rhetoric did attempt to temper public expectations of "victory" at the outset of the War on Terror. In his landmark address to Congress in the wake of 9/11, Bush (2001a) informed the American public that the nascent conflict would "not be like" the US interventions in Iraq and Kosovo in the 1990s, and instead that the War on Terror would be "a lengthy campaign, unlike any other we have ever seen." This rhetoric reflected Bush's understanding of the problems of invoking "victory" in the War on Terror: as "a product of the Vietnam era," the president stated he "knew full well that if we could rally the American people behind a long and difficult chore, that our job would be easier" in terms of maintaining public support (Woodward 2002).

Yet, because of the necessary emphasis on "victory" in American political culture, Bush primarily emphasized achieving "victory" and "defeating" terrorist groups in conclusive terms. These contrasts played out in individual speeches, such as Bush's 2002 State of the Union address. In the speech, Bush (2002) announced the invasion of Afghanistan had "showed us the true scope of the task ahead," warning that the scale of al-Qaeda training camps meant "thousands of dangerous killers . . . are now spread throughout the world like ticking timebombs, set to go off without warning." Despite these warnings, Bush (2002) also declared that "we will demonstrate that the forces of terror cannot stop the momentum of freedom" and "in this great conflict . . . we will see freedom's victory". Indeed, "victory" was a central theme of Bush's rhetoric concerning the War on Terror, and "in virtually every case" was "stated grammatically as a certain fact" (Jackson 2005, 137).

In terms of "winning" the War on Terror, Bush made the two years without a terrorist attack on US soil the "core" of his 2004 reelection campaign (Suskind 2006).[4] Again, although Bush's (2004) State of the Union Address warned that it was "false . . . to believe that the danger is behind us," he reassured Congress that "by our will and courage, this danger will be defeated." Later in the election campaign, the political necessity of using such decisive language could be seen in the political furor created by Bush's response to the question "can we win [the War on Terror]?": "I don't think you can win it. But I think you can create conditions so that . . . those who use terror as a tool are less acceptable in parts of the world" (CBS News 2004a). This was the language of administration strategy documents but was subject to fervent criticism from Democrats. Senator John Edwards contended that the "War on Terrorism is absolutely winnable" and asked "what if President Reagan had said that it may be difficult to win the war against Communism?" (CBS News 2004b). Senator John Kerry virtually repeated Bush's previous rhetoric (see, for example, G. W. Bush 2001b), stating that "with the right policies, this is a war we can win, this is a war we must win, and this is a war we will win . . . because the future does not belong to fear, it belongs to freedom" (Halbfinger 2004). As an indication of the necessity of speaking in the language of unambiguous victory, Bush promptly returned to the tone of his previous statements, proclaiming just days later that "make no mistake about it: we are winning [the War on Terror] and we will win" (Allen 2004).

Even as the failings of the War on Terror became apparent during Bush's second term in office, the Bush administration doubled down on the language of victory, especially after Feaver joined the National Security Council from Duke University in 2005 after previous consultation on polling concerning the Iraq War (Shane 2005). In contrast to the idea that politicians can successfully "flip-flop" to current public opinion (in this case, a majority of the US public wanted to reduce the number of US troops in Iraq), Feaver's scholarship on public opinion and war suggested that emphasizing progress and the likelihood of eventual victory offered a pathway to reignite popular support (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2005). With Feaver on board, the Bush administration opted exactly for that public relations approach: Gelpi referred to how the 2005 "National Strategy for Victory in Iraq" was "not really a strategy document," was "clearly targeted at American public opinion," and "hit exactly on the themes" that their previous research "said they should" (Shane 2005; Steele and Campbell 2021, 45–46). Similarly, Bush's speech accompanying the document's release "strongly reflected" Feaver's presence in the administration, featuring the word "victory" some fifteen times (Shane 2005). As Bush later argued in a meeting with the Iraq Study Group that "our idea is to make the American people know we're working for victory. If I say we're looking for something short of victory, I am out of here tomorrow" (Woodward 2008).

To provide evidence of the likelihood of victory, Bush made a conscious effort to provide evidence of progress being made in Iraq (Casey 2014, 232). This was because Bush believed that although "most Americans wanted to win in Iraq . . . if the cost seemed too high or victory too distant, they would grow weary" (G. W. Bush 2010). The challenge for Bush (and other administrations of the War on Terror) was providing metrics of success in a conflict largely devoid of memorable milestones. The killing of prominent leaders of transnational terrorist organizations provides one graspable example of the "illusion of victory" used by all three administrations here (Cohen 2020); although the estimated impact of individual decapitation on the termination of terrorist organizations is significant and provides "dramatic sign[s] of progress" to the electorate (G. W. Bush 2010), it is "usually not a silver bullet" and depends on other factors (Johnston 2012, 50, 77). As

[4]Using the lack of terrorist attacks in the United States as a measure of success is questionable, for it rests on a counterfactual logic where voters are unable to credibly judge whether this reflects a successful policy or other factors (Ångström 2008, 104).

Bush (2006c) put it a week after the June 2006 killing of al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, "obviously, the [individual] raids aren't going to end terrorism." However, a week prior, Bush (2006b) delivered a televised address announcing Zarqawi's death, pronouncing boldly that "the developments of the last 24 hours give us renewed confidence in the final outcome of this struggle, [namely] the defeat of terrorism threats." The Bush administration also attempted to subdue any news that suggested the United States was not "winning" in Iraq; although the Bush administration had concluded before the November 2006 elections that the current strategy was failing and the "surge" would be adopted, this information was kept from the electorate until after the midterms (Payne 2023, 169).

Ultimately, however, the Bush administration was subject to the pressures of the victory trap and the inability to achieve results commensurate with previous rhetoric. Most infamously, Bush's (2003) address on the *USS Abraham Lincoln* in front of a "Mission Accomplished" banner became renowned for its prematurity. This speech neatly demonstrates the challenges of the "victory trap," as Bush (2010) claimed that he told then-Spanish Prime Minister José Maria Anzar after the toppling of the statue of Saddam Hussein that "you won't see us doing any victory dances or anything" before being persuaded by General Tommy Franks to deliver an address to consolidate public support and "show that a new phase in the war had begun." Furthermore, the speech itself avoided the phrase "mission accomplished" and included multiple warnings of the longevity of the conflict and the broader War on Terror, but none memorable enough to prevent the speech from becoming "a shorthand criticism for all that subsequently went wrong in Iraq" (Bush 2010). As Rumsfeld (2006) later deplored, "they fixed the speech but not the sign."

Later in the Bush administration, the emphasis on successes in Iraq after 2005 likewise proved ineffective, echoing the fate of the Johnson administration's "progress offensive" (Casey 2014, 232). Though inspired by the research of Feaver and his colleagues, Ricks (2009) claims that Feaver "cringed" when Bush affirmed in October 2006 that "absolutely, we're winning" in Iraq given events on the ground. The negative political effects of the victory trap ensued: with Iraq as a central point of contention, the Democrats won control of both the House of Representatives and the Senate in the November 2006 midterm elections (which neither party had achieved since 1994; Casey 2014, 234), and a then-record low of just 28 percent of respondents felt the United States was "winning the War on Terrorism" in January 2007.[5] Although the salience of the Iraq War had declined by the end of the Bush presidency with the perceived success of the surge and the growing significance of the financial crisis, the president finished his second term with historically low approval ratings and Obama undoubtedly profited from his long-standing stance against that conflict during his presidential campaign (Klaidman 2012, 1).

Barack Obama and the Pressures of Victory

Almost immediately, however, Obama was subject to the pressures of the victory trap. Concerning Afghanistan, a leaked assessment of the conflict by General Stanley McChrystal repeatedly stressed that without troop reinforcements, the US war effort would result in "failure" and "defeat" (Woodward 2009). Going further in terms of assigning potential culpability for "losing," the report argued that "insurgents [in Afghanistan] cannot defeat us militarily; but we can defeat ourselves" (Woodward 2009). Speaking in the language of traps, then Central Intelligence Agency Director Leon Panetta (Walldorf 2022, 117) argued vis-à-vis Afghanistan that "we can't leave, and we can't accept the status quo."

Of particular concern for the Obama administration during the deliberations over Afghanistan was the prospect of post-withdrawal terrorist attacks on the

[5] CNN poll, January 21, 2007, question 25. Accessed via the Roper Center (n.d.).

US homeland. Although some studies have shown that terrorist attacks and the fear of terrorism can increase the standing of right-wing candidates and parties (Berrebi and Klor 2008; Getmansky and Zeitzoff 2014), there are contrasting results (Chowanietz 2011; Randahl 2018), making the specifics of each political context seem crucial (Holman, Merolla, and Zechmeister 2022). In the United States, Croco's (2011) work suggests that the Obama administration would not be held accountable for the consequence of terminating wars when they were not deemed "culpable" for them, but the political costs of "losing" the War on Terror appear to transcend the Bush administration. During deliberations over Afghanistan policy, Bruce Riedel (chair of a White House review committee on the war) argued that "we were surprised once on 9/11 . . . It's going to be pretty hard to explain what happened to the American people if we're surprised again," whilst the president recognized that he "already own[ed]" the conflict politically and that even a small attack would have "an extraordinarily traumatizing effect on the homeland" (Woodward 2011, 105–6, 161–8 in Walldorf 2022, 115–16). The victory trap was in play, resulting in the continuation of military action.

With the administration committed to some continued form of military intervention, Obama argued internally for the merits of accurate messaging regarding the war in Afghanistan, remarking how his administration "need[ed] to set public expectations" by making it clear that it was "going to be difficult and . . . going to take time" (Woodward 2011, 301–2). Publicly, Obama generally spoke about the War on Terror in much narrower terms than Bush by making clear that it would be the policy of his administration to "disrupt, dismantle, and defeat Al Qaida."[6] Obama also commented in July 2009 that he was "worried about using the word 'victory'" in the context of the Afghanistan War because it was not going to live up to traditional conceptions of the term such as the peace treaty signed between MacArthur and Emperor Hirohito in 1945 to mark the end of World War II (ABC News 2009). Like Bush's rejection of the concept of definitively "winning" the War on Terror, this comment was subject to critique for disavowing "victory" as the goal of US counterterrorism. Indeed, Newt Gingrich's reaction mirrored Edwards' criticism five years prior by summoning Reagan's rhetoric regarding the Cold War and his "four words that changed history: 'we win. They lose'." Emphasizing the relationship between the human costs of war and the aversion to "losing" introduced above, Gingrich asked that if the goal in Afghanistan wasn't "victory," then why were "young American men and women risking their lives?" (Fox News 2009). These criticisms were echoed in the wake of a failed bombing attempt in December 2009, such as Cheney's claim that "we are at war and when President Obama pretends we aren't, it makes us less safe" (Klaidman 2012, 179–80). Obama's (2010) response to these claims was striking, returning to Bush-like language by referring to how his inaugural address "made it very clear our Nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred and that we will do whatever it takes to defeat them."

Having enjoyed a significant turnaround in approval ratings on national security policies during his first term (Klaidman 2012) and with the percentage of Americans "very" or "somewhat worried" about the threat of terrorism having fallen to its lowest point since December 2003 (Mueller and Stewart 2018), the recently reelected Obama attempted to take advantage of the more permissive political environment to again attempt to move beyond the victory trap. In a broad-ranging speech at the National Defense University, Obama (2013) pointed toward the successes of his administration's counterterrorism policies: that there had "been no large-scale attacks on the United States" during his presidency, and that "the core of al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan" was "on the path to defeat" after the assassination of Osama bin Laden. With the caveat that the United States would "never

[6]For example, Obama (2009). Accounting for variations in the spelling of al Qaeda, Obama stated these goals forty-six times in his presidency as per the "all of these terms" search function on the American Presidency Project (2024) website.

erase the evil that lies in the hearts of some human beings, nor stamp out every danger to our open society," Obama put forward his account of "victory against terrorism," which would be "parents taking their kids to school; immigrants coming to our shores; fans taking in a ballgame; a veteran starting a business," and the like (Obama 2013). Essentially, "victory" was life returning to normal whilst the "systematic effort to dismantle terrorist organizations . . . continue[d]" (Obama 2013); as one journalist noted, although the president had "wisely avoided the phrase 'mission accomplished'," his message was "it is time to declare victory and get on with our lives" (Robinson 2013).

Even despite the political context, the reaction to this speech again mirrored the response to Bush's comments in 2004, which is indicative of the need to abide by dominant conceptions of total victory in US political thinking. Conservative critiques echoed the historicizing efforts of Bush after 2006 in which he compared the War on Terror to the early stages of the Cold War (see, for example, G. W. Bush 2006a): a Wall Street Journal (2013) editorial suggested that the speech overlooked "that the best analogy to the current conflict is the Cold War," whilst both Stephens (2013) and Krauthammer (2013) mentioned how Dwight Eisenhower did not declare the Cold War over in 1958 after twelve years of war. Obama could not simply announce the security threat of terrorism was reduced and "pretend. . . that the war is over" (Krauthammer 2013), and should instead do what "America does best" by following history and fighting "its wars to a successful conclusion" (Stephens 2013). Inverting Obama's argument on its head, Senator Saxby Chambliss—then the top-ranking Republican on the Senate Intelligence Committee—contended that the president's speech would "be viewed by terrorists as a victory" (Baker 2013).

Moreover, the political reaction to the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 was a testament to the continuing potential political costs of "losing" in the War on Terror even after the boost to Obama's approval ratings in his first term. To prevent such accusations of "losing," Obama adopted noticeably more decisive language to describe counter-ISIS operations, pledging 51 times that his administration would "destroy ISIL"; the comparative figure for "destroy Al Qaida" during his presidency was just seven. Like Bush, Obama (2016a, 2016b) also turned to individual successes in the War on Terror, including the listing of nine full names of assassinated terrorists in two speeches in June 2016. Nevertheless, because of the president's deliberately measured rhetoric surrounding ISIS (just days after the ISIS-inspired terrorist attack by a married couple living in San Bernadino, Obama (2015) argued that his administration's policies of using "airstrikes, special forces, and working with local forces" were working to "achieve a more sustainable victory' than beginning "long and costly ground war[s]") his administration's policies were heavily criticized during the 2015–2016 Republican campaign in line with the victory trap.

Jeb Bush (2015) claimed that the counter-ISIS campaign was "the war of our time" and that the United States "need[ed] a war-time Commander-in-Chief who is ready to lead this country and the free world to victory." These critiques appear to have resonated with the American electorate, as only 34 percent of respondents approved of Obama's handling of ISIS, whilst 73 percent wanted the next president to take a different approach to counterterrorism (Politico 2015). Furthermore, on the only occasion out of 70 polls across the Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations, more respondents after San Bernardino (40 percent) felt that "the terrorists" were "winning the war on terrorism" than the United States (18 percent). (Counter)terrorism became a significant issue in the 2016 presidential election (Hall 2021a, 48), with polls showing that fear of terrorism helped Trump's rise through the Republican primaries and that prominent attacks increased his approval ratings (Silver 2016). In sum, Obama was a victim of the victory trap in two different ways: being criticized for not aiming for "victory" and then for "losing" in the form of terrorist attacks. It is noticeable that Obama's final attempts to put

forward what he deemed an accurate picture of victory all came as a lame-duck president outside of electoral constraints, returning to the untranslatability of the 1945 surrender ceremony between MacArthur and Hirohito three times in December 2016, including in his final significant national security speech.[7]

Donald Trump and the Declaration of Victory

In comparison to Bush and Obama, there is less evidence that Trump harbored private misgivings about the challenges of achieving traditionally conceived military victories against transnational terrorist organizations. It is significant, however, that as early as July 2017 Trump privately remarked that "we should just *declare victory*, end the wars and bring our troops home" (Woodward 2018, emphasis added). Trump's understanding of the significance of "victory" could further be seen in the centrality of this concept in his speech announcing that more American troops would be sent to Afghanistan. Though Trump noted that his "instinct" to withdraw from Afghanistan had been curtailed by members of his administration, he asserted that "the American people are weary of war without victory," that US soldiers "deserve[d] a plan for victory," and that "from now on, victory will have a clear definition" (Trump 2017). This aligned with Trump's (2016) criticisms during his presidential campaign that the "Washington establishment" had given the United States "decades of endless wars producing only death and bloodshed, but no victory."

To fulfill his campaign promises and enjoy the electoral benefits of "winning" wars, Trump (2018a) suddenly announced in December 2018 that he had ordered US troops to return from Syria given that "we have won against ISIS. We've beaten them, and we've beaten them badly." These claims ran directly at odds with members of his administration, leading to the resignations of Secretary of Defense James Mattis and Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS Brett McGurk (Specia 2019). A large part of these disagreements centered around what would constitute the "defeat" of a transnational terrorist organization, with McGurk stating just one week prior that "if we've learned one thing over the years, enduring defeat of a group like this [ISIS] means you can't just defeat their physical space and then leave" and that "nobody working on these issues . . . is declaring a mission accomplished" (Nordland 2018). In Congress, Trump ally Senator Lindsey Graham charged that "to say they're defeated is an overstatement and is fake news" (Hayes 2018), whilst Senator Robert Menendez claimed that it was "only in President Trump's parallel alternate universe [that] has ISIS been defeated" (Wagner 2018). The American public also disagreed with Trump's declaration of victory, with 72 percent of respondents in a January 2019 poll answering that ISIS had not "been defeated in Syria."[8] Having achieved the rare contemporary feat of creating bipartisan agreement, Trump was forced into tempering his administration's policies in Syria, with around 1000 American troops remaining in Syria for the next year (Stewart 2019).

In October 2019 Trump again unilaterally announced a withdrawal of American troops from Syria, with similar results: Graham claimed that "the biggest lie being told by the administration is that ISIS has been defeated" (Wise 2019), 73 percent of American voters answered that they did not believe that ISIS "had been defeated in Syria," and policy was again adjusted with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark Milley announcing that around 600 US troops would remain in northeastern Syria (Klar 2019). The electoral logic of Trump's decisions was clear; during both withdrawal efforts he attempted to enhance his credibility and status as a "winner" by referring to how "I campaigned on getting out of Syria and other places" (Trump 2018b) and how "I was elected on getting out of these endless wars"

[7] See footnote 1.

[8] Fox News poll, January 22, 2019, question 19. Accessed via the Roper Center (n.d.).

(Trump 2019a). Indeed, as Trump's presidency progressed, he became increasingly committed to the centrality of "victory" to American warfighting in the tradition of General Douglas MacArthur, with the president even approvingly quoting MacArthur's famous statement from the Korean War that "in war, there is no substitute for victory" (Trump 2020). Like his predecessors, he also stressed his administration's counterterrorism achievements to prevent accusations of "losing," making the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (which he described as evidence of "our commitment to the enduring and total defeat of ISIS and other terrorist organizations"; Trump 2019b) a central plank of his re-election campaign by referring to Baghdadi in fifty-two different speeches.[9]

However, the inherent challenges of producing decisive military defeats against terrorist groups made such "victories" politically unviable. Not only did Trump struggle to enact his desired policies before the 2020 presidential election, but 55 percent of respondents to one poll in early 2021 felt that the United States had "stood still" or "lost ground" in terms of counterterrorism.[10] Though the politics of "winning" and "victory" was undoubtedly an important part of Trump's populist appeal, this suggests limits to the claim that "the feeling that "America is WINNING AGAIN" (Trump 2018b) . . . is more important than the actual substance of his initiatives" in foreign policy (Wojczewski 2020, 305). Put another way, Trump could not bluff his way out of the victory trap, again suggesting the limits of elite rhetoric in foreign policy legitimation. In terms of policies, Trump was only able to achieve significant troop withdrawals from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia after his electoral defeat (Hall 2021b, 204–7), providing further evidence that the victory trap can only be tackled when electoral pressures are reduced.

Conclusion

This paper has put forward the concept of a victory trap in American politics, as detailed in the case of the War on Terror. Contrary to accounts that stress how policymakers should adopt accurate or ambiguous foreign policy messaging, this paper has shown that Bush, Obama, and Trump have all, to varying degrees, used the decisive and ill-suited language of "victory" and "defeat" against transnational terrorist organizations. As such, all three presidents have been subject to the pressures of the effects of the victory trap on politics and policy. For Bush and Trump, their administrations were primarily criticized for being unable to produce results in war commensurate with the specific ideas of "victory" (i.e., total victory) in US political discourse. The political consequences were particularly striking for Bush, with the War on Terror becoming a significant political burden as mobilization costs increased without sufficient policy results. On the other hand, Obama was not only subject to pressures to continue military action in Afghanistan to avoid the political costs of "defeat" in war, but his repeated attempts to move beyond the language of "victory" were subject to fervent criticism, especially with the rise of ISIS providing evidence that the United States was "losing" the War on Terror. Strikingly, the condemnation of Obama's more realistic account of "victory" in 2013 closely mirrored the reaction of Democrats after Bush's remarks in the 2004 presidential election, suggesting how the victory trap transcends partisan boundaries. Trump's struggle to just "declare victory" in Afghanistan and Syria likewise suggests that presidents were damned if they adopted the language of victory, and damned if they didn't. This is a noticeable pushback against those perspectives that stress the ability of policymakers to lead or manufacture public opinion in the foreign policy arena.

With all presidents eager to provide evidence of not "losing" the War on Terror, the paper has also shown how questionable metrics of deaths of individual lead-

[9] See footnote 1.

[10] Gallup poll, February 2, 2021, question 5. Accessed via the Roper Center (n.d.).

ers of terrorist groups have been emphasized, therefore paradoxically increasing the chance of war continuation. This has important ramifications for arguments surrounding the perceived effectiveness of democracies in warfighting due to informational advantages but also democratic accountability in foreign policymaking more broadly (Reiter and Stam 2002). As per the need to demonstrate the likelihood of future success to ensure war support, Whitlock's (2021) study of the "Afghanistan papers" shows how policymakers across the three administrations studied here "knew their war strategy was dysfunctional and privately doubted they could attain their objectives" all whilst "they confidently told the public year after year that they were making progress and that victory . . . was just over the horizon." Indeed, the evidence above suggests that presidents have only felt confident enough to directly challenge the victory trap when they were less electorally vulnerable (such as Obama's rebranding of "victory" in 2013), albeit with no guarantee of success.

Biden's decision to withdraw all US troops from Afghanistan in August 2021 (and thus hopefully exit the victory trap) further suggests the importance of perceived political context. Though certainly aligning with Biden's long-held views on the US intervention in Afghanistan (Marsh 2014, 277), it was important that just 36 percent of Americans—another record low since 2003—were "very" or "somewhat worried" about the threat of terrorism in August 2021 (Gallup 2021). Furthermore, much like Gerald Ford at the end of the Vietnam War, Biden's "culpability" was decreased by the fact that he had inherited a widely supported peace agreement from his predecessor, with 70 percent of respondents in a July 2021 poll supporting withdrawing all American troops by September of the same year (Smeltz and Sullivan 2021). Seemingly wary of being accused of inaccurate claims of "victory," Biden was cautious to avoid overstating America's success, as he maintained before, during, and after the withdrawal that the United States had neither achieved "victory nor admitted defeat" but instead had achieved the invasion's initial goals (Sanger and Shear 2021).

And yet, Biden was still criticized along the lines of the victory trap; Senator Ben Sasse labeled one of Biden's speeches as an "unseemly victory lap" that was "detached from reality" (Baker 2021), whilst General H. R. McMaster echoed McChrystal's narrative in 2009 in claiming that the United States had "defeated ourselves" (Crowley 2021). The chaotic scenes at Kabul airport were reminiscent of the pictures from the US withdrawal from Vietnam in 1975, which—in opposition to the confusion around what "victory" would constitute—brought clarity to what "defeat" looked like (Steele 2010, 146). The damage of "losing" the Afghanistan War in such a visually striking manner had a clear impact on Biden's popularity, with his approval ratings dropping below 50 percent for the first time on the day that the Taliban took over Kabul, from which they have yet to recover at the time of writing (Boot 2021). Furthermore, despite inheriting the withdrawal agreement, Boot (2021) suggested that Biden would still be held culpable for "losing": "the political pain of Afghanistan could get worse. Imagine what would happen if there were a major terrorist attack emanating from Afghanistan, especially on U.S. soil". The preliminary evidence suggests that Biden has been subject to the same victory trap in war termination that previous presidents have been in war continuation. As the "American public has wanted only one thing from its commanders in chief: quick wars for substantial victories with minimal costs" (Pearlman 1999, 13), it will take a wholesale "change [in] the psychology of how Americans view. . . war" (as Rumsfeld called for during the Bush administration; Buley 2008, 101) for the victory trap to end.

Although this article has focused exclusively on the presence of a victory trap in US politics, the consensus on the domestic effects of the perceptions around "losing" (reduced leader tenure) and "winning" (increased war support) wars across regimes and nations suggests generalizability beyond this case. The intuitive find-

ings of Feaver, Gelpi, and Reifler's research (2006, 2009) imply that emphasizing success and eventual victory is likely to be a common tactic of wartime leaders beyond the United States, despite the scholarly consensus on the unlikelihood of achieving clear-cut victories in twenty-first-century warfare. Even in more "conventional" interstate warfare between Ukraine and Russia, Fix (2023) has predicted that a lack of clarity of what "victory" might look like from a Ukrainian perspective could lead to "Western publics" to view the "war as a protracted, indeterminate struggle" that they will be reluctant to assist. Whilst there seems to be an unparalleled "victory culture" in the United States when it comes to memorializing wars and valorizing total victories, opposition parties across nations are likely to "target any leader who ends a war short of victory" (Cochran 2018, 209). The kind of meaningful narrative contestation shown here is only likely to be exaggerated by the advent of a more diverse and accessible media environment (Hoskins and O'Loughlin 2010). For those reasons, the important politics and policies of the victory trap are well worth investigating elsewhere.

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