

“It’s the War, Stupid!”: Determinants of Retrospective Evaluations of American Presidents

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Public opinion of presidents after they have left office is primarily the product of whether or not their administration entangled the United States in an unpopular military conflict. Using data from Gallup polls, we demonstrate that the forces of peace and prosperity drive approval ratings of former presidents when out of office but do not impact public assessments equally. A former president’s popular standing is tarnished more by association with an unpopular war than it is enhanced by economic prosperity.

Keywords: presidential approval, public opinion

Assessments of presidential performance in office are ubiquitous in contemporary America, yet assessments of presidential job performance do not end when the person leaves office. Panagopoulos (2012, 719) describes “[p]olitical observers and presidents” as “preoccupied with the notion of presidential legacy,” an obsession that regularly spawns surveys of historians and political scientists that yield rankings of past presidents from best to worst. The American public in general also has a fascination with former presidents and occasionally is asked to contribute to the discussion about former presidents’ job performance. In many respects, these public assessments of former presidents are more important as they contribute to general support of the political system and enable former presidents to continue wielding influence after leaving office (Jacobs 2018).

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How do Americans evaluate past presidents? What factors drive these evaluations? This analysis adds to our understanding of assessments of former presidents by demonstrating the import of entanglement in unpopular war upon the approval of presidents after they leave office. Our findings give credence to the notion that while both economic concerns and foreign entanglements affect contemporary perceptions of presidents, involving the nation in a military conflict that is perceived negatively by the American people will permanently plague a president's approval ratings after leaving office.

Studying Retrospective Presidential Approval

Two approaches have been used for understanding Americans' perceptions of former presidents. Panagopoulos (2012) assesses retrospective presidential approval using measures of job performance taken during the president's term, personal factors associated with the individual president, and the current president's approval rating. Most notable are the effects on retrospective approval of a president's mean approval rating for the term and final approval rating. This finding leads Panagopoulos (2012, 728) to observe that "even though presidents may be able to rehabilitate appraisals of their performance in office over time, they cannot escape entirely from the conditions that affected levels of public approval during their presidencies." Additional findings of note in Panagopoulos's analysis are that retrospective approval increases the longer a former president has been out of office, decreases after the former president's death, and is positively influenced by the approval rating of the current president at the time of the retrospective poll.¹ The link between approval of a former president and the incumbent president perhaps relates to general attitudes toward government, as public trust in government and presidential approval are interconnected (Hetherington 1999). Perhaps better feelings about the current status of the polity—reflected in the incumbent president's job performance rating—prompt more favorable assessments of the institution and, by extension, previous holders of the office. While touching upon an array of meaningful determinants of retrospective presidential approval, Panagopoulos nevertheless fails to address why involvement in an unpopular military conflict during the president's term is seemingly immune to the "rehabilitation" dynamics so clearly described.

King (1999) and Cohen (2018) use an alternative approach, utilizing variables known to affect presidential performance assessments in real time for determining factors affecting retrospective presidential approval. There is a rich literature on the influences on presidents' job approval ratings (Gronke and Newman 2003; 2009). A president's approval ratings decline over the term in office as disappointments mount following the hopefulness of the early months, although a resurgence of popularity often occurs as reelection approaches (Brace and Hinckley 1992; Stimson 1976). International crises yield rally-around-the-flag effects that provide short-term benefits for the occupant of the Oval Office as citizens normally critical of the administration become more supportive of the

1. That presidents' retrospective approval ratings decline after their deaths was contrary to expectations, and an explanation is not offered. "Deceased" was not significant in a preliminary estimation of our model reported below but correlates highly ($r = .75$) with time out of office.

president for short periods of time (Brace and Hinckley 1992; Edwards and Swenson 1997; Kriner and Schwartz 2009; Mueller 1970). Conversely, scandal associated with the president or the president's administration saps public approval (Brace and Hinckley 1992; Ostrom and Simon 1985). For the most part, however, presidential approval ratings respond to two factors. "Peace and prosperity," Kernell (1978, 520) reminds us, "are the foundations of a popular president."² Following this reasoning, King (1999) shows retrospective approval ratings being driven by the proportion of a president's term during which the United States was engaged in the unpopular wars in Korea and Vietnam and by economic conditions, measured by the misery index that combines unemployment and inflation rates. Additionally, King demonstrates that retrospective approval ratings improve with the passage of time but identifies Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard M. Nixon as exceptions to this generalization. Cohen's (2018) analysis also indicates an effect of an unpopular war on public perceptions, incorporating presidents throughout American history while employing data from a single Rasmussen poll conducted in 2007.

Our analysis of the determinants of retrospective approval borrows from both of these approaches, by adding explanatory power with the incorporation of a broader array of presidents and by analyzing data from more recent Gallup surveys. The core of the analysis follows King's (1999) approach and assesses the effects of economic conditions and war on retrospective presidential approval. Drawn from the analysis of Panagopoulos (2012) is the former president's time out of office and the popularity of the incumbent president. In this way, we blend the approaches of King and Panagopoulos, using the findings of the latter as controls to reinforce the findings of the former. We then explore more fully the retrospective approval of the two presidents whom Americans consistently rate as the worst among recent chief executives.

Retrospective Presidential Approval

Building upon roughly five decades of analysis, the principal data for this analysis come from 11 Gallup Polls asking Americans their perceptions of former presidents in the post–World War II era. (Data sources are described in the appendix.) The polls, conducted intermittently between 1990 and 2018, asked respondents a variant of Gallup's standard question on approval or disapproval of the incumbent president's job performance.³

"From what you have heard, read, or remember about some of our past presidents, please tell me if you approve or disapprove of the way each of the following handled their job as president?"

2. Kernell's conclusion regarding the effects of peace and prosperity is echoed in most studies of presidential approval ratings. See Gronke and Newman (2003; 2009) for overviews of these findings and Berlemane and Enkelmann (2014) for a summary of research specifically on the relationship between presidential approval and economic conditions.

3. Question wording has varied slightly among Gallup's polls of retrospective presidential approval, primarily regarding the pronoun used in the sentence. The language quoted here was used for the 2018 poll and most of Gallup's earlier polls.

Harry Truman and Dwight D. Eisenhower appear only in the 1990 poll.⁴ Most polls include all presidents from John F. Kennedy through the most recent ex-president, although the 1994 poll of retrospective approval included only Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H. W. Bush while the 1998 poll omitted Johnson and Gerald Ford.

Thus, our project is built upon a true measure of *retrospective* public opinion. By asking respondents to rate approval or disapproval of how *past* presidents handled their job as president, Gallup calls upon participants to engage in the complex task of explicitly recalling what they can about the former president, but also implicitly judging that former office holder in light of whatever might have occurred since that president left office and, importantly, evaluate him against not only other presidents of yesteryear, but also the current occupant of the White House at the time the poll was taken. In that regard, one cannot simply dismiss “nostalgia” for leaders of yore, in light of the trials of polls’ present.

The results from Gallup’s retrospective presidential approval polls are summarized in Table 1. Kennedy has the highest retrospective approval ratings, peaking at 86% approval in two polls and having by a wide margin the highest mean across 10 polls. Kennedy’s popularity also is among the most consistent: his retrospective approval ratings have a low range (10 percentage points) and a low standard deviation. The next most popular presidents in the retrospective approval polls are George H. W. Bush and Reagan. The mean retrospective approval ratings of these presidents are in the mid–60% level, and both have high retrospective approval ratings in the mid-seventies. At the opposite end of the spectrum is Nixon. The first retrospective approval poll in 1990 showed only 32% of respondents approving of his performance in office. Over the years, the thirty-seventh president’s rating has ebbed and flowed the least, peaking at 37%, twice falling as low as 28%, and averaging 32%. Nixon’s immediate predecessor, Johnson, is the only other president whose retrospective approval rating has never exceeded 50% or has dipped below 40%. Johnson ranks as the second most unpopular former president in most of Gallup’s retrospective approval polls, but his standing has improved over time.

Reflecting earlier studies, a consistent pattern in Table 1 is that postpresidency approval ratings are higher than presidents’ mean approval ratings during their terms (King 1999; Morini 2013; Panagopoulos 2012). Most notable are Ford, Kennedy, Reagan, and Carter, with mean retrospective approval ratings more than 10 points above their mean job performance ratings while in office. Because he was included in only one postpresidency poll, caution must be used in assessing Truman’s circumstance, but the thirty-third president’s 1990 retrospective approval rating of 68% was more than 20 points above his mean job performance rating as chief executive. The only exceptions to this pattern of higher retrospective approval ratings are Johnson and Nixon. Johnson had particularly high approval ratings during his first 15 months as president, but public support slid with public discontent for the war in Vietnam; his reputation later was tarnished by disclosures that he pressed forward in Vietnam despite harboring doubts about the country’s

4. Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) was included in the 1990 poll, receiving a 75% retrospective approval rating. FDR is not included in this analysis, however, because data comparable to those on the other former presidents are not available. For example, Gallup’s now-standard job performance question was not asked regularly throughout FDR’s term.

TABLE 1
Retrospective Presidential Approval

	<i>Retrospective approval</i>			<i>Term</i>
	<i>High</i>	<i>Low</i>	<i>Mean (s.d.)</i>	<i>Mean</i>
Harry Truman ^a	68%			45.4%
Dwight Eisenhower ^a	70%			65.0%
John Kennedy	86%	76%	82.4% (3.9) (10) ^b	70.1%
Lyndon Johnson	49%	35%	42.2% (5.5) (9)	55.1%
Richard Nixon	37%	28%	32.0% (3.1) (10)	49.0%
Gerald Ford	71%	50%	59.7% (6.1) (9)	47.2%
Jimmy Carter	69%	45%	55.9% (8.4) (11)	45.5%
Ronald Reagan	74%	50%	64.3% (9.4) (11)	52.8%
George H. W. Bush	76%	56%	65.9% (7.7) (9)	60.9%
Bill Clinton	69%	51%	60.8% (7.4) (4)	55.1%
George W. Bush	53%	47%	50.0% (4.2) (2)	49.4%
Barack Obama ^a	63%			47.4%

^aPresident included in only one Gallup Poll of retrospective approval.

^bNumber of polls used in calculating mean and standard deviation.

ability to win the war. Nixon's approval ratings in office and postpresidency reputation cratered with unpopular decisions regarding Vietnam, the Watergate scandal, revelations of abuse of power, and the impeachment inquiry in Congress.

Explaining Retrospective Presidential Approval

Our model for explaining retrospective presidential approval is specified as:

$$Y_{ji} = b_0 + b_1MI_j + b_2W_j + b_3T_j + b_4X_j + b_5A_i + e$$

where:

Y_{ji} is a measure of retrospective presidential approval, measured as the percent of survey respondents approving a former president's job performance in various Gallup polls of Americans' assessments of former presidents;⁵

5. Our measurement of retrospective approval as the percentage of respondents approving the former president follows the convention for measuring presidential approval in the literature. Moreover, the simple approval measure correlates very highly ($r = .96$) with a measure adjusted for disapproval (approval/approval + disapproval). Thus, the conclusions drawn from the analysis are not affected by this measurement choice.

MI_j is the *misery index* during president j 's term, measured as the sum of the mean of annual change in the consumer price index and the mean of the annual employment rate;
 W_j is an unpopular war, measured as the percentage of months of president j 's term that the United States was engaged in the Korean War, Vietnam War, or Iraq War;
 T_j is president j 's *time out of office*, measured in years;
 X_j is whether president j was subject to a serious *impeachment* investigation by Congress, equaling one for Nixon and Bill Clinton and zero for all others;⁶
 A_i is the *job approval rating* of the incumbent president at the time of Gallup Poll i ; and
 e is the error term.

Models are estimated using ordinary least squares regression with robust standard errors. Prior studies of the determinants of presidential approval ratings, both in-term and retrospectively, suggest hypotheses of $b_1, b_2, b_4 < 0$ and $b_3, b_5 > 0$.

The first two measures reflect the "peace and prosperity" factors so common in studies of presidential approval ratings. Different economic measures are used in studies of presidential popularity in multivariate models (Berlemann and Enkelmann 2014). In this analysis, economic conditions during a presidency are measured by the misery index, which sums annual inflation and unemployment rates, following the procedure in King's (1999) analysis.⁷ Involvement in an unpopular war is measured by the percent of a president's term (in months) the United States was engaged in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq.⁸ While public support for the president and the president's policy was high at the outset of each conflict, support waned as the engagement continued with few indicators that a successful conclusion was near. The Korean War is dated from June 1950 (North Korea's

6. Nixon was not formally impeached by the House of Representatives. The Senate Committee on the Judiciary adopted three articles of impeachment, and several Republicans announced their support for impeachment after the release of transcripts of White House tapes revealing that Nixon and chief of staff H. R. Haldeman in June 1972 discussed strategies for using the Central Intelligence Agency to impede the Federal Bureau of Investigation's investigation of links between the Watergate burglary and Nixon's reelection campaign. Faced with probable impeachment in the House of Representatives and conviction in the Senate, Nixon resigned the office. Clinton was impeached by the House of Representatives on allegations of perjury and obstruction of justice related to his actions concerning a civil lawsuit alleging sexual harassment but was not convicted by the Senate.

7. The analysis that follows was replicated using two alternative measures of macroeconomic conditions: change in real gross domestic product per capita and change in real disposable income per capita over the president's time in office. The magnitude of coefficients and goodness-of-fit measures differed across regressions, but the substantive conclusions drawn from the analysis did not change. We used the misery index because this model yielded the strongest goodness-of-fit measures and for comparison with previous studies of retrospective presidential approval (King 1999).

8. The converse of "unpopular war" is "popular war," or extended military engagement that yields popular support. Two military engagements during the time frame of this analysis that might yield a positive effect were the end of World War II during the first 4 months of Truman's presidency and the brief 1991 Persian Gulf War or Operation Desert Storm during George H. W. Bush's presidency. The model presented below was estimated using a popular war variable measured in the manner of the unpopular war variable. This variable had a negative regression coefficient (contrary to the hypothesis) and failed to achieve standard levels of statistical significance. World War II and the Persian Gulf War were qualitatively different from the long-lasting, unpopular wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq. Although supported by the American public, success in World War II is associated with FDR, who led the nation through three and a half years of war, rather than with Truman, who held office only during the final 4 months of the conflict. The Persian Gulf War, with less than 2 months of actual combat, bears a greater resemblance to rally-around-the-flag events due to its short duration. As a consequence, this variable is not included in the analysis.

TABLE 2
Determinants of Presidential Approval Ratings

Variable	(1)		(2)		(3)	
	<i>Mean term approval</i>		<i>Retrospective approval</i>		<i>Retrospective approval</i>	
	<i>b^a</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>b^a</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>b^a</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Misery index	-1.63** (.44)	-.70	-2.28*** (.30)	-.50	-2.08*** (.22)	-.46
Unpopular war	-.12* (.05)	-.50	-.42*** (.03)	-.92	-.40*** (.02)	-.88
Time out of office					28*** (.06)	.22
Impeachment president					-8.91*** (2.12)	-.22
Incumbent's approval					.16*** (.05)	.15
Constant	72.73 (6.66)		92.54 (3.92)		76.56 (4.17)	
R ² /adjusted R ²	.512/.464		.756/.753		.869/.862	
MSE	6.2		8.0		5.9	
N	12		78		78	

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (one-tailed tests of significance).

^aUnstandardized regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

invasion of South Korea) to July 1953 (the truce signing); the Vietnam War is dated from August 1964 (the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution) to January 1973 (the cease-fire announcement); the Iraq War is dated from March 2003 (initiation of hostilities) to August 2010 (withdrawal of U.S. troops). Short-lived international events, including limited military actions, are not modeled, as these “rally-around-the-flag” events have limited impact on presidents’ contemporary approval ratings and often are soon forgotten by the public (Edwards and Swenson 1997; Marra, Ostrom, and Simon 1990).

The results of a set of regression analyses are presented in Table 2. Estimates are first generated for each president’s mean job approval rating during his term using the economic variables and the measure of involvement in an unpopular war (column 1). On the whole, this baseline model performs respectably, explaining approximately half of the variance in presidents’ mean term approval ratings and yielding a relatively small error of under seven percentage points. The individual regression coefficients show that adverse economic conditions during a president’s term significantly reduce presidential approval. Engagement in Korea, Vietnam, or Iraq also reduces presidents’ approval ratings. Most notable is that the standardized regression coefficients indicate economic conditions having a slightly greater effect, with involvement in an unpopular war having a notable effect nonetheless.

Regressing these same factors on presidents’ retrospective approval ratings reveals a different pattern of influences. The foremost influence on Americans’ assessments of

former presidents, evidenced by the standardized regression coefficients, is association with an unpopular war (column 2). The misery index remains impactful; however, the unpopular war variable has nearly twice the impact on retrospective approval ratings as does the economic variable. Expanding the model of retrospective approval rating to include the length of time the president has been out of office, whether the ex-president was subject to impeachment, and the incumbent president's approval rating has no bearing on our interpretations of the primary influences on public evaluations of former chief executives (column 3). The more fully specified regression model yields stronger goodness-of-fit measures, and the added factors significantly impact retrospective approval ratings as predicted. *Ceteris paribus*, a former president's retrospective approval rating rises one point for each 4 years out of office, the impeached presidents' retrospective approval ratings are nine points lower, and the incumbent president's job performance rating has a very modest effect. But the magnitudes of the regression coefficients—both unstandardized and standardized—for association with an unpopular war and rate of inflation during the president's term change only slightly between the restricted and expanded models, indicating that the added explanatory variables operate independently of the measures of economic conditions and war abroad. "Peace and prosperity" might be "the foundations of a popular president" (Kernell 1978, 520), but these factors are not equal in the minds of Americans as they assess former presidents. Unquestionably, *the absence of peace* is the foundation of retrospective presidential approval.⁹

To explore more fully the impact of war on retrospective presidential approval, we disaggregated the unpopular war variable of the model to create separate measures—again, the percent of the president's term during which the United States was engaged in the conflict—for the Korean War, Vietnam War, and Iraq War. The regression estimates, presented in Table 3, indicate that each war influences post-White House assessments of presidents, as the regression coefficient is negative and statistically significant. Former presidents' retrospective approval ratings are marred by association with the Korean War and the Iraq War, but it is association with the Vietnam War that most damages perceptions of ex-presidents. The standardized regression coefficients for the wars in Korea and Iraq are smaller than those for other variables in the model. The standardized regression coefficient for connection to the Vietnam War indicates that this war most influences retrospective approval of presidents. Cavari (2019), Edwards, Mitchell, and Welch (1995), and Ostrom et al. (2018) show that the influence of economic conditions and war on presidents' approval ratings was conditioned by the saliency of the issue. It appears that the role of issue saliency extends to assessments of former presidents. Unquestionably, the Vietnam War remains a particularly salient event when Americans consider past chief executives and has the greatest impact. A Gallup Poll taken just before the peace accords were signed found 60% of Americans responding "yes" to the statement, "Looking back,

9. The robustness of the model was tested in three ways. First, to test the effects of individual polls, the model presented in column 3 of Table 2 was reestimated excluding each poll sequentially. Second, we reestimated the model with each former president excluded sequentially. Third, we clustered the robust standard errors by president. The results of these alternative estimations were nearly identical to those presented in Table 2 and, in particular, did not change the substantive conclusion that association with an unpopular war far outweighs the other explanatory variables.

TABLE 3
Determinants of Presidential Retrospective Approval Ratings

Variable	(4)		(5)	
	<i>Retrospective approval</i>		<i>Retrospective approval</i>	
	<i>b^a</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>b^a</i>	<i>Beta</i>
Misery index	-2.28*** (.22)	-.46	-1.99*** (.22)	-.44
Unpopular war	-.40*** (.02)	-.88		
Korean War			-.42** (.07)	-.10
Vietnam War			-.43*** (.23)	-.92
Iraq War			-.23*** (.04)	-.17
Time out of office	.28*** (.06)	.22	.35*** (.05)	.28
Impeached president	-8.91*** (2.12)	-.22	-7.35*** (2.09)	-.18
Incumbent's approval	.16*** (.05)	.15	.19*** (.05)	.18
Constant	76.56 (4.17)		72.41 (3.78)	
<i>R</i> ² /adjusted <i>R</i> ²	.869/.862		.886/.880	
MSE	5.9		5.6	
<i>N</i>	78		78	

p* < .01; *p* < .001 (one-tailed tests of significance).

^aUnstandardized regression coefficients with robust standard errors in parentheses.

do you think the United States made a mistake in sending troops to fight in Vietnam?" When the question was repeated in later years, the share of the sample agreeing with the statement never fell below the January 1973 number and rose as high as 74% in 1990 (Gillespie 2000). In comparison, a similar question in Gallup polls regarding U.S. involvement in Iraq found a high of 63% of Americans (April 2008) believing that sending troops to fight in that country was a mistake (Gallup Poll n.d.). A Gallup Poll taken in 2000 showed 34% of Americans believing a mistake was made in fighting the Korean War and 47% believing the war was not a mistake (Moore 2000).

As the two chief executives closely associated with the Vietnam War, Nixon and Johnson consistently rank as the least popular among recent ex-presidents. Yet there are differences in perceptions of their performances in the White House over time. The positive, statistically significant effect of the time a former president has been out of office on retrospective approval rating evident in Tables 2 and 3 aligns with previous research. The two exceptions to this pattern in King's (1999) analysis were Johnson and Nixon. Although he does not draw attention to the patterns, Panagopoulos's (2012) illustrations of retrospective approval ratings in polls through 2010 indicate a modest improvement in public perceptions of Johnson but not of Nixon. Figure 1 shows the retrospective

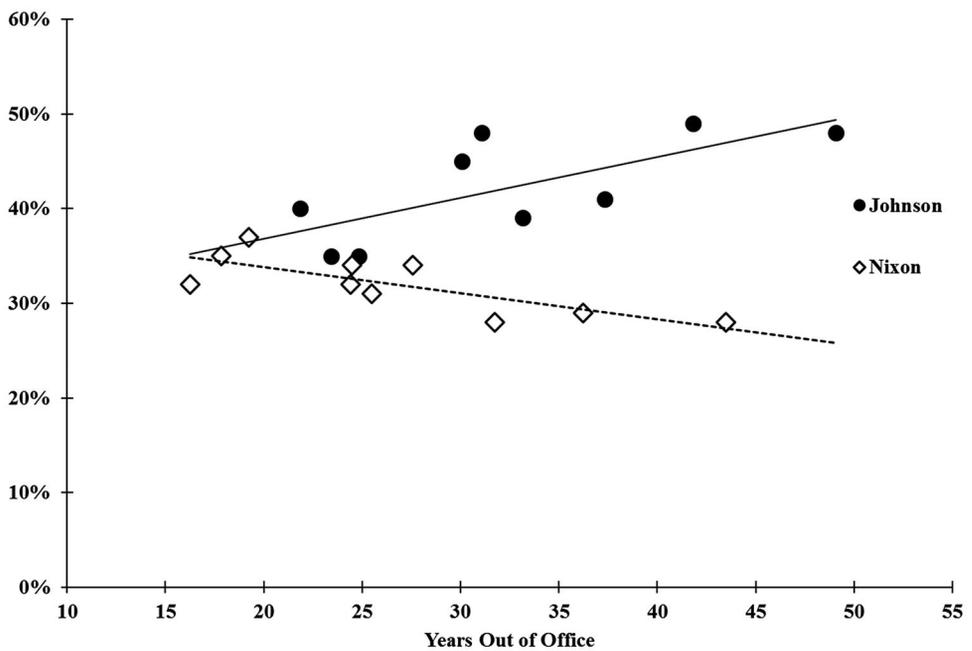


FIGURE 1. Retrospective Approval by Time out of Office.

approval ratings of these least-popular ex-presidents arrayed against time out of office. The scatterplots indicate that the public views Johnson in a much more favorable light today than in the earliest retrospective approval polls. His ratings of 49% and 48% in the 2010 and 2018 Gallup polls represent high points for Johnson. In contrast, Nixon's lowest ratings—at either 28% or 29%—have come in Gallup's three most recent polls.

It is easy to attribute Johnson's and Nixon's lower approval ratings, both retrospectively and during their terms, to public discontent regarding the Vietnam War. An oddity regarding the Vietnam War and presidential approval, however, is that annual fatalities among Americans declined during Nixon's presidency at numbers mirroring the annual increases during Johnson's presidency.¹⁰ Nixon's lower standing and decline in retrospective approval polls might in part stem from different perspectives of the two presidents' roles in the war. Johnson occupied the White House when large-scale American involvement in Vietnam began and American presence in Southeast Asia expanded but with popular support in the nation (Gillespie 2000). Despite the decrease in American casualties and an end to direct American engagement, the Nixon years were marked by declining public support and unpopular decisions that further fractured American opinion on the war: the excursion into Cambodia; the expanded campaign of bombing North Vietnam; the premature announcement of a peace agreement days before the 1972 election; and, ultimately, a cease-fire agreement that differed little from what was rejected by

10. Data are from the National Archives: <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics#date>.

Nixon at the onset of his presidency (Farrell 2017). Furthermore, the Watergate scandal and associated misdeeds by the president and members of his administration left a lasting impact on Nixon's legacy. A Gallup review of public opinion related to the Watergate scandal 25 years after Nixon left office showed 72% of Americans believing the president's actions were serious enough to warrant his resignation, up seven percentage points from the time when he resigned (Newport 1999). A majority of Americans—54%—considered the charges against Nixon more serious than the charges that resulted in Clinton's impeachment and trial in the Senate less than a year before the poll was taken. Certainly Johnson was no saint, and many abuses of the office during his presidency subsequently came to light. But there is little question that Nixon and the Watergate scandal have remained at the forefront of the American psyche and that this scandal continues to tarnish Nixon's reputation.

Discussion

Sterile terms such as “approve” or “disapprove” are commonplace among social science research. While providing focus and parsimony to projects aplenty, they threaten to sanitize the more visceral meaning underlying a respondent's answer choice. Inherently a question of retrospective approval or disapproval asks in abbreviated fashion, “Looking back, how do you think President _____ did in light of _____, _____, and _____?” Gallup implicitly asks respondents to fill those blanks with the factors the respondents think relevant, however many factors there might be. For some respondents, their economic fortune (or lack thereof) is no doubt important. For other respondents, a different factor dominates their assessments.

During the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton's campaign strategists posted a sign at the headquarters that read: “The economy, stupid!” (Germond and Witcover 1993). The purpose of the message—now often misquoted as “It's the economy, stupid!”—was to remind everyone involved with Clinton's pursuit of the White House that voters were most concerned about the economy and wanted candidates to address these concerns, rather than reliving the end of the Cold War or the successful military campaign in 1991 to liberate Kuwait after Iraq's occupation of its neighbor. This focus on the economy helped Clinton win the presidency. Similar attentiveness to voters' anxieties regarding the state of the economy contributed to the successful presidential bids of Reagan, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump in 1980, 2008, and 2016, respectively (Ceaser, Busch, and Pitney 2009; 2017; Germond and Witcover 1981).

Similarly, Americans' considerations of former presidents' job performance have a singular focus. The catchphrase for describing this focus might be, “It's the war, stupid!” Unquestionably, the public focuses on association with an unpopular war—especially association with the war in Vietnam—when evaluating former chief executives. Any president engaging in military action believes that national security interests are being advanced and that the action will be successful. The short-term effects of failure on presidential popularity vary, but certainly a president who does not succeed and becomes

mired in a long-term, unpopular engagement is punished in public opinion polls long after leaving office. The obvious question is why association with an unpopular war has such a devastating effect on retrospective approval while war and economic conditions have comparable effects on presidents' popular standing during their administrations.

News coverage of presidents and policies in real time varies by the topic, and the resulting saliency of an issue affects public assessments of the incumbent president (Cavari 2019; Krosnick and Kinder 1990; Ostrom et al. 2018). A similar dynamic of saliency might affect retrospective approval of presidents. Coverage of economic performance is fairly systematic with monthly reports on matters such as unemployment, job growth, and inflation and often fades once a president is out of office. In contrast, war coverage is episodic and, given the media's predilection to war coverage due to professional pressures such as ratings and prestige (Shinar 2013; Wolfsfeld 2004), results in attention given to both successes and failures. More important, attention to military conflict continues into the postpresidency years. Perceived losses matter most in the long run and, thus, the coverage of successes and failures does not balance out in retrospective public assessments. Adler (2003, 467) contends that while uses of military force "are apt to boost a president's public approval rating in the short term, the long-term gain derived from the act is difficult to assess and, in any case, may be negative or negligible." Groeling and Baum (2008) note that positive rally-around-the-flag effects rarely overcome the negative media coverage of the use of military force that has become commonplace in the U.S. media since the 1960s. "Dovish" coverage of the 1968 Tet Offensive in Vietnam is offered by Zaller and Chiu (1996, 385) as evidence of typical press behavior in times of "military setback," as journalists reported the attacks by North Vietnamese and Vietcong forces as representing "a failure of American policy." Our analysis does not treat military engagements that last for brief periods of time and are likely to produce rally-around-the-flag effects. But it is clear that scholars' assessments of the negative effects of war on presidents' reputations are on target. An electorate that has "rallied" appears to take a dim view of a president who loses the hill, and the electorate retains this view as time passes. Thus, with failures receiving disproportionate attention from the media, any public opinion toll a commander in chief experiences due to engagement in an unpopular war has a lasting impact upon the public's perceptions of that president, as demonstrated through research on a host of conflicts, from Vietnam to Iraq (Karol and Miguel 2007; Mueller 1971).

A factor in the up-and-down nature of presidential approval associated with war might be that the source material for media coverage of conflict comes from *inside* an administration. Bennett (1990) argues that press coverage of foreign policy events is "indexed" or linked to the range of views within any given presidential administration, particularly officials perceived as decision makers and key presidential advisors. Early stages of a conflict typically feature unified support of the president's policy from within the administration, but this unanimity dissipates as foreign engagements endure and perceptions of military successes and setbacks change (Gans 1979; Hallin 1986; Mermin 1999). After the president leaves office, memoirs of former administration officials and analyses utilizing archives from the administration often paint uncomplimentary portraits of the president and the president's choices regarding military and foreign policy. Publication of such treatises refreshes the public conscience and revives debate. Thus, critical media

coverage of unpopular war is not only contemporaneous to the conflict but occasionally resurfaces to the detriment of the former president viewed as responsible for a national setback.

Many factors influence how Americans regard their former presidents. Our analysis confirms that Americans remember the lows of administrations, as evidenced by the strong bivariate correlations between retrospective approval and approval rating during presidents' final years in office, lowest approval ratings, and final approval ratings. For presidents other than Nixon, the passage of time either heals wounds or allows people to put presidents' legacies into perspective as, *ceteris paribus*, retrospective approval ratings improve the longer they are out of office. That being said, while political economists have lamented competing conclusions within their literature (Erikson et al. 2000; Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier 2013), our most significant conclusion is that peace and prosperity equally affect presidents' mean term approval ratings. Entangling the nation in a military conflict that is unpopular is the foundation of retrospective presidential approval. Those concerned about legacy should look first and foremost to involvement in unpopular military conflict. Popular opinion looks dimly upon administrations engaging in military forays abroad that do not easily translate to a long-term understanding of "victory" to the American public.

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Appendix

Data Sources

Gallup Poll retrospective approval data:

- 1990: Gallup and Newport (1990).
- 1992, 1993, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2006: Jones (2006).
- 1994: Gallup Poll (1994).
- 1998: Moore (1998).
- 2010: Saad (2010).
- 2018: Jones (2018).

Gallup Poll historical data:

- Mean presidential approval rating for the president's term: <http://news.gallup.com/poll/116677/Presidential-Approval-Ratings-Gallup-Historical-Statistics-Trends.aspx>.
- Incumbent president's approval rating: <http://news.gallup.com/poll/trends.aspx>.

Economic data:

- Annual inflation rate: Economic Report of the President 2018 (Table B-10)
- Annual unemployment rate: Economic Report of the President 2017 (Table B-12) <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/ERP-2017/pdf/ERP-2017.pdf>.

Vietnam War casualties: <https://www.archives.gov/research/military/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics#date>.