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Matthew A. Baum: Soft News Goes to War

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CHAPTER ONE

War and Entertainment

It started with the Gulf War—the packaging of news, the graphics, the music, the classification of stories . . . Everybody benefited by saturation coverage. The more channels, the more a sedated public will respond to this. . . . If you can get an audience hooked, breathlessly awaiting every fresh disclosure with a recognizable cast of characters they can either love or hate, with a dramatic arc and a certain coming down to a deadline, you have a winner in terms of building audience.¹

—*Danny Schechter, former producer, CNN and ABC's 20/20*

ON AUGUST 20, 1998, just three days after President Clinton testified before a federal grand jury regarding his alleged affair with Monica Lewinsky, the United States launched a series of cruise missile strikes against six suspected terrorist sites in Afghanistan and Sudan. The Clinton administration justified the strikes as retaliation for terrorist attacks against the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania two weeks earlier, for which it blamed suspected terrorist mastermind Osama Bin Ladin.

Due both to its extraordinary timing and to widespread public concern over terrorism, the cruise missile attack captivated the nation. The strikes began at 1:30 P.M. EST; by that evening—long before the next morning's newspapers hit the stands—almost three-quarters of the public had heard about them.² In a survey conducted the next day, fully 79 percent of respondents claimed to have followed the story “very” or “fairly” closely.³ Indeed, according to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, public interest in this event ranks among the top 10 percent of all major news stories (through August 2001) since Pew began compiling its News Interest Index in 1986.

A great many people undoubtedly learned about the missile strikes from traditional television news programs. After all, on a typical evening, between 6 and 8 million households watch each of the major network news broadcasts. And over the next week, the three major networks' evening newscasts combined presented fully sixty-nine stories on the subject. Still others learned about the strikes from local TV news or cable news networks. Yet, unlike coverage of foreign policy events of decades past, traditional TV news programs and newspapers were not alone in reporting the story. In addition to these and other hard news outlets, a variety of entertainment-oriented, soft news programs also covered the missile strike story.⁴

On the evening of the missile strikes, such decidedly apolitical programs as

Entertainment Tonight, *Access Hollywood*, and *Extra! The Entertainment Magazine* (henceforth *Extra*), to name only a few, featured the attack as their lead story. The missile strike story also dominated the late-night talk shows, including *The Tonight Show*, *Politically Incorrect*, *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, and the Comedy Central Network's *Daily Show*. The next day's daytime talk shows (e.g., *The View*) also featured discussions about the events, as did that evening's entertainment newsmagazine shows. And far more viewers, in turn, regularly watch soft news programs than all of the all-news cable networks combined.⁵ Indeed, depending on which programs one counts as soft news outlets, nearly as many watch soft news shows as watch the network evening news. For instance, about 6 million, and sometimes even more, households typically tune in to *Entertainment Tonight*, while over 5 million watch a typical broadcast of *The Tonight Show*.⁶ This suggests that television viewers were nearly as likely to encounter the missile strike story on *Entertainment Tonight*, *The Tonight Show*, or a variety of other soft news shows, as on a network newscast.

Does it matter where people learned about the missile strikes? In fact, coverage by the major networks differed in potentially important ways from that of the soft news media. While the networks focused heavily on the tactics and strategy of the attacks, as well as on their likely ramifications for the fight against global terrorism, soft news coverage focused primarily on a single theme: the uncanny parallels between real-world events and a relatively obscure (until then) movie called *Wag the Dog*.

In the film, an incumbent president in the midst of a reelection campaign is accused of molesting a young girl in the White House. As media interest in the story begins to spike, and his poll numbers consequently begin to plummet, the president responds by hiring a mysterious political operative (played by Robert DeNiro) to devise a means of distracting the public's attention from the emerging sex scandal until after the election. DeNiro enlists the aid of a top Hollywood movie producer (played by Dustin Hoffman). Together, they devise a plan to "produce," in a studio, a phony war in Albania.⁷ Despite protestations by the Albanian government that there is no war, the media and public unquestioningly accept the manufactured war scenario, and the public dutifully rallies round the flag. The sex scandal is forgotten, and the president easily wins reelection.

Using Lexis-Nexis, I reviewed transcripts from twelve soft news programs.⁸ I found that in the week following the attacks, thirty-five out of forty-six soft news stories on the subject (or 76 percent) addressed the Wag-the-Dog theme, repeatedly raising the question of whether the president might have launched the missile strikes in order to distract the nation from the Lewinsky scandal. While stories about *Wag the Dog* were ubiquitous in the soft news media, traditional news programs were far less enamored with this conspiratorial aspect of the story. During that same period, the three network evening news programs, combined, mentioned *Wag the Dog* or Monica Lewinsky in only eleven of sixty-nine stories (or 16 percent) on the missile strikes.

In numerous opinion polls, upwards of 75 percent of the public expressed

support for the attack. In the same polls, the vast majority of Americans indicated they did not believe the strikes were merely a ploy to distract the nation's attention from the Lewinsky scandal. Yet, as many as 40 percent, including 25 percent of self-described Democrats, also indicated they *did* believe distracting the nation was *at least one of the considerations* motivating the president.⁹ And these suspicions appear to have been most widespread among the less-educated segments of the population, perhaps not coincidentally the primary consumers of soft news (Davis and Owen 1998; Pew Research Center 1996, 1998b, and 2000).¹⁰

One survey (*Star Tribune* 1998), conducted in the immediate aftermath of the attack, found that respondents with less than a twelfth-grade education were nearly twice as likely as their counterparts possessing a college or postgraduate degree (60 vs. 31 percent) to believe that the president's decision to order the missile strikes was influenced "a great deal" by his political problems stemming from the Lewinsky scandal.¹¹ Many of these people doubtless required no external prompting to recognize the parallels between real world events and the fictional events portrayed in *Wag the Dog*, nor to judge the president's motivations accordingly. Yet, in this instance, for at least some of those who did not draw such connections on their own, the soft news media may have done it for them.

The media and public responses to the Afghanistan-Sudan missile strikes illustrate a number of potentially important changes that have taken place over the past several decades in how the mass media cover major political stories, like foreign policy crises, and as a result, in how and what the public learns about such stories. This book is about such changes, and their consequences for public opinion and foreign policy.¹²

Prior to the 1980s, the public learned about politics, particularly foreign policy, primarily from newspapers or the nightly newscasts of the big three broadcast networks, or, moving back a bit further in time, from radio newscasts or meetings of civic organizations. Today far fewer Americans participate in socially oriented civic organizations (Putnam 2000), and political information is available across a far broader array of media outlets and formats, many of which bear only a superficial resemblance to traditional news venues. Indeed, the Afghanistan-Sudan case also suggests that given the mass media's—particularly television's—status as the primary, if not sole, source of political information for the vast majority of the American people, changes in mass media coverage of foreign policy are almost certain to affect how at least some segments of the public understand and evaluate the political world. Indeed, many politically inattentive Americans actively avoid politics and foreign policy, except when covered by their favorite soft news programs. And, as the Afghanistan-Sudan case further illustrates, such individuals may receive information in the soft news media that differs substantially, even dramatically, from that presented in more traditional news outlets.

Ultimately, a change in public perceptions of foreign policy may have important implications for public policy. Scholars have long pondered the barriers to

information and political participation confronting democratic citizens. The traditional scholarly consensus has held that the mass public is woefully ignorant about politics and foreign affairs (Converse 1964; Almond 1950; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), and hence, with rare exceptions, only relatively narrow segments of the public—the so-called attentive public or issue publics—pay attention to public policy or wield any meaningful influence on policy makers (Rosenau 1961; Key 1961; Cohen 1973; Graebner 1983). By, in effect, democratizing access to information about at least some political issues, soft news coverage of politics challenges this perspective, at least in part.

If a substantial portion of the public that would otherwise remain aloof from politics is able to learn about high-profile political issues, like foreign crises, from the soft news media, this may both increase the diversity (or heterogeneity) of public opinion (Krause 1997; Baum and Kernell 2001) and expand the size of the attentive public, at least in times of crisis. And research has shown that intense public scrutiny, when it arises, can influence policy makers, both in Congress and the White House (Ostrom and Job 1986; Bosso 1989; Powlick 1995; Baum 2000a; Rosenau 1961; Key 1961).

Moreover, as the Afghanistan-Sudan case implies, the *nature* of the political information people consume can influence the substance of the opinions they express (Zaller and Feldman 1992; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Key 1961). Because the information these new, transient members of the attentive public glean from soft news may differ significantly from that consumed by the traditionally attentive public, soft news coverage may potentially influence not only the extent (i.e., breadth) of public opinion regarding a given political issue, like a foreign crisis, but also its form (i.e., valence and diversity). Such changes, in turn, may influence public policy, both by affecting outcomes at the ballot box and by altering a president's calculus concerning the likelihood of sustaining public support for his policy initiatives.

Along these lines, it is important to bear in mind that even if an issue, such as the Afghanistan-Sudan cruise missile attack, is not intrinsically salient to an individual or she does not truly understand it, if the issue penetrates her consciousness to even a limited degree, it may nonetheless influence her opinions or attitudes, or even her political behavior. Such influence may be either direct, as a response to the information received and the issue to which it pertains, or perhaps indirect, through the information's relationship to other issues or values that the individual *does* consider personally important. In the former case, an individual may develop an opinion regarding an issue about which she had not previously given much thought. Even if this opinion is not deeply held and the issue is not particularly important to the individual, it may still have public policy ramifications if a political entrepreneur, like a journalist or politician, *primes* the issue (brings it to the forefront of attention) during an election period (Miller and Krosnick 1996; Iyengar 1990, 1993; Iyengar and Kinder 1987). For instance, an individual who knows and cares little about foreign policy, and paid only limited attention to the U.S. intervention and withdrawal from Somalia, may nonetheless at election time factor the president's performance

with respect to Somalia into her overall evaluation of the president's competence if a political entrepreneur reminds her of the apparent failure of the president's Somalia policy.

In the latter case, some aspect of an issue with which an individual is largely uninterested may also be linked, by a political entrepreneur, to another issue or value about which she cares more deeply. This process is known as *framing* (Iyengar 1991; Druckman 2001a, 2001b; Entman 1991, 1993; Khaneman and Tversky 1984; and many others). For instance, an individual may be untroubled by an illicit presidential affair with a White House intern, yet may hold strong feelings about the ethical and legal significance of lying under oath to cover up the affair. Such an individual may be attentive to the affair story because of its salacious nature. Yet, a political entrepreneur may be able to exploit that attentiveness by refocusing the individual's attention from the salacious details of the affair—which may have little political meaning for the individual—and toward the postaffair coverup. Hence, an individual's opinion about an issue may influence her attitudes or behavior, even if she does not consider it intrinsically important.

Indeed, the Afghanistan-Sudan attack and its aftermath highlight a number of intriguing questions. To what extent and under what circumstances do entertainment programs convey news about serious political issues? What types of public affairs topics appeal to such programs? How and why does the content of such coverage differ from that found in traditional news sources? Who is likely to be watching when an entertainment-oriented program covers a political story, and why? Has soft news coverage systematically influenced public opinion regarding select political issues, including foreign policy crises, in meaningful ways? Finally, how might such changes affect public policy outcomes? These are the primary questions I address in this book.

WATER-COOLER EVENTS AND THE SOFT NEWS MEDIA

Many political issues—including presidential policy initiatives, local or state elections, economic shocks, major debates in Congress, and the like—are covered at length by the news media and, hence, assume a relatively high public profile, at least for some period of time. Yet, a few issues, such as the Afghanistan-Sudan cruise missile strikes, defy comparison to most other political stories. These are issues, like the Monica Lewinsky scandal, the Persian Gulf War, and the post-9/11 war in Afghanistan, that occasionally transcend normal political discourse to become media “events.” Throughout the book, I refer to such issues as “water-cooler events,” meaning that they are the topics of spontaneous conversations around the water coolers at workplaces across the nation.

I argue that the rise of a new class of entertainment-oriented, quasi-news and information programs, which I refer to collectively as the *soft news media* has had the unintended effect of increasing the likelihood that, like the Afghanistan-Sudan missile strikes, a given foreign policy crisis will become a water-cooler

event. They have done so by attracting greater public attentiveness to foreign crises than that achieved by comparable crises in previous decades, particularly among segments of the population not typically interested in politics or foreign policy. Recall that in the Afghanistan-Sudan case, many Americans appear likely to have learned about the cruise missile strikes not from network newscasts, but from soft news programs. And the demographics of the soft news media suggest that this latter group is disproportionately composed of individuals who are relatively uninterested in politics or foreign affairs (Davis and Owen 1998).

Though the term *soft news* is widely employed by media scholars (e.g., Hamilton 2003; Patterson 2000; Kalb 1998a; Scott and Gobetz 1992), no commonly accepted definition exists. Patterson (2000, 3) observes that soft news has been defined, variously, as a residual category for all news that is not “hard,” as a particular vocabulary in presenting the news (e.g., more personal and familiar, and less distant or institutional), or as a set of story characteristics, including the absence of a public policy component, a sensationalized presentation, human-interest themes, and an emphasis on dramatic subject matter, like crime and disaster. Though admittedly imprecise, for my purposes, the final definition—based on the aforementioned story characteristics—appears most useful for distinguishing the soft news media from traditional news outlets.

While virtually all news- or information-oriented media present at least *some* stories possessing some or all of the above characteristics, only a subset focus *primarily* on such material, largely (though not necessarily entirely) to the exclusion of traditional—local, national, or international—political or public policy topics and themes. And it is these latter media outlets with which I am concerned. Clearly, in at least some instances, the difference between soft and hard news is one of *degree* rather than *kind*. And a few media outlets (e.g., local TV news, network TV newsmagazines) are not easily categorized as belonging unambiguously in either category.¹³ Still, with a few notable exceptions, the differences are fairly stark.

By my definition, a diverse array of program formats qualify as soft news outlets, ranging from network newsmagazine shows to cable and syndicated entertainment newsmagazine shows, to tabloid newsmagazine shows, to daytime and late-night talk shows. These various program formats, along with their core audiences, obviously differ in many important respects. Yet, they share in common three factors that are central to my investigation. First, as we shall see, they all focus *primarily* on soft news topics and themes. Second, their audiences tend to be relatively uninterested in politics (Hamilton 2003; Pew Research Center 1996, 1998b, 2000). And third, as we shall also see, their audiences, unlike those of most traditional news outlets, tune in with the *primary* goal of being entertained, rather than enlightened (Pew Research Center 1996, 1998b, 2000; Prior 2003).

While my predominant focus is on television, this definition also encompasses additional media outlets, including *some* talk radio programs, as well as supermarket tabloid newspapers and a wide variety of specialty magazines. I

nevertheless focus primarily on television because, as noted by Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992, 114), television “can break the attention barrier for issues of low salience. . . . Newspapers and magazines are better sources for new information when the audience is already motivated to pay attention” (see also Patterson 1980).

The soft news media increase the likelihood that a given issue will become a water-cooler event by increasing many individuals’ exposure to information about select high-profile political issues, including foreign policy crises, that involve scandal, violence, heroism, or other forms of sensational human drama. And, as shall become apparent in subsequent chapters, it does so *without* necessarily increasing the public’s overall appetite for foreign policy or politics in general. Indeed, the Afghanistan-Sudan missile strikes—a dramatic use of military force in the midst of a presidential sex scandal—involved many of the previously described elements, each of which was effectively exploited by the soft news media.

To explain this phenomenon, I develop an *incidental by-product* model of information consumption (e.g., Popkin 1994), based on a standard expected utility model (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). I assume that individuals attempt to derive as much benefit from the information they consume as they are able, given the finite volume of information they can consume, as well as the inherent trade-off between consuming a given piece of information and doing other things within a given time period. Given this assumption, the model becomes a simple cost-benefit decision rule (to be delineated in the next chapter).

In employing an expected utility model, I necessarily incorporate a variant of the rational-actor assumption in my argument. Political scientists, psychologists, economists, communication scholars, and others continue to debate the appropriateness of this assumption, at least in its stronger forms (e.g., Green and Shapiro 1994; Munck 2001). Yet it is important to bear in mind that my use of the rationality assumption is far more modest than that typically debated in the literature. In fact, while expected utility jargon gives the appearance of presuming precision, I do not assume that individuals are cunning, perfectly informed utility maximizers. Rather, all I assume is that people have goals (which may be as basic as seeking to be entertained) and act to achieve their goals as best they can, given their circumstances. In the context of media consumption, I assume only that people know what they like and weigh the pros and cons of consuming a given media product on the basis of how it stacks up against what they like. Hence, for purposes of this book, I remain agnostic concerning the validity or appropriateness of stronger variants of rational-choice theory.

In short, I argue that the public has grown increasingly attentive to foreign crises in recent years, relative to comparable events in prior decades, and that this trend is attributable, at least in significant part, to a previously underappreciated, yet important, characteristic of such events. That is, like celebrity murder trials and sex scandals, foreign crises are easily framed as compelling human dramas. Hence, such events are relatively more likely than most political issues to become water-cooler events. I attribute this evolution primarily to

market-driven efforts by television broadcasters (and, to a lesser extent, other media outlets) to make certain types of news appealing to viewers who are uninterested in politics. In other words, broadcasters have sought to reduce the perceived costs for many individuals of attending to select varieties of news and information, including, but not limited to, foreign crises. By altering the cost-benefit calculus for typical individuals, the rise of the soft news media has, without necessarily increasing the public's overall appetite for political news, nonetheless increased the likelihood that typical individuals will attend to *select* high-profile political issues, primarily those possessing characteristics—such as violence, heroism, scandal, a readily-identifiable villain, and the like—amenable to framing as dramatic human interest stories.

THE MEDIA'S EVOLVING INFLUENCE ON PUBLIC OPINION REGARDING FOREIGN POLICY

For many decades, social psychologists and sociologists believed the media had only “minimal effects” on public opinion and behavior (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948; Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield 1949; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; Campbell et al. 1960). Contemporary scholars have challenged this perspective, finding that the media does influence public opinion in important ways—through priming, framing and agenda setting (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1990, 1993; Miller and Krosnick 1996; Bartels 1993; and others)

Similarly, while acknowledging widespread public ignorance about politics in general, and foreign policy in particular (Almond 1950; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Rielly 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Sobel 2001), scholars have increasingly come to view the public as rational, capable of employing informational shortcuts to make reasoned judgments based on limited factual knowledge (Page and Shapiro 1993; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987; Popkin 1994; Sniderman 1993; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). Additional research (Jentleson 1992; Oneal, Lian, and Joyner 1996) has shown that, despite its relative ignorance about foreign policy, the public, by relying on heuristic cues, is able to develop “pretty prudent” opinions about it.

Nonetheless, while the predominant views concerning the media and the public have undergone substantial revision, the vast majority of the scholarly literature assumes that, in spite of a well-documented “information revolution” in the mass media, the relationship between the media and the public has remained static throughout the post–World War II era. And, indeed, previous studies (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996) have found that the mass public, at least in terms of factual political knowledge, has remained largely unchanged over the past half-century. This implies that changes in the media, however dramatic, have largely failed to affect the public's awareness or understanding of politics. Yet the absence of change in factual knowledge does not necessarily imply a comparable stasis in public *awareness* or *perceptions* of politics and foreign

policy. And no theory adequately addresses whether or how changes in the mass media might in fact alter public perceptions of politics in general or foreign policy in particular.

In this book, I challenge the conventional wisdom of an unchanging relationship between the media and the public. I argue that past empirical findings suggesting that changes in the mass media have not affected the public's knowledge about politics and foreign policy have failed to capture meaningful changes in this relationship, and, as a result, in public opinion regarding foreign policy. I shall demonstrate that the media's influence on public opinion has evolved in the post-World War II era, resulting in an increase in the likelihood that the public will be *attentive* to certain high-profile political issues—notably among them foreign policy crises involving the actual or potential use of military force. I shall further demonstrate that such changes hold important implications for the *substance* of public opinion, again, particularly with regard to foreign policy and, ultimately, for public policy outcomes.

WHY FOCUS ON FOREIGN POLICY CRISES?

The conditions described in this study are general, and so not unique to foreign policy. Indeed, my argument also applies to a fairly narrow range of domestic political issues. For instance, the Monica Lewinsky scandal represents perhaps the quintessential non-foreign-policy illustration of a political story receiving intensive coverage by the soft news media. And the scandal also perfectly demonstrates my incidental by-product model in action. During the first week of the scandal, the major networks broadcast more stories about the scandal than about Princess Diana in the week following her death (J. Scott 1998). Yet, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that in the week following the first reports of the president's affair with a White House intern, ratings for the nightly network news broadcasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC increased hardly at all, by only about 6 percent. This compares to *dramatic* increases in ratings—in some instances upwards of 60–70 percent, for a variety of soft news programs (Lowry 1998). Indeed, in the first week following the breaking of the Lewinsky story, tabloid newsmagazine programs like *Hard Copy* and *Inside Edition* accounted for roughly one-third of all television coverage of the scandal (Lowry 1998).

Additionally, while the soft news media have traditionally ignored most traditional political issues, including electoral politics (for reasons addressed in chapter 2), in 2000 this changed, as appearances by presidential candidates on predominantly entertainment-oriented television programs emerged as a mainstream political strategy. And, in the aftermath of the election, the ballot-counting controversy in Florida received intensive coverage by the soft news media. I discuss this development in greater detail in the concluding chapter.

Given that the soft news media may engage in “feeding frenzies” on many kinds of issues, and seem increasingly disposed to do so, why focus on foreign policy? The answer, in short, is that while my argument has broad implications,

foreign policy is the area of political news coverage most significantly and consistently affected by the soft news media, and the *only* such news area broad enough to sustain systematic over-time analyses. For instance, major presidential scandals—to say nothing of presidential *sex* scandals—are exceedingly rare.¹⁴ And the soft news media discovered foreign crises long before their recent focus on presidential politics. Foreign policy therefore represents the best available domain for understanding the more general changes in media (particularly television) treatment of news and their effects on public opinion. Hence, while I freely illustrate the applicability of my argument to other domains whenever the opportunity arises, I focus primarily on foreign policy, particularly foreign military crises.¹⁵

In fact, as we shall see, foreign crises have consistently proven more appealing to the soft news media, and hence more likely to become water-cooler events, than have most other political issues. There are several reasons for this. First, foreign crises are more likely than most political issues to be viewed by the media, elites, and the public as being of exceptional importance and thereby to transcend traditional partisan boundaries. It is this combination of high importance and (relative) nonpartisanship that has led to such issues being labeled “high politics” by the popular press. The broad acceptance of this notion is evident in the oft-cited cliché that politics “stops at the water’s edge.”¹⁶ As a result, public interest in foreign crises is less likely than most other political issues to be affected by the heightened public cynicism in recent years regarding partisan politics (Dionne 1991; Putnam 1995).

Second, beyond celebrity murder trials or sex scandals, few issues are as likely to focus the media’s, and by extension the public’s, attention as the prospect of large-scale violence and the potential deaths of large numbers of Americans at the hands of a clearly identifiable villain. Yet Americans know and care less about foreign than domestic affairs (Sobel 2001, 1989; Kegley and Wittkopf 1996; Rielly 1995; Graber 1984, 1997). Moreover, in the post-Cold War era, in the absence of a perceived direct threat to the nation’s survival, the public has increasingly tuned out from foreign affairs (e.g., Holsti 1996; Moisy 1997). This trend has by and large persisted even in the aftermath of 9/11 (Kurtz 2002). Not coincidentally, foreign affairs coverage has also steadily declined since the end of the Cold War (Hoge 1997; Moisy 1997; *Media Monitor* 2000; Shaw 2001).¹⁷ These trends, combined with the fact that most noncrisis foreign news is typically ignored entirely by the soft news media, make a trend toward *increased* attentiveness to foreign crises—both pre- and post-9/11—particularly striking, as well as counterintuitive.

WHAT IS ATTENTIVENESS?

Defining and measuring attention has proven a highly elusive endeavor. Writing nearly a century ago, Edward B. Titchener (1908) observed:

The discovery of attention didn't result in any immediate triumph of experimental method. It was something like the discovery of a hornet's nest: The first touch brought out a whole swarm of insistent problems. . . . The discovery of a reliable measure of attention would appear to be one of the most important problems that await solution by the experimental psychology of the future.¹⁸

Reflecting on Titchener's observation over seventy year later, Kinchla (1980, 214, emphases in original) notes that little changed in the ensuing decades. He thus comments: "Unfortunately, the hornets Titchener referred to are still on the wing. There still is not any widely accepted definition of, or method of measuring, *attention*." Kinchla goes on to argue that attention "should *not* be thought of as a single entity. It seems more useful to assume that a variety of cognitive mechanisms mediate selectivity in information processing." Indeed, according to Wickens (1980, 239), attention is not an objective *thing*. Rather, it is an "inferred construct," used to describe a relationship between the relative costs in performance when multiple tasks are undertaken simultaneously (for a similar perspective, see Kahneman 1973).

With this cautionary note firmly in mind, I briefly enter the hornet's nest; absent reasonably precise definitions of my key variables, both the veracity of the theory and validity of the empirical evidence would be justifiably suspect. At the same time, though partly grounded in social and cognitive psychology, this book is about politics. More precisely, the purpose of this book is to improve our understanding of the influence of one element of the mass media on the political process, through its effects on public opinion. In order to maintain this focus, some compromises are necessary. A large literature in experimental psychology is devoted to defining and measuring attention. My purpose is not to challenge, nor even necessarily to contribute to, this literature. Indeed, as I discuss below, many of the theories concerning attention remain highly controversial, and this book will do little to resolve these debates. Instead, I draw on this literature in the hopes of offering sufficiently precise definitions and operationalizations to allow the reader to both understand the distinctions drawn in the theory and to evaluate the empirical evidence brought to bear in supporting it.

Rather than developing a novel nomenclature for my theory, I rely upon commonly employed, and hence more familiar, terminology. Of course, any widely used technical jargon necessarily carries with it the baggage of its previous usage. My project is particularly plagued by such difficulties. As the above quotations suggest, the extant literature includes numerous, sometimes contradictory, definitions and interpretations of the phenomena I am addressing. In an effort to avoid the pitfalls of imprecise terminology, I offer the following, admittedly imperfect, definition for my primary dependent variable, *attentiveness*: *to be cognizant of an object, and selectively process information about it*. Following Kinchla (1980, 214), I define *selective* as: "the degree to which one may choose to process specific sources of information and ignore others."

Hence, by this definition, attention derives its meaning in the context of a trade-off between multiple possible information sources (Kinchla 1980; Wickens 1980; Navon and Gopher 1980). In more common parlance, this means simply that directing one's focus more toward one object requires focusing less on some other object or objects. Operationally, by my working definition, to be attentive to something, such as a foreign policy crisis, implies that, at a minimum, in addition to being exposed to it and processing sufficient information to be cognizant that it exists, an individual must watch, listen to, or read (i.e., process) *some* additional information about it. Greater attentiveness, in turn, simply implies processing more information.

This brief discussion clearly does not do justice to the voluminous literature on attention. Still, my definition of *attentiveness* comes into somewhat clearer focus when, for instance, one compares and contrasts it with other, conceptually similar, psychological constructs, such as *cognizance* and *saliency*. In the interest of maintaining a focus on the principal arguments presented in the book, however, I defer further explication of the meaning of attentiveness to the appendix to this chapter, where I refer the interested reader.

PLAN OF THE BOOK

The book proceeds as follows. In chapter 2, I delineate my theory of how the relationship between the media and the public has evolved over the past half-century. I begin by investigating the typical individual's *expected benefit* from information about politics. I consider how people in their daily lives go about determining which types and quantities of information warrant their attention, and conclude that, for most people, the expected benefit from political information has remained largely unchanged over the past half-century.

Given largely constant expected benefits, I turn my focus to the *expected costs* of consuming political information. Here I explicate several processes that may reduce the expected costs for typical individuals of attending to information about foreign crises. In doing so, I summarize the evolution of television news in the post-World War II era and the resulting changes in television coverage of politics. A combination of technological, economic, and regulatory changes have resulted in what might best be termed a "direct marketing" revolution in political coverage on television. The net effect has been to make certain types of political information extremely cheap.

Leading the way in this media "revolution" are a wide variety of soft news outlets, which have proliferated dramatically over the past two decades. Many soft news programs, to varying degrees, *look* like traditional newscasts, yet offer viewers very different types of information. Some soft news outlets feature stories about celebrities; others focus on crime or various forms of sensational human drama. While they usually steer clear of politics, when dramatic political events occur, like military conflicts, such programs all cover them, albeit, as we shall see, differently so from the traditional news media. Hence, in

recent years, broadcasters have actually captured a larger number of viewers who will now watch television programs that occasionally present information about politics, including foreign crises, even if they are not particularly interested in politics or foreign policy. The seemingly paradoxical effect is that even though fewer Americans express an interest in foreign affairs in the post-Cold War era—even after 9/11—a wider spectrum of the American public is now attentive to specific international events, or crises, than ever before.

In chapter 3, I turn to a series of content analysis investigations, comparing the contemporary mass media with that of the 1950s and 1960s, as well as comparing the *manner* in which the soft and hard news media cover foreign policy crises. I show that in recent years, whenever the United States deploys or employs military force abroad, soft news outlets routinely cover the story, frequently at some length. Yet they do so in very different ways from those of traditional news outlets. I also compare the breadth and depth of soft and hard news coverage of a series of foreign crises since the 1960s, focusing upon comparisons of several major foreign policy crises that took place in the 1960s with comparable events that took place in the 1990s.

Chapter 4 presents a series of statistical investigations into the relationship between soft news consumption and public attentiveness to a series of high-profile foreign crisis issues. Here I seek to determine if, *ceteris paribus*, individuals who consume soft news are systematically more attentive to foreign crises than are their counterparts who do not. I also investigate whether any such patterns are uniform, across the public, or whether the relationship between exposure to soft news and attentiveness varies across different segments of the population. I find that soft news coverage of foreign crises matters primarily for politically inattentive individuals, who might otherwise avoid *any* exposure to news about foreign policy.

In chapter 5, I shift my focus from the correlates of attentiveness to specific foreign crises, to long-term trends in public opinion regarding foreign policy crises. I consider whether the relationships identified in chapter 4, combined with the over-time increases in soft news coverage of foreign crises identified in chapter 3, can account, at least in part, for trends in public attentiveness to a variety of U.S. military interventions and other related foreign policy engagements from the 1950s through the 1990s.

Demonstrating a causal link in a time-series context is extremely difficult under the best of circumstances. It is rarely possible to account for all potentially competing explanations for virtually any trend one might discover. My investigations are no exception. In fact, I am particularly plagued by a relative scarcity of data appropriate for tracing trends in public attentiveness to foreign crises, and by the obvious and stark differences in the events I seek to compare—including myriad differences in the economic, political, and social circumstances surrounding such events across time.

Nevertheless, in this chapter I attempt to make the most of a far-less-than-ideal situation by compiling as much circumstantial evidence as I have been able to obtain, from a variety of sources and regarding a wide range of foreign

crisis issues. For instance, I begin by comparing public attentiveness to the Korean, Vietnam, and Persian Gulf Wars. This comparison exemplifies the difficulties noted above. These wars differed profoundly in countless ways, including both the conduct of the conflicts themselves, and the social and political contexts within which they took place. Hence, virtually any effort to draw comparisons across the three wars is vulnerable to the criticism that it is impossible to rule out any number of alternative explanations for *whatever* patterns I find.

My response to this general critique is not to deny the uniqueness of each war, nor to assert that they are in many respects comparable, but instead to attempt to draw extremely limited comparisons, involving circumstances that appear analogous in the most critical respects. For instance, in several instances, in comparing the Vietnam and Persian Gulf Wars, I concentrate on the earliest years of Vietnam, before it became unpopular, and when U.S. troop deployments and casualty rates were similar to those experienced during the Gulf War. My goal with this and subsequent analyses in this chapter is to build as convincing a circumstantial case as possible by demonstrating that my proposed explanation(s) for the trends I identify is more plausible than most other obvious alternatives. While none of the investigations in this chapter produces anything approaching a “smoking gun” (definitive evidence of a causal relationship), my hope is that, viewed in tandem, they add up to a convincing circumstantial case in support of my causal argument.

In chapter 6, I shift my focus to an in-depth case study of one widely studied manifestation of public opinion regarding foreign policy: the “rally-round-the-flag” phenomenon (Mueller 1970, 1973; Brody and Shapiro 1991; Brody 1991; Baum 2002a; and many others). This is the tendency of the public to rally behind presidents—manifested as short-term spikes in their job approval ratings—immediately following sudden, high-profile foreign policy events. I find that the changing media environment over the past several decades, and resulting changes in public perceptions of foreign policy, appear to have potentially consequential implications for the rally phenomenon. Specifically, I show that more Americans joined opinion rallies in the 1980s and 1990s than did so in the 1950s and 1960s. And those more likely to rally now than in the past are the very citizens most dependent on soft news outlets for information about a foreign crisis.

Next, in chapter 7, I consider an additional implication of my theory for public opinion regarding foreign policy. Specifically, I argue that due to the *nature* of soft news coverage of foreign crises, politically inattentive individuals who consume soft news are likely to be more skeptical of U.S. foreign policy—particularly when it involves multilateral engagements—as compared to their counterparts who either do not consume soft news or are more politically engaged. And, in fact, my various statistical investigations in this chapter all point in a single direction, toward an *inverse* relationship, primarily among politically inattentive or relatively uneducated Americans, between soft news consumption and support for a proactive or internationalist U.S. foreign policy.

Finally, in chapter 8, I consider the role of the Internet, a topic I largely

ignore—or at most treat as a control variable—throughout the book. I then consider a variety of broader implications of my findings for public opinion and for U.S. politics and foreign policy. In doing so, I broaden my focal lens beyond foreign policy, in order to consider the effects of soft news on high-profile domestic political issues, including the 2000 presidential election and the Monica Lewinsky scandal. Many readers will not be surprised to learn that soft news coverage of the Lewinsky scandal influenced public opinion. Yet, perhaps a bit more surprisingly, I find that the soft news media also influenced public opinion regarding the 2000 election. I also present evidence that not only does exposure to soft news influence *attentiveness* to particular foreign crises, but it can also enhance viewers' factual knowledge about them. I then discuss the possibility that because enhanced public scrutiny raises the political risks associated with policy failure, presidential crisis decision making may be influenced in important ways—manifested through increasingly risk-averse policy choices—by enhanced public attentiveness to their overseas activities. I conclude by offering conjectures concerning a few of the many possible implications of the soft news revolution for America's democracy.

APPENDIX: DEFINING “ATTENTIVENESS”

There is substantial debate in the experimental psychology literature concerning whether individuals possess a single overarching “pool” of attention resources or multiple, more task-specific attention resources. A primary distinction between these two perspectives concerns the relative trade-offs required to process a given piece of information, or to pay attention to something. If individuals possess a single, finite resource pool, which is accessed whenever an individual processes a piece of information, then paying attention to one thing necessarily detracts from one's ability to pay attention to something else. In other words, performance suffers when individuals attempt to undertake more than one attention task at the same time. The extent to which performance suffers depends on how much a given attention task draws down one's resource pool. This, in turn, varies with the difficulty of the task. Hence, the trade-off required to perform multiple simple tasks is smaller than that required to undertake multiple difficult or complex tasks.

If, in contrast, individuals possess multiple resource pools, which are oriented toward different types of tasks, then drawing from one resource pool may or may not degrade one's ability to perform a second, simultaneous attention task. If the two tasks draw from different pools, then the individual may suffer no performance degradation at all. In this case, there would be no trade-off. (Of course, if the two attention tasks draw from a common resource pool, then the trade-off returns.) Researchers have found evidence supporting both perspectives. For a review of the arguments and evidence on both sides of this debate, see Kinchla 1980; Wickens 1980; and Khaneman 1973.

As we shall see in the next chapter, my theory assumes that there are indeed attention trade-offs. It does not, however, require that such trade-offs be universal; merely that under normal circumstances, individuals do face some trade-offs in allocating their finite attention resources. This view appears broadly consistent with both theoretical perspectives, neither of which deny the existence of attention trade-offs under many, if not all, circumstances. Indeed, the multiple resource hypothesis accepts that trade-offs are necessary when an individual undertakes multiple tasks that are likely to draw on a common resource pool. One example of this might be watching television and reading, both of which depend on visual information processing.

Regardless of one's view with respect to the aforementioned debate, it is important to distinguish my definition of attentiveness from other similar, yet conceptually distinct, psychological constructs. As I have defined it, attentiveness occupies a conceptual middle ground between two widely employed constructs borrowed from social psychology: *cognizance* and *saliency*. To be cognizant of an issue means simply to know that it exists, and nothing more. After all, an individual must know an issue exists before she can decide whether to attend to it. By itself, however, cognizance seems unlikely to have meaningful behavioral consequences. If an individual is aware that an issue exists, yet neither cares about nor follows it, then it seems relatively unlikely that the issue will influence her political attitudes or behavior (Campbell et al. 1960). Hence, *cognizance*, by itself, appears to represent a less intensive, and less purposive, form of interaction with an object than does attentiveness.

Saliency, in contrast, carries an implication of personal importance or urgency (Smith, Bruner, and White 1956, 35), which, relative to attentiveness, implies a *more* purposive and intensive interaction with an object. It also implies intrinsic interest. As will hopefully become clear in chapter 2, my incidental by-product model holds that individuals are sometimes willing to attend to information about an issue, even if they are *not* actively seeking it (i.e., they are not intrinsically *interested*). This, in turn, becomes more likely as the information or performance trade-off (i.e., the *selectivity*) required to be attentive to a given object declines.

The distinction between attentiveness and saliency, or interest (for my purposes, *interest* and *saliency* are essentially synonymous) requires further clarification. It seems less than obvious that an individual could be attentive to an issue with which he or she is entirely uninterested. Nonetheless, *attentiveness* and *saliency* are not synonymous. An individual might pay attention to information about an issue, say a war, not because she is interested in or cares about the war, its implications, or its outcome. Rather, it may simply be the case that the *presentation* of the war in the media is emotionally exciting (i.e., entertaining) or the person discussing the war on the radio or television might be intrinsically interesting to the individual (e.g., a celebrity). Hence, an individual may pay attention to information about the war, not because she is interested in the war itself, but rather because she is interested either in being entertained or in listening to the person presenting the information. Hence, saliency and atten-

tiveness, though certainly related, are not equivalent. An individual can be attentive to an object without being interested in it.

To further clarify the distinctions between cognizance, attentiveness, and salience, I briefly consider the propensity of individuals to manifest opinions about a given object at each level of interaction with the object. While an individual must become aware of an object before attending to it, cognizance, by itself, may be insufficient for an individual to form an opinion about the object. To form an opinion, an individual must pay attention to some information about the object beyond mere recognition of its existence. Yet one can certainly pay enough attention to form an opinion without truly *understanding* the object or determining that it is particularly important. And, as noted, *salience* implies personal importance. So, for instance, though attentiveness does not necessarily require one to have an opinion, if one is attentive to an object, one is more likely to have an opinion about it than if one is merely cognizant that it exists. Such an opinion may not, however, be particularly important to an individual. Salience, in turn, requires that any opinion about the object be of some personal importance.

Of course, even a personally important, or salient, opinion may not be accurate. Knowledge or understanding requires that any such opinion be both contextually and factually accurate. Hence, there is an important distinction between *knowing* about (or understanding) an issue and *thinking* that one knows about (or understands) an issue. Indeed, an individual may spend many hours watching news programs about a given issue on television, yet retain primarily false, or perhaps technically accurate but tangential, information about it. While most observers would agree that such an individual is *attentive* to the issue, few would equate this with possessing knowledge or understanding.

It is also important to point out that the single dimension upon which I have placed these several constructs is itself a construct, and a rough one at that. It seems unlikely that an individual will attend to sufficient information about an issue to acquire true understanding unless that issue is at least somewhat salient to her, for whatever reason. Yet salience (or interest) and knowledge (or understanding) are clearly not linear quantities that rise and fall in tandem with one another. More salience does not necessarily lead, monotonically, to greater knowledge. We may have a better understanding about an issue that is only somewhat salient to us than about another issue that is highly salient. Numerous factors, such as the accessibility of information or its complexity, intervene between salience and knowledge. Nevertheless, it remains unlikely that an individual will pay sufficient attention to acquire true understanding of an issue unless he or she is at least *somewhat* interested in it. Hence, for purposes of this book, I treat attentiveness as lying somewhere between cognizance or awareness, on the one hand, and salience or personal importance, on the other.