The Use of Humanitarian Rhetoric to Avert Audience Costs

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Introduction

This project seeks to analyze credible threats made by incumbent presidents, as well as the language utilized to make said threat, in the interest of understanding how reliance on humanitarian rhetoric to justify foreign intervention may impact domestic audience costs. Aligning with the theories of Kertzer and Brutger, this piece recognizes the existence of both the traditional audience cost and a belligerence cost, which holds, in short, that incumbent leaders may be penalized not only for political inconsistency, but for "making a threat in the first place."[1] Central to this study is the research question: '*Can the belligerence cost be countered by claims to intervene in the interest of protecting human rights or the spread of democracy?'*

In the interest of answering the aforementioned research question, this project will engage in qualitative analysis with special attention to the cases of El Salvador and Nicaragua, two countries embroiled in civil conflict during the Reagan administration. Apparent between these two cases is a shift in the rhetoric surrounding the United States' involvement in these Central-American crises; what was at first a hawkish detestment of rising leftist leaders in each nation soon became a morally-charged crusade against the violation of human rights to freedom and democracy, . Several factors are to be considered in the analysis of these cases, including the political composition of the incumbent's constituency, the extent of the domestic audience's interest in the El Salvadoran and Nicaraguan conflicts, and the American public's perceived role of the United States in the global political sphere. Collectively, these measures indicate the domestic audience's interests and perceptions of these foreign policies, and thus may indicate the audience costs associated with them. With insight gained from existing literature, it is argued that due to the plethora of potential factors which shape potential audience costs, the balance between the power of humanitarian rhetoric and the audience costs incurred by incumbents when making a threat is to be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Literature Review

The literature considered for this study provides valuable insight into the practicality of audience costs as a theory, and engages in analysis of potential factors contributing to the behavior of incumbent presidents, as well as their interactions with domestic populations. It is in James Fearon's *Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes* that the concept of audience costs is first introduced; indeed, traditional audience cost theory sought to highlight the mutually-influential relationship between public opinion and an incumbent leader's decision-making process and behavior in the realm of foreign policy. In essence, Fearon's theory suggests that misalignment between a leader's words and actions, particularly after the public issuance of a threat, generates an "audience cost." This expense, incurred by the incumbent leader in the form of a potential shift in political support, is rooted in the domestic audience's concerns with "whether the leadership is successful or unsuccessful at foreign policy" as well as their country's reputation in the global political sphere.[2] Importantly, it is also

[1] Joshua D. Kertzer and Ryan Brutger, "Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience Back into Audience Cost Theory," *American Journal of Political Science,* Vol. 60, No. 1, (January 2016): 234**, 10.1111/ajps.12201**

[2] Fearon, "Domestic Political Audiences," 581.

emphasized that inconsistent behavior by an incumbent leader or the making of concessions during international disputes are understood as compromising a country's international reputation relative to values such as respect, strength, and honor.

Fearon's work has opened the door to a new branch of policy-centered discourse, and thus made way for both critique of his theory and the crafting of more modern conceptualizations of audience costs. Among the main criticisms of Fearon's audience cost theory is that the public's concern for inconsistent behavior from incumbent leaders may be "overestimated;" to some, "traditional audience cost models" are too quick to "assume the public cares about consistency rather than the public outcome itself."[3] Moreover, a number of experimental studies attest to the ideological rigidity of traditional audience cost theory, contending that it is "impervious to the types of individual differences that routinely play an important role in public opinion about foreign policy more generally."[4] This paper seeks to expand on this work by further elaborating on the importance of context to the true political expense associated with varying forms of audience costs.

Taking the aforementioned criticisms of Fearon's theory into account, Kertzer and Brutger's re-conceptualization of audience costs, detailed in their work *Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience Back into Audience Cost Theory* emphasizes the dynamic relationship between the public's political composition and the audience costs incurred by incumbent leaders as a result of their behavior in the realm of foreign policy. The heterogeneity of domestic populations and the responses they generate to foreign policy measures is accounted for by the "belligerence cost;" here, the public's perceptions of threats made by incumbent leaders is considered as a separate determinant in the total political expense incurred by domestic politicians.[5] Kertzer and Brutger's work holds great significance to this research project for its well-substantiated argument that there is no "unitary logic" of audience costs.[6] The conceptualization of audience costs as widely variant to the composition of the audience itself emphasizes relevance of leaders' constituencies to the costs incurred when a threat has been established.[7] That this theory seeks to depart from the rigidity of a singly-focused audience costs theory further attests to its theoretical value; it allows for the closure of the previously existing ideological aperture between the original audience cost theory and the "study of public opinion."[8] This theory does not, however, consider the ways in which the carefully-crafted rhetoric surrounding a threat may appeal to those across the political aisle, and thus sway audience costs.

That traditional audience costs and belligerence costs are understood as separate entities allows for the construction of a fluid theoretical framework that is seamlessly applied to varying political, temporal, and situational contexts. The existence of a belligerence cost makes it

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[3] Kerzter and Brutger, "Decomposing Audience Costs," 236.
[4] Ibid., 236.
[5] Ibid., 245.
[6] Joshua D. Kertzer and Ryan Brutger, "Decomposing Audience Costs: Bringing the Audience Back into Audience Cost Theory," *American Journal of Political Science,* Vol. 60, No. 1, (January 2016): 234, 10.1111/ajps.12201
[7] Ibid., 235.
[8] Ibid., 246.

theoretically possible, then, that while the public may not "punish" a leader for conceding in foreign policy, political costs which "directly affects the leader's approval" may still be generated for the initial act of making a threat. As compared to Fearon's original conceptualization of audience costs, Kertzer and Brutger's work reminds us that audiences are heterogeneous, and that, for this reason, the composition of the general public is incredibly instrumental in determining the type and extent of political expenses incurred by incumbent politicians on the domestic front.[9] The logic established by Kertzer and Brutger is applied to more fully understand how the audience costs incurred by an incumbent leader are subject to a number of factors, including the composition of the leader's constituency. Attention to the centrality of constituency composition to audience costs proves useful in evaluating the nature and effectiveness of rhetorical appeals made by incumbent leaders based on their constituencies.

In *Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach* author Michael Tomz analyzes the effect conflict escalation may have on audience costs. Based on Tomz's findings, it is apparent that though audience costs do not escalate in conjunction with conflict, they do rise once it becomes known that arms are in use.[10] Further, it is displayed that audience costs are principally driven by citizens' concerns about the international reputation of their country and leader.[11] Similar to the aforementioned works, this piece holds value in that it attests to the inability to establish general measure of audience costs and emphasizes importance of context in estimating audience costs. Moreover, the strong relationship between concerns of a nation's reputation in global society and audience costs suggests that the employment of morally-just rhetoric when issuing threats may satisfy the audience's existing perceptions of the nation, and thus lower the associated audience costs.

Matthew Baum's *Going Private: Public Opinion, Presidential Rhetoric, and the Domestic Politics of Audience Costs in U.S. Foreign Policy Crises* and *How Public Opinion Constrains the Use of Force: The Case of Operation Restore Hope* both highlight the domestic population's attentiveness as another variable contributing to the severity of audience costs paid by incumbents when making a threat. Importantly, Baum contends that while public attentiveness can act as a determinant for audience costs, it is ultimately the public's perception of a given policy that holds the most weight in the long-term.[12] Thus, the incumbent's evaluation of how the issuance of a threat will affect future support or opposition from their constituencies establishes "politically relevant domestic audience costs."[13] Here, it is also emphasized that leaders are unable to exercise full control over the audience costs associated with their actions; while acknowledging this, my work emphasizes that the employment of rhetoric which speaks to a

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[9] Ibid., 235.
[10] Michael Tomz, "Domestic Audience Costs in International Relations: An Experimental Approach," *International Organization*, No. 61, (Fall 2007): 829, DOI: 10.1017/S0020818307070282
[11] Ibid., 821.
[12] Matthew A. Baum, "How Public Opinion Constrains the Use of Force: The Case of Operation Hope," *Presidential Studies Quarterly,* Vol. 34, No. 2, (June 2004): 194, https://www.jstor.org/stable/27552585,
[13] Matthew A. Baum, "Going Private: Public Opinion, Presidential Rhetoric, and the Domestic Politics of Audience Costs in U.S. Foreign Policy Crises." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution,* Vol. 48, No. 5 (October 2004): 603, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4149812

nation's perceived role in international politics and established moral principles may prove a powerful tactic when it comes swaying audience costs within the American political context.[14] Moreover, while Baum's *Going Private* highlights an incumbent president's capability to shift public attention toward a particular issue, it does not account for the significance of nation-based values and general perceptions of a nation's role in global politics to the formation of audience costs.

In sum, my work builds on existing literature to understand the degree of influence the use of humanitarian rhetoric may have on audience costs when presidents announce the insertion of the United States into foreign conflict. Using the expanded conceptualization of audience costs crafted by Kertzer and Brutzger, I aim to explore the significance of verbiage which utilizes nationally-endorsed values (democracy, freedom, humanitarianism), and its ability or inability to counter the political expense incurred by incumbent presidents when they make presumably credible threats in the realm of foreign policy.

Theory

Advised by existing literature, this paper argues that due to the plethora of potential factors which shape potential audience costs, the balance between the power of humanitarian rhetoric and the audience costs incurred by incumbents when making a threat is to be determined on a case-by-case basis. The wide range of factors to consider, which are variable to temporal, situational, and political contexts, make it theoretically irresponsible to concoct a generally applicable response to the aforementioned research question. Indeed, as emphasized by literature consulted for this piece, to make general statements about audience costs often subtracts from the fluidity of a theory, and thus its logical potency. Thus, the intention of this paper is to craft a theoretical model through which different cases may be situated and analyzed in order to answer the research question in a case-specific fashion. This work is of substantial value to existing literature in that it provides further insight into a potential tactic commonly exercised by incumbent leaders to curb audience costs.

The aforementioned research question is best approached by performing a qualitative analysis. I aim to account for a number of measures (public attentiveness, public perceptions of the United States' role in international politics, and constituency composition) which collectively reflect the potential audience costs associated with the threats made by President Reagan respective to the cases of El Salvador and Nicaragua. I aim to gage the American public's satisfaction with foreign policy measures exercised during the Reagan administration by analyzing available public opinion data. Collectively, these practices provide the insight necessary to gage both the public's interest in- and satisfaction with- the aforementioned cases of intervention, thus acting as significant indicators of the associated audience costs.

Further qualitative analysis will center around a case study which compares the rhetoric employed by Ronald Reagan with respect to American intervention in the countries of El Salvador and Nicaragua. The El Salvadoran and Nicaraguan cases are of particular interest to

[14] Ibid., 603.

this study for a number of reasons: (1) these crises occur within the Cold War context, when reliance on nationalism against threat of communism was a strongly employed political tactic (2) while the initial stages of intervention are accompanied by aggressive rhetoric, during later stages of involvement the narrative surrounding intervention make a notable shift toward the proliferation of intended American values such as human rights advocacy and the installation of democracy (a system which is presented as more conducive to the protection of human rights), and (3) this narrative shift occurs when there is increased controversy surrounding the nature of the United States' presence in Central America, and the amassing of the American public around the cause of protecting human rights.[15] Proper consideration of these cases entails the analysis of presidential statements made with regard to the Central American crises, so as to evaluate the relationship between the employment of humanitarian rhetoric and lowered belligerence costs. Though this is an analysis that must be on a case-by-case basis, this work is valuable for the model of analysis that may be applied to individual circumstances.

Case Study - El Salvador

Pre-Conflict Clashes

Economic and social inequality loomed long loomed over the Central-American nation. Seeking to expand the domestic economy, Salvadoran leaders "unleashed the productive forces of capitalism" and adopted policies which reshaped distribution of land, wealth, and other resources in a manner that was highly disadvantageous for the "peasant majority."[16] This "state-led economic transformation" not only prompted a steady growth in the landless population, but also depressed agricultural wages, leaving many of the nation's impoverished individuals with no land to cultivate crops on, and little money to buy subsistence goods from stable produce markets.[17]

That such a significant sector of the population was so adversely affected by the newly installed regime's economic policies made way for the establishment of opposition movements at the grassroot level. Collectively, organizations composed by- and of- displaced agricultural workers began to demand improved and secured wages, and safer working conditions.[18] These pro-poor, labor-advocacy groups found their way to one another, forming a coalition formally known as the Faramundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). Clashes between the discontented poor, organized labor groups, and the state prompted "increasingly repressive" government responses.[19] In 1979, the nation became increasingly polarized and a coup was staged by a "reformist junta" to oust the sitting military regime.[20] The newly-installed Chrstian

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[15] Evan McCormick, "Freedom Tide?," *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 4, (Fall 2014): 61, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26926143.
[16] T. David Mason, "The Civil War in El Salvador: A Retrospective Analysis," *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (1999): 182, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2503968
[17] Ibid., 182.
[18] Ibid., 184.
[19] Ibid., 191.
[20] Ibid., 193.

Democrat government intensified the suppression of opposition groups, and closed "virtually all legal avenues for peaceful opposition to the government."[21]

Civil War

While the assassination of peaceful political figure Archbishop Romero "tipped the sporadic political violence...into full-scale civil war," the launch of the FMLN military offensive in 1981 is considered as the nation's initiation into "formal" conflict.[22,23] In the interest of both pacifying discontented citizens and dismantling political opposition, the Salvadoran government enacted policy that undertook both "aggressive agricultural reform" and violent means of subduing the FMLN, making for "one of the bloodiest campaigns of repression ever witnessed in contemporary Latin America."[24] Christian Democrats believed that both the satisfaction of peasant demands and aggressive deterrence from alignment with the FMLN would push Salvadoran citizens into the arms of the incumbent regime.[25]

In taming the "countryside revolution," the Salvadoran state maintained a firm reliance on the military as an instrument of actualizing its political agenda.[26] The state's strong relationship with sitting military leaders left the incumbent regime unwilling to "challenge [corrupt] senior officer corps," disallow death squads, or penalize officers responsible for the death of thousands of innocent civilians.[27] Thus, the violence inflicted onto the Salvadoran people quickly became indiscriminate, and remained so until the end of the conflict. In the year 1981 alone, an estimated 12,000 non-violent civilians were claimed by the violence surrounding the Civil War. Between 1979 and 1992, an estimated 75,000 Salvadoran lives had been claimed by the intense civil conflict. Over a half-million people were displaced, and nearly a million Salvadorans immigrated to the United States seeking refuge.[28]

While rebel forces certainly held their own throughout the Civil War, discord among different factions of the FMLN proved to be the insurgents' downfall. Each rebel organization, supporting unique civilian constituencies, conceptualized victory differently, and thus envisioned its achievement differently. This ideological disparity, in turn, harmed each group's "willingness and ability to compromise with its coalition partners on tactics and strategy," leaving the FMLN in ideological disarray.[29] Though the "death squad campaign" kept political opposition at bay, that such terror was associated with land reform and democratization shed a suspicious light onto the sincerity and true intentions of governmental reformers.[30] For this reason, any public support which may have otherwise accompanied such reforms "evaporated in the crossfire between the

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[21] Margaret Arnold, John Eriksson, and Alicia Kreimer, "El Salvador Post-Conflict Reconstruction," *World Bank Operations Evaluations Department: Country Case Study Series* (2000): 18, www.worldbank.org/oed
[22] Arnold, Eriksson, and Kreimer, "El Salvador Post-Conflict Reconstruction," 18.
[23] Ibid., 50.
[24] Mason, "The Civil War in El Salvador," 182.
[25] Mason, "The Civil War in El Salvador," 186.
[26] Ibid., 186.
[27] Ibid., 188.
[28] Arnold, Eriksson, and Kreimer, "El Salvador Post-Conflict Reconstruction," 18.
[29] Mason, "The Civil War in El Salvador," 192.
[30] Ibid., 193.

death squads and the rebels."[31] Between 1979 and 1992, an estimated 80,000 Salvadoran lives had been claimed by the intense civil conflict.[32] Over a half-million people were "displaced internally," and nearly a million Salvadorans immigrated to the United States seeking refuge.[33]

Peaceful Settlement

By 1989, the Salvadoran state and FMLN insurgents agreed that neither party was capable of conquering another on the battlefield and that negotiations were in order.[34] With the election of Alfredo Cristiani as President of the Republican Alliance party (ARENA) in 1989, the official transition toward peace was initiated.[35] The newly-inaugurated administration was "committed to economic reform and peace," and guided negotiations with the FMLN.[36] Discussions of peace, "by no means smooth," came to an end in 1991 with the signage of the "historic" Peace Accords in January of 1992.[37] Among the highlights of this settlement agreed upon by both the Salvadoran state and FMLN were: (1) the installation of anti-corruption measures into the state's military practices (2) the establishment of a land-transfer program which was formed to "benefit former combatants on both sides" (3) the recognition of the FMLN as an official Salvadoran political party and (4) the dismantling of "internal security forces" such as death squads and paramilitaries, and the substitution of said groups with a state-wide police force.[38]

The United States in El Salvador

Throughout the Salvadoran Civil War, the United States maintained an amicable relationship with the incumbent regime. Assuming an externally supportive role of the Christian Democrats, the Reagan administration aided in the suppression of oppositional forces by supplying the Salvadoran military with arms, training, and funding.[39] Having campaigned on an aggressively anti-Communist platform, President Reagan understood "ensuring the survival" of the incumbent Salvadoran regime as central to the accomplishment of political reform and preservation of democratic institutions.[40] Indeed, that the administration was driven by such an objective is reflective of anxieties that the spirit of revolution would bleed across the Salvadoran borders, and spark a regional turn toward Communism.

Congress attempted to maintain a watchful eye over the Reagan Administration's behavior in El Salvador. The state institution took both political and rhetorical measures to insist that the American presence be primarily motivated by the protection of human rights, which the

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[31] Ibid., 193.
[32] Arnold, Eriksson, and Kreimer, "El Salvador Post-Conflict Reconstruction," 18.
[33] Ibid., 18.
[34] Mason, "The Civil War in El Salvador," 192.
[35] Arnold, Eriksson, and Kreimer, "El Salvador Post-Conflict Reconstruction," 22.
[36] Ibid., 22.
[37] Ibid., 22.
[38] Mason, "The Civil War in El Salvador," 195.
[39] McCormick, "Freedom Tide," 67.
[40] Ibid., 78.

Salvadoran state continued to grossly violate. Moreover, Democrats demanded that the Salvadoran state be held "strictly accountable" for its egregious acts to further ensure that American tax dollars "did not fund political violence."[41] Here, it is abundantly clear that dometic audiences were both aware of the atrocities endured by Salvadoran citizens, and insistent that American policy toward El Salvador be constructed in the interest of sparing civilians from any further violence.

With discontentment surrounding the U.S.'s role in El Salvador on the rise, it became apparent to members of the Reagan administration that an anti-Communist initiative alone was not enough to justify American insertion into the Salvadoran crisis; an advisor close to the president remarked went so far as to remark that the incumbent could "never maintain wide public support for their foreign policy unless [he] could relate it to American ideals and the defense of freedom."[42] Unwilling to accept domestic "defeat" relative to the Salvadoran crisis, Reagan "embraced the pro-democracy stance that the State Department had voiced earlier in the year."[43] Yet, there is "little reason" to truly appreciate Reagan's rhetorical embrace of nations which uphold "principles of democracy and freedom for their people in a stable and peaceful environment" as a heartfelt commitment to the protection of human rights on a global scale; the "vagueness" of this proclamation provided little insight into the concrete action to be taken, reflecting the administration's "indecision" regarding the purpose of its support for the Sandinista movement.[44] Indeed, Reagan's promises of Salvadoran accountability "amounted to more bark than bite;" while the administration was "publicly committed" to anti-Communist and pro-human rights objectives, the incumbent and his advisors "struggled to articulate a viable strategy for doing so."[45] These foreign policy deficiencies did not fare well with the President's congressional opponents, who continued to insist that the administration publicly acknowledge the growing evidence of human rights violations in El Salvador as "part of any political reform."[46]

By the end of the Salvadoran Civil War, the protection of human rights was far from achieved. In funding the Salvadoran military and holding the regime loosely accountable for their gross violations of human rights, the United States failed to balance its proclaimed principles with its practices in Central America. Seeking to avert the political costs associated with their "preferred actions," the Reagan administration failed to produce a concrete course of action to combat the indiscriminate killing of Salvadoran citizens and condemn the repressive acts of the Central American state.[47] Indeed, the secrecy accompanying the gross violation of human rights by the incumbent regime was reflective of the fact that American officials truly prioritized securing the re-election of Reagan over the protection of human rights and democracy abroad.

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[41] Ibid., 80.
[42] Ibid., 85.
[43] Ibid., 82.
[44] Ibid., 83.
[45] Ibid., 84.
[46] Ibid., 84.
[47] Ibid., 83.

Case Study - Nicaragua

Pre-War Clashes & Resistance to Revolution

Prior to 1980, Nicaragua was a country under a dynastic dictatorial rule, subject to the political whims of the Somoza family. The dictatorship's aggressive "repression of civil liberties" and the large absence of "representative institutions" made way for the collaboration of oppositional forces; the odds for revolution became increasingly favorable.[48] The Marxist-Leninist Sandinista Front of National Liberation (FLSN) led the revolution that ousted the sitting dictator. Undertaking rule in a "country in ruins," the Sandinista regime aimed to reverse old patterns of "repression and brutality toward the general populace," facilitate economic growth, and construct institutional foundations to "consolidate the revolution."[49] Importantly, though nominally championing civil rights for all citizens of the country, the FLSN saw its non-leftist compatriots with anti-Somoza sentiment as "temporary allies" who would, with the installment of a new regime, become its opposition.[50] With the removal of dictator Anastacio Somoza came the rise of the Sandinista regime, issuing the Nicaraguan government into the leftist movement.

This divide became especially apparent as the Sandinista regime began to establish ties with the Soviet bloc, and the regime made political moves to "expand parliament to a number that would give them total governmental control."[51] Soon after the seizure of parliament, the party announced that elections would be suspended for the next five years. It is apparent that the FSLN collective "intended to retain supreme power" and encourage neighboring countries to adopt the principles of Marxist-Leninst thought into their domestic policies.[52] Throughout the 1980s, the Central American nation was embroiled in conflict as the Sandinista regime continued to advance its leftist agenda and Contra forces made their opposition apparent through violent action.

Counter-revolutionary forces, soon operating under the moniker "Contra," violently resisted the leftist leanings of the newly-established regime, as they were explicitly excluded from governmental affairs.[53] While Contra forces upped their violence, the Sandinista regime's "tolerance of political pluralism waned," prompting them to install "emergency laws" that forbid criticism of the government and the "organization of political opposition."[54] Though setting the stage for the establishment of the first post-revolutionary election (largely inspired by international pressure), opposition groups claimed that the FLSN "created a climate of

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[48] Merrill, *Nicaragua: A Country Study,* 28.
[49] Ibid., 39.
[50] Robert P. Hager Jr. and Robert S. Snyder, "The United States and Nicaragua." *Journal of Cold War Studies,* Vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring 2015): 14.
[51] Ibid., 15.
[52] Ibid., 15.
[53] Ibid., 3.
[54] Merrill, *Nicaragua: A Country Study,* 48.

intimidation that precluded a truly open election."[55] Throughout the decade the incumbent regime made a habit of engaging in both political and physical violence, "suspending civil liberties" through means such as press censorship and taking aggressive measures to repress opposition groups.[56]

Peaceful Settlement

Peace negotiations were brought about by Central American mediators who sought to negotiate a settlement that was satisfactory to Nicaragua. The U.S. military's cutoff played an instrumental role in encouraging the two opposing forces to engage in peace talks. Indeed, this military stalemate left the Contras "unwilling to fight," and the Sandinista government could no longer economically or politically sustain itself while engaging in such an "unpopular war."[57] The Arias plan, agreed upon by the involved parties in 1987 negotiated a ceasefire, and agreed upon (1) reconciliation on a national scale (2) put an end to "all external aid to insurgencies" and (3) granted amnesty to persons charged with political crimes.[58] Negotiations were "undermined," however, by the U.S.'s "reluctance to offer positive inducements for Nicaraguan cooperation" as well as its failure to "exploit Nicaraguan concessions rather than to reciprocate them." Certainly, this is reflective of the U.S. perspective that any negotiated settlement was "inherently dangerous," since Nicaragua's "'communist'" regime could not be trusted to abide by treaty provisions."[59]

The United States in Nicaragua

This conflict was of specific interest to the United States as, within the context of the Cold War, the country was especially interested in taming leftist tide surfacing in Central America, understanding it as a site of proxy-war against communism, especially subject to Cuban and Soviet influence. Importantly, the Reagan administration understood itself as "elected to restore U.S. power in the world" and halt the proliferation of leftist political ideologies, principally Communism.[60] Though it had initially appeared that the United States maintained a "reasonably cordial" relationship with the Sandinista regime following the revolution in Nicaragua, this was relatively "temporary;" soon into his second term in office, Ronald Reagan publicly announced his "intention to remove the Nicaraguan government in the sense of its present structure," forcing the Sandinista leadership to "cry uncle" at the knees of American democracy.[61] Statements were also made "warning the Sandinistas that the United States would not tolerate Nicaraguan arms shipments to the guerrilla movement in El Salvador," who they had supported in the interest of "promoting the larger Marxist-Leninist cause in international

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[55] Ibid., 48.
[56] Ibid., 47.
[57] Ibid., 47.
[58] Merrill, *Nicaragua: A Country Study,* 48.
[59] Kenneth Roberts, "Bullying and Bargaining: The United States, Nicaragua, and Conflict Resolution in Central America." *International Security,* Vol. 15, No. 2 (Fall 1990): 101, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2538866
[60] Hager Jr. and Snyder, "The United States and Nicaragua," 20.
[61] Roberts, "Bullying and Bargaining," 67.

politics."[62] The Reagan administration was ultimately unwilling to negotiate with the Sandinista regime, as they sought to accomplish the "elimination or complete restructuring of the opposing regime."[63]

Similar to the Salvadoran case, the Reagan administration failed to detail a clear plan of action. The administration remained firmly united, however, in its intention to "maintain pressure on the Sandinistas." This was to be achieved through a combination of military coercion (through supporting the contra army), and "trade and credit embargos as economic coercion."Indeed, under the Reagan administration, much of the U.S.'s policy toward Nicaragua fell under the helm of "coercive diplomacy;" economic coercion became a heavily relied upon instrument in "promoting attrition in Nicaragua that would wear down and weaken the Sandinista government." This was achieved not only through the "direct and indirect effects of the contra war, including material destruction, production losses, and inflated military spending," but also "direct economic measures" such as the imposition of a trade embargo on Nicaragua in 1985 and the "consistent blocking" of loans to Nicaragua from institutions such as the World Bank and international Monetary Fund.[64]

A number of constraints surrounded the Reagan administration's policies toward Latin America: (1) The White House was not explicitly set on military confrontation in Nicaragua (2) the public was openly opposed to what many perceived as excessive belligerence toward the nation (3) Reagan was faulted by some as, relative to rhetoric focusing on "East-West struggle" which "blinded" the administration to "Central American realities" of extreme violence and political repression."[65] Following the Iran-Contra scandal -- where it was unveiled that the United States had been covertly taken action to support the Contras despite a Congress' ban on military aid -- the opposition toward U.S. foreign policy in Central America was doubly reinforced by Republican Party's loss of a Senate majority in 1986, Reagan's policy toward Nicaragua was "put on the defensive," and understood as a "lost cause."[66] This prompted Democratic-controlled Congress to "refuse" to grant military aid to the contras.[67] Thus, the Reagan administration slowly "lost control of its policy," and its stance in Nicaragua continued to weaken.[68] Support for the Contras came to a full stop in 1987.

The Reagan Administration's Trends Towards Human Rights Rhetoric

Presidential Campaign and Early Days in Office

In the election of 1980, foreign policy was an area of contentious debate. Seeking to distinguish himself from his potential predecessor, President Ronald Reagan took a firm stance against President Jimmy Carter's approach to international matters; to the presidential candidate,

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[62] Ibid., 77.
[63] Ibid., 99.
[64] Roberts, "Bullying and Bargaining," 92.
[65] Hager Jr. and Snyder, "The United States and Nicaragua," 21.
[66] Roberts, "Bullying and Bargaining," 98.
[67] Ibid., 94.
[68] Ibid., 95.

the Carter Administration's policies were too focused on taking a humanitarian approach to crises, compromising the United States' strong image in the global political sphere. Shortly after his inauguration, the incumbent worked relentlessly to deconstruct the policies put forth by former President Carter in the realm of foreign relations, including measures which stalled loans for authoritarian regimes in Latin America, the Philippines, and South Korea.[69]

In a 1981 address to the Trilateral Commission, Secretary of State Alexander Haig contended that there were "limits" to what the United States "can or should" accomplish in the realm of foreign policy, especially relative to the "transformation of other cultures, customs, and institutions."[70] Generally, Haig sought to make the place of human rights within the Reagan Administration explicitly clear: according to the Secretary of State, if they were to be considered any capacity, it would be to use them "as a weapon against hostile communist regimes."[71] During this period, the Administration remained intent on providing loans to military governments in the Latin American region, and consistently attempted to sell Congress its militarized vision of an international anti-Leftist campaign.

Growing Demands on the Front of Human Rights Protection & Shifts in Rhetoric

As the Reagan Administration continued to advocate for the entrenchment of the United States into Central American civil conflict, criticism of the incumbent leader and his foreign policy measures was on the rise.[72] Journalists, human rights activists, and other impassioned citizens began to "coalesce into a loosely structured community" intent on pushing the Administration to place the sanctity of human rights at the locus of their foreign policy measures.[73] It soon became clear to the Reagan Administration that there was a "growing national consensus" around the need for new human rights policies which were "more aggressively" protective of civilians' well-being and "even handed" in their application to global regimes despite their political leanings.[74]

The employment of humanitarian rhetoric as a potential strategy to heighten the approval of the Administration's foreign policy measures is first apparent in a memo issued by the State Department in late 1981. Once on the periphery, human rights was now deemed as the "core of President Reagan's foreign policy."[75] Also among the contentions of the State Department's memo was that the incumbent ought to undertake a "more assertive campaign on behalf of democratic values," so as to further "convey to the public...just what the difference was between East and West."[76] Here, it is apparent that the Administration had relinquished its efforts to "downgrade" the importance of human rights, and redirected its policy course so as to "co-opt

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[69] Tamar Jacoby, "The Reagan Turnaround on Human Rights." *Foreign Affairs,*" Vol. 64. No. 5 (Summer 1986): 1067, https://www.jstor.org/stable/20042781.
[70] Ibid., 1069.
[71] Ibid., 1069.
[72] Ibid., 1071.
[73] Ibid., 1070.
[74] Ibid., 1067.
[75] Ibid., 1071.
[76] Ibid., 1071.

the idea" of human rights advocacy as a means of achieving its "geo-political interests."[77] Put differently, the sitting administration came to understand that human rights rhetoric could be used as a means to achieve a satisfactory political end, affording them the "best opportunity" to communicate "what [was] ultimately at issue" in the combat of Communism and the Soviet bloc.[78] By 1984, the American public became increasingly concerned with the protection of human rights relative to the Central American civil crises.[79] From this point in time on, concerns surrounding the protection of human rights had maintained a consistently strong presence in the American political ring.

Visible Gaps between Rhetoric and Action

With the understanding of humanitarian rhetoric as a means of making its questionable foreign policy more palatable, the Reagan Administration increasingly claimed a firm allegiance to the protection of human rights. Yet, consideration of the United States' true presence in the nations of Nicaragua and El Salvador reveal that the commitment to the protection of human sanctity and proliferation of 'American values' was a "flimsy cover" for policy which clearly failed to prioritize human rights over halting the spread of leftist ideology.[80] This was especially true for the Central American cases. To Reagan and his advisors, as a nation that fought leftist insurgency, to "press too seriously on end abuses" in El Salvador jeopardized the stability of an "important ally."[81] Remaining determined to "have human rights on its side," and avoid agitating the Sandinista regime, the Administration also set out to diminish and "defend" the "egregious violations of human rights" committed by the Nicaraguan regime.[82]

Reception from the American Public

To some, the Administration's newly-adopted foreign policy objective of protecting human rights, "narrowly defined as it was," evoked a moralism that was seen as "hardy and indivisible."[83] This was especially true in 1986; concerns surrounding the protection of human rights had maintained a consistently strong presence in the American political ring, Reagan "vowed, in the name of human rights," to " to "oppose tyranny in any form," regardless of the political leanings of the oppressor.[84] While some praised this as a noble departure from the ideology that dictatorial rule from the left should be more opposed than dictatorships with right leanings, others were ultimately unimpressed with the administration's verbal commitment to non-discriminatory defense of human rights. Recognizing the placement of human rights at the locus of foreign policy as a tactical move, some critics of the Administration charged that the incumbent's prior inattention to human rights discourse had been usurped by a "hypocritical

[77] Jacoby, "Reagan and Human Rights," 1071.
[78] Ibid., 1072.
[79] Ibid., 1079.
[80] Ibid., 1073.
[81] Ibid., 1073.
[82] Ibid., 1066.
[83] Ibid., 1071.
[84] Ibid., 1067.

show of interest."[85] Naturally, the discord between the administration's rhetoric and action brought into question the sincerity of the President's commitment to the protection of human rights.

Detractors of the Administration labeled Reagan's focus on democracy as an instrument used to disguise the vagueness of the incumbent's policy and "evade human rights concerns" expressed by domestic and international audiences.[86] Thus, those unmoved by Reagan's sentimental appeal to democratic values, including Congress and human rights activists, demanded to see concrete action taken in the interest of protecting human rights. Further motivation for this movement came from the fact that the United States continued to play a supportive role in a conflict that jeopardized the lives and well being of civilians of the Salvadoran state. Pushed by its critics to "pay attention to human rights abuses," Washington claimed to put forth a more concerted effort to force the Salvadoran state to better respect and protect the rights of their citizens.[87]

Evaluating Audience Costs - Data

Considered Measures

This study considers a number of measures in order to gauge both the potential shift in audience costs associated with the Reagan Administration's insertion of the United States into the aforementioned Central American crises. Data from Cornell University's Roper Center is analyzed to identify values that the domestic audience identifies as distinctly America, and complementary to conceptualizations of the United States as a harbinger of justice on an international scale. The aforementioned data set also holds value in that it reflects registered voters' satisfaction with the incumbent administration's behavior in the realm of foreign policy, and is strongly indicative of how this shapes the audience's overall perception of President Reagan. Importantly, this data is collected on the eve of the 1984 election, when audience costs are of especially high significance, given the incumbent's interest in continuing his presidency. Additionally, this piece utilizes data collected for Richard Sobel's *A Report: Public Opinion About United States Intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua* to further understand the domestic audience's attention to- and understanding of- the United States' role in Central America. Collectively, the considered data proves instrumental in estimating the audience costs associated with the shifts in the rhetoric tied to the justification of the United States' continued presence in Central America.

American Values

As reflected in the results of the Roper Center's 1983 questionnaire issued to a sample of registered voters, over 50% of respondents found the protection of "allies and friends" to be

[85] Ibid., 1073.
[86] Ibid., 1076.
[87] Ibid., 1074.

"very important."[88] Further, 80% of surveyed voters identified the maintenance of "values America stands for," such as liberty and democracy as a goal that ought to be central to foreign policy.[89] Participants also placed a high value on the promotion of peace in the international sphere, with 85% labeling it is "very important."[90] Per this same poll, it is revealed that 61% of respondents identified the safeguarding of the aforementioned "traditional American values" as "very, very important" or "very important."[91] Registered voters were relatively divided in their confidence of which party could better "protect traditional American values;" while 30% stored their confidence in Republicans solely, 34% felt that Democrats and Republicans were equally capable of safeguarding American principles.[92] Overall, these results suggest that human rights rhetoric, especially when touching on American values such as liberty and democracy, should have a relatively appealing to American voters, and that faith in capabilities to protect and proliferate these ideas was not overwhelmingly stored in one political party. Speaking to the thesis of this paper specifically, this indicates that the belligerence cost has the potential to be offset when tailored to protect 'traditional American values.'

The U.S. Domestic Audience and Knowledge of the Central American Crises

As of 1982, 79% of Americans had "read or heard about" the civil conflict in El Salvador.[93] In 1983, 92% of surveyed voters knew at least "a little" about the ideology-based power struggles occurring in the Central American region.[94] Of those who claimed to have knowledge of the crises in 1983, 70% claimed to have engaged in conversation with others about the crises. On the eve of the 1984 election, 90% of voters within the sample identified candidates' stances on Central America to be of some significance to their decision to support each candidate (46% "a lot", 44% "a little").[95] Relative to the Nicaraguan case, in 1986 78% of Amerians had "read or heard about" the civil conflict, and by 1987 54% had a proper understanding of the U.S.'s role in the Central American country.[96] Thus, it is apparent that though there was not an overwhelming majority of Americans who had vast knowledge of the Central American crises, a majority were at least vaguely aware of the ideologically-based power struggles. Indeed, the circumstances abroad were known well enough that the majority of Americans were able to identify the potential spread of communism in the Central American region as a "threat" to the United States' security interests.[97] It is essential to note, however, that

[88] Yankelovich, Skelly, and White. Time Soundings #5652, Question 176. 1983, Time Magazine. Cornell University, Ithaca, NY: Roper Center for Public Opinion Research. Accessed April 5, 2021.
[89] Ibid., question 178.
[90] Ibid., question 171.
[91] Ibid., question 45.
[92] Ibid., question 61.
[93] Ibid., question 61.
[94] Ibid., question 181.
[95] Ibid., question 75.
[96] Richard Sobel, "A Report: Public Opinion About United States Intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua," *The Public Opinion Quarterly,* Vol. 53, No. 1 (Spring 1989): 115.
[97] Ibid., 115.

in spite of this, the majority of Americans consistently opposed the imposition of the United States into Nicaragua and El Salvador's domestic disputes.[98]

The Domestic Audience's Perceptions and Perspectives of Central America

Though a "simple awareness" of the civil conflicts in Central America had become "relatively widespread," it is clear that the American public did not identify the potential spread of leftist ideology in the region as among the most pressing issues the United States was faced with at the time.[99] Importantly, though not pegged as the most important issue in foreign policy, the rise of leftist ideology in Central America was identified by a "large majority" of United States citizens as a threat to their nations' security interests; in 1983, 69% of polled Americans thought a "pro-communist government" in El Salvador would present a threat to the U.S., while between 1983 and 1986 49-56% of people saw the conflict in Nicaragua as a "threat." [100] Yet, on the eve of the 1984 election only 7% of citizens identified the defusing of Central American conflicts as a primary concern in the realm of foreign policy.[101] Though concerned with the spread of communism, the majority American voters felt it more appropriate to focus on domestic issues rather than foreign affairs.

Importantly, as the conflicts in Central America progressed, worries that the U.S. would become too deeply entrenched in each countries' conflicts increased. Speaking to the case of El Salvador specifically, between 1983 and 1984 there was a 12% increase in the number of Americans who opposed the provision of aid to the Salvadoran government (62% to 74%).[102] By 1985, "at least 70%" of Americans did not support the United States' participation in the overthrow of the Sandinista regime.[103] More compellingly, in 1985, 77% of those who declared themselves to be "knowledgeable" about the situation in Nicaragua were against deploying U.S. troops to Nicaragua, and by 1986 only 10% supported this potential policy measure. Further, public opposition to the United States' behavior in Nicaragua was "consistently strong" throughout the Congressional conversations concerning contra aid; "at least 60%" of Americans opposed the transfer of U.S. funds to Nicaraguan rebels in 1986, and opposition generally remained to be "twice the level of support."[104] Following a televised public address delivered by President Reagan in 1986, though the majority of Americans remained unmoved by the Administration's campaign to increase aid to the Contra movement, the initiative received a 12% (from 30% to 42%) increase in support from the public.[105] While in 1986 opposition to intervention in Central America slightly decreased during the Administration's campaign to deliver $100 million in aid to the contra forces in Nicaragua, this upward trend in support was

[98] Ibid., 115.
[99] Ibid., 115.
[100] Ibid., 115.
[101] Soebel, "Public Opinion About United States Intervention," 115.
[102] Ibid., 116.
[103] Ibid., 117.
[104] Ibid., 117.
[105] Ibid., 117.

reversed in 1987 after the Iran-Contra scandal, which caused the rate of disapproval to return to 70%.[106]

Approval of Reagan and the Administration's Foreign Policy

In 1983, before the incumbent had announced his intention to run for a second term, 46% of surveyed voters said they would prefer a Democratic candidate that they found "acceptable" over President Reagan.[107] Additionally, only 35% of voters claimed to have had an improved perception of Reagan based on his performance during his first term, while 40% claimed their opinion of the incumbent remained unchanged, and 23% of respondents found that their view had worsened.[108] For those whose perception of President Reagan had improved after his first time, 14% said it was due to the incumbent's initiatives in the realm of foreign policy.[109] For those who had worsened impressions 14% said it was for his foreign policy in general.[110] In the same year, 48% of Americans agreed with the statement "The President's policies in Central America end up supporting right wing dictatorships just because they are anticommunist. The regimes we support in countries like El Salvador are so repressive that in the end they cause people to support the communists."[111]

In terms of "maintaining America's prestige abroad," over half of Americans gave the incumbent a score of five or above on a scale of six, indicating a general satisfaction with the ways in which the President's foreign policy represented the nation in the global political sphere.[112] Moreover, 66% of polled registered voters agreed with the statement: "After many years of permitting ourselves to be pushed around by other countries, we finally have a President who is prepared to be assertive in the use of American power and influence in the world," reflecting a generally positive perception of the incumbent's foreign policy measures.[113] Finally, on a scale of 1 to 10, where one was "very poor" and ten was "excellent," 35% of Americans gave the incumbent a score above 6, indicating no strong dissatisfaction with the president's behavior.[114]

Interpretation of Data

Relative to the cases of Nicaragua and El Salvador, the considered data provides a plethora of meaningful insight. For one, it is apparent that the American public maintained a strong interest in the preservation and proliferation of 'traditional American values' domestically and abroad, indicating that citizens understand the nation's place in global politics as one of protection. Additionally, the public identifies ideals such as democracy, human freedom, and

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[106] Ibid., 117.
[107] Yankelovich, Skelly, and White, "Time Soundings," question 29.
[108] Ibid., question 93.
[109] Ibid., question 94.
[110] Ibid., question 95.
[111] Ibid., question 197.
[112] Ibid., question 150.
[113] Ibid., question 200.
[114] Ibid., question 97.

peace which should be prioritized on a domestic and global scale, thus indicating that foreign policy measures are more likely to be palatable to the domestic audience when understood as proliferating these values. Moreover, it is apparent that among surveyed American voters, there was no faith in one particular party to safeguard American values on the global front. That citizens were not explicitly in support of or against the incumbent's party indicates that, relative to this context, there were no preconceived notions of politicians' capabilities based on party membership which may have otherwise altered audience costs.

Interestingly, this data reveals that, though citizens were concerned about both the protection of human rights and the proliferation of communism in El Salvador and Nicaragua, they were not particularly attentive to the Central American crises unless matters were directly related to the protection of American security interests, specifically when it came to the avoidance of deeper entrenchment into each respective country. Moreover, it is apparent that though an overwhelming majority of the public was aware of the civil crises in Central America, relatively few were deeply familiar with them, and able to boast an in-depth understanding of events occurring in the region. This indicates that public interest in the cases of El Salvador and Nicaragua was relatively low for much of the Reagan Administration's time in the White House.

Speaking specifically to the thesis of this work, it is apparent that shifts in rhetoric toward the protection of human rights was ultimately ineffective in persuading the majority of Americans to amass behind the Administration's policies toward Central America. Indeed, the apparent emptiness of this rhetoric, as well as the Administration's failure to articulate clear routes of action to protect human rights left many, in the long term, unconvinced that the United States' insertion into the civil conflicts of El Salvador and Nicaragua were principally driven by humanitarian moralism. The Reagan Administration's nominal centrality of the proliferation of democracy and protection of human rights in his foreign policy measures came across to those critical of the incumbent as insincere -- this is especially true for the period following the Iran-Contra scandal, in which the effect that this rhetorical strategy had relative to the approval rating of the incumbent's Central American policy was reversed. Thus, it is apparent that, in the long run, the belligerence cost was not offset in each case; the Administration's empty rhetoric and the vagueness of their policy goals certainly overshadowed any positive effect that the application of human rights rhetoric may have had on the general public's approval of the further entrenchment of the United States into the civil conflicts of Central America.

Conclusion

Insight Gained from this Study

This study sought to understand how the use of humanitarian rhetoric to justify foreign intervention may alter audience costs. Importantly, this piece utilized a modern conceptualization of audience costs theory, which argues for the existence of both the traditional audience cost and the belligerence cost. Qualitative analysis, entailing both the review of both historical and polling data, was performed in interest of answering the research question '*Can the belligerence cost be countered by claims to intervene in the interest of protecting human rights or the spread of*

democracy?' Advised by both existing literature and the qualitative analysis performed for this project, it was argued that due to the wide range of factors which shape potential audience costs, the balance between the power of humanitarian rhetoric and the audience costs incurred by incumbents when making a threat is to be determined on a case-by-case basis.

Using the Reagan presidency as its example, this project produced a model of analysis which can be utilized to evaluate the strength of humanitarian rhetoric in reshaping audience costs. Specific attention was paid to the incumbent's political and rhetorical behavior relative to the cases Nicaragua and El Salvador, two nations ensnared in civil conflict as both governments (the Sandinista regime in El Salvador) and rebel forces (the Contra in Nicaragua) sought to tame the rising leftist tide in Central America. In analyzing public opinion data, it became apparent that relative to these cases the application of humanitarian rhetoric did not alter audience costs for the better in the long-term. Indeed, the emptiness of President Reagan's proclamation to defend human rights on an international scale paired with the vagueness of the policy measures that would be exercised to ensure the well-being of Central American citizens left many unconvinced that an increased U.S. presence was necessary in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Importantly, the findings of this study also speak to existing literature in that they display that domestic audiences are indeed concerned with concordance between rhetoric and enacted policy measures.

Limitations

Naturally, this study hosts limitations. Among them is the possibility that the domestic audience's relatively basic knowledge of the crises drove them to lowly prioritize intervention in Central America. Thus, it is possible that when the public is both consistently attentive to and well-versed in the ideological dynamics of a crisis, that the audience costs associated with the issuance of a threat are altered, as well as the power of humanitarian rhetoric in shaping audience costs. Moreover, it is possible that the model of analysis utilized in this study is not easily applicable to other cases, such as those for which public opinion data is not readily available. This is not to say, however, that there are not other viable indicators of public opinion available.

Broader Implications

In spite of its limitations, this paper makes a number of valuable contributions to the field of international studies. For one, reinforces the validity of newer conceptualizations of Fearon's audience cost theory. Affirming the existence of both traditional audience costs and belligerence costs further emphasizes the projected consequences of incumbent presidents' actions as widely variable to political, social, and situational contexts. Further, specific attention paid to the rhetoric accompanying threats, and the policies they produce, proves useful in evaluating how the nature of statements made by political figures may alter the realities reflected in audience costs. Thus, this work is applicable beyond this project in that it considers another potential determinant of audience costs. Additionally, insight gained from this analysis may further

contextualize behavior accompanying the United States' current presence in Latin America, and act as a projection of future policy measures exercised toward the nation as well as the domestic rhetoric tied to them. Thus, the potential reach of the findings of this proposed project extends beyond the specific case study.

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