

# PEACE STUDIES JOURNAL

Vol. 4, Issue 1  
January 2011

---

**Book Review: In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion From World War II to Iraq. 2009. By Adam Berinsky. Chicago: University of Chicago.**

Gabriel Rubin,  
Assistant Professor of Justice Studies,  
Montclair State University

---

**BOOK REVIEW: *IN TIME OF WAR: UNDERSTANDING AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION FROM WORLD WAR II TO IRAQ*. 2009. BY ADAM BERINSKY. CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO.**

Adam Berinsky says that it is because elites that we trust cue us to the worthiness of the cause of war. Public opinion regarding the decision to go to war and support for war follows the same domestic partisan cues that lead the public to support or oppose quotidian issues such as tax hikes and whether to tinker with Social Security. “Above all else,” he writes. “Patterns of conflict among partisan political actors shape mass opinion on war.” (7).

Berinsky develops elite cue theory to explain opinion dynamics regarding American wars. He posits that members of the public look to trusted political figures to “delegate the difficult process of arriving at an opinion on a complicated policy matter” (70). For foreign policy, the President can be a good source of information one way or the other. If you like the President, you are likely to take on his positions; if you don’t like him, you will adhere to the opposite position.

Berinsky depicts this process through an example of the run up to America’s involvement in Kosovo. One party is arguing to authorize the use of force, the other is pointing out the dangers of combat (“Americans are...going to come home in body bags,” one Senator cautioned) (86). What sounds like the debates surrounding the Iraq War, with Republicans insisting on the use of force and Democrats pushing against them turns out to be a debate about entering Kosovo with Democrats playing the hawks and Republicans

doves. In this instance, Democratic citizens were more likely to support the use of force than Republican ones. Further, Berinsky tellingly shows that those citizens who took their political cues from FDR were ready for intervention in World War II well before the bombing of Pearl Harbor (51-2).

So elites lead the public to support or oppose wars. But don't elites read polls as well? Didn't George W. Bush create an Iraq Study Group partly due to pressure from the public? Aren't elections the ultimate lever for telling elites that the public doesn't like what they are doing? If elites read polls, and I contend that some do, then one could imagine an infinite regress of elite cues leading to public opinion leading to elite cues leading to public opinion, etc.

More importantly, how does the view that the public simply follows elite cues in making decisions about something as important as going to war reflect on our democracy? Berinsky writes that, "the magnitude of the partisan differences over the Iraq War is unparalleled in the history of opinion polling" (218). Could this simply be because elites are divided on Iraq? That can't be, because as Berinsky proffers, Democratic politicians were notoriously confused about whether to support the 2003 conflict or not (30). The mass protest movement against the Iraq War that took hold all over the country and the world though not dealt with in this book, was, in this reviewer's opinion, not simply the work of the public taking cues from politicians.

Still, Berinsky shows that as the Iraq War progressed, support for the conflict became increasingly polarized as Democrats began to staunchly oppose a war that Republicans staunchly supported (218). The two sides even perceived general facts, such as the casualty rate, differently with strong Democrats more likely to overestimate Iraq War casualties and strong Republicans more likely to underestimate them (77). An increasingly divided government has led us to an increasingly divided public, Berinsky argues, particularly on this war.

The implications of these findings are troubling. If the public simply looks for elite cues when making decisions about war, then there is little hope for the brakes on war that Immanuel Kant and others hoped that democracy would enable. Instead, democracy creates a system where the public is manipulated into fighting wars of questionable merit. As stated above, the protest movement against the Iraq War provides hope as do shifts in public opinion. George W. Bush and his strong partisans may have supported the Iraq War through his last day in office but Barack Obama was elected because a majority of voters stopped buying what Bush was selling.

What stands to question is why, then, America is more bellicose than other countries. If all democratic leaders have the same incentives to convince the public to go to war, then why is Europe so peaceful of late? One might explain this away by saying that Europe is militarily weak and America is militarily strong, so the incentives for America to go to war to feed the military-industrial complex are a special case. Or one might try to find examples of Europeans—or other countries—going to war or engaging in foolish battles

like England's fight with Argentina over the Falkland Islands. Explaining America's taste for war is a question raised by the book but outside its scope. Hope might come in the form of more female representation in government. Mirroring other studies, Berinsky witnesses a gender gap on support for war particularly when the word "war" is used (52-3). Women are less supportive of wars than men, so more female control of government could lead to less arguments for going to war.

From the perspective of peace, this book tells us, once again, to focus on our leaders. There may be just causes to fight over but most wars neither change the world nor bring about great national gains. Instead they bring human suffering and death. It is disappointing that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, democratic publics are still convinced time and again to send their sons and daughters to fight and kill the sons and daughters of other nations. The tragedy is two-fold: that war still exists and that reasons for war still exist.

*In Time of War* explains how the rally to fight wars—even World War II—does not enrapture all Americans. Instead, Americans look to the leaders they trust for cues about whether to fight or not. It is the hope of this reviewer that more leaders come to recognize the weight of that trust as well as the horrific magnitude of the decision to counsel war.