

Aiming at Doves: Experimental Evidence of Military Images' Political Effects

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Abstract

Politicians (and journalists covering them) assume that association with the military has political consequences. We propose and experimentally test conditions under which military images have such effects. We presented subjects with images of the US president before varying backgrounds—including soldiers, students, children, and “ordinary” people. Only the image of soldiers has any significant effect, shifting participant preferences toward spending money on defense over education. The image does this by increasing respondent sense of threats to national security, despite the military’s depiction out of combat and in the background. The soldiers image does little to shift opinion about the president. However, the image has the largest hawkish effect on both the president’s copartisans and the strongest supporters. Given the routine use by many democracies of tactics unlikely to produce images of one’s fellow citizens in combat, the power of more sanitized images to cue hawkish policy preferences requires increased attention.

Keywords

constructivism, domestic politics, framing, national security, experiments, political communication

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The belief that military images have important political effects is widespread among political operatives, journalists, and social scientists. Military personnel often appear prominently behind elected officials during speeches, in campaign literature, and on the websites of political candidates. Indeed, in a recent round of acrimonious budget negotiations, the American Speaker of the House explicitly recognized these images' potential power by accusing the president of "using our military men and women as campaign props" (Boehner 2013).

To date, scholarship has largely focused on the political effects of wartime images. In contrast, the average citizen may actually be more likely to see images of soldiers in uniform but *out of battle* rather than highly potent ones of conflict, war, and loss. What role do these more prosaic, even sanitized, images of uniformed soldiers play in individual decision making? And what are the implications for deliberations over national security, public spending for "guns" rather than "butter," and for international politics?

Constructing an argument that integrates political communication research, psychology, and security studies, we argue that even quite banal images of soldiers can shift the importance individuals place on "national security." In turn, this shifts respondent opinions about national defense. Our integrative approach draws on insights from "securitization theory"—which links security-related discourse to extraordinary political effects. Specifically, we argue that images associated with national security produce a powerful effect not found in other issue areas, leading individuals to break with their partisan preferences even when presented with information that should—following previous research—reinforce partisan attachments (Taber and Lodge 2006).

We test our predictions using experiments that take advantage of recent political events explicitly mandating government cuts to both defense and nondefense discretionary budgets. Manipulating the types of images subjects see, we show that exposure to a very weak treatment of soldiers standing behind the US president shifts the way individuals prioritize defense spending.¹ We fail to shift subjects toward prioritizing education with similar images of children and graduating students. Importantly, our test shows that the military images provoke perceptions of threat rather than patriotism, social desirability incentives, or simple partisan effects. Breaking with conventional wisdom about partisan patterns in opinions about defense spending, these images have a particularly intense effect for the most left-leaning individuals.

We make our case as follows: first, we develop a theory of the conditions under which images of soldiers can be most effective. Next, we take advantage of a unique point in American politics—budget "sequestration"—to experimentally test our hypotheses. Here we not only trace the effect images have on opinion but conduct a mediation analysis to trace whether these shifts are a function of an increasing focus on security. We also conduct several robustness checks to address alternative explanations for our findings through different experimental specifications and stimuli. We conclude by speculating on our findings' implications for the study of security and American politics.

The Role of Images in Political Discourse

Existing research suggests that the media have an intense power to shift what individuals think of national security (Boydston and Glazier 2013; Glazier and Boydston 2012). Visual images affect the types of considerations individuals use to make political decisions (Druckman 2003). Because visual processing is critical to learning, images have an informational capacity separate from that of verbal communication (Bucy and Grabe 2007). Further, an image can cue individuals to focus on a particular aspect when thinking through an issue and forming an opinion (Taber 2003), changing what they find important about the issue (Mendelberg 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002).

Although scholars have identified a number of mechanisms through which images may affect individual responses, agenda setting may have particular importance when focusing on the effect of military images (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972). Scholars of communication have argued that agenda setting can not only make a topic more salient but (in a process scholars often term “second-level agenda setting”) can also make certain *attributes* of a topic more salient (Weaver, McCombs, and Shaw 2004).² These types of agenda setting can occur through images. Focusing on elections, for example, Coleman and Banning (2006) show that images and other visual cues directed individuals to form certain impressions of candidates. While media coverage made the election and the candidates generally salient, the visual cues led people to focus on certain attributes of the candidates (Coleman and Banning 2006). In sum, the process of agenda setting can not only influence whether a person considers the topic important but also *how* a person thinks about that topic (Coleman and Banning 2006; Weaver, McCombs, and Shaw 2004).³

There is mounting evidence that images have the power to shape how people think and feel about certain political issues as well as the types of considerations individuals bring to bear on political decisions. Implicit racial images (Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002) can lead some individuals to take more conservative positions on issues such as welfare. National symbols such as flags and yellow ribbons can induce higher levels of patriotism (Schatz and Lavine 2007; Schatz, Staub, and Lavine 1999), increasing militarism and anti-internationalism (Sullivan, Fried, and Dietz 1992), as well as ideological conservatism (Schatz and Lavine 2007).

Within this research on the power of images, a foundation of scholarly work has examined the way military images, in particular, can affect public opinion (Aday 2010; Fahmy 2010). Much of this research, however, has focused on images that somehow relate to combat: soldiers either winning or losing a battle (Gartner 2011), wartime atrocities (Pfau et al. 2006), or “conventionalized casualty images” (grieving widows, a folded flag; see Gartner 2011).

We focus instead on prosaic *noncombat* images of soldiers. In these types of photographs, soldiers may appear only in the background, for example behind a politician giving a speech. These soldiers are not portrayed in any danger or distress and appear frequently in campaign ads and in photographs of political speeches.

Sulkin and Swigger (2007) show that in 2000 nearly 25 percent of all Congressional candidates included military images in their ads, and Democrats and Republicans were equally likely to do so. Moreover, in the last two weeks of the 2012 campaign, nearly 13 percent of all of President Obama's ads featured military images (Cox, Peçanha, and DeSantis 2012). Comparatively, the same percentage of ads focused on women—a group identified as potential swing voters in the 2012 election.

Both sides of the 2012 American presidential campaign invoked a crucial “commander-in-chief test.”⁴ The White House website highlighted images of the president with the military in its “2012 in Review” feature and includes a number of other images of both Obama and Vice President Biden speaking in front of or to soldiers. The Mitt Romney campaign, not having the resources of a commander-in-chief, was reduced to (unsuccessfully) pleading with the Virginia Military Institute “to select a few cadet veterans and give them a place of honor” standing behind Romney during what was billed as a major foreign policy address (Weinstein 2012). President George W. Bush also frequently relied on the military as a backdrop for policy speeches. The now infamous “Mission Accomplished” speech aboard the *USS Abraham Lincoln* obviously comes to mind, but candidate Obama complained of Bush's “photo op” visit to the troubled Walter Reed Army Medical Center during the 2008 presidential campaign (Bohan 2007). Despite their ubiquity, however, the extent to which these types of “public relations” style images of soldiers can move public opinion remains untested.

Military Images as Extraordinary Politics

While research on war images suggests that their critical effect will be through emotional responses, it is unlikely that public relations style photos will have such visceral effects. We predict that these images will instead set the agenda through which individuals evaluate political issues: perceiving threats to the state. Because of the deep ties between security and the state, we argue such images have potentially unique political effects.

We base this case for military images having powerful cuing effects on the continued relevance of the venerable notion, often associated with Hobbes and Schmitt, that providing security for its citizens is regarded as the state's most profound duty, a principal source of its legitimacy, and a means of extracting resources from the public. Securitization theory, often referred to as the “Copenhagen School,” builds on this to argue that an act of communication encouraging audiences to think in terms of security can shift politics into a different sphere (Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998). Ole Wæver (2011, p 469) recently summed the theoretical process succinctly as “a securitizing actor claiming an existential threat to a valued referent object in order to make the audience tolerate extraordinary measures that otherwise would not have been acceptable.” Originally theorized as a “speech act,” subsequent work has

expanded its attention to the use of evocative images (Hansen 2011; McDonald 2008; Williams 2003; Campbell and Shapiro 2007).

By this logic, invoking security can serve as a trump card in day-to-day politics. In political communication terms, securitization is a form of agenda setting, perhaps a uniquely powerful one.⁵ Even prosaic military images can encourage people to think in terms of threat and security, which in turn will lead them to support more hawkish policies, to the point of valuing defense above other political issues such as education. Equally important, we seek to test the assumption of security as a salient and effective political tool by observing whether the image of soldiers has a stronger effect than other, similar stimuli.

However, securitization theory rests on a foundation that assumes that nothing is inherently a security issue. And indeed, the deep resonance of military images for many people means that they have been employed for a variety of agendas. After all, in the United States, images of soldiers can provoke mourning when seen next to a coffin, inspire patriotism and barbecues at a July 4 parade, and sell beer and cars in Super Bowl commercials. How can the effect of generic images proceed from a general awareness of the military (first-level agenda setting) to a focus on threats to the nation requiring a policy response (second-level agenda setting)?

An Authorized Speaker and a Receptive Audience

To answer this question, we again turn to securitization theory and its emphasis on the ability of what Wæver calls the “securitizing actor” (also known as the “authorized speaker”) to link an issue to the safety of the state as well as the receptivity of the audience to the speaker’s message.

The extent to which a prosaic military image cues national security should rest in large part on its association with an actor understood by the audience as having the capacity (“social capital” in the words of Buzan, Wæver, and Wilde 1998, 33) to weigh in on security matters. In contemporary US politics, constitutional prerogatives underpinning the office and the trappings of the national security state clearly make the president—that is, commander-in-chief—the actor with the greatest authority to securitize (Kaufmann 2004, 41; Western 2005).

In tandem with speaker authority, securitization theory places immense theoretical importance on the receptivity of the audience, although empirical work on both aspects of the theory has lagged (Balzacq 2005; Léonard and Kaunert 2010; McDonald 2008; Watson 2011, 285).⁶ To explore receptivity, we look to partisanship as an obvious first step, at least in the American case. Research on political processing and communication makes clear that partisanship cues have a strong effect on message response (Zaller 1991; Taber and Lodge 2006; Nicholson 2012; Beaulieu 2014) and that individuals’ partisan identity heavily influences their response to political information (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997). Previous research on wartime images has shown consistent differences in response between Republicans and Democrats (Aday 2010; Gartner 2011). Combining these

partisanship effects with the idea that audiences are receptive to particular actors based on their security bona fides, we predict *differential partisan effects*, depending on the partisan identification of both the audience and the speaker.

In sum, we predict that an image combining the military and a speaker will effectively increase focus on national security with audiences responsive to the speaker (even if only subconsciously). Importantly, we predict this effect will differ from a simple partisan response to an actor's party identification. Exposure to military images under the proposed conditions will increase focus on security, leading individuals to shift opinions away from the positions that their party or even the authorized speaker may espouse. Put another way, were this a simple case of partisan cuing we would expect individuals to shift closer to the authorized speaker's end of the ideological scale. Under securitization, we expect them to shift their opinions in a direction that reflects a worry about national security.

The mechanism suggested here—increased focus on security—differentiates the power of military images from other patriotic images, from social desirability incentives, and from simple partisan effects. While military images are certainly “national” and potentially patriotic, we predict that soldiers will rouse different feelings than, say, a flag. After all, a flag represents ideas associated with the entire nation, while soldiers represent a much more specific aspect of the state. Soldiers will shift focus on national security without necessarily increasing patriotic or nationalistic thinking.

Expectations

Jointly, the theoretical arguments we discuss earlier lead us to three hypotheses. Our first hypothesis draws directly from the literature on communication and the power of images.

Hypothesis 1: Exposure to military images will lead individuals to prioritize national defense.

Having determined if such a relationship exists, we then turn to hypotheses derived from securitization theory to test the causal links between image and defense prioritization. Securitization theory suggests the importance of an audience accepting a speaker's authority, which leads us to the second hypothesis.

Hypothesis 2: Exposure to military images will have a greater effect for individuals who believe the speaker is authorized than for those who believe the speaker is unauthorized.

Since we theorize that images can guide people to focus on certain attributes of a given issue or topic, and our third hypothesis focuses on this mechanism. Bridging literature on agenda setting security studies, we predict that the prosaic images of soldiers—accompanied by an authorized speaker—lead people to focus on the

importance of national security. In turn, it is this focus on security that leads to the prioritization of defense.

Hypothesis 3: Exposure to military images leads individuals to focus on the importance of national security, which leads to the prioritization of defense.

Experimental Analysis

To test our hypotheses experimentally, we choose a military stimulus image that is unambiguous yet anodyne. We then expose our participants to this image (among others) in the context of a policy issue that is easily *but not automatically* linked to security: US budget sequestration. In order to uncover evidence of a successful securitization process, we invite participants to choose between budget cuts to defense and budget cuts to education. Our experiments use a highly conservative research design, in effect loading the dice against finding a hawkish response to military images.

Our experiments also account for a series of alternative explanations. We consider not only the effect of our pivotal images on perceptions of security and defense, but whether the same images can change opinions on other issues, whether the shifts in opinion are indeed mediated by perceptions of threat, rather than patriotism, and whether images of soldiers alone (without an authorized speaker) produce similar results. These additional tests reinforce our main findings.

To consider the way images of soldiers affect individuals, we leveraged “budget sequestration.” In late 2012, facing a political deadlock and consequent budgetary crisis, Congress and the president agreed that automatic cuts would be implemented at a future date absent a broader deficit reduction agreement. These automatic cuts were unique in their explicit mandate to cut equally both defense and nondefense discretionary spending. This mandate allowed a direct, timely, and conservative test of our research predictions.

While sequestration cut many programs, the comparison of defense and education provided the most controlled experimental approach. First, while defense is an issue typically considered to be “owned” by Republicans, government education spending is associated with Democrats (Petrocik 1996). As a result, our subjects should have “natural” positions given their party. Indeed, Pew surveys conducted over the past five years show that a majority of Democrats believe in prioritizing education, while over 50 percent of Republicans believe that strengthening defense should be a governmental priority. We therefore have an expected baseline that enables us to consider whether an increased focus on security can cut across partisan preferences.

Experimental Design

Treatments. Our hypotheses focus on the way exposure to prosaic military images affects perceptions of defense and national security. To track this relationship, we

design an experiment that holds constant most factors but randomly varies the image participants receive. In our main experimental analysis, all participants were provided with an article that opens with President Obama calling upon Congress “to support his deficit reduction proposal,” and containing information about potential cuts to defense and education spending. Again, the article’s primary focus was on deficit control and generic budget cuts. We subsequently used a nearly equivalent number of words to describe both types of cuts to ensure control. The article did not pit the cuts against each other as a trade-off but merely stated both would occur. The article contained a quote by President Obama encouraging Congress to come to an agreement on the budget. Importantly, the quote offered *no information* about Obama’s position on cuts to education or defense. All subjects received identical articles—only the accompanying *image* differed.

Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the six conditions. Condition one served as a control and did not include an image. Conditions two through six featured Obama speaking at a podium in front of different backgrounds. In condition two, subjects simply saw Obama with a generic pressroom style background. In condition three, Obama was positioned in front of people with no particular unifying characteristic. Our next two images depict Obama in front of populations generally associated with education: graduating students in caps and gowns (condition four) and a group of elementary school-aged children (condition five). Condition six was our pivotal group: here subjects saw Obama positioned in front of a group of uniformed soldiers (see Supplemental Material for text and images). All images were specifically created for this study. The image of Obama speaking is identical regardless of the background image, and we deliberately balanced race, gender, and the number of people in the background.

Our images include President Obama because of his unique securitizing capacity as commander-in-chief. As a robustness check, we conducted a separate study to ensure Obama was, indeed, perceived as “authorized” on security matters and that there was no Republican politician with equivalent status.⁷ Including images of Obama with graduating students and children allows us to eliminate the alternative explanation that subjects are simply using the photo background as a cue about Obama’s position in the budgetary debate. Including images of Obama alone allows us to ensure that the effect is not simply due to the presence of the president. A follow-up study also considered an image of soldiers without Obama (all images presented in Online Supplemental Material).

These images provided a controlled test of the power of prosaic military images, operationalized here through uniformed soldiers. They also provide a highly conservative test, since our study literally consigns soldiers (and other types of people) to the background. In short, we provide a very weak stimulus, using images ubiquitous to the point of banality.⁸

Dependent variables. We employ a traditional post-test-only design, as it is the experimental approach best suited for studies that attempt to track the effect of a single cue.

Our key outcome measures focus on defense and national security. Following exposure to our stimulus, we asked subjects questions about the extent to which defense should be a national priority and the extent to which education should be a national priority.⁹ We use the grouped differential of these measures as a dependent variable. We also offered individuals a list of many governmental programs slated to be cut by sequestration—including defense and education—and asked which programs they believed are most and least deserving of cuts.¹⁰ We use the proportion reporting that defense is most deserving of cuts as an additional dependent variable.

Our second set of outcome measures stems from a question about the extent to which national security is important to the participants. In addition to this measure of security, we also consider alternative mechanisms such as patriotism and support for soldiers to serve as checks of alternative explanations. We discuss all of these questions in greater depth as we present tests of our three hypotheses.

In addition to these outcome measures, we also measure factors that serve as important covariates. Specifically, we measure individual partisanship and approval of the way President Obama is handling his job.¹¹

Subjects. Subjects ($N = 582$) were recruited via the Internet, following Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz (2012).¹² The demographic makeup of a sample recruited in this manner comes closer to a national representative sample (e.g., 2008 American National Election Survey [ANES]) than previous undergraduate pools used to consider the effects of military images, particularly in terms of partisan identification (see Online Appendix for sample demographics and comparisons).

Expectations and statistical tests. The hypotheses we specify earlier are general. As a next step, we relate these hypotheses directly to our main experimental study and preview our statistical tests. Given that Hypothesis 1 states that individuals exposed to military images are more likely to prioritize defense, we expect that individuals who are randomly assigned to view an image of soldiers will score higher on measures of defense prioritization relative to the control group. In particular, given that our stimulus compares spending on defense and education, we expect the group exposed to a military image to be more likely to prioritize defense *relative to education* (as compared to the control group). In contrast, we expect that when comparing our other image groups to the control group, we should not observe any increased prioritization of defense.

Hypothesis 2 conditions Hypothesis 1 by including the role of the authorized speaker. Following this hypothesis, we will consider whether study participants who are more responsive to the speaker—in this case President Barack Obama—are also more responsive to the military image. In our tests, we will first proxy responsiveness through participants' partisanship, as Democrats should be more responsive to President Obama than Republicans. Given that we do not have a Republican politician who can serve as an equivalently authorized speaker, we conduct additional tests to ensure that our results are a function of our hypothesized connection to the

authorized speaker rather than simply being a Democrat. We also examine results for those who approve of Obama's performance as president, a group that includes non-Democrat subjects. Subsequently, we consider our results for nondefense issues. Finally, we compare our results to previous work on cues (Druckman 2001; Arceneaux 2008) which suggests that, to the extent the presence of Obama offers a partisan cue, its effect should also be reflected in opinions about Obama himself.

Next, as Hypothesis 3 states, exposure to the military image should lead to a higher belief in the importance of national security. In turn, this increased belief in the importance of national security should lead to the increasing prioritization of defense relative to other governmental programs. We use our data to conduct two types of analyses to address this hypothesis. First, we consider whether participants randomly exposed to the military image are more likely to believe that national security is important when compared to the control group. In this particular analysis, we also conduct tests to ensure that exposure to the military image is affecting perceptions of security importance rather than perceptions of patriotism or trust in soldiers. Second, we conduct an analysis of mediation that focuses on the relationship between exposure to the military image, belief in the importance of national security, and the subsequent prioritization of defense.

Although the design of our main experiment allows us to test all three of our hypotheses and although we use the measures included in our experiment to eliminate alternative explanations, we conduct two additional, smaller tests to address alternative explanations that our main study alone may not address. These additional experiments follow the same structure and subject recruitment¹³ as our main study but rely on different stimuli. The first smaller experiment traces the effect of an image of soldiers *without* President Obama, and the second considers whether an image with another uniformed group (police officers) can produce results similar to the ones we find in our main experiment. Since these additional experimental tests rely on the same dependent variables as our main experiment, we analyze the results following the same methods of mean comparisons to a control group. Although these smaller studies are not direct tests of our hypotheses, they work to reinforce the findings of the main experiment.

Results

We first test Hypothesis 1 and analyze whether exposure to an image of soldiers affects the prioritization of defense across the entire sample. Next, we consider results among the individuals expected to be most and least responsive (Hypothesis 2). For robustness's sake, we use multiple means of determining potential responsiveness. A final set of analyses focuses on Hypothesis 3 and relies on an analysis of mediation to trace the role of concern for security. Following a test of each one of our hypotheses, we also include tests of possible alternative explanations of our results.¹⁴

Opinion Patterns

Our first hypothesis is that exposure to images of soldiers should increase the prioritization of defense. To measure prioritization, subjects were asked about the extent to which education and defense should be a priority for the government. In two separate questions—one for defense and one for education—individuals rated their priority for each issue on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being “top” priority). To consider the relative issue prioritization, we subtracted the two scales to create three groups of individuals based on whether they believed that education should be a higher priority relative to defense, the two should have equal priority, or defense should be prioritized over education. We then compared the percentage in each experimental group who believe education should take higher priority to the same percentage in the control group, following previous research (Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Druckman and Nelson 2003; Krosnick and Brannon 1993b).¹⁵

Figure 1 depicts the full sample results: 57 percent of the control group subjects believe that education should be a higher priority than defense.¹⁶ This level of educational prioritization remains consistent among our noncritical treatment conditions. Indeed, both exposure to President Obama alone and exposure to him in front of children lead a higher percentage of subjects to prioritize education over defense, though this effect is substantively small and not significant when compared to the control group.¹⁷ In contrast, exposure to our critical Obama with soldiers condition leads to a statistically significant decrease in the prioritization of education over defense, not only relative to the control group relative to other treatment groups as well. While Figure 1 presents the results by group, Table 1a presents a difference-in-difference analysis that compares differences relative to the control group. Table 1a demonstrates that exposure to our pivotal image moves subjects’ opinion to a significantly greater extent than other treatment images.¹⁸

Alternative explanations. These prioritization shifts cannot be due to cross-pressures or changes in perceptions of Obama. If these shifts were due to an increasing uncertainty created by seeing Obama with the military (Huckfeldt, Mendez, and Osborn 2004), we would expect an increase in the number of subjects who rate the prioritization of education and defense in the same way. Yet, exposure to the pivotal military image does not lead to a statistically significant increase in the percentage of people who prioritize education and defense equally. A comparison to the control group produces a statistically insignificant difference ($p = .39$).

Further, if these results were simply due to the counter-stereotypical combination of Obama—a Democrat—with the military (Arceneaux 2008), we should also observe differences in presidential approval compared to other treatment groups (Druckman and Holmes 2004; Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Druckman and Jacobs 2006; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994; Krosnick and Brannon 1993a). We see no such changes in presidential approval (Table 1b). This is not to argue that posing with the military is meaningless for a political figure. There

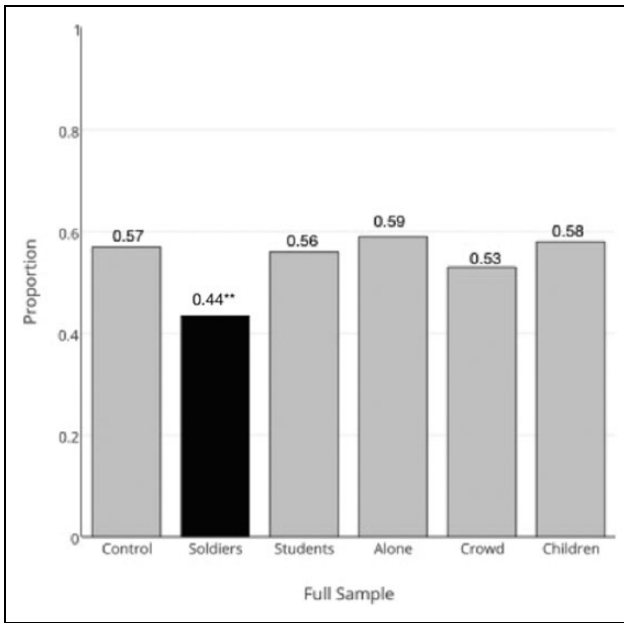


Figure 1. Percentage of individuals believing education should take priority over defense. The difference between the soldiers and control groups (as well as between the Obama-alone and children groups) is significant at $p < .05$. No other groups differ from the control or from each other (one-tailed).

may be other conditions under which the president's association with the military has a more powerful effect (our stimulus is a deliberately weak one). Nonetheless, our results suggest that the effect is not as broad and unconditional as conventional wisdom might anticipate.

In sum, our first set of tests supports Hypothesis 1. When compared to the control group, only the image of Obama with soldiers leads to significant decreases in prioritization of education relative to defense. In addition to this main set of tests, we address the alternative explanation that our results are simply due to a potential incongruence of observing Obama alongside soldiers.

Considering the Most Receptive Individuals

Our results suggest so far that exposure to our pivotal image leads individuals to prioritize defense over education. We theorize, however, that this effect varies with individual responsiveness to Obama—a relationship we posit in Hypothesis 2. Next, we test Hypothesis 2 using several different proxies for individual responsiveness to the authorized speaker.

Table 1. Difference-in-difference Analysis of Education Relative to Defense.

	Difference from control group	Comparison to Obama/military group difference
(a) Shifts in prioritization of education relative to defense		
Obama/military	-13.1**	—
Obama/students	-1.1	-12.0**
Obama alone	+1.7	-14.8***
Obama/crowd	-4.1	-9.0*
Obama/children	+0.04	-13.14***
(b) Shifts in approval of Obama by group (four-point scale)		
Obama/military	0.14	—
Obama/students	0.22	+0.08
Obama alone	0.19	+0.05
Obama/crowd	0.14	0
Obama/children	0.18	+0.04

Note: Difference in prioritization is in percentage points. Difference in approval is shifts on a four-point scale from strongly approve (1) to strongly disapprove (4).

* $p < .1$.

** $p < .05$.

*** $p < .01$.

In our treatment, the authorized speaker is Barack Obama, which means we would expect the greatest shifts among those most receptive to the Obama image. Most obviously, then, these should be subjects who identify as Democrats. Therefore, we first proxy receptivity using partisanship. Following previous research, we group together subjects who identify as strong, weak, and leaning partisans (Baum and Groeling 2009; Druckman 2001; Bullock 2011; Keith et al. 1992; Petrocik 2009).¹⁹ Figures 2–4 present the results, divided by party identification, for three different outcome variables that capture defense prioritization and opinions about the importance of defense.

We first examine our measure of prioritization of defense relative to education (which we used in the previous test) and consider Democratic subjects, as they are most likely to be responsive to Obama.²⁰ In the control group, these subjects are more likely to prioritize education over defense (Figure 2a). Conventional wisdom would predict that exposure to images of the leader of the Democratic Party may reinforce partisan preferences. Although our stimulus deliberately does not include any mention of Obama's position on education or defense, subjects may simply assume that Obama would behave in accordance to partisan issue ownership and thus be more supportive of education. In addition, research on motivated reasoning shows that exposure to information which pits an issue individuals support against one they oppose leads them to cling even more strongly to their original opinions (Taber and Lodge 2006). Put another way, previous work suggests that if

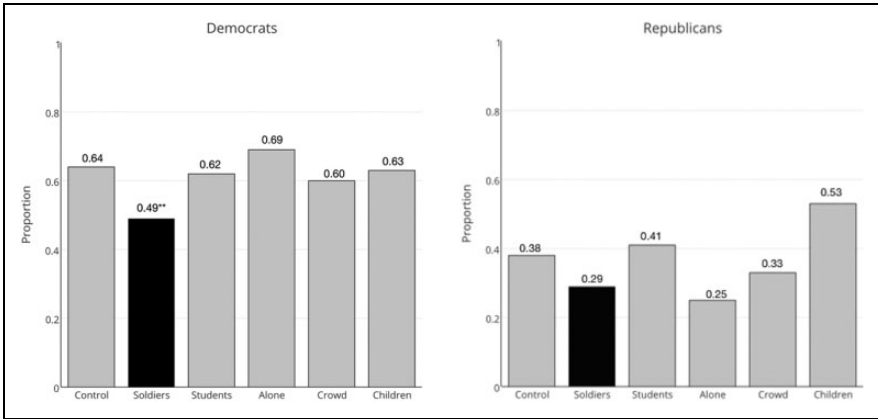


Figure 2. Percentage of individuals believing education should take priority over defense by party. For Democrats, the difference between soldiers and control groups is significant at $p < .05$ (one-tailed).

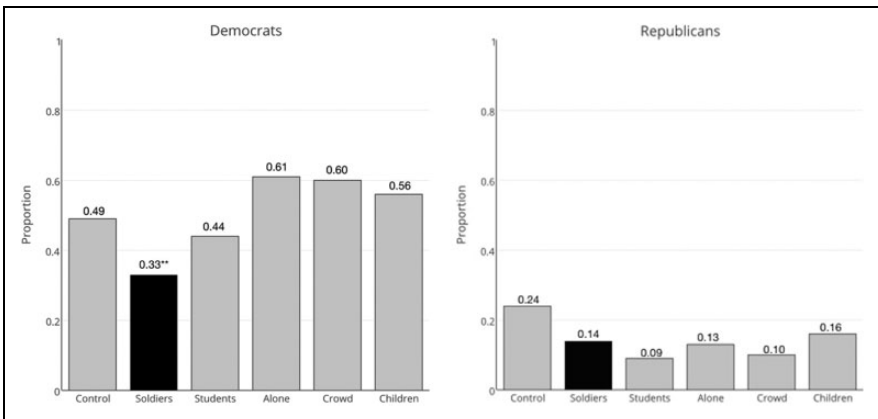


Figure 3. Percentage believing defense to be most deserving of budget cuts for Democrats. Difference between soldiers and control groups is significant at $p < .05$ (one-tailed).

anything we should see increases in support for education relative to defense among Democrats.

Indeed, Democratic subjects exposed to the image of Obama alone do actually increase prioritization of education relative to defense—albeit not at a statistically significant level when compared to the control group. Further, none of the other nonmilitary image conditions have any statistically discernable effect in comparisons to the control group. In contrast, the military image (and only the military image) produces a significant shift relative to the control group: a

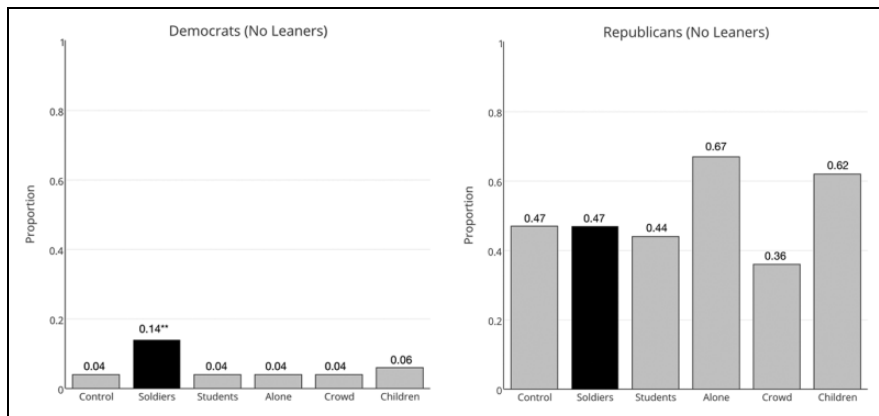


Figure 4. Percentage choosing to cut education in a zero-sum choice with defense. For Democrats, the difference between soldiers and control groups is significant at $p < .05$ (one-tailed). Results are for participants who identified as partisans on the first round of the partisanship question. When individuals who “lean” Democratic are included in the analysis, the soldiers group still leads to the largest increase (7 percentage points over the control group) in the percentage of Democrats (including leaners) who would cut education in favor of defense.

decrease in the percentage of Democrats who prioritize education over defense (Figure 2a).

Importantly, we cannot explain this effect by simply arguing that Democratic subjects saw soldiers with Obama and assumed he supported defense funding. If this was the case, then observing Obama with students and children would signal the president’s support for education funding, leading these treatments to have a stronger effect on Democrats. Furthermore, Nicholson (2012) suggests that partisan cues in the form of a politician often have little persuasive effect on members of the politician’s own party, which means that if our effect hinged on Obama we would likely see more minimal shifts. Instead, our pattern suggests that there is something particular about our pivotal military image in tandem with the president.

We see different results among Republicans—a group less likely to be responsive to Obama (Figure 2b). As expected, the Republicans in our sample are less likely, overall, than Democrats to prioritize education, although nearly 40 percent of control group subjects report a higher priority for education than defense (a rate, consistent with survey data, suggesting the unlikelihood of a floor effect). While we do observe that exposure to the soldier image leads to fewer Republicans prioritizing education over defense, this decrease is not significant relative to the control group, and it is substantively smaller than the effect for Democrats.²¹

We also offered subjects a list of areas (education, defense, funding for courts, NASA, farming subsidies, and subsidies for airports) that may face cuts as a result of sequestration. We then asked subjects to select the area *most* deserving of budget cuts. As we show in Figure 3a and b, when compared to the control group, Democrats were significantly *less likely* to report defense to be most deserving of budget cuts after exposure to our pivotal military treatment. Again, although relative to the control group we see a decline in the percentage of Republicans who report defense as most deserving of a budgetary cut, this decline is not significant and smaller than the effect for Democrats.

Finally, we conducted the most conservative test possible. We asked our subjects to choose directly between defense and education (Figure 4a and b), pitting these programs against each other in a zero-sum choice. To increase the conservative nature of our test, we consider “pure” partisans—individuals who expressly identify as Democrats and Republicans—and excluded “leaning” partisans. We do so as it is these individuals who feel the strongest expressive connection to their party (Klar and Krupnikov 2016). These are the Democrats, for example, who should be least likely to give up their party’s prioritized issue of education.

Our results again show the same pattern: compared to the defense, our pivotal military image moves Democrats toward a more favorable approach on defense, away from their partisan inclination to favor education. We see no effects among Republicans, reinforcing our theoretic argument that securitization is more likely when individuals are responsive to the speaker.

Partisanship, of course, is just one proxy for responsiveness to Obama as an authorized speaker. It is possible, however, that party does not fully capture this responsiveness. As a result, we conduct an additional test of Hypothesis 2, using a different proxy. Given that our treatment does not move Obama’s approval, we can use this as a different measure of receptiveness to an authorized speaker to ensure that our results are not simply a function of partisan effects. Within our sample some Republicans (13.1 percent) approve and some Democrats (also 12.4 percent) disapprove of Obama’s performance, similar to a February 2013 Pew survey ($N = 1,504$) in which 9 percent of Democrats disapproved and 10 percent of Republicans approved of Obama. We return to our prioritization differential (which we also used to test Hypothesis 1) and consider patterns by approval and disapproval of Obama, and we observe results consistent with Hypothesis 2 (Figure 5a and b). Across all tests, we see patterns that are nearly identical to our initial findings.

In sum, this second set of tests points to support for Hypothesis 2—even when we use potentially imperfect proxies for the extent to which a person finds Obama an authorized speaker, a military image leads to greater prioritization of defense among those more responsive to the president. Moreover, exposure to military images leads individuals to prioritize issues of defense even when this works against their baseline ideological interests. Our additional test suggests that this effect cannot be explained

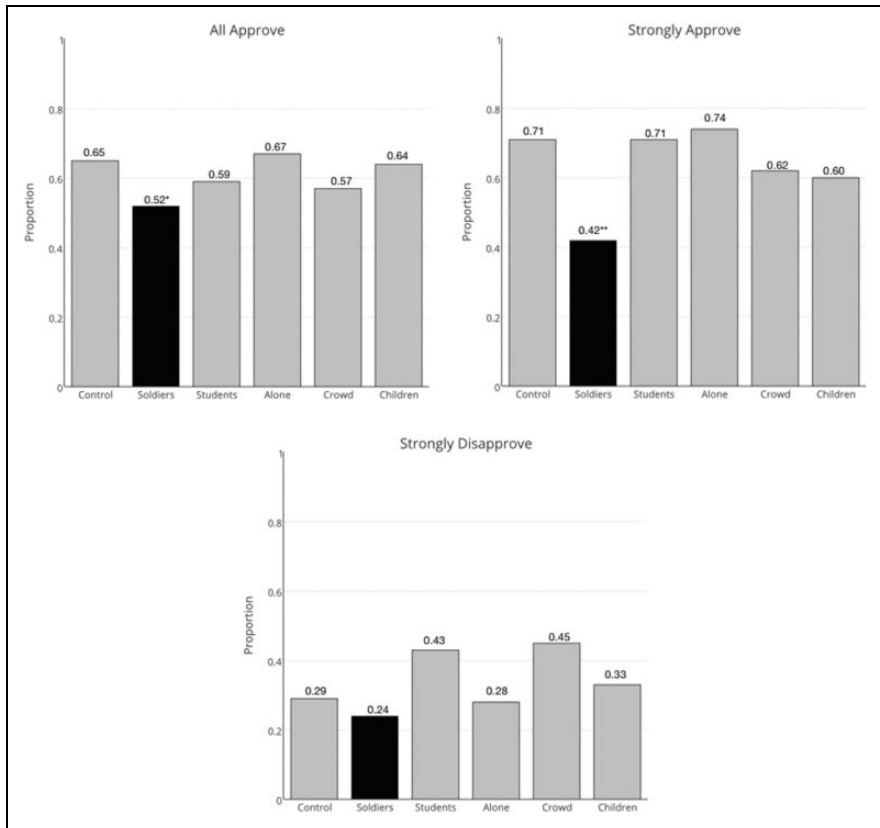


Figure 5. Comparison of education prioritization by Obama approval. For participants who approve of Obama, the difference between soldiers and control groups is significant at $p < .1$, for participants who strongly approve of Obama, the difference between the soldiers and control groups is significant at $p < .05$ (one-tailed). For participants who strongly disapprove of Obama and for participants who both strongly and weakly disapprove of Obama (not depicted), the difference between the soldiers and control groups is not significant.

by partisanship alone, nor can it be explained by the possibility that subjects are gathering position cues from Obama.

Establishing Security Concerns as the Mediating Link

Our theory links shifts in defense opinions to an increased focus on national security. In this section, we turn to Hypothesis 3 and consider this underlying mechanism. In the process, we also eliminate a number of other alternative explanations about the mechanisms underlying our results.

Table 2. Shifts in Security Importance, Patriotism, and Trust by Treatment.

Comparison to control group			
	Security importance (percent-point change)	Patriotism (percent-point change)	Trust in soldiers (ten-point scale)
Military image	+0.13**	-0.02	-0.11
Student image	+0.04	+0.05	-0.13
Obama image	+0.02	+0.01	-0.33
Crowd image	+0.06	+0.01	-0.19
Children image	-0.03	-0.10*	-0.14

Note: Security is measured as proportion reporting that defense cuts would strongly or somewhat affect national security. Patriotism is measured as proportion reporting that it is important to be American. Trust is measured on a ten-point scale, where ten means highest trust and one means lowest trust.

* $p < .1$.

** $p < .05$ (one-tailed).

Hypothesis 3 suggests a relationship between exposure to the military image, perceptions of security importance, and subsequent prioritization of defense. We begin to analyze this relationship by first considering whether our treatments move individual focus on security. Since we theorize that the process of securitization increases the perception of security importance, we consider this with a question that measures individual perceptions of how budget cuts might affect national security. Our results, shown in Table 2, support our claim. Across the entire sample, exposure to the soldiers treatment increases the belief that budget cuts would affect security by 13 percentage points relative to the control condition. No other condition shifts individual security perceptions. Because all individuals received *identical* textual information about potential budgetary cuts, these differences are a function of image exposure.

Although these results are already suggestive of the relationships we posit in Hypothesis 3, we consider alternative mechanisms. We use a patriotism measure from the 2008 to 2009 ANES panel study to consider whether our military image increased these patriotism perceptions, thereby moving opinion (Schatz and Lavine 2007; Schatz, Staub, and Lavine 1999). We also use measures of trust (Valentino, Beckmann, and Buhr 2001) to test whether exposure to soldiers led respondents to support defense due to beliefs about the social desirability of supporting the troops. Table 2 shows that our treatments affected neither patriotism nor levels of support for soldiers. In sum, to this point, our results suggest that defense opinions are moving as a function of security rather than other potential mechanisms.

To trace more directly our theorized relationship between treatment, importance of security, and opinions about defense, we turn to mediation analysis. Specifically, we predict that only exposure to the military image leads to a greater concern about security, which in turn leads to the increased prioritization of defense. In contrast, we do not expect this effect to occur under any other conditions because our remaining

treatments do not move perceptions of security. This mediation analysis offers a test of Hypothesis 3.

We calculate the average causal mediation effect (see Imai et al. 2011), which estimates the effect of moving from the estimated level of security importance at control to the estimated level of security importance under an image treatment, *while holding treatment constant*. This allows us to consider the extent to which the relationship between treatment and defense prioritization is moved by perceptions of national security (additional details in Supplemental Material). In tracing the mediating effect, we control for factors (education and income) shown to play a role in opinions about defense (Shapiro and Mahajan 1986; Bartels 1994; Caverley 2014, 69-86). Second, because our effects differ depending on subject responsiveness to Obama, we also control for individual partisanship. We do so in order to show the effect over the entire sample as well as to eliminate the potential for confounding effects. Further, since our approach compares a particular treatment group to another group, we compare each treatment condition to the control and then, as a check, our military treatment to the rest of the image treatments (Imai et al. 2011).

The results of this analysis reinforce Hypothesis 3. First, as expected we see that increasing perceptions of security importance lead individuals to prioritize defense relative to education. Importantly, these increasing perceptions of security importance only mediate the relationship between treatment and defense prioritization when individuals are exposed to our pivotal military image. Notably, in comparison to the control, increases in perceptions of security explain most of the relationship between seeing a military image and prioritization of defense.²² We discuss possible post hoc rationalizations, an alternative explanation for mediation mechanisms, in the Supplemental Material.

Issues and Uniforms: Alternate Specifications

Although our main study offers direct tests of, and support for, our three hypotheses, we consider our results with additional experimental specifications to test two alternative explanations for our findings. These additional experiments were separately conducted several months after our initial study (we ensured that no subjects from our initial study participated in any secondary study). The full results are presented in the Supplemental Material along with the treatments used in these supplemental analyses.

We first pitted education against crime instead of defense. Crime prevention is also considered to be a Republican issue (Petrocik 1996). If our initial results are simply a function of something particular about Democrats—which leads them to shift on Republican issues in the presence of military images—we should see shifts on crime in the soldier image condition. If, military images increase focus on national security—in turn affecting a particular security-related issue—we should see different effects in the crime study. Since crime prevention is largely unrelated

to national security issues, we should expect military images to increase focus on national security, with little effect on crime-related issue positions.

We begin by considering whether images of soldiers increase a focus on security even when the text of the stimulus does not mention defense programs. We see that, indeed, exposure to the image of Obama with soldiers in the background leaves individuals significantly more likely to believe that national security is important; no other image has the same effect.²³ This highlights the power of the *image* in our experimental study. Next, we consider the extent to which individuals prioritize crime relative to education. We see no significant effects depending on stimulus—in particular, exposure to the military actually *decreases* the prioritization of crime. This result reinforces our argument that soldiers cue national security-oriented thinking, but this increased focus only affects opinions on issues that individuals can easily relate to security—such as defense spending. Second, this suggests that our initial findings are not simply a partisan quirk or due to Democrats moving on defense because they had more room for opinion shifts.

A second follow-up study considers the effect of two new images: soldiers *without* Obama and Obama speaking in front of uniformed police officers. This study addresses two alternative explanations. First, it ensures that our initial results are a combination of an authorized speaker (Obama) and soldiers. Second, it ensures that our findings are not the result of the Democrats responding to uniformed individuals. Neither exposure to the president in front of uniformed police officers nor exposure to images of soldiers without the president shift perceptions of security importance that statistically differ from control.²⁴ Indeed, we observe a slightly larger (though statistically nonsignificant) shift when exposed to Obama alone, relative to either image. Similarly, when we consider questions of defense prioritization neither exposure to soldiers alone nor exposure to Obama in front of uniformed police leads to significant increases.²⁵ Moreover, exposure to police officers leads to a *decrease* in the prioritization of defense. These effects hold across the entire sample as well as for our Democratic subjects.

Implications: Sanitized Images, Hawkish Policies?

To date, research in both political communication and International Relations has failed to investigate the common use (at least in the United States) of noncombat-focused military images. IR scholars who study public opinion and conflict have tended to focus on intense, wartime images and eschewed examining the potentially important effects of more prosaic military images. Explorations of securitization, in which discourse about national danger can result in extraordinary effects on day-to-day politics, have yet to take advantage of experiments to test important aspects of its complicated, multistep mechanism. Finally, given the routine use by the United States and other western powers of unmanned aerial vehicles, offshore firepower, and standoff support of indigenous fighters—tactics unlikely to produce images of

one's fellow citizens in combat—the power of more sanitized images merits scrutiny for substantive as well as theoretical reasons (Caverley 2014).

In this article, we have used a synthetic theory and a series of experiments to establish a remarkable finding: military images in combination with the president have unique and significant effects on individuals' perceptions of threats to national security, encouraging them to interpret a budget crisis as a threat to security, leading them to support spending on defense over education. Moreover, these images' effects appear to be strongest on the individuals we assume to be most hostile to increased defense spending: strong Democrats.

That the stimulus is relatively weak—the soldiers are literally in the background—suggests the image's potency (and the experiment's external validity). Coupled with the ubiquity of such images, this suggests the potential for continuous reinforcement overcoming the fading effect over time of a single exposure.

This finding is robust to different specifications and measurements. We also evaluated, and dismissed, a host of alternative explanations. Little evidence exists that images of soldiers increased feelings of patriotism or engendered a sense of social desirability in those we surveyed. Appearing in front of soldiers has no effect on participants' assessment of the president's competence, which challenges the prevailing wisdom on military images' usefulness in passing the commander-in-chief test. That the president got little political “bounce” from appearing in front of soldiers is somewhat surprising.

The results demonstrate both the breadth and the power of agenda setting. Political circumstances (such as the sequestration case we present in this article) create agenda-building opportunities for the media (Scheufele 2000). In turn, the media cover these events, increasing the salience of these political events for ordinary citizens. Of course, media coverage often emphasizes certain attributes of an issue over others, and images in particular are one means of doing so. This process of focusing on certain attributes of an issue—which scholars often term second-level agenda setting—means that when ordinary people come to find certain issues salient, they also come to think of these issues in particular ways. Our work demonstrates one such example of this process: the inclusion of soldiers in an image with the president leads people to focus on national security and the need to increase the defense budget.

In generating our results, we seek to show how experiments can play a very useful role in isolating many of the causal steps intrinsic to the process of securitization: the potent role of images in creating a sense of threat, the importance of an authorized speaker, and the essential role of audience receptivity. To date, empirical work in this field has largely excluded such an approach (Balzacq 2011).²⁶ Our results also highlight the importance of theorizing about where a speaker's authority comes from, suggesting that one's formal position provides only a partial explanation. Audiences need to accept the speaker as authorized, and thus factors ranging from political party to gender and race are likely to play a role. Theoretically, the political communication concepts of first- and second-level agenda setting will help shed light on both when an issue becomes salient (i.e., migrants

crossing the Mediterranean) and when it becomes securitized (requiring a naval rather than a humanitarian response).

This article confines itself to the American case, but the same approach can shed comparative light on other countries' politics of security. On the other hand, there is little reason to believe that the effect is universal given variations in threat perception, partisanship, and the prestige of the military around the world. Cross-cultural research on audience receptivity to and authorized speakers' use of military images will lead to exciting comparative findings for civil–military relations, grand strategy, and political communication. Given the gendered aspects of military and security discourse, examining the role that gender (in content, speaker, and audience) plays in receptivity to these images appears to be an obvious next step.

This article's robust results have important implications not only for how we think about the domestic and international political effects of communication but also for how we think about the public and security. Conventional wisdom suggests that it is quite difficult to move people on partisan political issues. Indeed, by this approach, we should have been unable to shift the defense-related opinions of those on the political Left. The fact that we do see shifts—especially at the expense of education, a traditional concern of the Left—attests to the potentially unique power of security to trump politics (or at least political preferences) as usual. That it is possible to shift partisans away from firmly held party positions is an exciting finding for political communication. That the effect appears limited to making doves more hawkish may be an unsettling one for world politics.

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Notes

1. While our theory and empirical approach hold promise for understanding domestic and foreign policy anywhere, we begin with the American case. As the largest and most influential international political actor, with the world's most powerful (and frequently used) military, the way in which the US polity views its security has unique implications for the

rest of the world. We can expect that most readers will be sufficiently familiar with the American-specific details of the role of the president and the two major political parties, essential for the theory.

2. The two levels of agenda setting may also be divided along the cognitive (first level) and affective (second level) dimensions (Coleman and Wasike 2004).
3. Another mechanism is priming, a process whereby exposure to certain information leads individuals to give more weight and importance to certain issues when making political choices (Druckman, Jacobs, and Ostermeier 2004; Scheufele 2000; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Iyengar and Simon 1993; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002; Taber 2003).
4. For example, see the Obama campaign's statement on the third debate (Messina 2012).
5. And indeed, the long, historical process of linking the state to security and the American president to being the commander-in-chief first and foremost (Tickner 1992) may be a powerful example of agenda *building*.
6. Indeed, empirical work that quantitatively analyses public opinion data finds that, at least when it comes to immigration, the securitization process is more difficult than theory has suggested (Aydan 2014; Karyotis and Patrikios 2010; Messina 2014).
7. A majority of Democrats surveyed chose Obama as most qualified to discuss security. Given six plausible Republicans (including Mitt Romney and John McCain), the largest Republican percentage chose "Don't Know" and "None of the Above."
8. Such a weak signal enhances external validity but raises the possibility that we will only detect responses to Obama, encouraging Democrats to become more Democratic and Republicans more Republican. We address partisan cues in our results and robustness checks later in this article.
9. Taken from Pew study on political priorities.
10. Order in which subjects saw programs was randomized.
11. Utilizing standard question batteries from the American National Election Study.
12. Research has shown that recruitment via Amazon Mechanical Turk can replicate the findings associated with national studies (Berinsky, Huber, and Lenz 2012).
13. Participants from our first study were ineligible for these additional studies.
14. In the Online Supplemental Material, we describe a number of manipulation checks that account for randomization and subject ability to recognize the groups in the background.
15. Druckman and Nelson (2003) argue that grouping measures in such a way (rather than relying on a continuous combination of the two) decreases measurement error.
16. Seventy percent of respondents in January 9–16, 2013 Pew survey ($N = 1,502$) reported that education should be a top priority of the government.
17. All difference tests, unless specified, are t -tests.
18. The Supplemental Material presents a multivariate model of the education–defense prioritization.
19. Our joint consideration of education and defense relative to each other makes floor and ceiling constraints unlikely (see Supplemental Material for detailed discussion).
20. All comparisons are done using t -tests unless otherwise specified.
21. This difference between control and treatment group across parties is statistically significant.

22. See Supplemental Material for detailed results.
23. See Supplemental Material for results.
24. Difference between the control and the Obama/police officer image is nonsignificant at $p = .53$, difference between the control and the soldiers alone image is nonsignificant at $p = .49$ (both two-tailed).
25. Difference between control and the Obama/police officer image is nonsignificant at $p = .19$, exposure to police officer leads to a *decrease* in defense prioritization, and difference between control and the soldiers-only image is nonsignificant at $p = .87$ (both two-tailed tests).
26. This exclusion is often based on legitimate ontological and epistemological grounds (Tickner 1997; Wight 2006). But methods need not have an exclusive relationship to a given philosophical position (Aradau and Huysmans 2013, 3; Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009; Jackson 2010, 139). Patrick Jackson (2010, 101-2), for example, finds “laboratory experiments” to be more appropriate method for “critical realist” approaches to social life than for what he calls “neopositivism.” We argue that experiments are particularly well suited to securitization research, much of which makes explicit, causal claims from a nonpositivist and nonrationalist standpoint (Guzzini 2011).

Supplemental Material

The online data supplements are available at <http://jcr.sagepub.com/supplemental>.

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