

## **COMPARING IRAQ TO VIETNAM** RECOGNITION, RECALL, AND THE NATURE OF COHORT EFFECTS

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**Abstract** Cross-section samples in five states were asked in December 2004 and July 2005 whether the Iraq war is more like the Vietnam War or more like World War II. The Vietnam analogy was chosen disproportionately by those who were alive during that war, though the choice was not limited to exposure to the Vietnam period during what have been called the “critical years” of adolescence and early adulthood. The distinction between two forms of remembering, recall and recognition, helps situate the results with regard to past research on cohort effects on collective memory. Evidence is also presented against interpreting the present effect as related to the biological and social correlates of aging. Other results are included on the relations of analogy choice to partisan identification, gender, education, race, and region.

The Bush administration has regarded the Iraq war as part of the war on terror and sees the war on terror as comparable in scope and importance to World War II (Bush 2001). Critics of the Iraq war have viewed it as at best a distraction from the war on terror and as a morass similar in important ways to the Vietnam War (e.g., Krugman 2004). The aim of this research was to determine whether those who themselves lived through the Vietnam period are more likely than those in more recent cohorts to perceive the Vietnam War as the closer analogy to Iraq than World War II. As Mannheim has stated, only knowledge “personally gained in real situations . . . sticks” ([1928] 1952, p. 296), and thus those Americans born after the Vietnam War ended should be less likely to see it as a possible analogy. Additionally, a more specific hypothesis tested is whether the experience of Vietnam during the “critical years” of adolescence and early adulthood (Mannheim [1928] 1952; Rintala

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1968; Schuman and Scott 1989) is especially important for seeing it as an analogue to military involvement in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> At a later point we also consider the possibility that aging rather than cohort experience can account for the evidence to be presented.

Despite some important differences between the Vietnam and Iraq wars, in each case American troops were sent into a country very different from their own in terms of language, culture, and history (Packer 2005; Polk 2005). In both wars public frustration grew because of an enemy difficult to identify clearly and seemingly impossible to combat by traditional military means. At a point in late 2004 when widely reported violence in Iraq was an almost daily occurrence, the following question was put to cross-section samples of adults in five states (California, Colorado, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Texas, with final Ns of 812, 814, 824, 802, and 816, respectively):

Some people think that what the United States is doing in Iraq is like our fighting in World War II.

Other people think that what the United States is doing in Iraq is like our fighting in the Vietnam War.

Do you see the Iraq war as more like World War II or more like the Vietnam War?<sup>2</sup>

1. Of course, there is an implicit cultural location assumed as well, e.g., most young Americans but perhaps not most young Nigerians should recognize “the Vietnam War.” Moreover, as Mannheim has written, memories of an event can have competing meanings to different subpopulations, though these need not create differences at an abstract level, e.g., both those who believe the Vietnam War was a complete mistake and those who believe that the United States should have entered and won the war are expected to remember the war itself and even to remember it as “unsuccessful.”

2. The data were collected by SurveyUSA, December 14–16, 2004, using the recorded voices of local professional announcers. Random digit dial state samples came from Survey Sampling Inc., and repeated attempts were made to contact respondents within and between days (see <http://surveyusa.com/home.html>). The mean response rate for the five states, using American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) response rate 4, was 11.4 percent; the cooperation rate, using AAPOR cooperation rate 2, was 22.6 percent. When considering the low response rate, which was calculated in a conservative direction, several points provide confidence that the central results reported here are not seriously distorted by nonresponse. First, Groves (2005) has reviewed 31 studies that report nonresponse rates and allow estimates of bias, and he found little evidence across a wide range of response rates that the *size* of the rate is related to nonresponse bias (see also Groves, Presser, and Dipko 2004). Second, when Groves (2005) examined specific cases of nonresponse bias, he was able to identify conceptual linkages between the stated purpose of the survey and influences on response propensities, e.g., studies where nonrespondents have socially undesirable attributes related to the topic of the survey. However, there is little reason to believe that the content of the Iraq analogy question would have affected either ability or willingness to answer, especially as the question was asked immediately after respondents agreed to participate in the survey by pressing “1” upon hearing the opening sentence about a “two-minute public opinion poll.” Third, SurveyUSA polls proved more predictive of final vote counts than those of most other polling organizations when systematic comparisons were made over more than a hundred statewide 2004 election contests (Shipman and Leve 2004), which indicates that in one of the few areas open to rigorous test, sample bias did not subvert the expected relationships. Finally, past research on cohort effects on beliefs in different countries has shown relations to be robust despite large variations in response rates, as well as in many other survey features (e.g., Jennings and Zhang 2005; Schuman, Akiyama, and Knäuper 1998; Scott and Zak 1993).

**Table 1.** Overall Iraq Analogy Choices, with and without “Not Sure” Responses Included

| Analogy Choice | With “Not Sure” | Without “Not Sure” |
|----------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| % World War II | 30.7            | 34.0               |
| % Vietnam      | 59.6            | 66.0               |
| % Not Sure     | 9.8             |                    |
| <i>N</i>       | 4,068           | 3,670              |

The overall division in choice of analogy, with and without “not sure” responses included, is shown in table 1.<sup>3</sup>

### Construct Validation

The partisan split in support of the president’s decision to invade Iraq, both initially and looking back in early 2005 (e.g., Pew Research Center 2005), suggests that a similar division should occur in choice of analogies to Iraq. This expectation is borne out: 84 percent of self-identified Democrats chose the Vietnam analogy, as against 41 percent of Republicans, with others (independents, third parties, not registered) in between at 72 percent. In addition, given the more conservative orientation and military tradition of southern states, the World War II analogy should have greater appeal to Texans than to those from the four nonsouthern states (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2004). Among Democrats, 24 percent of Texans favored the World War II analogy as against 14 percent of those living in the other four states ( $p = .001$ ); among Republicans, the percentages are 66 percent and 57 percent ( $p < .01$ ).<sup>4</sup> Thus, the results for both party identification and state of residence support the meaningfulness of the Iraq analogy question.

3. Results can be cell weighted to Census data for each state on the dimensions of gender, age, race, and region. However, because weighting has only trivial effects throughout the present analysis (e.g., World War II, Vietnam, and “not sure” percentages change to 31.8, 57.8, and 10.4 in table 1), unweighted data are employed because of later use of regression (see DuMouchel and Duncan 1983). Furthermore, in the analysis that follows, we usually omit “not sure” responses. As is typically the case with “don’t know” responses, “not sure” was given significantly more often ( $p < .01$ ) by less educated respondents, probably because they felt too uninformed about both wars to judge, and also by women. It was also given more often by several younger cohorts and by the very oldest cohort shown in table 3. Evidence presented later also suggests that “not sure” reflects some ambivalence about the choice between analogies, especially for Republicans.

4. Although there no doubt have been changes over time in the composition of the five states that we sampled and of the overall American population to which we generalize, we assume that such changes would not have importantly altered the effects of the Vietnam experience on later beliefs. In support of this assumption, we note that apart from Texas, where a prediction was made in advance, there are no differences approaching significance among the several states.

## Results

We can date the Vietnam War itself in two different ways: first, as the period between 1965, when the United States entered that war openly, and 1973, when U.S. involvement officially ended; second, as the single year 1968, treated as the peak of public attention because of the impact of the Tet Offensive, as well as very high American casualties and such closely related events as Lyndon Johnson's decision not to run for reelection. These two conceptualizations of the Vietnam period lead to the same basic results and conclusions; hence only the evidence for 1968 will be presented in detail because focusing on the single year simplifies the calculation of the "critical years" for exposure to that war. Thus, those cohorts born between 1939 and 1956, having the age range of 12 to 29 in 1968, will be treated as in their critical years of adolescence or early adulthood during the Vietnam War.<sup>5</sup> Those born before 1939 will be referred to as "early cohorts," and those born after 1956 will be termed "recent cohorts."

Table 2 presents the percentages of early, critical years, and recent cohorts that chose the World War II and Vietnam analogies. The percentages are further broken by party identification, shown previously to be an important correlate of analogy choice. Among all three types of party identifiers, the Vietnam analogy

**Table 2.** Iraq Analogy Choices by Early Cohorts, Recent Cohorts, and Cohorts Whose Critical Years Include 1968, with Party Identification Controlled

| Analogy Choice            | Early Cohorts | Critical Years Cohorts | Recent Cohorts |
|---------------------------|---------------|------------------------|----------------|
| <b>Republican</b>         |               |                        |                |
| % World War II            | 56.5          | 51.9                   | 64.8           |
| % Vietnam                 | 43.5          | 48.1                   | 35.2           |
| <i>N</i>                  | 239           | 457                    | 616            |
| <b>Independent, Other</b> |               |                        |                |
| % World War II            | 20.3          | 26.8                   | 29.8           |
| % Vietnam                 | 79.7          | 73.2                   | 70.2           |
| <i>N</i>                  | 143           | 314                    | 453            |
| <b>Democratic</b>         |               |                        |                |
| % World War II            | 11.4          | 10.6                   | 21.5           |
| % Vietnam                 | 88.6          | 89.4                   | 78.5           |
| <i>N</i>                  | 280           | 502                    | 666            |

NOTE.—Early cohorts ( $N = 662$ ) were born before 1939; critical years cohorts ( $N = 1,273$ ) were born between 1939 and 1956; recent cohorts ( $N = 1,735$ ) were born later than 1956. "Not sure" responses ( $N = 398$ ) are omitted.

5. Mannheim, writing some 75 years ago in Germany, used the ages of 17 to 25, and some recent writers have adhered closely to that range (e.g., Krosnick and Alwin 1989). Schuman and Rodgers (2004) have found evidence that the wider range of 12 to 29 fit their empirical distributions slightly better, but the difference was not of great importance, and a start point of age 17 would have fit our present results more closely. (References to respondents "born" before, during, or after the Vietnam period treat ages of less than 12 as similar—from the standpoint of influence from an event—to not being born.)

was chosen most often by the early and critical years cohorts that experienced the Vietnam War, as against the recent cohorts that did not (early/critical years versus recent:  $p < .01$  for both Democrats and Republicans;  $p < .05$  for independents/others). At the same time, none of the differences between the early and critical years cohorts is large or statistically significant, and they are not consistent in direction. Thus the reliable contrast is between those who experienced the Vietnam War *at any age* and those who were too young to have lived through that war.

The result is further confirmed when the cohort continuum is broken into finer categories, as shown in table 3, where five-year groupings are used (except for the oldest respondents, where samples become quite small) and party identification is omitted to preserve adequate base *Ns*. There are six cohort categories included as recent (i.e., from 1957 on) and seven categories considered early or critical years. If each of the six is matched with each of the seven, there are 42 comparisons of Vietnam choices: for 41 of these the percentage choosing Vietnam is greater for the early/critical years groupings than for any of the recent groupings. Only the 1952–56 grouping (those 12 to 18 years of age in 1968) is at all ambiguous as to where it belongs: more detailed examination indicates that it is the youngest birth year (those born in 1956 and thus closest to our dividing point of age 12, as well as younger than Mannheim's dividing point of 17) that pulls it in the "recent" direction.

#### MULTIVARIATE ANALYSIS

To confirm and expand on the main finding from tables 2 and 3, we created the variable "cohort experience," with 0 = recent cohorts and 1 = early and critical years cohorts combined. Table 4 presents the results of regressing Iraq analogy choice (0 = World War II, 1 = Vietnam War) against cohort experience, with controls for party identification, education, gender, race, and state.<sup>6</sup> As in tables 2 and 3, cohort experience shows a highly significant relation to choice of analogy, with those who lived during the Vietnam years more likely to see that war as the closer analogue than those born more recently. In addition, party identification and state of residence show significant relations to analogy choice (Democrats and non-Texans choosing Vietnam more than Republicans and Texans); race and gender do not show relations to Iraq analogy, though gender is involved in an interaction reported below. If education is treated as categorical, there is also clear evidence that those with a college degree (but not postgraduate experience) are more likely to accept the World War II analogy than are those with either more or less education; this is

6. For party identification, the codes are ordered, with Republicans = 1, Democrats = 3, and all other party identifications = 2. Gender is coded 0 = men and 1 = women. Preliminary analysis of race/ethnicity showed that the only effect was for blacks to favor the Vietnam analogy more than all others (white, Hispanic, other); hence a binary variable was constructed, with blacks = 1 and all others = 0. State of residence is treated as categorical, with Texas serving as the reference category. Education is a five-level variable (grades 0–11, 12, 13–15, 16, and 17+), ordinarily treated as linear but also examined as categorical.

**Table 3.** Relation of Iraq Analogy Choices to 13 Cohort Categories from Oldest to Youngest

| Analogy Choice | 1906–26 | 1927–31 | 1932–36 | 1937–41 | 1942–46 | 1947–51 | 1952–56 | 1957–61 | 1962–66 | 1967–71 | 1972–76 | 1977–81 | 1982–86 |
|----------------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|
| % World War II | 25.9    | 32.1    | 29.5    | 30.6    | 24.8    | 26.6    | 35.5    | 37.2    | 42.9    | 41.6    | 38.6    | 36.3    | 34.9    |
| % Vietnam      | 74.1    | 67.9    | 70.5    | 69.4    | 75.2    | 73.4    | 64.5    | 62.8    | 57.1    | 58.4    | 61.4    | 63.7    | 65.1    |
| <i>N</i>       | 193     | 165     | 224     | 229     | 306     | 395     | 423     | 366     | 347     | 327     | 272     | 237     | 186     |

NOTE.—“Not sure” responses (*N* = 398) are omitted.

**Table 4.** Logistic Regression Results for Choice of Vietnam as Analogy to Iraq ( $N = 3,670$ )

| Variable                                     | <i>B</i> | Odds Ratio | Significance |
|--|----------|------------|--------------|
| Cohort Experience (1 = Early/Critical Years) | .48      | 1.61       | .001         |
| Party Identification                         | 1.06     | 2.88       | .001         |
| Education                                    | .01      | 1.01       | .79          |
| Gender (1 = Female)                          | -.13     | .88        | .10          |
| Race (1 = Black)                             | -.04     | .96        | .77          |
| State (Reference = Texas)                    |          |            |              |
| California                                   | .28      | 1.33       | .02          |
| Colorado                                     | .42      | 1.52       | .01          |
| Ohio   | .23      | 1.26       | .06          |
| Pennsylvania                                 | .42      | 1.52       | .01          |

NOTE.—Iraq analogy choice is coded: 0 = World War II, 1 = Vietnam. “Not sure” responses ( $N = 398$ ) are omitted.

consistent with past findings that point to college graduates as the part of society most aware of and accepting of a presidential administration’s worldview (Converse and Schuman 1970; Mueller 1973; Zaller 1992).

Additional regressions tested interactions involving the variables in table 4, with other controls included. The interaction of cohort experience and gender is significant ( $p < .01$ ) and reflects the fact that the increase between recent and all older cohorts in choice of the Vietnam analogue is greater for women (13 percentage points) than for men (five percentage points)—a finding we return to in the discussion below. Less certain in reliability or interpretation is a possible interaction involving party identification ( $p = .09$ ); and three other variable interactions do not approach significance.

Previously the “not sure” response to the Iraq analogy question was shown to be similar to typical “don’t know” answers: it is given disproportionately by those lower in education, by women, and by both the youngest and the oldest cohorts. There is also indirect evidence that “not sure” responses reflect some ambivalence about the choice between the World War II and Vietnam analogies. In table 2 Democrats are overwhelmingly in favor of the Vietnam analogue, whereas Republicans are more evenly divided between the two choices. If “not sure” responses are included in the table, Republicans are also twice as likely to give “not sure” answers than are Democrats: 13.4 percent to 6.1 percent. The two findings suggest greater conflict on the part of Republicans than Democrats in deciding between the two analogies.

#### REPLICATION

Our original questionnaire did not rotate the alternatives “World War II” and “Vietnam” and thus could have been subject to a response order effect (Knäuper

1999; Schuman and Presser [1981] 1996). We were able to gather new data for Ohio in July 2005 with an instrument that randomly varied the order of the two alternatives, and there is no sign of such an effect ( $p > .20$ ;  $N = 1,019$ ). The new data also successfully replicate the results shown in tables 2 and 4 and, with a little less precision (probably because the 13 cohort subsamples are much smaller), the table 3 details as well. As with the original data, the contrast is between all those who lived through the Vietnam War and those too young to have done so ( $\tau\beta = .10$ ;  $p = .002$ ), and there is no sign of a specific “critical years” effect ( $\tau\beta = .01$ ;  $p = .88$ ).<sup>7</sup> Of additional interest, there is no indication of a change in the choice of analogies by Ohio respondents between the December 2004 and the July 2005 survey administrations (e.g., 59.0 percent chose the Vietnam analogy in December, and 58.2 percent chose it in July).

## Discussion

Hypotheses about the effects of cohort experience can be stated in two versions. First, “extended cohort experience” applies to all persons alive and past early childhood when an important event occurs, as against all those who appear on the scene at a later point. Schuman and Corning (2000) have found that recognition and correct identification of particular facts from the past (e.g., the meaning of the phrase “the Doctors’ Plot” to Russian respondents) reflect mainly this kind of extended cohort effect. A second, more sharply focused “critical years” hypothesis deriving from Mannheim ([1928] 1952) is that an important event experienced during the years of adolescence and early adulthood (e.g., the assassination of President Kennedy) makes such a strong impact on memory that it is readily recalled later with no cue other than the request to mention an important event from the past.

The results of the present study of preferred analogies to the Iraq war fit the “extended cohort experience” model rather than the “critical years” model. There is a highly reliable and substantively strong preference for the Vietnam analogy to the Iraq war by those who lived through the Vietnam period at any age. However, there is no evidence that the Vietnam analogy is chosen more by those who were in their critical years of adolescence or early adulthood during that war, as against all those who were alive at the time. This conclusion makes sense because the Iraq analogy question is initially a matter of “recognition,” with the two analogies presented to respondents and their task being to judge their relative applicability. The question does not call for spontaneous recall of an important event from the past. There may not be a hard and fast rule, but it seems probable that the free recall of an event as especially

7. However, it is interesting to note in table 3 that among the recent cohorts the youngest (those born in 1982–86) were relatively high in choice of the Vietnam analogy; the same is true in the Ohio replication (71 percent choice of Vietnam). This suggests an additional learning process among the very young that differs from direct cohort experience.



important is most likely among those who experienced it during their critical years, whereas the simpler memory task of recognition prior to judgment will hold more broadly for all those alive at the time.<sup>8</sup>

Although the results presented here point to the lasting effect of cohort experience during the Vietnam period, we must consider the possibility of an entirely different interpretation. If choice of the World War II analogy by younger respondents can be seen as a form of support for the Iraq war, one might look to age and its physiological and social correlates for an explanation, rather than to cohort experience (Goldstein 2001). For example, what might be called the “testosterone hypothesis” would suggest that younger respondents, especially younger men, are more likely to find the call to war more appealing on average than older men and than women, regardless of past experience. As age and birth cohort are different ways of viewing the same continuum, cohort and age explanations cannot be distinguished statistically, but we can consider indirect evidence to evaluate an interpretation in terms of physiological or social correlates of age (Glenn 2005).

First, in a February 2005 Pew Research Center poll, older American men supported remaining in Iraq more than did younger men (66 percent of men 50 and older versus 62 percent of men 18 to 49), which is the reverse of the age hypothesis. Second, although the same Pew poll shows that among younger Americans (18 to 49), men are more in favor of remaining in Iraq than women (62 as against 47 percent), within the Iraq analogy data for recent cohorts, the trend is for men more than women to choose the Vietnam analogue (63 to 59 percent, n.s.). Third, if an interaction term for cohort by gender is added to the regression shown in table 4, women show a significantly greater difference than do men between recent and older cohorts ( $p < .01$ ) in choosing the Vietnam analogue, so it is women rather than men who especially differ by age. In sum, an explanation in terms of the nature of aging is considerably less persuasive than an explanation in terms of cohort experience.

Turning to the larger issue of the importance of cohort experience for attitudes toward the Iraq war, no claim is made that such experience shapes attitudes toward future policy in a rigid fashion. It seems reasonable to believe, however, that those who see Vietnam rather than World War II as the better analogue for the Iraq war will be more supportive of the withdrawal of troops to the extent it becomes an active question for Americans to decide. Thus a collective memory of the Vietnam experience by those who lived through that period could prove to be one factor contributing to a change in individual attitudes and perhaps in collective policy as well.<sup>9</sup>

8. The traditional distinction between recall and recognition is discussed in several chapters in Tulving and Craik (2000). For a striking example of the difference in difficulty between recall and recognition of names of congressional representatives, see Tedin and Murray (1979).

9. An important turnaround occurred in Congress as this article was completed: Representative John Murtha, a highly decorated Marine veteran from the Vietnam period, reversed his previous strong support for the war and openly advocated removal of U.S. troops from Iraq.

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