
Revisiting Downs' Issue-Attention Cycle: International Terrorism and U.S. Public Opinion

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Revisiting Downs' Issue-Attention Cycle: International Terrorism and U.S. Public Opinion

Abstract

Lamenting the lack of public awareness of international events and U.S. foreign policy is not a particularly novel exercise; yet, explaining the process by which issues enter and exit the public realm remains a challenging endeavor. Despite contributions from researchers working in international relations and mass communication, explaining public inattentiveness continues to vex scholars. However, in his article, "Up and Down with Ecology: The 'Issue-Attention Cycle,'" Anthony Downs provides a parsimonious and tractable model of public opinion that can be applied to foreign policy issues.¹ While Downs concerns himself exclusively with domestic issues, particularly environmental issues, his model has the potential to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between the public and policymakers over critical issues such as international terrorism. With minor modifications, the model has the potential to explain public support for failed foreign policies as well. Downs' model, when applied to international terrorism, explains why policymakers seek simple solutions, why the public supports such solutions, and why the media fail to provide meaningful coverage of intractable issues such as international terrorism. Before discussing Downs' model, the basic tenets and shortcomings of some of the more prevalent theories of the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy are discussed below.

Revisiting Downs' Issue-Attention Cycle: International Terrorism and U.S. Public Opinion

By Karen K. Petersen

Introduction

Lamenting the lack of public awareness of international events and U.S. foreign policy is not a particularly novel exercise; yet, explaining the process by which issues enter and exit the public realm remains a challenging endeavor. Despite contributions from researchers working in international relations and mass communication, explaining public inattentiveness continues to vex scholars. However, in his article, "Up and Down with Ecology: The 'Issue-Attention Cycle,'" Anthony Downs provides a parsimonious and tractable model of public opinion that can be applied to foreign policy issues.¹ While Downs concerns himself exclusively with domestic issues, particularly environmental issues, his model has the potential to contribute to our understanding of the relationship between the public and policymakers over critical issues such as international terrorism. With minor modifications, the model has the potential to explain public support for failed foreign policies as well. Downs' model, when applied to international terrorism, explains why policymakers seek simple solutions, why the public supports such solutions, and why the media fail to provide meaningful coverage of intractable issues such as international terrorism. Before discussing Downs' model, the basic tenets and shortcomings of some of the more prevalent theories of the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy are discussed below.

The Relationship between Public Opinion and Foreign Policy

Framing, or presenting issues in such a way as to influence the emotive reaction, fits within the realm of elite-driven public opinion theory. Robert Entman discusses framing as an interactive process he labels "cascading network activation."² Cascading reflects the interactive process whereby information flows from the top (administration) through the middle (media) to the bottom (public) with limited interplay up the "waterfall." According to Entman, all actors in the cascade model behave as "cognitive misers" who seek to "satisfice" rather than articulate fully

the details of a given issue.³ For issues that are congruent with existing perceptions (at all levels), the process of framing is readily achieved and accepted. For example, responding to a major attack (such as September 11), fits the parameters of the existing framework that dictates that the responsibility for protecting the United States belongs with the commander-in-chief and that the citizens of the United States were undeserving of such an attack. However, when issues do not fit pre-existing notions, generating a smooth process of information dissemination becomes more difficult, as we see in the period prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

Entman does have a role for citizens to direct information up the hierarchy; rather, the media act as a go-between for citizen framing. Unfortunately, citizen response to foreign policy events, an issue which has been perplexing public opinion scholars for decades, does not always follow a logical progression. The Converse-McGuire Model explains citizen preferences as non-monotonic due to variations in the probability of reception and acceptance: citizens who are moderately aware (receptive) and moderately partisan (acceptant to change) are most malleable for typical events, and the less aware are more malleable for high-intensity messages.⁴ Zaller's inclusion of the intensity of the message (based on Brody⁵) moves us towards considering that not all foreign policy issues should be treated as equal and even different stages in the same issue receive different levels of attention.

One of the most successful models challenging the assumption that foreign policy is an elite realm comes from communications scholarship on the influence the media bring to bear on foreign policy agendas, particularly the process by which agendas are constructed or influenced. Thomas Birkland defines an agenda as "a collection of the elements of public problems to which at least some of the public and governmental officials are actively attentive."⁶ Agendas range from concrete policy proposals to beliefs, and exist at all levels of government and society.⁷ Agenda setting is the process whereby actors attempt to get issues on or keep issues off the agenda, or attempt to control the content of the agenda. The role of the media in setting the agenda can best be described as a process (intentional or otherwise) whereby "through their day-by-day selection and display of the news, editors and news directors focus our attention and influence our perceptions of what are the most important [salient] news events of the day."⁸ The media influence "the salience of an issue, an influence on whether any significant people really regard it as worthwhile to hold an opinion about that issue."⁹ As evidence of the important role of

the media in the agenda-setting function, Maxwell McCombs discusses numerous instances in his book in which the media created a sensation of fear over issues that were actually improving rather than worsening.¹⁰

In contrast to the above schools of thought, Downs provides a model explaining the level of attention to an issue that allows the salience of events to drive the public reaction rather than relying only on elites or the media (as the framing and agenda-setting models do, respectively). Instead of viewing the media as the agenda-setting force, Downs posits that events drive public interest and that public interest determines media coverage. The model developed by Downs, while focused exclusively on environmental issues, appears to fit other critical issues, including international terrorism. After describing the issue-attention cycle below and discussing the applicability of each component to the issue of international terrorism and U.S. public opinion, a modification of Downs' model is offered and the potential implications for U.S. policy are discussed.

The Five Attributes of the Issue-Attention Cycle

While Downs' issue-attention cycle has received widespread attention in domestic politics, there is no reason to assume that the relative dearth of attention in international relations and/or foreign policy research means that the cycle is inapplicable to those areas. For example, Christopher Bellavita finds that homeland security issues do tend to follow the issue-attention cycle,¹¹ and Michael C. Hall finds that the stages of the issue-attention cycle "well describe" travel safety policies and public opinion of travel safety measures in the wake of September 11.¹² Extending Downs' model beyond the water's edge, while uncommon, does not lack precedent.

The five stages of the issue-attention cycle—pre-problem, alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm, realizing the cost, gradual decline of intense public interest, and post-problem—all fit the issue of international terrorism. Each of these five stages and evidence of the analytical leverage of the model based on applicability of each stage to the issue of international terrorism is discussed below.

The Pre-Problem Stage

The pre-problem stage "prevails when some highly undesirable social condition exists but has not yet captured much public attention, even though some experts or interest groups may already be alarmed by it."¹³

Clearly, international terrorism was a problem for numerous other states and for the U.S. prior to 2001 (at least since the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut). In public testimony before the September 11 Commission, then National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice stated:

The terrorist threat to our nation did not emerge on September 11, 2001. Long before that day, radical, freedom-hating terrorists declared war on America and on the civilized world. The attack on the Marine barracks in Lebanon in 1983, the hijacking of the Achille Lauro in 1985, the rise of al-Qaida and the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, the attacks on American installations in Saudi Arabia in 1995 and 1996, the East Africa embassy bombings of 1998, the attack on the USS Cole in 2000, these and other atrocities were part of a sustained, systematic campaign to spread devastation and chaos and to murder innocent Americans. The terrorists were at war with us, but we were not yet at war with them. For more than twenty years, the terrorist threat gathered, and America's response across several administrations of both parties was insufficient.¹⁴

While Rice meets the criteria of "expert," she presents a post-hoc analysis of the threat. The pre-problem stage is also supported by an analysis of news coverage of terrorism in two of the nation's leading periodicals. Mathew Storrin finds that while several high quality, in-depth stories on the threat of international terrorism had been published (even one in the months prior to September 11), articles addressing the issue of international terrorism accounted for only slightly more than 1 percent of the total articles he reviewed.¹⁵ However, during the period prior to the September 11 attacks, "a large body of work concerning terrorism was being compiled in the academic community,"¹⁶ indicating an elite interest prior to the September 11 attacks consistent with the pre-problem stage of Downs' model.

Additionally, policymakers in both the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. Federal Government left a paper trail of evidence relating to their concerns over international terrorism that dated back at least to Alexander Haig's announcement that opposition to terrorism would replace the Carter administration's focus on the advancement of human rights, an announcement that included discussions of al-Qaida and Usama bin Ladin.¹⁷ As described by Downs, the pre-problem stage fits public and elite perceptions of international terrorism prior to September 11, 2001, an event which propelled the issue of terrorism into stage two, the "alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm" stage.¹⁸

Alarmed Discovery and Euphoric Enthusiasm

Movement into the second stage occurs abruptly, according to Downs. "As a result of some dramatic series of events . . . the public suddenly becomes both aware of and alarmed about the evils of a particular problem."¹⁹ Despite the fact that the attack of September 11 was not the first attack on the United States or the World Trade Center, it was the first attack that was sufficient in scale to generate awareness and alarm in the public realm and among policymakers. The United States immediately mobilized for a "War on Terror" with all of the zeal predicted by Downs' model. Nine days after the attacks of September 11, President Bush addressed Congress and the global community offering the following rally cry: "Our war on terror begins with al-Qaida, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped, and defeated."²⁰ Three years later, 70 percent of respondents to a Cornell University survey responded somewhat or strongly favorably to the U.S. War on Terror, which, presumably, included Iraq by this time.²¹

Alarmed discovery and euphoria certainly seem to characterize the period after September 11. Eventually, however, public opinion about the War on Terror, propelled by an increasingly complex situation in Iraq and the deterioration of security in Afghanistan and Pakistan, began to turn against the war and the administration. Pew surveys demonstrated a precipitous decline in the public's confidence in the government's ability to protect citizens from further attacks, from 48 percent immediately after September 11 to 17 percent only four years later.²² Downs predicts a variety of disenchantments and explains their possible sources in the third stage of his cycle.

Realization of the Costs

The third stage in Downs' model, a gradual realization of the high costs of significant progress, includes awareness that "part of the problem results from arrangements that are providing significant benefits to someone—often to millions."²³ Intellectuals have debated the relationship between terrorism and various components of Western culture and foreign policy at length; however, the public discussion of culpability is far less well developed. This is, perhaps, the point at which the assumption that "the asymmetry between what leaders know and what the public knows" is a significant modifying factor when considering the role of public preferences in foreign policy arenas.²⁴ One could frame this as an asymmetry of intellectual training as opposed to simple asymmetry of knowledge. Practically speaking, the third stage involves the realization of the high costs and the low probability of success. In the case of the United States' over-

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seas contingency operations, the public perception centers on the flawed strategy rather than a flawed paradigm. Nonetheless, public support for funding the Iraq war began to wane even before the depth of the current economic crisis became apparent, demonstrating that at a minimum the public understood the costs.

Decline in Intensity of Interest

A key part of the third stage—the increasing recognition that the relationship between the problem and its solution requires inordinate sacrifice—leads to the fourth stage, a gradual decline in intense public interest.²⁵ As Downs notes, "The previous stage becomes almost imperceptibly transformed into the fourth stage . . . As more and more people realize how difficult, and how costly to themselves, a solution to the problem would be . . ."²⁶ Boredom, discouragement, and suppression of thoughts (or some combination thereof) causes the issue to wane and attention to shift to other issues that are now entering stage two.²⁷ Birkland provides evidence of the movement of the issue of international terrorism from stage three to stage four.²⁸ He finds that *New York Times* coverage of terrorism during the first quarter of 2002 was 60 percent less than the rate of coverage in the fourth quarter of 2001. By the fourth quarter of 2002, the rate of coverage had dropped by 80 percent, suggesting that movement into stage four began to occur shortly after the initial event (September 11).²⁹

Post-Problem Stage

The fifth and final stage, the post-problem stage, is referred to as a "twilight realm of lesser attention," but it is distinct from the pre-problem stage in that the presence of new institutions and bureaucracies continue to impact policy and allow for a higher level of attention than issues in the pre-problem stage.³⁰ Of course, Homeland Security is now fulfilling the role of a new bureaucracy and is likely to continue to do so for decades to come. While we may not have entered fully into the post-problem stage yet, it is likely that we will when the Iraq campaign ends (and in the absence of another major attack on the U.S.), and it is possible that we will remain there indefinitely. Figure 1 represents the stages of Downs' issue-attention cycle as originally conceived.

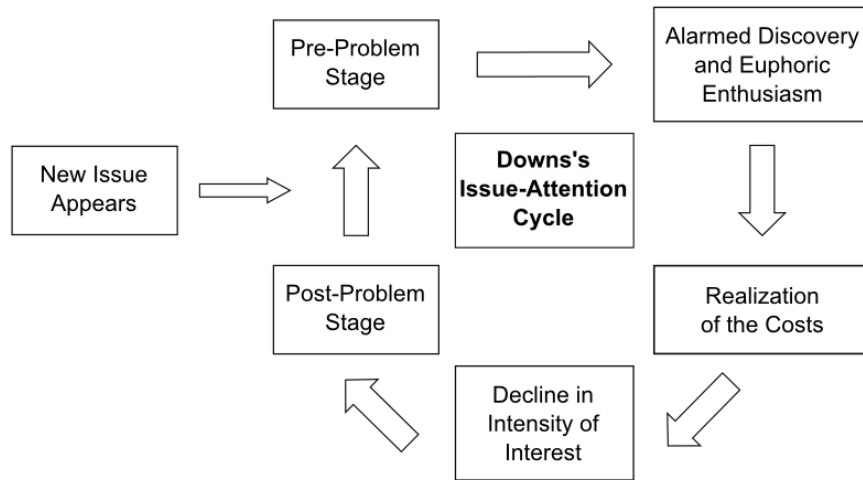


Figure 1: Downs' Issue-Attention cycle

Issues Prone to the Issue-Attention Cycle

Of course, Downs readily acknowledges that not all problems will go through the issue-attention cycle and posits that three specific characteristics increase the likelihood an issue will move through the cycle.³¹ According to Downs, "First, the majority of persons in society are not suffering from the problem nearly as much as some minority (a *numerical* minority, not necessarily an *ethnic* one)."³² Clearly, if one were to equate suffering with being a victim of international terrorism directly or even indirectly, then international terrorism meets criteria one. Second, the problem itself can be attributed to "social arrangements that provide significant benefits to a majority or a powerful minority of the population."³³ Academic discussions of international terrorism, particularly after September 11, tend to be framed in terms of "root causes," which often point to large-scale social problems like global poverty that have roots in social and economic arrangements that benefit the global north or the West. Other justifications for international terror attacks on the United States include the U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia, which traditionally secured access to key resources through our allies thus benefiting a majority of the U.S. population as well as the powerful, elite military-industrial complex. The final attribute of an issue

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prone to the issue-attention cycle is that "the problem has no intrinsically exciting qualities—or no longer has them."³⁴ While international terrorism excites academics, the lack of attacks on U.S. interests means that sustained public interest is unlikely. After all, the public paid little attention to the issue of international terrorism prior to September 11, 2001, and no longer considers Afghanistan or Iraq to be the biggest threats to U.S. security.³⁵

According to Downs, "when all three of the above conditions exist concerning a given problem that has somehow captured the public attention, the odds are great that it will soon move through the entire 'issue-attention cycle'—and therefore will gradually fade from the center of the stage."³⁶ This linear process occurs because condition one means that the majority of the population is not suffering and therefore will not be continually reminded of the problem. The second condition means that significant changes that would cause either social upheaval or painful concessions from the powerful (or both) would be required to solve the problem. And the third condition means that any attempt by the media to sustain the attention of the public would undermine profit, thus giving the media incentive to find a new, more exciting, or entertaining issue to pursue.³⁷

International Terrorism, the U.S. Media, and the Issue-Attention Model

Empirically, Downs' model predicts patterns of media coverage of international terrorism whereby we would expect to see very little attention devoted to the issue prior to 2001, which is exactly what Storin³⁸ finds as shown in Figure 2 below.

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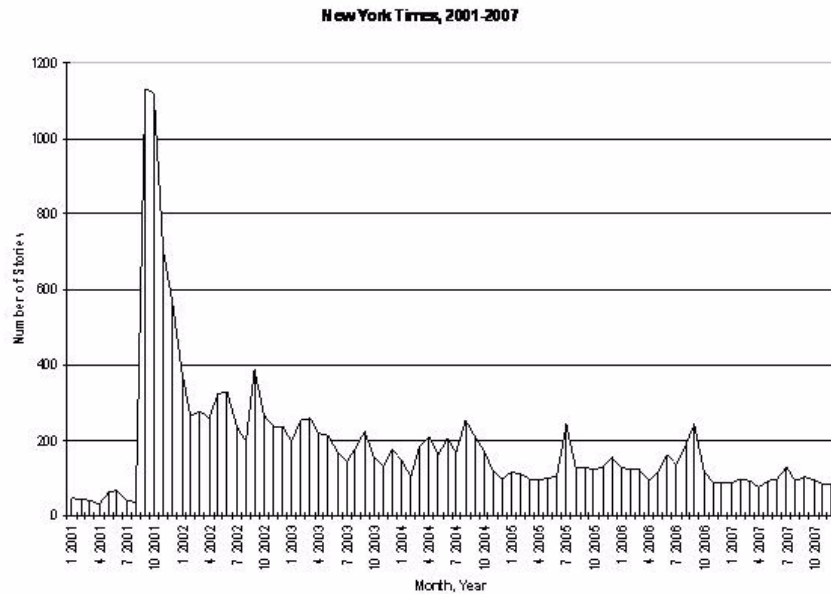


Figure 2: Frequency of Stories on International Terrorism

Additionally, we would expect that media coverage would be high for a period following 2001, but that the frequency would wane as the issue moves from stage two to stage three or four.³⁹ Consistent with that expectation, coverage is reduced significantly through 2007. Figure 2 indicates a steady downward trend in the frequency of stories related to international terrorism appearing in the *New York Times* from 2001–2007.⁴⁰ This downward slope is punctuated by spikes that correspond to the attacks in Madrid and London, but overall the trend holds. International terrorism appears to conform to the issue-attention cycle theoretically (as described in the preceding sections) and empirically with respect to media coverage.

While the issue of international terrorism conforms to the model as presented by Downs, one minor modification may increase the usefulness of the model without undermining parsimony. The modification and its potential impact are discussed below along with policy implications of foreign policy issues that conform to Downs' model.

Modifications of the Issue-Attention Cycle

Downs provides a parsimonious, elegant explanation of a problem that vexes researchers—the inability of the American public to focus consistent attention on important policy issues. As such, the issue-attention cycle has excellent potential in the realm of foreign policy analysis. As a "thought experiment," a minor modification to stage three is offered along with speculation as to how the modification would alter the overall model.⁴¹ Stage three (realization of the costs) is modified to include "asymmetry of understanding" rather than asymmetry of information. Clearly, policymakers (particularly at the highest levels of authority) will have access to information that is not available to the media and the public. While disparity in information access could create divergent issue positions, difference in access to information need not lead the public to become disinterested in an issue once it enters the issue-attention cycle. Now that interested individuals, at least in developed countries, have access to multiple media sources and more information than ever, the potential for the average person as well as for journalists to research issues is much greater than it ever has been. If anything, this new wealth of information should increase the probability that a given issue will attract public attention. This does not appear to be the case and can be explained with reference to asymmetry of understanding rather than asymmetry of information.

The purpose here is not to expound on why people might pay less attention than ever before (something Downs lamented thirty-seven years ago⁴²), rather I want to explain why an asymmetry of understanding might be important to the issue-attention cycle and other research on public opinion and foreign policy. Generally speaking, we are not doing a very good job educating people about international issues from elementary education through college. A 2007 Pew Research Center survey finds that "despite the fact that education levels have risen dramatically over the past 20 years, public knowledge has not increased accordingly."⁴³ The U.S. public remains woefully uninformed about history, geography, and other basic subjects pertinent to understanding international relations.⁴⁴ The significance of this lack of understanding to the issue-attention cycle is apparent in stage three where Downs predicts that a gradual realization of the high costs of success will occur along with the realization that the policies that lead to the problem benefit society (a majority or powerful minority), thus leading people to become less interested in the problem in general.⁴⁵

While there have been debates about international terrorism and its complexities, they tend to be either isolated to academic discussions or part of

over-the-top conspiracy-theorist weblogs, infrequently reaching the mainstream media. Due to a lack of understanding of the complexities of international terrorism, public perception of international terrorism in the U.S. may have cycled into the fourth stage without ever being affected by stage three. Evidence of this can be seen in survey research showing that almost half of the public remains optimistic about our chances of winning the War on Terror.⁴⁶ A reserve of optimism regarding the ability to win the War on Terror exists within the United States public/electorate due in part to the public's lack of awareness of the role of geopolitical and international economic factors that seem to provide motivation or at least a semblance of justification for those engaged in international terrorism. Perhaps optimism regarding the War on Terror is a coping mechanism, or it could reflect that the public lacks depth of understanding of the complexities associated with the causes of terrorism and its use as a political tool. While this may be a good thing for advocates of the war on terror, it does not bode well for our democracy. In addition to complicating the issue-attention cycle, such asymmetry of understanding allows policymakers to sell overly simplistic renditions of complex policy without the requisite accountability necessary to ensure the people continue to check the power of those who make such decisions.

Because the public lacks the will or ability to process the complex issue of international terrorism, the issue-attention cycle is disrupted in a fundamental way. Due to a failure to understand the complexity of international terrorism, the issue could become mired in a process whereby it cycles through stages two (alarmed discovery and euphoric enthusiasm) through four (decline in interest) rather than progress linearly into the final stage of a twilight realm where only the bureaucracy remains. The insufficiency of education about international relations in the U.S. contributes to the recycling of the issue because the public lacks the intellectual training to process the information that would complete the third stage (realization of the costs), particularly the attributes of the problem that benefit the few at the expense of the many. Any significant event (akin to an event that would precipitate the creation of an issue-attention cycle) could propel the issue back to stage two, as indicated in Figure 3 below.

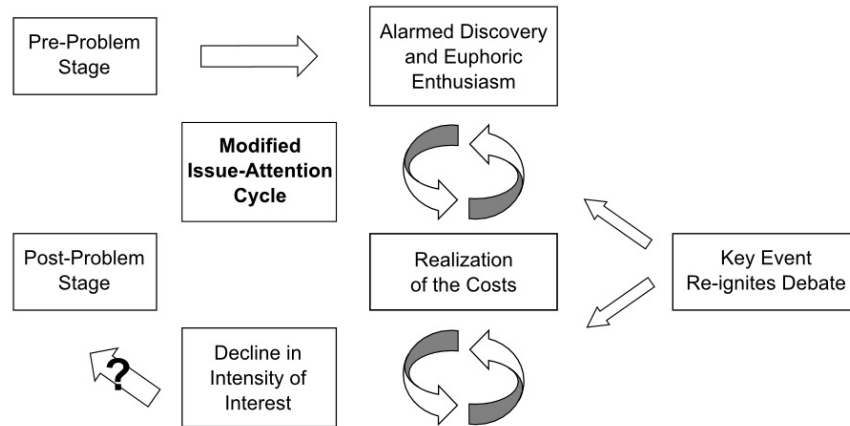


Figure 3: Modified Issue-Attention Cycle

With the change to stage three described above, the issue of international terrorism could continue to cycle through the core of the model indefinitely rather than entering the post-problem stage of lesser importance. Perhaps such a cyclical pattern could be positive? By keeping the issue alive, we could eventually create a constituency that develops enough sophistication to realize fully stage three thereby actually pressing policymakers to address international terrorism with more attention to detail rather than simply as a military operation. However, if such a change does not occur, the recycling of the issue could amount to carte blanche approval of failed policies, and not just failed policies either, but dangerous and expensive failed policies.

Policy Implications of the Issue-Attention Cycle

Attempts to understand the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy have occupied academics for decades. If foreign policy constitutes the "high politics" of the elite, then why are we so concerned with untangling this complex relationship? First, the foundation of democracy, at least theoretically, is the public, which means that understanding public opinion is both fundamentally important and politically astute. Second, reputation matters in international relations. Public support for

democratic policies sends signals to allies and adversaries alike (as does opposition to policy). The strength of public support can provide leverage in international negotiations whether that support is based on thoughtful consideration or otherwise.⁴⁷

If the issue-attention cycle (including the modification above) describes U.S. public attention to international terrorism, then we should expect that policymakers who attempt to deal with issues of international terrorism, in any way that addresses the nuances of cause and effect, will encounter little public support. Generally, the public should favor strategies that appear to be quick and painless even if such strategies are counterproductive. Eliminating the asymmetry of information may be the only useful strategy for moving the issue of international terrorism out of the issue-attention cycle. If the cycle can be disrupted, then perhaps the core problem can be addressed. Revisiting the issue that Downs first analyzed offers a glimmer of hope. Downs analysis focused on environmental issues and we have seen a re-awakening of at least one key environmental issue that fits the issue-attention model perfectly—global warming. Attempts to educate the public about the root causes and changes in behavior to combat global warming appear to be enjoying some initial success. "One series of surveys show that the 'personal importance' of global warming has increased considerably over the past decade, with the proportion of Americans who say that global warming is either personally 'extremely important' or 'very important' shifting from 27 percent in 1997 to 52 percent in 2007."⁴⁸ There appears to be growing support for policies that deal with global warming even at a significant cost to the public.

While education about environmental issues has begun to shift public opinion and, possibly, public policy, we cannot assume a similar trajectory with respect to international terrorism or other key foreign policy issues. Only if sustained public attention to the issue leads to more depth of understanding can we expect the public to push for more nuanced (even more costly) policies to address the issue of international terrorism. Until that time, public opinion and international terrorism policy will continue to demonstrate consistency with Downs' model and policymakers will continue to pursue policies that advocate easy solutions to complex problems in an effort to maintain the support of the electorate.

About the Author

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- 32 Ibid., emphasis in original.
- 33 Downs, "The Issue-Attention Cycle," 41.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 A Rasmussen Reports survey taken in June 2009 ranked Afghanistan and Iraq last among seven potential threats with only four percent of respondents placing either at the top of the list, available at: <http://tinyurl.com/myppp3> (www.rasmussen-reports.com/public_content/politics/mood_of_america/war_on_terror_update).
- 36 Downs, "The Issue-Attention Cycle," 41.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Storin, "While America Slept."

- 39 The frequency of media discussions is measured by examining the frequency with which stories about transnational terrorism with respect to U.S. interests or policies appear in the *New York Times* from 2001 through 2007.
- 40 While most Americans get their news from television, there is a great deal of congruence between the major periodicals and the content of television news. A comparison of the coverage immediately after September 11 of eight major newspapers and five major television networks revealed some differences. Overall, however, all sources shared the same top frames and in those areas "little difference was evident among different media . . ." See Xigen Li and Ralph Izard, "9/11 Attack Coverage Reveals Similarities, Differences," *Newspaper Research Journal* 24 (2003): 217.
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