No Man Left Behind?
Hostage Deservingness and the Politics of Hostage Recovery*

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Abstract

Kidnappings of soldiers, journalists, aid workers, and other civilians by armed groups happen every day, yet the politics of hostage recovery remains understudied. We develop an original theory about hostage deservingness that investigates how hostages' personal responsibility for their own capture shapes public opinion and elite decision-making. We also examine the influence of traditional principles associated with hostage recovery and the costs of recovery. Our multi-method approach includes the use of survey experiments embedded in large national surveys of Americans and 22 interviews with current and former senior hostage recovery personnel. Across our experiments, we find that when capture occurs under circumstances that suggest the hostage bears responsibility, support for recovery decreases, especially when costs are high. We further demonstrate that policymakers are similarly susceptible to notions of deservingness, which affects all parts of the recovery process: internal debate among policymakers, operational decisions, and messaging to the public.

The United States government has declared hostage taking to be a national emergency. In a July 2022 executive order, President Biden deemed hostage taking "an unusual and extraordinary threat to the national security, foreign policy, and economy of the United States," which endangers "the integrity of the international political system and the safety of United States nationals and other persons abroad."[1] Coinciding with Russia's "wrongful detention" of WNBA player Brittney Griner, the executive order underscored the longstanding problem of hostage taking. Hundreds of Americans have been kidnapped abroad in several dozen countries over the last two decades (Loertscher and Milton, 2015; Gilbert, 2023); according to a former director of the U.S. Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, "Not a week goes by without the kidnapping of an American citizen abroad" (FBI, 2018).

Hostage taking presents a dilemma for leaders. From the frequent airplane hijackings of the 1970s to the October 2023 kidnappings by Hamas, hostage crises force leaders to choose between the multifaceted costs of recovery and the political costs of sacrificing victims' lives. Existing research shows that the costs of inaction are central to targeting decisions: kidnappers are more likely to target democracies *because* democratic publics care about hostage takings and pressure policymakers to respond (Lee, 2013). This finding suggests that citizens of democracies would agree with the military maxim to "leave no man behind," expecting their governments to recover anyone in harm's way. Indeed, the U.S. government's chief hostage negotiator regularly stresses that "if you have a blue passport, your country's com-

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[1] https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/presidential-actions/2022/07/
19/executive-order-on-bolstering-efforts-to-bring-hostages-and-wrongfully-detained-unit
#:~:text=I%20therefore%20determine%20that%20hostage,to%20deal%20with%
20this%20threat.

ing to get you."[2] However, the prospect of universal hostage recovery stands in stark contrast to some countries' putative "no concessions" policies, which prohibit paying ransoms, exchanging prisoners, or giving in to hostage-takers' demands. Though diametrically opposed, both principles share a common assumption: that each individual kidnapping victim should be treated the same by their government. Yet the intense debate and partisan blowback to some hostage recoveries—from Bowe Bergdahl to Brittney Griner—reveal significant variation in elite reactions to and public support for hostage recovery.[3] Despite the implications for international relations and political science scholarship, as well as the real-world stakes for policymakers, we know little about the politics of bringing hostages home.

In this article, we develop a theory about the role of the deservingness heuristic in the politics of hostage recovery. We argue that perceptions of hostage "deservingness" play a central role in the recovery process shaping both elite decisions and public opinion. In contrast to universal principles such as "no man left behind" and "no concessions" often invoked in hostage policy debates, we argue that citizens and policymakers will view hostage recovery as government assistance that some, but not all, victims deserve. In evaluating hostage recovery options, people make value judgments about individual hostages—and in particular, whether the circumstances of capture suggest that the hostage bears personal responsibility for encountering danger. In doing so, we contribute to the discipline-wide exploration of how the deservingness heuristic shapes support for government assistance to

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[2]Ambassador Roger Carstens with Amna Nawaz of *PBS Newshour*, December 12, 2022. Online at `https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/hostage-negotiator-recounts-brittney-griners-first-moments-after-release-from-russia`.

[3]Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl was kidnapped in 2009 after walking off his military base in Afghanistan and later freed in a prisoner exchange for five Taliban officials. We discuss the Bergdahl case below. `https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/09/us/politics/griner-blowback.html?searchResultPosition=2`

those in need. We explore these dynamics in the United States, where such deservingness considerations are in tension with official U.S. policies that purport to ignore hostages' circumstances of capture.

We test the theory using a multi-method approach incorporating both public opinion data and policymaker interviews. We conducted experiments embedded in two large, national surveys of the American public (a pilot fielded in 2016 and a final survey in 2020) and 22 elite interviews with current and former senior hostage recovery personnel. We examine the range of factors that we hypothesize will influence recovery policies. First, we focus on testing the conventional wisdom of "no man left behind" and "no concessions," as well as our theory of hostage deservingness. Second, we contrast these principles with cost sensitivity in terms of the operational costs of a rescue mission and the amount of ransom demanded. Finally, we hypothesize an interaction between deservingness and costs, with deservingness considerations growing more salient as costs increase.

Our survey experiments show that public support for hostage recovery is high: in line with the principle of "leave no man behind," a majority of respondents surveyed support hostage rescue. The public also prefers rescue options to paying a ransom, a pattern consistent with the "no concessions" approach. Additionally, we show that respondents are attuned to the costs of the mission. Our key result, however, is the evidence consistent with our theory that support for recovery is conditional on perceptions of deservingness. The public exhibits the greatest support for recovering Americans who were captured while "just following orders" or granted permission to travel by the State Department. When the circumstances of capture suggest that the hostage holds personal blame for being in a dangerous situation, support for recovery drops—especially when the ransom amount is high or the rescue mission is costly.

Our interview evidence shows how these factors affect elite decisionmaking. Our study is the first to draw on interviews with current and former principals of the modern American hostage-recovery enterprise. Despite the official stance that the circumstances of capture (i.e.

deservingness) are irrelevant to recovery decisions, our elite interviews reveal that notions of deservingness and the public's approval of hostages matter a great deal in the hostage recovery process. We demonstrate that—like the public—policymakers are susceptible to notions of deservingness, yielding internal debates at the highest levels of government about recovery options. Furthermore, policymakers work to avoid public criticism both for rescuing blameworthy victims—and for failing to recover hostages seen as more deserving in the eyes of the public. Our findings suggest a disconnect between stated policy and policymaker responsiveness on this issue: While official U.S. policy makes no distinction among hostages based on their circumstances of capture, deservingness looms large in *both* public opinion and policymaker decision-making.

Our theory and findings make several important contributions to the study and practice of international politics. First, we demonstrate a new empirical context in which the deservingness heuristic shapes public support for government expenditures. We build on work in several literatures across the social sciences, including research on public support for social welfare programs, that note a pattern of the use of deservingness as a heuristic to explain a range of policy outcomes, including important foreign policies (see, for example Baker, 2015; Bayram and Holmes, 2020; Fraser and Murakami, 2022). Second, we further contribute to the literature on deservingness by showing the conditions under which it is more and less salient. Our theoretical insight that deservingness and cost sensitivity interact can apply to other public policies: as government spending on programs increases, the deservingness of recipients may grow increasingly important in the eyes of the public.

Finally, to our knowledge, this represents the first scholarly examination of the politics of hostage taking and recovery in target countries—a powerful and highly newsworthy form of international violence. In the United States—as well as other countries such as France (Simon, 2019) and Israel (Sherwood, 2010)—hostage taking captures the attention of the public and government elites alike; thus it is essential to understand the psychological pro-

cesses that motivate responses to these attacks. Because of the critical role of the public in pressuring policymakers during the recovery process, a focus on public opinion and its influence on elite decision-making is warranted. Thus, we join other recent scholarship that seeks to understand individual attitudes about important issues in international security (see, for example Mattes and Weeks, 2019; Myrick, 2019; Kertzer, Rathbun and Rathbun, 2020; Tomz and Weeks, 2020; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020; Dill and Schubiger, 2021; Kostyuk and Wayne, 2021).

Bringing Hostages Home

Hostage recovery decisions rest with the President of the United States. A broad infrastructure across the U.S. government—including an advisory board at the White House; an inter-agency, operational body at the FBI; and special envoy at the State Department—tracks kidnappings, generates recovery options, supports hostages' families, and carries out the actual recovery process.[4] Still, decisions regarding when and whether to recover hostages are elevated to the commander in chief. The fates of presidents and hostages are thus intimately intertwined, as presidents wrestle with the competing costs of action and inaction (Lee, 2013).

How does the United States government recover Americans kidnapped abroad?[5] Hostage-recovery options can be influenced by case-specific factors, including the location, demands, and identity of the perpetrator. The vast majority of kidnapped Americans are released fol-

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[4]For a detailed account of these offices, see Appendix 6.

[5]Following Gilbert (2023, 3), kidnapping is the "forceful abduction of an individual by a non-state armed group, including terrorists, rebels, and criminals." We focus on transnational kidnappings, in which "the hostages, the perpetrators, or the targets of demands are of different nationalities" (Kim, George and Sandler, 2021, 621).

lowing ransom payment or other concessions to the kidnappers; some die, fewer are rescued, and even fewer escape (Gilbert, 2023). Most hostages are released in exchange for concessions. While concessions, including ransom payments and prisoner exchanges, work to bring captives safely home, they can be costly (Gilbert and Rivard-Piché, 2021). Ransoms can be expensive, as kidnappers may demand tens of millions of dollars (Kim, George and Sandler, 2021). Paying ransom is sometimes impossible: kidnappers' demands may be higher than targets are willing or able to pay, and U.S. law prohibits paying ransoms to U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs).[6]

In such circumstances, military rescue missions present an alternative. If successful, they too have the benefit of recovering captives, plus they punish—rather than reward—perpetrators (Dyrud, 2021). However, rescue attempts represent the most dangerous time for hostages—when they are most likely to be killed by captors or die in the crossfire (Wright, 2009). Like ransoms, they too cost millions of dollars. Rescues require substantial, accurate intelligence and put servicemembers at risk. Rescue missions are thus seldom attempted and rarely succeed: Between 2001 and 2023, for instance, the U.S. military conducted or supported several dozen publicly known rescue missions, but among those missions led by U.S. Special Forces, only six hostages were recovered alive.[7] According to a government official, each rescue is an enormous production: "There may be 20 to 25 men on the ground, but there are hundreds if not thousands of people involved in the broader mission, including transit, intelligence, support, and tankers."[8]

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[6]Section 2339(B) of the material support statute defines paying a ransom to an FTO as material support for terrorism. See https://casetext.com/statute/united-states-code/title-18-crimes-and-criminal-procedure/part-i-crimes/chapter-113b-terrorism/section-2339b-providing-material-support-or-resources-to-designa

[7]For descriptive statistics on U.S. hostage recovery missions, see SI.

[8]Interview 02, May 16, 2019.

The Politics of Recovery

Kidnappings are highly salient, newsworthy events. As Chermak and Grunewald (2006) and Weimann and Brosius (1991) have shown, transnational kidnappings attract significantly more media coverage than other forms of violence. This has meaningful implications for public awareness about Americans kidnapped abroad. For example, according to a September 2014 *NBC/ Wall Street Journal* poll, 94% of Americans were aware of the kidnapping of journalist Jim Foley and his subsequent beheading by the Islamic State—the highest proportion of Americans aware of any news event polled in the prior five years (NBC, 2014). Moreover, kidnappings are precisely the types of events covered in many media outlets including soft news, which is likely to reach even the relatively unaware (Baum, 2002). Thus, although other foreign policy decisions are frequently insulated from public opinion because of American disinterest in the subject (Almond, 1950; Lippmann, 1955), the public is likely to be familiar with and animated by kidnapping cases.

Public attention is paradoxically magnified by the fact that hostage-takings often feature single victims. Hostage crises are subject to a "collapse of compassion," in which the public pays more attention to—and is more willing to help—a single, named individual than a larger group of nameless victims (Gilbert, 2023). Thus, attacks with fewer victims receive more attention than those with many, focusing the public on particular individuals. Public outreach by hostage families relies on this notion: By launching social media campaigns that highlight the plight of their loved one (Dias, 2017; Rezaian, 2018), families hope the public will pressure the U.S. government to respond. However, attention to single victims may make hostages' characteristics and choices more salient in the minds of the public and more influential to public opinion about how to bring them home.

Conventional wisdom suggests that the public holds two competing views about hostage recovery. One view suggests that Americans support a "no concessions" position, opposing government satisfaction of kidnapper demands for ransom money or prisoner exchanges,

regardless of price. A majority of Americans incorrectly believe that the United States has a "no concessions" policy (Mertes, Bohm and Huffmeier, 2021), in line with elite cues to that effect. For example, in 1985, President Reagan asserted: "America will never make concessions to terrorists. To do so would only invite more terrorism [...] Once we head down that path, there will be no end to it—no end to the suffering of innocent people, no end to the ransom all civilized nations must pay" (Auerbach, 1999).

Underpinning the "no concessions" mantra are several policy priorities: a refusal to reward bad behavior, an unwillingness to strengthen adversaries, and the belief that making concessions today will lead to more attacks tomorrow (Brandt, George and Sandler, 2016). The policy implies that some—if not all—hostages will die in captivity. Nevertheless, the United States regularly makes concessions to hostage-takers. If the public opposes making concessions, leaders who do so could face political costs.

Conversely, the public might oppose abandoning hostages. The military dictum to "leave no man behind" implies that governments should recover any captive, no matter the cost. Existing research suggests that this position is core not only to policymakers' response to hostage-takings, but in kidnappers' targeting decisions, too. As Lee (2013) argues, hostage-takers are more likely to target democracies due to the coincidence of press freedom and civil liberties: democratic publics know about—and are intolerant of—fellow citizens' remaining in captivity. Elected officials may thus prioritize hostage recovery out of concern for their own political prospects (Lee, 2013; Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020).

For example, public pressure to recover hostages may encourage policymakers to launch rash rescue missions, such as "Operation Eagle Claw," President Carter's ill-advised attempt to recover the 52 Americans held captive in the U.S. embassy in Tehran. Internal documents from the Carter administration reveal that the president's advisors unanimously doubted that a rescue mission would succeed, calling the possibility of rescue "self-defeating and probably suicidal" (Bowden, 2007, 212). In hopes of securing a potentially monumental political

victory, the Carter Administration launched a mission that even the planners expected to fail. According to contemporaneous polling, Carter was right to worry: 20% of voters cited the hostage crisis as Carter's "worst failure"; 23% of those who switched their vote in the campaign's final days said that the hostage crisis was the decisive factor.[9]

No Man Left Behind?

While "no concessions" and "no man left behind" principles push in opposite directions, both are unconditional beliefs about hostage recovery, which expect similar treatment across cases. Instead, we contend that case-specific heuristics shape the politics of hostage recovery. Building on insights from studies on welfare and support for the use of force, we argue that Americans believe that hostage recovery is government assistance that some—but not all— victims deserve.

First, we build on a large body of work explaining support for government expenditures like social welfare programs to argue that the deservingness heuristic affects individuals' beliefs about how government resources should be expended for hostage recovery. Research on public opinion about domestic welfare programs finds that judgments about how recipients came to be in need of financial assistance affect how individuals view the obligation of their government to help them. Regarding domestic welfare programs, scholars note that this heuristic follows from individual evaluations of the extent to which the poor are responsible for their economic condition (Gilens, 1999; Alesina and Glaeser, 2004; Alesina and Angeletos, 2005; Bénabou and Tirole, 2006). People make both backward-looking and forward-looking judgments by asking how individuals came to be poor (backward-looking) and whether they will attempt to improve their economic condition in the future (forward-looking) (Petersen

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[9]Clymer, Adam. "Poll Shows Iran and Economy Hurt Carter Among Late-Shifting Voters," *The New York Times*, A.1, 16 November 1980.

et al., 2010). The public responds to deservingness cues: if one induces Americans to believe the poor are less responsible for their economic condition, then Americans support redistribution at higher rates similar to Europeans (Aarøe and Petersen, 2014).

The deservingness heuristic is a key predictor of support for domestic redistribution (Gilens, 1999; Fong, 2001; Alesina and Giuliano, 2011). The deservingness heuristic also affects public support for foreign policy, including foreign aid and refugee policy (Baker, 2015; Bayram and Holmes, 2020; Fraser and Murakami, 2022). Moreover, judgments about intentionality and blame affect perceptions in international conflict (Chu, Holmes and Traven, 2021).

We build on this literature to theorize about hostage deservingness. First, governments must decide to allocate resources to assist hostages—through rescue missions or ransom payments—in the same way that governments decide to allocate resources to assist the poor. Second, as with views on poverty and personal responsibility, individuals may vary in the extent to which they think a hostage used bad judgment or was otherwise responsible for their own capture, or instead, if their capture was the result of bad luck. Hostages will be viewed as more deserving if their capture is the result of bad luck rather than bad judgment.

The contrast in the public response to two contemporaneous hostages—Captain Richard Phillips and Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl—demonstrates this dynamic. In April 2009, U.S. Merchant Marine Captain Richard Phillips was taken hostage off the coast of Somalia, where he was held captive by Somali pirates. Under direct orders from the President of the United States, U.S. Navy SEAL Team 6 rescued Phillips in a cinematic rescue (McNight and Hirsh, 2012). The American public hailed Phillips as a hero; President Obama said shortly after the operation, "I share the country's admiration for the bravery of Captain Phillips and his selfless concern for his crew. His courage is a model for all Americans" (Discovery, 2009). Captain Phillips's saga was later dramatized in the eponymous Oscar-nominated film, and the merchant marine was played by Tom Hanks.

While the response to Captain Phillips's ordeal suggests that Americans are invested in recovering those whose jobs put them in the line of danger, not all captured Americans garner public support. In June 2009, recently deployed Pfc. Bowe Bergdahl walked off his base in Paktika province, Afghanistan. Upon deserting, he was immediately captured by the Taliban and held by the Haqqani Network for five years (Rubin, 2019). When Bergdahl disappeared, the U.S. military immediately launched unsuccessful rescue missions, sustaining injuries and fatalities.[10] As one officer tasked with Bergdahl's rescue asked: "How does it make you feel when you've walked for 15 days straight looking for a guy who walked off?" The military knew "...that Bowe had left [his outpost] voluntarily, and now they felt like they were going through hell on his behalf," inflicting "major damage on morale."[11]

Years after multiple unsuccessful rescue attempts, President Obama authorized a prisoner exchange, trading Bergdahl for the release of five Taliban detainees held at Guantanamo. The U.S. military charged Bergdahl with "desertion with intent to shirk important or hazardous duty," as well as "misbehavior before the enemy by endangering the safety of a command, unit, or place." Nevertheless, President Obama was steadfast in his support for Bergdahl's recovery: "The United States has always had a pretty sacred rule, and that is we don't leave our men or women in uniform behind...regardless of the circumstances, whatever those circumstances may turn out to be, we still get an American soldier back if he's held in captivity. Period. Full stop. We don't condition that." Bergdahl's recovery led to vociferous, bipartisan outrage of the Administration's choices and damage to Obama's

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[10]*Serial*, Season 2, `https://serialpodcast.org/season-two/`

[11]From transcript of *Serial*, Season 2, Episode 2, found here: `https://serialpodcast.org/season-two/2/the-golden-chicken/transcript`

approval ratings.[12]

Accordingly, we expect perceptions of hostage deservingness to influence individual support for recovery efforts. This leads to our first hypothesis:

> *H1: The more hostages are perceived as responsible for their capture, the less the public will support their recovery through rescue or paying a ransom.*

Next, we consider the idea of cost sensitivity, related to the operational costs of hostage recovery. Casualty sensitivity is a relatively good predictor of support for military interventions abroad. For example, scholars have tested how casualties accumulated over the course of a war affect approval for wartime efforts (Mueller, 1971). Public opinion trends suggest that support for war tends to degrade over time as casualties rise. Casualties further affect other political outcomes such as approval of the president and vote choice (Karol and Miguel, 2007). The controversy over "expensive" hostage deals—whether releasing notorious arms dealer Viktor Bout for Brittney Griner or allowing Iran to access $6 billion in oil profits in exchange for releasing five American detainees—suggests that the Americans are sensitive to the perceived cost of hostage recovery. Given the operational costs of hostage recovery options in terms of both blood and treasure, we extend the casualty sensitivity logic to hostage recovery. We argue that Americans will be less supportive of large rescue missions that risk many soldiers' lives and large ransom payments.

> *H2: The public will have higher support for less costly recovery options (small rescue missions and small ransom payments) and lower support for more costly recovery options.*

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[12]Michael Crowley, "How the Bergdahl Story Went from Victory to Controversy for Obama," *Time*, 3 June 2014, Online at `https://time.com/2817830/bowe-bergdahl-obama/`.

Thus far, we have theorized about the role of deservingness and cost sensitivity. We now return to the more traditional principles associated with hostage recovery: "no man left behind" and "no concessions," which assume that the public views all cases of hostage recovery similarly. On the one hand, if the public believes strongly in the "no man left behind" principle, then we would expect factors such as cost and deservingness to have little effect on public support for hostage rescue and ransom payment. Furthermore, we would expect the public to be highly supportive of *both* paying ransoms and rescue missions.

> *H3a: Perceptions of responsibility for capture and operational costs are uncorrelated with support for recovery through rescue or paying a ransom.*

> *H3b: The public will be highly supportive of both recovery through rescue or paying a ransom.*

On the other hand, if the "no concessions" rhetoric has been internalized by the American public, we can expect a significant difference in opinion between the two key policy options to recover hostages: rescue and ransom. We should observe that Americans are significantly more supportive of rescue attempts relative to paying ransoms.

> *H4: The public will be more supportive of hostage rescue than paying ransoms to recover a hostage.*

Finally, we theorize here that operational costs and the size of ransom demanded may increase or decrease the salience of these different cues. Here we follow work by Herrmann, Tetlock and Visser (1999) who find that situational factors interact with core values to shape public opinion about foreign policy. We expect that for low-cost operations and ransom payments, deservingness cues will be less salient than the principle of "no man left behind"; thus Americans should support recovering hostages regardless of circumstances of capture. As the operational costs and ransom demands increase, however, deservingness considerations will become more salient and condition opinion about recovery.

H5: The public will be less sensitive to blame for capture when hostage recovery is cheap and more sensitive to blame for capture when hostage recovery is more costly.

Research Design and Results

To test our hypotheses, we use a multi-method design. First, we embed experiments in two large national surveys of Americans fielded in 2016 and 2020. The 2020 experiment replicated and extended the findings from the 2016 experiment. Because both experiments show support for our hypotheses, we focus in the main text on the more recent data and report the findings from 2016 in the Appendix.[13] Second, we conducted 22 interviews with political elites and practitioners involved in U.S. hostage recovery and policy-making. We use these interviews to uncover whether elites rely on similar factors as the public in their decision-making and whether public opinion affects how they make and implement hostage recovery policy. We discuss the design and results of the survey experiments first and then turn to our interviews.

Survey Experiment

The 2020 experiment was embedded in a survey measuring Americans' political attitudes fielded just before the November 2020 election. The survey firm, Dynata, recruited a sample of respondents based on demographic data from the U.S. census. Respondents completed the survey online and received a small amount of compensation. Around 2,000 respondents

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[13]We note here that the evidence presented in our article is consistent with a rigorous incrementalism approach in which we fielded a large, exploratory pilot survey in 2016 and a main survey in 2020 that replicated and extended the findings from the 2016 study.

completed the survey.[14]

The 2020 experiment builds on the 2016 pilot in important ways. The pilot experiment randomized elements of a hypothetical scenario that describes an American *missing* abroad. In contrast, our 2020 experiment focuses more precisely on the scenario of an American *captured* abroad. Several features of the scenario are randomized to control for important characteristics of kidnappings, such as the geographic location, the identity of the captors, and the gender and profession of the captured American. These are randomized independent of our core treatments of *Deservingness* and *Cost* and only used as control variables in regression models. In other words, when we analyze the effects of the deservingness and cost sensitivity treatments, we average over the other randomized elements of the scenario.[15]

Respondents were first told that they would be reading about a situation that could happen in the future. When they clicked to the next screen in the survey, they were asked to read the following short vignette detailing the kidnapping:

> A [rebel/terrorist] group captured an American [soldier/aid worker/journalist/hiker] in [Colombia/Syria/Somalia/Afghanistan]. Intelligence officials say [he/she] is being held in the [rebel/terrorist] group's stronghold...

An additional sentence was included in the scenario for all respondents that randomized the deservingness of the captured American. For the three treatment conditions in which the

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[14]The Appendix includes descriptive statistics of the survey sample as well as balance tests that demonstrate the three main experimental treatments were balanced across demographic variables.

[15]We note here that although there are a number of randomized elements of the scenario, the survey experiment is a vignette experiment and not a conjoint experiment. Our theoretical interest is in the effects of the deservingness and cost sensitivity treatments, not in the average marginal component effects often estimated for conjoint experiments.

American was described as a professional, *Deservingness* manipulated whether the American was following orders or not:

- [*He/She*] traveled to the dangerous area [*following the orders/without the knowledge/against the orders*] of [*his/her*] superiors.

In the case of the hiker who was there for personal reasons, we manipulated whether or not the hiker had permission from the U.S. State Department:

- The hiker [*received permission from the U.S. State Department to hike/did not contact the U.S. State Department before hiking/was warned by the U.S. State Department not to hike*] in the dangerous area.

After reading the scenario, respondents were asked how much the captured American was to blame for their situation and asked about their approval or disapproval for different policy options to bring them home. The question about blame read:

- To what extent do you think the captured [*soldier/aid worker/journalist/hiker*] is to blame for [*his/her*] situation? Completely to blame, Somewhat to blame, Somewhat blameless, Completely blameless

After the question about blame, we asked about support for a rescue operation and support for paying a ransom.[16] For the rescue and ransom policy options, we included randomized text related to costs. For rescue, the mission was described as using a nearby unit of either 10, 100, or 1,000 soldiers to rescue the captured American. For the ransom, respondents read that the rebel or terrorist group was demanding $100 thousand, $1 million, or $10 million

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[16]Importantly, in our pilot survey the order of questions was different. In the pilot, the respondents received the scenario, then a question about support for rescue, and then several questions later were asked about their perceptions of the hostage's blame. In the 2020 survey, the blame question preceded the rescue and ransom questions. We find that the order of the blame question does not change the treatment text's effects on the dependent variables.

in ransom to release the prisoner.[17] Respondents were given a five-point scale ranging from disapprove strongly (coded as 1) and approve strongly (coded as 5).

The distribution of responses for the question measuring deservingness beliefs and our dependent variables of *Rescue* and *Pay* can be seen in Figures 1 and 2. With respect to deservingness, the modal response was to say that the captured American was "somewhat to blame" for their circumstance, with nearly 50 percent of respondents selecting this option. Another 25 percent said the captured American was "completely to blame." When looking at the other end of the spectrum, respondents appear evenly split between believing the captured American was "somewhat" or "completely" blameless. It should be noted that the figures of the distributions of this variable and the dependent variables pool together respondents in different treatment groups. As we show below, the deservingness treatment significantly affects whether respondents believe the captured American is to blame for their situation.

Figure 1: **Distribution of beliefs about deservingness**

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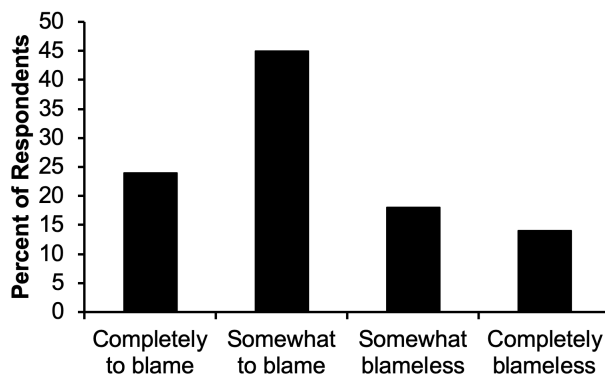
[17]Another treatment group read that the rebel or terrorist group had not made contact and the ransom demands were unknown. For simplicity, we do not use this treatment group in the analysis that follows.

Figure 2: **Distribution of dependent variables**
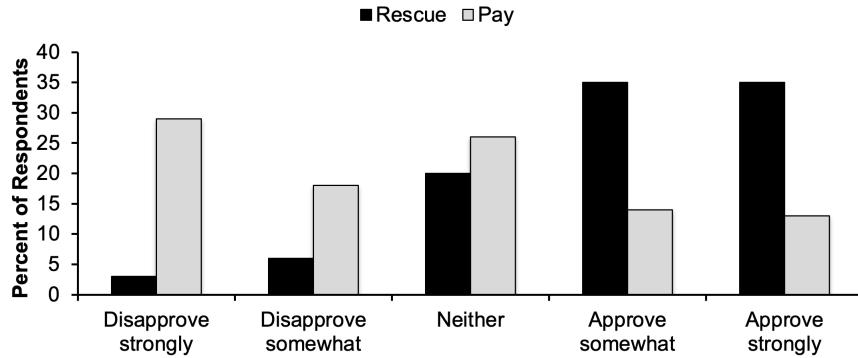
Turning to the dependent variables, we see in Figure 2 that there is significant variation in support for rescue and ransom payment. Nearly three-fourths of the sample approve somewhat or strongly of the rescue mission to recover the captured American. On the other hand, only around a quarter of respondents approved of paying the ransom either somewhat or strongly. Again, these distributions pool respondents across treatments. As we will see in the following sections, support for these policy options depends substantially on the perceived deservingness of the hostage and the costs to bring the hostage home.

Nevertheless, we view the descriptive pattern in Figure 2 as consistent with both the "no man left behind" and "no concessions" mentalities. The fact that averaging across the deservingness and costs treatments we still see high support for rescue missions (around 70 percent approve somewhat or strongly) suggests that Americans have bought in considerably to the idea that the government should work to bring home captured Americans. On the other hand, the low support of ransom payments (less than 30 percent of the public approve somewhat or strongly) suggests that the "no concessions" approach has also been internalized by the American public, such that they would strongly prefer to bring Americans home through rescue operations rather than pay ransoms to armed groups. We view these patterns as support for H4 that the public will be more supportive of rescue than ransom, but go

against H3b that the core value of "no man left behind" would lead Americans to want to recover hostages regardless of the method.

Results of Experiment

Recall that we hypothesized that individuals would be more supportive of government attempts to recover the captured American if they were perceived to be less responsible for their situation (H1) and recovery was less costly (H2). We also anticipated an interaction between deservingness and cost sensitivity, with Americans being more willing to recover undeserving hostages when the costs are low, but more sensitive to deservingness considerations when costs are high (H5). Our experimental evidence reported below supports these hypotheses.

Figure 3: **ATE of Deservingness on Support for Rescue and Ransom Payment**

(a) Rescue   (b) Pay Ransom
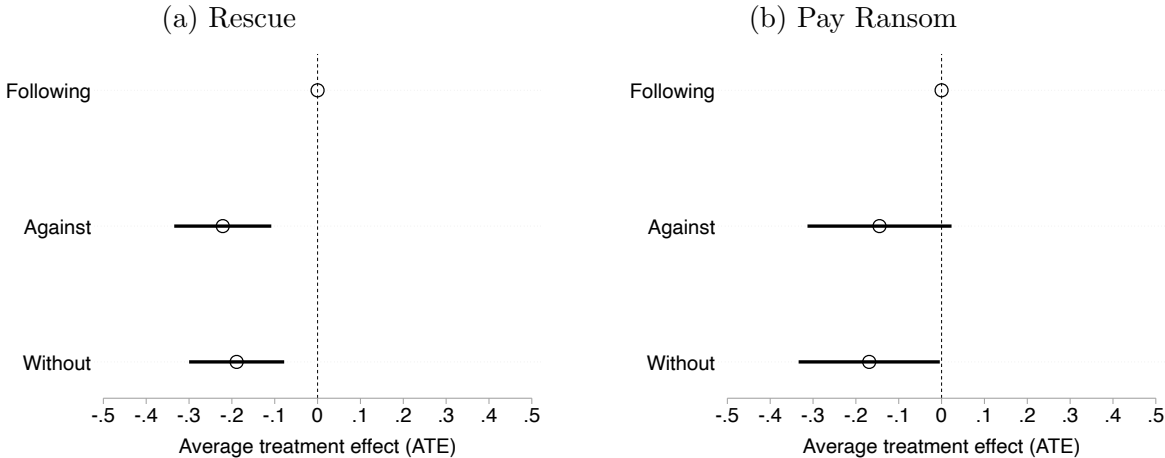
Note: Table 5 in the Appendix reports regression results corresponding to these figures.

Figure 4: **ATE of Deservingness Treatment on Perceived Hostage Deservingness**
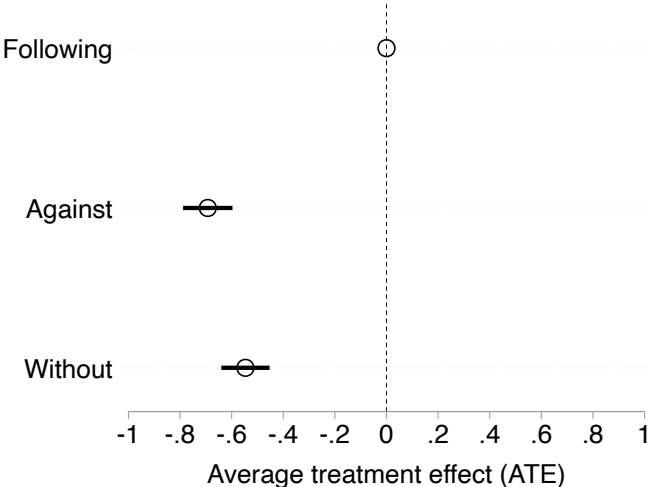
Note: Table 5 in the Appendix reports regression results corresponding to this figure.

We first examine the effects of the deservingness treatment on our rescue and ransom outcomes. Figure 3 shows the average treatment effects from OLS models regressing *Rescue* and *Pay* on the deservingness treatment and controlling for the other treatments. In each model, "following orders" is the baseline category.[18] The other two treatment conditions, which describe situations in which the captured American has either not told the relevant authorities or has acted against them, have strong, nearly identical, negative effects on support for a rescue mission and for paying the full amount of the ransom.

Figure 4 provides evidence of the mechanism. We show that the deservingness treatment affects how respondents assign blame to the hostage. By telling respondents in the scenario that the kidnapped American had defied orders or the U.S. State Department, respondents are much more likely to say that the hostage is to blame for their situation. Like the results for the various recovery options, respondents do not distinguish between the scenario in which the hostage actively disobeyed versus simply acting without the knowledge of the authorities. For both the recovery policies and perceptions of deservingness, these two treatment conditions have equally negative effects on support and blame. Thus, for ease of interpretation in our interaction models that follow, we create a binary indicator for deservingness where respondents receiving the "following orders" treatment or "with the State Department's permission" treatment are labeled as "deserving" and coded as 1 and the other two categories are labeled as "not deserving" and coded as 0.

Turning to cost sensitivity, we hypothesized that individuals would be less supportive of more costly recovery options and more supportive of relatively less costly options. To test the hypothesis, we independently randomize the size of the mission and the amount of ransom demanded by the captors. Figure 5 displays the average treatment effect for the recovery cost treatment. Compared to a mission of 10 soldiers, respondents are relatively

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[18]Recall that for the hiker treatment the equivalent of following orders was "with the State Department's permission."

less supportive of missions of 100 or 1,000 soldiers. However, there is no statistically significant difference between a mission of 10 or 100 soldiers, while the mission of 1,000 soldiers is significantly different from the baseline of 10 soldiers. The size of the treatment effect is also relatively smaller in magnitude than the deservingness treatment and smaller than the cost treatment for the ransom outcomes. Overall, mission size has a significant, but substantively relatively smaller effect on support for rescue. For ecological validity, it should be noted that each of these mission sizes in some way captures the number of servicemembers working on a typical hostage rescue. As one policymaker explained, hostage rescues involve around two dozen special forces operators on the ground, but hundreds or thousands of servicemembers in supporting roles to pull off a successful rescue mission.[19]

Figure 5: **ATE of Costs on Support for Rescue and Ransom Payment**

(a) Rescue   (b) Pay Ransom
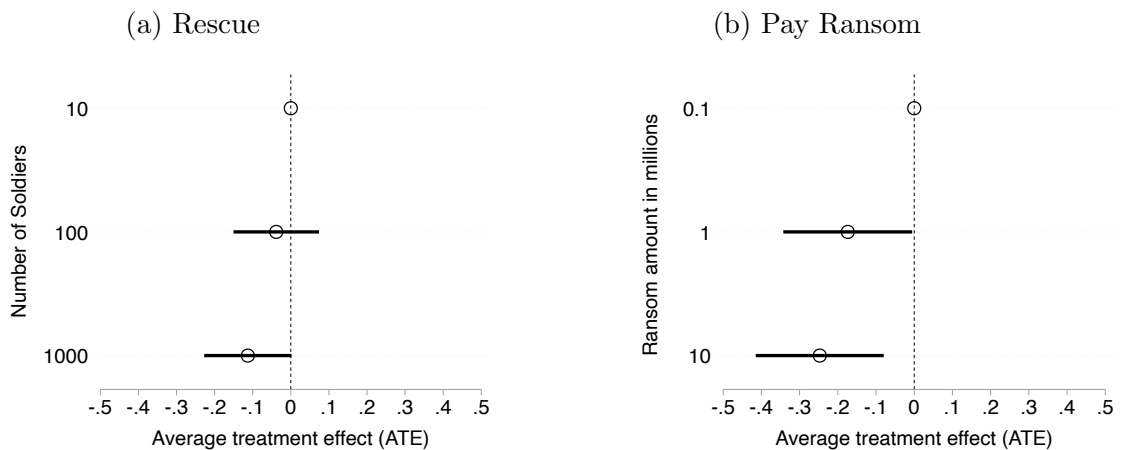
Note: Table 5 in the Appendix reports regression results corresponding to these figures.

For the ransom outcome of *Pay*, the ransom amount demanded by the captors has a larger effect. As shown in Figure 5, compared to the baseline of $100,000, respondents are much less willing to pay higher amounts. However, our respondents do not seem to differentiate

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[19]Interview 02, May 16, 2019.

much between the demand of $1 million and the demand of $10 million, both have about the same effect on support for paying ransom. In terms of ecological validity, $10 million is a much larger ransom amount than is typical, while $100,000 is relatively lower than normal amounts.[20]

Figure 6: **ATE of Deservingness and Cost on Support for Rescue and Paying Ransom**

(a) Rescue

(b) Pay Ransom
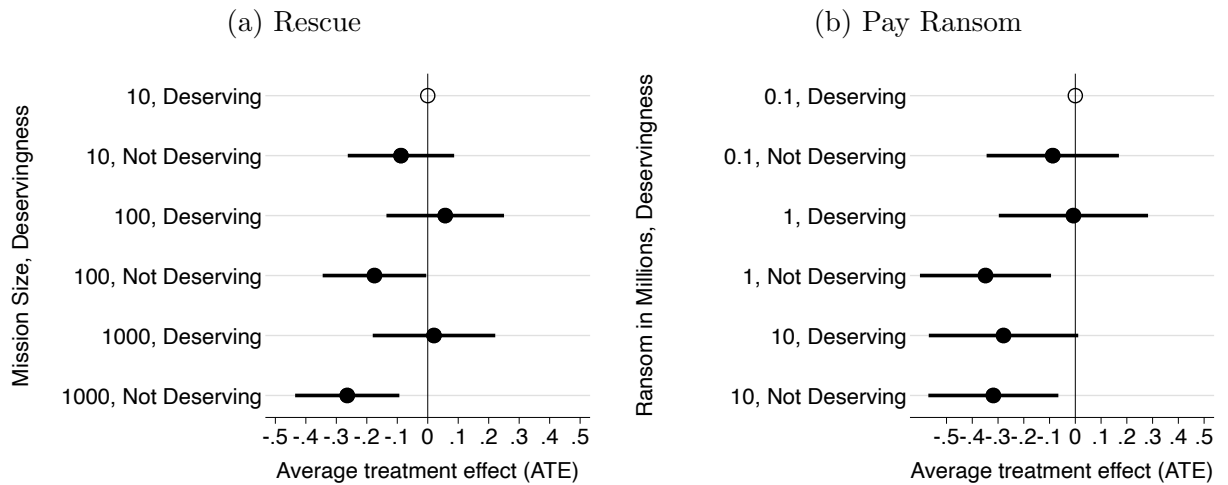
Note: Table 5 in the Appendix reports regression results corresponding to these figures.

Next, we examine the hypothesis that operational costs and the size of ransom demanded condition the effect of hostage deservingness on public support for recovery. To do so, we include an interaction term in our OLS models between the binary indicator for the deservingness treatment described above and the cost treatments. We find significant support for the hypothesis. Figure 6 shows the average treatment effect on support for the rescue mission and ransom payment outcomes by the deservingness treatment and the cost treatment. In terms of the effect of deservingness, for low cost rescue missions, the difference in support for deserving and not deserving hostages is negligible. Those described as going against orders

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[20]Interview 01, December 13, 2018.

or the State Department's travel warning were only slightly less likely to inspire support for rescue than those described as following orders. As the mission size for the rescue operation increases, costing more and putting more lives at risk, the difference between deserving and undeserving hostages increases. While support for rescue missions of deserving hostages stays relatively consistent across the size of mission, support rapidly declines for undeserving hostages as mission size increases. This results in increasingly large and significant treatment effects of the deservingess treatment as mission size grows. These results provide significant support for H5. Thus, it appears for low cost missions, the more salient norm guiding individual thinking is "no man left behind" as support remains high and stable regardless of the deservingness cues. However, the deservingness heuristic becomes more important as costs grow.

The conditioning power of costs on the deservingness heuristic is also quite interesting for the ransom outcome. At both high and low costs, deservingness has little effect on support for paying ransom. As can be seen in the figure, when the ransom amount is high, support decreases, but it does so equally for both deserving and undeserving hostages. We might interpret these differences across cost in light of the conventional wisdom described above associated with hostage recovery. At low ransom amounts, support is relatively higher regardless of deservingness due to the principle of "no man left behind." Conversely, support is relatively lower at high ransom amounts regardless of deservingness due to the principle of "no concessions" kicking in when demands are too extreme. The deservingness treatment has its largest, and only significant, effect at the middle treatment of $1 million. This is important for its proximity to real-world ransom demands: the biggest effect of the deservingness treatment on support for rescue is at $1 million—the most realistic ransom demand amount.

Finally, we do not find evidence in favor of hypothesis H3a that hostage deservingness and costs are unrelated to support for recovery. This alternative hypothesis suggested that the U.S. public might ignore the circumstances of capture and support bringing home any

hostage, following the principle of "no man left behind." While there is some evidence that when recovery is less costly, circumstances of capture are ignored, we find that deservingness weighs heavily on the minds of citizens for larger missions and more costly ransoms.

Interview evidence

One potential shortcoming of public opinion research is that it rarely tests a causal link between public preferences and policymaker response (but see Tomz, Weeks and Yarhi-Milo, 2020). Our design explicitly probes that link, unveiling two pathways through which perceptions of deservingness shape hostage-recovery decisions. To investigate how the principles and cost sensitivity described above affect elite decision-making, we draw on evidence from 22 elite interviews with policymakers and servicemembers responsible for hostage recovery. We demonstrate in several ways that perceptions of deservingness—and the public's view of hostage recovery—matter for the hostage recovery process. Through interview evidence, we show that policymakers are both independently susceptible to the same deservingness perceptions as the public, and they think about—and respond to—public pressures on hostage issues.

Between January and July 2023, we interviewed principals and senior staff from all relevant entities across the U.S. federal government tasked with hostage recovery policy and operations, spanning political parties, military branches, and the Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations. These include the Hostage Response Group: the officials in the White House's National Security Council that make high-level hostage recovery decisions; the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell: an interagency, operational body housed at the FBI; and the office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs: the State Department's chief diplomat for hostage cases. We also interviewed senior Congressional staff responsible for hostage recovery legislation, as well as senior military officers who participated in hostage

recovery missions. We conducted interviews by phone, Zoom, and in person.[21] Given the sensitive nature of this subject, and the fact that many interview participants are currently serving in government, we guaranteed all interview participants confidentiality as a condition for participating. Moreover, due to the small size of these offices and the limited number of officials who have ever served in these roles, we do not specify whether quotes are attributed to current or former officials, nor which office they served, as the combination would almost certainly identify individual participants.

While the preceding experiments provide robust evidence that perceptions of deservingness affect the public's view of hostage recovery, U.S. policy officially ignores the circumstances of capture in recovery decisions. As a mission meant to convey both a "reflection of American values," and "national security interest,"[22] hostage recovery decisions are supposed to revolve only around available intelligence and determinations of safety—what officials call "risk to force (the guys going in) and risk to mission (the hostage)."[23] Accordingly, policymakers stress their commitment to leaving no one behind. As one policymaker stressed, regardless of circumstance, "We're going to work the case just as hard...we're going to provide 100% of our efforts to get the person home."[24] As another described, "the whole point of having an American passport is the fact of knowing you'll be safe abroad, that the full force of the U.S. government will try to get you home."[25]

This begs the question: if circumstances of capture are irrelevant in U.S. policy and

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[21]Interviews conducted under [withheld for peer review] IRB# 00032606. See Appendix 6 for further details on how interview subjects were identified, selected, and contacted; a sample of interview questions; and a list of interviews by format and date.

[22]Interview 10, January 27, 2023.

[23]Interview 02, May 16, 2019.

[24]Interview 14, February 6, 2023.

[25]Interview 20, April 4, 2023.

law, how do perceptions of hostage deservingness matter to decisionmakers? Drawing on interview evidence, we show that notions of deservingness (and the public's approval of hostages) matter a great deal in the hostage recovery process. Specifically, policymakers are similarly susceptible to notions of deservingness, yielding substantial internal debate about recovery options. Moreover, policymakers are responsive to public opinion, adapting their messaging to avoid backlash from recovering less sympathetic hostages or failing to recover those seen as more deserving.[26]

"Who goes hiking in Afghanistan?"

Just like the American public, some government officials are susceptible to judgments of deservingness and blame, and they frequently affirmed so in interviews.[27] These admissions were particularly striking coming from the decisionmakers tasked with hostage recovery, who simultaneously stressed that circumstances of capture are irrelevant, yet criticized individual hostages by name. As one senior official said, "Austin Tice[28]—someone can make the case

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[26]Despite the public assumptions that the United States has a "no concessions" policy, most policymakers we spoke to fully accepted that negotiations and concessions are crucial tools in hostage recovery efforts. Nevertheless, a minority of interview participants made comments in line with a "no concessions" framework. One policymaker stated, incorrectly, that "our law says we don't negotiate with hostage-takers." (Interview 04, January 23, 2023). Others highlighted perceived risks of making concessions: "We can't continue to incentivize hostage taking." (Interview 19, April 4, 2023.)

[27]Only two interview subjects resolutely and consistently rejected that the circumstances of capture could ever matter: Interview 09, January 27, 2023; Interview 16, March 3, 2023.

[28]Austin Tice was abducted in Syria in 2012 while traveling as a freelance journalist. He is believed to be held by the Syrian government.

that he shouldn't be in Syria. Someone could make the case that Sam Goodwin[29] shouldn't be in Syria as an adventure tourist. James Foley[30]—God rest his soul—was kidnapped before once in north Africa. What was he doing going back?"[31] Communicating frustration regarding Sam Goodwin and Otto Warmbier,[32] a policymaker said,

> Of course we did what we could to help, but in my head, you're like, *what the hell were you doing in Syria? You were trying to visit every country in the world? How stupid!* There's an element of frustration—you had no business going there [...] How many warnings does the U.S. government have to give not to travel to North Korea? People do this black market tourism, and the families are like, 'Help us!' But in the back of your mind, you're like, *what the hell?! What were you doing going there?* So you say it in private, you say it behind closed doors: this person had no business going there.[33]

Even when dedicated to hostage recovery, policymakers find it difficult to ignore the circumstances of capture. One admitted, "It's hard to be supportive when they're going over to a Syria or a Yemen, right? And now a Russia and Iran, where we have travel warnings galore."[34] Another stressed, "You don't want to blame the victim, but they made a conscious choice—a lot of people would say, a stupid choice."[35] Although it is U.S. policy to ignore

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[29]Sam Goodwin was detained by the Syrian government in 2019 while he was attempting to visit every country in the world.

[30]James Foley was kidnapped in Syria in 2012 while traveling as a freelance journalist. He was the first American beheaded by the Islamic State.

[31]Interview 04, January 23, 2023.

[32]Otto Warmbier was detained in North Korea in 2016 while on a guided tour.

[33]Interview 18, March 21, 2023.

[34]Interview 09, January 27, 2023.

[35]Interview 13, February 3, 2023.

circumstances of capture, we found that the vast majority of relevant policymakers and staff brought up those circumstances in interviews.

Servicemembers tasked with hostage recovery were also frustrated and resentful of hostages perceived as willingly courting danger. Asked about U.S. military efforts to recover Bergdahl, several expressed their personal disagreement with the repeated, futile missions to bring him home. "You try not to be upset, try to be as professional as possible, but you start asking the questions."[36] Though they followed orders to try to recover Bowe Bergdahl, Dilip Joseph,[37] and others, they thought about hostage deservingness—particularly as it related to high costs of rescue efforts. "What are these people thinking, making these decisions? [Hostage recovery] is your job...but at the back of your mind, you realize that when people make these decisions, they put themselves in situations where they need to be rescued, and we end up putting our own lives on the line."[38]

Variable perceptions of deservingness bubbled up among senior officials, yielding frequent, internal debates. In contrast to official policy ignoring circumstances of capture, interview participants noted that it "came up a lot."[39] In presenting a case to colleagues, "we would hear strong comments about agency: *We told him not to go to Syria. He was told not to go, but he went anyway.*"[40] Staff working on these cases "definitely saw personalities that didn't want to be helpful." Specifically, several people suggested that deservingness slowed

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[36]Interview 06, January 24, 2023.

[37]Dilip Joseph was kidnapped in Afghanistan in 2012 while working for an international aid organization. He was rescued by the Navy SEALs in a 2012 operation in which operator Nicholas Cheque was killed.

[38]Interview 19, April 3, 2023.

[39]Interview 22, July 11, 2023.

[40]Interview 03, January 20, 2023.

recovery efforts for Caitlan Coleman:[41]

> I think if she had been by herself, or if her husband didn't have a history of very strange things. . . I think that would have had a different outcome. Here would be a woman with a small child. You know: *let's get her out faster. We really need to work harder.* I think we did work pretty hard in her case, but I know that in some instances, having him there became a problem.[42]

In accordance with expectations of social desirability bias, policymakers always emphasized that it was some *other* individual, office, or agency bringing up the circumstances of capture. Different interview participants alternately attributed such views to the Department of Defense, Department of State, and FBI; from within the White House and among cabinet officials: "I could name them, but I won't. It's not necessary."[43]

Finally, in line with our theory, judgments regarding hostages' deservingness became especially salient as a function of high recovery costs. As one interview participant explained, "most of these comments [about circumstances of capture] come up when people had another policy agenda: they didn't want to expend the military resources to go get them. They'll say, *well, this person shouldn't have been hiking there and they got taken, and so we shouldn't expend our resources to return 'em.*"[44] After unsuccessful rescue attempts, executive branch agencies debated the merits of expending government resources to bring home blameworthy hostages. As one official recalled, "[the Department of Defense] is now, like, livid, and they would throw that in our face—*why are we wasting our resources here? Why are we spending*

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[41]American hiker Caitlan Coleman and her Canadian husband Joshua Boyle were kidnapped while hiking in Afghanistan.

[42]Interview 12, January 30, 2023.

[43]Interview 04, January 23, 2023.

[44]Interview 22, July 11, 2023.

all of these high-value assets to go after somebody that got themselves in a predicament they shouldn't have?" [45] Still, interview participants assured us that despite "anger" and "angst," the naysayers "always got rebuked" [46] or "were forced to be supportive." [47] Even when efforts were invisible to the public, officials emphasized that the government "still moves mountains to attempt hostage recovery and often succeeds." [48] But those efforts are accompanied by internal disagreement and external political costs.

"It polls really, really well."

Beyond their own perceptions of deservingness, policymakers affirm that public opinion on hostage recovery is consequential, and they respond to it in several ways. First, policymakers agreed that the White House was responsive to public attention, approval, and pressure for hostage recovery. President Trump, for instance, "enjoyed" hostage recovery as "a metric, a success that you can show," something "demonstrable." [49] Across presidential administrations, policymakers believe that hostage issues were "ingrained in the psyche of the American public." [50] Bringing home innocent American hostages is seen as a tremendous political win: "Having the hostage come off an airplane at Andrews Air Force Base, and having the president stand at the foot of the plane, and welcome them home, with his wife and the vice president, and shake their hand: it polls really, really well." [51] Explaining presidential engagement, an official said, "it's partly because the public cares about these issues, and when

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[45] Interview 12, January 30, 2023.

[46] Interview 08, January 27, 2023.

[47] Interview 16, March 3, 2023.

[48] Correspondence with interview participant 08, September 24, 2023.

[49] Interview 22, July 11, 2023.

[50] Interview 04, January 23, 2023.

[51] Interview 05, January 23, 2023.

they care, they want to see a president who cares."[52] Another stressed that "it's one place where policy meets people; it's the cherry on top of an ice cream sundae."[53] Interview participants suggested that presidential attention varies with public attention across cases: "it was not the U.S. government's highest priority—unless it looks like it's going to be a political win for the administration."[54] Therefore, the officials who work on hostage issues want to encourage public attention, which "definitely makes the administration engage on a case."[55]

However, this public attention comes with twin risks: the White House suffers when it fails to recover sympathetic hostages *and* for recovering hostages seen as less deserving. On the one hand, failure to recover deserving hostages is "humilitating" for the White House.[56] The 1979 Iran hostage crisis looms large in the minds of policymakers: "that took down a presidency, it took down Jimmy Carter's presidency, and nobody else ever wanted to be caught out like that."[57] The Obama Administration's failure to recover several hostages kidnapped by the Islamic State was seen in a similar light, "because of how public it was, and understanding how the public reacted. There were videos that ISIS posted on YouTube, there were [photos] on the front pages of every major newspaper."[58]

On the other hand, some policymakers fear or avoid association with hostages judged poorly by the public. Referring to Bowe Bergdahl, one interview participant said, "nobody wants to be on the frontlines advocating for a deserter who caused political suffering and

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[52]Interview 08, January 27, 2023.

[53]Interview 21, May 4, 2023.

[54]Interview 12, January 30, 2023.

[55]Interview 15, February 15, 2023.

[56]Interview 20, April 4, 2023.

[57]Interview 11, January 30, 2023.

[58]Interview 08, January 27, 2023.

death of his squadmates and people trying to rescue him."[59] Policymakers feared making unpopular prisoner exchanges, not wanting "to have another kind of Bergdahl fiasco where they do a trade and they look bad for it."[60] Policymakers expressed that the public's judgment makes hostage recovery more difficult, hampering their ability to "float strategies and negotiation tactics to get their release, because people were judging them, essentially, for what they may have done to get themselves captured."[61] Officials were especially worried about deservingness as it intersects with the cost of recovery efforts: "if we go in there, and a number of SEALs get killed or something, and we've got to go face the American public over somebody who did something stupid, I'm sure that had to weigh in the backs of peoples' minds."[62]

Finally, policymakers work to shape the narrative around hostage deservingness in order to minimize public scorn. Interview participants explained how the White House itself would try to "raise the awareness on certain cases" to persuade the public "to, you know, not judge the person adversely for the circumstances that led to their capture."[63] Officials and staff would coach families on how to talk about their loved one,[64] with the purpose of making sure they would "avoid being judged like Bowe Bergdahl."[65] As one policymaker explained, "We have typically advised families to try to build a sympathetic narrative around the person. That's really important. I think it's being able to depict them as somebody who's not an unnecessary risk-taker, who's doing something noble, like humanitarian work, journalism, or

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[59]Interview 13, February 3, 2023.

[60]Interview 16, March 3, 2023.

[61]Interview 03, January 20, 2023.

[62]Interview 11, January 30, 2023.

[63]Interview 07, January 23, 2023.

[64]Interview 12, January 30, 2023.

[65]Interview 13, February 3, 2023.

something innocent," to see the circumstances of capture as "just wrong place, wrong time."[66] They minimize cues related to blame, because "we're not in the business of showing people's faults from the podium."[67] Beyond coaching families, policymakers actively shape the public conversation on hostage recovery, emphasizing "no man left behind" and downplaying blame:

> We decided pretty early on that we're going to make it very clear—and we started to build it into speeches and talking points—that Americans are adventurous. We don't have exit controls on Americans. We value the American spirit, and hikers, journalists, ex-military—they are contributing to the fabric of life by traveling and exploring. So we did very consciously try to build a narrative, that you see now, even with other leaders repeating our words: that the only thing that matters is the color of your passport."[68]

In sum, our interviews provide evidence of both direct and indirect pathways through which perceptions of deservingness affect hostage recovery. The indirect effect of deservingness manifests in the ways that policymakers think about the public's attention to hostages. Policymakers consider hostage recovery as alternately popular and a source of pressure. They actively alter their language—producing elite cues—and actions to minimize the public's tendency to judge controversial hostages. But our interviews also show the direct effects of deservingness on the hostage recovery process. Policymakers are unable to ignore hostages' circumstances of capture, leading to frequent, internal debates. Some interview participants suggested that debates and disagreements affected rescuer morale and the urgency (or lack thereof) of recovery in certain cases, contributing to variation in how cases were prioritized.

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[66]Interview 07, January 26, 2023.

[67]Interview 21, May 4, 2023.

[68]Interview 03, January 20, 2023.

Conclusion

In exploring the public perception of a widespread and understudied element of international violence, this paper makes important empirical and theoretical contributions to literatures on international relations and public policy. It represents a first attempt to understand the variation in public support for hostage recovery missions. We develop a theory of hostage deservingness and show that individuals' beliefs regarding a hostage's responsibility for putting herself in danger affects overall support for recovery options. We further show that principles like "no man left behind" and "no concessions" also shape the way the public thinks about hostage recovery. Additionally, we uncover a novel interaction effect between operational costs and deservingness cues, showing that the public becomes more sensitive to deservingness as the costs of recovery grow.

These findings explain the public pushback in cases of "undeserving" victims, like Pfc. Bergdahl. The Navy SEAL who lost his leg while searching for Bergdahl testified at Bergdahl's court martial hearing that the military knew Bergdahl had deserted his post when they went looking for him. Why did they still conduct the research and rescue mission? "Because he's got a mom," the SEAL testified. "Plus, it's my job; that's what we're told to do."[69] Yet, as research on this case has shown, the perceived deservingness of a hostage can affect how that job is performed and the approval of elected leaders responsible for recovery efforts.

This study demonstrates that the American public largely supports hostage recovery missions and that support declines for more costly recoveries and less "deserving" victims.

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[69]Alex Horton, "At Bergdahl sentencing, a former Navy SEAL sheds tears recounting death of military dog," the *Washington Post*, 25 October 2017, Online at `https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/10/25/at-bergdahl-sentencing-former-navy-seal-sheds-tears-recounting-death-of-military-dog/`.

Considering the United States in comparative perspective, a puzzle remains: Given the high levels of support for bringing captured Americans home, why do individual hostage crises not receive *more* attention and advocacy? For several close U.S. allies, including France, Israel, and Canada, hostage crises spur major public protests (Simon, 2019; Gilbert and Rivard-Piché, 2021). In these countries, a culture of protest against the government maintains public pressure until hostages are brought safely home. Future work should investigate these dynamics, exploring why some populations seem more concerned with hostage recovery than others. We suspect the analogy to welfare policies could travel to this comparative context, generating a greater expectation of government intervention in countries with more robust social welfare programs, and lower expectation where individual responsibility is culturally paramount. Understanding these dynamics is an important next step in assuring hostage safety and survival, as kidnappers may leverage public outrage to exact increasingly painful concessions.

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Appendix for "No Man Left Behind? Hostage Deservingness and the Politics of Hostage Recovery"

Contents

1 2020 Survey Sample Demographics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.	N
Age	49.838	16.735	18	90	1898
Woman	0.536	0.499	0	1	1898
Education Level	4.456	1.109	1	6	1898
Employed	0.427	0.495	0	1	1898
White	0.736	0.441	0	1	1898
Income	4.811	3.052	1	10	1898
Democrat	0.387	0.487	0	1	1898
Ideology	6.601	2.903	1	11	1896
Internationalism	0.599	0.49	0	1	1898
Has Children	0.584	0.493	0	1	1898
Political Interest	3.198	0.881	1	4	1898

Table 1: **Descriptive Statistics of 2020 Survey Sample**

2 2020 Experiment Balance Tests

Variable	Mean			P-Value for test that:			N
	Following (FOL)	Without (W/O)	Against (AG)	FOL=W/O	FOL=AG	W/O=AG	
Age	49.738	49.959	49.811	0.812	0.939	0.875	1898
	[17.169]	[16.685]	[16.343]				
Woman	0.545	0.542	0.52	0.909	0.371	0.43	1898
	[0.498]	[0.499]	[0.5]				
Education Level	4.353	4.521	4.493	0.006	0.026	0.656	1898
	[1.105]	[1.098]	[1.119]				
Employed	0.409	0.435	0.436	0.345	0.331	0.96	1898
	[0.492]	[0.496]	[0.496]				
White	0.74	0.737	0.729	0.914	0.67	0.746	1898
	[0.439]	[0.441]	[0.445]				
Income	4.748	4.772	4.923	0.886	0.313	0.38	1898
	[3.039]	[2.975]	[3.15]				
Democrat	0.382	0.394	0.385	0.662	0.938	0.726	1898
	[0.486]	[0.489]	[0.487]				
Ideology	6.813	6.466	6.523	0.031	0.08	0.726	1896
	[2.816]	[2.951]	[2.933]				
Internationalism	0.56	0.634	0.602	0.006	0.128	0.24	1898
	[0.497]	[0.482]	[0.49]				
Has Children	0.583	0.573	0.597	0.699	0.62	0.379	1898
	[0.493]	[0.495]	[0.491]				
Political Interest	3.213	3.211	3.167	0.973	0.36	0.374	1898
	[0.911]	[0.856]	[0.877]				

Note: Averages for each treatment condition of key variables. Standard deviation in brackets. P-Value based on OLS regressions of variable on treatments.

Table 2: **Balance Test: 2020 Deservingness Treatment**

Variable	Mean			P-Value for test that:			N
	Size=10 (10)	Size=100 (100)	Size=1000 (1000)	10=100	10=1000	100=1000	
Age	49.875	49.942	49.692	0.943	0.85	0.786	1898
	[17.105]	[16.929]	[16.2]				
Woman	0.535	0.546	0.527	0.682	0.78	0.476	1898
	[0.499]	[0.498]	[0.5]				
Education Level	4.47	4.446	4.453	0.702	0.782	0.918	1898
	[1.151]	[1.078]	[1.105]				
Employed	0.416	0.423	0.44	0.808	0.406	0.535	1898
	[0.493]	[0.494]	[0.497]				
White	0.732	0.73	0.744	0.959	0.616	0.563	1898
	[0.443]	[0.444]	[0.436]				
Income	4.864	4.839	4.733	0.885	0.458	0.529	1898
	[3.112]	[3.053]	[2.999]				
Democrat	0.39	0.4	0.371	0.723	0.486	0.274	1898
	[0.486]	[0.489]	[0.487]				
Ideology	6.414	6.414	6.776	0.273	0.031	0.255	1896
	[2.989]	[2.9]	[2.821]				
Internationalism	0.598	0.571	0.631	0.338	0.237	0.026	1898
	[0.491]	[0.495]	[0.483]				
Has Children	0.563	0.597	0.588	0.217	0.367	0.746	1898
	[0.496]	[0.491]	[0.493]				
Political Interest	3.221	3.146	3.233	0.133	0.81	0.073	1898
	[0.857]	[0.907]	[0.874]				

Note: Averages for each treatment condition of key variables. Standard deviation in brackets. P-Value based on OLS regressions of variable on treatments.

Table 3: **Balance Test: 2020 Mission Size Treatment**

Variable	Mean			P-Value for test that:			N
	100,000 (100thd)	1 Million (1mil)	10 Million (10mil)	100thd=1mil	100thd=10mil	1mil=10mil	
Age	49.962	50.276	50.089	0.777	0.908	0.863	1416
	[17.18]	[16.765]	[16.503]				
Woman	0.533	0.568	0.553	0.282	0.534	0.639	1416
	[0.499]	[0.496]	[0.498]				
Education Level	4.416	4.451	4.528	0.626	0.116	0.271	1416
	[1.115]	[1.094]	[1.08]				
Employed	0.422	0.409	0.427	0.683	0.893	0.578	1416
	[0.495]	[0.492]	[0.495]				
White	0.708	0.756	0.744	0.099	0.211	0.676	1416
	[0.455]	[0.43]	[0.437]				
Income	4.784	4.868	4.856	0.678	0.723	0.948	1416
	[3.064]	[3.046]	[3.114]				
Democrat	0.389	0.347	0.419	0.187	0.347	0.021	1416
	[0.488]	[0.476]	[0.494]				
Ideology	6.497	6.774	6.613	0.149	0.542	0.391	1414
	[3.018]	[3.018]	[2.967]				
Internationalism	0.587	0.622	0.618	0.268	0.326	0.892	1416
	[0.493]	[0.485]	[0.486]				
Has Children	0.609	0.578	0.581	0.344	0.39	0.924	1416
	[0.489]	[0.494]	[0.494]				
Political Interest	3.252	3.167	3.234	0.141	0.753	0.233	1416
	[0.872]	[0.856]	[0.887]				

Note: Averages for each treatment condition of key variables. Standard deviation in brackets. P-Value based on OLS regressions of variable on treatments.

Table 4: **Balance Test: 2020 Ransom Amount Treatment**

3 2020 Experiment Results Table

MODEL VARIABLES	(1) Rescue	(2) Pay Ransom	(3) Deservingness	(4) Rescue	(5) Pay Ransom
Deserving: Without	-0.19***	-0.17**	-0.55***		
	(0.057)	(0.084)	(0.048)		
Deserving: Against	-0.22***	-0.14*	-0.69***		
	(0.058)	(0.086)	(0.049)		
Soldiers: 100	-0.04	0.02	-0.01		0.02
	(0.057)	(0.085)	(0.048)		(0.085)
Soldiers: 1000	-0.11*	0.06	-0.00		0.06
	(0.058)	(0.087)	(0.049)		(0.087)
Ransom: 1 million		-0.17**			
		(0.086)			
Ransom: 10 million		-0.25***			
		(0.085)			
Interact Rescue: 10, Not Deserving				-0.09	
				(0.089)	
Interact Rescue: 100, Deserving				0.06	
				(0.098)	
Interact Rescue: 100, Not Deserving				-0.17**	
				(0.087)	
Interact Rescue: 1000, Deserving				0.02	
				(0.102)	
Interact Rescue: 1000, Not Deserving				-0.26***	
				(0.087)	
Interact Ransom: 0.1, Not Deserving					-0.09
					(0.131)
Interact Ransom: 1, Deserving					-0.01
					(0.148)
Interact Ransom: 1, Not Deserving					-0.35***
					(0.130)
Interact Ransom: 10, Deserving					-0.28*
					(0.148)
Interact Ransom: 10, Not Deserving					-0.32**
					(0.129)
Order: Rescue First	0.02	-0.22***	-0.02	0.01	-0.22***
	(0.047)	(0.070)	(0.039)	(0.047)	(0.070)
Job: Aid Worker	-0.10	-0.10	-0.13**	-0.11	-0.10
	(0.065)	(0.097)	(0.055)	(0.066)	(0.097)
Job: Journalist	-0.20***	-0.19**	-0.22***	-0.20***	-0.20**
	(0.065)	(0.097)	(0.055)	(0.065)	(0.097)
Job: Hiker	-0.28***	-0.07	-0.32***	-0.29***	-0.06
	(0.067)	(0.100)	(0.056)	(0.067)	(0.100)
Kidnapper: Rebel	-0.00	-0.02	0.04	-0.00	-0.02
	(0.047)	(0.070)	(0.039)	(0.047)	(0.070)
Hostage Sex: Woman	0.09*	0.10	0.02	0.09*	0.10
	(0.047)	(0.070)	(0.039)	(0.047)	(0.070)
Country: Colombia	-0.01	-0.05	0.04	-0.01	-0.05
	(0.066)	(0.100)	(0.056)	(0.066)	(0.100)
Country: Somalia	-0.04	-0.06	-0.04	-0.04	-0.06
	(0.067)	(0.099)	(0.056)	(0.067)	(0.099)
Country: Syria	-0.07	-0.07	0.03	-0.07	-0.07
	(0.066)	(0.099)	(0.056)	(0.066)	(0.099)
Constant	4.19***	3.23***	2.74***	4.11***	3.19***
	(0.096)	(0.142)	(0.081)	(0.108)	(0.158)
Observations	2,068	1,546	2,074	2,068	1,546
R-squared	0.02	0.02	0.12	0.02	0.02

Note: Table reports coefficients from OLS models and standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Figures 3(a) and 3(b) in the main manuscript are based on Models 1 and 2 in this table. Figure 4 in the main manuscript is based on Model 3 in this table. Figures 5(a) and 5(b) are based on Models 1 and 2 in this table. Figures 6(a) and 6(b) are based on Models 4 and 5 in this table. All coefficients reported are relative to one dropped treatment condition for each randomly assigned attribute. This can be seen clearly in the Figures in the main text.

Table 5: **Regression Table for Main Text Figures**

4 2020 Experiment Robustness and Additional Results

In this section, we look at both the robustness of the 2020 experimental results to an expanded set of control variables, as well as highlighting some additional variables that also play a role in explaining variation in public support for hostage recovery in our 2020 study including an additional outcome variable of support for negotiating with hostage takers.

As noted in the main manuscript, we included a number of other experimental variations in our hostage recovery vignette in addition to measuring several demographic background characteristics of the respondents in our sample. We include control variables for these additional experimental treatments as well as important demographic characteristics of the respondent. We report coefficients and standard errors *for variables that obtained statistical significance* in Table 3.

We first highlight that the deservingness treatment and costs treatments retain their significance even with the full set of control variables.[1] Here again, we can see that compared to the "following orders" condition, the other two deservingness treatments have a negative and similar effect on support for rescue and paying the full ransom amount. The deservingness of the kidnapped American does not affect support for negotiating the ransom amount. We also see confirmed the patterns discovered above for the mission costs treatment and the ransom costs treatment. Both the number of soldiers involved in the mission and the ransom amount have a negative effect on support for hostage recovery as the costs increase. These results confirm the robustness of the treatment effects to a more complete set of controls.

In addition to these results, we also find two other strong treatment effects. The first treatment that also has a strong effect on support for hostage recovery is the jobs treatment. We find that relative to recovering kidnapped soldiers, respondents are much less supportive of rescue missions to recover aid workers, journalists, and hikers.[2] Interestingly, these effects do not replicate for either negotiating the ransom or paying the full ransom amount. The second treatment effect of note is a question order experiment in which we asked half the sample about their support for rescue first and then asked about support for ransom payment. The other half of the sample received the reverse order. As can be seen in the table, there is a strong order effect on support for the ransom options if respondents received the rescue questions first. Respondents are much less likely to support either negotiating or paying a ransom when the possibility of rescue is made salient to them by answering questions about that option first. Question order has no effect on the other hand on support for rescue. We take this as further evidence that Americans prefer rescue missions to negotiating or paying ransoms to recover kidnapped Americans.

Additionally, there were some treatments that were included to control for different elements of a kidnapping scenario that could influence public opinion that did not have a significant effect on support for hostage recovery. Unlike in our pilot experiment, the gender of the kidnapped American in the 2020 survey did not affect support for either rescue or ransom. In the pilot and consistent with the well-established phenomenon of the "Missing White Women Syndrome," we found that individuals supported a rescue mission more when we used female pronouns to describe the kidnapped American rather than

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[1]This is unsurprising given that the treatments were independently randomized from each other and well-balanced on demographic characteristics.

[2]This finding also replicates a similar pattern in the pilot.

	Rescue	Negotiate	Pay
Deserving: Without	-0.21***	-0.08	-0.23***
	(0.058)	(0.083)	(0.081)
Deserving: Against	-0.23***	-0.08	-0.21**
	(0.059)	(0.086)	(0.083)
Soldiers: 100	-0.04	0.00	0.03
	(0.059)	(0.085)	(0.082)
Soldiers: 1000	-0.19***	0.04	0.10
	(0.061)	(0.087)	(0.085)
Ransom: 1 million	-0.06	-0.19**	-0.21**
	(0.067)	(0.086)	(0.083)
Ransom: 10 million	-0.03	-0.24***	-0.30***
	(0.067)	(0.085)	(0.082)
Job: Aid Worker	-0.15**	-0.08	-0.11
	(0.067)	(0.097)	(0.094)
Job: Journalist	-0.24***	-0.10	-0.18*
	(0.067)	(0.096)	(0.093)
Job: Hiker	-0.31***	0.00	-0.11
	(0.069)	(0.100)	(0.097)
Order: Rescue First	-0.01	-0.26***	-0.28***
	(0.048)	(0.069)	(0.067)
Political Interest	0.14***	0.06	0.03
	(0.030)	(0.044)	(0.043)
Party: Republican	0.04	-0.06	-0.23**
	(0.067)	(0.097)	(0.094)
Party: Independent	-0.04	-0.19**	-0.33***
	(0.068)	(0.098)	(0.095)
Party: Other	0.17	-0.41	-0.70*
	(0.313)	(0.430)	(0.417)
Party: None	-0.51***	-0.35	-0.05
	(0.151)	(0.229)	(0.222)
Internationalism	0.23***	0.31***	0.28***
	(0.053)	(0.076)	(0.074)
Ideology	0.04***	0.02*	0.03**
	(0.010)	(0.014)	(0.014)
Full-time Employed	0.07	0.18**	0.37***
	(0.057)	(0.083)	(0.080)
Age	-0.00	-0.01**	-0.03***
	(0.002)	(0.002)	(0.002)
Parent	0.13**	0.04	0.10
	(0.052)	(0.076)	(0.073)
Education	-0.07***	-0.03	-0.03
	(0.026)	(0.038)	(0.037)
Constant	3.87***	3.45***	4.54***
	(0.281)	(0.422)	(0.410)
Observations	1,895	1,411	1,412
R-squared	0.13	0.11	0.27

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. The OLS models include, but do not report, indicators for treatments that had no significant effect on respondents' support for rescue and ransom. These treatments include the gender of the kidnapped American, whether the captor was a rebel or terrorist group, and the location of the kidnapping. The models also include, but do not report, respondent characteristics that had no significant relationship with the dependent variables. These respondent characteristics include household income, race, gender, and state of residence.

Table 6: **Additional Effects and Correlations with Demographic Variables**

male pronouns.[3] In this study, gender had no effect. Similarly, the identity of the captors—rebels or terrorists—and the geographic location of the kidnapping also produced null effects for all outcomes. The former null effect is in some ways surprising given elite rhetoric and U.S. policy forbidding negotiations with foreign terrorist organizations.

Finally, several demographic variables of survey respondents were significantly correlated with support for hostage recovery. The most consistent finding across the recovery options is that internationalists are much more likely to support all recovery options compared to isolationists. All other demographic variables have inconsistent patterns across the recovery options. Most notable in this respect is political party. There appears to be bipartisan consensus when it comes to supporting rescue missions and negotiating ransoms, with Republicans and Democrats supporting both at equal rates. *Paying* ransoms is where Republicans and Democrats diverge with Republicans being significantly less supportive than Democrats.

5   2016 Pilot Experiment

We fielded a pilot study in November 2016 using a survey of around 1300 Americans. The survey included an embedded experiment with a vignette that randomized elements of a scenario of a search and rescue operation for a missing American. The scenario described an American missing in a rebel stronghold in a foreign country. The key manipulations concerned characteristics of the missing person such as their profession (soldier, journalist, or hiker) and gender (male or female) as well as language designed to cue the deservingness of the individual (3 treatment groups). Finally, we included manipulations of the cost and location of the mission. We randomize the cost of the mission by varying the number of soldiers involved (10, 100 or 1000) in the potential rescue as well as the country in which the American has gone missing (Nigeria, Syria or Afghanistan). This yielded a 3 x 2 x 3 x 3 x 3 design. Although this design has a small cell size for any given combination, we only assess the effects of the deservingness and cost treatments averaging over the other manipulations. The scenario is provided in full below. The randomized elements are in italics and brackets.

> An American [*soldier / journalist / hiker*] has gone missing in [*Nigeria / Syria / Afghanistan*]. [*She / He*] is believed to be in a rebel stronghold. [*She / He*] traveled to the area [*following the orders of / without the knowledge of / against the orders of*] [*his / her*] superiors. The U.S. government has proposed that a nearby unit of [*10 / 100 / 1000*] American soldiers conduct a search and rescue mission. When you have finished reading the situation carefully, click the arrow.

In the case of the hiker, we still wanted to provide a deservingness cue, but as a tourist a "superior" would not have been the appropriate wording. Thus, instead for those who received the hiker scenario the deservingness cue was as follows: [*She / He*] traveled to the area [*with the blessing of / without the knowledge of / against the wishes of*] [*his / her*] family.

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[3] "Missing white woman syndrome" (MWWS) suggests that white, female victims of crimes—particularly abductions—attract more media attention than their non-white, male counterparts, and may be portrayed as more sympathetic victims (Gilchrist, 2010; Gruenewald, Chermak and Pizarro, 2013; Min and Feaster, 2010; Simmons and Woods, 2015; Sommers, 2016; Slakoff and Fradella, 2019).

The main dependent variable is a question asking respondents about their support for a rescue mission. In the pilot, we did not ask about support for paying a ransom. We first asked respondents immediately following the vignette, the following: "To what extent do you support or oppose the U.S. government's proposed search and rescue mission?". A six-point scale followed from "oppose a lot" to "support a lot."

After answering the rescue mission support question, respondents answered a question designed to measure the deservingness mechanism. We examine the deservingness hypothesis more closely by asking respondents how responsible they think the American is for their situation. The question reads as follows: "To what extent do you think the missing [*soldier / journalist / hiker*] is to blame for [*his / her*] situation?". Respondents could give one of four response options ranging from "completely to blame" coded as 1 to "completely blameless" coded as 4. This question appears below:

- If the search and rescue mission is approved, how likely do you think it is that it will succeed? Very likely, somewhat likely, not too likely, not likely at all

We use the pilot data to test the deservingness and cost hypotheses as well as the conditional hypothesis that predicts mission cost and hostage deservingness interact to shape support for rescue.
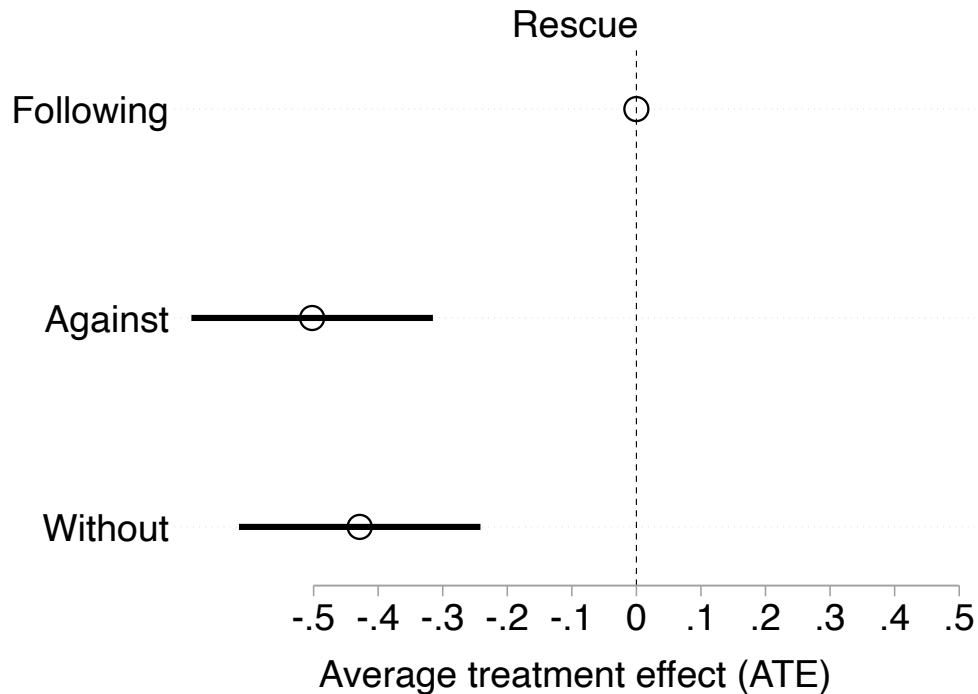

Figure 1: **Average Treatment Effect of Deservingness Cue Treatment on Support for Rescue**

First, Figure 1 clearly shows the effects of the deservingness cue on support for rescue. Respondents are significantly more likely to support rescue when the individual is described as following orders or having the blessing of their family. The average treatment effect is a more than 10 percentage point increase in support.[4] Support increases from 72% to 84% when the missing American is "more deserving".

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[4]For ease of exposition, we discuss the results in the text in terms of percentage points instead of the ATE on the

Although support for rescue is still relatively high when the missing individual is not the ideal type, these results suggest that the American public does not ignore the responsibility of the missing person for their situation.
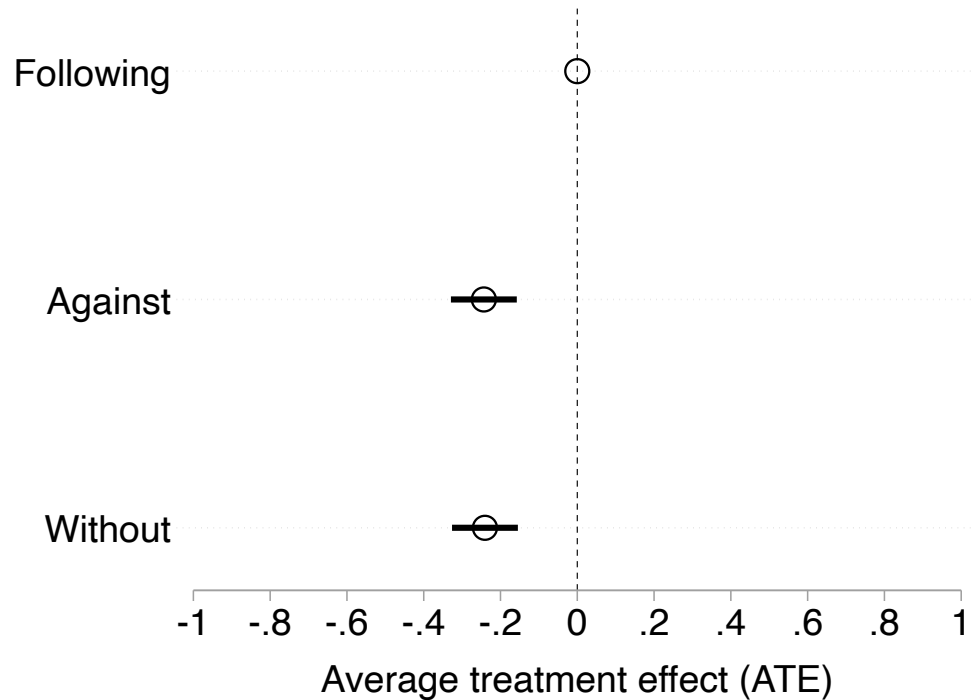

Figure 2: **ATE of Deservingness Cue Treatment on Perceived Deservingness**

Next, we examine the effects of the deservingness treatment on perceptions of deservingness. Recall that higher values mean the missing person is "more deserving" or less to blame for their own situation. We observe that in the pilot the deservingness cue also had the expected effect on individual perceptions of whether the missing person was to blame for their situation. Figure 3 shows that relative to when the missing person was just following orders, those who traveled to the rebel stronghold either against orders or without telling anyone are viewed as less deserving or more to blame for their own situation. There is on average a high level of belief that individuals are not completely or somewhat blameless even when going to a rebel stronghold following the orders of their superiors. This may indicate that going missing or getting taken hostage must be precipitated by an individual mistake even if in the location due to the orders of a superior.

Together these results provide strong evidence that the responsibility the public feels individuals have for their potential capture or hostage situation influences support for government attempts at rescue. Importantly, in the pilot, the blame question came after the question about support for rescue, while in the 2020 survey, the blame question came before the rescue question. These results show that regardless of where we asked about perceptions of blame in relationship to the dependent variable, we see similar effects of the deservingness treatment on support for rescue.

six-point scale.

Finally, the pilot clearly shows a similar interaction between deservingness and costs. At low cost, deservingness has a small, although significant, effect. When the rescue mission is larger however, the deservingness of hostages has a stronger effect. In both the pilot and the 2020 survey, we see a significant effect of deservingness on support for rescue when the number of soldiers involved is 100 or 1000.
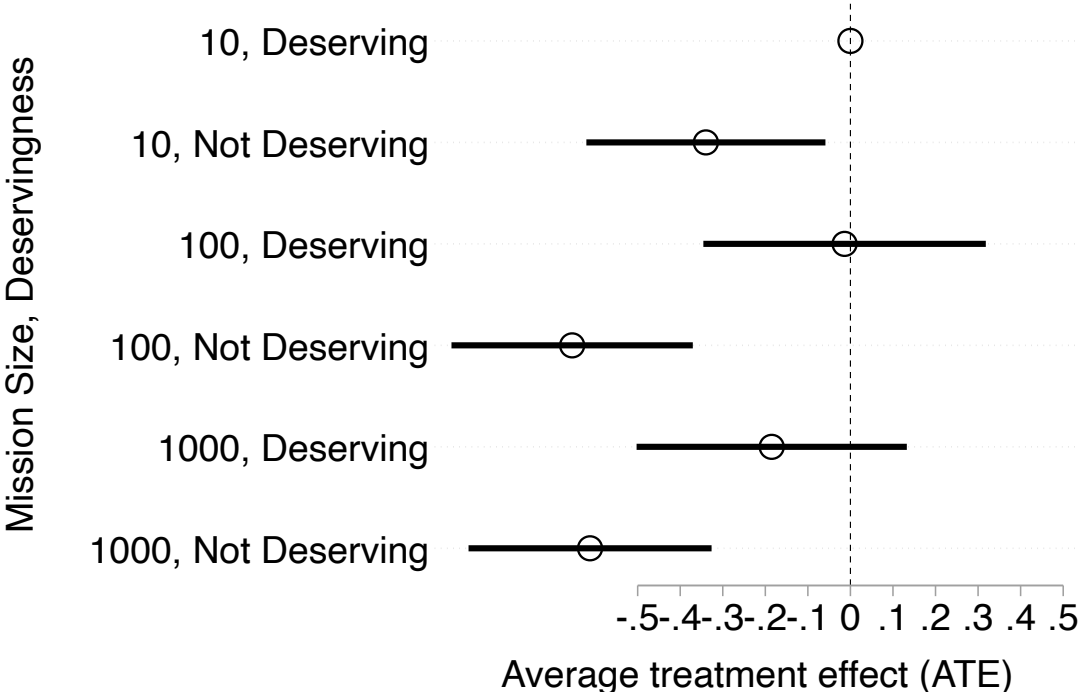

Figure 3: **ATE of Deservingness Cue Treatment and Costs on Support for Rescue**

6   Interviews

This study's interview protocol was approved under the [withheld for peer review] IRB #00032606. We conducted 22 elite interviews with 21 current and former officials and servicemembers responsible for hostage recovery, as outlined in Table 7.

Table 7: Interview Dates and Format

Participant	Date	Format
01	12.13.18	In-person, hand-written notes
02	05.16.19	In-person, hand-written notes
03	01.20.23	Zoom, recorded and transcribed
04	01.23.23	Zoom, notes typed simultaneously
05	01.23.23	Phone, notes typed simultaneously
06	01.24.23	In-person, notes typed simultaneously
07	01.26.23	In-person, recorded and transcribed
08	01.27.23	In-person, hand-written notes
09	01.27.23	In-person, recorded and transcribed
10	01.27.23	In-person, recorded and transcribed
11	01.30.23	Zoom, recorded and transcribed
12	01.30.23	Zoom, recorded and transcribed
13	02.03.23	Phone, notes typed simultaneously
14	02.06.23	Zoom, recorded and transcribed
15	02.15.23	Zoom, notes typed simultaneously
16	03.03.23	Zoom, recorded and transcribed
17	03.03.23	Zoom, recorded and transcribed
18	03.21.23	Phone, notes typed simultaneously
19	04.03.23	Phone, notes typed simultaneously
20	04.04.23	Phone, notes typed simultaneously
21	05.04.23	In-person, hand-written notes
22	07.11.23	Zoom, recorded and transcribed

6.1   Interview Population

To understand the policymaker and special operator perspective on hostage recovery, we sought to interview current and former officials from the U.S. government entities responsible for bringing hostages home. That population comprises representatives from offices in the executive branch, Congress, and the U.S. military.

Three modern failures of hostage recovery efforts shaped what the U.S. hostage recovery enterprise looks like today. First, in 1980, the U.S. military attempted to rescue 52 Americans held hostage in the U.S. embassy in Iran, but the mission was an "ignominious disaster": the military did not rescue any of the captive Americans, and eight servicemen lost their lives (Naylor, 2015, 3). Post-mortem analyses

revealed that the different military services had failed to coordinate effectively in service of the mission.[5] In response, the military established the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) headquarters and Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) to coordinate multiple branches of the military in joint operations overseas, including the hostage recovery missions by the Army's Delta Force and the Navy's SEALs.

Second, the 2002 kidnapping and killing of *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl altered which types of hostages the United States government attempts to recover. The policy of "Mission First, People Always," allows explicit U.S. government intervention, provisions for negotiating with kidnappers, and the ability to order rescue missions for *any* American citizen kidnapped abroad—not only U.S. government personnel, as it had previously done.[6]

Third, U.S. hostage recovery policy was further formalized in 2015, in the wake of the kidnapping and beheading of several Americans by the Islamic State. President Obama's Presidential Policy Directive 30 on Hostage Recovery Activities ("PPD-30") and its classified annex, as well as Executive Order 13698 on Hostage Recovery Activities, established three new, executive branch offices responsible for hostage recovery decisions: the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell (HRFC), an interagency, operational body housed at the FBI; the Hostage Response Group (HRG), the officials in the White House and National Security Council that make high-level hostage recovery decisions; and the office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA), the U.S. government's chief diplomat for hostage and wrongful detainment negotiation, housed at the State Department.

Asserting its role as the legislative branch, Congress in turn codified into legislation the HRFC, HRG, and SPEHA offices. The Robert Levinson Hostage Recovery and Hostage-Taking Accountability Act of 2020, which originated in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and House Foreign Affairs Committee, formally established these offices, while defining the criteria for designating someone as "wrongfully detained," and creating new authorities to sanction hostage takers.[7]

The relevant population for interviews is therefore composed of current and former representatives of the decision-making and operational bodies in the hostage recovery enterprise: the Hostage Response Group, the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell, and the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs; Congressional offices with jurisdiction over foreign affairs, especially the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and House Foreign Affairs Committee; and military servicemembers from—or supporting—Joint Special Operations Command.

6.2 Interview Sample

We used a combination of convenience sampling, purposive sampling, and snowball sampling to reach current and former officials from the population described above. The three sampling methods we use are appropriate for obtaining interviews from a non-random sample (Mosley, 2013; Lynch, 2013). First, *convenience sampling* entails gaining information from interview participants who are convenient or ac-

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[5]Interview 02, May 16, 2019.

[6]"Personnel Recovery Strategic Communication Guidance, (30 January 2008)" Online at http://dtic.mil.dpmo/laws_directives/documents/stratcomm_guidance.pdf

[7]https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/senate-bill/712/text

cessible for the interviewer. [Details and justification for convenience sampling withheld for peer review.] All individuals contacted accepted the invitation. Second, *purposive sampling* entails identifying interview participants because they have characteristics needed for the sample. We used purposive sampling to make sure that we had reached each relevant office across each administration. So, for instance, had we not interviewed anyone from the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell during the Biden Administration or the Special Presidential Envoy's office during the Trump Administration, we targeted interview invitations accordingly, reaching out to individuals via LinkedIn or through contact information provided by other interview participants. In this manner, we reached all relevant entities across all relevant administrations, branches, and political parties. Third, *snowball sampling* entails asking interview participants to help identify additional subjects. At the end of every interview, we asked if the participant had any recommendations for others to interview; every participant made at least two recommendations. In most cases, we had already identified or spoken to the people they recommended; when they provided a new name, we asked the interview participant if they would be willing to make an introduction. In doing so, we reached the vast majority of key players in the hostage recovery enterprise over the last eight years.

Given the sensitive nature of this subject, and the fact that many interview participants are currently serving in government, we guaranteed all interview participants confidentiality as a condition for participating in interviews. Moreover, due to the small size of these offices and the limited number of officials who have ever served in these roles, we do not specify whether quotes are attributed to current or former officials, nor attribute them to a specific office, as this would almost certainly identify individual participants. (For example, only four people have ever served in the role of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs.) However, the interviews represent all relevant entities across all relevant administrations: principals and senior staff from each of these entities who served during the Obama, Trump, and Biden Administrations. Of the 18 non-military interview participants, 10 served or currently serve in principal- or director-level positions in the hostage recovery enterprise. Many of our interview subjects have also served in other, relevant roles in the hostage recovery enterprise. For example, Deputy Directors of the Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell come from relevant positions in the State or Defense Department; principals in the HRG and SPEHA offices have previously served in Special Operations units in the military (see "Past" affiliations in Table 8.) Our 22 interviews thus represent saturation of our sample frame.

Table 8: Descriptive Statistics: Interview Subjects by Affiliation

Organization	Primary	Past
Department of Defense (hostage recovery personnel)	3	4
Department of State (Presidential Envoy, Hostage Affairs)	6	1
Department of State (Consular Affairs)	-	5
Federal Bureau of Investigations (Hostage Recovery Fusion Cell)	3	1
White House (National Security Council/ Hostage Response Group)	5	
U.S. Congress (hostage policy staff)	4	
Total	21	

We conducted interviews by phone, zoom, and in person. We recorded nearly all interviews to ensure

the accuracy of quotes and destroyed recordings after finalizing transcripts. Where noted, some interviews were not recorded, including one interview that was conducted in a SCIF (sensitive, compartmented information facility). For that interview, we took simultaneous, hand-written notes, which we subsequently typed and summarized to the best of our ability. For that particular interview, compared to the others, quotes represent the best recollection of the participant's words.

6.3 Ethical Considerations for Human Subjects

Because our interview participants were former and current government employees speaking in their professional capacity, there are minimal risks undertaken in the interview process. Still, we designed our interviews to ensure that we protected participants' privacy and confidentiality, adhering to human subjects' considerations in recruitment, consent, participation, data management, data analysis, and publishing results. All elements of this study conform to the "Principles and Guidance for Human Subjects Research," approved by the American Political Science Association Council in April 2020. Specifically: no compensation was paid to human participants; no conflicts of interest arise from the research; all sources of financial support are disclosed to the journal and are acknowledged with the submission; and we have acknowledged contributions to the research, including citing previous work as appropriate. Because the interview transcripts provide sufficient contextual information to identify individual participants (for example, identifying their professional responsibility for a specific hostage's case, which can pinpoint the interview participant), we do not share the underlying raw data. In place of sharing the data, we endeavor to facilitate production and analytic transparency of the data collection process, including through the extensive appendices to this article.

In designing this study, we took several precautions to protect human subjects' privacy. This refers to measures that ensure that subjects have control over who knows about their participation in the study. A violation of human subject privacy occurs when a subject's participation in the study is revealed. Other than the interviewing author and the interview participant, no one else was present for any of the interviews, which protects subjects' privacy. The author worked to speak to subjects in locations that maximized their privacy and never confirmed to anyone else who had participated in the study. Moreover, privacy concerns present a dilemma for informed consent; a signature on a saved document could create a risk to participant privacy. Therefore, we sought and obtained a waiver from [university withheld] IRB to conduct oral, rather than written, informed consent with all participants. The author shared a prepared oral consent document with all participants before conducting the interview, and asked for their verbal, affirmative consent. At that point, all participants had the opportunity to ask questions and/or opt out of the study. While some participants volunteered their willingness to "go on the record," we decided to maintain privacy and anonymity for all participants so as to not inadvertently identify those who chose to remain anonymous.

Several of the precautions implemented to protect subjects' privacy also maintained their confidentiality. A violation of confidentiality occurs when a subject is connected to or identified with any of the resulting data. This would occur if an interview participant was linked to something they had said. We protected against such violations in several ways. First, after completing the interviews, we removed any explicitly identifying information from the interview transcripts, identifying each instead by a numerical code and date. The interviewing author maintained a separate, protected file that connects the partici-

pant codes to the participants' identities, which we used to check accuracy and generate the descriptive statistics of participants' affiliations. Subsequently, all interview transcripts and notes were uploaded into NVivo, in which the author coded subjects and themes across interview memos. These codings were later used for organizing thematic sections of the interview section of the manuscript. All files remain protected. In the resulting article, the use of numerical codes and eschewing any identifying information attached to any interview ensures that no subjects can be connected to any particular quotes.

6.4   Interview Questions

Below is a sample of interview questions:

1. For context, what is/was your job as it relates to hostage recovery?

2. What are some examples of hostage recovery cases you've worked on? Can you tell us about the dynamics of that case?

3. Whom does the United States recover from captivity abroad?

4. What is the U.S. government's responsibility to recover hostages?

5. How does the U.S. government decide whether someone is a hostage or wrongful detainee?

6. What does the U.S. government consider when deciding whether to recover a hostage?

7. What affects how much external/ media attention a hostage receives?

8. What affects how much internal/ government attention a hostage receives?

9. What should hostage families do regarding attention and publicity to a case?

10. What do you think the U.S. public thinks about hostage recovery?

11. How does public support or opposition influence the hostage-recovery process?

12. How would you advise the President handle the news around hostage recovery?

13. Is hostage recovery good politics? Why or why not?

14. Why do some, but not all, hostage families get a meeting with the president?

15. *If the interview participant had not already spoken about circumstances of capture or hostages' public image:* In another part of this project, we explore what the American public thinks about hostages and their circumstances of capture. Some hostages are unpopular. Does that factor into the internal conversation or decision-making process?

16. What have I not asked that's important for me to understand about hostage recovery?

17. Is there someone else you'd recommend I talk to?

Questions for specific offices/agencies:

1. Why did President Obama pursue PPD-30?

2. What is the role of Congress in hostage and detainee issues?

3. Why did Congress pass the Levinson Act?

4. The Levinson Act has 11 official criteria for designating someone as "wrongfully detained." Does anything else matter?

7 Descriptive Statistics of Hostage Rescue Attempts

Since 2001, there have been at least 33 American hostages who have been the object of a rescue mission. In Table 9, "success" means that the hostage was recovered alive; "failed" means that the mission did not recover the hostage but is otherwise silent on the hostage's final outcome; "killed" means the hostage died as a result of the rescue attempt. Some of these hostages were part of the same rescue mission. For example, Jean and Scott Adam, Phyllis Macay, and Bob Riggle were part of the same doomed mission in which they were all killed; Gracia Burnham was safely rescued in the same mission in which her husband Martin was killed. In addition to Ayala and Rowan, four additional American hostages were rescued by Algerian forces in the In Amenas hostage crisis. Their names have not been released.

About half of these missions were led by JSOC teams, and the other half by foreign forces with the support of the U.S. military. Table 9 is based entirely on publicly available information and media reports. There are likely further rescue attempts that were never reported. We shared a draft version of this table with several interview subjects to ask for corrections and additions.

Table 9: Reported Rescue Attempts for U.S. Hostages (2001 – 2022)

Year	Hostage	Profession	Country	Force	Success	Failure	Death
2002	Gracia Burnham	Tourist	Philippines	Philippines	x		
2002	Martin Burnham	Tourist	Philippines	Philippines			x
2003	Jessica Lynch	U.S. Army	Iraq	U.S. Special Forces	x		
2005	Roy Hallums	Contractor	Iraq	U.S. Delta Force	x		
2008	Marc Gonsalves	Contractor	Colombia	Colombia	x		
2008	Thomas Howes	Contractor	Colombia	Colombia	x		
2008	Keith Stansell	Contractor	Colombia	Colombia	x		
2009	Bowe Bergdahl	U.S. Army	Afghanistan	U.S. Army, SEALs		x	
2009	Richard Phillips	Merchant marine	Somalia	U.S. SEALs	x		
2010	Jeff James	Contractor	Nigeria	Nigeria	x		
2010	James Robertson	Contractor	Nigeria	Nigeria	x		
2011	Jean Adam	Tourist	Somalia	U.S. Navy			x
2011	Scott Adam	Tourist	Somalia	U.S. Navy			x
2011	Phyllis Macay	Tourist	Somalia	U.S. Navy			x
2011	Bob Riggle	Tourist	Somalia	U.S. Navy			x
2012	Jessica Buchanan	Aid worker	Somalia	U.S. SEALs	x		
2012	Dilip Joseph	Aid worker	Afghanistan	U.S. SEALs	x		
2013	Wilmer Ayala	Contractor	Algeria	Algeria	x		
2013	Frederick Buttaccio	Contractor	Algeria	Algeria			x
2013	Victor Lovelady	Contractor	Algeria	Algeria			x
2013	Gordon Lee Rowan	Contractor	Algeria	Algeria	x		
2014	James Foley	Journalist	Syria	U.S. Delta Force		x	
2014	Peter Kassig	Aid worker	Syria	U.S. Delta Force		x	
2014	Kayla Mueller	Aid worker	Syria	U.S. Delta Force		x	
2014	Steven Sotloff	Journalist	Syria	U.S. Delta Force		x	
2014	Luke Somers	Journalist	Yemen	U.S. SEALs			x
2016	Kevin King	Academic	Afghanistan	U.S. SEALs		x	
2017	Caitlin Coleman	Tourist	Afghanistan	Pakistan	x		
2019	Danny Burch	Oil worker	Yemen	UAE with U.S.	x		
2019	Unnamed woman	Tourist	Benin/Burkina Faso	France	x		
2020	Philip Walton	Farmer	Niger/Nigeria	U.S. SEALs	x		
2022	Unnamed woman	Tourist	Yemen	Saudi Arabia, U.S.	x		
2022	Unnamed woman	Tourist	Yemen	Saudi Arabia, U.S.	x		

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