

4-16-1999

Credibility on Credibility: A Reason to Fight a War?

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Recommended Citation

(1999) "Credibility on Credibility: A Reason to Fight a War?," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 15 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol6/iss15/2>

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International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Credibility on Credibility: A Reason to Fight a War?

Author: Editor

Volume: 6

Issue: 15

Date: 1999-04-16

Keywords: Credibility, NATO, Serbia, Yugoslavia, War

Abstract. This article describes some problems in fighting a war for the purpose of defending a political entity's credibility.

Some political authorities of some North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nation-states, NATO civilian and military authorities, and politico-military analysts and commentators have advocated that NATO's credibility and that of its constituent members is on the line in the conflict with the Yugoslav and Serbian governments. If this credibility is found suspect, so the argument goes, the very existence of NATO and sizable amounts of its members' political power will be seriously threatened. What is this credibility that seemingly can have such impact?

Credibility may denote that an entity means what it says. Yet, always meaning what one says is not necessarily a politico-military virtue--or so intimate the many classical studies on the utility of deception. Moreover, whether it means what it says or not, the resulting consequences for that entity may entail combinations of positive and negative features. In addition, the salient consequences for an entity may have little or nothing to do with whether it means what it says.

Credibility also may denote that not only does an entity mean what it says but it will stick with this meaning. Besides the Issues raised above, however, is sticking with a meaning necessarily a politico-military virtue? Information may disconfirm or not support an initial impression or contention. Events and their accompanying consequences can radically change essential parameters of an initial situation and context. Sticking with one's initial meaning under such circumstances can be fatal to maintaining security and power.

Credibility has at least one other denotation--an entity's ongoing combination of ability and motivation to act in its own interests. It is here that an entity's viability may truly be on the line. However, an entity may become too caught up in ensuring that allies, neutrals, and adversaries alike perceive that it is credible--so caught up that the essence of this denotation of credibility is forsaken. For in the context of this third denotation, perception is not reality. The entity that engages in force--when force is otherwise not in its interest--purely to reinforce the perception that that entity is credible is expending resources detrimentally. In such a case, the entity is expending resources in a manner that underlines its inadequate credibility--or its own perception of a threat to its credibility that may be not shared by other perceivers--and that detracts from the resources that should remain unused until force becomes in its interests to employ.

The "staying the course" rationale to wage war for credibility will most often credibly lead to straying off the credible course. (See Banzai, T. (1997). Effects of experts' comments on the causal and intentional attributions of newspaper readers. *Japanese Journal of Social Psychology*, 13, 53-63; Borg, M.J. (1997). The structure of social monitoring in the process of social control. *Deviant Behavior*, 18, 273-293; Engstrom, E. (1996). Audiences' perceptions of sources' credibility in a television interview setting. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 83, 579-588; Fox, C.R., & Irwin, J.R. (1998). The role of context in the communication of uncertain beliefs. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 20, 57-70; Peters, R.G.,

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Covello, V.T., & McCallum, D.B. (1997). The determinants of trust and credibility in environmental risk communication: An empirical study. *Risk Analysis, 17*, 43-54.) (Keywords: Credibility, NATO, Serbia, Yugoslavia, War.)