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Trends. If You're So Right, Why Are We Sure You're So Wrong? Iraq, Free Riders, and Social Loafing

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Abstract: This Trends article discusses and evaluates public discourse surrounding the acceptability of militarily invading Iraq through a social psychological perspective. In social psychology, the research tradition for constructs such as free-riding and social loafing suggests that, wittingly or unwittingly, many political actors assume that the United States will act to address actual political threats in a certain way, and that they (the other political actors) can adopt contrarian ideological stances because they don't have to address those same threats.

Public discourse on the acceptability of militarily invading Iraq is often couched in rules of engagement featuring reason, rationality, and logic. And these rules focus on strategic, ethical/moral, and domestic political considerations on the nature of threat, military intervention, and its consequences. However, at least one research tradition from social psychology might highlight another contributor to public discourse.

The research tradition for constructs such as free-riding and social loafing suggests that, wittingly or unwittingly, many political actors are not bellying up to the bar of honest discourse and action because they feel that they don't have to. According to this narrative, the United States as superpower will do what has to be done, and other political actors, therefore, do not have to. Instead, these other actors can quibble; take privileged, purely abstract, and largely contrarian ideological positions; or assert their own prerogatives to address instrumental economic issue, without having to bear the brunt of addressing what may be a looming and significant threat.

The social psychological literature comprises some suggestions for what might attenuate the psychology of free-riding and social loafing. For example, Sweeney (1973) posits that the smaller a group within which a political actor resides, the less likelihood there is of free-riding and social loafing. He also posits that the psychology is less likely to occur if a private good accompanies contributing to a public good. From Duffy & Shaw's (2000) work on the Salieri Syndrome, one might posit that envy within a group of political actors (and inter-actor directed) leads to an increase in the psychology. Henningsen et al. (2000) posit that when actors expect to work alone and not engage in value-tinged acts, the psychology is less likely. Harkins (1987) suggests that public accountability/identifiability may lead to a decrease in the psychology.

The above psychological findings might be appropriately validated for replicability and for social, cultural, and historical constraints. Then the findings could be operationalized for the praxis of diplomacy and negotiations. In the meantime, some political actors may continue to engage Truth through not engaging Truth. (See Duffy, M. K., & Shaw, J. D. (2000). The Salieri Syndrome: Consequences of envy in groups. *Small Group Research*, 31, 3-23; Harkins, S.G. (1987). Social loafing and social facilitation. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 23, 1-18; Henningsen, D. D., Cruz, M. G., & Miller, M. L. (2000). Role of social loafing in predeliberation decision making. *Group Dynamics*, 4, 168-175; Latane, B., Williams, K., & Harkins, S. (1979). Many hands make light the work: The causes and consequences of social loafing. *Journal of Personality & Social Psychology*, 37, 822-832; Sweeney, J.W.

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(1973). An experimental investigation of the free-rider problem. *Social Science Research*, 2, 277-292.)
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