Retributive Support for War and Torture

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Abstract

This article tests the hypothesis that ordinary people favor punishing badly behaved foreign actors to make them “pay” for their crimes, rather than purely to protect national security interests. In a large college-student sample, individual differences in the endorsement of a retributive punishment principles predicted support for punishing transgressor states (including a state sponsoring terror attacks against a rival, a nuclear proliferator, and a small aggressor state) and terrorist detainees. These estimates controlled for partisanship, ideology, humanitarian and security values, and beliefs about the efficacy of force. These results provide further evidence that retributive values and motivations contribute to laypeople’s support for punishing foreign wrongdoers.
Introduction

Much of international relations theory is devoted to analyzing security incentives for the use of force, especially against states that have behaved aggressively or greedily (e.g., Glaser 2010). A simpler form of the same logic informs rationalist theories of public support for war (e.g., Gelpi et al. 2009; Jentleson 1992; Jentleson & Britton 1998; Page & Shapiro 1992). But might we favor punishing badly behaved foreign actors to make them “pay” for their crimes, rather than purely for self-protection? In principle, punishment can aim not only at security, but also retributive, restorative, or rehabilitative justice. But the roles of the justice motives in foreign policy and foreign policy opinion have received relatively scant attention.

Retributive justice motivations are particularly worth studying, because they play such an important role in everyday thinking about domestic crime and punishment. This is clear from the boom in research on the psychology of punishment that followed the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1976 reinstatement of the death penalty. The Court’s majority decision argued that public opinion should help define the boundaries of “cruel and unusual” punishment. Moreover, because “the instinct for retribution is part of the nature of man,” the Court contended that retributive justice was a legitimate reason for executing murderers, regardless of the penalty’s efficacy as a deterrent (quoted in Finckenauer 1988: 82).

Survey research has found that “a life for a life” was in fact Americans’ favored justification for the death penalty, more important than was deterring serious crime or preventing killers from killing again. Indeed, most death penalty supporters did not waver when asked to suppose that the penalty had no deterrent effect (Bohm 1992; Ellsworth &
Gross 1994; Ellsworth & Ross 1983; Gross & Ellsworth 2003; Lord et al. 1979; Tyler & Weber 1982; Vidmar 1974). More recently, experimental research has demonstrated the centrality of retribution in laypeople’s penal sentencing preferences for a variety of crimes, and a surprising insensitivity to instrumental incentives for punishment (reviewed by Carlsmith & Darley 2008).

Of course, people may think about punishing foreign wrongdoers very differently from the way they think about punishing ordinary criminals. Wars are much more costly than are death-row executions, and this greater cost could lead people to weigh consequences more heavily than the gratification of moral impulses. In addition, national identity moderates moral and emotional responses to international offenses (Gordijn et al. 2001; Gordijn et al. 2006; Yzerbyt et al. 2003). For example, the generally tepid level of public support for humanitarian intervention suggests that people are much less upset by crimes against unfamiliar foreigners than by crimes against their own kind (Eichenberg 2005; Jentleson 1992; Jentleson & Britton 1998; Herrmann & Shannon 2001).

However, a number of scholars have argued that desires for revenge can fuel international conflicts (Harkavy 2000; Lebow 2008; Lebow 2010; Löwenheim & Heimann 2008; Scheff 1994). In less guarded moments, some leaders and officials have seemed to reveal or imply retributive motives. For example, President George W. Bush in a private meeting in early 2003 justified his opposition to a war-avoiding settlement that would grant Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein a safe exile, on the grounds that Saddam was “a thief, a terrorist, a war criminal. Compared to Saddam, Milosevic would be a Mother Teresa. When we go in, we’ll uncover many more crimes and we’ll take him to the International Court of Justice in The Hague” (Danner 2007: 61). Bush also implied a
retributive motive in his decision to approve the C.I.A.’s request to waterboard Khalid Sheikh Mohammad, a man who reportedly had masterminded the September 11, 2001 terror attacks and had beheaded personally *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. “I thought about my meeting with Danny Pearl’s widow, who was pregnant with his son when he was murdered,” Bush wrote in his recent memoir. “I thought about the 2,973 people stolen from their families by al Qaeda on 9/11. And I thought about my duty to protect the country from another act of terror. ‘Damn right,’ I said” (Bush 2010).

It is difficult to determine when such feelings have played a decisive role in decision-making. When an official emphasizes an enemy’s past crimes, this could reflect a retributive justification for punishment, an argument about the threat posed, a case for the need to bolster deterrence, or some combination of these reasons. In addition, moralistic justifications are often accompanied by parallel national security arguments, as in Bush’s reference mentioned above to “my duty to protect the country.” There are good political and professional reasons for political leaders and officials to conceal the role of emotion and retribution in policymaking. Thus the relative scarcity of references to moral outrage and moral desert in historical sources on decision-making does not rule out their having played a role. But it does make these motives difficult to study.

Retributive motives are easier to investigate in public opinion, where they also may play a greater role. After all, ordinary citizens are arguably less able to evaluate the efficacy and utility of war, as well as being less accountable for their preferences, than decision-makers. Judging by their frequent emphasis on enemy regimes’ crimes and evil nature in prowar rhetoric, political leaders apparently think that the public responds to such moral appeals (Ben-Porath 2007; Moerk 2002).
A handful of studies of retributive motivation in foreign policy opinion suggest that there may be something to this belief. In prior research on U.S. opinion on the 1991 Persian Gulf War and 2003 Iraq War, I found that death penalty supporters were particularly supportive of war against Iraq, and argued that this could reflect individual differences in the moral belief that wrongdoers deserve harsh punishment (Liberman 2006, 2007). Other studies have found that anger—which is closely linked to the desire for retribution—correlates strongly with support for war and for punitive occupation policies (Huddy et al. 2007; Lambert et al. 2010; Pagano & Huo 2007; Sadler et al. 2005; Skitka et al. 2006). Still other work has found that explicit desires to avenge the September 11th attacks on the United States predicted support for the Afghanistan War, the War on Terror, and the Iraq War (Liberman & Skitka 2011; Liberman & Skitka 2011). Finally, addressing a different kind of organized violence against foreigners, Carlsmith and Sood (2009) showed that U.S. citizens supported the coercive interrogation of terrorist detainees as much as for retributive punishment as for intelligence collection.

These findings, though important, have left unanswered questions about the psychology of international punishment. Correlations between support for the death penalty and support for war may well reflect underlying retributive values, in light of the well-known retributive basis of Americans’ death penalty support (DPS), but there are other plausible explanations for such correlations. It is also unclear how whether earlier findings generalize to other targets of punishment.

This paper seeks to build on prior work by examining retributiveness and support for punishing a greater variety of foreign offenders, including nuclear proliferating states, unthreatening aggressors, state sponsors of terrorist attacks against foreign countries, and
terrorist detainees. The variety of offenders and offenses provides a test of the breadth of situations that can elicit retributive reactions. Using a direct measure of retributiveness, instead of a surrogate measure like DPS, allows a more straightforward test of its connection to support for international punishment. And controlling for a wider array of potential confounders offers more convincing tests of the retributive motivation underlying observed correlations between retributive dispositions and support for punishing foreign actors.

Analyzing survey data collected from a large college-student sample, I find that individual differences in the endorsement of a retributive punishment philosophy predicted support both for punishing transgressor states and for the coercive interrogation of enemy detainees. These relationships, moreover, were not artifacts of partisanship, ideology, humanitarian or security values, or beliefs about the efficacy of coercion. Retributiveness also closely correlated with support for the death penalty, suggesting that it is their retributive values that lead death penalty supporters to favor harsher punishment of transgressor states and detainees.

In addition to gaining a better understanding of the role of retributive logic in public attitudes about war and torture, this paper contributes to a broader research agenda on the role of core values in political attitudes (see, e.g., Feldman 2003; Goren 2005; Hurwitz & Peffley 1987; Schwartz et al. 2010). Though party identification and left-right ideology remain the leading factors explaining policy positions, particularly among the political aware (Abramowitz & Saunders 2008; Jost et al. 2009; Lewis-Beck et al. 2008; Zaller 1992), citizens’ core values often shape their positions as well, particularly issues where interests are ambiguous or contested and that cut across the main partisan and
liberal-conservative divides.

The rest of the paper is divided into five sections. I begin by situating this study in relation to prior research, and then proceed to describe the study’s main hypotheses, survey sample, and measure of retributiveness. The following sections analyze in turn support for punishing transgressor states and support for coercive interrogation. A brief conclusion reviews the findings, discusses caveats and limitations, and considers their implications for theories of public opinion and international politics.

Study Questions and Context

Research on the retributive nature of laypeople’s support for punishing foreign enemies is still in its infancy. Although often called a “punishment philosophy” or a “penal sentencing goal,” there is good reason to conceptualize retributiveness as being among a larger set of fundamental human values, which values theorists define as “cognitive representations of desirable, transsituational goals” (Schwartz et al. 2010; see also Rokeach 1973). But retributiveness has been ignored in research on values and political attitudes, most of which has focused on more self-evidently political values, such as egalitarianism, humanitarianism, and libertarianism in the domestic issue domain, and militarism, anti-communism, and ethnocentrism in the foreign policy domain (see, e.g., Feldman 1988; Goren 2004; Hurwitz & Peffley 1987; Steenbergen 1995; and the review by Feldman 2003).

Research on personal value inventories, such as Schwartz’ list of basic personal values—power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security—has also not focused on retributiveness per se (studies on their relationship with foreign policy attitudes include Argo 2009;
Cohrs et al. 2005; Cohrs et al. 2005; Davidov, Meuleman, et al. 2008; Schoen 2009; Schwartz et al. 2010; Spini & Doise 1998). None of these values quite captures the concept of retributiveness. Retributiveness is a disposition to believe that wrongdoers deserve to be punished for their crimes, in proportion to the degree that their crimes caused others to suffer. While retributive punishment may affect security or conformity, it is an end-in-itself rather than a means to personal or societal safety or stability. Although related to benevolence and humanitarianism, these values do not reflect the transactional nature of “an eye for an eye.” Retributivists are harsh and tough-minded toward the guilty, but can be extremely benevolent towards the innocent.¹

Retributiveness has been studied almost exclusively in research on interpersonal vengefulness (Cota-McKinley et al. 2001; Douglas & Martinko 2001; Eisenberger et al. 2004; McCullough et al. 2001) and criminal punishment attitudes (e.g., Bohm 1992; Okimoto et al. in press; Tyler & Weber 1982; Vidmar 1974; Warr & Stafford 1984). But the fact that people’s personal vengefulness correlates with their endorsement of retributive sentencing principles suggests that a more general retributive value may shape thinking in both domains (McKee and Feather, 2008).

These studies have proceeded by analyzing correlations between people’s retributive punishment philosophies and their punitive attitudes or behavior. This is a better approach than directly asking people to justify their punishment preferences for

¹ The inverse relationship between benevolence and retributiveness is evident in the use of an item on forgiveness to measure benevolence scale in the full Schwartz values questionnaire. But this item is only one of several, and is typically dropped in the most commonly used shorter versions of the scale.

² It is harder to use this experimental design to study interstate punishment than torture.
two reasons. First, people often are unaware of the reasons for their preferences, especially those guided by intuition and gut feeling rather than by deliberate reasoning. And there is good reason to think that much moral judgment is driven by intuition; what is often taken for moral reasoning is really post-decisional rationalization that people engage in when pressed to justify their moral judgments (Carlsmith 2008; Haidt 2001; Wilson 2002). Second, a taboo on revenge and retribution in many societies—rooted in Christian teachings of forgiveness, states’ demands to monopolize the administration of justice, and widespread utilitarian principles—prompts people to clothe their retributive motivations in euphemisms for retribution (e.g., “let justice be done”, “God’s will”) or in utilitarian terms (e.g., “necessary to deter others,” or “stop killers from killing again”).

As a result, some of the most compelling demonstrations of laypeople’s retributive motivations for punishment have used experimental methods to manipulate retributive and instrumental incentives for punishment, and determine their effects on the severity of preferred punishments (reviewed by Carlsmith & Darley 2008). The only work in this vein to investigate support for punishing foreign actors was Carlsmith and Sood’s (2009) study of Americans’ support for coercive interrogation. The investigators described to all respondents a detained Afghan terror suspect named “Farid.” Respondents were given varying expert estimates of likelihood that Farid was withholding vital information about an imminent terror attack, ranging from no chance to a 95% chance. In a second, orthogonal manipulation, half the participants received additional information about Farid’s past terrorist activities. Those informed about Farid’s terrorist past recommended significantly harsher coercive interrogation methods than did those told nothing about these activities. The effect of this information was as
large as the effect of being told there was a 95% chance that Farid was withholding vital information, compared to the “no chance” condition. An additional finding demonstrated further that people implicitly regarded coercive interrogation as a punishment: preferences on interrogation severity correlated closely with those on how harshly the prisoner should be “punished.”

Although this study provided compelling evidence of the retributive nature of support for punishing foreign detainees, it is unclear whether the findings generalize to punishing transgressor states. Military punishment usually requires expending far more national blood and treasure than does punishing helpless individual detainees. So people might be less likely to indulge their moral and emotional desires for retribution through war than through torture.

Prior research on the retributive nature of public support for military punishment has used non-experimental methods. Two studies used direct measures of desires for revenge over the specific foreign transgression of the September 11th attacks on the United States (Liberman & Skitka 2011; Liberman & Skitka 2011). Others used DPS as a proxy measure for a more general retributive disposition, examining correlations between U.S. popular support for the death penalty and support for wars against Iraq. On the

\[^{2}\] It is harder to use this experimental design to study interstate punishment than torture. Rightly or wrongly, people might infer security incentives as well as retributive ones for punishment from information provided about a state’s past crimes. Respondents might find stipulations in the vignette about the perceived security incentives of military punishment (such as it is or is not required to restore deterrence) less credible than stipulations about the probability that a detainee is withholding vital information.
grounds that retributiveness correlates highly with DPS, these studies suggest that retributiveness probably accounted for the DPS/war support associations (Liberman 2006, 2007).

The hypothesis that retribution might motivate support for military action might explain the associations found in prior work between war support and anger. Feelings of anger have been linked by other lines of research to retributive dispositions and to desires for retribution (Barber et al. 2005; Carlsmith et al. 2002; Douglas & Martinko 2001; McCullough et al. 2001). Thus findings that anger predicts support for war or other sanctions on offending outgroups (e.g., Gordijn et al. 2006; Lambert et al. 2010; Mackie et al. 2000; Huddy et al. 2007; Sadler et al. 2005; Skitka et al. 2006; Pagano & Huo 2007) provides indirect evidence for the role of retributive values and motives.

However, all of these studies are vulnerable to the standard charge against correlational findings that some omitted covariate might account for the observed associations. This charge is particularly persuasive against work using proxy measures for vengeance-seeking (i.e., anger) or retributiveness (i.e., DPS), to the extent that non-retributive motivations or dispositions that also affect these proxies. But even work that more directly measures desires vengeance-seeking or retributiveness must address the possibility that their associations with punitiveness are due to other confounding factors.

The most plausible alternative factors are desires for security and inclinations or aversions to using force, along with any dispositions to experience these desires/feelings. Abstract efficacy-of-force beliefs like “bad guys will inevitably strike unless they are incapacitated” and “punishing bad guys demonstrates that crime does not pay” might motivate punitiveness in both the law-and-order and international domains, at least for
pragmatic citizens. The “rational public” school contends that public opinion does in fact respond in roughly prudent ways to obvious environmental incentives and changes, like soaring crime, new international threats, or the prospects for military victory (Eichenberg 2005; Gelpi et al. 2009; Jentleson 1992; Jentleson & Britton 1998; Page & Shapiro 1992). Anger is related to perceptions of power and efficacy as well as to desires for retribution (Mackie et al. 2008; Maitner et al. 2006; Valentino et al. 2009), so the findings on anger and military punishment do not provide conclusive evidence of retributive motivation. Finally, the fact that some people care more about security and conformity than others offers an explanation focusing on non-retributive values for cross-sectional correlations between DPS and retributiveness, on the one hand, and support for military punishment, on the other (Cohrs et al. 2005; Cohrs et al. 2005; Schwartz et al. 2010).

Humanitarian values and feelings also shape attitudes toward war, but in a less contingent way than retributive values and feelings. Prior research has found humanitarianism and pacifism to predict broad military-policy postures as well as attitudes about specific uses of force (Hurwitz & Peffley 1987; Schwartz et al. 2010).

In short, much work remains to be done to determine the influence of retributive dispositions and motivations on support for punishing foreign enemies. In this article, I focus on dispositions, and seek to test three hypotheses. First, retributiveness heightens support for the use of military force against states that have violated international norms (H1). This test goes beyond prior work by analyzing correlations between a direct measure of retributiveness, instead of reliance on the proxy of DPS, and support for punishing a variety of offender states other than Afghanistan or Iraq. The second
hypothesis provides a cross-sectional test of Sood and Carlsmith’s (2009) argument about torture: Retributiveness heightens support for the coercive interrogation of terrorists and insurgents (H2). For the reasons explained above, I estimate these associations while controlling for beliefs and values relating to security and the use of force. The final hypothesis is that retributiveness is a stronger predictor of DPS than are other personal values, partisanship, or ideology (H3). H3 is useful for evaluating research on international punishment relying on DPS as a proxy for retributive dispositions.

Study Sample and Measure of Retributiveness

I tested the above hypotheses using data collected in an online survey completed by 946 college students at a large southern university, for extra credit in a required introductory American Politics course, from April 26th–May 6th, 2010. The sample was more young (M=21), female (63%), African-American (39%), Asian (14%), Democratic (52%), and liberal (44%) than the nation as a whole. There is good reason to expect whites, males, and conservatives to be somewhat more retributive and punitive than others, so this sample is far from ideal for U.S. population estimates. But this sample provides useful data for the purpose of investigating hypothesized inter-relationships between retributive values and punitive attitudes.

The two central concepts in retributive justice are deservingness and proportional punishment. In this study I measured retributiveness using five questions addressing both of these concepts, drawn from prior work on criminal punishment sentencing goals.
(Bohm 1992; McKee & Feather 2008; Pratto et al. 1998; Tyler & Weber 1982; Vidmar 1974):³

1. Society should not punish murderers just to avenge the victims. (reversed)
2. For a terrible crime, there should be a terrible punishment.
3. We should show mercy to those who have done wrong. (reversed)
4. Those who hurt others deserve to be hurt in return.
5. Punishment should fit the crime.

For the most part, these questions avoid loaded terms like “retribution,” “vengeance,” and “revenge,” whose negative connotations would likely heighten measurement error. The two con-trait items were somewhat distinct from the pro-trait items, but I retained them to reduce acquiescence bias. All five items were combined into an additive Retributive scale, and adjusted to range from 0-1 (like all the variables in this study), with higher scores representing greater approval of retributive punishment (Alpha=0.68; M= 0.56; SD=0.19).

Having a face-valid measure of retributiveness, though an improvement from reliance on proxy measures such as DPS, does not obviate having control for utilitarian punishment goals and beliefs as well as humanitarianism. As noted earlier, people with utilitarian reasons for embracing tough law-and-order policies might embrace retribution as a complementary justification for this position. In addition, some people might adopt “tit for tat” as a rule of thumb for dealing with all sorts of transgressors, less from the principle of desert than to signal intolerance for future misbehavior. Thus responses to

³ The response options for items 1-5 were: strongly agree, agree somewhat, agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree.
questions on proportionate punishment (particularly items 2 and 5 in Retributive, in contrast to 1 and 4 which highlight desert), even though they do not mention its consequences, might reflect beliefs about its utility for personal and social gain (on which see Axelrod 1984; Gintis et al. 2005). A similar argument could be made about benevolence or humanitarianism. As noted above, humanitarians may tend to be both nonretributive and opposed to violence of all kinds because they shrink from causing human suffering.

**Does Retributiveness Predict Support for International Punishment?**

I measured support for international punishment by combining responses to three pairs of questions about three hypothetical international transgressions:

1. How should the United States respond if one small nation attacks another that has done it no harm? [Response options: do nothing; condemn the aggressor; impose economic sanctions on the aggressor; bomb the aggressor; invade the aggressor and overthrow its government]

2. How severely do you feel the aggressor should be punished for its actions? [No punishment at all; very weak punishment; weak punishment; moderate punishment; strong punishment; very strong punishment]

3. How should the United States respond if Iran withdraws from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and tries to build nuclear weapons? [Do nothing; condemn Iran; impose economic sanctions on Iran; bomb Iran; invade Iran and overthrow its government]
4. How severely do you feel Iran should be punished for its actions? [No punishment at all; very weak punishment; weak punishment; moderate punishment; strong punishment; very strong punishment]

5. How should the United States respond if the government of Pakistan was found to have sponsored a deadly terrorist attack killing hundreds of civilians in India? [Do nothing; condemn Pakistan; impose economic sanctions on Pakistan; bomb Pakistan; invade Pakistan and overthrow its government]

6. How severely do you feel Pakistan should be punished for its actions? [No punishment at all; very weak punishment; weak punishment; moderate punishment; strong punishment; very strong punishment]

These scenarios all involve crimes against foreign nations, which should elicit less powerful desires for retributive justice than crimes against one’s own. Retributive reactions were also likely to be limited by the absence of vivid, realistic details about wrongdoers, their malevolent intentions, and their heinous crimes, all of which magnify emotional arousal and judgments of blame (Alter et al. 2007; Douglas et al. 1997; Ogloff & Vidmar 1994; Small & Loewenstein 2005).

There are also important differences between these scenarios. Whereas the “small nation” and “Pakistani terrorism” scenarios involved clear violations of international law, the “Iranian proliferation” scenario involved a legally permissible action, which nonetheless violated the global NPT norm. The transgressors also differ in terms of the threat they pose to U.S. security. Whereas most small nations are unlikely to pose much danger, Americans might have regarded Pakistani sponsorship of terrorism as threatening to the United States in a post-9/11 world. A nuclear-armed Iran would probably have
been regarded as the most threatening. In repeated polls over the last five years, more Americans have identified Iran as the greatest foreign threat to the United States, and 60-72% have called Iran’s nuclear program a “major threat to the well being of the United States” (Pew Research Center for the People & the Press 2009: 20). Americans have also widely regarded the Iranian regime as morally bad from the time of the 1979 hostage crisis, an image no doubt accentuated by President Bush’s 2002 speech branding Iran as part of an “Axis of Evil.”

Despite these differences, the highly intercorrelated response to these items suggests that they measured a common underlying reaction. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) revealed a single dominant underlying factor (Eigenvalue=1.97 followed by 0.29). I thus averaged these items into a single scale of Punishment (Alpha=0.74; M=0.54; SD=0.17), the mean of which fell between “weak” and “moderate” punishment, and closer to economic sanctions than to bombing.

The location of the Punishment items in the survey, immediately following questions on the utility of force and more than seventy-five questions later than the Retributive items, was designed to minimize the possibility that questions about retributive punishment principles primed retributive reactions to the international punishment scenarios. Any question-order priming effects would have favored the alternative hypothesis that people punish transgressor states to enhance security rather than to give them their just deserts.

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4 The most unique item was the one on specific punitive responses toward the small aggressor nation (loading of 0.38 on the single factor, compared to 0.50-0.72 for the others).
A simple regression of *Punishment* on *Retributive*, shown in Model A on Table I, shows that the latter was a significant predictor of the former.\(^5\) To determine whether this relationship was a byproduct of gender, race, political partisanship, ideology, humanitarianism, or beliefs in the utility of force, I control for each of these potential confounders. In addition to standard seven-level measures of political partisanship (*Republican*, M=0.36; SD=0.31) and left-right ideology (*Conservative*, M=0.43; SD=0.27), I include right-wing authoritarianism (RWA) as a political orientation, as it has been found in prior work to correlate with attitudes about both criminal punishment and war (Doty et al. 1997; McFarland 2005; McKee & Feather 2008). An abbreviated RWA scale combined six questions on agreement/disagreement with the following statements (Alpha=.76; M=0.29; SD=0.11):\(^6\)

1. Our country desperately needs a mighty leader who will do what has to be done to destroy the radical new ways and sinfulness that are ruining us.
2. Gays and lesbians are just as healthy and moral as anybody else. (reversed)
3. Atheists and others who have rebelled against the established religions are no doubt every bit as good and virtuous as those who attend church regularly. (reversed)

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\(^5\) All regression models analyzed here employed list-wise deletion of missing data.

\(^6\) Arguably, an element of retributiveness appears in *RWA* due to the statements on the need to “destroy the…sinfulness” and “smash the perversions” in society. The negligible effect on the *Retributive* term discussed below indicates little shared explained variance.
4. The only way our country can get through the crisis ahead is to get back to our traditional values, put some tough leaders in power, and silence the troublemakers spreading bad ideas.

5. Our country needs free thinkers who have the courage to defy traditional ways, even if this upsets many people. (reversed)

6. Our country will be destroyed someday if we do not smash the perversions eating away at our moral fiber and traditional beliefs.

Table I shows results from regressing *Punishment* on the demographic and political variables (Model IB) and from adding *Retribution* to these variables (Model IC). It is clear from the scarcely diminished *Retribution* term that the variable’s relationship to *Punishment* was not epiphenomenal to gender, race, partisanship, or ideology.

As noted above, controlling for humanitarian values, security concerns, and instrumental beliefs about the efficacy of punishment should help provide a clearer test of retributive motivation. The survey data included items on all of these values and beliefs, though not all at the same level of generality. An EFA on the items specifically addressing foreign policy attitudes revealed two underlying factors (two Eigenvalues near 2.0 and the third dropping to 0.36), a hawkish stance and a humanitarian one (see Table II). Although clear logical distinctions can be drawn among the items loading on the hawk/dove factor, in the data there was considerable similarity between the importance people attached to security (item 3), their belief in the utility of force (items 9 and 10), and their desires for military power and spending (items 1, 2, and 4). I thus combined

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7 Multicollinearity was not a problem in the model, with all variance inflation factors $<1.80$. 

these six items into a single scale of *Hawk* attitudes (Alpha=0.76; M=0.56 of a 0-1 range; SD=0.16).

However, the patterns of responses to the item on bombing (11), as well as to two others on the consequences of coercive interrogation (items 12-13) discussed further below, were quite distinct from both the hawkish and humanitarian factors. I thus used item 11 as a separate measure of belief in the coercive efficacy of *Bombing* (scaled 0-1 so that higher values reflected belief in the efficacy of coercive bombing; M=.39; SD=.34). The four items on helping poor countries (items 5-8) loaded on the second factor, and were combined into a *Humanitarian* scale (Alpha=0.74; M=0.63; SD=0.18), which correlated very modestly with *Hawk* (r=0.05).

Values at the personal level were measured using a short version of Schwartz’ Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ), the same 21-item scale appearing in the European Values Survey (see e.g., Davidov, Schmidt, et al. 2008). The PVQ asks the extent to which respondents regard themselves as similar to or different than a series of abstract persons described as having particular values. In some cases I combined closely related values, which the short version of the PVQ often has difficulty discriminating between (Knoppen & Saris 2009), but this was not necessary for the PVQ value of personal *Security*, based on two questions asking for the degree of similarity or difference people felt to those for whom “It is important to her/him to live in secure surroundings. S/he avoids anything that might endanger her/his safety” and for whom “It is important to her/him that the government ensures her/his safety against all threats. S/he wants the state to be strong so it can defend its citizens” (Alpha=0.60; M=0.71 of a 0-1 range; SD=0.21). These items did not load heavily on either of the two foreign policy factors when added
to the EFA shown in Table II, and Security correlated only moderately with Hawk (r=0.33). Preliminary tests found that Security was the only PVQ value that was a significant predictor of Punishment.\(^8\)

As can be seen in Table I (Model ID), Hawk, Bombing, Humanitarian, and Security all were significant and positive predictors of Punishment.\(^9\) The positive Humanitarian coefficient indicated that, instead of being averse to international punishment as might have been expected, humanitarians favored harsher punishment, perhaps thinking it would prevent more suffering than it would inflict. More importantly, as Model IE on Table I shows, Retributive remained significantly related to Punishment, even after removing the explained variance shared with the control variables. The Retributive term was comparable in magnitude to those of Hawk and Humanitarian, whether measured in terms of the unstandardized coefficients in Table I, or in terms of standardized Beta coefficients (Betas of 0.12 vs. 0.12 and 0.15). In sum, even if it is not the main source of support for punishing foreign transgressor states, retributiveness appears to be an important one distinct from security and humanitarian beliefs and values.\(^10\)

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8 A combined Power/Achievement value, as well as Tradition and Conformity also had statistically significant bivariate correlations with Punishment, but these were not significant predictors when controlling for Security.

9 A separate test not shown found no positive interaction between Security and a combination of the two utility-of-force beliefs used in the Hawk scale.

10 Not all of the Punishment scale items were equally related to Retributive. The items on how severely the transgressor state “should be punished” correlated more strongly than
Does Retributiveness Predict Support for Coercive Interrogation?

The same survey included four questions on support for coercive interrogation, prefaced with a common stem: "The US has signed a number of treaties that prohibit certain methods for trying to get information from detainees. Here are some of those prohibitions. For each one, please select whether you agree or disagree:"

1. Governments should never use physical torture
2. Governments should never threaten physical torture.
3. Governments should never use mental torture (such as making a detainee believe that his family will be killed).
4. Governments should never use humiliating or degrading treatment.

These combined into an internally reliable scale of Torture, which was scaled 0-1 so that higher values reflected greater support for coercive measures (Alpha=0.82; M=0.44; SD=0.25). Nearly ninety questions separated the Torture items from those used to measure Retributive, so it is highly unlikely that the latter primed retributive responses to the former.

those asking about specific punitive policies. Across cases, with all the controls in the model, Retributive was the strongest predictor of punishment severity for Iran (Beta=0.16), followed by the small nation (Beta=0.13), followed by Pakistan (Beta=0.10). Whether such differences stem from the greater threat posed by Iran or from prior moral images the Iranian regime is an important question for future research.

11 The response options were: strongly agree; somewhat agree; somewhat disagree; strongly disagree.
As can be seen in Model IIIA in Table III, *Retributive* had a strong relationship with *Torture*, even stronger than with *Punishment*. But as was the case with international punishment, it is important to test whether this relationship was a byproduct of gender, race, political partisanship, ideology, humanitarianism, beliefs in the general utility of force, or more specific beliefs about the utility of coercive interrogation.

One would expect political predispositions to account for more variance in *Torture* than *Punishment*, due to the prominent national debate over the use of coercive interrogation measures such as waterboarding by the George W. Bush Administration. This debate has been more intense and more politically polarized than discussion over the hypothetical international punishment scenarios in the *Punishment* items. This probably accounts for greater relationships between *Torture* and left-right ideology, party identification, and RWA (see Model IIIB in Table III). The relationship between *Retributive* and *Torture* was attenuated somewhat when controlling for these general political variables, as can be seen from comparing Models IIIB and IIIC. But *Retributive* remained by far the strongest predictor.

One of the issues in the debate over torture has been whether or not it works. Proponents contend that coercive methods are sometimes necessary to extract information from terrorist detainees in order to prevent impending terror attacks, while critics reply that coercion yields unreliable confessions. Critics also contend that U.S. maltreatment of enemy detainees will make American personnel falling into enemy hands more likely to be mistreated as well. These two reasons for and against torture were tapped respectively by questions 12 and 13 on Table II. Responses to these questions were distinct from the “hawk” and “humanitarian” factors underlying the other foreign
policy items, as can be seen from their high uniqueness. They were also scarcely related to each other (r=-0.05; p=0.14), so I treated them as separate variables, Savelives (M=.47; SD=.28) and Reciprocity (M=.61; SD=.27). Both were scored 0-1, so that higher values of Savelives represented stronger faith in the utility of coercive interrogation, and higher values of Reciprocity reflected greater concern that torturing terrorists would eventually boomerang against American detainees.

As can be seen from Table III (Model IIID), Hawk, Savelives, and Humanitarian all significantly predicted support for coercive interrogation, and in the expected directions. Interestingly, Hawk was by far the strongest predictor, suggesting that support for torture was shaped above all by respondents’ general hawk/dove posture on national security issues. Reciprocity and the personal value of Security both had significant bivariate correlations with Torture, but neither were significant predictors in this model.12

In additional tests, the Security term dropped to insignificance when controlling just for Hawk. This is consistent with a hierarchical-opinion-constraint effect (Hurwitz & Peffley 1987), i.e., with general desires for personal security constraining people’s hawkish/dovish foreign policy orientation, which in turn constrained support for coercive interrogation. Additional tests also found that the Reciprocity term dropped to insignificance when controlling for just Hawk and Humanitarian. Since the concern

12 Preliminary tests found that of the ten PVQ values, only Security and the compound values of Universalism/Benevolence and Power/Achievement had significant bivariate correlations with Torture. But none of these variables were significant predictors when added to Model IIID, nor did they alter the regression coefficient for Retributive when added to Model IIIE.
about blowback from the U.S. practice of torture was unlikely to have shaped these broad foreign policy orientations, this finding suggests that the blowback concern may have functioned as a rationalization for positions on coercive interrogation stemming from general hawk/dove and humanitarian postures.

Consistent with hypothesis H2, Retributive was a strong predictor of support for coercive interrogation, even when controlling for all these covariates (see Model IIIE).¹³ Retributive was the strongest single predictor, whether measured by the unstandardized coefficients reported in Table III or by standardized Betas. In another model not shown, adding a measure of the terrorist threat (from an item asking “How worried are you that in the near future there will be terrorist attacks in this country?”) did not affect the coefficient of Retributive and failed to attain statistical significance at the p<.05 level.

The shrinking of the Retributive coefficient with the addition of the block of security and humanitarian variables in Model IIIE indicates some shared explained variance. Further tests indicated that Hawk and Savelives were responsible for this entire effect; controlling for just Security did not affect the Retributiveness coefficient at all.

While one can imagine Retributive being endogenous to Security, it does not appear that the correlation between Retributive and Torture was a spurious byproduct of underlying personal insecurity. It is harder to imagine Retributive being endogenous to Hawk and Savelives. How could hawkish international security preferences or a belief in the life-saving utility of coercive interrogation have shaped retributiveness?

¹³ Multicollinearity was not a problem in the model, with all variance inflation factors <1.80.
Indeed, the reverse seems more plausible. Retributiveness might influence beliefs about the acquisition of military power, which can support military retribution as well as more prosaic goals. Retributiveness might also lead some to endorse the deterrent and defensive virtues of force, to rationalize desired retributive punishment. This could account for the diminishing coefficient for Hawk with the addition of Retributive in Table III (and to a lesser extent in Table I). Hawkish views that stemmed originally from retributive dispositions, moreover, could assume independent causal force. Consistent with this hypothesis, a Sobel-Goodman mediation test with bootstrapped standard errors indicated that Retributive had a modest but significant indirect effect (b=.04 p<0.001) on Torture through Hawk, amounting to 12% of Retributive’s total effect.

Retributiveness and Death Penalty Support

Measures of DPS are much more common in survey data than are direct measures of retributiveness, providing more opportunities to use secondary data analysis to study the role of retributive dispositions in support for military punishment. The present survey offers an opportunity to test the utility of this approach. To what extent does DPS reflect retributive rather than security and humanitarian values?

To answer this question I measured DPS using three items:

1. Do you favor or oppose the death penalty for persons convicted of murder?
   [strongly oppose, somewhat oppose, neutral, somewhat support, strongly support]

2. If you could choose between the following two approaches, which do you think is the better penalty for murder, the death penalty or life imprisonment, with absolutely no possibility of parole? [strongly prefer death penalty,
moderately prefer death penalty, neutral, moderately prefer life imprisonment, strongly prefer life imprisonment]

3. Uphold the death penalty for the most serious crimes. [strongly agree, agree somewhat, agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree]

These items were averaged and rescaled 0-1 so that higher values reflected greater DPS (Alpha=0.77; M=0.47; SD=0.15).

I then regressed DPS on the political variables discussed above, Retributive, and Schwartz’ personal value of Security, and a compound value using two PVQ items measuring universalism and two measuring benevolence:

1. S/he thinks it is important that every person in the world should be treated equally. S/he believes everyone should have equal opportunities in life.

2. It is important to him/her to listen to people who are different from her/him. Even when s/he disagrees with them, she still wants to understand them.

3. It's very important to her/him to help the people around her/him. S/he wants to care for their well being.

4. It is important to her/him to be loyal to her friends. S/he wants to devote her/himself to people close to her/him.

These values are so closely related that they are often merged into higher-order compound values, particularly when using the shortened version of the PVQ (see e.g., Davidov, Schmidt, et al. 2008). All four items were averaged and rescaled 0-1 so that
higher values reflected greater universalism and benevolence, or *Benevolent* for short (Alpha=0.67; M=0.82; SD=0.14).\(^{14}\)

As Table IV shows, *Retributive* was by far the strongest predictor of *DPS*. This suggests that the retributive nature of *DPS*—rather than its basis in insecurity or tough-mindedness—accounts for its ability to predict support for punitive military action, as found in other research (Liberman 2006, 2007).

**Conclusion**

To sum up these findings, differences in individuals’ belief in retributive punishment predicted their level of support for punishing transgressor states and their support for coercively interrogating enemy detainees. These relationships controlled for measures of partisanship, ideology, humanitarianism, security concerns, and beliefs in the efficacy of military force or of coercive interrogation.

The controls on humanitarianism and hawkish beliefs and values should have removed most of their effects from the *Retributive/Punishment* and *Retributive/Torture* associations. Undoubtedly, there remains room for improvement in these measures. But the coalescence of diverse security beliefs and concerns along a single hawk/dove dimension suggests that additional measures might also fall on the same dimension. If so, they would not have accounted for the estimated effect of *Retributive*.

These results are consistent with prior findings on retributive motivation for

\(^{14}\) One other PVQ value, the compound *Power/Achievement*, had a significant bivariate correlation with *DPS*. But it was not a significant predictor at the p<.05 level after controlling for gender, race, *Security*, and *Benevolent*, or when added to model IVE in Table IV, nor did adding this variable affect the coefficient of *Retributive*. 


international punishment and torture. The substantial relationship of retributiveness to death penalty support lends support to inferences about retributive dispositions from studies analyzing DPS/war support correlations (e.g., Liberman 2006, 2007). In other words, it seems warranted to infer that death penalty supporters are disproportionately bellicose toward rogue states because of their “eye for an eye” values, rather than their humanitarianism or their belief in strategic punishment. Insofar as the convenience sample analyzed here resembles the U.S. population, scholars lacking more direct measures would be justified in using DPS as a proxy for retributiveness in future secondary data analyses. The findings on coercive interrogation are also consistent with prior findings that laypeople endorse torturing terrorists to give them their just deserts rather than merely to extract vital information (Carlsmith and Sood 2009). The different method of capturing retributive motivations used here—individual differences in retributive values rather than situational differences in deservingness—lends added weight to this conclusion.

More broadly, this study contributes to the accumulating evidence that values and morality shape political attitudes (for further discussion, see Schwartz et al. 2010; Skitka 2010). It also points to the potential fruitfulness of looking beyond systems of universal values, such as the Schwartz basic personal values inventory, to other values that might shape judgment about particular value-laden personal, societal, and international issues. This is not to argue that retributiveness accounts for broad structures of public foreign and domestic policy attitudes. The ethic of desert may extend beyond criminal and international punishment, but it applies mainly to the punishment of wrongdoing. Future work ought to focus on the explanatory horizons of retributiveness.
The findings presented here also point to limits of the rationalist-materialist model of public opinion. Retributive punishment may well be rational in a broader sense that encompasses deontological moral as well as material ends. While many philosophers disagree with the legitimacy of retributive justice, it has had staunch and trenchant defenders from Immanuel Kant to the present (e.g., French 2001). But rational materialism has difficulty explaining punishment as an end in itself, especially when punishment is costly to impose.

To be sure, none of the scenarios used here to measure punishment specifically ruled out threats posed to the United States or the potential utility of punishment. Moreover, rational materialism can explain why retributive values explained less variance in attitudes about the costly enterprise of punishing states than about punishing helpless detainees. However, had utility been the only motive for punishment, one would have expected that people’s general beliefs about the efficacy and importance of force would have accounted more fully for the relationship between retributive values and support for both coercive interrogation and for international punishment. Such work should also strive to measure Retributiveness in ways that tap the motive of punishing transgressors because they deserve it, insofar as formulations emphasizing proportionality might reflect an unstated strategic rule of thumb rather than an end in itself.

The support for interstate punitiveness observed in this study was unlikely to have been shaped by elite-led opinions, due to the hypothetical nature of the scenarios and the lack of elite polarization, at least in recent years, over them (on opinion leadership effects on war support, see Berinsky 2007; Zaller 1992, 1994). Coercive interrogation has been a
more partisan issue, with contemporaneous polls showing support from two-thirds of Republicans but only one-third of Democrats, a gap reflected in data analyzed here too. The apparent effect of retributiveness on both sorts of attitudes suggests that elite leadership is not a necessary condition. But political communication that frames conflicts in morally black-and-white terms, punctuated by graphic descriptions of enemy atrocities, is likely to greatly amplify such effects. An obvious lesson for political and media elites that those seeking to build public support for war or coercive interrogation can do so by recounting heinous, unpunished crimes, while those favoring restraint should instead acknowledge offending states’ legitimate grievances and trumpet successful punishments.

Parallel lessons can be drawn, though with still more serious caveats, about foreign policy making and international politics. To the extent that decision makers think about international punishment like the study sample here, or to the extent that they feel compelled to pander to such audiences, desires for retribution might actually shape actual international conflicts (Harkavy 2000; Lebow 2008; Lebow 2010; Löwenheim & Heimann 2008; Scheff 1994). If so, that would underline the importance of avoiding gratuitous international injury and insult, as well as the value of international apologies in deflating international animosities (David & Choi 2009; Lind 2009). However, there are good reasons to expect that most leaders think about foreign policy in less emotional and moralistic terms than do average citizens. There is also much evidence that leaders have considerable autonomy from public pressure to go to war (Foyle 1999; Jacobs & Shapiro 2000; Sobel 2001). Much work remains to be done to investigate not only the psychology of international punishment, but also how it might affect actual foreign policies and conflicts.
Bibliography


Table I. Support for International Punishment

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Note: The figures in the table are unstandardized, ordinary-least-squares (OLS) regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. All variables range from 0-1.

Two-tailed significance levels are indicated by: †p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01, ***p<.001.
## Table II. Exploratory Factor Analysis of Foreign Policy Goals and Beliefs

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Note: The figures in the first two columns are obliquely rotated factor loadings. The response options for items 1-11 were: strongly agree, agree somewhat, agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree. Those for items 12-13 were: very unconvincing, unconvincing, somewhat unconvincing, neither unconvincing nor convincing, somewhat convincing, convincing, or very convincing.
Table III. Support for Coercive Interrogation

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Note: The figures in the table are unstandardized, OLS regression coefficients, with standard errors in parentheses. All variables range from 0-1. Two-tailed significance levels are indicated by: †p<.10, * p<.05, ** p<.01, ***p<.001.
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