

## **Making sense of war: Using the interpretation comparison model to understand the Iraq conflict**

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### *Abstract*

*The current research addressed the issue of how people use the past to compare and interpret the present. Using the logic of the Interpretation Comparison Model (ICM) we examined two factors (distinctness of past events and ambiguity of target event) that may influence how people make sense of a real world event (the Iraq War) within the context of past events (World War II and Vietnam). Extending earlier ICM studies, we used new manipulations and measures to examine the impact of these two factors. Results show that higher levels of (manipulated as well as measured) distinctness lead to contrastive evaluations about the Iraq War (and involved politicians) as a function of past wars. Lower levels of distinctness lead to assimilative evaluations, but only when the meaning of the target stimulus was somewhat ambiguous. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.*

### **MAKING SENSE OF WAR: APPLYING THE INTERPRETATION COMPARISON MODEL TO UNDERSTAND THE IRAQ CONFLICT**

The war against Iraq began at 5.30 am (Baghdad time) on March 20, 2003 when the United States launched 'Operation Iraqi Freedom.' Over the ensuing months the United States mounted numerous air and ground strikes primarily targeting Baghdad, the Iraqi capital. During the first week of April (April 5, 2003), US tanks entered the Iraqi capital and British forces (April 7, 2003) took control of Basra (Iraq's second-largest city). A few days later (April 9, 2003) Baghdad fell to US military forces. On May 1, 2003 the United States officially declared an end to major combat operations in Iraq (*Infoplease*, Iraq War Timeline, 2004). Since then, however, coalition forces face continued attack, generally organized by small militant pockets of Iraqi resistance.

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Clearly, making sense of the events described above is of paramount importance to politicians, the lay public, and social scientists alike. People's actions in times of war are in fact often determined by how they make sense of the war. This article is concerned with how people give meaning to the ongoing Iraq conflict. We will argue and demonstrate that the way *past* wars (e.g., World War II and Vietnam) are perceived or understood can influence the meaning of present wars (i.e., The Iraq War). Using and further extending the framework of Stapel and Koomen's (2001) *Interpretation Comparison Model* (ICM), we will show that when the past is used as an interpretation frame to encode and disambiguate the present, assimilation effects are more likely (i.e., the present will be judged in terms *similar* to the past). When past events (i.e., World War II or Vietnam) are used as an extreme anchor to which the present can be compared, contrast effects should occur (i.e., the present will be judged in terms *dissimilar* to the past).

### LOOKING BACKWARD TO INTERPRET AND COMPARE THE PRESENT

Throughout the Iraq War there has been a constant struggle between proponents and opponents of the war to come to an agreement about the terms used to describe the events. That is, proponents of US involvement in Iraq liken the conflict to what is seen by most people as a 'just war' brought to a successful conclusion (i.e., World War II). Furthermore, these proponents tend to compare Hussein's Iraq to Hitler's Germany. For example, consider the following quote from US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, who at the time was intent on mobilizing the US for what might become a long and costly war as well as on gaining public approval for such actions:

*Think of the prelude to World War II. Think of all the countries that said, well, we don't have enough evidence. I mean "Mein Kampf" had been written. Hitler had indicated what he intended to do. Maybe he won't attack us. Maybe he won't do this or that. Well, there were millions of people dead because of the miscalculations. (Fox Special Report with Brit Hume, August 19, 2003)*

While Rumsfeld and other American politicians attempted to emphasize the ethical necessity of the Iraq War by evoking images of Hitler's Germany, those who opposed such involvement employed a very different past to give meaning to the present. They tried to influence public opinion by reminding Americans of its national nightmare: Vietnam. As an illustration of this point, Iowa Senator Tom Harkin said, 'This may not be Vietnam, but boy, it sure smells like it' ('Common Dreams News Center,' Hutcheson, 2003) and, in a speech at the Brookings Institution, Massachusetts Senator Edward Kennedy said that, 'Iraq is George Bush's Vietnam' ('Inside Politics,' Wright & Yuille, 2004).

These examples underscore people's use of historical events (e.g., Vietnam and World War II) when making sense of the present (i.e., the Iraq War). Moreover, these examples indicate that this strategy is routinely employed by politicians, journalists, and propagandists when attempting to make sense of new social situations. Namely, they search the past for similarities and differences to give meaning to the present in terms of what is already known (e.g., Gilovich, 1981; Stapel & Spears, 1995). The question then is what determines whether people will see new situations in terms that are similar (show assimilation) to old experiences or in terms that are opposite (show contrast) to these old experiences?

## APPLYING THE INTERPRETATION COMPARISON MODEL TO UNDERSTAND THE IRAQ CONFLICT

Albeit anecdotal evidence, the above examples suggest that politicians use well known past events to push evaluations of new events in a particular direction.<sup>1</sup> However, they may not always be able to guide their audience in the desired direction. How perceivers choose to see the relation between the judgmental target and the contextual information that is activated thus becomes a critical issue.

Recently, Stapel and Koomen (2001) presented their Interpretation Comparison Model (ICM) of accessibility effects to address the issue of what determines how people relate context to target information. The ICM was inspired by several other models of knowledge accessibility effects that either implicitly assume or explicitly propose a direct relation between the consequences of accessible knowledge (i.e., assimilation vs. contrast effects) and the way such information is used in the construction of judgments (i.e., as an interpretation frame or as a comparison standard), such as Schwarz and Bless' (1992) Inclusion–Exclusion Model, Trope's (1986) Identification–Inference Model of person judgments, and Wyer and Srull's (1989) seminal work on the differential effects of primed information during encoding versus judgment stages of impression formation.

Current tests of this interpretation-comparison logic have identified several key determinants of whether the impact of information on subsequent evaluations is more likely to be driven either by the interpretation or by the comparison processes (see LeBoeuf & Estes, 2004; Schwarz & Bless, 1992; Stapel & Koomen, 2000; Wyer & Srull, 1989). In the following research we focus on two such factors that seem crucial to the use of past-present analogies when making sense of (the Iraq) War: the level of perceived *distinctness* of the past event and the perceived *ambiguity* of the target event.

### Distinctness

As many classical studies in psychophysics and comparative judgment have shown, stimuli that do not provide judges with information that is perceived as distinct or unique will not be used as subjective standards for purposes of comparison contrast (e.g., Brown, 1953; Helson, 1964; see Stapel & Koomen, 2000). Distinct information constitutes a separate entity with clear objective boundaries (e.g., 'The Vietnam War lasted from 1965–1973 and killed 58,235 Americans') and is therefore more likely to be used as a comparison standard in subsequent judgments than diffuse, abstract information (e.g., 'The Vietnam War dragged on for years and killed many people') that can be less easily used as a clear and specific anchor point. When information is less distinct or defined, assimilation rather than contrast is likely to occur. As Murphy and Zajonc (1993) put it, such "diffuse [information] can 'spill over' onto unrelated stimuli" (p. 736, for more detailed discussion of the distinctness construct see Stapel & Koomen, 2000, 2001; Stapel & Suls, 2004).

### Ambiguity

According to the ICM, whether a target event is ambiguous (e.g., new) or unambiguous (e.g., old) can also have important consequences for how accessible knowledge may affect interpretation and

<sup>1</sup>It has been argued elsewhere (e.g., Herr et al., 1983; Sherif & Hovland, 1961; Stapel & Spears, 1995) that one important factor that could undermine the intended use of past events to give meaning to a new event is the issue of *relevance* or *appropriateness*. For example, one may feel that it is just too great a stretch to think of the Iraq War as being in the same class as Vietnam. After all, more than 3 million US troops served in Vietnam, while approximately 150,000 US troops fought in Iraq. A similar case could be made for the inappropriateness of comparing Iraq to World War II or Hitler to Hussein. From our perspective, however, the issue of comparison appropriateness is not germane to the present research because by making an analogy to the past the comparison become appropriate by implication (e.g., Ortony, 1993).

judgment of the specific target. That is, assimilative interpretation effects should be obtained *only* when judging a target requires interpretation. No such assimilative comparison effects should emerge when the target stimulus is unambiguous or well known and thus needs no interpretative efforts. Comparison effects, however, should emerge regardless of whether the target requires interpretation.

Previous studies support this ICM logic (see Stapel & Koomen, 2000; Stapel, Koomen, & Van der Pligt, 1997). For example, Stapel, et al. (1997) demonstrated that diffuse primes (i.e., trait concepts such as 'friendly' vs. 'hostile') led to assimilative interpretation effects in judgments of an ambiguous person description (friendly/hostile Donald). No such assimilation effects emerged in judgments of unambiguous targets, which required no interpretive effort, namely judgments of participants' friends. However, priming distinct information (person exemplars such as 'Gandhi' and 'Hitler') led to contrast effects in judgments of both ambiguous and unambiguous targets (see also Herr, Sherman, & Fazio, 1983; Philippot, Schwarz, Carrera, & de Vries, 1991).

### Overview of Studies

In the current research, we used the theoretical framework of the ICM to a real world event (the Iraq War) in order to understand how past-present analogies may affect the way people make sense of a new event. Vice versa, we used the Iraq war to further test some essential ingredients of the ICM. To date, ICM studies have been performed mainly 'inside,' in the lab, using constructed, novel prime and target stimuli. In the current set of studies we take the ICM 'outside' into real life. That is, in each of the current four studies, we studied the impact of thinking about World War II versus Vietnam on people's opinion about the legitimacy ('is it a just war?') and probable outcome ('will US involvement be successful?') of the Iraq War. Although we feel it is of the utmost importance that social cognition models like the ICM are tested in a real life context with real life priming and target stimuli, in the current studies we do more than simply applying the ICM to the real world. In the current studies, we also introduce new manipulations and measures of the distinctness construct. In previous ICM studies, 'distinctness' was never explicitly measured. In the present studies we introduce a measure of distinctness and use this measure as an individual difference variable (Study 1) and as a check of the successfulness of activating diffuse versus distinct representations of priming stimuli in relatively indirect distinctness manipulations (Study 2, Study 4).

We tested the *distinctness hypothesis* in a variety of new ways: In Study 1, we treated distinctness as an individual difference variable to assess the extent to which participants thought World War II or Vietnam was a distinct and unique event. In Studies 2 and 3, we treated distinctness of the past as a contextual variable that can be manipulated (as a manipulation check study shows) by giving people specific instructions while thinking about a specific event (i.e., diffuse activation = think about X and keep your thought in mind because later you will be asked questions, distinct activation = think about X and then form a succinct and precise judgment that summarizes your thoughts). In Study 4, we manipulated distinctness by giving people a newspaper article about a new museum about WWII or Vietnam and instructing them to either memorize all the information in the article or form an impression of the events mentioned in the text. As a manipulation check study suggests, information is more likely to be represented in a distinct way under impression conditions, whereas diffuse representations are more likely to be activated under memory instructions.

We also tested the *ambiguity hypothesis* in a number of new ways. In studies 1 and 2, we investigated the impact of thinking about World War II and Vietnam *before* the Iraq War had started, thus studying the impact of the past on a novel and ambiguous present. In Study 3, we investigated the impact of past wars on Iraq War judgments *after* the Iraq war had started, thus studying the impact of the past on a relatively well-known and unambiguous present. In Study 4, we manipulated the perceived ambiguity

of the Iraq War by focusing participants either on the unpredictability and ambiguity of the war or on the predictable, routine-like aspects of the war. Furthermore, in Study 4, we also measured the importance of target ambiguity by asking participants to give judgments of President George W. Bush, a non-fictitious, well-known person who plays an important role in the Iraq conflict, and U.S. Foreign Affairs Officer Bill Klein, a fictitious unknown player in the Iraq conflict.

### STUDY 1: MEASURING DISTINCTNESS OF THE PAST BEFORE THE START OF THE IRAQ WAR

We conducted Study 1 ten days before the Iraq War started. In this study, we investigated whether and how knowledge about previous wars (i.e., World War II, Vietnam) could affect people's construal of the Iraq conflict. In particular, we tested the ICM hypothesis that whether the new conflict would be assimilated to or contrasted away from old wars should depend on whether these past wars activate diffuse or distinct information. In previous ICM tests, the dominant approach to investigating assimilative interpretation effects versus contrastive comparison effects was to manipulate the *characteristics* of the knowledge that is activated during impression formation. That is, in past studies it was demonstrated that some kinds of stimuli were more easily used for assimilative interpretation purposes (e.g., diffuse traits: 'aggressive'), whereas others mainly function as standards of comparison during judgment (e.g., distinct exemplars: 'Adolph Hitler') and result in contrast (see Stapel & Koomen, 2001).

In the present study, we treated distinctness as an individual difference variable. Using a word puzzle, we subtly primed participants with the items 'World War II' or 'Vietnam War' and then asked them their opinion about the legitimacy and probable outcome of the Iraq War. We also measured distinctness of the primed event by asking participants to indicate the extent to which they thought the primed war was a distinct or unique event. The hypothesis was that the impact of past wars on assessments of the Iraq conflict would be moderated by these perceptions of distinctness, as predicted by the ICM.

## Method

### *Participants, Design, and Material*

Fifty passengers on a train traveling from Groningen to Amsterdam in the Netherlands served as participants. For this study we used a 2 (War Prime: World War II, Vietnam)  $\times$  (Perceived Distinctness) between-participants design, with perceived distinctness serving as a continuous predictor.

All participants received a three-page booklet that consisted of 'several, unrelated questionnaires.' The first page was titled *Word Puzzle* and contained a  $20 \times 20$  matrix of letters with seven target items embedded in the matrix. A list of these items was provided to ensure that participants could find all the items. Half of the participants received the Vietnam version of the Word Puzzle. For these participants the items were *hairstylist, painting, person, telephone, Vietnam, War, diner*. The other half of the participants received the World War II version of the puzzle. For them, the last three items were replaced by *World War II*. The second page of the booklet was titled *Iraq Survey*. On this page, participants assessed how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) with the statements 'The US will be successful in solving the Iraq conflict' and 'The Iraq War is fought for a good cause.' We averaged these two items ( $r = 0.87$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) to form a single Iraq war rating score. Next, participants

indicated the extent to which they thought the historical conflict they were primed with (World War II or Vietnam) was a 'distinctive, clearly bounded' event (1 = *not at all distinctive*, 7 = *very distinctive*). Next, all participants indicated how successful the performance of the US army was in the Vietnam War and in World War II (1 = *not at all successful*, 7 = *very successful*).

On the third page of the booklet, participants were probed as to what they thought the study was about. Specifically, participants were asked (a) what they thought the purpose of the study had been, (b) whether they thought the Word Puzzle and the Iraq Survey, and (c) whether they thought that their answers in the survey were affected by the Word Puzzle task (for similar procedures see, Stapel & Koomen, 2000). No participant showed any suspicion or awareness of a relation between the two questionnaires contained in the study booklet. On completion of the booklet, participants were debriefed and thanked for their time.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To begin, we checked whether participants judged the performance of the US military as more successful in World War II than in Vietnam. This was indeed the case: Participants perceived World War II as more successful ( $M = 6.12$ ,  $SD = 0.57$ ) than they did the Vietnam War ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 0.72$ ),  $t(48) = 31.54$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.95$ , and this effect was not moderated by the war primes ( $t < 1$ ). Analyses showed that participants' distinctness ratings were not affected by the war primes ( $t < 1$ ). The Vietnam war and WW II were seen as equally distinct.

### Main Analysis

#### *Iraq War Rating*

To examine whether perceived distinctness moderated the effect of the war prime on participants' Iraq war ratings we conducted a 2 (War Prime)  $\times$  (Perceived Distinctness) model, with Perceived Distinctness serving as a continuous predictor (see Figure 1). There was no main effect of war prime nor was there an effect of distinctness orientation (both  $ps > 0.27$ ). These results make sense considering that only when the contextual information (i.e., the war primes) is perceived as sufficiently distinct or diffuse should there be an effect on perceptions of the target event (i.e., the Iraq War). As hypothesized, we found a reliable interaction,  $F(1, 46) = 106.38$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.70$ , such that more perceived distinctness led to contrast as a result of the war primes, but less perceived distinctness led to assimilation as a result of the war primes.

This finding clearly supports the notion that people's impression of the Iraq conflict ('is the Iraq War fought for a good cause?' 'will the US be successful in solving the Iraq conflict?') depends on their level of perceived distinctness, as is consistent with the ICM. That is, the way in which World War II and Vietnam influenced our participants' construal of the Iraq War was a function of the extent to which they perceived these past wars as distinctive events. Specifically, contrast occurred for those who saw the primed event as relatively more distinctive, whereas assimilation occurred for those who perceived the primed event as relatively less distinctive. In short, the effect of 'seeing the past in the present' (see Gilovich, 1981), depends on *how* the past is perceived.

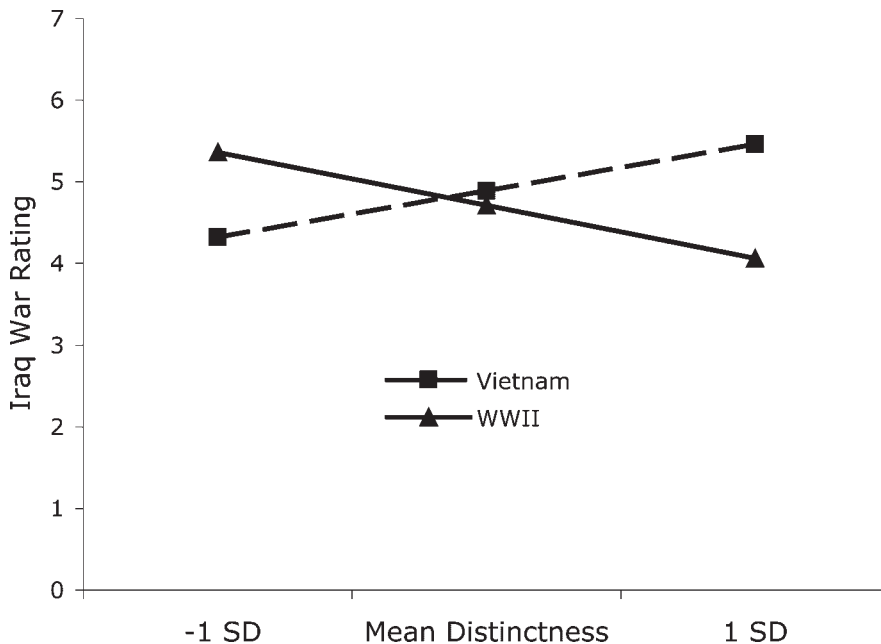


Figure 1. Iraq war rating as a function of war prime and perceived distinctness in Study 1. Scale range is from 1 to 7. Higher numbers indicate that US involvement in the Iraq conflict was judged more favorably

## STUDY 2: MANIPULATING DISTINCTNESS OF THE PAST BEFORE THE START OF THE IRAQ WAR

In Study 1, we were successful in showing how participants' perceptions of distinctness regarding past events determined the impact on sense-making efforts by treating the distinctness construct as an individual difference variable. The goal of the second study was to generalize the validity of this phenomenon by manipulating, rather than measuring, distinctness orientation. Thus, similar to previous ICM tests (see Stapel & Koomen, 2001), we investigated the judgmental impact of the distinctness of accessible knowledge by manipulating the characteristics of such knowledge.

Specifically, in the week before the start of the Iraq War, we asked participants to either think about US involvement in either World War II or the Vietnam War. In the diffuse conditions, we simply asked participants to think about the event and to keep their thoughts in mind until the end of the study. In the distinct conditions, we asked participants to think about the event and to write down their evaluation of the event using two clear adjectives. In other words, we manipulated distinctness by having participants just *think about* the event (diffuse mindset) versus think about and *evaluate* the event (distinct mindset). The idea behind this manipulation is that the mere act of evaluating an event makes the evaluation necessarily linked or connected to that event (i.e., World War II = success), while not explicitly evaluating the event makes this linkage less likely.

## Method

### *Participants and Design*

Fifty-nine Dutch psychology students participated for pay. For this study we used a 2 (War Prime: World War II, Vietnam)  $\times$  2 (Mindset Orientation: think, evaluate) between-participants design.

### *Independent Measures*

All participants received a three-page booklet that was titled *International Survey*. On the first page of this booklet, we asked participants in the *World War II* conditions to think 'a minute' about US involvement in World War II. Specifically, we asked them to 'think about how the US got involved, how this conflict developed, and whether or not the US was successful.' Participants in the *Vietnam* conditions were asked the same thing with respect to the Vietnam War. Moreover, in the *think* conditions, we asked participants to think about the relevant event and to keep their thoughts in mind until the end of the study, ostensibly because 'later you will be asked questions about this.' In the *evaluate* conditions, we asked participants to think about the relevant event and then to write down their evaluation of the event using two adjectives. To do this we asked participants to write down their 'summary judgment' of the event as 'succinctly and clearly' as possible using only two adjectives.

Previous research suggests that whether or not a stimulus is explicitly judged, is an important way in which the distinctness of accessible information may be manipulated (see Martin & Seta, 1983; Parducci, 1995; Wyer & Srull, 1989). Explicitly evaluating an event is thus likely to render its mental representation distinct, whereas not doing so is more likely to leave this representation more diffuse (Stapel & Koomen, 2001; Stapel, Koomen, & Ruys, 2002). To test this hypothesis empirically, we performed a 2  $\times$  2 between-participants pilot study ( $n = 46$ ). The procedure and design of this study was identical to the present study. Participants were given a war prime (WW II, Vietnam) and a mindset (think, evaluate). After these manipulations, participants made two ratings. First, participants indicated the extent to which they thought the historical conflict they were primed with (World War II or Vietnam) was a 'distinctive, clearly bounded' event (1 = *not at all distinctive*, 7 = *very distinctive*, see Study 1). Next, all participants indicated how difficult they thought the mindset task (think vs. evaluate) had been (1 = *very easy*, 7 = *very easy*). Results showed the predicted impact of the mindset manipulation on the distinctness measure. Participants judged the primed event more distinct in the *evaluate* conditions ( $M = 4.39$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ) than in the *think* conditions ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 1.09$ ),  $F(1,42) = 13.83$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.25$  (Other  $F$ s  $< 1$ ). Results showed no effects on the difficulty measure ( $F$ s  $< 1$ ), suggesting that the four conditions did not differ in the extent to which they were cognitively taxing.

### **Dependent Measures**

After these manipulations, participants were asked to turn to the second page of the booklet, which was titled *Iraq Survey*. On this page, similar to Study 1, participants assessed how much they agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) with the statements 'The US will be successful in solving the Iraq conflict' and 'The Iraq war is fought for a good cause.' As in Study 1, we averaged these two items ( $r = 0.43$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) to form a single Iraq war rating score. Next, all participants indicated how successful the performance of the US army was in the Vietnam War and in World War II (1 = *not at all successful*, 7 = *very successful*).

On the third page of the booklet, participants were asked what they thought the study was about. As in Study 1, no participant showed any awareness of the hypothesis or suspicion about the relationship between the different parts of the booklet. On completion of the study booklet, participants were debriefed, paid, and thanked for their time and effort.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, we checked whether participants judged the performance of the US army to be more successful in World War II than in the Vietnam War. This was done in two ways. First, two assistants who did not know the hypothesis we were testing looked at the words participants in the *evaluate* conditions had used to evaluate the war that they were asked to think about. All participants in the *evaluate/World War II* condition used at least one word that clearly communicated the concepts of 'successful,' 'victory,' or 'good performance.' Similarly, all participants in the *evaluate/Vietnam* condition used at least one word that clearly communicated the concepts of 'failure,' 'loss,' or 'bad performance.' Next, we checked whether participants' judged the US military's performance in World War II as more successful than in Vietnam. Just as in Study 1, participants judged World War II as more successful ( $M = 5.66, SD = 0.96$ ) than they did the Vietnam War ( $M = 1.98, SD = 0.63$ ),  $t(56) = 25.50, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.92$ . This effect was not influenced by the war prime, mindset manipulation, or their interactions ( $ts < 1$ ).

### Main Analysis

#### *Iraq War Ratings*

To examine the effect of our independent variables on participants' ratings of the Iraq war, we conducted a 2 (War Prime)  $\times$  2 (Mindset Orientation) between-participants ANOVA (see Table 1). This analysis only revealed the hypothesized war prime by mindset orientation interaction,  $F(1, 55) = 21.68, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.28$ , such that participants demonstrated assimilation when primed to just think about the prime and contrast when primed to think and evaluate the prime (other  $F$ s  $< 1$ ). Simple effects tests revealed that in the *think* condition the Iraq conflict was judged more favorably after thinking about World War II ( $M = 5.18, SD = 1.20$ ) than Vietnam ( $M = 3.96, SD = 0.66$ ),  $F(1, 55) = 13.19, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.19$  (an assimilation effect). In the *evaluate* condition, the Iraq conflict was judged more favorably after thinking about Vietnam ( $M = 5.13, SD = 0.79$ ) than World War II ( $M = 4.14, SD = 0.86$ ),  $F(1, 55) = 8.96, p < 0.01, \eta^2 = 0.14$  (a contrast effect).

Table 1. Study 2. Mean ( $SD$ ) Iraq war rating as a function of war prime and mindset orientation

Mindset orientation	War prime			
	Vietnam		World War II	
	Think	Evaluate	Think	Evaluate
Iraq War	3.96 (0.66)	5.13 (0.79)	5.18 (1.20)	4.14 (0.86)

Note: Scale range is from 1 to 7. Higher numbers indicate that US involvement in the Iraq conflict was judged more favorably.

This finding gives further credence to our hypothesis that the way in which people use past wars to construe the meaning of a new and ambiguous international conflict (i.e., the Iraq conflict) depends on the perceived distinctness of these wars at the time the judgment is made. As the ICM predicts, the impact of a diffuse past on the present seems to be diametrically opposite to the impact of a distinct past. That is, people use the past to give meaning to the present but how they do this seems to depend on whether these past events represent a distinct and evaluatively confined event-evaluation link or whether they activate information that is not as evaluatively confined and thus is more diffuse and undefined.

### STUDY 3: MANIPULATING DISTINCTNESS OF THE PAST AFTER THE START OF THE IRAQ WAR

In the first two studies, we demonstrated how the construal of a newly erupting conflict (i.e., the Iraq war) is influenced by past conflicts (e.g., World War II and Vietnam) that are on people's minds during the construal process. In Study 3 we further test the viability of an ICM analysis of how people may use past wars to give meaning to a new war. Whereas in the previous studies, we first 'primed' people with World War II or Vietnam and then asked participants to give their opinion about the Iraq conflict the week *before* the war officially started (in the week before March 20, 2003), in the present study we did the same, but *after* the war had started. In other words, Study 3 was conducted between August 14 and August 16 (in 2003), that is *after* the US had officially declared an end to all major combat operations, but *before* suicide bombings destroyed United Nations head quarters in Baghdad (August 19, 2003). In fact, at the time we did this study, the Iraq War had gotten its own identity—it had become a known event in the minds of people all over the world. Now the Iraq War was not something new, strange, mythical, or ambiguous, as was the case in Studies 1 and 2; it was a war associated with its own imagery, news reports, and combat operations. The ICM therefore suggests that the contrastive comparison impact of previous wars (World War II and Vietnam) on evaluations of the Iraq War should still occur when this war is well under way—when it has become a war with its own identity and set of images. Assimilative interpretation effects, in this case, should be less likely.

#### Method

##### *Participants, Design, and Material*

Seventy Dutch students took part in exchange for pay. As in Study 2 we used a 2 (War Prime: World War II, Vietnam)  $\times$  2 (Mindset Orientation: Think, Evaluate) between-participants design. The manipulations and materials were identical to those used in Study 2. Moreover, just as we had done for Studies 1 and 2 we combined the participants' ratings of the Iraq war's justness and success to form a single Iraq war rating score ( $r = 0.42$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Again, as in Studies 1 and 2, no participant showed any awareness of the hypothesis or suspicion about the relation between the different parts of the booklet. On completion of the study booklet, participants were carefully debriefed and thanked for their time and effort.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As before, we checked whether participants judged the performance of the US army to be more successful in World War II than in the Vietnam War. This was done in the same two ways that we did it

Table 2. Study 3. Mean (SD) Iraq War Rating as a Function of War Prime and Mindset Orientation

Mindset orientation	War prime			
	Vietnam		World War II	
	Think	Evaluate	Think	Evaluate
Iraq War	4.14 (1.01)	4.95 (1.15)	4.34 (1.03)	3.82 (1.14)

Note: Scale range is from 1 to 7. Higher numbers indicate that US involvement in the Iraq conflict was judged more favorably.

in Study 2. First, two assistants who did not know the hypothesis of this study looked at the words participants in the distinct conditions had used to summarize the war they were asked to think about. All but 1 participant in the *distinct/World War II* condition used at least one word that clearly related to 'successful,' 'victory,' or 'good performance.' All but two participants in the *distinct/Vietnam* condition used at least one word that clearly related to 'failure,' 'loss,' or 'bad performance.' Second, we checked whether participants' judged World War II as more successful than the Vietnam War. As expected, participants did judge World War II as more successful ( $M = 5.99$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) than they did the Vietnam War ( $M = 2.23$ ,  $SD = 0.73$ ),  $t(67) = 24.68$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.90$ . This effect was not influenced by the war prime or mindset manipulation ( $ts < 1$ ).

## Main Analysis

### *Iraq War Ratings*

To examine the effect of our independent variables on participants' ratings of the Iraq war we used a 2 (War Prime)  $\times$  2 (Mindset Orientation) between-participants ANOVA (see Table 2). This analysis revealed a marginal effect of War Prime,  $F(1, 66) = 3.12$ ,  $p = 0.08$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.05$ , and the expected interaction,  $F(1, 66) = 6.38$ ,  $p < 0.02$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.09$  (all other  $F$ s  $< 1$ ). This interaction indicates that when primed to think in a distinct manner, participants made contrastive judgments as a function of the war primes, yet, no differences occurred when primed to think in a diffuse manner. Simple effects tests showed that in the *distinct* condition the Iraq conflict was judged more favorably after thinking about Vietnam ( $M = 4.95$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ) in relation to World War II ( $M = 3.82$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ),  $F(1, 66) = 9.93$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.13$  (a contrast effect). In the diffuse condition, no effects occurred between the Vietnam ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) and World War II conditions ( $M = 4.34$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ),  $F < 1$ .

## STUDY 4: MANIPULATING DISTINCTNESS OF THE PAST AND AMBIGUITY OF THE PRESENT

In Study 4 we set out to further test our ICM analysis of how people may use past wars to give meaning to a new war by manipulating the perceived distinctness of these past wars as well as the perceived

ambiguity of the present, target war, in one experimental design. To achieve this goal, we used manipulations that have been used successfully in other tests of the ICM (see Stapel & Koomen, 2001).

We manipulated perceived distinctness of past wars by giving participants a newspaper article (about a new museum devoted to World War II or the Vietnam War) and instructing them to either *memorize* all the information in the article or form an *impression* of the events mentioned in the article. Previous research suggests the social information is more likely to be represented in a relatively distinct manner when approached with an impression rather than a memorization goal (see Stapel & Koomen, 2000). However, this impact of processing goal (memorization, impression) on stimulus representation (diffuse, distinct) has never been shown empirically. In the present investigation we therefore included a manipulation check study to empirically test this assumption (see Method section below).

Perceived ambiguity was manipulated as follows: The current study was done in June 2005. At that time the Iraq conflict was less of salient, front-page news event, less of a newsworthy issue than was the case in 2003 (when we did Studies 1–3). This made it relatively easy to manipulate the perceived ambiguity of the conflict. Following Stapel and Koomen's (2000) manipulation of the extent to which people think the self is a malleable or fixed entity, we manipulated the perceived ambiguity of the Iraq War by focusing participants either on the unpredictability and ambiguity of the war ('It is difficult to draw a clear and consistent picture of the Iraq War. Every day, every week new information comes in that changes one's perspective') or on the predictability of the war ('It is easy to draw a clear and consistent picture of the Iraq War. Every day, every week the same type of information comes in that is unlikely to change one's perspective').

Furthermore, in Study 4, we extended our study of the impact of the Vietnam War versus World War II on judgments of the Iraq War to judgments of policy makers involved or associated with the Iraq conflict. After all, one of our theses is that journalists, politicians, and propagandists use historical events to make sense of the present events, not only to influence the public's definition of those *events*, but also to influence the public's perception of the *people*, the policy makers associated with these events. Thus, we asked our participants to give judgments not only of the Iraq War, but also of President George W. Bush, a non-fictitious, well-known person who plays an important role in the Iraq conflict, and U.S. Foreign Affairs Officer Bill Klein, a fictitious and thus relatively ambiguous player in the Iraq conflict.

Following the ICM, the predictions are as follows. An impression formation set should lead to a distinct representation of the past and thus result in contrastive comparison effects that are likely to occur independent of the target's ambiguity. An memorization set should lead to a diffuse representation of the past and thus result in assimilative interpretation effect that should occur especially if the target is perceived as ambiguous.

## **Method**

### *Participants and Design*

One hundred and twenty-two Dutch psychology students participated for partial course credit. Participants were randomly assigned to the conditions of a 2 (War Prime: World War II, Vietnam)  $\times$  2 (Instruction: memorization, impression)  $\times$  2 (Ambiguity Iraq: ambiguous, unambiguous) between-participants.

### Independent Measures

All participants received several sheets of paper. The first sheet was titled *Newspaper study*. Participants read a newspaper article about a new War museum that was to be opened in St. Louis, Missouri. In all conditions, the newspaper article gave a short biography of the architect commissioned to design the museum, shortly described the design of the museum, and mentioned the costs involved. In the *World War II* conditions, it was mentioned that exhibits in the 'World War II museum' would focus mainly on 'the development of USA's very successful involvement in World War II, a victory of morality' In the *Vietnam* conditions, it was mentioned that exhibits in the 'Vietnam museum' would focus mainly 'on the development of USA's very unsuccessful involvement of the US in the Vietnam War, a moral quagmire.'

Before being exposed to the newspaper article, participants were given instructions concerning how to process this information. These instructions were modeled after earlier investigations of the impact of processing goals on judgment (see Stapel & Koomen, 2000). *Memorization* participants were informed that they were participating in a study of memory and that their task was to memorize the contents of the newspaper article. *Impression* participants were informed that they were participating in a study of impression formation and that their task was to read the newspaper article and to form an impression of both the museum described and the war it commemorated.

Although a number of previous studies suggest that distinct representations (e.g., 'Stanley is sweet,' 'The Vietnam War was unjust') are more likely to be activated when participants have an impression formation goal whereas abstract, diffuse representations (e.g., 'sweet,' 'unjust') are more likely to be activated under memory instructions (see further Stapel & Koomen, 2000), the impact of goal instruction on representation has never been tested empirically.

To fill this void (and be more certain that the memorization/impression manipulation actually did what it was designed to do) we performed a  $2 \times 2$  between-participants pilot study ( $n = 42$ ). The procedure and design of this study was identical to the present study. Participants were given a war prime (WW II, Vietnam) and a specific instruction (memorization, impression). After these manipulations, participants made two ratings. First, participants indicated the extent to which they thought the historical conflict they were primed with (World War II or Vietnam) was a 'distinctive, clearly bounded' event ( $1 = \textit{not at all distinctive}$ ,  $7 = \textit{very distinctive}$ , see Studies 1, 2). Next, all participants indicated how difficult they thought the memorization or impression formation had been ( $1 = \textit{very easy}$ ,  $7 = \textit{very easy}$ ). Results showed the predicted impact of the goal instructions on the distinctness measure. Participants judged the primed event more distinct in the *impression* conditions ( $M = 4.65$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) than in the *memorization* conditions ( $M = 3.73$ ,  $SD = 1.12$ ),  $F(1,38) = 8.73$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.19$  (Other  $ps > 0.19$ ). Results also showed that the memorization task was perceived as easier ( $M = 3.56$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ) than the impression formation task ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ),  $F(1,38) = 13.83$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.27$  (Other  $Fs < 1$ ), indicating that the impression formation task was cognitively more taxing than the memorization task.

### Dependent Measures

After these manipulations, participants were told that they would be quizzed later about the newspaper article, handed in the sheet with the newspaper article, and were asked to turn to the second 'study,' titled *Iraq Survey*. Participants in the *ambiguous* conditions were given the following introduction to this questionnaire: 'As you know, international conflicts develop quickly and are ever-changing. It is difficult to draw a clear and consistent picture of the Iraq War. Every day, every week new information

comes in that changes one's perspective.' Participants in the unambiguous conditions were given a different introduction to this questionnaire: 'As you know, international conflict have a clear and stable basis. Because of this, it is easy to draw a clear and consistent picture of the Iraq War. Every day, every week the same type of information comes in that is unlikely to change one's perspective.' After having read this ambiguity manipulation, all participants were asked to give their opinion about the Iraq conflict. Similar to Studies 1–3, we assessed how much participants agreed (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) with the statements 'The US will be successful in solving the Iraq conflict' and 'The Iraq war is fought for a good cause.' We again averaged these two items ( $r = 0.41$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) to form a single Iraq war rating score.

Next, all participants indicated how positive US President George W. Bush's role was in the Iraq conflict to date (June 2005) (1 = *not at all positive*, 7 = *very positive*) and similarly, how positive U.S. Foreign Affairs Officer Bill Klein's role was (1 = *not at all positive*, 7 = *very positive*).

Next, all participants indicated how successful the performance of the US army was in the Vietnam War and in World War II (1 = *not at all successful*, 7 = *very successful*). On the third page of the booklet, participants were asked what they thought the study was about. As in the previous studies, no participant showed any awareness of the hypothesis or suspicion about the relationship between the different, ostensibly unrelated, parts of the studies. On completion of the study, participants were debriefed and thanked for their time and effort.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As before, we checked whether participants judged the performance of the US army to be more successful in World War II than in the Vietnam War. This was done in the same as before. We checked whether participants' judged the US military's performance in World War II as more successful than in Vietnam. Participants judged World War II as more successful ( $M = 5.77$ ,  $SD = 1.02$ ) than they did the Vietnam War ( $M = 2.20$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ),  $F(1, 122) = 398.17$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.78$ . Importantly, this effect was not influenced by the war prime, instruction manipulation, ambiguity manipulation, or their interactions ( $F_s < 1$ ).

### Main Analyses

#### *Iraq War Ratings*

To examine the effect of our independent variables on participants' ratings of the Iraq war, we conducted a 2 (War Prime)  $\times$  2 (Instruction)  $\times$  2 (Ambiguity Iraq) between-participants ANOVA (see Table 3). This analysis revealed a marginal effect of War Prime,  $F(1, 114) = 3.11$ ,  $p < 0.09$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.03$ , a war prime by instruction interaction,  $F(1, 114) = 6.25$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.05$ , and the hypothesized war prime by instruction by Iraq ambiguity interaction,  $F(1, 114) = 6.81$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.06$  (other  $F_s < 1$ ). Simple effects tests revealed that in the *memorization* condition, when the Iraq conflict had been introduced as ambiguous, it was judged more favorably after thinking about World War II ( $M = 5.20$ ,  $SD = 1.22$ ) than Vietnam ( $M = 3.98$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ),  $F(1, 114) = 14.45$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.11$ , whereas such assimilation effect did not occur when the Iraq conflict had been introduced as unambiguous ( $F < 1$ ). In the *impression* condition, the 'ambiguous' Iraq conflict was judged more favorably after thinking about

Table 3. Study 4. Mean (SD) Iraq war rating, George W. Bush rating, Bill Klein rating as a function of war prime, instruction, and ambiguity Iraq

War prime:	Vietnam		World War II	
Instruction:	Memorization	Impression	Memorization	Impression
Iraq War				
Ambiguity Iraq:				
Ambiguous	3.96 (0.77)	5.11 (0.79)	5.20 (1.22)	4.13 (0.50)
Unambiguous	4.64 (0.82)	5.13 (0.76)	4.38 (0.57)	4.08 (0.86)
George W. Bush (unambiguous)				
Ambiguity Iraq:				
Ambiguous	3.29 (0.92)	3.69 (1.08)	3.53 (0.92)	2.88 (0.89)
Unambiguous	3.50 (1.35)	3.78 (0.81)	3.47 (1.41)	3.00 (1.71)
Bill Klein (ambiguous)				
Ambiguity Iraq:				
Ambiguous	3.50 (1.09)	4.31 (1.30)	4.00 (1.00)	3.44 (1.21)
Unambiguous	3.43 (0.94)	4.00 (1.19)	4.33 (1.63)	3.36 (1.69)

Note: Scale range is from 1 to 7. Higher numbers indicate that US involvement, Bush's role, and Klein's role in the Iraq conflict was judged more favorably.

Vietnam ( $M = 5.10$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) than World War II ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 0.50$ ),  $F(1, 114) = 10.57$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.08$  (a contrast effect). Similarly, in the impression condition, the 'unambiguous' Iraq conflict was judged more favorably after thinking about Vietnam ( $M = 5.13$ ,  $SD = 0.76$ ) than World War II ( $M = 4.08$ ,  $SD = 0.86$ ),  $F(1, 114) = 10.02$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.08$  (a contrast effect).

#### President George W. Bush ratings

To examine the effect of our independent variables on participants' ratings of Bush's role in the Iraq conflict, we conducted a 2 (War Prime)  $\times$  2 (Instruction)  $\times$  2 (Ambiguity Iraq) between-participants ANOVA (see Table 3). This analysis revealed a marginal effect of War Prime,  $F(1, 114) = 2.65$ ,  $p = 0.11$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.02$ , and the predicted war prime by instruction interaction,  $F(1, 114) = 4.56$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.04$  (other  $F$ s  $< 1$ ). As predicted, simple effects tests revealed that (independent of the Ambiguity Iraq manipulation) in the *memorization* condition, judgments of this unambiguous target were not affected ( $F < 1$ ), whereas in the *impression* condition, a contrast effect was revealed: Bush was judged more favorably after thinking about Vietnam ( $M = 3.74$ ,  $SD = 0.93$ ) than World War II ( $M = 2.93$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ),  $F(1, 114) = 7.81$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.06$ .

#### Foreign Affairs Officer Bill Klein ratings

To examine the effect of our independent variables on participants' ratings of fictitious Foreign Affairs Officer Bill Klein, we conducted a 2 (War Prime)  $\times$  2 (Instruction)  $\times$  2 (Ambiguity Iraq) between-participants ANOVA (see Table 3). This analysis only revealed the predicted war prime by instruction interaction,  $F(1, 114) = 9.87$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.08$  (other  $F$ s  $< 1$ ). As predicted, simple effects tests revealed that (independent of the Ambiguity Iraq manipulation) in the *memorization* condition,

judgments of this ambiguous target showed assimilation: Klein was judged more favorably after thinking about World War II ( $M = 4.17$ ,  $SD = 1.34$ ) than Vietnam ( $M = 3.46$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ),  $F(1,114) = 4.35$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ . In the *impression* condition, contrast occurred: Klein was judged more favorably after thinking about Vietnam ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ) than World War II ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 1.43$ ),  $F(1,114) = 5.41$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.04$ .<sup>2</sup>

Again these findings give support to the hypothesis that the way in which people use past wars to construe the meaning of international conflicts (e.g., the Iraq conflict) depends on the perceived distinctness of these wars at the time the judgment is made as well as the perceived ambiguity of the target conflict. Moreover, our findings also show that past wars may influence judgments of involved policy makers and politicians in similar ways. As the ICM predicts, distinctness-driven contrastive comparison effects are more likely to occur when an unambiguous policy maker is to be evaluated (US President George W. Bush), whereas both diffuse-driven assimilative interpretation effects and distinctness-driven contrastive comparison effects may occur when a fictitious and thus relatively ambiguous policy maker is to be evaluated (Foreign Affairs Officer Bill Klein).

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

The Interpretation Comparison Model (ICM; Stapel & Koomen, 2001) provides a comprehensive framework for how people use accessible knowledge to construct judgments. In the current studies we used the ICM to show how people may make sense of a real world event—the Iraq War—and policy makers and politicians involved in this event, such as U.S. President George W. Bush. In doing so we developed and tested new manipulations of core constructs of the ICM (distinctness and ambiguity). Thus, the current studies further corroborate the strength of the ICM logic. On a more applied level, the findings from our four studies suggest that how people make sense of the Iraq War depends on at least two factors, (a) the distinctness of the knowledge that thinking about the past activates, and (b) the ambiguity of the target event that is to be judged. Specifically, in Studies 1 and 2, we showed that when participants are in a distinct frame of mind, contrastive evaluations will occur when comparing the past to the present, and when they are in a diffuse frame of mind assimilative evaluations will occur when comparing the past to the present. The results from Studies 1, 2, and 4 suggest that this assimilation effect will occur mainly when the current event is new (i.e., before the Iraq War had started) or when it is presented as ambiguous (i.e., when the Iraq War is defined as ever-evolving and—developing). Once an event becomes well known (as was the case for the Iraq War in Study 3) or is presented as clear and unambiguous (as was the case in the unambiguous conditions of Study 4), assimilative interpretation effects are less likely to occur. After all, when there is no need to interpret the present event, assimilative interpretation effects should be less likely.

Our analysis thus explains the contrast effects that were found in terms of how activated information is used (as an interpretation frame or a comparison standard). In the social judgment literature it has been argued that there are at least two forms comparison-contrast effects could take. One is a comparison involving the subjective representation of the prime (e.g., WW2) and the target stimulus

<sup>2</sup>One could argue that given our specific predictions of the effects of our manipulations on judgments of the Iraq War, Bush, and Klein judge, separate *F*-tests that are followed by simple main effect analyses are not informative (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 1991). Moreover, since each individual prediction of our the model tested in Study 4 has received support in previous conceptually related studies (as reviewed in the Introduction of our paper) as well as in the current Studies 1–3, the use of *a priori* contrasts in the studies reported here seems justified. Therefore, we would like to note that for all the relevant analyses reported in the four main and two ‘pilot’ studies in this article, we performed *F*-tests (see main text) as well as *a priori* contrasts with weights that were based on our specific predictions. For each of the six studies, these *a priori* contrasts reached significance ( $p < 0.01$ ), thus strongly supporting the ICM model.

(e.g., Iraq conflict). According to this perspective, comparison contrast is a *perceptual* phenomenon: Just as lukewarm water *feels* cold when one has just had a hot bath, a neutral face is *seen* as less happy compared to a happy face (e.g., Stapel et al., 2002). The alternate view is that comparison contrast is a *semantic* or output phenomenon that occurs when individuals attempt to translate a previously formed impression in an overt response (see Biernat, Manis, & Nelson, 1991; Mussweiler, 2003). More specifically, it is assumed that individuals align the extremes of the available response alternatives with the extreme values of the stimulus they expect to judge. A change in the relation between the objective and subjective ranges would cause a stimulus of a given subjective value to be mapped onto a different objective response category. According to this account, comparison contrast does not result from changes in cognitive representation; instead, it is thought to reflect changes in the way the representation is described (rated).

It was not a goal of the current studies to provide evidence for or against either *perceptual* or *semantic* accounts of comparison contrast (but see Stapel & Blanton, 2004). We believe, however, that a semantic model of comparison contrast would not provide a parsimonious explanation for the present results. In the current experiments, all participants were exposed to the same priming and target stimuli and rated these stimuli on the same response scales. Therefore, in those experiments all participants should have had the same stimulus range and the same response range. Hence, they should have aligned their subjective and objective ranges in similar ways across conditions. If so, the semantic model of comparison contrast should have predicted that there would be no differences in judgments (see Stapel & Blanton, 2004).

It is also important to note that other models of assimilation and contrast effects have suggested that *awareness* of a primed event at the time of judgment leads to contrast away from the primed information, whereas no awareness of a primed event leads to assimilation towards the primed information (e.g., Lambert, Khan, Lickel, & Fricke, 1997; Strack, Schwarz, Bless, Kuebler, & Waelenke, 1993; Wilson & Brekke, 1994). However, the studies presented here make clear that assimilation and contrast effects can occur independent of whether or not people are aware of the influence of the primed information on their judgments. Recall that in each of our studies, none of the participants showed any suspicion or awareness about the influence of the prime on their subsequent judgments regarding the Iraq War.

The present results are also difficult to explain in terms of the *extremity* of the primed information. In other studies of social judgment, contrast occurred when accessible knowledge was extreme, whereas assimilation was more likely when this knowledge is moderate (e.g., Herr et al., 1983; Hogarth & Einhorn, 1992; Stapel et al., 1997). In the present studies, however, none of the ratings were more extreme in conditions where we found contrast than in those conditions where we found assimilation.

The amount of *cognitive effort* expended during information processing may also be coined as a possible, alternative explanation of the present assimilation and contrast effects. In several models of assimilation and contrast it has been posited that contrast demands more effortful processing than assimilation (e.g., Martin, Seta, & Crelia, 1990; Schwarz & Bless, 1992; but see Stapel et al., 2002; Stapel & Blanton, 2004; Stapel & Suls, 2004). It is possible that our 'think' (Experiments 2, 3) and 'memorization' (Experiment 4) manipulations were cognitively more straining than our 'evaluate' and 'impression formation' manipulation. Interestingly, however, the pilot (manipulation check) studies reported in the Method sections of Experiments 2 and 4 show that participants did not think the 'contrast' instructions were more demanding. If anything, they thought the 'assimilation' instructions were relatively difficult. In other words, at least on an experiential level, there is no strong support in the current data for the notion that the reported contrast effects are accompanied with the expenditure of more cognitive effort.

We believe that the present research demonstrates how the ICM can help explain how people make sense of world events such as the Iraq War. The current findings support quite strongly the notion that

how we interpret an event can be profoundly affected by *the way* we think about past events. Of course, there are other models of assimilation and contrast effects that may be employed to explain the current set of results. Likely candidates are Schwarz and Bless's (1992) *Inclusion Exclusion Model* and Mussweiler's (2003) *Selective Accessibility Model*. These models also posit that an important determinant of the impact of primed information is how such information is categorized and used. However, since the ICM is the only model that explicitly links a feature of the priming stimuli (i.e., distinctness) and a feature of the target stimulus (i.e., ambiguity<sup>3</sup>) to the outcome of priming effects, we think it is most parsimonious to explain the present effects using the ICM as the guiding model.

### CODA

Politicians and the media have long recognized the power of iconographic imagery to shape public perception. For example, after the first televised presidential debate, a journalist likened Kennedy to 'a fictional hero, something like a shy young sheriff' and Nixon to 'the railroad lawyer who signs contracts that are not in the interests of the folks in the little town.' Indeed, this vivid imagery showed the writer's political preferences and probably affected his audience's perceptions as well (McLuhan, 1969; Stapel & Spears, 1995). When political commentators use well known images from the past to describe politicians and their policies, they intend for the public to go *beyond* the information given, and thus to make additional inferences based on their knowledge regarding the specific images (Bruner, 1957; Patterson, 1994). Hence, the inferences we make when we hear that a newly emerging conflict is like Vietnam are expected to increase our distaste and influence our actions and opinions accordingly. Similarly, when political commentators label a recent political scandal in a way that explicitly refers to the infamous Watergate scandal (e.g., the Iran-Contra Affair, Travelgate, the Whitewater scandal, Lewinskigate, Iraqgate) it is expected that the public will infer from the Watergate analogy that the scope of the recent scandal is like the past one (Stapel & Spears, 1995). Our research suggests, that one should be careful when applying such analogies. In other words, when the references to the past are clear and explicit such that the past becomes distinct, contrast rather than assimilation on our judgments of a newly emerging event is likely, but when the event is well known then only contrast is likely regardless of whether the event requires interpretation. Thus, when looking backward to interpret and compare the present, we should be aware of the pivotal roles distinctness and event ambiguity play in our judgments of ongoing, real world events.

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<sup>3</sup>One of the important determinants of whether inclusion (and assimilation) or exclusion (and contrast) occurs in the Inclusion Exclusion Model (IEM) is category width. Specifically, the IEM posits that accessible is more likely to be included in the target category when this category is wide, whereas exclusion is more likely to occur for narrow categories. Thus, when Nixon and the Watergate scandal is on one's mind when judging the Republican party, inclusion and assimilation towards Nixon is likely to occur, whereas exclusion and contrast is more likely when judging George W. Bush (see Schwarz & Bless, 1992). It is important to distinguish *category width* from *ambiguity*. Whereas the category width variable in the IEM focuses on whether accessible information can be added to, included in the larger representation of a target, the ambiguity variable in the ICM focuses on whether a accessible information can be used to make sense of, to disambiguate the actual meaning of a target. Thus, whereas the IEM focuses on whether accessible items can be seen as members of the target category, whether they can be *added* to this category and thus indirectly affect its meaning, the ICM focuses on whether accessible items can be used to *disambiguate* the target category and thus directly affect its meaning. Since the present work focuses on disambiguation rather than addition processes, the ICM seems a somewhat more applicable model.

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