

United States Marine Corps
Command and Staff College
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2076 South Street
Marine Corps Combat Development Command
Quantico, Virginia 22341-5068

MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE: American Aversion to Casualties: Debunking the Myth

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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AY 01-02

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REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing this collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden to Department of Defense, Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports (0704-0188), 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to any penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number. PLEASE DO NOT RETURN YOUR FORM TO THE ABOVE ADDRESS.					
1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 01-07-2002		2. REPORT TYPE Student research paper		3. DATES COVERED (FROM - TO) xx-xx-2001 to xx-xx-2002	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE American Aversion to Casualties: Debunking the Myth Unclassified				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S) Huffman, Suzanne C. ;				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME AND ADDRESS USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University, MCCDC 2076 South Street Quantico, VA22134-5068				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME AND ADDRESS USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street, MCCDC Quantico, VA22134-5068				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT A PUBLIC RELEASE					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT See report.					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:		17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Public Release	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 58	19. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON EM114, (blank) lfenster@dtic.mil	
a. REPORT Unclassified	b. ABSTRACT Unclassified	c. THIS PAGE Unclassified		19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER International Area Code Area Code Telephone Number 703767-9007 DSN 427-9007	
				Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98) Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39.18	

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		FORM APPROVED - - - OMB NO. 0704-0188
public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters services, directorate for information operations and reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the office of management and budget, paperwork reduction project (0704-0188) Washington, dc 20503		
1. AGENCY USE ONLY (LEAVE BLANK)	2. REPORT DATE	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED STUDENT RESEARCH PAPER
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE AMERICAN AVERSION TO CASUALTIES: DEBUNKING THE MYTH		5. FUNDING NUMBERS N/A
6. AUTHOR(S) MAJOR SUZANNE C. HUFFMAN, USAF		
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE 2076 SOUTH STREET, MCCDC, QUANTICO, VA 22134-5068		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER NONE
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) SAME AS #7.		10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER: NONE
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES NONE		
12A. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT NO RESTRICTIONS		12B. DISTRIBUTION CODE N/A
13. ABSTRACT (MAXIMUM 200 WORDS) THE AMERICAN PUBLIC IS NOT MANIFESTLY CASUALTY AVERSE. INSTEAD, THERE EXISTS A COMPLEX AND INTERTWINED SET OF VARIABLES THAT THE AMERICAN PUBLIC EXAMINES – SEPARATELY AND CONTINUOUSLY FOR EACH CONFLICT – THAT DETERMINES THE EXTENT TO WHICH THEY WILL LEND OR WITHHOLD THEIR SUPPORT. MUCH MORE IS FACTORED INTO WHETHER AMERICANS SUPPORT OR OPPOSE INVOLVEMENT IN A PARTICULAR CONFLICT OR OPERATION THAN MERELY NUMBER OF COMBAT DEATHS. FACTORS SUCH AS THE EXTENT TO WHICH THE COUNTRY'S LEADERSHIP BACKS AND FRAMES THE CAUSE, THE PERCEIVED NECESSITY OF THE OPERATION, THE POTENTIAL COSTS AS WEIGHED AGAINST THE PROSPECTS FOR SUCCESS, AND AN OVERALL CALCULATION OF COST-RISK-BENEFIT ANALYSIS THAT DRIVES PUBLIC SUPPORT OR LACK THEREOF. IT IS A GRAVE OVERSIMPLIFICATION TO BELIEVE THAT IN INSTANCES WHERE AMERICANS HAVE CALLED FOR REMOVAL OF U.S. TROOPS FROM CERTAIN REGIONS OR CONFLICTS, THAT IT WAS A CALL BASED SOLELY ON THE NUMBER OF BODY BAGS SENT HOME. THIS PAPER EXAMINES THE VALIDITY OF THE PERCEPTION THAT AMERICANS ARE CASUALTY AVERSE, CHALLENGES THAT ASSERTION, AND THEN SUGGESTS MORE REALISTIC REASONS BEHIND WHY THE U.S. PUBLIC DOES OR DOES NOT SUPPORT VARIOUS U.S. MILITARY INVOLVEMENTS OVERSEAS.		
14. SUBJECT TERMS (KEY WORDS ON WHICH TO PERFORM SEARCH) CASUALTY AVERSION		15. NUMBER OF PAGES: 42
		16. PRICE CODE: N/A

17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT UNCLASSIFIED	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE: UNCLASSIFIED	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT UNCLASSIFIED	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT
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Title: American Aversion to Casualties: Debunking the Myth

Author: Major Suzanne C. Huffman, USAF

Thesis: The American public is not manifestly casualty averse.

Discussion: Instead, there exists a complex and intertwined set of variables that the American public examines - separately and continuously *for each conflict* - that determines the extent to which they will lend or withhold their support.

The tendency is to correlate rising death tolls for a given conflict with what has many times in the past been declining public support over time, and to declare it a causal relationship. This is a serious mistake. Note that cumulative death tolls can only go in one direction - up. Given that, one could assert an inverse, ostensibly cause-effect correlation between total number of body bags and American public support for *any* conflict in which support falls off, completely apart from any further study into *why* support has fallen off. It is this tendency to take the effortless route that has fueled so much hype about Americans being unable to stand the sight of their own blood. This, however, is simply not the case.

Conclusion: Much more is factored into whether Americans support or oppose a involvement in a particular conflict or operation than merely number of combat deaths. Factors such as the extent to which the country's leadership backs and frames the cause, the perceived necessity of the operation, the potential costs as weighed against the prospects for success, and an overall calculation of cost-risk-benefit analysis that drives public support or lack thereof. It is a grave oversimplification to believe that in instances where Americans have called for removal of U.S. troops from certain regions or conflicts, that it was a call based solely on the number of body bags sent home.

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INTRODUCTION

There exists a great deal of speculation and concern about the willingness of the American public to accept casualties in military operations. The perception is that the public has become less tolerant of casualties in military operations in recent decades, and has become unwilling to support such operations unless they are concluded at very low cost in terms of human life. Certainly, the impulse not to sacrifice indiscriminately the lives of American servicemen and women is a worthwhile goal; it is unquestionably preferable to the historical callous attitude of the Russian military toward its rank and file.¹ But the concern is that U.S. "casualty aversion" has surpassed just the desirable aim of *avoiding* U.S. casualties to the greatest extent possible—call it "casualty consciousness" or "casualty avoidance." Rather, the fear, even the belief, is that the pendulum has swung completely to the far end of the spectrum, and Americans have become "casualty *phobic*," or completely "casualty *intolerant*." If true, such a conclusion would have broad implications for U.S. strategy, forces and doctrine, and for the U.S. ability to deter or coerce adversaries.²

Where does this perception Americans will not tolerate casualties come from?

HISTORICAL DATA

The preponderance of research and literature on the existence (be it real or imagined) of the American public's aversion to combat casualties points to the origin of this mindset becoming evident during the Korean and Vietnam conflicts. (It is rare to find an article that discusses casualty aversion in reference to military actions prior to 1950; instead, most studies of casualty aversion use American attitudes during World Wars I and II to demonstrate that in those conflicts it clearly did not exist.) Those who allege the existence of a strong American aversion to committing troops to protracted battle, and their numbers are great, almost invariably point to Korea and Vietnam as the earliest in a string of conflicts that prove Americans will withdraw their support as the result of a climbing death toll. The data can certainly be presented such that this appears to be true.

Consider the following casualty figures (Table 1):

U.S. Personnel Killed in Action (KIA)	
<u>Conflict</u>	<u>Total KIA</u>
World War II	291,557
Korea	33,651
Vietnam	47,364

Table 1³

World War II emerges as the departure point with regard to casualty aversion because of the extremely high levels of support despite enormous losses incurred (*Chart 1*).



Chart 1.⁴

Regarding both Korea and Vietnam, both wars started with a significant level of support, based on the important U.S. interest of “containing communist expansion.”⁵ Polling data clearly shows, however, that public support for both of these conflicts eroded significantly over time (*Chart 1*); in fact, in both cases, every time U.S. casualties went up by a factor of ten, support in both wars decreased by approximately 15%.⁶ Looking exclusively at data points such as these that marry the decline in public support to the increase in casualties, one

might draw the conclusion that public support dwindled *as the result of* the large number of casualties incurred. Often that conclusion does not even have to be drawn by the reader, it is clearly stated. For instance a study conducted by RAND in 1985 concluded that in Vietnam, the war's costs had become too high for all but a minority. They reviewed a number of studies that associated casualties with declining support for the Vietnam War, and reported public opinion data from the Harris organization that showed that casualties, especially war dead, had increasingly become the single most troubling aspect of the Vietnam War.⁷ By March 1969, the number of battle-related deaths had risen to over 34,000—the final toll of the Korean War—and nearly two out of three said they would have opposed the U.S. entry into the war if they had known the costs of that conflict.⁸ Succinctly put, the 1985 RAND study “concluded that the public was sensitive to casualties and gradually withdrew its support of military operations in Korea and Vietnam based on the cumulative number of casualties.”⁹ This type of data is the launching point for many who would attempt to build a case for American's inability to stomach casualties in conflict; however, it ignores a number of other variables that influence public opinion. These will be addressed later.

The case for an American unwillingness to sustain casualties can be further made with data from U.S. interventions

in the Dominican Republic (1965), Lebanon (1982-1984), and Somalia (1992-1994)(*Chart 2*).

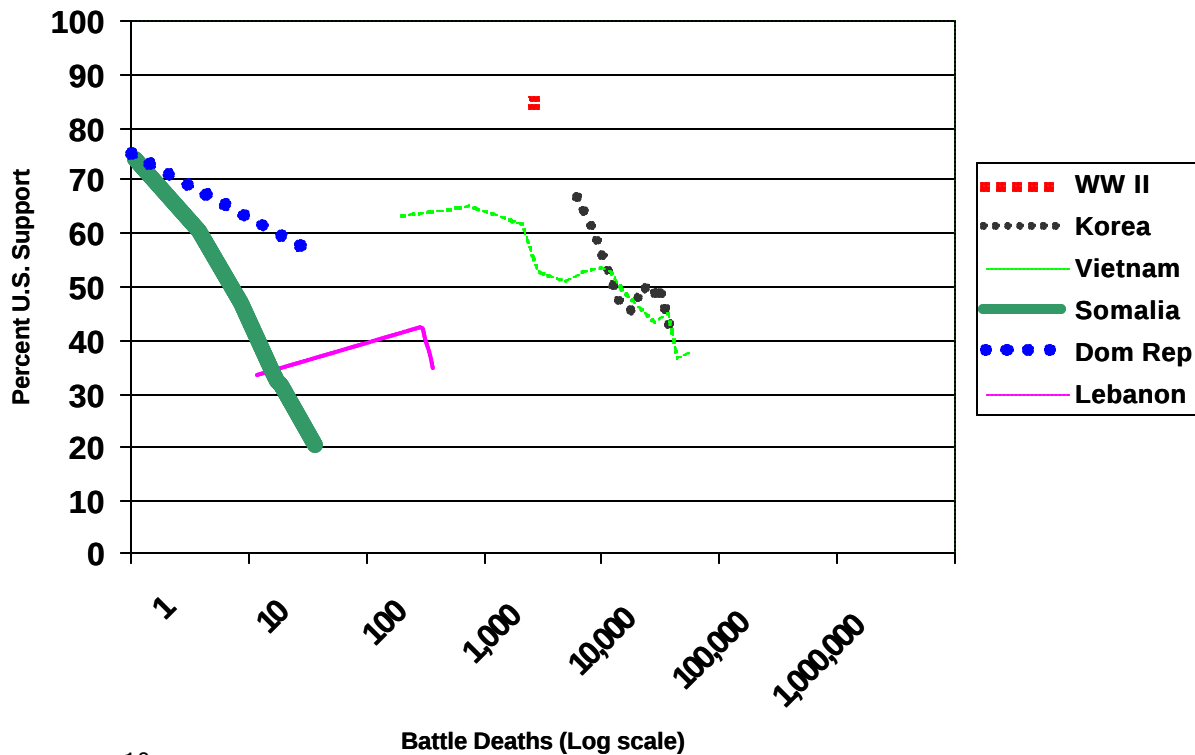


Chart 2.¹⁰

Over the course of the intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965, support fell from around 75% to between 36 and 52%, again seemingly showing a strong decline in support as a function of rising casualties.¹¹ Similarly, regarding Lebanon, 57% of the U.S. public in September 1982 approved of President Reagan's decision to send U.S. Marines to Beirut; however, subsequent to the Marine barracks bombing support had dropped to 37%.¹² Likewise in Somalia, support declined precipitously, losing about 30 percentage points for each increase by a factor of ten in deaths. And support for the intervention in Somalia

looks very similar to the intervention in the Dominican Republic; both showed steeper rates of decline as casualties grew.¹³

These are some of the historical data that people who accept the myth of an unwavering American aversion to casualties use to bolster their argument; and the aforementioned is only a small representative sample of the data that is available to support such claims. In almost every instance where U.S. troops have been committed in support of foreign policy, one could make a case for diminished support as casualties rose; but, that view is overly simplistic and patently inaccurate, as will be demonstrated later.

TECHNOLOGICAL IMPROVEMENTS

There is no doubt that Operations DESERT STORM (Iraq) and ALLIED FORCE (Kosovo) raised the bar on what Americans can expect in terms of minimized loss of life in warfare. Both dramatically demonstrated the effectiveness of high-explosive, precision-guided munitions (PGMs). Combat footage of air-delivered weapons "hitting corners of buildings, plunging down ventilation shafts, and destroying individual tanks became a staple of the nightly news."¹⁴ The U.S. death tolls in both of these recent conflicts were very low, and have undoubtedly "demonstrated to the American public the increasing potential cleanliness of warfare."¹⁵ DESERT STORM and ALLIED FORCE have

given rise to the belief that the U.S. can go to limited war for limited aims and achieve them in a short period of time at a very low cost in terms of human life. While undeniably true, the fact that Americans *have seen* the U.S. win battles relatively quickly while sustaining minimal casualties is a far cry from asserting that the American public will henceforth and forever *demand* as much. That is far too strong a conclusion to be reasonably drawn based on purely anecdotal "evidence."

THE MEDIA

Finally, the media is perhaps the biggest purveyor of the idea that Americans cannot tolerate casualties. First, the very frequency with which the media poses this question tends to lend credibility to the concern. The current conflict in Afghanistan is a perfect example. With each additional U.S. military death the nightly news anchors are asking whether *this* will affect American popular support for the operation. There is no shortage of interviews, polls, or commentaries on whether or not the American people will tolerate additional casualties. The very extent to which this issue gets covered gives it a life and a credibility all its own, deserved or not. Second, it is through the media that statistics such as those cited above are reported and propagated, leading people to conclude that high body bag counts directly and perhaps solely influence American support for military action. These figures and their subsequent

erroneous conclusions are widely found in books, newspapers and on documentaries. Third, videogame-like footage from American fighters (and now bombers) dropping precision munitions on Iraqi/Serbian/Taliban targets from seemingly safe heights fuels the idea that America can and therefore *must* go to war without sustaining casualties. But it is through blatant statements to the effect that *Americans cannot tolerate casualties* that the media contributes most directly to this idea. There are frequent references to the "body bag syndrome;" or statements about "our greatest vulnerability [being] our aversion to casualties."¹⁶ There is no shortage of reference to America's supposed casualty averse mindset in the media, both current and historical. But this is not a self-fulfilling prophecy, nor is it an accurate depiction of fact; instead, it is merely a widely propagated and self-fueling myth. It is a colored lens through which the media frequently views and characterizes unfolding events: we left Beirut and Somalia because of our casualty aversion; we did not pursue and eliminate Saddam due to casualty aversion; we did not use ground troops in Kosovo because the American people are casualty averse, etc. Simply put, this is not true. American people at large, and certainly rank and file members of the U.S. military, judge our military involvement overseas with much more in mind than simply the number of lifeless bodies sent home.

Clearly, then, there are a number factors at work in propagating this pervasive belief that Americans are casualty averse. But more important than the matter of where it comes from, is the question of whether it is true?

Will Americans tolerate casualties?

There are numerous indicators (as cited above) that the American public is casualty averse. It is a conclusion that can be extrapolated from certain historical data (albeit superficially), it is a phenomenon widely touted in the media, and it is an assumption underpinned by technological advancements that *would seem* to give it merit. But is it true? Direct efforts to answer this question (vice just drawing conclusions based on existing data, as cited above) show that it is not.

Consider first a recent poll conducted by Fox News, which shows that in the aftermath of the events of 11 Sep, "Large majorities of Americans (80%) strongly support the actions being taken by the military."¹⁷ In fact, the poll found that "Many Americans are prepared to suffer thousands of casualties in order to win this war,"¹⁸ and 44% stated that the U.S. should be prepared to lose as many soldiers as it takes to stop terrorism.¹⁹ A Gallup poll from Oct 01 shows similar results, reporting that:

In polling leading up to Sunday's initiation of military action, the public has consistently said it was willing to continue to support military action against terrorists even if it produces both military and civilian casualties, and even if it leads to a prolonged war.²⁰

Another Gallup poll of 21-22 Sep 2001 assessed the level of support for military action under five specific circumstances, including a protracted war that would involve American casualties, and it found a range of support from 65% to 86%. The high of 86% support is in reference to military action that would continue for a period of several months. The lowest level of support is for military action that would last for several years (66%) or would involve the deaths of 1,000 American troops (65%).²¹ Note, even at the lowest level of support, 65% is a very high level of endorsement from an American public purported to be casualty averse!

In addition to Gallup, several other polling organizations have asked similar questions. For example, a Newsweek poll of 27-28 Sep 02 found 65% of Americans supporting military action even if the loss of U.S. troops or civilian casualties were likely. Four CBS/New York Times polls conducted [since 11 Sep] have shown a steady 70% support for "military action against whoever is responsible, even if innocent people are killed."²² Such appears to be the majority of data in the aftermath of the 11 Sep attacks. Americans are united behind the ongoing

military action and are braced to accept casualties. But there are those who would state that this is different; that the attacks on U.S. soil were so traumatic an event as to solidify American support for military action, despite the risk to American soldiers' lives. What, then, can be gleaned from studies on American casualty aversion completed prior to 11 Sep 1999?

A 1998 study on casualty aversion conducted by the Triangle Institute for Strategic Studies (TISS) concluded that the strong belief that the American public will not accept casualties is not supported by survey data. "The mass public says it will accept casualties."²³ The study goes on to identify specific scenarios, both traditional (such as defending Taiwan against a PRC invasion) and untraditional (such as preventing Iraq from obtaining weapons of mass destruction or stabilizing a democratic government in the Congo), then asking the mass public to give estimates of acceptable casualties in each case.²⁴ In the case of the PRC-Taiwan scenario, there was strong consensus that it was a cause worth spilling American blood over, and the "acceptable casualties" figure given averaged over 20,000 American dead.²⁵ Regarding the Iraq scenario, the American public polled said over 29,000 deaths would be acceptable. And in the case of bolstering democracy in the Congo, the "acceptable deaths" figure given averaged over 6,800.²⁶ While it

is true the latter figure is roughly one-third to one-fourth the number of acceptable deaths as compared to the Taiwan and Iraq averages, "we must not miss the point that the public was willing to accept *over sixty-eight hundred deaths* to accomplish the mission."²⁷ In fact, even at 6,800 that number is many times higher than the actual casualties suffered by the U.S. military in all post-Cold War military actions combined.²⁸

The cumulative weight of evidence provided by TISS research...on the role of casualties in prospective or actual conflicts...supports the contention that policy makers and senior military leaders [and the media!] have attributed to the public an aversion to casualties that does not, in fact, exist.²⁹

Moreover, research suggests that suffering casualties can "actually increase American public support for a military operation, so as to ensure that their soldiers did not die 'in vain.'"³⁰ Polling data shows that there were spikes in public support for military operations after the Beirut bombing in Lebanon, after the Tet offensive in Vietnam, and at times during the campaign in Korea as well. Thus, when leaders choose not to enter a war, or "choose to fight with the most antiseptic means possible, they should not cite public opinion as an alibi for their (in)actions."³¹

So what *of* the policy makers and senior military leaders?

Research indicates it is not, in fact, the American public that blanches at the prospect of military casualties during war; rather, there is strong evidence that it is the nation's political and military elites who, if anyone, are casualty averse. This may stem from today's leadership having been in their "formative years" during both Vietnam and the public outcry that was its aftermath. Perhaps it has to do with the astonishing evolution of precision weapons and the fact that we "practically expect to hit a windowpane from 30,000 feet without any loss of life."³² Or, possibly it issues from their having been constantly bombarded with media messages (as referenced above) regarding the weak stomachs and weaker resolve of the American public. Whatever its origin, there is substantial reason to believe that this country's political and military leadership, *not its mass public*, is casualty averse.

While articles and commentaries abound that point to U.S. military and political elites being casualty averse, to count them as proof of this phenomenon would be as flawed as to believe media accounts that claim the same of the American people. Rather, there is ample data to support this claim. The same TISS study cited above found that average "Americans give substantially higher estimates of acceptable casualties than do civilian or military elites."³³ The data was based on a survey

of forty-nine hundred Americans drawn from three groups: senior/rising military officers, influential civilians, and the general public, and the results were as follows (*Chart 3*):

<i>Mission</i>	<i>Military Elite</i>	<i>Civilian Elite</i>	<i>Mass Public</i>
Congo	284	484	6,861
Iraq	6,016	19,045	29,853
Taiwan	17,425	17,554	20,172

Number of Deaths Acceptable

Chart 3.³⁴

This study demonstrated that "the American public is far more tolerant of potential casualties than are policy makers or senior military officers."³⁵ The "study confirmed that the myth of casualty aversion is entrenched at the upper levels of society."³⁶

As the authors [of the study] point out, one must interpret these averages in general terms and must realize that they do not necessarily reflect the actual casualties the public will accept once real soldiers start dying. But the "sheer numbers" and "dramatic differences" between the groups are significant.³⁷

Consider next what has become commonly known as the "Weinberger Doctrine," laid down in a speech by then Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger in November 1984, and what many would say shows U.S. leadership learned the lessons of Vietnam and Beirut a little too well. The speech contained six points intended to sharply limit the use of combat forces:

- Either the United States' or its close allies' vital national interests had to be at risk
- The war had to be fought "wholeheartedly, with the clear intention of winning"
- We should employ decisive force in the pursuit of clearly defined political and military objectives
- We must constantly reassess whether the use of force is necessary and appropriate
- There must be a "reasonable assurance" of Congressional and public support
- Force should be used only as a last resort³⁸

This was first well-publicized instance of the actual codifying of the U.S. political and military leadership's fear of military casualties. It is widely described as criteria for the prudent use of military force, and certainly who can argue with wanting to use combat power judiciously? However, with references to "public support" and "force as a last resort," it reads more like a recipe for waging war that will conform with the desires of an American public that is light on resolve. Some have even called Weinberger-Powell little more than a list of excuses for avoiding political risk. This mindset

derives from America's disastrous experience in Vietnam and prevails among the present national political and military elites, who may have wrongly convinced themselves that the American people have no stomach for casualties...indeed, for these elites, Vietnam is the great foreign-policy referent experience—one seemingly validated by failed U.S. intervention in Lebanon and Somalia.³⁹

The Weinberger Doctrine was slightly modified/expounded upon in 1992 by then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Colin Powell. Powell's thinking, too, reflected the "lessons

learned" in Vietnam; he posed a series of questions, or tests, that should be asked in situations which required the use of violent force:

Is the political objective we seek to achieve important, clearly defined and understood? Have all other nonviolent policy means failed? Will military force achieve the objective? At what cost? Have the gains and risks been analyzed? How might the situation that we seek to alter, once it is altered by force, develop further and what might be the consequences?⁴⁰

Powell's prerequisites for the use of military force have since been succinctly summarized as follows: it should be overwhelming, it should be used as a last resort, with the full support of the public, and with a well-planned exit strategy.

Collectively, the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine is the intellectual construct of the strategic lessons that many military professionals drew from the Vietnam war. It implicitly assumes that public tolerance of casualties is minimal in circumstances that do not satisfy the doctrine's use-of-force criteria. This assumption runs afoul of substantial evidence to the contrary.⁴¹

Weinberger and Powell managed to effectively put into "doctrine" what the aforementioned TISS study verified through polling: "that policy makers and senior military leaders believe that the American public is casualty averse and will not

tolerate deaths except when vital interest are at stake.”⁴²

In fact, the authors of the TISS study reported that

“Overwhelmingly, both civilian and military leaders agreed with the statement, ‘The American public will rarely tolerate large numbers of U.S. casualties in military operations.’”⁴³

Further reflections of the extent to which U.S. military elites are casualty averse can be found in “the recent mission statement of the Army’s European Command, which holds that its primary objective is ‘To Protect and Take Care of the Force’”⁴⁴ This obsession with protecting the force, seemingly above accomplishing the mission, has become more and more pervasive in recent years, particularly since incidents like the Khobar Towers and *USS Cole* bombings. So evident is this phenomenon it has prompted more than one editorialist, discoursing on America’s supposed casualty aversion, to note that apparently “our [armed forces] are supposed to stay out of harm’s way, which raises the question of why we have men and women under arms in the first place.”⁴⁵

Yet another formal documentation of what appears to be the DoD leadership’s belief in America’s lack of tolerance for casualties appears in *Joint Vision 2010*, which states that the “American people will...expect us to be more efficient in protecting lives and resources while accomplishing our mission successfully.”⁴⁶ This excerpt lies in concert with the findings

in a recent *Project on Defense Alternatives* article, which states that political elites in wealthy democratic countries have a particularly low political tolerance for war casualties. This does not necessarily mean these elites are always averse to war, but it does mean they feel a growing pressure to achieve military aims at very low casualty rates.⁴⁷

Thus, the fact that elites are casualty phobic is not in dispute; as stated above, it has been documented through polling data. There is substantial evidence that both political and military elites are convinced the American public's intolerance is significantly higher and more intractable than is actually the case."⁴⁸

It is worth noting at this point, however, that this casualty aversion does not appear to exist among the rank-and-file soldiers, sailors, airmen and marines of the U.S. forces.

In one survey of 12,500 service members conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, 86% agreed with this statement: "If necessary to accomplish a combat/lifesaving mission, I am prepared to put my own life on the line."⁴⁹

"It is hard to say exactly who is responsible for today's no-casualties mindset, demanded neither by ordinary civilians nor by ordinary soldiers."⁵⁰ It is also difficult to assess whether these political and military elites are casualty averse as the result of their own experiences during their formative

years, when many felt that American soldiers' lives were needlessly lost during Vietnam; or, whether it is their perception that the American public will demand the military cut and run at the first sign of blood. Perhaps these leaders are themselves victims of the faulty logic drawn from the charts shown above; or, maybe the constant media insistence that the American public demands casualty-free conflict has taken its toll. But, "whatever its origins, the body bag syndrome represents a powerful hindrance to the effectiveness of the U.S. armed forces."⁵¹

What then is the impact of the casualty aversion mindset of U.S. pol/mil elite

There are many potential effects of America's leaders, both political and military, having bought into the casualty aversion mindset. Whether they themselves are casualty averse, or, more likely, they believe the American people are (as demonstrated in the TISS study), is irrelevant; either way, the effect is the same, and the implications are far-reaching. Potentially affected are decisions on when to employ or withdraw military forces, how to employ them, weapons development, how potential threat countries perceive our willingness to back up our foreign policy with force, and even recruiting and retention.

WHEN TO EMPLOY OR WITHDRAW FORCES

Many statesmen and generals believe, with absolute and

unquestioning conviction, that the U.S. can no longer use American military force unless casualties are virtually nil, even though there is little evidence to support this belief, and in spite of its pernicious effects on U.S. foreign and defense policy.⁵² Consequently, our leaders' "planning could be hamstrung by the erroneous belief that the public will demand that they cut and run at the first American combat deaths."⁵³ Without question, military leaders must be wary of involvement in situations where U.S. troops are put at risk. But one of the worst possible outcomes of the political elites believing the casualty aversion myth lies in the potential for policy makers to abandon military force when we need it. In the future, a president may elect to forgo direct military intervention in a conflict—even though it may be needed to defend legitimate U.S. interests—for fear that public support may decline or collapse once the United States is deeply committed.⁵⁴

Further, considering the rationale for/restrictions upon use of military force as expressed in the Weinberg-Powell Doctrine,

endorsing the use of overwhelming force to protect vital interests while prohibiting the use of limited force for more modest ends does indeed tie the hands of statesmen both unnecessarily and inappropriately,

subordinating pursuit of the national interest to protection of the government's popularity.⁵⁵

HOW FORCES ARE EMPLOYED

What has emerged as a supreme example of civilian and military elites making decisions on how to employ forces, based on what they perceive as a casualty-intolerant American public, is Kosovo. President Bill Clinton's announcement to the American people that ground forces would not be employed in Kosovo pointed to a collective assumption that he and the senior military brass did not think the American public would tolerate casualties.⁵⁶ Considering what was at stake in Kosovo, there may be some validity to this idea, as will be addressed later. Yet,

Something is clearly wrong when our closest allies in the Kosovo war look askance at our unwillingness to risk any casualties at all...[British pilots saw] the high-altitude, minimum risk, low-intensity strategy [of the conflict] as effeminate and useless, bordering on the cowardly. And indeed a campaign largely limited to cruise-missile strikes on empty offices, and high-altitude air raids with laser-guided bombs (that happen to require perfect, cloudless weather), has had no discernible effect on the enemy's ability or willingness to continue the brutalizing of Kosovo. (note-written 3 May 99)⁵⁷

The "crippling caution" displayed by the military in Kosovo is unprecedented in American history, and represents a creeping cultural shift that is exacerbated by the inability of political and military elites to lead rather than follow public opinion when it comes to applying force.⁵⁸

Once bombing in the Kosovo operation began on 23 March 1999, General Wesley Clark, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe, told his subordinates that the top priority was "not to lose aircraft."⁵⁹ This, according to Clark, was because "when you start to lose these expensive machines the countdown starts against you. The headlines begin to shout, 'NATO loses a second aircraft,' and the people ask, 'How long can this go on?'"⁶⁰ "Blocking Yugoslavian military and police activities on the ground was a secondary concern, [Clark] wrote in his recently published memoir."⁶¹

One cannot imagine Henry Stimson, George S. Patton, or Curtis LeMay ever uttering such statements. Surely we must make a distinction between, on the one hand, the moral and political imperative of shielding military forces from risks that are superfluous to the accomplishment of the operational and strategic objectives and, on the other hand, the subordination of those objectives to pursuit of the ideal of bringing every soldier home alive. Casualty-phobic timidity on the battlefield can be just as self-defeating as bloodthirsty recklessness.⁶²

One must also consider that deliberate planning at the theater strategic and operational levels of war is the domain of the war-fighting Commander-in-Chiefs (CINCs). If these senior military leaders are causality-averse, or erroneously believe that the American public will not accept losses, the very planning process that determines how we fight will be skewed,

resulting in contingency plans that fall short of their intended purpose.⁶³

In the aftermath of the bombing campaign a multinational peacekeeping force was sent to Kosovo, where again U.S. leadership's risk-averse mentality quickly became evident, and negatively impacted operational effectiveness. Army troops seldom ventured outside their fortified compound without wearing their forbidding body armor and Kevlar helmets. This impeded their ability to interact with local civilians, gather intelligence, and spread goodwill—prerequisites for a successful occupation. British soldiers, by contrast, looked more confident and approachable in their berets and rolled-up sleeves. And, though dressed for battle, U.S. forces shied away from any confrontation.⁶⁴ This is but one example where an overriding concern for casualty avoidance caused U.S. forces to be employed in a less than optimum way for mission accomplishment.

A similar case has been noted in Bosnia, where American troops rarely emerge from their heavily fortified compound except in heavily armed, multivehicle convoys; the result is that they can contribute little to real peacekeeping. This again prompts the claim that the U.S. leadership has placed force protection and the need to avoid casualties above mission

accomplishment, and this is driving how U.S. forces are employed.⁶⁵

'So what's wrong with that?' some might ask. The heart of the problem is that excessive casualty aversion breeds casualties...A downhill ski racer who enters the gates fearing a broken leg will not win the race and will probably fall. Likewise, a platoon leader in a firefight can face two options: (1) lose a few people while maneuvering to win the fight, or (2) fail to maneuver out of fear and lose everyone. In other words, not just tactically but strategically we must effectively apply...all the time-honored principles of war that, incidentally, do not include casualty aversion.⁶⁶

Of course, the easiest way to minimize casualties is not to send any. Hence, cruise missiles have emerged on the scene as what some call America's preferred instrument of waging war. In 1998, President Clinton launched these unmanned weapons against Sudan and Afghanistan in retaliation for the terrorist bombings of two U.S. embassies in Africa. These strikes achieved little of significance,⁶⁷ other than to tip America's hand as to its reluctance to use ground forces unless absolutely compelled. This was not only an inefficient use of military resources, but it was one for which we have arguably paid dearly ever since. It served to demonstrate that you get what you pay for—and while no U.S. military lives were lost in those cruise missile strikes, U.S. leadership has little else to show for them.

The casualty avoidance cult is so powerful among military leaders that it threatens the very existence of U.S. ground

forces, and it holds the potential to transform the U.S. Air Force into mere deliverers of standoff munitions and operators of uninhabited aircraft.⁶⁸ The editor of *Air Power Journal* goes so far as to state that casualty aversion is "the *raison d'être* of the Air Force. [This is because] airpower...can help win wars with less cost to human life."⁶⁹ "Indeed," writes one authority on the casualty aversion myth, "why not do away with casualty-prone ground forces altogether and rely instead exclusively on airpower?"⁷⁰ Certainly this was a tongue-in-cheek statement, but its elements of truth are more sobering. Considering recent history, one cannot deny that elected U.S. officials continually call on airpower to project a U.S. or U.S.-led coalition force decisively from above in situations where action is demanded but where the commitment of ground troops could result in casualties or longer-term involvement, both of which are anathema to contemporary policymakers.⁷¹ Consider DESSERT STORM, Kosovo, and most recently the beginnings of the war over Afghanistan. There has been a clear preference in military force employment for airpower, or the even more sterile cruise missiles, over ground forces. Further, as noted above, when ground forces do come in, the tendency is to focus more on self-preservation than on mission accomplishment.

The argument here is not that the U.S. can or should rely from now on primarily...upon airpower to do its military business; rather, it is that *the political*

*attractiveness of airpower to a casualty-phobic national leadership is likely to reduce National Command Authority [sic] consideration of ground combat options in a crisis.*⁷²

"To a policymaker, airpower seems to offer easy answers to hard questions of how to project U.S. power without risking U.S. lives."⁷³ Unfortunately, as the cruise missile retaliation against terrorism mentioned above demonstrates, sometimes the "easy answers" don't really *answer* anything. This is yet another negative ramification of military policy and employment being guided by casualty-averse leaders.

WEAPONS DEVELOPMENT

Tied very closely to the way the casualty aversion myth causes the U.S. to employ its military is the extent to which it shapes the development of weapons that the military is forced to use. "An exaggerated concern for casualties...limits our military options and forces a reliance on high-tech, stand-off technology."⁷⁴ Even before American forces go into battle, this mindset distorts military weapons research and development. There is, for instance, deep resistance in the Navy to developing the Streetfighter, a small ship that could be of great use in coastal engagements, because of the concern that Americans would not tolerate the loss of a few of these vessels, each carrying a dozen sailors.⁷⁵

Another effect on weapons development is that many of the recently introduced or planned technical developments, originally required to produce a battlefield advantage over Soviet forces, are now marketed with the emphasis on force protection. Any prospective foe America might face is already undoubtedly far outgunned; but the bar has been raised, and simply having technology sufficient to win the conflict is no longer enough. The perceived requirement of extremely low casualties has taken over in driving U.S. weapons development and marketing. Already plans for new heavy armor platforms are being sold to the U.S. Congress on the basis of survivability enhancements rather than overall combat capabilities.⁷⁶

Justification of F-22 procurement in light of the Soviet Union's demise has taken a similar tack, with its advocates now contending that it is a necessary platform in order to "protect our sons and daughters with the best aircraft we can afford."⁷⁷ What our foes possess is no longer the measuring stick by which we determine the weapons we need to have in our arsenal. To a certain extent, our arsenal is being driven by the perception of U.S. leaders and policy makers that they have to fight virtually casualty-free wars.

One problem, however, with a reliance on costly high-tech warfare, though seemingly beneficial to our own forces, is the likelihood that our very reliance on high technology will

encourage our foes to fight in such a way that prevents us from bringing our weapon systems to bear in the first place, much as the Vietcong did.⁷⁸ Much as Al Chaida did. This in itself is not a direct negative result of U.S. leadership casualty aversion attitudes; however, it should serve as a reminder that U.S. leaders would be well advised not to put all their military eggs in the high-tech casualty aversion basket.

PERCEPTIONS HELD BY THREAT COUNTRIES

The Weinberger-Powell doctrine, that outcropping of senior leadership casualty aversion, again emerges here, this time as having a negative impact on how threat nations perceive U.S. willingness to act in defense of its interests. In fact, this doctrine only serves to encourage renegade world leaders to take risks, based on the potential that their actions will skirt under the threshold of U.S. interests that would elicit a response. If they are successful, engagement is weakened, and other rogue groups will likely test U.S. resolve in areas closer to vital interests. This does not imply that the United States must respond militarily to every disturbance in world harmony; but, that the decision to respond should be based upon our national security strategy and *not* upon our need to dispel the myth of casualty aversion.⁷⁹

The belief that the U.S. will avoid risking the lives of its troops, and will capitulate if they are killed in quantity,

encourages America's enemies by offering an apparent means to defeat an otherwise numerically and technologically superior superpower.⁸⁰ Every tyrant in the world thinks that if you kill a couple hundred or even 20 American troops, the rest of them will run away. Saddam Hussein, Hafeez Assad, and Slobodan Milosevic have all cited the Mogadishu debacle in 1993 or the evacuation from Beirut as key to understanding American foreign and military policy.⁸¹ In fact, in 1996 Osama bin Laden himself, speaking of the U.S. experience in Somalia, stated "You have been disgraced by Allah and you withdrew. The extent of your impotence and weaknesses became very clear."⁸² The caution shown by the U.S.-led allies in confronting the Serbian dictator is also cited as only strengthening the impression that Americans can dish it out (or least send cruise missiles against it) but not take it.⁸³

Any foe, assessing America's strengths and weaknesses, would quickly zero in on what they perceive to be our greatest vulnerability: our aversion to casualties. Kill a few of them, and the Yankees go home. Accurate or not, this impression has spread widely throughout the world.⁸⁴ And if adversaries believe they can defeat America, or, more likely, force it to withdraw from a military intervention by imposing casualties on U.S. forces, then they are unlikely to be deterred by U.S. threats to intervene.⁸⁵ Statements or actions by our political

leaders that demonstrate an unfounded casualty aversion based on the myth of a weak-kneed public weaken coercive diplomacy and embolden future adversaries. As an ironic result, deterrence crumbles, and we must use military forces to contain the Saddam Husseins and Slobodan Milosevics of the world who refuse to heed our diplomatic warnings.⁸⁶

RECRUITING AND RETENTION

"Casualty aversion creates another more subtle threat to national security: It is corrosive to the professional military ethic."⁸⁷

Excessive emphasis on force protection damages military morale and is a major reason for some of the difficulty the Army, Air Force and Navy are having with recruiting and re-enlistment. (It's instructive that the Marine Corps, the one branch of the armed forces whose powerful internal culture precludes the embrace of such a doctrine, has no trouble getting young people to join up.) Soldiers assigned to Haiti complained that they spent so much time and energy keeping out of harm's way, they were able to accomplish much less than they would have.⁸⁸

In Bosnia a battalion commander from the First Armored Division recalled that his written mission from Division stated that absolutely minimizing casualties was the first priority. Another soldier, and Army major, was told by his brigade commander "If a mission and 'force protection' are in conflict, then we don't do the mission."⁸⁹ This casualty aversion mindset, imposed on the soldiers from above, cannot help but

have a corrosive effect on morale, and, consequently, on retention. According to Donald Snider, a retired Army colonel and West Point professor, the military ethic is built on the "principles of self-sacrifice and mission accomplishment. Troops are supposed to be willing to die so that civilians do not have to."⁹⁰ Placing emphasis on force protection over mission success eats away at that military ethic.

Ground Truth

Americans are not casualty averse. At least, not to the extent that it exists detached from context. Rather, Americans take into consideration myriad factors before determining how many body bags they can tolerate. It is within the framework of the entire operation that the American public metes out its support. The 1985 RAND study cited above concluded that Americans withdrew their support for Korea and Vietnam solely as the result of rising casualties; but this study did not even look at other influencing factors. Therefore this study identified more of a correlation between support and casualties than any type of a valid, causal relationship. A subsequent RAND study conducted in 1994 did take into account other factors influencing American opinion; namely, alternative courses of action that the public may have supported in the Korean and Vietnam conflicts.⁹¹ This report drew very different conclusions

as to the American public's support for these conflicts. This study concluded that while Americans were disillusioned with U.S. participation in Korea and Vietnam and regretted the decision to intervene, a majority of Americans supported escalation over withdrawal.⁹² This study, with the mere addition of one other factor considered, turns the earlier RAND study's conclusion on its head.

The seminal work on this topic, however, was a RAND study conducted in 1996 by Eric Larson. In an attempt to resolve the disparity among research studies on casualty aversion conducted up to that year he studied public-opinion polls taken from World War II through the military intervention in Somalia, seeking to determine if other variables accounted for the difference in support documented in U.S. military interventions.⁹³ Larson's study considered five factors outside of casualty counts in determining American support for military operations: leadership cueing, perceived benefits of the intervention, prospects for success, potential and actual costs, and changing expectations. Notably, Larson's findings demonstrate that with regard to the very cases cited above (Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia -- frequently trotted out as proof that Americans will demand withdrawal once casualties are inflicted on U.S. forces), a variety of other issues were clearly at work influencing American opinion--not just numbers of casualties.

Support can be thought of as a constant rebalancing of the benefits and prospects for success against the likely and actual costs—and a determination of whether the outcome is judged worth the costs.⁹⁴

I have fleshed out, and added to, the factors he studied below.

LEADERSHIP SHAPING

According to studied polls, it is a mistake to believe that the American public is unwilling to take risks and to sustain casualties when its leaders say that risks are appropriate.⁹⁵ And it has been shown that the best defense against losing public support for military actions once casualties begin to occur is to foster the popular conviction of their compelling moral value. To a considerable extent, this can be shaped by effective leaders.⁹⁶ Much credit is also given to the ability of the media to shape American opinion and reaction, the so-called “CNN effect”; but

the belief that images of American casualties drives [sic] the American public’s willingness to endure the human costs of war is based on an inaccurate understanding of how people respond to visual images. By setting the context for interpretation, leaders have far more leeway to shape the public’s reaction...to the same...images, than is implied by the so-called “CNN effect.”⁹⁷

This is not to imply that society is a pawn in the hands of wily politicians, but rather that the public takes cues from credible political leaders.⁹⁸

In the case of Somalia, for example, if in fact the sight of a dead American soldier being dragged through the streets of

Mogadishu somewhat undermined public support for the operation, it was at least in part because the Clinton administration made no effort to frame the casualties U.S. Rangers sustained as anything other than a disaster in a mission that had drifted dreadfully off course.⁹⁹ Had the Clinton administration chosen instead to galvanize public opposition to Somali warlord Mohammed Farah Aideed, research suggests that Americans would have tolerated an expanded effort to catch and punish him.¹⁰⁰

One could argue that the antithesis to this proposition is currently in effect with regard to operations in Afghanistan and in the war on terrorism overall. In daily press conferences and interviews and one Sunday morning talk show after another, the U.S. President, the Secretary of Defense, and innumerable other leaders in the U.S. political and military hierarchy have reiterated the importance and necessity of this cause. Moreover, as they repeatedly and clearly articulated the military goals they are seeking to achieve, they deliberately and forcefully remind the American public that this *will* take time, and there *will* be loss of life, but that those lives will have been given in a worthwhile cause. And to date, despite set-backs and losses of U.S. troops, polling demonstrates that the American public understands, and they continue to strongly support what they perceive to be a worthy and just case.

Behavior of the enemy needs to be included here as well, because the public's casualty tolerance depends on circumstances that include not only the leadership's success or failure in mobilizing public opinion, but also enemy behavior itself. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor instantly dissolved the "America First" movement as a domestic political obstacle to President Franklin Roosevelt's foreign policy, and manifest personal and political evil of Saddam Hussein greatly facilitated George Bush's successful demonization of the Iraqi dictator.¹⁰¹ And certainly the crashing of airplanes into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon fits into this category; these acts and their enduring images stand as symbols of terrorism to which the current administration can point any time their arguments in support of military operations need bolstering—something they will probably not need any time soon.

PERCEIVED NECESSITY

America is only allergic to casualties in wars that don't matter. Our history over the last century suggests a General Theory of Casualties: America's capacity to sustain casualties in war is nearly infinite, as long as the wars are wars of necessity.¹⁰² Restated, Americans will not accept the same amount of blood spill to prevail in strategically inconsequential civil wars (such as in Lebanon or Somalia) that they willingly accepted in defeating Nazi Germany and containing

the Soviet Union.¹⁰³ Somalia, which has come to symbolize the American people's alleged unwillingness to suffer any losses in a military mission,¹⁰⁴ is a perfect example.

What Somalia showed was that when you go into a country of total strategic irrelevance for solely humanitarian reasons, and then find yourself being fired upon by thugs and ingrates, your tolerance for casualties is-and should be-virtually zero. You pick up and get out. This is not cowardice; this is common sense.¹⁰⁵

This requirement of "necessity" helps explain why the American public favored a pullout from Somalia but not from Saudi Arabia, where 19 airmen were killed in the 1996 Khobar Tower bombing. The U.S. stake in Saudi Arabia was obviously much greater. It also helps to explain why Americans are not perturbed by deaths suffered in training exercises (which since Vietnam have killed more U.S. soldiers than all battlefield action): They understand that this is the price of preparedness, and preparedness is a necessity.¹⁰⁶

A determination of necessity, along with aforementioned shaping by the leadership, also explains the strong level of support for operations currently ongoing in Afghanistan. Just as when Pearl Harbor was attacked, the U.S. response to the attack on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon smacks of self-preservation and the maintenance of world order. Some have said the war on terror is "the first war of necessity since World War

II...an existential struggle...and no one should underestimate America's capacity to sustain casualties in such wars."¹⁰⁷

There appears to be no doubt among Americans as to the necessity of fighting in this cause.

PROBABILITY OF SUCCESS

Certainly, the American public does not like losing its military men and women for nothing. However, if there is a reasonable chance of victory and our political leaders are able to articulate understandable war aims, then the public will show the fortitude required.¹⁰⁸ Declining support for operations in Korea, for instance, can be explained in terms of this phenomenon, which was one of the factors examined in Larson's study.

In Korea, support increased as the prospects for success rose after Inchon, the potential benefit including a unified peninsula. Conversely, after the Chinese intervention, support declined, based on dimming prospects for gains beyond the status quo. As a stalemate developed, political opposition increased, and public support declined. The RAND study of 1996 noted that although casualty costs were important in declining support, "their influence cannot be untangled from these other factors."¹⁰⁹

Support for operations in Vietnam also mirrors the ends-and-means calculus reflected in the Korean War. Dwindling prospects for success as the war continued, a decrease in the perceived benefit of containing Communism, and the dramatic division among political leaders all led to decreasing support

for the war. Casualties, although important, were not the sole determinant of public support, suggesting a problem with the assertion that the American public will demand immediate withdrawal when casualties rise.¹¹⁰ In fact, support for Vietnam did not decline until after 1968—when the U.S. had completed three years of intense combat with little to show for it. And even as late as 1968, roughly as many Americans favored escalation (37%) as called for withdrawal (39%). Further, even once public sentiment had shifted in favor of a withdrawal, the course favored by the public was a gradual, not an abrupt, pullout.¹¹¹

THE COST

Like most myths, the belief in American casualty intolerance is constructed around a kernel of truth. U.S. public support for wars that seem inordinately costly relative to their objectives—or that appear to offer little prospect of success—has indeed disintegrated as body counts have risen.¹¹²

But historical experience offers no reason to believe that the American public will fail to support costly wars in which the lives of U.S. troops are not apparently being wasted.¹¹³

THE BENEFITS

In the case of humanitarian operations, the case for “benefits” of the operation to the U.S. is tougher to make, and most likely the operations fall below the “necessity” threshold. Consequently, this is the area where Americans are less likely

to tolerate loss of life during operations. The earlier example of declining support for humanitarian operations in Somalia demonstrates this paradigm. It has been widely reported that the death of the 18 U.S. soldiers in Somalia in October 1993 caused the public to demand immediate withdrawal from that country. However this view misses entirely the fact that popular support had already waned before the firefight in Mogadishu, with only 40% of the public supporting the operation. The shift in mission focus from initially popular humanitarian objectives to nation building and warlord hunting, combined with the congressional "cues" against the operation (both houses of congress passed nonbinding resolutions calling on the president to articulate his objectives and exit strategy in September 1993) had already doomed the intervention.¹¹⁴ Larson labeled this type of shift in mission during military operations "changing expectations," particularly as it related to the American public's perceived benefits of the operation. And with regard to perceived benefits, he went on to conclude that once that is taken into account, the evidence in favor of a recent decline in the willingness of the public to tolerate casualties is rather thin.¹¹⁵

DURATION

"Duration" was not examined by Larson as a factor by itself. Most likely this results from the assumption that with

the other factors taken into account - namely things such as leadership support, necessity, perceived gains, etc - duration would not be an influencing factor by itself. Its exclusion notwithstanding, it still deserves mention, particularly since many would argue it played a significant role in the decline of public support for Vietnam. Others would assert that recent conflicts in Iraq and Kosovo, and now possibly Afghanistan, have gotten Americans used to short wars, and anything of long duration would now be beyond the scope of the collective U.S. attention span and ability to support. But just as casualties incurred in inconclusive wars waged for unconvincing goals are not the same as losses taken on behalf of decisive military operations launched for a compelling cause,¹¹⁶ so too there is a difference between prolonged wars fought for necessary reasons and those waged with shifting missions and unclear goals. Therefore, though Vietnam was a protracted struggle during which American support declined decidedly, the length of the battle alone cannot be the sole hook upon which blame for its failure in the eyes of the American people is hung. Just as casualty count alone does not undermine American support for a cause, nor does duration alone. A protracted war against terrorism, therefore, is not automatically doomed; particularly given the extent to which the other factors mentioned above are strong, and hold sway with the American people.

Conclusion

Comprehensive study suggests that casualties are hardly the sole factor shaping public attitudes toward military operations, be they humanitarian or combat. Social scientists and pollsters have concluded that other many other considerations, such as those cited above, count much more. Rather than just withdrawing support as casualties rise, as the charts and figures in part one would have you believe, Americans consider a number of factors before lending their support to or pulling it from a particular military operation. To only consider the correlation between support and death toll over time, without taking into account the many other issues and circumstances involved, is to take too superficial a view; in fact, a blatantly inaccurate view, and to give the American people far too little credit. This is not to say that Americans will not pull their support from a conflict that is costly in terms of military lives. It is to say, however, that that will not be the only factor in their deciding to do so. Studying the many factors that the American public takes into consideration, Eric Larson was able to demonstrate that

the American public has not become more casualty-averse since World War II. Indeed, Americans have always had a high regard for human life, but they balance that regard within a continuous cost-benefit analysis which ultimately determines support. It is only logical that increasing costs in terms of casualties will result in a decline in public support unless an increase in the

benefits or prospects for success offsets that cost. This explains the difference in support for various interventions since World War II and also explains the general decrease in support over time as casualties mount in a particular operation.¹¹⁷

In fact,

expensive wars are often acceptable, while apparently pointless or disproportionately expensive wars are not. In the end, however, the assumption that the public will not support doing that which is right is simply unacceptable as a basis for national policy. If it were consistently true, the United States would not deserve the protection of those who have pledged their lives to defend it.¹¹⁸

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