

*Lieutenant Colonel Lacquement is professor of strategy and policy on the faculty of the Naval War College. He holds a Ph.D. in international relations from Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. In his over nineteen years of active duty he has been a field artillery officer and a strategic plans and policy specialist. His operational assignments include the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) (serving during Operation IRAQI FREEDOM), the 3d Infantry Division, the 1st Armored Division (Gulf War, 1991), and the 82d Airborne Division. He has also taught American politics and international relations in the U.S. Military Academy's Department of Social Sciences. He is the author of Shaping American Military Capabilities after the Cold War (2003) as well as articles in Army, U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, Military Review, and Field Artillery.*

*The author gratefully acknowledges comments and suggestions on earlier drafts by Michael Desch, Peter Feaver, Bradford Lee, Thomas Mahnken, and two anonymous reviewers, as well as the support of the Institute for National Security Studies.*

*The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. government.*

## THE CASUALTY-AVERSION MYTH

---

*Lieutenant Colonel Richard A. Lacquement, Jr., U.S. Army*

*It's easy to see. . . . [P]eople go off to war and the bands play and the flags fly. And it's not quite so easy when the flag is draped over a coffin coming back through Dover, Delaware.*

SENATOR JOHN GLENN, 1997

**W**hat is the nature of the American public's sensitivity to U.S. military casualties? How does casualty sensitivity affect the pursuit of American national security objectives?<sup>1</sup> The first question is easy to answer: There is no intrinsic, uncritical casualty aversion among the American public that limits the use of U.S. armed forces. There is a wide range of policy objectives on behalf of which the public is prepared to accept American casualties as a cost of success. Squeamishness about even a few casualties for all but the most important national causes is a myth. Nonetheless, it is a myth that persists as widely accepted conventional wisdom.

The second question is more difficult to answer. Avoidance of casualties is an unassailably desirable objective. It is precisely the natural nobility of the argument that makes it susceptible to misuse in the policy-making process, potentially leading to ineffective or inefficient choices. The persistence of the myth also causes adversaries to misjudge the likely reactions of the United States. In both of these ways, the myth of deep-seated casualty aversion among the American public hinders the pursuit of American national objectives.

The evidence indicates that the public response to casualties is a function of leadership and consensus among national policy elites, who have wide latitude in this area. They should not allow concern about casualties to replace thorough consideration of the larger context of costs and benefits. National leaders must not let unsubstantiated assertions of American casualty aversion distort the national security policy-making process or compromise professional military ethics.

This article briefly describes the nature of American casualty sensitivity, identifies some prominent negative effects of widespread acceptance of the casualty myth, and offers recommendations that may produce a more accurate understanding of the American public's casualty sensitivity.

### AMERICAN CASUALTY SENSITIVITY

Are the American people in fact reluctant to risk lives? In a superficial and unhelpful sense, the American public is always reluctant to risk lives, particularly if there is some other reasonable way to accomplish objectives. No one *wants* casualties.

#### *Myth and Conventional Wisdom*

We had 500 casualties a week when we [the Nixon administration] came into office. America now is not willing to take any casualties. Vietnam produced a whole new attitude.

HENRY KISSINGER, 1999

It's obvious that there's a political agenda to have low casualties. . . . If my Achilles' heel is the low tolerance of the American people for casualties, then I have to recognize that my success or failure in this mission [in Bosnia] is directly affected by that.

MAJOR GENERAL WILLIAM L. NASH, 1996

[America is] a nation intolerant of casualties.

EDWARD LUTTWAK, 1995

And the hearts that beat so loudly and enthusiastically to do something, to intervene in areas where there is not an immediate threat to our vital interests, when those hearts that had beaten so loudly see the coffins, then they switch, and they say: "What are we doing there?"

SENATOR WILLIAM COHEN (LATER SECRETARY OF DEFENSE)

These are just some of the many similar expressions of the conventional wisdom of American public casualty aversion.<sup>2</sup> The conventional wisdom is strong among civilian, military, and media elites. Steven Kull and I. M. Destler have recorded many interviews—with members of Congress and their staffs, the media, the executive branch, and leaders of nongovernmental organizations—that support this view.<sup>3</sup> Other interviews with members of the media and military leaders also confirm a widespread belief that the American public is unwilling to accept casualties.<sup>4</sup>

The wellspring of this conventional wisdom is generally understood to be the Vietnam War, as reinforced by experiences in Lebanon (1983) and Somalia

(1993). The tremendous efforts by civilian and military leaders to minimize casualties in other operations—the Persian Gulf War (1991), Haiti (1994), Bosnia (1995), and Kosovo (1999)—can be read as a reaction to the public’s purported low tolerance for casualties. Rising casualties in Iraq following the end of “major combat operations” have also been portrayed as an important factor affecting the public’s willingness to support the mission. The abandonment of military intervention in several instances in which it was seriously considered has also been attributed to casualty aversion. Examples include the Balkans (before 1995), Rwanda (1994), and Zaire/Congo (1995).

Manifestations of this conventional wisdom are many and widespread—the “Vietnam syndrome,” the “Dover test,” the “CNN effect,” part of the Weinberger/Powell doctrine, the concept of “post-heroic warfare,” and a social equity effect attributed to the absence of American civilian elites and their children from military service.

The “Vietnam syndrome” is commonly understood as a general reticence among Americans to use military force abroad as a result of negative lessons of the Vietnam experience. It is “that revulsion at the use of military power that afflicted our national psyche for decades after our defeat.”<sup>5</sup> It is a comprehensive generalization about the American public’s unwillingness to continue to support U.S. foreign military efforts, particularly as casualties rise. This aspect of the Vietnam syndrome relates casualty aversion to the idea that public support for military operations in Vietnam declined because of the human costs of the war.<sup>6</sup> A variant attributing the decline in popular support to media portrayals of events in Vietnam has fed negative attitudes toward the media, particularly among many members of the military.

Senator John Glenn’s “Dover test” (alluded to in the first epigraph, above) refers to the American public’s assumed response to American service people returning to the United States in flag-draped coffins. This oft-repeated image symbolizes the cost in casualties of American military operations. In an interesting response to its presumed visceral effect, the Department of Defense has prohibited media coverage of such events since 1989: “There will be no arrival ceremonies for, or media coverage of, deceased military personnel returning to or departing from Dover AFB [Air Force Base] or Ramstein AFB [in Germany], to include interim stops.”<sup>7</sup> In a sense, this provides an official endorsement of the presumption that casualties have a powerful effect on the public.

The “CNN effect” refers broadly to the purported impact of certain types of visual images, to include American casualties, when broadcast on the news. Like the Dover test, it suggests that visual images of casualties will elicit an immediate response from the public. Its various formulations convey the idea that the public can respond precipitately to gut-wrenching depictions of human suffering,

not only military casualties but starving children and other civilian victims of war.<sup>8</sup> This dynamic is also assumed to induce a similar visceral response to such dramatic pictures as those of the body of an American soldier being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu in 1993.<sup>9</sup>

The Weinberger/Powell doctrine is a set of six tests, drawn in part from the Vietnam War experience, that, its advocates believe, should govern the use of American military power.<sup>10</sup> One test is the presence or absence of the support of the American public and its elected representatives. In policy debates considering the use of force, it is in the framework of this test that assertions about the willingness of the public to handle casualties enter decision making.<sup>11</sup>

“Post-heroic warfare” is the idea that the scope of casualties resulting from the clash of armies at close quarters is no longer tolerable to the American public. Edward Luttwak asserts that America is “a nation intolerant of casualties”;<sup>12</sup> he relates this to the decreasing size of American families in the post-World War II era. Luttwak believes that there exists a powerful unwillingness among Americans to permit military operations that might endanger their children.

Finally, sociologist Charles Moskos posits that the American public’s sensitivity is a function of inequitable social relations created by the absence of elite members of society or their children in the ranks of the military. “Only when the privileged classes perform military service does the country define the cause as worth young people’s blood. Only when elite youth are on the firing line do war losses become more acceptable.”<sup>13</sup>

#### THE NUANCED REALITY

Nonetheless, there are many interests and national objectives for which Americans have readily found the risk of casualties an acceptable cost. There is in fact no evidence that the public is intrinsically casualty averse. Several studies based on polling data demonstrate that the American public is willing to accept casualties when the need and the likely consequences are explained to them by national leaders. This readiness is not restricted to issues of vital national interests or self-defense. The public takes its lead from how national leaders characterize and justify the mission. Leadership plays a crucial role in influencing how the public responds to casualties.

One of the best studies on this topic is Eric V. Larson’s *Casualties and Consensus*.<sup>14</sup> In this detailed study, Larson explores the relationship between public support for military operations and the level of casualties for World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Dominican Republic, Lebanon, Panama, the 1991–92 Gulf war, and Somalia. The findings are very instructive.

Majorities of the public have historically considered the potential and actual casualties in U.S. wars and military operations to be an important factor in their support,

and there is nothing new in this. But the current attention to the public's unwillingness to tolerate casualties misses the larger context in which the issue has become salient: The simplest explanation consistent with the data is that support for U.S. military operations and the willingness to tolerate casualties are based upon a sensible weighing of benefits and costs that is influenced heavily by consensus (or its absence) among political leaders.<sup>15</sup>

Further, casualties do not trigger an immediate public desire for withdrawal from an operation. Both in Vietnam and in Somalia, for example, the public was willing to accept casualties even as the political leaders signaled that the United States would extract itself. The public supported orderly, not precipitous, withdrawal. In both cases, Larson's analysis suggests that an important consideration was the public's support for continued engagement until prisoner or hostage issues were resolved.<sup>16</sup>

In a study that differentiated between the mass public, civilian elites, and military elites, Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi found the mass public more willing than policy elites to accept casualties in hypothetical national missions ranging from conventional war to peacekeeping and humanitarian intervention. They also found civilian elites more ready than military leaders to accept casualties in intervention missions short of conventional war.<sup>17</sup>

Polling data indicates that though the American public's willingness to accept casualties is related to the strength of U.S. interests involved, a wide range of justifications is acceptable. The public does not require a direct threat to U.S. or allied security or other such vital interests to endorse the use of armed force. Instead, it supports broader American efforts on behalf of democratization, humanitarian assistance, and cultivation of a favorable international environment for the United States and other nations, including for the United Nations and UN peacekeeping.<sup>18</sup> Polling related to operations in Afghanistan as well as with respect to military operations against Iraq also demonstrates robust public support for military operations, even with expectations of casualties.<sup>19</sup> Polling data, then, reinforces what many analyses have noted over the years—Americans are motivated by considerations of both realistic national interests and idealistic international aspirations.<sup>20</sup>

#### NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF THE CASUALTY-AVERSION ASSERTION

If the response to the supposed casualty aversion is simply the use of alternative means to accomplish the same objective, there is no problem. Unfortunately, perceptions of casualty aversion can have more negative effects. Misplaced concern on this point can significantly impede the pursuit of national objectives, in four main ways.

### *Inefficient or Ineffective Execution*

Belief that the public cannot withstand casualties can skew choices concerning the use of force in ways that cause operations to be conducted inefficiently or ineffectively. Recent combat operations in Kosovo (1999) and Afghanistan (2001–present) illustrate this point. Another aspect of this negative effect is the manner in which American armed forces, overly concerned about casualties, pursue force protection and “zero defects” to such an extent that mission effectiveness is hindered.

In 1999 in Yugoslavia, NATO found itself in a dilemma partly, if not wholly, based on the priority given to avoiding friendly casualties. On the first night of the war, President William Clinton announced that he did not intend to use ground forces in Kosovo. This knowledge made it possible for the Serbs to hide weapons and troops—forces that otherwise would have been tactically deployed and therefore more easily detectable—from the NATO air campaign. Furthermore, the difficulties in accurately targeting from the mandated fifteen-thousand-foot altitude made accidental civilian deaths and injuries (“collateral damage”) more likely. Meanwhile, the Serbian forces (regular, police, and irregular), free to operate near civilian targets that NATO was taking care to avoid, were able to accelerate their efforts to force Kosovar Albanians to leave.

Ultimately, in terms of lost U.S. lives, the Kosovo operation was a resounding success, if not a rapid one. In terms, however, of one of the operation’s principal objectives—support for the Kosovar Albanians and an end to ethnic cleansing and atrocities—the effect was less gratifying. Did an unwillingness to threaten, much less use, ground forces or to deliver lower-level and more accurate aerial attacks exacerbate and extend the suffering of the people we intended to help? A counterfactual but plausible argument suggests that military tactics that would have posed greater risks to friendly forces would also have ended the conflict more swiftly and, quite possibly, with much smaller loss of life overall.

Casualty aversion hindered operational effectiveness in Kosovo in other ways as well. For instance, Task Force HAWK, which combined Apache attack helicopters and the Army Tactical Missile System, was not given permission to attack inside Kosovo because, among other things, Serbian targets, having been dispersed, were no longer appropriate targets for the Apaches, which had been designed to attack massed armored formations. The modest rewards expected from flushing out dispersed Serb units was outweighed in the minds of many Americans involved by the high risk of casualties.<sup>21</sup> An Air Force officer assigned to one of the key NATO intelligence centers said, “If he [Slobodan Milosevic] kills one U.S. pilot, he wins. . . . [H]e knows that, and we know that.”<sup>22</sup> This view had much to do with keeping Task Force HAWK sidelined.

### MASS VERSUS ELITE OPINION

The poll upon which analysts Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi based their assertion of the relative willingness of the mass public to countenance casualties was conducted between September 1998 and June 1999. It addressed hypothetical missions to “stabilize a democratic government in Congo,” “prevent Iraq from obtaining weapons of mass destruction,” and “defend Taiwan against invasion by China.” In each case the public identified a higher level of acceptable casualties than did samples of elite military leaders and civilian elite leaders. Significantly, in each case the number of acceptable casualties to the public was in the thousands. The question even included a description of how many casualties the U.S. had actually suffered in Somalia (forty-three), the Gulf War (383), Korea (approximately fifty-four thousand), Vietnam (approximately fifty-eight thousand) and World War II (approximately four hundred thousand). Results:

		Military Elite	Civilian Elite	Mass Public
Highest number of American military deaths acceptable to . . .	Stabilize democratic government in Congo	284	484	6,861
	Prevent Iraq from obtaining WMD	6,016	19,045	29,853
	Defend Taiwan from Chinese invasion	17,425	17,554	20,172

Polling sample: 623 military officers, 683 nonveteran civilian elites, 1,001 adults from the general public. In addition to Feaver and Gelpi’s *Washington Post* article (note 17), see Triangle Institute for Security Studies, “Project on the Gap between the Military and Civilian Society: Digest of Findings and Studies,” Conference on the Military and Civilian Society, Cantigny Conference Center, 1st Division Museum, 28–29 October 1999, available at [www.poli.duke.edu/civmil/summary\\_digest.pdf](http://www.poli.duke.edu/civmil/summary_digest.pdf), 8.

The negative effect of excessive casualty aversion was evident in the war in Afghanistan, despite the clear, self-defense justification for the operation and its overwhelming public support.

Addressing the nation when the bombs began to fall on 7 October, Bush said the troops might have to make the ultimate sacrifice of their lives. Despite such warnings, there is some evidence that U.S. officials have questioned whether Americans would accept significant casualties, in spite of polls indicating that they would. An adviser to senior Pentagon officials said concerns about high American casualties led the Bush administration to craft a strategy that relied on air power and small numbers of commandos, as opposed to tens of thousands of American ground troops. “They are risk-averse about casualties,” said the adviser, who requested anonymity. “They didn’t know what we were facing.”<sup>23</sup>

An important cost of this approach was the failure to capture or destroy large numbers of al-Qa‘ida and Taliban forces—and possibly Osama Bin Laden himself—during the Tora Bora fight of December 2001.

It was widely acknowledged that the attacks on al-Qa‘ida and its Taliban hosts had been forced upon Americans as a matter of self-defense. As after Pearl



Harbor, Americans were strongly committed to fighting the perpetrators of mass murder and their accomplices. Polls conducted in the months after 11 September 2001 demonstrated willingness to accept the risks of significant ground force operations, even high casualties.<sup>24</sup>

The initial U.S. military forces on the ground included small contingents of special operations forces coordinating the support by American aerial attacks of the operations of Afghan allies. The strategy worked brilliantly in the first phase, unseating the Taliban government and seizing major population centers. However, even when the enemy was pushed into the mountainous hinterlands, the same American strategy continued—a low-level commitment of U.S. ground and air power, in favor of heavy reliance on local coalition partners. In retrospect, it appears that as a result large numbers of enemy soldiers and leaders were able in December 2001 to escape into neighboring Pakistan or remote areas of Afghanistan.<sup>25</sup> Having interests different from those of the American forces, local Afghan coalition members appear to have made deals that permitted these escapes.

[An Afghan] commander, Hajji Zaher, said in an interview in Jalalabad that he had pleaded with Special Forces officers to block the trails to Pakistan. “The Americans would not listen,” said Mr. Zaher, 38. “Their attitude was, ‘We must kill the enemy, but we must remain absolutely safe.’ This is crazy. If they had been willing to take casualties to capture Osama then, perhaps they’d have to take fewer casualties now.”<sup>26</sup>

A more substantial American ground force might have crippled al-Qa‘ida—that is, would have better achieved the national objective at Tora Bora. A stronger American effort could have rendered ineffective enemy fighters intent on continuing attacks against American or allied forces in Afghanistan, maybe even disrupted or destroyed cells dedicated to further terrorist attacks on the United States itself. The additional risks would have been easy to justify. If casualty aversion among military leaders was a significant factor in this misjudgment, the implication is that the military, for institutionally dysfunctional reasons, may be unwilling to accept prudent risks in the pursuit of national interests—even when public support is unequivocal.

This unhealthy state of affairs is a factor not only at the upper levels of military and civilian leadership. As emphasis on risk avoidance filters down the chain of command, junior commanders and their soldiers become aware that low-risk behavior is expected and act accordingly. As Brigadier General Daniel Kaufman, dean of academics at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, has said,

What it [priority on force protection] says is officers no longer have the right to use their judgment, to make decisions based on the situation on the ground and act decisively in accordance with what they believe to be the requirements of carrying out their mission. You do not deploy somewhere to protect yourself. If you want to do

that you stay in Kansas. You deploy somewhere to accomplish a mission. And, oh, by the way, an ancillary part of that is you never put your soldiers in harm's way recklessly, but you understand that in operations that's the nature of war.<sup>27</sup>

Concerned about the effects of any casualties, then, commanders and small-unit leaders become hesitant to act, fearing that even small events at the tactical level could have important strategic effects.<sup>28</sup>

Recent studies have revealed the existence in the services of a degree of safety consciousness and focus on risk assessment that reinforces risk aversion in general.<sup>29</sup> To prevent the automatic investigations and presumptions of error that attend any death—in peace or war—commanders make tremendous efforts to avoid such an event and, in some cases, to shield themselves from blame if a fatality does occur. Such efforts, however well intentioned or understandable in themselves, are inappropriate and even professionally unethical if they override mission accomplishment. “Force protectionism” as an end in itself can corrupt professional standards of service to society, as represented by the assignment of the mission in the first place.<sup>30</sup> It places the interests of the members of the armed forces and of the institutions themselves first, and the mission second.

### *Emboldening Adversaries*

Another negative effect of embracing the unsupported conventional wisdom on casualty aversion is that it needlessly encourages American adversaries. With respect to the 1999 war in Kosovo, the NATO commander, General Wesley Clark, observed,

There was continuous commentary on the fear of NATO to accept military casualties. This, unfortunately, is unlikely to be unique to this operation. Of course, using friendly personnel on the ground risks friendly casualties. Neither political nor military leaders will want to take these risks. But our adversaries will exploit our reluctance by facing us with the dilemma of either inflicting accidental injuries to civilians or risking our own people on their territory.<sup>31</sup>

There are numerous examples of the perception by foreigners that the United States is unwilling to risk casualties.<sup>32</sup> This perception has been a factor in the considerations of the nation's enemies. Saddam Hussein before the 1991 Gulf War, Slobodan Milosevic before the Kosovo War in 1999, and Osama Bin Laden and al-Qa'ida generally in 2001 all appear to have had great confidence that the United States lacked the moral courage to face a deadly military confrontation. This assurance made them less susceptible to diplomatic maneuvers or military threats. They seem to have considered the prospect of U.S. military action, particularly the use of ground troops, a bluff.

During the first Gulf war, it appears that the central element of Saddam's strategy was to keep his forces in place during the air war and wait for the ground

attack, when, he believed, they would be able to inflict massive casualties and therefore cause the United States to give up. “Saddam Hussein clearly believed that his greatest chance of success lay in inflicting the maximum number of casualties on coalition forces through close combat.”<sup>33</sup> In the 2003 war, the apparent Iraqi plan to draw the coalition into an urban battle in Baghdad seemed to have presumed that the Iraqi army would cause unacceptable U.S. casualties. The guerrilla-style war that (at this writing) still continues in Iraq, whether representing the organized resistance of remnants of the former regime or external terrorist groups, also seems based on the premise that simply inflicting casualties on American forces will break the will of the American public and thereby lead to withdrawal.

The supposed American glass jaw with respect to casualties is often connected to the battle in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, in 1993. In another incident that seemed to reinforce this point, Haitian thugs prevented the USS *Harlan County* (LST 1196) docking and offloading troops in Port-au-Prince just a week after the battle in Mogadishu.<sup>34</sup> Osama Bin Laden was to cite Somalia as a reason to expect to be able to force the United States to withdraw from the Middle East. In his 1996 declaration of war on the United States, Osama Bin Laden dismissed the idea that the United States would be able to sustain support for a military response if it suffered casualties.

Your most disgraceful case was in Somalia, where after vigorous propaganda about the power of the USA and its post cold war leadership of the new world order you moved tens of thousands of international force, including twenty eight thousand American soldiers into Somalia. However, when tens of your soldiers were killed in minor battles and one American Pilot was dragged in the streets of Mogadishu you left the area carrying disappointment, humiliation, defeat and your dead with you. Clinton appeared in front of the whole world threatening and promising revenge, but these threats were merely a preparation for withdrawal. You have been disgraced by Allah and you withdrew; the extent of your impotence and weaknesses became very clear.<sup>35</sup>

To Bin Laden, the fact that the bombings in 1998 of two U.S. embassies in Africa elicited only cruise missile attacks in retaliation was further confirmation of this weakness.<sup>36</sup> Ultimately, the planners of the suicide attacks launched against the USS *Cole* and then the World Trade Center and Pentagon appear to have relied heavily on the presumption of acute casualty sensitivity by Americans.<sup>37</sup> In an October 2001 al-Qa‘ida videotape (released just as the U.S. attacks on Afghanistan commenced), Osama Bin Laden’s lieutenant, Ayman Zawahri, expressed a conviction that the American will to fight would weaken quickly after a few casualties. The United States would retreat, just as it had “fled in panic from Lebanon and Somalia.”<sup>38</sup>

### *Casualty/Technology Trade-offs, Force Structure, and Weapon Programs*

The American way of war has long been characterized by a search for ways to substitute firepower for manpower.<sup>39</sup> In its most recent manifestation, this laudable quest has emphasized the utility of airpower, applied at stand-off range, to accomplish coercive aims. Airpower has been a valuable force multiplier for the United States and is regularly advocated in terms not only of effectiveness but of the higher casualties that ground operations would likely produce. Stating the argument directly, Edward Luttwak has suggested that the United States focus more on the development of long-range attack forces, particularly aviation, as an alternative to ground forces, which he asserts are less usable in practice because of casualty aversion on the part of the American public.<sup>40</sup>

Casualty-aversion arguments also provide convenient support for a variety of particular weapons programs. A typical example is the Crusader artillery program. Informed that the system was under consideration for cancellation, Army officials attempted to defend the system by lobbying members of Congress that its termination would put soldiers' lives "at risk."<sup>41</sup> This argument, however, was more sensitive than the Army knew and seems to have had much to do with the rather nasty and public manner in which the issue was finally resolved: the cancellation occurred more swiftly than originally envisioned, the Army was flailed in public, and the person responsible for drafting the "talking points" lost his job.<sup>42</sup>

Another example was opposition to STREETFIGHTER, a prospective naval weapon system, on the premise that it posed a casualty risk. The concept was to complement the small number of high-cost large warships that currently dominate the Navy force structure with more numerous, smaller ships. Like the PT boats of World War II, these boats would provide flexibility and a capability to attack close to shore. Larger numbers and smaller crews make individual STREETFIGHTER ships less indispensable to the overall force. Unlike the PT boats of World War II, however, they would not be expendable—because of the potential effect of the loss of even their small crews.<sup>43</sup>

Exaggerated concern about casualties can inhibit the selection and development of new systems that can add important capabilities and improve the effectiveness of the armed forces. It may also impede the progress of transformational tactics and approaches—swarming, dispersed operations, network-centric warfare—that by their nature would not provide the degree of force protection afforded by large platforms and massed formations.

### *Self-Constraint in the Use of Armed Forces*

Another negative effect is the failure or reluctance to use the U.S. armed forces at all, due to mistaken beliefs about the public's likely response. To the degree that policy makers believe that the American public cannot endure casualties, leaders

may well decide that the risk of casualties is disproportionate to the value of an objective and refrain from taking action in situations. This effect was apparent in debate over use of force in Bosnia (1992–94) and in Rwanda (1994).<sup>44</sup> Failure to intervene probably saved U.S. lives, but counterfactual (yet plausible) scenarios in both cases suggest that hundreds of thousands of lives could have been saved by intervention, and peace and stability reestablished much earlier.

Assertions of casualty aversion may simply reflect the normative preference of individuals for what the public *ought* to find acceptable or not. Speaking of the pursuit of Serb war criminals under the Dayton accords, the former commander of the Implementation Force in Bosnia, Admiral Leighton Smith, gives an example:

What's it going to take and what's it going to cost? Then I've got to feed that back to the politicians. . . . "All right, you want me to do this, this is the price." Remember what I said about the war criminals [whom the military might be asked to arrest]? "You want me to do that, it's going to cost you lives. We're going to get people killed doing this. I might have to go to Kansas and tell Johnny's mama that he got his head blown off trying to arrest [Ratko] Mladic [a Bosnian Serb military leader and indicted war criminal] in a coffee shop somewhere. Or better, in a bunker."<sup>45</sup>

In this formulation, it is not a matter of whether the public is willing to accept casualties but this officer's opinion that the public ought not to accept casualties for this mission. In this way the public's supposed casualty aversion may become a screen for other objections to a particular mission. It may be easier and more morally persuasive to invoke casualty concerns than to pursue a complex or sensitive argument.

## POLICY APPLICATIONS

The concept of the American public's casualty aversion is a myth—an inappropriate oversimplification of an important issue. The fundamental policy need is to reject this oversimplification—leaders must understand the more complex reality of the public's reaction to casualties, a reality that in fact affords wide latitude. With a better grasp of this issue, national leaders can avoid errors that distort the policy-making process and corrupt professional military ethics.

### *Latitude for Leadership*

The likely response of the American public to casualties is primarily an issue of leadership. As many studies have noted, even when support for a military operation wanes over time there is no compelling evidence that the public expects either immediate withdrawal or escalation simply in response to casualties. The American public weighs the costs and benefits of the use of force, and the interests involved. In general the public takes a permissive view, one that allows

national leaders tremendous discretion to launch military operations and to persevere in them even as casualties mount. It's about leadership.

Elected civilian leaders play a critical role in shaping the public's response to casualties and in characterizing the missions for which they may be incurred. The dynamic is somewhat circular—the extent of public willingness to abide casualties is a function of the degree of consensus among policy leaders, whereas public reaction to cost has much to do with how elites present the situation. Congressional leaders and their agreement with the administration, or lack of it, have an important effect on the public's sensitivity to casualties. Average citizens perceive policy elites—privy to classified material and detailed analysis, subjected to innumerable inputs from interest and advocacy groups, and served by extensive staffs—as better placed than themselves to weigh costs and benefits. Unsurprisingly, opinion on such major issues as the use of force reflects a “follower effect,” whereby individuals take their cues from the nation's civilian and military leaders. There is also evidence that members of political parties tend to favor the positions and policies supported by their parties' leaders—particularly when those leaders include the president.<sup>46</sup>

This understanding also reveals a certain circularity in the Weinberger/Powell rules—that is, though it is undeniably desirable to have American public support for any military operation, the public takes its cue from the political leadership as a whole. Broad agreement among national leaders tends to give the public confidence that the costs of action, including casualties, are being incurred in support of important national interests. If the country's leaders are unsure, the public is unlikely to accept the price willingly.

The public's tolerance for a particular level of casualties in a specific case is not predictable. Moreover, there is considerable evidence that casualties exceeding original expectations may generate greater scrutiny over military operations in question, without changing the commitment to the objectives sought. In fact, it is common for such sacrifices to cement more firmly the commitment of those who favored force in the first place. Casualties already suffered, far from being dismissed as “sunk costs,” are often perceived as requiring redemption, increasing the value of the original purpose.

Not only are the dynamics of casualties difficult to anticipate, there is a natural tendency in the midst of war for casualties to trigger passions that can overwhelm reasoned consideration of government policy. It is valuable to recall Clausewitz's metaphor of the “remarkable trinity” of passion, creativity, and reason:

As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a remarkable trinity—composed of primordial violence, hatred, and enmity, which are to be regarded

as a blind natural force; of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its element of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone.<sup>47</sup>

Policy makers are responsible for managing the application of reason in the realm of war. This responsibility extends to a clear-headed understanding of the costs and benefits of military operations and the manner in which their results are likely to shape the public attitude.

### *The Cost-Benefit Policy Equation*

A nuanced understanding of the public's willingness to accept casualties should frame the policy process. Leaders should be careful not to let overemphasis on casualty avoidance lead to risk-averse behavior that jeopardizes American policy interests. A misperception of the public's willingness to accept casualties distorts the cost-benefit calculations of civilian and military leaders as they consider when to use military force and how. As General Edward Meyer, former Chief of Staff of the Army, has warned, "No commander likes to lose soldiers, but if he starts out with [no casualties] as his goal, nobody is going to accomplish anything."<sup>48</sup>

The public's understanding of casualties is neither capricious nor fickle. The emotional commitment of liberal societies to the dignity and worth of individuals is part of the foundation of those societies. Human costs weigh heavily—but not too heavily. The public understands and accepts that risks to individuals are sometimes required by the larger interests of society. The public wants to minimize casualties—not just among members of the American military but also innocent civilians and sometimes even enemy combatants. However, as numerous studies have shown, the public understands in essence Clausewitz's dictum that "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means."<sup>49</sup> Military force is used as a means to a policy end; it is difficult to consider the costs (of which casualties are but one) in isolation from the benefits sought. This is true both in the midst of conflicts (for example, Korea and Vietnam) and in the consideration of future military operations. It is extremely difficult to articulate succinctly and in advance all possible ends of policy against which casualties might be measured. Moreover, the value of each new casualty is of uncertain subjective weight that varies tremendously from one citizen to the next.

Evocations of the casualty-aversion assertion by national leaders can, as we have seen, cause serious problems. They can embolden adversaries and cause them to overestimate the strategic value of inflicting casualties. They can undermine the deterrent effect of American threats that otherwise might have averted the use of force. Casualty aversion can also give the impression that the United States is trying to shift to allies casualty risks that it is unwilling to accept itself.

Technology has significant drawbacks here; the technology/casualty trade-off debate has been a long one. Again, it is perfectly laudable to pursue methods that minimize casualties; arguing the converse would be ludicrous. More important, however, are the strategic effectiveness and opportunity costs that accrue from the use of various military instruments in singular, sequential or synchronized ways. The casualty-aversion issue can become a surrogate for decades-old interservice arguments between airpower and ground-power advocates. Such often-misdirected disputes focus on the special interests and constituencies of particular means at the expense of national strategic ends. That an option is ostensibly cheaper should not relieve it from the ultimate tests of military effectiveness in achieving national ends. The conviction that technology can or must substitute for risk to human life has a pernicious tendency to distort the consideration of risks and rewards. Cheaper, less risky means may also make more likely the use of force in situations of marginal importance—in which the prestige and effectiveness of the United States and its allies may require escalation to achieve success.<sup>50</sup>

#### *The Professional Military Ethic*

How the American public is likely to react to casualties in a particular case is not within the scope of military judgment; officers must stick to their own professional expertise and ethics when rendering advice on the use of armed forces. One reason that concern about casualties has been allowed to cross over into military planning is the Weinberger/Powell doctrine. In particular, its fifth test—which requires “reasonable assurance we will have the support of the American people”—seems to require judgment by national security planners about American public opinion.<sup>51</sup>

Predicting the likelihood and magnitude of casualties in a particular mission is in itself an appropriate professional judgment, firmly grounded in expert knowledge and military experience. Assessments of the impact of casualties on military effectiveness are similarly appropriate; for example, a planner would properly recommend against a course of action in which casualties were likely to render the force unable to complete the mission. However, judgments of the “social weight” of casualties or their effect on public opinion are matters for civilian leaders.

Of course, urging civilian leaders to consider that factor in their decisions to use armed force is appropriate. It is a very weighty matter, touching on important values; military leaders should be confident that civilian leaders have carefully addressed it. However, suggesting in advance *what* level of casualties, if any, the American public would accept, as an element of considered military judgment, is inappropriate. It represents a corruption of the professional military ethic. Military leaders should recognize the issue of casualty sensitivity for what



it is—a question of how potential costs will be valued in terms of policy aims. “If a military officer expresses preferences among policy goals while acting in an official capacity, that officer may come to be seen as more a political figure than a military expert.”<sup>52</sup> Such a reputation would undermine the professional credibility of the officer on other issues.<sup>53</sup> There is no objective, a priori standard for predicting the American public’s toleration of casualties on behalf of national interests—vital, important, routine, or otherwise.

There is no doubt that military leaders have a profound responsibility to their subordinates and to society more broadly to minimize casualties and take all prudent and reasonable measures to protect the precious human resources entrusted to their care. As servants of society, senior officers are obliged to provide the best possible professional assessment of military alternatives and their likely costs. Advice on military capacity to achieve objectives is appropriate; opinions as to whether the costs or risks are acceptable exceed the professional responsibility of officers.

This is a significant civil-military relations issue. Assessment of the military costs and risks of a given operation in support of national policy is an appropriate element of professional military judgment and the management of violence, what Clausewitz called the “grammar of war.”<sup>54</sup> To decide whether the costs and risks are worth it is to judge the policy itself. That is a decision reserved for civilian leaders.

Public casualty aversion is a myth. There is no evidence that the American public has an intrinsic, uncritical aversion to U.S. military casualties. There is strong evidence that the American public seriously considers the costs and benefits of particular missions and that it judges the acceptability of casualties against the value of objectives. Historically, the relationship between public support for military operations vis-à-vis the level of casualties has been a function of national leadership.

The myth’s persistence as widespread conventional wisdom is harmful and should be vigorously opposed. The myth impedes efforts to achieve national objectives. National leaders—civilian and military—should work to dispel the presumption that the American public will not endure military casualties; this would place debates on national objectives on a firmer foundation. Dispelling the casualty-aversion myth would allow more precise and appropriate consideration of when to use military force, more effective and efficient political and military decisions, and more accurately communicate American resolve to potential adversaries.

## NOTES

1. Senate Armed Services Committee, Hearing on the Nomination of William Cohen as Secretary of Defense, 22 January 1997, available at [pcinegi.udlap.mx/infoUSA/politics/biograph/2142.htm](http://pcinegi.udlap.mx/infoUSA/politics/biograph/2142.htm).
2. Henry Kissinger, quoted in C. David Kotok, "Vietnam's Lessons Still Shaping U.S. Policy, Practice," *Omaha World-Herald*, 14 September 1999, p. 1; Maj. Gen. William Nash quote cited in Rick Atkinson, "Warriors without a War: U.S. Peacekeepers in Bosnia Adjusting to New Tasks: Arbitration, Bluff, Restraint," *Washington Post*, 14 April 1996, p. A1; Edward N. Luttwak, "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (May/June 1995), p. 115; Senator William Cohen, quoted in Charles Lane, "The Double Man," *New Republic*, 28 July 1997, available at [www.tnr.com/archive/07/072898/lane072897.html](http://www.tnr.com/archive/07/072898/lane072897.html) (date of original quote not identified).
3. Steven Kull and I. M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999). Kull and Destler "conducted a series of eighty three interviews with persons selected from four groups: twelve members and sixteen staff of the U.S. Congress; nineteen officials of the executive branch; eighteen representatives of the media and eighteen senior professionals at nongovernmental organizations" (pp. 25–26).
4. To clarify the nature of this conventional wisdom among policy elites, I conducted over twenty interviews with members of major news organizations, with particular emphasis on correspondents, producers, and analysts experienced in defense and national security interests. I also conducted interviews with over a dozen senior military leaders (current and former). The focus of the interviews was the respondents' perceptions of the American public's aversion to casualties.
5. William Safire, quoted by Richard Falk, "The Vietnam Syndrome," *Nation*, 9 July 2001.
6. Eric V. Larson, "Ends and Means in the Democratic Conversation: Understanding the Role of Casualties in Support for U.S. Military Operations," Ph.D. dissertation, RAND Graduate School, 1996, pp. 33–36.
7. Defense Press Office, Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), "Public Affairs Guidance—Casualty and Mortuary Affairs—Operation Enduring Freedom," 1 November 2001.
8. For a detailed treatment of this subject, see Susan Moeller, *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
9. For one example of this interpretation, Lawrence S. Eagleburger, speaking during a panel discussion on the so-called CNN Effect, "I think there's no question that TV pictures of the dead GI has a lot to do with our leaving." "'The CNN Effect': How 24-Hour News Coverage Affects Government Decisions and Public Opinion," Brookings/Harvard Forum: Press Coverage and the War on Terrorism, transcript of panel discussion, 23 January 2002, available at [www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/comm/transcripts/20020123.htm](http://www.brook.edu/dybdocroot/comm/transcripts/20020123.htm).
10. Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon*, appendix: "Text of Remarks by Secretary of Defense Weinberger at the National Press Club, November 28, 1984" (New York: Warner Books, 1991), pp. 445–57.
11. For an example of this, see descriptions of General Powell's concerns in Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), pp. 34, 130–31.
12. Luttwak, "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare," p. 115.
13. Charles Moskos, "Our Will to Fight Depends on Who Is Willing to Die," *Wall Street Journal*, 20 March 2002, p. A22; Mark Shields, "In Power but Not in Peril," *Washington Post*, 15 October 2002, p. 19.
14. Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1996). The larger study from which this is drawn is Larson's dissertation, "Ends and Means in the Democratic Conversation: Understanding the Role of Casualties in Support for U.S. Military Operations."
15. *Ibid.*, p. xv.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

17. Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, "Casualty Aversion: How Many Deaths Are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer," *Washington Post*, 7 November 1999, p. B3.
18. Kull and Destler, *Misreading the Public*, pp. 81–112.
19. For example, see a CBS News Poll released 24 September 2001, based on a nationwide random sample of 1,216 adults, 20–23 September 2001. Before military action began in Afghanistan, 72 percent of the public supported military action against whoever had been responsible for the terrorist attacks, even if that meant "thousands of American military personnel will be killed." ABC News polls since 11 September 2001 also continue to show strong support for military action, even when the public believes there will be significant U.S. military casualties. There is evidence of increasing popular concern about casualties since the end of major combat operations in Iraq. Nonetheless, there is still evidence of strong support for seeing the mission through in the face of mounting casualties. In an August 2003 ABC News poll, 69 percent of those polled favored the statement, "The United States should keep its military forces in Iraq until civil order is restored there, even if that means continued U.S. military casualties," versus 27 percent who favored withdrawal of U.S. military forces even if civil order had not been restored.
20. For a recent example of this analysis from a somewhat surprising source, see Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 834–35.
21. Dana Priest, "Risks and Restraints: Why the Apaches Never Flew in Kosovo," *Washington Post*, 29 December 1999, p. A1.
22. Gen. Dennis Reimer and an unnamed U.S. Air Force officer who provided a classified intelligence briefing on Yugoslav air defense measures for the Apache pilots of Task Force Hawk (assigned to the Joint Analysis Center in Molesworth, United Kingdom), quoted in Sean Naylor, "Sidelined: How America Won a War without the Army," *Army Times*, 16 August 1999, p. 20.
23. Tom Bowman, "War Casualties Could Test Public's Resolve," *Baltimore Sun*, 18 November 2001.
24. Gary Langer, "Support for War: Do They Mean It?" *Polling Report* 17, no. 18 (24 September 2001).
25. Michael Gordon, "Rumsfeld Burdened by Stilling Echoes of the Grisly Raid in Somalia," *New York Times*, 7 March 2002.
26. John F. Burns, "10-Month bin Laden Mystery: Dead or Alive?" *New York Times*, 30 September 2002, p. A1.
27. Serge Schmemmann, "Word for Word/The Long Gray Line: For Tomorrow's Army, Cadets Full of Questions," *New York Times*, 8 July 2001, "Week in Review," p. 1.
28. Atkinson, "Warriors without a War," p. 1. The article describes the concerns of commanders that any casualties will have a tremendous impact on the mission, even the cancellation of the mission and the withdrawal of U.S. forces. Consequently, there is tremendous anxiety about force protection and the actions of even the most junior members of the peacekeeping force. The point is reinforced by the high-level attention paid to the first fatality of the operation, a sergeant killed trying to disarm a land mine against orders.
29. Center for Strategic and International Studies, *American Military Culture in the Twenty-first Century*, Report of the CSIS International Security Program (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, February 2000).
30. Don M. Snider, John A. Nagl, and Tony Pfaff, *Army Professionalism, the Military Ethic and Officership in the 21st Century* (Carlisle, Penna.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1999).
31. Wesley K. Clark, *Waging Modern War: Bosnia, Kosovo, and the Future of Combat* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2001), p. 436.
32. Many instances of the conventional wisdom on U.S. casualty aversion have been voiced by foreigners. Examples include: an Indian commentator on the Gulf War cited in Thomas G. Mahnken, "America's Next War," *Washington Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (Summer 1993), p. 171; the commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps and a senior Chinese government official cited in John A. Gentry, "Military Force in an Age of National Cowardice," *Washington Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (Autumn 1998), p. 179; a European diplomat cited by

- Justin Brown, "Risks of Waging Only Risk-Free War," *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 May 2000, p. 1; and the prominent British military historian John Keegan, cited in Atkinson, "Warriors without War," p. A1.
33. Mahnken, "America's Next War," p. 171.
  34. David Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace* (New York: Scribner's, 2001), pp. 271–73.
  35. Osama Bin Laden, "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," 23 August 1996, available at [www.comw.org/pda/fulltext/960823binladen.html](http://www.comw.org/pda/fulltext/960823binladen.html).
  36. Avigdor Haselkorn, "Martyrdom: The Most Powerful Weapon," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 December 2000, p. M5.
  37. *Ibid.*
  38. Ayman Zawahri, quoted in James S. Robbins, "Chinook Down," *National Review Online*, 5 March 2002, available at [www.nationalreview.com/robbins/robbins030502.asp](http://www.nationalreview.com/robbins/robbins030502.asp).
  39. Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of the United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1973), p. xii.
  40. Luttwak, "A Post-Heroic Military Policy," pp. 33–44.
  41. Rowan Scarborough, "Army Investigating Officials Who Defended Crusader," *Washington Times*, 4 May 2002, available at [www.washtimes.com/national/20020504-13602565.htm](http://www.washtimes.com/national/20020504-13602565.htm).
  42. *Ibid.* and Joe Burtas, "Civilian Deputy Resigns over Crusader Flap," *Army News Service*, 10 May 2002.
  43. Greg Jaffe, "Risk Assessment: Plans for a Small Ship Pose Big Questions for the U.S. Navy—The Street Fighter Would Add Punch in Close Combat; Are Deaths Acceptable?" *Wall Street Journal*, 11 July 2001, p. A1.
  44. For Bosnia, Luttwak, "A Post-Heroic Military Policy," p. 39. For Rwanda, Steven Livingston, in comments during panel discussion, "The CNN Effect," Brookings/Harvard Forum, 23 January 2002.
  45. Leighton W. Smith, Jr. [Adm., USN], interview by Harry Kreisler, "Shaping the U.S. Role in Peacekeeping Operations," University of California Conversations with History, 1 April 1997, available at [globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/LWSmith/](http://globetrotter.berkeley.edu/conversations/LWSmith/).
  46. For descriptions and discussion of the follow-up effect, see John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973), pp. 69–74, 122–40; and Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, pp. 76–79.
  47. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael E. Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), p. 87.
  48. Quoted in Dan Fesperman, "'Casualty Aversion' Overcome by Terror," *Baltimore Sun*, 17 September 2001, p. 1A.
  49. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 89.
  50. A good example of this is the dynamic of the Kosovo intervention. The initial hope was to use only limited airpower, but lack of quick success increased the willingness to escalate, even to include ground forces, which had been ruled out at the beginning. See Halberstam, *War in a Time of Peace*, pp. 468–78.
  51. Quoted in Suzanne C. Nielsen, "Rules of the Game? The Weinberger Doctrine and the American Use of Force," in *The Future of the Army Profession*, Don M. Snider and Gayle L. Watkins, project directors (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2002), p. 216.
  52. *Ibid.*, p. 218.
  53. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
  54. Clausewitz, *On War*, p. 605.