# 8 The French and the use of force

## Public perceptions and their impact on the policy-making process

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### Introduction: the public and the use of force

Since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, questions about the use of military force have more than ever become topical issues in France. French military forces have indeed been actively deployed more times to more places than in any comparable number of years during the Cold War. In December 1992, France sent 2,000 troops to Somalia as part of *Operation Restore Hope*. Since 1992, an average of more than 4,000 troops have been involved in the various UN and NATO peacekeeping operations in ex-Yugoslavia. In June 1994, under the auspices of the United Nations, 2,500 soldiers were deployed in order to bring assistance to the civilian population of Rwanda. Humanitarian aid is the common denominator of these post-Cold War military operations. Their main aim is not to serve the national interest but rather to allay civilian deaths and suffering in countries ravaged by civil war. Intra-state conflicts calling for peace operations have indeed replaced the more traditional inter-state conflicts prevalent prior to and during the Cold War.

Has public opinion been an element in the decisions to undertake these military operations? Proponents of the realist theory would argue that the decision to deploy French troops as part of military operations was taken without regard to popular attitudes, as these are merely an ill-informed, volatile and mood-driven force. Their contenders would respond that some of these decisions were taken under public pressure generated by televised images of human suffering. Régis Debray, for instance, a leading French intellectual, deems that France's foreign policy is today 'shaped by the television, the radio and the press'.[1]

Are French policy makers thus impervious to public influence or are they, on the contrary, responsive to it? As was argued in Chapter 1, while some progress was made to fill the gaps, our knowledge of the contents and determinants of public opinion is much more developed concerning the political system in the United States than with respect to European countries. In this chapter, an effort is made to improve this situation with respect to France. In particular, the aim is to determine to what extent, on what kinds of issues, under what circumstances, if any, the French public played a role in recent decisions to undertake military operations. Did policy makers decide to participate in certain military operations because of a belief that the public demanded some form of action? Did they, on the contrary, rule out certain courses of action because of a belief that lack of support would reduce or eliminate the prospects of success of the mission? Did they revise their position because of public response to a given policy orientation?

In order to address these questions, we must first briefly analyse the public's attitude towards the use of force in general. In the first part of this chapter, we shall therefore determine whether the French favour contributing troops to military operations, notably peace operations, and, if so, identify what are the sources of this support. We will also determine whether the fundamental changes in the international system that began with the fall of the Berlin Wall have had an impact on the French attitudes towards the use of military force. We will then try to reveal, through the examination of case studies, to what degree public preferences have been incorporated into policy makers' decisions to use force, how they take them into account when selecting a course of action and whether and how they feel motivated or constrained by the public.

### The public's attitude towards military operations

In order to determine how the French public perceives military interventions, we look at three different sources of information.[2] First, more than sixty surveys on the broad theme of the use of force, conducted since 1980, have been analysed.[3] Individual in-depth interviews were then conducted with thirty-two opinion leaders. The members of this panel were selected according to their knowledge of the subject and of the French public. This panel was composed of members of the defence committee of the National Assembly, elected members of garrison towns, members of the media specialised in defence questions, humanitarian association and youth movement representatives.[4] These interviews brought forth explanations of some of the trends revealed by the survey study. Finally, a thorough study of the press was carried out, since the media not only contributes to the formation of public opinion but also, at least partially, reflects it.[5]

#### *General trends on the use of force*

France's involvement and role in the international system have always been strong. From the Suez crisis to the French participation in the Gulf War in 1991, French military operations have indeed been numerous. Whereas some were conducted in accordance with defence agreements with African states, others can be assimilated with traditional war operations. Yet, since

the end of the Cold War, the problem of war and peace has fundamentally changed. Specific dangers linked to the East–West ideological opposition have been replaced by diffuse risks entailing a variety of possible uses of the armed forces. Public perception of the use of force has nevertheless not dramatically changed, although in France, as in other European countries, since the plight of the Kurds following the Gulf War, a humanitarian consciousness that favours peace operations has emerged.

The overall stability of French public opinion on the principle of the use of force is indeed revealed by the following survey question which forms part of the regular SIRPA (*Service d'Information et de Relations Publiques des Armées* – recently renamed DICOD, *Délégation pour l'Information et la Communication du Ministère de la Défense*) barometer of the French Defence Ministry since 1985. It reads: 'Some say that the event of war is so intolerable that it is better to accept the domination of a great power. What do you think?' This question stresses the intolerability of the event of war in order to propose two options: the option of resistance, which entails the risk of war, and the option of submission. No concrete situation is referred to as this question tries to gauge the overall principle of the use of force. The results of this survey, shown in Table 8.1, reveal the stability of public perception.

A strong majority of the French (between 46 per cent and 61 per cent) consistently prefer the risk of engaging in war rather than accepting submission. Hence, although the level of 'no opinion' reveals the limits of such a general question – around a fifth of the population feels it cannot answer such a question, which is probably due to the absence of reference to a specific situation – close to or more than 50 per cent of the French population consistently prefer to call upon the use of military force in such a situation. The increase from 51 per cent in 1990 to 61 per cent in 1991 is probably a result of the 'Gulf effect'. This is in fact consistent with the

*Table 8.1* The acceptance of the event of war (in %)

*Question: 'Some say that the event of war is so intolerable that it is better to accept the domination of a great power. What do you think?'*

| | *Sept. 85* | *Sept. 86* | *Sept. 88* | *May 89* | *June 90* | *May 91* | *May 92* | *May 93* | *May 94* | *June 95* | *June 96* | *June 97* | *June 98* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| It is better to risk a war | 48 | 51 | 49 | 49 | 51 | 61 | 58 | 56 | 58 | 52 | 53 | 49 | 46 |
| It is better to accept domination | 28 | 28 | 28 | 29 | 29 | 22 | 23 | 26 | 27 | 30 | 29 | 35 | 38 |
| No opinion | 24 | 21 | 23 | 22 | 20 | 17 | 19 | 18 | 15 | 18 | 18 | 16 | 16 |

*Source*: Baromètre SOFRES/SIRPA, Les Français et la défense nationale.

*Table 8.2* The use of French military force (in %)

*Question: 'For each of the following reasons, would you approve or disapprove of the use of the French military force?'*

| | *May 88* | *June 90* | *May 91* | *May 92* | *May 93* | *May 94* | *June 95* | *June 96* | *June 98* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *To preserve the life of nationals abroad* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | 65 | 76 | 73 | 81 | 84 | 86 | 85 | 84 | 88 |
| Disapprove | 24 | 14 | 16 | 12 | 11 | 9 | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| No opinion | 11 | 10 | 11 | 7 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 6 | 2 |
| *In case of a major economic aggression* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | 50 | 47 | 55 | 58 | 64 | 59 | 58 | 59 | 68 |
| Disapprove | 36 | 37 | 30 | 28 | 27 | 29 | 32 | 30 | 29 |
| No opinion | 14 | 16 | 15 | 14 | 9 | 12 | 10 | 11 | 3 |
| *To destroy a terrorist camp* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | 70 | 72 | 74 | 76 | 83 | 81 | 84 | 83 | 88 |
| Disapprove | 20 | 16 | 16 | 15 | 10 | 12 | 11 | 10 | 11 |
| No opinion | 10 | 12 | 10 | 9 | 7 | 7 | 5 | 7 | 1 |
| *To contribute to bring peace in a region of the world* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | 58 | 60 | 70 | 73 | 72 | 75 | 73 | 75 | 78 |
| Disapprove | 27 | 26 | 20 | 17 | 18 | 17 | 20 | 16 | 20 |
| No opinion | 15 | 14 | 10 | 10 | 10 | 8 | 7 | 9 | 2 |
| *To obtain the liberation of French hostages* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | 63 | 74 | 79 | 84 | 90 | 87 | 91 | 89 | 89 |
| Disapprove | 27 | 17 | 13 | 10 | 6 | 8 | 6 | 7 | 10 |
| No opinion | 10 | 9 | 8 | 6 | 4 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 1 |
| *To honour the defence agreements passed with a number of African countries* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | 56 | 55 | 61 | 59 | 60 | 62 | 60 | 60 | 68 |
| Disapprove | 25 | 26 | 24 | 26 | 26 | 24 | 28 | 26 | 28 |
| No opinion | 19 | 19 | 15 | 15 | 14 | 14 | 12 | 14 | 4 |
| *To assist a population in distress (famine, civil war)* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | | 73 | 79 | 81 | 81 | 83 | 78 | 82 | 87 |
| Disapprove | | 14 | 13 | 11 | 11 | 11 | 14 | 12 | 12 |
| No opinion | | 13 | 8 | 8 | 8 | 6 | 8 | 6 | 2 |
| *To intervene under the auspices of the United Nations for the respect of international law* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | | | 82 | 84 | 84 | 84 | 81 | 79 | 85 |
| Disapprove | | | 9 | 7 | 8 | 8 | 12 | 12 | 12 |
| No opinion | | | 9 | 9 | 8 | 8 | 7 | 9 | 3 |

*Source*: Baromètre SOFRES/SIRPA, Les Français et la défense nationale.

attitude of the French public during the Gulf War.[6] They indeed strongly favoured France's participation in the allied war effort if all negotiation efforts had failed.

What *is* different since the end of the Cold War is the emergence of a humanitarian feeling amongst the general public. Table 8.2 reveals that whereas in the late 1980s support for the various possible uses of armed forces stagnated around 50 per cent to 70 per cent, by the mid-1990s this rate of approval reached between 58 and 91 per cent. Aside from the traditional support of the use of force in order to preserve the life of nationals abroad or to free French hostages, this evolution specially benefited the support of the use of force in order to fight terrorism (up to 88 per cent in 1998), to contribute 'to bring peace in a region of the world' (up from 58 per cent in 1988 to 78 per cent in 1998) or to 'assist a population in distress' (up to 87 per cent in 1998) – situations which often call for peace operations which have characterised the post-Cold War era.

### *Support for peace operations*

The various peacekeeping or peace-making operations of the beginning of the 1990s, conducted under the auspices of the United Nations, have indeed gathered strong initial support. This initial support, based on humanitarian concerns, was granted in a particular historical context, i.e. the wake of the Gulf War, when the general trust in the capacity of the United Nations to handle multilateral military operations was at its highest. *Operation Restore Hope* in Somalia in December 1992, for example, enjoyed overwhelming support from the French public. As the troops arrived in Somalia in December 1992, a CSA/La Vie poll found 82 per cent support for France's participation in this UN-mandated operation to deliver humanitarian relief.[7] The French were moved by the haunting images on television of starving people. Across the country, children even brought bags of rice to school for the young Somalians. The peacekeeping operation in Rwanda in 1994 was a little different and actually quite unusual. Questions on the actual motives behind *Operation Turquoise* were raised due to France's prior support for President Juvénal Habyarimana's regime, which was accused of the massacre of hundreds of thousands of Tutsis. The ambiguity of the situation transpired through the results of a poll taken at the very beginning of *Operation Turquoise* when 49 per cent of the respondents agreed with the following statement, itself quite ambiguous: 'France is in its role by intervening in Rwanda', while 35 per cent agreed with the opposite statement, no less ambiguous: 'France is assuming responsibilities that are not hers'.[8] Yet, if this initial support seemed somewhat weak, the strong majority that approved the peacekeeping operation favoured France's initiative to address a pressing humanitarian problem. As for France's involvement in Bosnia, the level of support was always similarly strong. Survey results showed that support varied from 60 per cent to 70 per cent between 1992 and 1994. The support was at its highest in July 1993, a few weeks after General Philippe Morillon's actions towards the besieged population of Srebrenica. The atrocities of the ongoing ethnic cleansing drove the public to believe that France should take strong steps to stop it. In December 1992, 67 per cent felt that France should participate in a military operation in ex-Yugoslavia 'because it is intolerable to allow such a civil war to go on in Europe without reacting' and only 23 per cent considered that France should not participate in such an operation 'because it would be too risky for its soldiers'.[9] Later 62 per cent of respondents even agreed, in April 1993, that they would

*Table 8.3* Individual motivation for the use of force (in %)

*Question: 'For each of the following reasons, do you think that it is justified or not to fight at the expense of risking one's life?'*

| | *May 88* | *June 90* | *May 91* | *May 92* | *May 93* | *May 94* | *June 95* | *June 96* | *June 98* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *To defend our country against the invasion by a foreign army* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | 82 | 80 | 83 | 85 | 83 | 82 | 83 | 80 | 82 |
| Disapprove | 13 | 12 | 10 | 9 | 12 | 13 | 13 | 14 | 18 |
| No opinion | 5 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 5 | 4 | 6 | – |
| *To defend other French territories (Guadeloupe, Martinique . . .)* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | 59 | 58 | 62 | 66 | 65 | 65 | 64 | 65 | 64 |
| Disapprove | 31 | 28 | 27 | 24 | 27 | 26 | 30 | 26 | 36 |
| No opinion | 10 | 14 | 11 | 10 | 8 | 9 | 6 | 9 | – |
| *To defend the values of our society (freedom, human rights . . .)* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | 74 | 72 | 73 | 74 | 77 | 77 | 77 | 73 | 73 |
| Disapprove | 16 | 17 | 17 | 15 | 16 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 27 |
| No opinion | 10 | 11 | 10 | 11 | 7 | 7 | 6 | 9 | – |
| *To defend allied countries, like Germany, from an invasion* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | 48 | 38 | 47 | 48 | 46 | 49 | 49 | 51 | – |
| Disapprove | 39 | 44 | 39 | 37 | 43 | 40 | 41 | 37 | – |
| No opinion | 13 | 18 | 14 | 15 | 11 | 11 | 10 | 12 | – |
| *To defend countries with which France has passed defence agreements* | | | | | | | | | |
| Approve | 32 | 31 | 32 | 34 | 29 | 30 | 29 | 29 | 37 |
| Disapprove | 53 | 52 | 54 | 52 | 60 | 58 | 60 | 59 | 63 |
| No opinion | 15 | 17 | 14 | 14 | 11 | 12 | 11 | 12 | – |

*Source*: Baromètre SOFRES/SIRPA, Les Français et la défense nationale.

understand if their child or a member of their family were called to participate in an operation whereas only 30 per cent were opposed to such a contingency.[10]

Finally, the evolution of the public support for the NATO operation in Kosovo further reveals the public's sensitivity towards humanitarian issues. After a first period of doubt immediately following the launch of *Operation Allied Force*, probably due to a lack of information, a majority of the French were in favour of the NATO-led operation. Indeed, although 46 per cent of the public disapproved of NATO's air strikes at the end of March 1999,[11] by 6 April, 50 per cent,[12] and 17 April, up to 70 per cent of the public approved of NATO's military operation in Yugoslavia.[13] This rapid structuration of the public was in fact largely due to the media coverage of the plight of the Kosovar refugees. Support for this operation was indeed essentially a moral and humanitarian reaction. Survey results were not, in that respect, the only illustration of this humanitarian emotion: donations were yet another expression. Hence, humanitarian values legitimised the interventions in Somalia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo. The importance that the French public grants to these humanitarian values and to the defence of the more general values that symbolise Western society (like freedom and human rights) in fact translates itself in Table 8.3. The French are indeed overwhelmingly in favour of, at the expense of risking their own life, the use of force in order to defend these values.

### The casualty hypothesis

Does this mean that the casualty hypothesis is not supported in the event of the international use of force, even when national interests are not directly involved, such as in peace operations? The 'zero casualties' concept is in fact implicitly refuted by the French population. It does not coincide with their perception of the role of the army. More than sixty French soldiers perished in the Bosnian conflict and the tolerance for casualties did not seem to diminish as the conflict continued. In February 1994, a few days before the expiration of the ultimatum addressed to the Bosnian Serbs requesting that they stop shelling the city of Sarajevo, a survey shows that 53 per cent of the respondents favoured a large-scale ground operation if the ultimatum was not respected.[14] Similarly, in April 1999, 60 per cent of the public favoured French participation in a multilateral ground operation in the event that the NATO air strikes did not bring an end to the Serbian offensive in Kosovo.[15] These results are significant as ground operations, by nature, are more costly in terms of human losses than air strikes. Opinion leaders interviewed on this subject also explicitly denounce the 'zero-dead doctrine'. They believe that it is 'absurd' and almost 'hypocritical'. They also underline its strategic incoherence: 'If zero deaths is the objective, the mission is bound to fail.' This does not mean that the French are trigger-happy nor that they are willing to sustain a large number of casualties. The threshold for deaths and casualties is indeed difficult to estimate. In fact, compared to the Cold War period where the security of the soldiers sent on military operations was not a worry – thousands of French soldiers perished during the war in Indochina accompanied by the total indifference of the French population – the French have become more sensitive to the security of the soldiers sent on military operations. French policy makers are aware of the duality and ambiguity of the French public: a desire for humanitarian operations, on the one hand, as well as the survival of its soldiers on the other. The French, in fact, support military engagement 'à la française' which uses limited means, 'which favours a dissuasive attitude to that of confrontation, appeasement to escalation, and which tries to limit casualties'.[16] Yet, they are also well aware and rather realistically accept that as soon as the military force is deployed, casualties are to be expected.

### An explanation for rising scepticism on the part of the public about peace operations

Support for the operation in Bosnia nevertheless began to erode in June 1994 and, in July 1996, only 54 per cent[17] (down from 67 per cent in December 1992) of the respondents still favoured such a peacekeeping operation. What then can explain this manifest drop in support and does that reveal an overall scepticism towards peace operations? There are clear indications that the reasons for the drop in support towards the peacekeeping operation in Bosnia lie in the public's distrust of the United Nations and of the French government. The French public was indeed frustrated with the performance of the United Nations, and of the French government, in Bosnia. They felt that the UN peacekeeping operation was not very successful, not only in protecting the civilian population of Bosnia but also in ensuring the security of the UN troops involved. Survey results illustrate these reservations about the performance of the United Nations. In May 1993, 66 per cent of respondents considered the United Nations to be inefficient. This number rose to 76 per cent in May 1994 and 79 per cent in May 1995![18] This frustration did not only concern the United Nations; the French government was also affected. A survey, conducted shortly after General Philippe Morillon's mobilisation in Srebrenica, indicated that 52 per cent of the respondents considered that 'the French government is not making sufficient effort to try to stop the fighting in ex-Yugoslavia' whereas only 31 per cent considered that 'the French government is doing everything in its power to stop the fighting'.[19] A survey, held at the time of the ultimatum addressed by NATO to the Bosnian Serbs, in February 1994, also shows that 52 per cent of the respondents disapproved of the way that the French president and the French government were handling the crisis.[20] The public tended to favour a firmer approach that would allow

the troops to have the option of using force to stop the violence, whereas François Mitterrand always tried to prevent escalation. This dichotomy between the French government and the public on the question of which means to use in the peacekeeping operation in Bosnia reached its highest point during the hostage crisis in June 1995. The French felt humiliated at the sight of their soldiers brandishing a white flag as a sign of resignation. The assertive attitude adopted by the newly elected president Jacques Chirac (deployment of the *Force de Réaction Rapide*) was therefore largely approved. The media and opinion leaders applauded France's 'renewed vigour'. Yet, it should be noted that this restored trust in the French government's actions in Bosnia was short-lived. It did not extend to France's involvement in the NATO-led operation in Bosnia. Indeed, although the NATO Implementation Force has been more assertive than the UN operation was, a survey conducted in June 1996 shows that public support remained at the 1995 level. Only 54 per cent of respondents in June 1996 approved of 'France's participation, under the auspices of NATO, in ex-Yugoslavia'.[21] Explanation for this relatively unenthusiastic support is probably to be found in the difficulties encountered by the NATO troops in enforcing the Dayton peace agreement. This distrust of the United Nations and of the French government does not, however, reveal an overall scepticism towards peace operations. The French do not indeed question their moral imperative to assist a suffering population nor have the setbacks encountered by UN troops caused the French to be disillusioned by peacekeeping operations. It is in fact interesting to note that although 52 per cent of the public considered, on 17 April 1999, that the NATO air strikes against Serbian forces in Kosovo were inefficient, 70 per cent nevertheless still approved of the military operation.[22] Similarly, since May 1991, between 70 per cent and 87 per cent of the respondents agree with the use of force 'to intervene, under the auspices of the United Nations, for the respect of international law', 'to assist a population in distress (famine, civil war. . .)', or to 'contribute to bring peace in a region of the world'. If the support for the humanitarian cause of 'assisting a population in distress' did drop (though very slightly) in 1995 (78 per cent down from 83 per cent in May 1994), it remained strong, recovered its initial level in June 1996 and rose to 87 per cent in 1998.

Hence, the French public has remained, overall, stable in its attitude towards military operations although there has been a general evolution in favour of peace-operations and operations led in order to respect international law. These attitude shifts are nevertheless not random, but are rather event-driven reactions to the ongoing situation. They respond to the evolution of the international situation and to the emergence of new forms of violence and conflict in the international arena. Results of this study therefore support the findings quoted in Chapter 1 concerning the basic stability and coherence of mass public opinion.

## The public's influence on the decision-making process

The question to address at this point is: do policy makers take public opinion into account when choosing a course of action? To what extent, on what kinds of issues, under what circumstances, if any, has the public had an influence on France's decisions to use force? Day after day during the Kosovo crisis of 1999, members of the media and political analysts raised this question of the public's influence on the political will of decision makers. Yet addressing this question is a little more delicate than describing the state of, or trends in, public opinion in view of the many methodological problems relating to the establishment of cause–effect relationships, some of which were already discussed in the introductory chapter. Research on the causal links between mass opinions and foreign policy decision making remains indeed scarce, especially in France.

For the purposes of this study, we have opted for methodological pluralism, based on the mixing of interpretative and historical approaches. We first relied on in-depth investigations of public opinion's impact on specific policies as determined through a correlation of polling results and policy decisions. We followed up with a thorough analysis of policy makers' memoirs and/or biographies that provided interesting clues on how they perceived public opinion. Still, the central axis of this research lies elsewhere. Given the necessity to take the decision makers' perceptions into account and since this research technique offers a valuable tool for penetrating the institutional black box of policy making, we held a number of in-depth interviews with both civil and military foreign policy decision makers (such as Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary, Prime Minister, senior military and civil service officers).[23] In the second part of this chapter we shall thus investigate, through the examination of case studies, to what degree public preferences have been incorporated into policy makers' decisions to use military force and how they have affected the conduct of the military operation. These case studies cover François Mitterrand's presidency and essentially apply to peacekeeping operations, although we shall also consider, for the interest of the study, the public's impact during the Gulf War.

Former UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali once stated that: 'For the past two centuries, it is law that provided the sources of authority for democracy. Today, law seems to be replaced by opinion as the source of authority, and the media serve as the arbiter of public opinion.'[24] Does public opinion today truly have such a powerful effect on policy making? A recent report from the Foreign Affairs Committee of the French National Assembly indeed concludes that 'one must admit the decisive influence of the media on both the decision to launch a military operation and in the way to conduct it'.[25] Yet, a detailed look at the opinion–policy nexus reveals a far more complex relationship.

### *When decision makers try to anticipate the public's reactions: the case of the Gulf War*

Policy makers certainly consistently try to anticipate public reaction. In his study, Philip Powlick (1990) revealed that 84 per cent of the foreign policy officials he interviewed for his study admitted trying to anticipate how the public was going to react.[26] It is thus feasible that policy makers can be constrained by their very apprehension of the public's possible reactions to a given policy option. François Mitterrand's attitude during the Gulf crisis is in fact revealing in this respect. In the autumn of 1990, as the Allies started preparing for *Operation Desert Storm*, a majority of the French public supported the eventuality of France's participation in the multilateral military operation. Yet François Mitterrand felt the urge to further mobilise the public. This urge explains his unprecedented communication effort. Between August and December 1990, he personally held six press conferences at key moments of the crisis (such as the hostage crisis or the violation of the French ambassador's residence in Kuwait). His main aim was 'to educate' and, as stated by former Secretary General, Hubert Védrine 'to prepare the public for the inescapable consequences of the war logic initiated by Saddam Hussein'.[27] Unsure of how the public would react, and in order to prevent a possible uprising, François Mitterrand took the lead.

Once *Desert Storm* was launched, François Mitterrand also took the necessary measures in order to prevent the members of government from debating the opportunity of the war. Indeed, the French political class was very divided on the question as to whether France should or should not participate in the Gulf War. Jean-Pierre Chevènement's position is well known. As Defence Secretary, he strongly opposed France's participation in the Gulf war and resigned only a few days after the launch of *Desert Storm*. Many other close advisers and political figures also questioned the reasons for France's participation. Hence, from Monday 21 January 1991, the members of government were only able to express themselves on the Gulf War from the 'Centre Kléber'[28] and only once they had obtained permission from the Elysée Palace or from Matignon. The aim of this scheme was clear: to prevent any kind of protest and to 'unify the public speech'.[29]

François Mitterrand's decision not to let draftees participate in the war effort also follows the same logic. On 10 November 1991, when Secretary of State James Baker was in France in order to obtain the President's support for a UN resolution authorising the use of force, the latter replied: 'How will I explain to the French farmers that I threatened the life of their children to restore a millionaire?'[30] When mothers started to express their fright on televised talk shows, François Mitterrand announced, during his last press conference prior to *Operation Desert Storm*, that no draftee would take part in the operation, on the front or on warships. His closest aides qualify this as a very 'personal' and 'political' decision that François Mitterrand announced without even prior notice to his Chief of Staff. Senior military officers still question today whether such a decision was justified, especially in the light of the logistic difficulties it generated on the warships. Yet, François Mitterrand nevertheless chose to take all options to limit a possible upheaval.

Hence policy makers can either abstain from or engage in a given action by anticipating what they perceive to be possible adverse reaction from the public. In this case, the President was constrained by his apprehension of the public and therefore took his time to prepare the French for the military operation in the Gulf. The public thus did have an impact on the policy process although it did not divert François Mitterrand from his principal objective: participate, in case of war, in the multilateral military operation.

### *Public opinion as a catalyst?* **Operation Restore Hope** *in Somalia and* **Operation Turquoise** *in Rwanda*

Some observers feel that public opinion can also act as a catalyst in the decision-making process. Régis Debray indeed considers that 'The discussion on the judiciousness of a humanitarian military operation, in Africa for example, comes to an end when it is known that 78 per cent of the French population approves it.'[31] We have revealed that a strong majority of the French public supports the idea of UN peacekeeping operations. The French feel they have a moral responsibility to assist suffering people and to allay civilian deaths in countries ravaged by civil war. Since May 1991, we have shown that between 70 per cent and 87 per cent of the respondents agree with the use of force: 'To intervene, under the auspices of the United Nations, for the respect of international law', 'to assist a population in distress (famine, civil war . . .)', or to 'contribute to bring peace in a region of the world.'[32] Let us note that Graham (1994) in his model of public opinion impact considers that a preponderant level of public opinion (70–79 per cent) not only causes the political system to act according to its dictates but also deters political opposition from challenging the specific decision, and, in response to a nearly unanimous opinion (more than 80 per cent), decisions appear to be automatic. Yet, do policy makers really decide to undertake certain courses of action only because of a belief that the public demands some form of action? Let us look more closely at the decision to participate in the peace operations in Somalia and in Rwanda.

On 17 November 1992, the UN Secretary General's proposal to deploy the French troops based in Djibouti to assist in the distribution of the humanitarian aid in Somalia was rejected.[33] The members of the French government were divided. The Defence Secretary at the time, Pierre Joxe, was against any type of humanitarian military operation. On the other

hand, Humanitarian Aid Secretary, Bernard Kouchner, strongly favoured such action. In the following days, the French were moved by the haunting images on television of starving people. Across the country, children brought bags of rice to school for the young Somalians. The question of France's participation in the peacekeeping operation was re-examined during a Cabinet meeting on 3 December 1992 in the President's presence. François Mitterrand resolved the dispute. France was to take part in *Operation Restore Hope*. What led him to such a decision? Was it public pressure? Was it political pressure emanating from Francophone African states, which wanted to limit US influence on the African continent? Was it political pressure emanating from the US wishing France's participation in the peace operation? Pierre Joxe explains that the President decided to participate in *Operation Restore Hope* upon receipt of a letter from George Bush. The Defence Secretary recalls that when he expressed his opposition to the mission, François Mitterrand answered: 'You're probably right, but we cannot say "no" to the Americans. They have committed themselves.'[34] Yet if François Mitterrand chose first and foremost to answer Bush's call, he was also well aware of the public's disposition towards peace operations. Most of the policy makers whom we interviewed agreed that *one* of the reasons for France's participation in *Operation Restore Hope* was to prevent public disapproval had France remained idle. Hence, public opinion was not the exclusive reason for France's participation in the peace operation yet it was factored into the decision-making process.

The situation in Rwanda was somewhat different. France's first reaction, upon learning of the death of President Juvénal Habyarimana on 6 April 1994, was to evacuate its nationals and not to intervene in the conflict. It was only when questions were raised in the media and amongst humanitarian associations about France's responsibility in the conflict that the French government started to consider a peace operation. Once again, the members of government were divided. Foreign Secretary at the time, Alain Juppé and the President's Personal Chief of Staff, General Christian Quesnot, were strongly in favour of this operation. François Léotard, Defence Secretary and Prime Minister Edouard Balladur were more reluctant. *Operation Turquoise* was nevertheless decided on 15 June. What led to this decision? 'The rise of public opinion pressure as it took the full measure of the massacres that were going on in that country', replied a close presidential adviser.[35] The President himself declared that, 'We could not see the images of what was going on in Rwanda which were brought into all the homes in Europe through the media, and let it be.'[36] Policy makers themselves, therefore, admit that public opinion acted as a catalyst to this peace operation. Yet, let us specify that the French public never expressed an outright request for a peace operation. There was no mass mobilisation, and the French were actually quite ambivalent towards the operation itself. It is in fact quite conceivable that what the political leaders feared most was that France be accused of complicity with 'genocide' or 'ethnic cleansing' at a time when the public was particularly sensitive to such terms. One of the aims of *Operation Turquoise* could very well have been to silence these accusations brought against France.

These two cases reveal that the cause and effect relationship between public opinion and the decision to participate in peace operations is thus more complex than what is often assumed. Indeed, in both cases, public opinion is factored into the decision makers' assessment of policy options, yet policy makers do not decide to participate in peace operations *only* because of a belief that the public demands some form of action. Public opinion can act as a catalyst, but it does not, by itself, have the power to force governments to launch these military operations. A detailed look at the opinion–policy nexus during the conflict in ex-Yugoslavia in fact further reveals that policy makers do not systematically respond to public opinion.

### *Symbolic actions to contain public opinion: François Mitterrand's partial concessions in ex-Yugoslavia*

François Mitterrand did realise that the level of support for France's involvement in ex-Yugoslavia was always strong. He did therefore concede to a number of symbolic gestures in order to *contain* public opinion. A first example is his call in favour of the opening of a security corridor to Dubrovnik on 10 November 1991. This humanitarian act was led by Bernard Kouchner, Humanitarian Aid Secretary at the time, on 20 November. It was undertaken 'largely under public pressure' as stated by former Secretary General Hubert Védrine.[37] It remained purely symbolic, however, since no military peace operation was then considered. During the closing press conference of the European Council, on 27 June 1992, François Mitterrand made a second concession. He admitted that, 'Serbia is today the aggressor in the Bosnian conflict even if its origin stems from faraway.' According to a close adviser, François Mitterrand regretted having to make what he considered was too summary a presentation of the Bosnian situation, but he also wanted to finally silence the criticism that had emerged in the press after an interview he gave to the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* on 29 November 1991.[38] During this interview, he had refused to name the aggressors. François Mitterrand's surprise visit to Sarajevo, on 28 June 1992, was yet a third symbolic gesture. He admitted the decisive influence of the outspoken intellectual Bernard-Henri Lévy on his decision to go to Sarajevo. Indeed, what prompted his decision was a letter that had been given to him by Bernard-Henri Lévy from President Izetbegovic.[39]

Yet, although he did concede to these symbolic measures, he did not directly yield to public pressure. He was convinced that the conflict in Bosnia could only be resolved by a political solution. Hence, while the atrocities of the ongoing ethnic cleansing drove the public to become increasingly frustrated with the government's performance in Bosnia and to favour the use of force – that is military violence – to stop the fighting,[40]

François Mitterrand always refused 'to engage France – especially alone – in any kind of war in the Balkans'.[41] When several intellectuals criticised his political choices, François Mitterrand responded: 'What do these personalities want? War? France and its army, alone, in a combat by nature deadly? Let me prefer other ways of doing things.'[42] He maintained his political orientation despite this strong movement of intellectuals and despite survey results which revealed the public's frustration. Similarly, despite a vivid debate between policy makers on the one hand, and outspoken intellectuals and journalists on the other, François Mitterrand refused to lift the arms embargo instituted on 26 September 1991 by UN resolution 713. He strongly opposed the American proposal of 'lift and strike', also upheld by French intellectuals (i.e. to lift the arms embargo on the Bosnian government and use air power against the Serbs), and chose not to yield even when this became an electoral issue during the European elections of 1994. Hence, this case study reveals that policy makers do not systematically respond to public opinion and can in fact choose to confront it when convinced of the judiciousness of their political choices.

## The executive's margin of freedom

This brief survey is by no means a comprehensive analysis of the role that public opinion plays in the decision to participate in military operations. It does, however, reveal the possible types of effects public opinion may have on the policy process and illustrates the general point that the public opinion–policy relationship is complex and variable rather than simple and constant. It challenges both the assumption of a profound automatic cause and effect relationship between public opinion and foreign policy decision making and the total lack thereof. It also reveals the leeway for decision that the French policy makers have. Indeed, although François Mitterrand prepared the French for the Gulf War and chose not to let the draftees participate in the war effort, the public did not prevent him from engaging France in the multilateral operation. Similarly, in ex-Yugoslavia the public did not drive him to change his policy orientation nor to allow the French soldiers involved in the peace operation to adopt a more offensive posture, although François Mitterrand did choose to concede some symbolic measures in order to contain public pressure and to prevent popular uprising. In Somalia, finally, he was pressed to participate in *Operation Restore Hope*, but did so very cautiously, far from the troubles of Mogadishu.

This opinion–policy nexus is also more interactive and reciprocal than unidirectional. Indeed, if the above case studies reveal that public opinion is often a constraint for policy makers, a constraint that they must factor into policy decisions, there is also a whole other dimension that must not be omitted. Policy makers can also come to use public pressure as a political tool either to convince one's own entourage or international partners. A significant example of this is the mortar that hit the Sarajevo market on 5 February 1994 and the subsequent international response. It is indeed often assumed that the public's reactions to the horrific TV images determined the decision of the ultimatum on Sarajevo. A close analysis of the decision-making process reveals that the reality is quite different.

Indeed, long before Sarajevo's massacre, Alain Juppé, Foreign Secretary at the time, was determined to take firmer action in Bosnia. Even before Christmas 1993, Juppé 'had given US Secretary of State Warren Christopher a firm message that either the US must do more to become engaged or the EU would take tougher action alone'.[43] British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd also 'traveled to Washington in the week before the massacre to reinforce the European pressure'.[44] Although the United States began to stiffen their position, the Clinton administration still resisted giving more political support to the peace efforts of the United Nations. The market massacre then occurred. The French government seized the opportunity of the emotion raised by the TV images to mobilise all its partners to demand that the Bosnian Serbs be threatened by air strikes. As White House Communications Director Mark Gearan explained, the market massacre 'helped the (French) argument'.[45] Graham Allison, Assistant US Defence Secretary at the time, confirmed that: 'France was pressing for action. The Sarajevo market massacre crystallised for the Clinton administration that it had to do something; that we could not do nothing. Those who wanted to do something seized on it.'[46] Four days later, Clinton backed NATO in issuing an unprecedented ultimatum to the Bosnian Serbs. Alain Juppé had used the alleged emotion this event sent throughout the public to convince his international partners of the necessity of an ultimatum.

## Theoretical implications – conclusion

The common assumption that suggests that French policy makers are insulated from public pressure is thus invalidated. Public opinion is indeed not completely irrelevant in the foreign policy process in France. We have in fact demonstrated in this chapter that although public opinion is rarely the exclusive factor taken into account when selecting a course of action, decision makers can nevertheless be either constrained by or motivated by public opinion in their policy choices, and can also come to use it as a political tool.

At this stage of research, it nevertheless remains difficult to determine general theoretical rules that would govern this complex opinion–policy relationship. The public's influence indeed largely depends on a number of variables that are difficult to predict, such as the issue at hand, the extent of the media coverage and the strength of the consensus among representatives of the executive branch. Indeed, whether it be in the case

of the Gulf War, Somalia or Rwanda, the public's impact increased as top decision makers (Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, Defence Secretary) disagreed amongst themselves on the best conduct to adopt. According to Hubert Védrine, some empirical rules seem nevertheless to emerge: 'If the public does not have a fixed opinion on a subject, the government can convince it of the judiciousness of its action as long as the media are not actively hostile to it and that the government has a clear vision. If the public is *a priori* fixed and the media share the same opinion, the government will not be able to reverse the situation without a sustained effort. If the government does not know what it wants, or does not dare say it, it will suffer from the cumulated weight of the public and of the media, one following the other, or vice versa.'[47] This reference to the media is not surprising. French foreign policy officials are indeed very receptive to it and consider it to be the main operational source of public opinion, far more than opinion surveys, elites or elected officials.

Let us also note that, as revealed by Thomas Risse-Kappen (1994), the public's impact in France depends almost exclusively on the degree to which the top decision makers are prepared to take its views into account. Indeed, there are, in France, few institutionalised access points for societal demands on foreign policy issues to reach the political system. Hence mass public opinion affects policy only if it reaches top decision makers, and notably the President. It is in fact often he who decides whether or not to respond to the public's demands. Hence, French policy makers do retain the power to make policy choices and to lead. Strong will, clear vision and consensus within the executive branch are nevertheless a prerequisite. Public opinion *can* exert influence on the decision to participate in military operations but whether it does, and how it does, largely depends on the government's own assertive attitude.

## Notes

1 Debray (1993: 182).
2 The first part of this article is based on a team study carried out in 1995 and published in 1996. Cf. Cohen (1996).
3 Cf. Thiéblemont (1995).
4 Cf. La Balme (1995).
5 Cf. Bruneteaux (1995).
6 Cf. Dupoirier (1992).
7 CSA for *La Vie, Les Français et l'opération militaire en Somalie et une éventuelle opération à Sarajevo*, 10 December 1992.
8 TF1/ 7–7, 24–5 June 1994.
9 CSA for *La Vie, Les Français et l'opération militaire en Somalie et une éventuelle opération à Sarajevo*, 10 December 1992.
10 CSA for *La Croix, Les Français, les conflits armées dans le monde et leur résolution*, 16 April 1993.
11 CSA for *Le Parisien, La réaction des Français face aux bombardements de l'OTAN en Serbie*, 28 March 1999.
12 CSA for *Le Parisien, La réaction des Français à la situation de guerre en Serbie*, 6–7 April 1999.
13 IPSOS for *Le Journal de Dimanche, L'opinion des Français à l'égard de la situation en Yougoslavie*, 17 April 1999.
14 BVA for SIRPA, *Le conflit en ex-Yougoslavie: l'état de l'opinion au 18 février 1994*, 18 February 1994.
15 SOFRES for *Libération, L'impact du conflit au Kosovo dans l'opinion publique française*, 27 April 1999.
16 Cohen (1996: 42).
17 Baromètre SOFRES/SIRPA, *Les Français et la défense nationale*.
18 Baromètre SOFRES/SIRPA, *Les Français et la défense nationale*.
19 IFOP for *VSD, Les Français et les événements en ex-Yougoslavie*, 15 April 1993.
20 IFOP-GALLUP for *Le Journal du Dimanche*, GALLUP US for *CNN* and *USA Today, L'intervention militaire en Bosnie: l'opinion des Français et des Américains*, 10 February 1994.
21 Baromètre SOFRES/SIRPA, *Les Français et la défense nationale*.
22 IPSOS for *Le Journal de Dimanche, L'opinion des Français à l'égard de la situation en Yougoslavie*, 17 April 1999.
23 The interview sample consists of 37 foreign policy officials – two Prime Ministers, five Foreign Secretaries (one of whom later held the position of Prime Minister), three Defence Secretaries (one of whom later held the position of Prime Minister), six close Presidential advisers (Secretary General, Adjunct Secretary General, Spokesman, Special adviser), four Prime Minister advisers, four Foreign Secretary advisers, ten Defence Secretary advisers, three Presidential (personal) Chiefs of Staff and two Chiefs of Staff. These individuals were of course not chosen randomly but rather according to the responsibilities they held and the role they played within the foreign policy process. These interviews were conducted between 1996 and 1998.
24 Remarks made at the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center, New York, 19 March 1995. Cited in Strobel (1997: 4).
25 Rapport d'information n°1950 de l'Assemblée nationale, *La politique d'intervention dans les conflits: éléments de doctrine pour la France* (1995: 21).
26 Powlick (1990: 213).
27 Védrine (1996: 540).
28 The 'Centre Kléber' is an international conference centre situated in 'rue Kléber' in Paris. During the Gulf War, the French government used the facilities of this conference centre for most of its press conferences.
29 Interview with Jean-Louis Chambon, former member of the Elysée press service, 3 April 1997.
30 Favier and Martin-Roland (1996: 465).
31 Debray (1993: 183).
32 Baromètre SOFRES/SIRPA, *Les Français et la défense nationale*.
33 Institut des Hautes Etudes de Défense nationale 1993, rapport sur *L'intérêt d'un Conseil national de sécurité*, 45ème session, p. 22.
34 Cited in Cohen (1998: 426).
35 Interview with Jean Musitelli, former Elysée spokesman, 1 April 1997.
36 Allocution de M. François Mitterrand, Président de la République, à l'occasion de la réception des ambassadeurs, Palais de l'Elysée, 31 August 1994.
37 Védrine (1996: 615).
38 Interview with Jean Musitelli, former Elysée spokesman, 1 April 1997.
39 Kouchner (1995: 39).
40 See Cohen (1996).
41 Védrine (1996: 637).

42 Vendredi, *Hebdomadaire du Parti socialiste,* 21 January 1993.
43 Gowing (1994: 71).
44 Gowing (1994).
45 Gowing (1994).
46 Gowing (1994: 72).
47 Védrine (1996: 65).

# 9 The myth of the reactive public

## American public attitudes on military fatalities in the post-Cold War period

*Steven Kull and Clay Ramsay*

### Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War a major portion of the American policy elite has perceived a major shift in the willingness of the American public to tolerate the loss of American soldiers in military operations. During the Cold War, virtually all military operations were in some way linked to the framework of the conflict with communism and thus were arguably linked to vital national interests. In the post-Cold War period, US troops have been used in a variety of operations for which the link is less direct or even arguably marginal. In such cases, it is widely believed among the US policy elite, public support for operations is, at best, tenuous and likely to collapse in the face of US troop fatalities. The public response to the deaths of eighteen US Rangers in Somalia in October 1993 is viewed as a key example. Most significant, this belief about the public appears to have had a significant impact on US foreign policy, leading policy makers to hesitate from using force when they might otherwise have done so, and when using force to do so in a more cautious fashion than would be ideal from a military perspective.

Our purposes in this chapter are two-fold. First, we will seek to demonstrate that this image of the public is indeed widespread in the American policy community and that it has had a significant impact on US foreign policy. We will make this case based on an interview study carried out with eighty-three members of the Washington foreign policy community in 1996, by public statements made by government officials, and by media interpretation of government behaviour.

Second, we will seek to demonstrate that this image of the public is largely a myth and is not sustained by available evidence. In fact, polls show little evidence that the majority of Americans are prone to respond to fatalities by wanting to withdraw US troops. If anything, the public is more likely to want to respond assertively. The critical determinant of the public's response is not whether US vital interests are involved but whether the operation is perceived as likely to succeed. This will be demonstrated