

- 42 Vendredi, *Hebdomadaire du Parti socialiste*, 21 January 1993.  
43 Gowing (1994: 71).  
44 Gowing (1994).  
45 Gowing (1994).  
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## 9 The myth of the reactive public

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

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### 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

by first analysing responses to actual fatalities in Somalia, in the Gulf War, in Saudi Arabia, and in Lebanon. Second, we will analyse the response to perceived US troop fatalities in the peacekeeping operation in Bosnia. Third, we will examine the results of extensive polling that ask respondents to assess their responses to hypothetical scenarios involving US fatalities. Finally, we will also look at public responses to US conflicts during the Cold War that involved large-scale fatalities including the peacekeeping operation in Lebanon and the wars in Vietnam and Korea to assess what they may tell us about possible responses during the post-Cold War period.

### **Elite perceptions of public reaction to US troop fatalities**

To assess elite perceptions, in addition to statements made on the public record, we will draw on a series of interviews conducted for a larger study that examined how the US policy-making community views US public attitudes on America's role in the post-Cold War world. Presented in greater detail in the book *Misreading the Public: The Myth of a New Isolationism* by Steven Kull and I.M. Destler,<sup>1</sup> these interviews were conducted in 1996 with eighty-three members of the policy community including twelve members and sixteen staff of the US Congress; nineteen officials of the executive branch (mostly State Department and National Security Council staff); eighteen journalists; and eighteen senior professionals at non-governmental organisations. They were chosen with an eye to representativeness and balance, but did not constitute a random sample of the policy community as a whole.

### ***Belief that fatalities will result in majority demand to withdraw immediately***

On the question of America's role in the world, three-quarters of interviewees expressed the view that the majority of Americans wants the US to disengage from the world. Respondents were also asked directly how they expected the public would react to US casualties in the course of participating in a UN peacekeeping operation, and how they believed the majority of the public had reacted after the deaths in Somalia.

The dominant response, given by two-fifths of all respondents interviewed and three-fifths of members of Congress and Congressional staffers was that if American troops are killed in the course of a peacekeeping operation, this would trigger a strong public demand for the immediate withdrawal of US troops. Others concurred with the view that there would be such a reflexive urge but believed that there were ways that it could be contained such as through strong leadership from Washington. Only one out of six said that the public could tolerate fatalities.

Those who held the view that the public would want to withdraw in response to fatalities stated it with considerable confidence. A prominent journalist said that in the event of fatalities, the public would want to 'remove them [troops], yes, redeploy, whatever they call it, but remove them from danger'. A reporter thought that 'the threshold for deaths and casualties in peacekeeping is almost zero. It's not exactly zero, but it's pretty darn close.'

In the interviews, members of Congress made the strongest statements about the public's reactivity to casualties. One asserted that in the event of casualties 'there'll be a very strong call across the country to get our troops out of there. And the people who were opposed to it will be more energised in their opposition.'

This readiness to withdraw in response to casualties was seen as increasing in the course of operations. A former executive branch official said, 'The tolerance for casualties diminishes as a conflict continues and as it becomes less and less clear how we're going to finish it.'

In the interviews, peacekeeping in Bosnia frequently was cited as being vulnerable to shifts in public attitudes towards withdrawal. A congressional staff member said of Bosnia, 'If [it] suddenly heats up and suddenly we have people engaged in firefights and start getting a weekly death toll, then I don't think they'd like it at all', and went on to say that this would mean that they would want to withdraw. Another congressional staff member said that a clamour to withdraw would result after relatively few American casualties: 'God forbid, something does happen in Bosnia . . . and you sustain a number of US casualties - I don't even think it has to be . . . eleven . . . I don't know what the magic number would be.' An executive branch official did not even think the public could tolerate that many: 'One American soldier dies and we're all in trouble. I think it's the biggest worry some people have in the political system about somebody getting popped in Bosnia.'

All interviewees were also asked directly for their perceptions of how the public responded to the deaths of US soldiers in Somalia in October 1993. Almost three-fourths (including *all* media respondents) said that a majority had wanted immediate withdrawal. Very small minorities made different characterisations: a few thought the public had had a conflicted response, others said the president could have built support for the existing policy had he so chosen, and even fewer thought the public wanted to 'come on stronger' and use greater force.

The view that the public wanted to withdraw was expressed with little equivocation. Asked whether most Americans had wanted the United States to pull out, a reporter exploded, 'Absolutely! Absolutely! The next morning people looked at the morning paper and said, "That's it, get out, this is stupid, this makes no sense! [sarcastically] Great! Some of our best soldiers stuck over in this God-forsaken place trying to get this tinhorn warlord and doing something that we were never told we were going to do in the first place!"'

Another journalist responded, 'In Somalia? Get out. Period. They instructed Clinton, in their fashion, to get out immediately.' A third journalist agreed, 'My impression is that they wanted to withdraw the troops at the time, and I think that any time you are in a situation similar to that that you would probably see a repeat of that sentiment.' A journalist went so far as to characterise the consensus for withdrawal as being nearly unanimous: 'They were close to 99% saying, "Get out".'

Congressional respondents described this perception as being pervasive within Congress at the time. Asked whether he thought a majority wanted to withdraw, a staff member replied, 'Oh yes, absolutely. I was heavily involved on the committee's work on that issue. Every member of the committee was overwhelmed with public revulsion - their own constituents' revulsion at what happened.' Likewise, a Democratic member of Congress, when asked whether a majority of the public had wanted to withdraw, groaned, 'Oh! God, we handed the Republicans the biggest issue that they could ever have asked for.'

The case of Somalia was cited as a key example of how an operation can have initial public support but evaporate at the sight of blood. A congressional staff member said,

Probably the biggest paradigm . . . is the way the Somalia thing turned out . . . If you recall, Somalia was initiated as a humanitarian thing, you saw the starving people on TV again. . . . People are inclined to say, 'Yeah, gee, we need to do something.' . . . However, as soon as you make it somewhat more ambitious, to start chasing warlords around and all kinds of things, we get people killed, we say, 'Well, the hell with that.'

Assertions about such public reactions have been widespread in the press. For example after the Mogadishu battle, it was widely asserted in the press that the American public was responding by wanting to withdraw US troops immediately. 'A Common Cry Across the U.S.: It's Time To Exit', headlined the *New York Times* three days after the battle.<sup>2</sup> Editorials spoke of 'public pressure for instant withdrawal', 'insistent popular . . . demands to get out of Somalia fast', and 'the crumbling of home support for any American mission at all in Somalia'.<sup>3</sup>

What is particularly interesting is how press reports about public attitudes have been immune to polling data to the contrary. As we will see below, polls did not show majority support for immediate withdrawal after the fatalities in Somalia. Nonetheless, on 8 October 1993, the *New York Times* reported that 'Public opinion polls taken since Sunday indicate that most Americans favor withdrawal now.' Just as flatly, a *San Diego Union-Tribune* article on the 10th declared: 'Should America's contingent . . . be pulled out sooner rather than later? Public opinion polls, congressional sentiment, and a flood of angry constituent phone calls . . . were answering

the latter question in resounding terms. Enraged by the sickening spectacle in Mogadishu, a solid majority of Americans and many of their representatives in Congress wanted US troops out, now.'<sup>4</sup>

Assumptions about public attitudes have been used to discount polls that find majority support for an operation. In October 1994, when US troops were in Haiti in a UN-sanctioned operation, some signs of success were evident and polls indicated modest majority support. An opinion piece in the *Phoenix Gazette* (that, incidentally, decried American vulnerability to casualties and argued for a more robust attitude) discounted the support this way:

Sen. John Glenn suggested the case for intervention could not pass the 'Dover Test', the televised return of body-bags from Port-au-Prince to the Air Force base in Dover, Del. . . . According to polls, a slim majority of Americans currently supports the operation to restore Father Aristide to power in Haiti. But Sen. Glenn is right, at least in the analytical sense: It's a near certainty the crowd will turn ugly when the mission's cost makes itself known.<sup>5</sup>

The assumption that public unwillingness to risk US troops in peacekeeping operations is embedded in a broader view that the public is going through a phase of isolationism. This view is so strong it has at times led reporters to be remarkably immune to contrary poll findings even when they have been produced by the reporters' own newspaper and, at least in one case, even when the contrary poll findings are mentioned in the article itself! Under the heading 'Cold Shoulder' an 28 October 1993 *Wall Street Journal* led with the headline 'As Global Crises Mount, More Americans Want America to Stay Home: Images From Somalia, Haiti, Revive Isolationist Mood, Put Clinton Plans at Risk'. Written from Elwood, Indiana, Wendell Wilkie's hometown, the reporter unequivocally asserted that in the wake of the Cold War the typical Americans of Elwood had returned to their 'isolationist' roots. Then, oddly, deep in the back pages of the article, surrounded by anecdotes from colourful local characters spouting isolationist rhetoric, were two short paragraphs that reported poll findings, sponsored by the *Wall Street Journal* itself, showing that 71 per cent favoured contributed US troops to UN peacekeeping and that 67 per cent favoured using them to prevent large numbers of people from starving. No poll numbers were offered to support the isolationist image. Most significantly, there was no effort to integrate the poll findings into the article, which ended with the same unequivocal assertion of rampant isolationism with which it began.<sup>6</sup>

In at least one case a reporter even asserted the existence of mythical polls. In an 8 June 1995 *New York Times* article that discussed the possibility of using US troops to redeploy UN peacekeepers in Bosnia the reporter referred to 'recent polls' showing that 'the American people' were

opposed. Of the four polls that had asked this question, one found a bare majority of 45 per cent opposed, while three others found a solid majority of 65–67 per cent in favour.<sup>7</sup>

Press reports have also taken poll questions that do not ask about casualties – for instance, questions about how closely news is being followed – and adduced them as evidence of the assumption that the public cannot withstand casualties. A September 1993 column about Bosnia in the *Los Angeles Times* (written before Mogadishu) made this amalgam: ‘Public opinion is unambiguously signalling its disinterest in accepting the costs and casualties that come from involvement in regional conflicts – in a recent poll, only 19% of respondents admitted to a close interest in Bosnia.’<sup>8</sup>

### ***Belief that national interest is key to public support***

In the interviews, the most common explanation given for why the public wanted to withdraw was that the public saw no link to the national interest and therefore could not accept casualties. One executive branch official said that, in the event of fatalities, demand for withdrawal is ‘certainly the initial reaction. . . . If it’s a peacekeeping mission in Africa, and all of a sudden the bodies pile up in Somalia, and there’s clearly a perception that this really doesn’t engage our fundamental interests, then yeah, I think that the majority of people are going to say, “Get the heck out of there”.’ Another executive branch officer explained the reaction of calling for withdrawal after the deaths in Somalia saying, ‘we sort of perceived that we didn’t have any interest, and that this was just the UN’. A member of a non-governmental agency said, ‘As we saw in Somalia, it was not perceived to be in the vital interest, and eighteen American soldiers were killed in one operation, and [Americans] said: “Bring them home”’. However, he also believed that in theory ‘if Americans are told and explained to by their president that this is a vital interest of the United States, and [the leadership] can give a compelling argument, they’ll withstand the casualties’.

This kind of reactivity was seen as being a relatively new phenomenon. A member of Congress said, ‘In World War II and in other wars, they accepted casualties. Now if, like in Somalia, twenty-something people get killed, they’re ready to call it off. They’re just not willing to accept the price of these things, as they used to.’

### ***Effect on policy***

The interviews and press reports suggest that policy makers’ assumptions about public reactivity to fatalities does indeed influence policy. This was particularly vivid in press accounts around the time of the war in Kosovo. A widely noted example was the fact that Army helicopters based in Albania were never deployed. The *New York Times* quoted a Pentagon

official as saying, ‘The Army’s concern is that this is a very dangerous mission. . . . No one thinks the mission can’t be done, but in an age when the American people believe we’re in a zero-defects war, there’s a real apprehension we’re going to bring soldiers back in body-bags.’<sup>9</sup>

After the war, some voices in the Clinton administration were explicit that fear of public reaction to casualties had driven military strategy. A ‘senior defence policy maker’ told the *Washington Post*, ‘We have gotten into this mentality where we feel the American public will cut and run if we have any casualties, and therefore we have to operate in a manner that absolutely minimises military losses.’ He went on to suggest that for the future US forces need to be structured accordingly, ‘If you think that future conflicts are going to be like Kosovo, where the American public isn’t very engaged, and the political types will be supportive only if things don’t get messy, then you need a different force structure so that you never have losses and can conduct some very conservative campaigns.’<sup>10</sup>

Press analysis has also been pervaded by the assumption that US actions are constrained by such thinking. A *Washington Post* article titled ‘Soldiering On in a War on Constraints: NATO’s Top General Works Around Politics’ stated, ‘Eighteen army soldiers perished in a botched operation in Somalia in 1993, leading Clinton to pull out US forces. The public reaction has framed Pentagon, White House and congressional views of foreign operations ever since.’ It went on, ‘The first [restriction] was that it could produce few allied casualties, a calculation NATO leaders made to hold public support. . . . As a result, [pilots] could not fly over Kosovo much in the beginning.’<sup>11</sup>

In the interviews numerous policy makers expressed concern that the policy makers’ belief in the public’s reactivity was having a deleterious effect on policy. A member of Congress said:

I’m really concerned about this. I think it’s really a major development in the United States . . . because leaders can no longer get by in engaging US in international initiatives, like wars, and expect to sustain it – because the people back home won’t, and . . . if the going gets tough, they’ll demand you quit.

Another member said, ‘That’s a dangerous circumstance, for us to have that kind of quick reaction to casualties.’ Another member of Congress said that he had ‘facetiously proposed to some of our colleagues . . . that I’m going to introduce a bill outlawing war, because the American people are not willing to accept casualties’.

At the time of the fatalities in Somalia members of Congress were perceived as shifting their positions in response to public outcry. For example, a *Washington Post* report on the views of African-American members of Congress, generally supportive of the Somalia effort, emphasised that they ‘also were affected by . . . public cries for a quick end to US involvement’,

and quoted Congressman Ronald Dellums: 'At the end of the day, [Black] caucus members are elected officials like everybody else. They respond to public opinion too.'<sup>12</sup>

In the press, the strategies and tactics of military adversaries have often been described as devised to take change US policy by taking advantage of the US public's inability to withstand casualties. 'In Somalia, Gen. Mohammed Farah Aidid sought to drag out the American engagement and wait for public opinion to turn against military involvement. General Aidid's strategy worked. After 18 Americans died in an Army Ranger raid, the Americans pulled out', stated a *New York Times* article a year after the event.<sup>13</sup> Just before the Haiti operation began, a Gannett News Service article quoted a policy expert: 'The Haitians know this. They know they don't have to win battles - all they have to do is kill a few dozen Americans.'<sup>14</sup>

In sum, the assumption found most often in the policy community is that a small number of casualties in a military operation would rapidly vitiate public support. A majority of those interviewed said that casualties would simply make most people desire an immediate withdrawal. Some respondents indicated their belief that support would be more stable if there was a direct connection to US interests. On the other hand, others made remarks implying that public support was fragile in any type of military operation.

Implicit in many of the comments was the idea that such public reactions in favour of immediate withdrawal would create an imperative to respond accordingly. Respondents described the public reaction as worrisome, not just because it could be problematic politically but because it would presumably lead to government actions that were less than optimal. The force of public opinion was portrayed as having the potential to 'overwhelm' the considered judgement of policy makers. The public's response was also seen as shaping policy inasmuch by appropriately prompting policy makers to refrain from getting involved in military operations that might lead to fatalities, because the public reaction might require the US to make a hasty and embarrassing retreat.

### **Evidence that the public is more resilient to fatalities than supposed**

We now turn to polling data to address the question of whether the public is indeed as reactive as many members of the policy elite assume. In fact polls show little evidence that the majority of Americans will invariably respond to fatalities by wanting to withdraw US troops. If anything, the public is more likely to want to respond assertively. The critical question that will determine the public response is not whether US vital interests are involved but whether the operation is perceived as likely to succeed. This pattern of response can be observed when the public has reacted

to actual US fatalities in Somalia, in the Gulf War, and in Saudi Arabia; when the public responds to (mis)perceived fatalities in Bosnia; and when the public responds to hypothetical scenarios for fatalities in Bosnia, Rwanda, Haiti and Kosovo.

### **Actual fatalities in Somalia, the Gulf War, and Saudi Arabia**

Since the end of the Cold War US troops have died from hostile fire in three operations: the peacekeeping operation in Somalia, the Gulf War, and in Saudi Arabia.

#### *Somalia*

Because the reaction to the fatalities in Somalia is seen as the quintessential case of the post-Cold War type of response we shall start with that case. Shortly after eighteen American soldiers were killed in a Somalia firefight in October 1993, television networks broadcast graphic pictures of dead GIs being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu.

The very evening following the news reports of the deaths, with these images still fresh in the minds of the American public, polls taken by ABC and CNN/*USA Today*, only 37 per cent and 43 per cent of respondents, respectively, said they wanted US troops to withdraw immediately. Three other polls taken over the next week produced similar results (see Figure 9.1).<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, it appeared that a majority of Americans favoured *increased* involvement after the firefight, at least in the short run. In polls by

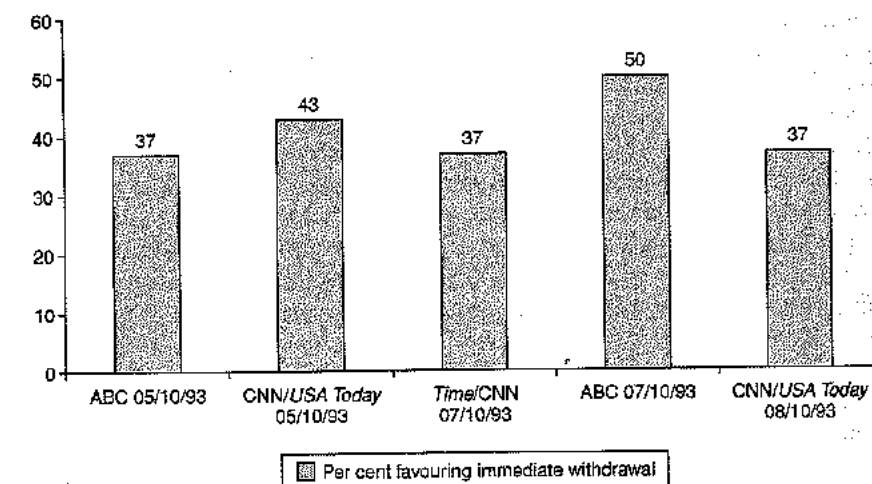


Figure 9.1 Public reaction to fatalities in Somalia, October 1993.



CNN/USA Today, ABC, and NBC, respectively, 55 per cent, 56 per cent, and 61 per cent supported sending more US troops. Seventy-five per cent favoured retaliating against Somali warlord Mohammed Farad Aidid with 'a major military attack' if American prisoners could not be released in a timely manner through negotiations, ABC found.

Several polls showed that a majority did want to withdraw at some point and did not want to stay in until the country was fully stabilised. A PIPA poll taken 15–18 October found that only 28 per cent wanted to withdraw immediately, 43 per cent supported the president's plan of withdrawing in six months, and only 27 per cent did not want to withdraw 'until we have stabilised the country, even if it takes longer than six months'. Some polls found as many as 65 per cent saying that the US should withdraw from Somalia, though when asked specifically whether this meant that the US should withdraw now, less than a majority felt such urgency.

However, it does not appear that this desire to eventually withdraw was prompted primarily by the fatalities. Earlier polls show that it was already in place before the fatalities occurred. In September 1993, 57 per cent favoured stopping US involvement in combat with Somali warlords (CNN/USA Today). Similarly, when CNN/Time asked, 'Do you think the US troops in Somalia should be responsible for disarming the rival warlords there, or should the US troops only be responsible for making sure that food is delivered to the areas affected by the famine?' only 22 per cent said troops should be responsible for disarming rival warlords, while 69 per cent said they should only protect famine relief. Thus it is not clear that the fatalities had the effect of changing attitudes, though they may have consolidated them.

Furthermore, there is evidence that after the fatalities occurred, the reason for wanting to withdraw eventually was not necessarily prompted by an unwillingness to suffer casualties, but rather by a belief that most Somalis wanted the UN and the United States to leave – not a surprising assumption after seeing the television images described above. In PIPA's October 1993 poll, 58 per cent believed that most Somalis wanted the UN and the United States to leave. When asked whether the US should leave if a substantial majority of Somalis wanted this, a resounding 88 per cent of respondents said yes (only 8 per cent said no). When asked how they would feel if most Somalis wanted the US to stay, 40 per cent still wanted to leave, but the majority, 54 per cent, said the US should remain.

Despite many Americans' doubts about the wisdom of getting involved in the civil war, and despite the fatalities, fairly strong majorities continued to support the mission. In two polls taken by CBS in October 1993 and one the following December, 64 per cent, 67 per cent and 62 per cent respectively said the US 'did the right thing' by going into Somalia. In PIPA's April 1995 poll, only 43 per cent retrospectively supported the

effort to resolve the civil war, but 82 per cent affirmed the humanitarian operation.

### *Gulf War*

Before the US began the ground war against Iraq there was widespread concern that if there were fatalities in such a war support for the war would collapse. Six weeks before the ground war began a *Washington Post* article asserted, 'Public opinion will not sustain a long and bloody engagement. If there is support for war, it is for a short one . . . [Americans'] gritty mood . . . is not likely to sustain a long, bloody or ambiguous struggle.' The authors made clear that this judgement was not based on the poll data they were reporting, but on the power of casualties to erode support. 'Post-ABC polls have found that . . . about three out of four Americans would appear to favor Bush policies or harsher measures . . . How long will that support last? The answer to those questions may lie less in what the polls currently measure than in how, if war starts, the military performs – and how many people, especially how many Americans, die . . . Analysts of public opinion disagree over exactly how much time Bush would have after the start of a war before he loses majority support. But almost all agree that he wouldn't have much.'<sup>16</sup> On 30 January 1991 eleven Marines were killed in fighting off an Iraqi incursion into Saudi territory. The *Boston Globe* reported that 'The toll prompted many at the White House, on Capitol Hill and in the military to question whether the public is ready to accept the rapid escalation in casualties that would likely result from increased ground combat.' The story quoted an expert saying: 'It doesn't matter whether we win or lose a particular battle. If the cost is heavy loss of life the American people are always going to question whether it was worth fighting.'<sup>17</sup>

One hundred and forty-eight American soldiers died in combat in the Gulf War, most of them immediately after the beginning of the ground war on 24 February 1991. These deaths had no impact on support for the war as it was progressing. During the war CBS/*New York Times* asked the trend question, 'Given the loss of life and the other costs of the war in the Persian Gulf, do you think the war to defeat Iraq is likely to be worth the cost or not?' In early February, 60 per cent thought the war would be worth the cost and 26 per cent did not. On 25 February – the day after the ground war began – those thinking the war would be worth the cost was up to 65 per cent (not worth cost: 22 per cent), and by 28 February those thinking the cost was worthwhile were up to 72 per cent (not worth cost: 17 per cent). Though this was the phase of the war when most casualties took place, during this phase support actually went up.<sup>18</sup>

Though concern for the public reaction to fatalities was high at the time, it is now common to see the Gulf War as distinctly different from most post-Cold War operations because, due to its link to oil reserves, it

had a stronger link to a narrow concept of US national interests. However, there is no clear evidence of this.

Two years later, in January 1993, when the US sent troops to Somalia support for this action was just as high as it was at the beginning of the ground war against Iraq, though there was little effort to rationalise the Somalia operation as addressing US vital interests. In January 1993 the *Los Angeles Times* found 84 per cent approving the president's decision to send US troops into Somalia; on 24 February 1991, Gallup found 84 per cent approving of the US decision to start the ground war against Iraq.

The argument that the Gulf War was popular due to its link with vital national interests, narrowly defined, is not supported by poll questions that asked about the reasons that justified military action. The principle of resisting aggression found more support in the public than the protection of energy resources as a reason to risk American lives. In November 1990 – a low point in support for military action in the Gulf – the *Los Angeles Times* asked: 'Do you think it's worth risking the lives of American soldiers in order to demonstrate that countries should not get away with aggression, or not?' Forty-eight per cent (down from 53 per cent in August) said this was worth risking lives, while 44 per cent (up from 37 per cent) said it was not. But another question in the same poll asked, 'Do you think it's worth risking the lives of American soldiers in order to protect our oil supplies, or not?' Only 29 per cent thought this was worth risking lives, while 65 per cent said it was not.

As the popularity of the Gulf War went up, the public's perception that its vital interests motivated US action dropped. More important, increased support for the war was accompanied by a *lowered* sense of the war's connection to a vital interest. Over 30 November–2 December 1990, ABC/*Washington Post* asked respondents to choose between two statements: 'The United States has sent troops to the Middle East because of the moral principle that we cannot allow Iraq or any other country to invade another', or 'because of the economic reality that we cannot let Iraq or any other country gain too much control over the flow and price of Middle Eastern oil.' A narrow majority of 48 per cent thought the US was in the Gulf because of oil, while 41 per cent thought it was there because of a moral principle. After December, support for action increased, and increased strongly once the air war began. When the question was asked again on 20 January 1991, 54 per cent said the US effort was based on the principle that no country should invade another, while only 35 per cent saw it as based on oil; on 1–4 March the responses were 56 per cent and 34 per cent, respectively.

It is commonly argued that because the Gulf War was a clear military success, the American public did not react to the US casualties suffered, and thus the Gulf War is an 'exception that proves the rule' of public reactivity. However, this argument only supports the case that success

(or its probability) is a more important factor in the public's attitudes than casualties.

### *Saudi Arabia*

One other key case in which US troops were killed in a military operation was in Saudi Arabia in June 1996. A truck bomb exploded outside apartment buildings in which US military personnel were lodged, near the Dhahran air base in Saudi Arabia, from which air patrols over Iraq were being conducted. Over 20 Americans were killed. Only one poll question (*Newsweek*, June 1996) on this subject is available – as follows:

Which one of the following statements best describes your own feelings after the killing of U.S. (United States) military personnel in Saudi Arabia this week? A. It was a mistake to send U.S. military personnel to a place like Saudi Arabia. B. It wasn't a mistake to send them, but the right thing for the U.S. to do now is bring the remaining military personnel home. C. The right thing for the U.S. to do now is maintain a military presence and support our Saudi allies.

Only 15 per cent said that sending military personnel had been a mistake, while 21 per cent said it was not a mistake, but remaining personnel should be brought home. Fifty-five per cent said the US should maintain its military presence.

Unfortunately, no polling was done before the bombing so it is not possible to determine how much the bombing influenced support. But clearly the fatalities did not lead to a majority demand for the withdrawal of troops.

### *Lebanon*

The incident in Lebanon in 1983, in which 241 American troops were killed by a terrorist truck-bomb, occurred during the Cold War and is thus outside the scope of this chapter. Nonetheless, the US was participating in a peacekeeping operation that was not directly related to the Cold War confrontation and thus may provide some analogy to the typical operations in the post-Cold War period – in fact the public at the time did not believe US participation was imperative for US interests. Also, it offers some information about how Americans might react to an incident involving hundreds of deaths.

Polls taken shortly after the truck-bomb attack on 23 October 1983 found that the majority did *not* react by wanting to withdraw – even though before the bombing, the Lebanon mission lacked majority support. On 26 October CBS/*New York Times* asked: 'What do you think the United States should do now in Lebanon – withdraw the Marines, replace those

who were killed and continue their current role there, or substantially increase the number of Marines so they can attack hostile forces?' Thirty-six per cent wanted to withdraw, 16 per cent to replace the troops, and 33 per cent to increase their numbers substantially. (A second overnight poll on 27 October found 35, 26 and 28 per cent respectively.)

A strong majority did favour an assertive response. Harris (28-31 October 1983) asked about the US 'finding out who really killed the more than 225 Marines in Lebanon, whether it was the Syrians or Iranians, and taking action against them to punish them for what they did?' Seventy-four per cent favoured this course of action.

The same Harris poll found strong agreement with arguments in support of continuing the operation. Seventy-three per cent agreed that 'If the US pulls the Marines out of Lebanon now, after we've had over 225 killed, it will look as though this country can be intimidated by terrorist tactics.' Sixty-eight per cent also agreed with the argument that 'If US Marines don't stay in Lebanon, then the present Christian government, which is friendly to the US, will probably be overthrown and a pro-Syrian, anti-US government could take over.'

All these poll results, however, only show that the majority of Americans did not respond to sudden casualties by wanting to withdraw. Other polls show that before the bombing occurred, the majority was critical of the Lebanon operation, wanted to put a time limit on it, and saw it as basically unsuccessful. Before the truck-bomb attack (but after lesser casualties) Harris (September 1983) found 47 per cent in favour and 48 per cent opposed to 'the US having Marines in Lebanon as part of an international peacekeeping force'. In the same month CBS/*New York Times* found only 36 per cent in favour of 'the government sending troops to Lebanon' 'as part of an international peacekeeping force to try to prevent fighting there', with 53 per cent opposed. In Harris' late October poll, 54 per cent agreed and 37 per cent disagreed that 'While it made sense to send US Marines to Lebanon in 1982 to be sure the PLO got safely out of Beirut, it is not at all clear why the Marines should stay in Lebanon for the indefinite future.' In a September ABC poll 62 per cent thought 'Congress should set a time limit on how long Reagan can keep the Marines in Lebanon' (should not: 28 per cent), and when asked to suppose that Congress did set a limit, the median preference was to set it at six months.

Thus - even in the case of an operation that already *lacked* public support - a single incident in which the US suffered almost double the combat deaths suffered in the entire Gulf War did not cause a majority to want to withdraw.

### ***Perceived fatalities in Bosnia***

Although no American troops have been killed due to hostile fire in Bosnia, it appears that the majority of the American public believes they have.

This offers a unique opportunity to see the effect of these perceptions on attitudes about the operation.

In February-March 1998 PIPA asked respondents 'Is it your impression that American soldiers have or have not been killed by hostile fire in Bosnia over the last year?' almost a two-thirds majority - 63 per cent - said that Americans had been killed. In reality, as of this writing, no Americans have been killed by hostile fire. Only 22 per cent of respondents knew this, while 15 per cent could not answer the question. Among those who said American soldiers have been killed, when asked to estimate how many have been killed over the last year, the median estimate was 25 deaths. A substantial number of respondents also gave estimates in the hundreds, so that the average estimate of US fatalities was 172.

Nonetheless, these perceptions did not lead to a desire to withdraw US troops. In the same poll 65 per cent said that they supported US participation in the operation. Fifty-seven per cent supported extending the missions beyond the original deadline for withdrawal.

In May 1999 PIPA re-asked the question about fatalities in the previous year. Once again a majority, in this case 56 per cent, believed that US troops had been killed. The median estimate for the number of dead was 20. Nonetheless, though most Americans perceived that the US had suffered yet another year of substantial troop fatalities, support for the operation was statistically unchanged from the previous year: 63 per cent.

Presumably, if Americans are highly sensitive to casualties, the misperception that fatalities have taken place would be an important factor in shaping their other attitudes about the Bosnia mission, and their attitudes would differ from those who know that there have been no fatalities. This follows logically from the original premise that the American public cannot withstand fatalities in an ongoing military operation. For this reason, PIPA did analyses to see if differences existed between the two groups.

What is perhaps most striking is that, in both years, there was no relationship between the perception of US fatalities and support for US participation in the Bosnia operation. Among those who believed fatalities had occurred, support was just as high as for those who believed there had not been. Also, there was no relation between the number of perceived fatalities and support. Even among those who believed that there had been more than 1,000 US fatalities support was no lower than for the general sample.

The 1998 study included a question which posed a battle scenario involving US fatalities and asked respondents what course of action they would support among four offered. According to the conventional wisdom, one might assume that those who think combat deaths have already occurred in the operation might be more inclined to cut further losses than would those who know no combat deaths have occurred. Virtually no reliable differences existed between the preferences of those who thought fatalities have really occurred, and those who knew they had not.



It could be assumed that those who believe that the Bosnia operation has already involved significant costs in American lives would be more wary of undertaking extra risks than those who know that no Americans have been killed. Respondents were asked in 1998:

There is a controversy about whether the NATO force in Bosnia should seek out and arrest the two Bosnian Serb leaders who have been charged with war crimes and turn them over to the World Court. Some say that the NATO force should arrest these leaders because they are responsible for the systematic killing of thousands of civilians. Others say that such an effort might lead to armed conflict as in Somalia, and some American troops might be killed. Do you favour or oppose having the NATO force carry out these arrests?

Again, no effect for perceived casualties was discernible. Those who believed that American troops had died in Bosnia under hostile fire were just as likely to favour the operations described in the question as were those who knew that US troops had not been killed in Bosnia.

The only case in which there was a significant difference was in the perception of the success of the Bosnia operation. In the 1998 study, among those who knew no casualties had taken place, the perception of success was 17 points higher.<sup>19</sup> However, in the May 1999 study, there was no significant difference between those who thought deaths had occurred and those who knew they had not.

### *Hypothetical scenarios*

When respondents have been asked to imagine how they would respond to a substantial number of fatalities in the course of a military operation only a small number – no more than 25 per cent – have said they would want the US to withdraw its troops. A majority has backed a vigorous response – either bringing in reinforcements or striking back at the attackers.

In a PIPA poll conducted in July 1994, respondents were asked to imagine that 25 to 100 American troops were killed in a UN peacekeeping operation in Haiti and to imagine that they had seen pictures of the soldiers' dead bodies on television. They were then asked whether they would then want to withdraw all American troops, strike back hard at the attackers, bring in reinforcements so that future attacks could be met with overwhelming force, or simply stay the course. Only 21 per cent opted for withdrawal. The majority favoured more assertive responses; bringing in reinforcements was chosen by 34 per cent, whereas 24 per cent said they would strike back hard. Also in July 1994, PIPA posed comparable scenarios for hypothetical UN operations in the civil war then in progress in Rwanda. The responses were almost exactly the same as for Haiti. No

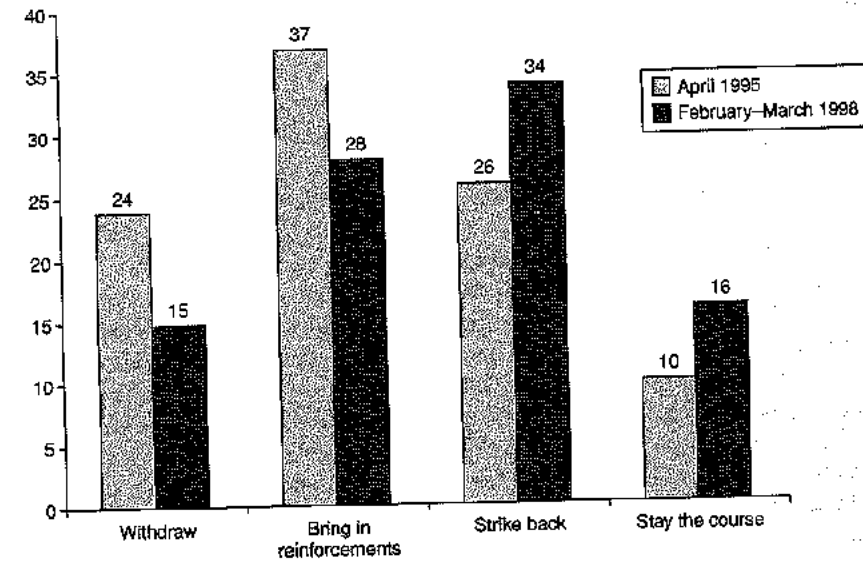


Figure 9.2 Public support for US response to a hypothetical scenario with US fatalities in a Bosnia operation (in %).

more than 21 per cent wanted to withdraw, and a fairly strong majority favoured active responses.

The situation in Bosnia has elicited similar responses. An April 1995 PIPA poll presented respondents with a scenario for a UN operation there in which 200 UN troops were killed, 100 of them American. Less than a quarter wanted to withdraw. In late winter 1998, when US troops were in Bosnia as part of the NATO operation, respondents were asked to consider a scenario with 20 US fatalities and even fewer favoured withdrawal (see Figure 9.2).<sup>20</sup>

At the time of the Kosovo War in May 1999, when the option of invading with ground troops was widely discussed, PIPA posed questions like those discussed above. Respondents were asked to imagine that 'in the course of carrying out a ground war, 50 Americans were killed in battle'. Only 20 per cent said they would want to immediately withdraw US troops. The majority backed one of the two assertive responses: 'Bring[ing] in reinforcements so that future attacks could be met with overwhelming force' was selected by 33–35 per cent, and 'strike back hard at the attackers' was chosen by 19 per cent, while 19–21 per cent elected to 'not react in any of these ways but to simply stay the course'.

Even if most Americans would not favour withdrawing troops in the event of fatalities, it is highly significant how they would feel about the original choice to undertake the operation if fatalities did ultimately occur.

A number of poll questions have tried to get at this somewhat complex issue, sometimes by asking respondents whether they would be willing to sacrifice soldiers to achieve an end. Basically, it seems that most Americans are uncomfortable affirmatively answering a poll question where they are effectively being asked to make the choice for troops to die. Also, if Americans are presented with a scenario in which it is spelled out that troops will die but no other outcome is defined, this is not an attractive proposition. However, if Americans are asked to assume that the operation succeeds, then Americans will endorse the original decision even with a surprisingly high number of fatalities.

As a general rule, many Americans resist making the explicit choice to sacrifice the lives of soldiers, even when doing so is implicit in other positions they may take. On three occasions a modest majority (averaging 53 per cent) said it would not 'be worth the loss of some American soldiers' lives to help bring peace to Kosovo' (ABC). When CNN/*Time* on 25 March asked, 'How many American lives would you be willing to sacrifice to achieve US goals in Kosovo?' 74 per cent said none.

These responses should not, however, be read to mean that most Americans would only support using ground troops in Kosovo if they were sure that no troops would be killed. In five polls conducted by four polling organisations over April-May (Pew, NBC/*Wall Street Journal*, ABC/*Washington Post* and *Newsweek*), majorities ranging from 65 to 71 per cent said they believed air-strikes would not be enough to achieve NATO objectives and that it would be necessary to intervene with ground troops. A CNN/*USA Today* poll also found an overwhelming 78 per cent predicting that US ground troops would ultimately be used. Asked how many soldiers would likely be killed, the median estimate was 15-24. Nonetheless, a substantial majority - 73 per cent in a March MSNBC poll - said they would support going into Kosovo with ground troops if it was the only way to stop the Serbs. Thus, it appears that the answer to questions about sacrificing lives is largely an artefact of the form of the question.

If the question limits the possible range of fatalities, or speaks of risking rather than sacrificing lives, this can shift the balance towards a majority (albeit slight) in favour of acceptance. Asked by Gallup on 6 April whether achieving NATO's goals in Kosovo 'is worth having a few American casualties in a limited military action', 50 per cent said that it was, while 42 per cent said that it was not. In an 8 April 1999 Louis Harris poll, 53 per cent disagreed with the statement, 'It's not worth risking American lives to bring peace in Kosovo' (41 per cent agreed). In late March, 54 per cent said it was 'worth risking the lives of American soldiers in order to demonstrate that Serbia should not get away with killing and forcing people from their homes' (*Los Angeles Times*).

When respondents are asked to evaluate a scenario in which it is spelled out that American troops would die in an operation but no other information is given about the outcome, majorities will tend to disapprove of

it. In April 1999 NPR/Kaiser/Harvard asked those who favoured intervening with ground troops in Kosovo, 'Would you still favor sending ground troops if 100/500/1,000 American soldiers were killed?' Only a small minority in all cases said they would favour doing so. When no other information is given, the value of the lives of American troops is given precedence. Also, providing information only about fatalities and not about the outcome implies that the operation is not going well. However, if the operation is explicitly portrayed as succeeding, then the respondent is being asked to weigh the value of American lives and the value inherent in the goals of the mission. In this case majorities tend to opt in favour of the value inherent in the success of the operation. In May 1999 PIPA asked respondents to 'Imagine that over the course of the ground war, 250 Americans were killed but the operation succeeded in driving Serb forces out of Kosovo so that ethnic Albanian refugees could return. Do you imagine that you would think that NATO did or did not do the right thing by going into Kosovo with ground troops?' In this context, a substantial majority (60 per cent) endorsed the choice to pursue the mission, despite the 250 fatalities posed by the question (not right thing: 33 per cent).<sup>21</sup>

In the November 1995 PIPA poll conducted in the period when the Dayton accords were being drawn up, in anticipation of US troops being sent to Bosnia, respondents were asked 'Imagine that in the course of carrying out this operation over the next year, there is an incident in which 50 American soldiers die fighting in a confrontation with a rogue band that resists the peace agreement. But overall, the operation succeeds in maintaining the peace and stopping ethnic cleansing.' In this case, 60 per cent said they would feel that 'in contributing US troops to the operation' the US 'had done the right thing', whereas 32 per cent said they would feel that the US 'had made a mistake'.

Even when respondents were asked to imagine scenarios involving substantial US fatalities, a majority supported action if it would stop ethnic cleansing. In the April 1995 PIPA poll respondents were asked to imagine that in the course of intervening to stop ethnic cleansing, 'the Serbs put up strong resistance and in the course of the conflict 10,000 UN troops were killed, 3,500 of them Americans'. But respondents were also told that the effort, notwithstanding these losses, ultimately succeeded in pacifying the region and stopping ethnic cleansing. In this case, 60 per cent said they would feel that the UN had 'done the right thing by threatening to intervene', while 29 per cent said they would feel it had been a mistake.

## Conclusion

The conclusion of this analysis is not that Americans are unaffected by the loss of American troops. Indeed, Americans do care deeply about the lives of their soldiers. What it does demonstrate is that Americans do not

and are not likely to respond reflexively to losses by wanting to withdraw from a military operation. As we have seen, support for continuing an operation is likely to be sustained provided that the public has support for the operation in the first place and believes that it is likely to succeed. If these conditions are not met, then it is possible that fatalities will contribute to a decline in support for the operation and even a desire to withdraw. However, even when confidence in a mission is low, this will not necessarily lead to a desire to withdraw. A majority has expressed a lack of confidence that the Bosnia mission will succeed; nonetheless, a majority supports US participation.

It is probable that fatalities will heighten public awareness of an operation and will lead to greater scrutiny and thus increase the likelihood that Americans will develop reservations. But it will not necessarily lead to a lowering of support even at high levels of casualties. John Mueller (1973) has analysed support for the wars in Korea and Vietnam and did find that support did decline, logarithmically, in tandem with increases in casualties. However, it is not clear that this is a direct relationship, as some have tried to argue.<sup>22</sup> Large-scale fatalities did not diminish support in World War II even though the public was slow to support the original idea of entering into that war. In Korea and Vietnam it is more likely that support diminished as the public came to question the purposes of the wars and their likelihood of success.

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine all aspects of the US public's reaction to US troop fatalities. However, this review of existing evidence does severely challenge the widespread view that in response to US troop fatalities in a military operation that is not closely tied to a narrow definition of the national interest, public support for the operation will necessarily drop precipitously and a majority of the American public will reflexively respond by wanting to withdraw US troops.

## Notes

- 1 The full detail of this study can be found in Kull and Destler (1999).
- 2 B. Drummond Ayres Jr, 'A Common Cry across the U.S.: It's Time to Exit', *New York Times*, 9 October 1993.
- 3 'Middle Course in Somalia', *Washington Post*, 8 October 1993; and 'Out of Somalia', *Washington Post*, 15 October 1993.
- 4 Douglas Jehl, 'Clinton Doubling U.S. Force in Somalia, Vowing Troops Will Come Home in Six Months', *New York Times*, 8 October 1993, A1; Robert J. Caldwell, 'Somalia: A Rescue Mission Turns Ugly', *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 10 October 1993, G1.
- 5 Jacob Weisberg, 'Zero Tolerance for Casualties in War; Nation Suffers from an Inability to Reason About Risk', *Phoenix Gazette*, 13 October 1994, B7.
- 6 Robert S. Greenberger, 'Cold Shoulder', *Wall Street Journal*, 28 October 1993.
- 7 Elaine Sciolino, 'Clinton's Policy on Bosnia Draws Criticism in Congress', *New York Times*, 8 June 1995. Polls referred to here are NBC/*Wall Street Journal*, 6 June 1995, 46 per cent opposed; *Newsweek*, 2 June 1995, 66 per cent in favour;

CNN/*USA Today*, 6 June 1995, 70 per cent in favour; *Time/CNN*, 2 June 1995, 65 per cent in favour.

- 8 Jonathan Clarke, 'U.S. Manifest Destiny is Now at Home: But Policy-Makers are Stuck in Cold War Mentality, Seeking a Mission to Replace Communism', *Los Angeles Times*, 21 September 1993, B7.
- 9 Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, 'Pentagon Withholds Copters from Battlefields in Kosovo', *New York Times*, 16 May 1999, sec. 1, p. 1.
- 10 Bradley Graham, 'War Without "Sacrifice" Worries Warriors', *Washington Post*, 29 June 1999, A12.
- 11 Dana Priest, 'Soldiering On in a War of Constraints; NATO's Top General Works Around Politics', *Washington Post*, 30 May 1999.
- 12 Kevin Merida and Kenneth S. Cooper, 'As the Crisis Grows, the Support of Black Politicians Fragments', *Washington Post*, 9 October 1993.
- 13 Michael R. Gordon, 'Pentagon's Haiti Policy Focuses on Casualties', *New York Times*, 6 October 1994, A8.
- 14 John Omicinski, 'For Americans, A Haiti Invasion Would Be All About Casualties', Gannett News Service, 13 September 1994.
- 15 Co-ordinates for Figure 9.1, Public reaction to fatalities in Somalia, October 1993:

(1) ABC, 5 Oct. 1993

The ABC 37 per cent for immediate withdrawal is based on two questions: 64 per cent who said in the first question that the US should pull out its troops 'very soon' were then asked, 'Immediately, before the end of the year, or what?' Only 58 per cent of the subgroup said they wanted this to happen immediately.

1a. Question: Do you think the United States should keep troops in Somalia until there's a functioning civil government there that can run things, or do you think the US should pull its troops out of Somalia very soon, even if there is no functioning civil government in place there?

Responses:	
Keep troops in Somalia	28 per cent
Pull troops out of Somalia	64
No opinion	8

1b. Question: How soon do you think US (United States) troops should be removed from Somalia - immediately, before the end of the year, or what?

Responses:	
Immediately	58 per cent
Before the end of the year	38
Longer than year's end (into 1994)	2
No opinion	2

(Asked of those who said US troops should be removed very soon even if there is no functioning civil government (64 per cent))

Source: ABC News. National adult sample, N = 509. Telephone survey, 5 October 1993.

(2) CNN - *USA Today*, 5 Oct. 1993

Question: In your view, what should the United States do now in Somalia?: One: Withdraw US troops right away. Two: Gradually withdraw US troops. Three: Keep US involvement the same. Four: Increase US military commitment.

<i>Responses:</i>	
Withdraw troops right away	43 per cent
Gradually withdraw troops	26
Keep involvement same	7
Increase military commitment	18
Don't know/Refused	5

*Source:* Gallup Organisation for Cable News Network, *USA Today*. National adult sample, N = 525. Telephone survey, 5 October 1993.

(3) *Time* - CNN, 7 Oct. 1993

Question: Here are a few questions concerning the recent events in Somalia, in which US (United States) soldiers have been killed or taken prisoner by Forces controlled by a Somali warlord. . . . How should the United States respond to the fighting that has broken out in Somalia? Should the US send more troops to Somalia, keep the same number of troops, remove all its troops from Somalia within the next six months, or remove all its troops immediately?

<i>Responses:</i>	
Send more troops	25 per cent
Keep current number of troops	6
Remove all troops in next six months	28
Remove all troops immediately	37
Not sure	4

*Source:* Yankelovich Partners Inc. for *Time/Cable News Network*. National adult sample, N = 500. Telephone survey, 7 October 1993.

(4) ABC, 7 Oct. 1993

Question: What would be your preference - to have all US (United States) troops withdrawn from Somalia immediately, by 31 March (1994), or sometime after 31 March?

<i>Responses:</i>	
Immediately	50 per cent
31 March	33
Some time after 31 March	9
Not at all (vol.)	3
No opinion	5

*Source:* ABC News. National adult sample, N = 506. Telephone survey, 7 October 1993.

(5) CNN - *USA Today*, 8 Oct. 1993

Question: In your view, what should the United States do now in Somalia - One: Withdraw all US troops now. Two: Withdraw US troops over the next six months, or Three: Keep troops in Somalia until our humanitarian mission has been accomplished.

<i>Responses:</i>	
Withdraw now	37 per cent
Withdraw in six months	27
Keep troops in Somalia	31
No opinion	5

*Source:* Gallup for CNN/*USA Today*. National adult sample, N = 1019. Telephone survey, 8 October 1993. *Source of this figure:* Kull and Destler (1999: Fig. 4-3).

- 16 Richard Morin and E. J. Dionne Jr, 'Vox Populi: Winds of War and Shifts of Opinion', *Washington Post*, 23 December 1990, C1.
- 17 Stephen Kurkjian, 'Public Reaction: Marines' Toll Spurs Officials to Worry About Support', *Boston Globe*, 1 February 1991, 6.
- 18 John Mueller (1994: 77) has argued that 'Actually, there is evidence to suggest that there was some erosion of war support during the course even of the Gulf War with its low casualties . . . the percentage calling American involvement in the conflict a mistake grew by some 5 percentage points between the beginning of the air war on January 16 and early February . . . This erosion was undone by a rally effect when the ground war was initiated on February 23.' He himself points out, however, that this possible decline in support is not borne out by trend questions which ask about approval or disapproval of having gone to war: these questions show high and stable support. Also, the 5-point drop in the one question on which Mueller bases this argument occurred during the air war phase, when casualties were few, while the rise in support occurred during the ground war, when casualties were greatest. Therefore, the 5-point drop in one question cannot be attributed to the erosion of support through cumulative casualties.
- 19 Perception of success was measured by response to the question: 'Do you believe that sending US and other NATO forces to Bosnia has improved the chances of finding a way to permanently end the fighting there, or not?' In February-March 1998, 49 per cent said that it had improved the chances and 43 per cent said it had not; in May 1999, the figures were 47 per cent and 46 per cent respectively.
- 20 Coordinates for Figure 9.2 *Public support for US response to a hypothetical scenario with US fatalities in a Bosnia operation.*

(1) PIPA, April 1995

'I would like you to imagine that in the course of doing this one side put up a sharp resistance and a conflict ensued in which 200 UN troops were killed, 100 of them American. Imagine that you saw the bodies of the Americans on television. What do you imagine you would want to do in these circumstances?'

Withdraw all American troops	24 per cent
Bring in reinforcements so that future attacks can be met with overwhelming force	37
Strike back hard at the attackers	26
Not react in any of these ways but stay the course'	10

(2) PIPA, February-March 1998

'I would like you to imagine that at some point NATO peace-keeping troops have a confrontation with an organised group resisting the Dayton peace agreement. Imagine that this confrontation becomes violent and some NATO troops are killed including 20 Americans. Imagine you saw the bodies of the Americans on television. What do you imagine you would want to do in these circumstances: (Randomised order)

Withdraw all American troops	15 per cent
Bring in reinforcements so that future attacks can be met with overwhelming force	28
Strike back hard at the attackers	34
Not react in any of these ways but stay the course'	16

Source of this figure: Kull and Destler (1999: Fig. 4-4).

- 21 To test for effects from the number of casualties posed, half the sample heard 25 killed and half heard 250 killed. Among those who heard 25 killed, 65 per cent thought they would feel NATO had done the right thing (not done right thing: 32 per cent) (Kull 1999).
- 22 Erik V. Larson (1996) argues that the American public makes a cost-benefit analysis when assessing a mission and that casualties necessarily increase the costs and thus diminish the level of support. Steven Kull critiques this argument in a review of Larson's book in *Public Opinion Quarterly* (vol. 64, no. 4, December 1997, 672), pointing out that support for an operation can actually increase concurrent with fatalities as it did in the Gulf War, provided that the operation is perceived as succeeding. Also once troops are committed and losses are taken, this can create an incentive to make sure that the lives were not lost in vain.

## 10 War without bloodshed?

### Public opinion and the conflict over Kosovo

*Philip Everts*

#### Introduction

The conflict over Kosovo in 1999 and the military actions undertaken by NATO and company in that context can be seen – as the critics would see it – as the last typical war of the twentieth century, but also as the first of the twenty-first – as NATO would like to portray it. In the former view it was only the most recent manifestation of a traditional struggle over power and influence in the Balkans, over competing nationalist claims and incompatible definitions of identity and nationhood. In the latter definition it is the first of a new kind of international use of force, not aimed at protecting or furthering traditional national interests, but at protecting people and their fundamental rights. Protagonists of this humanitarian interpretation like Messrs Clinton and Blair would like to see it as paradigmatic and as a model for the future. One essential condition for that to happen is that there should be public support for such military operations, which is what concerns us here. More than in any earlier recent conflict, the question of the degree of public support for the various options and strategies available has taken a central place in the public debate and the calculations of decision makers.

The evolution of international involvement in the crisis and conflict has clearly shown, again, the complexity of the relationship between public opinion and decisions to use military force. More generally, it has emphasised the intricate ways in which contemporary democracies deal with the eternal tensions between the demands of peace and the demands of justice. Clearly, the public, stimulated by media reporting, is horrified, be it often selectively, by real or perceived injustices and violations of human rights, and demands from their governments 'to do something about it'. At the same time, there are enormous variations in what are seen as the best ways to deal with these problems, particularly when the question of the use of force arises. Governments may be mistaken in thinking that public opinion acts as a narrow constraint on the use of military force for purposes other than the protection of immediate national interests. But they can also be forgiven for thinking so since a superficial reading of the data often