

Casualty Aversion

Implications for Policy Makers and Senior Military Officers

MAJ CHARLES K. HYDE, USAF

Editorial Abstract: In this article, both a survey of casualty-aversion studies and an analysis of the American casualty-awareness syndrome, Major Hyde argues for a clear recognition of what drives casualty consciousness on the part of political and military decision makers and the civilian populace at large. Involving more than reaction to alarming numbers or pictures, this consciousness is part of a calculation of perceived benefits as portrayed in our democratic process. More importantly, the author addresses the negative implication that unwarranted casualty aversion potentially has on operational planning and execution. In essence, casualty aversion leads to casualty displacement because those who should take on the casualty burden fundamental to their mission and professional ethos shift that obligation to others who have inherited a more vulnerable situation.

THE EVENTS OF the last one hundred years have witnessed dramatic changes in American foreign policy and, in particular, the use of force in support of national objectives. From a sleeping giant with overt isolationist tendencies prior to World War II, the United States has evolved at the beginning of the twenty-first century into the world's only superpower. The transition from a body politic wedded to the charge of George Washington's farewell address that we should avoid "entangling alliances" to a recognized superpower with global interests and responsibilities has been marked by the commitment of the United States to stand up for its values and principles with military might. This might, in combination with other elements of national power, defeated Nazism and Japanese hegemony in World War II and hastened the end of the cold war, which saw the collapse of Soviet-dominated communism and global bipolar confrontation.

The end of the cold war, however, unleashed an uncertain world that has not developed into a new world order or seen the end of conflicts. Challenges to the interests of



the United States and free people around the world remain, and the United States is currently positioned as the only nation with the global capabilities and power to provide leadership for an uncertain future. As stated in *A National Security Strategy for a New Century*, "Our nation's challenge—and our responsibility—is to sustain that role by harnessing the forces of global integration for the benefit of our own people and people around the world."¹ In order to meet these challenges and remain the "world's most powerful force for peace, prosperity and the universal values of democracy and freedom" that the president's strategy champions,² the United States has to show leadership in an anarchical world by acting like a great power.

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of global communism, many countries have challenged the ability of the United States to maintain its position as world leader. Conventional wisdom has it that the United States is unwilling to commit the military power required to influence events, settle disputes, and act as the force for democracy, peace, and economic freedom that our national strategy promulgates. The perception among our enemies and allies alike is that the American public is unwilling to commit to any military operation in which one can expect even a minimal number of casualties. Furthermore, they believe that once an enemy engages the United States, it can force the latter to withdraw from its commitments when American casualties mount. Because of our casualty aversion, in the eyes of the world, we are becoming "a sawdust superpower."³

In light of the changing environment in which military and security policy is conducted, the Triangle Institute for Strategic Studies (TISS) recently conducted a study on civil-military relations. As part of that study, several scholars studied casualty aversion and concluded that the American public is far more tolerant of potential casualties than are policy makers or senior military officers. In a *Washington Post* article, two of the principal TISS researchers stated that the common belief that the American public demands "a

casualty-free victory as the price of supporting any military intervention abroad" is a myth.⁴

If true, the TISS findings have significant implications. Does a casualty-aversion syndrome exist? If so, what are the implications for policy makers and senior military commanders? In the broadest sense, these are the issues examined in this article. TISS data is consistent with research that sheds light on the casualty-aversion issue. By examining the existing body of research, this article argues that policy makers and senior military leaders have misinterpreted the public's casualty tolerance and that their incorrect view of casualty aversion adversely affects national security and military operations.

Casualties and Public Opinion

Do our civilian and military leaders have a sound case for believing that public opinion is linked to the number of casualties suffered in a military operation? Several RAND studies have examined this issue by consolidating available research and drawing conclusions based on the data. The first significant report, published in 1985, used Korea and Vietnam as case studies.⁵ The overall decline of public support over time in Korea and Vietnam shows that public support in both wars "behaved in a remarkably similar manner: Every time U.S. casualties went up by a factor of ten, support in both wars decreased by approximately 15 percent."⁶ Likewise, comparing public support for Vietnam with the cumulative costs of the war leads to the conclusion one would hope for in a civilized society: "The most significant costs to the American people were the number of American boys killed and wounded in Vietnam."⁷ Finally, analyzing monthly casualty rates indicates "a strong negative correlation (-.68) was shown to exist between monthly casualty rates and president Truman's popularity in the Korean War."⁸ In a companion finding, President Lyndon Johnson's popularity was negatively correlated to the monthly number of Americans killed in action and the number of bombing sorties over Vietnam.⁹

The research documented in the 1985 RAND study concluded that the public was sensitive to casualties and gradually withdrew its support of military operations in Korea and Vietnam, based on the cumulative number of casualties. The study made a significant contextual point of the limited-war environment in which these conflicts took place. Analysis of the data by RAND researchers led to the conclusion that “the public tends to be unwilling to tolerate anything more than minimal costs in limited war situations.”¹⁰ From this perspective, it is easy to discern the roots of a casualty-aversion syndrome. Were this the only research, it would be difficult to refute the common belief among our policy makers, senior military leaders, allies, and enemies that casualty aversion is the Achilles’ heel of the United States. The study, however, did not address several key variables: the reasons underlying the support for relatively high casualties for a significant length of time, the impact of public disapproval on alternative courses of action, and the impact of other variables that could have influenced public opinion.

Another RAND study by Benjamin Schwarz in 1994 dealt with the question of alternative courses of action that the public may have supported in the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf Wars.¹¹ This report analyzed the earlier study’s conclusion that the American public is casualty-averse and postulated that the perceived casualty aversion affected regional deterrence strategies. If adversaries believe they can defeat America or force it to withdraw from a military intervention by imposing casualties on US forces, “then they are unlikely to be deterred by U.S. threats to intervene.”¹² This fear emerged prior to the Gulf War, when Saddam Hussein remained undeterred and boasted to the US ambassador to Iraq on 25 July 1990 “about Iraq’s readiness to fight any foe over honor, ‘regardless of the cost,’ while America, unable to stomach ‘10,000 dead in one battle’ was incapable of pursuing a major war to a successful conclusion.”¹³ Saddam was wrong, but his perception of American casualty aversion hurt our ability to deter Iraqi aggression.

Schwarz contends that the public became “disillusioned” with America’s participation in Korea and Vietnam and regretted the decision to intervene but actually rejected withdrawal in favor of escalation of the conflicts. He states that “there was, however, very little movement in the percentage of Americans polled who wished the United States to withdraw from the conflict. In fact, a growing number of Americans favored escalation of the conflicts to bring them to a quick—and victorious—end.”¹⁴ Backing up this assertion was selective polling data showing that a majority of Americans supported escalation over withdrawal in Korea and Vietnam and preferred escalation of US war aims in the Gulf, including the removal of Saddam from power. Rather than fitting the American casualty-aversion perception, this data implies the opposite.

In 1996 Eric Larson completed a comprehensive RAND study that attempted to explain the disparity among research studies conducted up to that year.¹⁵ He examined the results of public-opinion polls taken from World War II through the military intervention in Somalia, seeking to determine if other variables accounted for the differences in support documented in US military interventions. The conventional wisdom, alluded to earlier, is that the American public has changed since World War II and will no longer accept interventions that produce casualties. A perceived corollary is that Americans will demand immediate withdrawal when casualties mount during operations. Larson investigated these issues by developing a model explaining public support for military interventions in terms of a broader context.

Larson’s model weighs the dynamics of public support within a simple calculation of ends and means. In this model, the public bases support for an intervention on a rational consideration of five factors:

- Perceived benefits of the intervention.
- Prospects for success.
- Prospective and actual costs.
- Changing expectations.

- Leadership and cueing from political leaders.¹⁶

This simple calculus captures the many variables that interact to produce public support. Using this approach means that “support can be thought of as a constant rebalancing of the benefits and prospects for success against the likely and actual costs—and a determination of whether the outcome is judged worth the costs.”¹⁷

This model of ends and means is embedded within the concept of a “democratic conversation.” The argument, supported by research, states that “political leaders lead the democratic conversation, the political discourse . . . is observed and reported by the media, [and] as members of the public are exposed to these messages, attitudes change in a predictable fashion.”¹⁸ This does not imply that society is a pawn in the hands of wily politicians but that the public takes cues from credible political leaders who have a similar worldview or political ideology. “In short, individuals ultimately choose which arguments are most credible but use a shortcut that reduces their information-gathering costs.”¹⁹ The implication is that public casualty aversion does not drive support for military interventions. The public is able to rationally discern the merits of each individual case and make an informed determination of support, based on expectations, benefits, prospects, and costs.

Using this conceptual framework, Larson determined that the American public has not become more casualty-averse since World War II. Indeed, Americans have always had a high regard for human life, but they balance that regard within a continuous cost-benefit analysis which ultimately determines support. It is only logical that increasing costs in terms of casualties will result in a decline in public support unless an increase in the benefits or prospects for success offsets that cost. This explains the differences in support for various interventions since World War II and also explains the general decrease in support over

time as casualties mount in a particular operation. As the RAND study states,

Less well understood, however, is the fact that the importance of casualties to support has varied greatly across operations; when important interests and principles have been at stake, the public has been willing to tolerate rather high casualties. In short, when we take into account the importance of the perceived benefits, the evidence of a recent decline in the willingness of the public to tolerate casualties appears rather thin.²⁰

One sees World War II as a departure point with regard to casualty aversion because of the extremely high levels of support despite enormous losses (table 1).

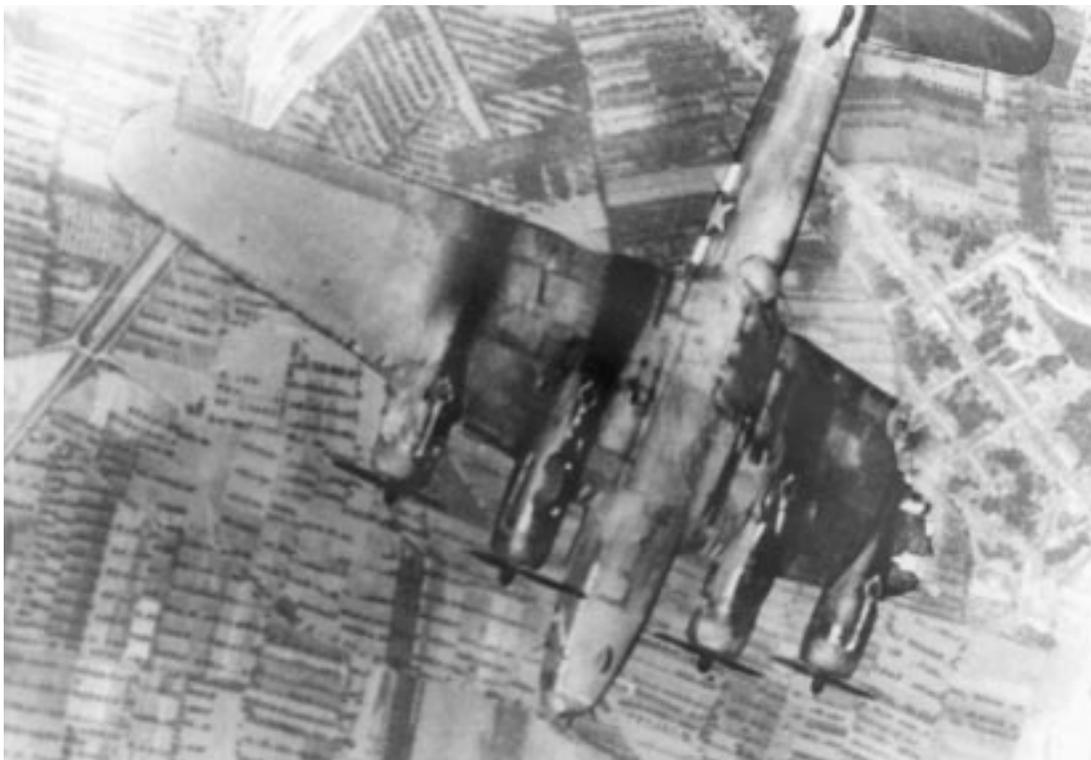
Table 1
US Personnel Killed in Action (KIA)

<i>Conflict</i>	<i>Total KIA</i>
World War II	291,557
Korea	33,651
Vietnam	47,364
Grenada	16
Panama	24
Persian Gulf	293

Source: Figures taken from Karl W. Eikenberry, “Take No Casualties,” *Parameters* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 113.

In light of the casualty figures, World War II appears to be an exception—in some way different from the limited conflicts of the cold war and recent interventions characterized by a decline in support as costs increased. In fact, one can attribute the nearly consistent public support despite dramatically rising casualties in 1944 and 1945 to the increasing prospects for victory, based on battlefield accomplishments in Europe and the Pacific, anticipated benefits of unconditional surrender, and near-unanimous political support from both parties. “In short, as the costs increased, these costs were compensated by increasing war aims and prospects for success.”²¹

Likewise, polling data from Korea and Vietnam supports the assertion that the public weighed the merits of each intervention, using a cost-benefit analysis. Both wars started



Heroic efforts undertaken during World War II reflect a cost-benefit analysis by the American public.

with a significant level of support, based on the important US interest of “containing communist expansion,” and both “contained the risk of a dramatic increase in costs if there were to be an expansion of the war to involve China or Russia.”²² In Korea, support increased as the prospects for success rose after Inchon, the potential benefit including a unified peninsula. Conversely, after the Chinese intervention, support declined, based on dimming prospects for gains beyond the status quo. As a stalemate developed, political opposition increased, and public support declined. The RAND study of 1996 noted that although casualty costs were important in declining support, “their influence cannot be untangled from these other factors.”²³

Support for the Vietnam conflict also mirrors the ends-and-means calculus reflected in the Korean War. Dwindling prospects for success as the war continued, a decrease in the

perceived benefit of containing communism and improving relations with China, and the dramatic division among political leaders all led to decreasing support for the war. Casualties, although important, were not the sole determinant of public support, suggesting a potential problem with conventional wisdom which asserts that the American public will demand immediate withdrawal when casualties rise.

In both Korea and Vietnam, America continued the struggle long after support for the interventions had declined below 50 percent. There was no consensus or immediate withdrawal or escalation to victory. What happened? In essence, the American public weighed the ends and means and supported a policy of negotiated settlement and orderly withdrawal. Larson points out that only a minority of the populace supported the extreme positions of immediate withdrawal or

escalation, "while pluralities or majorities ('the Silent Majority') occupied a centrist position."²⁴

If Korea and Vietnam fit within the framework of ends and means, as well as democratic conversation about support for military interventions, then Somalia becomes the chief evidence of those who proclaim that the public, swayed by Cable News Network (CNN), will cut and run at the first sign of blood. Analyzing the "CNN effect" is beyond the scope of this article, but detailed research indicates that rather than setting the agenda, CNN reports responded to the actions of the White House, Congress, and the State Department²⁵ in a manner consistent with democratic conversation.

Common perception has it that the death of 18 US soldiers in Somalia in October 1993 caused the public to demand immediate withdrawal from that country. This view misses the fact that support had already collapsed *before* the firefight in Mogadishu, with only 40 percent of the public supporting the operation.²⁶ Changing expectations caused by the shift in mission focus from popular humanitarian objectives to nation building and warlord hunting, combined with congressional "cues" against the operation (both houses of Congress passed nonbinding resolutions calling on the president to articulate his objectives and exit strategy in September 1993)²⁷ had already doomed the intervention. Larson states that

Somalia represents another case in which the historical record suggests a more sensible and subtle response to increasing casualties and declining support: A plurality or majority has typically rejected both extreme options of escalation and immediate withdrawal and has remained unwilling to withdraw until a negotiated settlement and orderly withdrawal—including the return of U.S. servicemen—could be concluded.²⁸

Thus, recent research supports the contention that the public does not demand bloodless interventions as the starting point for securing national interests and exercising world leadership, as articulated in our *Na-*

tional Security Strategy. The public has consistently operated within the realm of an ends-and-means evaluation with significant cues from political leaders who frame the public debate.

The Casualty Myth

If the public is not casualty-averse, as the evidence suggests, the focus turns to the misinterpretation of this fact by our national security leadership. The TISS study provides strong evidence that policy makers and senior military leaders believe that the American public is casualty-averse and will not tolerate deaths except when vital interests are at stake. The study reached this conclusion by posing three plausible intervention scenarios (defending Taiwan against a Chinese invasion, preventing Iraq from acquiring weapons of mass destruction, and stabilizing a democratic government in the Congo) to senior military officers, influential civilian leaders, and the general public and by asking them to consider how many American deaths would be acceptable to complete each mission (table 2).

Table 2
Number of Deaths Acceptable

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

Source: Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, "A Look at Casualty Aversion: How Many Deaths Are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer," *Washington Post*, 7 November 1999, B3.

As the authors point out, one must interpret these averages in general terms and must realize that they do not necessarily reflect the actual casualties the public will accept once real soldiers start dying. But the "sheer numbers" and "dramatic differences" between the groups are significant.²⁹ More importantly, they are consistent with the previous research that explained public support in terms of ends and means and the democratic conver-

sation. The Taiwan case is a holdover from the cold war and represents deep-rooted American sentiment for the Nationalist Chinese and the “long-standing commitment to defend Taiwan.”³⁰ Many Americans associate defending Taiwan with resisting communism and defending democracy—links that go back to the cold war and World War II, which the public considers very important, if not vital, national interests. It is not surprising, therefore, to find consensus on the costs that all three groups are willing to accept to accomplish the mission.

The Iraq and Congo cases are examples of post-cold-war interventions which have sparked the contention that the American public is casualty-averse. The Iraq case is significant because it demonstrates the effectiveness of leadership and cueing from public leaders. According to the poll, civilian elites claim willingness to accept over three times as many deaths as do military elites. The democratic-conversation model predicts that broad-based support from civilian leaders will influence public opinion. The extremely large number of deaths that the public indicated it would be willing to accept is consistent with the democratic-conversation concept—despite the fact that the reported results from TISS did not imply a direct link between civilian leaders and the public. Feaver and Gelpi postulate that the public’s willingness to accept more casualties in Iraq than Taiwan “may reflect lingering traces of successful Bush-Clinton efforts to demonize Saddam Hussein combined with Clinton’s attempts to pursue a conciliatory policy toward China.”³¹ This rationale is also consistent with the premise that cues from public leaders influence and aid the public. The fact that right-center and left-center ideologues from the general public received similar anti-Saddam cues from Bush and Clinton supports the role of leadership in the ends-and-means model.

The Congo scenario arguably encompasses the least vital interests of the three prospective interventions. Likewise, it remains consistent with RAND research predicting that the public will tolerate fewer casualties if the ben-

efits and prospects are not as great. The data shows that the public would tolerate roughly only one-third to one-fourth as many deaths as compared to the Taiwan and Iraq averages. But we must not miss the point that the public was willing to accept *over sixty-eight hundred deaths* to accomplish the mission. The researchers stated that “the public’s estimates for the mission to restore democracy in the Congo were much lower, but were nonetheless substantial. In fact, they were many times higher than the actual casualties suffered by the U.S. military in all post-Cold War military actions combined.”³² The cumulative weight of evidence provided by TISS research is consistent with past public opinion on the role of casualties in prospective or actual conflicts and supports the contention that policy makers and senior military leaders have attributed to the public an aversion to casualties that does not, in fact, exist. The number of deaths that the public indicated it would accept was, in all cases, more than those specified by civilian and military elites. The magnitude of the disparity, as mentioned earlier, has implications for national security and military operations.

Implications for Policy Makers

Our current national security strategy calls for both engagement in the international arena and the use of economic, diplomatic, informational, and military instruments of national power to shape an environment with multiple centers of regional power.³³ In the absence of cold-war-type threats to our national existence, engagement is an attempt by our civilian leadership to prevent the development of pariah states, such as Germany and Japan after World War I, and to reduce the potential for a multifaceted conflict with a nuclear-armed power. These goals are threatened, however, not by a lack of national resources, but by the casualty-aversion myth working among our policy makers and senior military leaders.

The perception among civilian elites—the policy makers who determine national strategy—that the public is casualty-averse

hinders coercive diplomacy and limits military options in support of our national strategy. In fact, James Nathan argues in "The Rise and Decline of Coercive Statecraft" that Clausewitz has been turned "on his head" and that the "current policy theory reverses the Clausewitzian insistence of the supremacy of policy over any autonomous logic attendant to arms."³⁴ Nathan contends that policy makers have surrendered to the [Caspar] Weinberger Doctrine and [Colin] Powell restrictions on the use of force and that the military has an effective veto over policy options that fall short of vital interests. This flies in the face of a security strategy that champions engagement at a level significantly below vital interests in order to shape the international environment. The effort to shape the environment specifically calls for military actions to prevent challenges to vital interests in the first place.

Nathan contends that the unwillingness of our policy makers to use force to back up diplomacy enfeebles such efforts: "Without a credible capability to use moderate force, fate rather than statecraft determines the future."³⁵ When tyrants see that our statecraft is weak due to the lack of a "big stick," they remain undeterred. In 1994 a Serbian official commented on the potential introduction of peacekeepers into Bosnia by saying, "Clinton has his own problems. . . . He can't afford to have even a few soldiers killed in Bosnia."³⁶ Statements or actions by our political leaders that demonstrate an unfounded casualty aversion based on the myth of a weak-kneed public weaken coercive diplomacy and embolden future adversaries. As a result, deterrence crumbles, and we must use military forces to contain the Saddam Husseins and Slobodan Milosevics of the world who refuse to heed diplomatic warnings.

A potentially worse scenario than our inability to deter enemies is the potential for policy makers to abandon military force when we need it. As Mark Lorell and Charles Kelley comment, "In the future, a President may elect to delay or forgo direct U.S. military intervention in a Third World conflict—even

though it may be needed to defend legitimate U.S. interests—because of concern that public support may decline or collapse once the United States is deeply committed."³⁷ This fear of casualties among our political leaders encourages renegade world leaders to take risks, based on the potential that their actions will skirt under the threshold of US interests that would elicit a response. If they are successful, engagement is weakened, and other rogue groups will likely test US resolve in areas closer to vital interests. This does not imply that the United States must respond to every disturbance in world harmony but that the decision to respond should be based upon our national security strategy and not upon our need to dispel the myth of casualty aversion.

Implications for Senior Military Leaders

As noted earlier from the TISS study, senior military leaders exhibit an intolerance for casualties that far exceeds the intolerance level of the public and policy makers in typical post-cold-war interventions. Potentially, this has widespread implications for military planning and the military ethos. The Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act codified joint war fighting and gave immense responsibility to senior military leaders, especially the war-fighting commanders in chief (CINC). Such responsibility, if tainted by a belief that military action must be casualty free, can have the unintended consequence of shifting the burden of risk to the people our military mission says we should protect.

Of course, legitimate reasons exist for military leaders to tolerate or accept fewer casualties than would the public or political leaders. As Feaver and Gelpi point out, it is entirely rational for "military officers to give lower casualty estimates for nontraditional missions" when "they do not believe those missions are vital to the national interest."³⁸ Military leaders adhere to the principle of economy of force and do not want to fritter

away limited assets on missions that might detract from the ultimate mission of defeating vital threats to national security. The danger, as mentioned earlier, is that military leaders will trump civilian policy and, in a bout of self-interest, “deter” missions that are essential building blocks in the national strategy of engagement.

It is also true that military commanders care about their troops and do not want to waste lives. The conviction that fewer casualties are warranted may indicate that there are better ways to fight than the World War I practice of frontal attacks. Most people agree that we should maximize effective planning and asymmetric strategies, which apply American technological strengths to enemy weaknesses, to dislocate, confuse, and defeat an enemy³⁹ but that we should not use them as a panacea because of a mistaken belief that the mission must be risk free. As one author stated, “Reduced casualties have always been a goal of a good commander. Yet stating this as an absolute requirement that can be fulfilled by our advanced technology simply ignores the true nature of mankind and war.”⁴⁰ The argument is not that commanders should avoid unnecessary casualties—duty demands no less. The issue is the impact of excessive casualty aversion on planning and the military ethos.

Deliberate planning at the theater strategic and operational levels of war is the domain of the war-fighting CINCs. If, as this article argues, senior military leaders are casualty-averse or erroneously believe that the American public will not accept losses, this process can be skewed and produce plans that fall short of their intended purpose. The Vietnam legacy for senior officers entails a belief that American lives “were needlessly lost” and a determination “to avoid putting military personnel at risk unless absolutely necessary.”⁴¹ The Gulf War corollary states that the American public will not tolerate future operations which promise more than a “handful of casualties.”⁴² Geographic CINCs and their senior staff officers produce theater engagement plans, write commanders’ esti-

mates of the situation, and provide courses of action to the National Command Authorities, all of which are affected by these legacies.

Military leaders adhere to the principle of economy of force and do not want to fritter away limited assets on missions that might detract from the ultimate mission of defeating vital threats to national security.

Casualty aversion on the part of senior officers, or the erroneous perception that the public demands casualty-free interventions, can produce a self-limiting filter or paradigm through which all plans must pass. One wonders whether Inchon would be possible today—would the plan be found “not acceptable” due to excessive risk?

A potentially greater threat posed by excessive casualty aversion is the destruction of the military ethos. Feaver and Gelpi highlight the views of Donald Snider, a retired Army colonel and West Point professor, who argues that the military ethic “is built on the principles of self-sacrifice and mission accomplishment. Troops are supposed to be willing to die so that civilians do not have to.”⁴³ Charles Dunlap agrees: “Uniformed professionals need to ask themselves whether the military’s altruistic ethos, axiomatic to its organizational culture, is being replaced by an occupationalism that places—perhaps unconsciously—undue weight on self-preservation over mission accomplishment.”⁴⁴ One can best see the degrading impact of casualty aversion in excessive force protection, which shifts mission risk from the US military to others.

The ongoing operations in Kosovo provide an insightful case study on the impact of casualty aversion on mission accomplishment and the military ethic. In a positive example, Lt Col Bruce Gandy, a Marine battalion commander, wrote an article in the *Marine Corps Gazette* describing his unit’s successful operations in Kosovo. His unit filled the vacuum

left by retreating Serbian forces and provided security for the local population. He described the mission by saying, "Although we minimized risk wherever we could, we quickly realized force protection cannot be paramount. First and foremost is the mission. Marines must always answer the call to arms no matter what the cost."⁴⁵

The Marine Corps accomplished the mission by decentralizing operations and giving companies control of individual sectors. Companies lived in the areas for which they were responsible, and the company commander acted as the police chief and civil administrator. These decentralized operations quickly gained the trust of the local population, but they were not without risks. Gandy states, "Decentralization while projecting a visible presence is not without risk. Marines are taught to seize the initiative. In peace enforcement operations, this means exposing our Marines and sailors to danger."⁴⁶

In contrast to the mission-focused approach of the Marine Corps, the follow-on Army forces are plagued by excessive force protection and casualty aversion run amuck. In an attempt to drive the casualty rate to zero, the US military is building an isolated, multi-million-dollar compound to provide a comfortable, secure environment. Allied soldiers who still live among the people, as marines did previously, ridicule the American compound, calling it "Disneyland."⁴⁷ In its mission statement, the brigade responsible for one-fourth of Kosovo lists its foremost objective as "self-protection" while other "peace-keeping tasks, such as maintaining 'a safe and secure environment' and . . . building a civil society receive lesser priority."⁴⁸ It is not surprising that the brigade lists self-protection as its first objective, given the fact that the Army's European Command "holds that its primary objective is 'To Protect and Take Care of the Force.'"⁴⁹

The compound in Kosovo is not the issue. The problem is that casualty-averse military leaders have determined that risk avoidance takes precedence over the mission given by American and North Atlantic Treaty Organi-

zation (NATO) policy makers and have shifted the risk to our NATO allies and the people of Kosovo. If presence in one sector declines, all of the adjacent areas are in greater danger, and the people in those sectors are at greater risk for reprisals. Even if civilian deaths do not increase, the greatest casualty is the military ethos—the warrior ethic of service before self, willingness to sacrifice for the society we protect, and the responsibility to minimize risk to those whom we protect. Excessive casualty aversion by senior military leaders does not accurately reflect the view of the American public and, instead of protecting the force, may actually be sowing the seeds of its destruction.

Conclusion

The cold war is over, and the world is still a dangerous place. American national security interests are no longer defined by the bipolar confrontation with the Soviet Union, and the threats to our national security are more subtle and hard to describe. As the only remaining superpower, the United States has embarked on the path of engagement—exercising active, decisive leadership in world economics and diplomacy to make the world a more prosperous and democratic entity. By engaging on many levels on which our interests are less than vital, our strategy seeks to preserve our vital interests and status as a superpower.

In a world without a governing authority, however, our ability to engage and resist those who do not share our vision of freedom and prosperity depends on the instrument of military power. At present, the United States has the most powerful armed forces the world has ever seen; but dictators, terrorists, and allies challenge our status as a superpower, based on the perception that a casualty-averse public limits our ability to wield military power.

Research shows that the public is not an irrational mass calling for immediate withdrawal from military interventions at the first news reports showing American deaths. Instead, the public weighs the expected and

actual costs with the benefits and prospects for success and makes a decision with the aid of cues from political leaders. Public support is not all-encompassing but can be counted on when civilian leadership adequately frames the debate in terms of a positive ends-and-means calculation. The conventional wisdom that the public is casualty-averse is wrong, but civilian policy makers and military elites still act on the mistaken assumption that the public will no longer accept the risks of military action.

By attributing casualty aversion to the public, civilian and military elites have masked

their own aversion to casualties and threaten our status as a superpower. Casualty aversion on the part of civilian leaders renders coercive diplomacy ineffective and undermines deterrence. Casualty aversion on the part of senior military leaders becomes a filter that limits bold options and aggressive plans and insidiously destroys the military ethos. The misinterpretation of public casualty aversion by policy makers and senior military leaders hurts our foreign policy and military credibility. A casualty-aversion myth "is hardly sound footing for American foreign policy"⁵⁰ and military operations. □

Notes

1. Executive Office of the President, *A National Security Strategy for a New Century* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 1998), iii.
2. Ibid.
3. Mark J. Conversino, "Sawdust Superpower: Perceptions of U.S. Casualty Tolerance in the Post-Gulf War Era," *Strategic Review*, Winter 1997, 22.
4. Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, "A Look at Casualty Aversion: How Many Deaths Are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer," *Washington Post*, 7 November 1999, B3.
5. Mark Lorell and Charles Kelley Jr., with Deborah Hensler, *Casualties, Public Opinion, and Presidential Policy during the Vietnam War*, R-3060-AF (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, March 1985), 1-92.
6. Ibid., 21.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 23.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., vii.
11. Benjamin C. Schwarz, *Casualties, Public Opinion, & U.S. Military Intervention*, MR-431-A/AF (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1994), 1-27.
12. Ibid., 4.
13. Conversino, 17.
14. Ibid., ix.
15. Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations*, MR-726-RC (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1996), 1-126.
16. Ibid., 10-12; and Eric V. Larson, "Ends and Means in the Democratic Conversation: Understanding the Role of Casualties in Support of U.S. Military Operations" (PhD diss., RAND Graduate School, 1996), 320.
17. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, 12.
18. Larson, "Ends and Means," 267.
19. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, 75.
20. Ibid., 49.
21. Larson, "Ends and Means," 167.
22. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, 24.
23. Ibid., 23.
24. Ibid., 65.
25. Larson, "Ends and Means," 245-51.
26. Ibid., 248.
27. Ibid.
28. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, 72.
29. Feaver and Gelpi, B3.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. *A National Security Strategy*, 1.
34. James Nathan, "The Rise and Decline of Coercive Statecraft," US Naval Institute *Proceedings*, October 1995, 61-62.
35. Ibid., 64.
36. Roger Thurow, "Serbs Bet That West Won't Risk the Thing They Fear: Ground Troops," *Wall Street Journal*, 21 April 1994, A10. Quoted in Nathan, 63.
37. Lorell and Kelley, iii.
38. Feaver and Gelpi, B3.
39. For an excellent discussion of asymmetric airpower strategies, see Ronald R. Fogleman, "Advantage USA: Air Power and Asymmetric Force Strategy," *Air Power History* 42, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 5-13.
40. Conversino, 21.
41. Charles J. Dunlap Jr., "Organizational Change and the New Technologies of War" (paper presented at the Joint Services Conference on Professional Ethics, Washington, D.C., January 1998), 9; on-line, Internet, 7 January 2000, available from <http://www.usafa.af.mil/jscope/JSCOPE98/Dunlap98.htm>.
42. Conversino, 21.
43. Feaver and Gelpi, B3.
44. Dunlap, 10.
45. Bruce A. Gandy, "Force Protection and Mission Accomplishment," *Marine Corps Gazette* 83, no. 11 (November 1999): 44.
46. Ibid., 45.
47. Jeffrey Smith, "A GI's Home Is His Fortress: High-Security, High-Comfort U.S. Base in Kosovo Stirs Controversy," *Washington Post*, 5 October 1999, A11.
48. Ibid.
49. Jonathan Foreman, "The Casualty Myth," *National Review*, 3 May 1999, 40.
50. Feaver and Gelpi, B3.