

# Victory Has Many Friends

Richard C.  
Eichenberg

U.S. Public Opinion and the Use of  
Military Force, 1981–2005

The war in Iraq and the ensuing occupation have once again raised doubts about the sustainability of public support for military intervention. From the moment the war began on March 19, 2003, until major hostilities were declared over on May 1 of the same year, support for the war among the U.S. public averaged 72 percent. After May 1, support for the war and occupation dropped steadily. Since major combat ended, average citizen support of the war has been 52 percent; by June 2005, however, it had dropped below 50 percent.<sup>1</sup> It is also widely recognized that the erosion of public support was a significant factor—perhaps the most significant factor—that brought a shift in the timing and substance of the George W. Bush administration’s approach to the eventual construction of a sovereign Iraqi government. Indeed, some scholarly accounts claim that the war very nearly cost President Bush re-election in 2004.

At least as concerns the erosion of public support, the similarity to the Vietnam War is tempting, but it is a complicated comparison. True, in both cases, domestic support for the wars was initially high but eroded as U.S. casualties mounted. Yet in the case of the Iraq war, support was in fact much higher in the initial phase than early support for intervening in Vietnam, and it has not yet dropped to anything near the nadir of support for the Vietnam War.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, three decades of scholarship on war and public opinion have not produced a scholarly consensus on a crucial question: whether the Vietnam War fundamentally transformed U.S. public opinion on the use of force. On the question of casualty aversion in particular, scholars have increasingly ques-

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*Richard C. Eichenberg is Associate Professor in the Department of Political Science at Tufts University.*

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1. The average includes surveys through February 14, 2005. I provide a more precise definition of support for the war in later sections of the article; briefly put, the average includes all public opinion survey questions that ask about support for the war or the subsequent occupation, including questions about this support in light of the human and financial costs. Figures for June 2005 are from <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq>.

2. Support for the war in Vietnam bottomed out at 28 percent in May 1971. See John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley, 1973), pp. 54–55.

tioned the conventional wisdom. In addition, they have offered a number of competing arguments to explain the willingness of citizens to support the use of military force, many of which downplay the importance of casualty aversion in public opinion.

The literature is hardly comprehensive, however. Many studies are limited to single historical cases, such as the interventions in Somalia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Iraq. True, there are several comparative studies of U.S. military interventions during the 1980s and 1990s. Nonetheless, the evidence is nowhere brought together in a unified analysis. A comprehensive reevaluation of the factors that condition public support for the use of military force is therefore needed.

In this article I provide such a reevaluation by analyzing all U.S. public opinion polls on the use of military force from 1981 through the Iraq war of 2003 and the subsequent occupation through early 2005. I begin with a review of previous research on U.S. public support for using military force and proceed to a reconsideration of two important findings in the scholarly literature. Specifically, I reconsider the putative influence of multilateral participation and the issue of casualty aversion in public opinion. In subsequent sections, I describe my procedures for documenting the level of support for using military force in public opinion surveys and compare the level of support in twenty-two historical episodes in which the United States contemplated, threatened, or actually used force. I also examine citizen support for specific types of military action, such as air strikes or troop deployments, and for particular purposes, such as peacekeeping or restraining other sovereign states to protect national security interests. Subsequent sections of the article examine the sensitivity of public opinion to multilateral participation and to casualties. A summary of the statistical results provides the backdrop for several conclusions and implications of the study.

One conclusion is that both the objective of the military mission and the resulting success or failure of the mission are important determinants of public support. While the initial base level of support for any military intervention is conditioned by the type of objective for which the use of force is contemplated, once force is used, the outcome of the mission also affects citizen support. This is the context in which the impact of casualties must be understood. Prior to any conflict, support for using military force is always lower when the prospect of casualties is mentioned in the question. In the event, however, support actually increases when the intervention is successful, regardless of the level of casualties (and decreases when the mission fails). Additional findings include a preference among the U.S. public for less risky military actions (e.g., air

strikes) as opposed to more risky actions (e.g., the commitment of troops). Not surprisingly, therefore, citizen support for intervening in civil wars is very low. As is true in most previous scholarship, multilateral actions are more popular than actions undertaken by the United States alone, and limited evidence indicates that multilateral actions are preferred for reasons of burden sharing.

These conclusions emerge from a historically comprehensive, multivariate analysis that provides an assessment of the combined impact of a number of factors on public opinion. It also provides an assessment of the relative impact of each factor—something not available from the various contributions to the previous scholarly literature. The statistical findings thus confirm that the principal objective of a military intervention correlates strongly with public support. But even taking this objective into account, the impact of risk, casualties, and multilateral participation remain statistically important. Nor are the findings confined to any single historical episode. Rather the findings emerge from a comparative analysis of all historical cases in which the United States threatened or used military force, and they are largely uniform across those cases. The findings are therefore likely to be of enduring relevance to a variety of future contingencies.

### *Research on U.S. Public Opinion and the Use of Military Force*

Public opposition to the Vietnam War heavily influenced early research on U.S. public support for the use of military force. John Mueller's finding that domestic support for the war eroded as a function of mounting casualties became the standard hypothesis for the future: one putative lesson of Vietnam was that the U.S. public would shy away from interventions that could lead to the loss of American lives.<sup>3</sup> Other researchers focused on different causes for the polarization over Vietnam, especially the hypothesis that support for the use of force was a function of the perceived interests at stake. For example, Bruce Russett and Miroslav Nincic found in a 1969 survey that public support for providing military assistance to nations that are attacked varied with geographic proximity to the United States and with the level of economic interde-

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3. *Ibid.*, p. 61. Another study that largely confirms Mueller's finding on casualties in Vietnam is Miroslav Nincic, "Casualties, Military Intervention, and the RMA: Hypotheses from the Lessons of Vietnam," paper presented to a conference on the revolution in military affairs, Monterey, California, August 1995. For a discussion of the impact of casualties in Iraq and several previous conflicts, see John Mueller, "American Public Opinion and Military Ventures Abroad: Attention, Evaluation, Involvement, Politics, and the Wars of the Bushes," paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 28–31, 2003.

pendence with the United States. Russett and Nincic also identified a clear distinction: support in 1975 for sending help to nations that were attacked far outstripped any willingness to assist a government that faced an internal insurgency. Helping to defend against external aggression was popular; intervention in civil wars was not.<sup>4</sup>

Bruce Jentleson and Rebecca Britton extended and refined this latter finding in two studies that together covered every actual or threatened U.S. military intervention from the 1980s through 1996.<sup>5</sup> Jentleson's original statement of the argument is a convincing one: public support in the United States is likely to vary as a function of the objective of the military intervention. He distinguishes three such principal policy objectives (PPOs). Foreign policy restraint (FPR) involves the use of force "to coerce . . . an adversary engaged in aggressive actions against the United States or its interests." A second category, internal political change (IPC), involves "force used to engineer internal political change within another country whether in support of an existing government considered an ally or seeking to overthrow a government considered an adversary," or more generally "influencing the domestic political authority structure of another state."<sup>6</sup> Finally, during the 1990s a third type of military intervention became prominent: humanitarian intervention (HI), or the "provision of emergency relief through military and other means to people suffering from famine or other gross and widespread humanitarian disasters."<sup>7</sup>

Jentleson argues that public support for the use of force for purposes of foreign policy restraint and humanitarian intervention should be higher than support for the use of force designed to influence internal political change, and his two studies provided strong confirmation of this argument. Indeed, in a careful examination of alternative hypotheses, Jentleson demonstrates that principal policy objectives appear to outweigh such factors as the risk of casu-

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4. Bruce Russett and Miroslav Nincic, "American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force Abroad," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 91, No. 3 (Autumn 1976), pp. 411–423. The unpopularity of U.S. intervention in civil wars has been a consistent finding in the quadrennial surveys conducted by the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. For a retrospective summary, see Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, *Worldviews, 2002: American Public Opinion & Foreign Policy*, <http://www.worldviews.org>.

5. Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (March 1992), pp. 49–74; and Bruce W. Jentleson and Rebecca L. Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent: Post-Cold War American Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (August 1998), pp. 395–417.

6. Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public," p. 50; and Jentleson and Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent," p. 400.

7. Jentleson and Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent," pp. 399–400.

alties, the existence of multilateral participation in the mission, and the level of perceived vital interests. Jentleson argues convincingly that higher levels of support for foreign policy restraint and humanitarian interventions are rooted in two characteristics of these actions: (1) the legitimacy under international law of using military force to defend against encroachments by other sovereign states (vs. the illegitimacy of intervening in the internal affairs of other states); and (2) the clearer standard of success that accompanies such actions, compared with the hazy standards that accompany the nation-building aspects of interventions designed to influence internal political conflicts. He quotes Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf on this lesson of Vietnam: "When you commit military forces, you ought to know what you want that force to do. You can't kind of say 'Go out and pacify the entire countryside.' There has got to be a more specific definition of exactly what you want the force to accomplish. . . . But when I harken back to Vietnam, I have never been able to find anywhere where we have been able to clearly define in precise terms what the ultimate objectives of our military were."<sup>8</sup>

To this, one might add that internal political conflicts are particularly intractable, because they are zero-sum situations pitting highly motivated factions against one another; "success" for any outside party that would intervene is difficult to define and even more difficult to achieve. Indeed, success is perhaps best conceived in political rather than military terms, for the mission (at least during many of the interventions of the 1990s) was not to defeat one party militarily but rather to create the conditions for stability, security, reconciliation, and perhaps even democracy in the aftermath of brutal internal conflicts. All of this is a tall order for military forces that have been trained primarily to defeat opposing military forces and only secondarily in "stability operations."<sup>9</sup> In 1993, then former Defense Secretary Dick Cheney articulated these points when he argued against involving the United States in the Bosnian civil war: "I don't think that advocates of U.S. military force to end the bloodshed in Bosnia have properly considered what would be entailed. . . . You need an objective that you can define in military terms. . . . If you say, 'Go in and stop the bloodshed in Bosnia,' that's not sufficiently clear to build a mission around. Does that mean you're going to put a U.S. soldier between every

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8. Quoted in Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public," pp. 53–54.

9. In a comprehensive study of U.S. Army education and training practices, Eric Giordano finds that the increasing importance of stability operations in army doctrine was not matched by a substantial increase in education and training for the mission. See Giordano, "The U.S. Army and Nontraditional Missions: Explaining Divergence in Doctrine and Practice in the Post-Cold War Era," Ph.D. dissertation, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, November 2003.

Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Muslim? You also need to know what constitutes victory. How would you define it? How would you know when you achieved it? . . . How do you get out?"<sup>10</sup>

Although Jentleson's argument challenged the post-Vietnam conventional wisdom, his findings are difficult to dispute. His data show a clear hierarchy of U.S. public support that differentiates the unpopularity of intervening in internal conflicts from the much higher levels of support for humanitarian interventions and the restraint of aggressive behavior of other sovereign states. Jentleson and Britton also conclude that such factors as the participation of multilateral organizations and alliances or the risk of casualties are less important than the central issue of principal policy objectives.<sup>11</sup>

### *Multilateralism Reconsidered*

The finding by Jentleson and Britton that multilateral participation does not independently influence the level of U.S. public support for using military force deserves additional discussion, for it goes against the grain of many scholarly findings. The authors are quite specific about the nature of their results. Concerning support for six military interventions between 1992 and 1998, there is "no difference for HI (63% unilateral, 62% multilateral), a preference for multilateral for IPC (34%, 41%), and a preference for unilateral for FPR (57%, 48%). This is one piece of evidence for the overriding effect of PPO. The public does not prefer multilateralism as a general disposition; it depends on the PPO. For HI, it makes little difference because support for the objective is already strong. For IPC, it makes a big difference, seemingly because of a desire for burden-sharing given the problematic nature of the mission."<sup>12</sup> Following this analysis, the finding in many case studies from the 1990s that multilateral participation increases public support might result from the large amount of scholarly attention focused on the interventions in Somalia and Bosnia, where IPC objectives were prominent. The findings from these two cases also elide the question of how public support compares to other cases of intervention with different policy objectives.<sup>13</sup> At least for the 1990s, however,

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10. Interview by Adam Heyerson for *Policy Review*, summer 1993, as cited in Richard Sobel, *The Impact of Public Opinion on U.S. Foreign Policy since Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 209.

11. Jentleson and Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent," pp. 408–414.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 406.

13. The strongest argument for the importance of multilateral participation is Steven Kull and I.M. Destler, *Misreading the Public: The Myth of the Isolationist Public* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1999). For additional works that treat the issue for specific historical cases, see Richard Sobel, "To Inter-

the findings of Jentleson and Britton suggest that the pattern does not hold when a variety of cases are examined, because the principal policy objective is the overriding influence on the level of support.

Yet the very uniqueness of the 1990s might argue for yet further reexamination. One reason is that the importance of multilateralism seems to flow directly from Jentleson's own conceptual logic: If some actions are more popular because they are more legitimate under international law and norms, should this not also be the case for actions that are carried out with the participation (or endorsement) of international institutions and allies? Would the addition of historical cases in which this logic was challenged—for example, the wars in Kosovo and Iraq—change the results? Would more finely grained measures of multilateral sentiment in public opinion make a difference to the analysis? The importance of exploring a variety of measures of public opinion is reinforced by a consistent finding in past research: international institutions (such as the United Nations) are generally popular with public opinion, and when given the choice of using military force as part of a multilateral action versus “going it alone,” survey respondents almost always choose the former. They are also likely to endorse the opinion that the United States should seek the approval of international institutions before launching a military action, an opinion that held with respect to war against Iraq in 2003 until the moment the conflict began.<sup>14</sup> Finally, although there is to my knowledge little evidence on the matter, logic would suggest that citizens are to some extent aware of one major argument in favor of multilateralism: the costs and risks of conflict will be shared rather than borne alone.<sup>15</sup>

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vene or Not to Intervene in Bosnia: That Was the Question for the United States and Europe,” in Brigitte L. Nacos, Robert Y. Shapiro, and Pierangelo Isernia, eds., *Decision-making in a Glass House: Mass Media, Public Opinion, and American and European Foreign Policy in the Twenty-first Century* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), pp. 177–194; and Steven Kull and Clay Ramsay, “U.S. Public Opinion on Intervention in Bosnia,” in Richard Sobel and Eric Shiraev, eds., *International Public Opinion and the Bosnia Crisis* (New York: Lexington Books, 2003), pp. 69–106.

14. For a thorough analysis of both polls and scholarship on multilateralism, see Ole R. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*, rev. ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), pp. 258–288. A listing of opinion surveys on the UN is provided on the web page of the Program on International Policy Attitudes, “America and the World,” [http://www.americans-world.org/digest/global\\_issues/un/un\\_summary.cfm](http://www.americans-world.org/digest/global_issues/un/un_summary.cfm). For a digest of surveys concerning the need to gain UN endorsement of a war against Iraq, see <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq5.htm>.

15. One recent survey did test the burden-sharing argument directly. Shortly after the U.S. presidential election in November 2004, the German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Trends survey asked respondents their reasons for having a favorable opinion of the UN. In the United States, 33 percent of those with a favorable opinion replied, “We can’t afford to pay the whole cost of international actions; we need others to share the cost.” The plurality response in the United States (and also France and Germany) read, “Many global problems can’t be solved by any single country.”

### *The Casualty Issue and the Use of Force*

The impact of casualties on U.S. public opinion also deserves additional discussion, for a substantial amount of scholarship and popular attention has been devoted to the issue since the publication of Mueller's landmark study. As noted above, Jentleson concluded in 1992 that the apparent risk of casualties or the actual deaths suffered in battle were not the most important influences on public opinion. Although there was one instance in which casualties seemed to have driven down public support for the mission (the deaths of U.S. Marines following the bombing of their barracks in Lebanon in 1983), there were more instances in which casualties and citizen support appeared uncorrelated. For example, although the United States sustained military casualties in the 1983 Grenada invasion, the 1989 Panama invasion, and in the 1990–91 Persian Gulf War, domestic approval of these actions was very high. U.S. military support for the Contras in Nicaragua and the government in El Salvador in the 1980s resulted in few American casualties, but citizen support for military involvement in Central America nonetheless remained extremely low. The reason, Jentleson argues, is that the former operations were successful, which produced a "halo effect" of high support. The missions in Central America were unpopular because of the reticence of the U.S. public for intervention in internal political conflicts. In effect, Jentleson does qualify his PPO framework with the additional factor of "success." Quite simply, successful military operations enjoy high support, even when the objective is unpopular and casualties are suffered. The finding was confirmed statistically in the 1998 study by Jentleson and Britton.<sup>16</sup>

Eric Larson drew similar conclusions in three subsequent studies of the impact of casualties on U.S. public opinion. Larson's argument has much in common with the Jentleson framework, despite differences in terminology. Like Jentleson, he asserts that casualties alone are not the determining factor in the U.S. public's opinion on military intervention. Rather he casts public support as a function of the interests and principles at stake and the real or perceived prospects for success. On closer examination, these two factors are conceptually similar to Jentleson's notion of principal policy objectives and the halo effect. Principal policy objectives condition assessments of "interests and

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See *Post Electoral Study, 2004* (Washington, D.C.: German Marshall Fund of the United States, February 7, 2005).

16. Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public," pp. 53–54; and Jentleson and Britton, "Still Pretty Prudent," p. 410.



stakes,” and the “halo effect” obviously refers to operations that succeed. Larson’s examination of public opinion data from World War II through the war in Iraq provides convincing support for these relationships. He concludes, “In short, 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—all informed by leaders and experts.”<sup>17</sup>

The conceptualization of public support as a cost-benefit calculation, including judgments about the expected or actual success of the military intervention, has become a common theme in subsequent scholarship. Aptly citing a long tradition of scholarship on presidential approval more generally, Louis Klarevas observes in a review of the research literature that public opinion on military interventions reveals a dynamic of appraising policy outcomes. In the words of Richard Brody and Richard Morin, “Public support during war is informed by perceptions of policy success or failure,” a conclusion that Klarevas finds confirmed in several scholarly studies of the Gulf War and several military interventions thereafter.<sup>18</sup>

A related finding is reported in my study of gender differences in U.S. public opinion on military interventions since 1990. Prior to the Gulf War, men and women differed considerably (20 percent) in support for military action, but after the successful conclusion of the war, the gap closed as both women and men increased their approval. In contrast, after the loss of American lives in Somalia in October 1993 and the eventual withdrawal of U.S. troops, support of both men and women for the mission declined considerably, and the polarization between the two groups increased because the decline in support among women was larger. As I wrote in 2003, “It thus appears that the success

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17. Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1996), p. 12; Eric V. Larson, “Putting Theory to Work: Diagnosing Public Opinion on the U.S. Intervention in Bosnia,” in Miroslav Nincic and Joseph Leggold, eds., *Being Useful: Policy Relevance and International Relations Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); and Eric V. Larson and Bogdan Savych, *American Public Support for U.S. Military Operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad*, MG-231-A (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2005). For a precise analysis of support for the war in Vietnam as a cost-benefit calculation, see Nincic, “Casualties, Military Intervention, and the RMA.” Essentially the same logic is articulated by Mueller, “American Public Opinion and Military Ventures Abroad.”

18. Richard A. Brody and Richard Morin, “From Vietnam to Iraq: The Great American Syndrome Myth,” *Washington Post*, March 31, 1991, as cited in Louis Klarevas, “The ‘Essential Domino’ of Military Operations: American Public Opinion and the Use of Force,” *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (November 2002), p. 428.

of the Gulf War operation versus the perceived failure of the Somalia operation is responsible for the difference.”<sup>19</sup>

Substantial additional evidence on the link between successful military operations and public approval of those operations appears in a study by Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi. Feaver and Gelpi confirmed the reasoning of Jentleson and Larson on the basis of their own original survey designed to test casualty sensitivity. Overall public support does indeed vary with the purpose of the mission: support for traditional “realpolitik” missions is generally higher than for “interventionist,” humanitarian missions.<sup>20</sup> More important, Feaver and Gelpi find little evidence for the argument that the public demands zero casualties in military operations. Although support levels do vary by the type of mission, substantial percentages of respondents (although not always majorities) reported a willingness to absorb more than 500 casualties in military operations.<sup>21</sup> The authors conclude that absolute opposition to the use of force that might bring casualties represents a small percentage of the population (10–30 percent). As for the rest, there are those who support almost any military intervention, but an important part of the population conditions its support upon a successful result. Reanalyzing a substantial amount of opinion data on military intervention from the 1950–53 Korean War through the 1999 war over Kosovo, Feaver and Gelpi conclude that support varies with the success of the mission: when military intervention is perceived as a success, the president’s job approval rating actually increases. When the public perceives failure, however, support drops. The authors conclude that “policy makers can tap into a large reservoir of support for the mission, even missions that entail a fairly high human price, provided those missions are successful. The public is defeat phobic, not casualty phobic.”<sup>22</sup>

This conclusion is further affirmed in a study of public opinion during the Iraq war by Gelpi, Feaver, and Jason Reifler. Analyzing both available polls on approval of the Iraq war and their own original surveys, the authors reach two conclusions that confirm the earlier analyses of Feaver and Gelpi. First, during the “war” phase of the conflict through May 2003, the president’s job approval rating increased, despite the casualties that were suffered. In the subsequent

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19. Richard C. Eichenberg, “Gender Differences in Public Attitudes toward the Use of Force by the United States, 1990–2003,” *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Summer 2003), pp. 134–135.

20. Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 63. This study also examines the gap in opinions between civilians and military personnel at both the elite and mass levels, but I focus here on the issue of casualty sensitivity among the mass public only.

21. *Ibid.*, pp. 116–120.

22. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

“insurgency” phase, however, casualties substantially eroded presidential job approval. The reason, the authors argue, lies in the difference between the successful war that deposed Saddam Hussein and the halting success of the insurgency phase that followed: “The onset of the insurgency in late May shook the public’s confidence in a successful outcome.”<sup>23</sup> Second, the authors also find in an analysis of several surveys conducted between October 2003 and April 2004 that expectations of success at the level of individual opinions were a significant influence on support for the war.<sup>24</sup>

The substantial evidence of the importance of mission success lends weight to Larson’s further argument that leadership consensus also conditions public support for military operations. In an analysis that closely follows the broader scholarly literature on the role of political leaders in shaping (if not totally determining) public opinion, Larson demonstrates that public support for the wars in Korea, Vietnam, and the Persian Gulf, as well as the intervention in Somalia, closely tracked the degree of leadership consensus. When political leaders were united in support of a policy, public support was also high. When leaders became polarized, the public also became divided.<sup>25</sup> It seems plausible to assume that leadership consensus is at least in part a function of mission success. When things are going well, it is difficult to mount a plausible criticism of military operations, but when things go badly, the gate is open for critics of the operation, especially when the costs are high.

In summary, a number of rigorous studies that examine the use of force from the 1950s through the war in Iraq converge on the conclusion that casualties alone are not the determining factor conditioning citizen support. Two cautions should be noted, however. First, as Jentleson himself concedes, the ambiguities of intervening in internal political conflicts may well condition expectations of success, fear of casualties, and the degree of leadership consensus. As noted earlier, one legacy of Vietnam (and perhaps Korea) may be the public’s view that interventions in civil wars are likely to involve the United States in protracted, inconclusive, and costly conflicts. Thus the low level of support for such interventions may result from the fact that the category “in-

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23. Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, “Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq,” Duke University, n.d., <http://www.duke.edu/~gelpi/iraq.casualties.pdf>, p. 17.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 28–35.

25. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, chap. 4. Larson builds on John R. Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), and his argument is broadly compatible with the theory of presidential approval articulated in Richard A. Brody, *Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion, and Public Support* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991). The importance of leadership consensus is confirmed statistically in Jentleson and Britton, “Still Pretty Prudent,” pp. 408–409.

ternal political conflicts" is in effect a stalking horse for all of these fears. Moreover, that Vietnam polarized the U.S. political leadership on questions of the use of force is well documented. Studies show that it is the question of whether to use force that has most divided the U.S. leadership in the post-Vietnam period, a fact that was surely not lost on public opinion.<sup>26</sup>

Although many scholars offer plausible arguments that the risk or fact of casualties alone is not the decisive influence, fear of casualties and failure may well underlie the low level of public support in the United States for intervening in internal political conflicts. Moreover, a curious gap exists in even the best studies: there is no comprehensive comparison of public opinion questions that mention the prospect of casualties with questions that do not.<sup>27</sup> There is thus no answer to the most basic questions surrounding the casualty issue: What do Americans say about casualties resulting from the use of force when they are directly asked? And how does public opinion actually react when human life is lost?<sup>28</sup>

These questions are important for two reasons. The first is that U.S. decisionmakers have apparently acted on the basis of their understanding of how the American public would react to the loss of life. For example, in the period before the war against Iraq in 2003, press reports indicated that decisionmakers had come to believe that the sensitivity of the American public to casualties had been exaggerated. In fact, Nicholas Lemann reported that, in

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26. Holsti, *Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy*; and Eugene R. Wittkopf, *The Faces of Internationalism: Public Opinion and American Foreign Policy* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990).

27. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, does examine individual survey items on casualty tolerance, but there is no comparison across all historical cases of the sort that I present here. For additional comparison of survey items that seek to establish a threshold of casualty tolerance, see Feaver and Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles*, pp. 116–120; Mueller, "American Public Opinion and Military Ventures Abroad"; and Larson and Savych, *American Public Support for U.S. Military Operations from Mogadishu to Baghdad*.

28. There are a number of additional studies that are largely compatible with those cited above. For a comprehensive review, see Feaver and Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles*, pp. 95–105. For a recent synthesis with comparisons to Iraq, see Mueller, "American Public Opinion and Military Ventures Abroad." For additional analysis of the Lebanon and Somalia: Persian Gulf, and Somali cases, see Steven Kull and Clay Ramsay, "The Myth of the Reactive Public: American Public Attitudes on Military Fatalities in the Post-Cold War Period," in Philip Everts and Pierangelo Isernia, eds., *Public Opinion and the International Use of Force* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 205–228; and James Burk, "Public Support for Peacekeeping in Lebanon and Somalia: Assessing the Casualties Hypothesis," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 114, No. 1 (Summer 1999), pp. 53–78. Two studies begin by arguing that the casualties hypothesis is "to some extent a self-fulfilling prophecy; politicians use it as an alibi to avoid taking their responsibilities seriously." Both studies appear to conclude, however, that public opinion is in fact quite sensitive to casualties. See Philip Everts, "Public Opinion after the Cold War: A Paradigm Shift," in Nacos, Shapiro, and Isernia, *Decision-making in a Glass House*, pp. 177–194; and Philip Everts, "War without Bloodshed? Public Opinion and the Conflict over Kosovo," in Everts and Isernia, *Public Opinion and the International Use of Force*, pp. 229–259.

early 2002, a “senior official” in the Bush administration “approvingly mentioned a 1999 study of casualty aversion by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies, which argued that the ‘mass public’ is much less casualty averse than the civilian elite believes; for example, the study showed that the public would tolerate thirty thousand deaths in a military operation to prevent Iraq from acquiring weapons of mass destruction.”<sup>29</sup> Events since the fighting in Iraq obviously call this inference into question.

The second reason to reevaluate the sensitivity of the public to casualties is that decisionmakers in other countries have apparently come to believe that the American public will not tolerate the loss of life in foreign military interventions, a fact that obviously affects their calculations of U.S. credibility. Three studies of the failure (or potential failure) of deterrence or coercive diplomacy are strikingly similar on this point. Janet Gross Stein argues that the inability to deter Saddam Hussein from invading Kuwait in 1990 can be traced in part to Hussein’s “estimate that the United States, given its aversion to high numbers of casualties, might not retaliate for the invasion of Kuwait with large-scale military force.”<sup>30</sup> Barry Posen notes that in the Kosovo war, the Serbian strategy of threatening to inflict pain on more powerful adversaries in fact worked: the United States and NATO essentially declared that they would not accept the costs of a ground attack, and in the event they could not coerce Serbia into signing the Rambouillet agreement with the threat of air strikes alone.<sup>31</sup> The result was a near disaster. Finally, Thomas Christensen argues that one important factor that may impel the People’s Republic of China to challenge U.S. power in the Far East (perhaps over Taiwan) is the belief among the Chinese elite that the United States would not accept the casualties that might occur in such a conflict. Christensen reached this conclusion based on interviews conducted before the terrorist attacks against the United States on September 11, 2001; but given the erosion of public support as casualties have mounted in Iraq, one wonders if views in Beijing have changed.<sup>32</sup>

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29. Nicholas Lemann, “The Next World Order,” *New Yorker*, April 1, 2002, p. 3. The full text of the survey question on toleration of casualties in a hypothetical war with Iraq is reprinted in Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), p. 485. The results are discussed in Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, “How Many Deaths Are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 1999.

30. Janet Gross Stein, “Deterrence and Compellence in the Gulf, 1990–91: A Failed or Impossible Task?” *International Security*, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Fall 1992), p. 167. Stein does identify many other reasons for the failure to deter Hussein.

31. Barry R. Posen, “The War for Kosovo: Serbia’s Political Military Strategy,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Spring 2000), p. 50.

32. Christensen refers to this as the “Somalia analogy” in Chinese thinking. See Thomas J.

## *Public Opinion and Military Force*

In this section I analyze U.S. public support for the use of military force during twenty-two episodes in which the United States contemplated, threatened, or used military force between 1981 and 2005. The episodes and the number of public opinion surveys examined for each are listed in Table 1.<sup>33</sup> Following a description of the methods that I employed to compile the database of polling materials on the use of force, I describe variation in public support among the episodes and provide an initial evaluation of the impact of multilateral participation, principal policy objectives, the risk of casualties, and casualties actually sustained.

### MEASURING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE USE OF MILITARY FORCE

Recent scholarship on public opinion emphasizes two lessons. First, a single question on any issue will be a misleading gauge of the public mood because an infinite variety of question wordings on any issue is conceivable, and each is likely to yield a different set of responses. The response to a single question on using “ground troops” in Iraq is likely to be modified (or even contradicted) by a second question with even slightly different question wording, and a question about “air strikes” will yield altogether different percentages. The second lesson, however, is that the study of many questions does yield an estimate of the public’s preferences that is both plausible and systematically related to government actions.<sup>34</sup> Survey respondents are attentive to the nuances of policy choices, and they do react differently to questions that reflect these nuances. The study of every question on the use of ground troops and air strikes over a substantial period is thus likely to yield a reliable estimate of the public’s preferences. The implication is that a reliable analysis requires the study of many survey questions that employ a variety of question wordings.

Table 1 summarizes my collection of survey questions on the potential or ac-

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Christensen, “Posing Problems without Catching Up: China’s Rise and Challenges for U.S. Security Policy,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Spring 2001), pp. 17–18.

33. For case summaries of the episodes studied here, see Jentleson, “The Pretty Prudent Public”; Jentleson and Britton, “Still Pretty Prudent”; and the analytical histories provided in Barry M. Blechman and Tamara Cofman Wittes, “Defining Moment: The Threat and Use of Force in American Foreign Policy,” *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 114, No. 1 (Spring 1999), pp. 1–30; and Richard N. Haass, *Intervention: The Use of Military Force in the Post-Cold War World*, rev. ed. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings, 1999).

34. The signal works are James A. Stimson, *Public Opinion in America: Mood, Cycles, and Swings* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1999); and Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. The same philosophy is also evident in Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

**Table 1. Public Opinion Surveys on the Use of Military Force by the United States**

Episode	Dates of Survey Coverage	Number of Survey Items
Soviets in Afghanistan	1980–85	6
El Salvador	1981–85	50
Libya air strikes	1981–88	10
Lebanon peacekeeping	1982–84	26
Grenada invasion	1983	8
Nicaragua	1983–89	49
Kuwaiti tanker re-flagging	1987–88	18
Panama invasion	1988–89	18
Gulf crisis and war	1990–2001	63
Haiti occupation	1992–95	50
Somalia	1992–93	41
Bosnia	1992–2002	141
Confrontation with Iraq	1992–2003	244
North Korea nuclear confrontation	1993–2003	41
Rwanda	1994	3
Sudan/Afghanistan missile strikes	1998	5
Kosovo	1998–2001	99
War against terror	2001–03	75
Iran	2002–05	9
Syria	2003	7
Liberia	2003	7
Iraq war and occupation	2003–05	122
Total		1,092

NOTE: The surveys include prospective actions; reaction to actions under way; and retrospective evaluation of past actions. “War against terror” refers primarily to military attacks in Afghanistan, although there are several polls dealing with potential attacks elsewhere (e.g., Somalia, Sudan, and the Philippines). Surveys updated through February 14, 2005.

tual use of military force in each of twenty-two historical episodes.<sup>35</sup> I included only those questions that query approval or disapproval of an action involving military force as a means of policy.<sup>36</sup> General questions concerning approval

35. I include only nationally representative probability samples of the entire population (thus excluding surveys of likely or registered voters or segmented polls of particular population subgroups). The average sample size is 859. The largest number of surveys came from the iPOLL database available to members of the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut (and also available via Lexis-Nexis). In addition, I retrieved surveys from archives at the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at the University of North Carolina; the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research; the Pew Center for the People and the Press; the Program on International Policy Attitudes; and the yearly Transatlantic Trends surveys conducted by the German Marshall Fund since 2002. Gallup surveys on the Persian Gulf War are taken from John Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), supplemented by later retrospective questions retrieved from the archives listed above.

36. This includes questions that ask if respondents “favor” or “agree” with a specific action in-

of the president's "handling" of the situation or questions that asked if an action was a "good idea" or somehow "right or wrong" were excluded. Also excluded were questions that contain a neutral third option, such as "doing nothing" or "continuing negotiations for a peaceful settlement."<sup>37</sup> I included questions about support before, during, and after military force is contemplated or actually employed, and these distinctions are applied in the analyses below.

Three examples illustrate the texture of the survey questions to be analyzed. The following questions were posed before the United States and coalition forces invaded Iraq on March 19, 2003:

- December 16, 1998: "As you may know, the United Nations' chief weapons inspector has reported that Iraq has not complied with its agreement to allow United Nations inspections of possible weapons facilities. In response, the United States and Britain have launched an air attack against Iraq this evening (December 16, 1998). Do you approve or disapprove of this attack?" (Gallup poll)
- August 6, 2002: "Do you approve or disapprove of the United States taking military action against Iraq to try and remove Saddam Hussein from power?" (CBS News poll)
- March 14, 2003: "Would you favor or oppose invading Iraq with U.S. ground troops in an attempt to remove Saddam Hussein from power?" (Gallup poll)

These examples make clear that there are a number of variations in question wording of potential theoretical or policy interest ("missile strikes" vs. "ground troops"; mention of removing Saddam Hussein; "military action" vs. "invading"; mention of the United Nations). Other variations—such as the mention of potential or actual casualties or approval of the occupation—also exist and have been preserved in the database. I employed these differences in wording below to examine the sources of variation in support of using military force.

With one exception, these procedures for including surveys are close to

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volving the military means of policy. As further described below, these military actions include general statements about the use of force or military actions; air and missile strikes; war; use of naval forces; deployment, maintenance, or increase of troops abroad; provision of advisers or training; and the sale or provision of military goods.

37. Approval of the president's handling of the situation in Iraq is analyzed in Richard C. Eichenberg and Richard J. Stoll, *The Political Fortunes of War: Iraq and the Domestic Standing of President George W. Bush* (London: Foreign Policy Centre, July 2004), <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/271.pdf>.



identical to those employed by Jentleson.<sup>38</sup> The exception flows from my desire to further pursue the impact of casualties on support for the use of force. During most of the episodes listed in Table 1, survey organizations posed a variant of the following question (here concerning Iraq): “Do you think getting Saddam Hussein to comply with United Nations weapons inspectors is worth the potential loss of American life and other costs of attacking Iraq, or not?”<sup>39</sup> There are several reasons to include this “worth it” question. First—and surprisingly—other survey questions dealing with particular military actions seldom mention casualties within the “action” question itself. In studying this important issue, scholars thus need to find better information, and this variant of the casualty question represents the best available. Second, these “worth it” questions invariably occur within survey questionnaires that also inquire about support for military actions—indeed, that is often the sole purpose for conducting the survey. Thus, due to “questionnaire effects,” it seems plausible that respondents connect the “worth it” question to the specific military actions queried in other items on the same survey questionnaire.<sup>40</sup> Third, the question serves as a supplement and comparison to the far greater number of polls that do query specific military actions; scholars can compare the reaction to surveys that do not mention casualties to this question that does.<sup>41</sup> Fourth, this survey question evokes an important calculus of security policy in a democratic society, what Michael Howard has called the requirement of public reassurance “to persuade one’s own people, and those of one’s allies, that the benefits of military action, or preparation for it, will outweigh the costs.”<sup>42</sup>

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38. Jentleson, “The Pretty Prudent Public,” pp. 54–55; and Jentleson and Britton, “Still Pretty Prudent,” p. 400.

39. Survey by CBS/New York Times, December 13–17, 1998. A similar version of the question has been regularly administered by the ABC/Washington Post survey, the NBC/Wall Street Journal poll, and occasionally by others. A version employed by the Gallup Poll is not included here because it does not specifically mention costs and benefits in the question.

40. There is a fairly standard sequence in survey questionnaires on the potential or actual uses of military force. Generally, survey organizations ask about (1) attention to the matter; (2) approval of the president’s “handling” of the situation; (3) approval of the action itself (e.g., “air strikes” or “send troops”); and (4) occasionally about approval if casualties would be suffered (including the “worth it” question discussed here). For an analysis that supports my argument that the “worth it” question is tied to military actions through questionnaire effects, see John Zaller and Stanley Feldman, “A Simple Theory of the Survey Response: Answering Questions versus Revealing Preferences,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 36, No. 3 (August 1992), pp. 579–616.

41. For example, there were 82 survey questions during the war over Kosovo concerning approval of air strikes, deployment of ground troops, and deployment of peacekeepers. None of these questions inquired about the risk of casualties associated with these actions. Survey organizations did, however, ask the “worth it” question sixteen times during the war.

42. Michael Howard, “Reassurance and Deterrence,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 2 (Winter 1982/83), p. 309.

**Table 2. Average Support for U.S. Use of Force by Historical Episode**

Episode	Favor (%)	N
War against terror	79	75
Sudan/Afghanistan missile strikes	73	5
Iraq war, 2003 (war phase through April 30, 2003)	72	38
Gulf crisis and war	64	63
Confrontation with Iraq, 1992–2003	62	244
Grenada invasion	59	8
Libya air strikes	59	10
Kuwaiti tanker re-flagging	58	18
Somalia	56	41
Panama invasion	52	18
Iraq war, 2003 (postwar phase from May 1, 2003)	50	84
Liberia	50	7
Kosovo	49	99
Soviets in Afghanistan	48	6
Rwanda	47	3
Bosnia	46	141
North Korea nuclear confrontation	45	41
Iran	44	9
Lebanon peacekeeping	40	26
Syria	40	7
Haiti occupation	37	50
Nicaragua	32	49
El Salvador	31	50
Total	54	1,092

As noted earlier, the question of whether public support for military action can be sustained as casualties increase is one that has vexed the scholarly literature and figured in policy calculations.

DESCRIBING PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR THE USE OF MILITARY FORCE

As Table 2 shows, there is a great deal of variation across the twenty-two episodes, but the apparent importance of principal policy objectives stands out immediately. The four highest levels of support involve responses to attacks against the United States itself (war against terror and missile strikes in Sudan and Afghanistan) or attempts to coerce Iraq into leaving Kuwait or comply with weapons inspections. The absolute lowest scores (El Salvador, Nicaragua, and the Haiti occupation) all concern U.S. involvement in internal conflicts.

There are of course exceptions. The invasions of Grenada, Panama, and Iraq in 2003 involved the United States in the removal of a regime, but support for these interventions was quite high. As I argue further below, however, each of

**Table 3. Support for U.S. Use of Force by Type of Military Action**

Military Action	Favor (%)	N
Military action (general)	64	263
Air or missile strikes	61	107
Naval forces	57	19
War	56	125
Increase of troops	52	15
Presence of troops	51	39
Unspecified action type	49	75
Sending of troops	48	341
Maintaining of troop presence	43	23
Provision of advisers or training	42	9
Selling or provision of arms	35	76
Total	54	1,092

these interventions was also prominently justified on grounds of U.S. national security, and many of the survey questions for these three cases do not mention “regime change” specifically. Similarly, the surprisingly high average of support for the intervention in Somalia results from the fact that a fairly large number of surveys between the beginning of the intervention in December 1992 and the late spring of 1993 ask only about support for an explicitly humanitarian mission (“making sure food gets through to people”). Only later were questions administered that omitted this phrasing, as the United States and the United Nations assumed the mission of apprehending warlords. As I show below, support for the latter action is much lower than for the humanitarian mission in Somalia.

There is also substantial variety in the types of military actions undertaken by the United States or posed hypothetically to survey respondents within each episode. That is, even within a specific episode, survey organizations may ask if respondents favor sending troops, conducting air strikes, or increasing troop levels, or if they approve of the presence of troops already deployed. Table 3 shows average support levels broken down by the type of military action mentioned in each survey question. A clear pattern emerges: the mention of a generally stated “military action” or “use military force,” as well as the mention of “air or missile strikes,” evinces much higher support than does any specific mention of sending or maintaining the presence of troops abroad. Clearly, Americans are more leery of committing troops than they are of using airpower or endorsing the use of “military force” when the type of force is not specified. The pattern also suggests (if indirectly) that Americans are con-

cerned about the risks of ground operations or perhaps about the danger of a prolonged engagement that may result from committing troops.<sup>43</sup>

#### REEXAMINING THE EFFECT OF MULTILATERAL PARTICIPATION

I noted earlier that studies of individual historical episodes have asserted the positive influence that multilateral participation has on public support for using force, but this is not a factor that has been closely studied across many historical cases. One reason may be that survey questions on what is essentially “support for multilateralism” are often not directly comparable to questions on using military force. Many questions on multilateralism offer two response options: decide (or use force) unilaterally or take the matter to an international institution such as the UN. The responses to this type of question generally favor multilateralism, but this may be misleading, for it seems likely that at least some respondents are choosing the multilateral option to postpone the unpleasant prospect of military conflict. As Al Richman has noted, most survey respondents will hold out for “peace” when that alternative is offered.<sup>44</sup>

In this section I employ a different method: for each of the 1,092 survey questions, I ascertained whether the United States was mentioned as the sole actor in the military action. To establish the impact of multilateral participation, I also classified general mentions of multilateral participation (“with an international force”; “together with friends and allies”) as well as specific mentions of multilateral partners (“as part of a UN force”; “NATO air strikes”; “U.S. and British forces”). This method arguably provides a more realistic test of the importance of multilateral sentiment, for it does not evoke the “war versus peace” dichotomy, and it yields a subtle experiment contrasting different variations on the multilateral theme with questions that contain no mention of multilateral participation at all.<sup>45</sup>

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43. The high support level for “going to war” is only a partial contradiction of this inference. Almost all of the questions about support for “going to war” occurred before and during the two wars against Iraq in 1991 and 2003 (support for “war” in other episodes is much lower). Support for “war” against Iraq in 1991 was indeed high before, during, and after the war. In contrast, in the 2003 Iraq war, the high levels of support for “going to war” before and during the war declined sharply after the end of major hostilities on May 1, 2003. In a subsequent section, I argue that the combination of mounting casualties and the uncertain prospects for success produced the decline in the latter case.

44. Al Richman, “The American Public’s ‘Rules of Engagement’ in the Post-Cold War Era,” paper presented to the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, Illinois, September 1–4, 1994.

45. Such an experiment was included by the German Marshall Fund in its Transatlantic Trends survey in June 2003. Respondents were asked about using military force if Iran or North Korea “acquired weapons of mass destruction,” but different subsamples of respondents were told that the decision to use force had been taken by “the United States,” “by NATO,” or “by the United Na-

**Table 4. The Effect of Multilateral Participation on Support for U.S. Use of Force**

Episode	Percentage Favoring Use of Force When Question Mentions:			
	No Multilateral Participation	UN Participation	NATO Participation	Any Multilateral Participation
Lebanon peacekeeping	37	56	44	45
North Korea nuclear confrontation	43	54	54	54
Bosnia	42	53	49	49
Kosovo	40	—	51	52
Somalia	55	66	—	66
Grenada invasion	60	—	59	58
Gulf crisis and war	64	—	62	62
Confrontation with Iraq, 1992–2003	61	67	69	69
Haiti occupation, 1994	36	35	42	40
Rwanda	49	45	—	45
War against terror	79	—	82	79
Liberia, 2003	—	48	—	50
Total	53	58	52	54
Number of surveys	859	60	127	233

The tabulations are displayed in Table 4, which compares questions that contain no mention of multilateral participation to questions with a specific mention (UN, NATO, or allies) or any mention of multilateral participation, be it general or specific. The overall totals help to explain why the impact of multilateral sentiment has been weak in previous comparative studies: across the entire set of questions, there is little difference in support for using force. Within specific episodes, however, multilateral sentiment is important. In the five episodes at the top of the table, support for using force is at least 10 percentage points higher when either the UN or NATO is mentioned as a participant in the action; and when specific mentions of multilateral actors are combined with general mentions (such as an “international force”), support is noticeably higher as well. Moreover, the higher support in some episodes may be politically significant. For example, there is little enthusiasm for using force unilaterally to coerce North Korea to eliminate its nuclear weapons program,

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tions Security Council.” Support for using force among both U.S. and European citizens was approximately 10 percentage points higher in the version of the question that mentioned either NATO or the UN. See *Transatlantic Trends, 2003* (Washington, D.C.: German Marshall Fund of the United States, released September 4, 2003).

but support for this option is substantially higher—indeed a slight majority—when the question wording specifies a multilateral action. In fact, the cases of Lebanon, North Korea, Bosnia, and Kosovo reveal that the only situation in which there is a majority favoring intervention is when the question specifies multilateral participation.

#### ANALYZING THE EFFECT OF PRINCIPAL POLICY OBJECTIVES

The percentages for each of the historical episodes and military action types reviewed above elide the question of the purpose for which military force is used or threatened. One can ask if respondents favor “sending troops,” but to what purpose? In fact, there is substantial variation within each episode and military action in the principal policy objective queried in survey questions. For example, one question on Rwanda asks if U.S. military forces should participate in “stopping the fighting,” which seems to imply active participation in an internal political conflict. Yet other survey questions on Rwanda simply asked if U.S. forces should assist in providing “humanitarian relief.”

Similar variants exist within other historical episodes. On Iraq, for example, there are a number of questions concerning the use of military force to coerce compliance with weapons inspections, to remove Saddam Hussein from power, or (fewer) to aid the Kurdish resistance during the 1990s. Within the Bosnian and Kosovo episodes, there are questions that imply participation in an internal political conflict (actively defend Bosnian Muslims or Kosovar Albanians) and humanitarian purposes (drop relief supplies to Bosnian Muslims). As Jentleson has shown, these variations within historical cases are more important than the target of military action itself. It is not enough to ask citizens if they support the use of force; one also has to ask why.

In this section I provide an analysis of public support for using force according to the principal policy objective mentioned in the survey question. My definitions follow Jentleson, as reviewed above. Foreign policy restraint involves the contemplated, threatened, or actual use of force to coerce another state or nonstate actor that is threatening U.S. interests or allies. Internal political change involves the use of force (most generally) to “[influence] the domestic political authority structure of another state.” Humanitarian intervention refers to the “provision of emergency relief through military and other means.”

In the course of reviewing the survey materials, it became clear that a fourth category—“peacekeeping operations”—was both conceptually necessary and empirically obvious. Conceptually, it is difficult to argue that peacekeeping is per se participation in internal political change, for the entire spirit and pur-

pose of peacekeeping is to provide a neutral buffer to warring parties. Indeed, in this sense, peacekeeping is also very much in the humanitarian tradition because it is often offered precisely to mitigate the suffering of civilians. Empirically, support for almost any question that mentions peacekeeping is generally low and very stable, which suggests that it is seen much differently than the use of force for other purposes.

The “neutral buffer” interpretation seems sufficient to analyze public opinion toward peacekeeping operations as a separate category, but it is crucial to the analysis that this neutrality be conveyed in the question wording. The reason is that in three episodes (Lebanon, Bosnia, and the war over Kosovo), a shift in the military mission from peacekeeping to actual participation in the conflict had been considered by policymakers, queried by pollsters, or had indeed occurred. In Bosnia and Kosovo, moreover, the ultimate insertion of peacekeepers was accomplished only after coercing one of the parties to an internal conflict to accept a peacekeeping force.<sup>46</sup>

Survey organizations have recognized the difference and have adjusted their question wording accordingly, making it possible to distinguish the purpose that underlies the military action (“peacekeeping”) that is proposed in survey questions. One version frequently inquires about “sending troops to enforce a peace agreement once peace has been established.” This formulation is closest to the true purpose of peacekeeping (the conflict has ended, and “peace” is what is being enforced). Other formulations are really questions about participating in internal political conflicts. One variation asks about sending peacekeepers “to help end the conflict [or: stop the violence].” Surely survey respondents understand that this wording implies potential participation in the conflict. Yet other questions ask if peacekeeping troops should be sent to “protect ethnic Albanians in Kosovo,” which certainly has a similar effect on survey respondents. Therefore the key rule as I tabulated the surveys was to establish the distinction between a question that actually inquires about “neutral” peacekeeping and one that is actually asking about “peacekeeping” that might involve participation in the internal political struggle under way.<sup>47</sup>

As this discussion suggests, the overriding methodological principle in the

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46. In the Somalia case, the shift in mission from humanitarian purposes to active pursuit of the warlords is already captured by clear differences in question wording, so the two can be analyzed separately.

47. To accomplish this, I classified only two types of action as true “peacekeeping operations.” The first is mention of sending peacekeepers when there is no suggestion that these forces would participate, or assist, one side in an internal conflict. The second involves questions about military actions to protect peacekeepers or facilitate their evacuation, but again only if there is no suggestion that the forces would participate in the conflict or assist any of its parties.

classification of survey questions by principal policy objective was this: follow the wording of the question that is put to survey respondents. Government pronouncements or scholarly arguments about the purpose of an intervention are irrelevant, because the scholarly literature confirms that survey respondents answer the question that is put to them. If the question mentions “regime change” or taking the side of one party involved in an internal conflict, the question is classified as internal political change. If the question asks about the use of U.S. military forces to help relieve the suffering of an anguished population, it is classified as humanitarian intervention.

Using this rule, almost 90 percent of the survey questions were classified by principle policy objective. The remaining 10 percent or so concern the U.S. Marine deployment in Lebanon in 1982 and 1983 and the invasions of Grenada, Panama, and Iraq. In these instances, question wording alone did not provide an unequivocal basis for classifying principal policy objectives. Perhaps this is not surprising because, in each of these historical episodes, the U.S. government offered multiple justifications for intervention, putting pollsters in the position of leaving judgments to respondents. In each case, threats to U.S. interests were a prominent government argument in favor of intervention (foreign policy restraint); but in each case, participation in internal political change was either offered as a justification or emerged as a fact of the intervention (Lebanon).

Because the wording of the unclassified survey questions does not resolve the matter, I treat these questions as “mixed” cases that potentially invoke both foreign policy restraint and internal political change. Whether these “mixed” cases also yield different levels of citizen support is something one can judge from the survey responses themselves.<sup>48</sup> For the analysis according to principal policy objectives, I therefore present five categories rather than the four ultimately employed by Jentleson: foreign policy restraint, humanitarian intervention, “mixed” objectives, internal political change, and peacekeeping.

The level of public support for using military force for each of these purposes is presented in Table 5. The striking feature of the data in this table is the clear confirmation of Jentleson’s argument: foreign policy restraint and humanitarian intervention enjoy the strongest support by far. Internal political change and peacekeeping are equally unpopular. This pattern holds not only for the overall totals at the top of the table, but also within most of the histori-

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48. This is the same approach taken in Jentleson, “Pretty Prudent Public,” pp. 59–64. Jentleson finds that support levels for the “mixed” cases fall between those for foreign policy restraint and internal political change.



**Table 5. Support for U.S. Use of Force According to Principal Policy Objective**

	Favor (%)	N	Favor (%)	N
All episodes				
Foreign policy restraint (FPR)	64	317	64	85
Humanitarian intervention	61	31	57	30
Mixed IPC/FPR	57	120	62	30
Internal political change (IPC)	48	484		
Peacekeeping	47	121		
Lebanon peacekeeping			45	40
Foreign policy restraint	45	2	35	1
Humanitarian intervention	40	1		
Mixed IPC/FPR	38	9		
Internal political change	31	1	37	50
Peacekeeping	41	13		
Grenada invasion			63	22
Mixed IPC/FPR	59	8	48	19
Panama invasion			69	1
Foreign policy restraint	69	2	37	2
Mixed IPC/FPR	66	2		
Internal political change	48	14	73	5
Nicaragua				
Mixed IPC/FPR	44	1	48	68
Internal political change	31	48	53	31
El Salvador				
Internal political change	31	50	79	73
Libya air strikes			76	2
Foreign policy restraint	70	8		
Internal political change	17	2	54	122
Reflag Kuwaiti tankers			67	33
Foreign policy restraint	58	18		
Soviets in Afghanistan			44	8
Foreign policy restraint	48	6		
Gulf crisis and war			40	7
Foreign policy restraint	64	63	50	7
Bosnia				
Humanitarian intervention	57	7		
Internal political change	45	64		
Peacekeeping	46	70		
Confrontation with Iraq, 1992-2003				
Foreign policy restraint				
Mixed IPC/FPR				
Internal political change				
North Korea nuclear confrontation				
Foreign policy restraint				
Internal political change				
Haiti occupation				
Internal political change				
Somalia				
Humanitarian intervention				
Internal political change				
Rwanda				
Humanitarian intervention				
Internal political change				
Sudan/Afghan missile strikes				
Foreign policy restraint				
Kosovo				
Internal political change				
Peacekeeping				
War against terror				
Foreign policy restraint				
Internal political change				
Iraq war, 2003-05				
Mixed IPC/FPR				
Internal political change				
Iran				
Foreign policy restraint				
Syria				
Foreign policy restraint				
Liberia				
Peacekeeping				

cal episodes for which different objectives have been queried in surveys. The only exceptions are the two episodes involving Iraq after 1992 and the war against terror. The latter is hardly surprising: after the September 11 terrorist attacks, support for pursuing those responsible was understandably high, even if that meant involvement in internal conflicts abroad (and in the event, many of these questions involved removing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan because it was seen as complicit in the attack on the United States).

In the case of Iraq, the high support for participating in internal political change (which derives from survey questions on “removing Saddam Hussein from power”) goes against the grain; it is essentially the same as support for foreign policy restraint. This pattern, which has been evident since the end of the Gulf War, suggests one of three things. The first is that the Gulf War resulted in the personalization of the U.S.-Iraqi confrontation and the demonization of Hussein to such an extent that the normal aversion to participation in internal political change was overcome. Any survey question that inquired about “removing Saddam Hussein” evoked a high positive response. The second is that the removal of Hussein was seen as an unfinished item of business left over from the war in 1991. Finally, it is possible that the American public essentially agreed with the argument of two U.S. presidents—Bill Clinton and George W. Bush—that the removal of Hussein was itself instrumental to the national security goal of restraining Iraq’s production and deployment of weapons that had been banned after the Gulf War.

Perhaps the public’s support for regime change in Iraq resulted from a combination of all three arguments, but notably the logic has not been generalized to favor removing other regimes that may be pursuing weapons of mass destruction. The most glaring example is the low level of support for using military force to restrain North Korean weapons programs, despite years of publicity on the issue and President Bush’s identification of North Korea as part of an “axis of evil.” A single question on “going to war to remove the North Korean government from power” evoked only 35 percent support in April 2003, and support for using military force to coerce North Korean compliance with nuclear weapons agreements has been a surprisingly low 45 percent in forty surveys since 1993. Similarly, support for using force against Iran or Syria to restrain those states from developing weapons of mass destruction has averaged only 42 percent since 2002.

All of this suggests that there is no general public consensus to use military force to remove regimes in states that are suspected of developing highly destructive weapons, and the data on the Iraq war in 2003 provide further evidence that the willingness to support regime change was confined to Saddam

Hussein. Note in Table 5 that the “mixed IPC/FPR” questions for this war show lower levels of average support (54 percent) than do the internal change questions that directly mentioned removing Hussein (67 percent). In other words, using force against Iraq when it was presented in general terms was less popular than using force to eliminate Hussein specifically. This pattern alone suggests that Americans were animated by a specific hostility toward Hussein, a conclusion buttressed by the fact that support for the war—without mentioning Hussein—dropped slightly below 50 percent after the war began on March 19, 2003 (it is 54 percent when Hussein’s name is mentioned). As I show later, the high levels of support at the beginning of the war were soon followed by a stark decline from the period of the war itself (when support was above 70 percent) and into the phase of occupation. When the mission changed to managing internal political change, support dropped as low as 50 percent or lower during the period from 2003 through early 2005.

Table 5 also shows that peacekeeping operations are just as unpopular as intervention in internal political conflicts. An almost identically low percentage of poll respondents support such operations overall. Moreover, the even divide of opinion on peacekeeping missions shows why they are so delicate politically. As is the case with involvement in internal political conflicts, there is no consensus support for using U.S. troops to “keep the peace” in the midst—or the aftermath—of internal conflicts. Whether this lack of consensus results from the fear of casualties among U.S. troops on the ground is the question to which I now turn.<sup>49</sup>

#### VICTORY HAS MANY FRIENDS: THE PUBLIC’S REACTION TO THE LOSS OF LIFE

The foregoing sections of this article offer several indirect clues that public support for military intervention is indeed conditioned by the fear of casualties. First, general invocations of “using military force” are more popular than are concrete mentions of specific military actions. Second, more risky actions, such as deploying ground troops or peacekeepers, are less popular than less risky actions, such as conducting air strikes.

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49. Although a thorough analysis is beyond the scope of this article, it is interesting to note that U.S. support for peacekeeping operations is substantially lower than support in European and other countries for the same missions. For example, the support of European citizens for peacekeeping operations in Bosnia and Kosovo averaged 57 percent in almost 100 surveys—compared with 47 percent in the United States. For further data and analysis, see Richard C. Eichenberg, “Global Public Opinion on the Use of Military Force from the First Gulf War to the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq,” Tufts University, May 30, 2005, <http://ase.tufts.edu/polsci/faculty/eichenberg/web.asp>.

**Table 6. The Effect of Mentioning U.S. Casualties on Support for U.S. Use of Force**

Episode	Casualties Not Mentioned	Casualties Mentioned	Increase or Decrease
	Favor (%)	Favor (%)	
Confrontation with Iraq, 1992–2003	64	50	–14
War against terror, 2001–03	80	66	–14
Iraq war, 2003–05	63	50	–13
Lebanon peacekeeping, 1982–84	44	31	–13
Kosovo, 1998–2001	51	40	–11
Gulf crisis and war, 1990–91	68	59	–9
Bosnia, 1992–2002	46	37	–9
Haiti occupation, 1994	37	32	–5
Grenada invasion, 1983	60	56	–4
Somalia, 1992–93	56	55	–1
Panama invasion, 1988–89	51	66	+15
Average	54	50	
Number of surveys	917	175	

There are a number of ways to examine more directly the public’s sensitivity to casualties. The most straightforward is to compare support for using force in survey questions that do not mention casualties to support when casualties are explicitly mentioned. The second is to examine the evolution of support before, during, and after combat operations. Finally, one can trace the evolution of support across these phases of a conflict and compare the levels of support to the number of casualties sustained. I present each type of analysis in this section.

I begin in Table 6 with the comparison of questions that include and exclude specific mention of casualties. The data show that public opinion is substantially sensitive to casualties. In seven of the eleven episodes for which the comparison is available, support for using force ranges from 9 to 17 percentage points lower when casualties are mentioned. The average decline for all episodes is 10 percent, excluding the increase for questions on the Panama invasion (which were asked after the invasion).

One troubling aspect of the results in Table 6 is the indication that the practices of polling organizations yield an overestimate of the enthusiasm of Americans for using military force. As shown at the bottom of the table, polling organizations have asked about using force 917 times without mentioning the potential human cost in the same question; casualties were mentioned in only 175 questions. Yet the figures show that even in cases where an enthusiastic

majority supported the use of force (basically the episodes in the top half of the table), support was reduced to more tenuous political levels when casualties were mentioned. The most salient recent example is support for the use of force against Iraq, which since 1992 has averaged well above 60 percent when casualties were omitted from the survey questions. When casualties were mentioned, however, the levels of support were substantially lower—in fact, much closer to the 50 percent level that signals a polarized citizenry. It is also telling that this 50 percent figure is very close to the average level of support for the war after casualties had been suffered.<sup>50</sup>

I speculated earlier that the low level of support for intervening in internal conflicts might result from the inherent risk of casualties in those situations, because such conflicts are intractable and because intervention raises the prospect of deploying ground troops or peacekeepers in strife-ridden situations. Table 6 does not bear out this reasoning. Indeed, the highest sensitivity to casualties occurs in the episodes involving at least some aspects of foreign policy restraint, such as the war in Iraq (–13 percent), the war against terror (–14 percent), and the Persian Gulf War (–9 percent). In several of these cases, what appeared to be majority support for using force declines to a tenuous majority (or even less) when the prospect of casualties is mentioned (confrontation with Iraq, Iraq war, Kosovo, and the Gulf War). In other cases, fragile political support in the abstract turns to outright opposition when casualties are mentioned (Lebanon, Bosnia).

To be sure, there are situations in which the public's casualty aversion is less pronounced or not visible at all (Grenada, Panama). In the case of Somalia, the apparent lack of casualty sensitivity seems to fly in the face of everything we know about the public reaction to the debacle in Mogadishu in October 1993, when eighteen U.S. Rangers were killed in a highly publicized event. In the latter instance, the reason is that the table combines all polls from before and after this tragic instance. Somewhat surprisingly, a willingness to absorb casualties for the humanitarian purpose in Somalia ("making sure food gets through to hungry people") was very high before the deaths of the rangers (68 percent). When they died in what appeared to be a heartbreaking failure, support for intervening in Somalia crumbled when casualties were mentioned (45 percent). In the cases of Grenada and Panama, approximately the same num-

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50. As noted earlier, many surveys do include follow-ups that mention the acceptable number of deaths. These follow-ups, however (which do tend to reveal the sensitivity to casualties), seem to get lost in the reporting of the "main" questions on using force.

**Table 7. Support for U.S. Use of Force prior to, during, and after Hostilities**

Episode	Prior to Hostilities	During Hostilities	Casualties Suffered	Change Prior/During
Gulf crisis and war	62	70	383	+8
Lebanon peacekeeping	44	42	265	-2
Iraq war, 2003 (through April 30, 2003)	61	72	139	+11
War against terror	77	80	101	+3
Somalia	72	52	43	-20
Panama invasion	40	75	23	+35
Grenada invasion	—	60	19	—
Libya air strike	17	76	2	+59
Reflag Kuwaiti tankers	—	58	2	—
Bosnia	42	48	0	+6
Kosovo	46	48	0	+2
Confrontation with Iraq, 1992–2003	61	72	0	+11
Sudan/Afghanistan missile strikes	—	73	0	—
Total (average)	57	60		

  

Episode	Prior to Hostilities	During Hostilities	Casualties Suffered	Change Prior/During
Somalia	72	41	43	-31
Lebanon peacekeeping	44	21	265	-23
Iraq war (from May 1, 2003)	61	51	1,484	-10
Bosnia	42	43	0	+1
Gulf crisis and war	62	65	383	+3
War against terror	77	80	101	+3
Kosovo	46	56	0	+10
Confrontation with Iraq, 1992–2003	61	72	0	+11
Haiti occupation	32	45	4	+13
Panama invasion	40	75	23	+35
Libya air strike	17	68	2	+51
Grenada invasion	—	56	19	—
Reflag Kuwaiti tankers	—	58	2	—
Sudan/Afghanistan missile strikes	—	73	0	—
Total (average)	57	49		

NOTE: Casualties in Iraq war through February 14, 2005.

ber of casualties was suffered as would later occur in Somalia, but support for the interventions remained high and even increased in the case of Panama. This suggests that the arguments of scholars about the importance of the success or failure of the mission are on the mark. The invasions of Grenada and Panama were deemed successes; the intervention in Somalia was not.

To explore this relationship further, in Table 7, I provide a more precise anal-

ysis of the sensitivity of the public to the loss of life. The table shows support for using force, now divided into three phases of each episode: prior to hostilities (when no casualties have occurred); during hostile operations (when casualties were incurred in many episodes); and after hostilities had ended (in which case, support is measured retrospectively). The number of casualties actually suffered in each episode is also shown in the table.<sup>51</sup>

The most important finding to emerge from the table is that there is no overall correlation between the number of casualties suffered and the level of support while combat operations are under way. Examine the top half of Table 7. In three of four episodes in which relatively high casualties were absorbed, citizen support for using force remained among the highest of all episodes while hostilities were under way. At the other end of the spectrum, it is clear that low casualties do not guarantee high support (Bosnia, Kosovo). Overall, the figures in the top half of the table tend to support Jentleson's principal policy objectives framework: instances of FPR restraint evince high support regardless of the level of casualties, and instances of internal political conflict evince low support, even when casualties are low or do not occur at all. Note also that the normal "rally" effect that usually occurs when hostilities begin is barely in evidence in the Bosnia and Kosovo episodes, and the two episodes in which support for the intervention actually declined (Lebanon, Somalia) also involve internal political conflicts.<sup>52</sup>

Nonetheless, any inference that the principal policy objective is the only important factor is confounded by another pattern involving the success or failure of the mission. Of course, the Lebanon and Somalia cases are two episodes that are widely seen as tragic—indeed humiliating—failures, and in these two cases, support declined during the interventions. Instances of high support generally result from "success"—as in Grenada, Panama, the Gulf War, and the major combat phase of the 2003 Iraq war. All of these involved rapid military victories and successful accomplishment of the mission.

The relationship between mission success and high public support becomes

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51. Casualty figures, updated through February 14, 2005, are taken from the following sources. For episodes prior to 2001, U.S. Department of Defense, *Worldwide U.S. Active Duty Military Deaths*, <http://web1.whs.mil/mmid/casualty/table13.htm>; and U.S. Department of Defense, *U.S. Military Operations: Casualty Breakdown*, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/casualties.htm>. Figures for the "war against terror" (Operation Enduring Freedom) and the war in Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom) are from the U.S. Central Command, as summarized at <http://www.icasualties.org>. Casualties include hostile and nonhostile fatalities in theater.

52. I define the hostilities phase in Somalia to have begun on June 6, 1993, when the UN Security Council called for the apprehension of those responsible for the deaths of twenty-four Pakistani peacekeepers the previous day. The first attack by U.S. and UN forces against those of the rebel leader Mohammed Farah Aidid took place on June 12, 1993.

even clearer in the lower half of Table 7, where public support is ranked according to the change in support from before hostilities began and after they had ceased. The pattern is clear—victory has many friends. Regardless of the level of casualties or the principal policy objective, interventions that end successfully show an increase in public support over the level of support prior to the conflict. This is true of major “victories” such as the Panama invasion and the Gulf War; it is also true, however, of some internal conflicts, such as Kosovo; and there is even a surprising increase in support for the 1994 Haiti intervention once U.S. troops had landed.<sup>53</sup> Even in the Bosnia episode, support held steady once the 1995 Dayton accord was signed and the peacekeeping force was deployed.

True, none of the latter operations resulted in significant casualties, and it is also true that the episodes in which support declined most are all instances of internal political change: the Iraq occupation and insurgency after May 1, 2003, Lebanon, and Somalia. In fact, the difficulty of separating out the relative importance of mission success, casualties, and principal policy objective is that these three episodes simultaneously involve internal political change, the occurrence of casualties, and a widely perceived notion that the operations had failed (or, in the case of the Iraq occupation from 2003 to 2005, that success was proving elusive). It is therefore difficult to know if it is mission success, the number of casualties, or principal policy objective that is the most important factor at work. What is known is that the combination of intervention in internal political conflict, the occurrence of casualties, and a lack of success seriously erodes support for military intervention.

Citizens may therefore shy away from military involvement in internal political conflicts because they fear that it will cost too many lives (because of the intensity that animates parties to internal conflicts), but also because the standard for success is very high. As Jentleson noted in his 1992 study, the standard of success in restraining another state is fairly clear: its military forces must be defeated. With internal political conflicts, the conflict between or among warring factions must be resolved, and a stable political system “built”—a demanding objective given the divisions that provoked the intervention in the first place. As the U.S. experience has shown, the probability of failure is not insignificant.

Moreover, in each of the cases where mission success was uncertain and

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53. This no doubt results from the avoidance of hostilities in Haiti. Nonetheless the increase in support for sending troops in an instance of internal political conflict is significant, and it suggests that the public viewed the negotiation of the occupation (under threat of invasion) as a “success.”



public support dropped, there was either a fragile consensus among political leaders to begin with (Lebanon, Somalia), or the existing consensus crumbled as the intervention failed to reveal successful results (all three cases, now including the Iraq occupation). In summary, the overall relationship of public opinion to casualties suffered seems to capture Larson's description of a dynamic citizen cost-benefit calculation, informed by the information gained from political debates: "Support can be thought of as a constant rebalancing of the benefits and prospects for success—and a determination of whether the outcome is judged worth the costs—all informed by leaders and experts."<sup>54</sup>

### *What Determines Public Support for the Use of Military Force?*

A final question is the relative influence of the factors examined in previous sections of this article. Which factors are most important and to what degree? In Table 8, I summarize the relative impact of the factors that influence citizen support for the use of military force in an ordinary least squares regression analysis. The beginning point is the constant from the regression, which can be interpreted as a baseline average level of support for questions classified as "mixed" foreign policy restraint and/or internal political change (52.7 percent). Because the question wording variables take the values of 1 and 0 (indicating the presence or absence of a particular question wording), they are readily interpretable as the percentage change in public support caused by the presence of a particular question wording. For example, Table 8 shows that average support for humanitarian intervention is fourteen percentage points higher than the baseline average (+14.4), but support drops by almost ten percentage points when civilian casualties are mentioned in the question (−9.7).<sup>55</sup>

The table confirms that principal policy objectives are a powerful influence on public support for the use of force. Regardless of what else may be mentioned in the question, support for humanitarian intervention, foreign policy

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54. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, p. 12.

55. The regression includes the groups of variables that showed a plausible relationship with public support in previous sections of this article (Tables 3–7). I also analyzed a number of additional variables in the survey database, but none proved statistically significant. For example, mentioning "ground" troops is negatively correlated with support when taken alone, but it is not significant in this regression, presumably because the variable "send troops" already taps into sensitivities about sending "ground" troops. The same is true of questions that mention the actual number of troops or the existence of an international mandate for military action ("send troops" and multilateralism already capture these effects). In sum, I am confident that I have included the variables that are prominent both in the theoretical literature and in the empirical results of prior sections of this article. The regression also included a control for the unusually low support scores for North Korea.

**Table 8. Regression Analysis of Support for U.S. Use of Force**

	Coefficient	Standard Error
Constant		
Principal policy objective	52.73	1.38
Humanitarian intervention	14.36**	2.42
Foreign policy restraint	7.32**	1.44
Peacekeeping	-5.44**	1.63
Internal political change	-10.31**	1.23
Effect of question that mentions:		
Removal of Saddam Hussein from power	17.08**	1.19
Retaliation for attack on United States	16.03**	1.53
Multilateral participation	5.42**	1.06
Air or missile strikes	5.35**	1.54
General "use of force" or "military attack"	3.41**	1.22
Selling or provision of arms	-9.49**	1.68
Sending of troops	-2.77**	1.11
Casualties in question wording		
Civilian casualties	-9.75**	3.21
Military casualties	-8.00**	1.11
Number of casualties actually suffered		
All historical episodes	3.79**	0.67
Lebanon	-7.52**	1.23
Somalia	-10.63*	6.16
Iraq, 2003 (war period ending April 30, 2003)	14.67**	2.41
Iraq, 2003 (postwar period)	-4.31**	0.69

\* $p < 0.10$ ; \*\* $p < 0.001$

restraint, and the mixed objectives reflected in the baseline average are all well above a majority level of citizen support. Involvement in situations of internal political change, however, is not: other things being equal, intervention in what are essentially civil war situations yields support well below a majority (the baseline average of 52.7 percent minus 10.3 percentage points). Nor is peacekeeping in the aftermath of internal conflicts very popular (5 percentage points below the average).

The single exception to the reticence of the public to involvement in internal conflicts is the popularity of regime change in Iraq. When survey questions mention that the purpose of the intervention is to remove Saddam Hussein from power, support levels increase by 17 percentage points.<sup>56</sup> This may be because regime change in Iraq was seen as instrumental to U.S. security interests

56. The phrase "remove Saddam Hussein from power" has been used in 112 survey questions since 1992.

(and thus perceived as foreign policy restraint), or perhaps it resulted simply from the personalization of the conflict against a vicious dictator.

Table 8 also helps to explain why support for the presence in Iraq declined after major hostilities were declared ended on May 1, 2003. In the first place, once Hussein was gone, the mission became one of managing political change, with insurgents attacking first U.S. forces and increasingly other Iraqis. The possibility of civil war among Iraqis is also widely discussed in the press. As Table 8 shows, involvement in this sort of internal conflict has never been popular with U.S. public opinion. Second, the middle portion of the table confirms that, even apart from policy objectives, Americans do not like risky military undertakings. Air strikes or generally stated "military attacks" evoke strong approval, but "sending troops" or supplying arms to warring parties detracts from it. The public is also sensitive to civilian and military casualties in question wording, and of course the death toll in Iraq continues to be a major part of the daily news cycle.

In Iraq and elsewhere, battle casualties have an impact on the support of the U.S. public for the use of force. Table 8 indicates that the prospect of casualties in question wording lowers support by 8 to 10 percentage points. When casualties actually occur, the effect is positive overall, a result that arises from the high levels of approval for the wars in Grenada, Panama, and the Gulf War captured in the term for "all historical episodes." Only in Lebanon and the postwar phase of the 2003 Iraq conflict have casualties been correlated with lower support (the same is true of Somalia, but the decline is only mildly statistically significant).

## *Conclusion*

There is a substantial amount of previous research on public opinion and the use of military force by the United States, but the attainment of a cumulative set of findings has been hindered by the lack of a unified analysis of public opinion across a number of historical cases in which the United States threatened or actually used force. In this article, I have presented such an analysis by studying all opinion surveys on the subject from 1981 to early 2005 and by re-considering several issues left open in the literature, including the question of casualty aversion and the impact of multilateral sentiment. Several conclusions emerge.

The first conclusion is that both the principal policy objective and the success or failure of a military operation are crucial factors determining the level of citizen support in its aftermath. Comparing across many cases historically

or within specific cases, the initial “base” level of support for any intervention is strongly conditioned by its principal policy objective, which is significant politically because politicians must calculate in advance whether military intervention will enjoy popular support. Restraining adversaries is popular, but intervention in civil wars (or peacekeeping in their aftermath) is generally not. In addition, it seems likely that one reason for the public’s reticence is the estimate that intervention in civil wars offers uncertain prospects for success. Civil wars are particularly intractable because of their zero-sum nature, and reconciliation of competing factions requires a political solution rather than a military victory. Defining “success” in such situations is difficult, and achieving it more difficult still.

Second, the public’s sensitivity to the loss of human life must be understood as part of this calculus. Support for using force is lower when the prospect of casualties is mentioned before the event; but when force is actually employed, the public’s support is conditioned by the outcome of the military intervention rather than by the number of casualties that are actually suffered. As several scholars have argued, the public is articulating a cost-benefit calculation. If the United States accomplishes what it sets out to do, citizens generally respond that it was “worth it.” If the mission fails, public support is withdrawn.

Third, other considerations also influence public opinion. Perhaps most important for the contemporary policy agenda, multilateral sentiment does matter. One of the most interesting findings is that majority support for using force in several historical episodes existed only when the survey question mentioned multilateral participation. Because these survey questions explicitly involved the use of force—they did not offer the “force versus UN” option—it seems plausible that respondents are attracted to multilateral actions because the costs and the risks are shared. Still, one must note that the attraction of multilateral participation, while visible, is nonetheless secondary to principal policy objectives and the cost-benefit calculation of success and failure. Support for restraining foreign adversaries is always higher than support for intervening in internal conflicts, even if the intervention is multilateral. Moreover, even the marginally higher level of support for multilateral interventions in internal conflicts remains at a somewhat tenuous political level. The levels of support for the interventions in Bosnia and Kosovo are good examples. Even in questions evoking multilateral action, support remained in a range—about 50 percent—that counseled political caution to two presidents.

A fourth conclusion is that the September 11 terrorist attacks did not fundamentally alter the underlying logic of U.S. public opinion on the use of military force. There are several reasons for this conclusion. The first arises from

public opinion on going to war against Iraq, which President Bush closely associated with the “war on terror.” In the immediate aftermath of September 11, the percentage of Americans willing to go to war to eliminate the Hussein regime increased slightly, but by late summer 2002, the percentage had returned to the average that had prevailed throughout the 1990s (fluctuating around 60 percent). To be sure, support for the initial phase of the war was very high, but once the task turned to occupation and “nation building” and the difficulties became apparent, public support dropped closer to 50 percent and occasionally dipped below that level. Nor has the broader strategy of preemption gained much support: Americans remain decidedly unenthusiastic about using force to prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction to North Korea, Iran, or Syria. In the case of North Korea, support for using force is lower on average than it had been prior to September 11. Certainly, responding to threats or attacks against the United States will continue to enjoy high support, but intervention in internal conflicts remains as unpopular as it ever was, and the occupation phase of the Iraq conflict has likely reinforced that view.

These conclusions represent something unique in the scholarly literature on public opinion and military force: a historically comprehensive, multivariate analysis that assesses the combined impact of a number of factors on public opinion. It also provides an assessment of the relative impact of each factor—something not available from individual contributions to the previous scholarly literature. The principal policy objective of a military intervention strongly conditions public support; but even taking these objectives into account, three factors—risk, casualties, and multilateral participation—have an important statistical impact. Further, the findings are not confined to any single historical episode. Rather, the findings emerge from a comparative analysis of all historical cases in which the United States threatened or used military force, and they are largely uniform across and within those cases. The findings are therefore likely to be of enduring relevance to a variety of future contingencies.

It is thus not surprising that the results help to explain the ebb and flow of support for the war in Iraq and the subsequent occupation. As this article shows, a war fought largely with the rhetorical justification of foreign policy restraint (the famed weapons of mass destruction) was extremely popular at first, both because the objective has been historically popular with the public and because of the rapid success of the operation. As the objective changed from foreign policy restraint to participation in an internal political struggle, however, support waned rapidly. The high human cost and halting progress of the occupation contributed further to the decline, with the result that support for the occupation has oscillated around 50 percent since late 2003—about the

same level of support for intervening in Bosnia a decade earlier. Reduced support for the war seems also to have contributed to a close presidential election when a comfortable victory might otherwise have been predicted.<sup>57</sup>

The declining trend of support has been interrupted, however, in ways that the analysis would also predict. For example, a visible success—such as the capture of Saddam Hussein in December 2003 and the Iraqi elections in January 2005—does arrest the downward trend of support and can even produce a short-term spurt in support for the occupation.<sup>58</sup> In addition, by campaigning intensively in late summer 2004 on the argument that the war in Iraq was a part of the broader war against terror, President Bush seemed to have successfully shifted the discourse on the war from one of civil war to one of foreign policy restraint. Significantly, both support for the war and presidential job approval increased during this crucial period at the outset of the election.<sup>59</sup>

Interestingly, although support for the occupation grew slightly following the January 2005 Iraqi elections, the increase was quite small in most polls. It was also short lived. By June 2005, approval of President Bush's Iraq policies had dropped to their lowest levels ever in most survey questions (40 to 45 percent), forcing the president to deliver an address to the nation in which he sought to restore support for the war by again tying the conflict in Iraq to the war against terror.<sup>60</sup> Whether he succeeded in shoring up long-term support for the war remains to be seen. Based on past patterns, future support for the military effort in Iraq will more likely reflect the fundamental factors that underlie citizen calculations. Above all, because the United States is involved in an increasingly bloody internal conflict, support is likely to remain at tenuous levels. Continuing accumulation of both military and civilian casualties could push it even lower in the absence of convincing evidence of success in quelling the insurgency. Indeed, failing some demonstration that political stability and internal security have been established in Iraq, the most compelling estimate is that popular support will remain below a majority.

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57. Eichenberg and Stoll, *The Political Fortunes of War*; and David Karol and Edward Miguel, "Iraq War Casualties and the 2004 Presidential Election," University of California, Berkeley, November 30, 2004.

58. Space precludes an extended presentation of data. For analysis of these points, see Eichenberg and Stoll, *The Political Fortunes of War*; and Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, "Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq." The best compendium of polls on Iraq is <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq>.

59. This confirms the importance of presidential leadership. On this point, see Jentleson, "Pretty Prudent Public"; and Feaver and Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles*.

60. For polling results, see <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>. The text of the president's address is available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/06/20050628-7.html>.