

# “...That he which hath no stomach to this fight, let him depart”\*: Understanding Public Support within Democracies for Military Operations (\*\*Henry V, Act 4 Scene 3)

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**Background**

Since the Vietnam War, the leaders of ‘western’ democratic states have worried about – and their opponents have calculated upon – the reluctance of their electorates to support military operations in the face of mounting military death tolls. This belief that the US in particular is no more than a “paper tiger” has informed and encouraged the strategies of opponents such as Osama bin Laden, who in 1996 wrote that:

“... your most distasteful case was in Somalia...when tens of your soldiers were killed in minor battles... you left the area carrying disappointment, humiliation, defeat and your dead with you ...”

But is this assessment actually true? Are democratic states really unable to sustain prolonged military operations in either ‘wars of choice’ or ‘wars of national survival’? Or do more subtle balances of factors determine:

- How completely an electorate will endorse a move to undertake military action in the first place?
- How large an effect of “rallying around the flag” can be expected on committing to operations?
- The rate at which public support for operations will be lost as military deaths mount?

- Whether such erosion of public support can be suspended or even reversed?
- What happens when public support for continuing an operation falls too low a level?

- What affects the level at which public support becomes inadequate?

These are not just academic questions: our enemies perceive the democratic requirement for popular endorsement of military activity to be a strategic centre of gravity that is vulnerable to ‘attack’ by them.

Understanding the true nature of public support for military operations within the UK – and within our NATO, EU and other democratic allies - will help us better understand how to withstand these indirect attacks by our opponents upon our national will to continue fighting.

**Larson’s Rational Cost-Benefit Model**

Public Support (for a military operation) –  $P \times B / C$

- Where:
- P** is (the public’s perception of) the operation’s Probability of Eventual Success
  - B** is (the public’s perception of) the operation’s Expected (End) Benefit, if successful
  - C** is (the public’s perception of) the operation’s Expected (Final) Cost, if successful

- In this model:
- Cumulative military fatalities incurred to date are an indicator of what the expected final cost of the operation may be

- Principal Policy Objective is an indicator of the operation’s importance – or expected end benefit – to national interests

“Saddam Hussein is said to believe that...Iraq could take the pounding longer than the U.S. and its allies could withstand... the arrival back home of thousands of body bags.”

George J Church, “The Gulf: Saddam’s Strategies”, Time Magazine, 1 Oct 90

**Existing Academic Research**

Political scientists in the USA have been studying US “casualty-phobia” since the Vietnam War:

- In 1973, JOHN E MUELLER showed how declining levels of US public support for both the Korean and Vietnam Wars could be associated with cumulative military fatalities. This work remains hugely influential and continues to underpin much modern research.
- In 1992, BRUCE JENTLESON introduced the concept of the Principal Policy Objective (PPO) to test the hypothesis that the US public would accept greater military fatalities on operations important to vital national interests.

- Between 1996 and 2005, ERIC LARSON at RAND Corp undertook a number of practical operations research studies that built upon MUELLER’s and JENTLESON’s work and has produced a simple rational cost-benefit model of US public support for US military operations (see box).

This US academic research has an almost exclusively parochial American focus, with little attempt made to generalise US models to other democratic states. Similarly, the only significant European research in this field – by PHILIP EVERTS in the Netherlands and PIERANGELO ISERNIA in Italy - compares the commitment of different European nations to the 1990s international military peacekeeping / peace-enforcement operations in the Balkans only.

The only known UK research was carried out at DERA in 1999; this specified a minimal generic model for democratic states from a small sample of operations by different nations in different conflicts. Although based upon LARSON’s work, it only models MUELLER’s minimal fatality-fatigue factor; it is also the ultimate inspiration for this Associate Fellowship project.



“Ramp Ceremony” in Helmand Province, Afghanistan on 16 June 2008 prior to the repatriation back to the UK of the bodies of Pts N Cutbush, D Murray, D Gamble and J Doherty and LCpl J Bateman, 2 PARA.

**This Associate Fellowship Project**

This Associate Fellowship project seeks to initiate a programme of research to develop a multivariate generic model of the factors that determine domestic public sentiment within democratic states (including, but not limited to, the UK and US) for supporting military operations. Specifically, the ultimate aim of this research is to:

- Synthesise the existing US academic research into a generic theoretical model of how public support in democratic BLUE states affects the willingness of the state to undertake and then continue with an operation or conflict (“resilience”).

- Determine what factors (including but not limited to casualties suffered) affect the robustness and sustainability of this public support.

- Determine what factors affect both the occurrence and nature of strategic “shift points” in public opinion.

The research will be undertaken as a “historical analysis” (HA) study which will seek to fit the generic theoretical model derived to real-world empirical data drawn from a wide range of historical and contemporary operations and conflicts undertaken from WWII onwards. This work will also be undertaken in collaboration with academia (see box).

“Public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail; against it, nothing can succeed”.

Abraham Lincoln

**Outputs from this Associate Fellowship**

The intended outputs to be produced by the Associate Fellowship project itself by September 2009 will be:

- A generic literature survey and review of researchers active in this field;
- The specification of a generic theoretical model;
- Location of data sources for the public opinion data on historical and contemporary campaigns;
- Simple exploratory analyses of UK and US public opinion in Iraq (see case study) and of the UK in Afghanistan (OP HERRICK);
- Bids for follow-on research funding to enable this work to continue, in collaboration with academia, after the end of the Associate Fellowship;

**The Elite Cue vs. Event Response Debate**

A secondary debate within the academic literature concerns whether “public opinion” is genuinely formed in response to external events as the aggregate of the different positions of individual members of the public or is instead formed by a small elite of informed commentators whose stances then influence the mass public, according to levels of trust, partisanship, leadership etc.

To an extent, this is an academic distinction. However, whilst elite opinion might well influence mass public opinion for an actual, ongoing operation, it is hard to see why it would affect the public’s theoretical toleration of fatalities for purely hypothetical operations.

Interestingly, work in progress (see right) suggests that even these theoretical polls largely replicate MUELLER’s original model – which suggests that elite influence is less of an issue for real operations than its proponents assert.

**Benefits from This Research**

An understanding of what factors are strong or weak drivers of public support for military operations amongst democratic states will provide practical and theoretical benefit to UK MoD *inter alia* by:

- Improving our understanding of UK and allies’ resilience to RED attacks upon our willingness to persevere with military operations;

- Informing our assessments of the wider value of Force Protection and Information Operations in current and future operations.

Furthermore, such a model will also provide insight into, and may possibly even be extendable to include, the mechanisms driving population sentiment within the RED semi- and non-democratic states and Non-State Actors that will be our future opponents.

An understanding of these factors will be a necessary component of any truly comprehensive approach to the generation of strategic effects in future military operations against likely RED regimes.

**Academic Collaboration**

Contact has been established with ERIC LARSON at RAND, and a visit to Santa Monica is being discussed.

Within Europe, approaches have been made to PHILIP EVERTS and PIERANGELO ISERNIA, but have not yet borne fruit.

Discussions are currently underway with PROF MIKE SPAGAT of the Department of Economics at Royal Holloway College, London about collaboration upon both the data collection and analysis aspects of the proposed research.

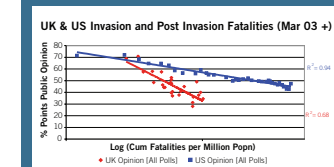
This collaboration would include the sponsoring of a PhD student within the department to act as a research assistant to Dr Hossack.



“Stop the War” March, London September 2002

**Case Study: OP TELIC / OP IRAQI FREEDOM**

In 2005, the previous (1999) DERA study was extended to include analyses of British and American support for the ongoing operations in Iraq (UK OP TELIC, US OP IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF)). This revealed some interesting behaviours which provided the immediate inspiration two years later for this Associate Fellowship project.



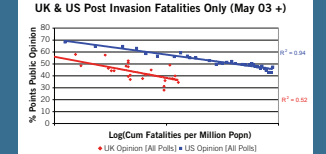
The diagram above (following MUELLER) shows how US and UK public support for operations in Iraq declined from March 2003 to February 2006 with mounting (cumulative) military fatalities in each country.

The diagram below, by contrast, shows the comparable trend plot for deaths suffered from May 2003 onwards (during the post-war Stabilisation / Counter-Insurgency campaign) only.

The change in trend rates between these two graphs shows that some component of both the UK/US public cost-benefit calculations changed after the end of the Iraq War proper (in April 2003). Was this due to:

- A greater belief in the centrality of the war itself to national interests than of the post-war nation-rebuilding?

**UK & US Post Invasion Fatalities Only (May 03 +)**



- A greater preparedness to accept fatalities as “inevitable” during the war as opposed to during the “peace” that followed it?
- A lesser ability to see a credible, short-term, “good” outcome to the Counter-Insurgency?

The final plot below shows what happens when the UK public opinion polls are separated out into questions asking about whether the UK was “right or wrong” to have invaded Iraq in the first place and those asking whether we should pull out or stay until the “job was done?”. The rate of loss of public support for each question is comparable, but levels of support for staying the course were 10 percentage points higher than levels of belief that the 2003 decision had been “right”.

**UK Post Invasion Fatalities Only (May 03 - Feb 06)**

