

THE PERIODICAL OBSERVER

Reviews of articles from periodicals and specialized journals here and abroad

Politics & Government	99	110 Religion & Philosophy
Foreign Policy & Defense	101	112 Science, Technology & Environment
Economics, Labor & Business	103	115 Arts & Letters
Society	107	118 Other Nations
Press & Media	110	

What Will America Risk?

A Survey of Recent Articles

When the United States has used military force in the Balkans and other hot spots in recent years, protecting the lives of its pilots and soldiers has been a high priority—too high, some analysts contend. As several make clear in *Aerospace Power Journal* (Summer 2000) and elsewhere, they worry that the world's only superpower is losing the ability to use force effectively, thus encouraging foes and quite possibly costing many more lives.

In the Kosovo operation of 1999, President Bill Clinton early on explicitly ruled out the use of ground troops, and pilots serving under the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), mostly Americans, were ordered to fly above 15,000 feet to avoid being shot down. On the ground below, the Serbian army was largely able to keep out of the bombs' way, and its "ethnic cleansing" accelerated. Thousands of Kosovar Albanians were killed and more than one million forcibly displaced. Then, after the 78 days of bombing ended in a self-proclaimed NATO victory, with nary an American life lost, U.S. troops became "peacekeepers." But once again, self-protection was paramount. R. Jeffrey Smith of the *Washington Post* (Oct. 5, 1999) reported. Whereas British soldiers, for instance, were widely dispersed and patrolled on foot in small numbers, most of the Americans were based in an isolated, protected enclave, allowed out only in helicopters or convoys of armored vehicles.

This is "force-protection fetishism," argues Jeffrey Record, a professor at the Air War College, Maxwell Air Force Base (AFB), Alabama, and one of several writers addressing U.S. attitudes toward casualties in the same issue of *Aerospace Power Journal*. "Was preserving the life of a single American pilot—a volunteer professional—worth jeopardizing the lives of 1,600,000 Kosovar Albanians and God-knows-how-many future victims of Serbian aggression?" Record asks. If protecting the lives of American pilots and soldiers is the top priority, why not just keep them home?

Vincent J. Goulding, Jr., a marine colonel, asserts in *Parameters* (Summer 2000) that in Kosovo, the United States "sent the strongest possible signal that, while it is willing to conduct military operations in situations not vital to the country's national interests, it is not willing to put in harm's way the means necessary to conduct these operations effectively and conclusively."

The excessive concern with casualties, these analysts say, not only hinders accomplishment of the mission, but also makes it harder to credibly threaten the use of force in the future. Slobodan Milosevic, Record notes, "called the West's bluff repeatedly and successfully during the war in Bosnia and later rejected NATO's ultimatum on Kosovo."

In Somalia—an example often cited by those who hold that Americans will not toler-

ate casualties—the United States swiftly withdrew its forces after 18 American soldiers were killed in Mogadishu in 1993. But while public support for the mission did fall after the deaths, it had also dropped sharply *before* the firefight, notes James Burk, a sociologist at Texas A&M University, in *Political Science Quarterly* (Spring 1999). The public did not go along when the humanitarian famine-relief effort turned into an attempt to end the civil war in Somalia and build a new nation.

Citing a 1996 RAND study, U.S. Air Force Major Charles K. Hyde writes in *Aerospace Power Journal* that Americans balance their regard for human life “within a continuous cost-benefit analysis. . . . It is only logical that [increased] casualties will result in a decline in public support unless an increase in the benefits or prospects for success offsets that cost.”

A recent study by the Triangle Institute for Strategic Studies, Hyde points out, found that the public “is far more tolerant of potential casualties” than its leaders are. In one hypothetical scenario, a question was put to 623 senior military officers, 683 influential civilian leaders, and 1,001 members of the general public: How many American deaths would be acceptable to complete the mission of stabilizing a democratic government in the Congo? Though that mission might be deemed remote from U.S. vital interests, the public was willing to accept, on average, more than 6,800 deaths, while the civilian leaders would accept only 484, and the officers only 284—gaps that are revealing, even though real-life numbers might be very different.

Record traces the leaders’ caution to the Vietnam War. An officer corps traumatized by the experience of fighting with declining public approval embraced the doctrine that force should be used only when vital interests are at stake, objectives are clear, public support is assured, and all alternatives have been exhausted—and then the force used must be overwhelming. “These tests effectively deny” the use of force for “coercive diplomacy,” he says.

The U.S. military may be more averse to taking casualties than other nations’ armed forces. But American sensitivity in that regard “long predates Vietnam,” observes Daniel R. Mortensen, of the Airpower Research Institute, at Maxwell AFB. In U.S. military history, technology, especially airpower, has often been

relied upon to avoid casualties, “even when airpower itself precipitates heavy [civilian] casualties, as it did in World War II.”

The high level of caution among American military and civilian leaders, writes Karl P. Mueller, a professor at the School of Advanced Airpower Studies, Maxwell AFB, in *Aerospace Power Journal*, partly reflects “the increasing potential cleanliness of warfare and the West’s slow, ongoing shift away from barbarism.” Over the last two centuries, conventional combat has grown “less horrible,” thanks to medical care and casualty evacuation, mechanization, and refinements in weaponry. “The more [that] casualties can and should be avoided, the more justification they require and the more unacceptable the profligate waste of soldiers’ lives becomes.”

Mueller also sees “a kernel of truth” in the belief that the American public will not tolerate casualties. “U.S. public support for wars that seem inordinately costly relative to their objectives—or that appear to offer little prospect of success—has indeed disintegrated as body counts have risen, most visibly in Korea, Vietnam, Lebanon, and Somalia.” Even so, “historical experience offers no reason to believe that the American public will fail to support costly wars in which the lives of U.S. troops are not apparently being wasted.”

“The real issue is reluctance to incur casualties in situations not in the national interest,” Goulding argues. “But since U.S. forces are routinely employed on such missions, [that] argument is moot.”

“We certainly ought to protect our forces and protect noncombatants, insofar as we can, regardless of popular opinion—not because doing so is politically prudent but because *it is morally right*,” Mueller writes. “Conversely, however, there are objectives that are worth dying—and killing—in order to achieve; in such cases, it is morally wrong *not* to risk or take lives when necessary.” How are national leaders to tell when and how to use military force? “Inconveniently for [them],” he says, “the answer is that these choices call not for simple rules of thumb but for actual wisdom. Deciding which causes are worth risking American lives to pursue and what amount of risk is appropriate ultimately requires a moral, not simply a political, compass.”