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ENDGAME FOR THE WEST IN AFGHANISTAN? EXPLAINING THE DECLINE IN SUPPORT FOR THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN IN THE UNITED STATES, GREAT BRITAIN, CANADA, AUSTRALIA, FRANCE AND GERMANY

Charles A. Miller

U.S. Army War College



The Letort Papers



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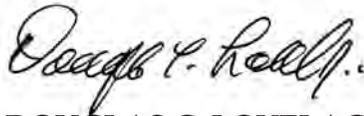
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FOREWORD

This piece was mostly written over the summer of 2009, with some modifications designed to take into account the initial reaction to President Barack Obama's announcement of a new strategy for Afghanistan in the winter of that year. However, more time will be required to gauge the true effect of the new strategy and the rhetorical campaign accompanying it. Readers should seek to use this work to investigate the linkages between various theories of public opinion and foreign policy with respect to the war in Afghanistan up to and including August 2009.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Douglas C. Lovelace, Jr." in a cursive script.

DOUGLAS C. LOVELACE, JR.
Director
Strategic Studies Institute

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

CHARLES A. MILLER worked for a number of years in the business world in companies such as Coors Brewing Company and Barclays Wealth Management. In 2008 he joined the Political Science Department at Duke University as a Ph.D. student. Mr. Miller holds a B.A. in modern languages from the University of Cambridge and an M.A. in international relations from the University of Chicago.

SUMMARY

Domestic support for the war is often mentioned as one of the key battlegrounds of the Afghan conflict. A variety of explanations have been put forward in the media and in the political realm to explain why this war, which once commanded overwhelming popular support in almost all participating countries, is now opposed by a majority, even in the United States itself. Casualties, lack of equitable multilateral burden sharing, confused and shifting rationales on the part of the political leadership for the war and a “contagion” effect from the unpopularity of the Iraq war have all been cited at one time or another.

This monograph contends that while most of these factors have played a role to some extent, the main reason why the Afghan war has lost support among the public of the main participating countries is the combination of mounting casualties along with the increasing perception that the effort on the ground is failing. This conclusion is drawn from in-depth case studies of the United States and five of its key allies – the United Kingdom (UK), France, Germany, Canada, and Australia. These countries include the top three troop contributing nations to the Allied effort in Afghanistan (the United States, the UK, and Germany), and the three who have suffered the heaviest casualties (the United States, the UK, and Canada). Moreover, these nations vary greatly in terms of their pre-September 11, 2001 (9/11) relations with the United States, historical tradition of, and public tolerance towards the use of force overseas, level of commitment to the Afghan war, and rhetorical strategies chosen by their political leadership to justify the deployment

to their peoples. The fact that a common thread—domestic support falls as the course of the war deteriorates—is still discernible is remarkable in light of the diversity of the cases studied.

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INTRODUCTION

In contrast to the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan enjoyed widespread domestic U.S. and international support. Widely perceived in the wake of September 11, 2001 (9/11) as a just and legal war to prevent future terrorist atrocities, the U.S.-led war had the active support of many allies from Europe and elsewhere. However, at the time of writing, this support has dropped off dramatically among the public in all six countries under study. In the United States, support levels as high as 91 percent in early 2002¹ have declined to approximately 50-60 percent in 2008,² with many polls showing a majority now opposed to the war.³ In the United Kingdom (UK), support fell from over 70 percent in early 2002 to just over 30 percent in the summer of 2008.⁴ In Canada, previous high support levels of 60-70 percent⁵ have been transformed into a current support rate a little above 35 percent.⁶ In Australia, the war in Afghanistan, an electoral asset for John Howard's Liberals in the 2001 election,⁷ now enjoys minority support of around 42 percent, according to the latest polls.⁸ In France, support fell from 67 percent shortly after 9/11⁹ to a mere 34 percent¹⁰ by September 2008. Finally, Germany has seen a similar drop in support from a comfortable majority of 61 percent in favor of action¹¹ to a small minority of 27 percent¹² by December 2009. From a policy perspective, this drop in support is concerning.

As is outlined shortly, the main finding of this monograph is that, although other factors such as confusing and inconsistent rhetoric from political leaders have been important, the key driver of the fall in support for the war in Afghanistan is a combination of casualties with an increasing perception that the war on the ground is being lost. If policymakers wish to halt this decline in public support, the single most important thing they can do is to consistently articulate a clear and credible plan to achieve success in Afghanistan. Other options, such as tightening the rhetorical justification for the war or inducing greater multilateral cooperation, may have some effect at the margins, but if publics do not believe the war can be won, then Afghanistan will be a lost cause in the court of public opinion.

This monograph will address the reasons behind this universal fall in support by looking at each country on a case-by-case basis. While it may be supposed that all of the countries in this monograph share certain generic similarities as highly developed democracies, each public's attitude is also presumed to be shaped by country-specific historical and cultural factors, and by the differing experiences of their militaries in Afghanistan.

Each country will form a separate case study. In turn, each case study will be prefaced with a short outline of the given country's recent historical experience with, and public attitudes towards the U.S. and towards the use of force overseas. Any assertion that a given country is "pacifist-inclined" or "pro-interventionist" must be backed up by historical facts and hard data, because in some cases—for example France or Canada—many stereotypes, which are popular even among well-informed policymakers, turn out on closer inspection to be poorly founded. Along with

opinion polls on public attitudes both of the United States and of the use of force in international affairs, this short introductory section will include information on whether the country in question imposes parliamentary caveats on its forces in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, for secrecy reasons, we are not aware of the actual content of most of these caveats. However, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) has made public information on which countries do and do not have caveats. This will be used, as it provides a good indication of a given country's preexisting attitudes to the use of force.

In seeking to explain the fall in support in each case, the author draws on both the academic literature on casualty sensitivity developed from the study of public opinion in previous conflicts and on theories that are popular in policy circles and the news media with respect to Afghanistan. The remainder of this introductory section will outline these theories. Academic theories are not important because they hold some kind of intrinsic, aesthetic value but because they provide policymakers with some guidance on where to look for the causes of an important phenomenon such as the decline in support for the war in Afghanistan. Academic debates are ultimately important only in so far as they are capable of yielding actionable and accurate advice to policymakers. At the same time, the academic literature does have some advantages over the news media debate in its ability to clearly and rigorously to spell out the mechanisms by which causes are linked to effects. With some news media-driven theories – such as the theory that the Afghanistan war has contracted illegitimacy from the war in Iraq – the precise way in which this process plays out in the minds of individual voters is somewhat nebulous.

Thus theories that are popular in the news media will sometimes require some additional fleshing out to gauge how crucial they really are.

The first set of explanations popular both in academia and in news media and policy circles is that the decline in public support for the war is a straightforward result of increasing casualties. There are two variants of this “casualty phobia” explanation. First, there is the view that public support for the war starts high but then drops rapidly when the first casualties are sustained, then drops more slowly afterwards—this is known as the “logarithmic casualties” theory and is associated with John Mueller.¹³ Second, there is the view that public support for the war drops sharply with the first casualties and then declines more sedately, unless there are then sudden bursts of increased casualties, which cause correspondingly sharp falls in the level of public support for the war. This theory is termed “marginal casualties” and is associated with Scott Gartner and Gary Segura.¹⁴

In addition to these claims, there exists a set of explanations that the author terms “casualties plus politics.” The first of these, associated with Eric Larson, states that elite discord about the mission, along with casualties, are what cause public support to fall.¹⁵ Elite discord most commonly means disagreement between the major parties but it could also mean public disagreement over the mission in the news media and upper reaches of the foreign service or military.

A different perspective claims that the public will tolerate casualties provided that the mission is based around restraining the aggressive foreign policy designs of a rival state—like the Gulf War of 1991—rather than around nation-building or counterinsurgency. This is known as the principal policy objective theory

associated with Bruce Jentleson¹⁶ and would suggest that the Afghan war lost popularity as it transformed from a straightforward defensive mission to extirpate al-Qaeda's bases post-9/11 to a more complex counterinsurgency and nation-building exercise.

Third, both academic analysts and news media pundits frequently suspect that a lack of multilateral backing for a mission may also be a key factor in causing support for it to fall. A lack of multilateral support for a mission may delegitimize it in the eyes of the peoples of participating nations,¹⁷ it may also cause them to doubt the judgment of the leaders who took them into the war (because other leaders did not come to such a judgment),¹⁸ or it may simply cause them to turn against the war out of resentment at the perceived "freeloading" of their allies.¹⁹ Popular though it is to blame a lack of equitable, multilateral burden sharing for the decline in support for the Afghanistan war, it is problematic for several reasons. First, the Afghanistan war is authorized by a specific United Nations (UN) resolution,²⁰ and all leaders of the Western alliance at least publicly claim the war to be just and worthwhile. Second, it is very difficult to tell whether the perceived lack of multilateral burden sharing is really having an independent effect on the downward trajectory of support for the war or whether the unwillingness of some countries to contribute merely reflects the same factors that are causing public support for the war to drop in the main participating countries – such as the deteriorating progress of the war itself. Determining whether the lack of equitable burden sharing is actually having an effect in its own right requires a natural experiment – an instance in which a previous under contributor decided, for its own reasons, to ramp up its deployment. I argue that the reaction to the decision

by France's President Nicholas Sarkozy to increase the French deployment to Afghanistan after his election in 2007 provides such a natural experiment, because this decision was essentially personal, not part of his election campaign, and did not reflect a sudden upsurge in France in support for the war or an improvement in the situation on the ground in Afghanistan.²¹

Finally, an increasingly popular view of the relationship between conflict and public opinion stresses that the public will be able to support military operations involving significant casualties only if they believe that the war will be won. This theory was developed by Peter Feaver, Christopher Gelpi, and Jason Reifler through close analysis of U.S. public opinion and the Iraq war²² and is here first applied to the war in Afghanistan. Their work also suggests that the American public contains a segment of around 30 percent of "solid hawks" who will support a mission regardless of costs and who provide a "floor" below which public support will not fall.²³ This author argues that this explanation is the only one that works in all of the cases surveyed, even those such as Australia in which all other factors would suggest a different outcome to what we observe. This author also claims that the solid hawks, as identified, do have counterparts in other developed democracies and account for the interesting fact that in all of the countries surveyed (except Germany), once support hits the mid to low 30 percent level, it tends to flatten out and not decline further.

Consequently, the rising belief that the Afghanistan war will not and perhaps cannot be won, when combined with rising casualties, is the most important factor in causing public support to fall. If policymakers wish to halt or reverse this trend, turning around the public's perception of the likely outcome of the war is the key.

Additionally, this paper examines two other popular explanations for the decline in public support for the war that have developed in the news media, policy circles, and academia and were specifically inspired by the case of Afghanistan. The first of these “Afghanistan-specific” theories is that the unpopularity and perceived illegitimacy of the Iraq war has spread to the war in Afghanistan. As evidenced by the popular slogan “Bush lied, people died,” this perspective suggests that the Iraq war destroyed the public’s belief in the honesty and integrity of the existing political leadership and made them suspicious of any conflicts initiated by them, even if apparently unconnected to Iraq.²⁴ This author argues that if this theory holds water, one would expect to see the public’s belief in the legitimacy of both conflicts decline at the same time and that if the leadership that initiated the Iraq war were to give way to a leadership that opposed Iraq but supported Afghanistan, we would see an increase in support for the latter conflict. In fact, evidence suggests that neither is the case and that the public is judging the Afghanistan war on its own merits, regardless of the situation in Iraq.

Also, it is widely held that the fall in support for the war derives from a poorly executed rhetorical strategy on the part of political leaders.²⁵ Leaders have often cycled through numerous rationales for the war—from counterterrorism to counternarcotics to humanitarianism and nation building to women’s rights to helping one’s allies and protecting the Western way of life. This has been accompanied by often vague and grandiose language. Critics charge that this has left Western publics confused and cynical about the true goals of the war. Far better, it is claimed, if leaders had simply stuck to a clear and simple rationale based

on counterterrorism. This author contends that the evidence on this is mixed – most politicians have used the multiple rationales strategy at most times, so it is difficult to say what would have happened had they used some other strategy. Nonetheless, using many rationales probably has not helped politicians rally support for the war. Sticking to a clearer and more consistent rationale may *help* to stem the decline in support, but it will be insufficient by itself if the situation on the ground does not improve.

THE GOOD WAR? AMERICAN PUBLIC OPINION AND THE WAR IN AFGHANISTAN

The interaction between foreign policy and public opinion is better studied with respect to the United States than any other country on the planet. The vast majority of the academic casualty sensitivity literature is inspired by U.S. experiences and research with the American public. Moreover, American opinion on foreign policy is more extensively canvassed by pollsters than that of any other country.

One of the two major superpowers between 1945 and 1989, and the sole undisputed superpower of the post-Cold War world, the United States has engaged in numerous interventions since overcoming isolationist sentiment to enter World War II. U.S. forces have fought long wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, and launched numerous smaller interventions including Grenada, Panama, Lebanon, Somalia, Haiti, and Bosnia. The earliest studies of the impact of casualties on U.S. support for such interventions, such as John Mueller's, painted a picture of a highly casualty-sensitive public who were apt to abandon foreign policy missions very quickly once they became costly. This

picture unquestionably influenced the beliefs not only of U.S. policymakers themselves, but also of American enemies such as Slobodan Milosevic, Saddam Hussein, and Osama bin Laden. Indeed, for all the U.S. news media commentary about European weakness that has emerged since 9/11, it is often forgotten that in the 1990s, it was the Americans who were believed to be the more casualty-sensitive. For example, when Belgian forces were withdrawn from Rwanda following a small number of deaths at the hands of the Hutu militias, UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Gali worried that the Belgians were becoming afflicted with "American syndrome: pull out at the first serious sign of trouble."²⁶

Yet even before the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, this view of the American people as being unthinkingly casualty phobic had begun to be challenged by many authorities. Along with the theories developed by Larson and Jentleson which we have already discussed, empirical work also challenged the view that the entire U.S. public was beset by a crippling casualty "phobia." Steven Kull and Clay Ramsay disputed the conventional wisdom that U.S. withdrawal from Somalia resulted from the U.S. fatalities in the Black Hawk Down incident. Rather, they pointed out support had in fact been falling for some time beforehand.²⁷ In the Gulf War, moreover, they point out that public support for the mission never fell below 60 percent and in fact rose to 72 percent over the period in which the majority of the 148 American fatalities were sustained.²⁸ Likewise, a majority of the American public continued to support the U.S. troop presence in Saudi Arabia after 20 U.S. troops were killed at Dhahran airbase in a terrorist attack.²⁹ Hypothetical scenarios involving a substantial loss of life always

saw sizeable majorities against subsequent withdrawal – with striking back and bringing in reinforcements being popular responses.³⁰ The realism of these responses had already been demonstrated after U.S. losses in Lebanon,³¹ when a combination of replacing or increasing troops numbers, or taking punitive action against the perpetrators of attacks on U.S. troops, won out over the withdrawal option in public opinion polls. Opinion polls over the Kosovo campaign revealed a significant majority – 60 percent – of the U.S. public were willing to incur 250 American casualties to push Serbian forces out of Kosovo.³² Moreover, besides some blips at the beginning and the end of the Kosovo conflict, U.S. public support for the war mostly held up significantly above majority levels.³³ Although the conflict evinced lower support in the United States than in some European countries, it must be remembered that Kosovo was close to a purely “pro-bono” humanitarian intervention, without a clear link to a definite U.S. national interest, which many believed make the U.S. public more inclined to support military interventions.³⁴ Moreover, Kosovo was not in the United States’ “backyard,” as it was for the European countries.

Thus at the start of the Afghan war, U.S. public opinion could be predicted to be solid in the face of casualties, even if the conventional wisdom had for many years suggested otherwise. Another reason to suspect the United States to have a strong stomach for losses lies in the fact that it is the only country that was directly targeted by al-Qaeda on 9/11. Other countries, of course, sustained losses in the Twin Towers, and both Britain and Australia have subsequently suffered terrorist attacks of their own, but nothing has been on the same scale.

Public support for the Afghanistan war in the United States began at a stratospheric 89 percent, higher than in any of the other participating countries. The United States has paid by far the lion's share of the human cost of the Afghanistan war—1,080 Americans have lost their lives as part of Operation ENDURING FREEDOM, as of this writing.³⁵ Support has fallen by 40 percent over the course of the mission, and now most polls claim a majority favor withdrawal. The United States was the last country in which the war commanded majority support—but this is not because the fall in support has been less in the United States, but rather because support started from such a high base.

Casualties.

Let us first examine the claim that casualties alone are the key determinant.

Logarithmic Casualties. The extensive polls on the issue in the United States allow us to track the trajectory of American public opinion on Afghanistan with a great degree of accuracy. Unfortunately, as with all the other countries, the years between 2002 and 2005 are largely a “black hole” as Afghanistan dropped off the political radar to be replaced by the much more controversial war in Iraq. Nonetheless, a graph of U.S. polling results on Afghanistan over time is still instructive (see Figures 1 and 2).

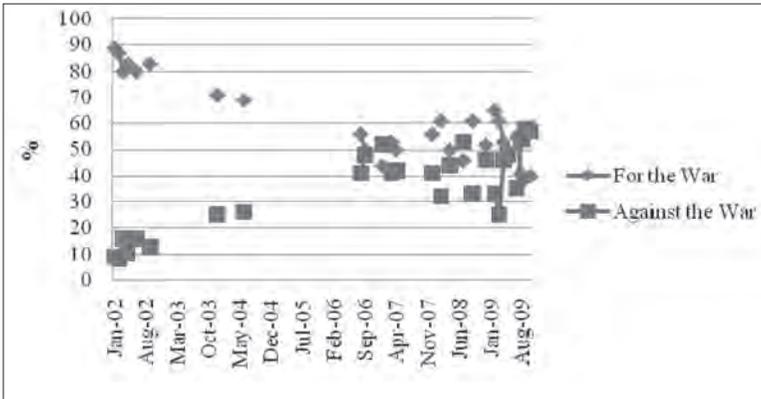


Figure 1: U.S. Public Opinion and the War in Afghanistan, 2002-09.

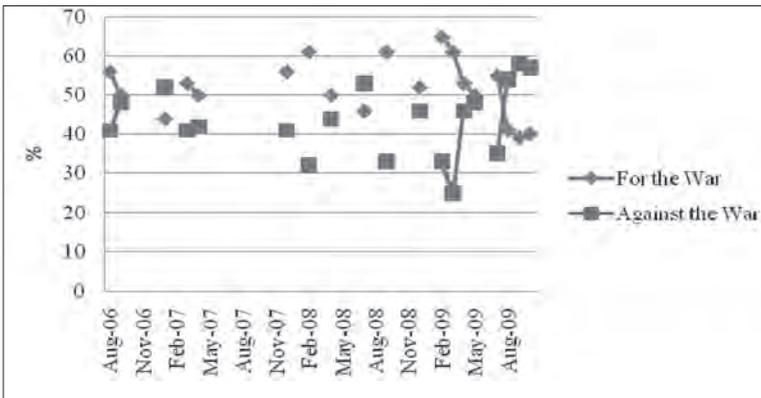


Figure 2: U.S. Public Opinion and the War in Afghanistan, 2006-09.

As can be seen from examining the two figures above, the U.S. data do not fit the logarithmic theory well. Instead of a sharp drop followed by a gradual decline, there appears to be a relatively steady linear decline before the revival of the Taliban insurgency in 2005-06, followed by a reasonably turbulent period since then, with the majority of public opinion almost certainly now opposed with some more room to fall.