Resistance, Resolve and Rights: The United States and the Effectiveness of Compellent Threats

Dianne R. Pfundstein

PhD Candidate, Columbia University
drp2109@columbia.edu

2011 APSA Annual Convention
Seattle, Washington

PLEASE DO NOT CITE WITHOUT AUTHOR’S PERMISSION

Abstract:
Why has the United States struggled to coerce weak states like Serbia, Iraq and Libya with compellent threats? This paper draws on game theoretic logic on costly signaling to argue that issuing and executing military threats is not costly for the United States. Consequently, the willingness to issue and to execute a compellent threat is not an informative signal of the United States’ motivation to defeat a stubbornly resistant opponent. The United States’ status as unipole permits it to issue military threats in most regions around the world without risk. The United States has also developed a war-fighting model that minimizes the human, political, and economic costs of conducting military operations. Changes in norms about the rights of individuals have helped to spur this drive to minimize the costs of fighting. By eliminating conscription and relying increasingly on private military contractors, remaking the post-Cold War military according to the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) thesis, emphasizing operations that rely on airpower to reduce U.S. casualties, paying for military operations with deficit spending, and actively minimizing the collateral damage inflicted on target states, the United States has lowered its costs for employing force. These cost-reducing strategies also undermine the effectiveness of U.S. compellent threats, however, because they signal to target states that the United States lacks the motivation to defeat a stubbornly resistant opponent.
Resisting the Unipole’s Compellent Threats

When the dust had settled after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States emerged as the world’s sole superpower. Two decades later, the United States’ conventional military power remains unrivalled. Clausewitz argues that, “Combat is the only effective force in war…even if no actual fighting occurs, because the outcome rests on the assumption that if it came to fighting, the enemy would be destroyed.”¹ With its overwhelming advantage in conventional military combat, the United States should be able to defeat its adversaries without having to fire a single shot. As Thomas Schelling argues, “Violence is most purposive and most successful when it is threatened and not used. Successful threats are those that do not have to be carried out.”²

Yet, since the end of the Cold War, the United States has found it necessary to carry out military action against several weak states because the threat of military action was insufficient to compel a change in the behavior of these states. Over the past two decades, leaders of Panama, Iraq, Haiti, Serbia, Afghanistan—and more recently, Libya—have refused to yield to U.S. demands before the actual application of force. What explains these failures of the world’s most powerful state to compel many of the world’s weakest targets?

The concept of “resolve” plays a large role in many arguments about war’s outbreak and outcome, particularly in the case of unevenly matched opponents. The concept has been neither defined nor employed consistently by these studies. This paper begins by arguing that state resolve consists of three related but distinct components: the willingness to initiate military action; the willingness to suffer costs in war; and the

willingness to inflict violence on the opponent. The paper then draws on game theoretic logic on costly signaling to argue that conditions and strategies that minimize a unipole’s costs for executing military action undermine the effectiveness of its compellent threats. Over the last sixty-five years, the United States has steadily and increasingly insulated the bulk of its population from both the human and economic costs of war. The United States’ military manpower structure, the rise of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) thesis and the evolution of the high-technology, low-footprint operational model, and the funding of U.S. military operations through deficit spending have all lowered the United States’ costs for executing military threats. Attitudes about the acceptability of collateral damage have evolved such that inflicting damage on target state civilians is politically costly. Consequently, the United States now takes great pains to minimize collateral damage. An increasing respect for the rights of individuals helped to drive both the elimination of conscription and the push to minimize violence inflicted on target states.

In combination, these trends have given rise to a unique American way of war in which the costs for executing limited military action are low. Efforts to limit the costs of war increase the ease with which the United States can execute compellent threats. These efforts also render the threat of military action an uninformative signal of the United States’ motivation to prevail over a resistant target. The United States’ compellent threats are likely to be perceived as credible because they are so easy to execute. They are also likely to be ineffective in securing target state compliance under many conditions, because they do not signal that the United States is willing to prosecute an ensuing military campaign with the intensity necessary to win.
Defining Resolve

Although “resolve” plays a major role in many models of war’s outbreak and war’s outcome, the concept is neither defined nor employed consistently. A more precise definition of the concept is necessary to build an argument about why the United States’ compellent threat may fail against a weak target state, even when the target believes that the threat will be executed. Formal models of war’s outbreak treat resolve as the willingness to initiate a war.\(^3\) Studies of war’s outcome define resolve as the willingness to persist in war, despite mounting costs.\(^4\) Such models ignore altogether a third component: the willingness to inflict pain on the opponent. By failing to employ a common definition of state resolve, these studies confuse our understanding of conflict processes and obscure the possibility that a weakly motivated coercer might initiate wars with stubborn target states.

“State resolve” then consists of three related but distinct characteristics: the willingness to initiate military action; the willingness to suffer costs in an ensuing war; and the willingness to inflict violence on the opponent. There is no reason to assume, as other theories implicitly do, that these three components are positively correlated. For example, a unipole may be highly willing to initiate military action because it expects that the ensuing fight will be relatively low-cost. This unipole may be unwilling to sustain costs, however, in the event that the conflict is not decided quickly. For this


reason, a target of a unipole’s compellent threat will consider not only the unipole’s willingness to execute the threat, but also its willingness to pay and to inflict costs, when deciding whether to concede to the unipole’s demands. To be effective, therefore, the unipole’s compellent threat must convince the target that the unipole is willing to execute its threat, and willing to suffer and to kill in a decisive campaign if the target continues to resist after the threat has been executed.

**Communicating Motivation: The Logic of Costly Signaling**

The challenge for a target is to infer from the unipole’s threat how motivated the unipole is to suffer and to kill in order to achieve its objectives. The target is aware, however, that a unipole that is not highly motivated has strong incentives to behave as if it were. As Fearon argues, “The dilemma arises because (a) the target of the threat cannot directly observe the threatener’s preferences and (b) the target knows the threatener has an incentive to pretend to be ‘resolved,’ even if this is not the case.”

Given the incentives for the unipole to misrepresent the strength of its motivation, and the target’s awareness that such incentives exist, how can a compellent threat effectively communicate a high level of motivation and convince the target to back down?

Game theoretic logic suggests that signals that are costly to send and to execute are more likely to be perceived as credible indicators of high motivation. Only a highly motivated actor would be willing to pay the costs associated with such a signal. The formal logic was first developed in research on the role of education in the job market, wherein acquiring education is a costly signal of a job applicant’s quality. As Spence argues, “a signal will not effectively distinguish one applicant from another, unless the

---

costs of signaling are negatively correlated with productive capability. For if this condition fails to hold, given the offered wage schedule, everyone will invest in the signal in exactly the same way, so that they cannot be distinguished on the basis of the signal."  

If everyone can acquire additional education with relative ease, then education conveys little information about an individual’s capability. Only the willingness to undertake a costly action (in this case, acquiring additional education) will effectively separate a highly qualified applicant from those less capable.

The logic also applies to a unipole threatening a weaker target state. A threat that is costly for the unipole to issue and to execute is more effective in inducing target compliance because it signals that the unipole is highly motivated to defeat its opponent. By contrast, a threat that is not costly for the unipole to issue or to execute will not communicate any information about the strength of the unipole’s motivation. Such a low-cost threat may be credible to the target because the unipole can execute it with ease. The willingness to execute a low-cost threat does not signal, however, that the unipole is highly motivated. The target chooses to resist such a threat because it believes that it can withstand the threatened action and that the unipole lacks the motivation to defeat it in a costly military conflict.

---


7 A low-cost signal does not indicate that the state sending the signal has a low degree of motivation. A low-cost signal simply does not communicate how motivated the signaler is, since both a highly motivated and less motivated state would be willing to send the same (low-cost) signal. A high-cost signal is a credible indicator of high motivation, but a low-cost signal is simply an uninformative indicator of the sending state’s motivation.

8 The purpose of this paper is to develop an argument about the United States’ ability to employ compellent threats effectively. A threat’s credibility is related to its effectiveness, but the two concepts are distinct. A “credible” threat is one that the target believes the unipole will execute. An “effective” threat is one that convinces the target state to back down, without the need to actually execute the threat. To be effective, a threat must be credible. That is, the target must believe there is at least some chance that the unipole will execute its threat. Credibility is not, however, a guarantee of threat effectiveness. A threat may be both credible and ineffective. In fact, the definition of resolve presented earlier in this paper suggests that a credible threat may fail to compel target compliance because the threat does not signal that the unipole is highly motivated to suffer and to kill in order to defeat the target.
A compellent threat could be costly for a unipole for one of two reasons: because issuing the threat exposes the unipole or one of its major allies to the risk of a wider military conflict; or, because executing the threat would generate significant human, economic, or political costs for the coercer. The rest of this paper argues that the international distribution of power and the United States’ war-fighting model minimize the United States’ costs for employing force. Conditions and strategies that reduce the United States’ costs for employing force undermine the effectiveness of the United States’ compellent threats, however, because they signal that the United States is unwilling to suffer and to kill in a decisive military conflict after the initial threat fails.

**Willing to Issue Military Threats: The Unipole Stands Alone**

There is some debate about the term that best describes the United States’ position in the post-Cold War international system. Brooks and Wohlforth use the term “unipolar power” to describe a state that “is preponderant in all relevant categories of capability.” They claim that, “the United States has a greater share of power than any single state has ever had in 300 years...”

A brief examination of U.S. economic and military resources reveals that the United States is indeed in a class by itself. The World Bank estimates 2009 U.S. GDP at roughly $14 trillion ($46,000 per capita). The United States’ GDP is nearly three times that of its nearest competitor, Japan, which had a GDP of $5.1 trillion ($40,000 per capita) in 2009. China followed Japan with a 2009 GDP of nearly $5 trillion ($3,700 per capita). In addition to having the world’s largest economy,

---


United States also has the world’s largest defense budget. The U.S. defense budget in 2009 was $693 billion, roughly 4.9% of U.S. GDP. This amounted to nearly half of total global defense spending in 2009. China’s official defense budget was roughly $70 billion in 2009, or 1.45% of its GDP. China’s record of impressive economic growth and increasing defense budgets have led some to conclude that the United States is in relative decline and that the world will soon be multipolar. Beckley argues, however, that the United States’ advantage over China in economic, technological, and military power is both real and likely to persist. This paper agrees with Brooks and Wohlforth that the United States is a unipole.

The United States has been more involved in international conflicts since it ascended to the status of unipole. According to the International Crisis Behavior (ICB) Project, the United States was involved in 49 of 285 international crises during the Cold War, roughly 17.2%. From 1990-2007, the United States was involved in 14 of 64 crises, roughly 21.9%. During the period from 1945-1988, the United States participated in 19 interventions overseas. From 1989-2003, the United States was involved in 16.

---


Michael Beckley, "China's Century?" Working paper, under review, 41-42.

List compiled by the author from the International Crisis Behavior Project at the Center for International Development and Conflict Management. Data from version 10 (2010) were downloaded from http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/icb/data/ on 8 June 2011. Although international crises have been less frequent in the post-Cold War period, the United States has been involved in a greater percentage of them.
United States participated in nearly as many interventions in this fifteen-year period as it did during the entire Cold War.\textsuperscript{15} Another measure of the United States’ involvement in international politics is its record of employing specific coercive instruments. From 1945-1988, the United States initiated economic sanctions 69 times, for an average of 1.6 new sanctions episodes per year. From 1989-2006, the United States initiated economic sanctions 45 times, for an average of 2.5 new sanctions episodes per year.\textsuperscript{16}

The United States has been involved in a greater percentage of international crises in the post-Cold War period than it was before 1990. It has also been more willing to employ the economic and military instruments at its disposal. These trends suggest that the dissolution of the Soviet Union removed a major obstacle to the United States’ use of coercion. “Unencumbered by cold war fears of sparking a confrontation with the powerful Soviet Union, American policy makers [have] turned frequently to threats and the use of military power” to manage international conflicts since 1990.\textsuperscript{17} Because it is a unipole, the United States has the ability to initiate military action in most regions around the world without fear of a major war that would put its core interests at risk. The United States has taken advantage of the freedom conferred by its unipolar status to become involved in a greater percentage of international conflicts and to exert coercive leverage more frequently than it did during the Cold War.

\textsuperscript{15} Patricia L. Sullivan and Michael T. Koch, "Military Intervention by Powerful States, 1945-2003," \textit{Journal of Peace Research} 46, no. 5 (2009): 707-718, data available at: http://www.prio.no/jpr/datasets. The authors define an intervention as, “a use of armed force that involves the official deployment of at least 500 regular military personnel (ground, air, or naval) to attain immediate-term political objectives through action against a foreign adversary” (709).


The Unipole’s Freedom is Not Unlimited

The United States’ freedom to introduce force or the threat of force into international crises is not without limits. The record of recent crises in which the United States did not issue a military threat suggests that the risk environment does play a role in determining U.S. strategy. The ICB Project identifies fourteen crises in which the United States was involved between 1990 and 2007. This list includes the Persian Gulf War and several other crises involving Iraq, including the invasion in 2003; the crisis over the Haitian regime in 1994; the Kosovo campaign in 1999; and several crises over North Korea’s nuclear program, among others. The project records the primary crisis management technique (and dozens of other variables) for each crisis. With the exception of the 1994 Haitian regime crisis and the crises over nuclear programs in North Korea and Iran, the United States managed all of the post-Cold War crises in which it was involved either with actual violence or with military pressure.\(^\text{18}\)

If we consider the extent to which the United States’ interests were threatened, which of these crises were most serious? The crisis with Haiti occurred closest to U.S. territory and involved refugee movements to the United States. The ICB Project lists “negotiation” as the primary crisis management technique.\(^\text{19}\) This crisis was resolved, however, only when U.S. troops were in the air and preparing to land on the island, suggesting that latent violence played a major role in the final outcome.\(^\text{20}\) Other than the

\(^{18}\) List compiled by the author from the ICB Data Viewer at the Center for International Development and Conflict Management (2010), http://www.cidcm.umd.edu/icb/info/project_information.asp (accessed 5 August 2010).


case involving Haiti, the crises over North Korea’s nuclear weapons activities were the most critical. During the months of stalled negotiations, averted inspections, and proffered concessions that characterized the 1993-94 crisis, the United States hesitated to threaten UN sanctions. The “[U.S.] administration (as well as the South Korean and Japanese governments) wanted to avoid such a move for fear that the ‘wrong kind of pressure on the isolated North Korean government could cause it to lash out.’”

Compared to the other crises in the post-Cold War period, “Only the Korea case involved a threat of nuclear proliferation…[and] none of the other cases entailed a risk of large-scale warfare…” The stakes were high for the United States. The risks posed by escalation were also high for the United States and for its South Korean ally. The United States did consider taking military action to confront North Korea in 1994. A mission by Jimmy Carter helped to defuse tensions enough, however, for the implementation of the Agreed Framework between North Korea and the United States.

A comprehensive analysis of the United States’ management of the 1994 crisis with North Korea is beyond the scope of this discussion. The case does suggest, however, that the United States is more hesitant to threaten and to employ military force when escalation would pose a serious risk to its security or to that of a close ally. The logic of costly signaling also suggests that, had the United States been willing to threaten military force in such a high-risk environment, the threat would have been an informative signal of its willingness to pay high costs to achieve its objectives. On the other hand, the

---

22 Ibid., 160.
23 Ibid., 177. The Agreed Framework did not prevent North Korea’s subsequent withdrawal from the NPT and test of a nuclear device.
willingness to threaten military action in a low-risk situation conveys no information about the United States’ commitment to prevail over its target. The United States was willing to introduce military force into most of the other crises in which it was involved in the post-Cold War period. It would be difficult to argue, however, that any of these crises posed a greater risk to the United States or engaged its interests more than the crises over nuclear proliferation. Because the United States can threaten and execute military action in most areas with little risk, in most cases the willingness to issue a compellent threat is not an informative signal of the United States’ motivation to prevail over the target of its threat.

**The Retreat from Total War**

Kant argued that a republic would be less likely to engage in wars than a state whose population does not control the government. If the unipole’s citizens bear the burdens of military campaigns, then they may punish policymakers that start costly wars. Policymakers thus have strong incentives to limit the costs of military action. The logic of costly signaling suggests, however, that efforts to minimize the unipole’s costs for executing military action render the threat of force an uninformative signal of the unipole’s motivation to defeat the target state. Consequently, the United States’ efforts to

---

24 The fact that the United States’ vital interests have rarely been threatened in the post-Cold War period poses a major challenge to an evaluation of the United States’ coercive success. It is difficult to identify any post-1990 crisis in which the United States’ major material interests were seriously at risk. The terrorist attacks of September 11th were horrific, put a drag on the U.S. economy and drove the United States to war in the Middle East. It would be difficult to argue, however, that transnational terrorists can inflict the damage that the Soviet Union could have inflicted on the United States during the Cold War. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been major military undertakings. They were, however, wars of choice. The failure to prevail in either campaign will not expose U.S. territory to invasion or put the United States at risk of an all-out nuclear exchange, as would have been possible if a Cold War-era crisis had escalated. The nuclear crisis with North Korea in the mid-nineties seems to be the closest that the United States came to involvement in a major war in the post-Cold War period. Even if that confrontation had spiraled out of control, however, it would have been devastating for South Korea and a major blow to the U.S. military, but it would not have posed an existential threat to the United States.

minimize the costs of undertaking military action erode the effectiveness of U.S. compellent threats.

The French Revolution and the levée en masse unleashed total warfare in modern Europe. Clausewitz noted that, “once barriers—which in a sense consist only in man’s ignorance of what is possible—are torn down, they are not so easily set up again.” Yet, the United States has worked hard to reestablish barriers that limit the impact of war on its population. In so doing, the United States has reversed the democratization of warfare that began with the French Revolution and culminated with the world wars of the twentieth century. The United States has developed a model of warfare that insulates the bulk of the U.S. population from the burdens of fighting. Because ideas about the rights of individuals to avoid compulsory military service evolved, the United States eliminated conscription. It now relies instead on a volunteer military supplemented with private contractors. The U.S. military has embraced many aspects of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) to protect the all-volunteer force from the worst realities of combat. The United States has relied on allies’ contributions and deficit spending to fund its post-Cold War campaigns. Furthermore, norms about the rights of noncombatants have evolved such that the U.S. military takes great pains to limit the harm that it inflicts on target states.

In combination, these trends have lowered the United States’ political costs for employing military force. By decreasing the American public’s stake in military operations, these measures have short-circuited the restraining mechanism of democracy proposed by Kant. These trends enhance the immediate credibility of U.S. threats because they make it easy for policymakers to employ military force. Because they

\[\text{Clausewitz, } \textit{On War}, 593.\]
lower the United States’ costs for executing military action, however, they also render U.S. threats uninformative signals of the United States’ motivation to defeat its targets. Features of the American war-fighting model that make it easier to execute limited military action enhance the immediate credibility of U.S. threats but undermine their ultimate effectiveness.

**The Will to Suffer: The United States and Conscription**

Conscription exposes a wider range of individuals—including members of elite segments of society that tend to be overrepresented in government—to the hazards of war than does an all-volunteer force. Conscripting individuals into military service is politically costly, and the willingness to do so is thus a credible signal of high motivation. Consequently, avoiding conscription limits the political costs of employing military force. On the eve of the Spanish-American War, Captain James Parker assessed the impact of conscription during the U.S. Civil War: “Abroad [the introduction of conscription] at once raised the credit of the nation, for foreigners then first saw that the people were in earnest, and that they had at last made effective provision for developing the whole power of the nation. Foreign nations no longer debated interference.”27 The Union’s decision to implement conscription discouraged outside states from intervening because it signaled that the North was highly motivated to defeat its opponent.

The United States has always had an uneasy relationship with conscription. Huntington argues that the American liberal ethos struggles with the idea of military service. “Concerned with the defense of the individual against the state, liberalism [is]

---

ill-equipped to justify the defense of one state against another.”

The ideals of liberalism clash directly with the notion of compulsory military service. At its founding, the United States relied on a citizen militia instead of a standing military. “[The militia] was the only form of military force suitable for the new republic. The militia embodied the democratic principle that defense of the nation was the responsibility of every citizen.”

According to Huntington, American culture has always admired the nonprofessional soldier and had an uneasy relationship with the professional officer.

Although the United States embraces the ideal of the citizen-soldier, it has not always relied solely on volunteers to fight its wars. As discussed above, a limited system of conscription was employed during the American Civil War. Conscription was reinstated during both world wars of the twentieth century. Although Truman briefly ended it in 1947, conscription was reinstated in 1948. A selective service system remained in place until 1973. The United States has never had a truly universal system of conscription, even during the two World Wars. A proposal was made in 1948, however, for a system of Universal Military Training (UMT). “Many reformers were impressed with the democracy of universal military service—the great leveler…”

The fact that UMT would have required all young men to serve was consistent with democratic ideals of fairness and equality. Leonard Wood advocated UMT as a way to “give meaning to citizenship…it was the logical corollary of universal manhood

---

29 Ibid., 167.
30 Ibid., 157-158.
31 Bernard Rostker, I Want You!: The Evolution of the All-Volunteer Force (Santa Monica: RAND, 2006), 2.
32 For a more complete description of the different types of military service, see Eliot A. Cohen, Citizens and Soldiers (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 23. Cohen also provides a thorough review of military service in the United States through the establishment of the all-volunteer force.
33 Huntington, The Soldier and the State, 294.
suffrage.”34 Most arguments in favor of UMT were based, however, on the belief that it would serve as a “universal panacea for all the social ills which beset America.”35 Advocates hoped that UMT would “foster national unity by mixing together young men (and in some versions, women) from all parts of the country.”36 The problem with such a program is, however, “the appropriateness of compulsion in such [liberal-democratic] societies…”37 The proposal for UMT was rejected in 1948 and the United States relied on selective service until 1973.38

The American liberal ethos clashes with the idea of compulsory military service. Conscription in the United States was ultimately undone, however, by inequities in its implementation. During the American Civil War, more than 2.6 million men were recruited into the Union army, of which 1.25 million joined after the implementation of conscription.39 The American Civil War draft functioned as “an indirect means of recruiting the poor into the ranks.”40 During World War I, the United States recruited into the armed forces 4,355,000 out of a total population of 92 million,41 or nearly 5% of the population. In the course of defeating Germany and Japan thirty years later, the

---

34 Ibid., 280.
35 Ibid., 286.
36 Cohen, Citizens and Soldiers, 128.
37 Ibid., 131.
38 In wartime, a selective service system drafts individuals on the basis of their usefulness to the war effort. See Cohen, Citizens and Soldiers, 23.
39 Parker, “Should Our Volunteers Be Raised by Conscription?,” 575.
40 George Q. Flynn, “Conscription and Equity in Western Democracies, 1940-75,” Journal of Contemporary History 33, no. 1 (1998): 12. Individuals called up by the draft could escape service by producing a substitute or paying a fee of $300, although the latter was later eliminated. To fill their local quotas, towns offered bounties to encourage individuals to “volunteer.” Richer communities that could offer more money to such volunteers would pull in men from surrounding towns. This left more men in these poorer communities exposed to the draft and unable to procure substitutes. See Parker, “Should Our Volunteers Be Raised by Conscription?,” 577.
United States mobilized 16,354,000 out of a total population of 129,200,000, or more than 12.5% of the population. Deferment of service was possible during World War II, particularly for farmers, fathers, and doctors. Student deferment was initiated after the Korean War because the military could not absorb all the country’s young men. These deferments drew criticism because they permitted elite youth to avoid service. By 1967, when U.S. commitments in Vietnam were increasing, there were still more than 1.7 million men with student deferments. Educational deferments were finally phased out in September 1971 at the height of protests over the Vietnam War. In 1973, the United States decided that it could no longer tolerate the infringement on individual liberty embodied by the draft and the inequities in the draft’s implementation, and so decided to rely instead on an all-volunteer force.

**The Will to Suffer: The United States and the All-Volunteer Force**

Eliminating the draft generated fears that the U.S. military would become a non-representative and isolated institution. Instead, the establishment of the all-volunteer force (AVF) has increased personnel retention and enhanced professionalism. An examination of the current military suggests that it is broadly representative of American society. Some groups remain, however, either over- or under-represented. In fiscal year 2008, active duty enlisted accessions were more likely to have a high school diploma or the equivalent than members of the civilian comparison group (99% percent of new

---

43 Flynn, “Conscription and Equity in Western Democracies,” 7-8.
44 A major study of the so-called civil-military “gap” finds that military officers tend to be more politically and socially conservative and more religious than members of the civilian elite (459-460). The study concludes, however, that “at present the gap between the military and society in values, attitudes, opinions, and perspectives presents no compelling need to act to avert an immediate emergency” in civil-military relations (11). Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001).
accessions vs. 82% in the civilian comparison group).\textsuperscript{46} Southern states continue to be over-represented among new accessions, while the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions have accession rates much lower than the national average.\textsuperscript{47} Surveys of new recruits suggest that they are drawn “primarily from families in the middle or lower middle class. The high end of the distribution [is] not well represented.”\textsuperscript{48}

When states are ranked by income and their enlisted accession rates are compared, it is clear that new accessions are recruited disproportionately from poorer states. States are ranked in the following table according to 2008 per-capita income. The ten states with the highest per-capita income are listed on the left, and the ten states with the lowest per-capita income are on the right. The accession rate is the number of new, enlisted accessions in each state expressed as a percentage of the civilian population aged 18-24 in fiscal year 2008:

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 34-35.
\textsuperscript{48} Rostker, I Want You!, 8.
The average accession rate for the ten least wealthy states (0.65%) is more than 21% higher than the average accession rate for the ten wealthiest (0.53%). Furthermore, the top ten wealthiest states have a total of 140 representatives in the U.S. House (an average of 14 per state). The ten poorest states have only 46 (4.6 per state), fewer than the state of California. 54 Although the average new enlistee is better educated than his or her civilian peer, the military draws recruits disproportionately from poorer states with fewer representatives in the national government than their wealthier counterparts.

---


53 Author’s calculation: enlisted accessions as percentage of civilian population aged 18-24.


---

Table 1: New Accessions by State, Fiscal Year 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Accessions</th>
<th>Civilian pool</th>
<th>Accession %</th>
<th>Last 10</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Accessions</th>
<th>Civilian pool</th>
<th>Accession %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CT</td>
<td>57,248</td>
<td>1275</td>
<td>299241</td>
<td>0.43%</td>
<td>AZ</td>
<td>34,500</td>
<td>4079</td>
<td>584165</td>
<td>0.70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NJ</td>
<td>51,583</td>
<td>3077</td>
<td>768579</td>
<td>0.40%</td>
<td>AL</td>
<td>33,900</td>
<td>3241</td>
<td>476660</td>
<td>0.68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>51,028</td>
<td>2413</td>
<td>587670</td>
<td>0.41%</td>
<td>NM</td>
<td>33,584</td>
<td>1141</td>
<td>180211</td>
<td>0.63%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WY</td>
<td>50,588</td>
<td>324</td>
<td>51766</td>
<td>0.63%</td>
<td>ID</td>
<td>32,979</td>
<td>1084</td>
<td>132111</td>
<td>0.82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD</td>
<td>48,410</td>
<td>2587</td>
<td>550700</td>
<td>0.47%</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>32,947</td>
<td>3067</td>
<td>390088</td>
<td>0.79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NY</td>
<td>48,107</td>
<td>7583</td>
<td>1905192</td>
<td>0.40%</td>
<td>AR</td>
<td>32,695</td>
<td>1729</td>
<td>233417</td>
<td>0.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VA</td>
<td>44,756</td>
<td>5005</td>
<td>716162</td>
<td>0.70%</td>
<td>UT</td>
<td>32,596</td>
<td>1202</td>
<td>287812</td>
<td>0.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AK</td>
<td>44,395</td>
<td>551</td>
<td>67984</td>
<td>0.81%</td>
<td>KY</td>
<td>32,368</td>
<td>2053</td>
<td>379820</td>
<td>0.54%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CA</td>
<td>43,732</td>
<td>3529</td>
<td>583831</td>
<td>0.60%</td>
<td>WV</td>
<td>31,513</td>
<td>943</td>
<td>151891</td>
<td>0.62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WA</td>
<td>43,732</td>
<td>3529</td>
<td>583831</td>
<td>0.60%</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>30,730</td>
<td>1585</td>
<td>293414</td>
<td>0.54%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Average % Acc.: 0.53%

Average % Acc.: 0.65%
Eliminating conscription may have been prudent given the United States’ reduced need for military manpower in the second half of the twentieth century. The United States’ all-volunteer force is the most professional and proficient military in the world. Ending the draft has had, however, the same impact as student deferments did in the era of selective service: it has allowed the most affluent and elite young people in the United States to avoid military service. One study links the elimination of conscription to the current underrepresentation of veterans in Congress: “individuals with high education levels and high socio-economic status, who are disproportionately more likely to serve as congressional candidates, are less likely to serve in the military compared to individuals who are less educated and of a lower socio-economic status.”55 This means that the individuals responsible for making decisions about war and peace are those most insulated from the human costs of war. Furthermore, the general public has less incentive to act as a check on policymakers when the military is composed of volunteers than they would in the face of conscription. By eliminating the draft, the United States has made it much less costly to employ military force. The logic of costly signaling suggests, however, that relying on an all-volunteer force undermines the effectiveness of U.S. military threats.

**The Will to Suffer: Reserves**

When faced with a military manpower shortage, a unipole relying on an all-volunteer force could choose to initiate conscription. An intermediate step between reliance on active volunteers and resorting to conscription is the mobilization of reserves.

---

Calling up reserves is more costly than relying on active volunteers, but much less politically costly than the decision to reinstate the draft would be. Reserve mobilization was seemingly more costly for the United States before the advent of the all-volunteer force than it has been since 1973. During the Vietnam War, Johnson avoided mobilizing the reserves and National Guard at the price of increasing the draft.\textsuperscript{56} With the movement to the all-volunteer force, however, the United States changed the way that reserves were integrated into the military. The total-force policy crafted by General Abrams after the Vietnam War expanded the role of reserves such that, “in any significant military involvement, reliance on Reserve Components would be required, thereby assuring public involvement in the action.”\textsuperscript{57} The need to call up reserves for major military operations was intended to limit the ability of policymakers to engage in unpopular wars.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, the need to call up reserves has not served as a check on the United States’ ability to launch military operations. Reservists were called up for the first war in Iraq and for peacekeeping in the Balkans. Many of these individuals volunteered to go, however, and they were not kept on duty longer than six months.\textsuperscript{58} By contrast, during the second war in Iraq, “several National Guard and reserve units have been mobilized without reasonable notice, kept on active duty for longer than anticipated, and sent overseas to Iraq and Afghanistan without effective training.”\textsuperscript{59} Furthermore, both soldiers on active duty and reservists have been deployed for multiple tours in these wars. This has eroded morale and hindered the military’s

\textsuperscript{56} Lawrence Korb, "Fixing the Mix: How to Update the Army's Reserves," \textit{Foreign Affairs} 83, no. 2 (2004): 2.
\textsuperscript{58} Korb, “Fixing the Mix,” 4.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 5.
ability to recruit and retain new members. The ability to call up reservists and members of the National Guard to prosecute recent military campaigns has enabled U.S. policymakers to avoid the politically costly decision to reinstate the draft while fighting two wars in the Middle East. These efforts to minimize costs also convince the United States’ targets that it lacks the will to defeat them in costly campaigns.

**The Will to Suffer: Private Contractors**

The end of the Cold War motivated cuts in U.S. defense budgets and a downsizing of the military. As discussed at the beginning of this paper, however, the end of the Cold War also coincided with an increase in U.S. involvement in international conflicts. The United States’ increased use of private military contractors in the post-Cold War period is part of a larger trend in the privatization of American foreign policy. This trend was motivated by a desire to save money while meeting the perceived demand for U.S. action overseas. “Democrats and Republicans alike [have] embraced outsourcing the work of government to the private sector whenever possible, both as a perceived cost-savings measure and as a mechanism for getting things done more efficiently.”

Because the United States is no longer willing to conscript its citizens into the military, hiring private military contractors allows it to carry out missions for which the all-volunteer force would be insufficient.

The hiring of private contractors is not a new phenomenon in American foreign policy. The United States’ use of military contractors has received a lot of attention in recent years, however, because private military firms have been very active in the war in Iraq. “During the first four years of the Iraq War, the U.S. government hired

---

approximately 190,000 contracted personnel in direct service contracts there. This
amount is greater than the total number of U.S. troops at the high point of ‘the surge’ and
is roughly 23 times the number of troops provided by our allies.”62 Employing
contractors allows the United States to make up for shortages in manpower. “Short of
instituting a draft, America’s ventures abroad could not be supported by the military
alone…When the army can hardly recruit enough soldiers to keep its ranks full, hiring
contractors to fill the gap seems like a win-win proposition.”63 The use of private
contractors is, however, a mixed blessing. These firms help “Washington to make up for
its troop shortage and [do] jobs that U.S. forces would prefer not to. But they have also
been involved in some of the most controversial aspects of the war, including alleged
corporate profiteering and abuse of Iraqi prisoners.”64

The reliance on private firms for functions once performed exclusively by the
military raises important questions about accountability, waste, and ethics. Private
military contractors’ greatest impact, however, may be in the realm of policy. Private
military firms “allow governments to carry out actions that would not otherwise be
possible, such as those that would not gain legislative or public approval…it also
disconnects the public from its foreign policy, removing certain activities from popular
oversight.”65 By relying heavily on private military firms, “the Bush

---

63 Stanger, One Nation Under Contract, 93.
64 Singer, "Outsourcing War," 123.
65 Ibid., 125.
administration…dramatically lowered the political price for its Iraq policies.”

Hiring contractors helped to shield the Bush administration from the choice between reinstating the draft and begging its allies for greater force commitments when the war became more difficult. “By outsourcing parts of the job…the Bush administration…avoided such unappealing alternatives and has also been able to shield the full costs from scrutiny: contractor casualties and kidnappings are not listed on public rolls and are rarely mentioned by the media.”

The hiring of private military contractors perverts the mechanisms of accountability that are supposed to function in a democracy. When the United States hires private military contractors instead of reinstating a draft, the general public is not called on to sacrifice. Instead, private individuals are paid to accept high levels of danger on a short-term basis for personal gain. Casualties among private military contractors are rarely reported in the media. This shields the public from the true human toll of the fighting. Furthermore, the public may not feel the same pain about a dead contractor as it would feel about a dead draftee, who would be viewed as the servant of the state and the embodiment of the United States’ values. General Abrams designed the total-force policy to compel policymakers to choose only wars that the public would support. If the U.S. government can supplement its uniformed personnel with private military contractors, however, then the decision to go to war, and to continue to fight an unpopular war, is much easier to make. Like the deployment of both active volunteers

66 Ibid., 126.
67 Ibid., 126.
68 Today, the U.S. public may not view a dead volunteer soldier in the same way that it viewed a dead draftee during the Vietnam War. Like the contractor, today’s volunteer soldier may be viewed as fighting by choice, not necessity. This may help to explain why current studies suggest that the public is not as casualty-shy as the media, U.S. policymakers, and foreign leaders seem to believe. It cannot explain, however, why U.S. policymakers remain so keen to minimize U.S. casualties. The next section of this paper will address the United States’ sensitivity to casualties.
and reservists for multiple tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, the hiring of private contractors allows U.S. policymakers to conduct military campaigns without paying the political costs associated with reinstating the draft. These strategies make the use of force less politically costly and make the United States’ compellent threats more immediately credible. They also render the threat of force a low-cost and uninformative signal of the United States’ commitment to prevail over a stubbornly resistant target state.

**The Will to Suffer: A Casualty-Shy Unipole?**

The willingness to withstand casualties is a potent indicator of a unipole’s willingness to suffer in order to achieve its objectives. The belief that the United States is unwilling to sustain casualties seems to be widespread, however, among its adversaries. Saddam Hussein based his strategy for the 1991 Gulf War on the assumption that, if his forces could withstand the initial air attack, they could inflict enough casualties on U.S. troops that the United States would pack up and leave.\(^{69}\) In his 1996 fatwa against the United States, Osama bin Laden cited the failed mission in Somalia as evidence that the United States was unwilling to suffer: “when tens of your soldiers were killed in minor battles and one American Pilot was dragged in the streets of Mogadishu you left the area carrying disappointment, humiliation, defeat and your dead with you…the extent of your impotence and weaknesses became very clear.”\(^{70}\) In a videotaped message issued shortly after the launch of U.S. operations against Afghanistan, bin Laden’s deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri exhorted Americans to, “Remember that your government was defeated in Vietnam, fled in panic from Lebanon, rushed out of Somalia, and was slapped across the

---


face in Aden. Your government today is leading you into a losing war, where you will lose your sons and your money.”

The belief that the United States cannot withstand casualties is not held exclusively by the United States’ opponents. U.S. policymakers also seem to believe that Americans cannot stomach casualties. Concerns about casualties figure heavily in the planning of U.S. operations. President Clinton announced that he would not send ground forces on the first night of the 1999 campaign over Kosovo. This declaration reflected a desire to minimize NATO casualties, but it also undermined the coercive campaign against Milosevic. Furthermore, the desire to bomb from high altitudes to minimize friendly casualties may have hindered accurate targeting and made collateral damage more likely.

Both U.S. planners and Milosevic seem to have been in agreement that even a few NATO casualties would have driven the coercers to abandon their objectives. Even after the spectacular terrorist attacks of September 11th, fears that heavy casualties would undermine support for the campaigns against bin Laden and the Taliban drove planning for the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan. “An adviser to senior Pentagon officials said concerns about high U.S. casualties led the Bush administration to craft a strategy that relied on air power and small numbers of commandos, as opposed to tens of thousands of American ground troops.”

The perception that casualties are politically costly influences planning by both U.S. policymakers and by the United States’ opponents. What evidence is there to

---

72 The tension between the United States’ aversion to casualties and its desire to minimize collateral damage will be addressed later in this paper.
73 Lacquemont, "The Casualty-Aversion Myth," 44.
74 Tom Bowman, "War Casualties Could Test Public's Resolve," Baltimore Sun, November 18, 2001: 19A.
support the claim that the U.S. public cannot stomach casualties and will punish policymakers for casualty-heavy operations? Mueller finds that support for the wars in both Korea and Vietnam declined as total casualties increased: “in each war, support is projected to have started at much the same level...and then every time American casualties increased by a factor of 10, support for the war dropped by about 15 percentage points.”

Gartner, Segura and Barratt examine U.S. Senate elections during the Vietnam War. They find that, “Incumbents from states that experience higher casualties receive a smaller percentage of the vote, an effect ameliorated when the incumbent opposes the war and his or her opponent does not.”

Casualties were a focal point for public opposition to U.S. involvement in Vietnam; however, the United States conducted that war with draftees. Conscription is politically costly because it exposes individuals to the risks of military service against their will. The end of conscription should have lessened the extent to which casualties inflame public opinion.

Recent studies of U.S. public opinion suggest that Americans will tolerate casualties only under specific conditions. They will also punish elected officials for casualty-heavy operations. A two-part study by Eric Larson finds that the American public decides whether to support a military operation through a rough cost-benefit analysis. Multivariate analysis of public opinion data suggests that, “belief that the United States had important stakes in a situation—whether conceived in terms of traditional security interests such as vital interests or in terms of humanitarian or moral equities—was the most important predictor of support or opposition to military

---

75 John E. Mueller, *War, Presidents and Public Opinion* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1973), 60, emphasis in original. The relationship does not seem to hold for World War II, in which greater U.S. interests were presumably believed to be at stake (62).

operations…“ If the public believes that the stakes are high, then they will tolerate casualties. By contrast, “limited ends justif[y] only limited means.” Furthermore, support in the post-Cold War era is higher for air campaigns than for missions involving ground troops.

Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler find that, “support for continuing a military operation (or, for that matter, starting such an operation) in the face of mounting combat casualties is a function of the interactive effect of two underlying attitudes: expectations about the likelihood that the military operation will be a success and belief in the initial rightness of the decision to launch the military operation.”

Eichenberg examines polls of American public opinion from 1981 through 2005, including polls on the 2003 invasion of Iraq. He finds that, “support…increases when the intervention is successful, regardless of the level of casualties…” He also finds that the public prefers “less risky military actions (e.g., air strikes) as opposed to more risky actions (e.g., the commitment of troops).”

The war in Iraq has been prosecuted with volunteers and private contractors. Karol and Miguel find, however, that the war’s 10,000 U.S. casualties cost Bush 2% of the popular vote in the 2004 election.

These studies suggest that Americans will tolerate casualties resulting from successful, high-stakes operations. Americans are also more willing to support

---

82 Ibid., 141-142.
operations that involve the use of limited instruments like airpower than operations involving ground troops. This gives policymakers a strong incentive to opt for these more limited instruments. The end of the draft should have minimized the impact of casualties on U.S. opinion. In some respects this is true, as Americans will accept casualties generated by successful, high-stakes operations. Americans are unwilling, however, to tolerate high casualties when U.S. interests are not strongly engaged and when victory is uncertain. Knowing this, policymakers face strong incentives to minimize casualties, particularly for operations in which success is uncertain and the United States’ core interests are not engaged. Even if the American public is not so unwilling to accept casualties as popular media accounts suggest, this fact is irrelevant so long as target leaders continue to believe that it is true, and so long as the United States bases its military strategy on the desire to minimize U.S. casualties.

The Will to Suffer: The Rise of the RMA Thesis

There are several strains of thinking on the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). The basic thesis, however, is that “technology is creating a new form of warfare in which long-range precision air and missile strikes will dominate the fighting, ground forces will be reduced mostly to scouts, and the struggle for information

---

84 The perception of what constitutes a “high” number of casualties seems to have shifted with the end of the Cold War. As Larson notes, “The concern about casualties among political leaders and the public, although humane, is not entirely rational—U.S. battle deaths are actually somewhat rare, typically very few, and are dwarfed by the number of deaths to U.S. service personnel from other causes” (Casualties and Consensus, 6). The fact that the 1991 Gulf War was judged successful and with fewer casualties than had been expected may have reset the public’s expectations about acceptable casualty rates. Furthermore, today’s policymakers inherited the legacy of Vietnam-era concerns about casualties. The force structure that emerged from the end of the Cold War reflects these concerns to limit casualties, regardless of current public opinion. The United States’ force structure and adoption of the RMA thesis will be examined in the next section.

supremacy will replace the breakthrough battle as the decisive issue for success.”

The rapid expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991 seemed to usher in a new era of U.S. military dominance. Observers believed that the superiority of U.S. technology, and air power in particular, would transform the face of warfare and allow the United States to force its will on any other state. The Department of Defense report to Congress finds that, “Operation Desert Storm validated the concept of a campaign in which air power, applied precisely and nearly simultaneously against centers of gravity, significantly degraded enemy capabilities.” Furthermore, “the revolutionary combination of stealth aircraft and PGMs allowed nearly simultaneous attack against scores of targets across the theater.”

The report by the House Armed Services Committee claims that, “the decisive factor in the war with Iraq was the air campaign.”

The HASC report also argues that, “the effective use of high technology was a key reason for both the high level of performance of air and ground forces, and the minimization of allied casualties.”

The HASC report acknowledges that ground troops were ultimately necessary to expel the Iraqis from Kuwait. It strongly emphasizes, however, the link between technology and reduced casualties.

A force structure based on the RMA thesis both exploits the United States’ advantages in information technology and precision targeting and complements the United States’ aversion to casualties. “Some believe that only a high-technology standoff-warfare force can make the U.S. military usable in a domestic political context,

---

89 Ibid., xx, emphasis added.
given Americans’ aversion to suffering casualties.” There are compelling political reasons to adopt the RMA model. If warfare has been transformed in the way that proponents of the RMA claim it has, then the United States should be able to exploit its unique advantages in military technology while at the same time minimizing casualties. This makes it less politically costly for policymakers to choose military force as a policy instrument. In fact, the HASC report claims that, “In planning Operation Desert Storm, minimizing allied and civilian casualties was the highest priority.”

Saddam’s expulsion from Kuwait was apparently not the highest priority. Instead, this claim suggests that the outcome was a foregone conclusion, and the goal of planning was to figure out how to conduct operations to minimize U.S. casualties. The fact that the operation succeeded with fewer casualties than had been predicted seemed to confirm the theory that high-tech warfare would be the key to both operational and domestic political success in post-Cold War warfare.

Policymakers seeking reelection have obvious incentives to minimize casualties, particularly when they are conducting unpopular campaigns. The U.S. military also has incentives to limit casualties. Relying on long-serving volunteers allows the United States to spend more resources training the force. This makes each individual more valuable and makes casualties more costly to the military as an institution. After the meat grinder of Vietnam, the U.S. army moved to “heavy forces,” integrated the National Guard and reserve units in such a way that political support would be necessary for major campaigns, and invested time and resources to train the all-volunteer force. According to General Wesley Clark, the American who commanded NATO operations over Kosovo in

---

90 O’Hanlon, Technological Change, 7.
91 Aspin and Dickinson, Defense for a New Era, 93.
1999, these developments encouraged the military to support civilian leaders’ desire to limit casualties. 

Air power is the most attractive weapon in the RMA arsenal. “For U.S. foreign policy, the Gulf War seems to show—and the 1999 Kosovo conflict appears to confirm—that air power is now so lethal, and American air power so dominant, that the United States can win nearly cost-free military victories against its foes.” The effectiveness of air power as an independent instrument of coercion is hotly debated. Whether or not air power is an effective tool, its allure is obvious to both policymakers and to the military. “Air power is an unusually seductive form of military strength, in part because, like modern courtship, it appears to offer gratification without commitment.” Air power seems to allow the United States to influence the behavior of target states without the political risks associated with ground forces. Limiting U.S. action to a bombing campaign also allows the United States to remove assets from the theater of operations more quickly than would be possible if it deployed a large contingent of ground troops.

95 The claim that air power could be a revolutionary, independent, war-winning instrument is not new. In a series of articles in the Saturday Evening Post in 1923-1925, Billy Mitchell argued ”that a powerful air force could make war a briefer, more humane, and cheaper affair by obliterating an enemy’s industrial centers.” Tami Davis Biddle, Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas About Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 137.
Air power has played a large role in U.S. operations since the end of the Cold War. The 1991 Gulf War began with an extensive bombing campaign. The 1999 campaign over Kosovo was conducted exclusively from the air. The 2003 invasion of Iraq began with a decapitation strike aimed at Iraqi leadership, after which U.S. forces launched simultaneous air and ground attacks. In fact, the Bush administration based the 2003 invasion of Iraq on the belief that a U.S. force structure consistent with the RMA thesis could defeat the Iraqi regime. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld rejected invasion plans from the military several times because they called for too many ground troops. In the view of one planner involved in the process, “Rumsfeld had two goals: to demonstrate the efficacy of precision bombing and to ‘do the war on the cheap.’”

Rumsfeld’s basic thesis was that, “speed and agility and precision can take the place of mass.” The desire for such a small footprint would have grave consequences for U.S. forces once it became clear that the vision of a relatively quick, technology-heavy victory with a modest ground force failed to be realized.

**The Will to Suffer: The Rise of Robots**

The use of robots and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) on and above the battlefield enhances the U.S. military’s ability to fight efficiently. “Robots [have proven] attractive for roles that fill what people in the field call the ‘Three Ds’ (‘Dull, Dirty, or Dangerous’)…Unmanned systems…don’t need to sleep, don’t need to eat, and find monitoring empty desert sands as exciting as partying…” Robots enhance the

---

capabilities of human soldiers while also protecting them from risk. In the twenty-first century, robots may be used for “street patrols, reconnaissance, sniping, checkpoint security, as well as guarding observation posts. [They are] especially attuned for urban warfare jobs, such as going first into buildings and alleyways where insurgents might hide.”

Robots can even substitute for additional manpower. If policymakers are unwilling or unable to send enough troops, then they “can use robots to augment the number of boots on the ground,” according to an executive at a major U.S. robotics firm.

The Air Force’s culture and command structure revere pilots. Consequently, the Air Force was initially very resistant to the development of unmanned aircraft. By 2008, however, “there were 5,331 drones in the U.S. military’s inventory, almost double the amount of manned planes.”

Drones are employed for both surveillance and attacking targets. They operate in warzones and above countries where U.S. ground troops are not permitted. The United States’ use of drones first received attention during the Bush Administration; however, “the number of drone strikes [rose] dramatically [after] Obama became President. During his first nine and a half months in office, he…authorized as many C.I.A. aerial attacks in Pakistan as George W. Bush did in his final three years in office.”

The use of unmanned aircraft for targeted killings raises thorny ethical issues about assassination. Unmanned aircraft are particularly

---

100 Ibid., 31.
101 Quoted in Singer, Wired for War, 221.
102 Singer, Wired for War, 54.
103 Ibid., 37.
attractive, however, for a unipole fighting two unpopular wars. Substituting UAVs and robots for soldiers minimizes U.S. casualties: “the low price and lack of a human pilot means that a Predator can be used for missions where it might be shot down, such as traveling low and slow over enemy territory.”

Singer argues that the low-cost 1991 victory in Iraq, combined with the specter of Vietnam and the humiliating pullout from Somalia in 1993, spurred investment in unmanned systems precisely because they minimize U.S. casualties.

The United States’ opponents are aware that robots and drones shield U.S. forces from casualties. Rather than convince opponents of the United States’ motivation, reliance on high-technology instruments that separate U.S. soldiers from their foes is interpreted as a signal that the United States is unwilling to pay high costs to defeat its opponents. According to Rami Khouri, editor of the Beirut-based Daily Star, “The average person sees [reliance on unmanned systems] as just another sign of coldhearted, cruel Israelis and Americans, who are also cowards because they send out machines to fight us…they don’t want to fight us like real men, but are afraid to fight. So we just have to kill a few of their soldiers to defeat them.”

Like private contractors, robots and UAVs both enhance the strength of the U.S. military and reduce the costs of employing force. They may also deceive the American public about the ease and costs of war. Lawrence Korb argues that reliance on robots and UAVs, “will further disconnect the military from society. People are more likely to support the use of force as long as they view it as costless.”

---

106 Singer, Wired for War, 33.
107 Ibid., 59.
108 Quoted in Singer, Wired for War, 309.
109 Quoted in Singer, Wired for War, 316.
force supplemented with private contractors, reliance on robots disconnects the American public from the sacrifices of war. This makes it less costly for policymakers to employ military force and makes U.S. compellent threats more immediately credible. The logic of costly signaling suggests, however, that efforts to minimize the human and political costs of war also render the United States’ military threats ineffective in coercing target states.

**The Will to Suffer: The United States and Counterinsurgency**

The rise of counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan has increased the U.S. military’s reliance on ground troops. This has been accomplished by shifting troops between theaters, not by instituting a draft. An introduction to the new Army and Marine Corps manual notes that counterinsurgency, “challenges much of what is holy about the American way of war.” The manual emphasizes that, “the military force’s primary function in COIN is protecting [the] populace…excessive use of military force can frequently undermine policy objectives…This dilemma places tremendous importance on the measured application of force.” The manual also emphasizes the integration of military and civilian efforts to secure the local population and defeat the insurgency. It stresses the importance of understanding local conditions and building relationships rather than maximizing firepower. Consequently, the new counterinsurgency manual places a much larger emphasis on ground troops than does the RMA model of warfare. Implementing the manual’s recommendations in Afghanistan

---

and Iraq has exposed U.S. troops to greater risk. U.S. forces have scaled back the use of some high-tech instruments, including air strikes, in efforts to secure the population while minimizing collateral damage.\footnote{The issue of collateral damage will be taken up later in this paper.}

Whether the United States retains the lessons from these counterinsurgency campaigns or will revert to the high technology, low footprint operations that dominated the immediate post-Cold War period remains to be seen. The U.S. military abandoned counterinsurgency after the Vietnam War. The increasing use of UAVs under the Obama administration and the 2011 standoff strike on Libya suggest that U.S. policymakers may not be anxious to depart from the American war-fighting model described in this paper. It is not inconceivable that a reluctance to become involved in operations requiring long term commitments of ground troops will pervade U.S. policy after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan finally wind down. In fact, the public outcry over these wars may convince potential targets that it will be politically infeasible for the United States to pursue similar campaigns in the foreseeable future.

\textbf{The Will to Suffer: Who Pays?}

The United States has developed a high technology, low footprint operational model consistent with the RMA thesis. This model shields U.S. forces from casualties while capitalizing on the United States’ advantages in information technology. Substituting technology for manpower is a politically attractive strategy for a democratic unipole,\footnote{Gartzke finds that, contrary to the popular wisdom, democracy is not the key factor determining whether a state employs a capital-intensive form of warfare. He argues instead that “Capital-abundant states buy more weapons while labor-abundant states hire more personnel” (468). To the extent that capital-abundant states tend to be democratic, this explains the apparent tendency of democracies to protect their forces. See Erik Gartzke, "Democracy and the Preparation for War: Does Regime Type Affect States' Anticipation of Casualties?,” \textit{International Studies Quarterly} 45, no. 3 (2001): 467-484.} but it can also be very expensive. It is true that the U.S. defense establishment
is not cheap. U.S. defense expenditures totaled $661 billion in 2009, or roughly 4.68% of U.S. GDP. The United States accounted for nearly half of 2009 global defense spending of $1.45 trillion. U.S. defense expenditures amounted to $2,153 per capita in 2009. This is ten times the global average of $214 per capita. In 2011, the United States has 1.5 million in the active armed forces, with 871,000 in the reserves.\footnote{All figures from International Institute for Strategic Studies, \textit{The Military Balance 2011} (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2011), 471-477. China reports armed forces of 2.285 million, with 510,000 in the reserves. North Korea reports standing forces of more than 1 million, as do India and Russia.}

That the United States spends a huge amount of money on defense is undeniable. Annual U.S. defense spending exceeds the GDPs of many countries.\footnote{For a list of 2009 GDP figures, see the World Bank table, “GDP (current US$),” http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD (accessed 12 July 2011).} When the $661 billion figure is situated within historical trends in defense spending and compared to the size of the U.S. economy, however, the number is not so outrageous as it initially appears. During the height of World War II, the United States spent more than 37% of its GDP on defense. At the end of the Korean War in 1953, the United States was sacrificing more than 14% of its annual GDP to national defense. During the first half of the Cold War, annual spending on national defense hovered around eight or nine percent of GDP. Annual defense spending finally settled to around five to six percent of GDP after the Vietnam War ended and before the drawdown in spending that followed the end of the Cold War. National defense spending as a percentage of GDP bottomed out at 3.0% in 2000, before climbing to the 2010 estimated high of 4.9%. Current U.S. defense spending is not insignificant. As a percentage of GDP, however, U.S. defense spending
is moderate in comparison to twentieth-century trends. Even at the height of the Vietnam War, the United States was willing to spend 8-9% of its GDP on defense.\(^\text{117}\)

The U.S. defense establishment is obviously expensive. This would seem to undermine the argument that pursuing an RMA-based military model lowers the costs of executing military action and renders U.S. compellent threats ineffective. The way in which the United States pays for its military operations is the factor that determines whether the threat of force is a costly signal of the United States’ motivation to defeat its opponent. States have often turned to taxes to pay for military campaigns. In fact, the evolution of modern militaries was often accompanied by the evolution of centralized bureaucracies. As Charles Tilly famously noted, “war made the state and the state made war.”\(^\text{118}\) The United States did not face the same pressures as did states in early modern Europe; however, it has turned to taxes to pay for some of its wars. A federal excise tax on long-distance telephone calls was enacted to pay for the Spanish-American War. Federal income tax withholding was established during the Second World War and remains in place to this day.\(^\text{119}\) If the public must pay for military action through increased taxes, then policymakers should initiate only those wars that they expect will be widely supported by the population. Yet, if we examine the United States’ major military operations in the post-Cold War period, we find that the United States does not want to pay for the wars that it fights—at least, not immediately.


The United States’ total incremental costs for the 1991 Gulf War were estimated at $61 billion.\textsuperscript{120} Allies pledged roughly $54 billion to offset these costs. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait made the two largest contributions of roughly $16 billion each. The Defense Department’s report notes that, without these financial contributions from its allies, “the US would have had to pay these costs either through a tax increase or through deficit spending, adding to the nations’ fiscal difficulties.”\textsuperscript{121} In other words, the mission was important to the United States and to the preservation of international peace, but not so important that U.S. policymakers would call on the public to pay for it with higher taxes. In fact, President Bush sent missions to the United States’ allies to solicit pledges of financial support in September 1990, before operations were underway. This suggests that U.S. participation in the campaign to expel Iraq from Kuwait was always contingent on other nations picking up the tab.\textsuperscript{122}

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been significantly more expensive than the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Before the Iraq War, “Office of Management and Budget director Mitch Daniels and Secretary Rumsfeld estimated the costs in the range of $50-$60 billion, a portion of which they believed would be financed by other countries.” They also expected Iraq’s oil revenues would pay for postwar reconstruction.\textsuperscript{123} These predictions have proven inaccurate. Total budget authority for the Iraq war in fiscal year

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{120} United States Department of Defense, \textit{Conduct of the Persian Gulf War}, 634. Figures are those reported in 1992 and not adjusted for inflation. “Incremental costs” include the costs of “deploying, operating, and supporting forces used in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm” and exclude the investment and baseline costs associated with the force structure (633).
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 634.
\textsuperscript{122} The argument does not suggest that seeking financial support from allies is inappropriate. In fact, the willingness of these allies to support the mission did help to ease the unipole’s burden while acting as policeman in the Middle East. The argument suggests, however, that not calling on the American public to pay for this operation lowered the costs for using force.
\end{footnotesize}
2011 is $51.1 billion, down from the 2008 high of $142.1 billion. Total spending on the Iraq war in fiscal years 2003 through 2010 is $748.2 billion. The budget authority request for the Afghanistan war in fiscal year 2011 is $119.4 billion, the highest since the start of operations in 2001. Total budget authority spending in years 2001-2011 on the war in Afghanistan is $455.4 billion. The total cost of the so-called global war on terror through 2011, including these wars and homeland security costs, is $1.29 trillion.\textsuperscript{124} Stiglitz and Bilmes estimate that total costs for the Iraq war will exceed $3 trillion.\textsuperscript{125}

Famous advertisements for Liberty Bonds issued during World War I called on Americans to sacrifice for the war effort. No such call to sacrifice has been made in the last decade. Americans have not been asked to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan with higher taxes. In fact, President Bush and congressional Republicans passed a series of tax cuts from 2001 through 2004. The 2003 tax breaks for the affluent were estimated to carry a $1 trillion price tag over ten years.\textsuperscript{126} Instead of funding its military campaigns with current revenues, “the United States has borrowed most of the funds used to wage the war”\textsuperscript{127} in Iraq. Funding requests for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have also circumvented normal budgeting procedures. The Bush administration funded the wars through “emergency ‘supplemental’ war requests [that] were often kept secret until the last possible minute. This effectively has denied not just Congress but even the administration’s own analysts in the Office of Management and Budget the opportunity to consider the numbers carefully.”\textsuperscript{128}

\textsuperscript{124} IISS, \textit{The Military Balance 2011}, 45.
\textsuperscript{125} Stiglitz and Bilmes, \textit{The Three Trillion Dollar War}, 24.
\textsuperscript{127} Stiglitz and Bilmes, \textit{The Three Trillion Dollar War}, 29.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 22.
The 2010 federal deficit was estimated at $1.6 trillion, roughly 11% of GDP.\textsuperscript{129} The deficit cannot be attributed solely to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The tax cuts and the recession also share the burden for increasing budget deficits. As costs mount and battles over government debt rage, however, neither party is willing to propose tax increases for the specific purpose of financing the United States’ current wars. This suggests that policymakers know that the American public is not willing to sacrifice to achieve the United States’ nebulously defined goals in Iraq and Afghanistan. Instead, the United States relies on deficit spending to transfer the burden of paying for these wars to future generations. Kant warned that the ability for governments to borrow money to fight wars would be an obstacle to peace: “a credit system, if used by the powers as an instrument of aggression against one another” contributes to an “ease in making war” that is “a great obstacle in the way of perpetual peace.”\textsuperscript{130} The ability to finance wars through deficit spending instead of increased taxes makes it easier for policymakers to employ military force. Efforts to avoid paying for military operations also undermine the United States’ ability to use compellent threats effectively.

The Will to Kill: Collateral Damage

The third component of state resolve is the willingness to inflict violence on the opponent. Norms about the rights of noncombatants in target states have evolved over the last sixty-five years. It is now politically costly to inflict collateral damage on target states.\textsuperscript{131} The United States has abandoned strategies that deliberately target civilians. Civilian and military leaders now go to great lengths to assure domestic and international

\textsuperscript{130}Kant, "Perpetual Peace," 95.
\textsuperscript{131}The term “collateral damage” refers to the accidental killing of civilians as an unintended byproduct of legitimate military operations.
audiences that the United States minimizes the harm that it inflicts on target state civilians. In some cases the United States has even been unwilling to kill a target state’s soldiers.

The United States has not always been reluctant to kill its opponents. The campaign to pacify the Philippines after the United States acquired the islands from Spain in 1898 “was pressed with a harshness and brutality Americans had rarely employed against its enemies, excepting of course against their own aborigines…Prisoners were often shot out of hand, villages were put to the torch, and atrocities against the noncombatant population were common.”132 Roughly 4,000 American soldiers died during the 1899-1902 campaign, most of them from disease. By contrast, “more than 16,000 Filipinos were killed in combat and possibly as many as 200,000 civilians died as a result of the diseases, starvation, and privation caused by the conflict.”133

The strategic bombing campaigns of World War II deliberately targeted civilians. The enlightened democracies of Great Britain and the United States rained ferocious destruction onto the people of Germany and Japan. Despite the American insistence on precision bombing at the outset, the technology of the day reduced both the British and Americans to area bombing by the end of the war.134 Sir Arthur Harris became head of Bomber Command in 1942. He was blunt about the intentions behind the strategic bombing of Germany: “It should be emphasized that the destruction of houses, public utilities, transport and lives…and the breakdown of morale both at home and at the battle fronts by fear of extended and intensified bombing are accepted and intended aims of our

133 Ibid., 272.
bombing policy. They are not by-products of attempts to hit factories."\(^{135}\) During the war, the Allies “dropped 1.3 million tons of bombs on Germany, destroying over 40 percent of the urban area of the seventy largest cities and killing 305,000 civilians.”\(^{136}\) The firebombing of Japan destroyed “40 percent of the urban area of the sixty-six cities attacked. 22 million people, 30 percent of Japan’s entire population, were rendered homeless. 2.2 million civilian casualties were inflicted, including 900,000 fatalities, more than exceeding Japan’s combat casualties of approximately 780,000.”\(^{137}\)

Conway-Lanz argues that the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan first “focused American attention on the dilemma of killing noncombatants.” The atomic bomb also highlighted the tension between the United States’ increasingly lethal firepower and its inability to use such power discriminately.\(^{138}\) Deterrence through mutual assured destruction was based on the willingness to kill millions of Soviet civilians. The general trend after World War II has been, however, an increasing desire to protect civilians from harm. Civilian casualties served as a focal point for critics of U.S. participation in the Vietnam War. The United States’ reliance on massive firepower in densely populated areas “greatly increased the inevitable noncombatant casualties.” The 400,000 tons of napalm dropped during the war, and the defoliation of more than 4.7 million acres of forest and 480,000 acres of cropland, exposed the population to both immediate and long-term suffering. The most famous American atrocity was the My Lai Massacre in March 1968, in which a company on a search-and-destroy mission

\(^{135}\) Quoted in Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*, 220.
\(^{136}\) Pape, *Bombing to Win*, 254-255.
\(^{137}\) Ibid., 104.
\(^{138}\) Sahr Conway-Lanz, *Collateral Damage* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 12. Conway-Lanz notes, however, that opinion polls from 1945 revealed that an overwhelming majority of Americans approved of the use of the atomic bombs (13-14).
massacred as many as 567 unarmed men, women and children.\(^{139}\) In Vietnam, the military did not go to the same lengths to protect civilians as it would in Afghanistan and Iraq. In public statements, however, both General William Westmoreland and President Johnson stressed that civilian casualties were the unintended and tragic consequences of legitimate military operations.\(^{140}\) This suggests that policymakers were more concerned about the fallout from collateral damage than they had been during the United States’ earlier wars.

The United States has demonstrated its new attitude about the rights of noncombatants in targeting plans for post-Cold War air campaigns. Advances in precision targeting complement the desire to avoid collateral damage. Reliance on “smart bombs” seems to allow the United States to use its firepower more discriminatorily.\(^{141}\) The decapitation campaign at the beginning of the 1991 Persian Gulf War was designed to target Iraqi leaders and spare civilians. Powell restricted the bombing of targets in Baghdad, however, after a February 13 strike on the Al-Firdos bunker killed hundreds of civilians.\(^{142}\) Not only did the United States take pains to avoid killing civilians, in some cases it also avoided killing Iraqi soldiers. Concerns about press reports on the “Turkey Shoot” along the “Highway of Death” restricted bombing of retreating Iraqi soldiers at the end of the war, allowing many to escape back into Iraq.\(^{143}\)

\(^{139}\) Clodfelter, *Warfare and Armed Conflicts*, 784-785. In pointing out American atrocities in the Philippines and Vietnam, I do not suggest that it was the policy of the U.S. government or of the military to inflict violence on local populations. Rather, I point them out to suggest that the United States’ willingness to tolerate acts of violence against civilians, including both incidents of collateral damage and atrocities committed in the heat of battle, has declined over time.

\(^{140}\) Conway-Lanz, *Collateral Damage*, 217.

\(^{141}\) Ibid., 220-221.


\(^{143}\) See Gordon and Trainor, Chapter 19: “The Gate is Closed,” in *The Generals’ War*. 
Concerns about both friendly casualties and collateral damage drove targeting debates during the 1999 Kosovo campaign. The NATO allies’ wish to oversee target lists and the desire to minimize collateral damage gave rise to a complicated approval system for individual targets. Some targets, such as bridges and petroleum storage locations, were ruled off-limits despite their strategic importance due to fears of collateral damage. General Wesley Clark noted that, “Everything possible was…undertaken to ensure that the strikes met strict legal standards and minimized risks of harm to innocent civilians.”\textsuperscript{144}

Planning for the 2003 invasion of Iraq also reflected a desire to minimize collateral damage. Before the invasion, the United States developed lengthy “no-strike” lists and took pains to minimize collateral damage caused by air strikes and by fighting on the ground.\textsuperscript{145} The U.S. military has been criticized for its treatment of Iraqi civilians. The evidence suggests, however, that civilian casualties in Iraq are low by historical standards. “Adjusted for population size and duration, civilian deaths in Iraq through the end of 2006 were 11-17 times lower than in the Philippines…Controlling for population and duration, Iraqi civilian fatalities attributable to U.S. action and crossfire through the end of 2006 were 17-30 times lower than those from bombing and shelling alone in Vietnam.”\textsuperscript{146} Furthermore, the United States’ adversaries can exploit this unwillingness to inflict civilian casualties to their advantage. In Iraq, “Sunni insurgents and Shia militias have purposively placed civilians at risk by positioning their forces in mosques and hospitals; using civilian homes as shelter; firing mortars from yards and fields in

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[144]{Clark, \textit{Waging Modern War}, 225.}
\footnotetext[146]{Ibid., 15.}
\end{footnotes}
civilian neighborhoods and near farms; and using ambulances, taxis, and other civilian vehicles to transport fighters and weapons and launch bomb attacks."¹⁴⁷ Such strategies increase the risk that the U.S. military will inflict politically costly collateral damage on the local population.

The United States has also taken pains to minimize collateral damage in the war in Afghanistan. In June 2009, General Stanley McChrystal issued new restrictions on the use of air strikes in Afghanistan because of collateral damage resulting from strikes aimed at insurgents. Although the strikes are considered “indispensable for protecting troops,” the accidental killing of Afghan civilians undermines the United States’ mission in Afghanistan. McChrystal noted that, “Air power contains the seeds of our own destruction if we do not use it responsibly.”¹⁴⁸ Adopting more restrictive rules of engagement to minimize civilian casualties comes at a price in Afghanistan: accepting greater risks to U.S. soldiers. This runs counter to the trend toward the insulation of U.S. forces from casualties demonstrated earlier in this paper. Just as it is not yet clear whether the U.S. military will retain the current emphasis on counterinsurgency operations, it remains to be seen whether the desire to minimize either U.S. casualties or collateral damage will prevail in American strategy.

The evidence from U.S. and NATO campaigns since the end of the Cold War suggests that attitudes about inflicting violence on target states have evolved over the last sixty-five years. The United States now goes to great lengths to limit collateral damage and in some cases even refrains from killing the opponent’s soldiers. This is a stunning

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 13-14.
reversal from the Second World War, when the *deliberate* targeting of civilians was a major component of the Allies’ strategy for defeating Germany and Japan. Can we imagine any U.S. official admitting that the United States wished to “de-house” the population of Baghdad to “win” the current war in Iraq? The reluctance to inflict heavy damage on target populations also reflects the strength of the United States’ interests in these post-Cold War conflicts. Clausewitz argues that, “The degree of force that must be used against the enemy depends on the scale of political demands on either side.” It should not be surprising that the United States restrains its use of violence in an era in which it has only fought wars for limited objectives, against opponents that pose at most a marginal threat to its core interests. Efforts to limit the violence inflicted on target states limit the United States’ political costs for employing military force. The logic of costly signaling suggests that efforts to minimize collateral damage also render the United States’ compellent threats ineffective in securing target state compliance. Paradoxically, the United States’ efforts to minimize harm to civilians increase the chance that the target will resist and thereby make it more likely that the United States will actually inflict violence on the target state.

**Willing to Execute Threats, But Unwilling to Suffer and to Kill**

More than two decades after the end of the Cold War, the United States retains unrivalled superiority in conventional military power. With no peer competitor to check

---

149 I do not suggest that the United States should revert to early twentieth-century forms of counterinsurgency or revisit the area bombing strategies of World War II. It is not inconceivable, however, that the United States would return to a policy of targeting civilians if a perceived need to do so arose. The argument suggests that the unwillingness to inflict pain on target populations minimizes political costs to the United States. This makes it less costly for the United States to execute military action and renders compellent threats less effective in inducing target state compliance.


151 Limiting collateral damage lowers costs for both the United States and its target, and both can make the target more likely to resist. For the purposes of signaling U.S. motivation, however, only the United States’ costs are relevant.
its behavior, the United States is free to threaten force against a variety of targets without risk. Simply put, the United States threatens states because it can, and because it thinks it can do so at low cost. Rather than signal a commitment to the objectives at stake, the willingness to issue a threat conveys nothing about the United States’ willingness to prosecute a winning military campaign against a target that continues to resist after the threat has been executed.

The United States has steadily reinsulated the American public from the human and economic costs of war. In so doing, it has retreated from the levels of sacrifice that characterized U.S. participation in the World Wars and lowered the political costs for employing military force. The United States eliminated conscription in 1973 and has since relied on an all-volunteer force. In the process, it created a military that is highly professional but not drawn equally from all groups in American society. Instead of reinstating the draft to meet military manpower shortages, U.S. policymakers have repeatedly called up reserves and hired private military contractors:

Our dependence on contractors has limited the extent to which America has felt the human toll of the [Iraq] war. The all-volunteer Army, National Guard, and Reservists perform heroically, but the percentage of the U.S. population bearing the cost of a conflict is the lowest ever. Rather than making more Americans share the burden, we hired, contracted, and required those who were in the armed forces, National Guard, and Reserves to work for longer. This is not only unfair, in the long run, it may even be costly, as it makes volunteering less attractive.152

These strategies shield the bulk of the American population—including the most affluent and elite individuals that disproportionately serve in government—from the human costs of the United States’ wars. The United States has also adopted many elements of the RMA thesis. Relying on air power and robots allows the United States to capitalize on its

---

advantages in information technology while simultaneously shielding its forces from politically costly casualties.

The American defense establishment is expensive; however, policymakers have not asked the public to pay for recent wars through higher taxes. Instead, they have called on allies to help pay for U.S. operations and turned to deficit spending to finance the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The public has less incentive to act as a check on policymakers when they do not bear the costs of war. Efforts to shield the American public from the human and economic costs of war lower the political costs of executing military action. Because these strategies make it easier for policymakers to employ military force, they make the United States’ military threats more immediately credible. Paradoxically, these same strategies also undermine the ultimate effectiveness of the United States’ compellent threats, because efforts to reduce the costs of military action render threats uncommunicative signals of the United States’ ultimate commitment to defeat its opponent.

Norms about the rights of noncombatants in target states have evolved over the last sixty-five years. The United States has become increasingly unwilling to inflict violence on target state civilians. The campaign to pacify the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century may have been successful, but it also permitted brutality that would be unacceptable today. The bombing of Germany and Japan during World War II, and to some extent the American bombings of North Vietnam, were based on the idea that inflicting pain on the target population would coerce these target states to yield to U.S. demands. The United States has abandoned strategies that deliberately target civilians, and the U.S. military actively minimizes collateral damage. It has also moved toward a
population-centered approach to counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq. Efforts to minimize civilian casualties in war may be desirable from a normative standpoint. Because they minimize the political costs of using force, however, they render military threats uninformative signals of the United States’ commitment to defeat target states.

Some might argue that the willingness to stay in Afghanistan for nearly ten years and in Iraq for eight should dispel the notion that the United States lacks the motivation to prevail in costly military campaigns. It would be difficult to claim, however, that the United States has “succeeded” in either war, despite the withdrawal of U.S. combat troops from Iraq. If the United States had been deeply committed to its objectives in either case, it could have reinstated the draft and raised taxes to send more troops to quell the violence. Furthermore, it is very possible that the United States will revert to the RMA model of warfare after it finally withdraws from Iraq and Afghanistan. The political fallout from these long campaigns has been so great that future targets may doubt the United States’ willingness to become involved in a similarly open-ended commitment of ground troops.

The United States has tried to limit as much as possible its involvement in the 2011 intervention in Libya. It explicitly excluded the use of ground troops and backed away from control of the mission as soon as possible. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that Qaddafi would doubt the United States’ commitment to achieving political change in Libya. In the coming decade, leaders of other target states may have good reason to believe that the United States will not be eager to become involved in another ground campaign, despite its willingness to drop a few bombs on wayward leaders.
Credibility is Not Enough

The end of bipolarity, combined with the United States’ post-Cold War military model and the reluctance to inflict violence on target state civilians, have rendered the United States’ military threats ineffective. The condition of unipolarity allows the United States to issue threats at little risk to itself in most regions. Consequently, the willingness to issue a threat is not an informative signal of the United States’ motivation to defeat a reluctant target state. Strategies that reduce the costs of executing military action increase the immediate credibility of U.S. military threats. In other words, targets believe that the United States will execute its threats because it is relatively easy to do so. The same strategies that make U.S. threats easy to execute also make them ineffective. The logic of costly signaling suggests that threats that are not costly to issue or to execute will not be credible signals of motivation. When the United States is a unipole and pursues the cost-minimizing strategies presented in this paper, then its military threats are not likely to convince target states that it would be willing to win a decisive contest if the target continues to resist after the threat has been executed.

The argument presented in this paper does not suggest that the United States can never use compellent threats effectively. The logic does predict that, as long as the United States is a unipole, the willingness to issue a military threat will not be an informative signal of U.S. motivation under most conditions. The logic of costly signaling suggests, however, that if the United States were willing to issue a threat in a dangerous region—such as on the Korean peninsula—the threat should be more effective than one issued in a low-risk region. The United States can pursue strategies to make its compellent threats more effective in general. The United States could choose to reinstate
the draft if it were sufficiently motivated to defeat a target state. Because it is more risky to execute, the threat of invasion by ground troops should be more effective than the threat of an air campaign. Policymakers could pass a law prohibiting the use of deficit spending for military campaigns. This would make the use of military force more costly and render military threats more effective signals of the United States’ motivation. If these changes were undertaken, however, it is likely that the United States would threaten and execute military action less frequently.

Implications

The argument presented in this paper suggests several predictions about the empirical record of U.S. compellent threats. Because it is much less risky for the United States to issue a compellent threat when it is the unipole, we should observe that the United States issues such threats more frequently in the post-Cold War period. Many of the trends described in this paper, including the end of conscription, the hiring of contractors, and the movement to the RMA model, can also be roughly dated to the end of bipolarity. This challenges our ability to separate the relative impact of these different changes. Furthermore, there is little opportunity to pick the brains of target state leaders to determine whether the United States’ decision to abandon conscription in 1973 influenced their decision to resist or concede in the face of a U.S. military threat. It is similarly difficult to question target leaders about how the rise of robots influenced their decision-making in the face of a U.S. threat.

If the argument presented in this paper is correct, however, there are two trends that we should be able to observe. First, the United States should issue compellent threats more frequently in the post-Cold War period. Second, these post-Cold War
threats should be less effective in inducing target state compliance than their pre-1990 counterparts. The next phase of this research program is to examine the empirical record of the United States’ use of compellent threats. Conducting such an analysis will require the construction of a new dataset on the United States’ use (and non-use) of compellent threats under bipolarity and unipolarity. Determining whether trends such as the elimination of conscription and the movement to the RMA model of warfare have had an impact on threat effectiveness will require a closer analysis of cases in which the United States employed compellent threats.