Abstract:

The United States possesses the most powerful conventional military in the world, and yet since the end of the Cold War, its threats to use military force have been insufficient to compel several weak states to change their behavior. This paper presents a new model of state resolve, and applies this model to the United States to demonstrate why the superpower’s threats may fail to compel target state compliance. Although the United States enjoys unique freedom to escalate crises, it has developed a model of war-fighting that insulates its own population from the human and financial costs of war and that avoids inflicting pain on target state populations. The movement to the all-volunteer force, the increasing use of private contractors, the development of a force structure consistent with the RMA thesis, the increasing use of robots, the use of deficit spending to finance wars, and the increased desire to minimize collateral damage resulting from U.S. operations, have convinced potential target states that the United States may be willing to escalate conflicts, but not to endure or inflict the suffering necessary to extract its objectives from the target, rendering resistance an attractive option even for weak states.
The Puzzle of Failed Compellence

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 by any other state. 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 actually 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 alone was insufficient to compel a change in the behavior of these states. Over the past two decades, leaders of Panama, Iraq, Haiti, Serbia, and Afghanistan 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? Furthermore, why would the United States willingly initiate military campaigns against such opponents?

The United States’ inability to coerce these weak adversaries violates many theories of power and influence in international politics. The occurrence of war between the world’s superpower and a weak state violates hegemonic stability theory, which

asserts that an obvious power imbalance should deter potential challengers from submitting to a military contest with the United States. Traditional theories of interstate coercion suggest that threatening a target state with the world’s most powerful military should be very effective in changing the state’s behavior. Yet the threat of U.S. military action has apparently not been sufficient to coerce many of these weak states.

Bargaining models of war outbreak suggest that uncertainty about relative resolve could account for war between the United States and weak targets like Serbia, but they paint an incomplete picture of the process by which a weak state would willingly engage in a war with an overwhelmingly powerful but marginally motivated opponent.

I argue that a new understanding of state resolve is necessary to understand both why a target state would resist the threats of an overwhelmingly powerful opponent, and why that opponent would start a war that it lacked the motivation to prosecute to a decisive conclusion. Furthermore, an examination of the United States’ model of war-fighting in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries reveals why, in an era of unipolarity and few (if any) challenges to the United States’ vital interests, the threat to unleash the American military fails to frighten target states into complying with U.S. demands.

**A New Definition of “Resolve”**

Although “resolve” is a major factor in many models of both war outbreak and war outcomes, the concept is neither defined nor employed consistently. Formal models of war initiation treat resolve as the willingness to escalate a dispute to war, while

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studies of war outcomes define resolve as the willingness to persist in war, despite mounting costs. Such models ignore altogether a third component: the willingness to inflict sufficient pain on the opponent that she will yield to the coercer’s demands. By failing to employ a common definition of state resolve, these models 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 escalate a conflict to war, the willingness to suffer costs, and the willingness to inflict pain on the opponent. There is no reason to assume, as other theories implicitly do, that these three components are positively correlated. For example, a state may be highly willing to escalate a conflict, because it expects that the ensuing fighting would be relatively low-cost; however, this same state may be unwilling to sustain costs in the event that the conflict is not decided quickly. For this reason, a target state will consider not only the coercer’s willingness to escalate, but also its willingness to pay and to inflict costs, when deciding whether to concede to the coercer’s threats. Only by separating these three elements of state resolve and examining each component individually can we understand why the United States’ threats to use military force may fail to compel weak states to change their behavior.

This paper applies this new model of state resolve to the United States to demonstrate how its twenty-first century war-fighting model, and its position as sole

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superpower, undermine the United States’ ability to employ threats of force to coerce weak target states. The United States enjoys unique freedom to escalate conflicts, both because of its military superiority and because of the absence of a peer competitor in most regions of the world to check its actions. Despite this freedom and its unquestioned conventional military superiority, the United States has over the last sixty-five years steadily and increasingly insulated the bulk of its population from both the human and financial costs of war. Furthermore, norms about the use of violence have evolved such that the U.S. military goes to great lengths to avoid inflicting pain on the civilian populations of target states. I will demonstrate that these trends have given rise to a unique American way of war that renders the United States incapable of compelling weak states to change their behavior without having to actually force compliance: the United States may be willing to escalate, but not to suffer or inflict the costs necessary to defeat strongly motivated but conventionally weak target states, making resistance an attractive option even in the face of a credible U.S. threat to escalate.

I will begin by demonstrating how the United States’ unique strategic position since the end of the Cold War has granted it the freedom to escalate most conflicts at little risk to its own safety, rendering escalation itself an uninformative signal of its willingness to suffer and destroy in order to achieve its objectives from target states. I will then examine the United States’ unwillingness to pay the human and material costs of war. My analysis reveals that, despite high absolute levels of defense spending, the United States does not want to pay for major wars, and has embraced many elements of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) to insulate its military from the dangers of combat. I will then evaluate the evolution in norms about the infliction of pain on target
states’ civilian populations. These trends, in combination with the demise of bipolarity, have freed U.S. policymakers to threaten and escalate military conflicts when the United States’ vital interests are not engaged and rendered the threat of military force an ineffective tool of coercion against weak but highly motivated target states.

**The Will to Escalate: A Costly Threat?**

For the target of a military threat, an estimate of whether the coercer is willing to escalate is an estimate of whether a threat is “credible,” in the sense that the coercer will follow through on the threatened action if the target chooses to resist. Schelling argues that the credibility of a state’s threat depends on the state’s record of upholding its past commitments. He argues that “face,” or “the interdependence of a country’s commitments,” is “one of the few things worth fighting for.”⁵ Press argues, however, that a target state cares more about the realities of the present threat environment than about the coercer’s record of following through on her past commitments. According to Press, leaders of target states “assess the credibility of their adversaries’ threats by evaluating the balance of power and interests—and not the adversaries’ history for keeping or breaking commitments.”⁶

Press’ assertion that current conditions matter more than a coercer’s reputation for upholding past commitments is consistent with my argument that state resolve has three distinct components. Press argues, however, that if the coercer can accomplish what he threatens at low cost, then the threat will be more likely to be perceived as credible: “The greater the adversary’s chances for a cheap victory are and the more is at stake in the

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⁵ Schelling, *Arms and Influence*, 124.
crisis, the more credible the adversary’s threats are.”  
Yet, this contradicts game theoretic logic on signaling, which suggests that signals must be costly to be informative. This argument 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 is able to acquire additional education with relative ease, then education conveys little information about an individual’s capability.

The logic should also hold for states involved in a game of coercion. If a coercer threatens to undertake action for which it will pay little in the event that it must carry out the threat, then the threat conveys little information about the extent to which the coercer is motivated to prevail in a prolonged military contest. In other words, if escalating a conflict would be relatively low-cost for the coercer, then the threat to escalate may fail to induce compliance from the target state, because it is not an informative signal of the coercer’s willingness to suffer and to destroy. A threat to escalate could be costly for the coerker in two ways: either because escalating a conflict would risk a major war that could threaten the security of the coercer or that of its close ally; or, because carrying out the threatened action would entail significant human, monetary, or political costs for coercer. Later in this paper, I will demonstrate that the United States has developed a method of war-fighting that minimizes the human and financial costs of war, both to

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7 Ibid., 21.
itself and to its targets, as much as possible. The section below demonstrates that, in addition to the relative cheapness of U.S. military action, the United States’ status as sole superpower gives it the freedom to escalate most conflicts without risking its own security, making the threat to use limited military force an uninformative signal of its willingness to persist in conflict if its threats fail.

**Escalation-Willing: The Hegemon Stands Alone**

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the United States has faced no global competitor capable of checking its behavior around the world. This new freedom of action has coincided with an increase in U.S. involvement in conflicts overseas. During the period from 1945-1988, the United States participated in 19 interventions; from 1989-2003, the United States was involved in 16, nearly as many as during the entire Cold War period.9 Another measure of the United States’ involvement abroad is its record for employing specific coercive instruments. From 1945-1988, the United States initiated economic sanctions a total of 69 times, for an average of 1.6 new sanctions episodes each year. From 1989-2006, the United States initiated economic sanctions 45 times, for an average of 2.5 new sanctions episodes per year.10 The record of the United States’ intervention in conflicts overseas and in the initiation of economic sanctions suggests that the end of bipolarity removed a major obstacle to both the initiation and implementation of coercive leverage. “Unencumbered by cold war fears of sparking a confrontation with

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the powerful Soviet Union, American policy makers turned frequently to threats and the use of military power” to manage crises over the past twenty years.\(^{11}\)

The United States’ freedom to escalate disputes is not without limits. In fact, an examination of recent cases in which the United States did not issue explicit military threats suggests that the risk environment plays a large role in determining U.S. strategy for dealing with crises. The International Crisis Behavior Project identifies fifteen crises in which the United States was involved between 1989 and 2007. This list includes the invasion of Panama in 1989; 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. The project codes the primary crisis management technique, in addition to dozens of other variables, for each crisis. In all these cases, with the exception of the 1994 Haitian regime crisis and the crises over nuclear programs in North Korea and Iran, the crisis was managed either with actual violence or with military pressure.\(^{12}\)

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. Although the ICBP lists “negotiation” as the primary crisis management technique,\(^{13}\) this crisis was resolved only after U.S. troops were in the air and preparing to land on the island, suggesting that


threatened military force played a major role in the final outcome.\textsuperscript{14} Other than the case involving Haiti, the crises over North Korea’s nuclear weapons activities were the most critical, both in terms of the United States’ interests and in terms of the risks in the event that the crisis escalated.

In his examination of the 1993-94 crisis over North Korea’s nuclear program, Drennan argues that, “The stakes could not have been much higher for the United States and its allies…”\textsuperscript{15} Among the other cases of post-Cold War coercive diplomacy, this case was unique: “none of the others involved the vital interests of the United States…Only the Korea case involved a threat of nuclear proliferation. Finally, none of the other cases entailed a risk of large-scale warfare…”\textsuperscript{16} During the months of stalled negotiations, averted inspections, and proffered concessions that characterized the crisis, the United States hesitated even to threaten UN sanctions, which “Pyongyang had warned would be tantamount to a declaration of war,” because “the 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.’”\textsuperscript{17} The United States did consider taking military action to confront North Korea’s quest for a nuclear weapon, and only a mission by Jimmy Carter helped to defuse

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 160.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 171.
tensions enough to permit the implementation of the Agreed Framework between North Korea and the United States.\textsuperscript{18}

The escalation of the 1993-94 crisis over North Korea’s nuclear weapons program would have placed the interests of the United States and its close allies at risk. The high costs of escalation restricted the universe of available options and induced U.S. policymakers to pursue a more cautious program of negotiations, concessions and eventually intimations of military force. Although this is not a comprehensive analysis of the United States’ management of North Korea’s nuclear weapons ambitions, the case does suggest that the United States may be less likely to employ stark ultimata when escalation would pose a genuine risk to its security or that of its close allies.\textsuperscript{19}

The record of when and where the United States has deployed the most forceful variants of coercive diplomacy over the last twenty years suggests that a selection problem may be partly responsible for the record of failed U.S. coercion in the post-Cold War era. Because of the lack of peer competitor to restrain its actions in most regions, the United States is free to threaten escalation of crises, without placing itself at any real risk. In those cases in which it or its allies could be put at risk from an escalating dispute, the United States is more likely to be restrained in its demands and in the coercive strategy employed. We therefore observe strong threats, i.e., explicit military ultimata, against weak states, not because the United States’ vital interests are necessarily engaged, but because the United States is free to threaten to bring out the big guns without risking its own safety. And in those cases in which the risks from escalating to violence actually

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 177. The Agreed Framework was not enough to prevent North Korea’s subsequent withdrawal from the NPT and test of a nuclear device.

\textsuperscript{19} The logic of costly signaling would also suggest that, had the United States been willing to threaten escalation 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.
threaten the United States or its close allies, for example when the possibility of nuclear war on the Korean peninsula looms, the United States employs a more restrained version of coercive diplomacy.

**Willing to Escalate: An Uninformative Signal**

The absence of any real threat to the United States’ vital interests in the post Cold War period means that, when the United States issues a threat of military action against a weak target, the threat itself conveys little information about how committed the United States is to go beyond the limited action threatened to achieve the objectives in question.\(^{20}\) Press is correct in arguing that the target state evaluates whether the coercer’s interests are vitally engaged by the issue over which it is threatening to use force:

“Because America’s enemies frequently recognize that America’s core interests are not at stake in their disputes, it will be hard to convince them that the United States will ‘go to the mattresses’ to prevail in these conflicts.”\(^{21}\) Knowing that the threat to escalate does not convey any information about the United States’ resolve on the other two dimensions—the willingness to suffer and the willingness to destroy—a target state may resist U.S. threats in the hope that it can outlast an arrogant but cost-shy superpower in a

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\(^{20}\) One of the major challenges in attempting to draw conclusions about the record of U.S. coercion since the end of the Cold War is the fact that the United States’ vital interests have rarely if ever been truly threatened during this period. It is difficult to identify any crisis in the post-Cold War period in which the United States’ major material interests were seriously at risk. 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, but even if that confrontation had spiraled out of control, 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. 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, but it would be difficult to argue that transnational terrorists can impose the same kind of damage as 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, but 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 during the Cold War if a crisis with the Soviet Union had gotten out of hand.

military contest. This may make resistance an attractive option for a highly motivated target, even if the target believes that the United States’ threat of escalation is credible.

**From Total War to the De-Democratization of War**

The limited escalation of crises with most small states does not place the United States’ vital interests at any risk, rendering the threat of escalation an uninformative signal of its motivation to prevail in an ensuing military conflict. The United States has also developed a model of war-fighting that minimizes the human and financial costs of fighting, further undermining the ability of threats of force to compel target states to back down and circumventing democracy’s restraining mechanisms on the decision to go to war. Kant argued that a republic would be less likely to engage in reckless wars than a state in which the population is not involved in the decisions of government:

> If…the consent of the citizens is required to decide whether or not war is to be declared, it is very natural that they will have great hesitation in embarking on so dangerous an enterprise. For this would mean calling down on themselves all the miseries of war, such as doing the fighting themselves, supplying the costs of the war from their own resources, painfully making good the ensuing devastation, and, as the crowning evil, having to take upon themselves a burden of debt…

Consequently, if the citizens of a democracy willingly supply the troops, money and violence necessary to prosecute a war, then this should be an indication of the population’s commitment to the war effort. On the other hand, if we observe a democracy that is not mobilizing its population and resources in a comprehensive fashion, then this would indicate the public’s lack of commitment to the war effort, and

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hence the low motivation of the state to persist in war if a quick and easy victory is not readily achieved.

Clausewitz recognized the fearsome power unleashed by the French Revolution and the levée en masse, which harnessed the resources of the nation-state for the first time in modern history. War had become an expression of and servant to the will of the people: “The people became a participant in war; instead of governments and armies as heretofore, the full weight of the nations was thrown into the balance. The resources and efforts now available for use surpassed all conventional limits; nothing now impeded the vigor with which war could be waged, and consequently the opponents of France faced the utmost peril.”23 War more closely approached the absolute, as the commitment and energies of the French population were poured into the war effort, and as the political objectives became more encompassing. As Michael Howard noted, the transformation in European states and societies changed the face of warfare by the end of the nineteenth century: “War was no longer considered a matter for a feudal ruling class or a small group of professionals, but one for the people as a whole. The armed forces were regarded, not as part of the royal household, but as the embodiment of the Nation.”24

Commenting on the total warfare unleashed by the new French state, 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.”25 And yet, the United States has worked hard to re-establish barriers that limit the impact of war on the vast majority of its population, and in doing so, reversed the democratization of warfare that

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23 Clausewitz, On War, 592.
25 Clausewitz, On War, 593.
began with the French Revolution and culminated with the world wars of the twentieth century. The United States has developed a model of war that insulates the bulk of the U.S. population from the burdens of fighting and that no longer permits the kind of violence that characterized earlier wars. Furthermore, 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. In combination, these trends indicate a lack of U.S. will to prosecute costly military campaigns, and they short-circuit the restraining mechanism of democracy proposed by Kant, thereby permitting U.S. policymakers to threaten and execute the escalation of crises when the United States’ vital interests are not deeply engaged. In other words, the United States is willing to neither suffer nor destroy for wars against weak target states. For these reasons, and because of its unique status as sole superpower, the United States’ willingness to escalate fails to coerce weak target states without the actual application of military force.

The Will to Suffer—Who Dies?: Volunteers

One of the most obvious indicators of a state’s commitment to war is whether it is willing to send its citizens to die. The willingness to conscript individuals for military service indicates a high level of commitment to a war effort, since general conscription exposes a much wider range of individuals to the hazards of war than would be the case in an all-volunteer force. Writing 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.”

The willingness of the Union to implement conscription was, therefore, a credible indication of the people’s commitment to the fight to determine the United States’ future. Indeed, fearing that the army had wasted away since the end of the Civil War, Parker called for the reintroduction of conscription in the event of war with a major European power, both to confront the military might of the opponent and to demonstrate to that opponent the depth of the United States’ commitment.

Despite the virtues of compulsory military service extolled by Parker, the United States has always had an uneasy relationship with the practice of conscription. A limited system of conscription was employed during the American Civil War, and conscription was reinstated during both world wars of the twentieth century. Peacetime conscription was not adopted until after the end of the Second World War: although Truman briefly ended conscription in 1947, it was reinstated in 1948, and a selective service system remained in place until 1973.

The United States has never had a truly universal system of conscription, although a proposal for a system of universal military training was made and rejected in 1948. Even during the World Wars, the United States did not employ universal conscription to fill the ranks of the military. Despite claims that the burden of military service was shared equally by all members of society, “in the end selection corrupted the draft.”

During the American Civil War, more than 2.6 million men were recruited into the Union

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27 Ibid., 582.
29 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.
army, of which 1.25 million joined after the implementation of conscription.\textsuperscript{31} The American Civil War draft functioned as “an indirect means of recruiting the poor into the ranks.”\textsuperscript{32} During World War I, the United States mobilized 4,355,000 into the armed forces out of a total population of 92 million,\textsuperscript{33} or nearly 5% of the population. In the course of defeating Germany and Japan thirty years later, the United States mobilized 16,354,000 out of a total population of 129,200,000,\textsuperscript{34} or more than 12.5% of the population. By contrast, active duty military personnel in the United States today constitute “barely one half of one percent of our total population.”\textsuperscript{35}

The procedures in place for deferment drew criticism after WWII and reached a fever pitch during the Vietnam War. Deferment was possible during World War II, particularly for farmers, fathers, and doctors. Student deferment did not begin until after the Korean War, when the military’s inability to absorb all the young men in the country made such a system attractive. 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 not phased out until September 1971, in the heat of protests over the Vietnam War and charges that elite youth were exempt because of their

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[31]{Parker, “Should Our Volunteers Be Raised by Conscription?” 575.}
\footnotetext[32]{Flynn, “Conscription and Equity in Western Democracies,” 12. Individuals called up by the draft could escape service by producing a substitute or paying a fee of $300 (although this option was later eliminated). Voluntary recruitment remained in place, but to fill their local quotas, towns would offer bounties to encourage individuals to “volunteer;” richer communities that could offer more money to such volunteers would pull in men from surrounding communities, leaving more men in these poorer towns exposed to the draft and unable to procure substitutes (see Parker, “Should Our Volunteers Be Raised by Conscription?” , 577.}
\footnotetext[33]{John Ellis and Michael Cox, The World War I Databook: The Essential Facts and Figures for All the Combatants (London: Aurum Press, 2001), 245.}
\footnotetext[34]{John Ellis, World War II: A Statistical Survey (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1993), 228, 254.}
\footnotetext[35]{Christopher A. Preble, The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 16. Total mobilization over the course of a war obviously exceeds the number of active duty personnel at any given point in time. At the end of WWII, there were 11,877,000 Americans in the armed forces, or roughly 9% of the U.S. population (Ellis, World War II: A Statistical Survey, 228, 254).}
\end{footnotes}
educational opportunities. The United States finally eliminated the draft in 1973, and it has relied on an all-volunteer force ever since.

The movement to the all-volunteer force generated fears that the U.S. military would become a non-representative, isolated institution, but the establishment of the all-volunteer force has increased personnel retention and contributed to the professionalization of the force. An examination of the actual makeup of the current military suggests that it is broadly representative of American society in some respects, but that some groups in society are 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 accessions, vs. 82% in the civilian comparison group). Geographically, the South continues to be over-represented among new accessions, while the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions have accession rates much lower than the national average. 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 was not well represented.”

After ranking states by income and comparing enlisted accession rates, it is clear that poorer states have higher accession rates than wealthier states. States are ranked in

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36 Flynn, “Conscription and Equity in Western Democracies,” 7-8.
37 Rostker, I Want You!, 8.
38 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), but the study concludes 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).
40 Ibid., 34-35.
41 Rostker, I Want You!, 8.
the following table according to per-capita income in 2008. 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 fiscal year 2008 expressed as a percentage of the civilian population aged 18-24 in each state:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Income 43</th>
<th>Accessions 44</th>
<th>Civilian pool 45</th>
<th>Accession % 46</th>
<th>Last 10</th>
<th>Income</th>
<th>Accessions</th>
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<th>Accession %</th>
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<td>299241</td>
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<td>AZ</td>
<td>34,500</td>
<td>4079</td>
<td>584165</td>
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<td>3077</td>
<td>768579</td>
<td>0.40%</td>
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<td>476660</td>
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<td>587670</td>
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<td>NM</td>
<td>33,584</td>
<td>1141</td>
<td>180211</td>
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<td>132111</td>
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<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>44,038</td>
<td>17949</td>
<td>3618155</td>
<td>0.50%</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>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.53%</td>
<td>Average</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.65%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: New Accessions by State, Fiscal Year 2008

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

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42 The “Top 10” states are those with the highest per-capita income in 2008 (excluding Washington, DC). The “Last 10” are the ten least wealthy states, measured by per-capita income in 2008.
46 Author’s calculation: enlisted accessions as percent of civilian population aged 18-24.
top ten wealthiest states have a total of 140 representatives in the U.S. House (an average of 14 per state), while the ten least wealthy states have only 46 (4.6 per state), fewer than the state of California.\textsuperscript{47} Although the average new enlistee is better educated than his civilian peer, the military draws recruits disproportionately from states that are poorer and have fewer representatives in the national government than wealthier states.

Eliminating conscription may have been prudent given the United States’ reduced need for military manpower in the second half of the twentieth century, and it has promoted the development of the most professional military in the world. The movement to the all-volunteer force has also served the same function as the system of student deferments did: it allows the most affluent and elite young people in the United States to avoid military service. One study finds that the elimination of conscription is responsible for 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.”\textsuperscript{48} To the extent that the affluent elite control the mechanisms of government in the United States, this means that those responsible for making decisions about war and peace are those most insulated from the direct human costs of war.\textsuperscript{49}


\textsuperscript{49} In an effort to try to tie the public more closely to U.S. military missions, General Abrams crafted the total-force policy to expand the role of reserves. Noting the loss of public support that occurred during the Vietnam War, Abrams wanted to expand the role of the reserves such that, "in any significant military
The Will to Suffer—Who Dies?: Private Contractors

In addition to relying on an all-volunteer force, the United States has also turned to private contractors to meet its need for manpower. The end of the Cold War may have motivated cuts in U.S. defense budgets and a downsizing of the military, but it also coincided with an increase in U.S. interventions around the world. The increased use of military contractors is part of a larger trend toward the privatization of American foreign policy: “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.”50 For a state unwilling to conscript its citizens into the military, turning to private military contractors may be a reasonable choice when the volunteer force is too small to meet the demands of its overseas operations.

The United States’ use of military contractors has received a lot of attention in recent years because the government has relied so heavily on private military firms to prosecute 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 action.”

_{Action, reliance on Reserve Components would be required, thereby assuring public involvement in the action._} Since the reserves are more directly integrated into society than active members of the military, the need to call up reserves for any significant deployment should serve as a check on policy makers wishing to engage in reckless action without the support of the public. See John O. Jr. Marsh, "Active and Reserve Forces," _Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science_ 517 (Sep. 1991): 96. Despite the adoption of the total-force policy, it is difficult to find an example in which the need to call up reserves for an extended deployment served as an effective check on a U.S. President’s decision to send American troops overseas. Back-door draft issue.

‘the surge’ and is roughly 23 times the number of troops provided by our allies.”51

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.”52 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.”53

The reliance on private military firms for roles once performed exclusively by the military raises important questions about accountability, waste, and ethics; however, their greatest impact is 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.”54 By relying heavily on private military firms, “the Bush administration…dramatically lowered the political price for its Iraq policies.”55 The ability to hire contractors helped to shield the Bush administration from the choice between calling up more troops from the United States or begging its allies for greater commitments of forces when the war became more difficult: “By

52 Stanger, One Nation Under Contract, 93.
53 Singer, "Outsourcing War," 123.
54 Ibid., 125.
55 Ibid., 126.
outsourcing parts of the job instead, 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.”

Reliance on military contractors short-circuits the normal processes of accountability that are supposed to function in a democracy. General Abrams designed the total-force policy to compel policymakers to choose only wars that would be backed by the public; however, if the U.S. government can circumvent the need to call up reserves by relying instead on private military firms, then the decision to go to war, and to continue to fight an unpopular war, is much easier to make. The public is not being called on to sacrifice—rather, private individuals are being paid to accept high levels of danger on a short-term basis, for personal gain. Casualties among such forces are rarely reported in the media, shielding 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, the embodiment of the United States’ values and goals.

The dangers of relying on mercenaries were obvious even to Machiavelli. He argued that, “Mercenaries and auxiliaries are useless and dangerous…they are disunited, ambitious, undisciplined and treacherous; they are powerful when among those who are not hostile, but weak and cowardly when confronted by determined enemies…they have

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56 Ibid., 126.
57 The U.S. public may also view a dead volunteer soldier differently than it viewed a dead draftee during the Vietnam War, since like the contractor, today’s 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, but it cannot explain why U.S. policymakers remain so keen to minimize casualties in the U.S. force. This paper takes up the issue of the United States’ casualty sensitivity in a later section.
no affection for you or any other reason to induce them to fight for you, except a trifling wage, which is not sufficient to make them want to risk their lives for you.”

Today’s contractors may not be cowardly and certainly earn more than a “trifling wage,” but as in Machiavelli’s time, their interests are not the same as those of the state by which they are employed, and their motivations may not be the same as those who fight in uniform for the regular military of the United States.

The Will to Suffer: A Casualty-Shy Hegemon

A belief that the United States is unwilling to sustain casualties in military campaigns seems to be widespread among its adversaries. Saddam Hussein based his strategy for the Gulf War in 1991 on the assumption that, if his troops could withstand the initial air attack, they could inflict enough casualties on U.S. forces that the United States would pack up and leave. In his 1996 fatwa against the United States, Osama bin Laden cited the failed mission in Somalia as evidence that the United States could be defeated: “when tens of your solders 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.”

In a videotaped message with bin Laden 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

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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 foreigners—indeed, concerns about casualties figure heavily in the planning of U.S. military operations. President Clinton announced that he would not send ground forces to Kosovo on the first night of the war against Milosevic, a declaration that reflected a desire to minimize NATO casualties, but one that would also undermine the effectiveness of coercion. 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 demands. Even after the spectacular terrorist attacks of September 11th, fears that casualties would undermine support for the campaign 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.”

Several studies suggest that casualties play a large role in both public support for wars and in the reelection of politicians. 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

63 Tom Bowman, "War Casualties Could Test Public's Resolve," Baltimore Sun, November 18, 2001: 19A.
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 and 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.”

Karol and Miguel find evidence that the 10,000 U.S. casualties from the Iraq War cost Bush 2% of the popular vote in the 2004 election. If voters do punish elected officials for casualties, then policymakers face strong incentives to minimize casualties as much as possible.

A recent study suggests that the belief that the U.S. public will not withstand casualties may be misplaced. 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.” Their findings suggest that the public will support winning operations in “correct” conflicts. But even if it is true that the American public is not so unwilling to accept casualties as popular media accounts would lead us to believe, 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. Furthermore, the absence of conscription in the United States may make it easier for members of the general public to

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claim that they will accept casualties, so long as they and their family members are not at risk. Although the public may have been more sensitive to casualties in the days of conscription, the United States has adopted a model of war-fighting that seeks to insulate American soldiers from the harshest realities of combat.\textsuperscript{68}

**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), but the basic thesis 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 supremacy will replace the breakthrough battle as the decisive issue for success.”\textsuperscript{69} The rapid expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991 seemed to usher in a new era of U.S. military dominance, in which the superiority of U.S. technology (and air power in particular) would transform the face of warfare and give the United States the ability 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

\textsuperscript{68} By extension, the U.S. government would have been even more sensitive about casualties if it had retained a conscript force, since more of the population would be directly exposed to the pain of dead and wounded soldiers. U.S. policymakers would therefore be less likely to threaten and deploy a conscript force for issues of marginal importance. Consequently, the threat to deploy a conscript force should be more effective in extracting target compliance, since the deployment of a conscript force would be more painful for the United States. This of course raises the question of why the United States government remains so casualty-shy in the twenty-first century. The answer may be partly that the impact of casualties during the Vietnam War shaped policymakers’ perceptions in a way that persists despite the new realities of the all-volunteer force.

allowed nearly simultaneous attack against scores of targets across the theater.”\textsuperscript{70} The report by the House Armed Services Committee claims that, “The decisive factor in the war with Iraq was the air campaign,” and 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.”\textsuperscript{71} Although the report acknowledges that ground troops were ultimately necessary to expel the Iraqis from Kuwait, it strongly emphasizes the importance of air power and precision targeting in the war against Saddam, and clearly links reliance on technology with reductions in casualties.

In addition to exploiting the United States’ advantages in information technology and precision targeting, building a force structure founded on the RMA thesis also complements the United States’ apparent 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, given Americans’ aversion to suffering casualties.”\textsuperscript{72} There are therefore compelling political reasons to adopt the RMA model of warfare in the twenty-first century: if warfare has been transformed in the way that the 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, making it politically less costly for policy makers to choose military force as a policy instrument. In fact, the HSAC report claims that, “In planning Operation Desert Storm, minimizing allied and civilian casualties was the highest priority.”\textsuperscript{73} The authors do not claim that Saddam’s

\textsuperscript{72} O’Hanlon, \textit{Technological Change}, 7.
\textsuperscript{73} Aspin and Dickinson, \textit{Defense for a New Era}, 93.
expulsion from Kuwait was the highest priority, almost as if the battlefield outcome were 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 and at casualty levels so much lower than had been predicted seemed to confirm the idea that relying on high-tech means of warfare would be the key to both operational and domestic political success in post-Cold War warfare.

Reliance on air power as an instrument of force is particularly attractive, both to RMA advocates and to those policymakers who would like to use the U.S. military in a low-risk manner. “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.”74 The effectiveness of air power as an instrument of coercion is hotly debated, and the 1999 NATO campaign over Kosovo serves as a focal point for the debate.75 Whether or not air power is an effective tool of interstate coercion, its allure is obvious to both policy makers 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.”76 Relying on air power as the primary instrument of

force seems to allow the United States to influence the behavior of target states without the political risks associated with ground troops, and with the option of removing U.S. assets from the theater of operations more quickly than would be possible for the use of a large contingent of ground troops.

When the Bush administration was planning the 2003 invasion of Iraq, they did so in the belief that a U.S. force structure consistent with the RMA thesis could achieve victory against the Iraqi regime. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld rejected plans from the military several times during the planning process because they called for too many ground troops. Rumsfeld explicitly sought to avoid a large U.S. military presence on the ground in Iraq, and 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.’”77 Rumsfeld’s basic thesis was that, “speed and agility and precision can take the place of mass.”78 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 political incentives for policy makers to minimize casualties are obvious, but the U.S. military also has strong motivations to limit casualties. After the meat grinder of Vietnam, the U.S. army moved to reliance on “heavy forces,” integrated the National Guard and reserve units in such a way that political support would be necessary for major deployments of ground troops, and invested time and resources to train the all-volunteer force. According to General Wesley Clark, the American who commanded NATO

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operations over Kosovo in 1999, these developments encouraged the military to support
the civilians’ desire to limit casualties.\textsuperscript{79} Relying on a long-serving, all-volunteer military
allows the United States to spend more resources training the force, making each
individual more valuable and therefore making casualties more costly to the military as
an institution. Military leaders, like their civilian counterparts, therefore have strong
incentives to develop and support technology-intensive military strategies that minimize
U.S. casualties.

\textbf{The Will to Suffer: The Rise of Robots}

The United States’ increasing use of robots and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs)
on and above the battlefield enhances the U.S. military’s ability to fight efficiently while
minimizing risks to soldiers. “Robots proved 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...”\textsuperscript{80} 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.”\textsuperscript{81} They can even serve as a substitute for
additional manpower: if policymakers are unwilling or unable to send enough troops, as
seems to have happened in Iraq, ‘we can use robots to augment the number of boots on
the ground,’” according to an executive at a major U.S. robotics firm.\textsuperscript{82}

\textsuperscript{80} Singer, \textit{Wired for War}, 63.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{82} Quoted in Singer, \textit{Wired for War}, 221.
As an institution whose culture and command structure reveres pilots, the air force was initially very resistant to the development of unmanned aircraft; however, “by 2008, 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, even in countries where U.S. ground troops are not permitted to operate. In fact, “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, but their use for both surveillance and combat is particularly attractive in the context of fighting two unpopular wars, as their use in place of manned aircraft minimizes the risk of 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.” In fact, Singer argues that the low-cost 1991 victory in Iraq, which policymakers believed had set the public’s expectations about casualties in post-Cold War operations, 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.

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83 Singer, Wired for War, 54.
84 Ibid., 37.
87 Singer, Wired for War, 33.
88 Ibid., 59.
Like the employment of private contractors, the use of robots and UAVs enhances the U.S. presence on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan, and even in other regions in which the United States is not technically engaged in a war. The danger of these sources of increased U.S. military strength is that they may deceive the public about the ease and costs of war. According to Lawrence Korb, a senior fellow at the Center for American Progress, 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.”

Like the use of a narrowly-drawn volunteer military, and the increasing use of private contractors, reliance on robots disconnects the American public from the sacrifices of war. This in turn makes it easier for policy makers to escalate wars that the public would not otherwise support.

The United States’ opponents are aware that reliance on robots and drones shields U.S. forces from casualties. Rather than convince opponents of the United States’ willingness to persist in combat to achieve its objectives, reliance on high-technology instruments that separate U.S. soldiers from their foes is instead interpreted as a sign of cowardice, and an indication that the United States is unwilling to pay high human costs to achieve its objectives from the target. 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.”

89 Quoted in Singer, Wired for War, 316.
90 Quoted in Singer, Wired for War, 309.
Whether or not we are in the midst of a true Revolution in Military Affairs or are simply experiencing the gradual evolution of the form of combat that emerged from the trenches of World War I,\(^91\) the lesson that U.S. policymakers seem to have drawn from the United States’ military campaigns in the early post-Cold War period is that technology can be an effective—indeed nearly invincible—tool for winning wars. The United States gradually moved to a model of war that relies on air power and a minimal ground footprint to achieve its objectives, consistent with the force structure advocated by proponents of the RMA.\(^92\) In the last couple of years, the United States has reoriented toward a more ground-troop-intensive model with the rise of counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan, but this has been accomplished by shifting troops between the theaters in Iraq and Afghanistan, not by instituting a draft. Finally, the lesson that America’s targets have drawn from these developments is that the United States does not care enough about these wars to risk significant human sacrifices.

**The Will to Suffer: Who Pays?**

The United States is unwilling to pay heavy human costs for military operations, and has developed a military model that relies on technology to minimize U.S. casualties. But what about the other costs that the United States must pay when it decides to undertake a military campaign or even a limited use of military force? If it is true that the United States is unwilling to spend many lives in achieving its objectives from target states, is it substituting treasure for blood?

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\(^{91}\) Biddle argues that the pattern of force employment that broke the trench stalemate of WWI still defines combat at the dawn of the twenty-first century. See *Military Power*, 196-202.

As the previous section demonstrates, the United States does seem to rely on a model of war-fighting that substitutes technology for lives, an expensive but politically attractive strategy for policy makers in a democracy. U.S. defense spending totaled $696 billion in 2008, accounting for nearly half of 2008 global defense spending of $1.547 trillion. This figure amounted to per-capita spending of $2,290 in the United States (nearly ten times the global average of $232), and 4.88 percent of U.S. GDP. Although this percentage exceeds the global average, there were several states whose defense spending in 2008 exceeded 5% of GDP, including Georgia, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and others (many in the Middle East and North Africa).

In 2010, the United States had 1.58 million in the active armed forces, with 865,000 in the reserves. The size of the U.S. force is large, but not unmatched: Russia is estimated to have 1.027 in its active armed forces; India has 1.325 million in the active armed forces and 1.155 million in the reserves; and North Korea is estimated to have 1.106 million in the active armed forces and 4.7 million in reserves. China had the largest armed forces in 2010, with 2.285 million in uniform and 510,000 in the reserves. Despite the large size of its military, China is estimated have to spent roughly $60 billion (officially, at market exchange rates), or 1.36 percent of its GDP on defense in 2008.

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93 Gartzke finds that, contrary to the popular wisdom, democracy is not the key factor in determining whether a state employs a capital-intensive form of warfare—rather, “Capital-abundant states buy more weapons while labor-abundant states hire more personnel” (468). To the extent that capital-abundant states also 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?,” *International Studies Quarterly* 45, no. 3 (2001): 467-484.


That the United States spends a huge amount of money on defense is undeniable. The nearly $700 billion figure from 2008 dwarfs the GDPs of most countries.\footnote{For a list of GDP figures, see World Bank, \textit{GDP (current US$)}, 2010, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD (accessed September 9, 2010).} Situated in historical trends in defense spending, however, the number is not so outrageous as it initially appears. During the height of WWII, 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, and it finally settled to around five to six percent of GDP after the Vietnam War ended and before the drawdown in defense spending following 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\% of US GDP. In the context of the history of U.S. defense spending, current expenditures on national defense are still significant, but not compared to the WWII era, in which the United States was willing to pour more than a third of its GDP into the war effort, and still less than the 8-9\% of GDP that the United States spent on defense during the height of the Vietnam War.\footnote{Figures from Table 3.1 in Office of Management and Budget, \textit{Historical Tables: Budget of the U.S. Government, Fiscal Year 2011} (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2010), 47-55. Available at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2011/assets/hist.pdf.}

Baseline defense expenditures may be moderate in comparison with twentieth-century trends, but where does the United States find the extra money it needs to finance its wars? The evolution of modern militaries has often been accompanied by the evolution of centralized bureaucracies. As Charles Tilly famously noted, “war made the state and the state made war.”\footnote{Charles Tilly, "Reflections on the History of European State-Making," in \textit{The Formation of National States in Western Europe}, ed. Charles Tilly, 3-83 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 42.} The need to pay for a standing military spurred the
development of state mechanisms for taxing populations in early modern Europe, while the military itself became an increasingly useful instrument for enforcing tax laws: “the development of professional armed forces, itself made possible by the increasing control acquired by the state over the resources of the community, enabled the state to acquire yet greater control over those resources by serving as an instrument, not only of external defence but of internal compulsion.”99 Just as the rise of conscription allowed states to fully tap the human resources of their populations, so did the rise of the modern bureaucracy enable states to tap the wealth of their societies for the purposes of waging war.

Although it was not subject to the same pressures as the states of modern Europe, the United States has also turned to taxes to pay for many past wars. A federal excise tax on long-distance telephone calls was enacted to pay for the Spanish-American War, while federal income tax withholding was established during the Second World War and remains in place to this day.100 If Kant’s theory is correct, and if the public is expected to 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 major military conflicts in which the United States has been involved since the end of the Cold War, we find that the United States does not, in fact, 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.101 The United States’ allies pledged roughly $54 billion (cash and in-kind

99 Howard, *War in European History*, 55.  
payments) to offset these costs, with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait making 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.”

In other words, the mission was important to the United States and to the preservation of peace in the international community, but not so important that U.S. policymakers would call on the public to pay for the operation through an increase in taxes. In September 1990, before operations were underway, President Bush sent missions to the United States’ allies to solicit pledges of financial support, suggesting that U.S. participation was always contingent on other nations picking up the tab.

The current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have been significantly more expensive than the 1991 Persian Gulf War. Total budget authority for the war in Iraq in fiscal year 2010 is $65.4 billion, with a total of $748.2 billion in spending from fiscal years 2003 through 2010; 2010 budget authority for the war in Afghanistan is $72.9 billion, with total budget authority spending of $299.6 billion in fiscal years 2001-2010. The total budget authority for costs associated with these wars, other operations in the so-called war on terror, foreign aid and diplomatic operations, etc., since September 11th is $1.082 trillion. With total costs running in the hundreds of billions of dollars and U.S.

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102 Ibid., 634.
103 I do not argue that seeking financial support from allies for the Persian Gulf War was inappropriate. In fact, the willingness of these allies to support the mission did help to ease the burden for the world’s superpower in acting as a policeman in the Middle East. I do suggest, however, that the unwillingness of U.S. policymakers to call on the American public to pay for this operation through an increase in taxes is an indicator of an unwillingness to sacrifice to achieve U.S. objectives from the target state.
allies much less forthcoming with financial support than they were in 1991, how has the United States decided to pay for these operations?

The obvious choice for a democracy fighting a war that enjoys the support of its population would be to call on its citizens to foot the bill. Famous advertisements for the Liberty Bonds issued to finance World War I called on Americans to save and sacrifice in support of the war effort. Nothing comparable has occurred to finance the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Americans have not been asked to pay for the wars with higher taxes. In fact, the Bush administration did exactly the opposite: President George W. Bush and congressional Republicans passed a series of tax cuts starting in 2001 and in each year through 2004. The 2003 tax breaks for the affluent were estimated to carry a $1 trillion price tag over ten years.105

Since Americans have been unwilling to swallow tax increases to pay for these wars, and since the United States’ allies are not as willing to foot the bill as they were in 1991, the alternative is to finance the war through deficit spending. The federal deficit for 2010 is estimated at $1.634 trillion, or more than 11% of GDP. Deficits have been climbing since 2001, after two years of modest budget surpluses. Of course, not all of these deficits can be attributed to increases in defense spending as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; the tax cuts and the recession also share the burden for increasing budget deficits. But the decision not to call upon U.S. taxpayers to dig into their own pockets to pay for the current military campaigns certainly has not helped the government to balance its books. Neither party is willing to suggest tax increases to pay for the wars, suggesting they know that the 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.106

The Will to Suffer: Summary

The United States military is the most professional, technologically advanced, and proficient conventional force in the world. The military owes a lot of this professionalization to the shift to an all-volunteer force in 1973. Yet, the decision to eliminate conscription has also had a powerful effect on the political processes of choosing war. When Captain James Parker wrote in 1898, he urged a reinstatement of conscription partly because the decision to draft individuals into military service sends such a potent message of a state’s commitment to a war effort. By contrast, reliance on a volunteer force disproportionately shifts the human costs of fighting onto those segments of society with less representation in the corridors of political power in the United States.

The increasing reliance on private military contractors further exacerbates this problem: hiring private individuals to perform functions formerly relegated to the military allows U.S. policymakers to initiate and persist in conflicts that the public would not otherwise support. The transformation of the U.S. military according to the RMA thesis and the substitution of technology for boots on the ground further shield both the public and policymakers from the political costs of high casualties. In the absence of conscription, the general public will be much more likely to claim that they support a mission if someone else’s children are dying overseas and if deaths of contractors remain widely unreported. “Most Americans don’t care [about the war in Afghanistan] because

106 Furthermore, the price tag of $64.5 billion for the war in Iraq and $72.9 billion for Afghanistan in 2010 does not include the costs of future medical and other benefits for veterans of these wars, nor the costs of restoring U.S. military readiness after the wars end, costs that will be paid for decades to come.
they’re not feeling any of the tragic losses. A tiny, tiny portion of the population is doing the fighting, and those troops are sent into the war zone for tour after tour, as if they’re attached to a nightmarish yo-yo.”

The United States spends a huge amount on defense in absolute terms, but makes nowhere near the material sacrifices American society made to prosecute the world wars, and even in 2010, defense spending as a percentage of GDP is still half what it was during the height of the Vietnam War. Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has relied on contributions from its allies and deficit spending to finance its military campaigns. 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.”

By severing the bulk of the American public’s connection to the human and monetary costs of war, U.S. policymakers have found a way to threaten and use the U.S. military for issues of marginal importance to the national interest; however, this ease in threatening and undertaking military action has not translated into coercive success. In sum, the United States as a nation is unwilling to suffer to achieve its objectives in military contests with conventionally weak states whose behavior does not threaten U.S. survival.

**The Will to Destroy: Collateral Damage**

I have demonstrated that the United States is unwilling to pay the human and financial costs associated with major military campaigns against weak states. I also argue that the willingness to inflict violence is a critical component of a state’s resolve in war,

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and that the United States’ willingness to tolerate collateral damage as a tragic but inevitable consequence of military operations has declined over time.\textsuperscript{109} Today, U.S. policymakers go to great lengths to assure both domestic and international audiences that they are making every possible effort to minimize civilian deaths resulting from U.S. operations, while the military has become increasingly vigilant about preventing civilian casualties.

The United States’ campaign to pacify the Philippines after it 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.”\textsuperscript{110} Although roughly 4,000 American soldiers died during the 1899-1902 campaign, most of them from disease, “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.\textsuperscript{111}

During World War II, the enlightened democracies of Great Britain and the United States rained down ferocious destruction on the people of Germany and Japan. Despite the American insistence on precision bombing at the outset of WWII, in reality the technology of the day reduced both the British and Americans to area bombing of cities by the end of the war.\textsuperscript{112} Sir Arthur Harris, who became head of Bomber

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\textsuperscript{109} The term “collateral damage” refers to civilian casualties that are the unintended by-product of legitimate military operations, and should be distinguished from strategies that deliberately target civilians as acts of policy.


\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 272.

\textsuperscript{112} Biddle, \textit{Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare}, 228-229.
Command in 1942, was blunt about the intentions of 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 bombing policy. They are not by-products of attempts to hit factories.”\(^{113}\) 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.”\(^{114}\) 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.”\(^{115}\)

Conway-Lanz argues that it was the dropping of the atomic bombs that first “focused American attention on the dilemma of killing noncombatants,” and on the tension between the United States’ increasingly lethal firepower and the inability to use such power discriminately.\(^{116}\) Although the policy of mutual assured destruction called for the deliberate killing of millions of Soviet civilians, the general trend since the end of World War II has been an increasing desire to protect civilians from military operations. 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,” while the 400,000 tons of

\(^{113}\) Quoted in Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare*, 220.
\(^{114}\) Pape, *Bombing to Win*, 254-255.
\(^{115}\) Ibid., 104.
\(^{116}\) 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).
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 massacred as many as 567 unarmed men, women and children.\textsuperscript{117} Although civilian casualties fueled the debate over American participation in Vietnam, in public statements both General William Westmoreland and President Johnson stressed that civilian casualties were unintended and tragic consequences of legitimate military operations,\textsuperscript{118} suggesting a sensitivity to collateral damage that had not been as evident in the United States’ previous wars of the twentieth century.

This new attitude towards collateral damage has been evident in targeting decisions for U.S. air campaigns since the end of the Cold War. Furthermore, the rise of precision targeting complements the increased desire to avoid collateral damage, as the use of “smart bombs” seems to allow the United States to use its firepower more discriminately.\textsuperscript{119} The decapitation campaign at the beginning of the 1991 Persian Gulf War was designed to target and punish the Iraqi leadership, not civilians. In fact, after a strike on the Al-Firdos bunker, which was believed to be harboring senior Iraqi officials, accidentally killed hundreds of civilians, strikes on targets within Baghdad were sharply reduced.\textsuperscript{120} In addition to a desire to minimize friendly casualties, concerns about collateral damage also drove debates over targeting during the 1999 Kosovo campaign.

\textsuperscript{117} Clodfelter, \textit{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 the local populations. Rather, I point them out to suggest that the United States’ willingness to tolerate acts of violence against civilian populations, including both incidents of collateral damage and atrocities that may be committed in the heat of battle, has declined over time.

\textsuperscript{118} Conway-Lanz, \textit{Collateral Damage}, 217.

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 220-221.

\textsuperscript{120} Pape, \textit{Bombing to Win}, 231.
The need for the various NATO allies to oversee target lists and the desire to minimize collateral damage gave rise to a complicated approval system for individual targets in the bombing campaign. Some targets, such as bridges and petroleum storage locations, were ruled off-limits because of fears of collateral damage, despite their strategic importance. General Wesley Clark noted that, in the planning of the air campaign, “Everything possible was being undertaken to ensure that the strikes met strict legal standards and minimized risks of harm to innocent civilians.”

The United States developed lengthy “no-strike” lists in the run-up to the opening of military operations in Iraq in 2003 and took pains to minimize the risks of collateral damage, both from air strikes and from fighting on the ground. Despite criticism of the U.S. military’s treatment of Iraqi civilians, the evidence suggests 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.” 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 civilian neighborhoods and near farms; and using ambulances, taxis, and other civilian vehicles to transport fighters and weapons and

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121 Clark, Waging Modern War, 225.
123 Ibid., 15.
launch bomb attacks.”\textsuperscript{124} These actions raise the risk that the U.S. military will inflict civilian casualties that will alienate the population and thereby make the war more politically costly for the United States.

The United States has also taken pains to minimize collateral damage in Afghanistan. In June 2009, General Stanley McChrystal issued new restrictions on the use of air strikes in Afghanistan because of incidents in which Afghan civilians had been killed by U.S. strikes aimed at insurgents. McChrystal noted that, “Air power contains the seeds of our own destruction if we do not use it responsibly.”\textsuperscript{125} Although the strikes are considered “indispensable for protecting troops,” the accidental killing of Afghan civilians undermines the United States’ mission in Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{126} The decision to minimize civilian casualties does come at a price: accepting greater risks to U.S. forces. Bombing from high altitudes may be low-risk for the pilots involved, but may also sacrifice some accuracy in targeting. Employing more restrictive rules of engagement for U.S. ground troops in Afghanistan entails the acceptance of greater levels of risk to U.S. forces, which runs counter to the trend toward the insulation of U.S. forces from casualties that I demonstrated in the previous section. The desire to minimize U.S. casualties in these situations conflicts with the desire to minimize collateral damage, and it remains to be seen which impulse will ultimately win out in American strategy.

The evidence from U.S. and NATO campaigns since the end of the Cold War suggests that attitudes about collateral damage have evolved such that the United States strenuously avoids collateral damage in a way that it did not earlier in the century. This

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 13-14.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
is a stunning reversal from the Second World War, in which the *deliberate* targeting of civilians was a major component of the Allies’ strategies 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 war in Iraq? Killing civilians in target states is now so politically costly that the United States takes great pains to avoid even accidental civilian casualties, rendering the threat of U.S. military action less fearsome to potential targets.  

The reluctance to inflict heavy damage on target populations, like the reluctance to suffer heavy damage in war, is also a function of the lower level of interests at stake in these wars in the post-Cold War period. 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, therefore, that in an era in which the United States has only fought wars for limited objectives, and against opponents who pose at most a marginal threat to its national interest, that it should be restrained in its use of violence against target states. The United States may have developed a model of warfare that enables it to confront its weaker opponents’ conventional militaries at seemingly low cost to itself, but no matter how efficiently the United States can knock out a communications network or remotely target an al-Qaeda leader, it cannot trick its opponents into believing that it cares more about obtaining its objectives than it actually does. In fact, the only state that may be fooled by this model is the United States itself, which seems to believe

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127 I do not argue that the United States should revert to early twentieth-century forms of counterinsurgency or revisit the area bombing strategies of World War II; however, it is not inconceivable that the United States would return to a policy of targeting civilians if a perceived need to do so arose. During the Cold War, nuclear deterrence rested on the assertion that hundreds of millions of civilians would perish in a nuclear holocaust if the Soviet Union ever launched a nuclear attack on the United States. Instead, I argue that the unwillingness to inflict pain on target populations renders the threat of military action less fearsome to potential opponents.

that the ability to efficiently destroy targets should be a guarantee of victory against weak but highly motivated opponents.

**Conclusion: Willing to Escalate, But Not to Suffer or Destroy**

Two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States remains the world’s sole superpower, with unrivalled conventional military superiority and a puzzling inability to use military threats to compel the leaders of weak states such as Serbia and Iraq to change their behavior. With no peer competitor to check its behavior and unmatched conventional military superiority, the United States is free to threaten force against a variety of targets, at very little risk to itself. Simply put, the United States threatens a variety of 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, threats to use force convey only the willingness to escalate a military dispute to an indecisive level—a willingness largely based on the expectation that any ensuing combat would be relatively low-cost. Knowing this, a target state may conclude that the United States would back down in the face of mounting debts and casualties, rendering the threat of force ineffective in compelling the target state.

The United States has steadily retreated from the levels of motivation and sacrifice that characterized its participation in the World Wars. It has eliminated conscription in favor of an all-volunteer force, and in the process created a more professional military that is not drawn equally from all groups in American society. The United States has also privileged modes of fighting that take advantage of its lead in technology and information systems to minimize U.S. casualties, and has become increasingly reliant on private military contractors to perform services formerly reserved
for the military. Furthermore, Americans are loath to foot the bill for military operations: operating costs for the 1991 Persian Gulf War were largely supplied by the United States’ allies, and neither Bush nor Obama called on Americans to dig into their pockets to pay for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, choosing instead to rely on deficit spending to defer the costs of these wars to future generations. All of these developments make it politically less costly to send U.S. forces abroad and indicate an unwillingness to make major sacrifices to achieve its objectives from weak target states. The United States may therefore be viewed as willing to escalate, but not willing to make major sacrifices to extract compliance from these weak targets.

Furthermore, the United States has become increasingly unwilling to inflict high levels of violence on target state civilians. Its campaign to pacify the Philippines at the turn of the twentieth century may have been successful, but it also permitted brutality on a scale that would be unacceptable today. The Allies’ bombing of Germany and Japan during WWII, and to some extent the American bombings of Vietnam, were based on the idea that inflicting pain on the target population would force the governments of the targeted states to yield to their coercers. Today, the American military seeks to avoid inflicting pain on civilians, and has moved toward a population-centered approach to counterinsurgency operations. Efforts to minimize civilian casualties in war may be desirable from a normative standpoint and may minimize political costs to U.S. policymakers, but suggest a lack of resolve to achieve U.S. objectives, particularly when the United States’ opponents are willing to engage in deliberate attacks against civilians and intermingle with the population in efforts to foment chaos and compel U.S. forces to choose between risking their own lives and risking higher levels of collateral damage.
Some might argue that the fact that the United States has stayed in Afghanistan for nearly ten years and in Iraq for eight should dispel the notion that it lacks the motivation to persist in extended military campaigns. However, it would be difficult to claim 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 re-instituted the draft and raised taxes to send more troops to quell the violence in each country. The fact that it did not and that it will likely withdraw from both countries in the next couple of years short of “victory” will only reinforce the perception in future target states that the United States can be defeated by bleeding it, both literally and monetarily.

No amount of military force can trick a target leader into thinking that the United States is deeply motivated to achieve objectives of marginal importance to its national interest. The United States is a society unwilling to fight wars for issues that do not threaten its survival. By developing a military model that circumvents some of the mechanisms that might rein in the use of force, the United States has made the threat to use force an ineffective tool for compelling target states whose behavior is objectionable but does not threaten the United States’ vital interests.
Works Cited


