



Force-Protection Fetishism

Sources, Consequences, and (?) Solutions

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Fetish: an object of unreasonably obsessive attention or regard

Editorial Abstract: In this article, expanded from a commentary published in the March 2000 issue of US Naval Institute Proceedings, Dr. Record brings up the issue of casualty aversion as a negative symptom of the Vietnam conflict and the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine. He argues, with strong accusations, that the current casualty "phobia" among the military and political leadership is unwarranted—because it is not shared by the populace at large—and detrimental to America's military effectiveness, thus giving us a reason to consider greater reliance on local surrogates and perhaps a change in force structure.

THE VIETNAM SYNDROME is alive and better than well. It was not "kicked" in the Gulf War, as a triumphant President George Bush claimed. On the contrary, it has metamorphosed into a force-protection fetishism that threatens to corrupt American statecraft in the post-cold-war era.

Force-protection fetishism was on full display during the Kosovo crisis of 1999. American behavior during that crisis reflected a desperate unwillingness to place satisfaction of US armed intervention's political objective ahead of the safety of its military instrument. Ground-combat options were self-denied.

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Airpower was kept at safe altitudes. Clausewitz was stood on his head.

The immediate effect was aerial activity that permitted the enemy to pursue and accelerate the very ethnic cleansing of Kosovo that Operation Allied Force had intended to halt. The long-term effect was to broadcast to friend and foe alike America's Achilles' heel as we enter the twenty-first century. For the peoples of the former Yugoslavia, the result was the political survival of Slobodan Milosevic, a two-bit Balkan Hitler, and the operational survival, virtually intact, of the Serbian army. Allied Force thus left the door open for Milosevic to start his fifth war (against Montenegro) in the Balkans. Was preserving the life of a single American pilot—a volunteer professional—worth jeopardizing the lives of 1,600,000 Kosovar Albanians and God-knows-how-many future victims of Serbian aggression?

Nor is force-protection fetishism a passing phenomenon. It derives from America's disastrous experience in Vietnam and prevails among the present national political and military elites, who may have wrongly convinced themselves that the American people have no stomach for casualties, regardless of the circumstances in which they are incurred. Indeed, for these elites, Vietnam is the great foreign-policy referent experience—one seemingly validated by failed US intervention in Lebanon and Somalia.

Clausewitz Corrupted

Force-protection fetishism corrupts the use of force because it ignores war as "a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other means."¹ Effective use of force rests on recognition of the intimate relationship between military means and political ends. Obsession with keeping the former out of harm's way, even at the expense of aborting attainment of the latter, violates war's very essence as an act of policy. Indeed, one should not make a decision to use force when force protection assumes greater importance than the political object on behalf of which one contemplates its employment.

Yet, the United States proceeded to attack Serbia with the primary purpose of avoiding American casualties. Lack of loss—not mission accomplishment—became the standard for judging the success of Allied Force.

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Consider the joint statement by Secretary of Defense William Cohen and Gen Henry Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), that "the paramount lesson learned from Operation Allied Force is that the well-being of our people must remain our first priority."² Consider also the postwar caution of Gen Wesley Clark, supreme allied commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO): "In an air campaign you don't want to lose aircraft" because when "you start to lose these expensive machines the countdown starts against you. The headlines begin to shout, 'NATO loses a second aircraft,' and the people ask, 'How long can this go on?'"³

One cannot imagine Henry Stimson, George S. Patton, or Curtis LeMay ever uttering such statements. Surely we must make a distinction between, on the one hand, the moral and political imperative of shielding military forces from risks that are superfluous to the accomplishment of operational and strategic objectives and, on the other hand, the subordination of those objectives to pursuit of the ideal of bringing every soldier home alive. Casualty-phobic timidity on the battlefield can be just as self-defeating as bloodthirsty recklessness. One Grant is worth a dozen McClellans and Custers. Should it have taken 78 days of bombing by the most powerful military alliance in history to convince Milosevic to accept NATO's watered-down terms for peace?

If protecting one's own troops is the greatest concern, then why expose them to combat at

all? Keep them home. At the least, select only enemies incapable of fighting us in the air, as was the situation over Kosovo, and offer them nothing to shoot at on the ground as well. Indeed, why not do away with casualty-prone ground forces altogether and rely instead exclusively on airpower? Not to cast aspersions on our very capable surface forces, but think of the budgetary and force-structural implications of a US Army reduced to performing homeland defense tasks and burials at Arlington Cemetery!

During the cold war, the term *half war* referred to a war with enemies other than Russia and China. Perhaps it should now be redefined to mean wars waged without the employment of US ground forces.

The Corrupting Agent: The Weinberger-Powell Doctrine

Force-protection fetishism is rooted in Vietnam—specifically in the resultant Weinberger-Powell Doctrine, which is the intellectual construct of the strategic lessons that many military professionals drew from the war. Caspar Weinberger, President Ronald Reagan's secretary of defense, proposed six "tests" for using force, later amended by Gen Colin Powell's emphasis on overwhelming force. These tests effectively deny the legitimacy of force as a tool of coercive diplomacy by restricting its use to circumstances involving clear and present threats to manifestly vital national interests.⁴ Such circumstances implicitly generate public and congressional support and place an explicit premium on overwhelming force to complete the job as quickly and cheaply as possible. Force is to be employed as a substitute for politics rather than its extension, which in turn strips diplomacy of any ability to coerce and thereby deter or alter adversarial behavior that could lead to war.

But is not force without war almost always preferable to war itself? Weinberger's tests included the presence of vital interests, a determination to win, the establishment of clear political and military objectives, the use of

properly sized forces, an assurance of public and congressional support prior to involvement, and the exhaustion of all diplomatic alternatives prior to using force as a last resort. But the tests always raised more questions than they answered. What are vital interests, and who defines them? What does "winning" mean? Does not war impose its own dynamic influence on political and military objectives? How is assured public and congressional support to be gained in advance, to say nothing of maintained throughout hostilities? And are there not circumstances that encourage an early use of force rather than its employment as a last resort? Is this not the supreme lesson of Munich?

Ironically, adherence to the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine would likely have reinforced the democracies' appeasement of Hitler at Munich because an Anglo-French resort to war against Germany in October 1938 over Czechoslovakia's Sudetenland would have satisfied none of the doctrine's tests for using force. Even more ironically, this doctrine would have encouraged the United States to plunge into the Vietnam War. In 1965 the United States considered its vital interests at risk in Indochina and intervened as a last resort, an action that commanded widespread public, congressional, and editorial support. As for overwhelming force, neither the British nor the French in 1938 were in a position to conduct effective offensive military operations against Germany. In Vietnam, however, the United States ultimately brought to bear much greater firepower proportional to that of the Vietnamese communists than it did against Iraq in the Gulf.

The Weinberger-Powell Doctrine implicitly assumes that public tolerance of casualties is minimal in circumstances that do not satisfy the doctrine's use-of-force criteria, and this assumption elevates casualty minimization above mission accomplishment. Yet, this assumption not only runs afoul of substantial evidence to the contrary but also ignores the role of presidential leadership in shaping public opinion on behalf of using force. The assumption furthermore subverts the integrity of military in-

tervention by compromising its potential operational and strategic effectiveness.

Public Opinion and Casualties

Casualty phobia reflects a misperceived lesson of the Vietnam War that, unfortunately, is shared among some senior political and military leaders. The lesson of Vietnam (and of Lebanon and Somalia) is not the public's absolute intolerance of casualties but an attitude toward casualties *contingent* on such reasonable criteria as perceived strength of interests at stake and progress toward a satisfactory resolution of hostilities. Casualties incurred in protracted, inconclusive wars waged for unconvincing goals are not the same as losses taken on behalf of decisive military operations launched for a compelling cause.⁵ Americans will not accept the same blood risk to prevail in strategically inconsequential civil wars in Lebanon and Somalia that they willingly accepted in defeating Nazi Germany and containing the Soviet Union.

The public's casualty tolerance depends on circumstances that include not only presidential success or failure in mobilizing public opinion but also enemy behavior itself. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor instantly dissolved the America First movement as a domestic political obstacle to President Franklin Roosevelt's foreign policy, and the manifest personal and political evil of Saddam Hussein greatly facilitated George Bush's successful demonization of the Iraqi dictator. In contrast, not even the Great Communicator, Ronald Reagan, could explain to the American people exactly what US military intervention in Lebanon was all about; nor could Bill Clinton convey to the public and Congress a persuasive reason for invading Haiti. Unfortunately, although study after study supports the contingent nature of the public's tolerance of casualties,⁶ such studies seem to make no impression upon the White House and Pentagon.

Public attitudes toward casualties are malleable, not rigid. Saddam Hussein's repeated miscalculations during the Gulf crisis stemmed

in large measure from his twin convictions that Americans could not stand the sight of their own blood and that he was in a position to spill enough of it to collapse US domestic political support for war against Iraq.

Twentieth-century America has been prepared to expend the lives of over half a million of its sons to defeat totalitarian aggression in Europe and East Asia. Only during the Vietnam War did public support crack—and even then only after the shock of the Tet offensive, four years of apparent stalemate on the battlefield, and manifest official duplicity in Washington. Indeed, in retrospect it is amazing that public support remained as strong as long as it did, given the war's geographic remoteness and the predominantly abstract quality of declared US war aims. Even after the cold war ended, President Bush mobilized substantial public and congressional support for going to war on behalf of a country little known to Americans. Although American casualties were miraculously low (146 killed in action), both the public and Capitol Hill were prepared to accept a much higher butcher's bill.⁷ The Pentagon planned Operation Desert Storm, and the president authorized it on the assumption that American war dead possibly would number in the thousands.⁸

Recent polling data marshaled by the Project on the Gap between Military and Civilian Society, conducted by the Triangle Institute for Security Studies, confirms not only that "the strong belief of civilian and military elites that the American public will not support casualties is not supported by the survey data," but also that the "mass public says that it will accept casualties" in a variety of such scenarios.⁹ The data further reveals that civilian policy makers—even more so, senior military officers—are much more casualty intolerant than the average American citizen.¹⁰ The data was based on a survey of forty-nine hundred Americans drawn from three groups: senior or rising military officers, influential civilians, and the general public. Among the questions asked were, How many American military deaths would be acceptable to (1)

stabilize a democratic government in the Congo, (2) prevent Iraq from obtaining weapons of mass destruction, and (3) defend Taiwan against an invasion by China? For the military elite, civilian elite, and the general public, the number of acceptable US military dead were, respectively, as follows: 284, 484, and 6,861 (Congo); 6,016, 19,045, and 29,853 (Iraq); and 17,425, 17,554, and 20,172 (Taiwan).¹¹

Why do these elites appear to be more casualty sensitive than the people they serve? Is it because the assumption of the public's intolerance of casualties excuses presidents and generals from taking the kind of battlefield risks that might invite casualties? Because casualty avoidance offers an alibi for mission frustration and even failure? Because casualty phobia reinforces the argument against using force as a tool of coercive diplomacy? The authors of the Triangle Institute's poll speculate that senior military officers may lack confidence in the reliability of civilian leaders to stay the course of intervention if casualties mount. They also suspect that "casualty aversion may be an aspect of a growing zero-defect mentality among senior officers, in which casualties are not only deaths—they are an immediate indication that an operation is a failure." Obviously, "civilian leaders must share culpability" for any rise in a zero-defect mentality.¹²

Strategic Consequences of the Elite's Casualty Phobia

Because force-protection fetishism unnecessarily degrades military effectiveness, it emboldens enemies and poorly serves a great power that dozens of other states and hundreds of millions of people around the world look to for leadership and security. The Albanian Kosovars, to be sure, were victimized by Serbian thugs, but they were no less victimized, albeit indirectly, by the casualty phobia of US elites.

Force-protection fetishism encourages military half-measures directed against symptoms rather than sources of international political

instability. This was as true of the Gulf War as it was of Allied Force. In both cases, the national leadership was not prepared to run the political and military risks necessary to achieve a strategically conclusive victory. Caution may well have been justified, but the chief consequence in the Gulf and the Balkans was the survival of two rogue regimes, one of them bent on massive revenge.

Anxiety over getting involved in a long and costly Arab conflict caused the Bush administration to end the war prematurely and with little thought of the politics of war termination. While the Iraqi army was in full retreat, the administration declared a unilateral cease-fire in the absence of any Baghdad request for terms and then sent Gen Norman Schwarzkopf—without political instructions—to Safwan, in enemy territory, to negotiate cease-fire terms with a bunch of Saddam Hussein's military flunkies. (Did it occur to no one that the Iraqis should have been summoned to appear at Schwarzkopf's headquarters and told that a cease-fire required, among other things, an acknowledgement of defeat by Saddam himself?) The administration failed to take advantage of potentially decisive leverage in forcing Saddam's ouster, and it permitted the Iraqis to continue flying their attack helicopters, which they promptly used to crush the subsequent Shia rebellion in southern Iraq.¹³

The Gulf War has been touted as a model display of the Weinberger-Powell Doctrine in action. And so it was in many respects. After all, at the time Powell himself was CJCS, and he was given great latitude in designing and implementing Desert Storm. For the Gulf War, the doctrine made sense. Any president contemplating a major war against an apparently formidable enemy would be foolish indeed to launch such a war over trivial interests without public and congressional support and without a convincing diplomatic exhaustion of nonwar alternatives. At the same time, however, the rush to declare military victory and vacate the premises underscored the Vietnam Syndrome's continued affliction of the White House and Pentagon—an affliction

that precluded a strategically conclusive success. Thus, the war against Iraq never quite ended; it has continued for nine years (and counting) in the form of repeated US packages of punitive air and missile strikes and the ongoing, costly occupation of Iraqi airspace to keep Saddam Hussein “in his box.”

Indeed, there might not have been any US involvement or war at all had the decision been Powell’s to make. He would have permitted Iraqi aggression to stand. Powell feared a possible US military embarrassment in the Gulf and lacked confidence that the American people and their elected representatives could be trusted to support whatever military action it took to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. Accordingly, he waged a subtle bureaucratic campaign against going to war. During the deployment phase of the crisis, he pushed for sanctions as an alternative to war and encouraged the submission of war plans that he believed, or at least hoped, would deter his civilian superiors from deciding for war.¹⁴ Two months after Iraq invaded Kuwait, Powell told Sir Patrick Hine, Britain’s air chief marshal, that the risks of war, including a high death toll, possible degeneration into attrition, and losing the peace, were simply too great.¹⁵ Powell, of course, went on to oppose any US military intervention in the former Yugoslavia.

The consequences of elite groups’ fear of casualties in the former Yugoslavia (read fear of a Balkan Vietnam) were evident years before the launching of Allied Force. James Gow, who has written the best diplomatic history of the “Yugoslav War of Dissolution,” concludes that “if there was an overall policy failure, its central feature was the absence of armed force as a bottom line. The reason for that absence was a lack of ‘political will’ to act forcefully in a transitional situation that appeared to be . . . laced with risk.” And to what was that lack of will attributable? To the fear of Western politicians that what lay waiting for them in the Balkans was “another Northern Ireland, Dien Bien Phu, or broader Vietnam,” and “particularly critical in this respect

was the shadow of Vietnam hanging over US political and military leaders.”¹⁶

To put it another way, the United States and its principal European allies failed repeatedly to make credible threats of force against Serbian aggressors because in fact they were clearly unwilling to actually use force in a convincing manner. Accordingly, Milosevic called the West’s bluff repeatedly and successfully during the war in Bosnia and later rejected NATO’s ultimatum on Kosovo. NATO’s record of political division and military faintheartedness over events in the former Yugoslavia persisted into Allied Force in both the White House’s public renunciation of a ground-force option and the initially tepid air “campaign” against Serbia. Is it any wonder that Milosevic refused to fold early (as Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and some of the administration officials expected)¹⁷ and successfully held out for terms significantly more favorable to Belgrade than those NATO insisted upon at Rambouillet?¹⁸

If force-protection fetishism saved Milosevic and spared the Serbian army (which departed Kosovo virtually intact and saluting victory), it has also distinguished the US component on the United Nations peace-keeping force established in Kosovo after the war. In Bosnia, unlike other national contingents, most of the US troops were based at a 775-acre, heavily fortified but exceptionally comfortable site from which they were permitted to venture outside only with body armor and Kevlar helmets—and even then only in helicopters or convoys of armored vehicles. These force-protection measures hindered the troops’ ability to perform peace-keeping tasks. In contrast, the British, long experienced in imperial policing operations and unconstrained by a political or military leadership petrified at the prospect of taking casualties, were widely dispersed in their sector, with small groups billeted in apartments and houses in tense local neighborhoods. They patrolled on foot in small numbers without armored vests or helmets, which put them in much closer touch with local residents and events. The US obsession with zero casualties

became the butt of jokes by officers from European peacekeeping contingents.¹⁹

Clausewitz reminded his readers that war is “a serious means to a serious end.”²⁰ Does elevation of force protection to first place among all other operational objectives convey a seriousness of means? Does it not instead signal to adversary and ally alike the presence of a frail will? Does it not encourage enemies to adopt the simple strategy of filling as many American body bags as possible? And what does it matter that the average American is more casualty tolerant than the senior US political and military leadership? If that leadership is more concerned about the safety of its military means than a decisive attainment of its political ends, has not the United States become, in the words of Richard Nixon, “a pitiful, helpless giant?”

Remedies for Force-Protection Fetishism?

No obvious cure exists for the affliction of casualty phobia. Hopefully, the elites themselves will come to recognize that the public's tolerance for casualties is much more contingent than pessimists believe or want to believe, and that the political leadership can greatly influence public attitudes on casualties in a given situation. Given the strength of the elite's conviction that the people they serve have little stomach for war under almost any circumstances, however, it would probably take an actual demonstration of casualty tolerance to change minds. But this hardly means seeking another war just to prove a point. Moreover, the United States is fast running out of enemies capable of inflicting significant casualties on deployed US military forces.

A more promising approach to the strategic problem posed by force-protection fetishism would be greater US cultivation of and reliance on local surrogates to assume the risks of ground combat. The Nixon Doctrine makes as much sense now as it ever did, and we should not forget the Reagan Doctrine's success in Afghanistan. Of course, surrogate

forces are only occasionally available and have their own political agendas. But when they are willing and (with training and assistance) able to fight a common enemy, they limit America's potential military liabilities in circumstances in which domestic political tolerance of US casualties is—or is believed to be—severely limited. Perhaps the Clinton administration's greatest squandered opportunity in the Balkans was its refusal to arm and train the victims of Serbian aggression. Arming the Bosnian Muslims and later the Kosovo Liberation Army, as well as supporting both with US airpower when necessary, would have been power balancing, pure and simple. But it would have provided an earlier and more effective check on Serbian behavior in Bosnia and Kosovo than the actual policy of hiding behind an ineffective international arms embargo of all of the former Yugoslavia and showering Belgrade with incredible threats of force.

To be sure, backing surrogates entails taking sides. But the history of international politics shows that the most effective means of thwarting bids for hegemony is to create situations of countervailing strength. When the United States can do so by developing local surrogates instead of committing its own forces, it should do so unless there is some compelling strategic or political reason not to. And yes, there is always the risk of surrogate failure, confronting the United States with the choice of either walking away altogether or committing its own forces. This is precisely what happened in Vietnam, where the United States picked a politically and militarily incompetent client threatened by a skilled and determined adversary. Indeed, once the United States took over the war, the South Vietnamese army had little incentive to fight. Circumstances in the former Yugoslavia, however, were quite the opposite—yet the Vietnam War blinded policy makers.

A final observation on force-protection fetishism: to the extent that casualty phobia persists and to the extent that it continues to promote—as it did in the war against Serbia—reliance on airpower to the exclusion of

ground-combat forces, then we need to take a new look at the present proportional allocation of resources to US ground and air forces.

If in combat the United States is going to be a one-armed superpower, then that arm should be as strong as possible. □

Notes

1. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1976), 87.

2. Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen and Gen Henry Shelton, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Joint Statement on Kosovo After-Action Review," before the Senate Armed Services Committee, 14 October 1999, 27.

3. Wesley K. Clark, "The United States and NATO: The Way Ahead," *Parameters*, Winter 1999–2000, 8–9.

4. Powell served as Weinberger's military aide and helped draft Weinberger's famous National Press Club speech entitled "The Uses of Military Power," delivered on 28 November 1984. Reprinted in Caspar Weinberger, *Fighting for Peace: Seven Critical Years in the Pentagon* (New York: Warner Books, 1990), 429–45.

5. See Richard K. Betts, "What Will It Take to Deter the United States?" *Parameters*, Winter 1995–1996, 70–79. See also Andrew P. N. Erdmann, "The U.S. Presumption of Quick, Costless Wars," *Orbis*, Summer 1999, 363–81.

6. See, for example, the following studies performed by RAND of Santa Monica, California: Mark Lorrell and Charles Kelley Jr., *Casualties, Public Opinion, and Presidential Policy during the Vietnam War*, March 1985; Benjamin C. Schwarz, *Casualties, Public Opinion, and U.S. Military Intervention: Implications for U.S. Regional Deterrence Strategies*, 1994; and Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations*, 1996.

7. See John E. Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 45, 124, 306–7.

8. Erdmann, 375–76.

9. *Digest of Findings and Studies Presented to the Conference on the Military and Civilian Society, Cantigny Conference Center, 1st Division Museum, 28–29 October 1999*, 5; on-line, Internet, 12 November 1999, available from <http://www.unc.edu/depts/tiss/CIVMIL.htm>.

10. Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, "How Many Deaths Are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer," *Washington Post*, 7 November 1999.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Administration officials hoped that the coalition's military victory, which at the end of the war appeared more decisive

than it actually was, would prompt a coup against Saddam. At the same time, the Shia and Kurdish rebellions portended Iraq's possible disintegration—something the White House most assuredly did not want. What the administration wanted was an intact Iraq without Saddam.

14. The plans included Schwarzkopf's initial unimaginative, Army-developed ground-war plan and, later, a second plan calling for doubling the size of the US deployment from a defensive to an offensive force. Brent Scowcroft, national security advisor, suspected the plans were deliberately crafted to discourage war: "The initial plan for retaking Kuwait, briefed to President Bush in October, had not seemed designed by anyone eager to undertake the task. Similarly, the force requirements for a successful offense given to him at the end of October were so large that one could speculate that they were set forth by a command [US Central Command] hoping their size would change his [Bush's] mind about pursuing a military option." George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 431.

15. For the best informed account of Powell's behind-the-scenes campaign to derail the Bush administration's drive toward war in the Gulf, see Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Generals' War: The Inside Story of the Conflict in the Gulf* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 123–58.

16. James Gow, *Triumph of the Lack of Will: International Diplomacy and the Yugoslav War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 306.

17. See John F. Harris, "Reassuring Rhetoric, Reality in Conflict," *Washington Post*, 8 April 1999.

18. Among the demands contained in the NATO ultimatum issued to Serbia at Rambouillet before the war was restoration of Kosovo's autonomy. Following this, three years later, was a referendum in Kosovo to determine its future and a provision granting NATO forces unrestricted passage and unimpeded access throughout all of Serbia—not just Kosovo. These provisions were subsequently dropped as conditions of war termination.

19. See R. Jeffrey Smith, "A GI's Home Is His Fortress," *Washington Post*, 5 October 1999.

20. Clausewitz, 86.

The duty of the men at Stalingrad is to be dead.

—Adolf Hitler

