Foreign Perceptions of American Casualty Sensitivity: Is Your Reputation Worth Fighting For?

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ABSTRACT

I examine America’s reputation for sustaining casualties (i.e., foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity) in order to test and shed light on the larger “reputation” hypothesis. For the purposes of this paper, the reputation hypothesis posits that foreign perceptions of American casualty tolerance are based on past American actions. The central question of this paper asks how countries come to hold their perceptions of American casualty sensitivity.

I conduct six case studies to test four (not mutually exclusive) hypotheses – reputation, interests, democracy, and culture – concerning foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity. The case studies document foreign leaders – including adversaries, allies, and neutrals – giving the United States reputations for lacking resolve and being unable to sustain casualties based upon America’s previous retreats and defeats. I conclude that, in disagreement with the central conclusions of the reputation literature to date, it is indeed right for a state to fight for its reputation. In addition, the evidence suggests that the reputation hypothesis, democracy hypothesis, and culture hypothesis explain different aspects of the phenomenon. However, when viewed in combination, these three hypotheses provide a nearly complete explanation of how countries come to hold their perceptions of American casualty sensitivity. Surprisingly, the historical record provides the least amount of support for the interests hypothesis.

These foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity hurt the ability of the United States to deter adversaries from making challenges against U.S. interests and to compel adversaries to back down once conflicts have broken out. Therefore, American leaders should understand that there are reputational costs and/or benefits associated with their foreign policy statements and actions.

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[But] a country’s “image,” consisting of other countries’ beliefs (their leaders’ beliefs, that is) about how the country can be expected to behave... relates... to its reputation for action. If the question is raised whether this kind of “face” is worth fighting over, the answer is that this kind of face is one of the few things worth fighting over... “Face” is merely the interdependence of a country’s commitments; it is a country’s reputation for action, the expectations other countries have about its behavior.

- Thomas C. Schelling, Arms and Influence, 124.
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I. Introduction

How do countries come to hold their perceptions of American casualty sensitivity? Are their perceptions based upon past American actions as the “reputation” hypothesis claims? Or are they based upon their estimate of the current balance of interests? Alternatively, are they based upon the democratic nature of American governance, or perhaps the post-industrial culture of the United States? In this paper, I dispute the central conclusion of scholars such as Ted Hopf, Jonathan Mercer, and Daryl Press that states should not fight for their reputations. I examine the specific case of America’s reputation for sustaining casualties (i.e., foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity) in order to test and shed light on the larger “reputation” hypothesis. In his dissertation, Daryl Press concludes with a challenge: “Until believers in the reputation hypothesis can produce a body of empirical studies which document a clear link between keeping commitments and credibility, it makes no sense to continue to pay the serious costs – in dollars and lives – that adherence to the reputation hypothesis requires.”¹ I believe this paper contains more than sufficient evidence to cast serious doubt on the policy prescriptions of Hopf, Mercer, and Press.

In every major military action taken since the end of the Cold War, scholars have found evidence of American adversaries questioning the ability of the United States to “stomach” casualties. On June 25, 1990, shortly before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Saddam Hussein told the American Ambassador to Iraq, April Glaspie: “Yours is a society which cannot accept 10,000 dead in one battle.”² When asked about the potential introduction of American peacekeepers into Bosnia in 1994, a Serbian official replied, “Clinton has his own problems... He can’t afford

to have even a few soldiers killed in Bosnia.”³ After the Haitian military turned away a shipload of American military trainers aboard the U.S.S. Harlan County in October 1993, a senior Haitian officer stated, “It’d be just like Somalia... Clinton will run away when the first U.S. soldier is returned in a body bag.”⁴ Both Mohamed Farah Aideed and Slobodan Milosevic had similar ideas about the unwillingness of the United States to suffer casualties in Somalia and Kosovo, respectively.⁵ Finally, in several interviews during the late 1990s, Osama bin Laden expressed his belief that the United States was “a paper tiger” whose soldiers were “unprepared to fight long wars.”⁶ In each of these instances, foreign civilian and military elites perceived (or, in some cases, misperceived) an unwillingness of the United States to take casualties.

What impact, if any, do foreign perceptions of American casualty tolerance have on the ability of the United States to coerce adversaries? Numerous academics, military elites, and civilian elites have argued that foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity have had deleterious effects on the conduct of American foreign policy and the maintenance of world peace since the end of the Cold War. According to Major Charles K. Hyde (USAF), the United States will continue to suffer the consequences of these perceptions in the future:

The perception among our enemies and allies alike is that the American public is unwilling to commit to any military operation in which one can expect even a minimal number of casualties. Furthermore, they believe that once an enemy engages the United States, it can force the latter to withdraw from its commitments when American casualties mount. Because of our casualty aversion, in the eyes of the world, we are becoming “a sawdust superpower.”⁸

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⁷ For the purposes of this paper, I define “coercion” as both deterrence and compellence.
In other words, foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity hurt the ability of the United States 1) to deter adversaries from making challenges against U.S. interests, and 2) to compel adversaries to back down once conflicts have broken out. Dr. Karl Mueller concludes, “The belief that the United States will avoid risking the lives of its troops, and will capitulate if they are killed in quantity, encourages America’s enemies by offering an apparent means to defeat the numerically and technologically superior superpower.”

The remainder of this paper is divided into five major sections. First, I review and critique the theoretical literature on reputation. The discussion focuses upon two major works written during the 1990s: Jonathan Mercer’s Reputation and International Politics and Daryl Press’s What Causes Credibility?: Reputation, Power, and Assessments of Credibility During Crises. It is interesting to note that both scholars conclude that one’s reputation is not worth fighting for. In addition, I draw upon articles by Paul Huth and Jonathan Mercer from Security Studies for criticisms and insights about the state of the reputation literature. Second, I make testable predictions based upon four hypotheses concerning foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity: reputation, interests, democracy, and culture. Third, I discuss my research design as well as the reasons for my case selections. Fourth, I conduct case studies to test the four hypotheses. Towards this goal, I analyze public statements and open-source articles; I also examine the actions of states to assess the veracity of public statements. Finally, I conclude with implications as well as directions for future research.

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II. Literature Review: Reputation and Credibility

The three most recent empirical works on reputation, credibility, and deterrence are Ted Hopf's *Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy in the Third World, 1965-1990*; Jonathan Mercer's *Reputation and International Politics*; and Daryl Press's *What Causes Credibility?: Reputation, Power, and Assessments of Credibility During Crises*. Daryl Press summarizes the findings of this literature: "The two most striking facts about the treatment of the reputation hypothesis in international relations scholarship are 1) that the reputation hypothesis is widely believed, and 2) that there is a surprising absence of evidence to support it."

The books by Ted Hopf and Jonathan Mercer as well as Press’s recent dissertation, despite differing methodologies and diverse cases, all come to the same conclusion: A state’s reputation is not worth fighting for.

Hopf examines the lessons that the Soviet foreign policy elite learned from American military experiences in the Third World during the Cold War. He concludes that the Soviets did not infer American resoluteness or irresoluteness from U.S. successes or failures, respectively. Mercer uses attribution theory from the social psychology literature to study a series of European military crises in the early twentieth century prior to the outbreak of the First World War. He concludes that actors usually use factors such as interests or capability, not resolve, to explain a state’s behavior. Press looks at Soviet credibility during the Berlin Crises of 1958-1961 and the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. To his surprise, he finds that Soviet credibility – in the eyes of

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10 Press, 24.
both American and British leaders – actually increased as the Soviets consistently failed to carry out their threats.\footnote{Press, 236.}

However, there are several methodological flaws in these works that cause one to question some of their findings and implications. Press has a thorough and insightful discussion of the methodological weaknesses of Hopf in his dissertation, so I do not repeat the same criticisms here. Instead, in the sections that follow, I critique Mercer’s book and Press’s dissertation, with references to Hopf’s book where appropriate.
Mercer: Reputation and International Politics

In Reputation and International Politics, Jonathan Mercer uses attribution theory from the social psychology literature to support his conclusion that “It is wrong to believe that a state’s reputation for resolve is worth fighting for.”\(^{14}\) According to Mercer, in order for a reputation to form, decision-makers must explain an ally’s or adversary’s behavior in dispositional (versus situational) terms, and then use these explanations to predict or explain similar behavior in the future.\(^ {15}\) Mercer is to be commended for clarifying the definition of reputation as a relational concept as opposed to a property concept, with the implication being that one cannot be in complete control of one’s reputation (or reputations). Unfortunately, Mercer’s work ultimately misses the mark because he incorrectly assumes that situational attributions cannot lead to reputations. I will comment briefly on Mercer’s most significant contribution to the reputation literature before making three critiques of Reputation and International Politics.

Much of the international relations literature on deterrence treats reputation as a property concept. That is, if a state fights for its reputation, then it will – without a doubt – be given a reputation for resolve. However, Mercer astutely points out that reputation is not a property concept, but a relational concept: “States may be given reputations, but they do not own them: a reputation is not the same as a self-image. Nor is a state’s reputation a piece of property that it owns.”\(^ {16}\) In addition, because a state can be given different reputations by different people, it does not make sense to talk about a state’s reputation. Instead, Mercer points out that academics and leaders should speak about a state’s reputations.\(^ {17}\) Based upon these observations, Mercer explains the dangers of not realizing that reputation is a relational concept: “Treating reputation

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\(^{14}\) Mercer, Reputation and International Politics, 1.

\(^{15}\) Mercer, Reputation and International Politics, 6.

\(^{16}\) Mercer, Reputation and International Politics, 27.

\(^{17}\) Mercer, Reputation and International Politics, 7.
as a property concept leads scholars and decision-makers to think of it as a tool that can be readily controlled and manipulated." Hence, even if the reputation hypothesis were correct, it would not necessarily follow that decision makers would get reputations for lacking resolve by not fighting for their reputation. However, I believe the evidence in the ensuing case studies proves beyond a reasonable doubt that leaders do give states reputations for lacking resolve when they abandon their commitments or fail to carry out threats.

Unfortunately, there are three main problems with Mercer’s research that cast doubt on his conclusions. First, Mercer’s use of attribution theory is unnecessarily complicated and difficult to operationalize. Press explains the problem: “Coding attributions as either ‘situational’ or ‘dispositional’ is extremely difficult. Most explanations of behavior – and perhaps all of them – involve a mix of situational and dispositional attributions.” Indeed, Mercer himself admits that these two categories are not dichotomous, but instead opposite poles on some sort of continuum. Given that people often make both dispositional and situational attributions to explain events, Mercer’s coding of decision makers’ statements is necessarily subjective and, in many instances, questionable. Although Mercer acknowledges these are not dichotomous categories, the end result of his coding scheme is dichotomous. By his definition, situational attributions cannot lead to reputations but dispositional attributions can. Thus, for Mercer’s argument to hold water, there would need to be a tipping point on the situational-dispositional continuum where reputations form.

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19 Press, 40-1.
20 Press, 42.
21 Mercer, *Reputation and International Politics*, 68.
22 Nowhere does Mercer indicate that such a tipping point exists.
Second, and most importantly, Mercer's argument rests upon the incorrect assumption that only dispositional attributions can lead to reputations and affect future credibility.\(^{23}\) Mercer defines a reputation as "a judgment of someone’s character (or disposition) that is then used to predict or explain future behavior."\(^{24}\) This definition is too restrictive for the purposes of his research. To understand if a state should fight for its reputation, one simply needs to study whether decision makers at T=2 look back at a state’s actions at T=1 in order to predict that state’s future actions.\(^{25}\) Mercer argues that a person would not get a reputation for lacking resolve if she backed down when a gun were pointed at her head. Press reveals the mistake in Mercer’s logic when he adds, "...but we know how to get her to give up her wallet; all we need is a gun."\(^{26}\) As a matter of fact, Press uses several examples from Mercer’s book to demonstrate how situational attributions can be used to predict future behavior.

By using an inappropriate definition of reputation, Mercer defines away evidence that may support the reputation hypothesis. In fact, Mercer himself uses historical examples where European statesmen made situational attributions and then referred back to them to predict future actions. Press cites one such example, "... German diplomats concluded that the French had given up in the Fashoda conference because the British had outmaneuvered the French diplomatically. Holstein concludes that Germany can get the French to back down a second time if Germany can maneuver the French into an awkward diplomatic position again."\(^{27}\) Situational attributions can lead to a reputation because many situations repeat themselves or countries recreate situations to induce the same responses they witnessed earlier.\(^{28}\) Press summarizes the

\(^{23}\) Press, 41.
\(^{25}\) Press, 42.
\(^{26}\) Press, 45.
\(^{27}\) Press, 46.
\(^{28}\) Press, 44-5.
main problem with Mercer's framework: "If both situational and dispositional explanations of behavior at T=1 can affect a state's credibility at T=2, then knowing when decision makers make one type of attribution or another is nearly irrelevant to the question about whether one should fight for reputation." ²⁹

Third, Mercer's case selections are questionable for a variety of reasons, and, consequently, he leaves himself vulnerable to charges that his results are not generalizable to the Cold War or the post-Cold War periods. Although a strong case can be made for studying historical cases (as opposed to recent cases)³⁰ Mercer cannot justify his choice of early nineteenth century European crises over the post-1945 crises in Berlin, Korea, and Cuba. Mercer's defense of his case selection is incredible: "Had I not examined pre-First World War cases, critics might charge me with ducking an important set of crises where many political scientists and historians claim that reputation mattered." ³¹ Most critically, Mercer does not place any stipulations upon his conclusions, nor does he even suggest that his results may be bound by time or location. Instead, he states unequivocally, "It is wrong to believe that a state's reputation for resolve is worth fighting for." ³²

²⁹ Press, 41. In a footnote, Press clarifies what he means by "nearly irrelevant": "I say nearly irrelevant because reputations based on situational attributions are probably less important than those based on dispositional attributions. A reputation based on a dispositional attribution should have much more cross-situation validity than one based on a situation, even if that situation was enduring, repeating, or re-creatable." Press, footnote, 41-2.

³⁰ A detailed discussion of the trade-off between data quality and case relevance is located in Section IV, "Research Design, Evidence, and Case Selection."


³² Mercer, Reputation and International Politics, 1.
Press: What Causes Credibility?

Much to his credit, Press performs the most systematic study of the importance of fighting for one’s reputation by testing the “reputation” hypothesis directly against the “power/interests” hypothesis. The “power/interests” hypothesis states “that decision makers predict their adversaries’ future actions by assessing the current balance of power and interests without reference to the adversary’s history for keeping or breaking commitments.”

Most importantly, Press clarifies the morass that Hopf and Mercer created by using a simple and elegant research design. Put simply, he “...investigates whether decision makers at T=2 looked back at T=1 in order to predict their adversary’s future actions.”

However, I have two main critiques of Press’s work that question his conclusion that a state’s reputation is not worth fighting for. First, the “power/interests” hypothesis should be separated into a “power” hypothesis and an “interests” hypothesis because interests are not always derived solely from power. In fact, a quick review of American military actions during the 1990s reveals that the balance of power was often decisively in favor of the United States while the balance of interests was often decisively in favor of the adversary.

For example, it is very likely that Mohamed Farah Aideed, Raoul Cedras, and Slobodan Milosevic believed the balance of power overwhelmingly favored the United States, but that the balance of interests favored each of them. Press’s combination of these two hypotheses is problematic because they often pull in opposite directions and make contradictory predictions.

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33 Press, 11.
34 Press, 42.
35 I do not test the “power hypothesis” in this paper because the balance of power has been consistently and decisively in favor of the United States since the end of the Cold War. Although it is the perceived balance of power that matters when one is studying credibility, there is no evidence that any American adversary believed it had a favorable balance of power in terms of military capabilities.
In his conclusion, Press speculates about why the United States has had difficulty coercing much weaker countries since the end of the Cold War. He concludes,

The answer, in short, is that America’s confrontations with Aidid and Milosevic have involved relatively small interests for the United States. The power/interests hypothesis suggests that it is very difficult to coerce one’s adversaries unless one’s national interests are significantly engaged. Trying to coerce a country over an issue which one does not care that much about is difficult and requires massive military superiority.\footnote{36}

This example clearly illustrates the need to separate the power/interests hypothesis into two distinct hypotheses. A “power” hypothesis would suggest that potential adversaries should have backed down in the face of overwhelming American strength. Conversely, an “interests” hypothesis would predict that potential adversaries should have challenged the United States when it had low interests at stake. In such cases, Press’s default belief seems to be that the “interests” hypothesis trumps the “power” hypothesis although he offers no theoretical justification for why this must be so. He concludes, “Maintaining credibility against the Milosevices and Aidids of the world will always be hard and very expensive, because as great as American military capability is, the interests which we have engaged in many disputes are tangential at best.”\footnote{37}

Second, Press overstates his conclusions by ignoring the criticisms he leveled against the works by Hopf and Mercer. In his final paragraph, Press concludes:

For decades American foreign policy has operated under the assumption that generating a pattern of keeping one’s commitments enhances one’s credibility in the future. Lives and dollars were spent before anyone did even rudimentary empirical studies to check this assumption. Now, finally, several studies have been done and they all point against the reputation hypothesis.\footnote{38} (Emphasis added)
However, in chapter 2, Press provides devastating critiques of the works by Hopf and Mercer, concluding that both authors overlooked evidence in favor of the reputation hypothesis. Press completely dismisses the idea that Hopf’s study casts doubt upon the reputation hypothesis:

Despite his conclusions to the contrary, Hopf’s data suggests that U.S. successes and failures in the Third World, when the U.S. was directly involved, might have affected U.S. credibility in Soviet eyes... there is little reason to infer from Hopf’s study that the reputation hypothesis is false. Rather than deliver a serious defeat for the reputation hypothesis, Peripheral Visions offers suggestive, but inconclusive, support for the idea that credibility depends on creating a pattern of assertive, hard-line behavior.\(^{39}\)

In fact, Hopf’s data on Vietnam, Grenada, and the Dominican Republic seems to support the reputation hypothesis. However, Hopf overlooks this evidence because he tests a very narrow formulation of the reputation hypothesis.\(^{40}\) Press’s bottom line on Mercer’s empirical study is strikingly similar: “Furthermore, because Mercer is focused on the question of whether or not decision makers make situational or dispositional attributions (despite the fact that either type of attribution can lead to a reputation) he overlooks evidence that he discovers that lends support to the reputation hypothesis.”\(^{41}\)

Instead of three studies that “point against the reputation hypothesis”, in reality there is only Press’s dissertation. In addition, Press himself admits that his is an indirect test of the reputation hypothesis as it is used in U.S. foreign policy debates. That is, his study shows how U.S. decision makers assessed the credibility of another country instead of the more interesting and relevant question (from the standpoint of U.S. foreign policy) of how other countries assess U.S. credibility. Press defends his methodology on two grounds: 1) neither the reputation nor the power/interests hypothesis suggests that they only apply to some governments (or types of

\(^{39}\) Press, 36-7.
\(^{40}\) Press, 33-36.
\(^{41}\) Press, 41.
government), and 2) there are significant data advantages to looking at U.S. decisions which more than compensate for using an indirect test. Press's dissertation makes a significant contribution to the reputation literature; however, a thorough study of foreign perceptions of American credibility would have allowed for more conclusive prescriptions for U.S. policy makers. Indeed, Press himself suggests that scholars can and should study Soviet evaluations of U.S. credibility throughout the Cold War now that there is greater access to Soviet archives.

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42 Press, 94.
43 Press, 37.
III. Hypotheses and Predictions

In recent years, several scholars have written articles on why it has been so difficult for the United States to coerce adversaries despite its unparalleled military dominance. Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman wrote in *Survival* in 1999:

> Despite the lopsided US edge in raw power, regional foes regularly defy threats and ultimatums: against Somali militants, Serb nationalists, the Iraqi dictator and other adversaries, the US record of coercion has at best been mixed. Even when threats are carried out, adversary resistance often actually increases rather than decreases. Why do the United States and its allies so often find themselves unable to force lesser adversaries to change behaviour?[^44]

Barry Blechman and Tamara Cofman Wittes asked basically the same question in their summer 1999 article in *Political Science Quarterly*: “The puzzle we seek to explain is the frequent inability of the United States to achieve its objectives through threats and limited uses of military power despite the political and military dominance its has enjoyed since 1989.”[^45] In other words, why have American threats to use military force lacked credibility at a time when the U.S. military has been at the apex of both relative and absolute military power?

In this paper, I ask a similar question to those posed above: Why have America’s adversaries so consistently questioned the ability of the United States to sustain casualties? More specifically, why have America’s opponents questioned the willingness of the United States 1) to get involved in potential conflicts (because of fear of casualties), 2) to place troops in harm’s way in conflicts (e.g., America’s heavy reliance upon airpower), and/or 3) to stay and fight when casualties are sustained? In *Reputation and International Politics*, Mercer has an excellent discussion of the three components that make up credibility: resolve, capability, and interests.

Mercer observes, “A threat may be incredible because observers think a state lacks either the capability or the interest to carry it out. A threat may be incredible because observers think the state lacks the resolve to make good on its threat. These distinctions often blur.” While Press pits the “reputation” hypothesis against the “power/interests” hypothesis in his dissertation, I test my version of the “reputation” hypothesis against the “interests” hypothesis, the “democracy” hypothesis, and the “culture” hypothesis.

In the following pages, I discuss four hypotheses that attempt to explain how and why foreign leaders perceived (and still perceive) the United States as having an extremely low tolerance for casualties. First, some scholars believe that foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity are based on past American actions. This explanation is a version of what Daryl Press refers to as the “reputation” hypothesis: “that tomorrow’s enemies will assess America’s credibility on the basis of U.S. actions today.” For example, according to some journalists and scholars, Saddam Hussein “used as evidence of American irresolution the American defeat in Vietnam and the 1983 retreat from Beirut after the Marines’ barracks were bombed.” Mohamed Farah Aideed admitted to Ambassador Robert Oakley, U.S. special envoy to Somalia, that he based his military strategy on his studies of previous American military operations in Vietnam and Lebanon. A wire service reported that Haitian paramilitaries demonstrating in Port-Au-Prince chanted, “We’re going to make a second Somalia here!” prior

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46 Mercer, Reputation and International Politics, 15.
47 Press also tests the “Never Again” hypothesis and the “Ingrained Lessons” hypothesis.
48 The hypotheses are framed with regards to the topic of foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity, but they can be stated more generally.
49 Press, 10. I contend that statements by American decision makers can reinforce pre-existing perceptions of American casualty sensitivity if they confirm the beliefs of foreign leaders.
50 Mercer, Reputation and International Politics, 219.
51 Blechman and Wittes, 5.
to American intervention in Haiti. Although several major works on credibility argue that countries should not fight for their reputation, substantial evidence indicates that reputation may be important in foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity.

Second, the “interests” hypothesis posits that states view American casualty tolerance as a function of the perceived balance of interests. That is, if an American adversary does not believe that U.S. interests are high in the region and/or issue, then it will also believe that American casualty tolerance will be low because it will be unwilling to pay high costs in areas of low interest. One possible example of a foreign leader questioning the balance of interests comes from an interview with Slobodan Milosevic in late April 1999: “NATO believes it can pick on a small nation and force us to surrender our independence. And that is where NATO miscalculated. You are not willing to sacrifice lives to achieve our surrender…” Even though this is not hard evidence in favor of the “interests” hypothesis, Milosevic’s use of the words “small nation” and “independence” are revealing. NATO soldiers were not defending their homeland from invasion, but were fighting on behalf of the Kosovar Albanians. Meanwhile, the Serbians were fighting for their independence and their very homes and lives, and Milosevic knew the balance of interests was tilted heavily in his favor.

Third, the “democracy” hypothesis claims that states believe American casualty tolerance is low because of the democratic nature of American governance. To be precise, democracies have a lower tolerance for casualties than non-democratic states because war requires the consent of the citizens, whom invariably bear the costs of war. This hypothesis is based upon Immanuel Kant’s writings in Perpetual Peace:

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If, as is inevitably the case under this constitution, the consent of the citizens is required to decide whether or not war should be declared, it is very natural that they will have a 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 war from their own resources, painfully making good the ensuing devastation, and, as the crowning evil, having to take upon themselves the burden of debts which will embitter peace itself and which can never be paid off on account of the constant threat of new wars. But under a constitution where the subject is not a citizen, and which is therefore not republican, it is the simplest thing in the world to go to war.  

Thus, foreign leaders may believe American casualty tolerance is low because they do not believe that the American people will support wars with significant numbers of casualties.

Finally, the “culture” hypothesis states that America’s casualty tolerance is a function of its Western culture and advanced state of development. In particular, foreign leaders will perceive that the United States – with its materialistic, post-industrial Western culture – is more sensitive to casualties than other cultures. Jeffrey Record writes that Saddam Hussein believed the United States was “an effete and indolent society no longer willing to risk significant casualties on foreign battlefields.”  

In a Foreign Affairs article published in 1994, Edward Luttwak argues that the unwillingness of some states to tolerate combat casualties is a result of “the demographic character of modern, post-industrial societies.”  

In addition, Luttwak disputes the idea that casualty sensitivity is confined to democracies; he cites the unwillingness of Soviet society to tolerate casualties in Afghanistan as evidence. Luttwak’s argument is provocative, and may be correct. However, it is irrelevant for my purposes because this paper examines perceptions of casualty sensitivity, not whether or not a country is casualty averse in reality.

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57 Luttwak, 24.
It is important to remember that these hypotheses are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, it is most likely the case that a cluster of these hypotheses – with different hypotheses explaining different aspects of the question – has the most explanatory power. However, by looking at the reasons given by foreign leaders and academics for their beliefs, one can assess which hypotheses have greater or lesser explanatory power. If the “reputation” hypothesis is correct, then the American decision to withdraw from Vietnam, Beirut, and Somalia damaged American attempts at coercion during the 1990s and today. As a result, American decision-makers would want to be extremely cautious about getting involved in crises unless they were fairly certain they were willing to complete the mission regardless of cost. Withdrawing from a conflict after suffering casualties would cost more than simply blood and treasure; it would have deleterious effects on the ability of the United States to deter and compel adversaries well into the future.

However, if the “interests” hypothesis is correct, then American decision-makers need not worry about their reputation for casualty tolerance. The U.S. could withdraw from conflicts after suffering casualties without worrying about potential adversaries taking lessons from its actions. It also implies that the U.S. would have a difficult time deterring and/or coercing adversaries over issues and in regions that the U.S. does not care much about. If the “democracy” or “culture” hypotheses are correct, then American decision-makers should get accustomed to foreign leaders believing they can force the United States to withdraw by inflicting a handful of casualties.

I summarize the four hypotheses below, and then draw three predictions – concerning the statements, policies, and reasoning of foreign decision makers – that follow from each.58

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58 The definitions are phrased with respect to the United States, but they could easily be translated to apply to any state. The predictions are expressed more generally by using the term “adversary”, but they could easily be translated to apply to allied and neutral states as well. The predictions for the “reputation” and “interests” hypotheses are modified versions of predictions from Press’s dissertation.
“Reputation” hypothesis:

Definition: Decision makers will use past American actions (and statements) to make predictions about the willingness of the U.S. 1) to get involved in potential conflicts (because of fear of casualties), 2) to place troops in harm’s way in conflicts (e.g., America’s heavy reliance upon airpower), and/or 3) to stay and fight when casualties are sustained.

Predictions from the “Reputation” hypothesis:

Statements: If decision makers are facing an adversary who has demonstrated a pattern of withdrawals and retreats because of sustained casualties (or the fear of taking casualties), they will express doubts about the adversary’s credibility (specifically, its willingness to take casualties).\(^\text{59}\)

Policies: If decision makers are facing an adversary who has demonstrated a pattern of withdrawals and retreats because of sustained casualties (or the fear of taking casualties), they will be less willing to compromise and will adopt more “hawkish” policies.

Reasoning: Decision makers will discuss their adversary’s history for following through on its threats in the face of potential, or even mounting, casualties. In addition, they will refer to that history as the foundation for their assessments of its credibility.

“Interests” hypothesis:

Definition: Decision makers will assess the current balance of interests to make predictions about the willingness of the U.S. 1) to get involved in potential conflicts (because of fear of casualties), 2) to place troops in harm’s way in conflicts (e.g., America’s heavy reliance upon airpower), and/or 3) to stay and fight when casualties are sustained. In their assessment, they will not make reference to the United States’ history for following through on its threats in the face of potential, or even mounting, casualties.

Predictions from the “Interests” hypothesis:

Statements: If decision makers believe that the stakes do not justify the adversary’s costs and risks (in terms of casualties), they will express doubts about the adversary’s credibility (specifically, its willingness to take casualties).

\(^{59}\) It is obvious that the opposite should also hold true. That is, decision makers will believe a state’s threats are credible if that state has not shown a pattern of retreat and withdrawal when casualties were sustained. In each case, I will only state one version of the prediction.
Policies: If decision makers believe that the stakes do not justify the adversary’s costs and risks, they will be less willing to compromise and adopt more “hawkish” policies.

Reasoning: Decision makers will discuss whether the interests at stake justify the adversary’s costs and risks. Furthermore, this appraisal will be the basis of their assessments of the adversary’s credibility.

"Democracy" hypothesis:

Definition: Decision makers will use the fact that the United States is a democracy to make predictions about the willingness of the U.S. 1) to get involved in potential conflicts (because of fear of casualties), 2) to place troops in harm’s way in conflicts (e.g., America’s heavy reliance upon airpower), and/or 3) to stay and fight when casualties are sustained.

Predictions from the "Democracy" hypothesis:

Statements: If decision makers are facing a democratic adversary, they will express doubts about the adversary’s credibility (specifically, its willingness to take casualties).

Policies: If decision makers are facing a democratic adversary, they will be less willing to compromise and will adopt more “hawkish” policies.

Reasoning: Decision makers will discuss the fact that their adversary has a democratic regime or may refer to the influence of public opinion. Moreover, they will refer to the fact of democratic governance as the foundation for their assessments of its credibility.

"Culture" hypothesis:

Definition: Decision makers will use America’s post-industrial, materialistic Western culture to make predictions about the willingness of the U.S. 1) to get involved in potential conflicts (because of fear of casualties), 2) to place troops in harm’s way in conflicts (e.g., America’s heavy reliance upon airpower), and/or 3) to stay and fight when casualties are sustained.

Predictions from the "Culture" hypothesis:

Statements: If decision makers are facing an adversary with a post-industrial society, they will express doubts about the adversary’s credibility (specifically, its willingness to take casualties).
Policies: If decision makers are facing an adversary with a post-industrial society, they will be less willing to compromise and will adopt more “hawkish” policies.

Reasoning: Decision makers will discuss the fact that their adversary has a post-industrial society, perhaps with reference to its materialistic culture. Moreover, they will refer to their adversary’s culture as the basis for their assessments of its credibility.
IV. Research Design, Evidence, and Case Selection

The books written on credibility and reputation make different tradeoffs in terms of the quality of their evidence and their ability to say something about *American* credibility. In his study of Soviet perceptions of American resolve, Hopf depends on the public statements and writings of Soviet foreign policy makers as well as Soviet academics and journalists because he has extremely limited access to Soviet archives.\(^{60}\) Meanwhile, Mercer and Press have access to archival materials, so they can “observe the statements and writings of decision makers as they made momentous foreign policy decisions.”\(^{61}\) On the other hand, neither Mercer nor Press can make definitive conclusions about foreign perceptions of *American* resolve because Mercer studies European crises during the early twentieth century and Press examines American perceptions of Soviet resolve during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Press summarizes the differences between his strategy and Hopf’s: “In sum, Hopf’s research design addresses the question directly at the cost of weaker evidence; I approach the question indirectly but benefit from high-quality data. These two research designs are complimentary.”\(^{62}\)

The anecdotal evidence cited from the previous section that supports the reputation hypothesis is not immune from criticism. In fact, there are serious reasons to question the motivations behind the public statements of American adversaries. Mercer argues, “Public statements are unreliable because they are usually meant to signal a particular disposition to friend and foe or to bolster an argument.”\(^{63}\) On the other hand, private internal communications (i.e., memos, transcripts of meetings, etc.) may be more reliable because they allow us to observe

\(^{60}\) Press, 32.
\(^{61}\) Press, 32.
\(^{62}\) Press, 33.
the decision-making process and what decision makers were saying behind closed doors.\textsuperscript{64} Mercer suggests that Hussein’s comments about Americans being irresolute and unable to sustain casualties may be explained as Iraqi signaling. That is, Hussein was dissatisfied with the status quo and wanted the United States to believe that Iraq considered the U.S. an irresolute power. The purpose of Hussein’s remarks was to convince the U.S. that Iraq was not bluffing, thereby deterring American intervention in the crisis for fear of suffering casualties. Mercer concludes that in order to assess the role of America’s reputation in Iraqi decisions to invade Kuwait, one must first “determine if this view [Americans as irresolute] was a cause of his aggression, or a consequence of his desire to aggress.”\textsuperscript{65}

More broadly, these leaders may have selected themselves into these crises by virtue of their ambitions, and their talk may have merely been signaling intended to deter American involvement. That is, the research designs used to study foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity thus far may be vulnerable to selection effects. This methodological problem is potentially damaging because the results may be “based on a nonrandom sample of cases that is not representative of the universe of cases from which it was drawn.”\textsuperscript{66} Thus far, scholars have only examined situations in which leaders challenged the United States; their research fails to explain why a majority of foreign leaders did not challenge the United States during the 1990s. For instance, Blechman and Wittes argue, “A review of the evidence reveals that Bosnian Serb leaders, Haitian paramilitary leaders, Saddam Hussein, and Somalia’s late warlord all banked on their ability to force a U.S. retreat by inflicting relatively small numbers of casualties

\textsuperscript{64} Mercer, \textit{Reputation and International Politics}, 13.
\textsuperscript{65} Mercer, \textit{Reputation and International Politics}, 220.
on U.S. forces." It is possible that American coercive failures can be explained by the revisionist aspirations of leaders such as Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic, and not necessarily sincere beliefs in American casualty sensitivity. Press summarizes the logic of selection effects as they relate to failed deterrence: "The prospective bluffers understand that highly credible defenders are likely to fight and will not want to be forced to back down. The pool of prospective attackers that challenge highly credible defenders, therefore, will be more motivated than the pool that challenge defenders with less credibility."  

Although this paper most closely parallels Press's dissertation, my research design in terms of data collection is most similar to Ted Hopf's in Peripheral Visions: Deterrence Theory and American Foreign Policy, 1965-1990. I examine the public statements of foreign decision makers as well as foreign academics and journalists in order to ascertain the most accurate foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity. This approach leaves me vulnerable to criticisms from Mercer and Press regarding the reliability of these sources. As discussed earlier, "public statements and open-source articles can distort the true views held by statesmen." The ideal research strategy would combine archival evidence (internal communications and statements of foreign decision makers) with an examination of the policies actually chosen, to provide the best evidence of the beliefs of decision makers. Unfortunately, such a strategy is not possible in this paper because the cases are too recent for archival materials to be available.

Because I am relying primarily on public statements and open-source articles, I have developed a two-tier research strategy that allows me to jump over the methodological hurdles outlined above. First, in order to overcome the potential pitfalls of selection effects, I analyze the statements of adversaries (past, present, and future), allies, and neutrals. By only looking at

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67 Blechman and Wittes, 27-8.
68 Press, 106.
69 Press, 32.
leaders who have recently challenged the United States, the casualty sensitivity literature has left itself vulnerable to selection effects. I may be able to sidestep this problem by looking at the perceptions of leaders of allied countries. The potential shortfall of this approach is that these leaders may also have had reasons to make statements regarding American casualty sensitivity. For example, American allies may have feared that the U.S. would become more isolationist if it suffered another setback like Somalia. As a result, allied leaders may have stressed American casualty sensitivity in order to deter the United States from taking actions in peripheral regions. Conversely, allies may have criticized American casualty aversion because they saw a lack of leadership from the world’s sole superpower. A U.S. official who eavesdropped on the private conversations of allied leaders stated, “They see us in disarray. As not leading. As having a weak foreign policy team. We’re unreliable. We make strong statements of principle about what we’ll do, and then we back down. They don’t think we have much credibility.”

Because looking at allied countries may also be problematic, the best solution may be to look at the public statements and published articles of neutral countries. Although a truly neutral country is difficult to find, statements from leaders of these countries should not have the same biases as those of adversaries or allies. In fact, a quick glance at foreign media sources provides tentative support for the idea that a variety of foreign countries – adversaries, allies, and neutrals – perceive American casualty sensitivity fairly consistently. Evidence from allied and

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70 In fact, Mercer argues that adversaries practically never get reputations for irresolution, while allies almost never get reputations for resolution. That is, leaders generally question the credibility of their allies for fear of being abandoned in crises.

71 George J. Church, “Dropping the Ball?” Time (2 May 1994).

72 “Neutral” here is most accurately defined as countries that “do not have significant interests at stake in the conflict, and close allies or adversaries are not involved in the conflict.”

neutral countries that confirm the public statements by America’s recent adversaries give me considerably more confidence in the veracity of these perceptions than I would have had if I had considered the adversaries’ statements in isolation.

Second, I also analyze the policies that decision makers take in response to American actions. Press defends the soundness of this approach: “Because the credibility of an adversary’s threats affects the choices that decision makers make during crises, the policies can be used to reason backwards about the adversary’s credibility.” Nonetheless, drawing inferences about how enemies perceive American credibility by looking at their actions is very complicated. I offer at least one potential way to mitigate this problem. If the motivation behind a country’s statements and articles is to signal that it is not bluffing, then it is reasonable to assume that such a country should be likely to back down if the United States prepares for military action. For example, General Raoul Cedras of Haiti accepted a U.S. offer to step down only after he received word that American military operations were under way. If a state does not back down after the United States takes military action, then it is more likely that the state actually believes in American casualty sensitivity. However, even this research strategy has its limitations: “Using ‘policies’ to draw inferences about credibility is hard because other things besides the adversary’s credibility may affect a state’s choice of policies during a crisis.”

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74 Press, 77.
75 Blechman and Witteness, 22.
76 Press, 78.
V. Case Studies

In this section, I conduct several case studies that are organized by the relationship of the country to the United States. First, I study the decision-making of the major active enemies of the United States since the end of the Cold War – Saddam Hussein (Persian Gulf War), Mohamed Farah Aideed (Somalia), Raoul Cedras (Haiti), Slobodan Milosevic (Bosnia and Kosovo), and Osama bin Laden (al-Qaeda and Afghanistan). In order to avoid the potential pitfalls presented by selection effects, I also look at the perceptions of neutral and allied countries as they relate to the aforementioned crises. Second, I examine Chinese perceptions of American casualty tolerance as some scholars have argued that China may be a potential future threat for the United States. As the Gulf Crisis is the first as well as most data-rich case in this paper, I systematically discuss the evidence for each of the four hypotheses in turn. The remaining case studies will vary in their explicit treatment of all four hypotheses for the sake of brevity.

The purpose of this research is to sort foreign statements and articles into piles – based upon the justifications given for their beliefs in American casualty sensitivity – in order to weigh the importance of the different hypotheses. Interestingly, some of the hypotheses may be explaining different phenomenon, so they should not necessarily be viewed as four competing hypotheses. The difficulty of conclusively testing these hypotheses will soon become apparent; however, I believe the case studies discussed below on the topic of foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity provide substantial evidence in favor of the reputation hypothesis. As a result, I believe it would be rash for scholars and decision makers to discard the reputation hypothesis at this time.
Case Study 1: Saddam Hussein and the Persian Gulf War

Background:

Under the orders of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi troops invaded and quickly occupied and controlled all of Kuwait on August 2, 1990. President Bush immediately condemned the action, and the United States assembled a broad international coalition, including many Arab counties, that should have signaled to Saddam its determination to go to war if Iraq did not withdraw from Kuwait. The coalition had unquestioned military supremacy, including an American military at its peak in terms of both quantity and quality.77 "Yet," Janice Gross Stein writes, "the deadline set for Iraq's withdrawal passed and on January 16, 1991, the international coalition led by the United States began a large-scale military campaign to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait."78

This curious set of circumstances brings two questions to mind: Why was the United States unable to deter Saddam Hussein from invading Kuwait in the first place? And given the broad international coalition and its tremendous military superiority, why was the United States unsuccessful at compelling Saddam to withdraw from Kuwait? In response to the first question, most scholars agree that deterrence did not receive a fair test as the United States sent inconsistent, unfocused, and confusing messages to Iraq in the weeks and months preceding the invasion. As a matter of fact, then-American Ambassador to Baghdad April Glaspie made the following remarks to President Hussein on July 25, 1990:

But we have no opinion on the Arab-Arab conflicts, like your border disagreement with Kuwait. I was in the American embassy in Kuwait during the late '60s. The instruction we had during this period was that we should express no opinion on this issue and that

the issue is not associated with America. James Baker has directed our official spokesmen to emphasize this instruction.  

While deterrence was never really tested, President Bush followed the textbook for coercive diplomacy following the invasion of Kuwait. The strategy of compellence included economic sanctions, a broad international coalition, the deployment of hundreds of thousands of troops and hundreds of aircraft in neighboring Saudi Arabia, and the threat to use force if Saddam did not comply with the deadline. And yet, against all odds, Saddam refused to back down. Why?

Although scholars have detailed a number of possible reasons why Saddam chose war over backing down, nearly all agree that Saddam doubted the resolve of the United States to sustain large numbers of casualties. This fact, more than any other, explains the failure of American and international efforts to compel Saddam Hussein between August 2, 1990, and January 16, 1991. According to Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, “Saddam strongly believed that the United States’s Achilles’ heel was its extreme sensitivity to casualties, and he was determined to exploit this weakness to the full.” After the war, a captured Iraqi general added credence to this view of Saddam’s perceptions:

He [Saddam] was certain that you would not attack, and if you did, it would only be by air. He kept telling the Iraqi people that airpower had never won a war in the history of warfare, and that the Americans would never have the nerve to engage the Iraqi army on the ground. I remember him saying that Americans would not be able to stand the loss of even hundreds of soldiers, that Iraqis were prepared to sacrifice thousands.

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80 Janice Gross Stein, 170.
Saddam’s words and actions during the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990-1991 reveal a central belief that the United States would not be willing or able to stomach large numbers of casualties. But what was this perception of American casualty sensitivity based upon?

Until the archives have been thoroughly examined, the speeches of President Saddam Hussein are one of only two sources scholars have to understand the perceptions that guided Saddam Hussein to war. I have already discussed at length the problems associated with relying upon public statements; however, I agree with Daryl Press and Norman Cigar that public statements, when studied in conjunction with actions, can provide reliable evidence:

Determining a nation’s perceptions is by no means an exact science and must be accompanied by caveats. One might argue, and some have, that what the Iraqis said was propaganda or bluff – and a good deal of it was. However, one can sort out the unifying threads in such verbal declarations which, when juxtaposed to what Baghdad actually did politically or on the ground, can help provide an understanding of the framework on which Iraq built its grand strategy.  

These speeches “are of particular importance in the study of a totalitarian regime such as that of the Iraqi Ba’th where the president had the first and last say on every matter, big and small, and where he became Iraq’s sole spokesman to the world.”  

Hence, the question more accurately reads: What were Saddam Hussein’s perceptions of American casualty sensitivity based upon?

The Gulf Crisis of 1990-1991 provides evidence in support of each of the four hypotheses. However, in the end, the interests hypothesis fairs less well than the culture, democracy, and reputation hypotheses.

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Evidence for the Culture Hypothesis:

There is no doubt that by 1990 Saddam Hussein believed the United States had become a soft and decadent society lacking staying power. The most oft-quoted evidence in favor of the culture hypothesis comes from Saddam’s now infamous conversation with then-American Ambassador to Baghdad April Glaspie on 25 July 1990. During this conversation, Saddam directly questioned the ability of American society to stomach war: “I do not belittle you. But I hold this view by looking at the geography and nature of American society into account. Yours is a society which cannot accept 10,000 dead in one battle.” Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait only eight days later suggests that Saddam may have been bluffing in an attempt to deter American intervention. Michael Gordon and General Bernard Trainor argue Iraq’s strategy “was rooted in a kind of cultural chauvinism. The West had its high-tech military toys and was good at bombing raids, but it lacked the determination to pay the ultimate price of going to war, or at least of finishing the job if it did. But Iraq, the Iraqis told themselves, was a nation inured to sacrifice.” For a variety of reasons, Saddam apparently believed that Iraqi culture was better suited for sustaining casualties than American culture. The perception of American society as decadent, morally weak, and lacking staying power was pervasive throughout Iraq before and during the Gulf Crisis. Most importantly, Saddam Hussein seemingly made predictions about the inability of the United States to sustain casualties based upon these perceptions.

Evidence for the Democracy Hypothesis:

Saddam Hussein’s perception of American casualty sensitivity was based heavily upon his belief that the President of the United States would be forced to retreat and/or negotiate when casualties mounted because of the democratic nature of the American regime. More specifically,
when significant casualties were sustained, public opinion would turn against the war and the President would be forced to heed public opinion or suffer the consequences in the following election. In Saddam’s words, “We are sure that if President Bush pushes things toward war and wages war against us – his war of aggression which he is planning – once five thousand of his troops die, he will not be able to continue the war.”88 Although this statement could be interpreted as mere signaling, it is interesting to note that Saddam explained on numerous occasions why the President would be unable to continue the war after casualties were sustained. For example, “...war has not erupted yet but anti-war demonstrations are staged. What would happen if war erupts?”89 An Iraqi assessment for early in the Gulf Crisis answered this question: “There is no doubt that the families of the soldiers sent to Saudi Arabia to threaten Iraq’s security... will not remain silent about the death of their sons in the Arabian desert at the hands of Iraqi soldiers, and will raise their voices high against President Bush.”90

The reliability of this speech evidence in favor of the democracy hypothesis is strengthened considerably by two actions taken by Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi army during the Gulf War. First, Saddam attempted to influence American public opinion by televising allied prisoners of war stating their opposition to the war. On 20 January 1991, one of the captured pilots stated, “Our losses were very great and this was one of the main reasons for the fear of American pilots flying against the Iraqi defense. We were talking together and we felt that Iraq had some of the best anti-aircraft systems and the losses caused by these systems to our aircraft have been very great and were leading to American pilots objecting to being in this conflict.”91

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89 Haselkorn, 52.
90 Cigar, 6.
In such a way, Hussein hoped to play on the fears of American citizens and to convince them to oppose the war because of the inevitability of mounting casualties. Much to his dismay, this strategy backfired as American and international condemnation of Iraq hardened as a result of this manipulation and mistreatment of prisoners of war.

Second, on 29 January 1991, Saddam attempted to goad the coalition into a premature ground offensive while American airplanes were exacting heavy punishment on the Iraqi military. With no signs of an allied ground offensive, Saddam needed to draw American ground forces into battle before American air power had completely decimated the Iraqi army. The primary purpose of the costly Iraqi offensive at Khafji was to spur the coalition into a premature ground war where the Iraqis could grind down the American forces. Saddam predicted: “[W]hen the battle becomes a comprehensive one with all types of weapons, the deaths on the allied side will be increased with God’s help. When the deaths and dead mount on them, the infidels will leave and the flag of Allahu Akbar will fly over the mother of all battles.” Saddam was willing to sacrifice huge numbers of Iraqi lives in order to inflict much smaller numbers of casualties on American troops. According to Saddam, casualties numbering in the high thousands or low tens of thousands would be sufficient to drive a disillusioned American public to demand an end to the war: “Not a few drops of blood, but rivers of blood would be shed. And then Bush will have been deceiving America, American public opinion, the American people, the American constitutional institutions.” Therefore, Saddam’s actions, especially his use of prisoners of war and his attempt to goad the allies into an early ground offensive, lend credibility to Saddam’s public statements regarding American public opinion.

92 Gordon and Trainor, 270-1. Also see Cigar, 5.
94 INA, 18 January 1991. Taken from Freedman and Karsh, 362.
In sum, the physical and verbal evidence from the Persian Gulf War supports the
democracy hypothesis. Saddam Hussein believed that opposition to the war in the United States
would increase as casualties mounted, and President Bush would be forced to negotiate as a
result. These perceptions damaged the ability of the United States to compel Iraq in the months
leading up to war because Saddam believed that he could achieve a political victory by killing
thousands of American soldiers. Jeffrey Record concludes, "Saddam believed he could inflict
more casualties on U.S. forces than the domestic American political traffic would bear." Even
after the humiliating defeat, the Iraqi leadership questioned the willingness of American public
opinion to support the war if casualties increased. According to Vice President Ramadan: "The
battle was at its height, Bush did not achieve his objective, that is why he accepted the cease-fire.
He knew what the reaction in the United States would be if U.S. losses mounted." Thus, the
decision by the United States to end the ground war after only 100 hours served to reinforce Iraqi
perceptions of American casualty sensitivity.

The belief that American public opinion would turn against the war in the wake of even
historically low numbers of casualties was not limited to Saddam Hussein and members of his
ruling party. In fact, during the Gulf War, one Indian commentator predicted that U.S. domestic
support "could [have faced] a disastrous reversal if cameras [had left] the Scuds and Tomahawks
and Patriots to focus instead on body bags arriving home." Another Indian analysis made the
following counterfactual argument: "A few hundred casualties in the initial stage could have had
a disproportionate domestic fallout in America and could possibly have even stalled the

96 Haselkorn, 109.
97 This statement actually supports the reputation hypothesis, but the argument demonstrates how the democracy
and reputation hypotheses are often complementary.
98 Thomas G. Mahnken, "America's Next War," The Washington Quarterly (Summer 1993), 174. Taken from
offensive.”99 It should be noted that both of these statements could be interpreted to support the culture hypothesis or the democracy hypothesis, or both. Most importantly, the fact that commentators from India – a country that has had an on-again, off-again relationship with the United States – made predictions and statements consistent with those made by Saddam Hussein lends credence to the conclusions of this section.

Evidence for the Interests Hypothesis:

As mentioned above, several scholars have persuasively argued that deterrence was not really attempted prior to the Gulf War of 1991. Indeed, based upon April Glaspie’s remarks of late July 1990, it is very likely that America’s apparent lack of interest in Iraq’s border dispute with Kuwait served as a green light for Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait only a week later. However, the more interesting question looks at Saddam’s beliefs about American interests and American casualty sensitivity when compellence was attempted between August 1990 and January 1991.

Viewed from this perspective, it is quite remarkable how few times Saddam Hussein made reference to the absence of vital American interests in the Gulf during the buildup to war. As a matter of fact, most of the evidence in favor of the interests hypothesis is ambiguous. An Iraqi assessment prior to the start of the First Persian Gulf War emphasizes that the costs of war could be “disproportionate to the ‘gains’ which could be achieved.”100 Nevertheless, this example illustrates the difficulty of codifying the rationale behind the perceptions of American casualty sensitivity. Specifically, the assessment also provides support for the democracy and reputation hypotheses when the quotation is viewed in context: “During the Vietnam War, millions of Americans criticized the war because casualties were disproportionate to the ‘gains’

99 Mahnken, 180. Taken from Conversino, 18.
100 Cigar, 6.
which could be achieved.” Evidence from a message from Saddam Hussein calling for Jihad on 5 September 1990, is even more difficult to interpret. Although Hussein does not directly address the question of low American interests, he does seem to imply that the balance of interests favors the Iraqis, just as it did the Vietnamese decades earlier. “Their outcome (in Vietnam) is known to you. How would they [the United States] do then if they were to confront Iraq under completely different circumstances, except for what the people, including the Vietnamese and Iraqi people, have in common: the determination to face the invaders?” Once again, however, a strong argument can and will be made that this statement also supports the reputation hypothesis.

The strongest evidence may come from the words of captured allied pilots on Iraqi television on 20 January 1991. These statements may serve as a useful window into the mind of the Iraqi leadership as the pilots gave clearly scripted answers after being subjected to considerable psychological and physical pressure. One pilot stated, “Myself and the other pilots talked about what interest the United States had for going to war, and we could find none. This was before the war. And now, we wonder whether American blood can be so cheap in the eyes of our government officials.” Ironically, this final piece of evidence points most clearly to the weakness of the interests hypothesis in comparison to the culture, democracy, and reputation hypotheses. The most logical explanation of Saddam Hussein’s decision to interview the allied pilots on Iraqi television has very little to do with low perceived interests. Instead, based upon his reading of American experiences in Vietnam and Lebanon, Saddam believed that American

101 Cigar, 6.
103 Baghdad Domestic Service, 23 January 1991. Taken from Karsh and Rautsi, 252.
public opinion would force President Bush to negotiate his way out of Iraq as soon as American casualties began to mount.

_Evidence for the Reputation Hypothesis:_

It is nearly indisputable that Saddam Hussein’s perception of American casualty sensitivity was grounded in his reading of American military and diplomatic history. Although there is significant evidence in favor of the culture and democracy hypotheses, it is clear that Hussein’s perceptions were meaningfully shaped by America’s humiliating defeats in Vietnam and Beirut. Hussein revealed the origins of his beliefs in a speech at the opening of the fourth summit of the Arab Cooperation Council (ACC) on February 24, 1990:

Brothers, the weakness of a big body lies in its bulkiness. All strong men have their Achilles’ heel. Therefore, irrespective of our known stand on terror and terrorists, we saw that the United States as a super-power departed Lebanon immediately when some Marines were killed, the very men who are considered to be the most prominent symbol of its arrogance. The whole US administration would have been called into question had the forces that conquered Panama continued to be engaged by the Panamanian Armed Forces. The United States has been defeated in some combat arenas for all the forces it possesses, and it has displayed signs of fatigue, frustration, and hesitation when committing aggression on other peoples’ rights and acting from motives of arrogance and hegemony.

In such a way, Saddam Hussein identified the American withdrawal from Lebanon as an example of how American forces have been defeated (i.e., by killing American soldiers).

There are also numerous statements by the Iraqi press, Iraqi generals, and Saddam Hussein himself that do refer to American defeats and retreats when making predictions about America’s willingness to use force and/or sustain casualties in combat. In particular, America’s Vietnam experience was a frequent source of analogies for Iraqi officials and the media, and was intended to play on the “Vietnam syndrome” perceived to be afflicting the United States. For

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104 “Saddam Husayn’s Speech at the ACC Summit, 24 February 1990,” Bengio, 48.
example, in his call for Jihad on 5 September 1990, Saddam emphasized the comforts and opportunities American troops had in Vietnam that would not be available in Iraq. Then he made the following prediction: “Their outcome (in Vietnam) is known to you. How would they do then if they were to confront Iraq...?”

Later, in a videotaped address to the American people, Saddam predicted that the war with Iraq would be like “repeating the Vietnam experience, only this time... more violent and more casualties.”

Staff Major General Wafiq al-Samarrai, who served as Iraq’s head of military intelligence until May 1991, reported that Saddam had thought that the American experience in Vietnam “had badly damaged its willingness to use military power.”

Finally, the Iraqi press made predictions about America’s willingness to use force on 2 August 1990: “We know that Washington’s threats are those of a paper tiger. America is still nursing the disasters from the Vietnam War, and no American official, be it even George Bush, would dare to do anything serious against the Arab nation.”

Saddam cited past American actions to make predictions about the willingness of the United States to get involved in a war in the first place (because of fear of casualties), and, if war broke out, to stay and fight when casualties were sustained. In Desert Victory: The War for Kuwait, Norman Friedman summarizes what has become the widely accepted interpretation of Saddam’s perceptions prior to the Gulf War:

Saddam seems to have expected the United States to feint and threaten, but then to withdraw under pressure, under the cover of some face-saving formula (the withdrawal from Beirut after 241 marines had been killed was officially a “strategic redeployment”). He recalled the failure of Desert One, the botched rescue of the Iranian hostages. The U.S. attack on Grenada seemed to show that the United States would fight only easy wars; after all, it did not tackle Fidel Castro. Saddam’s belief

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105 Bengio, 143.
106 Haselkorn, 40.
108 Cigar, 3.
may explain his series of threats (for example, "you will swim in your own blood") during the tense buildup in the fall of 1990.109

Thus, Saddam Hussein made predictions about the behavior of the United States during the Persian Gulf crisis based upon its past actions in Vietnam, Lebanon, Iran, Panama, and Grenada, as the reputation hypothesis predicts.

Finally, public statements by President George Bush, predictions by U.S. experts about the upcoming war, as well as decisions made about the conduct and duration of the Persian Gulf War confirmed Saddam’s perceptions of American casualty sensitivity. President Bush gave credence to Saddam’s predictions about the war being a “second Vietnam” when, on the first day of the air war, he stated, “It is my hope that when this is over, we will have kicked once and for all the so-called Vietnam syndrome.”110 Norman Cigar cites evidence of Iraqi media sources latching on to statements by U.S. experts about the potentially high costs of a war – in blood and treasure – as proof of weak public support for war against Iraq.111 In addition, the statements and writings of American military leaders following the Gulf War confirmed Saddam’s beliefs. In December 1996, General Charles Horner (USAF) explained the nature of the air campaign:

We gave casualty avoidance priority over military effectiveness because it was the morally correct thing to do. The American people have demonstrated unbelievable tolerance at the losses of sons and daughters in battle when they believe in the cause, but no President or general can overestimate the speed at which that patience will disappear if they are perceived to be spending lives foolishly. Public sensitivity to casualties can dominate our political and military decision-making in a crisis.112

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111 Cigar, 6-8.
Lastly, as mentioned previously, the decision to end the ground war after 100 hours, and after suffering casualties in the low hundreds, did nothing to dispel Saddam’s perception of America’s lack of will and unwillingness to sustain casualties.

Conclusion:

The words and actions of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein during the Persian Gulf crisis of 1990-1991 provide significant support for the culture, democracy, and reputation hypotheses. It seems most likely that the three hypotheses each explain a different part of the question: What was Saddam Hussein’s perception of American casualty sensitivity based upon? It is certain that Saddam Hussein had given the United States a reputation for irresolution based upon its military and diplomatic experiences during the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, Saddam apparently believed quite strongly that American culture had become soft and decadent, and, as a result, public opinion would turn against the war when significant casualties were sustained. Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh succinctly capture the interplay of these three hypotheses in Saddam’s mind: “It was suggested that the United States became unable to prosecute the war in Vietnam because public opinion could not stomach nightly scenes of war on television and the mounting lists of casualties.”

And, most importantly, Saddam believed that he could replicate what smaller and less developed countries had done in the past and create a “second Vietnam.”

Epilogue:

The recent war against Iraq provides more data to be collected and examined, and then used to test these hypotheses. Time and data constraints prevented me from conducting a thorough examination of the war. However, public statements by Saddam Hussein since 1991 indicate that the first Persian Gulf War did not disabuse him of the perception that the United States was unable to sustain large numbers of casualties. In fact, the decision by the United

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113 Freedman and Karsh, 283.
States to terminate the ground war after only 100 hours may have confirmed Saddam’s beliefs in America’s irresolution. More recently, on 11 July 2000, Saddam Hussein made the following statement at a reception for Vietnam’s first Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Tang Dung: “Iraq will continue to face American aggression against its cities and installations, and, in the same way the Americans were forced to declare directly or indirectly their failure in Vietnam... they will be forced to declare their failure in Iraq.”

Moreover, statements made by officials and media in other countries preceding the recent war in Iraq confirm the perception of American casualty sensitivity throughout the world, and provide more evidence for the reputation and democracy hypotheses. An article in the *Dubai Gulf News* on 2 April 2003 made the following prediction:

> Once the war started, support mounted for the troops in the field. But once the casualty figures start increasing and the dead start arriving back home in their tens and more, then the public will realize the truth: that surgical strikes and clinical attacks, as seen on television from the ground after the attacks are real and that each dead body represents a large number of grieving family and friends. This will gradually arouse the ire of the public and lead to calls to the U.S. and British governments to cease their conflict. It happened in Vietnam, it happened in Somalia, it affected the foreign policy of previous American presidents. It can do so again, despite the domination of the hawks at present in the Bush administration. Eventually, the public will have their way.

Hoseyn Shari’atmadari, the Chief Editor of the *Tehran Keyhan* in Iran, predicted that public opinion would “play an effective role in the fate of the war since it was public opinion that brought America back from Vietnam.” There are numerous other instances of foreign leaders, including nominal allies of the United States, commenting on the inability of the United States to

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116 “Shari’atmadari: The America-British War Against Iraq Turning into a War of Attrition will be to the Benefit of the World of Islam,” *Tehran Keyhan*, 5 April 2003. Taken from “Iran: Officials Comment on Iraq, Say ‘War of Attrition’ to ‘Benefit’ of Muslims,” FBIS, IAP20030406000059.
sustain casualties based upon their interpretation of America’s defeat in Vietnam. For instance, a
Turkish force commander reportedly stated that the United States could not win the war against
Iraq without a northern front because “the war would last for too long and the United States
would sustain too many casualties.”\footnote{“Turkish Columnist Urges ‘Correct’ Interpretation of Wolfowitz Remarks,” Istanbul Dunden Bugune Tercuman, 9 May 2003 (FBIS, GMP20030510000029).} In this way, the evidence from the most recent war in
Iraq suggests the academic literature to date may not have given the reputation hypothesis a fair
shake.
Case Study 2: Mohamed Farah Aideed and Somalia

Introduction:

Along with Vietnam, Somalia is the most oft-cited example of America’s lack of will and extreme sensitivity to casualties. Friends and enemies alike have questioned U.S. credibility after the American withdrawal from Somalia following the bloody firefight in the streets of Mogadishu on 3 October 1993. According to Barry Blechman and Tamara Cofman Wittes, “The disastrous U.S. intervention in Somalia probably did more to undermine worldwide perceptions of the efficacy of U.S. military power than any event in recent memory. Among other things, American actions in Somalia influenced the calculations of leaders in Haiti and Bosnia as they confronted U.S. threats simultaneously.”

The remainder of this paper will discuss the consequences of the U.S. withdrawal from Somalia on the perceptions and decision-making of American enemies and allies. However, this case study of America’s involvement in Somalia will examine the bases for Somali perceptions of American casualty sensitivity. That is, why did Somali warlord Mohamed Farah Aideed believe the United States could not sustain casualties?

Background:

American involvement in the humanitarian crisis in Somalia began under President George Bush in late 1992. Contrary to popular belief, the humanitarian intervention achieved a number of successes, including the provision of essential goods to a population stricken by a famine of epic proportions. However, in the end, the U.N. mission is considered by most scholars to have been a tremendous failure: Somalia remains a failed state to this day following the withdrawal of U.S. troops in March 1994. The United States and Somali warlord Mohamed Farah Aideed butted heads throughout the intervention, but it was not until UNOSOM II in the summer of 1993 that Aideed engaged the United States in a true test of strength by going on a

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118 Blechman and Wittes, 17.
broad offensive against American troops. Following the deaths of four U.S. soldiers on August 8 and the wounding of six more soldiers by a landmine explosion on August 22, President Clinton ordered Delta Force commandos and Army Rangers to Mogadishu to capture Aideed and senior SNA (Somali National Alliance) officials. During a raid on October 3, Aideed and his supporters shot down two Black Hawk helicopters, killing 18 U.S. soldiers and wounding 78 more. Following a policy review on October 6, President Clinton publicly announced a major policy change on October 7, including a promise to withdraw all American forces no later than 31 March 1994.

Aideed's Belief in American Casualty Sensitivity:

Mohamed Farah Aideed undoubtedly believed in American casualty sensitivity, and he intentionally targeted what he perceived to be America’s weakness in the summer of 1993. American and U.N. officials as well as Somalis sympathetic to Aideed stated that he “made a calculated decision to kill American soldiers” following the July 12 attack by the Quick Reaction Force against Aideed’s command and control center. According to SNA spokesman Abdi Abshir Kahiye, after the air strike, “there was no more United Nations, only Americans. If you could kill Americans, it would start problems in America directly.” John Hirsch and Robert Oakley claim that Hersi Morgan made similar threats in conversations with USLO political officers and UNITAF representatives during early 1993. Based upon these statements in isolation, it is nearly impossible to determine the reason why Aideed believed the United States could not sustain casualties.

120 Hirsch and Oakley, 127.
124 Hirsch and Oakley, 122.
Fortunately, Aideed expressed the bases for his perception of American casualty sensitivity in a conversation with Ambassador Robert Oakley, U.S. special envoy to Somalia during the U.S. involvement there from 1993 to 1995: “We have studied Vietnam and Lebanon and know how to get rid of Americans, by killing them so that public opinion will put an end to things.”\(^{125}\) Although these twenty-seven words do not disconfirm any of the four hypotheses, they do provide the most obvious support for the reputation and democracy hypotheses. Aideed based his beliefs in American casualty sensitivity on the U.S. experiences in Vietnam and Lebanon. Blechman and Wittes interpret Aideed’s statement as follows: “Based on his understanding of recent U.S. history, he believed that the United States could not sustain a campaign against him in the face of casualties.”\(^{126}\) The lesson he garnered from these failed American interventions was that the loss of U.S. soldiers’ lives was more than the American public could bear.

It is not clear from Aideed’s statement why he believed American public opinion would turn against the intervention in Somalia if the U.S. suffered casualties. Consequently, it would be imprudent to discount the possibility that Aideed believed the American public had grown soft and decadent or that American interests in Somalia were low because it was a humanitarian intervention in Africa or a combination of these two hypotheses. However, it is very interesting that Aideed explicitly mentioned the U.S. experiences in Vietnam and Lebanon, and then made predictions about how to defeat the United States based upon these past events. Thus, the reputation hypothesis fares at least as well as, and probably much better than, the competing hypotheses in this case study of the American intervention in Somalia.

\(^{125}\) Letter from Robert Oakley to Barry Blechman (7 August 1997) in Blechman and Wittes, 5.
\(^{126}\) Blechman and Wittes, 18 (emphasis added).
Supporting Evidence from Kofi Annan:

Somewhat surprisingly, the strongest evidence for the reputation hypothesis probably comes from a much friendlier actor in the Somali intervention. Following the retreat from Somalia in 1994, then-Under Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Kofi Annan commented, “One has only to kill a few Americans and the U.S. leaves.”127 Kofi Annan’s statement is particularly important for two reasons: First, Kofi Annan was not an opponent of the United States, yet his statement reinforces the viewpoint of American enemies like Aideed. Although some enemies of the United States made statements purely for propaganda purposes, it becomes much less likely that these statements are unreliable if enemies, allies, and neutral parties alike were making similar statements. Second, and more importantly, his statement not only draws a lesson from the past, but also implies that similar events are likely to occur in the future. Based upon the American withdrawal from Somalia, he casts doubt upon the ability of the United States to conduct peacekeeping operations in the future if casualties were sustained.

Conclusion:

In the remaining case studies, I will argue that the American withdrawal from Somalia probably did more to undermine American credibility than any other event since the end of the Cold War. The U.S. decision to retreat when casualties were sustained did not come without a high cost. Instead, it encouraged and emboldened American enemies to challenge the United States in the hopes that 1) the United States would be deterred from intervening for fear of suffering casualties, 2) the United States would fight only using airpower because of the expectation of high casualties in ground combat, and/or 3) the United States would retreat from battle when casualties were sustained. Blechman and Wittes state, “And the withdrawal from

Mogadishu not only was a humiliating defeat for the United States but it also reinforced perceptions of America’s lack of resolve and further complicated U.S. efforts to achieve its goals through threats of force alone.\textsuperscript{128}

However, the American intervention in Somalia serves as more than evidence for future opponents to cite as proof of America’s lack of resolve. In addition, Mohamed Farah Aideed believed the United States could not sustain casualties because of American actions in Vietnam and Beirut \textit{years earlier}. The decisions to abandon American commitments in Vietnam and Beirut may have been correct, but it would be naïve to argue that they did not come without cost. Blechman and Wittes conclude:

\textit{... [T]he U.S. experience in Vietnam and subsequent incidents during both the Carter and first Reagan administrations left a heavy burden on future American policy makers. There is a generation of political leaders throughout the world whose basic perception of U.S. military power and political will is one of weakness, who enter any situation with a fundamental belief that the United States can be defeated or driven away.}\textsuperscript{129}

Enemies and allies gave the United States a reputation for lacking resolve and for being unable to sustain casualties. This reputation (or, more accurately, these reputations) harmed the ability of the United States to deter and coerce much weaker opponents throughout the 1990s, when the U.S. reached its peak in terms of military strength. In such a way, Somalia serves a dual role in this study of reputation: First, Aideed’s belief in American casualty sensitivity was based upon the American experiences in Vietnam and Beirut. And, second, future adversaries were emboldened and encouraged by the lesson of Somalia, where the United States retreated in the face of double-digit casualties.

\textsuperscript{128} Blechman and Wittes, 5.
\textsuperscript{129} Blechman and Wittes, 5.
Case Study 3: General Raoul Cedras and Haiti

Background and Introduction:

Strong evidence for the reputation hypothesis comes from the rebuff of the U.S.S. Harlan County at Port-Au-Prince just a week after the loss of eighteen American soldiers in Mogadishu, Somalia. Nearly two years after the coup of Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the United Nations Security Council, in September 1993, voted to send military police and advisers to Haiti under the terms of the Governor’s Island Agreement. The first U.S. naval vessel, the U.S.S. Harlan County, departed the United States in late September carrying approximately 220 lightly armed U.S. and Canadian military engineers. When the ship arrived at Port-Au-Prince on 11 October 1993, it was met by “a mob of about 100 Haitians equipped with small arms, sticks, and pitchforks.” The mob had banners and threatened journalists, diplomats, and the Harlan County with chants of “Kill the whites!”, “Somalia! Somalia!”, and “We are going to turn this into another Somalia!” Consequently, the ship anchored in the harbor about half a mile from shore, and President Clinton ordered the ship to return to the United States the next day.

Despite numerous coercive efforts, the United States did not achieve the resignation of General Cedras for more than a year after the rebuff of the Harlan County. In fact, Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide was not able to return to Haiti as President until 15 October 1994. Why did U.S. efforts at coercion take so long when it faced an enemy as disorganized and weak as the paramilitaries under General Cedras’s command? Barry Blechman and Tamara Cofman Wittes comment on the inefficacy of U.S. threats:

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The turning away of the U.S. ship followed closely on the defeat of U.S. forces in Somalia, a coincidence that was particularly harmful to the efficacy of U.S. threats. For the next eight months the United States made numerous demonstrations of its military capabilities through deployments of Navy and Marine forces off the island and by staging exercises intended to show practice for an invasion. Yet the Haitian ruler, General Raoul Cedras, with virtually no means of defending himself if the United States did invade, refused to back down.133

In other words, General Cedras made predictions about future American behavior based upon its recent history of actions in both Somalia and Haiti. Tighter economic sanctions, military exercises, and rumors of an imminent U.S. invasion did not impress Haitian military leaders. “On the contrary, on 11 May 1994, the junta-controlled Haitian Senate proclaimed Emile Jonassaint, the head of the Haitian Supreme Court, provisional president of Haiti. Two months later, on 11 July 1994, international human rights observers, who had remained in Haiti after the October 1993 withdrawal, were given forty-eight hours to leave Haiti.”134 As a matter of fact, General Cedras did not agree to step down until he received word that U.S. forces had left their bases and the military operation was actually under way.

_A Rebuttal and a Reply:_

One could argue that the decision by General Cedras to step down reveals that he did not really believe in American casualty sensitivity, but was simply using it for propaganda purposes. I respond to this argument in two ways. First, I disagree that General Cedras’s decision proves that he did not believe in American casualty sensitivity. Instead, it is just as likely that he knew he did not have the capabilities to impose any significant casualties on the invading American forces. Therefore, even though he believed American forces could not sustain casualties, he did not have any confidence in the ability of his own military forces to actually impose any costs on

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133 Blechman and Wittes, 22.
invading American troops. Or, perhaps the most plausible explanation contends that there were numerous factors that went into General Cedras’s decision to step down. In other words, General Cedras may have realized that the offer by the United States to allow him to escape to Panama was better than the uncertainty of facing off against the American military, even if there was a chance the U.S. would retreat in the face of mounting casualties.

Second, even if General Cedras did believe he could impose substantial costs on U.S. troops, his belief in American casualty sensitivity (or even his feigned belief in American casualty sensitivity) harmed American efforts at coercion. In this sense, it is irrelevant if General Cedras actually believed the United States would be unable to sustain casualties when they occurred. Instead, he based his strategy on avoiding that very situation: he intended to deter an American attack by repeatedly reminding the United States of the human costs that would be associated with an invasion of Haiti. On 10 October 1993 – the eve of the arrival of the U.S.S. Harlan County – U.S. Defense Secretary Les Aspin tried to calm fears of “another Somalia” by stating that the soldiers would be carrying M-16s. Within hours, General Cedras told the Haitian press that he disagreed with Aspin’s declaration.135 One Haitian official remarked, “We thought we had a fifty-fifty chance that he’d run away, which is what he’s done.”136 A senior aide to Malval [Prime Minister] stated that the Haitian paramilitaries were waging psychological warfare to convince the United States that American troops would be as unsafe in Haiti as they were in Somalia just days earlier: “It is a show for the Americans… to tell the Americans this is Somalia, but it is not.”137

136 Conversino, 20.
137 Perusse, 56.
Evidence from Academic Literature:

There is very little scholarly work discussing the beliefs and perceptions of General Cedras during the crisis over Haiti. However, what little has been written supports the reputation hypothesis while providing scant evidence for the culture, democracy, and interests hypotheses. Remarkably, there are practically no statements by General Cedras or other members of Haiti's junta arguing that the United States would not sustain casualties because U.S. interests were low or because American society had become soft and decadent. Instead, most scholars agree that Haitian perceptions of American casualty sensitivity were based upon past American actions, especially those in the very recent past such as Somalia. Indeed, as recently as October 7, President Clinton had publicly announced a major change in U.S. policy regarding Somalia, including the selection of a date for the withdrawal of U.S. forces (March 31, 1994).  

According to Major Mark J. Conversino (USAF):

... [T]he impression that America can be thwarted by simply inflicting a handful of casualties or invoking the ghost of Vietnam persists and has not been lost on other nations and groups as well. Members of Haiti’s junta, men who could hardly be described as wielding tremendous military power, believed that the Clinton Administration’s reaction to Somalia showed that it lacked the “stomach” to fight.  

Blechman and Wittes argue that U.S. threats were ineffective because General Cedras “may have taken heart from the recent American behavior in Somalia, as well as from his success in compelling the ship carrying UN peacekeepers to withdraw. He may have believed that even if the United States did invade, all his forces would have to do would be to inflict some casualties and the Americans would withdraw.”

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138 Hirsch and Oakley, 128.
139 Conversino, 19.
140 Blechman and Wittes, 22-23.
Conclusion:

In sum, the United States had to go to painstaking lengths to coerce a relatively small number of Haitian military thugs because it had shown signs of weakness, in particular the inability to risk or sustain casualties, in the recent past. The withdrawal from Somalia as well as the rebuff of the Harlan County "sowed doubt worldwide on U.S. capacity to carry out its foreign policy commitments."\(^{141}\) These American retreats emboldened current and future American adversaries. Even American allies began to question the credibility of American commitments. Reverend Antoine Adrien, Roman Catholic priest and adviser to Aristide, stated, "[T]he Clinton administration has lost credibility not only with the Haitian people but also with the military. They no longer think that the Clinton administration is serious about anything they say or do."\(^{142}\) Although this case does not disprove the interests, culture, or democracy hypotheses, it certainly strengthens the argument that states should fight for their reputations.

\(^{141}\) Perusse, 56.
\(^{142}\) Perusse, 82.
Case Study 4: Slobodan Milosevic, Bosnia, and Kosovo

Introduction:

Former Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic played a key role in triggering the conflict in the Balkans in the early 1990s as well as the crisis in Kosovo during the late 1990s. In both cases, he questioned the resolve of the United States, doubting that it had the stomach for a sustained military effort. When one simply looks at the enormous advantages the United States and NATO possessed in terms of military and economic strength, it is remarkable that they were unable to deter and/or compel Milosevic twice in the same decade. However, when one examines the history of international waffling over the former Yugoslavia – marked by frequent threats, failed ultimatums, and inaction – as well as former President Clinton’s pledge not to introduce ground troops into Kosovo, Milosevic’s intransigence becomes understandable, if not predictable. In addition, like most opponents of the United States after the Cold War, “Milosevic reportedly evoked the Vietnam analogy as a reason the United States would not risk casualties to defeat him.”143 Why did Milosevic believe the U.S. would not carry out its threats and risk the lives of its troops?

Bosnia:

Although I will focus upon Milosevic’s perceptions of American casualty sensitivity prior to and during Operation Allied Force in the spring of 1999, I would be remiss if I did not at least mention his perceptions during the crisis in the Balkans in the early 1990s. In an interview with David Rieff, Mihailo Markovic – one of the principal ideologists of the Milosevic regime – said that Milosevic had assured him in May 1993 that the Americans would not deploy the peacekeepers that Clinton had promised. Markovic admitted, “I was skeptical at the time, but given what I have seen of the Clinton administration’s behavior, I am inclined to think that

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143 Christensen, “Correspondence: Power and Resolve in U.S. China Policy,” 163.
Milosevic was right.” Markovic was most likely referring to the years of intense national debate characterized by indecisiveness and a general lack of leadership from the Clinton administration. In fact, Markovic made direct comments about the emptiness of American threats: “We can compare the threats from the United States to shooting stars. There are some stars that are still shining on us even though they have been dead for many years.” Statements about America’s unwillingness to take casualties were not limited to Serbian leaders. According to The Economist, people at the United Nations were reportedly describing U.S. policy toward peacekeeping as “not one soldier, not one cent.”

Neither Serb soldiers nor their commanders believed that the West would ever summon the will to fight. According to one Bosnian Serb official,

You think the American public was upset when eighteen of your soldiers were killed in Africa. Wait until the coffins start coming back from Bosnia. You are not a strong nation anymore. You cannot stand the idea of your children dying. But we Serbs can look at death. We are not afraid. That is why we will beat you even if you come to help these Turks you love so much.

In this statement, the Bosnian Serb official used arguments that support the reputation, democracy, and culture hypotheses, but interestingly he did not mention the balance of interests. And Radovan Karadzic, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs, liked to say, “We will be your next Vietnam.” Therefore, the evidence from the crisis in the Balkans in the early 1990s provides fairly strong evidence in favor of the reputation hypothesis as well as the democracy and culture hypotheses. In “Sawdust Superpower: Perceptions of U.S. Casualty Tolerance in the Post-Gulf

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147 Hirsch and Oakley, 159 (footnote 10).
148 Rieff, 160.
149 Rieff, 160.
War Era,” Major Mark Conversino (USAF) summarized the Bosnian Serb strategy: “Waving the bloody shirt of protracted and costly military adventures, Serbian leaders hoped to discourage direct U.S. intervention in the war in Bosnia.”

*Milosevic, Kosovo, and American Casualty Sensitivity:

Stephen Hosmer cautions: “It is important to acknowledge that the absence of authoritative documentary evidence and in-depth oral histories from Milosevic and other key Serb officials and advisers must necessarily render any conclusions about the actual sources of Milosevic’s decisions during the Kosovo crisis somewhat speculative.” Fortunately, I have found persuasive and credible evidence about Milosevic’s perceptions of American casualty tolerance by researching 1) statements made by Milosevic himself publicly or in meetings with American diplomats, 2) statements and published interviews of Serb military and civilian officials who directly interacted with Milosevic, and 3) Serbian wartime policy and behavior.

Milosevic did not believe NATO would bomb Yugoslavia. In fact, when told that bombing was a realistic option, Milosevic retorted: “Anyone who does that – bomb – is going to spend the rest of his life on a psychiatric couch.” And, even if it did bomb from the air, he was confident that the West could not sustain a bombing campaign for very long. During a ceremonial dinner in late 1998, Holbrooke reminded Milosevic that he faced the prospect of massive bombing if he did not agree to the U.S. proposal. And Milosevic, in an extraordinary scene, leaned back and replied, “Yes, Dick, I understand, but I’m sure that the bombing will be very polite.” When General Short objected to his statement, Milosevic replied with a sneer,

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150 Conversino, 20.
"Yes, I understand, but I’m sure the Americans will bomb with great politeness." In addition, he thought the United States lacked the resolve for a ground invasion because it could not tolerate the requisite casualties. So, why did Milosevic believe the United States could not sustain casualties, and consequently, would only conduct a brief bombing campaign without any threat of a ground invasion? Milosevic’s statements and actions provide at least tentative support for all four hypotheses, but the reputation hypotheses fairs the best once again.

Evidence for the Culture and Democracy Hypotheses:

Milosevic seemingly believed Western culture had become so soft and decadent that the U.S. and NATO would not be able to stand body bags coming home. He told German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer in March 1999: “I can stand death – lots of it – but you can’t.” This statement could also be interpreted to support the democracy hypothesis, as Milosevic may have been implying that he would not lose his job, unlike Western leaders, when casualties mounted. In an interview with Arnaud de Borchgrave of United Press International on 30 April 1999, Milosevic referred to the American legislative branch when arguing that the U.S. bombing campaign would fail: “The U.S. Congress is beginning to understand that bombing a country into compliance is not a viable policy or strategy.” Although these statements provide circumstantial evidence in support of the culture and democracy hypotheses, scholars will have to wait for greater access to Milosevic’s own writings in order to conduct a more conclusive test of these hypotheses.

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154 Doder and Branson, 254.
156 Stigler, 128.
Evidence for the Interests Hypothesis:

Milosevic firmly believed the balance of interests favored the Serbs: “What is the reason for the aggression from the American soldiers? When our soldiers die, they know why they are dying: for their fatherland, for their homeland. And what does your soldier die for 5,000 miles from home?”\textsuperscript{157} In his interview with Arnaud de Borchgrave during the NATO bombing campaign, Milosevic openly questioned the ability of the United States to sustain casualties: “You are not willing to sacrifice lives to achieve our surrender; but we are willing to die to defend our rights as an independent sovereign state.”\textsuperscript{158} While the Serbs were fighting for their homeland and their very existence as a state, the U.S. and NATO were fighting for humanitarian purposes, alliance concerns, and a host of other reasons (none of which included the defense of their homelands or their existence as states). Indeed, Milosevic even questioned America’s interests in Kosovo during his negotiations with Richard Holbrooke: “Are you crazy enough to bomb us over these issues we’re talking about in that lousy little Kosovo?”\textsuperscript{159} Milosevic did not believe the United States would sacrifice the lives of American soldiers to defend the lives of Kosovar Albanians, and he may have been correct.

Evidence for the Reputation Hypothesis:

Milosevic grounded his belief in American casualty sensitivity in past American actions (or, more accurately, inactions) and statements. More specifically, Milosevic gave the United States a reputation for irresolution based upon its weak responses to crises in Iraq, its waffling


\textsuperscript{158} Doder and Branson, 263.

\textsuperscript{159} Interview with Richard Holbrooke, PBS Frontline, “War in Europe,” 22 February 2000. Taken from Hosmer, 19.
over earlier crises in the former Yugoslavia, former President Clinton's very admission of his fear of American casualties in ground combat, and the conduct of the air campaign over Kosovo.

First, with regards to Iraq, Saddam Hussein's open defiance of the U.N. inspection regime dated back to at least November 1997; however, it took thirteen months for the United States to make good on its threat to use force.\footnote{Ivo H. Daalder, \textit{Getting to Dayton: The Making of America's Bosnia Policy} (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2000), 186.} And when American and British forces finally carried through on their threats in December 1998, the bombing campaign dubbed "Operation Desert Fox" lasted just seventy-two hours.\footnote{Sell, 300.} According to Louis Sell, Milosevic made predictions about future American actions in Kosovo based upon the duration and extent of the American bombing in Iraq in December 1998. Vuk Draskovic, who served as deputy prime minister during the crisis over Kosovo, stated: "Milosevic absolutely did not expect to be bombed by NATO, or if it did bomb, it would only be for two or three days, just to save face and say it had done something."\footnote{Author's interview with Vuk Draskovic, Belgrade (21 June 2001). Taken from Sell, 302.} It is more than a coincidence that Milosevic's expectations of the duration and intensity of a bombing campaign were identical to the duration and intensity of Operation Desert Fox. Ivo Daalder and Michael O'Hanlon write, "Not only did NATO generals and senior U.S. and allied officials say as much, but also American and British air strikes against Iraq the previous December suggested that the Clinton administration itself did not have the stomach for a sustained military effort."\footnote{Daalder and O'Hanlon, 95.} Simply put, Milosevic gave the United States a reputation for irresolution – including an unwillingness to put soldiers in harm's way – because of its extraordinarily slow and weak response to Iraq's defiance of the U.N. inspections regime.

Second, "... the U.S. reputation for following through on its threats to use force was severely weakened over time, undermining both their credibility and usefulness in backing up
diplomacy.” American and Western credibility eroded dramatically in 1991 when diplomatic posturing during the sieges of Vukovar and Dubrovnik was not followed by action. Neither the Serb crackdown in Kosovo that began in March 1998 nor the blatant violation of the October agreement was met by a military response. Therefore, Milosevic gave the United States a reputation for lacking resolve based upon firsthand experiences in Bosnia and Kosovo as well as lessons from past U.S. military engagements including Vietnam and Operation Desert Fox.

Third, in his national address on the night that the air campaign began over Kosovo, President Clinton announced, “I do not intend to put our troops in Kosovo to fight a war.” Clinton’s decision to publicly and explicitly rule out the use of ground troops confirmed Milosevic’s perception of American casualty sensitivity and emboldened him to stand up to the United States. According to Lenard Cohen,

Milosevic already knew, of course, that the allies had not prepared for a ground invasion. But as statements by Clinton and members of his administration stipulating there would be an exclusive use of air operations in the struggle undoubtedly encouraged the Yugoslav president to try and withstand the bombing for as long as he could. If a central component of crisis resolution through the use of linked diplomatic and military power is to “preserve uncertainty” in the opponent’s mind concerning the consequences of rejecting peaceful options, then the Clinton administration certainly made a crucial mistake in ruling out the possibility of a ground invasion of Kosovo at the beginning of the war.

Clinton’s statement was not an anomaly; instead, it was one in a long list of public statements suggesting, if not explicitly stating, that any military operation would be limited to air strikes. Prior to the opening of the Rambouillet conference in February 1999, U.S. Secretary of State

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164 Daalder, 186.
165 Stigler, 149.
166 Daalder, 186.
168 Cohen, 277.
Madeline Albright warned Milosevic that he could expect a sustained NATO air campaign if he refused to comply; she did not threaten, however, any ground attack. In addition, statements by Western leaders that the introduction of ground troops was not an option hamstrung efforts at coercion. For example, during the bombing in mid-May, Schroder stated, "Germany believes that sending in ground troops is unthinkable. That is our position, and it won't change in the future." Such statements only reinforced Milosevic's perceptions of a weak-willed Western alliance unwilling to risk lives to achieve victory.

The preceding paragraph contains strong evidence that the United States sent frequent signals that it would not introduce ground troops into Kosovo regardless of the situation. However, it also assumes that Milosevic received these signals. Is there any evidence that he actually received these signals? As a matter of fact, Milosevic revealed such knowledge even before Clinton's March 24 announcement. In a final meeting with Richard Holbrooke on March 22, Milosevic said that he understood that the NATO would bomb Serbia if he did not agree to negotiate and accept Rambouillet as the basis for negotiation. And Holbrooke said (deliberately and after consultations with the Pentagon), "I want to be clear with you... it will be swift, it will be severe, it will be sustained." And he replied, in a very matter-of-fact way: "No more engagement, no more negotiations, I understand that you will bomb us." It is very interesting that Milosevic twice used the phrase, "you will bomb us," when Holbrooke asked if he understood the consequences of his decision. Milosevic did not say "you will invade us" or "you will declare war on us." Instead, he replied that he knew an air strike was imminent, and all evidence suggests that he believed it would be of relatively short duration. Stigler concludes,

169 Stigler, 127.
170 Stigler, 147.
"... when NATO publicly disavowed all ground options, it unwittingly set itself a high threshold for any later efforts to signal a credible ground threat."¹⁷²

Finally, America’s conduct during the war and maintaining the peace only confirmed Milosevic’s belief that the United States could not sustain casualties. The NATO campaign was characterized by flying at medium and high altitudes, with minimal risk to pilots and their aircraft but at the expense of bombing accuracy. According to Jeffrey Record,

> 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. Airpower was kept at safe altitudes. Clausewitz was stood on his head.¹⁷³

It is nearly impossible to believe that Milosevic did not notice NATO’s extreme caution in the air campaign. Military leaders joined their civilian counterparts in encouraging the adversary by making statements about American casualty sensitivity and the importance of force protection even at the expense of mission accomplishment.¹⁷⁴ In a joint statement before the Senate Armed Services Committee months after the war had concluded, Secretary of Defense William Cohen and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Henry Shelton declared, "the paramount lesson learned from Operation Allied Force is that the well-being of our people must remain our

¹⁷² Stigler, 130.
¹⁷³ Dr. Jeffrey Record, “Force-Protection Fetishism: Sources, Consequences, and (?) Solutions,” Aerospace Power Journal (Summer 2000), 4-5.
¹⁷⁴ Following the conclusion of the war, General Wesley Clark, NATO’s then Supreme Allied Commander, explained NATO’s unprecedented concern over the loss of aircraft and pilots: “It was paramount that we avoid losses. Why? Because in an air campaign you don’t want to lose aircraft. When you start to lose these expensive machines the countdown starts against you. The headlines begin to shout, ‘NATO loses second aircraft,’ and the people ask, ‘How long can this go on?’ The answer had to be, ‘It can go on indefinitely, whatever time it takes to compel Milosevic to comply with the will of the international community.’ But all realized it could not go on indefinitely if we were suffering a succession of aircraft losses. Moreover, the same argument applied if we were losing air crewmen. Thus the extraordinary steps to avoid losses." Wesley K. Clark, “The United States and NATO: The Way Ahead,” Parameters (Winter 1999-2000).
first priority. In fact, it seems that he hoped to be victorious by splitting the alliance and/or forcing NATO countries to the bargaining table by shooting down aircraft and killing or capturing NATO pilots. One account claims that Milosevic’s military chiefs had promised him that they could shoot down ten to twenty aircraft within a relatively short time with their existing air defense systems. Following the war, follow-on Army forces in Kosovo stressed “self-protection” over other peacekeeping tasks. Moreover, soldiers from the other NATO countries were quick to note and then make fun of America’s timidity in the peacekeeping effort. In an article published during the summer of 2000, Major Charles K. Hyde wrote: “In an attempt to drive the casualty rate to zero, the US military is building an isolated, multi-million-dollar compound to provide a comfortable, secure environment. Allied soldiers who still live among the people, as marines did previously, ridicule the American compound, calling it ‘Disneyland.’” According to Jeffrey Record, “The US obsession with zero casualties became the butt of jokes by officers from European peacekeeping contingents.” Tales of America’s unwillingness to risk lives in order to accomplish military missions serve as evidence of American casualty sensitivity for current and future American adversaries (and allies). That is, America’s decision to sacrifice military effectiveness for the sake of force protection “broadcast to friend and foe alike America’s Achilles’ heel.”


176 Hosmer, 32 (footnote 37). See Judah, 232.

177 Major Hyde, 26.


179 Record, “Force Protection Fetishism: Sources, Consequences, and (?) Solutions,” 5.
Conclusion:

In sum, American statements and actions displaying a lack of resolve and unwillingness to take casualties encouraged Slobodan Milosevic to stand up to the United States and NATO in the face of overwhelming military and economic power. Although this case study presents evidence that supports each of the four hypotheses, it is clear that the reputation hypothesis stands upon the most solid ground. Milosevic clearly viewed America’s history of irresolution, including an unwillingness to put troops in harm’s way, as a forecast of what he could expect in a confrontation with the United States.
Case Study 5: Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda, and Afghanistan

Introduction:

On 11 September 2001, Osama bin Laden’s name became synonymous with global terror even though his terrorist leadership of and activities with al-Qaeda dated back roughly a decade. Bin Laden’s al-Qaeda was responsible for the bombing of the American embassies in Africa in 1998 as well as the U.S.S. Cole in the fall of 2000, and apparently played a significant role in Somalia in the early 1990s. Moreover, he has repeatedly stated his belief that Americans cannot stand the sight of their own blood. Bin Laden’s strategy has focused upon using terrorism to bring about his political goals such as removing American troops from Saudi Arabia and ending U.S. support of the Israeli occupation of Palestine. Why did bin Laden believe that he could influence American foreign policy by engaging in acts of terrorism? That is, why did he believe the United States could not sustain casualties?

The evidence presented in this case study strongly supports the reputation hypothesis: Osama bin Laden predicted future American behavior based upon his interpretation of past U.S. actions, particularly the American retreats from Vietnam, Beirut, and Somalia. Now, it would be foolhardy to argue that bin Laden would not have committed the aforementioned terrorist attacks if he had not believed in American casualty sensitivity. However, bin Laden’s words and actions suggest that he was encouraged by these American retreats and hoped to achieve similar results by inflicting comparable numbers of casualties. The evidence also provides reasonable support for the culture and democracy hypotheses. On the other hand, I was unable to find any statements by bin Laden that provide support for the interests hypothesis.
Evidence for the Culture Hypothesis:

Osama bin Laden undoubtedly believed that Western culture, and specifically U.S. culture, had become materialistic and soft. In an interview with Al-Jazeera television aired on 10 June 1999, bin Laden commented on “the weakness, frailty, and cowardice of U.S. troops.”\textsuperscript{180} His comments, however, have not been limited to the weakness of American soldiers but have been extended to all of American society. In Holy War, Inc., Peter Bergen paraphrased a message from bin Laden printed in The Washington Post months after the September 11 attacks: “Referring to the ‘blessed attacks’ on the Trade Center, bin Laden says the havoc they wreaked in the United States revealed its ‘fragile’ nature.”\textsuperscript{181} Therefore, bin Laden’s belief in American casualty sensitivity appears to be based at least partially on his perception of American society as weak and fragile.

Evidence for the Democracy Hypothesis:

Bin Laden also believed that the deaths of American civilians and soldiers would result in a change in U.S. foreign policy because of America’s democratic nature. In an interview with CNN aired on 10 May 1997, he told the mothers of U.S. soldiers to protest against American policy in the Middle East:

If there is a message that I may send through you, then it is a message I address to the mothers of the American troops who came here with their military uniforms walking proudly up and down our land... I say that this represents a blatant provocation to over a billion Muslims. To these mothers I say if they are concerned for their sons, then let them object to the American government’s policy.\textsuperscript{182}

In this statement, bin Laden reveals his belief that public opinion can lead to changes in American foreign policy because of the democratic nature of American governance. He believed

\textsuperscript{181} Bergen, 234.
\textsuperscript{182} Bergen, 22-23.
that the mothers of American soldiers could sway public opinion with their protestations, and American leaders would eventually bow to the pressures of mounting public opposition.

*Evidence for the Reputation Hypothesis:*

Bin Laden’s belief in American casualty sensitivity was grounded in the history of American defeats and retreats in Vietnam, Beirut, and Somalia over the past three decades. Bin Laden’s speech record casts serious doubt upon the proposition put forward by scholars like Mercer and Press that leaders of other countries do not look at a state’s previous behavior to predict future actions. In his interview with CNN in 1997, bin Laden made veiled threats to the American military: “If the U.S. thinks and brags that it still has this kind of power even after all these successive defeats in Vietnam, Beirut, Aden, and Somalia, let them go back to those places.”

It appears that bin Laden paid close attention to America’s defeats and retreats during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. But did he make predictions about future American actions based upon these past humiliations? Unfortunately, the answer to this question is a resounding “yes”.

For bin Laden, the American withdrawal from Beirut ranks second only to the retreat from Mogadishu as evidence of American irresolution. For example, in an interview with John Miller of ABC News in 1998, bin Laden claimed, “…the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier… was proven in Beirut when the Marines fled after two explosions.”

As a matter of fact, bin Laden once met with Imad Mughniiyeh, the Iran-based head of Hezbollah’s security service who masterminded the suicide truck bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983. The bombing killed 241 American servicemen and precipitated a U.S. withdrawal from Lebanon within a few months. Bin Laden not only cited the retreat of the Marines following the bombing of the barracks, but also frequently made

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183 Bergen, 176.
predictions about future American actions based upon this retreat. Ali Mohamed, a captured al-Qaeda member, claimed that bin Laden used the Beirut model in his 1998 attacks on the American embassies in Africa. In addition, Ali Mohamed stated that bin Laden planned to use “the same method, to force the United States out of Saudi Arabia.”

Bin Laden most frequently cited the American retreat from Somalia as proof of America’s lack of resolve and inability to sustain casualties. Bin Laden discussed the American retreat from Somalia in his interview with CNN in March 1997: “After a little resistance, the American troops left after achieving nothing. They left after claiming that they were the largest power on earth. They left after some resistance from powerless, poor, unarmed people whose only weapon is the belief in God, and who do not fear the fabricated American media lies.” In his interview with Al-Jazeera in June 1999, he discussed what members of al-Qaeda who had fought in Somalia thought of the American military: “Based on the reports we received from our brothers, who participated in the jihad in Somalia, we learned that they saw the weakness, frailty, and cowardice of U.S. troops. Only eighteen U.S. troops were killed. Nonetheless, they fled in the heart of darkness, frustrated after they had caused great commotion about the New World Order.” These mujahideen fighting against Americans in Somalia “were surprised at the collapse of American morale. This convinced us that the Americans are a paper tiger.”

There is no doubt that America’s withdrawal from Somalia following the loss of eighteen soldiers in a firefight on 3 October 1993 gave bin Laden tremendous hope. According to Elaine

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Landau, "Bin Laden counted the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Mogadishu as among his most significant victories against America. Following it he reasoned that if it were possible to drive the United States out of Somalia, it was possible to purge the entire Middle East of Western influences." In his interview with John Miller of ABC News in 1998, bin Laden expressed these ideas in his own words:

We have seen in the last decade the decline of the American government and the weakness of the American soldier, who is ready to wage cold wars and unprepared to fight long wars. This was proven in Beirut when the Marines fled after two explosions. It also proves that they can run in less than twenty-four hours, and this was also repeated in Somalia... [They] forgot about being the world leader and the leader of the new world order. [They] left, dragging their corpses and their defeat, and stopped using such titles.

Bin Laden had been intricately involved in setting up the camps and training bases for the fighters heading to Somalia. With this early success, his confidence soared and he prepared to challenge the United States in a larger arena. In sum, the leader of al-Qaeda – arguably the most serious threat to American national security today – made numerous statements consistent with the reputation hypothesis and no statements that support the interests hypothesis.

Furthermore, bin Laden and his Islamic fundamentalists viewed Somalia as an opportunity to punish the United States and create an "outcome [that] would be even worse than the result of the Vietnam War." They studied the details of the American experience in Vietnam and attempted to recreate the same situations in which U.S. forces suffered decades earlier. According to Yossef Bodansky, the plan involved "drawing them [the Americans] into a land war, street battles, attack and retract, and ambushes, as was done in Vietnam." In such a

189 Landau, 79.
191 Landau, 80.
192 Bodansky, 77.
193 Bodansky, 76.
way, bin Laden’s actions revealed that America’s history of irresolution was the basis for his perception of American casualty sensitivity.

_data for future enemies:_

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, the United States launched a military campaign against al-Qaeda as well as the Taliban, the government of Afghanistan that harbored al-Qaeda. Although the Taliban was soundly defeated by a combination of American air power, American special forces, and indigenous anti-Taliban forces, most experts agree that Osama bin Laden and much of his senior leadership probably escaped to Pakistan following fierce fighting in the White Mountains near Tora Bora.\(^{194}\)

According to Jeffrey Record,

...[R]eliance on proxies proved a two-edged sword. It spared US lives, but it may also have made it easier for Osama bin Laden and much of the al Qaeda leadership to escape. U.S. troops were withheld from most of the potentially deadly cave searching in the Tora Bora area, leading some commentators to conclude that unabated casualty phobia – war on the cheap – may have spared bin Laden to fight another day.\(^{195}\)

There were numerous legitimate reasons why the United States wanted to avoid the appearance of an overbearing American military presence on the ground in Afghanistan. However, I contend that casualty aversion should not have been one of these reasons because the United States had the opportunity to capture its most dangerous enemy, Osama bin Laden. Record concludes, “US combat operations in Afghanistan were nonetheless conducted in a manner consistent with those of casualty-phobic Operations Deliberate Force (Bosnia) and Allied Force


(Kosovo). Either the political and military leadership remained casualty-phobic, or circumstances permitted a cheap victory, or – most probably – both.\textsuperscript{196} In this way, American reluctance to introduce ground troops in combat becomes evidence for the next adversary when making a decision about challenging the United States.

\textit{Conclusion:}

This case study of Osama bin Laden directly contradicts the conclusions of Hopf, Mercer, and Press regarding reputation and credibility. Remarkably, I was unable to find any speech evidence from bin Laden that supports the interests hypothesis. Meanwhile, there is considerable evidence that bin Laden based his perception of American casualty sensitivity upon America’s string of defeats and retreats in Vietnam, Beirut, and Somalia during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, respectively. These American retreats not only served as proof of American irresolution for bin Laden, but also provided him with the strategic and operational templates for how to force Americans to withdraw from countries like Saudi Arabia. In addition, America’s unwillingness to put troops in harm’s way to prevent senior al-Qaeda members, perhaps including bin Laden himself, from fleeing into Pakistan may be evidence for the next terrorist or dictator. The bottom line is indisputable: Osama bin Laden gave the United States a reputation for being unable to sustain casualties based upon America’s history of withdrawing after suffering casualties in Vietnam, Beirut, and Somalia.

\textsuperscript{196} Record, “Collapsed Countries, Casualty Dread, and the New American Way of War,” 11.
Case Study 6: Chinese Perceptions of American Casualty Sensitivity

Introduction:

The potential implications of foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity can be seen in Thomas J. Christensen’s article, “Posing Problems without Catching Up.” He discusses a very dangerous line of thinking amongst a number of Chinese government analysts regarding U.S. staying power. Niu Jun, a prominent CCP America watcher, believes that a Chinese ability to impose a significant number of American casualties would prevent American intervention in a conflict over Taiwan.197 Coupled with other factors,198 Chinese faith in this perception of American casualty sensitivity could be strong enough to influence a decision to take military action in the Taiwan Straits. Christensen summarizes the disturbing and destabilizing aspect of this belief: “If leaders believe that their enemy lacks the willingness to fight once a situation gets very dangerous for that enemy’s personnel, then those leaders need not acquire weapons that can defeat that enemy militarily before deciding to use force.”199 In a commentary published in The Straits Times (Singapore) in September 2000, Richard Halloran foreshadowed Christensen’s argument: “Rumbling through Asia and the US with increasing intensity has been a perception that Americans are no longer willing to spill blood to defend their national interests.”200

While recognizing the potential dangers of these perceptions, it is significant that this is a case of “a dog that has not barked.” Indeed, Christensen states that there is currently a debate in

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198 Christensen cites two other factors that could lead to conflict over Taiwan in the not-so-distant future when combined with a belief in American casualty sensitivity: “increasing Chinese coercive capacity over the next decade and the possibility of a growing sense of domestic desperation in Beijing if the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is unable to gain accommodation from Taiwan over the next several years.” Christensen, “Correspondence: Power and Resolve in U.S. China Policy,” 162.
199 Christensen, “Posing Problems without Catching Up,” 17.
200 Richard Halloran, “History Shows America Won’t Shir as Fight, Even in Asia,” The Straits Times (Singapore), 4 September 2000, 48.
China about American resolve and the ability of the United States to sustain casualties.\textsuperscript{201} It is quite possible that Chinese inaction can be explained by the fact that the Chinese leadership does not place much credence in American casualty sensitivity.\textsuperscript{202} Alternatively, Chinese analysts may simply be signaling to the United States in order to prove they are not bluffing when they make military threats. However, Chinese inaction in the Taiwan Straits can also be explained by other factors, such as the lack of an amphibious capability to launch an attack or a desire to avoid conflict because of the high levels of trade and investment between Taiwan and the mainland. The true perceptions of the Chinese leadership may not be known for sometime, but the fact that a sizable number of Chinese government analysts apparently believe U.S. staying power is quite limited should be very disturbing to scholars of American and Chinese foreign policy. More closely examining the reasons some Chinese analysts hold their beliefs in American casualty sensitivity may prove invaluable to preventing war in the Taiwan Straits, arguably the most likely site for a great power war in the near future.

Setting aside the current status of the debate, this case study investigates the reasons why certain Chinese analysts and scholars believe the United States cannot sustain casualties. That is, what is the basis for their perceptions of American casualty sensitivity? As was true for many of the previous case studies, the perceptions of Chinese analysts are based upon a diverse set of factors, including each of the four hypotheses presented in this paper. Nevertheless, once again, the reputation hypothesis receives at least as much support as any of the other hypotheses.

\textit{Evidence for the Culture Hypotheses:}

A number of Chinese strategic writings question the ability of America’s self-centered and decadent society to pay the price that war entails. For example, Zhang Zhaozhong, a

\textsuperscript{201} Christensen, “Correspondence: Power and Resolve in U.S. China Policy,” 162.
professor at the National Defense University, claims: “Americans usually give the impression
that they are chivalrous and generous [people] who want to help when they see something unjust,
[but] underneath this superficial image, they are in fact extremely selfish... Americans can never
afford to take a beating, not even a light one.”203 An article published in Beijing’s Guangming
Ribao in the summer of 1999 claims that “modern Americans have a fragile psychology and very
poor endurance for war.”204 Fu Liqun, a colonel at the prestigious Academy of Military Sciences
in Beijing, argues that the foundation for America’s casualty aversion “is closely related to the
U.S. society’s humanist cultural tradition centered around the human person.”205 The idea that
American casualty sensitivity is based in the very character of the American people has many
you must know is that this is a nationality that has never been willing to pay the price of life...
They are willing to spend any amount of money to win victory but are very reluctant to sacrifice
human life to win victory...”206 These Chinese analysts view the decisions by the U.S. military
to purchase costly weapons as proof of the societal demand for low, or even zero, casualties.

Evidence for the Democracy Hypothesis:

In the literature on Chinese perceptions of American casualty sensitivity, much of the
evidence supporting the democracy hypothesis is stated only implicitly. For example, when
Chinese analysts discuss the lessons from Vietnam and Somalia, they often claim that “things
became unbearable for the government as well as people outside the government in the United

203 Interview with Zhang Zhaozhong in Ma Ling, “Will Foreign Armed Forces Be Involved in a War between the
Two Sides of the Taiwan Strait?” Ta Kung Pao (Hong Kong), 18 August 1999, A3. Taken from Christensen,
204 Liang Jie, “Interview with Military Expert Quan An,” Guangming Ribao (Beijing), 15 June 1999. Taken from
Dr. James D. Perry, “Operation Allied Force: The View from Beijing,” Aerospace Power Journal (Summer 2000),
85.
Taken from Christensen, “Posing Problems without Catching Up,” 18.
206 Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, Unrestricted Warfare: Assumptions on War and Tactics in the Age of
States, and the government could not but declare the withdrawal of U.S. forces." Fortunately, one example of a Chinese author explicitly employing the democracy hypothesis appeared in an article in Beijing’s Renmin Ribao during the war over Kosovo. In “Why Is the United States Vague About a Ground War,” Yuan Bingzhong predicted in May of 1999 “that the United States would not launch a ground war, because the complex terrain and stubborn defenders could create a ‘quagmire’ that would lead to heavy casualties and an upsurge in anti-war sentiment.” More specific evidence comes from Chinese newspaper articles and editorials regarding the recent war against Iraq. For instance, a Xinhua reporter discussed the potential problems of urban warfare for the American troops: “If the brutal hand-to-hand street combat led to heavy casualties among the civilians or US troops, this could trigger off anti-war waves in the United States and add to the tremendous pressure of world opinion.”

Evidence for the Interests Hypothesis:

Although Chinese perceptions of American casualty sensitivity may be based in part on the interests hypothesis, the literature rarely states so explicitly. It may be the case that it is “common knowledge” that U.S. interests in any possible Taiwan conflict are low. However, America’s strong support of Taiwan for over fifty years suggests this is not the case, so the absence of arguments (at least from the Chinese literature on American casualty sensitivity) about the United States being unwilling to sustain casualties to defend Taiwan is telling. Zhang Zhaozhong, the previously cited professor from the National Defense University, may be an

exception when he concludes, "[T]he United States is unlikely... to fight a large-scale war for
the sake of Taiwan." Although his statement is most likely made in the support of the culture
hypothesis, the most generous interpretation for the interests hypothesis emphasizes his use of
the clause "for the sake of Taiwan." This statement could be interpreted to mean that the United
States would fight a large-scale war in a region where America's vital national interests were at
stake. All things considered, there is a remarkable lack of evidence for the interests hypothesis
in the Chinese literature on American casualty sensitivity.

Evidence for the Reputation Hypothesis:

Most Chinese analysts who have written about American casualty sensitivity base their
views upon their interpretation of America's recent military experiences, especially those in
Vietnam and Somalia. According to Fu Liqun,

After a war has started, [American strategy tries] every means to escape, regardless of any effects on the nation's face... The United States was aggressive and arrogant at the start of the military intervention in Somalia... However, after the body of a killed U.S. serviceman was paraded through the streets, things became unbearable for the government as well as people outside the government in the United States, and the government could not but declare the withdrawal of U.S. forces. This incident can be regarded as a typical example in recent years.

Although the U.S. withdrawal from the humanitarian intervention in Somalia has been the most
common analogy of late, the American defeat in Vietnam is often referred to as the source of
American casualty sensitivity. Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui summarize a typical Chinese
interpretation of American military history since the Vietnam War:

Ever since the Vietnam War, both the military and American society have been sensitized to human casualties during military operations, almost to the point of morbidity. Reducing casualties and achieving war objectives have become the two equal weights on the American military scale. These common American soldiers who should be on

210 Interview with Zhang Zhouzhong. Taken from Christensen, "Posing Problems Without Catching Up," 18.
211 Fu Liqun. Taken from Christensen, "Posing Problems Without Catching Up," 18.
the battlefield have now become the most costly security in war, like precious china bowls that people are afraid to break. All of the opponents who have engaged in battle with the American military have probably mastered the secret of success — if you have no way of defeating this force, you should kill its rank and file soldiers.²¹²

This passage is a damming critique of American foreign policy and military planning, as well as a disturbing message for all U.S. soldiers. Opponents of the United States have learned what they believe to be a truism: that the United States will retreat when faced with the loss of U.S. lives. Moreover, Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui admit their beliefs are based at least in part upon the U.S. Congressional report’s emphasis that “reducing casualties is the highest objective in formulating the plan.”²¹³ In such a way, many Chinese analysts and scholars have given the United States a reputation for lacking resolve and being unable to sustain casualties based upon the words and actions of American military and civilian leaders.

Ironically, the success and brevity of the Persian Gulf War of 1991 and the “zero casualty” war over Kosovo in 1999 did not force Chinese analysts to reassess their perceptions of American casualty sensitivity. Instead, these wars as well as America’s involvement in Bosnia confirmed their belief that the United States lacks staying power. Niu Jun argued in an article in a leading Chinese newspaper that the “zero casualty” war fought in Kosovo demonstrated that America’s “ability to bear cost” is “extremely frail.”²¹⁴ Thomas Christensen remarks that the war over Kosovo is interpreted in two ways in China, neither of which serves U.S. interests: The United States is viewed as a bully who intervenes in the internal affairs of other countries, but it is seen as a bully lacking resolve, forced to rely upon airpower from high altitudes because of its unwillingness to risk the lives of its troops.²¹⁵

²¹² Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, 98-99.
²¹³ Qiao Liang and Wang Xiangsui, 99.
²¹⁴ Christensen, “Posing Problems without Catching Up,” 19.
Conclusion:

The evidence presented in this case study supports two general statements. First, a disturbing number of Chinese analysts and scholars believe that the United States is unable to sustain casualties. And, second, this perception is based at least in part upon their reading of American military and diplomatic history, particularly the American defeats in Vietnam and Somalia. Fortunately, to the best of our knowledge, the debate between Chinese scholars about America’s willingness to sustain casualties in a future conflict over Taiwan has not yet been settled in favor of the “America cannot sustain casualties” camp. Consequently, Christensen provides a useful policy prescription:

[T]he United States should work hard to disabuse Chinese elites of any belief they might have about American unwillingness to suffer casualties and pay economic costs in war. This goal is difficult, but not impossible to achieve. It would be helpful if American officials, scholars, and businesspeople pointed out to their Chinese counterparts the stark differences between Somalia and China in American strategic thinking.²¹⁶

Although actions undoubtedly speak louder than words, American leaders can begin to dispel the notion that the United States cannot sustain casualties by constantly reminding Chinese leaders and scholars of America’s willingness to take casualties when its vital interests are at stake. In addition, U.S. leaders in the White House, Congress, Pentagon, and the State Department can realize the importance of reputation, and only make decisions to use force when they are prepared to accept the risk of the loss of American lives in combat.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ Christensen, “Posing Problems without Catching Up,” 36.
²¹⁷ I will expound upon these policy prescriptions in the final section of this paper, “Conclusions, Implications, and Future Research.”
VI. Conclusions, Implications, and Future Research

In his doctoral dissertation, Daryl Press argues, "[T]he reputation hypothesis has been given a free ride for far too long." Both Press and Mercer cite examples of American leaders arguing that the United States must fight to defend its reputation. For example, in the aftermath of the 3 October 1993 firefight in Mogadishu, President Clinton predicted the following if the United States abandoned Somalia:

Our own credibility with friends and allies would be severely damaged. Our leadership in world affairs would be undermined at the very time when people are looking to America to help promote peace and freedom in the post-cold-war world. And all around the world, aggressors, thugs and terrorists will conclude that the best way to get us to change our policies is to kill our people. It would be open season on Americans. Secretary of Defense Les Aspin echoed President Clinton's words and even more explicitly addressed the topic of foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity: "If after we get a dozen guys killed on Sunday, we pull out, it tells people wherever we go – the Golan Heights, Bosnia, Syria, Haiti, wherever – that all they have to do is give us double-digit casualties and they can get rid of us." But, as both Press and Mercer point out, the views of former President Clinton and other U.S. leaders are nearly irrelevant when studying America's reputation, because a reputation is a "perception, held by others, of the state's pattern of past behavior." Therefore, the United States is given a reputation (or reputations) by the leaders of other states.

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218 Press, 14.
220 Mercer, International Politics, 44.
221 I say "nearly" irrelevant because it has been shown throughout this thesis that the public statements of U.S. leaders have often served as further evidence of America's lack of resolve and unwillingness to sustain casualties. In such a way, statements can contribute to the formation of a reputation by affirming perceptions of a state's history of actions.
222 Press, 19.
Press and Mercer conclude that U.S. leaders have fought wars throughout the years with the intent of defending America’s reputation, but in reality only paying the high cost in both blood and money that war entails.

Consequences of Foreign Perceptions of American Casualty Sensitivity:

The evidence presented in this paper, however, confirms the aforementioned statements of former President Clinton and Secretary of Defense Les Aspin. The six case studies document foreign leaders – including adversaries, allies, and neutrals – giving the United States reputations for lacking resolve and being unable to sustain casualties based upon America’s retreats and defeats in Vietnam, Beirut, and Somalia. Surprisingly, the historical record provides the least amount of support for the interests hypothesis. Perhaps the most interesting conclusion points to the possibility that the culture hypothesis, democracy hypothesis, and reputation hypothesis explain a different aspect of the broad question concerning foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity. Specifically, foreign leaders believe the United States is unwilling and unable to sustain casualties because they view American society as weak and decadent. As a result, these leaders believe American citizens will oppose war when casualties mount, and punish American leaders (through democratic processes) who are in power when casualties occur. Finally, foreign leaders base these beliefs upon their interpretation of American experiences in Vietnam, Beirut, and Somalia, and their perceptions are reinforced or contradicted by current and future American statements and actions (or inactions). In such a way, these three hypotheses, in combination, may provide a nearly complete explanation of the reasons behind foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity.

Blechman and Wittes explain how these experiences affect the efficacy of American threats: “Vietnam’s legacy abroad pushes foreign leaders’ defining moments back, requiring
greater demonstrations of will, greater urgency, more tangible actions by U.S. forces, and greater potency for threats to succeed." Even though the United States had the most powerful military the world had ever seen after the end of the Cold War, the perception of American casualty sensitivity encouraged adversaries to take risks and challenge U.S. interests, betting that their actions would not elicit a response. According to Major Troy E. Devine (USAF), a belief in American casualty sensitivity "presents our adversaries with an obvious and potentially effective asymmetric strategy. Instead of meeting the massive military power of the United States head on, weaker nations may choose to adopt subconventional tactics." The writings of Thomas Christensen on China illustrate the potentially destabilizing and dangerous consequences of foreign leaders holding these perceptions. Dr. Record's article on force-protection fetishism summarizes this logic with two questions that he answers in the affirmative: "Does it [casualty aversion] 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?"

Is the United States Casualty Averse?

The reader may find it incredible that the objective question – Is the United States casualty averse? – has not been addressed yet. If the United States is indeed as casualty averse as American adversaries and allies have claimed, then this paper would be a fruitless exercise. The conclusions would be that foreign leaders accurately perceive American casualty sensitivity, and the policy prescriptions would be even more unexciting and uninformative. Fortunately for this paper (but unfortunately for American foreign policy), foreign perceptions of American

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223 Blechman and Wittes, 28.
224 Major Hyde, 24 and 26.
225 Major Troy E. Devine, USAF, The Influence of America's Casualty Sensitivity on Military Strategy and Doctrine, (School of Advanced Airpower Studies, Air University, June 1997), 52.
226 Dr. Record, "Force-Protection Fetishism: Sources, Consequences, and (?) Solutions," 10.
casualty sensitivity are based upon a misunderstanding of American military and diplomatic history. A plethora of studies — including research by RAND as well as Peter Feaver and Christopher Gelpi — conclude that the conventional wisdom that the American public will not tolerate casualties is simply wrong.\textsuperscript{227} Instead, according to Eric V. Larson, “The simplest explanation consistent with the data is that support for U.S. military operations and the willingness to tolerate casualties are based upon a sensible weighing of benefits and costs that is influenced heavily by consensus (or its absence) among political leaders.”\textsuperscript{228}

Feaver and Gelpi’s research on public opinion polls reveals that the American public may be more willing to accept casualties than is currently believed by American civilian and military elites.\textsuperscript{229} With the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of a consensus regarding America’s vital national interests, American civilian and military leaders became more sensitive to casualties. During the 1990s, tremendous advances in technology proved the answer to American leaders’ greater sensitivity to casualties. These leaders tried to convince potential enemies that the United States could punish them effectively without risking the loss of American lives. Lacking a consensus on American grand strategy, the United States took numerous missteps as the whims of domestic politics often wagged the dog of American foreign policy. However, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001, a new consensus may be emerging to replace the uncertainty of the post-Cold War decade. If this is the case, then American leaders may be more willing to sustain casualties in a variety of circumstances.


\textsuperscript{228} Larson, *Casualties and Consensus*, xv.

229 Feaver and Gelpi, B3.
In the meantime, the available evidence suggests America’s casualty sensitivity is conditional. According to Dr. Jeffrey Record, “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.” Many scholars and journalists have claimed that public support for the military intervention in Somalia plummeted after the death of eighteen soldiers on 3 October 1993. However, it is flat wrong to believe that the loss of American life single-handedly caused the public to demand that the United States withdraw from Somalia. Instead, public opinion data shows that “support had already collapsed before the firefight in Mogadishu, with only 40 percent of the public supporting the operation.” In sum, foreign leaders have incorrectly predicted future American irresolution and an unwillingness to risk casualties based upon their incorrect interpretations of America’s experiences in Vietnam, Beirut, and Somalia.

*Policy Prescriptions:*  
If foreign leaders are usually wrong to believe that the United States will not risk casualties to achieve important foreign policy objectives, then what should American leaders say and do to dispel foreign leaders of their misperceptions? With regards to actions, Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman make the following policy prescription: “[I]f the US and its allies decide to intervene, they should do so with the recognition that their own soldiers may die: if this is not

230 Dr. Record, *Force-Protection Fetishism*, 7.  
231 Major Hyde, 22. Taken from Larson, *ends and Means in the Democratic Conversation*, 245-51.  
232 I find it incredible that any state would give the United States a reputation for being unable to sustain casualties based upon its experience in Vietnam. The U.S. lost more than 58,000 soldiers in a strategically insignificant area. If anything, the U.S. should have been given a reputation for being willing and able to sustain casualties regardless of the interests at the stake.
acceptable, then the West should stay home.”233 Similarly, when making decisions about making threats and potentially using force, American decision makers should consider reputation when considering the pros and cons of action or inaction. In sharp contrast to the prescription of Jonathan Mercer, I maintain that is indeed right for a state to fight for its reputation. Mercer’s tongue-in-cheek comment in the introduction to his book is ironically apropos: “Woe to the state that has a reputation for irresolution, for it will suffer the indignity of repeated challenges, and its threats and promises will pass unheeded by friend and foe.”234

With regards to public statements and writings, U.S. leaders should not give credence to foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity by discussing or writing about the influence of public opinion on their decisions or the inability of the American public to sustain casualties. Instead, as discussed in the conclusion of the case study on China, U.S. leaders should take every opportunity to dispel these perceptions from the leaders and scholars of adversaries and allies alike. In his recent address to the nation, President George W. Bush expressed his belief that America’s reputation is worth fighting for in Iraq: “There is more at work in these attacks than blind rage. The terrorists have a strategic goal. They want us to leave Iraq before our work is done. They want to shake the will of the civilized world. In the past, the terrorists have cited the examples of Beirut and Somalia, claiming that if you inflict harm on Americans, we will run from a challenge. In this, they are mistaken.”235 In these six sentences, President Bush affirmed America’s determination to win the war in Iraq in the face of mounting casualties. Unlike President Clinton’s public announcements that American troops would withdraw from Somalia within six months and that he would not introduce ground troops into Kosovo, President Bush’s

233 Byman and Waxman, 118.
234 Mercer, Reputation and International Politics, 2.
declaration about American resolve – in a televised address to the nation (and the world) – demonstrates how a President can strengthen American diplomacy and the effectiveness of American threats with words backed by actions.

Most importantly, leaders can mitigate the effects of acts of weakness or irresolution by explaining their actions and decisions. Although states’ reputations are perceptions and not possessions, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that states do retain some control over their reputations. Leaders can spin past retreats in any number of ways, including distinguishing between areas of high and low interest as well as leaking internal documents that explain the reasoning behind their decisions. For example, American leaders should have explained the enormous differences between the humanitarian mission in Somalia and future conflicts in areas of greater strategic interest. By engaging in this interpretive exercise, American leaders may be able to limit the reputational damage caused by acts of weakness or irresolution.

Topics for Future Research:

The evidence presented in this paper provides significant support for the reputation hypothesis with regards to the more specific case of foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity. I have argued that the reputation literature to date has been plagued by a variety of flaws which cast doubt upon its conclusions. It is my hope that this paper represents a step forward for the reputation literature. Nevertheless, there are a number of important questions that remain unanswered. First, do leaders attribute reputations to individual leaders and policymakers or to states more broadly?236 The answer to this question has important implications for the United States, where the leadership of the executive branch changes every four to eight years. Second, “What are the number of observations of past behavior from which

a potential attacker might generalize and infer a reputation for a defender? In other words, what is the time frame over which a leader looks at the past behavior of another leader or state? Paul Huth summarizes Elli Lieberman’s hypothesis: “reputations will be important but only if the potential attacker believes that past and current cases involving the defender are similar in terms of the conditions which gave rise to the reputation to begin with.” More specific answers to the question of how states or leaders are given reputations will provide greater insight into the importance of fighting for your reputation.

In addition, there are numerous alternative strategies that may prove valuable for future research. For instance, one could examine foreign perceptions of American casualty sensitivity across time periods, perhaps focusing upon one or two cases from each of the following eras: pre-Vietnam, between Vietnam and Somalia, and post-Somalia. A comparison across time may provide insights about the formation of reputations for casualty aversion; however, numerous methodological problems arise when one tries to study cases from different time periods. A second strategy would look at foreign perceptions of two countries with similar regime types such as the United States and the United Kingdom. The strategy of holding one variable constant would provide a more conclusive test of certain hypotheses, such as the culture and democracy hypotheses. Another strategy would intentionally look at foreign perceptions of two countries with different cultures or regime-types. The main problem with this line of research stems from possible data limitations on foreign perceptions of casualty tolerance of a non-democratic or culturally distinct country. Until these or other research strategies can be

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237 Huth, 80.
239 Historical cases would benefit from more reliable data because of the availability of archival materials.
240 For an excellent discussion of the effects of history and maturation on research designs, see Donald T. Campbell and Julian C. Stanley, “Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Designs for Research,” 1-13, 34-71.
executed, and in direct contradiction with the conclusions of Hopf, Mercer, and Press, the evidence from the six case studies supports the conclusion that states should fight for their reputations.
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