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Correspondence

Casualties, Polls, and the Iraq War

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To the Editors:

In their article "Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq," Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler attempt to flush out the relationship between public opinion and the use of force as it pertains to the Iraq war.¹ The authors promote the following proposition: "Our thesis is that expectations of future success are the key determinants of public casualty tolerance. That is, the U.S. public can accept that the war is not yet won and will involve continued and even mounting costs, provided that events thus far are not convincing it that eventual success is impossible" (p. 24).

This statement actually contains two theses. First, public support for a military operation will not necessarily wane in the face of rising casualties.² Second, the public's tolerance for casualties is most affected by its expectation of victory (i.e., ultimate strategic success). These theses are consistent with Feaver and Gelpi's argument in their earlier work: "Casualty phobia is not the dominant feature of the general public. On the contrary, policymakers can tap into a large reservoir of support for missions, even missions that entail a fairly high human price, provided those missions are successful. The public is defeat phobic, not casualty phobic."³

Applying this argument to Iraq, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler assert that, as long as Americans expect victory, they will tolerate mounting casualties and thus support the war. Put another way, they claim that opposition to the Iraq war is driven not by casualties per se, but by the expectation of failure: "When the public believes that the mission will succeed, it continues to support the mission, even as costs mount. When the public thinks victory is unlikely, even small costs will cause support to plummet" (pp. 15–16).

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Christopher Gelpi is Associate Professor of Political Science at Duke University. Jason Reifler is Assistant Professor of Political Science at Loyola University Chicago. Because of his current service on the National Security Council, Peter Feaver was unable to contribute to this reply.

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1. Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, "Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq," *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Winter 2005/06), pp. 7–46. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.
 2. As in Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler's article, all references to "casualties" in this correspondence are references to U.S. troop fatalities. Moreover, all references to the "public" are to the mass American public.
 3. Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 97.

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To test their theses, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler begin by trying to establish that rising casualties do not necessarily produce a corresponding drop in public support. To do this, they tracked presidential approval ratings against casualties over a twenty-month period (from March 2003 through October 2004) and divided this period into three phases of the war. They report their findings as follows:

U.S. military deaths did not appear to have the same impact on presidential approval in the 'major combat,' 'occupation,' and 'sovereign Iraq' phases of the war. For example, presidential approval actually increased despite the toll of U.S. casualties during the major combat phase of the war. This is not to say that the public increased its approval of the president because U.S. soldiers were being killed. Rather, the public rallied to support the president despite the casualties because it was confident that the United States would succeed. After the onset of the insurgency, however, presidential approval dropped steadily as the death toll increased. After the U.S. transfer of sovereignty to Iraq, on the other hand, U.S. casualties continued to mount at the same rate as during the occupation, but presidential approval oscillated at about 50 percent despite the mounting death toll. (pp. 18–19)⁴

At first glance, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler's analysis seems to question the impact of casualties. Yet a closer examination of the study raises significant methodological concerns that evoke suspicions about such conclusions. First, the authors use presidential approval ratings as their dependent variable for public support of the war. Assessments of the president's overall job performance, however, do not provide accurate reflections of support (or opposition) for a specific military operation. Consider how events exogenous to war can drastically swing such ratings. One need only recall how the disclosure of CIA operative Valerie Plame Wilson's identity, the failed nomination of Harriet Miers to the Supreme Court, the poor federal response to Hurricane Katrina, or the rising price of gas drove down President George W. Bush's approval ratings to see that expecting such numbers to reflect only war support is problematic. Therefore, reading war support in overall approval ratings should be avoided, especially given the scholarly consensus that there are other survey questions that do capture public sentiment on war quite well.⁵ In particular, scholars have found greater reliability when tracking questions that assess the president's handling of a particular war and others that probe whether going to war was a mistake.⁶

Second, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler divide casualties into three measures that correspond to the three phases of the war they identify. Such a breakdown, however, is artificial and again calls their findings into question. One need only recall news reports

4. Statistical testing of the data and trends provided further support for this reported relationship. Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, "Success Matters," pp. 19–24.

5. See, for example, Louis J. Klarevas, "American Public Opinion on Peace Operations: The Cases of Somalia, Rwanda, and Haiti," Ph.D. dissertation, American University, 1999, pp. 298–299; and John Mueller, "The Cost of War," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85, No. 1 (January/February 2006), p. 139.

6. See, for example, John Mueller, *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (New York: Wiley, 1973); John Mueller, *Policy and Opinion in the Gulf War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Eric V. Larson, *Casualties and Consensus: The Historical Role of Casualties in Domestic Support for U.S. Military Operations* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 1996); and Scott Gartner, Gary Segura, and Michael Wilkening, "All Politics Are Local: Local Losses and Individual Attitudes toward the Vietnam War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 5 (October 1997), pp. 669–694.

on U.S. troop deaths in Iraq to note that, nearly all of the time, the casualties have been reported to the American public as cumulative casualties since the beginning of the war. Although some news reports broke down U.S. casualties into different time periods, even those also provided cumulative counts. Therefore, running tests with artificial divisions that the public, for the most part, does not employ in continually assessing the war hardly produces an accurate test of the relationship between casualties and support.

Third, even though their article came out in the winter of 2005–06, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler did not examine any data or trends from 2005.⁷ Yet recent data might be as insightful, if not more insightful, as earlier data. In all due fairness to the authors, they correctly claim that truncating their time-series data does not necessarily bias their theses. At the same time, though, the more recent the data, the more they reflect the cumulative effects of the war, in turn, producing more robust reflections. Take the following example: if there is still sentiment that the United States will succeed in accomplishing many of its goals in Iraq, despite an additional year of incurred costs and operational setbacks, it might mean that such sentiment is even more robust than if it had been expressed in the earlier stages of the conflict, when fewer events were available upon which to draw in making assessments. Perhaps cognizant of this, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler recommended, “Our argument should be continuously tested against new data” (p. 10).

The authors’ invitation begs the question: Does the U.S. public still expect victory in Iraq? If so, according to their analysis, students of public opinion will find a strong tolerance to casualties and continued support for the war. As it happens, new data do shed insights on their defeat-phobia and casualty-tolerance theses.

VICTORY IS OVERRATED

Does the American public expect a U.S. victory in Iraq? Moreover, given the public’s two benchmarks of strategic success that Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler identify in their study, does the public ultimately expect (1) Iraq to become a stable democracy, and (2) Iraqi forces to be able to provide for their country’s security?⁸

7. One could raise an additional concern: by assessing public support as opposed to public opposition, scholars are employing the wrong numbers. Presidents, after all, are primarily concerned not with maintaining support for their deployments, but with avoiding political sanction for such military endeavors. See Louis J. Klarevas, “The ‘Essential Domino’ of Military Operations: American Public Opinion and the Use of Force,” *International Studies Perspectives*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (November 2002), pp. 433–435. Therefore, a strong case can be made that scholars would better serve policymakers by using disapproval/opposition scores (as opposed to approval/support scores) in our public opinion studies. Toward this end, disapproval ratings are used instead of approval ratings to support my arguments below, as these are better indicators of public opposition and intolerance.

8. The authors distinguished these long-term benchmarks as “understandings of success.” They also identified several measures that the public uses “to track and estimate future success.” Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, “Success Matters,” pp. 41–43. The former seem to be realistic goals that would reflect ultimate success. The latter seem instead to be measures of current trends, which, if continued, could result in ultimate success. Moreover, the benchmarks are frequently polled, whereas the measures do not often get probed by mainstream surveys. Thus, the former are a more helpful set of indicators by which to measure the expectation of victory.

Beginning with these two benchmarks, recent survey data indicate an absence of defeatism among the American people. On the expectation of a stable Iraq, a June 2006 CBS News poll found that 54 percent of those surveyed believed that Iraq would eventually become a stable democracy. Similarly, a June 2006 Pew Research Center for People and the Press survey found that 55 percent of respondents felt that the United States would ultimately succeed in establishing a stable democratic government in Iraq. Moreover, with regard to training Iraqis so that they can provide for their own security, a late May 2006 CBS News/*New York Times* poll found that 47 percent of those surveyed felt the United States was making progress—a major difference from the 26 percent who, in the same survey, expressed the opinion that the United States was making little to no progress. A June 2006 CNN poll, in fact, found that exactly half of its respondents believed that in a few years the Iraqi government would be strong enough to maintain order without the assistance of American troops. Not surprisingly, an April 2006 Pew Center poll found that 78 percent of respondents believed that Iraqis would be better off in the long term as a result of the U.S.-led invasion.

Even on the impact of the Iraq war on U.S. security, public reactions reflect positive expectations. For example, a late June 2006 ABC News/*Washington Post* poll found that 51 percent believed that the war has contributed to the long-term security of the United States (although 48 percent felt that the war has not enhanced America's long-term safety). Equally important, a March 2006 CBS News/*New York Times* survey found that only 23 percent believed that, as a result of outcomes in Iraq, the United States is less safe from terrorism—a mere 5 percent rise from the 18 percent who expressed this belief in January 2004, when solid majorities still supported the war. Yet, to leave no ambiguity, a December 2005 ABC News/*Washington Post* poll found that 60 percent of those surveyed believed that the United States would ultimately win the war in Iraq. A March 2006 CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll confirmed this majority expectation, when it found that 54 percent of respondents still felt that the United States would win the war in Iraq. Consistent with such findings, an NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll found that 54 percent of those polled in June 2006 expected that the United States' involvement in Iraq would eventually be successful.

The poll data indicate that most Americans do not have a defeatist attitude on Iraq. Instead, it seems that many foresee long-term successes. Yet, despite these slightly upbeat expectations, all of these recent polls also found that most continued to express displeasure with the war.⁹ As Figure 1 shows, public opposition to President Bush's

9. Some readers might wonder if this criticism is misplaced. More to the point, the headlines out of Iraq in the early spring of 2006 left the impression that events there were deteriorating in a manner inconsistent with U.S. interests. Some commentators even speculated that Iraq was on the brink of a civil war. This might explain why an April CBS News poll found that 58 percent of those surveyed felt that efforts to bring stability to Iraq were going badly. Moreover, 61 percent of the same survey pool expressed opposition to President Bush's handling of the situation in Iraq. Still, the close correlation between those who perceive events as unfolding negatively and those who oppose the war should not be read as sustaining the thesis advanced by Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler. The problem with making such a jump is that Gelpi and his colleagues argue that it is the expectation of victory that is the real driver of support. Even if, at present, things are going badly, the public might still expect ultimate success. Operational successes and failures—the daily ups and downs being reported out of Iraq—can tick opinion up or down for brief periods of time. These

handling of the war has been mostly at majority levels since April 2004.¹⁰ More important, during the winter and spring of 2006—the period that corresponds with the survey results identified above—opposition hovered at around the 60 percent mark. As such, while Americans have recently expressed an expectation of success, they have also expressed some of the strongest antiwar sentiment to have been recorded by pollsters to date. How can majorities of the public consistently have positive expectations of the war and yet not support it? Contrary to the argument advanced by Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, public support for war is not driven by expectations of victory.¹¹

CASUALTIES MATTER MOST

In an oft-cited 1999 *Washington Post* op-ed, Feaver and Gelpi asserted, “The general public indicates that it is willing to accept not just hundreds but thousands of casualties to accomplish [post-Cold War] missions.”¹² And according to that op-ed, the mean casualty threshold for an invasion of Iraq to prevent Saddam Hussein from developing weapons of mass destruction was approximately 30,000.¹³ What the op-ed did not report was that the median number of tolerable fatalities in Iraq was 500, and the mode was a mere 100.¹⁴ Relying on this selective reading of their poll results, Feaver and Gelpi insisted that the idea of a casualty-averse American public was nothing more than a “myth.”¹⁵

Subjecting their now famous survey as well as their article in *International Security* to

operational outcomes should not, however, be conflated with the “expectations of success” variable, which clearly speaks to long-term strategic accomplishments that, in turn, reflect victory. The two are distinctly different. As Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler write, “Note that the critical belief specified here is the expectation of eventual future success, not necessarily assessments of how the war is going right now or most recently.” Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler, “Success Matters,” p. 16. In short, even before the violence escalated in late February 2006, there were consistent indicators that long-term strategic expectations were favorable and, despite this, opposition was clear.

10. The two exceptions were in September 2004 and February 2005, when opposition was at 49 percent and 48 percent respectively. In both cases, given the survey margins of error, these measures were within the statistical range of majority opposition to the handling of the war.

11. Again, this should not be confused with the correlation that exists with operational successes and rises in public support. As I have shown elsewhere, operational successes can correlate with public support if they are heavily reported in the news media. See Klarevas, “The ‘Essential Domino,’” pp. 432–433. In the Iraq war, as Figure 1 shows, the capture of Saddam Hussein in mid-December 2003 not only arrested a rise in opposition, but also gave the president a 10–15 percent bump in the polls. The holding of the first democratic election in Iraq in more than forty years in late January 2005 similarly gave the president a 7–10 percent boost. The killing of al-Qaida in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi in early June 2006 also produced a 7–10 percent lift in the president’s handling ratings. Such rally effects, however, are short-lived. In the first two cases, the boosts lasted approximately six weeks. Reactions to the death of al-Zarqawi are still being measured as this correspondence goes to press. Early indications are, however, that this rally effect is over—after a mere two weeks. (The quick reversal of the rally effect associated with al-Zarqawi’s death might be because, within days, news of the terrorist leader’s death was overtaken by news that the United States had surpassed the 2,500-casualty mark in Iraq.)

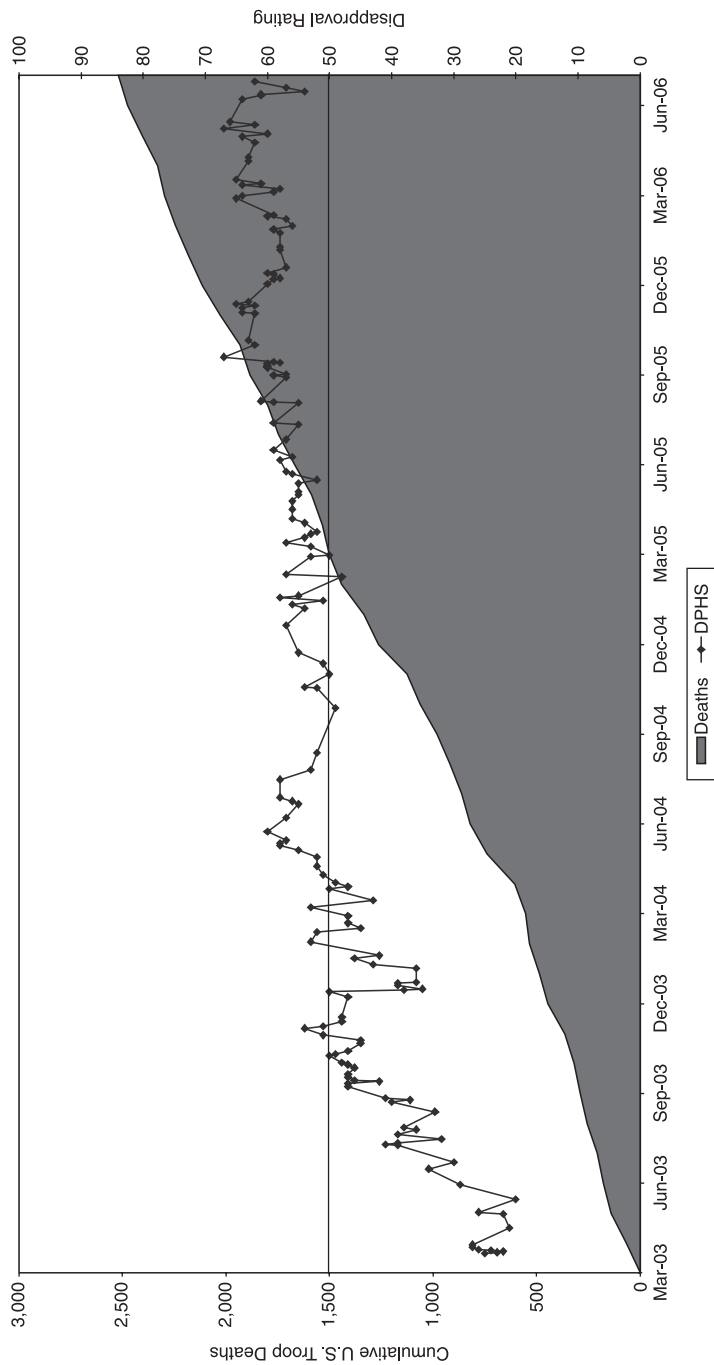
12. Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, “How Many Deaths Are Acceptable? A Surprising Answer,” *Washington Post*, November 7, 1999.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Feaver and Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles*, p. 116.

15. Feaver and Gelpi, “How Many Deaths Are Acceptable?”

Figure 1. Presidential Disapproval for Handling of Iraq War Related to Cumulative U.S. Military Deaths



SOURCE: All presidential ratings are drawn from <http://www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm>. All casualty data are from <http://icasualties.org/oif>.

NOTE: In general, the figure graphs disapproval responses to a form of the question, "Do you approve or disapprove of the way [President George W.] Bush is handling the situation/war in Iraq?"

greater scrutiny raises serious questions about the casualty-tolerance thesis that has been pitched to the Bush administration.¹⁶ To begin, a closer examination of Feaver and Gelpi's earlier survey data on the use of force to prevent Iraq from obtaining weapons of mass destruction actually reveals that only 46 percent of those surveyed were willing to tolerate more than 500 U.S. fatalities—and only 25 percent of the survey pool was willing to accept more than 5,000 fatalities.¹⁷

Nevertheless, in their *International Security* article, Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler conclude, "Mounting casualties have not always produced a reduction in public support. The Iraq case suggests that under the right conditions, the public will continue to support military operations even when they come with a relatively high human cost" (p. 8).

Here too, however, a careful reading of their poll numbers reported in *International Security* seems to tell a different story. First, the authors' own data suggest that when U.S. troop deaths surpass certain milestone levels (e.g., 500, 1,000, and 2,000), public perceptions change significantly. For instance, their new data show that in the early stages of the war, when there were only about 300 U.S. fatalities, 15 percent of those surveyed expressed an unwillingness to incur any more deaths; another 24 percent expressed an unwillingness to incur more than 500 deaths; and an additional 32 percent expressed an unwillingness to incur more than 5,000 deaths. But soon after the United States surpassed the 500 fatalities threshold, those percentages shifted dramatically, with 23 percent expressing the zero further casualty/"stop now" view, 31 percent setting a 1,000 fatality cap, and only 19 percent still willing to accept up to 5,000 deaths. In other words, the number of respondents willing to incur up to 5,000 deaths dropped by about one-third (i.e., 32 percent versus 19 percent) immediately after the 500 deaths threshold was crossed. Furthermore, 54 percent of those surveyed were no longer willing to accept even another 500 fatalities (p. 31). This is a match to what Feaver and Gelpi's initial survey from the 1990s predicted—but which they selectively chose not to emphasize.¹⁸ As the data display, mounting casualties undoubtedly produced changes in the U.S. public's opinion of the Iraq war.¹⁹

16. Peter Feaver, in particular, has promoted his colleagues' views that the public will stomach large numbers of casualties, as long as victory is likely. See, for instance, Feaver, "To Maintain That Support, Show Us What Success Means," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2001; Scott Shane, "Bush's Speech on Iraq Echoes Analyst's Voice," *New York Times*, December 4, 2005; and Peter Grier, "In 'Victory,' Both Power and Peril," *Christian Science Monitor*, December 9, 2005.

17. Feaver and Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles*, p. 120.

18. *Ibid.*

19. In "Success Matters," Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler write, "Our data indicate that public casualty tolerance actually rose between June and October 2004. . . . Specifically, in October, 50 percent of the respondents stated that they would be willing to tolerate 1,500 U.S. military deaths, whereas only 44 percent expressed that view in June" (p. 30). This raises two problems. First, unlike every other survey they report in their study, the June 2004 survey was the only one that did not probe respondents' attitudes toward accepting casualties to the next 500-increment threshold (i.e., if current casualties are at 750—that is, between 500 and 1,000—the next increment to be probed would be to ask if the respondent would accept 1,000 casualties). With around 800 casualties at the time, the June survey probed whether respondents would accept 1,500 casualties. This break in pattern from the other eight surveys reported in their study raises questions about the comparability. Second, the results reported from the October 2004 survey add up to 104 percent, calling into question

Second, the mainstream media surveys also show a correlation between mounting deaths and growing dissatisfaction with the war. As Figure 1 illustrates, as more U.S. soldiers are killed in Iraq, the number of people disapproving of President Bush's handling of the war increases (although the rate of this increase slows as there are fewer people to convert from approval to disapproval as time passes). Interestingly, disapproval was on its way to majority levels as early as the winter of 2003, but it reversed course for a brief time after Saddam Hussein was captured. When U.S. casualties passed the 500 threshold six weeks later, however, disapproval ratings returned to their prior course, surpassing the majority mark in April 2004, and staying within the 50–60 percent disapproval range until September 2005, when disapproval shot into the 60–65 percent range. As each casualty milestone edged close, it seems as if the public's disapproval of the war jumped slightly. But the jumps were far greater with the 500 threshold than they were with the others.²⁰

Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler's study on Iraq suggests that expectations of success outweigh casualties in driving public opinion. But scrutinizing the data lends support instead to the argument that the defeat phobia of the American public is overblown. Indeed, success is not likely to breed much more support. For this reason, a more accurate postulate on public opinion and the use of force, borne out by reactions to the Iraq war, may be that casualties trump expectations of success—not the other way around.²¹

FOR WHAT CAUSE AND AT WHAT COST?

The claim that casualties might trump expectations of success, nevertheless, should not be read as a blanket endorsement that casualties, on their own, drive public support. The killed-in-action thresholds—which, when crossed, result in majority opposition—are sure to vary across different military operations given the interests at stake. As I have argued elsewhere, when deciding whether to back a particular use of force, the U.S. public asks two simple questions: For what cause? And at what cost? Put another way, the more important the cause (i.e., the stakes involved), the higher the threshold for incurring costs (usually measured as U.S. lives lost).²² Thus, in an operation such as the nation-building mission in Somalia, the cause was so weak that the public was not willing to stomach more than a few dozen casualties. On the other hand, in World War II, the cause was so vital, that Americans tolerated hundreds of thousands of casualties. In Iraq, the American people no longer seem to perceive the cause at stake to be worth the costs incurred.

the reported data from that particular survey and raising the issue that perhaps their finding of greater casualty tolerance from that time period is mistakenly inflated. The results referenced in this note are in *ibid.*, p. 31.

20. Writing in November 2003, I predicted that hitting the 500 casualties mark would have a significant impact in transforming public opinion on the Iraq war from support to opposition. See Louis J. Klarevas, "How Many War Deaths Can We Take?" *Newsday*, November 7, 2003.

21. For another study that reaches similar conclusions about the importance of casualties in undermining public support for the Iraq war, see John Mueller, "The Iraq Syndrome," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 6 (November/December 2005), pp. 44–54.

22. Louis Klarevas and Daniel B. O'Connor, "At What Cost? American Public Opinion toward the Use of Force," paper prepared for presentation at the annual meeting of the International Studies Association, 1994. See also Klarevas, "The 'Essential Domino,'" p. 433.

Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler maintain that “beliefs about the likelihood of success matter most” (p. 8). As such, they offer the following policy advice: “The president can garner [public] support from a majority of those who are moderately skeptical of the war’s justification by persuading them that victory is very likely” (p. 37). The data reviewed herein, however, suggest that such claims should be received with much skepticism. The sounder argument seems to be that Americans are not, after all, convinced that victory cannot be achieved in Iraq. Rather, given more than 2,500 American fatalities, they are questioning what good will come from victory in Iraq.

Gelpi and Reifler Reply:

We welcome Louis Klarevas’s focused attention to our work on U.S. military casualties and public support for the war in Iraq.¹ Klarevas raises four central concerns about our data: (1) the use of presidential approval as a measure of war support; (2) the division of casualties into “periods” of the war; (3) the ending of our data collection with the November 2004 presidential election; and (4) our interpretations of the responses to our casualty-tolerance questions. We address each of these concerns in turn and conclude that none of the issues raised by Klarevas calls any of our central conclusions into question.

PRESIDENTIAL APPROVAL AND WAR SUPPORT

Klarevas criticizes our use of presidential approval as an aggregate measure of support for the Iraq war because other factors also influence presidential approval. We certainly do not disagree with the claim that presidential approval has many causes. As we note in our article, however, we use the standard statistical technique that social science has developed to address this common problem: multivariate analysis (or multiple regression). Our model accounts for some of the other major sources of presidential approval (such as economic performance) through control variables. We actually consider the general presidential approval question to be a strength of our aggregate-level analysis: we can control for events and causes unrelated to Iraq, and we can assess the relative impact of different causes. Should international events force the United States into a new conflict, our dependent variable would be able to accommodate it. A measure specific to Iraq would not. We could also compare the impact of this new conflict to Iraq with regard to its effect on the same dependent variable. A measure specific to Iraq could not accommodate such comparisons. Moreover, a general measure of presidential approval allows one to create a time-series model that predates the war. While we cannot control for every possible cause of presidential approval, the only way omitted variables could bias our estimates is if the excluded variables vary with the independent variable of interest (casualties). Klarevas gives no reason to expect that these excluded variables will be correlated with casualties. Instead, these other sources of presidential approval seem likely to introduce a larger stochastic component to our model, increasing the standard errors of our coefficients and making it less likely that we should ob-

1. Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, “Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (Winter 2005/06), pp. 7–46. Further references to this article appear parenthetically in the text.

serve any statistically significant relationships. That our model performs well despite these measurement problems suggests that the other causes of presidential approval do not threaten our inferences.

Moreover, we use presidential approval as an indicator of war support in our aggregate analysis because it is available on a regular basis with consistent question wording, enabling us to be more confident in our time-series model. But we are careful to note in the article that this choice of methodological convenience does not threaten our inferences, because presidential approval correlates with the public's approval of George W. Bush's "handling of Iraq" at 0.95; it also correlates with whether the Iraq war has been "worth it" at 0.90 (p. 17). Analyses of these variables yield results very similar to those reported in our article.

PHASES OF WARFARE

Klarevas is also concerned that we erode the apparent impact of casualties by dividing battle deaths into separate phases of the war, when the public is more likely to think about the aggregate number of deaths throughout the entire conflict. We agree with Klarevas that the public is more likely to be aware of the aggregate number of deaths. We divided casualties into phases of the war in Figure 1 from our article for illustrative purposes (p. 18), but the variable that we use in the analyses in Table 1 from our article is the log of the total number of U.S. battle deaths (p. 21). We estimate the varying impact of casualties by interacting that aggregate number of U.S. casualties with dummy variables marking the different phases of the conflict. Thus the results we present were obtained with the method of counting casualties that Klarevas advocates. When we initially reached these findings, however, we also reestimated the model in Table 1 using the log of the number of casualties within each phase of the war as a robustness check, instead of using interaction terms. The results are essentially similar to those reported in our article, suggesting that our findings are not sensitive to this coding issue.

EXTENSION OF THE DATA TO 2006

We agree with Klarevas that we should continue to evaluate data on U.S. military casualties and public support for the Iraq war as they become available. We should point out that our research project was launched before the war began and then unfolded as it progressed. The model we present in the article was itself continually reestimated over the course of the war. Although the coefficients changed slightly from month to month, the underlying argument proved remarkably robust. We are in the process of updating our analyses, and we do have results that extend into the summer of 2005. These analyses indicate that—consistent with the results reported in our article—casualties continued to have no effect on presidential approval through the Iraqi elections of January 2005 and a brief period thereafter when President Bush could demonstrate some success in Iraq. Beginning in the spring of 2005, however, we found that casualties began to erode presidential approval once again. This result seems consistent with our model, because even the president acknowledged that much of 2005 was a time of setbacks in Iraq after the initial success of the elections.

Since the summer of 2005, we—like Klarevas—can only speculate based on the marginals of a few polls about what systematic data might say about our hypotheses.

Nonetheless, it is our impression that public attitudes over the twelve months since we stopped collecting data have been consistent with our argument.

Klarevas calls our findings into question because he says that the U.S. public is optimistic about victory but disapproves of the war. This static comparison of aggregate "levels" of attitudes misses the fact that our claim is about a relationship between variables. That is, we expect that the public's tolerance for paying the ongoing and future costs of staying in Iraq will decrease as pessimism about success increases. This trend seems to be holding. If one examines Figure 1 in Klarevas's letter, for example, public disapproval drifts upward from about 50 percent in October 2004 to about 60 percent in June 2006, along with a two-and-a-half-fold increase in casualties. At the same time, Klarevas notes that in June 2006, about 55 percent of the public expected that the United States would ultimately succeed in Iraq. That result represents a 10 percent decline in optimism since our last poll in October 2004 and a 20 percent decline since our first survey in October 2003. The ten percentage-point change in approval from October 2004 to June 2006 nicely matches the 10 percentage-point change in perceptions of success over that period.

So what is driving disapproval? Is it casualties, or a lack of success? Our argument suggests that the two operate in tandem, and Klarevas's data appear consistent with that conclusion. In the absence of more systematic multivariate analyses such as those presented in our article, however, a visual review of Klarevas's figures cannot distinguish between his argument and ours. The analyses presented in our article, however, can distinguish between the two arguments and indicate that the impact of casualties on presidential approval depends upon the level of progress on the ground in Iraq. Klarevas presents no data to contradict this claim.

Moreover, readers should recall that we chose casualty tolerance as our key variable because we want to focus on public pressure to withdraw U.S. troops as a result of the growing number of casualties. Thus, although we do utilize the frequently asked general questions about "war support" such as presidential approval and approval of the president's "handling of Iraq" for longitudinal aggregate analyses, we would expect public attitudes toward success to relate more closely to questions about withdrawing troops than they do to expressions of dissatisfaction with the president. This is precisely what Klarevas reports. He notes that as of late spring 2006, there remained moderate (though eroding) levels of optimism about eventual success in Iraq and minority (though climbing) pressure to withdraw troops immediately. This moderate pressure for withdrawal coincides with widespread dissatisfaction with the president's handling of the issue. For example, while approval of the president's handling of Iraq has been oscillating between 30 percent and 35 percent for some time, a majority of the public still does not favor a withdrawal of U.S. forces. The same June 2006 survey Klarevas cites regarding public optimism also asked, "Do you think the U.S. should keep military troops in Iraq until the situation has stabilized, or do you think the U.S. should bring its troops home as soon as possible?" Only 47 percent of the respondents stated that the U.S. should bring its troops home as soon as possible, while 50 percent stated that the troops should stay until the situation is stabilized. This distribution seems to match well with the level of optimism noted above. Our argument is that this moderate optimism prevents the widespread dissatisfaction with the president's handling of the war from translating into strong pressure to withdraw troops immediately.

REREADING OUR DATA ON CASUALTY TOLERANCE

Klarevas criticizes our measurement of casualty tolerance by citing out of context a survey statistic that Feaver and Gelpi reported in an op-ed published in 1999 regarding the mean response among the general public to a question about the number of acceptable casualties in a (then) hypothetical U.S. military intervention in Iraq.² Klarevas clings to a confused reading of that statistic, despite our extensive discussion in a subsequent book, *Choosing Your Battles*. We invite readers to read pages 95–148 (especially pp. 107–111, and 118–128) of *Choosing Your Battles* to decide for themselves whether Klarevas has accurately reported our argument.³

Turning to the casualty-tolerance data that we gathered for our current research, Klarevas argues that these data indicate a public reaction to crossing “casualty thresholds.” The importance of such artificial thresholds, he argues, is evidence that the public responds reflexively and negatively to the idea of casualties. A careful rereading of our data in Table 3, however, indicates that there is no evidence of casualty-threshold effects (p. 31).

To begin, Klarevas claims that “the number of respondents willing to incur up to 5,000 deaths dropped by about one-third (i.e., 32 percent versus 19 percent) immediately after the 500 deaths threshold was crossed.” Unfortunately, Klarevas appears to misread the table. The proportion of the public that expresses a willingness to tolerate at least 5,000 casualties remains relatively unchanged at 25–30 percent throughout all of our surveys. In fact, the only substantial change in the public’s tolerance for that very high level of casualties is the *increase* in tolerance for 5,000 casualties that we observe between March and October 2004 from 23 percent to 33 percent.

The drop from 32 percent to 19 percent that Klarevas notes is actually the change from the percentage of respondents who stated in October 2003 that they would tolerate at least 500 casualties to the percentage of respondents who stated in February 2004 that they would tolerate at least 1,000 casualties. Notice that two things are going on to create this change: the United States is suffering more casualties, and the threshold that we are asking about changes. In October 2003 we found that 32 percent of respondents stated that they would tolerate 500 casualties but not 5,000. By February 2004 the United States had passed the threshold of 500 battle deaths, so we would expect that the threshold of “tolerable” casualties had been crossed for some respondents. But the increase in U.S. casualties also forced us to raise the casualty threshold that we asked about from 500 to 1,000, so the drop that Klarevas observes conflates the real increase in U.S. casualties with the hypothetical increase of asking about 1,000 casualties. Thus one could view this result as showing that only about 13 percent of the public turns from support to opposition when casualties are doubled from 500 to 1,000.

A better test of the impact of casualty thresholds, however, is to look at the crossing of the 1,000 fatalities barrier in the fall of 2004. This represents a better test because the crossing attracted a great deal more attention from the media, and it took place in the midst of an election that gave opposing politicians every opportunity to exploit the at-

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

3. Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004).

tention to this unhappy milestone. Despite the massive media coverage of the crossing of this threshold, we find that casualty tolerance actually rose during the fall of 2004. Specifically, in June 2004, 44 percent of the public said that it would tolerate at least 1,000 U.S. battle deaths. But by October 2004 we found that 53 percent of respondents expressed a willingness to tolerate at least 1,500 casualties, and—as noted above—the percentage expressing tolerance for 5,000 casualties increased as well.

CONCLUSION

In sum, the available data—both ours and others’—clearly support the central findings of our article. We stand firmly by our conclusions that “beliefs about the likelihood of success matter most” in the public’s decision to support the war (p. 8), and that “the president can garner [public] support from a majority of those who are moderately skeptical of the [Iraq] war’s justification by persuading them that victory is very likely” (p. 37). These conclusions have been corroborated repeatedly with a variety of data sources and methods.

We want to be clear, however; these conclusions do not imply that casualties do not have an impact on the public’s support for war. Rather, our argument is that the impact of casualties on war support is a contingent one. The public’s response to casualties will depend upon the context in which they occur, and one of the most important aspects of that context is the public’s perception of the likelihood that the mission will succeed.

We also want to emphasize that other factors—type of military mission, level of international support, and partisanship—also influence war support. In our book we use a variety of research designs—longitudinal analysis of aggregate polling, multivariate analysis of individual-level survey data, and survey experiments—to describe and compare the impact of these factors.⁴ This breadth of analyses has led us to the conclusion that the public’s perception of the eventual success of the mission matters most in determining its level of support.

—*Christopher Gelpi*
Durham, North Carolina

—*Jason Reifler*
Chicago, Illinois

4. *Ibid.*