



WARFARE UNDER SCRUTINY: BRITISH PUBLIC PERSPECTIVES AND THE BRITISH ARMY AT WAR 2001-2014

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Adam Michael Shindler

DPhil in Public Policy
St Antony's College
University of Oxford

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Abstract

The information age has made Britain's military operations since 2001 more visible to the public than ever before. It has strengthened connections between the public, political elites, and the military. Despite scholarly and practitioner literature suggesting consequences for the military's operations, no systematic enquiry has examined their impact in this regard. This thesis addresses that gap by using British operations in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014 as a case study, alongside comparative analysis of concurrent and later operations.

This study introduces the concept of Societal Operational Influence (SOI) to explain how political and military interpretations of public attitudes shape military behaviour. The research presents four key findings: (1) Public perceptions of soldiers are important to society's appraisal of war, and are based on rational criteria—such as a campaign's justifiability, success, and competent management—rather than on aversion to casualties. (2) Political and military elites consistently misinterpreted these public attitudes, resulting in significant impacts on campaigns to the lowest levels. (3) Society's influence on operations is underrepresented in academic theory and military concepts, despite evidence of lasting effects on British military culture particularly regarding risk tolerance. (4) The extent of SOI varies depending on conflict intensity, public salience, and individual commanders' responses. SOI can operate even without direct public engagement when elites act in anticipation of society's responses.

These findings contribute to UK civil-military relations (CMR) theory by developing the understanding of society's influence on the British military. They are likely to be applicable to states with similar CMR structures. They also update British understanding of the Clausewitzian relationship between the people, state, and military, arguing that public influence over modern warfare is greater than is usually recognised. These insights carry implications for the British military's approach to the future use of force.

This thesis employs a mixed-methods approach, integrating media analysis, survey and polling data, previously unexamined secret archival materials, and elite interviews.

Declaration

This research was funded by the British Army's External Placement Programme.

Two portions of this thesis have been published as papers in international peer-reviewed journals. A first article was published in *Defense and Security Analysis* in 2023, which draws primarily from the contents of Chapter 5's archival research (Shindler 2023). A second article was published in the *Journal of Armed Forces and Society* in 2024, and draws primarily from the media content analysis section of Chapter 4 (Shindler 2024).

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1. Introduction

“Operation Herrick¹ saw public opinion begin to sentimentalise the role and loss of Service personnel while growing increasingly ambivalent of [sic] the cause for which they fought. These observations have important implications for the future utility of Land power and are worthy of deeper reflection”

Directorate Land Warfare (2015, p. xxix)

“Different societies fight different sorts of wars”

Margaret MacMillan (2020, p. 4)

1.1. The research question

In June 2016 a team of newly promoted British Army and Royal Marine Majors, of which I was a part, gathered around a map table at Staff College to ‘wargame’ a plan. These students were a generation forged in the combat experience of Afghanistan. In the wargame scenario, set during a future conventional war, air assault troops were to attack an objective as part of a wider battle. The game controllers simulated a helicopter being shot down during the insertion. The team’s attention shifted immediately onto managing the downed helicopter, and they discussed the provision of overwatch of the site from surveillance assets, protection of the troops, and the recovery of casualties. After a while the course Director (a Brigadier) intervened to halt the wargame. Was there still sufficient force to proceed with the original mission, he asked? There was. Then, he said, proceed and handle the crash site and casualties later. It had not occurred to the team that casualties were not more important than mission.

This event suggested a divergence in priorities between the ‘counterinsurgency’ generation of Majors, for whom the mission was stopped to manage the casualties, and the Brigadier who was trained in an Army prepared for conventional warfare, for whom the mission had to continue without immediate regard for the dead and injured. What drove this divergence?

The primary question that this research seeks to answer is how societal perspectives on soldiers altered the Army’s behaviour at war from 2001 to 2014. It does so because classical and modern theory tells us to expect that the public will have impact on how war is fought, and literature from scholars and practitioners contains disparate references hinting at significant recent ramifications

¹ The name for British operations in Afghanistan 2004-2014.

from such perspectives. Despite this, there are few dedicated academic enquiries into the issue and, to my knowledge, none by the military.

During 13 years of combat operations from 2001 to 2014 the British people connected directly to the lowest levels of British military campaigns to an unprecedented degree. Britain's conflicts were broadcast, beamed, downloaded, and browsed from countless forms of media, many unrestricted, with unprecedented immediacy. *The Guardian* noted in 2003 that “reports from Vietnam were shaped, taped and commentated. Even during the first Gulf war—when images were first flashed back directly from battle—the scenes were usually mediated and delayed.” But, by 2003, “this is the first time that death has gone live, 24 hours a day, with a continuous feed of pictures as if the whole shooting match were a football match” (Lawson 2003).

The central argument that this thesis defends is the theory of ‘Societal Operational Influence’ (hereafter ‘SOI’).² The theory describes how a revolution in information technology drives informed public opinion about soldiers and their wars. It posits that these opinions are predicated on rational criteria of a campaign’s justifiability, its success, and its competent management rather than casualty aversion (which is the preferred explanation of political and military elites). These opinions are assessed by political and military actors who, whether they have assessed them accurately or not, respond in ways that result in significant behavioural changes to the conduct of operations. Hypothesising that such changes will be discernible from the strategic to tactical levels and across the range of military activities from equipment design and training to tactical planning, I show that this is indeed the case. I also argue that SOI will be experienced to varying degrees in different contexts, depending on the intensity of a campaign’s violence, its related salience amongst the public, and how military commanders choose to respond to its pressures.

The timing of this research is relevant. At the time of writing the British Army faces a return to the prospect of conventional conflict on the European continent. It should do aware that casualties may be acceptable but also that the way in which it conducts operations will be determined in part by its societal, as well as political, dependencies.

² This phrase refers to ‘operational’ in the sense of matters pertaining to a given military operation. Such operations are conceived of by the Army in a framework of three levels: the military strategic, operational and tactical levels. These military levels are used by the Army to delineate command and management responsibilities. They are also used to distinguish between state and military spheres of influence over operations (HMG 2017, p. 2-4). In this hierarchical framework, the ‘political’ level would be above the military strategic level and beyond the Army’s direct control. SOI includes all levels and is not confined to the operational level of war.

1.2. Thesis origins and relevance

Four observations provide initial support for the theory to be tested.

The first is the commonly held, but anecdotal, belief among the highest-ranked military officers that the British public has increasingly come to view war since 2001 through the lens of the British soldier as a figure of pity and victimhood. In this view, senior officers contrast pity with sentiments of value, respect, and an association of soldiers with heroism. They argue that this perception is predicated on either a misunderstanding of soldiers or ignorance of their work, and they are concerned about the impact of such sentiments on both UK Defence policy and individual soldiers. This has been articulated in public fora by the Chief of the General Staff (Farmer 2017) and Chiefs of the Defence Staff (Royal United Services Institute 2016; 2018; respectively, ‘CGS’ and ‘CDS’ hereafter).

The second observation is the importance attributed to domestic opinion in military affairs by academic and military-practitioner writing. These analyses note that throughout history societies have been fascinated by war in ways which, in turn, have influenced their militaries. Furthermore, in the information age (coinciding with high public participation in political life), domestic scrutiny of warfare is only likely to increase, thereby increasing societal influence. These examinations of societal perspectives and warfare tend to discuss theoretical impacts on a force at war or construe them as a source of influence over Government policy. This includes *jus ad bellum* and *in bello*, as well as influencing ‘*post bellum*’ disengagement from conflicts. But there is room in both academic and military spheres to extend analysis into the specific ways in which societal perspectives impacted the Army’s decision-making when deployed.

The third observation comes from a body of multidisciplinary scholarship that argues that there is a causal relationship between narratives and norms on the one hand, and culture, motivation and behaviour on the other. Applying this idea suggests that, if a dominant societal perception of soldiers as victims did exist, it might have had direct effect on the military’s strategic, operational, and tactical levels.

The last observation is the common, but anecdotal, belief among veterans of Britain’s recent wars that public perspectives on soldiers have shaped behaviours down to the tactical level. During my

own experiences in Afghanistan in 2007, 2010 and 2014, British public opinion was constantly transmitted into the war zone, just as images and stories of the war featured significantly in British domestic life. Task Force Helmand's (hereafter 'TFH') wide-screen televisions displayed rolling 24-hour UK news across the Province, often as far forward as front-line Forward Operating Bases. UK news clippings about the war were placed at the entrance to the TFH HQ in 2010; deployed soldiers were connected to their families and wider UK society through the internet, telephone, and newspapers; and the number of HQ staff grew to include media operations officers and political advisors.

The practical relevance of this research for the Army lies in connecting these threads which suggest, cumulatively, that public perspectives on soldiers may have significantly influenced the Army's behaviour at war. In other words, civil society might have had an effect below the level of government policy and affected behaviours not just at the strategic level, but at the operational and tactical levels as well. If so, the thesis will improve understanding of the influences on decision-making at war and offer greater insight into how civil society can act as either a constraint on or enabler of the Army's action at all levels.

This comes at a time when the Armed Forces want a closer relationship with society, which has not always been the case. This intent was articulated by the current CDS (MOD and Radakin, 2021) and in recent advertising branding which use phrases like 'Your Army' (Royal United Services Institute 2018). If the Army seeks a closer relationship with society, it is likely to render itself more susceptible to the pressures of social norms. As a result, understanding their potential power is critical.

The policy consequences of SOI span Defence³ conceptual and practical considerations offering an opportunity to improve the design and delivery of military activity. The research coincides with both Army and wider Defence modernisation programmes seeking to determine the future character of conflict to ensure preparedness. For these reasons, a member of the Army's executive governing board remarked of this research at its outset that "in-depth examination of the impact that social attitudes have had on the Army in recent deployments would be of immeasurable value for Army HQ, particularly with reference to lessons that can be elicited for the future."⁴

³ Capitalised when relating to the whole UK institution. 'Defence' in this monograph refers to the totality of the Armed Forces and is inclusive of the Ministry of Defence and all of the Services beneath it (Royal Navy, Army, Royal Air Force, and Strategic Command).

⁴ Endorsement of research proposal for the Army's Academic External Placement Board by Major General Neil Sexton CB, Director Army Engagement and Communication, June 2018.

This research will also contribute to the academic debate. It sits within civil-military relations theory (CMR) and therefore aims to speak both to those interested in British CMR and to the military. It is also likely to be relevant to readers from other states with similar civil-military paradigms, providing opportunities for further research. The majority of CMR studies focus on the interaction between the state and military. As Professor Anthony Forster has noted, “as a field it remains very state-centric, indeed often executive-centric, offering a particular ontological focus that disregards a wide range of actors, that do not fit in clearly with its assumptions, and often ignoring civil society altogether” (Forster 2006a, p. 11). The majority of analyses of Britain’s 21st century wars therefore deal with domestic opinion primarily in terms of their political ramifications (see Smith 2012; Johnson et al. 2014; Farrell 2018; King 2019). There are some exceptions, however, which are explored in the literature review (for example, Forster, 2012; Dandeker and Wessely 2015; Dandeker 2017). This research will build on these exceptions and a body of research that has explored societal perceptions of soldiers to extend analysis deeper into the military-theoretical arena. It will investigate how these views were transmitted to the Army at war, and with what effect.

In addition to CMR theory, this research will contribute to classical military theory. Carl von Clausewitz’s writing remains a cornerstone of thought for the British military. At the heart of his conceptualisation of warfare is a three-way relationship between reason, emotion (detailed by Clausewitz as the “blind natural force” of human emotions), and chance (Clausewitz 1993, p. 101). These are respectively associated with the behaviours of the government, the people, and the army and its commander in a ‘secondary trinity’ which is still a dominant theoretical construct for scholars and military professionals (Waldman 2009; Vennesson 2011). This thesis will subject the secondary trinity to fresh scrutiny, aiming to improve understanding of its relevance to the contemporary British Army, and to draw implications for its future operations. Given the points above about public interest in, access to, and influence over modern warfare this thesis argues that ‘the people’ in Clausewitz’s secondary trinity play a much larger role in the 21st century than is usually considered, something that must be explored if we are properly to understand contemporary warfare.

1.3. Thesis approach: The British war in Afghanistan

To examine this issue, a primary case study was required. British forces have deployed to many places since 2001. The war in Afghanistan began in October 2001 with combat operations ending in 2014, while the war in Iraq began in March 2003 with combat operations ceasing in 2009. Smaller deployments took place to Libya (2011), Mali (2013-2022), and to combat ISIS in Iraq and Syria (2014 to present). Alongside these missions the UK had enduring peacekeeping operations in Cyprus and the Balkans, was present in Northern Ireland until 2007, and conducted short-term humanitarian missions such as the Ebola response in Sierra Leone (2014-2015) and hurricane relief to the Caribbean (2017).

The detailed reasons for selecting the Afghanistan war from 2001 to 2014 are given in Chapter 3, but they are summarised as: the length of the combat operation; its epochal changes in character; its large number of participants; an abundance of media coverage and formal records; and my personal familiarity with the campaign. It was also arguably the highest profile of Britain's operations after 2001. Although the Iraq war from 2003 was similar in terms of intensity and complexity, Afghanistan's longer duration helped it to define the British military in the first decades of the new century and it was a major influence on the Army's thinking about future war.

Although the Army did not conduct operations Afghanistan alone, the findings are most relevant to the Army, and other ground forces. At the tactical level, the Royal Marines (RM) of 3 Commando Brigade (part of the Royal Navy, hereafter RN) played a significant part in the campaign, as did Royal Air Force (RAF) and RN airpower, RAF Regiment troops, Special Forces and a significant number of RAF and RN personnel attached to various mission headquarters. At operational and strategic level headquarters, the staff was a mix of Army, RN, RAF and civil service personnel. However, most of the tactical force involved in this land war was from the Army and the majority of senior officers and staff at all levels were also from the Army.

Because this was primarily a ground war, the findings are most applicable to similar future conflicts. Drawing lessons from this study for aerial or naval combat may have limited utility, although there will inevitably be some cross-over. A key distinction between domains is the exposure of large numbers of British Service personnel to direct violence in a way that is more likely in ground campaigns and less likely (although possible) in aerial or naval operations. Thus, this research

focuses on the Army as the principal director, contributor to and executor of the Afghan war, making its lessons directly relevant to future ground conflicts.

1.4. Thesis structure

Chapter 2 reviews relevant academic and practitioner literature. Chapter 3 details the hypothesis of SOI, and describes the method used to examine it. Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 comprise the primary research. To aid readers those Chapters contain summary boxes highlighting key findings. Chapter 4 uses new media content analysis alongside existing survey, polling, and wider media data to examine how the public viewed British soldiers from 2001 to 2014. It compares this with political and military elite assessments of British society's opinions. Chapter 5 uses newly declassified archive material for evidence of whether these assessments influenced the conduct Afghanistan war. Chapter 6 builds on these findings through elite interviews and participant surveys before Chapter 7 examines later operations in Mali via interviews with British ground commanders to deliver a comparative analysis. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss the implications of this research for Defence policy and for CMR theory respectively.

Findings Summary Boxes

- **Embedded in Chapters 4 - 7**
- **Used to summarise key findings of primary research**

2. Literature review

2.1. Introduction and theoretical foundations

This Chapter examines the theories, literature, and Defence writing which relate to the impact of societal perspectives on soldiers on the Army. Together they confirm that the relationship between society's opinions and military operations warrants extended analysis.

The introduction situated this research within CMR theory. Within this framework, the thesis addresses five interrelated concepts which are described in turn below. First, the idea that domestic societies matter to the conduct of war. Second, the idea that the information age has transformed warfare by broadening participation and changing the relationship between deployed forces and their home audience. Third, the idea that domestic society influences the nature of the Armed Forces both during peacetime and wartime. Fourth, the concepts of 'strategic culture' and Clausewitz's notion of war's 'grammar' which integrate these themes. The fifth concept is found in social science theory, and explores how public preferences affect public policy. This fifth theme aligns military-focused theory with wider social science research. Each of these concepts could be explored individually through analysis of the war in Afghanistan, but their combined effect enhances their importance.

After examining these five concepts, this Chapter examines existing Defence approaches to its relationship with society. It will show that academic and military thinking is currently misaligned.

2.2 Domestic societies matter

The first key concept is the importance of domestic societies to the conduct of modern warfare.

2.2.1. General theories on society and military policy

Gil Merom's work (2003) explains how popular support can determine conflict outcomes. Merom places Thomas Risse-Kappen (1991) and Robert Putnam (1988) at the heart of his work, who argue that domestic pressure influences foreign policy. Merom extends this to conflict management, examining the US, French, and Israeli experiences of the late 20th century, choosing

expeditionary, asymmetric, and non-existential wars which also characterised Britain's major conflicts after 2001.

Merom builds his study on three concepts of 'instrumental dependence' (the degree to which the state is reliant on society for war resource); 'normative difference' (the gap between the state's and society's positions on a given conflict); and 'political relevance' (the degree of influence that society holds over policy). The key to democratic states' failures in 'small wars' lies not only in state-controlled or in-theatre factors, but in the influence of civil society, and the effect that they can exert over war. In short, in democracies in which there are high degrees of instrumental dependence and political relevance, normative difference proves difficult to resolve. For Merom, this costs victory when a domestic public forces counter-productive policy changes on government. "Because of the preferences of this constituency [domestic population] and its capacity to effectively exercise political power at home (through the media, the free marketplace of ideas, and political protest), the state's foreign policy is not "ratified" and the war-effort becomes unsustainable" (2003, p. 15).

Merom's ideas resonate with academic and military theoretical work which has sought to draw lessons for the UK's future conflicts from the experiences of the late 1990s and early 2000s. The first key argument of this literature is that populations are becoming more central to warfare, and that public perceptions matter. General Rupert Smith's 'war among the people' concept places populations at the heart of modern conflict and describes the range of associated complexities (R. Smith, 2012). Peacekeeping operations (Cyprus 1964-present), liberal interventions on humanitarian grounds (Kosovo 1999), and evacuation operations for British citizens (Lebanon 2006) are all examples, but major combat operations have also often taken place within densely populated areas, either with societies' liberation included in stated war aims, or with their protection at the centre of operational planning (Afghanistan and Iraq are both examples).

Smith's ideas underpin several significant subsequent works proposing that audiences inside and outside conflict zones are now participants in warfare. These include academic studies (such as Simpson 2012; Freedman 2015; Barry 2017; King 2019) and military doctrine (such as key Army doctrines found in Land Warfare Centre 2009; HMG 2018; British Army 2023). Populations who might be physically removed from a battlefield but who can access it through information technology are important. Smith notes that the phrase 'theatre of conflict' reflects not only to actors on the stage, but a varied audience observing them (2012, pp. 127-128). The implied, and

sometimes explicit, concern of these analyses, particularly in military doctrines, is to win and maintain legitimacy⁵, ensuring (to borrow from Merom) that ‘ratification’ of defence policy is achieved from voters.

This has roots in classical theory. Recalling Clausewitz’s trinities, he states that each element has a direct and variable relationship with the others (1993 p, 101; Waldman 2009; Vennesson 2011, p. 245). This implies, therefore, that ‘the people’ will influence the conduct of warfare through their relationship with the army and its commander, as well as through their relationship with the state. Enquiry into the operation of the trinities will help to better understand their 21st century nature, where all entities have changed significantly from the early 19th. The way in which the primary trinity operates is likely to have changed, and so too the degree to which its facets should be linked to the secondary trinity, which is a matter of continued debate.⁶ Extended study of the relationship between people and the Army at war is therefore theoretically appropriate as well as practically necessary given Clausewitz’s continued relevance to both theory and the British Army.

2.2.2. *Societal engagement with the military*

For all that British society might be increasingly important to war, its direct experience of the military has declined. The Armed Forces are a largely closed system with their people behind fences and activities often deliberately obfuscated. This prevents direct access by the public, which is not true of their experiences of most other British public services. The Army’s small size contributes to the fact that very few citizens now draw their views of the organisation from personal experience (Keegan 1998a; Forster 2006a; Ashcroft 2012). Instead, the public draws its opinions about the Army from representations and conceptions of the military. This may be from the media or “...experiences of previous conflicts and reinforced by the widespread presence of war memorials

⁵ The definition of ‘legitimacy’ provided by the Land Warfare Centre at the height of the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts places popular assent at its heart, describing it as “a population’s acceptance of its government’s right to govern or of a group or agency to enforce decisions [...] Legitimacy is neither tangible nor easily quantifiable [...] Legitimacy comes from the idea that authority is genuine and effective, and is used fairly and legally. Legitimacy is the central concern of all parties directly involved in a conflict.” (Land Warfare Centre 2009, pp. 1-6). It selects an argument more associated with constructivists than realists who might argue for a *de jure* interpretation that simple state sovereign action rooted in international law is sufficient (Ropp 2016). The choice is significant because the doctrine was designed to inform commanders at all levels, down to the tactical. It therefore introduces the domestic population explicitly as a planning consideration for decision-making.

⁶ A good example is found in Christopher Bassford’s critique of the Michael Howard and Peter Paret translation of Clausewitz in which he argues that their primary and secondary trinities are locked “rather too firmly and exclusively to each of these sets of human beings”. He notes that each of the aspects of the primary trinity will interact with different elements of the secondary trinity in variable ways according to context, arguing for example that the public are as capable of rational decision making as political leaders are of responding to emotional stimuli. (Bassford 2007, p. 81).

and processes of memorializing such as Poppy Day, as well as recent commemorations of a distinctly personal and familial kind epitomized in the repatriation of those killed in action via Royal Wootton Bassett” (Hines et al. 2015, p. 17. See also McGarry and Walklate 2011, p. 7; Beevor 2000, p. 66).

Given this reliance on second-hand characterisations of the Army, the nature of these presentations is important. As Hines et al. suggest, a preferred modern British lens (whether in media coverage of current conflicts, or public commemoration rituals of past ones) has been the ‘human face’ of the conflict. Anthony King has described how “soldiers are personalized and domesticated, remembered as fathers, husbands, wives, sons and daughters” in media coverage (2010, p. 1). This applies not just to the dead, but affects coverage of the living. The most popular documentary coverage or dramatisations about Afghanistan, for example, includes series such as *Ross Kemp in Afghanistan* (following “incredible bravery from very young guys”⁷), *Our War* (described by the BBC as “telling the story of the conflict through the words and pictures of the young soldiers themselves”⁸) or *Our Girl* (advertised as a “drama about a teenage girl who finds herself drawn to the Army recruitment office”⁹). Such coverage focuses less on issues of policy, war’s conduct, or the collective actions of an Army and more on its individual, human, dimensions.

Some scholars argue that the Army itself is partially responsible for this narrative shift (Forster 2006b; Edmunds 2014; Crawford 2020; Strachan and Harris 2020). These authors have noted that the public is deprived of access to serious debate about policy and strategy in the UK as a direct result of cautious Government, Ministry of Defence (hereafter ‘MOD’), and Army approaches to public engagement. This leaves space in public discourse for others to shape popular impressions of the Army, which is dependent on editorial decisions about what elements of Army life to publicise and from what angle. The media accordingly holds disproportionate power in shaping the public’s experience of the military. This is why Chris Dandeker (2000), Williams, Segal and Moskos (2000), and Lawrence Freedman (2006) all ascribe the media a crucial role in this regard.

Hew Strachan and Rachel Harris state that the Army has done little to challenge the lack of serious public debate, with “mythologised memory” becoming the preferred means of communication with the public on military affairs to assure continued public goodwill towards soldiers (2020). This suggests that the then CDS, Sir Nick Carter, might be right when he observed that “it is

⁷ Independent 2008.

⁸ ‘BBC Three - Our War, Series 1’ 2012.

⁹ Our Girl - Pilot 2013.

difficult to remember a time when they [the Forces] were more popular but, it's also very difficult to remember a time when we were less well understood..." (Defence Committee 2020). The cause of that misunderstanding might lie close to home, however.

Other scholars have taken this theme further, arguing not only that the military deprived the public of alternative discourses about war, but that it encouraged the public's preference for the individualised lens. Anthony Forster, Helen McCartney, and Sarah Ingham have all argued that, during the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the Army drove initiatives such as Armed Forces Day or the Armed Forces Covenant to generate support for troops, but with unforeseen consequences (Forster 2006b, 2012; McCartney 2010; Ingham 2016). First, the initiatives compounded the public's tendency to focus on individual stories rather than engage with wider matters of policy. Second, they caused the public's support for soldiers to advance beyond introspection about how civil society could better support the troops, and into demands for the Government and Army themselves to improve the treatment of soldiers (through better medical support for injured troops, or the provision of better equipment to those in the field, for example). As the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan intensified, so too did these societal expectations.

2.2.3. *Civil-Military dissonance*

The way the public receives its information and forms its opinion has contributed to the theme of a 'civil-military gap' in the UK, which can be summarised as the notion of divergence in mutual understanding and values between society and the military. This is a common theme of research in British CMR studies (see Strachan 2003; Bredow 2007; McCartney 2010; Berndtsson, Dandeker and Ydén 2015). It also shapes the military's conceptualisation of its relationship with society, as seen in General Carter's quotation above and in the themes of several Defence Academy research papers (see Bowers 2008; Worthington 2014; Rivett 2020).

Recognition of growing social participation in war has amplified these debates about cultural relationships between Western societies and their armies (in relation to the UK, see Strachan 2000; King 2015; Kuhlmann 2017). A notable feature of the debate is the degree to which the Army should reflect—or remain insulated from—changing social norms. Totemic examples from the start of the century are shifts in social and military attitudes towards sexuality and gender. The impacts of instances of cultural tension between society and the military are explored in more detail later in this Chapter.

A final aspect of the ‘domestic societies matter’ literature argues that war is of great and enduring interest to the British public. This is relevant because, if warfare were of limited interest to the public, we might expect the consequences of their theoretical power to be limited in practice and their preferred concepts of soldier-individuals to be inconsequential. Anyone spending at least some time in the UK, however, will recognise a public fascination with war, with a love of iconic war films, national military monuments (the National Arboretum or Cenotaph), immortalised battles (at Trafalgar Square or Waterloo station), and extensive coverage of overseas campaigns in the news and wider media. Margaret MacMillan has written about the fascination that humans find in war using some of these examples (MacMillan 2020, p. 3), and Martin van Creveld has discussed the same (van Creveld 2008, p. xi). It was something that one *Guardian* journalist reflected on, guiltily, during the invasion of Iraq in March 2003 when she queried whether “military pundits” who are “everywhere” might be “enjoying themselves a little too much” (Brockes 2003).

2.3. The Information Age as accelerant

If domestic societies are an important facet of modern warfare, their significance has been enhanced by the tools provided by the ‘information age’. Military operations of the last two decades occurred against a backdrop of what David Betz has called a global “explosion of connectivity” (Betz 2015, p. 42). This has given the public unprecedented access to events at the lowest levels of conflict, increased public political participation and, in turn, connected the deployed force to the opinions of the domestic audience.

The impacts of developing information technology were subject to speculation both before the UK’s post 9/11 wars, and during them. In 1991, Michael Handel wrote about the degree to which technology would connect the public to military operations, warning that politicians and commanders would be under increased pressure to respond to their demands (Handel 2001, p. 128). Twelve years later Group Captain Stuart Peach and Colonel Mungo Melvin wrote that the information age amounted to a ‘revolution in military affairs’ because of its significant impacts for both in-theatre command and control, and the external pressures that the media could bring to bear on field commanders of the future (Melvin and Peach 2003, p. 128).

The experience of conflict such as the Gulf War in 1991 caused other practitioners and scholars to reflect on the consequences of intensified public fascination with, and access to, operations.

Field Marshal Sir John Stanier and Miles Hudson described how that war's participants of all ranks "became international celebrities overnight" (Hudson and Stanier 1997, p. 241), warning that "public relations will be an essential, perhaps the most essential, element of any future conflict. The media *will* influence events" (p. 320). David Willcox reflected of British operations in Kosovo that, "military considerations are directly occupied with the influence of public opinion on policy making" (Willcox 2005, p. 40).

During the 2001-2014 period of Britain's wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya, information technology exponentially developed, with the corresponding ability for commentary and impact from a range of civilian sources (Hines et al. 2015; Corner and Parry 2017). For this reason, by 2022 Matthew Ford and Andrew Hoskins built on Peach and Melvin's 'revolution' in describing a 'new war ecology' whereby digital technology dramatically increases participation in war, with wide ranging consequences from public pressure on domestic politicians to the way that tactics evolved. They wrote that "this removes the bystander from war and collapses the relationship between audience and actor, soldier and civilian, media and weapon" (Ford and Hoskins 2022, p. 12). Emile Simpson's warning from Afghanistan on this a decade earlier was stark: "the information revolution that is currently going on irreversibly accelerates and expands the information dimension of modern conflict right down to the tactical level" (Simpson 2012, p. 17).

This new ecology and high public appetite for war coverage relates to the idea of the 'strategic corporal'. This concept describes the potentially global impact that a single soldier's actions at the tactical level can have in the modern information environment and has been expanded by other scholars since (Krulak 1999; Bowen 2013; Ruffa, Dandeker, and Vennesson 2013). As a result, three key military publications have noted the risk of thinking in rigid terms about levels of war (tactical, operational, strategic) when considering audiences, since pervasive access to information can cause levels to become compressed (Land Warfare Centre 2009; DCDC 2017; HMG 2018).

2.4. Society's influence on the Armed Forces

This Chapter has established that these interested and connected societies matter to warfare not just for their ratification of Defence policy or public acceptance of campaign legitimacy that Merom and others describe. They matter in more direct ways suggested by Simpson and the military's references to audiences' impacts. This section will explore literature and examples which relate to society's alterations to the character and behaviour of the military in non-operational

contexts. This is considerably more developed than literature about how it has occurred on operations (the subject of the next section). This is important because evidence of public preferences affecting Army behaviours at peace strengthens the theory that they will do so at war.

There are clear examples of societal influence over the British military outside of its operations. A well-analysed case study is the admittance of homosexuals into the Forces in 2000. This was not a change to military norms which would have occurred without civil societal intervention through a growing public lobby in favour of change to military policy and, thereafter, through legal enforcement. Debate and the government's own position at the time also demonstrates that an 'anti change' lobby felt that the imposition of change would inhibit the military's operational effectiveness (ECHR 1999, pp. 28-33).

A second key example is the opening of dismounted close combat (DCC) roles in the Army to women in 2016. In this regard, the military found itself under increasing public scrutiny again on an area of policy which was divergent from civil normative standards and change followed. In the case of homosexuality, the military elite's interpretation of societal perspectives was moot, because the change was forced on it by *Lustig-Prean and Beckett v United Kingdom* in the European Court of Human Rights. Women in DCC was not legally derived, but the chain of command accurately gauged long standing societal preferences for equal treatment and anticipated further legal challenge (MOD 2010, p. 3). Homosexuality and women in DCC are two examples which demonstrate that the Army is sometimes subject to enforced change and is sometimes also capable of pre-empting it.

Lustig-Prean and Beckett is a neat example of what has been called the 'juridification' of the military. It was first described by Gerry Rubin in 2002 as a process of "coercively imposed civilian legal norms" initially applied to concessions forced onto the military justice system from the 1960s (Rubin 2002, p. 57). From this start point, other legal interventions into the previously reserved arena of military affairs have occurred. These are reflective of two things. First, they are a clear extension of civilian influence into the military realm. Second, they are a challenge to those who see the military as an autonomous self-governing institution with no civilian inputs other than political direction. That is to say, the military has come to accept civil normative incursion into its processes in key areas of its operation.

These issues have created a new context in which the British Armed Forces work. Anthony Forster writes that “the effects of juridification have initiated a permanent liminality—an enduring instability and the absence of any final settlement—for the government, the armed forces and for society. They have also provided a new social, political and legal context in which British armed forces now have to operate.” (Forster 2012, pp. 299-300).

Supporting his position, a Defence research paper in 2008 noted the long gap between civil and military decriminalisation of homosexuality (1967 and 2000 respectively), and argued that in such instances of civil-military normative divergence the faster pace of civil societal change increased “[...] civil-military tensions that has [*sic*] threatened to make the UK armed forces an anachronism. In response, this ‘gap’ is being actively narrowed by Government intervention with civilian oversight of the military to drive change and encourage engagement with wider society to improve civil-military relations and thus legitimacy” (Bowers 2008, p. 32).

A later Defence research paper of 2013 concluded that after 13 years of military-societal friction on issues like this, the effect was “the establishment of further civilian control over the military’s regulation of its affairs. This has been brought about by the civilian distrust of the military to look after itself in a responsible manner- and in line with the norms and behaviours that it expects from its military.” (Heron 2013, p. 35).

Beyond the totemic issues of homosexuality and gender, myriad smaller examples can be found of civilian norms exerting influence (or coercion) on the character and behaviour of the military. Coverage of suspicious deaths at the Deepcut barracks from 2002, and of negligence claims over the deaths of soldiers on SAS selection in a Brecon training incident in 2013 are two examples. Both cases were high profile incidents which, in past years, the military may have preferred to handle internally and without public attention. Both, however, generated significant public interest, official responses, inquiries, and far-reaching change.

Other notable instances of civilian-inspired reform can be found in the 2017 Army-commissioned research into its popular image for recruitment purposes. Here, the Army sought to tailor its recruitment messages for both potential recruits and wider society who might influence them (Nicholls 2019). Similarly, a swathe of reforms since 2001 have been made in response to social disquiet about issues in training less dramatic than the Deepcut affair: training centre regimes have softened, advanced welfare facilities at training establishments have been introduced alongside the

introduction of new instructor training courses, and the publication online of independent inspection reports.¹⁰

Another example of apparent direct behavioural change as a result of social pressure is the response to high profile allegations in the British press of inappropriate political activity and sexual assaults.¹¹ These have been addressed by the CGS with messages to the Army which were published for this first time on YouTube specifically for their wider ‘reach’ to the civilian population. The March 2025 announcement that the government was removing military commanders’ authority to investigate allegations of sexual assault after a series of further high-profile failings in the media demonstrates the continuation of the trend.

These are examples of the wide-ranging assertion made by McCartney that “the ways in which a society and its armed forces view and interact with each other can have profound effects on how force is used, on the character, size and legitimacy of the military, and on the experience and commitment of service personnel” (McCartney 2010, p. 412). This is not a new phenomenon and McCartney’s observation echoes history. In 1962, General Sir John Hackett noted that “what society gets in its armed services is exactly what it asks for...[which] tends to be a reflection of what it is” (Hackett 1962). Hackett had, perhaps, learned something in peacetime which Eric Von Ludendorff bitterly reflected on from command of his Army in the Great War, which was that “at some time or other the Army is bound to echo back what was so constantly being shouted at it from home” (Ludendorff 1933, p. 613). Margaret MacMillan takes us back further still, pointing out that war and society have been entwined across the span of human history. She uses some totemic examples of society’s long influence over ways of war, such as the Spartan mothers ordering their sons to return “with their shields or carried, dead, on them” or Roman society’s veneration of combat (MacMillan 2020, p. 64).

In the 1970s Charles Moskos considered civilian normative influences over Armed Forces to be making them increasingly ‘occupational’, as opposed to exceptional institutions separated from the societies they serve. As occupations, he considered them to be increasingly refracting “broader social trends” (Moskos 1977, p. 41) and less cocooned from societal (and legal) norms. Anthony

¹⁰ See ‘ATC Pirbright’ a webpage open to the public in which latest inspection reports and explanations of facilities are made available. This reflects the author’s personal experience as an Army instructor between 2010 and 2011.

¹¹ Sexual assault allegations have dogged the Army over the past 15 years, resulting in a MOD investigation which was released to the Press in 2019 (MOD 2019). See also the high-profile political incident involving a video from Afghanistan of paratroopers conducting target practice with a picture of Jeremy Corbyn, the then leader of the Opposition (BBC News 2019).

Beevor noted that such shifts became pronounced from the 1970s and 80s with ‘Army civilianisation’ bred of a decline in deference culture and an increase in graduate officer recruits who were “much more career conscious and they tended to keep in closer touch with their civilian contemporaries. The Army started to lose much of the cultural isolation which had been its largely self-imposed lot until then” (Beevor 2000, p, 63). Forster has offered his own explanation, explicitly building on Moskos’ argument. He ascribes the post-modern ‘transformation’ of civil-military relations to the convergence of multiple factors including an increase in social focus on individual rights; an increase in discretionary (vs existential) wars; an active desire by the military to close the gap with society; the developing technology environment; and increasing participation in war by other government departments less isolated from society (Forster 2006a, p. 9).

Academic and some public debate has argued about the consequences of these trends. Some have argued that societal pressure compromises military efficiency, and that an effective Army must guard against erosion from an increasingly pacifist society characterised by the growth of individualistic and minority-group interests (Rose 2000). Others acknowledge the need for the military to be ‘different’ but argue that the military has been unnecessarily obstructive in responding to social demands for change, dressing cultural resistance up as warfighting necessity (Strachan 2000). Still others view the military’s cultural change as inevitable, regardless of desirability. Chris Dandeker writes that the Armed Forces “...have to adjust to a social and cultural climate, which poses a number of challenges to their unique cultural and organizational character [...] armed forces are dependent upon the host societies from which they recruit, which they serve, and from which they derive financial and moral support” (Dandeker 2017, pp. 24-28).

2.5. Hints of wartime impacts

If the Army’s culture and non-operational behaviours in the UK have been affected by societal perspectives, it is plausible that the same will be true of its operational behaviours. There is little work dedicated to this, but analysis of the extensive literature about the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns reveals many suggestions that operational behaviours were affected just as significantly. These mostly concern legal intervention, responses to perceived public casualty aversion, and efforts at media operations. Each is explored below.

Relating to the imposition of civilian legal standards on militaries, there is evidence that the Army’s ability to self-govern on operations was weakened when civil expectations about soldiers’ rights

became sufficiently powerful that they forced change via the state (Forster 2006b). The 2011 judgement of the European Court of Human Rights in the *Al Skeini* case extended the Human Rights Act's jurisdiction into Iraq, mandating that investigations be carried out into civilian deaths by British soldiers (see Marko Milanovic 2011). In turn, it paved the way for a 2013 Supreme Court ruling, following *R Smith and Others vs Ministry of Defence 2013*, which directed European Convention of Human Rights protection for individual soldiers in warzones, with that duty falling on the state and thereby constraining how the state should equip, support, and otherwise employ its soldiers. In these cases the soldier can be subject to the behaviours of a negligent or even criminal state and so is construed as an employee who is the victim of an employer's malpractice.

Janina Dill argues that the origins of this extension of human rights law into the operational theatres lie in societal preferences for "de-collectivisation" and a focus on war's participants as individuals, a similar argument to that of Anthony Forster and Anthony King described earlier (Dill and Roberts, 2021). This builds on Moskos' notion of 'occupation' on the page above and further exemplifies the extent to which changes in society have exerted irresistible pressure on the military to alter in the 21st century. Following the *Al Skeini* case, senior commanders and commentators expressed concern about increasing constraints on operations caused by domestic scrutiny and the risk of litigation created by the extension of human rights law in this way (Tugendhat and Croft 2013). In 2012, the CGS, Sir Peter Wall, argued that scrutiny from the media, public inquiries, and coroners' inquests had "reset the appetite for and handling of risk in military operations" (Dandeker and Wessely 2015, p. 303). Such cases hint at the Army's operational decision-making being determined at least in part by altered judicial norms, as well as evolving societal perceptions of soldiers.

Hints of societal impact on operations are not limited to formal, legal, expressions of public will. Accounts of the UK's recent campaigns from the Gulf War to Afghanistan and Iraq commonly refer to the Government's concern with civil society's 'war weariness' as the conflicts continued, often defined by concerns over casualties (most notably: Willcox 2005; Ledwidge 2011; Ucko and Egnell 2013). Prominent accounts of the British campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan support this, noting that these societal concerns over soldiers' wellbeing translated directly into constraints over military activity (see Chalmers 2014, p. 125) and suggesting that protecting the lives of soldiers came to be a major feature of the Army's operational behaviour even at the expense of other military priorities. One of the starkest examples of this can be found in the Iraq War Inquiry report. Although its investigation pertains to Iraq, many of its key findings relate equally to concurrent

operations in Afghanistan. One example of its relevant content is the British Divisional commander in Iraq who told the Inquiry that “strategic risk aversion over casualties was a real planning consideration that routinely shaped tactical operations” (Chilcot et al. 2016, p. 137).

There are explanations for how this occurred. Ben Barry describes media criticism over casualties leading to enormous efforts at developing equipment to protect troops which reduced “the agility and endurance of infantry on the ground”. He also describes tactical measures such as control of road movements and allocation of forces to protect other forces which “so reduced the available combat power of the British brigade, that not only was its operational effect reduced, but also it had to reduce the troops available to train the Iraqi forces” (Barry 2020, loc. 5841).

Others describe similar, serious, societally derived impacts on the conduct of the Afghanistan campaign. Like Barry, Lawrence Freedman writes about political assumptions of public casualty aversion and the consequent high premium placed in-theatre “on the protection of one’s own force rather than the actual mission objective.” (Freedman 2017, p. 99). Theo Farrell’s preeminent account of Britain’s Afghanistan war notes the preoccupation with protecting soldiers and, like Barry and Freedman, also frames the response as being in tension with the achievement of the mission (Farrell 2018, p. 272). Some have argued that this is a broad feature of modern Western war in general: Maragaret MacMillan writes that modern societies’ low tolerance for casualties leads military and civilian leaders to “invest heavily in weapons and other defensive measures which will minimise, as much as possible, the danger to our fighters” (MacMillan 2020, p. 283). Frans Osinga describes how a “central feature of Western strategic culture is the almost obsessive concern about risks to military personnel...” (Osinga 2021, p. 5). He details how this, alongside concerns for civilian casualties, leads to risk aversion which translates into “stringent restrictions on the use of force during missions” (2021, p. 5). Concerns about the implications of this for future military effectiveness have been raised by British military officers as will be shown in Chapter 5’s archival analysis.

The nature of strategy (the most senior military level at which campaign direction is formulated) helps explain how operational impacts can be expected from Government sensitivities. Strategy inherently involves compromises between military and political imperatives (Strachan 1997; Cohen 2003; Elliott 2015; Kiszely 2019) and politicians have a vested interest in monitoring public opinion (Elliott 2015). The strategic level is, therefore, particularly susceptible to dominant public perspectives.

Demonstrating some recognition of civil society's influence over the conduct of war at the national level, the Government made efforts at 'strategic communication' to impose a dominant narrative about its wars during the period 2001-2014 (assessed by Freedman 2006; Ledwidge 2011; Ucko and Egnell 2013; Cawkwell 2015; De Graaf, Dimitriu and Ringsmose 2015; Jensen 2015; Kriner and Wilson 2016). The Army did the same, as noted by Frank Ledwidge and Barry. Reflecting on the Army's approach in Afghanistan, the latter noted that, henceforth, "information operations will need to be seen as central to military planning" (Barry 2017, p. 39). Ledwidge observed the responsive rise of 'media operations' at the tactical level, designed to influence the British public. He argues that these became a driving factor in determining what operations were planned (Ledwidge 2011, p. 86).

While the insights described in this section are significant, they tend to be passing observations tucked into wider examinations of Britain's wars. Nevertheless, they imply that societal perspectives held some power over British operational priorities and behaviours. If that is accurate, the issue deserves dedicated examination to better understand its operation, mechanisms, and limitations. This will contribute to academic and practitioner understanding of strategic, operational, and tactical decision making and the extent to which domestic societal perspectives can come to impact operations, and is the goal of this thesis.

2.6. Strategic culture and the 'grammar' of war

There are relevant concepts which relate to culture's influence on both operational and non-operational military affairs. From the 1970s onwards, theorists began examining the subject of culture and its relationship to strategy. Jack Snyder introduced the concept of 'strategic culture' in his 1977 report on Soviet nuclear considerations. He emphasised the importance of beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours in determining strategic thinking rather than the idea that a given strategic problem is approached with detached objectivity (Snyder 1977, p. v). Colin Gray's work expanded Snyder's concept beyond the Soviet Union and nuclear deterrence, his writing becoming central to the subsequent literature. There are key points across his work which relate to SOI. First is the idea that strategy is necessarily culturally informed because it is conducted by 'encultured' humans, and this will have consequences for behaviour as well as thought (Gray 2013, p. 93). Second, Gray notes important caveats which he developed as his ideas about strategic culture generated challenge and debate (most notably Johnston 1999). These are that culture's influence is important but it will

wax and wane in comparison to other drivers of thought and action depending on context; culture itself is multifaceted and difficult to define; and that cultural perspectives are not fixed but can alter (albeit slowly, and retaining some identifiable consistencies) according to circumstance (Gray 1999, pp. 61-63; 2013, p. 94). Together, these points comprise a view that culture is a vital factor in Defence affairs which weaves together ideas and behaviours.

The idea of strategic culture and hints above of society's impacts on operations also relate to the idea of war having a 'grammar' governing its conduct. This concept, Clausewitzian in origin, explains war in ways other than the physical equipment, people, or the cascade of orders which set them in motion. The grammar of war incorporates the myriad imperceptible factors which shape the way in which a state conducts war, its "moral codes and technical scripts" (Farrell 2005, p. 173). It is the contention of this thesis that this is an important framework in understanding why an interested society can affect the conduct of operations.

This notion of war's grammar influencing how a state fights is central to several key authors' work. For authors like Stephen Biddle, how a state conducts war is determined by more than just the equipment or technology it employs. He argues for a more holistic view of what constitutes military capability (Biddle 2010) in line with the notion of grammar. This bears resemblance to the British Army's own conceptualisation of fighting power, which is considered in the moral and conceptual realms (covering such aspects as leadership, ethos, training, or morale) as well as the physical realm of the troops and their equipment. Biddle notes, however, that this social aspect to the study of war is relatively neglected (2010, p. 207).

Christopher Coker's work reflects this. He goes some way to explaining why dedicated analysis of societal impacts on operations have not been given detailed attention in the UK, noting that "grammar is difficult for those who already know a language because meaning and function are fused and seem indivisible". Nonetheless he connects the idea of grammar with the hints explored above, using the Afghanistan campaign to argue that NATO states' preoccupation with casualty avoidance means that "risk has become the organizing principle for allied decision-making" (Coker 2009, p. 24). He argues that "risk has become the *lingua franca* of modern life. It has become the language of business, politics and public policy, and so we should not be surprised that it should also have become the language of war" (p. 26) and he views the consequences in the same way as Barry, Freedman, and Farrell—in tension with, and risking the compromise of, mission achievement.

Military culture can be seen as central to the grammar of war. Christian Breede describes this culture as comprising identity, values, and norms, and how it serves as both “a *force* and a *factor*. It is a force that acts on the military, shaping it, changing it, and making it do new things. It is also a factor in military operations, at times employed by militaries while conducting operations and at other times constraining or changing what they do from within” (Breede 2019, p. 2).

These analyses can be considered detailed extensions, at the tactical level, of the central ideas of ‘strategic culture’ and they remind us of the Forster quotation that “armed forces are shaped by a range of purposes which are located around the organisational use of violence, but then reshaped by social and political factors” (Forster 2006a, p. 16). MacMillan observes that “how societies fight wars and the weapons they use affect and are affected by their values, their beliefs, and their institutions, their culture in the broadest sense...” (MacMillan 2020, p. 63).

2.7. Narratives, norms, and behaviours: Wider social science perspectives

If we can understand the grammar of war through Breede’s framework of identity, values and norms then an important, connected, field of study merits attention to understand how they might affect the conduct of military operations. These are interdisciplinary social science studies, not necessarily related to warfare, which deal with the interaction of these facets and behavioural change.

Paul Collier’s study of motivation relating to behavioural economics explores how identity and norms affect behaviours, adding ‘narratives’ to the list of key facets of culture. He writes that “as an approximation, identity is a characteristic which is acquired pre-rationally through the imitation of stereotypes resulting from participation in networks” (Collier 2016, p. 8). With Collier’s account applying generally, Graham Dawson’s proposal—that perceptions of heroic soldiers rooted in an Imperial tradition have influenced successive generations to join the military—is consonant, and specific to the military (Dawson 1994, p. 283). So too is the more pessimistic concern of Helen McCartney who suggests that ‘victim’ characterisations might have dissuaded new joiners during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (McCartney 2011, p. 50). Collier’s words resonate closely with the way that the Forces deliberately shape individual and collective identities through both selection in their own preferred image, and also through the traditions and rites of chosen trades and units.

The influence of such culturally informed identity can be identified in actions. Kurt Braddock and James Dillard write that “exposure to narratives can affect message recipients’ beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviours such that they move into closer alignment with viewpoints espoused in those narratives” (Braddock and Dillard 2016, p. 463). The argument has been applied to analysis of citizen’s responses to policy: Lucy Barnes and Timothy Hicks find this in regard to public attitudes to government deficits (Barnes and Hicks 2018) and, in relation to public responses to policy in general, others argue that “social norms influence people’s perceptions and behaviours” (Furth-Matzkin and Sunstein 2018, p. 1345).

David Tuckett’s work has explored this in more detail. His concept of ‘conviction narratives’ notes the impact of wider social norms on professional judgement (Tuckett 2018). Although not related to the military, Tuckett’s theory deals with decision-making in conditions of very high levels of uncertainty (‘radical uncertainty’)—a precise description of most warzones. He notes that decisions in such environments are made “in a social environment” (p. 64); that is to say, they are predicated on emotional frames of thought as well as other more ‘rational’ factors.

It is very likely that a large organisation such as the Army will find its decisions similarly influenced by a wider social context, and unavoidably affected by social norms, bringing us back to the matter of cultural influences on the Forces. This is the explicit conclusion of Charles Moskos (1977) with regard to the US military, of Theo Farrell (2005) with regard to multilateral military institutions, and of Anthony Forster, Colin Gray, and Chris Dandeker in relation to the fighting force in theory. Gray noted of the strategic level that “...all strategically rational choice is culturally informed; this has to be so because all strategic actions are human” (2013, p. 93). Forster argued that to understand military decision making “it is also necessary to be conscious of the impact of behavioural and attitudinal factors on the practical operation of the institutions and procedures” (2006a, p. 23). Dandeker has asserted that modern communications have brought societal expectations to bear on military activities to an unprecedented degree, affecting decision-making “on the ground” (2017, p. 31). Soldier-turned-academic Emile Simpson’s approach (forerunning Tuckett’s conviction narrative, but echoing Clausewitz’s trinity) is that war can be considered in ‘rational’ and ‘emotional’ terms, with military behaviour subject to both. In some cases, “the emotional can trump the rational, and proposes a new rational” (Simpson 2012, p. 153). The hints littering the Afghanistan war literature about societal operational impact can be viewed through this theoretical lens.

Others have extended this approach to the level of individual soldiers, similarly arguing that identity creates motivational and behavioural impetus (Ryan 2011, p. 134; Robillard 2017, p. 217; Callister and Whitbread 2022, p. 7). Application of this to the deployed context is important because it is the realm in which soldiers ply their trade, but also because studies exist showing that deployed soldiers engaged with social attitudes whilst deployed (Pinder et al. 2009 regarding Iraq; Gerras and Wong 2015 regarding Afghanistan). Although they are not focused on the impact of social attitudes on soldier behaviours, they point to the easy access that the modern deployed soldier has to domestic narratives and norms using contact with family and the media as case studies. My personal experience points to short six-month deployments and 18-month gaps between Afghanistan tours as an exacerbating factor in this regard; this system immersed soldiers in civil society for long spells between short tours. Such access and immersion raise a question about whether the distinction between the 21st century ‘soldier’ and ‘civilian’ is as clear as it once was.

These reflections on culturally informed military behaviours rarely feature detailed examination of how theory might translate into practice. Given the significant ramifications they imply, they provide strong reasons to examine in detail how this manifests at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of operations, especially given the hints of significant deployed impact which litter the Afghanistan war literature.

This line of enquiry is made more promising by ex-CGS Lord Dannatt’s observation of where the media and public gaze was focused. In spite of most military treatments of public opinion as a factor impacting the policy level, Dannatt observes of his time as CGS (2006-2009) that the media were more interested in the “blood and guts of the action” than they were in the political aspects of Britain’s wars (Dannatt 2011, p. 285). This has echoes of King’s point that public interest was focused on human stories, the nature of much TV and film drama content, and a raft of books giving gritty, popular accounts of troops in action. Three paradigmatic examples are *3 PARA: Afghanistan, 2006*’s action-packed account of a battalion in Helmand in 2006 (Bishop 2007), *Dead Men Risen* about the Welsh Guard’s bloody 2009 Afghanistan tour (Harnden 2011), and *Dusty Warriors*’ firefight-by-firefight story of an infantry Battle Group in Iraq (Holmes 2007).

It might follow that if society develops certain narratives about soldiers which those same soldiers absorb, altered behaviours (even new operational norms) will develop. There is a hint of this in an

assertion made by Dannatt when he noted in Autumn 2007 of growing disapproval of the Afghanistan campaign that "...we are in danger of sapping our volunteer Army's willingness to serve in such an atmosphere again" (Dannatt 2011, p. 281). The implication is that serving soldier perspectives are influenced by their interpretation of dominant social narratives and that this has motivational and behavioural effect. Dannatt's observation is supported by Richard Holmes' ethnography of British soldiers in Iraq which described soldiers' morale being influenced significant part by the support of friends and families at home (Holmes 2007, p. 345). It was for this reason that in Helmand in 2006 Colonel Stuart Tootal became concerned about his soldiers' families reading negative media reporting about their operations. This led him to push for altered media strategies in theatre (Tootal 2010, p. 239). Tootal's intuition was shared. Reflecting on Britain's campaigns at this time, Ledwidge noted that, in their deployed headquarters, "the influence of 'media ops' on both [the Iraq and Afghanistan] campaigns, especially the Afghan effort, was critical. The 'narrative' took a far more important place than anything that was really happening on the ground" (2011, p. 85).

Other examples of societal normative impacts at war can be found. One high profile example is the popular disgust about the beating and subsequent death of Iraqi detainee Baha Mousa whilst detained by the Queen's Lancashire Regiment in 2003. Relatedly, Ledwidge contrasted the campaign in Afghanistan with the Malayan Emergency to demonstrate the impact such societal perspectives can have: he observed that muscular tactics might have been one way to deal with the growing insurgency in Helmand, but that the behaviours of the British and Malay governments "...are simply not practically possible today: the levels of coercion required are unacceptable to Western liberal democracies" (p. 161).

Significance was added to this notion of societal influence over the military's people and their behaviour when, on the appointment of Sir Nick Carter to the position of CDS, the Prime Minister noted that "over his period of leadership the Army has become more reflective of the society it serves" (Farmer 2018). The Prime Minister was borrowing a phrase that Carter has previously used, and efforts to bring the military closer to society may increase the latter's normative influence over the former.

2.8. Defence's conceptual approaches

Surprisingly, given all that has been examined above, it is hard to find references to societal impacts in Defence or Army concept and doctrine documents. This section examines MOD-level approaches first, and thereafter the Army's approach at one level beneath.

The Defence Concepts and Doctrine Centre's *Future Strategic Trends* programme attempts to predict the future global operating environment to make recommendations about the development of the UK Armed Forces. Its series of publications variously hint at military dependence on society, but its observations do not give serious consideration to UK society in a direct constraint/enabler role. 'Audiences and actors' are identified but in relation to overseas environments in which the Army may operate. There are nods to the British domestic population but little more. Its 'Future Operating Environment 2035' analysis (DCDC 2015) pays cursory attention to the issue, with a single paragraph describing a post-2003 reticence on the part of the public about the deployment of the UK Armed Forces. A superseding, colossal, assessment of the operating environment to 2055 currently in use stops short even of this, making a broad assertion about the "ubiquitous information environment" which may "increase transparency" (DCDC 2024, p. 430) but not relating this specifically to the domestic audience. Across the DCDC's publications such observations are unreferenced, do not constitute the papers' key messages, have no attendant recommendations, and are not explored in detail.

Joint Doctrine Note 2/18 Information Advantage (HMG 2018) is the most directly relevant Defence analysis. The wide-ranging note does not get beyond broad assertions about the importance of domestic society, and lacks underpinning research. Crucially, it does not demonstrate how or why "sensitivity to national opinion" (p. 4) matters to the Forces. In these regards, Defence publications all go so far as to note that there is something important worthy of consideration but not far enough to deliver clarity on either defining or addressing the issue. This implies a phenomenon which is 'felt' by the Defence institution, but which is not yet explored through dedicated enquiry.

'Joint Doctrine Publication 0-01' is one of two exceptions in addressing the issue more closely (Ministry of Defence 2022). It is the foundation stone of British Defence doctrine. It is unusual in recognising the power of society's opinions (albeit briefly), in two regards. First, in relation to individual soldier motivation, it notes that military "motivation is susceptible to external influences,

including public opinion [...] the media's contribution is important" (2022, p. 20). Second, JDP 0-01 labels the public as a key participant in modern warfare. The doctrine names the public as a key group in its 'audience-centric approach' to military affairs. This is described as an approach to operations which recognises that "people are at the heart of competition; it is their decisions and behaviours that determine how competition is conducted and resolved" (2022, p. 16). It describes how the public's perspectives, alongside those of other audiences who observe or participate in a conflict (allies, enemies, etc) must be understood in the design of military operations and it also implies that they play a role in a conflict which encompasses "the legal, moral, political, diplomatic, and ethical propriety of the conduct of military forces" (2022, p. 29). But the research basis for these important observations is unclear, there is no expansion on how the public's role is important beyond these broad assertions, and (perhaps because of this) no detail is offered about how military operations can be designed to respond to them. For all of its limitations, JDP 0-01's recognition of public power is unusual in military publications.¹²

The second exception is the Royal College of Defence Studies (RCDS) 2022 strategy guide. In common with JDP 0-01 it identifies potential societal influence over the execution of Defence policy in noting that "there is a clear link between the media, public opinion and political/strategic decision making: the media has been known to influence strategic decisions directly" (Defence Academy of the United Kingdom 2022, p. 22). For its tantalising hint of something significant, however, the source basis of its assertions is once more not given, and detailed examination of the implications is lacking.

Although JDP 0-01 and RCDS get close, the most important and recent Defence strategies at the time of writing (the 'Command Papers' of 2021 and 2023 which direct the activities of the MOD) fall back in line with the trend of Defence publications in not addressing the British public as a significant factor influencing conflict (HMG 2021; 2023). This could, in part, be because the issue does not attract significant attention in the UK's joint Foreign and Defence policy that sit above them (the 'Integrated Reviews' of 2021 and 2023) beyond a cursory observation in the 2021 document (removed from the 2023 version) that "our foreign policy rests on strong domestic foundations [...] on a bond of trust with the British people" (Great Britain and HM Government 2021, p. 12).

¹² It is of note that a major Defence conceptual publication, the *Integrated Operating Concept 2021*, acknowledges an "inflection point between the industrial age and the information age" (MOD 2021, p. 7), opines that "old distinctions" between domestic and foreign spheres of operations are now blurred (p. 5), and even states that "narrative increasingly determines defeat or victory and hence the importance of information operations" (p. 6). However, it only examines British public opinion in terms of its susceptibility to adversary nefarious information operations.

The 2023 Command Paper makes an oblique reference which *is* of note: “Risk aversion—one of the consequences of a period of relative peace and stability—makes us less agile and less competitive than we need to be. In some areas, the fear of failure, litigation or embarrassment has created a culture that ends up compounding operational risk, slowing the pace of delivery and eroding our strategic advantage. We must proactively manage our risk, rather than allowing our activity to be restricted by existing regulation and guidelines” (HMG 2023, pp. 43-44). No further detail is given of either risk aversion’s causes, implications, or mitigations and this excerpt is found in a section about process and bureaucracy rather than an analysis of societal influence.

Shifting this review of official literature down from Defence to the Army level, the doctrine of the latter accepts the broadening of participation in war that Simpson and Smith write about and conceives of this breadth in two main ways. The Army’s main doctrine (Army Doctrine Publication: Land Operations) accepts that the information age has intensified audiences’ scrutiny of conflicts and will continue to do so (“we live and fight in a goldfish bowl”, HMG 2017, p. i). Relatedly, it accepts that the perceptions of these audiences (domestic, allied, local, adversary, etc) matter for conflict outcomes (HMG 2017). Once more, however, it goes no further.

In 2017 the Army created a new doctrine of ‘Integrated Action’. It was described as a ‘unifying doctrine’ which means that it is sufficiently important to underpin all Army planning. Central to it are ‘information activities’ which reflect Simpson’s idea of the proliferation of groups beyond the enemy who are involved in modern war, and the doctrine conceives of involvement in conflict in the overlapping layers depicted in *Figure 1* below.

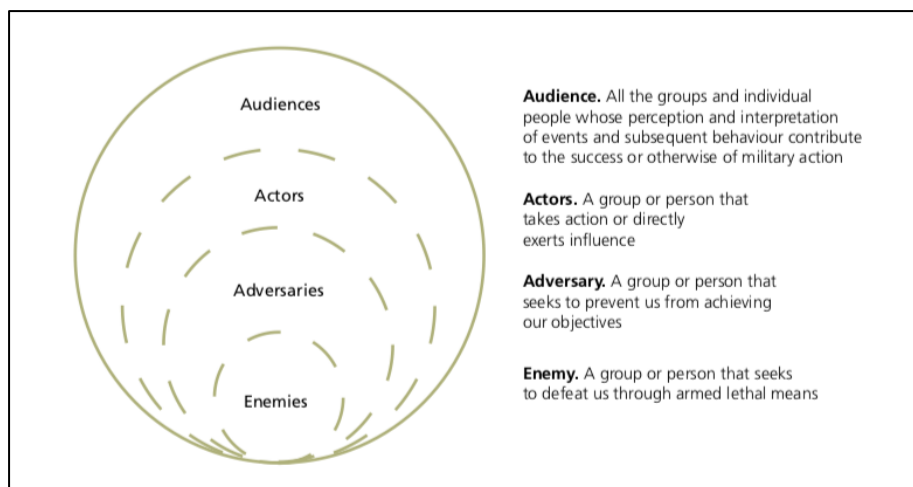


Figure 1: Participants in the doctrine of Integrated Action (HMG 2017, p. 4)

Integrated Action does refer to ‘global audiences’, and UK domestic audiences can be inferred as being included. But there is little which recognises the domestic society’s potential focus on, and power over, the lowest levels of warfare that academic and participant literature suggests. Newer doctrine in 2019 and 2022 is heavily skewed towards influencing global audiences in an adversarial sense and deals with the domestic population in the information age in terms of defending them from adversary misinformation (Land Warfare Centre 2019; HMG 2022). Examples of this might be countering fake news, or other types of propaganda designed by malign actors to affect domestic opinion.

The Army’s most recent strategy, its Land Operating Concept, was published in 2023. Extending the ideas in Integrated Action the authors describe how public scrutiny will be “intrinsic and critical for us in terms of how we prosecute operations in the future” noting that operations will be “in the public gaze more than ever before” (Athow-Frost and Muir 2023). It refers to campaign legitimacy (in keeping with traditional Defence perspectives on public influence over war), but the explicit mention of impact on the prosecution of operations is highly relevant to this thesis and unusual in Defence publications. However, in common with the other official documents so far examined, there is no referencing, subsequent development of this theme into consequences, or recommendations for responses.

Given the literature described above relating to the potential wide-ranging power of public opinion over military operations, the military’s theoretical acknowledgement but lack of practical examination of it constitutes a significant gap. The dangers of this gap are well summed up by James de Waal when he states in relation to public opinion that “these debates raise the question of whether British military intervention will in future be possible in practice, even if it remains part of government policy in principle. If the conditions for future interventions are highly restrictive, reflecting a lack of strong political and public support ...then it must be asked what the point of funding and developing a military capacity is in the first place” (de Waal 2014, pp. 21-22). This is similar to Ben Barry’s warning that “the unpopularity of the [Afghanistan and Iraq] wars has made it more difficult for many Western governments to contemplate the use of force” (Barry 2017, p. 152). If it is ascertained that military operations were constrained in response to society’s perspectives, then the note of caution sounded by Sarah Ingham is important. She writes that “...the question must be raised as to whether, in feeding unrealistic expectations of bloodless

conflict among a casualty-averse public already steeped in a culture of health and safety, the Army undermined its *raison d'être* in the long term” (Ingham 2016, p. 161).

2.9 Conclusion

In spite of the weight of literature pointing to the unprecedented relevance of public opinion to the conduct of modern warfare there remains no dedicated academic or military study into its operation. Military concepts have identified the importance of this aspect of modern war but have not moved from identification to analysis.

Both scholars and military professionals are clear on the requirement to follow the logic. Breede notes that “although culture is a vast and diverse field of study, receiving substantial theoretical attention, comparatively little has been done to show how it has moved out of the realm of theory and into military operation” (Breede 2019, p. 1). Peter Feaver has advocated for “a more detailed look at civil military relations during combat” as part of his wider treatment of the ways in which state and the military interact in the US (Feaver 2009, p. 293). Forster has written of studies like Feaver’s that CMR tends to focus on the formal mechanisms by which states govern militaries. Citing explicitly the need for further enquiry into the role of ‘norms and values’ he writes that “it is also necessary to be conscious of the impact of behavioural and attitudinal factors on the practical operation of the institutions and procedures” (Forster 2006a, p. 23). Echoing Forster, Biddle concludes his analysis of modern military capability by arguing that further research is required into how force is employed, noting that “war’s conduct and outcomes need to receive the same kind of sustained, explicit, rigorous theoretical analysis that other social phenomena have come to receive” (Biddle 2010, p. 207). In their broad-span analysis of British conflict from Hastings to Helmand, Graeme Callister and Rachel Whitbread argue in line with Gray that “the underlying understandings of the world created by each society or culture, and shared by its members, help to influence how its soldiers think, react to circumstance and, at times, act on the battlefield [...] To understand a battle it can therefore be useful to understand something of the societies that put the armies into the field” (Callister and Whitbread 2022, p. 7).

Military practitioners make similar calls. Former British Divisional commander Patrick Cordingly noted that the power of the media, and its preference for emotive coverage of casualties, caused him to question whether “commanders can now be ruthless enough, in a television age, to pursue an enemy to the limit, if the stakes are anything less than national survival” (Hudson and Stanier

1997, p. 241). Cordingly's inference is that the public have an important role in the conduct of modern war, but that there are criteria (in this case, existential conflict) which might alter its influence.

The most powerful practitioner encouragement for enquiry can be found in the military's official Afghanistan campaign review, which foreshadowed the Land Operating Concept's concern about scrutiny in the information age. The review, quoted in the introduction of this monograph, states that "public opinion began to sentimentalise the role and loss of Service personnel" in Afghanistan, noting that there are "important implications" for the future utility of the Army which require deeper consideration (Directorate Land Warfare 2015, p. xxix).

This review of the literature has revealed, first, there is a weight of academic and military practitioner theory which places populations close to the heart of British conflict, noting their relationships with information technology, a growing social focus on individual rights, and the power of culture over the military. This work, from both within and beyond the Defence establishment, comes to a broad consensus that social perspectives matter, and that they will only become more important as technology makes conflict more visible. Hints across Afghanistan war literature support these points. Furthermore, major military analyses of modern warfare in general recognise the increased participation of global audiences in conflict because of ever-growing access to information.

Second, however, military assessments of current and future conflict are notable for their lack of underpinning research regarding domestic public opinion or analysis of its influence. Assertions in key publications about the importance of domestic attitudes are invariably brief, unfootnoted, and offered as anecdotal 'truism'. There are possible explanations for this absence. The Army may see its dependence on society as suitably obvious that detailed research does not need to be stated. It might not think that it can influence the public. Alternatively, it might choose not to deal with direct societal influence because it does not judge such influence to be a sufficiently significant factor in its behaviours.

I believe that this omission is not deliberate, and that it results from the fact that there is little work which connects the themes in literature dealing respectively with the importance of domestic societies to conflict outcomes, the exacerbating impact of the information age, the role of culture in the conduct of war, and the strong suggestions throughout the literature that the military was

being affected at all levels of war during its 21st century operations. This leaves the military (and much academia) to use a conceptualisation of societal impact which is predominantly bureaucratic in nature, conceiving of public opinion as usually a policy matter and sometimes a cultural matter. This is a conceptualisation which creates dissonance between these institutional views and what theory tells us to expect, supported by the literature's hints of what the British military experienced in its post 9/11 wars.

This must be challenged or confirmed by extending existing research through a detailed examination of the Army's recent experiences and connecting these currently disparate themes together.

3. Method

3.1. The theory of Societal Operational Influence (SOI)

The theory of SOI developed during this research and it makes three salient points. 1) Public interest in war and soldiers is enduring and the information age has revolutionised society's ability to scrutinise it. 2) UK political and military responses to public opinion can lead to significant changes to the conduct of a campaign from strategic to tactical levels, and across the span of military activities from conceptual design to physical activity. 3) These changes can alter the national character of conflict and have lasting effects on the culture of military force.

In the case of Britain's operations since 2001 this behavioural change took different forms but was predominantly concerned with reduction, and avoidance, of risk. This is because political and military elites incorrectly believed (and continue to believe) that public perspectives were driven by aversion to casualties, rather than a public basing its opinions on rational criteria. In general, therefore, SOI delivered changes which commanders would have rather operated without. This monograph will show how military interpretations of British society's preferences were an important dimension to the conduct of military operations which makes their omission from military thinking important.

The preferred explanation for how SOI operates is in two main parts. They are the assessment of public perspectives, and the alterations to the conduct of operations which result.

3.1.1. Assessment of public perspectives

Politicians and soldiers assessed public opinion from multiple sources between 2001 and 2014. These included the print media, television, radio, every-day engagement with civilians, and online sources. They communicated their conclusions about what the public thought across the military in different ways.

First, political and military elites accessed and assessed public opinion at the political and strategic levels. The nature of strategy inherently involves dialogue between military and political actors (Strachan 1997; Elliott 2015; Kiszely 2019), and politicians have a well-analysed, vested interest in monitoring public opinion (Elliott 2015). During operations, political and military strategic actors

were interested in public opinion and their physical location in London ensured access to the full range of communication technology while daily immersion in civilian life exposed them to public discourse.

Second, societal perspectives on soldiers and their wars were similarly directly apprehended and assessed by commanders at the operational and tactical levels. Aside from intrinsic interest in what the public think of them and their activities, the modern British military requires its senior officers to be 'politically aware' (Kiszely 2019). This suggests that it is unlikely that commanders, even deployed overseas at the tactical level, were unaware of societal perspectives and their associated political pressures. Like their strategic masters, operational commanders are likely to have had greater exposure to public sentiments due to their location in London, unregulated access to communications devices, and immersion in civilian life when off-duty. Deployed tactical commanders had some access, discussed in Chapter 6, but were in a more constrained information environment (without mobile phones, and not living amongst civil society, for example).

Third, I argue that deployed soldiers also directly received and assessed public opinion during their deployments from 2001-2014. The thousands of soldiers comprising the campaign force had unprecedented access to domestic opinion while deployed via sporadic contact with family and media reporting but with slightly greater constraint than tactical commanders because many of them were deployed in more isolated bases without the same communications equipment of larger camps (Pinder et al., 2009; Gerras and Wong, 2015). These periods of deployment did feature a single two-week spell of rest and recuperation ('R&R') in the UK which briefly re-immersed all deployed personnel back into civilian life part way through their tours. It is likely that troops were particularly attuned to public discourse about them and the war at these times given their participation in it.

Finally, assessments of public opinion also flow through the military system in a cascade of 'accepted narratives' from strategic leaders to deployed soldiers. In this cascade, narratives are formed at senior levels and begin to influence others. This creates institutional ideas which can override individuals' private ideas where they diverge (in line with organisational ideas posited by Sunstein 2019). The military appears particularly susceptible to this as a hierarchical organisation which prizes conformity.

3.1.2. Alterations to the conduct of operations

I argue that alterations to military operational behaviour followed from these appraisals of public opinion in four ways.

First, I argue that changes to tactical activity were directly imposed by very senior political and military leaders at the strategic level. Strategic leadership felt pressure, and had the ability, to impose changes on the war through direct means such as dictating the sorts of equipment that the MOD procured for the Task Force to use, or making decisions about the total numbers of troops in theatre. Direct imposition can also occur through strategic level commanders bypassing the operational level of command to express opinions or give direction to tactical commanders.

Second, I argue that behavioural change occurred through the cascade of orders from the strategic to the operational level and thence to the tactical level, setting direction for subordinate commanders to follow. This normal approach to military orders included instructions which altered the use of military forces in a very broad range of ways (for example where they should operate, how, for how long). This has long historical precedent. But I will show that in the context of SOI the process can place so many limitations on tactical commanders as to frustrate their ability to achieve their mission. The flow could sometimes be reversed. The explicit responsibility of the operational level headquarters to provide 'politically aware military advice' to the strategic level (explored in Chapter 8) means that some strategic behaviours may have changed because the operational level anticipated societal pressure on senior political and military leadership and framed recommendations for action accordingly.

Third, I argue that tactical commanders instigated change themselves either in anticipation of chain of command direction, or in response to their own personal appraisal of public preferences. The writing of Braddock and Dillard, Collier, and Tuckett, summarised in the literature review, suggests that perceptions of societal narratives may directly impact on motivations and behaviours. I argue that this occurred with tactical commanders during the period 2001-2014.

Finally, I propose that alterations occurred through the changed motivation and behaviours of soldiers at the lowest level who had likewise directly absorbed public opinion. This affected their morale and expectation of how operations would be conducted, particularly regarding the prioritisation of protective measures for soldiers and the primacy of care for casualties.

Cumulatively, I argue that SOI's impacts had far-reaching ramifications for how the deployed British Army fought between 2001-2014, affecting the character of the British Army's warfare in ways which altered outcomes in Afghanistan. This has enduring implications for Britain's future wars.

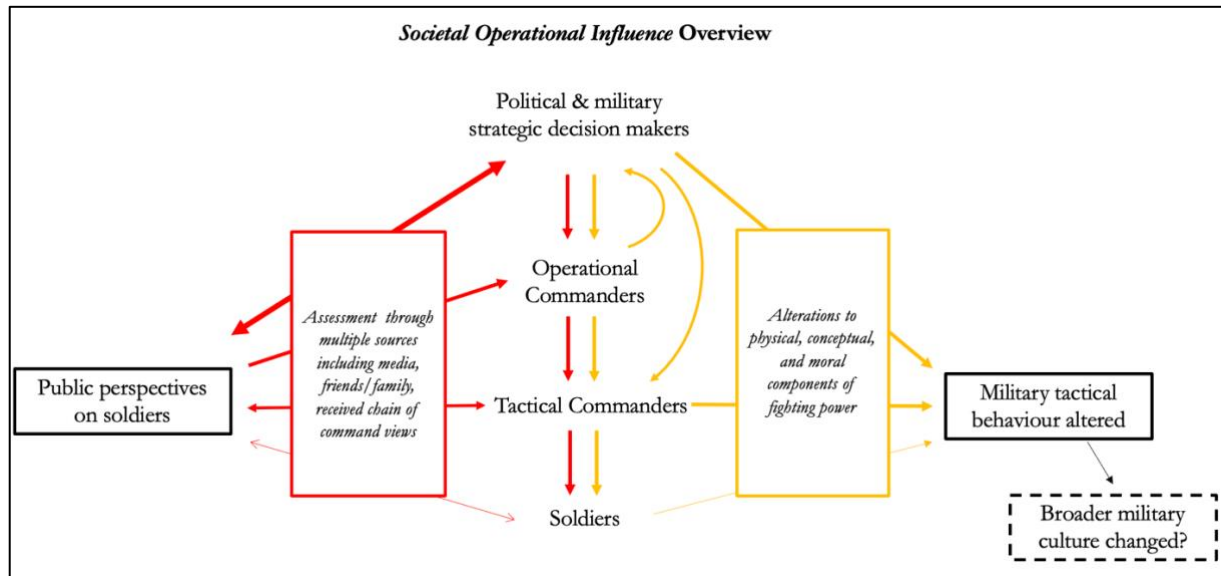


Figure 2: Hypothesis of SOI showing how public opinion is assessed (red arrows) directly by political and military actors and how accepted interpretation is cascaded down the chain of command. Alterations to tactical behaviours (yellow arrows) follow by direct imposition of changes from the strategic level, interactions up and down the chain of command, through decisions made by tactical commanders, and through the responses of individual soldiers.

If it is a Clausewitzian maxim that all warfare is inherently political, then this theory underscores the fact that modern warfare is also inherently social. This is a facet of his secondary trinity which is more relevant than ever in the information age of public scrutiny and high social participation in politics.

Future conflict is likely to be even more visible and public interest in warfare will continue. It should therefore be expected that public preferences for how warfare is conducted will exert pressure which the military must contend with. In that case, future operations must not be planned or forecast without factoring in SOI's potential impacts.

3.2. Research questions and hypotheses

3.2.1. *Research question and hypothesis*

I will test SOI, and its implications, in considering the following research question: How did societal perspectives on soldiers alter the Army's behaviour at war during the period 2001-2014?

This is broken down into three subordinate questions:

1. *Public perspectives on the soldier.* Are political and military institutional concerns over popular perceptions of British soldiers as victims 2001-2014 accurate, and did these perceptions change over time?
2. *Impact.* What relevance did public perspectives have to decision makers? What were the mechanisms by which the military assessed societal perspectives (including strategic, operational, and tactical level commanders)? What impacts, if any, on their behaviour can be identified? Did they occur in other contexts?
3. *Implications.* What are the consequences of these findings for Defence policy and for CMR theory?

These research questions will be addressed in turn in this thesis. The hypotheses created at the start of the research for testing are as follows:

Research Question	Hypothesis	Explanation
Determining perspectives	H1: A soldier-as-victim narrative increases over time 2001-2014, becoming dominant	Between 2001 and 2014 a narrative is discernible in the media of soldier-as-victim. This perception becomes stronger over time and comes to dominate public perspectives on the UK's military operations at the expense of other conceptualisations.
Determining impact	H2: This dominant narrative reaches operational personnel	'Soldier-as-victim' is understood as a dominant social narrative by commanders and soldiers through a range of sources including media reporting, contact with home from deployed operations, and immersion in societal norms when not deployed.
	H3: There is a 'cascade' effect whereby strategic, operational, and tactical decision making is affected	Commanders experience pressure from their chain of command to make strategic, operational or tactical decisions predicated in part on perceptions of societal perspectives on soldiers. This will be manifest in different ways: changes to operational and tactical planning, pre-deployment training, equipment provision, strategic plans, etc.
	H4: There is direct operational and tactical effect whereby commanders and soldiers are independently affected	Motivational and behavioural effects occur spontaneously in commanders and soldiers without being directed by the chain of command, because of H2.
	H5: Patterns of influence change over time, and at different levels of war	Societal perspectives on soldiers exert increased pressure over time 2001-2014, and effects of this diminish down the levels of command (with less impact at lower levels of command because of decreased civil-military engagement and increasing number of competing factors).
Determining implications	H6: Current military and CMR thinking pays insufficient attention to H2, H3, H4 and H5	Military and theoretical concepts do not weight societal influence sufficiently, and accordingly underestimate the power of 'people' in the Clausewitzian trinity and as an element of Clausewitzian 'friction' in modern warfare.

Table 1: Theory hypotheses

3.2.2. *Alternative explanations*

As laid out above the thesis comprises distinct questions. The fact that each can be answered differently gives rise to several plausible alternative explanations ranged against the theory, and they are laid out below.

Competing Hypothesis	Determining perspectives explanation	Determining impacts explanation
CH1: No dominant victim perspective, no impact (FALSE/FALSE)	Societal perspectives do not clearly constitute a soldier-as-victim narrative.	They do not significantly constitute a driver for behaviours at any level.
CH2: No dominant victim perspective, misplaced impact (FALSE/TRUE)	Societal perspectives do not clearly constitute a soldier-as-victim narrative.	Mistaken Army interpretations result in the belief in a soldier-as-victim narrative. This leads to behavioural change at some/all levels under a misconception of constraint.
CH3: Different dominant societal perspective, different impact (FALSE/FALSE)	A dominant societal perspective is discernible other than soldier-as-victim.	This is accurately interpreted by the Army, and yields behavioural impacts at some/all levels.
CH4: Dominant victim perspective, no impact (TRUE/FALSE)	Soldier-as-victim is a dominant societal narrative.	It does not translate to noteworthy behavioural change at any level. Whether through failure to accurately interpret the sentiment, or because of strong contestation, the societal perspective does not significantly alter Army operational behaviour.
CH5: Dominant victim perspective, policy impact only (TRUE/FALSE)	Soldier-as-victim is a dominant societal narrative.	It does not have direct impact below the policy level. Some behavioural change may be detectable, but because of altered Government direction. In this case, the scholarly and military focus on policy impacts of societal perspectives is correct because strategic, operational and tactical impacts are not important. This argument favours a bureaucratic explanation in which direct impacts on soldiers at any level were minimal, with impacts occurring at the political level from where they were transmitted down the chain of command.

Table 2: Competing hypotheses

Hypothetically, findings consistent with CH1 and CH3 would challenge senior political and military perspectives and key academic and practitioner publications about soldier-victimhood and its impacts on modern war. Findings in line with CH2 would indicate that the military had misread public sentiment and imposed unnecessary constraints on their own behaviour. Findings consistent with CH4 and CH5 would be the most damaging to the hypothesis since they would suggest that SOI was not occurring.

This thesis will argue that there is significant support for H2-6, but that H1 requires modification in line with CH2. Specifically, victimhood will be shown to be significant but not in ways that political and military elites thought. Behavioural change therefore occurred based on a misconception.

3.3. Research Design

This research employs a mixed methodology. It is primarily qualitative, with elements of quantitative analysis used in support. It is exploratory and inductive in nature, using definitions provided by Robert Stebbins, (Stebbins 2001, p. 6) in that it generates new theory from immersion in data, rather than testing a previous theory. However, it is not exclusively inductive: the first phase determining public perspectives will require a deductive component, because it will test existing political and military beliefs about public perceptions of soldiers (2001, p. 7). That is a necessary preliminary enquiry which sets the context for exploration of the military's responses in subsequent Chapters.

Each research question requires a different approach. The multi-method research design is shown below.

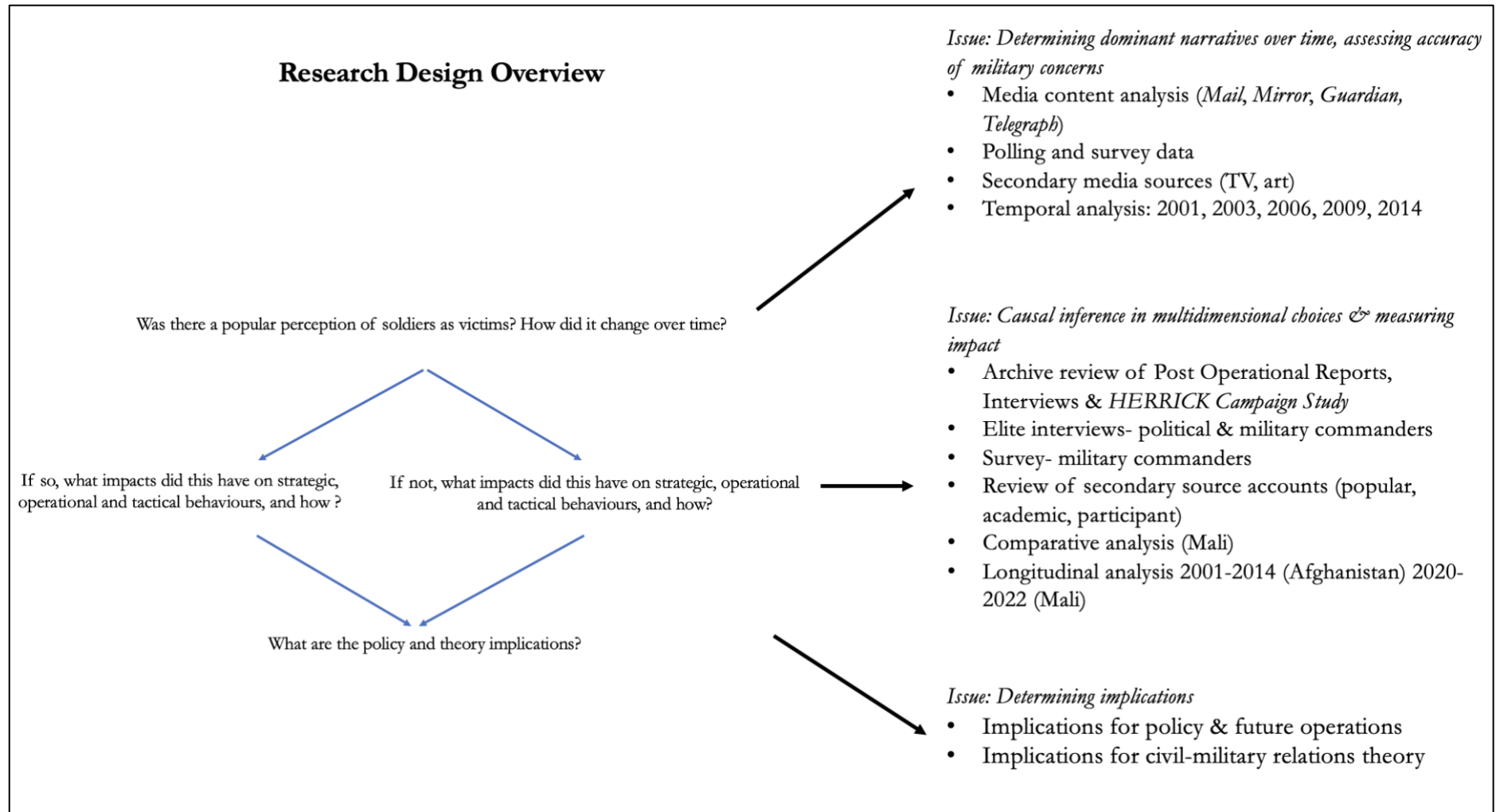


Figure 3: Research design overview

3.3.1. Case selection

During the period in question, the British Army was engaged in combat operations in Afghanistan (2001-2014), and Iraq (2003-2009). Concurrently, smaller tasks were ongoing such as the long-standing peacekeeping operation in Cyprus or intervention in Libya (2011). The Afghan campaign provides the most suitable case study for analysis for several reasons.

First, its duration as the longest British conflict of this century led to discernable changes in its character as time went on (for example: the types and levels of violence; changes to the geographical and strategic span of the British operation; shifts in the way that the war was portrayed by participants and observers). These changes can be used to measure changing responses in British public attitudes. Key moments in the campaign have been identified as the war's start (2001), expansion (2006), peak lethality (2009), and end (2014).

Second, the war's length and rotational system of command (approximately two years for UK-based strategic and operational commanders, and six months for in-theatre tactical commanders) means that a relatively high number of commanders directed it. This allows for data to be collected from a larger cohort than would be available in studying a shorter campaign. The duration of conflict and concurrent improvements in information technology also mean that there is a large amount of data from public coverage (press reporting, TV programmes, etc.) available for analysis.

Third, it is a continued assumption of Defence doctrine that the UK is likely to fight multilaterally in the future, and in wars which may not be existential. The NATO-led coalition in Afghanistan presented the Army at war with tensions typical of international and discretionary operations, particularly regarding the balance of UK national priorities and those of the multinational military chain of command in-theatre. These complexities are likely to be a feature of future operations.

Finally, I selected Afghanistan from a range of potential case studies because of my first-hand experience of the war (2007-8 in a Helmand infantry Company, 2010 in Task Force Helmand headquarters, 2014 in the Kabul headquarters of NATO's International Security and Assistance Force, hereafter 'ISAF'). This personal experience gives me in-depth knowledge of the case but introduces the risk of personal bias. The research design addressed this risk in different ways including through awareness of the risk of pre-conceived ideas influencing data collection or

analysis. My status as a serving officer risked influencing the responses of interview subjects, and mitigations are explained in detail in Chapter 6. However, my military appointment and experience was also beneficial. The military is a largely closed culture which presents certain opportunities for ‘insider’ research (Higate and Cameron 2006). It allowed me, for example, to engage with subjects using a common military vernacular and lexicon, and with first-hand understanding of the context of interview content. These issues are also expanded on in Chapter 6.

3.3.2. Methodology overview: Determining public perspectives

The key research questions for this phase are whether political and military institutional concerns over popular perceptions of British soldiers as victims 2001-2014 were accurate; and whether these perceptions changed over time. They are addressed in Chapter 4.

This phase of research employs a media content analysis to assess prevailing societal perspectives in four mainstream media outlets. Content analysis data is analysed alongside polling and survey data to ensure that it accounts for direct, as well as indirect, measurements of public perspectives. Analysis of select documentary and drama content supplements these sources to provide another means of insight into prevailing social themes.

3.3.3. Methodology overview: Determining impact

This second stage of research tests the theory of SOI. It aims to understand subjects’ reasons for action, cognitive processes, and the actions themselves whilst exploring SOI’s operation, impacts, and boundaries. It addresses the research questions of what relevance public perspectives had for decision makers; what the mechanisms were by which the military assessed societal perspectives (including strategic, operational, and tactical level commanders); what impacts can be identified; and whether these impacts are likely to have occurred more generally.

This stage of research employs a mixed methodology. It uses Afghanistan as the primary case study but draws from the experience of concurrent conflicts where relevant, using the later operation in Mali for comparative analysis. This research stage comprises three steps. First, archival research, in Chapter 5. Second, elite interviews and surveys with leaders of the Afghanistan war, in Chapter 6. Third, elite interviews with commanders of the UK’s Mali operation 2020-2022 for comparative value, found in Chapter 7. As noted by Catrina Thomson and David Blagden (2018), blending elite

interviews and archive research is useful because whilst the latter will give insight into formal processes, the former can better elicit informal dynamics. In addition, secondary data from a body of academic and popular accounts of the conflict are analysed for supplementary evidence, whether supporting or contradictory.

The archival research uses classified Afghanistan war documents from closed MOD and Army records. I knew from personal experience that each deployed British force in Afghanistan completed a formal 'Post Operational Report' (submitted to the Army Historical Branch) and that select senior officers conducted 'Post Operational Interviews' at the Land Warfare Centre. These archival documents deliver insight into key decision makers' considerations across the different levels of the campaign, from authors with very high inferential leverage.¹³ Examination of archival material from the Afghanistan campaign early in the research was important, since an absence of evidence to support the hypothesis would have required reconsideration and redesign. Archival research was also important in identifying the most useful interview subjects, and providing start points for a question set. The material also provided a useful cross-check of subsequent interview responses, mitigating the risks of respondent bias (including social desirability bias) and failures of memory.

The elite interviews and surveys directly ascertain the opinion of political, strategic, operational, and tactical leaders of the war in Afghanistan 2001-2014 and ground operation in Mali 2020-2022. The aim is causal inference in complex choices, and measurement of impact. It was important to isolate the effect of public perception of soldiers in decision-making from, say, a commander's view of the local military conditions.

The analysis and reporting focused on ethnographic understanding in which detailed accounts of soldier experiences were collected (Wilkinson 1998). Data analysis followed data collection. In this stage of research I was aiming at descriptive and analytical outcomes (Rowley 2014; Ghauri, Grønhaug, and Strange 2020). I aimed to determine how public perspectives reached key actors, what they thought of them, whether they felt that public perspectives influenced either their decisions, or the orders they received (the descriptive analysis), and what they did in response (the analytical element).

¹³ This term refers to a source's potential to yield useful insights for testing theoretical claims.

For Afghanistan interviews five cohorts were selected for interviews. These were political leaders, strategic level commanders at the MOD, operational level commanders at the Permanent Joint headquarters (PJHQ) in London, the principal tactical level ground commanders, and lower tactical level ground commanders. These cohorts comprise the universe of subjects who led the campaign in Afghanistan, and those with the greatest inferential leverage for testing the thesis.

The Mali research is a shorter, comparative, analysis. It uses the same methodology as the Afghanistan chapter to deliver elite interviews of all four principal ground commanders of the UK's operation in Mali 2020-2022.

3.3.4. Implications

The implications Chapters (8 and 9) consider the consequences of the primary research for policy and theory respectively. The literature review made it clear that Defence policy makers are aware of the importance of societal scrutiny but have not invested significantly in investigating it. Similarly, theory has not privileged examination of British societal impact on its deployed military. There are significant implications to be examined in both arenas.

3.3.5. Observable implications

A key tenet for social science research is collection of data on as many observable implications of a theory as possible (G. King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). If the hypotheses above are accurate, then I would expect to see observable implications as per *Table 3* below. The observable implications therefore serve as an evidence base against which a theory can be tested.

Each observable implication is accompanied by a designator, giving its value according to the major tests involved in process tracing. This technique comprises tests which are applied to observable implications to determine their value as evidence for a hypothesized explanation (Bennett 1994), and aids the identification of processes by which causes result in outcomes. Process tracing will form a key part of the analysis of data gathered from content analysis, archives, interviews and surveys. The advantages of process tracing in this context are the ability to subject disparate pieces of evidence within a case to tests, to determine their value as effects of causes. The disadvantages of process tracing in this case can be that infinite regression of pieces of evidence occurs, or that too many variables will be at play in the proposed case study. In this case,

it is possible that military decision-making is prone to ‘equifinality’, whereby multiple paths lead to the same outcome. Determining a clear path for societal perspectives to decision making may prove challenging. I mitigated these problems by exploiting the high inferential leverage of elite interviews, conducting archival research to augment that information, and through my own knowledge of the context.

Research Stage	Observable Implications	Process Tracing Tests			
		<i>Straw in the Wind</i>	<i>Hoop</i>	<i>Smoking Gun</i>	<i>Doubly Decisive</i>
1. Determining perspectives	Focus on injuries and deaths		✓		
	Focus on human stories with negative slant towards war		✓		
	Focus on bereaved families	✓			
	Focus on struggling veterans	✓			
	Regular detailed coverage of service charity work	✓			
	Common regular references to victimhood			✓	
	Negative portrayal of commanders and/or political decision makers in contrast to portrayal of soldiers	✓			
	Questioning value of conflict	✓			
	Comment about wasted life and negative connotations to sacrifice	✓			
	Absence of focus on strategic effects of conflict	✓			
2. Determining impact	References to societal perspectives on soldiers <i>in relation</i> to operational decision-making (strategic, operational, or tactical commanders)			✓	
	References to societal perspectives on soldiers <i>as drivers</i> for decision-making (strategic, operational, or tactical commanders)				✓
	Evidence of news consumption by strategic, operational, or tactical commanders		✓		
	UK domestic news playing in operations rooms	✓			
	Press commentary on British soldiers displayed in operations rooms	✓			
	Briefings on UK domestic opinion to operational commanders		✓		
	Structural change in HQs to accommodate media officers / management of British public opinion			✓	
	Managed approach to journalists		✓		
	Communication outputs aimed at domestic audiences in strategic, operational and/or tactical headquarters			✓	
	Changes to short term activity tied to sensitive UK political moments (framework patrols around elections, for example)			✓	
	Changes to training, equipment, doctrine, TTPs (tactics, techniques and procedures), and planning noted as being a result of societal perspectives on soldiers				✓
	Political Advisor (POLAD) guidance to Commanders recommended responses to UK public perspectives			✓	
	Explicit comment in PORs or interviews about responding to UK opinion of soldiers				✓
	Social preconceptions about the soldier (cultural frames such as those resulting from education) affecting self-perception or decisions			✓	
	Absorption of societal perceptions of soldiers by soldiers		✓		
	Popular perceptions of soldiers inspired subjects to join the Army		✓		
Altered behaviour because of social perspectives on soldiers (resisting archetypes, acquiescing to archetypes, etc.)				✓	
Self-perception of soldiers aligned to dominant societal perceptions of soldiers			✓		

3. Determining implications	Insight into civil-military relationship commensurate to findings of stages 1 and 2	
	Foresight into how social-military relationship might develop and impact on the Army at operational and tactical levels	
	Recommendations made for operational decision makers in Army doctrine, Defence doctrine, commanders' course material	

Table 3: Observable Implications

3.4. Approvals procedure and ethical considerations

A twin track ethical approvals procedure was required, one through the military and another through the University of Oxford.

The military procedure first required approval by the Army Scientific Assessments Committee (ASAC) and then by a central MOD Research and Ethics Committee. At the ASAC two reviewers conducted an examination in turn: Professor Lloyd Clark (Director of the Research Centre for Modern War Studies and Leadership) and Dr Andrew Roberts (Chair of the ASAC). Following approval from the ASAC (reference: ASAC 371), the MOD Research and Ethics Committee (MODREC) examined the proposal and conducted a viva with 12 examiners to confirm their understanding of my intentions and to question me on elements of research design. Following the viva, I amended certain key elements of the proposal. First, I re-considered my approach to the welfare of my research participants. The subject of interviews and surveys is a war in which subjects participated, and I introduced more robust safeguards for participants in the event of psychological distress. This included introducing signposts for military mental health support organisations. Second, I strengthened my planning considerations for the maintenance of security of participant personal data. Once these amendments were submitted, approval was granted under MODREC reference 1092/MODREC/20.

I also clarified the military procedure in cases of incorporating classified information into the thesis. This required a separate approvals process for access to, and reporting on, archival material. I was given written approval from the Director Land Warfare and the Director Army Engagement and Communication for access to the relevant archives which fall under their purview (at the Land Warfare Centre and Army Historical Branches respectively). I then accessed RESTRICTED Post Operational Interviews at the Land Warfare Centre, and SECRET Post Operational Reports at the Army Historical Branch. Having reviewed these documents, I compiled desired extracts into two single documents on military computer systems which were of the same classification as the source material. Both consolidated documents were submitted to the Land Warfare Centre as the official owners and originators of the documents, for a review and approval of declassification. This was in line with Joint Service Publication 440 which contains the governing policy on access, declassification, and use of classified material. Approval of declassification for use in my research was received by email in May 2022, which resulted in the re-classification of both of my

consolidated archival documents to UNCLASSIFIED and incorporation into the monograph and a published journal article.

University of Oxford approval through the Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) was granted under reference SSH/BSG_C1A-21-05. The DREC's key focus was on sensitive treatment of subjects and their data. Sensitive treatment of subjects relied on awareness of the potential adverse psychological impacts of discussing events that occurred between 6 and 20 years ago in a high-intensity theatre of war, noting that some may suffer or have suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In this, the concerns of the DREC aligned to MODREC's. The participant information sheets and survey front page explained the purpose of the study, its methods, dissemination plans, military sponsorship, voluntary nature of participation, procedures and options for protecting anonymity. Participant information also contained this introduction to ensure informed consent, comprising comprehension of the project, and agreement to participate (Israel and Hay 2006).

Sensitive treatment of data has been managed through the assurance of anonymity for participants, and storage of personal data in line with university policies, codes of conduct, and national laws. This includes never naming interview or survey subjects and using randomised participant codes in both transcripts and the monograph. The code key is held on an encrypted Microsoft OneNote file, itself on the Oxford secure cloud (requiring multifactor authentication to access).

To further ensure the anonymity of personnel, and to address potential political and security sensitivities in sections of this research, the University has granted me dispensation from consultation for Chapters 6, 7, and 8. The publicly available copy of this thesis therefore has three chapters redacted.

4. Public perspectives on the soldier 2001-2014

4.1. Introduction and literature on British public perspectives on the soldier

“the loss of our soldiers [...] arouses a sense of the pain not being worth it, of a battle that is too much, too heavy, too laden with grief [...] the public tires, emotionally exhausted and psychologically unnerved.”

Tony Blair, UK Prime Minister 1997-2008 (2010, p. 391)

“When I asked why the casualty figures had been so high and heard them [military chiefs] respond that there were fewer casualties than expected—something for which we had not prepared public opinion—I knew our strategy had to change.”

Gordon Brown, UK Prime Minister 2008-2010 (2017, p. 281)

“As we lost troops, public consent was dwindling [...] I was clear where action was most urgently needed: Sangin [...] this small town is where we sustained nearly a *quarter* of all of our losses during the conflict.”

David Cameron, UK Prime Minister 2010-2016 (2020, pp. 166-167)

Before later Chapters examine whether public preferences affected the conduct of military operations, this Chapter explores what the public thought.

The sense of a public gauging success in Afghanistan through the lens of casualties, and a resultant sympathy for troops, is at the forefront of the autobiographical reflections of the UK’s war in Afghanistan by all three Prime Ministers who oversaw it (Blair 2010; Brown 2017; Cameron 2020). Senior British military leaders have also repeatedly asserted that the public is casualty averse, and sympathetic towards soldiers who they came to see as victims during Britain’s wars after 2001. This was articulated in public fora by a CGS (Farmer 2017) and three successive CDS (Defence Committee 2015; MOD 2020; Royal United Services Institute 2016; 2018).

Although Chapter 6 will return to this issue by asking what ground commanders thought of public perceptions of soldiers, these elite assessments have become institutionalized. The military’s formal internal review of its Afghanistan campaign and the government’s inquiry into the Iraq war both demonstrate institutional belief in a casualty-averse British public and describe far reaching ramifications for British military operations (Chilcot et al. 2016; Directorate Land Warfare 2015). These include recruitment challenges, how the military equips for future conflicts, and how the government thinks about using ground forces in the future. These institutional beliefs are reflected (and plausibly reinforced) by prominent veterans like Ben Barry or Tobias Ellwood, who have

repeated them from both academic and political perspectives (B. Barry, 2020; Roberts & Ellwood, 2020).

This elite understanding is supported by some academic approaches. In the US, John Mueller's argument that public support for war is directly correlated to casualties was a foundational work which he has continued to develop (Mueller 1973; 2024). It remains highly influential in and beyond the US. Latterly, the idea of a 'post heroic society' which relates to both soldiers' victimhood and the public's casualty aversion was first described by Edward Luttwak (1995). In the UK some have found the notion of casualty sensitivity and post heroism to have been intensified by the violence of campaigns in which victims were placed by governments (Louth 2018), while others have proposed that there is a cultural and historical predisposition to thinking about soldiers as victims in the UK (Keegan, 1998a; McCartney, 2014; Wilson, 2014). Many have pointed to the media's role in promulgating these portrayals during Britain's 2001-2014 wars and in earlier conflicts (Fergusson 2009; Keegan 1998b; Ross McGarry and Ferguson 2012; R. McGarry and Walklate 2011; Tootal 2010).

Alternative academic views highlight greater nuance in public depictions of soldiers. Lawrence Freedman describes how heroic portrayals of soldiers can be found despite, or perhaps necessarily accompanied by, depictions of the cruelty of war which represents soldiers as victims (Freedman 2017). Others have pointed to this duality of heroism and victimhood operating simultaneously, with each characterisation sharpened by the presence of the other (Coker 2007; Hines et al. 2015; Ross McGarry and Ferguson 2012). Hew Strachan (2009) approaches this through the lens of the 'popular soldier in the unpopular war' whereby the soldier is concurrently admired and sympathised with as a consequence of their sacrifice in the context of a war over which they have little control. This idea of a British public's preference for differentiating between soldiers and the operations they were deployed on—'I support the soldiers, but not the war', or variants thereon—is reported in a large range of studies of Britain's wars since 2001, both qualitative and quantitative (Berndtsson, Dandeker, and Ydén 2015; Clements 2011; Colley 2019; de Waal 2014; Farrell 2018; Gribble et al. 2015; R. Johnson 2017; Rogers and Eyal 2014; Strachan 2009; Urban 2014).

Is elite understanding accurate? In later Chapters, this thesis contends that these assessments of public opinion had significant, underreported, impact on Britain's war in Afghanistan. So, it is necessary to test them, identifying with evidence what the social perceptions of soldiers were between 2001 and 2014, rather than assuming such an insight, as the elite actors cited above

standardly did. This enquiry is also intrinsically important to informing the current understanding of British civil-military relations.

This Chapter addresses two questions. Are political and military institutional concerns over popular perceptions of British soldiers as victims between 2001-2014 accurate, and did these perceptions change over time? It will also address the policy implications of these findings. Providing a first analysis of British media representations of soldiers at key moments throughout the span of the Afghanistan campaign, it finds that political and military leaders misjudged the nature of soldier victimhood. Where they attributed public disquiet to military casualties and the actions of the enemy, this research finds that the public was more likely to be concerned with contextual factors (notably competent management by UK authorities in charge of the war) and argues that casualty-aversion was a symptom of this concern rather than its cause—a finding which sees the UK experience as supporting and extending theory first developed on the basis of evidence from the US.

Data presentation and discussion will follow in three sections, ending with synthesis. The first section presents new data from media content analysis of news coverage of British soldiers between 2001 and 2014. The second section compares the content analysis findings with polling and survey data from the same period, on the same topic, to compare the indirect evaluation of public opinion (through the media) with direct means. The third section examines the way the British soldier has been portrayed in other media, selecting notable examples of portraiture and television to expand the analysis beyond the news and survey and polling data. Synthesis occurs at the end of the Chapter, exploring the policy implications.

4.2. Content analysis methodology

This section describes the theoretical context for the Chapter, justifies the use of a media content analytical approach, and lays out the detailed methodology of the content analysis itself.

4.2.1. Theoretical context

This Chapter tests dominant UK political and military beliefs about public perceptions of soldiers described in the literature review. These are that the public were casualty averse, and that consequently they viewed the soldier sympathetically as a victim between 2001 and 2014. As noted

in Chapter 3, this phase of research is deductive in testing this position but must be viewed in the wider inductive, exploratory, frame of the broader thesis (in line with the theoretical approaches described by Stebbins 2001, p. 6).

4.2.2. *The basis for media content analysis*

The use of media as a means of inferring societal perceptions is supported by major strands of social science concerned with communication, policy, and the public. The ‘agenda setting’ argument of Maxwell McCombs builds on the early 20th century work of Walter Lippmann. McCombs’ theory is that the media is significant in reflecting what people think, but also in shaping the public agenda (McCombs 2014, p. 2). Pepper Culpepper’s research relates this to policy impact in noting that socially prominent issues become political priorities, and that “media coverage is a key mechanism for bringing issues to public attention, and the media will publish more stories about issues that voters, as news consumers, will purchase” (Culpepper 2011, p. 7). This corresponds to work by Robert Entman and Brian McNair who analyse how the media ‘frames’ public opinion to elites, and vice versa, with policy implications (Entman 2004; McNair 2011).

These themes apply as equally to warfare as to other public policy issues. Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling have explored this in relation to US public opinion, the media, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Baum and Groeling 2010). Professor Chris Dandeker commented on the same subject from a UK perspective when he described the media as playing “a crucial role, providing the indirect knowledge and experience on which most people rely for their information on the military” (Dandeker 2000, p. 38). By 2006, Lawrence Freedman described the media’s role in communicating between the combat zone, ‘home front’, and international audience as “crucial” (Freedman 2006, p. 73). In 2009 Peter Feaver, the US’ leading civil-military relations theorist, called the media “the most prominent fire alarm on defense policy [...] anecdotal evidence suggests that the media play an important role even for senior policymakers who have a wealth of internal sources of information”(Feaver 2009, p. 80). In 2012 Ross McGarry and Neil Ferguson described how media in the UK such as “print news media is a key arbiter of fuelling public opinion and public imagination...” (McGarry and Ferguson 2012, p. 126). One UK CDS told me that during the Iraq and Afghan campaigns “it was quite clear that the vast majority of the public was taking their opinion pretty much direct from the media, and so that was the key”.¹⁴

¹⁴ Interview with former CDS.

Chapter 2's literature review described the public's lack of direct access to the military (see Forster, 2006; Ashcroft, 2012) and how the public's opinions about the Army are thus disproportionately derived from second hand representations and conceptions (Hines, L.A. et al. 2015, p. 17). This enhances the role that the media plays in shaping and reflecting public opinion, and in "linking the armed forces to the people" (Strachan and Harris 2020, p. 1).

The role of the media as an interlocutor in both shaping and reflecting British public opinion about modern warfare was felt by deployed commanders. In a forerunner to this research, some of them suggested that there were impacts inside the warzone as well as the living room: Air Marshal Brian Burridge, commander of UK forces in the Gulf during the invasion of Iraq in 2003, accused the media that April of having "lost the plot.... it's a spectator sport to criticise anybody or anything, and what the media says fuels public expectation. That may sound harsh, but that's the way it feels from where I sit" (Sylvester 2003, p. 8). US Marine Corps General and former Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis reflected similarly on the role of the media in informing domestic attitudes in the US. As a ground commander in Iraq, he felt that "...news and graphics about the anticipated casualties were disturbing to families. Mail call fed that back to my Marines and Navy corpsmen" (Mattis and West 2019, p. 28). An almost identical observation about media reporting and its impact on deployed soldiers was made by British Lieutenant Colonel Stuart Tootal, who commanded a Parachute Regiment battalion in Helmand three years later (Tootal 2010, p. 166). Further demonstrating the military's belief in the power of the mainstream media, the head of the British Army invited journalists to visit Afghanistan in the same year that Tootal was deployed. It was done "to establish a better understanding amongst the British public" about the campaign (Dannatt 2011, p. 240), something judged to be so important to the campaign as to require personal action by the CGS. These observations underline the importance of understanding media narrative but are also suggestive of the direct 'in-theatre' impacts that this thesis explores later.

To help explain the relative power of the media in these wars compared to the major conflicts before them, we return to David Betz's notion of an 'explosion of connectivity' at the time (Betz 2015, p. 42). For Chris Dandeker this communications revolution gave the media a central role in the formation of public opinion. He suggests, as a result, that commanders "were made aware of the importance of accommodating the media in modern war" (Dandeker 2017, p. 29) which the comments of Burridge, Mattis, and the action of Dannatt all bear out.

Social media use was rapidly growing during the period under analysis but it was not yet in its primacy. Use of the news media goes some way to addressing this additional resource. The work that news outlets can reasonably be expected to be conducting in aggregating information from on and off-line sources makes them a useful source of integrated opinion, rather than leaving the researcher to attempt to determine dominant themes in public sentiment from myriad different strands of ‘raw’ resources such as Twitter feeds, Facebook posts, etc. Philip Seib has referred to this “new facet of journalism” which he examined at play during the Arab Spring (Seib 2012, p. 45). Furthermore, data in Chapter 6 below will demonstrate that, between 2001-2014, print media was the primary means of military commanders’ connection with public opinion.

4.2.3. *Approach*

Once the media was determined as the vehicle for investigating public perceptions of soldiers, four national mainstream media outlets were selected. They were chosen on the basis of OFCOM and Audit of Bureau Circulation data from the period 2001-2014 (OFCOM 2013; 2014; ‘National Newspapers - Audit Bureau of Circulations’, n.d.). *The Daily Mirror* and *Daily Mail* were consistently in the top five most-read newspaper outlets. They were selected over more ‘centrist’ popular publications because they are tabloids with political bias, on opposing sides of the political spectrum from one another. *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* are broadsheets which are likewise on opposite sides of the political spectrum. Their inclusion provides demographic diversity since they were amongst the highest-read mainstream broadsheets. This ensures that analysis includes media being read by the UK’s socially ‘higher status’ as well as ‘lower status’ groups (in line with the ‘status hypothesis’ supported by Chan and Goldthorpe, 2007).

The sample units were determined as being news, commentary, editorial or opinion articles which mentioned ‘soldier’ or ‘soldiers’ from the selected publications during the period 1 June to 1 July in the following notable years: 2001 in order to provide a ‘baseline’ of public perceptions before the Afghanistan war commenced; 2003 in the first year of the Iraq campaign; 2006 as the British war in Afghanistan expanded into Helmand; 2009 at the peak of British casualties; and 2014 at the conclusion of British combat operations in Afghanistan. Research was subsequently extended to cover the invasion phase of the Iraq war from 20 March to 20 April 2003 to test some conclusions drawn from the original analysis.

Across all four publications in the original five time periods, an initial data trawl on the Factiva database yielded 14, 534 articles. Each was read to determine whether it met sample unit criteria (see *Table 4*). These rules were designed to create a comprehensive set of all articles in relevant outlets which referred to serving British soldiers during the five time periods in question. 566 sample units met the criteria and were imported into NVivo for coding. Discarded articles were reports which, for example, covered foreign soldiers, historical soldiers, fictional soldiers or, in several cases, soft boiled eggs and soldiers. Extending the analysis into the invasion phase of the Iraq war yielded an initial sample from Factiva of 2, 345 additional articles, of which 783 met the criteria for inclusion as sample units. This increased the total *n* of the content analysis from 566 to 1, 349.

Sample	Sample Unit (Unit of analysis)	Recording Unit (Unit of coding)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Daily Mirror</i> • <i>Daily Mail</i> • <i>The Guardian</i> • <i>The Daily Telegraph</i> 	<p>From the sample, the sample units are articles of the following categories:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • News • Commentary • Editorial • Opinion articles <p>Sample Units must also feature the inclusion criteria in the ‘sample unit comment’ box below</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tenor of the article, comprising content of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Headlines ○ By-lines ○ Sentences within articles in which the soldier is referenced
Sample Comments	Sample Unit Comment	Recording Unit Comment
<p>Samples are drawn from the Factiva database.</p> <p>The search is conducted in the sample publications for the words ‘soldier’ or ‘soldiers’ published in the following time periods:</p> <p>01/06 – 01/07 for 2001, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2014.</p> <p>Note additional subsequent search under the same criteria for the invasion phase of the Iraq war, which was set as 20/03/2003 – 20/04/2003.</p>	<p>Include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Any article including comments about British soldiers or synonyms thereof (‘squaddie’, ‘troops’, ‘serviceman/woman’ etc), or a specific soldier (‘General Wall’, ‘Sergeant Smith’, ‘Wilson’, etc) serving in the Army during the ‘war on terror’ or 1 year before the article’s publication in the case of the 2001 articles. ○ Articles which may appear in the same paper on the same day on the same topic if they are substantively different (article and editorial for e.g.). ○ Articles on the same topic in different papers. ○ Soldiers in abstract/concept. <p>Exclude:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Articles which are not news, commentary or opinion article (i.e., book serialisations, arts reviews, travel supplement, money supplement, etc). ○ Articles which are duplicates (the same article in different editions) ○ Articles only referring to historical soldiers (of Bloody Sunday, the Falklands, etc). ○ Articles only referring to veterans/ex-soldiers or families. This is not an analysis of ‘family as victim’ or ‘veteran as victim’. Familial representation of the soldier is to be included (soldier as father or daughter, etc). This helps to paint the soldier in a particular light so shapes the conceptualisation of the soldier. But this is distinct from articles focussing on ‘Daniel’s bereaved mother’ for example. 	<p>Include for review when coding for tenor:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ All sentences relating to British ‘soldiers’, ‘soldier’, or synonyms thereof (‘squaddie’, ‘troops’, ‘serviceman/woman’ etc), or a specific soldier (‘General Wall’, ‘Sergeant Smith’, ‘Wilson’, etc). This includes collective nouns (‘Regiments’, ‘Corps’, ‘Divisions’, ‘Task Force’, etc). To include sentences which are quotations from secondary sources. ○ Reference to all Royal Marines, Special Forces, RAF Regiment personnel, Army soldiers. <p>Exclude from coding:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sentences pertaining to Royal Navy and RAF personnel, apart from Royal Marines (‘sailors’, ‘airmen’, etc). ○ Sentences in which ‘the Army’ or ‘Armed Forces’ is the subject. ○ Sentences which describe ‘British commanders’ without specifying which Service they are from <p>Other comment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ When coding the tenor, the rater must keep the review tightly focused on how soldiers are being characterised within an article which might be

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ References to fictional or foreign soldiers. ○ Articles referring to ‘Coalition’ Forces—the article must be about British soldiers whether the word ‘British’ is appended or not. ○ Coding units referring to ‘the Armed Forces’, ‘military’, or ‘British Forces’ are not specific enough 	<p>making an emotive point about something else. The concern is with the tenor of soldier portrayal, not the overall tenor of the article.</p>
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Table 4: Selection criteria for sample, sample units, and recording units

4.2.4. *Codes*

The coding framework (Appendix B) was built on quantitative research conducted by Helen McCartney (2011). She analysed characterisations of British soldiers over the course of a year (2010-2011) using headlines across national papers. Her main concepts were ‘hero’, ‘victim’ and ‘villain’ with sub-categories. I used a longer time frame to increase the size of the data set and examine trends over time (see *Table 4*) and I modestly expanded the category list to include ‘helper’ and some sub-categories following immersion in that data.

The expansion included ‘neutral’ frames which were not obviously emotively charged. Examining emotive depictions is important to identify what the British public think of soldiers *when* they think in emotive terms. But, without inclusion of non-emotive coverage one cannot hope to know how often this is the case, and whether therefore emotive characterisations are of comparative relevance. Inclusion of neutral portrayal results therefore helps to deliver a more comprehensive view of how the soldier is portrayed in civil society.

Finally, I narrowed the sample publications to manage the greater quantity and applied coding to the tenor of the article rather than just the headline. This was done because articles often contained more nuance in soldier presentations than the headline suggested. In this regard the analysis became qualitative, although NVivo’s quantitative analytical tools were exploited for data interpretation. This enabled the identification, description, and analysis of themes appearing in media reporting. Working to extend an established approach means that my method is part descriptive.

4.2.5. *Ambiguities, boundaries, and exclusions*

Boundaries and exclusions reduced the risk of diluted findings. The first major conceptual challenge in this regard concerned veterans. There is evidence in several studies that the British public makes distinctions in how it approaches the veteran and the soldier (Ashcroft 2012; Hines et al. 2015; Colley 2019). Plausible differences in how veterans and soldiers are perceived created sufficient risk to the focus of my project that I decided on a boundary for the research, limiting it to coverage of soldiers serving during the ‘war on terror’ 2001-2014, with allowance made for soldiers serving one year before June 2001 (to establish the baseline). A second reason for excluding veterans is practical: a boundary became essential to avoid the study determining a

general view of soldiers across time, rather than the soldier during 2001-2014. This is predicated on the reasonable assumption that the presentation of soldiers from different conflicts is likely to differ. Many articles in the initial sample referred to historical campaigns, for example, the treatment of Northern Ireland veterans called to give testimony at the Bloody Sunday inquiry in 2001. Other articles covered veterans' attendance of D-Day memorials. Still others went further back to the First World War and in some cases wars of preceding centuries.

During the selection of sample units and during coding, I decided that any soldier serving at any point in the war on terror would be included (rather than, say, restricting analysis of 2009 reporting to soldier actions in that year alone). This is because reporting of soldier-related events is often delayed, but coverage in year X of events that occurred earlier in year Y still contributes to the tenor of reporting about soldiers in year X. Three examples are inquests, gallantry awards, and legal actions by soldiers' families. All attracted public interest, and all occurred with varying degrees of delay (up to years), meaning that coverage of a soldier event could be informing public perceptions with a gap of months or years. In 2006, for example, inquests were still pending for soldier deaths during the war on terror as far back as 2003, and the reporting of those inquests informed opinions about contemporary soldiers engaged on those same wars in 2006. Gallantry awards are typically made many months after action (see the award of the Victoria Cross to James Ashworth who was killed in action on 13 June 2012 and awarded the medal on 22 March 2013). Legal action follows the same pattern. In the instance of a 2009 court case brought by the bereaved families of two soldiers (Cyrus Thatcher and Lee Ellis), Thatcher was killed earlier that year, while Ellis was killed in 2006.

A second area requiring a decision was the portrayal of military families. During the selection of sample units and coding it was important to distinguish between presentations of soldiers themselves, and presentations of loved ones. The two can be entwined in much reporting, particularly those with a 'victim' tenor. It was important to keep in mind the purpose of the research, which is perceptions of the soldier and not the soldier's family. Often, for example, in reports of soldier deaths or injuries there was detailed coverage of the grief or treatment of the casualty's family and friends. These were often emotive, had a clear 'victim' tenor, but were not related directly to the soldier themselves.

A third area of ambiguity was collective nouns. When examining the tenor of articles, I decided not to include any references to collective nouns for soldiers at or above the level of 'the Army'

when conducting analysis. I included, therefore, collective nouns such as ‘Task Force’, ‘Battalion’ or ‘Corps’ for example whilst excluding reference to ‘the Army’, ‘the Armed Forces’, ‘the MOD’, etc. The reason for this boundary is that, during initial immersion in the data, ‘the Army’ and ‘the Forces’ or ‘MOD’ were typically presented in impersonal language of the ‘faceless organisation’, often in juxtaposition to the soldier. Collective nouns below that level appeared in more personalised terms.¹⁵

A definition of the ‘soldier’ was needed in determining which sample units would be included. This term is used imprecisely across society, both in common discourse and the media. For the purposes of this study, any person who has joined the Army was considered a ‘soldier’, including those under initial training. I included reporting referring to ground troops which are not technically within the Army (Special Forces soldiers, Royal Marines, and members of the RAF Regiment). This is because their actions are often conflated in society with those of Army personnel, and vice versa, and to exclude ground troops who are not officially in the Army would have reduced the data set unnecessarily.

Regarding geography, it was deemed necessary to analyse coverage of soldier activity anywhere in the world and not just Afghanistan: the purpose of this Chapter is to get a sense of how soldiers were viewed holistically by British society during the ‘war on terror’. This is important for two reasons. First, the soldiers were the same (*i.e.*, troops serving in Afghanistan would work at other times in the UK and conducted tours across different theatres). Second, one of my assumptions was that the average British citizen is unlikely to have drawn distinctions between conflicts that were conducted concurrently as part of that war. Nevertheless, I implemented additional coding structures to log the different geographical context of each sample unit (Iraq, Afghanistan, UK domestic, Libya, etc) to allow for different manipulation of data later if required. The results demonstrate that this was a helpful decision: contrary to my initial expectation, public perspectives of soldiers did vary between locations.

¹⁵ This approach is supported by the findings of a 2015 Ipsos Mori survey in conjunction with Kings College London which made a similar distinction in public opinion surrounding ‘soldiers’ and ‘Armed Forces’, and which yielded different results for perspectives on each (Ipsos MORI and Kings College London 2015). This is discussed in more detail later in this Chapter.

4.2.6. *Reflexivity and review*

Self-reflection was important given the qualitative nature of this stage of research. It was important to consider my own biases and initial expectations which might influence the study. I accordingly recorded my initial expectations, and used trials and reviews at different stages of the project to guard against bias compromising either research design or the results (Schreier 2012, p. 128).

Analysis and review occurred in four stages. First, a trial in the pilot phase used a coding dictionary which was both deductive (drawn from McCartney) and inductive (with the addition of new codes as the pilot proceeded). A second rater checked a selection of these articles, which yielded only 40% consistency, with several major areas of ambiguity in the coding dictionary which therefore required addressing. These included a lack of clarity in category definitions, and a lack of sufficiently detailed code descriptions both of which were amended in the coding dictionary which guided the subsequent main analysis (Appendix B).

Second, I trialled the amended dictionary again using 80 sample unit articles drawn from across the sample publications. In this second trial, the articles were drawn evenly from the five key dates in the study (2001, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2014). This was not done in the pilot which used only sample units from 2001. This was a mistake because the topics of reporting changed as the war on terror progressed. For example, articles from 2001 did not cover the war in Afghanistan—which had not yet commenced—and so reporting differed in terms of content and tenor to later reporting. Likewise, as the character of the conflict changed (becoming more violent, for example) the tone of reporting altered.

Following the second trial, I further clarified the coding dictionary and checked it for unidimensionality, mutual exclusivity, exhaustiveness, saturation, and clarity of rules throughout (as prescribed by Schreier 2012, p. 71). Formal coding then proceeded as the third stage. During coding, I annotated recording units which were ambiguous in NVivo. I returned to these recording units after an ‘air gap’ of two weeks and reviewed my coding decision.

Once the full data set had been coded, the fourth, final, stage comprised two rater checks. The first was an intracoder reliability check in which I reviewed 10% of the total sample units drawn evenly from across 2001, both 2003 periods, 2006, 2009, and 2014 (in line with the recommendations of O’Connor and Joffe, 2020). This yielded 89% consistency for top-level

coding, and 87% consistency in both top level and subcategory codes. An interrater reliability check then coded the same 10% selection of my sample units. This meant that two raters “working independent of each other, apply the same coding instructions or recording devices to the same set of units of analysis.” (Krippendorff, 2004, p. 414). The external rater check yielded a consistency of 87% of top-level coding, and 85% consistency in both top level and subcategory codes.

4.3. Content analysis findings

This section reports the findings of the content analysis. It describes the overall results by tenor, exploring each main characterisation (victim, hero, etc) in turn. It then examines results over time, and reports on an extension which was conducted to examine a key moment in time during the Iraq War.

4.3.1. Overall reporting by tenor

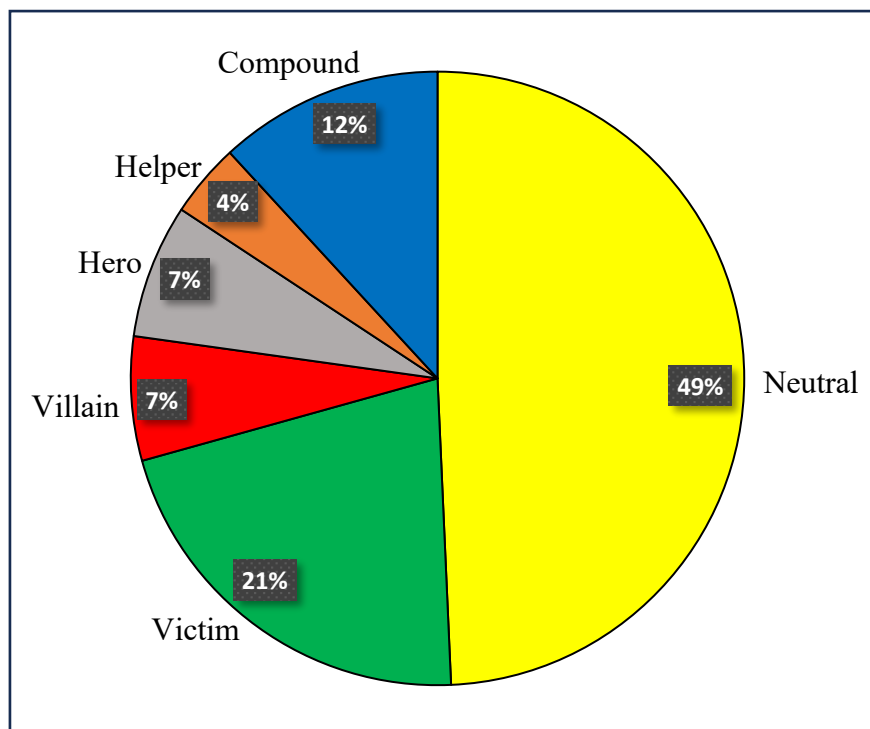


Chart 1: Media characterisations of the soldier 2001-2014 (n = 566 articles from the month of June for the years 2001, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2014)

Chart 1 compares the top-level codes found across data in the five subject years. Its most striking feature is that factual, neutral, reporting is the predominant single way in which soldiers are reported on. Neutral material is descriptive and lacks emotive depiction. An example is the June 2006 *Daily Telegraph* report containing the phrase, “Mrs Beckett [then Foreign Secretary] would not

say whether the 800 British soldiers in Maysan would return home or be redeployed to other parts of Iraq” (La Guardia 2006). These articles contain factual coverage which contains no clear emotive portrayal of soldiers in the article.

Chart 1 shows that, cumulatively, there are marginally more emotive portrayals than neutral ones. The range of emotive depictions shows that there was considerably more breadth to media perceptions of British soldiers during the wars of 2001-2014 than simply ‘victim’. Although it is the case that victim is the largest single characterisation of these emotive presentations (and many of the compound depictions include victim characterisation) there is clearly more to the full picture than the soldier-victim of elite discourse.

If there was more breadth to emotive public perceptions than soldier ‘as victim’, then the data behind Chart 1 demonstrate interesting depth to each of these themes. The functionality of NVivo and the use of subcategories in coding allowed deeper investigation to examine trends within each top-level category. These subcategories revealed the following:

Victim 2001-2014

121 of the total 566 articles examined were coded as ‘victim’ (21%). This is greater than any other emotive characterisation, but still far short of the expectations set by elite narratives. Of these 121, most related to soldiers on operations (89 articles). Examination of these 121 articles also revealed that, regardless of whether these soldier-victims are in operational or non-operational contexts, they are mostly portrayed as victims of their own military or political chain of command and not of the adversary, or physical or psychological injury (74 of the 121 articles were coded as ‘victims of authority’). A typical example is a *Daily Telegraph* article from 2003 headlined “Frontline troops had only five bullets to defend themselves” (M. Smith 2003) featuring an inset photograph of the smiling Defence Secretary. This is a significant finding which challenges elite assessments of public opinion, and will be examined in greater detail in the discussion below.

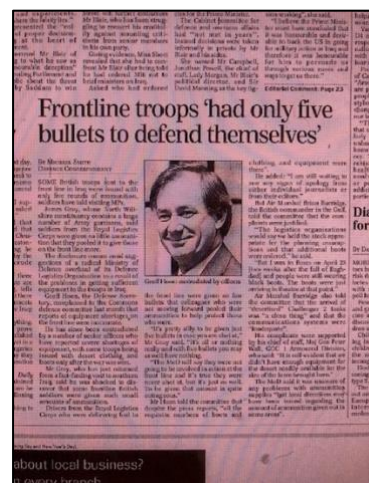


Image 1: Daily Telegraph 2003

Hero 2001-2014

40 articles (7%) were coded hero. Unsurprisingly, heroic presentation largely occur in articles which are operational in focus (32 out of 40). Coverage of the early fighting in Helmand Province in 2006 accounts for many of the portrayals of operational heroism: ‘My boy died in job he loved to do’ in the *Daily Mirror* that year is one example, exploring the actions of ‘brave Para’ Captain Jim Philippon who was killed while supporting Afghan partners (Hughes 2006). These articles avoid further commentary on the wider contexts of strategy, management, or leadership to focus on the acts of the soldier(s) themselves.



Image 2: *Daily Mirror* 2006

Villain 2001-2014

Portrayals of the soldier as ‘villain’ accounted for 37 articles of the 566 total (7%). ‘Villainy’ is portrayed in both operational (mostly pertaining to Iraq) and non-operational spheres (mostly relating to the UK). Non-operational coverage accounts for most, but only marginally, and focuses predominantly on criminal behaviour of soldiers. It is notable that even where these criminal acts are not related to service (*i.e.*, they do not occur on duty or whilst in a professional capacity), perpetrators’ soldier status is often mentioned. Examples include “A teenage soldier killed two girls...” (Anon 2001) or “a soldier was remanded into custody yesterday accused of raping a woman...” (Erwin 2014).

Operational ‘villainy’ is mostly focused on reports of abuse perpetrated by British soldiers in Iraq during the June 2003 period, but accounts for a very small number of the total sample units analyzed.

Helper 2001-2014

‘Helper’ was the smallest coded characterisation (22 articles of 566, or 4%), applied where soldiers are described clearly in terms of rendering assistance or support. In these cases, soldiers are described positively in terms which are beyond neutral description of routine activity, but which

stop short of hailing them as heroic. Provision of peacekeeping support or delivery of humanitarian aid are both examples. Typical are articles entitled ‘Army on Balkans stand-by’ relating to peacekeeping in 2001, and ‘Army cull duty over in Wales’ describing soldiers’ support to civil authorities with an animal disease outbreak (Newton Dunn 2001; Porter 2001).

Compound 2001-2014

67 articles of the 566 total were coded ‘compound’ (12%). Of these, the most significant were 34 given the sub-code ‘villain-victim’, and 22 given the sub code ‘hero-victim’. The presence of compound presentations demonstrates that the soldier can be characterised in multiple ways at the same moment. It is notable that these two predominant compound presentations both feature the soldier ‘as victim’.

The newsworthy actions behind the ‘villain-victim’ portrayals largely cover instances of ‘soldier-on-soldier’ crime, mistreatment, or other ill behaviour. This typically includes events such as physical attacks, sexual harrassment, or affairs. Soldiers are simultaneously portrayed in two ways in such reporting, with at least one as the victim and at least one other as the perpetrator. One example is the *Daily Mail* report entitled “Para officer confesses to affair with soldier’s wife; disgrace in elite unit where loyalty and camaraderie are sacrosanct” (Gardham 2003). This indicates that apparent popular sympathy for the soldier does not provide indemnity from criticism. Indeed, it might be precisely the high regard that soldiers are held in that makes soldiers’ villainy an unusual and report-worthy event.

The majority of the ‘hero-victim’ portrayals use soldiers’ heroism to sharpen portrayals of victimhood. This is most often in relation to their heroism in dying for their country, or being betrayed by authority whilst heroically engaged on operations, thus reinforcing the findings above about ‘victims of authority’. These reports are usually operationally focused, and the *Daily Mail’s* coverage from 25 June 2003 is typical: “BETRAYED: Our heroic soldiers have been let down disgracefully by the politicians” (Rose 2003).

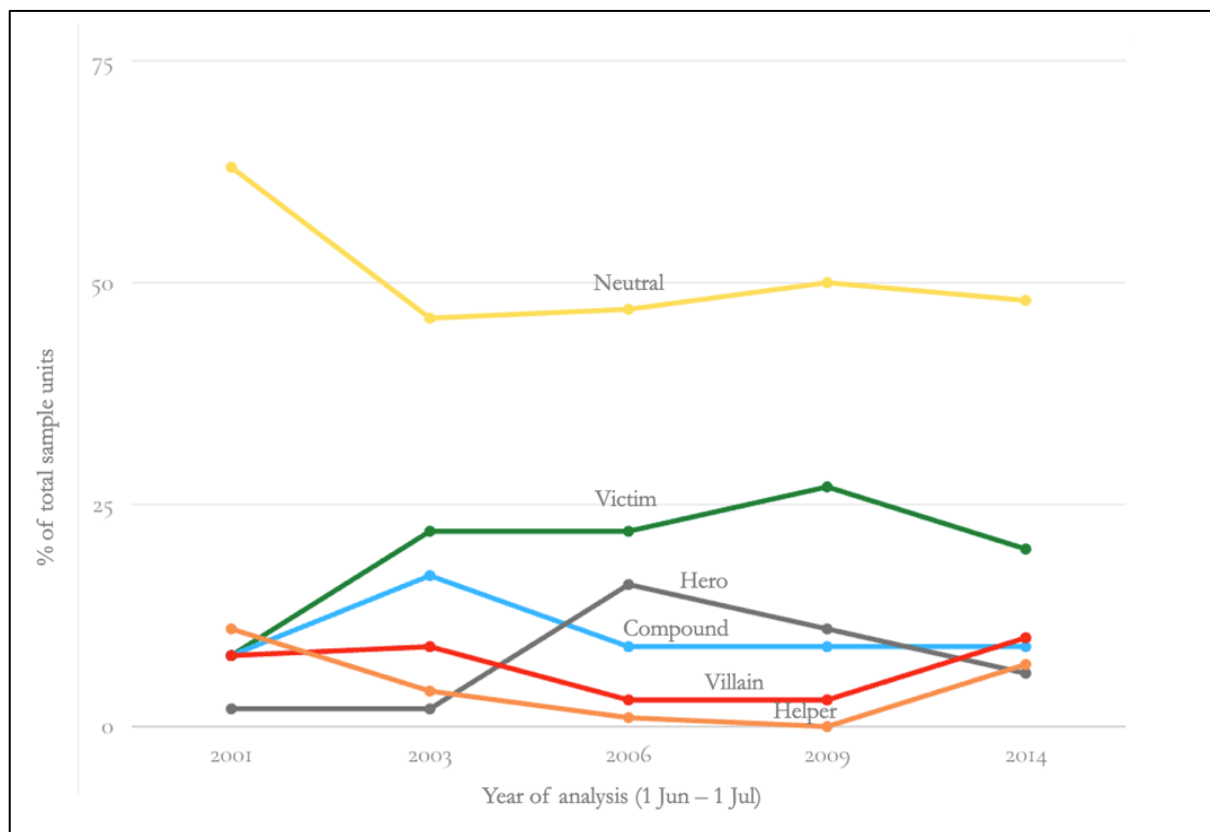


Image 3: Daily Mail 2003

4.3.2. Reporting by tenor over time

	2001	2003	2006	2009	2014
Total no. of articles	62	189	117	117	81
Neutral	63% (39)	46% (86)	47% (56)	50% (59)	48% (39)
Victim	8% (5)	22% (42)	22% (26)	27% (32)	20% (16)
Compound	8% (5)	17% (33)	9% (12)	9% (10)	9% (7)
Hero	2% (1)	2% (3)	16% (18)	11% (13)	6% (5)
Villain	8% (5)	9% (17)	3% (4)	3% (3)	10% (8)
Helper	11% (7)	4% (8)	1% (1)	0% (0)	7% (6)

Table 5: Soldier characterisation over time



Graph 1: Soldier characterisation over time

Examining the data over time shows that neutral depictions are consistently the largest single characterisation of the soldier regardless of context. In 2001 they account for the majority of all characterisations of soldiers and come close to doing so again in 2009.

The data also show that both victimhood and heroism grow with intensity of operations between 2001-2014. Victim presentations climb steadily throughout the period, declining as combat

operations decrease in both Iraq and Afghanistan, but dominating emotive characterisations. The hero category operates less predictably but nevertheless makes a significant leap in salience during these conflicts from a very low baseline in 2001. Helper and villain characterisations operate in the opposite direction, decreasing as combat operations began and remaining low until they concluded. Compound portrayals remain broadly consistent as a percentage of total coverage in each year aside from a rise in 2003.

The rise in heroic presentations in 2006 and their low numbers in 2003 respectively indicate that there are circumstances in which victimhood is challenged by heroism, and other circumstances in which it is not. The timing of data collection is relevant: the arrival of British troops into Helmand and accompanying fighting occurred during June 2006, the same month from which data was collected. Fewer presentations were present in data from June 2003, three months after the successful invasion of Iraq and when the campaign was beginning to run into signs of serious trouble.

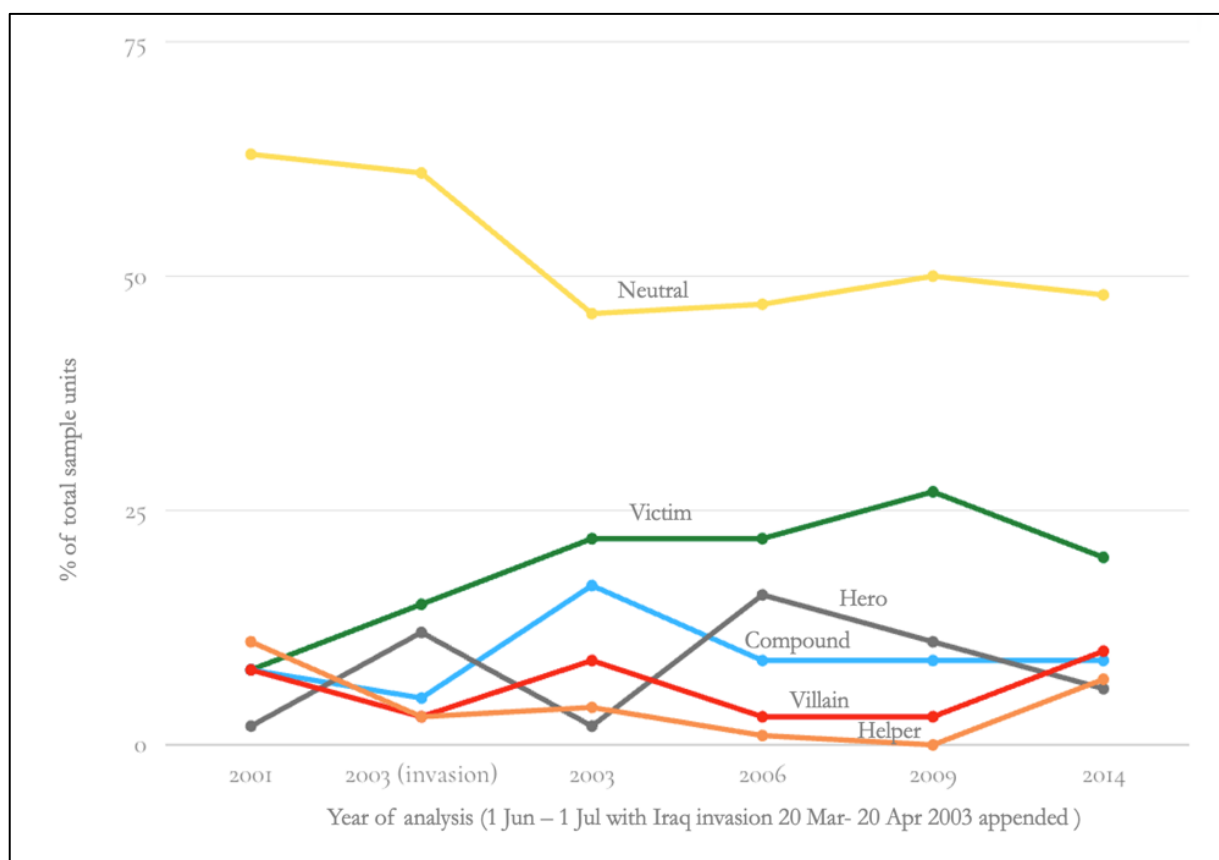
4.3.3. Extended enquiry: 2003 Iraq invasion data

To work on this data and their context in more detail, the analysis was extended to see if media portrayals of soldiers during the initial fighting in Iraq (March 2003) matched that of initial fighting in Helmand (June 2006). This offered an opportunity to examine how the soldier was portrayed in a moment of intense combat other than Helmand 2006, and one which was more domestically controversial. The intuition leading to the additional data collection was that, if the 2003 data showed similar spikes in heroism to those of Helmand, we might argue that, in the short term at least, the very act of fighting and soldiers being in danger can enhance public respect for the soldier and rival alternative victimhood narratives regardless of wider factors such as a campaign's perceived legitimacy or progress.

The invasion of Iraq began on 20 March 2003 and was declared complete on 1 May 2003. To provide methodological consistency, a single month's worth of reporting during the invasion was collected and analysed (20 March to 20 April 2003).

	2001	2003 invasion	2003	2006	2009	2014
<i>Total no. of articles</i>	62	783	189	117	117	81
Neutral	63% (39)	61% (482)	46% (86)	47% (56)	50% (59)	48% (39)
Victim	8% (5)	15% (117)	22% (42)	22% (26)	27% (32)	20% (16)
Compound	8% (5)	5% (43)	17% (33)	9% (12)	9% (10)	9% (7)
Hero	2% (1)	12% (95)	2% (3)	16% (18)	11% (13)	6% (5)
Villain	8% (5)	3% (26)	9% (17)	3% (4)	3% (3)	10% (8)
Helper	11% (7)	3% (20)	4% (8)	1% (1)	0% (0)	7% (6)

Table 6: Soldier characterisation over time, Iraq invasion phase included



Graph 2: Soldier characterisation over time, Iraq invasion phase included, showing a jump in hero presentations similar to the 2006 Helmand incursion

The most striking result from the new data is the very high number of sample units which met the threshold for analysis. There were more media articles about British soldiers during the month 20 March-20 April 2003 than in all the other periods of analysis combined. The content behind the data spans the complete range of the levels of war, from individual stories like *The Guardian's* 'Soldiers ready for battle—with pills, pads, and [foot] powder' (Audrey 2003) through to strategic

reflections like *The Daily Telegraph's* 'War on Saddam—Blair plays down UN's role in rebuilding Iraq' (G. Jones 2003).

This intensity of coverage during moments of peak violence and jeopardy faced by British soldiers accords with an observation by Martin Van Creveld in his examination of the culture of war in the West:

“So great is public interest in war, and so heavy the pressure to obtain and disseminate information about it, that there are many cases when coverage is much too close for comfort...they [the media] tend to be swept along by events. This is especially likely to happen when they cover wars waged by their own countrymen, with whom they can identify. Even in Vietnam, a war that attracted as much media opprobrium as did any other in history, some American journalists, while absolutely disgusted with the top brass, could not help but feel sympathy for the grunts who had to carry out orders and who paid the price for doing so” (van Creveld 2008, p. 312).

This argument is a 21st century echo of Morris Janowitz's observation in 1960 that “the gravity of military affairs, the spectacle of new weapons, and visibility of military heroes make the military “news worthy” (Janowitz 1960, p. 395). These impulses caused some press introspection during the invasion, with *The Guardian's* Emma Brockes reflecting on the “jazzy graphics, fact boxes and breathless statistics...” that peppered contemporary media reports (Brockes 2003). The intensity of coverage in terms of both quantity and focus from tactical to strategic supports a key premise of the theory of SOI, which is that technological advances have rendered the modern battlefield susceptible to public scrutiny to an unprecedented degree.

As well as the intense coverage, a spike in heroic depictions occurred during the Iraq invasion, consistent with the 2006 spike in heroic depictions identified in coverage of Afghanistan. The spike dramatically drops by June of that year to its 2001 level.

4.4. Content analysis discussion

Three main findings are drawn from the data for discussion. These are the nuance in emotive presentations of soldiers, the fact that victimhood appears misunderstood in institutional interpretations of public opinion, and society's preference for presenting the soldier 'as individual' rather than member of a collective.

Findings Summary Box

Content analysis:

- **Emotive nuance**
- **Victim misunderstood**
- **The soldier as individual**

4.4.1. *Emotive nuance*

Christopher Gelpi, Peter Feaver, and Jason Reifler have theorised that success and justifiability are key determinants of public opinion with evidence drawn from the US (Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler 2006). The spikes in the 2003 invasion and 2006 data suggest that, at moments of great violence, support might be expected amongst the public for at least a short period regardless of either a military operation's justifiability or success. The legitimacy of the Iraq war was strongly contested in the UK, but this did not dampen the public's appetite for stories of individual soldier heroism at this moment. In terms of success, media articles analysed from the 'hero spikes' of the 2003 invasion and 2006 were both written whilst troops were in combat and before the results of either the Iraq invasion or Helmand expansion had become clear.

This supports observations about a 'rally round the flag' effect by Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling (2010) in the US and by Theo Farrell in his analysis of the UK campaign in Afghanistan (2018). Here, the soldier 'as individual' is key during acts of violence in which relatable fighting men and women in harm's way (more 'person' than 'soldier') generate sympathetic responses. *The Daily Mirror's* front page from 24 March 2003 is an example of this response. Under the headline 'Still Anti-War? Yes, Bloody Right We Are', featuring stark images of the war's brutality, the paper writes that "...this war is being waged against international law [...but] *The Mirror* continues to support our brave servicemen and women" (Anon 2003, p.1 and p. 8).



Image 4: *Daily Mirror* 2003

The drop in 'hero' portrayals during June 2003 demonstrates the limits to such positive presentation, however. It suggests the importance of context: close reading of the material behind the data showed that any heroic depictions which were present in coverage of the invasion of Iraq were quickly thrown into shade by presentations of victimhood associated with popular dissatisfaction with the war's legitimacy, perceptions of poor management, British casualties, and early signs of the deterioration of Iraq's stability. The drop in heroic portrayals after June 2006 may plausibly be attributed to the same concerns over Afghanistan. These tentative inferences about context are extended and strengthened in the next section. Policymakers should view this data aware, therefore, of the temporary nature of support if broader campaign issues are not

addressed quickly. Both the Baum-Groeling and Farrell studies make a point about the time-limited nature of ‘rally round the flag’ (2010, p. 3; 2018, p. 267).

In terms of the entire data set, the figures show that complex presentations of soldiers will exist concurrently in public presentation, with victimhood/heroism rising with combat intensity. This dual presentation of the soldier is noted by Sandra Walklate, Gabe Mythen, and Ross McGarry (2011) as existing as a paradox but the two strands appear to work more in tandem, in line with Lawrence Freedman’s ideas about a ‘duality’ in war between “desperate moments of tragedy and sorrow...but also of inspiring moments of heroism” (Freedman 2017, p. 8). The soldier is admirable in terms of their own agency (their conduct or voluntary sacrifice, for example) but is simultaneously, or perhaps consequently, a victim of circumstance, whether the enemy or incompetent domestic leadership. At the time of the 2003 *Daily Mail*’s ‘BETRAYED’ article lamenting poor care afforded to soldiers, for example, there was considerable media coverage of Saddam Hussein’s continued liberty, Iraq’s destabilisation, and the lack of evidence of weapons of mass destruction. These are presented as evidence of the inadequacies of authority in contrast to the admirable qualities of the soldier deployed in the face of them.

This idea of hero-victim is similar to modern popular perceptions of World War One—indeed they may be directly influenced by them—in which the sense of individual valour and heroism on the Front is heightened by a sense of wasted (young) life and sacrifice.¹⁶ On this view, the ‘victim’ image does not detract from individual or collective acts of heroism during the Great War, with evidence for this being the dominant narrative of the War found in portrayals of it over the past century, from Sassoon’s war poems to Sam Mendes’ film *1917*. Christopher Coker (2007), therefore, describes modern society as experiencing a ‘post-heroic’ age in which “survival is considered the act of real moral or emotional worth. Thus, we see Achilles as a victim. We claim to recognise pain in his fortitude. In the twentieth century, his early death had particular emotive appeal; it was at one with the wasted lives and broken hopes of so many other young men who went to their deaths on the Western Front or other battlefields” (2007, p. 2).

This theme is evident before Coker: Graham Dawson’s research into popular imaginings of the British military was a forerunner of Coker’s, noting that the horror with which the First World

¹⁶Ross Wilson (2014, 2015) has described the enduring influence of the ‘soldier-poets’ of the First World War on media narratives and wider cultural perspectives on war. He has also examined the way in which First World War lexicon has been used to frame coverage and debate about the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns. Helen McCartney (2014) has similarly explored the evolution of now-dominant ideas of First World War soldiers as victims, exploring both this view’s durability in the face of academic challenge, and application to modern soldiers.

War came to be viewed was particularly potent precisely because of the romance with which it had been associated initially, and because of the perceptions of bravery and youth which it destroyed (1994, p. 56). The implications of this for the modern military (and its dislike of ‘soldier-as-victim’) were noted by the CDS in 2016 when he said of the Somme centennial events, that “...the last thing we want to do is see soldiers of former wars as victims...[today] we’re not all heroes. But we’re certainly not victims. And we need to be really careful as a society that we don’t start to see the armed forces as victims to be pitied...” (Royal United Services Institute 2016). Air Chief Marshal Peach did not expand on what the dangers of this view were, and it is left to the audience to assume that they may be wide-ranging. Chapters 5 and 6 will go some way to identifying what they were.

Helper presentations operate in the opposite way to victim and hero. They mostly relate to soldiers on operations, rather than in the UK or on non-operational deployments elsewhere. Practical considerations may account for this inversion, since use of soldiers within the UK is likely to have been significantly reduced during the war on terror given the demand imposed on the Forces after 9/11. This contrasts with the number of soldiers available before 9/11 for tasks such as livestock pandemic (Op SLUBBER in 2001) or, after 2014, for support to floods (Op SHAKU in 2015-16) or COVID (Op RESCRIPT 2020-2022). The nature of the campaigns between 2001 and 2014 also helps explain why ‘helper’ is the smallest theme measured: after 9/11 and until the rise of ISIS, warfighting operations were not seen as ‘rendering assistance’ in the way that they appear to have been before the war on terror (most notably regarding peace missions in Bosnia, Kosovo, or Macedonia) and have come to be again since. Supporting this explanation is the fact that most of the material behind the helper characterisation is from 2001 (discussing peace and disarmament tasks in the Balkans) and 2014 (as coverage begins to turn to the assistance that could be provided to the Iraqis against ISIS).

Portrayals of the soldier as villain in the present data are also inversely related to hero and victim. This suggests that, whilst the public media narrative can hold multiple characterisations of the soldier at the same time, it prefers these characterisations to be sympathetic whilst soldiers are engaged in high intensity operations. The soldier can, therefore, be hero and victim at the same time but is generally not villain concurrently. Since it is unlikely that levels of soldier-perpetrated crime or misbehaviour decrease during periods of combat, it appears that there is less appetite for coverage (and therefore framing) of soldier misdemeanours whilst troops are engaged in combat. Representations of soldier-villainy can be expected to increase in prevalence as operational

intensity decreases: the rise in media villain presentations between 2009 and 2014 demonstrates that there is no enduring immunity for troops, who can expect scrutiny when combat ebbs.

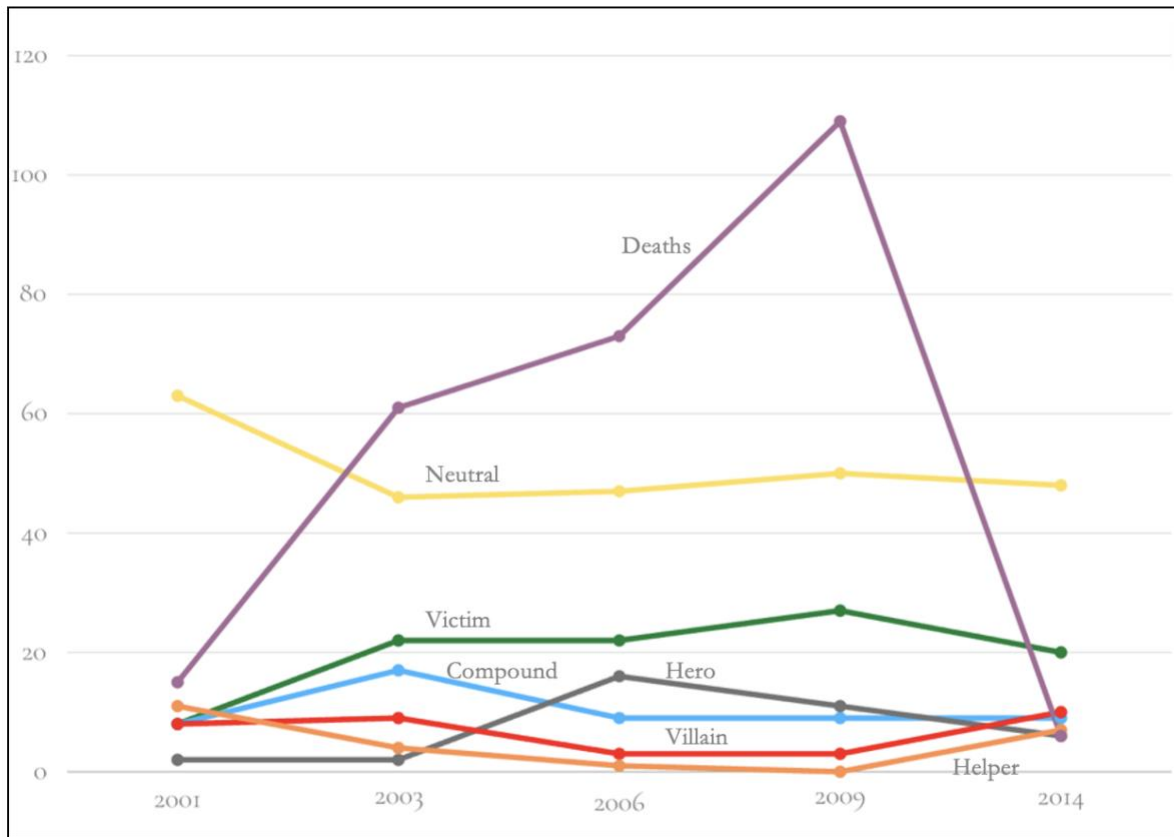
The predominance of neutrality in each year and over the entire timeframe is an important caveat to this discussion: the media and society do not always have to be thinking about soldiers in charged emotive terms. The lack of either negative or positive tenor in these articles may reflect the nature of media reporting in war (often descriptive rather than analytical, conveying information or meaning but not necessarily with an emotional agenda). Neutral portrayals might also imply a default satisfaction in the media and its readership with their soldiers, and interest in military professionals conducting business that the British public wishes to learn about which is sufficient to merit coverage, but insufficiently provocative to attract emotive characterisation. However, there are limits to this inference that non emotive coverage means the public were proportionately neutral about soldiers: it is also possible that emotive articles have greater impact on public discourse than non-emotive ones.

4.4.2. *Victim misunderstood: competence not casualties*

If it has been established that there is more to the public's idea of the soldier than sympathetic victim, the findings also demonstrate that elite ideas about victimhood itself appear misjudged. The data show that elites were right to think that soldiers were predominantly portrayed as victims in public discourse when emotive characterisations were used, but they were wrong about what they were portrayed as victims of. Where soldier victimhood is presented in the data, the articles mainly concern themes of the soldier being let down by their own military or political chain of command, not the intrinsic issue of casualty-inspired sympathy. This is an important finding because it challenges existing elite assumptions about why soldiers are victims. As such, it supports Helen McCartney's proposition that, during the conflict, public sympathy for UK soldiers was rooted in critical perspectives on their management (McCartney 2011, p. 46). It also supports Helen Parr's analysis long after the war's conclusion, writing of public perspectives that "if soldiers were victims, then they were victims not of war [...] they were victims of government decisions" (Parr 2024, p. 174). This stands in contrast to a military elite narrative of public misunderstanding of the soldier (see reflections of General Lord Dannatt 2011; and General Sir Nick Carter in Defence Committee 2020) or of sympathy stemming from casualty figures alone (per Prime Ministerial quotations at the start of this Chapter).

The literature review quoted Dannatt ascribing his view of the casualty sensitive public to a media which was “more interested in the blood and guts of the action than they were in the tactics and strategy of the war” (2011, p. 285). However, the following excerpts are two examples of substantive public critical appraisal which challenge this and they are typical of the data. A 2003 *Guardian* article addresses issues of strategy in Iraq, describing how “the six British soldiers killed last week [...] are victims of an overbearing and inept occupation policy that is alienating ordinary Iraqis” (Murray 2003). A 2009 *Daily Mail* article focuses on the management of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, lambasting a government who sent “our troops to die in two deeply unpopular wars—yet starved them of money, equipment and medical care” (Hastings 2009).

Concerns over poor management might be triggered by public aversion to casualties. But, it is more plausible that public concern over casualties is a symptom mistaken for a cause of public disquiet about British soldiers: the reports coding the soldier as ‘victim of authority’ are not consistently about casualties, but are often focused on the healthy soldier and, for example, their lack of adequate equipment, care (pay, pensions, housing, etc), or the justifiability and efficacy of the campaign. 53% of ‘victim of authority’ coded articles (39 of the 74) focused on such issues, not casualties or enemy conduct. This suggests a correlation between the perceived competence of authority and victimhood, rather than necessarily casualties and victimhood. It is not primarily enemy action which inspires sympathy but perceived incompetence on the part of British authorities which includes, but is not limited to, the issue of casualties. This supports aspects of recent analysis of Getmansky and Weiss who have argued that public appraisal of war uses multiple metrics (including casualties as a prime input) to measure the costs of war, which in turn informs judgements about political leadership performance and competence (Getmansky and Weiss 2023, p. 331).



Graph 3: Comparative assessment of actual numbers of global British military fatalities and media characterisation of the soldier by % of coverage.¹⁷

Comparing fatality rates with media tenor supports this line of argument. The data in *Graph 3* show a correlation between soldier deaths and victim presentations, but it is slight: a significant leap in casualties between 2006 and 2009 is accompanied by only a moderate rise in media victimhood presentations, with data instead suggesting that the victim characterisation is a broad, stable, view of the British soldier over this time and different conflicts regardless of whether soldiers were being killed.

This interpretation supports and is supported by the analysis of UK polling during the war on terror conducted by Joel Rogers and Jonathan Eyal in 2014. They noted that “support and even admiration for the men and women in uniform remains high, even though confidence in the ability of politicians to use these armed forces in an efficient manner is now low” (Rogers and Eyal 2014, p. 190).

¹⁷ Fatality data drawn from Statista 2021

The data support an interpretation from a different angle. John Louth's 2018 analysis of British defence in the 21st century observes that, "...the soldiers killed and injured in the sustained campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan seemed often to be regarded by the public as victims of government decisions rather than as soldiers who knowingly accepted the risks and rewards of the job" (Louth 2018, p. 103). This characterisation of vulnerability may operate in a self-reinforcing circle in which young (relatable) people are subject to violence which is all the more shocking because of their vulnerability, which is further emphasised.

Given the context of theory derived from US data, this factor of 'competent campaign management' should be considered an extension to the work of Gelpi et al. The present data for the UK do suggest the importance of the twin factors of campaign justifiability and success. But the media's recurring close examination of soldiers' treatment suggests a scrutiny of their management at an individual level. This is important to the public in a way which, although related, is distinct from these twin factors. Success may be plausible even if a campaign is poorly managed, and likewise campaign failure may occur in instances where campaign management is not in question (such as superior enemy skill, for example, or the role of chance). These data suggest that it must be considered a key driver of UK public opinion about troops in combat.

According to the data over time, by 2014 emotive characterisations of soldiers had mostly returned to their pre-9/11 levels (with a slight increase in hero representations). Victim is the exception which, although decreasing in prevalence, remains substantially higher in 2014 than it was in 2001. A plausible explanation for this is humans' psychological 'negativity bias', as explored by John Tierney and Roy Baumeister. Here, public discourse is particularly sensitive to moral failings which are perceived as avoidable, including deception or incompetence (Tierney and Baumeister 2021). It has been argued that casualties were viewed by the public as a symptom of this incompetence, and the nature of injury makes casualties particularly visible and durable. Victimhood, particularly injury, is often viewed through the lens of a moment's consequences whereas hero, villain, or helper tend to be discussed in terms of actions in the moment. This arguably affords the soldier-victim greater durability in the public eye than the hero. Their more obvious presence at Remembrance events, the continued high-profile work of charities for the injured, a sense of public introspection about their treatment, and other initiatives such as the Invictus Games are all examples of the comparative longevity of victimhood.

A final explanation for victimhood's durability, not exclusive of the previous points, might be that there are more victims than there are heroes. Perceptions of poor campaign management are broad and are likely to affect swathes of the military population where instances of heroism are (by their very nature) applied only to the exceptional.

4.4.3. *The Soldier as individual*

In tying together varied media presentations of the soldier and the evident interest in their context, this study suggests that the media felt a demand from readers to frame the soldier as an 'individual'. Broadly, these individual presentations can be expected to be interested (neutral), supportive (hero, victim, helper), or in a minority of depictions unsupportive (villain). In this interpretation the media data support and are supported by the arguments of Walklate et al. who argue that soldiers at this time were subject to a "range of constructions" (Walklate, Mythen and McGarry 2011, p. 8), Hines et al. who note a "shifting kaleidoscope of images" of the soldier (Hines et al. 2015, p. 706), but particularly Anthony King who describes 'domestication' of soldier portrayals in recent conflicts (King 2010, p. 14). Here, soldiers are described in relatable, personal, family terms such as boyfriends, wives, or parents. The media data also correlate particularly to recent work by Parr who observed of spontaneous public displays of mourning for dead soldiers at the town of Wootton Bassett that "the new practice showed the public viewed soldiers in a new way. Soldiers came to be remembered increasingly as individuals, killed less for Queen and country or campaign, but doing a job at which they excelled, mourned by loving families" (Parr 2024, p. 174). This individualised public focus might not be happenstance: the literature review pointed to several strands of scholarship which analyse the deliberate efforts by political and military leaders to offset public scepticism of war and increase support for troops by encouraging the public to focus on the social contract between the nation and its soldiers as individuals (Cornish 2013; Forster 2012; Ingham 2016).

Context matters in determining when Hines et al's 'kaleidoscope' shifts in delivering presentations of the soldier-individual. The data do not demonstrate a clear conceptualisation at the outset of the war on terror which portrays the soldier 'as victim'. This suggests that there are boundaries to the enduring power of the First World War legacy regarding modern soldiering discussed above. Of the emotive depictions present in 2001 data (in the clear minority compared to neutral coverage), the soldier is most commonly a helper first (plausibly bred of Balkan, Sierra Leone, domestic crisis support, and Northern Ireland experiences), and thereafter a blend of villain,

victim, and compound presentations. Resultantly, there does not seem to be anything inevitable about soldier 'as victim' at the outset of the war on terror. Thereafter, media and public belief in justifiability, success, and competent management have been offered as drivers for the jockeying in position of victim, hero, helper, and villain. This implies that context matters more than any culturally fixed idea in the British media of what the soldier is or is not. But an interest in the soldier as relatable individual is likely to reinforce public critical appraisals of the way that they are being managed and on what task.

The importance of context over cultural priors is supported when Nvivo data was examined in terms of coding by country. When looking at emotive presentations only (i.e., removing neutral depictions) the soldier is predominantly cast as 'victim' in Afghanistan and Iraq. Data from other theatres vary, however, suggesting that it is not possible to generalize about how the media will respond to military operations in the round: although there are similarities between Iraq and Afghanistan, there are significant differences between those theatres and the presentation of British soldiers in the Balkans (predominantly 'helper'), Northern Ireland (predominantly 'villain'), and the UK (predominantly compound but closely followed by 'villain' and 'victim'). It is, however, noteworthy that whilst hero, helper, and villain do not consistently appear across types of soldier activity (operational/non-operational) or places, victim consistently appears to some degree for soldiers anywhere in the world, whether soldiers are deployed operationally or are non-operational. This gives the victim characterisation a degree of geographical stability in addition to its greater stability over time relative to other emotive portrayals. This means that although there is apparent flexibility in public perceptions of soldiers, it would not be prudent to dismiss preconceived ideas completely. It is also possible, however, that those preconceptions provide the range of conceptual options from which the public choose how to respond to changing contexts. The durability of soldier 'as victim' across time and geography supports this idea.

There is a coda to the discussion about context, which is that it also impacts how agency is applied to the individual soldier. Detailed examination of the articles behind the data suggest an inequality in the way that this is attributed: the soldier's agency is frequently removed when they are subject to negative events and so they can be labelled 'victim', but agency is retained when the soldier does something positive enabling them to be called 'hero' or 'helper'. This appears to afford the soldier something that could be labelled a 'double positive' outcome in terms of public sentiment, and accordingly constitutes a double negative outcome for the authorities who are not acknowledged in positive soldier events, but are blamed for negative ones. This characterisation of agency has

echoes of Churchill's reported lament in the aftermath of Galipoli that "politics require popularity, and the direction of war means inevitable unpopularity. The fighting men got all the popularity of success; the statesmen, the unpopularity of any ill-success" (Sheffield and Till 2000, p. 4).

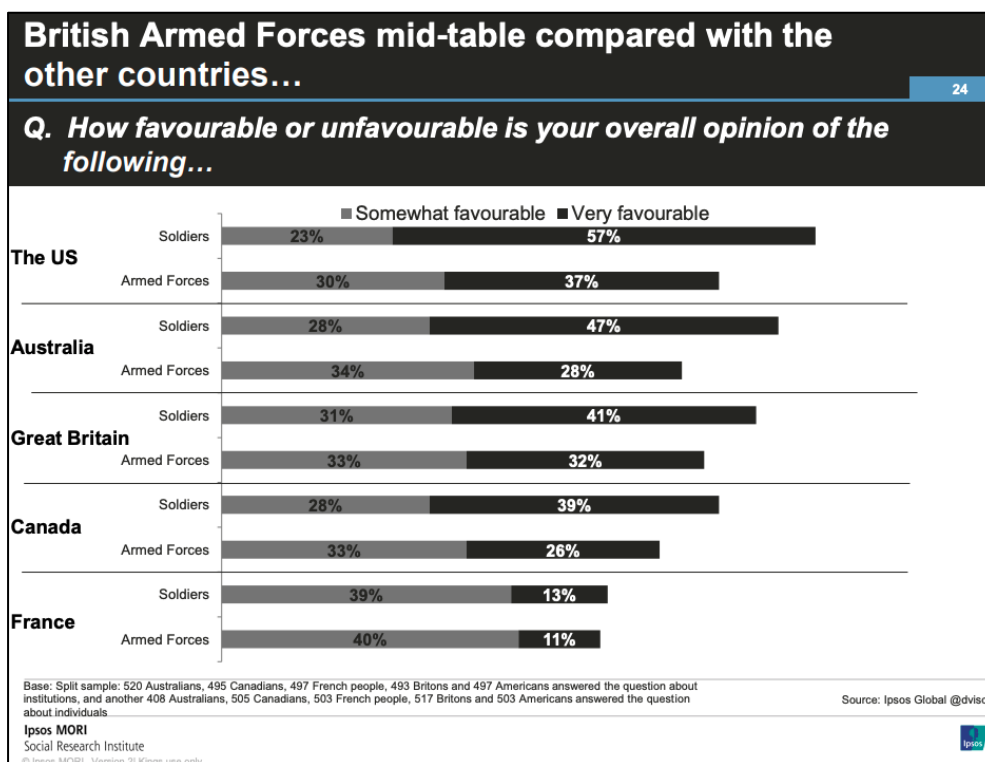
Finally, it is noteworthy that the research yielded unexpected results in showing little variation in left- and right-wing media presentations of the soldier. The overall sentiment analyses are very similar across all four publications. There is, for example, little evidence of positive characterisations of soldiers being overlooked by the left-wing press or of problematic characterisations of soldiers being avoided by the right-wing press. One possible explanation for this is that the operation of British soldiers was overseen until 2010 by a Labour government, giving right-leaning media (who might be seen as traditionally less critical of military action and more supportive of soldiers) as much reason for critical analysis as left leaning media. It might equally demonstrate that the matter of British soldiers as individuals at war transcends political opinion: there is plenty of variation to be found in the material about the politics of the wars themselves, but broad consistency in how news outlets respond to the soldiers who fight them.

4.5. Content analysis in polling and survey context

This section compares the media content analysis with existing polling and survey data which delivered direct measurement of public opinion. It supports the main inferences of the content analysis. The most notable areas of correlation are that: the soldier is more than just a victim, and that, where portrayed as victim, they are commonly a victim of authority not injury. This section explores these in turn and addresses areas of divergence between polling and content analysis findings.

Data was gathered through literature review, searches of YouGov, Ipsos MORI, Oxford University's SOLO databases, and Google Scholar. The search terms 'UK' and 'British public' were also used on the Sage Journals database to search the *Journal of Armed Forces and Society* between the years 2001 and 2014.

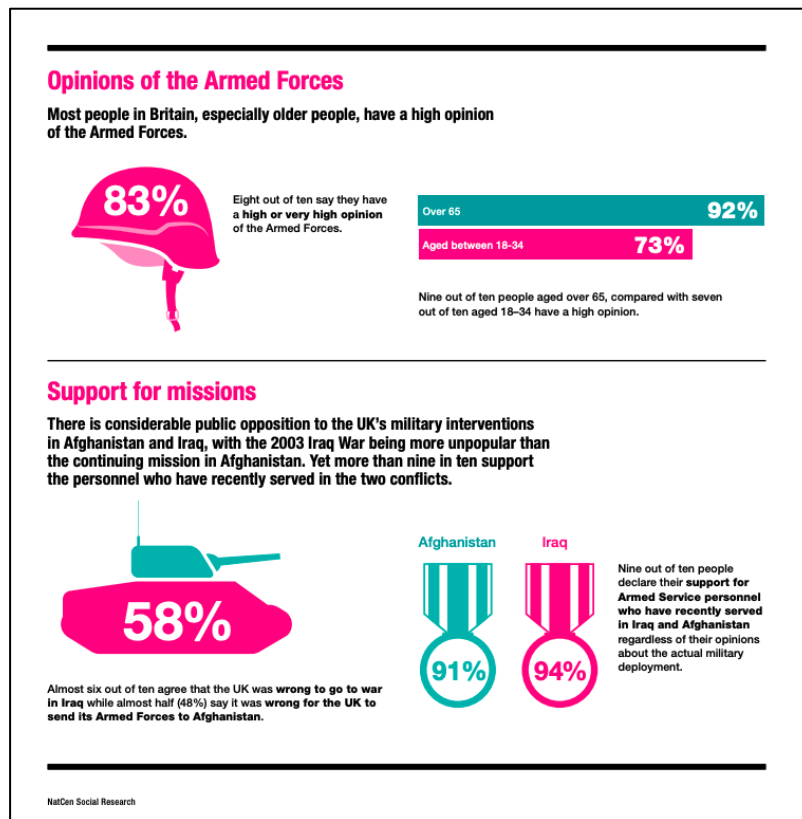
The decision at the outset of content analysis to make a distinction between the soldier and 'the armed forces' is supported by a 2015 study by Ipsos MORI. This work returned different results for 'soldiers' and 'armed forces' when polling 493 British respondents for their opinions of each (Ipsos MORI and Kings College London 2015).



Graph 4: Ipsos MORI/KCL 2015

One plausible cause of the distinction between ‘soldiers’ and the ‘armed forces’ in 2015 is the relatable nature of the individual which contrasts with the less-relatable ‘Forces’ as an organisation, examined in the content analysis discussion above. It is also possible that ‘soldiers’ were seen to have borne the brunt of military campaigning at that time rather than members of the wider Forces such as the Royal Navy or Royal Air Force.

The distinction between ‘soldier’ and ‘Armed Forces’ is also to be found in a British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey of 2012 (Gribble et al. 2012). 83% of respondents recorded ‘high’ or ‘very high’ opinions of the Armed Forces with this number rising notably when considering individual soldiers who have served in Iraq (94%) or Afghanistan (91%). The BSA survey highlights another important distinction, which is the difference between public views of soldiers and their missions. This Chapter has already highlighted the prominence of this distinction in academia, and it was posited as a driver for certain portrayals of soldiers between 2001 and 2014. The BSA data reveal that the opinions of soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan are very high in spite of data showing that 58% of respondents felt that the war in Iraq was wrong and 48% thought the same of Afghanistan.



Infographic 1: British Social Attitudes 29: Armed Forces

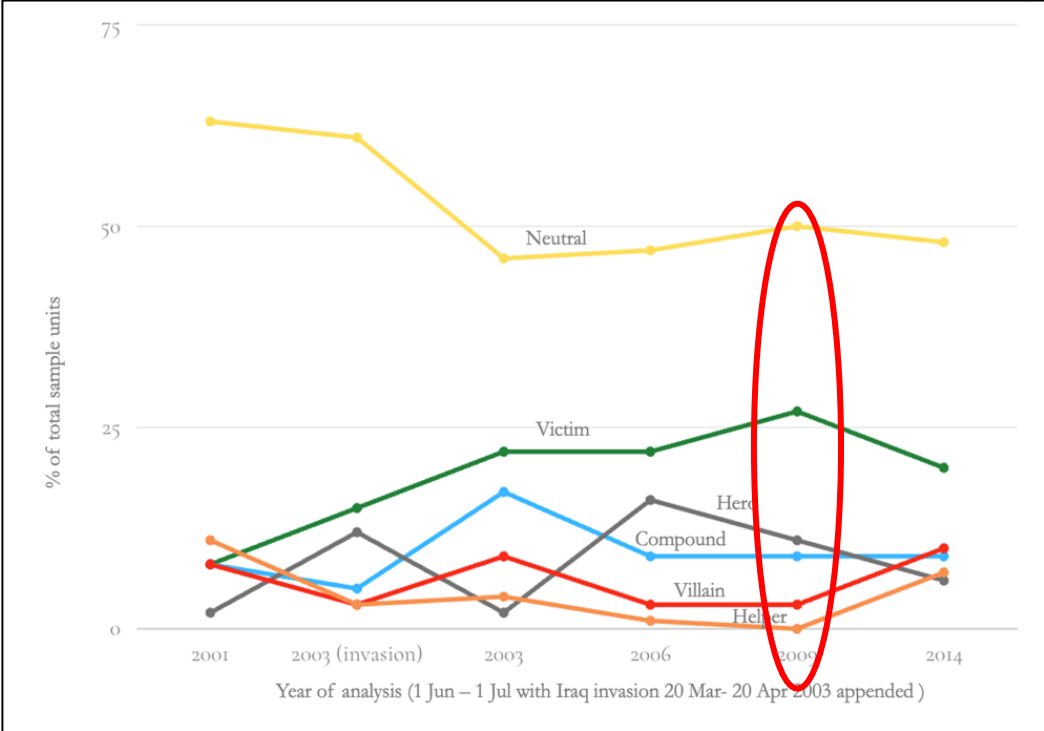
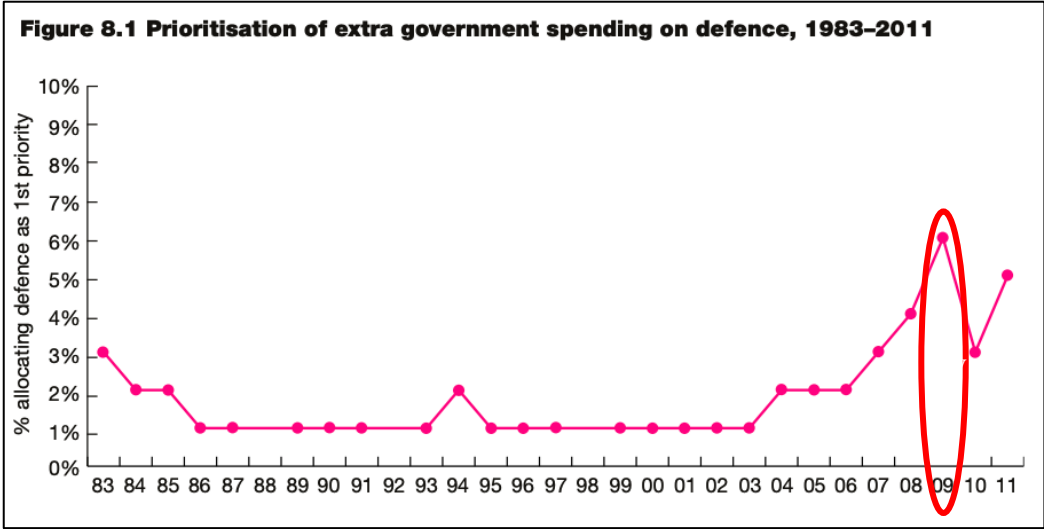
In fitting this data together with the content analysis results, it is important to note the difference in terms of the question. Most survey and polling research examines whether the public are supportive of soldiers. The content analysis attempts to understand how the public conceives of them. But the latter should be considered to fit into the former. Victim, hero, helper and compounds are all consistent with sentiments of support, even if not always in the way that political and military elites would have preferred. YouGov polling in 2018, with the benefit of hindsight over the wars of 2001-2014, argues this point, with its authors noting that “despite anger and frustration at the conflict itself, a majority of participants say respect for those serving in our armed forces remains intact....participants hold politicians responsible for UK involvement in conflict; anger directed towards politicians often enhances respect for service personnel...” (Latter, Powell, and Ward 2018). This observation is consistent with my arguments about the prevalence of ‘victim of authority’ above, and this Chapter’s proposal for perceptions of ‘competent management’ to be considered a major factor in determining the British public’s opinion about a given campaign.

Further support for this is found from polling and survey data in 2009 and 2012. A 2009 YouGov/Daily Telegraph survey ($n = 2,334$) demonstrated very strong majority opinions for the

soldier 'as victim of authority' (YouGov/Daily Telegraph 2009).¹⁸ The results should be viewed with caution; the questions here were not openly posed, but rather respondents were primed. For instance: "...the past month has seen the heaviest casualties...do you think...?" and "Different people have said different things about the supply of helicopters to British troops in Afghanistan...which statement comes closer to your view?" (2009, p. 2). Nevertheless, this data points to majority support for the views that soldiers' lives had been wasted; that there was a lack of government support for troops in the field, and inadequate compensation, in line with the content analysis's propositions relating to competent campaign management.

The 2012 BSA survey also examined how the public viewed prioritisation of extra government spending on defence between 1983 and 2011 (Gribble et al. 2012). Its findings are notable in relation to the content analysis because they reveal a spike in the percentage of respondents allocating defence as a top government spending priority, at precisely the same moment that the content analysis detects soldier 'as victim' to be at its peak:

¹⁸ The survey asked questions about the campaign's worthiness set against soldiers' lives (50% felt the campaign was justified but not worth soldiers' lives with 27% feeling the campaign wasn't justified), soldiers' equipment (71% felt that the government was doing "too little too late" to equip soldiers), and wounded soldiers' compensation (62% felt that it was inadequate and should be raised) (YouGov/Daily Telegraph 2009).



Graph 5: BSA 2012 Defence spending findings compared to content analysis data

These results support the idea that soldiers can be respected and heroized, and concurrently (indeed, resultantly) be viewed as victims per Freedman’s ‘duality’ described above. Another YouGov survey from 2009 ($n = 1, 996$) brought this theme out clearly. The results recorded clear preferences for the idea of “high quality” soldiers of whom respondents were “proud” whilst at the same time showing majority opinions amongst the same sample that soldiers were underpaid, not properly cared for by the government, not making sacrifices in a worthwhile war, and were poorly equipped (YouGov/The Sun 2009).

The idea that hero does not preclude victim is found in different terms in a later YouGov survey of 2018 (Latter, Powell, and Ward 2018). These findings demonstrate that positive perceptions of soldiers do not necessarily translate into comfort with the idea of a loved one's service. The soldier might be predominantly brave, but there is an important caveat to that ideal which prevents this from translating into a job for someone they love. Statements selected for presentation of YouGov's research reflect concern about the potential for physical and psychological harm, and the risk of moral injury from partaking in misguided campaigns. This is consistent with the content analysis's findings. It is also consistent with a 2014 survey in which only 32% of respondents said that they'd be "happy for [your] own child to pursue a career as a member of the Armed Forces" in contrast to 79% who would be content for a child to be a doctor, 69% a lawyer, and 48% a police officer (Rogers de Waal 2014).

There are challenges to my findings in survey and polling data. Lord Ashcroft's 2012 study sought the 'first word or phrase that comes to mind when you think of people who work in the Armed Forces' (Ashcroft 2012, $n = 2,033$). The top three responses (accounting for 60% of all responses) would have fit into the content analysis's 'hero' category using words like 'brave', 'courageous', and 'heroes'. On the one hand this supports the content analysis's challenge to casualty-centric elite assessments of public opinion. But on the other it runs contrary to the content analysis's findings about prevalence of neutral and victim-of-authority characterisations. One explanation for the disparity between this and the content analysis's results is that there is a delta between the public's opinion and media framing. In support of this idea, Ashcroft's report finds that 84% of the sample felt that "the media deliberately focuses on negative things and ignores more positive aspects" (2012, p. 64). Alternative explanations are that the question is unlikely to generate 'neutral' responses, and that none of the heroic presentations reported in the Ashcroft findings preclude the soldier being viewed as a victim—the brave and courageous troops can still be let down by the State or tragically killed by the adversary. Although the Ashcroft study posed open-ended questions and respondents didn't articulate these victim sentiments, this argument is supported by the YouGov 2009 and YouGov 2018 data above.

A similar challenge to that posed by Ashcroft is found in the research carried out by Rita Phillips, Vincent Connelly, and Mark Burgess in 2020. They asked 234 respondents for word association about 'soldiers' and the responses were mainly neutral (concerning, for example, 'war') which supports my content analysis data on neutral tenors, but thereafter emotive choices were "heroizing associations" and "positive characteristics" (Phillips, Connelly, and Burgess 2020).

Most notably, victimising sentiments were associated with veterans but not soldiers, although veterans did also attract heroizing portrayals.

Semantics and timing offer a possible explanation for the dissonance between my content analysis and Phillips et al. By 2020, when the Phillips survey took place, ‘soldier’ and ‘veteran’ had come to mean different people to those found in the same categories in 2001-2014. That is to say that ‘veteran’ in 2020 will necessarily include people who were ‘soldier’ during the controversial wars of 2001-2014. The authors’ comment that “victimizing sentiments may be related to conceptualisations of war as a reason for suffering” (2020, p. 17) supports this, pointing to events during the veterans’ active service as the origin of their victimhood rather than anything intrinsic about ‘veteranhood’. Conversely, the still-serving soldier in 2020 had been out of major combat operations for six years, engaged instead in other high profile and, importantly, well-regarded missions (perceived as justified, successful, and well-managed). Examples are the campaign against ISIS from 2014 on Operation SHADER, counter-poaching operations in Africa from 2018 on Operation CORDED, and humanitarian aid/disaster relief operations (Operation RUMAN in 2017, for example, in which soldiers were well covered by the media as they delivered urgent assistance to British Overseas Territories in the Caribbean following Hurricane Irma). If this argument is correct, then the Phillips et al. data support rather than contradict my findings that the soldier between 2001-2014 was, in emotive terms, predominantly viewed as a victim. Furthermore, in looking four years beyond my analysis and finding that the soldier is predominantly portrayed positively when emotive sentiments were used, Phillips also supports the content analysis’s suggestions that there is nothing inevitable or fixed about the soldier ‘as victim’, and that context is central to public perceptions of the soldier, rather than fixed cultural preconceptions.

4.6. Content analysis in wider context

This section explores the wider context of British depictions of soldiers. It looks at other British media presentations of soldiers presented both before and during the UK’s operations from 2001, first in historical art and then in later presentations in television.

Emotive depictions of soldiers as individuals are not new. Just one example of historical precedent can be found in the 1789 painting *The Dead Soldier* by British painter Joseph Wright. It was the only of his works which ran to numerous editions, indicating its popular resonance, and it was being reprinted into the 1840s, a period of time spanning the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic

wars (Craske 2020, p. 275). These wars were less controversial and more successful than the British Army's campaigns of 2001-2014, and so it is interesting to see the theme of soldier 'as victim' (in contrast to the more common heroic portrayal of aristocratic officers) so popularly received. Matthew Craske observes that the presence only of the soldier, widow, and child implies an abandonment by the Army of both the fatally injured soldier, face-down, and his family. Craske also observes that *The Dead Soldier* was notable for its subversion of artistic precedent whereby soldiers are traditionally portrayed as heroes (even in death, which often has a tone of glory or nobility). Here, the human cost of war is more readily apparent. The popularity of *The Dead Soldier* indicates a public appetite for this alternative presentation, but the enduring popularity of heroic artistic frames suggests a public content with multiple portrayals of the soldier. This resonates with the findings of the content analysis and polling data.



Image 5: The Dead Soldier, Joseph Wright

The prominence of the dead soldier's wife and infant reveals another consistent theme between this 18th century and 21st century popular depictions of the soldier, which is the inclusion of the family in coverage of dead or severely injured soldiers. There are comparable aspects between Wright and modern editors who have explored the pity of the soldier, as spouse and parent who has been abandoned by leaders to death.

A contemporary review of the work is quoted by Craske as observing that, “the eye of sentiment cannot fail of viewing the Dead Soldier and his wife! – Here we rest pensive and melancholy. Here we distil, in drops of pity, the precious eulogy of an artist, whose colours are the colours of sympathy, and whose feeling-guided pencil appeals directly to the heart” (2020, p. 275).

The appeal of the soldier as individual has endured in modern media, arguably becoming dominant rather than exceptional. A basic AI-enabled search for British television programmes about UK Forces in the Afghanistan war reveals at least 8 documentaries (including several *Panorama* programmes), three drama series (including *Our Girl* described in the literature review), and one comedy series (*Bluestone 42*)

Our War was one such series about Afghanistan broadcast amid the conflict from June 2011, which won the BAFTA Award for best factual series in 2012 and 2013. Examination of the first series’ three episodes supports the content analysis’s findings in several regards.



Image 6: *Our War* cover image (*Our War* (2011))

First, *Our War* is an example of the personalisation of the soldier, a theme identified in the content analysis, and a feature also of Wright’s painting. Regardless of emotive characterisation, there is a fascination with the soldier ‘as individual’ engaged in military activity. Each episode’s introductory narration announces, against a backdrop of exciting first-person perspective combat footage and laughing soldiers, that “for the last 10 years, young British soldiers have been filming the war as

only they can see it...now the MOD and the young soldiers have allowed us to use that footage to tell their extraordinary stories” (BBC 2011a). So closely focused is the series on the individual that ‘the professional soldier’ appears to fade into the background with a tight focus on the individual characters. It is as though youths have been plucked from their parents’ homes and dropped into Helmand. The opening narration from one episode describes the programme as a tale about a... “close knit group of friends” and the events that created “the defining summer of their lives” (2011a). This applies a relatable civilian filter over the troops; a ‘group of friends’ rather than a body of trained soldiers who have experienced a ‘defining summer’, almost as if a holiday has gone wrong rather than the wartime experience of professional troops engaged in military operations.

Each of the three episodes tells the story about the experiences of these individuals and their immediate teams. Casualties are the focus of each episode, around which they are built. In Episode 1, a letter written by a Platoon Commander to a dead soldier’s mother forms the narrative thread running through the story with extracts read by the author at different points as the episode proceeds. Studio interviews with the soldiers from the tour augment the footage from the deployment, giving both contemporary and retrospective commentary. *Our War*’s focus on warfare at the individual level helps to explain why those like Dannatt came to see the media’s attention as being predominantly fixed at the lowest levels of warfare, even if the content analysis does not bear this out as a fair judgement on the print media.

Second, *Our War* is a clear example in televisual media of the dualism of ‘hero’ and ‘victim’ that the content analysis identified. Victim presentation is the clearer of the two: youth is emphasised throughout each episode, with that youth portrayed as being subject to the uncontrollable and seemingly unanticipated violence of war. Their age and exposure to the horrors of war are the central themes of the series alongside a focus on the physical and psychological damage inflicted on them as people who are killed, injured, or caught up in events occasioning death and injury. Victim portrayal is occasionally extended to focus on the perpetrators: episode one (*Ambushed*) and episode two (*The Invisible Enemy*) focus respectively on the actions of a wily and devious enemy. But episode two also features criticism of authority in a bungled Prime Ministerial response to the family of the dead soldier who is the subject of the episode (BBC 2011c).

Heroism is less obvious, but implicit throughout this series. It stems from the resilience and performance of these soldiers despite the hardships they face, but also because these qualities are

present in the face of the very youth, vulnerability, injury, and repeated operational tours upon which the victim presentation relies. Their relatability therefore works to support both victim and hero presentations since the viewer is exposed to individuals' backstories, laughing youngsters larking about in the privation of their patrol bases, and then the horrors with which they contend.

Third, 'villain' is absent in *Our War*: it would be inconsistent with the editorial approach that the series pursues, in line with the content analysis's findings about news editors' selections at this time. This is notable because the series does not shy away from civilian casualties caused by British soldiers during the fighting. The soldier avoids culpability because of the implication throughout the series that war is something happening *to* these young men, rather than something they are themselves active in. Civilian casualties are a result of 'the war' in this regard, not of any incompetence, mistake, or deliberate action on the part of the soldiers.

This relates to the notion above of the soldier's 'double positive' regarding the retention of agency when doing good and loss of agency when involved in bad events: agency in this potentially 'villainous' instance is not attributed at all. Indeed, in one segment which covers serious injuries to a little girl sustained during a firefight the documentary's focus is on the heroic efforts of the troops to provide medical care before evacuating her, thereby framing as 'heroic' an event which could easily be covered from an alternative editorial 'villain' angle (BBC 2011b).

In this regard, *Our War* anticipates Kevin Hearty's 2019 argument that support for troops has created a narrative which, in some circumstances, "misrecognises the victim of state violence and ultimately leads to public sympathy favouring those who stand accused of human rights abuse over and above those actually subjected to it" (Hearty 2019, p. 217). Hearty argues that this constitutes a "moral myopia" which extends to a popular belief in protection for soldiers accused of war crimes. Although there were no insinuations of crimes in this *Our War* episode, the phenomenon was apparent in some public quarters during the war crimes trial of Sergeant Alexander Blackman (*a.k.a.* 'Marine A') in 2013. It has been in evidence again during the fierce public and political debates of the 2010s and early 2020s about the pursuit of historic war crime allegations for veterans of Northern Ireland and Iraq.

These modern documentaries can be contrasted with an older documentary, *In The Highest Tradition* (BBC, 1989) which was recently selected for the BBC Four collection. That collection is described as "a series of archived programmes chosen by experts" and is therefore judged by the BBC to be

of sufficient value as a representative documentary that it should be archived. This series is notable for its focus on ‘The Army’ as an institution, taking a different set of Regiments as the focus for its storytelling in six episodes about the activities of the contemporary Army and the traditions that underpin them.

It demonstrates that a different approach was taken to soldiers and the military in past decades. This documentary focuses clearly on a collective rather than individual story. It interviews officers only (and no enlisted ranks) who relay their view of the traditions and activities that make up Army life. The interviewees are the vehicle for the series’ narrative, not its subjects in the way that they are in *Our War*. The titles of the two series are themselves instructive. *In The Highest Tradition* is a title which nods to the values of the institution without reference to the individuals comprising it, whilst *Our War* is a plain and powerful title linking individuals with combat. There is an apparent dual meaning to the word ‘our’ which could relate to the young soldier protagonists or the viewers themselves, or both simultaneously. Each of these interpretations links the civilian to the soldier in the same way that the programme’s content is designed for relatability, not something sought by *In The Highest Tradition*.



Image 7: Major Willie Peter gives a tour of 13/18th Royal Hussars’ Mess during Episode 1 of *In The Highest Tradition* (BBC 1989)

The contrast between these two documentaries might be viewed as supporting an underlying idea that the construal of the soldier ‘as individual’ does not so much reflect something unique to the military as being, rather, a cipher for modern society’s preference for the individual over the collective. The differing approaches also reflect how the information age has brought the public

closer to the closed world of the military: where one documentary relies on well-staged interviews with senior protagonists, the other exploits helmet camera and media footage direct from the front line, bypassing senior members of the chain of command in delivering its insight about military affairs.

4.7. Implications

This section summarises the main findings from the Chapter and describes three associated implications.

This Chapter's main finding is that perceptions of competent campaign management, justifiability, and success determined UK public opinion about operations, and their impacts on British soldiers. It also points to the preference of the public, and media, for viewing war through the lens of the soldier-individual. These findings build on US and UK CMR theory, and challenge Defence institutional thinking. Assessments of public opinion appear to have been a major factor in the governance of military campaigning according to the Prime Ministerial autobiographies and formal British military reviews of its post 9/11 campaigns. This Chapter has implications, then, for both theorists and Defence policy practitioners.

The significant weight of reporting during the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and higher numbers of reports around the intense combat of 2006 and 2009 demonstrate an unsurprising media interest in high-intensity operations, lending additional weight to the argument of Martin Van Creveld about the intrinsic fascination that societies have in warfare (2008). This interest, combined with the popular appetite for the soldier as relatable individual, has implications for the Army. In March 2003, Max Hastings suggested that these facets had generated fragility about soldiers' suffering. In the aftermath of the deaths of several UK personnel in a helicopter crash in Iraq, he wrote that

“...a month ago, news of eight British soldiers dying in a helicopter crash in say, Ulster, would not for a moment have interrupted excitement in the pub about a football match. Yet now, the nation has absorbed itself in war, subordinating our own identities to those of our young men on the battlefield. Millions of people sit mesmerised in their lounges, watching the campaign unfold on real-time television.” (Hastings 2003)

Soldier presentations like those of *Our War* or the sample units examined in the content analysis often use individuality to reinforce the connection between the civilian at home and the soldier at war. The soldier is presented in familiar personal terms rather than professional ones. This can be expected to exacerbate, and in turn be intensified by, expectations of competent management and

to focus it on the treatment of the individual soldier. According to Hastings's logic, it is then a short step to public expectation of the same protections for our soldiers at war as for our children at home. Hastings would go on to observe that, "...some people seem to suppose that the same rules of safety govern men in conflict as govern men at peace..." (2003).

Hastings may have felt that subsequent events proved him right as the UK extended human rights protections for soldiers and civilians on operations, triggering an enduring debate between advocates and opponents of juridification. Janina Dill more recently reviewed these developments, suggesting that the cultural shifts that have come to see war's participants primarily as individuals rather than part of a collective have been "a causal driver for human rights law [interposing] into questions of how we should fight wars" (Dill and Roberts 2021). We return to King's observations about the "personalized and domesticated" frames in which the war dead are presented (King 2010, p. 1). The laughing, jocular faces and fraternal relationships of the 'young soldiers' in *Our War* and the way soldiers are portrayed in the content analysis suggest that this characterisation can be extended to the living soldier as well as the dead, as audiences attempt to connect and relate to their servicepeople. This is the "media of the self" described by John Corner and Katy Parry, in which human stories alter the nature of communication between the military and civil society (Corner and Parry 2017, p. 6).

Although Dill's comments about individualisation resonate with this study, caution is required in using this study to make any argument about the public view of war in general: the search criteria and analytical framework were focused on 'British soldiers' and so might have been more likely to yield data which covered military affairs from individualised perspectives. Search criteria focused on collective nouns ('British Army' for example) might have yielded different results. But, the existing criteria yielded a very rich seam of data which adds an important challenge to certain assumptions evident at the outset of this project in Defence and academic discourse about victimhood and the soldier (Keegan 1998a; Royal United Services Institute 2016; Farmer 2017).

The findings of the content analysis, and examination of other existing research and media must therefore challenge several beliefs which endure in the British military, to the point that they have become institutional.

First, the notion that 'the top knows best'. Political and military elite misdiagnosis of public casualty aversion and resultant sympathy has already been discussed in relation to what the media, in fact,

portrayed. This Chapter has argued that casualties became a symbol for the public of a war of uncertain justifiability, without evident success, and which was being poorly managed. Instead, political and military elite belief is that casualty aversion and sympathy is attributable to public misunderstanding of soldiers and their lot (Defence Committee 2015; Royal United Services Institute 2016; Farmer 2017; Royal United Services Institute 2018; MOD 2020). Media commentary, however, spans the full range of military operations from examination of the individual soldier through to the political basis for these wars. There are examples, throughout the sample units, of media analysis which accurately assessed deteriorations in operating environments, in ways that were resisted by elite narrative at the time. That is to say that, at times, media insight about the campaign was more accurate than elite discourse. *The Guardian's* 26 June 2003 commentary is one example, which noted that the US administration's insistence that insecurity was a result of 'Saddam loyalists' did not chime with ominous evidence of deeper Iraqi public disquiet about US and UK occupation (Ramadi 2003).

These data support Strachan and Harris' argument that while defence policy in the UK was and remains "elite activity", it would be wise not to ignore the analysis of informed public discourse (Strachan and Harris 2020, p. ii). The content analysis data suggest that this would be sound practice, regardless of the theory already examined which suggests causal relationships between the media and public opinion, and between public opinion and public policy.

Second, and consequently, the public arena should not be considered an adversarial battleground in which a military narrative must 'win' wherever elite and public discourse diverges. There is only so much gloss that strategic narrative can provide if a conflict is being poorly managed, in the information age of pervasive public insight. There is also a possibility that the civilian analysis is right. One could view a critical media could as an opportunity for constructive tension, therefore, rather than just tension. An extract from a *Guardian* report from June 2009 captures the friction evident that summer:

"...the key point, say journalists, is that the MoD is controlling them in order to convey what senior officers refer to as the "official narrative" of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the absence of sufficient independent access to Helmand, news organisations are often willing to use interviews with soldiers gathered by army press officers, or video shot by the MoD's Combat Camera Team. The result, says Harding, is clear. "We have constantly been told that everything is fluffy and good—and we, and the public, have been lied to." [MOD director of communications Nick] Gurr, however, says the military should not conduct internal debates in public during a war. "I don't think commanders should be saying it's all shit and it's all getting worse . . . We have to sustain the morale of people on operations." Newton Dunn emphasises the honesty of soldiers and commanders on the ground. It is the ministries, he says, who should lighten up: for all their efforts, they will never be able to stop bad news getting

out: “Once the MoD realise they can't control the message, they will have a chance of success.”” (Grey 2009)

This tendency for the political and military establishments to avoid public debate where possible (and control it where it is not) is a central theme of Strachan and Harris' 2020 paper. Aside from the arguments that better policy and strategy can be devised from public engagement, they argue that avoiding it (or, worse, seeking to manipulate it) creates a “democratic deficit” in Defence affairs (2020, p. 15). They argue, in line with Grey, that “influence through debate, not control through statement, should be the maxim” for government engagement with the public on Defence affairs (p. 22).

Third, these points undermine the idea that the media focuses only on tactical action during moments of intense operational activity. There is certainly a considerable amount of coverage of this level of conflict, notably weighted this way in documentary and drama. But the range of broader commentary and analysis undertaken is significant. Although this finding was not a research aim of this phase of research, it is nonetheless important. The military must prepare to face the full glare of media attention, which is as likely to point at its operational and strategic commanders as at their front-line personnel. The Army should also be aware that support for soldiers at these moments is almost certain to be high, but that support might, in part, stem from a sense of sympathy for the victim as well as admiration of the hero.

Support for the soldier is not, therefore, necessarily of benefit to the Army as an institution. The CDS, Sir Nick Carter, addressed this problem in 2018, but this study identifies some problems with his analysis. He noted that soldiers want to be “valued and respected not pitied” (Royal United Services Institute 2018). The problem with his analysis is that value and respect are evident across content analysis and polling data and are not mutually exclusive of pity. Indeed, this Chapter contends that they are related; value and respect might be responsible for pity in some circumstances (such as the perceived mismanagement of a campaign).

In the same lecture the Defence chief attributed pity to a lack of understanding. If my findings suggest that the media was often accurate in its commentary about Britain's wars then sympathy might not stem from a lack of understanding, but from an accurate grasp of the failures of authority. As Malcolm Chalmers points out, there was a “widespread public understanding of governmental responsibilities to servicemen and women sent to fight in discretionary operations”(Chalmers 2014, p. 125). The content analysis data in this regard therefore support

Theo Farrell's analysis of British political approaches to the Afghan campaign at the height of its violence, which noted that the Brown government focused on "immediate" issues of tactical equipment provision and casualties "missing the larger problem, namely the absence of political-strategic direction over the military campaign" (Farrell 2018, p. 272).

In arguing that political and military institutions have misjudged a sophisticated public perspective on soldiers this study supports another of Strachan and Harris's arguments, which points to an attribution error on the part of the Government. Akin to Farrell, they note that the Government "may have learnt the wrong lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan, in that it believes that the public is averse to the use of armed force, when the real public concern is with its inept use in a strategy which proved inconsistent and ill-considered" (Strachan and Harris 2020, p. 14). Carter's attribution of public disquiet to a lack of understanding is likely to be comforting for the military because it attributes the cause of unhelpful public attitudes to something other than political and military management.

This misattribution has three important policy implications.

First, widely reported government and military approaches to reducing in-theatre casualties between 2001 and 2014 (Directorate Land Warfare 2015; Chilcot et al. 2016) may have served to assuage public concern, but could never have been a sufficient policy response to social commentary which was more concerned with the effective management of soldiers on operations of which they disapproved. Nor can any amount of strategic communication make up for an accurate perception of poor management at either the political or military leadership levels. The view of public sympathy for soldiers has endured beyond the campaign's end, with one senior officer noting in 2022 in relation to Afghanistan veterans that "we don't want sympathy...we want empathy" (Lloyd 2022). This research suggests that, in circumstances where competence of authority, justifiability and success are in question, it may not be possible to attract empathy without incurring sympathy.

This in turn means that the variables determining public support are beyond the Army's ability to control. *Graph 2* reflects that perceptions of victimhood rose regardless of the levels of violence, demonstrating the limits to the notion that a reduction in casualties would result in improved public perspectives on the campaign. As Sibylle Scheipers remarks, "it is not casualty aversion that makes wars unpopular. Rather, it is the other way round: the unpopularity of a war provokes

casualty aversion by making the sacrifice of soldiers' lives seem 'meaningless'" (Scheipers 2014, p. 11). The 2012 BSA authors' comment on the 2009 spike in demands for defence spending was a forerunner of these points, opining that public responses were likely to be "a response to the public debate...around claims the UK Armed Forces were experiencing shortages of vital equipment" rather than casualty figures (Gribble et al. 2021, p. 189).

The second implication is that misreading public cues is likely to impact national thinking in line with ideas of 'strategic culture' explored in the literature review (see Gray 2010, p. 40). That is to say that these assumptions have become absorbed into the normative culture of UK policy and strategy, with the consequence of reduced government appetite for 'boots on the ground', and of increased appetite for high-level interference in the conduct of tactical activity. Both actions attempt to minimise the chances of casualties occurring but may have the opposite effect. Although dedicated study into this is presented in following Chapters, the literature review has pointed to the hints already evident in practitioner and academic writing about UK operations between 2001 and 2014. A 1999 US study addressed this point, noting that American policy-makers laboured under the belief that the public favoured isolationism where in fact the public mood was more in favour of engagement in world affairs than elites realised (Kull and Destler 1999). Similar misreading is evident in both academic and practitioner opinions in the UK between 2001 and 2014. A former chair of the Royal United Service Institute wrote in 2014 that "aversion to service casualties...played a key role in domestic British politics concerning both Iraq and Afghanistan, limiting military options..." (Chalmers 2014, p. 125). Brigadier Ed Butler, commander of British forces during the entry into Helmand in 2006, noted of his tour that "London was very concerned that there was too much kinetic activity going on and too many soldiers were being killed and injured" (Ucko and Egnell 2013, p. 91).

The chairman of the UK Parliamentary Defence Committee, Tobias Ellwood, demonstrated the enduring power of this misreading. Reflecting on Britain's experiences of recent wars he noted in 2021 that "we [the West]... have become too reticent and lacklustre in wishing to expend troops, and have those terrible headlines..." (Roberts and Ellwood 2020). Ellwood's comments demonstrate the durability of a phenomenon noted by Pascal Vennesson in 2011 in relation to the USA whereby "...despite the lack of evidence, and despite some evidence to the contrary in the United States, the belief in the general public's casualty aversion has been, and remains, widespread among policymakers and journalists" (Vennesson 2011, p. 246).

The third implication of misattributing public concern to casualties is that casualty figures should not be assumed to be a useful predictor of public opinion. This Chapter demonstrates the sophistication with which the public engaged with the campaign and the more nuanced way in which victimhood was ascribed to soldiers. Accurate measurement of the state of public opinion requires engagement across different forms of media and use of direct measures in properly crafted surveys. This Chapter has offered a more useful framework for such measurements to use for appraising how the public will consider the context in which casualties occur: perceptions of justifiability, competent management, and success. It is perfectly conceivable that the British public will have a higher degree of casualty-tolerance if these criteria are met, as indeed they have demonstrated at different points in British history.

This Chapter's demonstration of elite misdiagnosis of public perspectives also points to an evident gap between political and Defence thinking on the one hand and the position of a stable of academic arguments on the other. This applies both to those concerned with the Afghanistan war itself and CMR theorists. Theo Farrell, Hew Strachan, Ruth Harris, and Sybille Scheipers are four such scholars quoted in this Chapter as arguing that there were more fundamental political and strategic issues guiding public opinion than casualties. Non-British scholars following this line of argument include Gelpi, et al. and work by Eric Larson and Bogdan Savych in the US who explore the same themes of success and purpose in driving public opinion as opposed to casualties (Eric V Larson and Bogdan Savych 2005).¹⁹ In all of these frameworks, the public is shown not to be casualty averse, but averse to perceptions of poor policy and military approaches. This Chapter provides evidence that the same is true of Britain as it is in the US.

4.8 Conclusion

The evidence presented in this Chapter suggests that assumptions held by UK political and military elites about public opinion 2001-2014 are inaccurate primarily for the misattribution of victimhood to casualties rather than more fundamental matters of context, namely campaign justifiability, success, and competent management. A less significant but still important misapprehension

¹⁹ Larson and Savych use the phrase 'importance of the stakes' whereas Gelpi et al. use 'rightness or wrongness'. Although these are different ('rightness or wrongness' might contribute to a view of the stakes, but the stakes might be about more than just moral judgements) they speak to broad issues of public perceptions of justifiability. Larson & Savych agree with Gelpi et al. that casualties are not the driver, but a symptom of public discontent. They disagree, however, that perceptions of success are more important than necessity finding that "perceived stakes are a more important predictor than beliefs about the prospects for success" (2005, p. 226).

concerns the failure to recognise other characterisations which compete for attention in both media and some polling/survey data. While victimhood is dominant in emotive media presentations, there are moments when other characterisations challenge this, most notably for time-bound periods of peak jeopardy. Context determines how the public chooses from a range of available representations.

Anthony Forster has written about social and political factors ‘reshaping’ armed forces (Forster, 2006, p. 16), similar to Helen McCartney’s view, quoted in the literature review, that society’s relationship with its armed forces can have profound effects on how force is used (McCartney 2010, p. 412). If the theory of SOI is correct, then gauging societal perspectives accurately is a prerequisite for successful military policy and operational decision making. Existing literature argues that perceptions of the civil-military dynamic are likely to affect the way in which the UK military approaches future war. This could impact strategic calculations, from the deployment of troops into harm’s way to the equipment and tactics that they will employ. The following Chapters will show how this occurred during the Afghanistan campaign.

“The strategist must know what motivates him and others, and what meets the criteria of both internal and external acceptability. Strategy founded on false constructs or beliefs, or on inconsistency with acceptability criteria at home or abroad, is at greater risk”

Harry Yarger (2006, p. 41)

5. Archival evidence of Societal Operational Influence during operations in Afghanistan

"... it will be the will of our stakeholders that truly matters, for it underwrites our authority to deploy and prosecute these difficult operations. If the public or political backbenchers lose their will in the endeavour, no amount of clever technology, new equipment or restructuring of our organisation will make a jot of difference."

Lieutenant General Sir Graeme Lamb KBE CMG DSO (2013, p. 149)

5.1. Introduction

This Chapter builds on the hints of societal impacts on military operations described in the literature review by extending focused enquiry into military archival material. This material has been de-classified for the first time for this research. It identifies 'signal in the noise' in classified reporting, finding evidence that military commanders' appraisal of British society's concerns affected the campaign in Helmand.

This chapter seeks to answer the following research questions: What relevance did public perspectives have to decision makers? What were the mechanisms by which the military assessed societal perspectives (including strategic, operational, and tactical level commanders)? What impacts, if any, on their behaviour can be identified?

5.2. Methodology

This chapter is derived from two lines of original research. The first was conducted at the Army Historical Branch archives and focused on the Post Operational Reports (PORs) written by successive HQs TFH between 2006-2014. The second was conducted at the Land Warfare Centre archives, using the Post Operational Interviews (POIs) collected and held by the Land Warfare Centre from all key personnel on their return from theatre.²⁰ The MOD procedures for access to, and declassification of, these documents were described in Chapter 2. 'Land Warfare Centre 2022a' refers to the declassified POIs, 'Land Warfare Centre 2022b' refers to the declassified PORs.

²⁰ This includes all Commanders TFH, TFH Unit Commanding Officers, key staff officers in HQ TFH, key staff officers in the UK Joint Force Support HQ at Camp Bastion, and key British officers in post at NATO ISAF HQ Regional Command-level (the Divisional HQ above TFH).

In examining the documents, I read select parts of the PORs in detail to identify relevant material (focussing on those parts which were written by TFH commanders or senior staff). POIs were much longer than PORs, numbering many thousands of pages. I searched them using the key words 'public perception', 'coverage', 'popular', 'opinion', 'perspective', 'political', 'media', 'influence', 'victim', 'hero'.

I supplement the content of the PORs and POIs with analysis of the Army's already declassified *Operation HERRICK Campaign Study* (hereafter 'HCS'), written in 2015. The HCS is derived in part from POR and POI content but also from other primary sources including post-mission conferences which were held by returning Helmand troops, and other interviews. The PORs, POIs, and HCS are further supplemented in this paper by primary and secondary source material about the campaign in Helmand and the West's concurrent wars, written by participants, journalists, and academics for a range of audiences.

Using multiple sources in this research is important because all had slightly different purposes. The PORs are part descriptive, part analytical and primarily focus on the tactical situation 'on the ground'. They constitute the formal report to Defence of what TFH experienced, and their aim was to prepare subsequent Task Forces for their deployments. They are also likely to have self-justification of their Task Force's approach in mind, consciously or not. The POIs are less formal, broader in content, and more candid. Interviewees, although not anonymous, are likely to have felt security in knowing that their material would not be distributed to their peers or immediate superiors, and they were being asked for broad practical and conceptual reflections rather than repetition of their PORs. The HCS was written anonymously by staff who did not necessarily serve as commanders or key staff officers in the campaign. It carries commensurately less risk of emotional influence or concern for individual reputation than PORs or POIs and is analytical, seeking to draw key themes from the Helmand campaign for the Army's future.

To manage the information involved in bringing PORs, POIs, and the HCS together, source material was imported into NVivo and thematic codes were developed from immersion in the documents on the basis of dominant themes. The codes were: training; equipment; personnel; organisation; and 'commanders' considerations'. This last theme was the most common. It captures the less tangible but nonetheless key outcome of perceptions of public opinion which is their cumulative impact on commanders and the associated tactical culture they created in

Helmand. This can be viewed as something operating symbiotically with the other themes, both informing and responding to them.

For the purposes of discussion, these themes were then grouped into the three ‘components of fighting power’. This is a Defence framework for considering all aspects of the application of military force, and it comprises moral, physical, and conceptual components. The diagram below visualises these components.

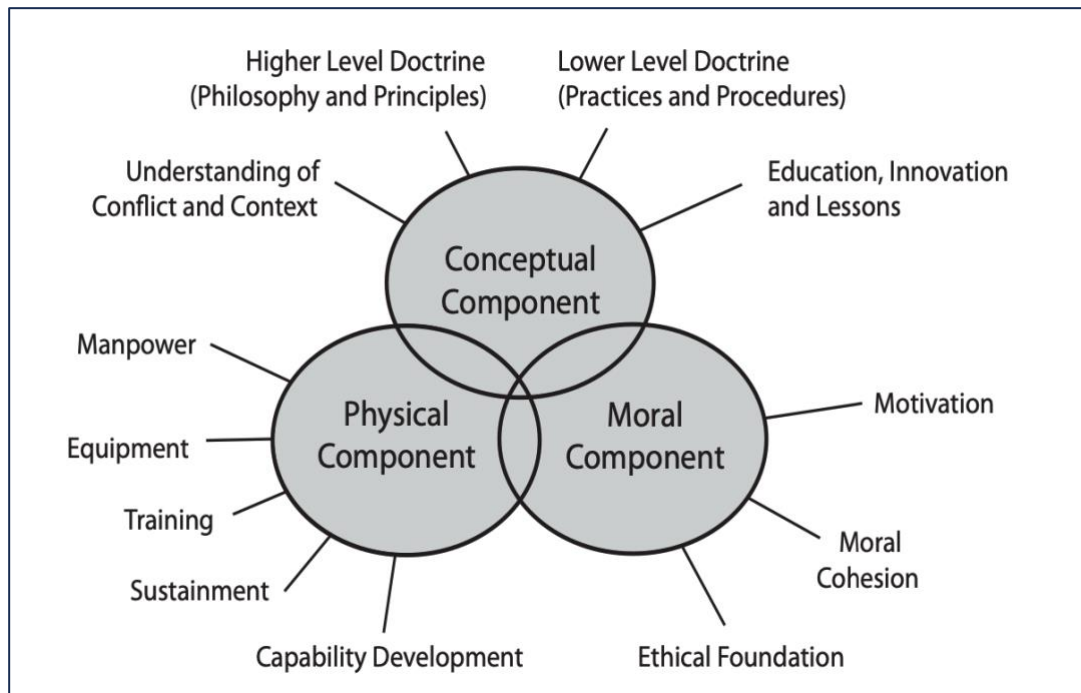


Figure 4: the components of fighting power²¹

Using *Figure 4* as a guide, commanders’ considerations and training best sit in the conceptual component. Equipment and organisational factors have been grouped into the physical component. Personnel considerations have been placed in the moral component.

I turn now to consider the evidence for SOI found in the archives.

5.3. Findings: Public perspectives and operations in Helmand 2006-2014

Archival analysis yields important findings relating to the three components of fighting power.

²¹ Army Force Development and Training 2011, p. 1-4.

5.3.1. *The conceptual component of fighting power*

First explored are tactical level commanders' considerations resulting from interpretation of public perspectives. This is because they set the culture and climate of the operation,

covering many of the aspects of the conceptual component described in *Figure 4* (most notably the understanding of the conflict, philosophy, practices, and procedures).

Findings Summary Box

Archival analysis:

- **Conceptual impacts: risk aversion**
- **Physical impacts: force protection primacy & strategic scrutiny**
- **Moral impacts: soldier morale**

Imposed and self-induced pressures over risk are the first way that commanders' considerations were influenced. One TFH staff officer noted that "PJHQ... was coming under significant pressure when casualty numbers rose in Helmand during our tour, and they were being called upon to explain, articulate and justify much of the planning and even tactics that we were delivering" (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 2). Towards the end of the campaign, a commander TFH reflected on the impact of this: "...it is widely acknowledged that over the last decade the [MOD's] appetite for risk on operations has decreased resulting from a combination of political reaction to losses, media and public pressure, coroner findings, public inquiries...a default risk avoidance has permeated into the psyche of troops and commanders" (Land Warfare Centre 2022b, p. 5). His description of 'permeation into the psyche' of tactical level personnel suggests a serious and widespread impact of strategic and operational level concerns.

The same commander points to this 'default risk avoidance' as imbuing the policy direction that TFH was subject to in Helmand. He lists public scrutiny as one factor which reshaped political attitudes in this regard with the consequent effect that "the military may not regain the risk freedom of the past" (Land Warfare Centre 2022b, p. 5). A staff officer interviewed shortly afterwards looked to the operation's future, concerned that "...as the campaign winds down there is a danger that the political attitude to risk will be such that casualties become increasingly difficult to accept" (Land Warfare Centre 2022b, p. 5). He worried that this could result in TFH "doing less and thus having less effect", demonstrating the impact that political concerns could have over behaviour in-theatre at the lowest levels.

Command considerations in response to perceived public casualty sensitivity were not only directed from above. There is evidence that they were also a consequence of theatre commanders' own reflection. This might plausibly have been occurring for several interconnected reasons: a broad cultural assumption in the military at the time that the public were casualty averse and that

this was worrying politicians; an associated tactical climate in which risk aversion was the norm (the ‘permeated psyche’ of troops and their commanders); the value that the military placed on ‘politically astute’ commanders able to pre-empt concerns held higher up in the chain of command; and the way in which TFH commanders were connected to an unprecedented degree to societal opinions and political masters whilst deployed. As one POI notes, “We were operating at the strategic level, but the tools we used were operational and higher tactical level ones” (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 3). This comment gives insight into the tensions felt by some Helmand commanders who were operating simultaneously under tactical, operational, and strategic pressure.

Tactical commanders’ direct concern about public opinion is evident in several PORs. One TFH commander early in the campaign noted that “24-hour news coverage has an appetite and effect all of its own” (Land Warfare Centre 2022b, p. 2). One of his successors noted similarly that “we must be clear that tactical actions can have strategic effect and political and presentational implications, particularly when the international and national media are driving a specific agenda” (Land Warfare Centre 2022b, p. 2). The view of TFH about what that agenda was becomes clear in one HQ officer’s lament: “We worked very hard to show the progress we were making, but the UK media tended to be just interested in kinetics and casualties” (Land Warfare Centre 2022b, p. 3).²²

There is evidence of changed actions as a result of these concerns. One Unit Commanding Officer late in the campaign contrasted his conventional warfighting training with his time in Helmand. He implied that in the former casualties were tolerable in the pursuit of a mission, but not in the latter. He observed of this contrast that, in Helmand, “I thought about and explored every single option and factor before I launched an op to ensure I reduced the likelihood of taking casualties” (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 5). This is a significant statement in support of the idea of SOI, here affecting a commander who, understanding the strategic context of the mission and compressed levels of war in the information age, began to alter his behaviours to pre-empt perceived public (and therefore chain of command) concerns.

Whether directed by higher HQs or self-directed by tactical commanders the tenor of the material is that assessments of public opinion constrained TFH’s freedoms. On one occasion when a commander wanted to do something as simple as remove personal protective equipment (most likely referring to removal of the helmet, ballistic glasses and body armour which can intimidate

²² These comments, and several which follow, demonstrate an apparent assumption on the part of the military about the power of the media in reflecting and shaping public opinion.

others and imply a lack of trust), he felt the hand of politicians on his shoulder: “I had to find my own way to manage potential risk; it was inappropriate to [...] wear PPE as it would have undermined my relationship [with local partners]. Whether our political masters in the UK would have been content with that approach if something had gone awry, I don’t know” (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 6).

Consequently, the appetite for tactical activity which would risk casualties could be low, and concern about casualties evidently began to pervade the tactical culture of parts of the operation. As one Battle Group commander observed, military thinking about Helmand tended to “constantly emphasise the risks and dangers in theatre.... they were beginning to create a climate of fear. This skewed the balance towards counter IED, CASEVAC²³, and Force Protection and away from offensive tactical operations and wider counter insurgency issues...” (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 3). Another Battle Group commander observed similarly that the “Brigade would normally follow a threat-based allocation[...] On several occasions we were doing well, so had assets taken from us to support more high threat areas, which then slowed our momentum considerably [...] There has to be a balance between saving lives in the short term through mitigation of immediate threat to life and in the long term through success” (Land Warfare Centre 2022b, p. 3).

There is evidence that these frustrations about the way in which the Task Force was fighting were felt at even lower levels within the Battle Groups. A young Household Cavalry reconnaissance officer writing of his 2009 tour in Northern Helmand wondered if:

“...counter-insurgency hasn’t blunted the Army’s sword. In Afghanistan risk awareness often seemed more like risk aversion, a tendency that restricted commanders at the tactical level. The politicisation of casualties and the over-sensitivity of our nation to body count doubtless played a part in constraining junior commanders and affecting their appetite for risk” (Jelinek 2009, p. 116).

He follows this comment with a description of a plan to move his reconnaissance troops deep behind enemy lines which, he writes, was vetoed by his Battle Group commander out of aversion to the risk of casualties: a decision which he felt was in contradiction with traditional Army doctrine (p. 117). His sense of tactical-level constraint bred of risk aversion, and his perception that this in turn stemmed from institutional belief in social casualty aversion, make this brief journal entry a short exemplar of the origins, operation, and consequences of SOI.

²³ ‘IED’ is an Improvised Explosive Device, commonly used by insurgents. ‘CASEVAC’ is ‘casualty evacuation’, the process of recovering injured soldiers from the battlefield.

These perceptions of an altered focus in the tactical culture of TFH are reflected explicitly in one POR. The Brigade noted of its tour that “casualty rates [...] have been significant, prompting close attention [...] It is self-evident that a duty of care exists to protect our soldiers [...] that duty of care outweighs the risk that increased protection reduces our ability to integrate and engage with the population” (Land Warfare Centre 2022b, p. 3). This comment is noteworthy because engagement with the local population is a touchstone of counterinsurgency. This Task Force’s official report accepts that as casualties rose its priority became the protection of itself at the cost of most effectively executing its military tasks. The phrase ‘self-evident’ is striking. The authors have gone out of their way to note that this approach is something obvious and intrinsic to the conduct of this operation. It can be inferred that by this point in the campaign the authors expect this idea to be as familiar to the reader outside of Helmand as to those within. What is far from ‘self-evident’, however, is that the duty of care to soldiers outweighs the risk arising from mission-critical activities. Indeed, the natural assumption is that, if the mission is sufficiently important that deploying soldiers is a justified means of achieving it, so the risk incurred from those mission-critical activities outweighs the duty of care.

Public scrutiny (rather than just threat or other in-theatre imperatives) also appears to have informed the training delivered to the force. Both pre-deployment and theatre arrival training developed as the campaign matured and the nature of threat changed. The approach to ‘insider attacks’ in which members of the Afghan security forces attacked NATO troops is one example of a threat to British soldiers which seized public attention in the UK, in turn contributing to altered training. On this issue, the HCS observes that “public opinion demanded a response to the increasing number of UK casualties.” The HCS goes on to describe the creation of new approaches to counter the insider threat and how the matter was of sufficient importance that new training practices were briefed to Commander ISAF in Kabul (Directorate Land Warfare 2015, p. 6-2_1).

The way that such training was recorded was also altered in response to public perspectives. The HCS notes that “political and public interest increased as coroners questioned the level and detail of threat-specific training given to individuals prior to deployment. As a consequence, a stand-alone Operational Deployment Record (ODR) was procured” to record soldier pre-deployment training, and training delivered in theatre (Directorate Land Warfare 2015, p. 5-6_2). It was not, therefore, just that training delivery was altered. Defence had to consider new approaches to auditing and recording such training, at least in part with an eye to providing evidence of its work to coroners’ inquiries.

5.3.2. *The physical component of fighting power*

Equipment demonstrates even more clearly the trend for responding to perceived public preferences. Margaret MacMillan was quoted in the literature review as noting that military and civilian masters invest equipment to protect troops as a response to public concerns (MacMillan 2020, p. 283). In 2017, Ben Barry noted the impact of such public concerns as a driver for significant change to the military's equipment in Helmand. He argued that as the popularity of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan declined, "protection and protective equipment became a much higher priority" (Barry 2017, p. 145).

There is evidence that commanders felt that this prioritisation was disproportionate and negatively impacted their ability to fulfil their missions. The HCS comments that "political and public risk appetites [...] prevented the MOD from being able to balance operational risk via other [means] which in turn meant that force protection became overly dominated by equipment solutions" (Directorate Land Warfare 2015, p. 5-2_4). The first implication from the excerpt's language is that Defence took decisions about tactical equipment for troops in Helmand based on political and public opinion. The second implication is that such decisions were detrimental to the Task Force, and that if permitted TFH might have preferred other ways of tackling force protection. It is also noteworthy that the HCS quotation differentiates between political and public pressure. Mentioning both suggests that they influenced the military independently, and so the inference is that Defence made equipment decisions in direct response to appraisals of public opinion as well as political.

The idea of juxtaposition between force protection and mission imperative is supported by one TFH officer's reflection in his post operational interview that "a huge difficulty remained with the amount of equipment people had to routinely carry. The weight of DCC²⁴ equipment constrained our ability to patrol, interact with the people, and react to incidents effectively" (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 4). Not only were soldiers burdened with equipment that made the mission harder to achieve, but they were also deprived of equipment that made it easier. Another TFH staff officer reflected on his return that, "while the JACKAL²⁵ is without equal in terms of the balance between firepower, manoeuvrability, protection, and situational awareness, the casualty rate has made it politically unacceptable" (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 6). A third officer makes it clear where they felt that the political pressure originated from, observing that the Task Force became reliant

²⁴ Dismounted Close Combat.

²⁵ An all-terrain patrol vehicle with little armour.

upon certain types of equipment “because of media politics” (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 5). Considerations such as these made one TFH commander feel sufficiently concerned to reference the ‘protection vs mission’ problem in his POR, discussing soldiers’ protective equipment: “Specific concerns of balancing physical risk management and soldiers’ load burden must be addressed. The dismounted soldier is currently too heavily burdened, to the significant detriment of his tactical agility and mobility, with resultant impact on likely mission success” (Land Warfare Centre 2022b, p. 5).

TFH’s equipment demonstrates the degree to which SOI can impact the tactical level in a way which is neither about ‘trickle down’ direction to theatre, nor direct apprehension and reaction on the part of tactical commanders. Equipment design and procurement happens in parts of Defence removed from direct operational and tactical level management, and so the shape of the deployed force began to be directed from places removed from operational commanders who were nevertheless constrained by the types of equipment they had available. To an extent this is likely to have shielded SOI from certain variables (public or political pressure may have been lower at some times, and some commanders may have resisted it to different degrees) because each TFH deploying for its six-month tour took over the existing equipment in-theatre. It was not free to design or choose its own and bring it with them. Tours therefore began already influenced by SOI in having to use a set of equipment that had partly been determined by pressures exerted from public perspectives on soldiers.

Organisational structure is another aspect to the physical component of fighting power which helps explain why societal attitudes had such impact on tactical level operations in Helmand. Although the operation was commanded in-theatre by a Brigade, there was no level of British command between that Brigade and the UK home base in a closely scrutinised war.²⁶ This meant that although the Brigade commander had a clear set of layered headquarters above him within Afghanistan through the NATO chain of command, he was subject to a second, parallel, national chain. In this national chain, Commander TFH, as a doctrinally low-level tactical commander, reported directly into the operational level headquarters in London. In normal warfighting circumstances such a commander could expect at least one, and possibly two, layers of command in-theatre between him and the PJHQ. In such circumstances, Charles Krulak’s famous concept

²⁶ During the Helmand years 2006-2014 TFH was commanded by a NATO Divisional Headquarters in Kandahar which, in turn, reported to the NATO Corps Headquarters in Kabul. The Corps Headquarters reported to Headquarters ISAF also in Kabul, itself answerable to the NATO Allied Joint Forces Command in the Netherlands. There were moments at which senior British officers held positions in that NATO chain but not consistently, and by dint of being in the NATO chain they did not interpose between Commander TFH and PJHQ.

of the 'strategic corporal' (Krulak 1999) should be conceived of as operating in two directions: the corporal can have strategic effect with the smallest action, but in return the horrified tabloid or concerned politician can quickly exert tactical influence on the deployed Task Force either trickling down through a compressed chain of command, or directly as explored above.

Reflecting on this point, the HCS observes that "the lack of a buffer between the tactical and the military strategic [levels] required Brigade commanders [...] to operate upwards" (Directorate Land Warfare 2015, p. 1-1_1). The comment suggests first that Commander TFH was often communicating directly with the military strategic level at the MOD, regardless of the role of PJHQ between the two. Second, one can infer from the comment that routinely engaging with the strategic level is likely to have made Commander TFH less well-shielded from strategic considerations than might be doctrinally expected. The presence of 'policy advisors' in every HQ TFH is an indicator of this; such civil servants would not normally serve at the Brigade level. This is reflected in one senior TFH officer's comment that "the Task Force Commander seemed to have much to do: not only tactical command but also dealing with political and national business" (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 3).

An example of how fast matters could travel from political to tactical levels is provided by a media Officer in TFH: "If the Prime Minister is asked something by the media in London, you will be asked your views in minutes. I don't think that anything else goes from Number 10 to sub-unit as quickly as Media Ops does [...] Media Ops were involved in all the internal HQ staff functions" (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 4). Alongside policy advisors, the operation of TFH's media branch is another piece of evidence supporting the notion of TFH being concerned directly with public perceptions. A chief media operations officer in TFH noted that "we monitored UK press by being sent out "morning cuts" from the British media as well as twice-daily Press summaries" (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 3). It is remarkable to consider a tactical formation so closely monitoring public sentiment, demonstrating how important this input was to decision making in a busy HQ.

5.3.3. The moral component of fighting power

The source material provides evidence for societal perspectives on soldiers having direct impact on the soldiers themselves, not just their management, training, or equipment.

Ed Butler, the first Commander TFH in 2006, commented of this tour that “the key thing to me is that as long as we have the popular support back home for this operation, we can do it. If we lose the support back home and it becomes another Iraq then that will make our job as soldiers that much harder”(Harding 2006). Recall, here, Richard Holmes writing about the impact of friends and family on troops in Iraq described in the literature review.

This may not be limited to public perceptions of soldiers negatively influencing Butler’s people, but one of his successors noted that “the modern soldier has almost unlimited access to the internet and mobile phones and is able to get information and news from home quicker than the chain of command can react [...] it is crucial that we send the correct message to our men as soon as possible in order that they are not negatively influenced or swayed by media reporting” (Land Warfare Centre 2022b, p. 2).

The source material demonstrates that over time a blend of public and political expectations and altered command approaches to the management of the campaign did indeed have an impact on soldiers’ expectations about war. One senior soldier noted that “the current expectation on the part of the soldier is that if a casualty happens a Company will cease to advance because they must deal with the casualty (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 5). This demonstrates that expectations amongst soldiers about tactical management had altered in line with the culture being set by commanders. At its extreme, one Battle Group commander became very concerned: “The Battalion was about to go on leave at the time when PANCHAI PALANG²⁷ reporting was all over the television, and I was worried that the combination of the two [leave and television reporting] would encourage absenteeism” (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 3).

Aside from public nervousness seeping into the attitudes of deployed troops, secondary source material demonstrates a negative reaction on the part of soldiers in the other direction: angry rejection of perceived public perspectives. An example is a reported outburst of a Welsh Guards officer in the immediate aftermath of his tour in Afghanistan (a period of high casualties). Pre-empting the concerns of successive CDSs, the Major reportedly “resented the way the media pitied soldiers. ‘I don’t want your fucking sympathy’. The average Briton’s view of the troops, he lamented, was summed up by the symbol chosen by the forces charity Help for Heroes. ‘I do not want a teddy bear representing us [...] We’re warriors, not fucking teddy bears – that’s pity, not pride” (Harnden 2011, p. 504). Military commentator and SAS veteran Andy McNab is quoted in

²⁷ A major offensive in Helmand.

an examination of soldier victimhood from 2012 as saying: “we’re not fucking victims: our troops are fighting a war as professional soldiers, not victims, and the sooner everyone stitches on to this fact, the better...”(Ross McGarry and Ferguson 2012, p. 128). Aside from the point these quotations make about military perceptions of public opinion, the passion demonstrates the frustration that some soldiers felt about public perceptions of them at the height of HERRICK.

These points are likely to be a reason that the media cell in TFH was considered important. At the tactical level, it allowed TFH to try to shape coverage of soldiers and the campaign. Given the comments of commanders above, that is likely to have been, in part, about ensuring the morale of deployed soldiers.

5.4. Implications

There are several implications which follow from the evidence presented.

The first is concern, articulated in several PORs and POIs, that institutional belief in public casualty aversion, and its consequent responses, had created a tactical culture which prioritised casualty avoidance or recovery which will not be appropriate for future conflicts that may incur heavy casualties. As one officer observed, “HERRICK has taught us that everything stops once we have a casualty [...] politics, the media and personal expectations on the part of the soldier has driven this behaviour to this extent. We now need to unpick these expectations” (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 5). One TFH commander reflected this, predicting the experience of the majors’ staff college 2016 wargame described in the thesis introduction, when he noted that “our collective appetite to take risk with casualties [...] has reduced. During HFT²⁸ I had to unpick the soldiers’ view that the battle had to stop when there was a casualty; it is the sort of lesson that will be difficult to undo as it is in our collective psyche to call for MERT²⁹ and protect a casualty [...] rather than [...] pushing on” (Land Warfare Centre 2022a, p. 6).

The military may have inadvertently exacerbated the challenge in ways explored above, namely the quest to boost public support for soldiers through initiatives like the Armed Forces Covenant which inadvertently focused public attention on soldier welfare. The consequent problem is now so marked that one senior officer asked in 2021: “What is the contract with the nation? We die for

²⁸ Higher Formation Training.

²⁹ Medical Emergency Response Team.

them? Or they keep us alive? I don't see both as possible. Has the Covenant overwhelmed Service?"³⁰

The second implication is that SOI will affect Defence in deeper ways than just its operational activity. It may affect the Army's broader culture. The Commander Land Forces noted in his introduction to the HCS that "operations in Afghanistan had a profound impact on the Army's equipment, training and doctrine, and inculcated valuable and hard earned operational experience across a generation of leaders" (Directorate Land Warfare 2015, p. iii). This suggests the export of TFH's altered culture to the Army at large, perhaps an inevitability given the duration of the campaign and the number of troops who participated (often multiple times).

Neil Renic has analysed this in liberal Western societies writ-large, describing how their pursuit of a fallacy of 'bloodless conflict' as a result of public concern for soldiers alters the equipment they purchase and types of war they pursue (Renic 2020, p. 188). British examples of this can be found in the continued investment in 'stand-off' capabilities such as unmanned ground, air, and maritime vehicles, cyber capabilities, intelligence capabilities to reduce the risks of the unknown, and a reliance on offensive action delivered by technology and small specialised operations forces or third parties. One must note that there are benefits to this approach other than Renic's 'bloodless war' argument. They are, for example, economical in delivering military effect without the expense of large numbers of soldiers or equipment. It is also fair to argue that the requirements of modern warfare demand technological solutions in addition to traditional military capability. However, it is undeniable that these capabilities assuage official anxiety about a casualty-averse public, with the concomitant constraints on deploying 'boots on the ground'. Furthermore, as Strachan and Harris point out, such decisions on types of force and their equipment in turn begin to shape policy and strategy which must be tailored to the means available (2020, p. 5).

The third implication of this Chapter is that the military must address the gap in policy, doctrine, and concepts about the impacts of public perspectives. The HCS, PORs, and POIs make this clear: commanders felt the public's intense interest in the experience of soldiers in Helmand, and it is evident that this affected deployed operations to the point of altering the UK's tactical culture in Helmand. Imperatives of the counter-insurgency mission then became subordinate to considerations of force protection at times. The omission of this in policy, doctrine, and concepts is even more significant because the implications of this are noted in all three primary sources, but they do not appear to have 'pulled through' into doctrine or policy. The HCS, for example, notes

³⁰ Senior officer correspondence with author, dated 18 Feb 2021.

that “political, media, and public expectation on risk is set at a level that could constrain how we train and fight in the future” (Directorate Land Warfare 2015, p. 1_2). It goes further, noting that the Force may find itself subject to irresistible pressure from society which expects “soldiers to have the equipment that affords them the best protection [,] that they wear it all the time [,] and that the mission will stop for a casualty” (Directorate Land Warfare 2015, p. 1_2). This constitutes acknowledgement that public opinion has a role in the very way in which the UK prepares and deploys force in the future.

There is a second-order, or meta-implication from the three above: there is unresolved tension between the UK’s strategic and operational cultures. The Integrated Review Refresh of 2023, still the highest level statement of British strategy at the time of writing, sets an internationalist and proactive foreign and defence policy for the UK (Great Britain and HM Government 2023). In such policy, Defence will play its part in non-existential, discretionary, military activity around the globe. The ongoing counter-ISIS mission is one example, as are overseas garrisons in Brunei and Cyprus or the frequent international deployments of the Royal Navy’s Carrier Strike Group. The findings of this Chapter and the one preceding it suggest that Defence must not assume societal acquiescence to any combat action involved in these operations and, if society are insufficiently convinced of justifiability, success, or competent management, then such deployments may find themselves quickly constrained in execution. Current Defence policy and thinking appears to recognise the military and political imperatives of a given operation but overlooks the social.

5.5. Conclusion

Taking the scattered references to elements of SOI in public literature, this Chapter has extended the enquiry into classified PORs, POIs, and the HCS. The goal has been to refine understanding of the ways in which public perspectives on soldiers affected TFH, as participants saw it, and with what effect.

Drawing these threads together for the first time, this Chapter has found strong evidence, first, of the institutionalised military belief in a casualty-averse public per the arguments laid out in Chapter 4. Second, the findings of this archival research support the literature review’s assertion that official military concepts and doctrine do not sufficiently grasp the role of the public in modern war. The archive material’s suggestions of extensive societal impacts on the delivery of Defence policy make this absence starker.

In as far as it goes, this Chapter therefore supports the theory of SOI. The consequences of assessments of public opinion by senior commanders and by field commanders were evident in the conceptual, moral, and physical approaches to the Helmand campaign. The organisational structure of the chain of command above TFH exacerbated these trends by exposing tactical level commanders to (misplaced) strategic level considerations. Cumulatively these findings suggest that perceptions of public opinion influenced Britain's very tactical culture in Helmand. Deployed soldiers' own assessment was that the pressure to avoid casualties (felt through political and chain of command demands and directly from their own understanding) changed how they fought, and potentially in ways that jeopardised the Army's ability to achieve its mission on Operation HERRICK. There is evident concern amongst commanders that this may constrain future operations.

It is noteworthy that the sources used in this Chapter were written without any focus on CMR theory. Consequently, they do not probe the phenomena that underlie the theory of SOI in any great detail. This requires further enquiry, with elite interviews and surveys allowing focused investigation, to test the theory of SOI in more detail, and to chart its mechanisms and boundaries more clearly. That is the subject of the next Chapter.

6. Testing the theory of Societal Operational Influence in Afghanistan

REDACTED UNDER DISPENSATION FROM CONSULTATION

7. Comparative analysis: Operations in Mali 2020-2022

REDACTED UNDER DISPENSATION FROM CONSULTATION

8. Implications for policy and future operations

REDACTED UNDER DISPENSATION FROM CONSULTATION

9. Implications for theory: UK civil-military relations

9.1. Introduction

This Chapter address the implications of this research for theory. It begins by describing where SOI challenges existing theory, before a section which addresses how it extends it.

9.2. Consequences for theory: Theoretical challenge

First, this research challenges the idea of casualty aversion as the primary driver of British public opinion about soldiers and their wars. Chapter 4's content analysis findings note that victimhood is a significant characterisation, but that there is important nuance behind this frame in terms of *why* the soldier is victim. It also finds that other characterisations vie for influence at different times and in different places. This is an important theoretical alignment in a Defence-funded project because UK institutional thought has positioned itself, wittingly or otherwise, with the 'aversion school' as demonstrated in all three wartime Prime Ministers' autobiographies and the official statements and publications referenced above.

Second, and relatedly, this research challenges the idea of 'post heroism' (from Coker). The findings imply that British society is not intrinsically post-heroic or anti-militaristic. Instead, they imply that the public applies rational cost/benefit analysis to a given war, and that the public 'bar' can be expected to be set high for discretionary, non-existential conflict in which the justifiability, success, and competent management of a campaign are unclear. The inverse can be true, with populations capable of extending the cost/benefit analysis as far as a categorical position (success at any cost) although we must rely on recent studies such as the Dill et al. (2023) Ukraine analysis noted in the previous Chapter since we have no data from a recent comparable UK conflict. It seems reasonable to generalise from such an extreme example, however. The idea of post-heroism is therefore something intrinsic for Coker but is more likely to be contextual. The content analysis demonstrates that heroizing characterisations of soldiers are identifiable at key moments, and that there is evident continued fascination with war and respect for society's own participants.

The third challenge is to the absence of theory itself. This research makes plain that there is insufficient social science enquiry examining domestic society as a major factor in the governance

of modern war. If we are, as Ford & Hoskins, Peach & Melvin, and the LOpC variously argue, amid a 'new war ecology' or 'RMA' then this theoretical gap requires attention. Social-military relations are underexamined despite classical theory's guidance about the interplay of society, government, and military. CMR tends to favour analysis of the 'state-military' relationship at the expense of the social-military one. Where societal issues are examined, the focus tends to be on juridification or other aspects of domestic societal-military interplay, not much exploring the operational effects for Defence policy theory and delivery. This research has argued that the modern information environment and the UK's preference for fast responses to public issues is weighting Clausewitz's trinitaries such that 'emotion' and 'people' are increasingly prominent in war's governance.

The imbalance in academic attention is understandable. The military is inaccessible at the best of times, but more accessible with regard to its domestic behaviours than with respect to the deep detail of its overseas operational activity. Nor does the military demand more from theory. It is not an academically minded organisation and tends to skew its professional military education towards history and success with the consequences for its understanding described in Chapter 8.

Nevertheless, the lack of easy public or academic access to this world is significant given the vital importance of warfare to the national interest. This is the tenor of Strachan & Harris' paper which expresses concern about the way that military affairs are conceived of and managed behind closed doors without the ready involvement of civilians (public, academics, or other). This creates intellectual risk in the development of political and military thinking about warfare in which institutional concepts about military affairs are infrequently subject to serious challenge and scrutiny by the civilian world which it exists to serve. Strachan & Harris also connect this to the democratic normative implications discussed above: military operations can become untethered from the public in ways which are detrimental to accountability and which also risk the very public censure and constraint that they are seeking to avoid.

There are some tools which exist to tackle this issue. Military engagement with think tanks like the Royal United Services Institute and the International Institute for Security Studies complement some wider academic engagement by the military with institutions like the University of Oxford's *Changing Character of War* programme and Kings College London. There are also a raft of academic journals dealing specifically with military affairs. The military has become better at engaging with such views. The establishment of the MOD's 'Secretary of States' Office for Net Assessment and

Challenge' in 2022 is one example, creating a dedicated unit for critical thinking and external engagement at the highest levels of Defence. But this outreach and challenge is not widespread beneath the MOD level.

9.3. Consequences for theory: Theoretical extension

The points above explore areas of theory that SOI challenges. There are other theoretical ideas which it supports and extends which are next explored.

9.3.1. Strategic culture

Chapter 4 has already extended the work of Gelpi et al. in describing how the British public form their opinions about soldiers and their operations. The second significant way in which this research extends existing theory is in the realm of strategic culture. The literature review described the Snyder, Gray, and wider school of strategic culturalists' arguments for the place of social ideas and constructs in understanding military approaches.

This research provides evidence in support of several key elements of these arguments. First, it finds that aspects of culture both set the context for operational decision making and drove behaviour in Afghanistan and, later, in Mali. In doing so it extends general ideas about culture influencing the execution of strategy as well as its formulation by providing detailed examples of how this occurred. It also extends these ideas through examination of the same influence over the operational and tactical levels.

The data also support some of Gray's most important caveats about strategic culture (Gray 1999). First, the interviews clearly underscore the point that culture's influence is vital, overlooked, but not necessarily 'prime' in determining outcomes. Several things dictate behaviour, of which culture is only one and this is reflected in interview comments on drivers for decision-making. Second, this research supports the idea that culture's influence will wax and wane according to circumstance. It has posited variables (intensity, salience, command personality) which will make the operations in question particularly susceptible to SOI as a cultural phenomenon at certain moments. Finally, Chapter 4 also firmly supports Gray's position that culture is dynamic. Ideas, narratives, and norms can change depending on context. They do not remain permanently fixed.

This is evident in the shifts identifiable in time and between geographical locations in the data in Chapters 4 -7.

Notwithstanding these points, the research supports Gray's central thesis about affording culture its proper place in understanding how warfare is governed. The thinking and behaviour of strategic, operational, and tactical commanders examined in this thesis constitute a discernible operational culture identifiable in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, counter-ISIS operations, and in Mali. It is also identifiable in the fabric of Defence reviews which design the future military force. That is not to say that this was the sole aspect of culture which guided the campaign, nor does it claim to explain every aspect of operational behaviour. But it is to argue, in the same way as the 1970s strategic culture pioneers did, that culture is a missing factor in existing understanding of how the execution of Defence policy works. As argued above, it is therefore significant that societal aspects of operational policy are underreported in CMR theory (leaving culture largely, although not solely, to the realm of strategy theorists) in which it ought to feature more prominently.

In the case of recent British military operations, the strong evidence in Afghanistan and Mali data is of risk aversion as a key feature of British operational culture, and one which at times overrode other behavioural impetuses. This is despite Chapter 4's argument that this was built on incorrect institutional foundational beliefs. The argument was made in Chapter 5 and confirmed in Chapter 6 that behaviours had translated into the deeper institutional culture of the military. This was exemplified with the perceived public prioritisation of casualties guiding the military's structures (designing lighter role forces such as the new Ranger Regiment designed for smaller engagements or to partner local forces), equipment to allow it to conduct operations without 'boots on the ground', and operational designs to privilege 'stand-off' capabilities. Operation ELLAMY in Libya in 2011 was the exemplar of where this approach led: the British military used air power, offshore naval power, special forces, and drones to prosecute its campaign but avoided the use of ground forces.

At the intersection of theory and practice, this conceptualisation of prevailing military operational culture presents a problem when applied to the modern context of threat from large scale European inter-state conflict. The operational and tactical culture of risk averse constraint, which has bled into force design as well as conceptual thinking, does not pair well with a security environment in which large scale conventional combat operations (with its demands on big forces and likelihood of heavy casualties) is the top priority of Defence policy. This tension was precisely

the fear expressed in archival reports by senior officers who were anxious about how the risk averse normative culture which developed in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Mali, would fare in any return to high-intensity conventional warfare.

9.3.2. US Agency Theory

A further significant theoretical extension that this research makes is to Peter Feaver's Agency Theory (Feaver 2009). The model, in which the US civilian institution is the principal and the US military is the agent, argues that at points of divergence in civil and military preferences, the military has two options, namely to 'work', in line with civil preferences, or 'shirk' and avoid them. 'Shirking' in this context does not hold usual connotations of laziness but aims to explain a military judgement about whether to pursue its own preference over the civil one. Feaver argues that the military's decision centres on its judgement about whether the shirking will be a) detected and b) punished (2009, p. 14).

Feaver's analysis does not extend to non-US states or the operational zone, focusing primarily on the case of the US domestically. He explicitly calls for further work to deal with the implications of his theory for the conduct of operations. I extend his work in two ways. First, exploration of the UK case at war (offering a comparative case internationally, and extending the work into the operational zone as he recommends). Second, Feaver's analysis primarily concerns the mechanisms of government/military interaction (notwithstanding his comment about the media serving as a 'prominent fire alarm' driving political decisions) whereas this thesis expands the debate to include society's role more fully.

The literature review identified the different ways in which British civilian normative expectations had altered the military's approach to non-operational matters (using homosexuality, gender, and wider juridification as prime examples) demonstrating the applicability of the Agency model to the UK at peace.

SOI can be considered an extension of the principal-agent model in ways that Feaver recommends, by providing an empirical study into how his theory of civil control of the military works in operational contexts. Feaver writes that "the agency model could be employed in a more detailed look at civil-military relations during combat" which his book considered only "in broad brush-strokes" (Feaver 2009, p. 239). He also notes that, where his theory explores the mechanisms of

civilian control over the military, it pays relatively little attention to “the other side, how civilian control might affect the ability of the military to carry out its functional role” (Feaver 2009, p. 198). Although this research examines these very issues in relation to the UK rather than US context, the two states share a broad approach to civil-military relations even if they differ in constitutions and institutions. This is a point which Feaver would agree with, having noted that agency theory should have relevance to any liberal democracy (Feaver 2009, p. 12).

An example of the applicability of Agency theory to this research is found in several tactical commanders who denied that societal perspectives influenced their tours. Of 5 TFH commanders who claimed they were uninhibited by public opinion, 3 stated that this was at least in part because they either did not suffer casualties or because they ensured that they actively planned to avoid them. In either case, the implication is that tactical freedom of action was preserved by avoiding issues of potential divergence occurring, and therefore of any ‘detection’ or ‘punishment’.

Feaver lays out a scale of civil intrusion over military affairs (Feaver 2009, p. 85). The experiences of primary and secondary sources discussed in the literature review suggest that the British military was operating near the most ‘intrusive’ end of Feaver’s spectrum in Afghanistan and its current and later operations and that it largely opted to ‘work’ within that context. In a position that PM1 would certainly agree with, Feaver argues that “in the civil-military context...even if the military is best able to identify the threat and the appropriate responses to that threat for a given level of risk, only the civilian can set the level of acceptable risk of society...the military can propose the level of armaments necessary to have a certain probability of being able to defend successfully against ones enemies, but only the civilian can say for what probability of success society is willing to pay” (Feaver 2009, p. 6). Agency theory is therefore found to be at play in UK operational experience and its dialectic between the military and its civilian masters is another challenge to the Huntingtonian model that the British military still holds normatively dear.

Ultimately, Agency theory and SOI as an operational subset of it may lead a campaign astray in the ways that this thesis has argued. But, as Feaver notes, “in a democracy, civilians have the right to be wrong. Civilian political leaders have the right to ask for things in the national security realm that are ultimately not conducive to good national security.” (Feaver 2009, p. 65). Describing a scenario in which the choice is between civilians designing the entire campaign or the military being left alone with the broadest objectives, Feaver makes the same argument for careful balance as was made in the previous Chapter. He writes that “the former would be tremendously costly

[...] in the extreme over-meddling could so jeopardize the lives of the military, or fate of the mission, that the military would turn in revolt. Over delegation [...] would amount to a de facto coup: the military would be deciding policy and making decisions that by right belong to the civilian political masters” (Feaver 2009, p. 76).

Seeing SOI in the context of Agency theory leads to a second order inference. It is not important merely to ascertain what the British public thinks of soldiers and their operations, it is important to understand broader societal normative preferences and how they might impact the Army. This enables either adjustment of Army norms (‘work’) or allows consideration of how to preserve a difference in military and societal cultures (‘shirk’). There is evidence of concern about this throughout recent military research and it covers the full gamut of potential outcomes. These range from the optimistic (the impacts of a tech-savvy generation Z and their potential as excellent recruits) to the pessimistic which, in line with post-modernist interpretations of society, worry about the increasing preference for the rights and needs of the individual at the expense of the collective which may weaken the military (Bowers 2008, p. 9).

These issues of civil influence over the military domestically and at war are intensified by the British military’s deliberate policy of closer ties with society. This is at odds with its traditional position for much of the 20th century. There are many reasons for the Army’s decision. Some are to do with workforce and the need to fill the ranks of the 2020s with different skills (Beale 2018): modern warfare increasingly requires technologically adept soldiers to run information operations, cyber warfare, or complex communications and weapons systems. Others are to do with retention. As Defence seeks to retain skilled and experienced staff, adjustments in military culture are needed to keep pace with attractive alternatives in the civilian sector. Whatever the basis of the decision of successive Chiefs of Defence staff to ensure that the military better “reflects the society we serve” (Royal United Services Institute 2018; MOD and Radakin 2021) it is relevant because it enhances the power of both Agency and SOI models and may result in fewer imposed and more voluntary reconciliations of military and civil positions at moments of tension.³¹

9.3.3. *Public opinion as a missing Defence policy component*

Given the importance that SOI places on society in the conduct of Defence affairs this thesis adds to the evidential base of Huw Strachan and Ruth Harris’s 2020 paper on *The Utility of Military Force*

³¹ The Army’s 2020 twitter handle was ‘@yourarmy’.

and Public Understanding in Britain. The research firmly supports their assertions that 1) the public are less risk averse than the government assumes; 2) that the government must better recognise the influence that public opinion will have on how Defence policy is made and how it operates; and 3) that the public must therefore be better engaged on detail matters of Defence policy instead of allowing assumptions of intrinsic risk aversion to drive Defence policy further behind establishment closed doors. Chapter 4's content analysis firmly supports their view on public risk appetites differing from political perceptions, while Chapters 5, 6, and 7 identify the significant impacts that public attitudes had on the conduct of operations. It cannot but support, therefore, calls for better understanding of what the public think, and better engagement with the public on that basis.

“The government relies on a body of trained experts to steer it through the thickets of national security, but in their work the latter have to recognise the role of popular opinion as well as of political guidance. Conflicts short of major war require more nuanced explanations than major wars, and by the same token demand more careful exposition and more space for debate.” (Strachan and Harris 2020, p. 14)

An important implication of this research which further extends Strachan & Harris' point is that, if the default position in the UK is avoidance of meaningful public engagement on defence policy and strategy, public opinion will find other routes to influence the management of war if it is motivated to do so. It also leaves the government and military at the mercy of a 'single bad day' in which a high-profile tactical reversal could have disproportionate effect on a public who have not had the moral purpose of the operation explained. This may undermine an otherwise sound military strategy.

10. Conclusion

This research has examined the relationship between societal perspectives on soldiers and the British Army's operational behaviour between 2001 and 2014. It has drawn together threads across academic, practitioner, and popular literature which describe social-military interplay, and wider social science theory about narrative, norms and behaviours. Thereafter, it has driven research forward into the UK's strategic, operational, and tactical level experience to test a theory of Societal Operational Influence. In doing so this thesis necessarily engages with the entire Clausewitzian secondary trinity of state, society, and Army and sheds new light on its operation in the intensifying information age of the 21st Century.

The primary question that this research asked was how societal perspectives on soldiers altered the British Army's behaviour at war during the period 2001-2014. It has addressed three constituent questions concerning the nature of public opinion about soldiers, the impact of public opinion on military operations, and the implications for Defence policy and CMR theory.

In response to these questions, this thesis hypothesised that a soldier-as-victim narrative became dominant between 2001-2014, that this reached operational personnel, and influenced decision-making through both cascading orders and self-generated actions by commanders. It also hypothesised that patterns would be discernible across time (as the campaign became more violent) and the levels of war (with less impact at lower levels). Finally, this thesis hypothesised that military and CMR thinking has insufficiently accounted for these phenomena.

To test these hypotheses the observable implications in the table below were set. Those in **green text** are found to be significantly represented in the research data.

Research Question	Observable Implications	Process Tracing Tests			
		<i>Straw in the Wind</i>	<i>Hoop</i>	<i>Smoking Gun</i>	<i>Doubly Decisive</i>
1. Determining perspectives	Focus on injuries and deaths		✓		
	Focus on human stories with negative slant towards war		✓		
	Focus on bereaved families	✓			
	Focus on struggling veterans	✓			
	Regular detailed coverage of service charity work	✓			
	Common regular references to victimhood			✓	
	Negative portrayal of commanders and/or political decision makers in contrast to portrayal of soldiers	✓			
	Questioning value of conflict	✓			
	Comment about wasted life and negative connotations to sacrifice	✓			
	Absence of focus on strategic effects of conflict	✓			
2. Determining impact	References to societal perspectives on soldiers <i>in relation</i> to operational decision-making (strategic, operational, or tactical commanders)			✓	
	References to societal perspectives on soldiers <i>as drivers</i> for decision-making (strategic, operational, or tactical commanders)				✓
	Evidence of news consumption by strategic, operational, or tactical commanders		✓		
	UK domestic news playing in operations rooms	✓			
	Press commentary on British soldiers displayed in operations rooms	✓			
	Briefings on UK domestic opinion to operational commanders		✓		
	Structural change in HQs to accommodate media officers / management of British public opinion			✓	
	Managed approach to journalists		✓		
	Communication outputs aimed at domestic audiences in strategic, operational and/or tactical headquarters			✓	
	Changes to short term activity tied to sensitive UK political moments (framework patrols around elections, for example)			✓	
	Changes to training, equipment, doctrine, TTPs (tactics, techniques and procedures), and planning noted as being a result of societal perspectives on soldiers				✓
	Political Advisor (POLAD) guidance to Commanders recommended responses to UK public perspectives			✓	
	Explicit comment in PORs or interviews about responding to UK opinion of soldiers				✓

	Social preconceptions about the soldier (cultural frames such as those resulting from education) affecting self-perception or decisions			✓	
	Absorption of societal perceptions of soldiers by soldiers		✓		
	Popular perceptions of soldiers inspired subjects to join the Army		✓		
	Altered behaviour because of social perceptions of soldiers (resisting archetypes, acquiescing to archetypes, etc.)				✓
	Self-perception of soldiers aligned to dominant societal perceptions of soldiers		✓		

Table 11: Process Tracing Tests for observable implications of SOI

The research findings largely support these hypotheses but with some important refinements, as follows: 1) although a ‘soldier-as-victim’ narrative was prominent in public discourse, soldiers were portrayed less as victims of injury than as victims of the authorities above them. The public applied rational criteria of campaign justifiability, success, and competent management to determine how the soldier is viewed. 2) Consequent impacts on operational behaviours were significant but did not just occur through cascading orders or self-generated actions of tactical commanders and soldiers. The strategic level directly imposed its will on tactical activity, bypassing the operational level of command with consequences for doctrinal concepts relating to levels of war, and for the autonomy that tactical commanders doctrinally expect through ‘mission command’. 3) While SOI’s direct influence was most pronounced at higher levels, the effects at the tactical level were substantial, albeit in different ways. Tactical commanders sometimes explicitly recognised and acted on SOI’s presence and sometimes did not, but they experienced its effects regardless through imposed changes such as those to equipment, training, procedures, and the operational designs which governed their activities.

The research’s overarching findings are, therefore, as follows. 1) The public form opinions about soldiers and campaigns predicated on rational criteria, not casualty aversion. 2) Political and military elite assessments of public perspectives were, and remain, inaccurate but nonetheless had significant impacts on the prosecution of the war in Afghanistan across its conceptual, moral, and physical aspects. At times these made the mission harder to achieve and exacerbated public concerns. 3) These impacts are underrepresented in academic theory and military practitioner approaches despite evidence that 4) they have had enduring effects on the British military’s culture, particularly around issues of risk tolerance as demonstrated in the case of later operations in Mali. This is significant for the potentially constraining role that SOI may have on political and military approaches to future operations, as articulated by ground commanders in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. The research argues that the military will experience SOI to differing degrees in different contexts, depending on the intensity of a campaign’s violence, its salience amongst the public, and how military commanders choose to respond to its pressures. The thesis has also found that, even where public salience is low, anticipatory political and military actions may still shape operations, as seen in Mali.

It is highly likely that the key aspects of SOI are an enduring feature of military, political, and social relationships. This has consequences for the future. SOI argues that society’s enduring interest in war, its preference for examination of soldiers-as-individuals, and increasing public access to

military affairs affect *how* the UK's wars were fought not just *whether* they were fought. Public oversight is a legitimate and necessary feature of democratic civil-military relations, and the challenge is not how to eliminate it but how to ensure that its effects are understood, anticipated, and managed. It will require commanders at all levels to navigate political and public sensitivities in real time.

It is not argued that SOI is the sole, or even principal, determinant of operational behaviours but it is one of several key factors impacting decision making and behaviour at war. Its level of impact depends on identified variables which determine the levels of monitoring and impact.

These findings imply a greater role for the British people in the governance of military operations than is generally found in academic and practitioner writing. These findings therefore contribute to re-balancing the academic discussion which underprivileges the societal-military dialectic, and should encourage the military to rethink its approach to conceptualising war. The Army has recognised public scrutiny as a key facet of modern warfare but, along with the wider Defence establishment, it lacks a clear framework for understanding its operational impacts. This omission has consequences for how Defence and the Army considers and prepares for future operations. There is a disconnect in this regard between current concepts and how wars are actually conducted.

Campaigns and battles are not like games of chess or football matches, conducted in total detachment from their environment according to strictly defined rules. Wars are not tactical exercises writ large. They are [...] conflicts of societies, and they can be fully understood only if one understands the nature of the society fighting them. The roots of victory and defeat often have to be sought far from the battlefield, in political, social, and economic factors which explain why armies are constituted as they are, and why their leaders conduct them in the way they do.

Sir Michael Howard (1981, p. 14)

10.1 Postscript: Thesis extensions

There are several ways in which the research presented in this thesis could be further developed.

First, more work could usefully be done on the nature of British public perspectives on soldiers to determine how they are formed (what role, for example, does cultural predisposition have?). A wider range of sources could also be used to thicken the appraisal of public opinion. Imagery, for example, is a media which could add greater colour to the analysis. Chapter 4 goes some way to addressing this by analysing British public perspectives on soldiers in different contexts (exploring historical and other media presentations).

This research could also be extended by conducting comparative analysis. The British experience of other wars across a wider timeframe, for example, would enrich the data presented in Chapters 6 and 7. SOI is proposed as a universal model, but its variables mean that it is likely to operate in different ways according to context. Exploring its operation in other conflicts would be useful, in particular, for examining in more detail the interplay between a campaign's perceived justification, success, and competent management. It is likely that these factors do not hold equal value in determining public perspectives, and that circumstances (such as an operation's non-discretionary or discretionary nature) will alter their dynamic.

An additional opportunity for comparative analysis is examination of different states' experiences at the same time. This could provide insight into how different societies form perspectives on their soldiers at the same moments in the same campaigns (over 50 countries participated in the conflict).

A fourth way of deriving further insight from comparative analysis would be to compare the media coverage of other British public institutions to determine whether there is anything unique about the soldier when compared to other public servants, and explore the impacts on frontline delivery. The Police Service during the national riots of 2024 might provide one such line of enquiry. The NHS during the COVID crisis would provide another, throughout which there are similar distinctions (and lexicon) evident in public discourse between 'front line' personnel, senior managers, and politicians.

Finally, SOI posits that societal influence would affect soldiers directly, creating 'bottom up' tension in which soldier expectations altered the conduct of operations. Chapter 5 found some evidence of this (recall archival reports about soldier expectations that operations would pause if they were injured, so that they could be cared for) but the methodology did not allow for further testing because it did not canvas soldier ranks' opinions. Although this is a way in which enquiry about SOI's mechanisms and operations could be extended, the absence of junior soldier impact does not negate the wider findings of this thesis which stand regardless. But understanding this aspect of SOI would help to build a richer model.

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Appendix A: Glossary

ACSC	Advanced Command & Staff Course. For select senior officers
AO	Area of Operations
BG	Battle Group. A combat formation of c1000 troops
CASEVAC	Casualty Evacuation. The process of extracting casualties from the field
CDS	Chief of the Defence Staff. The head of the UK's Armed Forces
CGS	Chief of the General Staff. The head of the Army
CJO	Chief of Joint Operations. Overseer of all UK overseas operations
CMR	Civil Military Relations
COB	Contingency Operating Base. The British base in Basra, Iraq
CORDED	Codename for British counter-poaching operations in Africa, 2018-2021
CWC	Captains' Warfare Course. Training for all British Army Captains
DCC	Dismounted Close Combat
ECM	Electronic Counter Measures, providing protection from roadside bombs
ELLAMY	Codename for British operations in Libya, 2011
FOB	Forward Operating Base
FINGAL	Codename for British operations in Afghanistan, 2002-2004
General Officer	A term for those of Major General, Lieutenant General and General rank
HERRICK	Codename for British operations in Afghanistan, 2004-2014
HFT	Higher Formation Training. Battle training for formation HQs
ICSC	Intermediate Command & Staff Course. For all newly promoted Majors
IED	Improvised Explosive Device. Common weapon of insurgents.
ISAF	International Stabilisation and Assistance Force. NATO in Afghanistan
Jackal	Lightly armoured vehicle with heavy weapons
LOpC	Land Operating Concept
MOD	Ministry of Defence
MERT	Medical Emergency Response Team. Helicopter-borne medical team
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NEWCOMBE	Codename for British operations in Mali, 2013-2022
OO	Other Officer (interview subject)
Operational	A phrase covering any aspect of military operations, at any level of war
Operational level	Middle level between the strategic and tactical. PJHQ between 2001-2014
Osprey	Body armour
PITTING	Codename for British operation to evacuate Kabul, 2021
PJHQ	Permanent Joint Headquarters. CJO's Headquarters
PM	Prime Minister
POI	Post Operational Interview
POLAR BEAR	Codename for British operation to evacuate UK nationals in Sudan, 2023
Political level	The level of above the strategic level. Ministerial and Prime Ministerial
POR	Post Operational Report
PSC	Private Security Company
PXR	Post Exercise Report
RC (S/SW)	Regional Command South/South West. The Divisional HQ above TFH
RCDS	Royal College of Defence Studies. For select very senior officers.
RESCRIPT	Codename for British military response to COVID 19
RUMAN	Codename for British military response to Hurricane Irma, 2017
RMA	Revolution in military affairs
SOI	Societal Operational Influence
SHADER	Codename for British operations against ISIS, 2014-present

SHAKU	Codename for British military response to flooding, 2015-2016
SINCREP	Significant Incident Report
SLUBBER	Codename for British military response to Foot & Mouth disease, 2001
Strategic level	The top level of military operations. MOD between 2001-2014
Tactical level	The lowest level of operations. 'In theatre' activity between 2001-2014
TELIC	Codename for British operations in Iraq, 2003-2011
TFH	Task Force Helmand, the British Brigade in Helmand between 2006-2014
TTP	Tactics, techniques, and procedures
UOR	Urgent Operational Requirement. Rapid equipment procurement system
VERITAS	Codename for British operations in Afghanistan, 2001
Viking	Tracked armoured vehicle

Appendix B: NVivo codebook

Categories	Sub-Categories	Sub-category description	
Hero	Non operational	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it describes heroic actions of a soldier/soldiers <u>whilst not deployed on operations</u> . These actions might be off duty (intervening in an assault) or on-duty (an act characterised as brave whilst at work). The category differs from the <i>belper</i> category in describing an act of unusual heroism or ‘guts’, and so the presentation must be heroizing.	
	Operational	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it describes the actions of soldiers/a soldier with regard to heroism <u>on operations</u> . The presentation must be positive and heroizing. It might relate to saving others, or martial skill (against the enemy for example).	
	Misc hero	A unit belongs to this subcategory if subjects are portrayed in heroic terms, but without the specificity required to place it in either category above.	
Helper	Non-operational	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it describes the actions of a soldier/soldiers in support of civilians or the UK government or others <u>whilst not deployed abroad on operations</u> . These actions might be off duty (aiding at the scene of a car crash) or on-duty (aiding the UK authorities with security, disaster relief, or health crisis for example).	
	Operational	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it describes the actions of a soldier/soldiers in <u>operational deployments</u> in which provision of assistance is the main focus. These actions might be as peacekeepers, participants in stabilisation missions, humanitarian missions but stop short of war fighting or coverage of just any military activity. It must paint the soldier as helper. This subcategory would not apply to coverage of heroic action, which would fall under the ‘hero’ category.	
	Misc Helper	A unit belongs to this subcategory if subjects are portrayed in ‘helper’ terms but without specific reference to either of the sub categories above.	
Victim	Non operational	Of authority	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it portrays a soldier/soldiers as being failed by the Government, MOD, the chain of command, or ‘the Army’ as a collective entity either whilst away from operations, or in general (defence cuts for e.g.). Failures may be found in terms of political direction, or any other failure of the chain of command to properly support soldiers.
		Misc non-operational victim	A unit belongs to this subcategory if subjects are portrayed in victim terms, but without specific reference to the sub-category above.
	Operational	Of the adversary	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it pertains to a soldier/soldiers as victim of enemy action. A report simply stating that a soldier was killed or injured (in a blast, for example) is insufficient, the tenor must be emotive, or refer to the soldier(s) explicitly as ‘victims’.
		Of authority	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it portrays a soldier/soldiers as being failed by the Government, MOD, the chain of command, or ‘the Army’ as a collective entity. Failures may be found in terms of political direction, the futility of conflict, flawed legal/moral justification for war, under-resourcing, poor equipment, under-funding, poor direction, negligence, etc.
		Misc operational victim	A unit belongs to this subcategory if subjects are portrayed in victim terms whilst on operations, but without specific reference to the sub-categories above. Or if it portrays the subject in multiple terms- i.e. of both the adversary and authority.

	Operational or non-operational	Of (physical or psychological) injury	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it relates to enduring physical or mental problems as a result of military service regardless of location of injury- once more, portrayed emotively rather than simply stating that they were injured/psychologically impacted (in which case the factual, descriptive nature of the tenor should be classed as 'neutral')
		Of criminal behaviour	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it relates to a soldier(s) as victim of criminal or morally dubious behaviour (bullying and harassment, for example, or assault/rape/murder) which is not that of the enemy/adversary in an operational theatre. Note that if a victim of culpable negligence on the part of authority, coding will be for 'victim of authority' either operational or non-operational depending on context.
		Of the British society	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it relates to the negative effect of British public actions. Soldiers feeling part of a forgotten war, facing protests on return from war, or discriminated against would all be examples.
Villain	Non operational	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it focuses on criminal, negligent, or morally dubious actions of a soldier/soldiers <u>away from operations</u> . Assaults, fighting, drug-taking, excessive drinking, sex scandals/affairs, or fighting would all be examples. The tenor of the unit must be to present the soldier exclusively negatively, rather than presenting the activity as a consequence of victimhood in which case the compound category must be considered. Note that whilst recording units detailing accusations against a soldier should be coded, recording units reporting a soldier being found 'not guilty of assault' should not be coded in this category. Although that sentence includes the indicator word 'assault', the sentence clearly does not present the soldier as villain since he/she has been vindicated.	
	Operational	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it focuses on criminal, negligent, or morally dubious actions of a soldier/soldiers which occurs <u>whilst involved in active military operations</u> . The impacts of those actions might be on friendly soldiers, civilians or civilian property, or enemies. Culpable friendly fire, looting or accidental or deliberate injury to civilians would be examples. So, too, would anything related to war crimes (torture, extra judicial killing, etc). The tenor of the unit must be to present the soldier exclusively negatively, rather than presenting the activity as a consequence of victimhood in which case the compound category must be considered. Note that whilst recording units detailing accusations against a soldier should be coded, recording units reporting a soldier being found 'not guilty of assault' should not be coded in this category.	
	Misc villain	If the unit portrays soldiers negatively (and culpably) but without specific reference to the sub-categories above.	
Compound	'Hero/Victim'	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it contains a blend of indicators from the hero and victim categories above.	
	'Villain/Victim'	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it contains a blend of indicators from the villain and victim categories above. Examples might be where a soldier has committed a failing but only because she was inadequately trained by the Army, or sentences in which two soldiers are presented- one as victim the other as villain.	
	'Helper/Victim'	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it contains a blend of indicators from the helper and victim categories above.	
	'Helper/Hero'	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it contains a blend of indicators from the helper and hero categories above.	
	'Helper/Villain'	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it contains a blend of indicators from the helper and villain categories above.	
	'Hero/Villain'	A unit belongs to this subcategory if it contains a blend of indicators from the hero and villain categories above.	
Neutral	Recording units in which there is no emotive language used which would reasonably place the unit in any of the categories above.		