

# The Specter of the Casualty: Elite Misreading of British Public Perceptions of the Soldier 2001–2014

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## Abstract

During military operations between 2001 and 2014, British political and military leaders came to believe that the public were casualty-averse and viewed soldiers sympathetically as victims. Recent scholarship has demonstrated that this interpretation of public opinion altered the way that British combat operations were conducted in Afghanistan. This study finds that this elite interpretation was inaccurate. Providing a first analysis of British media representations of soldiers at key moments throughout the whole campaign, it finds that this interpretation misjudged the nature of soldier victimhood. Where political and military elites attributed public disquiet to military casualties, this research finds that the public was more likely to be concerned with contextual factors (notably competent management) and argues that casualty-aversion was a symptom of this concern rather than its cause—a finding which sees the U.K. experience as supporting and extending U.S.-based theory.

## Keywords

civil military relations, public, society, media, perspectives

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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, U.K. 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, U.K. 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, U.K. Prime Minister 2010–2016 (2020, p. 166–167)

It is now established that political and military leaders' interpretations of public opinion impacted the conduct of U.K. combat operations in Afghanistan from 2001 (Shindler, 2023). These interpretations at times exerted significant influence over the way that the campaign was fought to the lowest level, in particular how commanders and politicians approached the conduct of tactical activity, altered training, and changed equipment.

Are the interpretations correct? This article retains focus on the United Kingdom, deepening the analysis to determine whether political and military elites' interpretations reflect what the public actually thought. Remarkably, given their impacts, it finds that they did not and identifies two ways in which elites misread the public. First, the public thought about soldiers in more nuanced terms than "victim" often described in elite narratives. Second, where soldiers were seen as victims it was less because of casualties, and more due to public perceptions of poor political and, occasionally, military leadership that was exposed by casualties.

The issue is important because these interpretations of public opinion endure in political and military elite narratives. Despite not being tested, their impacts on the Afghanistan campaign were significant. Also significant are the deeper cultural and institutional effects that these presumptions of casualty-aversion have had on Britain's approach to future warfare (Shindler, 2023). Helen McCartney (2010) summarized the significance of this: "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" (p. 412). In the information age with increased public scrutiny of military operations, the military must test its assumptions about domestic audiences' perceptions.

While the U.K. military is the focus, the structural features of the relationship between society and deployed military force are unlikely to be unique to the United

Kingdom, raising similar questions for at least other NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) member countries. Chris Gelpi et al. (2006) challenged U.S. policymakers' interpretations of the American public's view of operational casualties in 2006. This article supports their central conclusion that success and "rightness and wrongness" of a war matter more than casualties, suggesting that the United States is not an exceptional case. In identifying coverage of management of soldiers as a central feature of the U.K. media discourse, it extends their argument in a way which is likely to be as applicable to the United States as the United Kingdom. These results echo Kull and Destler's (1999) earlier analysis of U.S. policymakers' misreading of public opinion of foreign policy.

## Literature Review

Senior British political and military leaders have repeatedly asserted that the public is casualty averse and sympathetic toward soldier-victims during Britain's wars after 2001. Examples include public statements by a Chief of the General Staff (Farmer, 2017) and three successive Chiefs of the Defence Staff (Defence Committee, 2015; Royal United Services Institute, 2016, 2018). The sense of the public appraising the war in Afghanistan through the lens of casualties and resultant sympathy for troops is also at the forefront in the autobiographies of all three wartime prime ministers (Blair, 2010; Brown, 2017; Cameron, 2020).

This view has become institutionalized. The military's formal review of its Afghanistan campaign and the government's inquiry into the Iraq war demonstrate institutional belief in a casualty-averse British public and describe far reaching ramifications for the military (Chilcott et al., 2016; Directorate Land Warfare, 2015), including recruitment challenges and considerations about future equipment and use of forces. These institutional beliefs are reflected (and plausibly reinforced) by prominent veterans like Barry (2020); Roberts & Ellwood (2021), who have repeated them in both academic and political spheres.

These elite interpretations are supported by some academic approaches. In the United States, J. Mueller's (1973) argument that public support for war is directly correlated with casualties was foundational, remaining highly influential in and beyond the United States. Later, Edward Luttwak (1995) proposed the idea of a "post heroic society" relating to both victimhood and casualty aversion. In the United Kingdom, some have found the notion of casualty sensitivity and post-heroism to have been intensified by the violence of Afghanistan and Iraq (Louth & Taylor 2018), while others have proposed British cultural and historical predispositions to thinking about soldiers as victims (Keegan, 1998a; McCartney, 2014; Wilson, 2014). Many point to the media's role in promulgating these portrayals during Britain's 2001–2014 wars and in earlier conflicts (Fergusson, 2009; Keegan, 1998b; McGarry & Ferguson, 2012; McGarry & Walklate, 2011; Tootal, 2010).

Alternative arguments challenge the idea of public casualty aversion, and some point to greater nuance in public depictions of soldiers than casualty-inspired victimhood.

Adam Berinsky (2009) rejects Mueller's theory arguing that U.S. public opinion about war is derived primarily through domestic political alignment and not warzone events. In the United Kingdom, Lawrence Freedman (2017) describes how heroic portrayals of soldiers are found alongside depictions of war's cruelty to soldier-victims. This duality of heroism and victimhood has been highlighted by others, with each characterization sharpened by the other's presence (Coker, 2007; Hines et al., 2015; McGarry & Ferguson, 2012). Hew Strachan (2009) views this through the lens of the "popular soldier in the unpopular war" whereby the soldier is concurrently admired and sympathized with because of their sacrifice in a war over which they have little control. This idea of the British public differentiating between soldiers and operations—"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 et al., 2015; Clements, 2011; Colley, 2019; Farrell, 2018; Gribble et al., 2015; Rogers & Eyal, 2014; Strachan, 2009; Urban, 2014).

## **Theoretical Framework**

This study is deductive: it seeks to test U.K. political and military elite beliefs about public perspectives of soldiers as part of a broader research project that analyzes their operational impacts (in line with the theoretical approach described by Robert Stebbins, 2001, p. 6). It does so on the basis that domestic populations' opinions are important in both classical and contemporary military theories, and on the basis of scholarship demonstrating their impacts at war (Barry, 2020; MacMillan, 2020; J. E. Mueller, 2024; Renic, 2020; Shindler, 2023). It is therefore important to determine whether policymakers and executors had (and still have) an accurate grasp of what the public think.

This article will address three questions. How did public perceptions of the soldier change as the Afghanistan war progressed and other operations took place? Does the portrayal of soldier-as-victim become dominant during the conflicts 2001–2014? What are the policy implications?

## **Media Content Analysis Method**

### *Approach*

This study uses a content analysis (Drisko & Maschi, 2015; Schreier, 2012) of news publications at key moments in time during the Iraq and Afghan campaigns in a longitudinal study of public perceptions of soldiers. The use of media as a means of gauging societal perceptions is supported by major strands of social science concerned with communication, policy, and the public. The "agenda setting" argument of Maxwell McCombs (2014) builds on the earlier work of Walter Lippmann in arguing that the media is significant in reflecting what people think, and also in shaping the public agenda (p. 2). Pepper Culpepper (2011) relates this to policy impact in

noting that socially prominent issues become political priorities, and that the media is a “key mechanism” in determining issues’ public prominence (p. 7). This corresponds to work by Entman (2004) and McNair (2011), who analyze how the media “frames” public opinion to elites, and vice versa, with policy implications.

These themes equally apply to warfare. Matthew Baum and Tim Groeling explored this in relation to U.S. public opinion, the media, and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Baum & Groeling, 2010). Peter Feaver (2009) called the U.S. 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” (p. 80). Leading academic perspectives in the U.K. concur, ascribing the media a crucial role in informing public opinion and reflecting it back to the war zone (Dandeker, 2000, p. 38; Freedman, 2006, p. 73). One U.K. Chief of Defence Staff noted that during the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns “it was quite clear that the vast majority of the public was taking their opinion pretty much direct from the media.”<sup>1</sup>

The British Army’s small size and limited role in public life (beyond occasional ceremonial events and crisis support) means few citizens have direct personal experience of the organization (Ashcroft, 2012; Forster, 2006). The public’s opinions about the Army are thus disproportionately derived from second-hand representations of the military, rather than direct knowledge (Hines et al., 2015, p. 17). This enhances the role that the media plays in shaping and reflecting public opinion.

Most importantly, given that this inquiry explores military and political elite interpretations of public opinion, the print media were used heavily by these elites as a bell-weather of public opinion about the military and wars. Ongoing unpublished research in the United Kingdom has found that newspaper coverage was the most common means by which the U.K.’s senior commanders in Afghanistan developed their understanding of the public’s opinion (Shindler, forthcoming). Public statements by both U.K. and U.S. senior commanders of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have described the in-theater impacts of media reporting on their operations (Mattis & West, 2019, p. 28; Sylvester, 2003, p. 8; Tootal, 2010, p. 166).

Four national media outlets were selected for analysis on the basis of OFCOM (2013, 2014) and Audit of Bureau Circulation data covering 2001–2014 (National Newspapers—ABC, n.d.). *The Daily Mirror* and *Daily Mail* were consistently in the top 5 most-read newspaper outlets. They were selected because they are tabloids providing breadth of perspective across the political spectrum. *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* were among the most-read broadsheets and are likewise on opposite sides of the political spectrum. This ensures that analysis includes media being read by the U.K.’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 news, commentary, editorial, or opinion articles that mentioned “soldier” or “soldiers” from the selected publications from 1 June to 1 July in: 2001 to provide a “baseline” of public perspectives before the Afghanistan war, 2003 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.

The coding framework (Appendix 1) was built on quantitative work conducted by Helen McCartney (2011). She analyzed characterizations 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; I expanded the category list to include “helper” and some sub-categories following immersion in those data; and I narrowed the sample publications to manage the greater quantity. Coding was applied to the tenor of the article rather than just the headline, introducing a qualitative element. This was done because articles often contained more nuance in soldier presentations than headlines suggested.

Five hundred sixty-six sample units met the criteria and were imported into NVivo for coding. For reasons explained below, supplementary analysis was conducted for the time period 20 March–20 April 2003, which yielded an additional 783 articles, giving a total  $n$  of 1,349.

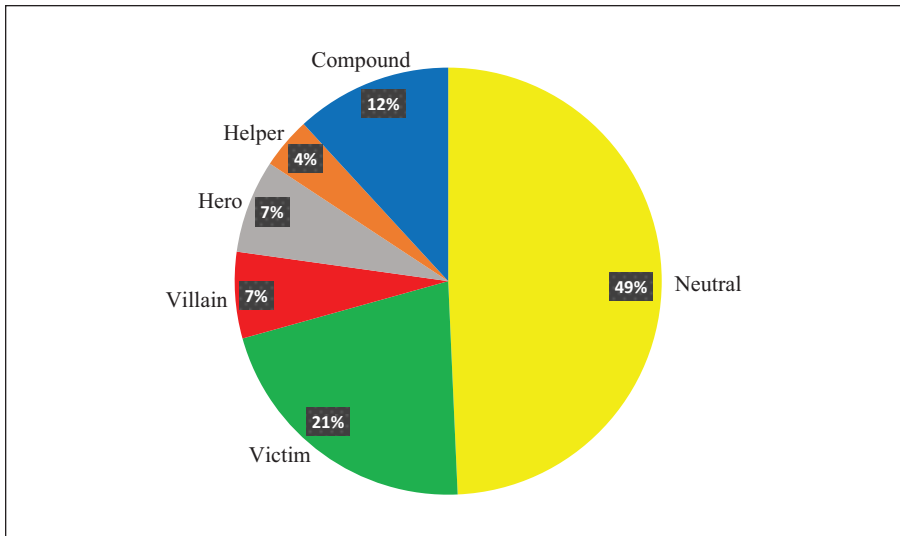
### *Ambiguities, Boundaries, and Exclusions*

The term “soldier” is used imprecisely across British society, both in common discourse and the media. For the purposes of this study, any person in the Army was considered a “soldier,” including trainees. I included ground troops who are not members of the Army; such as Special Forces, Royal Marines, and members of the RAF (Royal Air Force) Regiment. This is because their actions are often conflated with those of Army personnel, and vice versa, and excluding them would have reduced the data set unnecessarily.

Collective nouns for soldiers at or above the level of “the Army” were excluded from analysis (“the Army,” “the Armed Forces,” “the MOD,” etc.) but I included collective nouns at a lower level, such as “Task Force” or “Battalion.” The reason for this boundary is that, during initial immersion in the data, “the Army,” “the Forces,” or “Ministry of Defence” were typically presented in impersonal language of the “faceless organisation,” often in juxtaposition to the soldier. Collective nouns below that level appeared in more personalized terms. This approach is supported by the findings of the 2015 Ipsos MORI, and Kings College London (2015) survey that made a similar distinction in public opinion between “soldiers” and “Armed Forces.”

### *Review*

In addition to trials conducted during code creation and refinement, two rater checks occurred. The first was an intra-rater reliability check in which I re-coded 10% of the total sample units drawn evenly from sample units across each year studied (O’Connor & Joffe, 2020). This yielded 89% consistency for top-level coding, and 87% consistency in both top-level and sub-category codes. An



**Chart 1.** Media Characterizations of the Soldier 2001–2014 ( $n = 566$  Articles From June for the Years 2001, 2003, 2006, 2009, and 2014).

inter-rater reliability check was also completed to conduct coding of 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 sub-category codes.

## Results

### Overall Reporting by Tenor

Chart 1 compares the top-level codes found across data in the five subject years. Its most striking feature is that factual, neutral, reporting, that lacking emotive depiction, is the predominant single way in which soldiers are described. 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).

Chart 1 demonstrates that there are marginally more emotive portrayals than neutral ones. The range of emotive depictions means that there was 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 most common emotive

characterization (and many of the compound depictions include “victim” characterization), there is more to the full picture than the soldier-victim of elite discourse.

If there is more breadth to emotive 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 sub-categories in coding allowed deeper investigation of trends within each top-level category. These sub-categories revealed the following details.

### *Victim 2001–2014*

One hundred twenty-one of 566 articles were coded as “victim” (21%). This is greater than any other emotive characterization, 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 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 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” (Smith, 2003).

### *Hero 2001–2014*

Forty articles (7%) were coded “hero.” Unsurprisingly, heroic presentation overwhelmingly occurs in articles which are operational in focus (32 of 40). Coverage of the early fighting in Helmand Province in 2006 accounts for many operational heroism portrayals: “Father in tribute to Brit killed in battle” in the *Daily Mirror* that year is one example, exploring the bravery of Captain Jim Philippon, killed supporting Afghan partners (Hughes, 2006). These articles avoid commentary on wider contexts to focus on the acts of the soldier(s) themselves.

### *Villain 2001–2014*

“Villain” accounted for 37 articles (7%). Villainy is portrayed in both operational (mostly pertaining to Iraq) and non-operational spheres (mostly relating to the United Kingdom). Non-operational coverage accounts for most, but only marginally, and focuses predominantly on criminal behavior of soldiers. Even where criminal acts are not related to service (i.e., do not occur on duty), 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, but accounts for a very small number of the total sample units analyzed.

### *Helper 2001–2014*

“Helper” was the smallest coded characterization (22 articles, 4%), applied where soldiers are described in terms of rendering assistance or support. In these cases, soldiers are described positively using language beyond neutral description of routine activity, but which stop short of hailing them as heroic, such as provision of peacekeeping support or delivery of humanitarian aid. 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*

Sixty-seven articles 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.” Compound presentations demonstrate that soldiers can be characterized in multiple ways simultaneously. It is notable that the two predominant compound presentations both feature the soldier “as victim.”

Articles containing “villain–victim” portrayals largely cover instances of soldier-on-soldier crime, mistreatment, or other ill behavior. This typically includes events, such as physical attacks, sexual harassment, or affairs. Soldiers are portrayed in two ways in such reporting: at least one as the victim and another 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 popular sympathy for soldiers does not indemnify them from criticism. Indeed, it might be precisely the respect with which soldiers are viewed that makes soldiers’ villainy an unusual and report-worthy event.

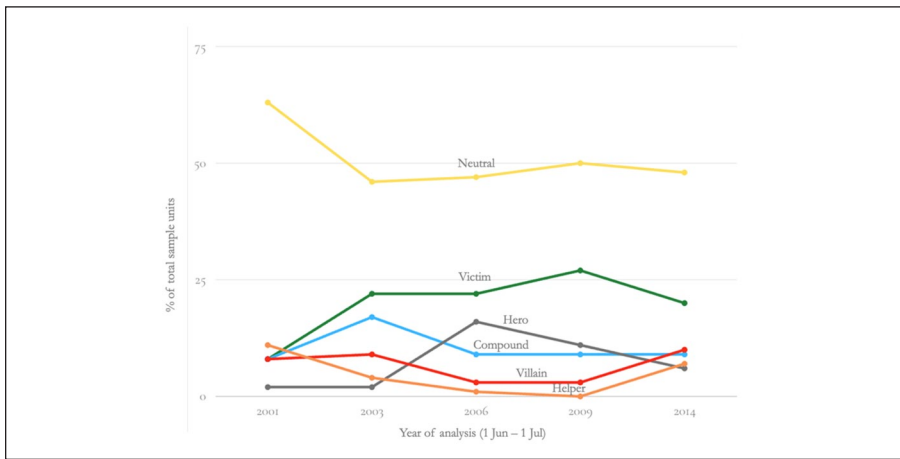
The majority of the “hero-victim” portrayals use soldiers’ heroism to sharpen presentations of victimhood. This is most often in relation to their heroism in dying for their country, or being betrayed by authority while heroically engaged on operations. These reports are usually operationally focused,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

### *Reporting by Tenor, Year on Year*

Examining the data over time shows that neutral depictions are consistently the largest single characterization of the soldier regardless of context. In 2001, they account

**Table I.** Soldier Characterization Over Time (Author).

| Year                           | 2001     | 2003     | 2006     | 2009     | 2014     |
|--------------------------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Total no. of articles per year | 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)   |



**Graph I.** Soldier Characterization Over Time (Author).

for the majority of all characterizations of soldiers and almost do so again in 2009 and 2014.

The data also show that victimhood and heroism grow with intensity of operations between 2001 and 2014. Victim presentations climb steadily, declining as combat operations decrease in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Hero operates less predictably, but makes a significant leap in salience during these conflicts from a very low baseline in 2001. Helper and villain characterizations 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 level in 2003 indicates that there are circumstances in which victimhood is challenged for dominance 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

**Table 2.** Soldier Characterization Over Time, Iraq Invasion Phase Included (Author).

| Year                           | 2001     | 2003 invasion | 2003     | 2006     | 2009     | 2014     |
|--------------------------------|----------|---------------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| Total no. of articles per year | 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)   |

occurred during June 2006, the same month from which data were collected. The lower level was drawn from data from June 2003, 3 months after the successful invasion of Iraq and when the campaign was beginning to run into signs of serious trouble.

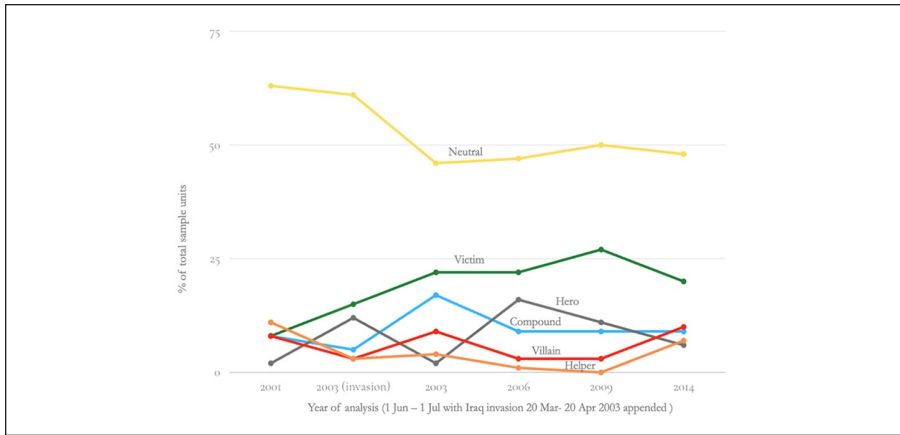
### *Extended Inquiry: 2003 Iraq Invasion Data*

To work on these data and their context in more detail, the analysis was extended to see whether 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 during intense combat other than Helmand 2006, at a time of greater domestic controversy. The intuition leading to the extended analysis was that, if March 2003 showed similar spikes in heroism to those of Helmand, it might mean that the act of fighting and soldiers being in danger can enhance public respect for the soldier and rival alternative victimhood narratives regardless of other factors, such as campaign justifiability or prospects of success.

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

The most striking result from the new data is the high number of sample units that met the threshold for analysis. There were more media articles about British soldiers between March 20 and April 20, 2003 than in all of the other analyzed periods 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 powder" (Audrey, 2003) to strategic reflections like *The Telegraph's* 'War on Saddam—Blair plays down UN's role in rebuilding Iraq' (Jones, 2003).

Thereafter, a spike is notable in heroic presentations during the Iraq invasion, consistent with the 2006 spike in heroic depictions identified in coverage of Afghanistan.



**Graph 2.** Soldier Characterization Over Time, Iraq Invasion Phase Included, Showing a Jump in Hero Presentations Similar to the 2006 Helmand Incursion (Author).

## Discussion

### Emotive Nuance

To return to Gelpi et al.’s theory that success and justifiability are key determinants of public opinion (albeit in the United States), spikes in the 2003 invasion and 2006 data suggest that at moments of great violence support might be expected among 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 contested in the United Kingdom, but this did not dampen the public’s appetite for stories of soldier heroism at this moment. In terms of success, media articles analyzed from the 2003 invasion and 2006 were both written while 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 Groeling (2010) in the United States, and by Theo Farrell (2018) in the United Kingdom. This is explicable through the lens of relatable individual fighting men and women in harm’s way (more “person” than “soldier”) generating sympathetic responses. *The Daily Mirror’s* editorial from March 24, 2003 is an example of this response. Under the headline “Still Anti-War? Yes Bloody Right We Are,” the article writes that “this war is being waged against international law [. . . but] The Mirror continues to support our brave servicemen and women” (Anon, 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 shows that any heroic depictions that 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

justifiability, 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. 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). Policymakers should view these data aware, therefore, of the time-limited nature of support if broader campaign issues are not addressed quickly.

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 et al. (2011) as existing as a paradox but it appears to work more in tandem, in line with Lawrence Freedman's (2017) ideas about a "duality" in war between "desperate moments of tragedy and sorrow . . . but also of inspiring moments of heroism" (p. 8). The soldier is admirable in terms of their own agency (e.g., their conduct or voluntary sacrifice) but is simultaneously, or 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, there was considerable media coverage of Saddam Hussein's continued liberty, Iraq's destabilization, 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.

Helper presentations operate in the opposite way to victim and hero. Practical considerations may account for this inversion, since use of soldiers in assistance rendering, rather than warfighting, roles 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 a livestock pandemic (Op SLUBBER, 2001) or disarmament in the Balkans, and after 2014 for tasks like COVID (Op RESCRIPT, 2020–2022), or aiding Iraqi forces against ISIS (Op SHADER, 2014-present).

The similar inversion of the villain theme in relation to hero and victim implies that, while the public media narrative can hold multiple characterizations of the soldier at the same time, it prefers these characterizations to be sympathetic while 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 misbehavior decrease during periods of combat, it appears that there is less appetite for coverage (and therefore framing) of soldier misdemeanors while troops are engaged in combat. Reports of soldier-villainy can be expected to increase as operational intensity decreases: the rise in villain presentations between 2009 and 2014 demonstrates that there is no enduring immunity for troops once 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 think 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 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 curiosity about military professionals conducting business that is sufficiently interesting to the British public to merit coverage and insufficiently provocative to attract emotive characterization.

### *Victim Misunderstood: Competence Not Casualties*

Notwithstanding these nuances, victim is the dominant theme where the media chooses emotive characterization. However, the findings demonstrate that elite ideas about victimhood are misjudged. Where soldier victimhood is presented in the data, the articles mainly concern themes of the soldier being failed by their own military or political chain of command, not the intrinsic issue of casualty-inspired sympathy that features in elite discourse. This supports Helen McCartney's (2011) proposition that public sympathy for soldiers stemmed from critical perspectives of their management (p. 46) and Helen Parr's (2024) opinion of public perspectives that "if soldiers were victims, then they were victims not of war [. . .] they were victims of government decisions" (p. 174). This contrasts with a military elite narrative of public misunderstanding (see General Sir Nicholas Carter at the U.K. Parliamentary Defence Committee (Director, 2020) or sympathy rooted in casualty figures alone (per Prime Ministerial quotations at the start of this article).

The following excerpts are two examples of substantive media critical appraisal, and they are typical of the data. A 2003 *Guardian* article addresses issues of strategy, 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, 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, the lack of care they are afforded (equipment, pay, housing, etc.), or the disputed legitimacy and efficacy of the campaign; 53% of "victim of authority" coded articles (39 of the 74) focused on such issues. This suggests a correlation between the perceived competence of authority and victimhood, rather than necessarily casualties and victimhood. This supports aspects of recent analysis of Getmansky and Weiss (2023) who have argued that public appraisal of war uses multiple metrics (including casualties as a prime input) to inform judgments about political leadership performance and competence (p. 331).

Competence of authority should be considered an extension to the work of Gelpi et al. The data for the United Kingdom contain evidence of the importance of both campaign justifiability and success, but the media's frequent close examination of soldiers' treatment suggests scrutiny of their management that is important to the public and which, although related to them, is distinct from these two factors.

### *The Soldier as Individual*

In tying together varied media presentations of the soldier and the evident interest in their context, the media appears to prefer the soldier as "individual." Broadly, these individual presentations can be expected to be interested (neutral), supportive (hero, victim, helper) or, infrequently, unsupportive (villain). This supports the argument of Walklate et al. (2011) who argue that soldiers at this time were subject to a "range of constructions" (p. 8), Hines et al. (2015) who note a "shifting kaleidoscope of images" of the soldier (p. 706), and 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. This might not be happenstance: several strands of scholarship that analyze British social–military relations point to the deliberate efforts by political and military leaders to offset public skepticism 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 appears to determine when Hines et al.'s "kaleidoscope" shifts. The data show that there was not a clear conceptualization at the outset of the war on terror which portrays the soldier "as victim." Of the emotive depictions present in 2001 data, the soldier is most commonly a helper first (plausibly bred of Balkan 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.

### *Direct Versus Indirect Analysis*

Direct studies of public opinion support the inferences above. A review of studies held by YouGov, Ipsos MORI, the University of Oxford's database and the *Journal of Armed Forces and Society* between the years 2001 and 2014 revealed key areas of correlation in survey and polling data, most notably regarding the nature of soldier victimhood (Latter et al., 2018), the importance of context (Gribble et al., 2012), and

hero and victim being often “two sides of the same coin” (YouGov/Daily Telegraph, 2009; YouGov/The Sun, 2009).

There are challenges in survey and polling data to these arguments. Michael Ashcroft’s study (2012,  $n = 2,033$ ) found that the top 3 responses for the public thinking about soldiers (accounting for 60% of all responses) would have fitted into the “hero” category using words like “brave,” “courageous,” and “heroes.” On one hand, this supports this analysis’ challenge to victim and casualty-centric elite interpretations of public opinion. But on the other it runs contrary to the findings about the prevalence of neutral and victim-of-authority presentations. One explanation for the disparity is that there is a delta between the public’s opinion and media coverage. An alternative explanation is that none of the heroic characterizations reported in the Ashcroft findings preclude the soldier being viewed as a victim: brave and courageous troops can still be let down by the State or killed by the adversary in line with the other polls referenced above.

## Implications

The U.K.’s institutional belief in a casualty-averse public has not been found to be well-grounded. This study thus supports Hew Strachan and Ruth Harris’s contention of an attribution error on the part of the government as to why the public may view soldiers as victims. 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 & Harris, 2020, p. 14)

Such misattribution has two important policy implications. First, widely reported government and military approaches to reducing in-theater casualties between 2001 and 2014 (Chilcott et al., 2016; Directorate Land Warfare, 2015) 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. The limits to the notion that reduction of casualties would result in improved public perceptions of campaigns are demonstrated by Graph 1 reflecting victimhood’s rise regardless of levels of violence. This supports a point made by Sibylle Scheipers (2014): “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’” (p. 11).

The second implication is that misreading public cues may lead to erroneous impacts on foreign and defense policy by reducing the government’s appetite for “boots on the ground,” and by encouraging high-level interference in the conduct of tactical activity. This impact is evident in practitioner and academic

commentary about U.K. operations between 2001 and 2014 (Barry, 2020; Chalmers, 2014; Ucko & Egnell, 2013) and in the findings reported in the work of Shindler (2023).

The chairman of the U.K. Parliamentary Defence Committee, Tobias Ellwood, demonstrated the enduring power of this misreading in 2021. Reflecting on Britain's recent wars he noted that "we . . . have become too reticent and lackluster in wishing to expend troops, and have those terrible headlines" (Roberts & Ellwood, 2021). Ellwood's comments demonstrate the durability of a phenomenon noted by Pascal Vennesson (2011) in relation to the United States 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" (p. 246).

## Conclusion

The evidence presented in this article suggests that assumptions held by U.K. 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 campaign justifiability, success, and competent management. A less significant but still important misapprehension is about the failure to recognize other characterizations that compete for attention in both media and some polling/survey data. Victimhood is dominant in emotive media presentations but there are moments when other characterizations challenge this, most notably for time-bound periods of moments of peak jeopardy. Context therefore determines how the public chooses from a range of available representations (short periods of peak jeopardy, campaign justifiability, success, and competent management being key determinants).

Established literature demonstrates that these erroneous elite interpretations had consequences for how campaigns were conducted. There is also evidence that the assumptions forged during this period have endured, and these perceptions of the civil–military dynamic are likely to affect the way in which the U.K. military approaches future war from strategic calculations about the deployment of troops into harm's way to the equipment and tactics that they will employ.

Three recommendations are made for work to build on this research. First, a more expansive analysis of both direct and indirect gauges of public opinion in the United Kingdom during the 2001–2014 period could deepen the study. Second, to broaden it, this methodology could be applied to other U.K. conflicts including less controversial operations before 2001 or after 2014. Finally, it is unlikely that either elite interpretation or its consequences are unique to the United Kingdom, and research into the cases of states with similar civil–military constructs would allow development of these ideas through comparative study.

# Appendix I

## Coding Dictionary.

| Categories | Sub-categories                 | Sub-category description (all references must be to soldiers actively serving globally 2000–2014)  |   |
|------------|--------------------------------|--|---|
| Hero       | Non-operational                | Heroic actions of a soldier/soldiers not deployed on operations. Off-duty (aiding at the scene of a car crash) or on-duty (an act characterized as brave while at work). Category differs from <i>helper</i> category in describing an act of unusual heroism or guts  |   |
|            | Operational                    | Actions of a soldier/soldiers with regard to heroism on operations. Presentation must be positive and heroizing. It might relate to saving others, or martial skill (e.g., against the enemy)  |   |
|            | Misc. hero                     | Subjects are portrayed in heroic terms, but without the specificity required to place it in either category above  |   |
| Helper     | Non-operational                | Actions of a soldier/soldiers in support of civilians/U.K. government/others while not deployed abroad on operations. Actions might be off duty (aiding at the scene of a car crash) or on-duty (e.g., aiding authorities with security, disaster relief, or health crisis)  |   |
|            | Operational                    | Actions of a soldier/soldiers in operational deployments with provision of assistance the main focus. Actions might be as peacekeepers, participants in stabilization missions/humanitarian missions but stop short of warfighting or coverage of routine military activity. Must paint the soldier as helper. Sub-category would not apply to coverage of heroic action |   |
|            | Misc. helper                   | Subjects portrayed in “helper” terms without reference to either of the sub-categories above   |   |
| Victim     | Non-operational                | Of authority   | Soldier/soldiers being failed by the government, MOD, chain of command, or “the Army” as a collective either while away from operations, or in general (e.g., defense cuts). Failures may be found in political direction, or any other failure of the chain of command to properly support soldiers                    |
|            |                                | Misc. non-operational victim   | Subjects are portrayed in victim terms, but without specific reference to the sub-category above  |
|            | Operational                    | Of the adversary   | Pertains to a soldier/soldiers as victim of enemy action. Simple reporting of death or injury (e.g., in a blast) is insufficient, the tenor must be emotive, or refer to the soldier(s) explicitly as “victims”   |
|            |                                | Of authority   | Portrays a soldier/soldiers as being failed by the government, Ministry of Defence, the chain of command, or “the Army” as a collective. Failures may be in political direction, futility of conflict, flawed legal/moral justification for war, under-resourcing, poor equipment, under-funding, negligence, and so on |
|            | Operational or non-operational | Misc. operational victim   | Subjects are portrayed in victim terms while on operations, without specific reference to sub-categories above. Or if it portrays the subject in multiple terms, that is, of both the adversary and authority   |
|            |                                | Of injury  | Relates to enduring physical or mental problems because of military service regardless of location of injury, portrayed emotively rather than factual descriptive statements about injury (in which case the tenor should be classed as “neutral”)  |
|            |                                | Of criminal behavior   | Soldier(s) as victim of criminal or morally dubious behavior (e.g., bullying/harassment/assault/murder) that is not that of the enemy/adversary on operations. If a victim of culpable negligence on the part of authority, coding will be for “victim of authority”  |
|            |                                | Of the British society   | Relates to the negative effect of British public actions. Soldiers feeling part of a forgotten war, facing protests at home, or discriminated against are examples  |

(continued)

(continued)

| Categories | Sub-categories   | Sub-category description (all references must be to soldiers actively serving globally 2000–2014)  |
|------------|--|--|
| Villain    | Non-operational  | Focuses on criminal, negligent, or morally dubious actions of a soldier/soldiers away from operations. Examples: Assaults, drug-taking, excessive drinking, and sex scandals. The tenor must present the soldier exclusively negatively, rather than acting as a consequence of victimhood in which case compound category must be considered. Recording units detailing accusations against a soldier should be coded but reports of a soldier being found “not guilty of assault” should not be coded in this category: vindication does not clearly present the soldier as villain                        |
|            | Operational  | Focuses on criminal, negligent, or morally dubious actions of a soldier/soldiers that occurs while involved in active military operations. The impacts of those actions might be on friendly soldiers, civilians or civilian property, or enemies. Examples: culpable friendly fire, looting or culpable injury to civilians. So, too, anything related to war crimes. 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. As above for “not guilty” reports |
|            | Misc. villain  | Portrays soldiers negatively (and culpably) but without specific reference to the sub-categories above   |
| Compound   | “Hero/Victim”  | Contains a blend of indicators from the hero and victim categories   |
|            | “Villain/Victim”   | Contains a blend of indicators from the villain and victim categories. Examples: 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”  | Contains a blend of indicators from the helper and victim categories   |
|            | “Helper/Hero”  | Contains a blend of indicators from the helper and hero categories   |
|            | “Helper/Villain”   | Contains a blend of indicators from the helper and villain categories  |
|            | “Hero/Villain”   | Contains a blend of indicators from the hero and villain categories above  |
| Neutral    | Recording units in which there is no emotive language used that would reasonably place the unit in any of the categories above |  |

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## Note

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