

When Should We Be Prepared to Fight?

By Alvin Richman

Objective criteria for applying US military force abroad have been enunciated by a number of policymakers in recent years. During the Reagan administration, Secretary Weinberger urged that the following “tests” be applied when considering the use of force: US vital interests must be at stake, and the US should possess and be willing to use sufficient military forces to achieve clearly defined objectives. Moreover, commitment of US forces to combat should be a measure of last resort, and used only if public and congressional support is reasonably assured.¹

The Bush and Clinton administrations have presented criteria for weighing US military involvement in Somalia, Bosnia and other areas not deemed vital to US interests in the more complex post-cold war environment. President Bush discussed the appropriateness of using force where the stakes may be less than vital (Somalia), but when other means have proved ineffective and the likely costs and level of risk are estimated to be low.² Last year, National Security Adviser Anthony Lake discussed US involvement in Bosnia within a broader ends/means framework. Decisions on using US military forces should be related, he said, to where a particular situation overseas fits along the “scale of threats” to US security. The situation in Bosnia, according to Lake, represented not a “direct threat” to the US, but fits into a second category of threats justifying limited use of American force in tandem with other countries.³

Public’s Criteria

Support of the American public is usually listed by US decisionmakers as one of the criteria for the use of military force. Numerous surveys in recent years reveal four fairly distinct attitudinal factors that affect the American public’s willingness to intervene militarily in different situations:

Nature of the Threat, including the type of interest perceived at risk and the imminence and severity of the threat (e.g., being attacked vs being defeated);

Source and Target of the Threat (e.g., perceived friendliness and importance to the US);

Preferences Among Military Actions and Other Means proposed to counter the threat, including multilateral participation; and

Ends/Means Calculus: Anticipated costs of actions and expectation of achieving objectives with acceptable losses.

Variations in these factors from situation to situation explain to some extent why some military interventions, having mainly positive readings on these factors, are supported (e.g., Persian Gulf War) and why other interventions, having mainly negative readings, are opposed (e.g., Vietnam War). In other situations, positive readings on some factors have been balanced by negative

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readings on other factors (e.g., Central America in the 1980s, Bosnia in the 1990s), leaving many Americans cross-pressured and the public as a whole divided on whether to intervene.

Nature of the Threat

The American public makes sharp distinctions among the types of threats it would counter with US military force. Several polls taken during the past two years show that protecting the US and its citizens have the highest priority in using US military forces (about 80-90% support). These are followed by using forces to provide humanitarian aid, de-

fend allied countries, combat the flow of illegal drugs and aliens into the US, and protect important US economic interests abroad (about 60-70% support). Lower priority has been given to countering foreign aggression generally and stopping a civil war or restoring “law and order” within a foreign country (about 40% support for using US forces).

Specific situations—The public has made sharp distinctions also in willingness to achieve different objectives by force in specific situations. Except for Haiti, these distinctions parallel those obtained from general survey measures.

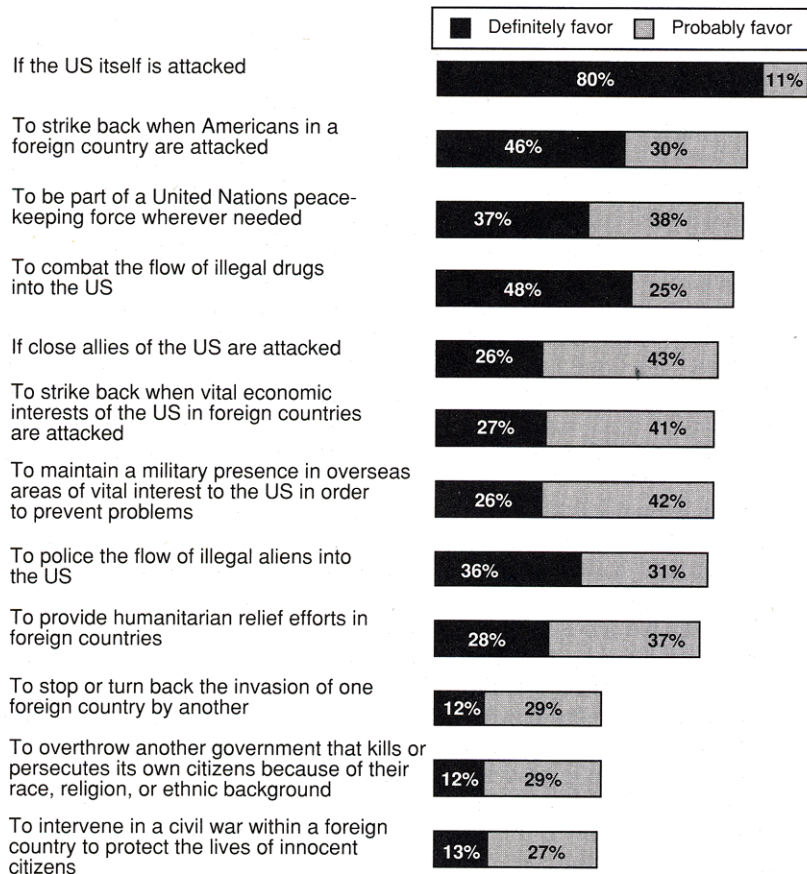
North Korea: The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations’ (CCFR) 1994 survey and other polls have shown that “preventing the spread of nuclear weapons” is rated a *very important* US foreign policy goal by about four-fifths of the American public.⁴ Polls relating specifically to North Korea have shown that support is much greater for the US taking military action, if necessary, to prevent a hypothetical North Korean nuclear arms build-up (about 55% in favor vs 35% opposed) than to help defend South Korea from an (non-nuclear) invasion from the North (about 35% in favor vs 60% opposed).⁵

Bosnia: Support for US/NATO airstrikes to ensure delivery of humanitarian supplies to Bosnian civilians (71%) has been greater than using such airstrikes to halt Serbian attacks against Muslim “safe havens” (52%) or to oust Serb troops from territories they have occupied during the war (41% in favor).⁶

Haiti: “Stopping the human rights abuses” by the Haitian military and its allies has been viewed as the most compelling reason, by far, for US intervention. Nearly two-thirds of the public (64% average on four polls) rated it as a *good reason* for intervention. By contrast, fewer than half gave this positive rating to other objectives tested, including preventing Haitian refugees from coming to the US (48% average) and restoring democratic rule in Haiti (47% average).⁷

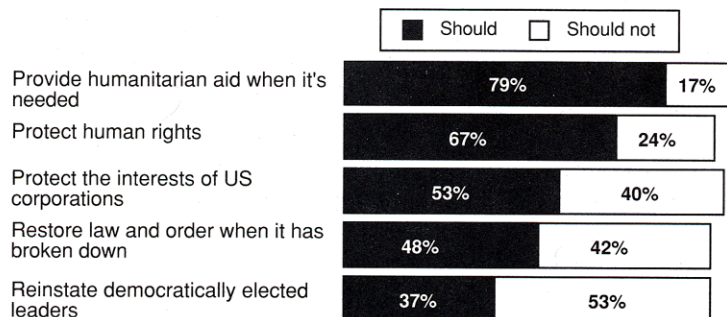
When To Fight? Protecting the National Interest

Question: There are numerous situations—some strictly military, some other than military—in which our armed forces could be used. As I read each situation, please tell me whether you definitely support using our armed forces, probably would, probably would not, or definitely would not.



Source: Survey by Roper Starch Worldwide, February 12-26, 1994.

Question: Thinking about foreign policy issues, do you think the United States' military forces should or should not be used to....



Source: Survey by Yankelovich Partners for Time/CNN, August 4, 1994.

Source and Target of the Threat

Support for using military force depends on the source and target of the threat, as well as the type of interest threatened. The public has been more willing to send US arms and troops to help defend countries considered important to the US than to other countries.⁸ It has been more willing to counter threats coming from countries perceived as unfriendly than from those seen as neutral or friendly to the US.

Countries Viewed as Threats to the US

No longer is one country singled out as the greatest threat to the US. As recently as 1990, one-third of the public perceived the *Soviet Union* as the country representing the "greatest danger to the US." Now, only about one-tenth of the public hold this view of *Russia*. Larger percentages than this have perceived the main threat to the US coming from Iraq and North Korea.⁹

Since 1982, Americans have been regularly asked to rate foreign countries on a five-point scale ranging from "close ally" to "enemy" of the US.¹⁰ The choice of countries has varied somewhat from year to year depending on current events, but two important shifts have been evident: A diminished perception of a Soviet/Russian threat and a less positive view of Japan.¹¹

The countries rated most recently by Roper Starch Worldwide fall into seven groups in terms of their perceived friendliness toward the US. They are ranked below from most positive to most negative:

Allies: About four-fifths of Americans view Canada and Great Britain positively, including about two-fifths who rate them as "close allies."

Friendly: Two-fifths or more view France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Israel and Japan positively, but less than one-fifth of Americans rate any of these countries as a "close ally."

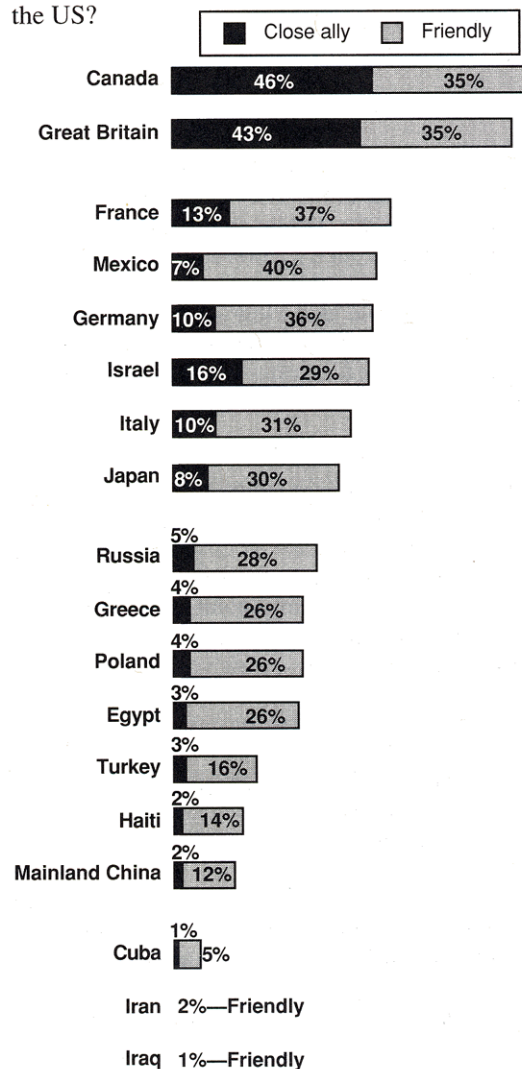
Neutral: A plurality of Americans view Russia, Poland, Egypt and Greece as "neutral" toward the US. However, the positive ratings of these countries outweigh the negative. **Strictly neutral:** Turkey. **Neutral/more negative than positive:** China.

Unfriendly: More than two-thirds view Cuba negatively, including a third who rate it as "an enemy" of the US.

Enemies: Half or more of the public rated Iran (50%) and Iraq (70%) as "an enemy" of the US.

Allies, Friends...and Others

Question: ...For each country tell me if you believe that country has acted as a close ally of the US, has acted as a friend but not a close ally, has been more or less neutral toward the US, has been mainly unfriendly toward the US but not an enemy, or has acted as an enemy of the US?



Source: Survey by Roper Starch Worldwide, July 10-17, 1993.

Countries Viewed as Important to the US

Americans make sharp distinctions among countries in terms of how important they consider them to US interests. According to surveys by the Chicago Council between 1978-1994, these assessments have been fairly stable for most countries rated repeatedly. In the mental map that Americans hold of the world, some countries loom larger than others and remain that way for some time. In the public's perception, the

countries fall into four groups in terms of their intrinsic importance:

First tier (three-fourths or more believe the US has a "vital interest" in the country): Japan, Russia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia.

Second tier (three-fifths or more perceive US vital interest): Canada, Great Britain, Germany, China, South Korea, North Korea, Philippines, Iran, Israel.

Third tier (two-fifths or more perceive US vital interest): France, Bosnia, Taiwan, Turkey, Egypt.

Fourth tier (one-third or less perceive US vital interest): Poland, Ukraine, the Baltic countries, Brazil, India, Nigeria, Rwanda, Somalia.

The importance attributed to different countries impacts considerably on willingness to send US forces to assist them. In the case of Haiti, nearly half of the public last September believed that the situation there was "somewhat important" to the US, and a third of this group favored *unilateral* US military intervention there. By contrast, among the one-fifth of the public who believed the situation in Haiti was "very important" to the US, half favored such intervention.

Military Actions and Other Means to Counter Threats

Americans are selective regarding the *means* they are generally willing to use abroad, as well as the *objectives* for which they are willing to intervene. When asked to choose among different military and non-military policy instruments proposed to counter a threat, the public generally opts for non-violent measures. Usually, the public's preference order is: (1) Diplomacy and negotiations; (2) economic pressure, including trade sanctions and arms cut-offs;

(3) US military aid or arms sales; (4) limited engagement of US forces (e.g., sending forces to the troubled region, using air strikes); and (5) engagement of US ground forces in combat.

For example, a survey by Americans Talk Issues in the spring of 1993 asked respondents to rate various types of actions (from "very preferable" to "not at all" preferable) the US and the UN could take to "stop the fighting" between different factions within such countries as "Bosnia and Somalia." About three-fifths rated "very preferable" the use of "diplomatic initiatives" (67%), "prohibiting arms sales" to the combatants (64%), and limited military intervention for humanitarian purposes (62%). About two-fifths gave this top rating to the use of "trade embargoes" (44%) and limited military intervention for the purpose of arresting leaders of the warring factions (45%). Only one-fifth rated "very preferable" military intervention with "overwhelming force to defeat the primary aggressors" (19%).

Regarding Bosnia, support for US/NATO *airstrikes* to halt Serbian attacks against Bosnian civilians (about 55% in favor vs 35% opposed on the average) generally has been considerably greater than support for using US *ground forces* together with West European troops, if airstrikes proved ineffective for that purpose (about 35% in favor vs 55% opposed).¹²

Multilateral Participation

Public support for using US forces generally has been greater when the missions have been described as being multilateral in nature, rather than unilateral, and involving lower-risk peacekeeping functions, rather than peacemaking. A 1992 Harris survey found support for a US peacemaking effort (i.e., "sending in US troops to fight and repel the aggressor" from Bosnia) was 20 points less than for a UN peacemaking effort (30% vs 50%). Both of these *peacemaking* options drew much less support than sending in UN *peacekeeping* troops "to maintain the peace but not fight the aggressor" (80% in favor).

Most Americans are usually willing to use US military forces *unilaterally* to defend vital US interests or mount

relatively low-cost humanitarian and counter-terrorist actions. Majority support for US involvement in peacekeeping or political rehabilitation missions, however, has required that these be part of a *multinational* effort.

Ends/Means Calculus

Support for using US military force in specific situations has been affected by whether the expected costs of the operation (casualties, economic resources and duration) were warranted by the perceived importance of the objective and the estimated likelihood of attaining it. A survey by Americans Talk Security in 1988, for example, found that the number of casualties suffered by American troops (86% “very important”) and foreign civilians (79%) generally are accorded greater weight than the expected length of time (61% “very important”) or dollar cost (45%) of the intervention. Survey findings on the Somalia mission illustrate the interaction between desired goals, preferred means and expected outcomes:

In December 1992, CBS News found about two-thirds of the public expected the US to accomplish its relief mission and be able to leave Somalia well within a year, while suffering few if any casualties. At that time, 70% expected the mission to be “worth the cost” in lives and resources (vs only 21% who thought it would *not* be worth the cost). In December 1993, two months after the highly-publicized fighting in Mogadishu, CBS reported that 48% believed the Somalia relief mission had been “worth the cost”—down 22 percentage points from the previous year. Forty-four percent said this mission had *not* been worth the cost.

Lessons of Past Conflicts

Previous polls have asked respondents to assess different foreign policy actions taken by the US since World

War II. These retrospective judgments provide insight into how the public currently values involvement abroad. In 1993 Gallup asked whether several conflicts involving the US were “a just war” or not. Americans distinguish sharply in assessing the conflicts, giving a positive rating to the Persian Gulf War (67% just war vs 29% not a just war) and a negative rating to the Vietnam War (23% vs 71%).

This difference in overall assessments of the Persian Gulf and Vietnam wars presumably stems not only from the outcome but also from differences in the perception of specific characteristics described earlier: (1) Nature of the threat—a clear case of foreign aggression (Iraq against Kuwait), compared to a perceived mix of external and internal sources of conflict (Vietnam); (2) Importance of the threatened region—a vital interest of the US (Saudi Arabia, Persian Gulf), compared to a lesser interest on the Asian rim; (3) Likelihood of success—a theater where US high-tech conventional weapons could be used effectively while minimizing US casualties (Kuwait), compared to terrain where the enemy was hard to find and isolate (Vietnam); and (4) Allied support—a conflict strongly supported by US allies and much of the international community, compared to a conflict fought by the US with lukewarm support from its regional allies.

US Involvement in Current Conflicts Seen in Terms of Historical Analogies

The public’s confidence in specific US military engagements today may be gauged by the extent they are seen to resemble the Persian Gulf conflict rather than Vietnam. For example, in April of 1993 Yankelovich found Americans were closely divided over whether “US military involvement in the war in Bosnia” would result in a “fairly quick and successful effort, like the Persian Gulf War” (46%) or “a long and costly involvement, like in Vietnam” (42%).

Whether involvement of US ground forces in Bosnia would be perceived as more analogous to Vietnam than to the Persian Gulf depended on the extent of *peacemaking* functions US forces were asked to perform.

Endnotes:

¹ Speech by Secretary Caspar Weinberger to the National Press Club, November 1984: “*The Uses of Military Power*” (Defense Issues, Department of Defense) Vol. 2, No. 44.

² Speech by President George Bush at the US Military Academy, West Point, January 1993. “*The Use of Military Force: The President’s Difficult Choice*” (Defense Issues, Department of Defense) Vol. 8, No. 1.

³ Speech by Anthony Lake at Johns Hopkins University, April 1994. In USIA Wireless File, April 7, 1994, pp. 20-23.

⁴ See surveys by the Gallup Organization for CCFR, October 1994 and Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA) for The Times Mirror Center, September 1993.

⁵ See surveys by Gallup for CNN/USA Today, February 1994 and November 1993; Los Angeles Times December 1993; and PSRA for Times Mirror, September 1993.

⁶ Survey by Yankelovich Partners for Time/CNN, August 1993.

⁷ See surveys by LA Times, September 1994; CBS News/New York Times, September 1994; Gallup for CNN/USA Today, September 1994; and Yankelovich Partners for Time/CNN, September 1994.

⁸ See survey by Roper Starch October/November 1988.

⁹ See surveys by PSRA for Times Mirror, September 1993; and Gallup for CNN/USA Today, May 1994.

¹⁰ Roper Starch has asked this question 11 times since June 1982. Potomac Associates asked the same question in October 1991 and February 1994. A similar question has been employed by Louis Harris and Associates since 1976.

¹¹ A decade ago, about 90% of the American public viewed the *Soviet Union* as hostile to the US, including 50% who saw it as “an enemy.” Now, only about 20% perceive Russia as hostile, including fewer than 10% who see it as “an enemy.”

In 1991, Roper Starch found that, for the first time, fewer than half of the American public gave Japan a positive rating. In July 1993 Roper found little change.

¹² Survey by CBS/NYT, April 1994; Gallup for CNN/USA Today, February 1994.



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