

Pollsters astonished by war's firm support

How many battle casualties are "too many"?

D. M. Giangreco and Kathryn Moore

Within days of al-Qaida's Sept. 11 attacks, many in Washington wondered whether would tolerate a lengthy, often secret, war. A critical question was, to put it bluntly, whether the public would accept significant US casualties that might result from a protracted struggle.

To be sure, after the Northern Alliance's offensive in Afghanistan last week, concern for US casualties has faded for now. But as the realization dawns that a comparable resistance movement is not operating in the Taliban's southern stronghold, observers now warn that US forces will have to play an increasing, perhaps principle, role in the fighting ahead.

At first blush, uncertainty about US mettle would appear to be a product of the Vietnam War and recent political decisions to withdraw from military operations like those in Somalia. But Americans have heard this all before.

"It's a decayed country," said one of our enemies. "And they have their racial problem, and the problem of social inequalities . . . Everything about the behavior of American society reveals that it is half Judaized and the other half Negrified. How can one expect a State like that to hold together — a country where everything is built on the dollar?"

This statement came not from a bin Laden video clip broadcast in the Middle East but from Adolph Hitler one month after Pearl Harbor, and the Japanese were also confident that their devastating attack would cow Americans into accepting Japan's Asian and Pacific conquests. One of their number, however, was less certain.

Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto had conceived and planned the strike on Pearl Harbor, yet warned that Japan would likely lose the war. As a young man, Yamamoto had studied at Harvard and later served as Japan's Naval Attaché in Washington. His nearly six years in the United States gave him insights into an America that was incomprehensible to his warrior colleagues. What they beheld was a chaotic, mongrel nation suffering under a weak, inefficient democratic process; what he saw was vibrancy and inner strength. Yamamoto understood full well that nothing motivates Americans like a clear unambiguous attack. He was right.

Today, the rock-solid public support behind US military efforts to get at Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida terrorists continues to bewilder the normally poker-faced journalists and pollsters. National Public Radio's Linda Wertheimer found it "fascinating" that survey numbers changed little even when "combat operations . . . accompanied by substantial casualties" were added to the equation.

Andrew Kohut of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press admitted that he was "absolutely stunned" by the results of one of their poll questions which showed a plurality backed going after the terrorists instead of building up defenses at home. Said Kohut, "It's surprising when people take an aggressive approach on military action. I've spent my entire career measuring how reluctant the American public has been to use force in the post-Vietnam, post-Cold War era. It's nothing like that now. "

Like Imperial Japan, al-Qaida knew how to inflict a telling psychological blow and they effectively achieved the maximum viewership for their terrorist acts through the careful sequencing of events — the first Trade Tower crash in the world's media center guaranteeing all eyes would be focused on the strike of the second plane. And like the Japanese, they also displayed little understanding of the undercurrents within American society.

When the al-Qaida network began planning for the strike four years ago, the targets were both the Pentagon and nearby CIA headquarters. If the terrorists had stuck with their original military-related targets, public support of the war would be radically different than what we see today. Instead, the initial flurry of knee-jerk peace demonstrations against "Bush's War" quickly faded, and comments like those of a history professor who stated that "anyone who can blow up the Pentagon has my vote" were roundly denounced. By moving their crosshairs to a vulnerable non-military target teaming with people, al-Qaida ultimately removed the most powerful impediment to their own destruction — a divided citizenry in America.

Americans are used to seeing the US military going to extraordinary lengths to *not* kill civilians--- and frequently even military personnel. For example, in the wake of the first World Trade Center bombing and foiled plot against the president's father in 1993, cruise missiles were launched against the Iraq Intelligence Headquarters in the dead of night in order to minimize deaths. American's understand all too well that the World Trade Center could also have been struck at night if all the terrorists wanted to do was make a point. Instead, al-Qaida went for the big kill — mass civilian deaths calculated to provoke an even more massive response against the Moslem world precipitating a blood-feud of global proportions.

America's measured, focused response has been just as unexpected to al-Qaida and the Taliban as the reaction of United Flight 93's passengers who charged their captors and brought down the plane short of its intended target. It was a very personal fight. Eye to eye. Three highly trained terrorists who had already killed the pilots with concealed knives and box cutters charged by a half dozen or more men, strangers to

each other, wielding makeshift clubs and hastily boiled coffee water from Flight 93's galley.

Now the fight moves to the Taliban's home turf in the southern hills and mountains of Afghanistan. A sudden collapse of organized resistance can always be hoped for, but it seems more likely that al Qaeda and the most fervent elements of the Taliban, although temporarily broken up and dispersed, may have to be alternately rooted out or sealed in their caves in this first campaign of the war on terrorism. And this time the casualties on "our side" are likely to be American and British instead of Tajiks and Uzbeks.

Pollster Andrew Kohut maintains that "The levels of support aren't challenged by the idea that we might lose a lot of men and women, not challenged by the idea that there might be civilian casualties." Many in the media still appear genuinely surprised by this and similar findings. But the last time that the United States experienced 6,000 dead was Vietnam in 1970, and Americans understand full well that we have already suffered nearly that many "battle casualties" in the war on terrorism.
