



Insight



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Charles Krauthammer

America, Battle-Tested

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"Your most disgraceful case was in Somalia. . . . When tens of your soldiers were killed in minor battles and one American pilot was dragged in the streets of Mogadishu you left the area carrying disappointment, humiliation, defeat and your dead with you."

-- Osama bin Laden, 1996, "Declaration of War Against the Americans."

Can America take casualties? Bin Laden's Sept. 11 calculation was that we could not. Indeed, his assassination of Northern Alliance leader Ahmed Shah Massoud on Sept. 9 shows that bin Laden expected us to bring the war to Afghanistan (he thus wanted the Alliance's best leader eliminated). Bin Laden thought he'd set a trap -- the Americans would arrive in force, take casualties, then flee. Where did he learn this? Somalia. "You have been disgraced by Allah and you withdrew," he said in his 1996 declaration. "The extent of your impotence and weaknesses became very clear."

A slightly more analytical exposition of the same question came from intellectual provocateur and JWR contributor Edward Luttwak. He once wrote a handbook for coups, which has been used by more than one disgruntled third-world flight lieutenant. In a 1994 article in *Foreign Affairs*, he theorized that the West's lower birth rates had created a new reality. Families with one or two children would be far less inclined to offer them as sacrifice to the gods of war than would the multitude of countries with large families. "If the significance of the new family



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demographics is accepted, it follows that no advanced low-birth-rate countries can play the role of a classic great power anymore. . . . Their societies are so allergic to casualties that they are effectively de-bellicized, or nearly so."

In America, this is the familiar "just wait for the body bags to start coming home" syndrome. I disagree. The lessons of World War II, Korea, Vietnam, the Gulf War, Somalia and now Afghanistan are that America is allergic to casualties -- *but only in wars that don't matter*. Our history over the last century suggests a General Theory of Casualties: *America's capacity to sustain casualties is near infinite, as long as the wars are wars of necessity*.

Bin Laden got Somalia very wrong. He should catch a cave-wall screening of the brilliant new film "Black Hawk Down," which portrays the extraordinary valor and toughness of the American soldiers in that lost battle in Mogadishu -- valor made all the more impressive by the pointlessness of the entire enterprise. What Somalia showed was that when you go into a country of total strategic irrelevance for solely humanitarian reasons, and then find yourself being fired upon by thugs and ingrates, your tolerance for casualties is -- and should be -- virtually zero. You pick up and get out. This is not cowardice; this is common sense.

In Haiti and Kosovo, Bill Clinton wisely chose casualty-free battle plans. In the absence of any strategic necessity for these adventures, he knew that with even a few American casualties he'd pull us out, as in Somalia.

The war against terrorism is different because it is our first war of necessity since World War II. When attacked, when engaged in an existential struggle, America is not just fierce. It is stoic. No one should underestimate America's capacity to sustain casualties in such wars.

Why, even in the Gulf War -- strategically important but not an absolute necessity -- there were consensus predictions of 10,000 dead. And yet we still went to war.

True, we will never know how that would have turned out had the casualties begun to rise. But the war on terrorism is so supremely important -- and the American people so deeply feel it -- that the General Theory applies: We expected ground war and body bags but did not hesitate. That will not change.

Yes, the country might become distracted. Cable news breaks in for live hockey-dad coverage, a flashback to the O.J. world of the '90s. But we will not forget Sept. 11. We will not tire. There may be reasons at some point to call a halt to the war on terrorism and declare victory, but it will not be because of an aversion to casualties. The General Theory has a very important corollary: We

should not engage in wars of pure humanitarianism. Bin Laden's interpretation of Somalia should be a warning. These are wars that by definition must be waged casualty-free. Black Hawk down -- and we're out.

Bin Laden misread us in Somalia, but so did much of the world. There are many arguments against humanitarian war but the clincher is that, as we are likely to pull out under fire, it erodes American credibility. It gives bad guys the wrong idea about us. It tempts them.

A Great Power should always keep its powder dry for the supreme fight. We are in one now. And no amount of casualties will deter us. 🌍

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