



**Americans on Kosovo:
A STUDY OF US PUBLIC ATTITUDES**

May 27, 1999

Overview

Assumptions about American public opinion have played a significant role in the debate about US policy on the NATO intervention in Kosovo. Particularly important has been a prominent concern that in the event of troop fatalities, public support for the mission would collapse, and Americans would demand retreat or withdrawal.

These assumptions have reportedly contributed to a cautiousness in US policy. Most prominently, this cautiousness has led the Clinton Administration to preclude the use of ground troops and to oppose making preparations for such an intervention. It has also led to limits on NATO air operations, with pilots in most cases being required to fly above the range of Yugoslav air defenses, thus limiting the capability to attack forces on the ground in Kosovo.

While there are many reasons for US caution—related to the political challenges of maintaining alliance cohesion, as well as military considerations—this study focuses on the question of how much public opinion is an appropriate cause for concern. It does so by exploring in depth the question of the likely public response to troop fatalities as well as the broader questions related to US involvement in Kosovo.

To explore these questions, the Program on International Policy Attitudes carried out a comprehensive review of existing polling data and conducted a new nationwide poll. The poll was conducted May 13-17, with 1,206 randomly selected adults (weighted to be demographically representative). This provides a margin of error of plus or minus 3%-4%.

Briefly stated, the key findings were:

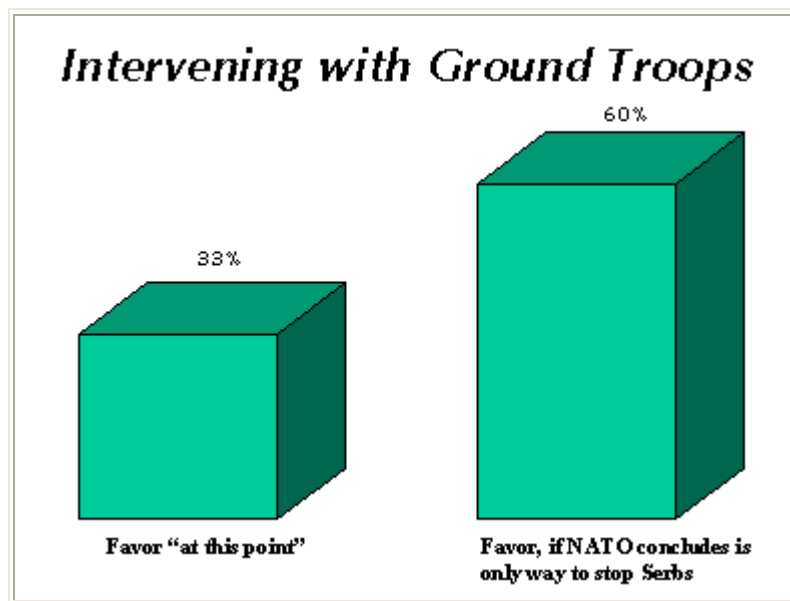
- Most Americans do not support NATO intervening at this point with ground troops, but if NATO decides that it is the only way to stop ethnic cleansing, a strong majority says that it will support that action. A strong majority feels that it was a mistake to preclude the use of ground troops, and a slight majority favors repositioning ground troops now.
- If American troops are killed in the course of a ground intervention in Kosovo, only a minority says it would want the US to retreat or terminate the operation. If the operation succeeds, even with significant fatalities, the majority says it would approve of the original decision to undertake the operation.
- While most polls show majority support for airstrikes, this support appears to be softening. This appears to be related to growing doubts about the airstrikes' effectiveness as well as a growing desire to pursue a diplomatic resolution. However, most Americans want to hold a fairly strong line in negotiations, and most think that a ground intervention will ultimately be necessary.

- A plurality opposes having bombers take the risk of flying low over Kosovo, unless the pilots have volunteered to do so. However, if NATO did undertake a low-altitude bombing campaign and it succeeded in preventing ethnic cleansing, even if some pilots were killed, a majority would favor continuing the campaign.
- Support for involvement in Kosovo is primarily derived from humanitarian concerns and the belief that genocide is occurring.
- A strong majority feels the imperative to respond to genocide overrides the prohibition against intervening in the internal affairs of a country. An overwhelming majority is uncomfortable about intervening in Kosovo without a UN Security Council resolution, but most favor proceeding nonetheless. However, if a ground intervention did not have NATO approval, only a very small minority would favor proceeding with an ad hoc coalition of allies.

Findings

1. Most Americans do not support NATO intervening at this point with ground troops, but if NATO concludes that it is the only way to stop ethnic cleansing, a strong majority says it will support such an intervention. A strong majority feels that it was a mistake to preclude the use of ground troops, and a majority believes that a ground war could succeed at an acceptable cost. A slight majority favors positioning ground troops near Kosovo now.

When asked whether they would favor intervening with ground troops "at this point," only 33% said that they would, while 59% were opposed. Those who said they were opposed or did not give an answer were then asked how they would feel "if after a period of further bombing, NATO commanders conclude that the only way to stop the Serbs from conducting ethnic cleansing is to intervene with ground troops." Combining those who would favor it under these conditions with those who initially favored a ground intervention, the total in favor becomes 60%.



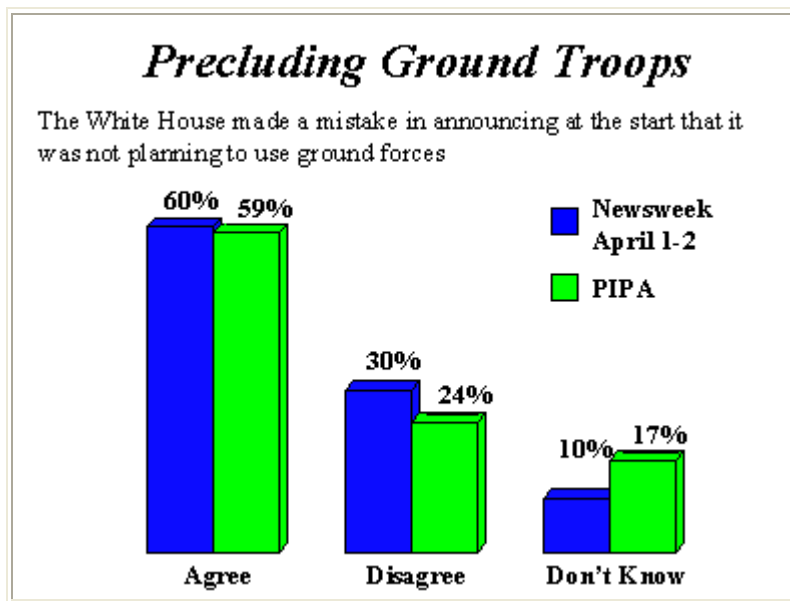
Other polls have found a similar pattern. On three occasions, CNN/USA Today asked respondents

45%. A CBS poll question that spoke of sending in ground troops in the present tense found favorable responses in the 41-45% range.

Questions beginning with the premise that current bombing will prove ineffective get higher numbers in support. An ABC/Washington Post poll question that began, "Suppose the bombing does not stop Serbia's military action in Kosovo," has found support in the 55-57% range. However, a similar CNN/USA Today question that specified the goal only as "achieving the United States' objectives" has elicited lower levels of support ranging from 39 to 52%—presumably because it makes no clear reference to the goal of stopping the Serbs.

The one other poll in which respondents were asked how they would respond to a "decision" to intervene received overwhelming support. An April 8 NBC/Wall Street Journal poll asked, "Would you favor or oppose a decision to send US and NATO soldiers into Serbia if it is the only way to stop the fighting in Kosovo?" Seventy-three percent said they would favor it.

Clearly, most Americans believe that intervention with ground troops should be on the table. In the current poll, 59% agreed it was a mistake to preclude the use of ground troops (Newsweek found 60% agreeing on April 1-2).



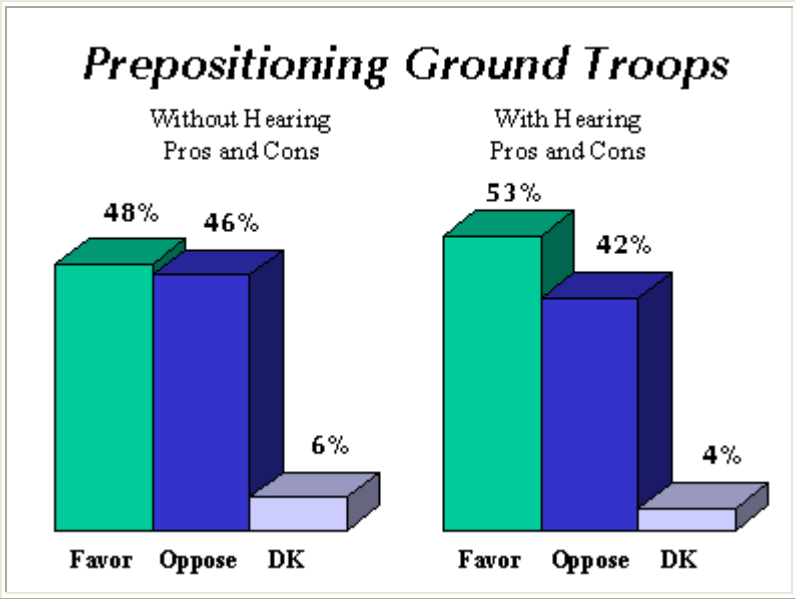
Americans also appear somewhat optimistic about the probable costs of such an operation. In the current poll, 57% said they thought such an intervention would be very (23%) or somewhat (34%) likely to "succeed at an acceptable cost."

Prepositioning Ground Troops

According to military experts, to make NATO forces ready for a ground war will require two to three months to preposition the troops close to Kosovo. Over and above the question of whether to intervene is the question of whether NATO should take steps now so as to have the option of intervening later.

Because this question has not been prominently discussed, half the sample was asked to evaluate two arguments in favor of the idea and two against it. Among those who first evaluated the arguments, a

modest majority of 53% favored the idea, while 42% were opposed. Among those who did not hear the arguments, a slight plurality of 48% favored it, while 46% were opposed.



In response to the arguments for and against prepositioning, a solid majority found the pro arguments convincing. Fifty-nine percent found convincing the pro argument:

Whether or not NATO ultimately intervenes with ground troops, it needs to have that option in case bombing fails to make Milosevic stop the ethnic cleansing. A ground invasion is the only direct means of wresting control of Kosovo from his forces.

Thirty-seven percent found this unconvincing. The argument that prepositioning troops would send a strong signal to Milosevic was even more persuasive. Sixty-nine percent found convincing the argument:

If NATO starts positioning troops near Kosovo, this will send a strong signal to Milosevic that NATO is really determined to stop the ethnic cleansing. This might help to bring the war to an end earlier and save lives.

Only 29% found it unconvincing.

Arguments against prepositioning were only found convincing by a slight majority. Fifty-one percent found the following argument convincing, while 45% found it unconvincing.

Going into Kosovo with ground troops is not a good idea. If NATO positions large numbers of troops close to Kosovo, this will just increase the chances that they will ultimately be used, and a ground invasion is likely to prove bloody and inconclusive.

Slightly more persuasive was an argument based on concern for how prepositioning troops might impact relations with other countries:

Many countries, especially Russia and China, are strongly opposed to NATO intervening with ground

troops in Kosovo. If NATO takes steps in this direction, this will damage our relations with these countries, even if we never use the troops.

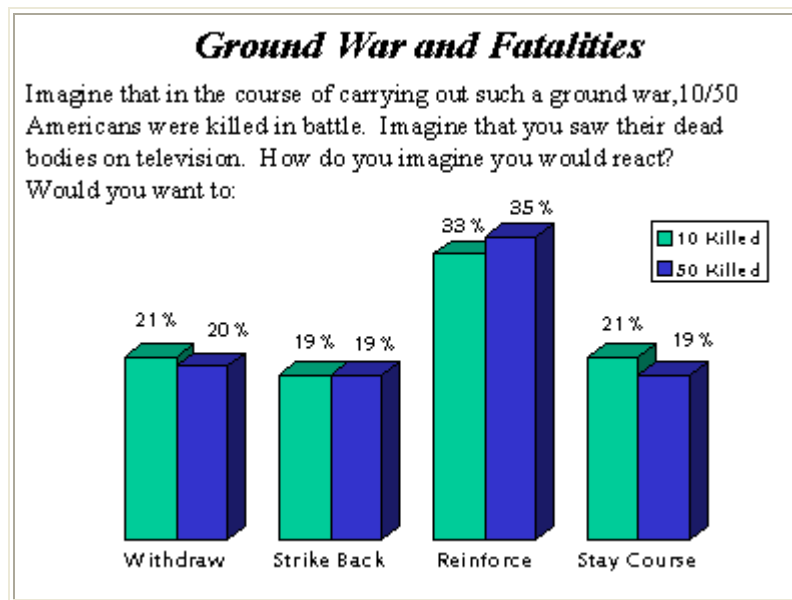
Fifty-four percent found this argument convincing, while 43% found it unconvincing.

2. If American troops are killed in the course of a ground intervention in Kosovo, only a minority says it would want the US to retreat or terminate the operation. The majority says it would prefer to respond in a more assertive fashion. If the operation succeeds, even with significant fatalities, the majority says it would approve of the original decision to undertake the operation.

A widespread concern is that if American soldiers are killed as part of a ground operation, the American public will react by wanting to withdraw US troops, partly as a reaction to seeing the bodies of dead American soldiers on television. To test this assumption, respondents were presented a hypothetical scenario. Half the sample heard that 10 Americans were killed, while the other half heard 50. The scenario went:

Imagine that in the course of carrying out a ground war, 10/50 Americans were killed in a battle. Imagine that you saw their dead bodies on television. How do you imagine that you would react?

Respondents were then given four options. Only 20% said they would want to immediately withdraw US troops. The majority backed one of the two assertive responses, such as "bring in reinforcements so that future attacks could be met with overwhelming force"—which was selected by 33-35%—or "strike back hard at the attackers," which was chosen by 19%. Just 19-21% elected to "not react in any of these ways but to simply stay the course."

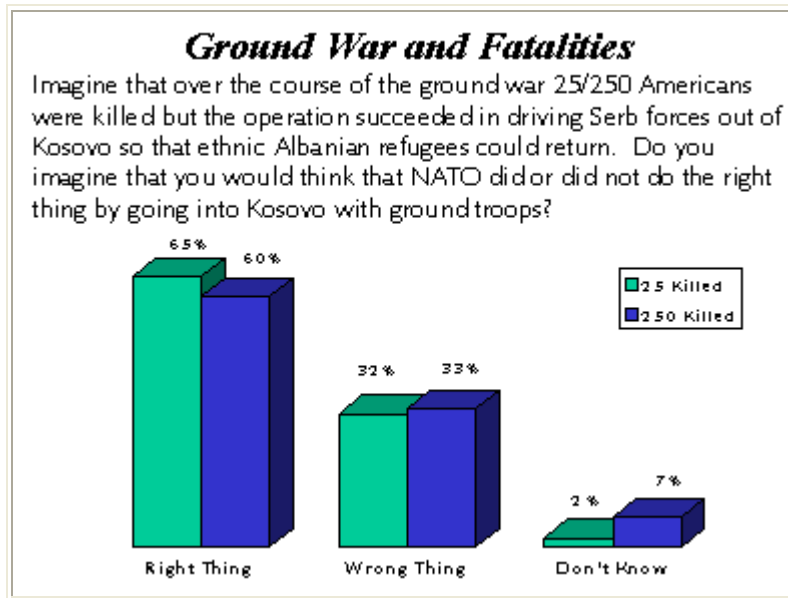


Besides the question of how Americans would respond immediately, there is the question of how they would view the original decision to undertake the operation. Respondents were asked how they would feel about the war effort overall if, over the course of the war, 25 or 250 American troops were killed. In order to require respondents to make a trade-off between the value of the lives of American troops and the value of achieving the war's objectives, it was necessary to specify that the operation succeeded

went:

Imagine that over the course of the ground war 25/250 Americans were killed, but the operation succeeded in driving Serb forces out of Kosovo so that ethnic Albanian refugees could return. Do you imagine that you would think that NATO did or did not do the right thing by going into Kosovo with ground troops?

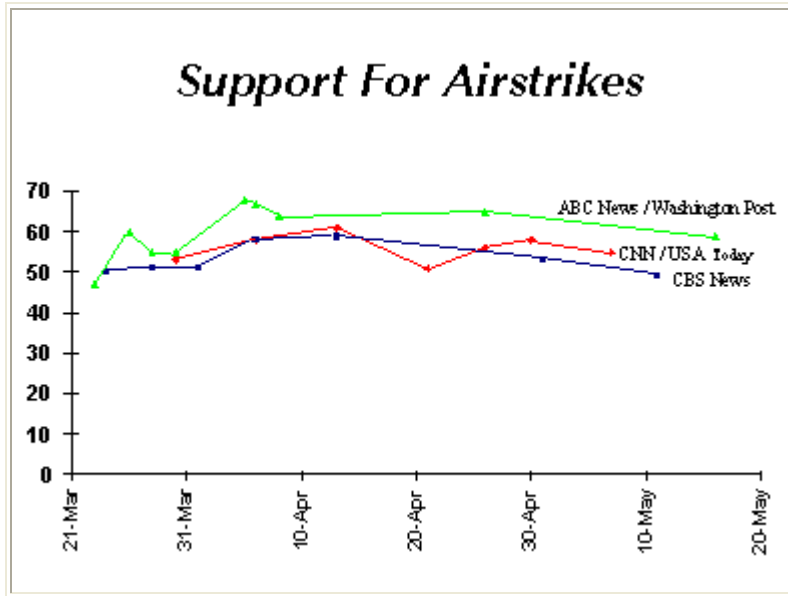
At both levels of fatalities, a strong majority said the US would have done the right thing by initiating the ground war—65% in the case of 25 fatalities and 60% in the case of 250 fatalities. The percentages opposing the decisions were 32% and 33%, respectively.



A series of questions in a March 25 CNN/USA Today poll also reveals that Americans, in fact, expect fatalities in the current operation in Kosovo. Asked, "Thinking about the current air and military strikes being launched against Serbian targets, do you believe this will or will not result in any combat deaths?", only 18% said they thought it will not. Respondents were then asked how many deaths they expected. Treating those who said they expected no deaths as a response of zero, the median response was in the range of 10-24 fatalities. Yet, support for the mission was fairly strong at that time. (More polls on fatalities can be found in the Appendix.)

3. While most polls show majority support for airstrikes, this support appears to be softening. This appears to be related to growing doubts about the airstrikes' effectiveness as well as a growing desire to pursue a diplomatic resolution. However, most Americans want to hold a fairly strong line in negotiations, and most think that a ground intervention will ultimately be necessary.

In trend line poll questions that simply ask whether the respondent favors or opposes NATO airstrikes, most find majority support. However, the level of support seems to be softening. On May 16 ABC/Washington Post found 59% support for airstrikes, (38% opposed) down from its high of 68% on April 5. On May 7-9 Gallup found 55% in favor (38% opposed), down from a high of 61% on April 13-14. CBS found 49% in favor (36% opposed) on May 11, down from a high of 59% on April 13-14.



In questions that challenge respondents further, this softening of support is also evident. PIPA asked, "Do you now think NATO made the right decision or the wrong decision by starting the airstrikes against Yugoslavia?"; 48% said it was the right decision and 33% said it was the wrong decision (don't know: 18%). When directly presented the option of stopping or continuing the airstrikes, 47% said NATO should continue, while 41% said to stop.

The decline in support for airstrikes may be related to growing doubts about their effectiveness. On March 24, CBS found that 53% of Americans believed NATO airstrikes could force Milosevic to stop attacking Kosovo. A week later, on March 31, just 41% believed air attacks could "accomplish [NATO's] objectives in Kosovo", while 47% disagreed. By the first week of April, polls for ABC, Gallup, and Fox News all showed that only 25 to 30% of Americans still believed airstrikes would be enough to force Milosevic to capitulate. In the current poll, a 51% majority found convincing the argument that "While NATO has been bombing around Belgrade, the Serb forces have been continuing ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. It is wrong to continue a military campaign that fails to confront the problem directly and effectively."

A second possible reason for the softening of support is a growing desire to see diplomatic efforts gain a higher priority. Newsweek asked on three occasions which of four options "should be the priority for NATO and the US: continuing the air campaign at its current level, stepping up the air campaign, launching a ground war against the Serbs, or stepping up diplomatic efforts to reach a negotiated settlement?" In mid-April, "diplomatic efforts" was highest with 52%; by mid-May, this had grown to 62%. "Stepping up the air campaign," however, fell from 19% to 11%. Similarly, CBS found 62% (May 11) in favor of "negotiat[ing] a compromise with...Milosevic in order to end the fighting."

Unfortunately, no questions have been asked about whether in pursuing diplomatic efforts it would be better to stop the airstrikes or continue them. Those that only offered the options of continuing airstrikes and stopping them to pursue negotiations did not elicit a clear majority. Gallup found a divided response, with 48% wanting to stop military action and focus on diplomatic efforts and 48% wanting to continue military action (May 9). CBS found 50% who wanted to "stop bombing now and negotiate," while 42% wanted to "continue the bombing until Serb troops withdraw from Kosovo" (May 11).

Though there is support for pursuing diplomatic initiatives, this does not mean Americans currently favor a highly accommodating posture. A May 18 ABC/Washington Post poll found that 58% believed NATO should "negotiate on terms for ending the conflict," but when presented a list of four conditions, most did not show a great deal of flexibility. Fifty-nine percent found non-negotiable "requiring Serbia to remove almost all of its soldiers and special police from Kosovo," while 54% rated "the return of all refugees to Kosovo" as non-negotiable. On "requiring Serbia to allow a NATO-led peacekeeping force in Kosovo," 50% said this was non-negotiable, while 47% said it was up for negotiation. The only condition a majority (55%) found negotiable was "a political settlement allowing Kosovo limited self-rule as a province of Serbia."

Americans are also not highly optimistic that diplomacy or airstrikes will succeed. In a variety of polls, a very strong majority has expressed the view that a ground war will ultimately be necessary to get the Serbs to withdraw from Kosovo. In five polls conducted by four polling organizations (Pew, NBC/Wall Street Journal, ABC News/Washington Post, and Newsweek), majorities ranging from 65-71% said they believed that airstrikes will not be enough to achieve NATO objectives and that it will be necessary to intervene with ground troops. A CNN/USA Today poll also found an overwhelming 78% predicting that US ground troops will ultimately be used.

4. A plurality opposes having bombers take the risk of flying low over Kosovo, unless the pilots have volunteered to do so, in which case a majority favors it. If NATO did undertake a low-altitude bombing campaign and it succeeded in preventing ethnic cleansing, even if some pilots were killed, a majority would favor continuing the campaign.

The controversy about flying low over Kosovo was presented as follows:

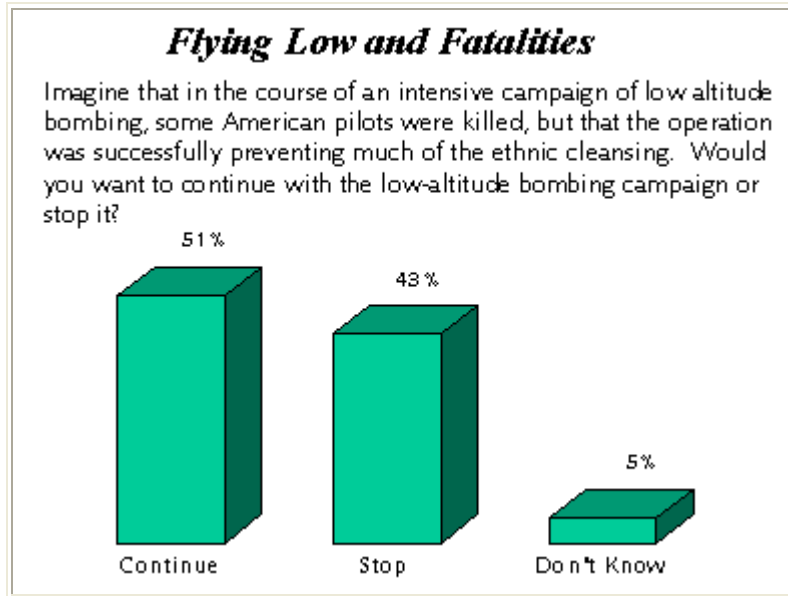
Despite NATO bombing, Serb forces have continued to carry out ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. They have been able to continue to do this, partly because NATO bombers do not fly low enough to strike these Serb forces. Some say that NATO should fly low, because this is necessary to stop the Serbs from carrying out ethnic cleansing. Others say bombers should not fly low, because it puts pilots at great risk of being shot down.

They were then asked what they favored. The response was a plurality of 48% opposing flying low, while 40% favored it.

Those who opposed flying low or said they did not know how to answer were then asked a follow-on question: "Suppose the pilots had volunteered for the low-altitude bombing." In this case, a bit more than a third of this group changed their position, thus raising the total who would favor flying low under some condition to a strong 60%.

So how are Americans likely to respond if NATO does conduct low-altitude bombing and some pilots are shot down and killed? Naturally, if American pilots are dying and the operation is also failing to achieve its desired effect, the public will likely oppose continuing. But what if the operation is helping to prevent ethnic cleansing?

When respondents were asked how they would feel if some American pilots were killed in a low-altitude bombing campaign that was succeeding, a majority of 51% said they would favor continuing despite the fatalities, while 43% said they would favor stopping the low-altitude bombing.



What is particularly striking is that the 51% who said they would favor continuing, despite fatalities was higher than the percentage who in an earlier question wanted to continue the existing operation. In that case, 47% said they would favor continuing, while 41% said they would favor stopping it. Thus, when presented a scenario with a riskier air campaign that explicitly included some pilot fatalities but was more successful, support even rose slightly.

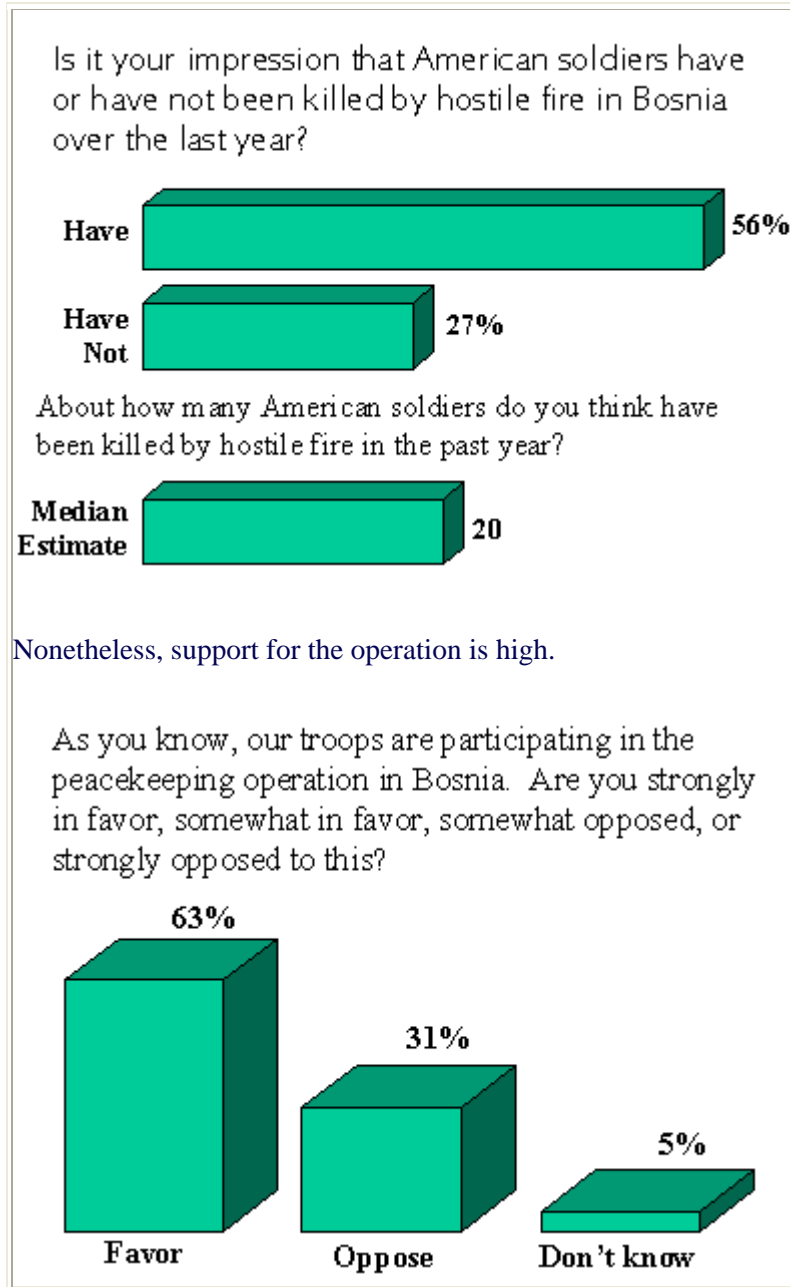
Respondents were also asked how they would feel in retrospect about the decision to undertake low altitude bombing if pilots were killed (half the sample were told 5 fatalities, the other half 50), but the operation succeeded. They heard this scenario:

Imagine that in the course of an intensive campaign of low-altitude bombing, 5/50 American pilots were killed, but that the operation succeeded in convincing Yugoslavia's President Milosevic to halt ethnic cleansing and withdraw his troops from Kosovo.

Among those who were told to assume 5 fatalities, a very strong majority of 67% said they would feel that NATO did the right thing (23% wrong thing). Assuming 50 fatalities, support was much less. But still, a modest majority of 52% said they would feel the decision to fly low had been the right one (37% wrong one).

Response to Perceived Fatalities

Questions asked about the NATO operations in Bosnia offer an interesting insight into how Americans may respond to fatalities in Kosovo. Although there have been no US fatalities in Bosnia, the majority of respondents in the May 13-17 PIPA poll thought there have been fatalities.



5. Support for involvement in Kosovo is primarily derived from humanitarian concerns and the belief that genocide is occurring. Concerns for the war spreading and the need to follow through on the US commitment are also strong. Arguments based on national interest are less persuasive. In general, arguments against involvement are less persuasive, but some do elicit slight majorities.

Although, as we have seen, no specific form of intervention garners strong majority support, strong majorities do respond favorably to arguments in support of the general principle of intervention in Kosovo, while no arguments in opposition receive strong majority support.

Humanitarian Concerns

Arguments based on humanitarian concerns and the belief that genocide is occurring received the highest level of support. Sixty-nine percent found convincing the argument:

The Serbs' effort at "ethnic cleansing" through killing many ethnic Albanians and driving hundreds of thousands of them out of Kosovo is a form of genocide. The US has a moral obligation to join in efforts to stop this genocide.

A strong majority also found convincing the argument that, once started, NATO and the US are under a moral imperative to follow through with the effort. Sixty-six percent found convincing the argument:

It may or may not have been wise to launch the military strikes against Yugoslavia, but now that we have done so, we must persist and prevail. For NATO and the US to promise to reverse ethnic cleansing and then fail would be a moral catastrophe for ourselves and the world.

Other polls have also found a widespread belief that the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo is a form of genocide. Newsweek polls in late March and early April asked, "Do you consider the Serbian attacks on ethnic Albanians to be a form of genocide or not?" In both cases, three-fifths of respondents said they believed it is a form of genocide, while less than a quarter believed it was not.

A strong and growing majority also believes "the US has a moral obligation" to intervene in Kosovo. Gallup found 58% holding this view on March 21 and 64% on March 25. ABC found 66% on April 6 and 71% on April 8.

Also asked in a March 26 Newsweek poll what a good reason is for US involvement in Kosovo, 69% cited "to prevent the killing of citizens in Kosovo," 65% said to "stop the attacks on ethnic Albanians," and 59% to "end starvation and a major refugee problem." In a March 31 Gallup poll, 65% said that "Serbian attacks on civilians in Kosovo" justify airstrikes.

Humanitarian concerns fare better than other reasons for intervention. When ABC News asked people to identify the main reason for US involvement in Kosovo, a 38% plurality said it was for humanitarian purposes. Far fewer (23%) cited fears of a wider war, and even fewer (16%) noted the need to protect the credibility of the US and NATO (April 8). Gallup found that over two-thirds of those who support sending ground troops into Kosovo believe the US should do so because of a "moral obligation to help the refugees" (April 7). Just 13% thought the need to win the war now that NATO is committed was most important; 8% cited strategic interests.

Concerns for Following Through on Commitment

A substantial majority finds persuasive the argument that it is important for the US to follow through on the commitment made by two American presidents. Sixty-one percent found convincing the argument:

The US government under both Presidents Bush and Clinton said that if Serbia conducts ethnic cleansing in Kosovo, the United States would intervene with military force. Now that this is happening, the US must follow through.

Only 34% found it unconvincing.

Concerns for the War Spreading

Another argument that received substantial support is the following:

If the ethnic cleansing in Kosovo continues, there is a chance that neighboring countries may become involved, leading to the spread of war in the region. Therefore, the NATO effort to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo is good insurance.

Fifty-six percent found this argument convincing, with 40% finding it unconvincing.

Other polls have found support for this argument. When asked to rate the importance of various reasons for US intervention to "help secure peace" in Kosovo, at least 80% said preventing "a larger war involving other countries in that part of Europe" was a very or somewhat important reason. Indeed, a majority said preventing the spread of war was a very important reason for US action in Kosovo (Pew, March and April 1999).

Large majorities of Americans are concerned that a wider war in the Balkans is a real possibility. In two CBS News polls from early and mid-April, nearly two-thirds said it was likely that the "situation in Kosovo will become a more widespread war in neighboring countries and other parts of Europe."

Concerns Based on National Interest

Rationales based on concern for US national interests are relatively less persuasive. However, support for them has grown over the course of the operation. ABC News/Washington Post has done extensive tracking of the question, "Do you think America's vital national interests are at stake in the situation involving Kosovo, or not?" Over the month between mid-March and mid-April, "yes" responses rose from a meager 27% to a solid 47%; at the same time, those saying "no" fell from a 57% majority to a 49% plurality. More recently, in an April 23-28 NPR/Kaiser/Harvard poll, 55% said "the US has a national interest in trying to help stop Serbian actions in Kosovo."

Since late March, CBS has provided data on the following question: "How important to the interests of the United States is what happens in Serbia and Kosovo?" The number of Americans saying "very important" or "somewhat important" has remained at about 80%, with those saying "not that important" hovering between 15% and 20%.

However, national interest reasons are not generally seen as compelling as humanitarian ones. Asked in the April 23-28 NPR/Kaiser/Harvard poll which is the more important reason for involvement in Kosovo, 45% said America's moral obligation, just 26% said the US national interest, while 23% said neither.

Arguments Against Involvement

Overall, arguments against involvement in Kosovo do not do as well as arguments in favor. The common argument—that involvement is not worth risking American lives in Kosovo because it is not relevant to US interests—received the lowest level of support. Only 41% found convincing the argument: "Kosovo is far from the US and we have no real interests there. Therefore, it is wrong to risk the lives of American soldiers in a NATO operation there." Fifty-six percent found it unconvincing.

An argument against involvement based entirely on concern for fatalities did elicit majority support. Fifty-two percent found convincing the argument, "The longer the NATO operations in Yugoslavia continue, the more likely it is that American soldiers will be killed. We should get out now before

Americans come back home in body bags." Forty-two percent found it unconvincing. Clearly this statement affirms the value of the lives of American troops. However, as we have seen above, when the value of ensuring that no American troops are killed is placed against the value of stopping ethnic cleansing in specific scenarios, a majority, in most cases a strong one, accepts some troop fatalities so as to stop ethnic cleansing.

The argument that received the highest level of support implicitly confirmed the value of involvement but opposed the involvement in Kosovo because the US has failed to intervene consistently in other cases. Fifty-three percent found convincing the argument:

There are many areas of the world where atrocities and even genocide have been committed, such as Rwanda and the Sudan, and we have not intervened there. Until we are ready to intervene in a consistent way, it is best to simply stay out of such situations, including Kosovo.

Forty-two percent found it unconvincing.

Another argument that emphasized that the current effort is not effective was found convincing by 50%. It went, "While NATO has been bombing around Belgrade, the Serb forces have been continuing ethnic cleansing in Kosovo. It is wrong to continue a military campaign that fails to confront the problem directly and effectively." Forty-two percent found it unconvincing.

Few arguments against involvement have been presented in other polls. An April 8 Louis Harris poll presented the case, "Kosovo is a European problem which Europe should be able to handle without American troops." A majority of 52% disagreed, while 45% agreed.

A March 25 Rasmussen Research question that highlighted the lack of broad international support did succeed in driving down support. It went, "China, Russia, and India have called upon the United States to stop the bombing raids. The Secretary-General of the United Nations has raised questions about the legality of the raids. Knowing this, do you think the United States should continue the bombing or stop?" In response, only a 41% plurality said the US should continue the bombing—a significantly lower level of support than most polls were finding at that time for airstrikes. Thirty-nine percent said the US should stop bombing, while 20% were not sure.

6. A strong majority feels the imperative to respond to genocide overrides the prohibition against intervening in the internal affairs of a country. An overwhelming majority is uncomfortable about intervening in Kosovo without a UN Security Council resolution, but most favor proceeding nonetheless. However, if a ground intervention did not have NATO approval, only a very small minority would favor proceeding with an ad hoc coalition of allies.

The situation in Kosovo raises numerous issues involving international norms. One of these is a conflict between the norm of respect for the national sovereignty of nations, which would prohibit intervention in Kosovo, versus the norm against genocide, which calls for intervention. When asked to prioritize these values, a strong majority put a higher priority on the norm against genocide.

National Sovereignty and Genocide

As a general principle, even if atrocities are being committed within a country, the international community should not intervene with military force because this would be a violation of the country's national sovereignty.



While respect for national borders is important, when large scale atrocities, such as genocide are being committed, this justifies military intervention by the international community.



Another issue involving international norms is the question of whether NATO has the right to intervene without UN Security Council approval. As shown below, an overwhelming majority of respondents does feel uncomfortable about the fact that the NATO intervention does not have UN Security Council approval. Nonetheless, most of those expressing such discomfort favor intervening.

UN Authorization

It concerns me that the UN has not approved NATO military action, but I think NATO's operation should continue.



It concerns me that the UN has not approved NATO military action, and I think that NATO should stop its operation.



It does not concern me that the UN has not approved NATO military action.



However, Americans are not ready to proceed with a ground war in Kosovo without a minimum of NATO approval. Those who said they would support intervening with ground troops if NATO said it was the only way to stop the Serbs (60% of sample) were asked, "What if there was not a consensus among the NATO allies to undertake a ground war, so that the action was not a NATO action and only included the troops of the US and some allies?" Under these circumstances, only 33% of those who favored intervention, and just 24% of the total sample said they would favor proceeding.

Conclusion

Broadly, a strong majority of Americans feels that ethnic cleansing in Kosovo creates an imperative to intervene--an imperative strong enough to override misgivings about intervening in another country's internal affairs and without UN Security Council approval. Americans, indeed, are highly sensitive to the prospect of losing the lives of American soldiers, but the moral imperative to intervene is stronger--provided that the operation is likely to succeed at a reasonable cost.

In the event of troop fatalities, few respondents in the present poll said they are likely to respond by wanting to withdraw. This is consistent with previous public responses to actual or perceived troop fatalities in the post-Cold War era. Even after the grisly images of bodies of Americans being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu in Somalia in October 1993, contrary to widespread assumptions, numerous polls found only about 4 in 10 Americans favored immediate withdrawal. As discussed, support for the operation in Bosnia is strong despite the fact that the majority believes, incorrectly, that a significant number of American troops have been killed there over the last year. In Kosovo, when the three US servicemen were captured recently, support for the operation and for using ground troops actually went up.

Naturally, if fatalities do occur this will make Americans scrutinize the operation more closely and ask harder questions about whether the operation is really working. At some point, losses could become high enough, and the evidence of success thin enough, that support for the operation could dramatically decline. But even in this case, frustration is as likely to lead to a desire for more aggressive efforts as to a desire for withdrawal. Once Americans are committed to a cause that they believe is just, it is not easy for them to simply back down.

So, besides the potential for perceived failure, are there any political risks in the Kosovo operation? Yes. If the NATO alliance were to fracture, the Administration could be in real trouble. Americans are very resistant to the US acting on its own and looking like the world's policeman. Since the Vietnam experience, this is anathema to most Americans.

But provided that the alliance holds together, the US public is likely to support a dynamic NATO effort in Kosovo. Fatalities would definitely raise the political stakes, but ultimately, Americans do see it as part of America's role to participate in multilateral efforts to stop genocide.

APPENDIX: Polls on Fatalities

Polls that ask Americans about the prospects of fatalities in Kosovo elicit seemingly diverse and contradictory findings. On closer examination, though, several patterns become clear.

In general, when polls ask about losing American lives in a military operation, but do not specify the outcome of the operation, the majority expresses opposition to it. An April 23-28 NPR/Kaiser/ Harvard poll asked those who favored intervening with ground troops, "Would you still favor sending ground troops if 100/500/1,000 American soldiers were killed?" In all cases, only a small minority said they would favor doing so. The value of American lives prompts respondents to reject such an option; in addition, providing information only about fatalities and not about the outcome implies that the operation is not going well.

However, if the operation is explicitly portrayed as succeeding, then the respondent is being asked to weigh the value of American lives and the value inherent in the goals of the mission. In this context, in

the PIPA poll, a substantial majority (60%) endorsed the choice to pursue the mission, despite the 250 fatalities posed by the question.

As a general rule, many Americans resist making the explicit choice to sacrifice the lives of soldiers, even when doing so is implicit in other positions they may take. For example, a strong majority says that the US has a moral obligation to stop ethnic cleansing in Kosovo; that it will probably be necessary to intervene with ground forces to stop the Serbs; and that it is likely that some troops will be killed. However, in response to other poll questions many Americans categorically reject sacrificing lives. On three occasions, a modest majority (averaging 53%) said it would not be "worth the loss of some American soldiers' lives to help bring peace to Kosovo" (ABC). When Time/CNN on March 25 asked, "How many American lives would you be willing to sacrifice to achieve US goals in Kosovo?" 74% said none. In the current poll, a plurality of 48% opposed having US pilots fly low over Kosovo when it was pointed out that this would put pilots at risk.

If the question limits the possible range of fatalities, or speaks of risking rather than sacrificing lives, this can shift the balance toward a plurality or a slight majority in favor of acceptance. Asked by Gallup on April 6 whether achieving NATO's goals "is worth having a few American casualties in a limited military action," 50% said it was, while 42% said it was not. In an April 8, 1999 Louis Harris poll, 53% disagreed with the statement, "It's not worth risking American lives to bring peace in Kosovo" (41% agreed). In late March, 54% said it was "worth risking the lives of American soldiers in order to demonstrate that Serbia should not get away with killing and forcing people from their homes" (Los Angeles Times).

But a strong majority can emerge in support of risking lives if a governmental authority or the soldiers themselves decide to take the risk. As discussed above, if NATO makes the determination that a ground war is the only way to stop ethnic cleansing, 60% say they would support the action. Presumably, Americans assume NATO commanders are in a better position to make judgments about whether the risks of a ground war are really necessary. Also, if the pilots volunteer for low altitude bombing, then 60% say they would favor such a campaign despite the risks. Apparently, many Americans want to share the responsibility for the solemn decision of risking lives.