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Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, *The Casualty Gap: The Causes and Consequences of American Wartime Inequalities*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2010. Pp. xvi, 302. ISBN 978-0-19-539096-4.

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Kriner and Shen here present the results of six years of study of local variations in casualties of the wars fought by the United States during the last seventy-five years (World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the War in Iraq). In their opening chapter, they discuss the main issues they examined and the significant conclusions drawn from the detailed statistical analyses contained in their other eight chapters.

At the start, they stress the importance of the human element in reckoning the costs of war, going back another seventy-five years to the Civil War to remind us that Abraham Lincoln “famously described the sacrifice of fallen soldiers as ‘the last full measure of devotion’ as he sought to reassure a war-ravaged nation that the principles for which its men fought and died justified their sacrifice” (3). Lincoln was speaking to those most affected by the deaths of the fallen—the members of their home communities and their brothers in arms. As Walt Whitman observed in his stark depiction of Civil War casualties, “I Saw the Vision of Armies,” “The living remain’d and suffer’d—the mother suffer’d,/ And the wife and the child, and the mus-ing comrade suffer’d,/ And the armies that remained suffer’d.”

Wartime casualties affect both soldiers in the field who have to be convinced to go on fighting and citizens on the home front whose attitudes influence political representatives and military leaders. This gives casualties their critical importance and explains why “scholars in various disciplines have long endeavored to understand how combat deaths shape public opinion, political outcomes and policymaking” (3).

Reactions to wartime casualties vary from the noble to the cynical. Kriner and Shen note that Pericles in his funeral oration at the outset (winter 431/430 BCE) of the Peloponnesian War, as reported by the Athenian general and historian Thucydides, “exhorted his fellow citizens to have more children, in part because he believed that only those with a direct stake in the outcome of military affairs can craft the wisest policy course” (4). The lives of soldiers are to be put at risk and expended wisely. And leaders of successful nations need a ready supply of men willing to face the dangers of war. The authors further observe that General and President George Washington “openly embraced [the] principle of shared sacrifice, ... proclaim[ing] the ideal that every citizen who enjoys the rights and privileges of citizenship ‘owes not only a portion of his property, but even of his personal service to the defense of it’” (4).

Anyone familiar with the literature and history of warfare knows that cynical views of casualties traditionally come from those who bear or have borne the heaviest burdens. In Aristophanes’s scathing play *The Acharnians* (425 BCE), the Athenians living in Acharnae, the district most thoroughly ravaged by the Spartan forces during the opening years of the Peloponnesian War, are the harshest critics of their leaders and the strongest advocates of peace.

World War II veterans like Paul Fussell (European Theater) and James Jones (Pacific Theater) express strong and cynical criticisms in their non-fiction and fiction even about the war most Americans still see as their one clearly “good” or at least necessary war. Their criticisms are based on the inequality of suffering and the hollowness of high ideals when one’s own life and those of one’s fellow soldiers are at stake.

Corporal Fife in Jones’s classic *The Thin Red Line*¹ flatly declares that war is all about property. His corollary is that the lives of the relatively small percentage of soldiers who do the actual fighting have little value when it comes to making decisions about the costs of war fought on such terms.

1. NY: Scribner’s, 1962.

Fussell carried deep resentments about the use of average GIs in the fighting after D-Day: “I’d like to recommend the retention of and familiarity with the first few minutes of Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan* depicting the landing horrors. Then I’d suggest separating them to constitute a short subject, titled *Omaha Beach: Aren’t You Glad You Weren’t There?* Which could mean, ‘Aren’t you glad you weren’t a conscripted working-class or high school boy in 1944?’ The rest of the Spielberg film I’d consign to the purgatory where boys’ bad adventure films end up.”²

The great achievement of *The Casualty Gap* is to clarify how pervasive such responses are throughout the American population and how they reflect the degree to which the young men and women of their communities are placed in danger of being killed in combat. Critical variables include income level, education, race and ethnicity, prevailing political affiliation, employment opportunities, and even regional histories. For example, Kriner and Shen argue convincingly that the deep South, with its cultural memory of the nobility of the devastating loss of lives during the Civil War, is less prone than other parts of the country to turn against an ongoing war because of high local casualty rates.

The “casualty gap” refers to the existence of much higher casualty rates in some communities and social classes than in others, for identifiable reasons that are not random. The authors first tested in 2007 (with a similar follow-up in 2009) a nationally representative group of more than a thousand Americans to see whether direct knowledge of a casualty gap affected their political views about going to war.

The test group comprised three sub-groups. All participants were told how many casualties the United States had suffered in Iraq. They were then told to “imagine for a moment that a future president decided to send military troops to halt Iran’s nuclear program and stop the infiltration of Iranian-backed forces into Iraq” and asked “what would be the highest number of American military deaths that would be acceptable to achieve this goal?” (98). The control group was told nothing else. The second group was told that all American communities, rich and poor, had experienced equal casualty rates (Washington’s ideal of shared sacrifice). The third group was told that poor communities had suffered significantly higher casualty rates than rich ones.

The group that had been told about a casualty gap between rich and poor communities proposed casualty figures 40 percent lower than the control group. The group that had been told that a shared sacrifice scenario prevailed among all communities accepted a higher number of deaths than respondents in the control group. Clearly, Americans believe wars should involve equally shared sacrifice. But no American war has.

Kriner and Shen also lay out the results of multiple empirical analyses, often quite ingenious, of data from the Korean, Vietnam, and Iraq wars. They convincingly show that citizens in communities with higher casualty rates “hold systematically different opinions and exhibit different political behaviors than their peers from communities more shielded from the human costs of war” (6). One clear result is that citizens from high-casualty communities lose both confidence in government and interest in the political process. Ironically then, “levels of civic and political engagement are depressed, and a feedback loop emerges: the populations with the most to lose in war become those communities with the least to say to their elected officials” (7). No wonder those in power favor an all-volunteer army.

If casualty gaps are a fact of American war, why, Kriner and Shen ask, are they peripheral to public, political, and academic discourse? One reason may be strategic: accurate and timely dissemination of casualty data can have an impact upon both the general public and the enemy.

One major asset of this statistically oriented study is its comprehensive bibliography. For example, the authors cite a two-part article in which historian Alfred Vagts carefully analyzes casualty statistics for World Wars I and II.³ Like the first few minutes of *Saving Private Ryan*, this sobering study should be a mandatory assignment for anyone thinking about going to war, in the literal or metaphorical sense. In passing, Vagts notes that after the Battle of Leuctra in 371 BCE the Spartans kept their exact losses secret by pick-

2. *The Boys’ Crusade: The American Infantry in Northwestern Europe, 1944-1945* (NY: Modern Library, 2003) 34-35.

3. “Battle and Other Combatant Casualties in the Second World War, I/II,” *Journal of Politics* (1945) 256-94, 411-38.

ing up their war dead at the same time as their allies. Like the Athenians, however, they could not and did not hide from their own civilian population the numbers and identities of their dead. By contrast, the Nazi regime in Germany stopped reporting casualty data as the figures mounted after 1942.

The United States by policy provided casualty data, particularly in wars (World War II, Korea, and Vietnam) where some claim could be made to a fair distribution of the burden of actual combat. During the Iraq War, however, members of Congress noted by 2005 that the government was not providing an accurate accounting of non-fatal casualties and cases of post-traumatic stress. As is well known, in 1991, then Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney instituted a ban on media coverage of the honor ceremonies, including the draping of coffins with the American flag, that marked the return of military casualties from abroad. The prohibition was continued by the George W. Bush administration despite a 2003 national poll showing that 62 percent of Americans favored such coverage while only 27 percent opposed it. When White House spokesperson Trent Duffy cited concern for the privacy of the soldiers' families, US representative Jim McDermott replied that the policy was designed "to keep the country from facing the reality of war" (10). (Secretary of Defense Robert Gates lifted the ban on 26 February 2009.)

Why do casualty gaps exist? Kriner and Shen prove that in all four of the surveyed wars disparities stemmed from the processes of selection into the military and the occupational assignment mechanisms that place some recruits more than others in positions of high combat exposure. Having ascertained the nature and degree of casualty gaps for each war, the authors turn to the impact of the gaps on public opinion and political behaviors. The deaths of soldiers within communities have effects through personal connection with the dead soldiers or their families; the cues about attitudes, behaviors, and values that elites put forward; and the way casualties are reported in the local media.

Kriner and Shen astutely deploy their data to foreground the significance of eight parameters: (1-2) income and education; (3) unemployment; (4) race; (5) rural farm population; (6) political partisanship; (7-8) geographic region and age of population within regions.

Income was a significant factor in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, with differentials of casualty rates between the top and bottom income groups of 10 percent in Vietnam and Korea and 15 percent in Iraq. For education, the differentials are 9 percent, 13 percent and 18 percent respectively. The income differential in terms of hard dollars adjusted to the year 2000 between communities with casualty rates in the top 25% and all other communities aggregated is \$5,500 for Korea, \$8,200 for Vietnam, and \$13,200 for Iraq. The education differential for Iraq is almost criminal: "The communities that have suffered the highest casualty rates in the Iraq War possess levels of college educational attainment that are almost 40 percent lower, on average, than those of communities that have not yet suffered a casualty" (31).

There are some surprises. It is well known that Martin Luther King, Jr. took up the statistical information that African Americans were suffering casualties in Vietnam 5 percent higher than their numbers in the army and 7 percent higher than their numbers in the overall population: Americans were "sending their [African Americans'] sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily higher proportions relative to the rest of the population" (24). These real disparities are "primarily the result of African Americans' lower socioeconomic status.... [T]he models show that poor white communities suffered casualty rates even higher than those suffered by communities with larger black populations and identical socioeconomic characteristics" (38). In other words, during the Vietnam War, we readily sent the children of the poor off to fight and die regardless of their skin color.

When has it not been so? The authors quote a directive from President Franklin Delano Roosevelt: "If a factory has just closed down in some town, at once rush a [military recruitment] canvassing party there" (60). Douglas MacArthur in 1934 testified before the US Senate that recruitment into the army was the cheapest means to relieve unemployment. And historian Robert Griffith declared that "The massive unemployment of the Great Depression represented a bonanza to the regular army" (60). Rural communities, lacking many alternative employment possibilities, are particularly hard hit by economic downturns.

Lack of education comes into play not only in limiting the employment opportunities of young men, and now women, thus making them more likely to enlist; education screening tests put in place for the Ko-

rean War and subsequently revised have been used to determine qualifications for specific military responsibilities. A study of combat infantry in Korea showed that “personnel assignment policies introduced an additional screening effect.... [M]en with civilian skills or education were assigned to rear-echelon duties ... [whereas] men assigned to rifle company were most likely to lack highly valued social attributes” (69).

World War II statistics show a more egalitarian profile in this category simply because the armed services did not then have in place accurate enough testing mechanisms to keep better educated recruits out of combat. Again, as with race, education levels are linked with socioeconomic standing. Thus, Fussell’s conscripts and now volunteers from working-class or impoverished communities are more likely to get combat infantry assignments and accordingly die at higher rates.

The Casualty Gap’s thoughtful analyses and arguments not only break down the larger statistical picture, but reveal how single communities respond to news of their own soldiers dying. Most disturbing is the clear pattern of civic and political disengagement in communities bearing the greatest sacrifices and most in need of increasingly unpopular government assistance. In this regard, Tea-Partyism is a diabolically clever way to perpetuate casualty gaps.

Kriner and Shen close by quoting Benjamin Franklin’s take on such inequity: “The question then will amount to this: whether it be just in a community, that the richer part should compel the poorer to fight in defence of them and their properties, for such wages as they think fit to allow, and punish them if they refuse. Our author tells us that it is ‘legal.’ I have not law enough to dispute his authorities, but I cannot persuade myself that it is equitable” (234).

Were Mr. Franklin alive today, *The Casualty Gap* would persuade him that it is not.