

Deaths to local soldiers matter in shaping war opinion

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Americans think locally when they consider whether the loss of U.S. troops overseas warrants troop withdrawals, a new nationwide study suggests.

Researchers found that people were more likely to support withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq if one or more [soldiers](#) from their home state were killed there within the past two to three weeks.

That was true regardless of how many soldiers from other parts of the country had been killed recently, or how many total national casualties had occurred.

"If you want to gauge [public opinion](#) about the [war](#), look at local coverage about the deaths of local soldiers - that seems to be driving opinion more than what's on national news," said Andrew Hayes, co-author of the study and associate professor of communication at Ohio State University.

This study adds a new dimension to past research that suggests American support for wars declines as casualties mount.

Most other studies examined how overall casualties in the war affected public opinion, and couldn't take into account the two key factors in this study: recent deaths, and those of local soldiers, said Teresa Myers, co-author of the study and a graduate student in communication at Ohio State.

"Local coverage of soldiers' deaths seems to have a more negative impact on public opinion than the more generalized view of how many soldiers across the country have died," Myers said.

The research will appear in an upcoming issue of the journal [Mass Communication](#) and *Society*.

The study included data from more than 30,000 Americans who were surveyed about their views of the war in Iraq between October 2003 and January 2007. The 21 separate surveys during that time were conducted by the Pew Center for People and the Press.

All of those surveyed were asked whether they believed troops should be withdrawn from Iraq "as soon as possible."

Hayes and Myers matched this survey data with information from the U.S. Department of Defense on deaths of U.S. [military personnel](#) in Iraq. They looked at which state the soldiers were from, and when the deaths occurred in comparison to the dates of the surveys.

As a result, the researchers were able to determine how many deaths of local soldiers - defined as soldiers living in the same state as the respondent - had occurred between 1 and 120 days of the survey.

The findings showed that the largest effect of deaths of local soldiers was within two to three weeks of their occurrence. These local, recent deaths increased support for withdrawal by 1 to 4 percent, the study showed.

Those aren't large changes, Hayes, said, but they may be additive.

"We know that support for withdrawing troops increases over time, as a whole. It is a slow process," he said.

This study wasn't designed to examine actual news coverage of casualties, but Hayes said it is logical to assume that local news coverage is what is driving these results.

"When a soldier dies, it may be newsworthy on a national level, but not nearly as newsworthy as it is locally," he said.

"Local news outlets are going to give more in-depth, emotionally charged coverage for casualties from their area. Local news reports are going to talk about the schools the soldiers attended, they may talk about friends and family, and the coverage is going to have more of an emotional impact that could influence people's views on the war."

In general, the study found that people who paid less attention to the news were more likely to support troop withdrawal. But, as expected, people who paid more attention to the news were more affected by the deaths of local soldiers.

The end result was that the deaths of local soldiers made attention to the news matter less for public opinion, because heavy news viewers became more like those who didn't pay attention. - both showed more support for troop withdrawal, Hayes said.

Most other studies that have examined how U.S. casualties impact public opinion were done during the Vietnam War, Hayes said. Those studies generally focused on 120 days as the window of impact when deaths would affect how people felt about the war.

However, this study shows how the era of instant communication and 24-hour news has shrunk that window of impact, he said. In this study, the maximum impact occurred within just two to three weeks of the death of soldiers.

"Events that happened in the past few weeks are what you're going to remember when you're participating in a survey," Hayes said. "Deaths that happened two months ago won't be on your mind. We learn about battlefield deaths much more quickly today than we did during the Vietnam era."

While this study concerned the war in Iraq, Hayes said the results are relevant as the Obama administration considers adding troops to the eight-year war in Afghanistan.

"Local coverage matters a lot. If government officials are concerned about how news of casualties affects opinion about military intervention, they should be focusing as much if not more on local coverage compared to national coverage," he said.

Source: The Ohio State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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