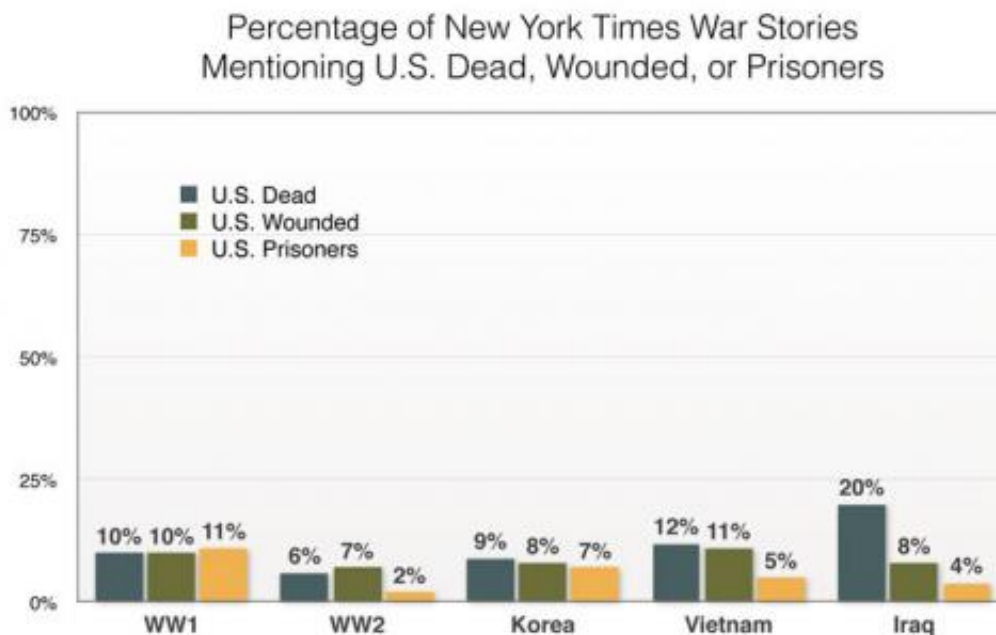


# Casualties get scant attention in wartime news, with little change since World War I

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Figures based on an analysis of 1,977 war-related stories in 125 daily issues of The New York Times during American involvement in World Wars I and II, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and the Iraq War through September 2006. The daily issues were chosen through random sampling, falling roughly every two months. Editorials and columns were included along with straight news stories.

From the article "Uplifting Manhood to Wonderful Heights? News Coverage of the Human Costs of Military Conflict from World War One to Gulf War Two," published in May 2014 in the journal *Political Communication*.

This chart shows the percentage of selected New York Times war stories mentioning US dead, wounded or prisoners, during US involvement in five major wars. Figures are based on an analysis of 1,977 war-related stories in 125 daily issues of The New York Times during those wars. Credit: Scott Althaus

The human costs of America's wars have received scant attention in daily war reporting – through five major conflicts going back a century – says an extensive and first-of-its-kind study of New York Times war coverage being published this month.

It's timely research given the major anniversaries this year for three of those conflicts.

No matter the war, the number of dead and wounded, the degree of government censorship, the type of warfare, or whether volunteers or draftees are doing the fighting, casualties get little mention, says Scott Althaus, a University of Illinois professor of political science and of communication, and the study's lead author.

Only about 11 percent of war-related stories examined in the study made even a passing reference to American military deaths, and that changed little over the century, Althaus said.

"What held true for World War I still holds true today, with few exceptions," he said.

"More important, we find that when casualties are covered, they are often presented in ways that minimize or downplay the human costs of war," Althaus said. Few stories mentioning casualties appear on the front page and few identify casualties by name.

Only 2 percent of war-related stories "reported numerical details of war deaths in a way that gave substantial attention to the scale or rate of American losses," he said.

Enemy and civilian losses got even less attention.

The study, which is the first to compare war casualty reporting across

several major wars, is the lead article in the issue of the journal *Political Communication* being published this month.

The study is part of a larger research project that also will analyze newsreel and/or television coverage of the same five wars: World Wars I and II, the Korean and Vietnam wars, and the Iraq War through September 2006.

(This summer marks 100 years since the start of World War I and 75 years since the start of World War II, as well as 50 years since the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution that authorized the commitment of U.S. ground troops to Vietnam.)

Althaus began the project seeking to close a gap in research on the dynamics of popular support for war. Standard theories suggest that mounting casualties often drive down support, he said, and yet those theories are based on little or no data about what the public actually hears or reads about casualties through the news.

"The theories hinge on the idea that the news media hold up a kind of magic mirror to what's going on in the war, and if you want to know, then you just open up the newspaper and it's going to tell you all the vital statistics," Althaus said. "I wasn't convinced that the news worked that way."

He and his co-authors chose to focus on The New York Times because all of its archives were available through an online database. The paper also has been widely considered the paper of record in the U.S. and has the reputation of setting the agenda for many other news outlets, he said.

One downside of using the Times, Althaus said, is that it may exaggerate what Americans overall would have learned about casualties. Most would not have read the Times, and other news sources were unlikely to have

its level of coverage.

"So we've probably discovered the upper limit for casualty information that people might have been exposed to," he said – even before taking into account that many people don't closely follow the latest news about an ongoing war.

In conducting their study, Althaus and his research colleagues did not examine the paper's entire wartime archive, but rather every war-related story that appeared on randomly sampled days, falling roughly every two months. Editorials and columns were included along with straight news stories; letters to the editor were not.

Therefore the study's data and conclusions are drawn from 1,977 war-related stories published in 125 daily issues of the Times during American involvement in the five wars.

Though the study emphasizes the consistently low mention of casualties across the wars, there are some differences, Althaus said. Mentions of U.S. military dead, for instance, were substantially higher for the Iraq War, at 20 percent of war stories, versus the 11 percent average overall. Some of that, however, resulted from greater use of "Names of the Dead" lists, which provide no context for the deaths and appear on inside pages.

Iraq war coverage also focused much more on deaths than on the wounded, about 2-to-1, versus the roughly equal coverage in earlier wars. (The wounded significantly outnumbered the dead in each war, and in Iraq it was more than 7-to-1 for the period considered in the study.)

It's commonly assumed that greater government censorship of war coverage means less news about casualties, but the study shows little support for that conclusion, Althaus said. The heavily censored coverage

of World War I, for instance, was little different from that of the uncensored coverage of Vietnam in the mention of casualties, he said.

"The ways that journalists tell the story of wartime casualties have changed hardly at all since World War I," Althaus said. "This suggests that what shapes news coverage of the dead and wounded may have more to do with how journalists cover wars than with how governments try to filter coverage of the fighting."

**More information:** The paper, "Uplifting Manhood to Wonderful Heights? News Coverage of the Human Costs of Military Conflict From World War One to Gulf War Two," is available online from *Political Communication* at [dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.894159](https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2014.894159) or at [faculty.las.illinois.edu/salth...plifting\\_manhood.pdf](http://faculty.las.illinois.edu/salth...plifting_manhood.pdf).

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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