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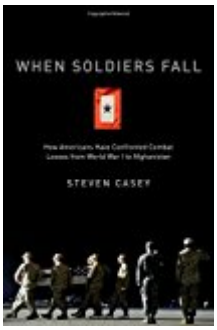

Steven Casey. *When Soldiers Fall: How Americans Have Confronted Combat Losses from World War I to Afghanistan.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 320 pp. $31.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-989038-5.

Reviewed by Paul Springer

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey (Air University)

Steven Casey's *When Soldiers Fall* is a work with a brilliant conceptual approach to a fascinating topic. Specifically, Casey examines the oft-repeated trope that the US public cannot accept large numbers of casualties in foreign wars. To investigate this claim, Casey analyzes American conflicts from World War I to the most recent engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan. He argues that the American public has proven capable of withstanding enormous losses within the armed forces, provided that US citizens believe the government is pursuing the war effort with an effective strategy. Further, the American public does not tolerate deception on the part of the military or the civilian leadership regarding casualty figures, and any attempts to shape the message or massage the data has typically resulted in a rising level of discontent regarding the current war. Casey also finds that military and political leaders have often been tempted to use military casualties for their own gain. This gain can include whipping up support for a conflict, as was the case immediately after Pearl Harbor. It can also encompass using wartime losses to criticize the president, particularly if there is a perception that the war is not being prosecuted effectively.

Casey conducted an impressive amount of archival research to support his assertions, and his meta-analysis of the broad effects of casualty rates is solid. It is particularly impressive that any inherent bias or political preference he might hold for certain presidents does not emerge in the narrative; he presents his findings in an even-handed manner and is perfectly willing to criticize some of the most revered American leaders of the twentieth century, where appropriate. If anything, Casey seems to be rather disdainful of politicians in general, particularly those who send American personnel into danger without carefully considering the ramifications of their decision making. The writing style is very engaging, and the argument flows naturally from one key period of conflict to the next.

Casey finds that the civilian leadership of the United States, regardless of political party or time

period, has found the issue of casualty reporting to be particularly challenging. On the one hand, an open democratic society expects transparency from its leadership, and the free flow of information. On the other hand, publicly releasing casualty figures can potentially depress the morale of the citizenry, and theoretically might provide significant intelligence to the enemy regarding the effect of specific operations. No administration has managed this problem without incidents, and all have been accused of hiding key information from the public. Most of those accusations have been groundless; the public does not realize the enormous amount of effort that is expended into personnel recovery, tabulation of casualty information, and notification of family members of fallen troops. Of course, this effort is often disrupted by the needs to conduct wartime operations—at times, there has literally been no report of casualties sent to higher headquarters due to the requirements of combat. In the frenetic pace of a twenty-four-hour news cycle, the public may have expectations that cannot be met under any circumstances.

The work is at its strongest when examining the wars of the past, no doubt in large part because the necessary sources to support Casey's claims have been archived, categorized, and made available to the public. Thus, the bibliography and endnotes are well stocked with materials from before and during the Cold War, but the more recent analysis is forced to be somewhat speculative and based on open sources. His examinations of the incursions into Grenada and Panama are very detailed, while his coverage of the deployments of the 1990s is almost nonexistent. Contrary to what Casey states, President Bill Clinton did not hesitate to deploy forces—Clinton actually ordered more deployments than any president in the past century, although the size of the forces sent tended to be relatively small. Unfortunately, many of the materials that might have significantly influenced his argument regarding the wars of the twenty-first century are still classified and may not be opened for public scrutiny for decades to come. Of course, some administrations have simply proven more transparent than others and have left more materials readily available for researchers.

This work is excellent, but it is not flawless. Casey relies heavily on the concept of "technowar," a term that he seems to use for any conflict strategy that is reliant on technology. Of course, every war relies on technology, and strategies that do not take it into account are either extremely inefficient or are exercises in fantasy. What Casey really means is that the United States has gradually sought to replace the human costs of warfare with advanced technology, which can at times convey an enormous, possibly insurmountable, tactical advantage. The United States has also sought to use its massive industrial base to literally outproduce its opponents, particularly during the world wars, when American forces used their superior logistical capabilities to expend an enormous amount of ordnance relative to the size of the forces engaged. Unfortunately, the silly term "technowar" becomes extremely distracting, in part because its usage seems to change throughout the text. There are also a surprising number of copyediting errors throughout the work, some of which produce humorous but frustrating results, such as repeating otherwise unique sentences, often with a clever turn of phrase, in multiple locations.

The author is a professor of international history at the London School of Economics. His previous works have examined the roles of the presidency and public relations during World War II and the Korean War. This most recent effort builds effectively on his previous books and is an excellent resource for scholars interested in how the military and civilian leadership communicate with the public during a time of war. Despite its minor flaws, it is a fine acquisition for a broad audience of readers interested in military history.

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