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Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight

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“Rich Man’s War, Poor Man’s Fight”

Harry van der Linden

Under review

Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, *The Casualty Gap: The Causes and Consequences of American Wartime Inequalities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010. Pp. 302. Cloth, \$ 29.95. ISBN 978-0-19-539096-4.

“It is a rich man’s war and a poor man’s fight.” This popular saying, going back to the Civil War when drafted men could buy their way out of military service for \$300, is cited by Kriner and Shen to show that there is a long history of awareness that American wars tend to have an objectionable casualty (killed in action) gap: the soldiers who fight the wars come disproportionately from poor communities, and so combat deaths are disproportionately found in the lower socioeconomic communities rather than reflecting a common and shared sacrifice of all citizens (viii-ix). Recently, the issue has been voiced forcefully by Bob Herbert in his op-ed “Blood Runs Red, not Blue” (New York Times, August 18, 2005), who writes that “for the most part, the only people sacrificing for [the Iraq] war are the troops and their families, and very few of them are coming from the privileged economic classes.” Kriner and Shen continue: “What is new in our book is not the *claim* that inequality is tied to wartime death but the *evidence* we present to support it” (ix).

Their empirical study is focused on World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Iraq War (of 2003). Kriner and Shen first show that there is a significant socioeconomic casualty gap with regard to the last three wars while this is not true of World War II. More specifically, “in Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq, [communities with] the lowest three incomes deciles took on 35 percent, 36 percent, and 38 percent of the casualties, respectively, [while] the top three deciles by income suffered only 25 percent, 26 percent, and 23 percent of the casualties, respectively” (29). A similar socioeconomic casualty gap is manifest when the measure of socioeconomic status is educational attainment instead of income. It is often said that there is

also a racial casualty gap, but Kriner and Shen argue that the data do not support this view after the Pentagon in 1967 reduced the number of blacks in combat positions in the Vietnam War in response to critics asserting such a gap. In fact, beyond this date, “after controlling for socioeconomic conditions, a greater percentage of minorities in a community is related to *lower* casualty rates” (40).

Kriner and Shen rightfully stress that the very fact that communities at the high and low ends of the socioeconomic spectrum have different casualty rates does not necessarily imply that *individuals* from poor socioeconomic background have died disproportionately in recent American wars. The communities for which casualty data are available are counties or census designated places, and “while it is highly unlikely, it is possible that casualties in a community with a low median income and level of educational attainment are predominantly from high-income, high-education backgrounds” (41-42). We lack data on the level of individuals to “conclude *definitively* that a casualty gap exists between individuals from socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds” (42). Still, the hypothesis is well-supported. In regard to the Iraq War, data are available that allow the determination of casualties of smaller census block groups (about one thousand residents). Block-group analysis shows that casualties within rich communities are disproportionately from blocks with income levels lower than those of the community at large, while casualties are also a bit more concentrated within the poorest blocks of poor communities (46). (The important implication is that the casualty gap percentages noted on the community level probably significantly understate the scope of the gap on the individual level.) Moreover, we have plausible and data-supported explanations for how the casualty gap between rich and poor communities has come about since World War II, and these explanations also account for the individual socioeconomic casualty gap. Accordingly, “the burden of proof [is on] those who reject an individual-level casualty gap” (58).

Two mechanisms have led to an increasing casualty gap beginning with the Korean War. The first one is that the economic benefits of volunteering for military service are comparatively more attractive and compelling to those with fewer economic opportunities. Here it should be noted that even before the emergence of the all-volunteer army in 1973 more than 50 percent of the fighting forces in the Korean and Vietnam Wars were volunteers (63). The second mechanism is that with the Korean War the testing of skills of new recruits became effective in assigning occupational roles, with the result that those who had lower levels of educational attainment more often ended up in combat roles. To complete the picture, we must also take into account changes in the draft (74-80). A widespread draft in World War II and ineffective occupational assignment procedures at the time based on educational attainment

(68-69) explain the lack of a casualty gap in this war. A more limited and selective draft, offering, for example, easy student deferments, reduced its blunting impact on the casualty gap in the Korean and Vietnam Wars, while the absence of the draft in the Iraq War helps to explain why this war has the highest casualty gap.

Kriner and Shen discuss next why the casualty gap matters. They note that the logic of the market as well as the economic and recognition opportunities provided by the military to the socioeconomically disadvantaged are arguments in favor of the status quo, while a long tradition of understanding fighting war as a public service with sacrifice to be borne by all goes against the casualty gap. On their account, Americans tend to be swayed by the traditional view because they become more opposed to war or lower their tolerance of high casualties in future wars once the casualty gap is brought to their attention. To support this claim, Kriner and Shen devised a survey in which they compared on a variety of questions respondents who were told that the casualties of the Iraq War were a “shared sacrifice” to respondents who were briefly informed about the casualty gap. The control group was not provided with this additional information. With regard to the question of whether the Iraq War was a mistake, approximately 56 % of the respondents of both the control group and the shared sacrifice group answered in the affirmative, while this rose to almost 62 % for the casualty gap group (97). Similarly, support for the draft went up from 18.6 % for the shared sacrifice group to 24.0% for the casualty gap group, while it was 20.8% for the control group (99). Moreover, with regard to the question of how many casualties would be acceptable in going to war with Iran to stop its nuclear program (and the respondents were provided casualty figures, among others, of around 400,000 in World War II, 54,000 in the Korean War, and 383 in the Gulf War), 37.4% of the shared sacrifice group said that 51-5,000 casualties were acceptable and, respectively, 30.9% and 34.8 % of the casualty gap group and control group held this opinion (102). The differences were smaller with regard to those who found more than 5,000 casualties acceptable; respectively, 15%, 14%, and 16.7% of the control, casualty gap, and shared sacrifice groups offered this answer. The remainder of the respondents found fewer than 50 casualties acceptable (and so, in effect, more or less opposed going to war).

It is debatable whether these figures show that there is currently a deep public concern with the casualty gap once the facts are known. Kriner and Shen write that the “6 percentage point increase [in viewing the Iraq War as a mistake] ... is even more striking when we remember the modest nature of the inequality cue [provided to the respondents] and the large amount of information that most Americans already possessed on Iraq, with which this new cue had to compete” (97). They speculate that the percentage increase would become even larger if

details of the casualty gap would be provided. But this cuts both ways in that further reflection on the casualty gap may lead to rationalizations. Moreover, the inequality cue suggests that the Iraq War is a mistake and this might have influenced the answers of the respondents, making the 6% far from impressive. With regard to the hypothetical war against Iran, what is, arguably, more striking and significant than the differences in casualty tolerance is that Kriner and Shen held polls in both September 2007 and March 2009 (of which the figures are provided above) and that the percentage of Americans of the control, shared sacrifice, and casualty groups who supported more than 50 casualties had increased in the range of 12 to 14% by the latter date (102). We may anticipate, then, that once the American propaganda machine is at full work, casualty gap concerns will have little bearing on preventing or restricting this war (or other future wars).

The casualty gap has an impact on political behavior irrespective of people's awareness of this gap. Comparing communities at the opposite ends of the socioeconomic spectrum, Kriner and Shen argue that poor communities with higher casualty rates will likely have a higher proportion of citizens with personal links to the casualties of a given war; its politicians will more likely be opposed to the war (due to its human costs); and its local media will likely pay more attention to the casualties of the war (113-23). Thus one would expect to find greater opposition to the war among citizens of poor communities and more support of anti-war politicians. Kriner and Shen discuss in great detail how indeed these expectations are overall corroborated during the Vietnam War and currently during the Iraq War. They conclude:

“Consistent with a large literature in political science, we find that Americans do respond to combat casualties by lowering their support for military operations and for the political leaders waging them. However, they do not do so *uniformly*. Rather, this backlash is most intense among citizens who have experienced the costs of war most intimately through the lens of their local communities” (182). Kriner and Shen add that “because residents of socioeconomically disadvantaged communities possess fewer of the resources needed to engage in politics, the casualty gap decreases the political pressure that is brought to bear on military policymakers to change course.” In other words, since affluent communities are more shielded from the human costs of war they are less likely to exercise their greater political influence in opposition to a given war even when the casualties overall rise significantly. This adds a new twist to the indictment that the typical American war is a “rich man’s war.”

Depending on their outcome, wars may have a positive or negative impact on the democratic participation and engagement of citizens, including their civic engagement, their trust in government, their interest in politics, and their willingness to vote. Kriner and Shen’s final

research concerns how the casualty gap plays out in this regard. Most importantly, they show that the Vietnam War disproportionately led to reduced democratic participation and engagement within high-casualty communities. The negative impact was more limited and restricted to fewer dimensions of democratic participation and engagement in the case of the Korean War, while high-sacrifice communities in World War II may even have gained disproportionately with regard to the positive participatory effects of this war.

The last chapter of *The Casualty Gap* offers some reflections on the “future of the casualty gap.” Kriner and Shen anticipate that “because current military selection and occupational assignment mechanisms are unlikely to change, ... the casualty gap will remain with us” (227). Still, they argue that the gap should be placed high on the agenda of policymakers because “open engagement of the issue might reenergize the democratic brake on costly military policies that the casualty gap blunts” (228). A clear problem with this expectation is that current American wars have much lower casualty rates and so the inequity of the casualty gap is nowadays presumably much less striking and compelling to the public at large than in earlier wars. The very fact that current military service is voluntary has a similar impact. More broadly, it is widely accepted within American society that the poor end up with jobs with greater casualty risks, jobs that also lead to a wide variety of “quality of life” gaps. In my view, it is ethically more urgent to focus attention on the collective failure of Americans to take responsibility for how their recent wars have had devastating consequences for civilian populations of other nations than to focus on their failure to take collective responsibility for the inequity of the distribution of their fallen soldiers. And, strategically, it might be more promising to try to increase the “democratic brake” on future military interventions by focusing attention on the economic costs of American wars. At the same time, I think that Kriner and Shen have strengthened the case for the inequity of the casualty gap by exposing its numerous dimensions and ramifications. They also rightfully note in their concluding reflections the need for an empirical study of what might turn out to become politically speaking a more influential gap, the “wounded gap.” The wounded/kill ratio in the Iraq War is 1 to 7.3 (through December 2008), while it was 1 to 1.7 in World War II, 1 to 1.9 in the Korean War, and 1 to 2.6 in the Vietnam War (229). Shrinking government budgets may add to the injustice done to poor communities, and those left wounded in military action at least can fight to have their voices heard.