CHAPTER 4

Misreading the Public

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Ms. Marvin said she was uncertain what course the United States should follow, because she did not know the alternatives. All she can be sure of, she said, is “I’m very against genocide.”

— New York Times, April 1999

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Public opinion is centrally important in the process of taking a democratic nation to war. However, in this uncertain and tumultuous post–Cold War period where internal conflicts are the norm, how does the “lone superpower” walk that fine line between neo-isolationist indifference and “globocop”? According to Catherine Kelleher, at the heart of the debate over the use of force is the question:

[How] do we now choose between what some portray as our moral responsibility to intervene to prevent further atrocities and protect the innocent, and what others argue should be our principled avoidance of an involvement in an uncertain quagmire?

The quagmire concern seemed to loom large for American policymakers confronting multiple humanitarian emergencies in the 1990s. The shadow first of Vietnam and later Somalia loomed large over them all. Policymakers assumed that a new general phenomenon was at work: the “body-bag syndrome,” a tendency for public opinion to turn against interventions that threaten to generate troops casualties. This “casualty hypothesis,” according to Philip Everts, contends that:

K. J. Campbell, *Genocide and the Global Village*
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Public support for the use of military force in high-risk operations in circumstances other than direct threats to the country’s security will not be forthcoming, and that initial support in such cases will dwindle as soon as casualties are incurred.4

Political leaders fear being politically whipsawed by first the “CNN effect” and then the “Dover factor.” They fear that televised scenes of humanitarian suffering will produce a public outcry to “Do something!” only to be followed by angry demands of “Bring our troops home!” once the flag-draped coffins begin arriving to Dover Air Force Base. Consequently, decisionmakers have sought to avoid political risk by keeping consideration of U.S. combat troops in complex humanitarian emergencies—including cases of genocide—“off the table.” As Mendlovitz and Fousek have explained:

The rather gruesome and tragic image of the body bag conveys perhaps the greatest obstacle to effective UN actions to halt the recent killings in both the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. That is to say, the major states of the world—the United States, Britain, France, and perhaps Russia—had the capacity to intervene in these situations and could have done so in a manner that would have saved countless lives. But these powerful states failed to act because their chief executives were fearful of an irate domestic backlash should any of their military personnel be killed in carrying out humanitarian intervention.5

This assumption that “the political traffic [public opinion] will not bear” a policy of using U.S. troops to suppress genocide in Bosnia, Rwanda, or Kosovo seemed to have solid evidence.6 For instance, an ABC poll conducted in the fall and winter of 1992/93 found that 58 percent of Americans were firmly opposed to using U.S. ground troops under any circumstances in the war in Bosnia.7 In early 1993, the Times Mirror Center for the People and the Press found that 55 percent of Americans opposed the use of military force to stop the fighting in Bosnia. In September 1993, according to an NBC poll, 59 percent opposed the use of U.S. troops in Bosnia, even as peacekeepers. By December 1993, a New York Times poll showed that 65 percent of Americans opposed U.S. military involvement in Bosnia. It seemed that, across the board, Americans believed that Bosnia was not an American fight.8

Regarding Rwanda, after the debacle just five months earlier in downtown Mogadishu in which eighteen U.S. soldiers died—and the firestorm of criticism that followed it—U.S. officials assumed that another U.S. intervention in the heart of Africa was politically out of the question.9 In three consecutive polls during the Kosovo conflict, a small