

Are the Armed Forces Understood and Supported by the Public? A View from the United Kingdom

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Abstract

Despite the importance of public opinion in supporting the military and their missions, little is known about how the UK public perceive their Armed Forces. This article reviews and evaluates available research and opinion poll data of public attitudes toward the UK military and situates the evidence within the civil–military gap literature. Current evidence suggests public regard for the UK Armed Forces is high despite low levels of support for the Iraq and Afghanistan missions. Public understanding of the work of the Armed Forces is limited. Nonetheless, the United Kingdom’s long history of military deployments may have given the public an “intuitive understanding” of the basic realities of the military compared with other European states. There are indications of differences in attitudes between the UK Armed Forces and wider British society, but no firm evidence that the civil–military “gap” has become a “gulf” as claimed by some military leaders.

Keywords

public opinion, UK armed forces, civil–military gap

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Introduction

The UK Armed Forces have a well-established tradition of engagement in military operations that extends back into Britain's imperial past. The military has long been a key focus of interest for both the UK public and the media, but this has strengthened in recent years as a result of their involvement in over a decade of intense operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet despite this development, how supportive the public are, or how much they understand of the UK Armed Forces remains unclear.

How the public perceive their Armed Forces is important for a range of reasons. Public opinion plays an important role in supporting defense and foreign policy.¹ Public attitudes can also influence recruitment and retention in the Armed Forces as well as how Service leavers transition back into civilian society, all concerns expressed by the Royal Navy, Royal Air Force (RAF), and the British Army.² Given these issues, it is surprising that there is currently limited knowledge on the subject of UK public attitudes toward the Armed Forces. While there is some robust research in the United States and other European countries on these issues, in the United Kingdom the majority of studies have been conducted via opinion polls. More in-depth or nationally representative data are infrequent in comparison with other nations and it is only recently that public attitudes to the military were included in the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey, the most influential survey of public opinion in Britain.³

Literature Search

By drawing on evidence from the 2011 BSA survey, as well as a wide-ranging literature review, we describe what is currently known about UK public opinion of the Armed Forces. Literature was gathered through reference searching and literature searches of abstracts in databases such as journal storage (JSTOR), Google Scholar, and *Armed Forces & Society* using the search terms "UK Public" or "public" or "attitudes" or "support" or "understanding" in combination with all of the following terms: "Armed Forces" or "military" or "army" or "navy" or "air-force." Articles were selected if they specifically addressed UK public attitudes to the Armed Forces or the attitudes of other countries in order to provide background and context to the issue of public attitudes toward the military. Opinion poll data were gathered through using the search terms "military," "Armed Forces," and "soldiers" in databases from Ipsos Mori, ComRes, YouGov, and Angus Reid. Sources were limited to research published after January 2000, in order to ensure focus was on the most recent public attitudes. Sources selected for inclusion in this article were (1) from a solely UK population and (2) reporting public views explicitly related to UK Armed Forces or UK military operations. Data were excluded if reporting data from populations other than the United Kingdom. Key aspects of public support have been selected as metrics of UK public attitudes; public support and pride in the UK Armed Forces, voluntary donations to Service charities, support for defense

spending, and public understanding of the Armed Forces. This evidence is blended with understandings about the civil–military gap within the UK context in order to build a wider picture of UK public support and understanding for the Armed Forces. Additional information can be found at afs.sagepub.com.

This article begins with an examination of the historical context of the relationship between the UK public and the Armed Forces in order to frame our understanding of current public attitudes. We proceed to discuss the “civil–military gap” theory and its relevance for an analysis of relations between the Armed Forces and society in the United Kingdom. Current knowledge on public understanding and support of the military will then be presented and summarized. Finally, gaps in the knowledge base and areas for future research are identified.

The Historical Context of UK Public Support for the Armed Forces

The relationship between the UK public and the UK Armed Forces has not always been an easy one. As an island country based primarily on maritime power, there have been only occasional risks of invasion,⁴ with much of the work of the Armed Forces taking place overseas in defense of the British Empire.⁵ The consequent absence of a military presence in everyday society meant that the relationship between the public and the Armed Forces was initially fractured, with relatively ambivalent public attitudes toward the UK military. Soldiers became better known for the trouble that they caused in garrison towns during peacetime than their service and were frequently viewed as a group to be tolerated until they were required.⁶

This initial disconnection in the relationship between the public and the Armed Forces changed during the twentieth century. War can often be a time when a nation unites in defense of its shared beliefs and way of life, and for the UK public, the First and Second World Wars were no exception.⁷ Few families were left untouched. Experience of direct military service spread throughout society with defense of the nation becoming an almost universal experience. Sons, fathers, and brothers were called up to active military service and women also participated, serving in noncombat roles in the women’s branches of all three services; the largest, the Woman’s Royal Air Force (WRAF), had 250,000 members between 1939 and 1945 alone.⁸ While war weariness affected public morale following the First World War,⁹ Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s posed a clear moral and physical threat to the United Kingdom. Although evidence is lacking, it is likely that this helped to rally support for the Armed Forces during a mission that was seen, at least in the West, as a just and necessary war.

The end of the Second World War brought about a number of changes to the structure of the Armed Forces and the missions in which they were engaged. While defense remained a central focus for the government and society during the Cold War and the United Kingdom’s contribution to North Atlantic Treaty Organization’s (NATO) deterrence of the Soviet Union, this was accompanied by a variety of small-

scale imperial and postimperial military campaigns, including counterterror operations in Northern Ireland. Conscription ended in the United Kingdom in 1963¹⁰ at a time when the nature of the missions assigned to the UK Armed Forces began to transform. The geopolitical changes following the fall of the Berlin wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union meant that engagement in classic interstate war declined, with the partial exception of the Falklands War during the early 1980s (the last case of “industrial war” for the United Kingdom until the Gulf war of 1991).¹¹ The end of the Cold War shifted the primary focus of the UK Armed Forces from defense of UK territory and countering alliances in the Eastern Bloc toward participation in military operations as part of multilateral forces under the auspices of the United Nations or NATO.¹² The goals and objectives of these “new missions” concentrated on peace enforcement, humanitarian relief, stabilization and democracy building, as well as counterterror and counterinsurgency operations.¹³ As these missions became increasingly specialized, the need for a large, easily mobilized military declined, prompting the UK Armed Forces to adjust their organizational structure and approach and leading to the emergence of a smaller, more agile, and highly trained all-volunteer military service which was better suited to participation in such missions.¹⁴ Economic pressures on public expenditure added a financial rationale for reductions in force levels and a rationalization of the organizational design of the military.¹⁵

These changes in the goals and structure of the Armed Forces had implications for public support for military operations and the military themselves. Historically, conflicts based on territorial disputes were underpinned by a clearly identifiable, “existential” threat or risk from external forces. Such missions are often seen to greater legitimacy¹⁶ and generate higher levels of public support for the Armed Forces¹⁷ as a consequence of the patriotism invoked during such campaigns. Contemporary missions, on the other hand, frequently have aims that are more diffuse, complex, or protean—the mission in Afghanistan being the most striking example. The resulting public uncertainty about involvement in such campaigns is often accompanied by grudging acceptance rather than widespread support.¹⁸ With public opinion playing an important role in foreign policy, poor support for current military missions can also limit the involvement of the UK Armed Forces in future campaigns. For example, it is likely that the public’s decreasing support for and perceived lack of success during the Iraq and Afghanistan missions¹⁹ has contributed to both the public’s and the political elite’s reluctance to become involved militarily in the crises in Syria and Mali.²⁰ With the formal conclusion to major UK combat operations in Afghanistan in April 2014, there is concern among political and military leaders that the currently strong levels of public support of the Armed Forces might fade into indifference. There are particular concerns that once further reductions in the size of the military following the 2015 Security and Defense Review are made, the Armed Forces—and especially the British Army, hitherto the largest of the three Services—could become increasingly disconnected from, and irrelevant, the general population. This issue of potential disconnections between the Armed

Forces and the general public stems from the concept of the civil–military gap, a theory which helps elucidate differences between the public and Armed Forces and the important implications of these on public support of the military, their missions, and government policy.

The Civil–military Gap and Attempts to Bridge

The civil–military gap describes the social distance that can arise between the Armed Forces and civilians from a lack of contact and shared experiences, and the implications for mutual understanding and support.²¹ In this article, discussion focuses on the differences in cultures, experiences, and demographics between the military and civil society in order to explore the impact that the civil–military gap may have on public perceptions of the UK Armed Forces. It is important to note that the term can also refer to connections between the military and the government, for example, experience of military service among current UK politicians is low, which may negatively affect the allocation of resources toward the military and support for certain defense policies; the last UK defense minister with military service left office in 1992.²² However, consideration of this aspect of the gap is beyond the scope of this article.

The question of the civil–military gap arose in the United States, first, in the debate between Huntington and Janowitz in the 1960s and 1970s. This addressed how far a military, necessarily conservative in its culture due to the functional imperatives of war, could afford to adjust to the increasingly liberal values of wider society, or whether society itself should become more conservative in order to bolster the military and its capacity to deter and if necessary prevail against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. Following the end of the Cold War, the theory evolved to focus more on the differences in the attitudes between the military and the civilian society and the potential impact of divergences on military effectiveness and national security.²³

Scholars in Europe and elsewhere began asking whether their own societies had experienced or were likely to experience similar problems, leading to the internationalization of the civil–military gap theory. Consensus regarding the answer to this question is still lacking,²⁴ largely as the civil–military gap is a complex issue and it is not easy to disentangle and operationalize the different facets of diverging cultures, experiences, and demographics between military and civil societies.²⁵ Although the extent of the gap in the United Kingdom is hard to operationalize, there are a number of examples that demonstrate the differences between civilian and military norms. The Army has expressed concerns that the lack of contact with the military and the social changes associated with the shift away from traditional labor-intensive manual occupations²⁶ means that new recruits often do not understand the expectations placed upon them.²⁷ Legal and social pressures²⁸ from society have forced the Armed Forces to alter a number of practices, overriding military concerns about operational effectiveness;²⁹ military dismissal for homosexuality was

overturned following the intervention of the European Court of Human Rights in 2000;³⁰ and employment opportunities for women have been extended, although the debate regarding their formal admission to ground combat roles is ongoing.³¹ Litigation against the military is increasing, with adverse events during combat operations now much more open to legal action from Service personnel, their families, or representatives.³² A Supreme Court ruling in 2013 which confirmed that the Ministry of Defense (MOD) could be sued for negligence regarding the provision of inadequate equipment during missions' means that human rights legislation can now be applied more fully in military spaces and the long-standing norm of combat immunity now being interpreted more narrowly.³³

The potential disconnections in these areas arising from the gap are of particular concern to the Armed Forces who rely on public support to maintain morale.³⁴ Disquiet among the UK military was so high that in 2007, the then Army Chief of General Staff, General (later Lord) Dannatt suggested that the traditional civil–military gap had escalated into a “gulf.”³⁵ A number of perceived consequences were outlined, including a lack of public understanding of the experiences of those who had served and indifference to their achievements.³⁶ Dannatt was not alone in holding these views, with both the former Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Mike Jackson, and the British commander in Iraq during 2006, Major General Richard Shirreff, expressing dissatisfaction with the current relationship between the Armed Forces and the public.³⁷

Concerns about the civil–military gap stem from the broader background of British military history and traditions. In countries without conscription, such as the United Kingdom post-1963, it is generally accepted that contact between society and the Armed Forces tends to be lower.³⁸ For example, in the United Kingdom only 7 percent of seventeen- to twenty-four-year-olds report that they have a member of their family serving in the military.³⁹ Along with the end of conscription come concerns about lower levels of understanding of the military,⁴⁰ which has spurred debate within other European countries such as Austria, Switzerland, France, and Sweden about how conversion to an all-volunteer force may affect public understanding and appreciation of military life.⁴¹ In the United Kingdom, the introduction of an all-volunteer force in the early 1960s occurred at a similar time to the beginning of wider cultural changes within the Western world. This shift toward what was subsequently referred to as a “postmodern” mind-set, with a greater focus on autonomy and personal fulfilment⁴² increasingly separated public attitudes from traditional military values of self-sacrifice, unit cohesion, obedience, and loyalty to the Crown; attributes the Armed Forces argue are necessary for operational effectiveness.⁴³ As most recently demonstrated by the overt public opposition toward the 2001 Afghanistan conflict and 2003–2009 Iraq campaign,⁴⁴ there has also been an increased questioning of tradition and less deference to authority,⁴⁵ with the public progressively more likely to question involvement in military campaigns or the evidence provided to support deployment of the UK Armed Forces. Combined with a decrease in direct contact between members of the public and military personnel,

these wider cultural changes and differences in cultural norms and beliefs are likely to have contributed to the civil–military gap in the United Kingdom.

The strongest indication of the apprehension around the civil–military gap in the United Kingdom is the introduction of the Armed Forces Covenant.⁴⁶ The levels of public support and understanding, and in particular how this might impact on recruitment, are an issue for all three military services, but for the Army, concerns were such that a document on the mutual obligations of the public, the government, and the Armed Forces was developed as there was a concern that some new recruits had only a vague idea of what military life entailed.⁴⁷ Indeed, the development of the Covenant was tied up with the Army’s defense of its professional space from outside incursions and of its interests during the wars of September 2011.⁴⁸ This formed the basis for the Armed Forces Covenant,⁴⁹ which underpins the UK government’s strategy to address the civil–military gap.

The introduction of the Armed Forces Covenant into UK legislation in 2011⁵⁰ followed a period of extensive public debate regarding the treatment of injured veterans and strong political pressure from military and political leaders. The Covenant serves to set out the rights and obligations of the Armed Forces, the government, and the public in relation to the sacrifices made by those serving in the Armed Forces while partially protecting military practices from the interference of society.⁵¹ Public support appears to be strong, and polls show that in 2011, 62 percent agreed it was important for the Covenant to be enshrined in law in order to protect the welfare of the Armed Forces and their families.⁵²

As with the Social Compact in the United States,⁵³ the Covenant seeks to ensure there is provision from the state for the Armed Forces and their families, but has stimulated discussion about the support that the military currently receive, and perhaps more importantly what they need, in a way that the Social Compact never has. Debates around government support for the Armed Forces have been driven by media stories about the treatment of military personnel returning from Iraq and Afghanistan⁵⁴ and high-profile campaigns such as the Royal British Legion’s “Honour the Covenant” campaign.⁵⁵ Much of the conversation has focused on the Government’s duty of care toward individuals who have served their country, and this focus is reflected in the view of 68 percent of the public polled that “if the Prime Minister makes a promise to the Armed Forces, he should keep it regardless of external circumstances.”⁵² It is not clear how successful discussion of the Covenant has been in informing public opinion on the relationship and respective obligations between the Armed Forces and the general public.⁵⁶ Public support for the Covenant at the time of its introduction appeared to be strong; polls show that 62 percent of the public agree it was important for the Covenant to be enshrined in law in order to protect the welfare of the Armed Forces and their families. A report by the MOD, however, found that 61 percent of the public report knowing nothing about the Covenant,⁵⁷ suggesting that it may have not gone far enough in meeting the initial aims of emphasizing the public obligations toward the Armed Forces and that further efforts may be needed.

The Armed Forces Covenant has given rise to other efforts by the UK government to address the civil–military gap. The Armed Forces Community Covenant, adapted from a US strategy for increasing public engagement,⁵⁸ encourages communities to support local military personnel in their area and improve public understanding of issues affecting the Armed Forces.⁵⁹ Veterans Day has been renamed as Armed Forces Day in order to raise awareness of personnel currently serving as well as those who have been involved in previous conflicts. What effect these efforts may have on improving public understanding and reducing possible public indifference is difficult to estimate, but exploration of the UK public’s support and understanding of the Armed Forces provide an indication of whether further efforts are needed.

UK Public Support for the Armed Forces

As discussed earlier, public support for the Armed Forces was historically linked with public support for the missions on which they serve. However, this relationship has changed in relation to modern military campaigns. Public endorsement of the contemporary campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan missions peaked during the early stages of invasion and fell significantly as the missions continued.⁶⁰ Since 2006, public support for military operations in Afghanistan has remained at around 30 percent to 40 percent,⁶¹ and although 75 percent of the public believe removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq was the right thing to do, 69 percent do not believe that the war was worth the human and financial cost.⁶² Despite opposition to the campaigns, the public appear to be overwhelmingly supportive of the military personnel serving on them, with more than 90 percent reporting they support members of the Armed Forces regardless of what they think about those missions.⁶³ Clearly, the public are able to separate their opinions regarding military operations from attitudes toward military personnel.

Previous data suggest that the public have a positive view of the UK Armed Forces and there is a great deal of respect and admiration for the Armed Forces (see Table 1; additional information can be found in the Online Supplementary Table). Supportive attitudes toward the Armed Forces vary from 50 percent to 80 percent depending on the survey, but are overwhelmingly positive in terms of both favorable opinion and trust. The public is also aware of the professional nature of the modern Armed Forces; 83 percent of the public report a great deal or a fair amount of respect for the Armed Forces because of their work in Afghanistan, 84 percent admire soldiers as a profession, and 83 percent state that they trust the military.⁶⁴ A third of the public report that the Armed Forces are a national institution or icon that makes them feel proud to be British, behind the National Health Service (NHS) and the country’s history.⁶⁵

Findings from the 2011 BSA survey confirm these findings, with 83 percent of the public saying they have a high or a very high opinion of the UK Armed Forces, and 75 percent reporting a great deal of respect.⁶⁶ This “general” public perception of the UK Armed Forces is likely to vary in relation to gender, age, social class,

Table 1. Examples of UK Public Support for the Armed Forces.

Public opinion of the Armed Forces			
2013	MOD and Armed Forces Reputation Survey Spring 2013: Topline Findings	Do you have a favorable impression of the UK Armed Forces?	84 percent report a very or mainly favorable impression of the Armed Forces 5 percent report mainly or very unfavorable impression of the Armed Forces
2013	YouGov survey	How much respect do you have for the UK Armed Forces for their service in Afghanistan?	83 percent a great deal or a fair amount of respect
2013	State of the Nation 2013 (Ipsos Mori)	What icon makes you proud to be British?	40 percent selected the Armed Forces
2012	Public opinion of the UK Armed Forces (British Social Attitudes 29th report)	What is your general opinion of the UK Armed Forces? Do you respect the Armed Forces as a profession?	83 percent have a high or very high opinion of the UK Armed Forces 75 percent have a great deal of respect for the UK Armed Forces Has your opinion changed over the last few years? 77 percent report no change over the last few years
2012	MOD and Armed Forces Reputation Survey	How favorable or unfavorable is your overall opinion or impression is (of each of the following)? UK Armed Forces	Autumn 2011: 87 percent hold very or mainly favorable opinion of UK Armed Forces—similar across all Services March 2011: 85 percent hold very or mainly favorable opinion of UK Armed Forces—similar across all Services
2012	YouGov-Cambridge Survey Results	Which of these professions do you admire?	84 percent admire soldiers
2012	Britons are more proud of their history, NHS, and army than the Royal Family (Ipsos Mori)	The establishment that makes you most proud to be British	36 percent selected the Armed Forces, third highest choice behind history (45 percent), and the NHS (37 percent)
2011	YouGov	On a scale of 1 to 10 (10 being highest), the majority rate their pride in the Armed Forces at 10	28 percent rate their pride in the Armed Forces at 10 percent to 56 percent rate their pride at eight of the ten or higher

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

2008	MOD poll: Public's support for Armed Forces at record levels (Daily Telegraph/Ipsos Mori)	Support for British troops has risen to record levels, new poll shows	81 percent have a favorable view of members of the Armed Forces
2001	Public Opinion and European Defence (Manigart, P.)	For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it, or tend not to trust it?	83 percent of UK public trust the military
Voluntary donations to Armed Forces charities			
2013	Public Awareness of UK Veterans' Charities	Do you know of any organizations or charities that support ex-Service members of the UK Armed Forces? Please tell us the names of the organizations or charities you have heard of (up to three responses)	64 percent of the public were aware of a Service charity or organization for ex-Service personnel
		Did you buy a poppy last year for Remembrance Sunday?	78 percent had bought a Poppy during the Poppy Appeal
2013	Majority of Britons Who Support Armed Forces' Charities Will Continue to Do So After Afghanistan, Shows New Poll (COBSEO)	—	Three-fourths of the public support charities for troops returning from Afghanistan
2012	Donations to Armed Forces charities surge, while giving to other charities dips (Charities Aid Foundation)	—	Donations to charities established to support Britain's Armed Forces have leapt by more than 25 percent since 2008
Public endorsement of defense spending			
2013	YouGov Survey	Role of government in providing defense	37 percent say government has an important role to play in defending the country and its citizens with effective police and Armed Forces (health and education and immigration only higher options)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

2013	YouGov Survey	Imagine (the UK) was run in the way you would most like. Which of these do you think would then be the three or four most important functions of the UK government?	37 percent selected defense, behind health and immigration
2013	Labor close the gap on economy with conservatives, but still don't convince that they would do a better job (Ipsos Mori)	As you may know, the government is reducing the overall level of public spending as part of the process of reducing borrowing. Which two or three, if any, of the following areas do you think the UK money from?	28 percent agree defense spending should be cut, behind overseas aid and benefits
2013	4th Report Engaging the public in National Strategy (House of Commons)	For each one, please say whether you think the United Kingdom should increase the amount of money it spends, or decrease the amount of money it spends, or should keep the amount of money it spends about the same as it is now	40 percent agree the UK should increase defense spending, compared with 55 percent education and 68 percent health 28 percent agree the UK should increase defense spending after knowing total amount of current spend, compared with 44 percent education and 57 percent health
2013	Effects of defense spending (YouGov)	The cuts have damaged Britain's ability to defend itself against security threats, and should be reversed Defense should be protected from future cuts, even if this means bigger cuts elsewhere	38 percent agree 46 percent agree
2012	NHS is number one area of public spending to protect from cuts says new Ipsos Mori/Nuffield Trust poll	Which two or three, if any, of the following main areas of public spending do you think should be protected from any cuts?	9 percent choose defense (down from 13 percent in June 2009)

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

2012	Defense spending (British Social Attitudes 29th report)	Select the public service that would be their highest priority for extra spending	5 percent selected defense in 2011
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Note: MOD = Ministry of Defense.

education, and political affiliation; generally older people, conservatives, and men tend to be more supportive of the Armed Forces and their missions.⁶⁷ Personal military experience and family connections to the military are likely to influence attitudes.⁶⁸ Although there are some differences across society, this study found that “most people, irrespective of age, educational qualifications or political affiliation—hold the military in high regard” and that these opinions are relatively stable over time.⁶⁹ Thus, the public’s respect and high regard for the Armed Forces suggest an overall positive view of the UK Armed Forces.

That the public are supportive of Armed Forces personnel regardless of opposition to the recent missions on which they have served indicates that the Armed Forces are perceived as people doing the job they are trained for⁷⁰—and doing it well or with professional competence. The separation of the politics of a situation from those in it reflects a broader change in western military institutions, stemming from the increasing perception of Armed Forces personnel as individuals, defined by their personal and familial relationships and professionalism.⁷¹ King argues that the emergence of the professional military in the twentieth century, as epitomized by the all-volunteer force, has changed the social identity of the soldier and, therefore, how the public perceives members of the Armed Forces. Whereas conscripted forces drew on identities such as the politically motivated citizen soldier inspired by civic values and/or ethnic nationalism, as well as masculine norms, which made up for a lack of military experience, the contemporary military relies increasingly on the professionalism of troops to operate effectively. Personnel are recruited based on their ability to perform the job and pass objective performance standards with sexual orientation, gender, and ethnicity becoming less relevant. As a result, the public comes to understand military personnel as individuals in terms of their professional achievement, rather as a representation of, for example, national identity.⁷²

Public support includes less overt signs of endorsement (see Table 1; additional information can be found in the Online Supplementary Table). Appreciation for the Armed Forces in the United Kingdom is commonly expressed through voluntary financial donations to Service charities,⁷³ as displayed by the overwhelming level of donations to Help for Heroes in the wake of the murder of Lee Rigby.⁷⁴ Donations to Armed Forces charities increased 25 percent between 2008 and 2013 while other charitable sectors faced decreases and nearly 75 percent of the public state they

would continue to support this sector following the United Kingdom's withdrawal from Afghanistan.⁷⁵ Nearly two-thirds of the public are aware of a Service charity for ex-Service personnel and more than three-quarters had donated during the Poppy Appeal prior to the survey.⁷⁶ The two largest charities, Royal British Legion and Help for Heroes, both raised approximately £30 million in their last annual campaigns,⁷⁷ and there are an estimated 2,000 Service charities operating in England and Wales alone.⁷⁸

One issue with the success of charitable campaigns is their reliance on characterizing Service personnel, and veterans in particular, as victims. Although extremely successful in increasing donations, this portrayal and its contrast with both military culture and how Service personnel regard themselves is a matter for concern. While the MOD appreciates donations to charitable organizations and provides information on how to donate to them,⁷⁹ this perception may contribute to the adoption of a sympathetic attitude toward the Armed Forces by the public, especially when fueled by media articles depicting soldiers as not only heroes but as victims of war and government insensitivity.⁸⁰ This hero-victim dichotomy is a catch-22 for the Armed Forces; public sympathy toward the military can undermine morale and support for deployment on future missions, but may lead to an increase in overall support for the military during operations. Yet, this type of support may be the antithesis of what members of the Armed Forces want. As outlined succinctly by former commander of 3 Para Regiment, British Army, Colonel Stuart Tootal, "Soldiers don't want sympathy, they don't want pity, they just want support, and the last thing they want is for the British public to wobble on them now."⁸¹

Alongside the question of whether the portrayal of members of the Armed Forces by charity organizations helps perpetuated public misconceptions about Service veterans are concerns about how much voluntary financial support can be expected of the public during an age of economic austerity in the United Kingdom. There is likely to be a limit to how much service provision the public feel willing to fund outside taxation and how much they feel the government should be responsible for given the service of military personnel in their name. The potential for public indifference to increase following the conclusion of major operations in Afghanistan and a reduction in the amount of news coverage of the military may affect public donations to charities, either through a decrease in public awareness of issues facing military personnel or a decline in willingness to donate to such charities.

Another measure of support for the Armed Forces, albeit one with a less immediate link to personnel, is public endorsement of government defense spending. Relative to other spending priorities, in particular health and education, there is limited support for increased defense expenditure despite high support for military personnel during the Iraq and Afghanistan missions (see Table 1; additional information can be found in the Online Supplementary Table). Even following public debates and news stories regarding a lack of resources for deployed personnel during the Afghanistan mission, public endorsement of defense spending did not change significantly, although it might be expected if it ensured personnel had what the public

viewed as the appropriate level resources.⁸² However, support for such measures may be meaningless when they occur in direct competition with other public sectors that are seen as more deserving. There also appears to be some tension in public attitudes regarding defense spending. When the public are asked about increasing defense spending in relation to budgetary cuts in other areas or following information on current levels of expenditure, there is little support for an increase. However, when asked in relation to the ability of the United Kingdom to defend itself, defense receives greater support (see Table 1; additional information can be found in the Online Supplementary Table). With the current period of economic austerity likely to persist for the next decade, how this tension may play out politically, especially in comparison with protected areas such as health, as well as following UK withdrawal from Afghanistan, is a matter of interest.

Overall, the public appears to hold the UK Armed Forces in high regard, but opposition to recent missions might mean that public endorsement continues to come with a more ambivalent element of sympathy or pity, although we cannot be certain of the extent of this. As a result, the stability of UK public support for the Armed Forces is far from certain. It is unknown whether this current situation, and the currently high levels of public support, will continue once the military withdraws from Afghanistan.

Understanding of the Armed Forces among the UK Public

On the surface, it appears that public understanding of the Armed Forces may be low, possibly an indication of a level of indifference. Opinion poll data suggest that the majority of the UK public do not feel confident in their understanding of the Armed Forces (see Table 2; additional information can be found in the Online Supplementary Table) and understanding of the work of the Armed Forces is low. When asked about their knowledge of the Armed Forces, 41 percent of the public report knowing only a little or almost nothing about the military, and 62 percent report knowing not very much or very little about daily military life.⁸³ Many of the public believe their comprehension of the objectives of the Iraq and Afghanistan missions to be incomplete⁸⁴ and accurate estimation of the number of deaths during these operations is poor.⁸⁵ Taken together, these findings imply, at the very least, lack of attention to the information available on the work of the military and at the most, an absence of interest in what the military do. While it is difficult to pinpoint the reasons for this, it is possible that public indifference to the military may be arising from a decrease in contact,⁸⁶ although public fatigue and confusion over the political complexities of recent missions should be considered as well. However, it is important to differentiate between understanding of the role of the military and understanding of recent missions. Doing so requires further in-depth analysis of public opinion.

In this regard, and given the lack of empirical evidence on public understanding of the UK Armed Forces, we can draw on the United Kingdom's imperial and post-imperial history to further investigate public understanding. The UK public is well

Table 2. Examples of UK Public Understanding of the Armed Forces.

Year	Title	Question	Findings
2013	MOD and Armed Forces Reputation Survey Spring 2013: Topline Findings	How well do you know the Armed Forces?	57 percent know the Armed Forces very well or a fair amount, 41 percent know the Armed Forces a little/know almost nothing
2012	The Armed Forces & Society: The military in Britain—through the eyes of Service personnel, employers and the public (Lord Ashcroft)	How much do you think you know about what a member of the Armed Forces does on a day-to-day basis?	10 percent report knowing a great deal, 28 percent know quite a lot, 52 percent know not very much, 10 percent know very little
2011	Poll Digest—Political—Royal British Legion Armed Forces Survey (ComRes)	Britain owes a great debt to the families of those who sacrifice their lives in the service of their country	76 percent agree
		How society treats bereaved Armed Forces families says a lot about our values as a Nation	80 percent agree
		As a nation, we should do more to the repay the debt we owe to those who have sacrificed their lives in the service of their country	67 percent agree
		We must support the families of deceased armed forces personnel in order to honor the memory of those who have given their lives in the service of the country	77 percent agree
		When someone dies serving their country, their family deserves as much support that we as a Nation can possibly give	85 percent agree
2010	Most Britons Continue to Regret Sending Soldiers to Afghanistan (Angus Reid)	Have a clear idea of what the war in Afghanistan is about, and a clear majority of Britons How many British casualties have there been in Afghanistan (correct response at time of poll publication: 301 and 400)	51 percent have a clear idea what the war in Afghanistan is about 21 percent accurately estimate the number of casualties, 55 percent believe the number of casualties is fewer than 300

Note: NHS = National Health Service; MOD = Ministry of Defense; AF = Armed Forces.

accustomed to a military that is regularly deployed on expeditionary operations⁸⁷—there has been only one year since 1945 when the Armed Forces were not on active duty or suffered an operational casualty.⁸⁸ The long-standing tradition of commemorating past conflicts in the United Kingdom,⁸⁹ which continued during the recent Iraq and Afghanistan missions, along with the media coverage and parliamentary statements of fatalities and high-profile repatriation of casualties in Royal Wootton Bassett (now discontinued), are likely to have reinforced the sense of sacrifice inherent in military service in the collective mind of the UK public. These previous campaigns and practices may have allowed the public to develop what we term an “intuitive” understanding based on common assumptions about the military rather than a direct, experientially based understanding. This intuition is reflected by polls examining what the public believes should be owed to the families of military personnel who have died during service (see Table 2; additional information can be found in the Online Supplementary Table). With the vast majority of those surveyed endorsing some level of support for bereaved families, this suggests that public awareness of the possible outcomes of military service, and their valuation, are understood in at least a broad sense.⁹⁰

This intuitive understanding or awareness is unlikely to apply to all states or in the same way, and comparison with other European states adds support to the idea of an intuitive understanding among the UK public. Nations with an imperial past similar to the United Kingdom, such as France, may find taking part in missions more acceptable as a result of their historical position of power in the international political system.⁹¹ For the populations of countries without such histories, and where combat is less likely to be a major role of their military forces, understanding of the Armed Forces is likely to differ. For example, in Sweden, the public perceive their nation as peaceful and neutral, and as a result support for the military declines whenever they are deployed on nonhumanitarian missions.⁹² Similarly, Germany’s avoidance of combat roles as a result of their involvement in the Second World War⁹³ has led to hesitation to refer to their participation in operations in Afghanistan as a “war”⁹⁴ and reluctance among both the public⁹⁵ and the government⁹⁶ to involve German military personnel in Libya in 2011. In the United Kingdom, the public may not agree with recent operations as seen during protests prior to the Afghanistan and Iraq wars. Despite the evidence of strong public support for the Armed Forces, as discussed earlier, this suggests a general understanding and acceptance of the consequences of the combat role of the military among the UK public.

Reflecting on the matter of intuitive understanding, both in a United Kingdom and European context, allows us to consider some of the broader implications for civil–military relations. For this, we can turn to Anthony King’s recent discussion on the memorializing of casualties. The ways in which military deaths are presented to the public contribute to their understanding, and King argues that in commemorating the deaths of their comrades in repatriation parades and remembrance services, military personnel stress the professionalism of those who have lost their lives and the personal significance of their deaths for their unit or regiment as well as grieving

family members. This brings the focus on personnel to their individual role and is in contrast with earlier in the twentieth century, when such losses were contextualized in terms of the wider causes of Nation and patriotism. King is careful to note national variations here, “Canada is very close to Britain and at the local level similar processes are observable in the US. In France and Germany the concept of the nation and the political context of the deaths are stressed much more.”⁹⁷ The idea that military personnel increasingly self-identify in terms of professionalism finds an echo in the perceptions of wider society. The British public not only support the troops rather than the war (in both Iraq and Afghanistan) but do so in ways that focus on the individuals and their families who have lost their lives or been injured in the wars. Consequently, the narrative presented is of Armed Forces personnel fulfilling a professional role, an understanding of which has developed among the public.

Given the lack of contact between the Armed Forces and the public, it seems likely that their understanding of their Armed Forces may have become intuitively drawn from the conceptions of the military role. This idea has been formed from experiences of previous conflicts and reinforced by the widespread presence of war memorials and processes of memorializing such as Poppy Day, as well as recent commemorations of a distinctly personal and familial kind epitomized in the repatriation of those killed in action via Royal Wootton Bassett. This may not provide a strong understanding of military life or the Armed Forces, but can become a spur for political action. For example, the public have been drawing attention to the support systems mitigating family and personal losses arising from war. Military family policy and duty of care issues have become politicized, and as previously discussed earlier in terms of the Armed Forces Covenant, the government is encouraged to commit to allocating scarce resources to these matters. There is now a legal precedent to do so; three key principles established by the Supreme Court ruling in June 2013 were that the MOD could be sued for negligence, Human Rights legislation was applicable within military and operational areas, and the interpretation of the idea of combat immunity was narrowed.⁹⁸ Unsurprisingly, there are concerns in military and MOD circles that the ruling leads to a flood of litigation and have deleterious effect on training and equipment.⁹⁹ This legal and social context of contestation among Service personnel, their families, the wider public, and the MOD may provide a framework in which public understanding and support of the Armed Forces, whether on operations or not, will evolve.

Conclusion

Our analysis suggests that the UK public have high regard for the UK Armed Forces, but little support for the recent missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The public also make a clear distinction between the politics of the mission and the individuals serving on it. Public understanding of the work of the Armed Forces and their recent missions is poor, possibly due to a lack of interest or fatigue regarding coverage of the Iraq and Afghanistan missions. Despite this, the United Kingdom’s long

history of military deployments may have instilled the public with an intuitive understanding of the basic realities of military life compared to other European states. This form of understanding highlights a distinctive feature of UK civil–military relations, which appears to reflect a broader western social transformation.

A major military and political concern has been whether the civil–military gap might have widened into a gulf. While we see evidence of some divergences in attitudes between civil and military cultures, we found no suggestion that a difference of this magnitude exists within the United Kingdom, but as the operational profile of the UK Armed Forces reduces following the withdrawal from Afghanistan at the end of 2014 current support and interest among the public might wane into indifference. Further public reflection about the heritage of the wars of September 2011, especially the costs relative to what has been achieved, might lead them to focus some of their doubts about the mission on to the military institution itself and the personnel that comprise it. In addition, as in previous eras, the different parts of the public are likely to think of Service and ex-Service personnel in terms of a shifting kaleidoscope of images: the hero, the victim, and the villain. Such myths, including the idea that most Service personnel are damaged by their service, provide the context in which military and political concerns in the United Kingdom about the civil–military gap becoming a gulf are likely to resurface.

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Author Biographies

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Nicola T. Fear is a professor in epidemiology at King's College London and Codirector of the King's Centre for Military Health Research alongside Professors Wessely and Dandeker. Before joining King's College London, Nicola spent two years working for the UK Ministry of Defence as a military epidemiologist. Nicola's research primarily focuses on the health and well-being of military personnel and their families.