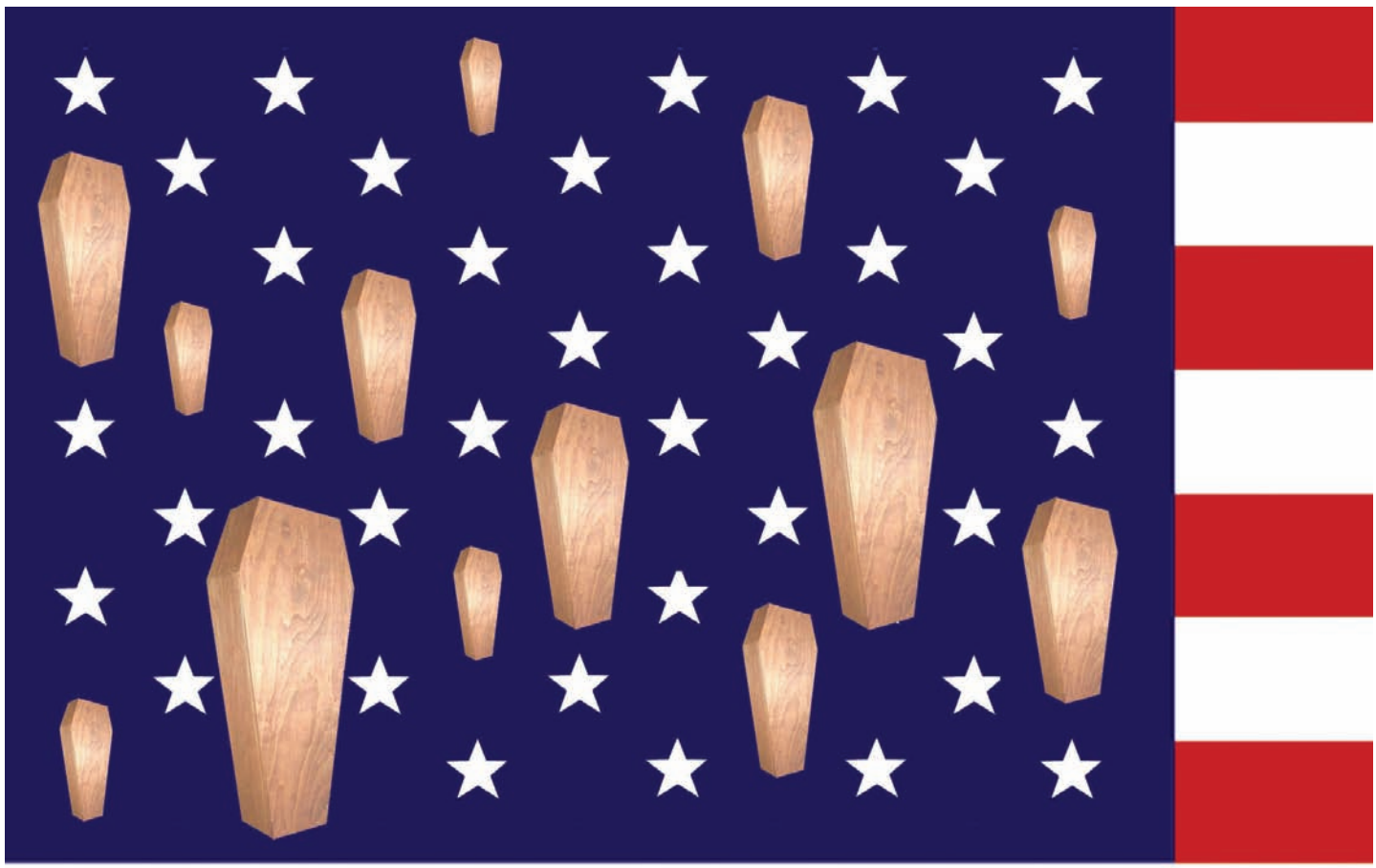
All's Not Fair in War



A POLITICAL SCIENTIST INVESTIGATES HOW LOCAL DEATHS AFFECT LOCAL VOTES

BY CALEB DANILOFF

ILLUSTRATION BY SCOTT MENCHIN

While researching the electoral ramifications of wartime casualties, Douglas Kriner checked out the local paper in his hometown in rural South Carolina. He read about a graduate of his high school who had been killed in Iraq. Kriner didn't know the soldier, but he recognized a few teachers interviewed for the article. The piece also quoted from the school yearbook and recounted an anecdote about the man's engagement.

"That really brought home for me that the way you view the war is shaped by how your local community experiences it," says Kriner, a College of Arts and Sciences assistant professor of political science. "You think of war as a big national event. But this war is really a conglomeration of local experiences. The way it impacts us as a nation is so narrow. What is the immediate, direct effect of the war in Iraq on me? It's almost negligible. I'm not going to be drafted. I don't have children who are going to be drafted, and I'm not even paying for the war in the form of higher taxes, because we're paying for it with deficit spending."

And that disparity of experience and sacrifice, Kriner argues in his forthcoming book, *The Casualty Gap*: *The Causes and Consequences of American Wartime Inequalities*, is bad for democracy.

Kriner and coauthor Francis Shen, a former doctoral classmate at Harvard, spent the past five years examining the county-by-county concentrations of American wartime casualties from World War II to Iraq, and how the local disparities influence political behavior.

"One of the questions we are trying to answer is why the democratic brake on costly military policies in wars like Iraq — which has dragged on longer than World War II — is not as strong as some political science theories suggest," says Kriner. "The inequality in distribution of sacrifice might take us part of the way in understanding that."

Kriner and Shen, who is now a lecturer at Harvard, found that as of November 2006, the rural state of Vermont had paid the highest price in the nation, with thirty deaths per million residents, while more densely populated New Jersey had suffered only five per million.

And at the county level, the disparities are even more dramatic. More than half of all U.S. counties had suffered no casualties in Iraq, while 13 percent had seen death rates of more than three per 100,000 citizens. Hollidaysburg, Pennsylvania, population 6,000, had held four military funerals, one for every 1,500 residents. As of September 2008, by contrast, Boston had lost just three soldiers, and neighboring Cambridge, with a population of just over 100,000, had seen not a single flag-draped coffin, according to Department of Defense figures.

"It's just a fact that some Americans see the cost of war much more starkly than others," Kriner says.

Unlike the mass mobilization of World War II and the Vietnam War draft, Iraq is a limited-scale conflict carried out by an all-volunteer force. But as in Korea and Vietnam, Kriner and Shen found, communities with lower income, employment, and education levels suffered disproportionately high casualty rates.

And as the death toll from Iraq started to mount, Kriner saw a notable decrease in vote share captured in 2006 by incumbent Republican Senate candidates in the counties with higher numbers of deaths.

"Public opinion will respond to the high costs of war by turning against it and punishing the political leaders who prosecute it, and that's the great democratic check and constraint on military adventurism," he says. "But if the costs aren't distributed across the country equally, if they're concentrated in pockets that tend to be socioeconomically disadvantaged, with lower levels of political participation, then that check isn't quite as strong."

As part of their research, Kriner and Shen conducted a survey to gauge American casualty sensitivity in a hypothetical mission: how many fatalities would be acceptable to prevent Iran from gaining weapons of mass destruction? When Kriner and Shen added that the poor had suffered higher wartime death rates than the rich in past conflicts, the casualty tolerance of respondents dropped by 40 percent.

"The equality of sacrifice, something that George Washington talked about 200-plus years ago, really does matter to people," Kriner says. "If Americans really were made aware of the inequality aspect of sacrifice for Iraq, and wartime service were more a part of our political dialogue, it could have very real policy consequences." ■

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