



# The Casualty Issue in American Military Practice: The Impact of World War I

*Evan A. Huelfer*

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Huelfer examines the casualty issue in American military thought and practice during the years between the World Wars. He argues that Americans exhibited a distinct aversion to combat casualties during the Interwar Period, a phenomenon that visibly influenced the military establishment and helped shape strategic planning, force modernization, and rearmament for World War II. In a broad topical approach, Huelfer's main theme—casualty aversion—is woven into discussions about military strategy and policies, doctrinal and technological development, the military education system, and how the American officer corps emerged from World War I and prepared for World War II.

As Huelfer makes clear, aversion to combat casualties is not just a post-Vietnam War phenomenon, but rather has long been embedded within the American national heritage. Conventional wisdom links today's exacerbated aversion to combat casualties as fallout from the Vietnam debacle. In fact, this Vietnam Syndrome has remained at the forefront of contemporary strategic thinking. Huelfer shows that American political and military leaders have held lasting concerns about risking soldiers' lives in combat, even predating U.S. involvement in World War II. The grim experiences of World War I had a profound impact upon the U.S. officer corps and how it viewed potential future conflicts. The casualty issue permeated the officers' strategic culture during the Interwar Period and colored their thinking about improving training, doctrinal evolution, force modernization, and technological development. Even though one cannot find the terms casualty issue, casualty aversion, or sensitivity to casualties directly stated in the speeches and writings of the era, this awareness clearly emerged as a subtext for the entire American effort in preparation for World War II. Huelfer highlights how casualty aversion shaped American strategy for World War II by incorporating ideas about the use of overwhelming force, air power, and mechanization—all designed to minimize losses.

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