
Combat Motivation in Today's Soldiers

U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute

Leonard Wong
U.S. Army War College

The MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin critique of *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* is based on the incorrect assumption that the outcome variable of the study is combat performance. *Why They Fight* seeks to investigate combat motivation—not battlefield performance. *Why They Fight* examines why soldiers continue in battle despite obvious risk to personal safety. Referencing a well-established body of literature and using a methodology appropriate for analyzing combat motivation, *Why They Fight* concludes that today's soldiers, just as those in the past, fight for each other. *Why They Fight* also reports, however, that today's soldiers are motivated in combat by notions of freedom and democracy.

Keywords: *cohesion; ideology; combat motivation*

Why They Fight

Although Robert MacCoun, Elizabeth Kier, and Aaron Belkin are scholars well known for their academic rigor, their critique of *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* misses the mark by a wide margin.¹ Problems emerge early in the article. They state in the second sentence that the purpose of *Why They Fight* is “to explain the U.S. military’s overwhelming victory over the Saddam Hussein regime during the initial combat operations.” Although an analysis of the coalition victory in the Iraq War would be an interesting study, it is not the topic of *Why They Fight*.

As the title implies, *Why They Fight* sets out to investigate combat motivation—not unit performance or military victory. The actual purpose of *Why They Fight* is stated plainly in the first sentence of the monograph: “This monograph seeks to answer the question Why do soldiers fight?” Contrary to the claims of MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin, the monograph does not purport to confirm or refute the causal relationship between cohesion and performance. The study is not an attempt to determine all the

Author’s Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the U.S. Army War College, the U.S. Army, or the U.S. Department of Defense.

factors involved in battlefield victory. It is not an endeavor to examine the differences between social and task cohesion. Instead, *Why They Fight* seeks to examine why, in the words of S. L. A. Marshall, “a tired, cold, muddy rifleman goes forward with the bitter dryness of fear in his mouth into the mortar bursts and machine-gun fire of a determined enemy.”²

The MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin critique rests on the creation of a straw man—the incorrect assertion that the goal of *Why They Fight* is to prove that “social cohesion is a determinant of combat performance.” As a result, subsequent criticisms about the *Why They Fight* methodology are comprehensive but largely misdirected. For example, MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin argue that *Why They Fight* confuses correlation with causation. This is an unfounded criticism because *Why They Fight* does not attempt to establish any causal inference between cohesion and performance. Similarly, claims by MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin that “Wong and his colleagues neither define nor measure combat performance” are based on the belief that combat performance is a variable in the study. It is not. Likewise, MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin state that “the authors need to address at least some central alternative explanations to show that the outcome of the war against Iraq reflected social cohesion not some other factor.” While this is an appropriate criticism of the straw man they have built, it is irrelevant to the actual methodology and content of *Why They Fight*.

Combat Motivation

MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin also argue that *Why They Fight* contradicts recent studies of unit cohesion and military effectiveness. In reality, *Why They Fight* takes its direction from a large literature of combat motivation. Decades of social science research from giants in the field such as Samuel Stouffer, S. L. A. Marshall, Edward Shils, Morris Janowitz, Roger Little, and Charles Moskos support the notion that a soldier’s concern for personal survival in battle is minimized by the strength of the emotional bonds with his comrades.³ Cohesion, specifically the affective, emotional bonds between soldiers, has been found to be a key component of combat motivation. As David Segal and Joseph Lengermann concluded, “Research on U.S. forces after World War II has repeatedly shown the impact of affective primary group ties and cohesion on effectiveness.”⁴

Interestingly, the combat-motivation literature often contrasts the primacy of soldiers fighting for each other with the absence of soldiers fighting for ideology, patriotism, or the cause. Civil War researcher Bell Wiley studied Confederate soldiers and noted that “it is doubtful whether many of them either understood or cared about the Constitutional issues at stake.”⁵ Concerning Union soldiers, he wrote, “One searches most letters and diaries in vain for soldiers’ comment on why they were in the war or for what they were fighting. . . . American soldiers of the 1860s appear to have been about as little concerned with ideological issues as were those of the 1940s.”⁶

The soldiers of the 1940s were the target of Samuel Stouffer's research. In analyzing their combat motivation, Stouffer wrote, "Officers and enlisted men alike attached little importance to idealistic motives—patriotism and concern about war aims."⁷ He added that except for expressions of flagrant disloyalty, the strongest taboo for World War II combat soldiers was "any talk of a flag-waving variety."⁸ S. L. A. Marshall put it simply, "Men do not fight for a cause but because they do not want to let their comrades down."⁹

With the literature in combat motivation supporting the general belief that soldiers exclusively fight for each other, *Why They Fight* seeks to examine if today's soldiers are similarly motivated. The methodology for *Why They Fight* is straightforward and deliberately mirrors the research strategy of previous studies of combat motivation—travel throughout a combat zone to interview U.S. soldiers and marines for their perceptions on what motivated them in battle. A key question in the *Why They Fight* interview protocol is taken directly from Stouffer's World War II *American Soldier* studies: "Generally, in your combat experience, what was most important to you in making you want to keep going and do as well as you could?"¹⁰

The *Why They Fight* findings confirm previous research conclusions. Soldiers gave responses such as "Me and my loader were talking about it and in combat the only thing that we really worry about is you and your crew." To soldiers in combat, emotional bonds with comrades serve two purposes. First, because of the close ties with their comrades, soldiers feel a burden of responsibility to achieve group success and protect the unit from harm. One infantryman stated, "I know that if [my buddy] dies and it was my fault, it would be worse than death to me." Second, the emotional bonds between soldiers provide the confidence and assurance that someone trustworthy is "watching their back." As one soldier noted, "It is just like a big family. Nothing can come to you without going through them first. It is kind of comforting."

Given the vast literature supporting the critical role of cohesion in combat motivation, it would be unremarkable to report that today's soldiers also fight for each other. And yet the *Why They Fight* interviews reveal something different about the current military. After three weeks of continuous combat, soldiers reported being motivated by another factor. One soldier commented, "I didn't see it at first, and then I saw the people coming back who are happy, it was like, 'Thank You!' That really was the turning point. Now I know what I am doing." Another responded, "Seeing the little children. Smiling faces. Seeing a woman and man who were just smiling and cheering 'Good! Good! Good! Freedom Good!' . . . That lifted us up and kept us going." Contrary to previous research on combat motivation, soldiers in the current military report being motivated by ideology or the cause. Liberating the Iraqi people and bringing freedom to Iraq were common themes in responses concerning combat motivation. As one embedded reporter wrote, "By far the most powerful motivation for many soldiers here is the belief that they will improve life for the Iraqi people."¹¹ As noted previously, the methodology of *Why They Fight* was deliberately developed to be consistent with past studies. Finding that soldiers fight not only for

each other but also for the cause is especially significant given the use of a consistent methodology.

Why They Fight offers three reasons why today's soldiers are motivated by the cause in addition to fighting for each other.¹² First, soldiers in the all-volunteer force are well educated. The average education of a new soldier in 2002 was 12.1 years of education. They can understand notions of ideology. Second, soldiers are amazingly in touch with the pressing issues of the day. Via the Internet, Fox News, and CNN, they know the world situation, who the key players are, and the essence of the policy debates. Finally, today's soldiers are volunteers. They were not coerced into service, and they did not approach the military as the employer of last resort. They come from a generation that trusts the military institution, and they understand the moral aspects of war. Today's soldiers, the monograph concludes, are truly professionals.

The implications of *Why They Fight* are twofold. First, today's soldiers—like soldiers in the past—are motivated to fight for each other. Strong emotional bonds between soldiers are critical to combat motivation and need to be nurtured by the military. *Why They Fight* helps to validate the U.S. army's shift from an individual to a unit replacement system that acknowledges the value of establishing bonds between soldiers.

The second implication concerns the transformation of the force into a professional army. The move from a struggling all-volunteer army to a truly professional force has not been easy. Early problems in the "hollow" army included declining enlistment propensity, low-quality recruits, high attrition, and plummeting morale.¹³ The army rebounded in the 1980s with "Be All You Can Be" and a recruiting overhaul, but the 1990s dismantled much of what had been accomplished through a demoralizing downsizing. The survivors picked up the pieces, however, and overcame another recruiting crisis in the late 1990s. Today, the "Army of One" is the culmination of thirty years of movement toward a professional army. It is a high-tech, highly trained, and highly *professional* force.

Conclusion

Why They Fight supports the combat-motivation literature with its finding that the emotional bonds between soldiers are critical in keeping soldiers fighting in combat. It goes beyond the extant literature, however, in asserting that today's soldiers are also motivated by ideology. The focus on combat motivation instead of the relationship between cohesion and performance makes *Why They Fight* distinctly different from the study described and critiqued by MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin. They are correct in asserting that the mere presence of strong cohesion does not guarantee military victory—certainly technology, training, and leadership are key variables. But to dismiss the powerful role of emotional bonds between combat soldiers, MacCoun, Kier, and Belkin need to do more than criticize the straw man they have created.

Notes

1. Leonard Wong, Thomas A. Kolditz, Raymond A. Millen, and Terrence M. Potter, *Why They Fight: Combat Motivation in the Iraq War* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, July 2003), 1, <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/display.cfm?PubID=179>. Subsequent quotations from soldiers are from this source.
2. S. L. A. Marshall, *Men against Fire* (New York: William Morrow, 1947).
3. Samuel A. Stouffer, Arthur A. Lumsdaine, Marion Harper Lumsdaine, Robin M. Williams Jr., M. Brewster Smith, Irving L. Janis, Shirley A. Star, and Leonard S. Cottrell Jr., *The American Soldier: Combat and Its Aftermath*, vol. 2 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949); Edward A. Shils and Morris Janowitz, "Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12 (Summer 1948): 280-315; Roger W. Little, "Buddy Relations and Combat Performance," in *The New Military: Changing Patterns of Organization*, ed. Morris Janowitz (New York: Russell Sage, 1964), 195-224; and Charles C. Moskos Jr., *The American Enlisted Man: The Rank and File in Today's Military* (New York: Russell Sage, 1970).
4. David R. Segal and Joseph H. Lengermann, "Combat Effectiveness," in *Combat Effectiveness: Cohesion, Stress, and the Volunteer Army*, ed. Sam C. Sarkesian (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1980), 182.
5. Bell Irwin Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (Indianapolis, IN: Wiley, 1943), 309.
6. Bell Irwin Wiley, *The Life of Billy Yank: The Common Soldier of the Union* (Indianapolis, IN: Wiley, 1952), 39-40.
7. Stouffer et al., *American Soldier*, 111.
8. *Ibid.*, 150.
9. Marshall, *Men against Fire*, 161.
10. Stouffer et al., *American Soldier*, 107.
11. Ann Scott Tyson, "Oceans Away, US Troops Crave Approval at Home," *The Christian Science Monitor*, April 8, 2003, A1.
12. The reasons are derived from James M. McPherson, *What They Fought For: 1861-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 4.
13. See Mark J. Eitelberg, "The All-Volunteer Force after Twenty Years," in *Professional on the Front Line: Two Decades of the All-Volunteer Force*, ed. J. Eric Fredland, Curtis Gilroy, Roger D. Little, and W. S. Sellman (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1996), 66-98.

Leonard Wong is a research professor with the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College. His recent publications include "Leave No Man Behind: Recovering America's Fallen Warriors" (*Armed Forces & Society*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2005, 599-622) and *Developing Adaptive Leaders: The Crucible Experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2004). Address for correspondence: Leonard Wong, U.S. Army War College, 122 Forbes Avenue, Carlisle, PA 17013; e-mail: Leonard.Wong@carlisle.army.mil.