

Armed Forces

The UK's Armed Forces: public support for the troops but not their missions?

Since the deployment of UK Armed Forces personnel to Afghanistan and Iraq, relations between the military, the government and the public have been placed under scrutiny. Politicians and Armed Forces leaders have expressed concern that public disapproval of these missions might have damaged civil-military relations. But are fears that the public may be losing its respect for the military justified?

Opinions of the Armed Forces

Most people in Britain, especially older people, have a high opinion of the Armed Forces.



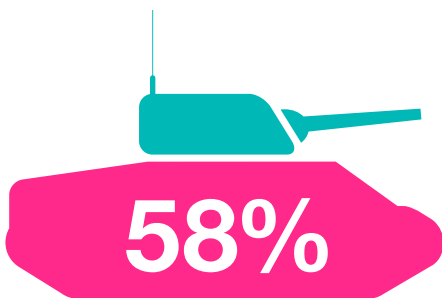
Eight out of ten say they have a **high or very high opinion** of the Armed Forces.



Nine out of ten people aged over 65, compared with seven out of ten aged 18-34 have a high opinion.

Support for missions

There is considerable public opposition to the UK's military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, with the 2003 Iraq War being more unpopular than the continuing mission in Afghanistan. Yet more than nine in ten support the personnel who have recently served in the two conflicts.



Almost six out of ten agree that the UK was **wrong to go to war in Iraq** while almost half (48%) say it was **wrong for the UK to send its Armed Forces to Afghanistan**.

Afghanistan

Iraq



Nine out of ten people declare their **support for Armed Service personnel who have recently served in Iraq and Afghanistan** regardless of their opinions about the actual military deployment.

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Introduction

Since the UK Armed Forces were deployed to Iraq (from 2003 until the end of combat operations in 2009) and Afghanistan (since 2001, but especially since the deployment in Helmand province in 2006), relationships between the military, the British government and the public have come under scrutiny. Fierce political and public debate has reflected expressions of widespread public dissent regarding the justifications for military operations, as well as doubts raised about the quality and quantity of equipment being provided for deployed personnel. Afghanistan and Iraq have become the most controversial conflicts since the Vietnam War, both in the UK (which was not militarily engaged in Vietnam) and globally. In 2001, around 20,000 people protested publicly against the UK's contribution towards the initial air strikes of the Afghanistan conflict¹ and, on a global day of demonstrations against the Iraq War in February 2003, more than 750,000 people marched in protest through London alone.² One consequence of this debate has been the concern expressed by some politicians and military leaders that a loss of mutual understanding between civil society and the military could not only lead to a decline in support for the missions conducted by the Armed Forces, but to a reduction in both public respect for the Armed Forces themselves and recruitment figures. This, in turn, could damage the morale and operational effectiveness of deployed troops, while creating pressure on the government to reduce its expenditure on defence. Another feared potential consequence of public indifference or hostility towards the military is that service personnel might face an inhospitable environment for their reintegration into civilian society following discharge. In the United States, research has suggested that personnel returning from Vietnam faced stigmatisation as a direct consequence of the overwhelming negative opinion of the public towards that war (Borus, 1973; Boman, 1982; Yager et al., 1984).

In Britain, one prominent way in which the current government has acknowledged these concerns and the importance of the relationships among government, society and the Armed Forces has been through legislation. Five-yearly Armed Forces Acts are the constitutional tool through which Parliament renews the basis on which the military are recruited and maintained as disciplined services. But the 2011 Armed Forces Act also gives legal force, for the first time, to the so-called Military Covenant whose core principles insist that members of the Armed Forces community should not suffer disadvantage as a result of their service and may receive special treatment where appropriate. The new law requires the Defence Secretary to make an annual report to Parliament on the state of the Covenant and the condition of civil-military relationships in the UK. According to the Prime Minister, David Cameron:

...the principles of the Covenant are now part of the law of our land and the value we place on our Armed Forces is clear for all to see.³

Even so, while a considerable fund of knowledge exists concerning public attitudes towards the military in the United States and in some continental European countries, there is relatively little empirical evidence available about British people's perceptions of their Armed Forces. Given the capacity for public opinion to influence when and where the Armed Forces can operate in pursuit of government policy (Foyle, 2004), and affect political decisions about defence budgets, this is a notable gap that this chapter will fill.⁴ Based largely on questions included for the first time in the latest British Social Attitudes survey, it explores people's views of the UK Armed Forces in general and of the military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan in particular.


We begin by examining overall perceptions of the Armed Forces; what is people's general opinion of them, how respected are they, and has this changed at all in recent years? More specifically, are there differences between the views of particular demographic groups? Previous research has found that men are more positive towards military conflicts and military spending than women (Eichenberg, 2003; Rohall et al., 2006; Caforio, 2007; Schoen, 2007; Burris, 2008; Clements, 2011) and that younger age groups are generally less supportive than older people (Gonzalez, 1996; Vennesson, 2003; Leal, 2005; Burris, 2008). They also suggest that people with higher education qualifications and those who place themselves on the left of the political spectrum tend to be more critical (Gonzalez, 1996; Holsti, 2004). But does opinion in contemporary Britain conform to the same patterns? Might we, for example, expect supporters of the Liberal Democrats and nationalist parties that were opposed to British involvement in Iraq to take a less sympathetic view of the Armed Forces generally than those of Labour, whose government sanctioned it? Or might the deployment of the Armed Forces on a 'mission impossible' lead to an increase in sympathy?

We next consider how far the public agrees (in principle) with the UK's military deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, and whether their general opinion of the Armed Forces is coloured by their view of these two controversial missions. Although other surveys have found majority opposition to the military operations in both Iraq and Afghanistan (Clements, 2011), there has been little previous evidence about whether this affects public support for Armed Forces personnel returning from these operations. Finally, we also use British Social Attitudes data, dating back to 1983, to look at the priority people attach to spending on defence and whether this has altered in response to military operations over time. Our guiding aim, throughout the chapter, is to cast light on how far the concerns of political and military leaders about a disconnection between civil society and the Armed Forces are justified.

Public opinion of the UK Armed Forces

To gauge people's overall view we asked them:

What is your general opinion of the UK Armed Forces?

 **More than eight out of ten people say they hold a "high" or "very high" opinion of the Armed Forces** 

We also invited them to say whether, on the whole, they respected the Armed Forces as a profession based on what they knew or had heard about them. As seen in Table 8.1 the response to both questions was very positive indeed. More than eight out of ten people say they hold a "high" or "very high" opinion of the Armed Forces. By contrast, only three per cent express negative opinions ("low" or "very low"), while another 13 per cent describe their opinion as "neither high nor low". It is, similarly, evident that most people (75 per cent) have "a great deal of respect" for the Armed Forces, with another 20 per cent stating they have "some respect". Just two per cent say they have "not a lot" of respect.

The responses reveal only small gender differences – and not in any consistent direction. Men are a little more likely to express a "very high" opinion of the Armed Forces, while women are slightly more likely to say they have "a great deal" of respect for them. However, attitudes do vary somewhat between age groups. Although seven out of ten people aged 18–34 (73 per cent) say they have a "high" or "very high" opinion of the Armed Forces, this is considerably lower than the nine out of ten respondents aged 65 and over taking the same view (92 per cent). Indeed, the percentage among the oldest age group that report a "very high" opinion (50 per cent) is almost double that reported in the youngest age group (30 per cent). The public's good opinion of the military is seen to increase steadily with age, while there is a decline in the very small proportions expressing a low opinion (from five per cent to just one per cent). Similarly, the proportion saying their opinion is "neither high nor low" drops from 21 per cent to six per cent. However, this may represent a cohort effect (with today's younger generations being generally less supportive of the Armed Forces than their predecessors) rather than indicating that views about the Armed Forces grow more positive over time.

The age gradient for replies to our question about respect is less marked. Seven out of ten respondents aged 18–34 say they respect the Armed Forces, compared with almost eight out of ten in the two oldest age groups. The proportion saying they don't have a lot of respect falls from just four per cent of the youngest respondents to only one per cent among those aged 35 and over.

Table 8.1 Public opinion of the UK Armed Forces, by age

	Age				All
	18–34	35–54	55–64	65+	
Opinion of the UK Armed Forces	%	%	%	%	%
Very high	30	43	49	50	42
High	43	41	40	42	41
Neither high nor low	21	13	9	6	13
Low	4	1	1	1	2
Very low	1	1	1	-	1
No opinion	1	1	1	*	1
<i>Weighted base</i>	948	1171	496	693	3311
<i>Unweighted base</i>	752	1159	541	856	3311
Degree of respect for the UK Armed Forces	%	%	%	%	%
A great deal	71	75	79	78	75
Some	21	21	18	17	20
Not a lot	4	2	1	1	2
No respect at all	*	1	*	*	*
<i>Weighted base</i>	799	1015	445	580	2841
<i>Unweighted base</i>	640	1006	488	710	2845

Examining people's views by educational qualification (Table 8.2), we also find strong support for the Armed Forces across all groups. Almost eight out of ten graduates (79 per cent) declare a "high" or "very high" opinion, moving closer to nine out of ten (87 per cent) among those without qualifications. Our second question about respect for the Armed Forces produces a wider difference of view between the six out of ten graduates (62 per cent) who answer "a great deal" and the eight out of ten with lower (78 per cent) or no qualifications (81 per cent) who say the same. However, only four per cent of graduates state they have "not a lot" or "no respect at all", falling to two per cent or less among those with lower qualifications. Most people holding higher qualifications are far from dismissive of the military but their responses do indicate a more mixed evaluation of the Armed Forces than other educational groups.

Table 8.2 Public opinion of the UK Armed Forces, by level of education

	Level of education				All
	Degree or equivalent	A level	GCSE or equivalent qualifications	No	
Opinion of the UK Armed Forces	%	%	%	%	%
Very high	33	41	42	35	41
High	46	43	41	9	13
Neither high nor low	18	13	15	2	2
Low	2	1	1	1	1
Very low	1	1	*	1	1
No opinion	1	*	1	*	1
<i>Weighted base</i>	656	860	787	800	3311
<i>Unweighted base</i>	610	798	774	928	3311
Degree of respect for the UK Armed Forces	%	%	%	%	%
A great deal	62	78	78	81	75
Some	32	18	18	13	20
Not a lot	4	1	2	1	2
No respect at all	1	1	-	*	*
<i>Weighted base</i>	591	759	685	649	2841
<i>Unweighted base</i>	552	714	678	752	2845

When it comes to political sympathies, Table 8.3 shows that a higher proportion of those who identify with the Conservatives (five out of ten) express a very high opinion of the Armed Forces than of those (around four out of ten) who support Labour, the Liberal Democrats, or smaller parties. But the differences are not as great as some might expect. When people claiming a “high” or “very high” opinion are combined, we see that nine out of ten Conservative and Liberal Democrat supporters take a positive view, as do eight out of ten who identify with Labour or other parties. Conversely, there are larger proportions of supporters of Labour and minority parties than Conservatives and Liberal Democrats who say their opinion of the Armed Forces is “neither high nor low”. Meanwhile, eight out of ten Conservative supporters say they have “a great deal” of respect for the Armed Forces, compared with seven out of ten supporters of all other parties, including the Liberal Democrats. Liberal Democrat sympathisers are also a little more likely than others to adopt a restrained view, saying they have “some” respect.

Table 8.3 Public opinion of the UK Armed Forces, by party identification

	Party identification				All
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Other parties	
Opinion of the UK Armed Forces	%	%	%	%	%
Very high	49	41	38	39	42
High	42	39	52	41	41
Neither high nor low	8	15	8	18	13
<i>Weighted bases</i>	881	1062	247	215	3309
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	926	1039	253	215	3309
Degree of respect for the UK Armed Forces	%	%	%	%	%
A great deal	82	73	70	71	75
Some	16	20	29	24	20
Not a lot	1	3	1	3	2
<i>Weighted base</i>	783	893	224	201	2839
<i>Unweighted base</i>	822	881	227	202	2843

Percentages may not add to 100% due to omission of options with low response rates

'Other party' supporters are those who identify with the Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, UKIP, Scottish Socialist Party, Respect, Green Party or the British National Party

Although as many as one in three say they have limited or no respect for lawyers, only one in fifty say the same about the Armed Forces and doctors, and less than one in ten about the police

Having established that most people – irrespective of age, educational qualifications or political affiliation – hold the military in high regard, it is interesting to see how this compares with their attitudes towards other professions. Do other groups inspire a comparable or even higher expression of goodwill? When inviting respondents to gauge their respect for the Armed Forces, we also asked them about three other prominent types of profession: doctors, police and lawyers. In Table 8.4 we see that the Armed Forces elicit the most enthusiastic response, although the level for doctors is similar if the totals for “a great deal” and “some” respect are combined. Moreover, although as many as one in three say they have limited or no respect for lawyers, only one in fifty say the same about the Armed Forces and doctors, and less than one in ten about the police. It seems, therefore, that the Armed Forces are popular with the public in relative as well as absolute terms.

Table 8.4 Respect for the Armed Forces and other professions

	Armed Forces	Doctors	Police	Lawyers
Degree of respect	%	%	%	%
A great deal	75	63	48	12
Some	20	33	41	50
Not a lot	2	2	7	25
None at all	*	*	2	7
<i>Weighted base</i>	2841	2841	2841	2841
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2845	2845	2845	2845

Public opinion over time

Another contextual question that arises from our findings about the popularity of the Armed Forces is whether the public's goodwill has remained constant or altered over time. Given the extent of controversy over the deployment in Iraq, we might wonder whether attitudes towards the military have improved at all since UK Armed Forces personnel were withdrawn in 2009. As the British Social Attitudes survey has not previously asked the public for their general opinion of the Armed Forces, we asked respondents to say if they thought their view had changed over the last few years. Their answers show that while a majority of people, almost eight in ten, report that their attitude has stayed the same, a significant minority (18 per cent) say their opinion has improved (Table 8.5). By contrast, only five per cent say they have formed a lower opinion of the military in recent years. Older people and those without qualifications are the least likely to report that their attitude has changed. Among political sympathisers, Conservative supporters are somewhat less likely to say their view has changed, while those who incline towards the Liberal Democrats are a little more likely than others to report that their opinion has become more positive (Table 8.5).

Table 8.5 Recent changes in opinion about the UK Armed Forces, by party identification

	Party identification				All
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Other parties	
Change in opinion	%	%	%	%	%
No change	80	74	72	78	77
Higher opinion	17	20	23	16	18
Lower opinion	3	5	5	5	5
<i>Weighted base</i>	881	1062	247	215	3309
<i>Unweighted base</i>	926	1039	253	215	3309

Another possible way of examining changes in people's perceptions is to compare responses to our new question about respect for the military with replies to a question in earlier surveys about pride in the Armed Forces. Respondents in 1995 and 2003 were invited to say how proud they felt of Britain in different ways, including the military. Clearly pride and respect are not identical concepts and the questions were asked in different contexts. Comparisons must, therefore, be treated with caution. It is, nevertheless, interesting that the questions about pride in the Armed Forces were asked at the time of multilateral peace-keeping operations in Bosnia (1995) and in Iraq and Afghanistan (2003), while replies to our question about respect were gathered after the British military mission in Iraq had ended but the Afghanistan campaign continued. We can cautiously estimate how public opinion responds to the active engagement of the UK Armed Forces in military conflicts.

In both 1995 and 2003, around half of all respondents said they were "very proud" of the Armed Forces, with only a slight upward increase between the two years. In the latest survey, three out of four people said they had "a great deal of respect". While we cannot accurately estimate public esteem for the military prior to 2012 from these data, it is likely that goodwill towards the UK Armed Forces previously stood at a lower level than it does now and that there has been a strengthening of public support for the military throughout the duration of the Iraq and Afghanistan missions.

Thus far we have seen that public opinion is generally very supportive towards the Armed Forces. We have also found evidence from two different sources that people's respect for the military is likely to have increased in recent years. However, we have also discovered interesting nuances in the way that people in different demographic groups react to different questions concerning their views. In particular, the discernible differences between younger and older people in their general opinion of the military are less marked when it comes to the concept of respect. One possible explanation is that responses to the latter question may be more indicative of attitudes towards the men and women who serve in the Armed Forces, while the former tells us more about people's opinions of the military as an institution. This leads usefully towards our next group of questions concerning British military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan. Here it will be important to find out whether similar or even greater distinctions exist between the public's view of the Armed Forces and the controversial combat missions in which they have been deployed.

Support for the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan

To gauge people's views on the two military missions, half our sample was asked about Iraq and the other half about Afghanistan. This was done to avoid the possibility that people might feel prompted by their opinion about one military conflict into expressing an identical view about the other. People were asked if they agreed or disagreed that:

The UK was wrong to send its Armed Forces to Afghanistan

or that:

The UK was wrong to go to war with Iraq in 2003

58%

object to the Iraq War – while the proportion who say it was wrong to send UK Forces to Afghanistan is just below half

Table 8.6 shows substantial public opposition to both of the military deployments. However, those who object to the Iraq War (agree with the statement) are in the majority – almost six out of ten – while the proportion who say it was wrong to send UK Forces to Afghanistan is just below half. The percentages of men and women who say that British military intervention was wrong are similar, although women are slightly more likely to object (agree) than men. However, men are more likely to indicate support (disagree with the statement) for UK military involvement. We also see among both groups that people are more likely to express a neutral attitude about the Afghanistan campaign than about Iraq, suggesting greater uncertainty or confusion about the UK's role in this conflict.

Table 8.6 View of the Iraq/Afghanistan missions, by sex

	Sex		All
	Male	Female	
UK wrong to go to war with Iraq	%	%	%
Agree	56	60	58
Neither agree nor disagree	15	18	16
Disagree	28	19	24
<i>Weighted base</i>	827	827	1654
<i>Unweighted base</i>	739	934	1673
UK wrong to send its Armed Forces to Afghanistan	%	%	%
Agree	46	50	48
Neither agree nor disagree	18	21	20
Disagree	34	25	29
<i>Weighted base</i>	785	872	1657
<i>Unweighted base</i>	711	927	1638

When investigating general attitudes to the Armed Forces we found that older people were more positive in their views than younger people. We might, therefore, expect younger age groups to be more opposed to the two military deployments. However, previous research points in the other direction, suggesting that it is older people who tend to be more opposed to armed conflict (Gonzalez, 1996; van der Meulen and de Konink, 2001; Scotto et al., 2011), possibly reflecting the influence on succeeding generations of significant world events – such as the Vietnam War or the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in 2001 – rather than being a simple consequence of advancing age (Holsti, 2004; Schoen, 2007). In our own survey, it is certainly clear that opposition to the UK's military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan increases with age (Table 8.7). Disapproval of the Iraq War rises steadily from 47 per cent among 18–34 year olds to 66 per cent among the over-65s and, in the case of Afghanistan, increases from 42 per cent among the youngest age group to 60 per cent among the oldest. However, the highest levels of positive support for British military involvement can be found in the middle age range of 35–54 year olds, particularly for Afghanistan, where 34 per cent support the mission. Neutral attitudes towards the two military operations are noticeably highest among younger age groups.

Table 8.7 View of the Iraq/Afghanistan missions, by age group

	Age				All
	18–34	35–54	55–64	65+	
UK wrong to go to war with Iraq	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	47	57	64	66	58
Neither agree nor disagree	24	16	11	12	16
Disagree	25	26	24	19	24
<i>Weighted base</i>	446	586	256	366	1654
<i>Unweighted base</i>	353	585	280	454	1673
UK wrong to send its Armed Forces to Afghanistan	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	42	44	55	60	48
Neither agree nor disagree	25	20	16	15	20
Disagree	30	34	28	21	29
<i>Weighted base</i>	502	585	240	327	1657
<i>Unweighted base</i>	399	574	261	402	1638

People without qualifications are one of the groups most strongly opposed to both the continuing military mission in Afghanistan, and to UK involvement in the Iraq War

Historical analyses of the relationship between people's levels of education and their opinions concerning military interventions has indicated that this is not a straightforward relationship (Gartner et al., 1997; Gelpi et al., 2009). Data from the United States suggest that people with higher levels of education are more likely to disapprove of the mission in Iraq but support Afghanistan (Burris, 2008). This is replicated in the UK, with graduates more supportive of the mission in Afghanistan, while only those whose highest qualification is at GCSE level are more supportive of the mission in Iraq (Clements, 2011). This apparent discrepancy is thought to be related to a greater understanding of the missions' particular objectives and individual merits, arrived at through an increased interest in current events and politics, among those with a university-level education (Holsti, 2004; Sirin, 2011).

Somewhat contrary to these points, the results of our survey show that people without qualifications are one of the groups most strongly opposed to both the continuing military mission in Afghanistan, and to UK involvement in the Iraq War (Table 8.8). In both cases, six out of ten people without qualifications say that UK involvement was wrong. A slightly higher proportion of graduates (64 per cent) take a similar view of Iraq, but only four out of ten express opposition in relation to Afghanistan (42 per cent). Moreover, while the (minority) levels of support for British involvement in Iraq are much the same regardless of educational qualifications, the proportions supporting the Afghanistan mission range from a fifth of people without qualifications to more than a third of graduates.

Table 8.8 View of the Iraq/Afghanistan missions, by level of education

	Level of education				All
	Degree or equivalent	A level	GCSE or equivalent qualifications	No	
UK wrong to go to war with Iraq	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	64	53	56	60	58
Neither agree nor disagree	11	23	17	13	16
Disagree	25	23	25	23	24
<i>Weighted base</i>	330	436	404	387	1654
<i>Unweighted base</i>	301	405	408	465	1673
UK wrong to send its Armed Forces to Afghanistan	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	42	43	47	60	48
Neither agree nor disagree	21	24	21	16	20
Disagree	36	32	30	20	29
<i>Weighted base</i>	326	425	384	413	1657
<i>Unweighted base</i>	309	393	366	463	1638

Existing research has also found that people's views of armed intervention are linked to political partisanship (Burriss, 2008) and that this operates primarily through people holding core values that favour or criticise the use of military action (Holsti, 2004). But what differences of opinion should we expect between supporters of the various parties in Britain, given that the involvement in the Iraq invasion was initiated by a Labour government with Conservative support – and that the Conservatives' current coalition partners, the Liberal Democrats, like the Scottish and Welsh nationalist parties, were opposed to the war? Might views also differ about Afghanistan, given that the Conservatives, in opposition, were especially critical about the helicopters and other equipment being provided for the Armed Forces?

Perhaps surprisingly, we find that agreement that the Iraq War was wrong extends across the political spectrum (Table 8.9), with the majority of people opposed to the mission despite their political affiliation. Around six out of ten people who identify with each of the three main parties at Westminster say Britain was wrong to go to war, rising to seven out of ten supporters of the nationalists and other smaller parties. However, levels of endorsement for the campaign are higher among those who lean towards Labour or the Conservatives (one in four) than Liberal Democrat supporters (one in five) and those of other parties (one in seven). While providing some evidence of a link between party political affiliations and support for military intervention, these findings also suggest that other factors are responsible for the antipathy towards British involvement in Iraq, which are shared by supporters of different parties. These may include continuing doubts about the legality of the invasion and its strategic value, as well as the consequent loss of military and civilian lives.

Opposition to the continuing Afghanistan campaign is also spread fairly evenly among supporters of the three main parties, but at a lower level. Around half of Labour supporters and a slightly smaller proportion of Conservative and Liberal supporters (45 per cent) agree that the UK was wrong to send its forces there. People who identify with minority parties are more likely to disagree with British involvement (55 per cent), including supporters of nationalist parties such as Plaid Cymru, which consistently opposed the deployment. Active support for military involvement is also lower among the supporters of other parties than those who identify with the Conservatives, Labour and, in this particular instance, the Liberal Democrats.

Agreement that the Iraq War was wrong extends across the political spectrum

Table 8.9 View of the Iraq/Afghanistan missions, by party identification

	Party identification				All
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Other parties	
UK wrong to go to war with Iraq	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	59	57	61	70	58
Neither agree nor disagree	16	15	18	15	16
Disagree	25	26	18	15	24
<i>Weighted base</i>	479	512	121	110	1652
<i>Unweighted base</i>	502	507	123	114	1671
UK wrong to send its Armed Forces to Afghanistan	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	45	49	45	55	48
Neither agree nor disagree	20	17	19	17	20
Disagree	33	31	35	27	29
<i>Weighted base</i>	402	550	126	105	1657
<i>Unweighted base</i>	424	532	130	101	1638

While it is evident from these findings that more people disapprove than approve of UK involvement in both military missions, public support for the Afghanistan campaign is greater than for operations in Iraq. This may suggest the public considers the core mission in Afghanistan – a declared act of self-defence to root out the planners of the 9/11 terrorist attacks – to have greater legitimacy. United Nations authorisation of the International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan, and the mission's broader focus on state building and improving living standards for the local population, may also have improved its palatability for the public. Conversely, confusion around the legality of the Iraq War and the justifications proposed for the invasion – not least the notorious claims concerning 'weapons of mass destruction' – may account for the higher level of public disapproval.

Support for returning service personnel

Since we earlier found that the public generally holds the Armed Forces in high regard, we are left with the interesting question of how far people's support for the military has been influenced – for better or worse – by their opinions about the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. As previously noted, public opposition in the United States to the war in Vietnam contributed to the poor treatment of returning veterans. To assess whether anything comparable might be happening to UK military personnel, we first of all compare responses to the questions about opinions of and respect for the Armed Forces, discussed earlier, with those measuring opposition to and support for the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. These comparisons are presented in Table 8.10 below. Although the numbers of respondents who report a low opinion or lack of respect for the Armed Forces are often too small to enable us to draw firm conclusions, there is some evidence that those expressing the most positive views of the Armed Forces are less likely to oppose the two missions. Less than six in ten of those who report having “a great deal of respect” for the Armed Forces agree the UK was wrong to go to war with Iraq in 2003; this proportion rises to almost seven in ten of those who express just “some respect” for the Armed Forces. On the other hand, less than five out of ten people with a “very high” opinion of the Armed Forces agree that the UK was wrong to send its Armed Forces to Afghanistan – a proportion which rises to almost six in ten of those who express a “low” opinion or an opinion which is “neither high nor low”. Clearly, those who hold less positive views of the Armed Forces are more likely to oppose its recent missions, although care must be taken in interpreting the small number of respondents in some categories. Nonetheless, around half of the public report the highest levels of support and respect for the Armed Forces despite opposing the mission they were asked about. Therefore, opposition to the missions the Armed Forces have recently been involved in does not appear to produce an automatic decline in an individual's opinion of, or respect for, this institution or its personnel.

Table 8.10 View of the Iraq/Afghanistan missions, by opinion of the Armed Forces

	General opinion			Respect			All
	Very high opinion	High opinion	Neither high nor low/low/very low opinion	A great deal of respect	Some respect	Not a lot/no respect	
UK wrong to go to war with Iraq	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	55	59	61	56	67	71	58
Neither agree nor disagree	15	18	17	16	14	7	16
Disagree	28	21	18	26	18	20	24
<i>Weighted base</i>	723	690	222	1077	287	32	1654
<i>Unweighted base</i>	758	691	203	1113	273	26	1673
UK wrong to send its Armed Forces to Afghanistan	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	48	45	58	47	50	71	48
Neither agree nor disagree	16	23	22	19	23	14	20
Disagree	35	29	18	32	25	15	29
<i>Weighted base</i>	656	676	291	1056	279	36	1657
<i>Unweighted base</i>	681	661	268	1060	267	32	1638

The public is overwhelmingly supportive of the men and women who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, irrespective of opinions about whether UK military personnel should have been deployed there

To explore the issue of support for returning personnel directly with the public, we invited the half of our sample who were asked for their views about the Iraq War (see earlier) to agree or disagree with the statement:

Regardless of what I think about the mission to Iraq, I support members of the UK Armed Forces who have recently served there

The same proposition was put to the other half of the sample in relation to Afghanistan.

As can be seen in Table 8.11 the public proves to be overwhelmingly supportive of the men and women who have served with the Armed Forces in Iraq and Afghanistan, irrespective of individual opinions about whether UK military personnel should have been deployed there in the first place. More than nine out of ten people say they support members of the Armed Forces regardless of what they think about those missions, while less than five per cent disagree (one per cent for Iraq, three per cent for Afghanistan). There are few differences between age groups, although younger people are a little less firm in their positive view and slightly more likely to express no opinion either way.

Table 8.11 Support for recently serving personnel, by age

Military mission	Age				All
	18–34	35–54	55–64	65+	
Iraq	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	88	96	95	95	94
Neither agree nor disagree	8	3	4	4	5
Disagree	2	*	-	*	1
<i>Weighted base</i>	446	586	256	366	1654
<i>Unweighted base</i>	353	585	280	454	1673
Afghanistan	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	87	90	96	95	91
Neither agree nor disagree	8	6	2	3	5
Disagree	3	3	2	2	3
<i>Weighted base</i>	502	585	240	327	1657
<i>Unweighted base</i>	399	574	261	402	1638

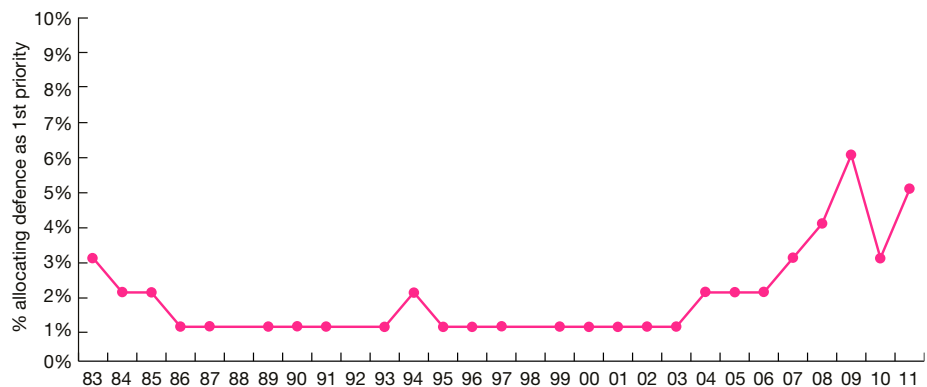
Further analysis shows the views given by women and men to be almost identical, and that there are only small differences according to educational attainment. While graduates express a slightly lower level of agreement with the statement than non-graduates, the proportions are still 91 per cent positive in relation to service personnel returning from Iraq and 89 per cent in relation to Afghanistan veterans. There are, similarly, only minor differences between the views expressed by people according to political affiliation, although those identifying with the Conservative Party are the most emphatic in their endorsement of service men and women who have recently served in Iraq (97 per cent) or Afghanistan (96 per cent).

Earlier we noted the possibility that the public takes somewhat different views of the Armed Forces as an institution and the men and women who serve with them. Even clearer from the findings reported above is the distinction people make between the UK military missions in Iraq and Afghanistan (more likely to be negative than positive) and their support for personnel who have served there (overwhelmingly positive). From these data, it would appear that concerns about the consequences of two unpopular deployments on public support for individual service personnel are unfounded. The coalition government might also conclude from these findings that its decision to reinforce the Armed Forces Covenant through legislation matches the broad thrust of public opinion.

Public support for defence spending

Finally, we look at changes in public attitudes to defence spending over time to see if they may have been influenced by high-profile military missions, and especially the deployments of UK Armed Forces to Iraq and Afghanistan given the debates around adequate resourcing for personnel. Since 1983, British Social Attitudes has collected data on people's priorities for government spending by asking them to select the public service that would be their highest priority for extra spending. The choices offered are between education, defence, health, housing, public transport, roads, police and prisons, social security benefits, help for industry and overseas aid. A full set of first and second priorities for extra spending are presented in the chapter on Health. Figure 8.1 shows the trend for the proportion of the public selecting defence as their first priority.

Figure 8.1 Prioritisation of extra government spending on defence, 1983–2011



The data on which Figure 8.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Only a small minority have ever said that defence is their top priority for additional government spending

We see that only a small minority have ever said that defence is their top priority for additional government spending. But while the first British Social Attitudes survey, conducted a year after the Falklands War, shows three per cent choosing defence, the proportion falls to just one per cent three years later and hovers around that level until 2003. It then increases to six per cent in 2009, before falling again. In the latest survey, five per cent regard defence as their top priority for extra spending.

It therefore seems there was no great public clamour for more money to be spent on defence near the start of either the Afghanistan or the Iraq deployments. Nor does it seem likely that the increase in support for defence spending that occurred between 2003 and 2009 is a response to the increasing number of deaths that have occurred among UK service personnel as this has continued to increase while the priority awarded to extra defence spending has decreased. It is more probable that the modest spike we see in support for increased defence spending is a response to the public debate that peaked in 2009 around claims that the UK Armed Forces were experiencing shortages of vital equipment – an interpretation supported by other recent studies (McCartney, 2010; Edmunds, 2012; Forster, 2012).

More generally, we may conclude that while the majority of the British public hold the Armed Forces in high esteem, only a small number regard defence as a top priority for additional public spending. It may be that the public supports the Armed Forces but is unwilling to provide additional spending at the expense of other government sectors if current spend levels are widely considered to be sufficient and resourcing problems seen to be due to poor financial organisation and planning. Other sectors, especially health and education, which regularly emerge as the top two priorities, are generally considered more pressing concerns and possibly more deserving of extra funding.

Conclusions

High public esteem for the Armed Forces is, as we have seen, in considerable contrast to the opposition that many people express towards the 2003–2009 deployment of troops in Iraq and, to a lesser degree, the continuing mission in Afghanistan. Given the extent of people's objections to these military campaigns, a striking feature of our survey findings is the public's overwhelming support for the Armed Service personnel who have served in Iraq and Afghanistan. This subtlety in public thinking and opinion about the Armed Forces and their deployment in specific military operations has not been sufficiently acknowledged previously. People clearly find little difficulty in separating the politics of military deployments from attitudes towards the service men and women who take part in them. It remains to be seen what effect the final withdrawal of military personnel from active operations in Afghanistan, due in 2014, will have on public opinion. Yet it seems highly probable from our survey findings that Armed Service personnel will be warmly welcomed home by most of the public, no matter what people think of the mission they have been asked to fulfil.

Notes

1. See news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/1596810.stm
2. A police estimate of numbers. Protest organisers suggested a figure nearer two million. See news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/2765041.stm
3. 'Armed Forces Covenant recognised in law for first time', Ministry of Defence, Defence News, 3rd November, 2011, available at www.mod.uk/DefenceInternet/DefenceNews/DefencePolicyAndBusiness/ArmedForcesCovenantRecognisedInLawForFirstTime.htm
4. A report by the former Liberal Democrat leader and career soldier Lord Ashcroft (2012) recently cast some light on public attitudes towards the Armed Forces, but owing to its sampling strategy the findings were not necessarily representative of the UK population as a whole.

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Appendix

Table A.1 Prioritisation of government spending on defence, 1983–2011

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1989	1990	1991	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Defence top spending priority (%)	3	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
<i>Weighted base</i>	1719	1645	1769	3066	2766	2930	2698	2836	2945	1187	1199	3620	1355
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	1675	1804	3100	2847	3029	2797	2918	2945	1167	1234	3620	1355

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Defence top spending priority (%)	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	3	4	6	3	5
<i>Weighted base</i>	3143	2302	3287	3435	4432	3199	2167	3228	3082	2184	3421	3297	3311
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3143	2292	3287	3435	4432	3199	2166	3240	3094	2229	3421	3297	3311

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