



Americans ready for military action - for now

By David Lightman and Anita Kumar

September 12, 2014

A nation furious about the beheading of two Americans is eager for military action. At least for the moment. And at least for the kind of low-risk military action now planned.

But the moment could change. As history in Iraq and the Middle East shows, the campaign against the Islamic State might not go as planned. Allies could prove unreliable. The enemy could adapt. The U.S. might have to send in its own troops. And the image could _ could _ change from two U.S. citizens being beheaded to American GIs coming home without limbs.

The country has little patience for an extended campaign involving American combat troops and casualties. Years of prolonged, inconclusive U.S. fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention Vietnam, linger in the public American psyche.

For the moment, President Barack Obama matches the public mood. He's ordering airstrikes, but he's limiting the campaign. But should this not go the way he predicts, and it takes more to meet his stated goal of destroying the Islamic State, he could prove unable to rally the American people to stay a changing course.

First, he was led by public pressure into action, rather than leading the country into it. Second, the American people already are skeptical about his leadership on foreign affairs. He would have little reservoir of trust to draw on should things get worse.

"The American public is pushing the president to act. He's going into this as a reluctant warrior," said Rick Brennan, a career Army officer and senior political scientist at the RAND Corp., a Santa Monica, Calif.-based think tank.

The rapid shift in American opinion stemmed from the videos of American journalists Sean Foley and Steven Sotloff being beheaded by Islamic extremists, images that ripped through American psyches. Ninety-four percent of Americans had heard about the killings, an NBC News-Wall Street Journal poll found, far higher than any event pollsters asked about over the last five years.

In addition to being angry, Americans were frightened. The Islamic State recruited Americans and Europeans, and appeared ready to slip them back home for terror attacks. Nearly half of

Americans today feel less safe than before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, nearly double the finding of a year ago.

Given the hunger to hit the Islamic State, Obama had an easy task. He's told the country the U.S. can destroy the terror network and do it with little risk of casualty.

"We will degrade, and ultimately destroy," the Islamic State, he said.

"This effort will be different from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan," he added. "It will not involve American combat troops fighting on foreign soil."

Beyond that, the public relations job gets rougher.

"If we're trying to fix (the Islamic State), that's one thing. If we're trying to fix Iraq, that's another," said Christopher Preble, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at Washington's Cato Institute. "The public has clearly signaled what they don't want."

Memories of unpopular wars in Iraq, Afghanistan and Vietnam remain vivid. Presidents Lyndon Johnson in 1964 and George W. Bush in 2002 got broad authority to wage war and led the country to believe military action would be manageable and limited.

In April 1965, Johnson gave his first major speech on Vietnam and proposed a billion-dollar program to aid all of Southeast Asia. The North Vietnamese rejected the offer. By the end of the year, about 200,000 Americans were in Vietnam, and domestic opposition began to grow.

In 2003, Bush declared victory six weeks after the U.S. invaded Iraq. Standing on the USS Abraham Lincoln flight deck, in front of a "Mission Accomplished" banner, he proclaimed, "Major combat operations in Iraq have ended." Eight years later, after more than 4,500 Americans had been killed and more than 30,000 wounded, the U.S. declared the war over.

When such strategies worked, American support remained strong. President George H.W. Bush led the U.S. into the Gulf War in 1991, defined his goal as driving Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein out of Kuwait, and when that was done, the war was over. Bush's approval ratings hit record highs.

The nation has no tolerance for muddled missions, and that's the challenge Obama faces today.

It's a tough task. The Islamic State is not really a state. Its leaders are not inclined to sign surrender documents some day, and the rules of war don't apply. Iraq and Syria remain in turmoil. Terrorism is a never-ending threat.

At home, constituents support airstrikes but are largely against deploying large numbers of American combat troops. They want protection without great sacrifice.

And, said Azzedine Layachi, professor of international, Middle East and African affairs at St. John's University in New York, "He would have to show progress, that he's getting results."

“A president who wants to lead and shape a course of action cannot and should not point out all of the risks in the strategy he chooses,” said Anthony Cordesman, a military analyst with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank.

“As this president has taken some years to learn, you do not catalyze your own country or your allies by focusing on complexity and risks,” he said.

So far, that’s what he’s done. The public is a willing listener, but it’s an impatient, skeptical audience, too.