

Limited Wars, Civilian Casualties, and Who Must Decide

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PREFACE

Strategic planning, as we understand the term, concerns the methods and mechanics of waging war. It is the business of the professional military men The formulation of military policy, on the other hand, means to us the determination of whether and when and under what circumstances and for what purposes we should go to war. It concerns political decisions rather than military methods and is the business of the Congress and ultimately of the people in our democracy.

**From an editorial "Policy and Strategy"
The Providence Journal
September 19, 1949**

When the 104th Congress convened in January 1995, a long simmering debate came to a boil over a proposed display of the Enola Gay at the Smithsonian's Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. The Enola Gay was the B-29 that dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945. Peace activists and some historians, who considered the bombing an American disgrace, favored graphic depictions and narratives describing the bomb's devastation. Veterans' groups and others objected. They wanted text material that explained what led to the bombing -- the already high American casualties in the Pacific War (150,000 killed or wounded on both sides in the battle for Okinawa alone) -- and note taken on the projected allied and Japanese casualties when Japan's home islands were invaded.

Apologists for dropping the bomb base their case largely on the thousands of civilian casualties at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The inference was that not only were these civilian casualties, but innocent civilian casualties.

This essay looks at the issue of civilian casualties in various types of armed conflict some 50 years later and discusses a number of questions that are but logical extensions of the Enola Gay debate.

In January of 1994, the U.S. Naval Institute published an article, "Getting It Right From . . . the Sea," by General Carl E. Mundy, Jr., Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps. While the article dealt with the effective and efficient use of naval expeditionary (task) forces, primarily with

respect to regional conflicts, of equal interest was the way in which a commandant of the Marine Corps, perhaps the most no-nonsense branch of our armed forces, viewed (1) total and less than total wars, (2) collateral damage, (3) the use or non-use of various weapons in our arsenal, and (4) the political costs incurred when American armed forces are put in harms way. Not addressed, however, was whether senior military officers should share responsibility with political leaders, that is, become decision makers with regard to when and where to commit forces, with what weapons, and under what constraints.

To quote General Mundy:

In addition, we cannot ignore the political ramifications of collateral damage that even precision weapons can cause. In wars that are less than total-potentially, most of our future wars-we may not be able to use weapons, however effective, if their political cost outweighs their tactical gain. There may be a time and place when near perfect accuracy just will not be good enough. That is not a pleasant thought, but it is a consideration we cannot ignore when we look at new systems and the application of existing technologies. (3)

Questions:

What difference, if any, is there between total war and less than total war? What are the implications for our armed forces, particularly our combat forces, if a distinction is made?

Discussion:

The model for total war is World War II. The London blitz, the bombing of Coventry, Cologne, and Dresden, the siege of Stalingrad, the fire bombings of Japanese cities and the later use of atomic weapons, leave no doubt about the totality of the conflict. On the other hand, Korea, Vietnam, and the 1991 Gulf War were characterized by the restrained use of weapons and military options.

In total war, the goal of national leadership historically has been to bring about the surrender or unconditional surrender of the enemy.(4) The objective military function is to achieve this end at a minimum cost in lives and national treasure.

Total war is also an unambiguous concept and generally understood by those doing the fighting. Limited wars, on the other hand, imply limited goals and as such are ambiguous and complex concepts. This ambiguity requires that the nation's leaders, both civilian and military, constantly explain and rationalize the reason for the conflict, a task which becomes increasingly difficult as time passes and, casualties mount.

Again quoting General Mundy:

In the future, we will . . . be operating in a political environment in which there is an "economy of will." The American people will not tolerate high casualties in military operations they do not view as critical to our national security. Either under U.N. auspices, or multilaterally-or even unilaterally-many of our likely tasks will not affect the national security of the United States directly. Many of our future operations are going to have objectives that-while important in a regional sense-may not be seen as vital in Peoria.⁵

While ambiguous and complex politics are fairly open to debate by the electorate, from military tactics to broad issues of national policy, such debate cannot be limited to the home front. In an age of instant communication, the issues will also be argued at every level of the military establishment. After all is said and done, is the soldier, sailor and airman doing the fighting more willing to fight, and possibly die, for something he understands than for something he does not?

The use of limited military force and by definition, limited political objectives, has a poor track record in the West. Witness Korea, the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, Lebanon, Iran and Iraq. Our cold war adversaries, however, used whatever force was necessary to achieve their objectives. Witness the swift dispatch of the Czech and Hungary uprisings by the Soviet Union, the crushing of Tibet dissidents by the Chinese People's Liberation Army, and the more recent crushing of Chechnya's rebellion by Russian military forces. Afghanistan was a Soviet failure but only because the United States decided to contest the outcome.

Question:

Is weaponry for total war significantly different than weaponry for less than total war? Under what circumstances, if any, is the use of atomic weapons an option? If there is a difference between weapons dependent upon what type of conflict is being waged, what is the implication for defense spending?

Discussion:

Improving weapon accuracy, that is, hitting what you aim at with a high probability of success, is certainly an acceptable goal of military research and development. The more accurate the weapon, the less chance it will have to be used a second or third time. The savings is easily identifiable in terms of lives and material. The problem, however, is not with developing so-called smart weapons but rather the argument that unless a weapon is highly accurate it should not be used at all, that is, cause collateral damage and kill innocent civilians.

From this point the debate can be extended to what constitutes an acceptable target. An ammunition factory, a bridge, a rail yard, an oil refinery, a column of tanks, government complexes . . . ? However, as the number of targets grows, as it will in all conflicts, the number of targets that can be more quickly destroyed by conventional but less accurate weapons will also grow. In a total war, no problem arises with respect to the choice of weapons. We use what accomplishes the task with the least cost in lives and material. In less than total war, however, an increasingly popular position is to use only accurate weapons aimed at strictly military targets. Carried to a logical end, this raises the question of how much money should be allocated to developing and producing sophisticated, "civilian friendly" weapons and how much should be spent for conventional weapons that are less accurate but more effective with respect to most enemy targets. Should a target be destroyed by naval guns, cruise missiles, or long range artillery with a minimum risk to military personnel or should a squadron of F-16s fitted with laser guided bombs be used with a much greater risk to men and equipment . . . very expensive equipment and very expensive men and women?

As to the willingness to use atomic weapons, peace as between NATO and the Warsaw Pact for the past 50 years was maintained not because a balance of conventional forces existed but rather the assured mutual destruction of both alliances should atomic weapons be used. While mass destruction weapons, biological and chemical as well as atomic, are hardly civilian friendly, they nonetheless kept the peace in Europe under the most trying of circumstances.

One might also ask-Is a fourth war between India and Pakistan more or less likely now that both are atomic powers? Or would conflict between Taiwan and Communist China be more or less likely if Taiwan, as well as the People's Republic of China, had nuclear weapons?

Question:

What is the distinction between armed conflict at whatever level and using our armed forces as peacekeepers in combat areas? What implication does such a difference have with respect to training doctrine?

Discussion:

The distinction between total war, less than total war, and peacekeeping as a military operation is simply one of degree. In total war, the use of available weapons is seldom constrained. Civilian casualties, innocent and otherwise, are accepted. In less than total war the use of available weapons is constrained while political goals constrain military options. In the role of peacekeepers, our armed forces must adapt to the role of a typical police force. When deadly force may be used is tightly proscribed . . . generally not to fire until fired upon. While we have not come to the point of "Mirandizing" a potential enemy . . . we are coming very close.

Developing a training doctrine for combat forces across a range of conflict situations is no easy task, if it can be accomplished at all. Infantry basic training which for the moment, still includes instruction in hand to hand combat where the objective is to kill or be killed, is hardly an option when the mission is to disarm an enemy but in no case do him bodily harm. Few would point to Somalia and Bosnia as success stories wherein military forces were used in a peacekeeper role.

Question:

What is the definition of collateral damage? Correspondingly, is there such a thing as innocent civilians in war, no matter what the conflict may be called?

Discussion:

Collateral damage is "spillover" damage inflicted on adjacent or nearby structures and populations when the intended target is destroyed or damage caused when the intended target is only partially destroyed or missed entirely. Collateral damage becomes visible and controversial when it includes civilian casualties.⁶

As to whether collateral damage in all of its aspects, including civilian casualties, can be avoided is an impossible question. It comes down to whether it is acceptable to kill a civilian while he/she is at work in a ammunition factory, railway yard or utility plant, as opposed to killing him in his home which was destroyed in an attack on an otherwise acceptable military target.

The other side of the coin is whether or not there is such a thing as a casualty-free conflict. One unintended result of the Gulf War is that the public has come to expect minimum military casualties when our forces are committed to combat. There is, however, a basic contradiction here. In many instances, weapons that inflict collateral damage are the ones that minimize the risk to our military personnel, while civilian friendly weapons are not only more expensive but increase the risk to those charged with delivering them.⁷

Question:

If a distinction is to be made as between a limited war and total war, where does responsibility lie with respect to deciding which type of conflict it will be?

Discussion:

As to which type of war our armed forces will be asked to fight and who is to decide should never be in question. The responsibility is that of the President of the United States.

Question:

If senior military officers become a part of the decision process, that is, decision makers, with respect to which type of war will be waged, can they then in good faith uphold and support the oldest of military traditions-an officer's responsibility for the well being and safety of the men and women under this command?

Discussion:

Few political leaders, whether presidents or other high level civilian decision makers, are willing to unconditionally accept responsibility for deciding under what circumstances to commit our armed forces and accept responsibility for the casualties that follow. President Harry Truman's decision to use atomic weapons against Japan and to accept full responsibility for his decision, is an exception to the general rule. On the other hand, the Vietnam War is a casebook study of where the line between traditional military decisions and political decisions became indistinguishable. The debate as to where blame lies for North Vietnam's conquest of the South is ongoing and probably will never be agreed upon.⁸

In deciding the level of conflict and, by definition, the constraints imposed, the Commander in Chief does not lack for civilian advice and expertise. Long recognized sources include the National Security Council, the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency, the President's cabinet, his civilian appointees in the Department of Defense, and knowledgeable members of Congress.

Laying out costs in terms of casualties and material and the likelihood of success of various options put forth by civilian authorities is, however, a military responsibility. But tasking our military leaders to be part of the decision process with respect to deciding on the level of conflict and the constraints to be imposed on military action puts them in an untenable position with respect to their first duty-the well being of those under their command.⁹ By definition, this includes doing all possible to minimize casualties.

Conclusion

With the adoption of the American Constitution over 200 years ago, the United States asserted in unambiguous language that the nation's military would be subordinate to civilian authority. The power to declare war was delegated to the Congress.¹⁰ Also implied was that conduct of foreign policy rest with the Executive Branch of government.

Throughout World War II, the different responsibilities of the military, the executive, and Congress in time of conflict, as envisioned by the framers of the Constitution, were generally adhered to with little debate. After World War II, however, things changed. A Joint Chiefs of Staff, headed by a chairman, was specifically tasked to give advice to the President on military matters. The secretaries of War (Army), Navy and Air Force became subordinate to the Secretary of Defense with only nominal authority over the services they headed. The Office of the Joint Chiefs became in fact, if not name, a fourth branch of service.

Armed conflicts became police actions, regional conflicts, people's revolutions, insurrections, undeclared wars, covert operations, and United Nations missions, but never total wars. When General Mundy stated that most of our future wars will be less than total wars he should have also noted that all conflicts involving American forces over the past 50 years have been less than total wars.

Why conflicts in the last half of the 20th century were something less than total wars is not hard to understand given that the world was essentially divided into two powerful military alliances, each having the ability to destroy the other many times over. A declared war could escalate into a total war, a contingency which neither side wanted. Thus did armed conflicts become less than total wars with limited goals and constraints on military options while military options that might lead to total war were studiously avoided. In such a cold war environment decisions with respect to when and at what level conflicts should be fought became joint decisions between military and civilian leaders. And as in the case of most joint committee-type decisions, accountability for a particular decision made was no longer possible. The Vietnam War was a textbook case in this respect. Generals became politicians, politicians became generals, while combat forces became replaceable pawns in a seemingly never ending chess game.

A second result of keeping conflicts at a below total war threshold was a growing public expectation that less than total wars, whatever they were called, should be civilian casualty free.

Now, in the last decade of the 20th century, the world has changed again. With the collapse of the Soviet Union the probability of a total war on the scale of World War II has greatly diminished. In this new environment it is time to reexamine the decision making process which leads to committing American armed forces to combat. That a reexamination is called for can be seen in the public's resistance to committing our armed forces to conflicts where no overriding U.S. national interest is at stake as poll after poll has shown.

One way to address the public's concern is a return to accountability where our civilian leaders, and them alone, make the decision of when to commit forces, where to commit forces, and what constraints are to be placed on military action.¹¹ Once these decisions have been made, our military leaders become accountable for achieving civilian determined goals at the least cost in lives and material. But more important, those who lead can once again, in clear conscious,

carry out their first dutyÑthe well being of those under their command. Field Marshall William Slim, commanding officer of British forces in Burma in World War II, probably said it best and for all time:

I tell you, as officers, that you will not eat, sleep, smoke, sit down, or lie down until your soldiers have had a chance to do these things. If you will hold to this, they will follow you to the ends of the earth. If you do not, I will break you in front of your regiments. 12

Stated another way by a civilian:

When an officer accepts command of troops, he accepts not only the responsibility of accomplishing a mission, but the guardianship of those who serve under his command. The military hierarchy exists and can function because enlisted personnel entrust their well-being and their lives to those with command authority. When those in command authority either abdicate that authority or neglect that guardianship, more is lost than lives. Lost also is the trust that enables those who follow to follow those who lead. 13

Representative Dan Daniel, In hearings on the Beirut tragedy:

To paraphrase Field Marshall Slim. "Give our forces a clearly stated reason to fight for a clearly stated end. Do all in our power to minimize the inevitable casualties they will suffer, including use, as appropriate, all weapons available. Do this and they will be little concerned with what the conflict is called."14

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Clinton H. Whitehurst, Jr. is Emeritus Professor of Management and Economics, Clemson University and a Senior Fellow of the Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs. He received his Ph.D. degree in Economics from the University of Virginia in 1962 and did post-doctoral work in Defense Studies at Edinburgh University in 1969-70.

In 1986-87, Whitehurst was a Fulbright Scholar in India. Following his retirement from active teaching at Clemson University in 1988 he resided in the Republic of China on Taiwan for two years, 1988-89 and 1991-92, as a Visiting Research Professor at the National Chiao Tung University. While in Taiwan he lectured at the R.O.C. Naval Academy and the Armed Forces University. In 1992 and 1994 Whitehurst was Visiting Professor at the Curtin University of Technology in Perth, Australia where he lectured and did research in the area of transportation and logistics.

During his academic career, Whitehurst has authored five books, a number of major research reports, and 125 articles and papers, primarily in the area of transportation and defense studies. In 1991 he received the Distinguished Educator Award from the National Defense Transportation Association and was also named Paul Hall Memorial Lecturer for that year.