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# A Revolution in Military Ethics?

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There is a popular disposition to regard ethics as absolute and enduring, yet they are neither. That which is considered ethical alters with time and varies between civilizations and even families. At some impalpable level, the impulse to ethics does appear to arise from within and may be a collective survival strategy conditioned by biological and cultural evolution. Yet the specific content of a civilization's or a society's ethics is generally determined by accumulative tradition, epochal convenience, and local habit. The ethics of war and conflict are especially fluid.

We live in a stage of Western civilization in which nameless casualties inflicted by bombing campaigns are acceptable, while the thought of summarily shooting a prisoner of war fills us with revulsion, even if the blood of war crimes drips from every finger of that prisoner. We are allowed to impose embargoes that strike the most powerless members of foreign populations, bringing deprivation, malnutrition, and deformity to the voiceless, while merely annoying antagonistic decisionmakers. Yet we must treat foreign entrepreneurs who torment our poor with narcotics as white-collar criminals entitled to the legal protections of our own Constitution. Where is the absolute ethical quality, or even the logic, of this unexamined behavior? Our military and foreign policy ethics have the nature of a great historical chain letter that warns but does not reward.

Ethics are enablers. Personal, social, or military, they allow us to interact without needless viciousness and without generalized violence to the soul, the body, or society. In the military sphere, ethics in war allow us to disguise psychologically the requirement to butcher other human beings, masking the blunt killing behind concepts such as just war, higher causes, and approved behaviors. Ethics in war on the part of a Western society do not so much protect the objects of our violence as they shield us from the verity of our actions. Military ethics are ceremonial in the religious sense: they rarify and codify the darkness, implying a comforting order in the chaos and void. So long as we believe we have behaved ethically, we can, statistically, bear the knowledge of our deeds.

In our time, much of the debate over what is and is not ethical military behavior has focused on the overarching issue of just and unjust wars. But we rarely examine the component parts of our ethical stance, even when, as in the Allied bombing campaigns of the Second World War, technological capability proved so enticing that it canceled ethical restraints that had prevailed in Europe for over two and a half centuries, since the armies of Louis XIV ravished the Rhenish Palatinate. Overall, the greatest cause of perversion in the "logic" of military ethics has been the rise of technologies that distance the killer from the killed, impersonalizing warfare and thus dehumanizing this archetypal male group activity. When English longbowman struck down masses of French knights with early stand-off precision weapons, chivalry reacted with a horror that we can no longer grasp. Crecy and Agincourt marked a profound civilizational change from biological to technological logic. Warfare was no longer a contest of individual qualities played out in groups, but a contest of mass against mass, with the man subordinated to the mechanism. While this enabled the rise of disciplined armies as we know them, it also offset war from any individual biological imperative.

Gunpowder weapons furthered this trend dramatically until, today, only snipers and hapless "peacekeepers" consistently get a detailed look at their enemies. The enemy has become faceless, and easier than ever to kill. The unexpected consequence of the advent of distancing weapons, however, has been that we in the West find it ever more distasteful to dispose of those enemies who acquire faces and, thus, identities. The celebratory combat of the *Iliad* survives only in the sports contests that have always been a substitute and preparation for biologically-competitive warfare. Our wars are, or attempt to be, wars of alienation.

Modern man has dehumanized warfare.

The "Highway of Death" issue in the closing phase of Desert Storm is a good example. Although the decisionmakers in Washington, shy of consequences since Vietnam, feared a reaction of disgust on the part of the American electorate, Americans generally seem to have been exuberantly proud of the performance of their military (after having been warned by countless journalists and disanalytical scholars that their country's weapons did not work and their kids could not fight). The citizenry of the United States, in fact, will tolerate enormous amounts of the killing of foreigners, so long as that killing does not take too long, victory is clear-cut, friendly casualties are comparatively low, and the enemy dead do not have names, faces, and families. Our bombing campaign that prepared the battlefield for the ground attack buried countless Iraqi conscripts alive in sandy trenches and bunkers, while killing and wounding tens of thousands more in less dramatic fashion. The conscripts by and large did not want to be there, but feared their own leaders and military gendarmerie, and bore little or no direct responsibility for Iraqi excesses in Kuwait City. We killed those who did not have the courage to desert. Yet killing them in their thousands was "legitimate" and untroubling. Try slapping one prisoner on CNN.

Our most recent campaign in the desert also highlighted another ethical disconnect: while it was acceptable to bomb those divisions of hapless conscripts, it was unthinkable to announce and carry out a threat to kill Saddam Hussein, although he bore overwhelming guilt for the entire war and its atrocities. We justify this moral and practical muddle by stating that we do not sanction assassination in general, and certainly not the assassination of foreign heads of state. Yet where is the ethical logic in this? Why is it acceptable to slaughter--and I use that word advisedly--the commanded masses but not to mortally punish the guiltiest individual, the commander, a man stained with the blood of his own people as well as that of his neighbors?

Legalists--and reflexive moralists--will warn that a policy that sponsors assassinations or supremely-focused military strikes could degenerate into a license to murder that would corrupt our institutions and our being. First, that is symptomatic of our Western tendency to view all things in black and white, as either-or. Killing a Saddam, and doing it very publicly, does not mean that we would then wipe out the cabinets of every foreign government that ran late on its debt repayments. We are capable of judicious selectivity.

More important, though, is our willful blindness to issues of guilt, relative guilt, and guiltlessness. Objectively viewed, our position is perverse and cruel when we allow great criminals to escape punishment while attacking their subject populations, infrastructure, or simply their military establishments. Let me be clear: as a soldier, I do not object to assisting in the battlefield killing of as many foreign opponents as it takes to accomplish the mission assigned by my Commander-in-Chief. As a human being, however, our "ethical" national behavior reminds me of those feudal squabbles in which minor nobles dueled by killing and raping each other's serfs and burning unoffending villages.

At its present stage of historical development, the United States (as well as most other truly Western nations), is incapable of engaging in an unjust war. Our dilemma is that of defining just and unjust actions within our wars and conflicts. It is time to reexamine habits that have come to pass for ethics and ask the sort of questions that are as controversial as they are uncomfortable to the man or woman of conscience.

One subject, touched on above, which merits separate study is the issue of the extent to which technology determines our acceptance of behaviors as legitimate or not. It appears that technology is the greatest of temptations in this sphere of human activity; what is unacceptable from the man is welcome from the machine. If the soldier shoots a family, he is a war criminal. If a pilot misses his target and wipes out a family, he has simply had an unsuccessful mission. The focus is not on the result, but on the distance between the actor and the object of his actions, on the alienation between subject and object. Since the pilot "could not have known" and assumedly did not will the result of his actions, he bears no guilt. The machine failed, and the machine is guilty (although the machine's designers bear no blame, so long as they have designed machines that are linear extrapolations of previous war machines and they do not explore weaponry that violates contemporary--or atavistic--taboos, such as chemical or biological weapons).

The high-performance aircraft is at once an extension of the rifle and qualitatively different from it. The rifle dehumanized individual combat to a degree, but beyond-visual-range systems obliterate the human factor. Sophisticated technological systems with stand-off capabilities are perceived as the real killing mechanisms, not their

operators. We speak of soldiers entering a town, but of aircraft--not pilots--flying above it. Much is permitted to the machine that is forbidden to the man. It is an enormous ethical failure, yet one that, at least until now, has enabled us to win conventional wars.

The practical difficulty today lies in the range of unconventional conflicts, from peacekeeping operations to punitive expeditions by any other name. The close-in nature of combat in these conflicts insists on re-humanizing an activity we believed we had successfully dehumanized. In the streets and alleys of Mogadishu, the divide between subject and object collapses, and the alienation is cultural, not physical. This cripples our ability to fight.

The ethical restrictions on our military organizations function well enough in combat against other militaries, but increasingly our enemies, our potential adversaries, and even our provisional partners either do not know or reject our Western ethics (at times they do not even adhere to the ethics of their own society or civilization, since some cultures find mass ethics fungible, although collective taboos are not). We face opponents, from warlords to druglords, who operate in environments of tremendous moral freedom, unconstrained by laws, internationally recognized treaties, and "civilized" customs, or by the approved behaviors of the international military brotherhood. These men defeat us. Terrorists who rejected our world view defeated us in Lebanon. "General" Aideed, an ethical primitive by our standards (and probably by any standards) defeated us in Somalia. Despite occasional arrests, druglords defeat us on a daily basis. And Saddam, careless of his own people, denied us the fruits of our battlefield victory.

Until we change the rules, until we stop attacking foreign masses to punish by proxy protected-status murderers, we will continue to lose. And even as we lose, our cherished ethics do not stand up to hardheaded examination. We have become not only losers, but random murderers, willing to kill several hundred Somalis in a single day, but unwilling to kill the chief assassin, willing to uproot the coca fields of struggling peasants, but without the stomach to retaliate meaningfully against the druglords who savage our children and our society.

We *must* reexamine our concepts of the ethical and the legal. The oft-lauded Revolution in Military Affairs is consistently associated with technological capability, but a genuine revolution in military affairs, one that would upset the trend of history and shift the nature of war, would be a military doctrine, recognized by government, that stated that the primary goal of any US war or intervention would be to eliminate the offending leadership, its supporting cliques, and their enabling infrastructure. If our technological capabilities enjoy such great potential, why not focus research and development on means we can use against enemy leaders and their paladins? Why continue to grind within the antique paradigm that insists that the leader is identical with his (or her) people, and, therefore, punishing the people or its military representation is a just response to the leader's offenses?

In antique ages--probably spiritually healthier--the aim of war between states or proto-state organizations was to kill the enemy chief or to capture him and display him in a cage. Entire peoples often suffered, but they were not usually the primary targets, and their suffering was often an incidental result of the lack on either side of the technological wherewithal to bound past intervening armies and populations to reach the ranking offender and his immediate circle. You had to cut your way through the mass to reach The Man. Then, with the rise of Western civilization, leaders realized that it was not a profitable precedent to hurt each other's persons, and personal combats and direct physical vengeance between leaders disappeared on our sliver of the planet--and, later, as we projected our ways, elsewhere. Rulers and leaders distanced themselves from the hazards of combat and fought by proxy with armies, then, in our century, with populations. Why not, for the first time in modern history, refocus military operations on punishing the truly guilty? In the 20th century, we would have liked to strike a Hitler directly, but had not the means. So we destroyed the cultural treasure-house that was Dresden out of spite.

*Current and impending technologies could permit us to reinvent warfare, once again to attack the instigators of violence and atrocity, not the representational populations who themselves have often been victimized by their leadership.* The whispered warning that we do not condone "assassinations" because we do not want our own leaders assassinated is a counsel of unspeakable cowardice. First, if leaders will not risk the fate they ask of their privates, they are not fit to lead their people. Second, if foreign criminals, official or private, knew that retribution would be generally swift and always sure, attacks on US leaders--or US citizens overall--would likely decrease wonderfully. And such a policy would return us once again to an objectively moral path. Our current system amounts to punishing the murderer's neighborhood, while letting the murderer go free.

This is not a prescription for ending conventional war or mass conflict. The dirty secret is that many human beings like to fight, and, so long as demagogues can transfer the responsibility for personal and collective failure onto foreign or otherwise-different groups, we will have to respond to mass violence, and that will sometimes require a violent response against the mass. But this is not an all-or-nothing world. We could revolutionize--and humanize--military activity by attacking the sources of evil directly and minimizing, when possible, assaults against the faceless foe and his kin. Should we only force ourselves to stop and think, who among us would not be better satisfied with Saddam Hussein dead than with the ghosts of twenty or thirty thousand or more common Iraqis rising from the sands of Kuwait and southern Iraq?

And what do we expect or want of our shrunken military establishment? Haven't we forced ourselves through a threshold requiring dramatically different strategies and doctrine? Wouldn't a doctrine of the focused pursuit of guilty individuals and their immediate accomplices make more sense for our jeweler's military of today? Must we content ourselves with doctrine still heavy with the legacy of the massive assembly-line militaries we enjoyed when technology was affordable in bulk and military service was a broadly accepted responsibility?

It is time to re-humanize warfare.

And old divisions of labor do not hold. Since the long-comfortable lines between military and law enforcement missions are collapsing in our fractured world, we must treat the most murderous foreign criminals who attack our citizens as military targets. Currently, our drug control policy, at home and abroad, concentrates overwhelmingly on controlling and punishing those at the bottom of the narcotics business. We must recognize that foreign criminals who attack the most vulnerable segments of our citizenry, bringing death to our streets and disorder to our polity, have no entitlement to US constitutional protection. The primary difference between Saddam Hussein and the druglords of Colombia or Mexico is that Saddam Hussein never attacked the United States or its population directly.

These issues demand serious debate. Traditionalists who decry even the possibility of attacking these sources of human misery in such a manner generally do so from campuses or comfortable offices. They are out of contact with our citizenry and its needs, as they are phenomenally out of contact with the sheer violence of this world. They will immediately push the issue to absurd extremes, crying out that such a doctrine would amount to giving our military, which they see through the eyes of Oliver Stone and their own disdain of service, a license to kill. But the purpose of a military *is* to kill, and if you cannot stomach that, you should not have a military. The only operative question is *whom* the military should kill. More important, it would not be left to sergeants or, in most cases, even to generals to decide which foreign leaders or criminals should die or be otherwise punished. That would be the task of our elected and appointed leaders, or their delegated representatives, as it always has been.

Even though Hitler never attacked the United States, we saw a need to go to war against Germany--not merely to admonish Hitler in policy journals for disturbing the peace. We justified shooting the most vital man in Japan, Admiral Yamamoto, out of the sky. And we executed the most-deserving German and Japanese war criminals after perfunctory trials. We *can* muster the will to strike evil at its source, and we must not continue to succumb to the allure of attacking faceless populations when such actions are no longer a technological necessity. Today, we increasingly have the means to execute atrocious leaders and criminal mass-murderers without firebombing Tokyo or Hamburg. We have the means to prevent wars and conflicts, or to stop them in their earliest stages, by aiming our military directly at the responsible parties. Do we not also have the duty to do so?

The United States enjoys a historically unique position of power, influence, and cultural empire. Whether we find this crown comfortable or not, we bear unprecedented responsibilities--and face unanticipated vulnerabilities. If we truly will protect our citizens, our allies, and (that most anomalous condition of mankind) peace, it is time to stand back and reevaluate our conception of what is ethical in war and in those haunting almost-wars arising from foreign disorder and international organized crime. We might discover that our current military ethics are the least humane thing about us.

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Reviewed 28 May 1996. Please send comments or corrections to [carl\\_Parameters@conus.army.mil](mailto:carl_Parameters@conus.army.mil).