

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 40  
Number 4 *Parameters Winter 2010*

Article 19

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11-1-2010

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### Recommended Citation

P. W. Singer, "Caution: Children at War," *Parameters* 40, no. 4 (2010), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.2560.

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# Caution: Children at War

P. W. SINGER

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*This article was first published in the Winter 2001-02 issue of Parameters.*

After less than two weeks of training, the strike force of 150 British paratroopers deployed to the target zone, a ramshackle camp located in the jungles of Sierra Leone. At H-Hour, the assault group raced out from three RAF Chinook CH-47s, while three other helicopters laid down curtains of covering fire. At the same time, Special Air Service (SAS) snipers, who had waited for nearly a week in the surrounding swamps, opened up. Much of the force had to wade through chest-deep water and then hack through 150 meters of jungle while under fire, but they persevered to the objective: a collection of low huts where six hostages were held. The hostages were hurried into waiting choppers and the operation was quickly over. The fighting had been brief but “brutal.”<sup>1</sup> Estimates of enemy dead ranged from 25 to 150.

This British rescue assault, code-named Operation Barras, took place in September 2000, but received little attention in the United States. It merits mention not because it was a textbook operation lasting just 20 minutes, but rather because of the nature of the enemy: the “West Side Boys,” a rogue militia primarily made up of children. In fact, the very reason for Operation Barras was that 16 days earlier, the “Boys” had seized a patrol from the British Royal Irish Regiment, deployed on military training duties. The soldiers had been surrounded and then captured when their squad commander was unwilling to fire on “children armed with AKs.”<sup>2</sup> Operation Barras was one of the first Western engagements with this new, troubling feature of global violence. It illustrates a reality of contemporary conflict for which the US military is ill-prepared.

As we enter the 21st century, a new phenomenon of warfare has emerged, one quite different from the technical revolution in military affairs (RMA). While not a formal doctrine, it similarly represents a body of fundamental principles, deliberate instrumental choices, and transferred teachings.<sup>3</sup> In this case, it prescribes the methods and circumstances of employing children in battle.

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Countries in Which Child Soldiers are Active



“Child soldiers” are generally defined as persons under 18 years of age engaged in deadly violence (of a non-criminal type) as part of an armed force.<sup>4</sup> Units made up of such fighters have become a fact of present-day warfare. Children are participating as active combatants in over 75 percent of the world’s armed conflicts. It is nearly inevitable that American troops will have to contend with this feature of modern warfare at some point and also “find themselves face-to-face with a 14-year old carrying an AK-47.”<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the issue of child soldiers is still a largely invisible one to American security studies. Most of our understanding of child soldiers comes not from within the field, but from advocacy efforts and the research side of pediatric medicine. Most worrisome, no doctrine has been developed for dealing with the specific challenges and dilemmas that child soldiers present to mission planners or deployed units.

The reasons for this omission are unclear. It may be that the subject of children in warfare is thought too peripheral or too sensitive an issue for serious consideration. Or, it may be because it is difficult to take a dispassionate, hardheaded approach to a topic that so tugs at one’s heartstrings. In any case, our failure to examine the phenomenon of child soldiers represents a gap that should be addressed. It touches on everything from the new dynamics of global conflicts to the rise of non-state actors in the military sphere. It may complicate the challenges US forces will face in future interventions and peacekeeping operations. To remain relevant, military studies must address all the new actors in warfare, even the littlest ones.

### ***Children at War: Past, Present, and Future***

Warfare always has been an almost exclusively adult domain. There were some instances in the past where male children did serve in the military,

though not equal to active soldiers. Pages helped arm and maintain the knights of medieval Europe, while drummer boys were a requisite part of any 18th-century army. But in each case they fulfilled minor support roles and were not considered as true combatants. They neither dealt out death nor were considered legitimate targets.

US troops have faced certain instances of children fighting in the last gasps of defeated states, most notably the VMI cadets at the Battle of New Market in 1864 and the arming of the *Hitler Jugend* when Allied armies entered Nazi Germany in 1945.<sup>6</sup> Some children also fought alongside some Cold War rebel groups, including the Viet Cong. Each of these cases, however, was qualitatively different from a general practice; they were isolated in time, geographic space, and scope, and children were never an integral, essential part of the forces engaged.<sup>7</sup> They were exceptions to what the rule used to be.

The nature of armed conflict, though, has changed greatly in the last few decades. As the 20th century closed, the role of children in battle had changed in many parts of the world from ancillary to primary. The case of the war in Sierra Leone reveals the extent of this change. The overall figure of child fighters for all sides there is between 15,000 and 20,000, putting them in the majority of total combatants; roughly 80 percent of the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF) organization is aged seven to 14.<sup>8</sup>

As we enter the 21st century, child soldiers are serving on the battlefields of every continent but Australia and Antarctica. They have become integral parts of both organized military units and nonmilitary, but still violent, political organizations, such as terrorist groups. They serve in a variety of roles: infantry shock troops, raiders, sentries, spies, sappers, and porters. In short, the participation of children in armed conflict is global in scope and massive in number, a far greater phenomenon than suggested by the scant attention it has received.

In the Americas in the 1990s, child soldiers served in fighting in El Salvador, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru. The most substantial current number is in Colombia. There they are nicknamed “little bells” by the military, which uses them as expendable sentries, and “little bees” by the guerillas, because they “sting” their enemies before they know they are under attack. Up to 30 percent of some guerilla units are made up of children, while some militia units are 85 percent children.<sup>9</sup>

In Europe, child fighters have been present in Chechnya, Daghestan, Kosovo, and Nagorno-Karabakh. The biggest European user of child soldiers is the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). From 1994, it started to recruit children systematically and even created children’s regiments. In 1998, it was reported that the PKK had 3,000 children within its ranks, the youngest being seven years old.<sup>10</sup>

Africa is often considered to be the epicenter of the phenomenon. Armed groups using child soldiers are present in nearly every one of its wars. Some 16,000 child soldiers fought in the Liberian conflict.<sup>11</sup> A 1995 survey revealed that 36 percent of all Angolan children had served as or accompanied soldiers in combat.<sup>12</sup> Of particular note is the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda, renowned—or rather infamous—for being made up almost exclusively of child soldiers. During its ten-year fight with the government, it has

abducted over 12,000 children to turn into soldiers. The LRA also holds the record for the world's youngest reported armed combatant, at age five.<sup>13</sup>

In the Middle East and Asia, there has been a proliferation of armed groups and a concurrent rise in the number of child soldiers. Students from Pakistani religious schools (*madrassas*) made up the bulk of Taliban forces in their initial takeover. Young teens are at the center of fighting in Lebanon, Palestine (70 percent of the *Intifada*), Laos, Philippines, Cambodia, and Kashmir. Myanmar alone has tens of thousands of child soldiers. The spillover effects of this recruitment were tragically illustrated in January 2000 when young members of the Karen "God's Army" took hundreds of hostages. The adolescent guerillas were subsequently killed at a hospital across the border in Thailand. (The leaders of "God's Army," the enigmatic Luther and Johnny Htoo, 12-year-old twin brothers, recently surrendered to Thai security forces.)

While armed rebel groups have made extensive use of child fighters, their use is by no means limited to non-state actors. The UN estimates that in addition to the 300,000 currently active child combatants (a conservative figure given the number of conflicts not included in the UN survey), over 50 states actively recruit children into their military forces, usually in violation of both international and their own domestic laws.<sup>14</sup>

Another new wrinkle of the child soldier phenomenon is that it defies gender boundaries. In the isolated instances in the past when children were used on the battlefield, they were generally boys. Now, while the majority of child soldiers are still male, roughly 30 percent of the world's armed groups that employ child soldiers include girls.<sup>15</sup> The most significant perhaps is the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelaam (LTTE), fighting in Sri Lanka since the mid-1980s. The group systematically recruits children and has even gone so far as to establish the LTTE *Bakuts* ("Baby Brigade"), made up of fighters aged 16 and under. Roughly half of the LTTE troops are women and girls, recruited from ages as young as ten. They are deliberately chosen for suicide bomber missions because they may not undergo as close a body search at checkpoints as men.

In sum, child soldiering is a global problem that occurs more systematically than previously suspected. It is important to note that these are not just children on the borderline of adulthood, but in many cases include those considered underage by any cultural standard. The statistics are telling:

- Seventy-six percent of ongoing or recently ended conflicts (37 of the 55) have had children beneath the age of 18 serving as combatants.
- Eighty percent of these conflicts where children have been present included fighters under the age of 15.
- Forty percent of the total armed organizations around the world (157 of 366, a figure that includes both state militaries and all armed non-state groups operating in a politico-military context) use child soldiers.
- Sixty percent of the non-state armed forces in the world (77 of 129) use child soldiers.
- Twenty-three percent of the armed organizations in the world (84 total) use children aged 15 and under in combat roles.
- Eighteen percent of them (64) use children aged 12 and under.<sup>16</sup>

Further, while the generally accepted total world figure of 300,000 child soldiers may be a somewhat small percentage of the overall number of armed personnel in the world, it makes up a larger part of actual forces involved in ongoing conflicts. Roughly ten percent of all current combatants in the world are children.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Causes: Behind the Child Soldier Phenomenon***

The recruitment and use of child soldiers is one of the most flagrant violations of international norms. Besides being contrary to the general constructs of the last four millennia of warfare, the practice is prohibited by a number of relevant treaties codified in international law.<sup>18</sup> However, these conventions are extensively ignored and, instead, the presence of child soldiers on the battlefield has become a widespread practice at the turn of the century. Thus, for professional military forces who will face them in the future, it is important to understand the dynamics of this phenomenon.

The recruitment and use of child soldiers is a deliberate and systematic choice. The reasons behind this conscious violation of international norms are complex, but involve three critical factors that form a causal chain: (1) generational disconnections caused by globalization, war, and disease create a pool of potential recruits; (2) efficiency improvements in small arms permit these recruits to be effective participants in warfare; which (3) results in the propensity to use children as a low-cost way to mobilize and generate force, particularly for individual goals in the context of failed or weak states. Let us look at each of these three factors in turn.

### ***The Lost Generation***

The desperate position that many children around the world find themselves in is almost unimaginable. The magnitude of global human insecurity is stunning in all its measures, from the 1.3 billion people who live in absolute poverty to the one billion rural residents who are landless.<sup>19</sup> Most important in the current context, the brunt of such social problems falls on the youngest segments of the population. Substantial proportions of the world's children are undereducated, malnourished, marginalized, and disaffected. As the population continues to swell to nine billion by 2025, this will worsen.

Child soldiers are drawn from this reserve. Those forcibly recruited are usually from special risk groups—street children, the rural poor, and refugees—while those who choose to enlist are often from the same groups, driven to do so by poverty, propaganda, and alienation. Adding to this, the wars of the past decade have created a follow-on generation of orphans and others dislocated and disaffected.

Other short-term catastrophes such as famine and disease outbreaks contribute to this trend. Of particular worry is the enduring nature of the AIDS epidemic, particularly in Africa. Seventy percent of those suffering from HIV live in Africa, where two million died last year. This will create a generation of new orphans for the following decades.<sup>20</sup> It will also debilitate the very

institutions needed to solidify the state, “gradually weakening the capacity of militaries to defend their nations and maintain civil order.”<sup>21</sup>

### *New Toys for Tots*

A concurrent trend necessary to the phenomenon’s expansion has been the proliferation of inexpensive light weapons. Rarely mentioned in analyses of world threats, which typically focus on the most complex and expensive systems, light weapons (rifles, grenades, light machine guns, land mines, and other “child-portable” systems) are the weapons most often used in contemporary warfare and produce 80 to 90 percent of all casualties.<sup>22</sup>

Technological and efficiency advances in these weapons permit the transformation of children into lethal fighters. For most of human history, weapons relied on the brute strength and long-term training of the operator, which was prohibitive to the effective use of children as soldiers. For example, a child not fully matured could not bear the physical burdens of serving in the phalanx. Even until just a generation ago, personal battlefield weapons were still heavy and bulky, generally limiting children’s participation.<sup>23</sup> But improvements in manufacturing, such as the incorporation of plastics, now make modern weapons—particularly automatic rifles—so light that small children can use them as effectively as adults. Just as important, most small arms have been simplified in their use, to the extent that they can be stripped, reassembled, and fired by a child below the age of ten. With only a few hours of training, a youngster can be taught all he or she needs to know in order to kill. At the same time, vast increases have been made in the lethality of small arms, multiplying their destructive power. Modern assault rifles give a handful of children the equivalent firepower of an entire Napoleonic regiment.

As these weapons have grown in ease of use and destructive power, they have also proliferated in number and fallen in price. Due to the post-Cold War surplus, there are an estimated 550 million small arms floating around the globe, making them startlingly cheap and easily accessible.<sup>24</sup> In Uganda, an AK-47 can be purchased for the cost of a chicken, while in northern Kenya it can be bought for the price of a goat.<sup>25</sup>

### *The New Child Labor Problem*

The result is that children are now easily transformed into soldiers and the nature of conflict is altered. Once children and battlefield weapons were incompatible; now they combine to create what one might conceptualize as a new pool of military labor. Children, considered in some societies as expendable assets, now represent an easy and low-cost way to mobilize armed force.

The practice has been particularly prominent in the context of vulnerable or failed states. It has been a way for even the weakest and most unpopular organizations to generate significant amounts of force with almost no investment. In most cases, there has been a direct link to ready commodities that provided willing conflict entrepreneurs the incentive to quickly seize what they

could.<sup>26</sup> Even when personal profit has not been the case, in wartime situations there is always motivation to assemble military force.

Where there are not enough adults available or willing to become soldiers, children have now become a solution. This may be because overwhelming losses from an enduring conflict or disease have eliminated the older pool of conscripts, or it may be because of the unpopularity of an organization's cause. As the map shown earlier illustrates, use of child soldiers has a certain geographic clustering, perhaps indicating cross-border spillovers. Another mechanism for the extension of the practice has actually been through deliberate transfer of knowledge and experience. The Lal Sena group in Nepal began to use child fighters after training and consultation with the Shining Path rebel group in Peru and Indian militant groups, indicating teaching pathways for the practice's spread.<sup>27</sup>

Highly personalized or purely predatory armed groups, such as warlords or religious fringe groups, are particularly dependent on this new labor source. They can transform children into soldiers and thus transform an insignificant force into an army. The classic example of the rationale behind using children as an alternate military labor source is Charles Taylor in Liberia. In the early 1990s he turned an "army" of 150 amateur soldiers armed with small arms into a force of thousands by the recruitment and use of child soldiers. Today, he is Liberia's president, demonstrating the potential payoff. Through child soldiers, he was able to use a small gang to gain a kingdom.

### ***Dynamics: Turning a Child into a Soldier***

The essence of the child soldier phenomenon is that the processes involved are simple. The ultimate aim is to foster a dependency that binds children to their armed organization.

#### ***Recruitment***

Case studies indicate that the primary recruitment method is abduction. Typically, recruiting parties are given conscription targets that change according to need and objective. Some groups even use sophisticated computerized population databases to direct recruiting efforts. All children are not automatically taken, only those who meet certain criteria. Those judged too small are often killed in order to intimidate both the local populace and the new recruits. Once caught, children have no choice; usually they must comply with their captors or die.

To maximize efficiency, both state armies and rebel groups target the places that they know children will be both vulnerable and in the greatest number. The most frequent targets are secondary schools, marketplaces, and refugee camps. In many ways, these tactics echo the naval press gangs of the Napoleonic era. The difference is that abductions are not just about building one's force, but are also instruments of war. Abduction raids often turn to rape and looting rampages.<sup>28</sup>

Some children choose to join an armed group of their own volition. However, to describe this choice as "voluntary" is misleading.<sup>29</sup> Leaving aside



that they are not yet of an age considered able to make mature decisions, many are driven into conflict by pressures beyond their control, usually economic in nature. Hunger and poverty are endemic in conflict zones, and children, particularly those orphaned or disengaged from civil society, may volunteer to join any group that guarantees regular meals. The same factors may also drive parents to offer their children for combat service.

Structural conditions may also oblige children to join armed organizations. If surrounded by violence and chaos, they may decide they are safer with guns in their hands. Revenge can also be a particularly powerful impetus to join.<sup>30</sup> Last, some groups may take deliberate advantage of adolescence, a stage in life where identity is still defining. Through propaganda or media distortion, violence may be glorified or fictions created to induce children to self-identify with an organization.<sup>31</sup>

### *Conversion, Training, and Action: Obedience through Fear*

The recruitment of children is only the first step. They quickly are made dependent on their leaders for their every need. Adding liberal doses of terror and propaganda makes the impressionable children begin to identify with causes they barely understand. Discipline within such groups is maintained by extreme and often arbitrary violence, used as both a conversion method and a deterrent to questioning authority. A particularly gruesome tactic among the groups most dependent on child soldiers is to force captured children to take part in ritualized killings very soon after their abduction. The victims may be POWs, other children seized for the purpose of being killed by the recruits, or, most heinous of all, the children's neighbors or parents. Any recruits who balk risk becoming the victims themselves, forcing the most terrible choice upon a child.

The children are recruited for military purposes, so they are quickly put to this task. Typically, they are given short instruction in the most basic infantry skills: how to fire and clean their weapons, lay landmines, set an ambush, and so forth. The time period of training tends to range from a single day to four months, well short of common standards, but enough to learn to kill. Their instructors may even be other child soldier "veterans."

Once minimally trained, most new recruits are quickly set out on the battlefield. For rebel groups, the standard unit tactic is to place them in small, platoon-sized groups (roughly 30-40 children) under the command of a few adults. Typically, they are grouped by age. These units tend to stay on the move and operate as raiding parties. Since they usually target civilians or ambush much smaller units or outposts, their effect can be devastating. The employment of child soldiers by state militaries is situationally dependent. Typically, in unpopular guerilla wars they are mixed in with standard units of adult soldiers. In conventional wars, they are often brought in as stopgap measures and set out on their own in the frontlines to disrupt enemy formations.

Despite their negligible training, their often-cruel indoctrination means that young children can quickly be turned into the fiercest of fighters. Weakened psychologically and fearful of their commanders, they can become obedient killers, willing to take on the most dangerous and horrifying assignments.

Young children rarely fully appreciate the dangers of the battlefield. The result is that in the midst of combat they get overly excited and take undue risks. This tendency toward fearlessness is deliberately exploited by many organizations and even reinforced by forcing the children to take drugs or alcohol.

The result is that, in the words of one observer in Sierra Leone, “Children make very effective combatants. Victims and witnesses often said they feared the children more than the adults because the child combatants had not developed an understanding of the value of life. They would do anything. They knew no fear. Especially when they were pumped up on drugs. They saw it as fun to go into battle.”<sup>32</sup>

When child soldiers attack unarmed civilians the results can be catastrophic. Child soldiers also have proven to be quite effective, however, even when facing regular adult troops. Their audacity, plus their sheer numbers and firepower, sometimes can compensate for their lack of training (and in fact, adults in developing state armies may often be even less trained). In December 1997, the Leopard brigade of the LTTE, its elite child soldier formation primarily made up of orphans, was able to surround and kill nearly 200 Sri Lankan army commandos. The loss demoralized the whole army, as these soldiers were considered the force’s vanguard.

### *Loyalty vs. Escape*

Once indoctrinated, many child soldiers do not want to leave their new lives. The general threshold appears to be around one year or longer in the organization. By this point, the children’s own self-concept has become solidly entwined with their captors. Some grow physically and psychologically addicted to the drugs that their adult leaders supply. Others gain a sense of identity within the small units or even develop the bonds of combat that keep them from deserting their fellow child soldiers.

However, the critical factor that binds children to the group is fear—fear of what would happen if they attempt to flee and are caught. Escape is quite difficult. Other fighters, including other children, almost always surround them and are equally fearful of what would happen to them if they do not turn the escapees in. For children within state armies, to flee, even for a child, is to commit desertion, which under many military codes is punishable by firing squad. Within rebel groups, the punishments are typically more ritualized, with the execution providing an opportunity for further indoctrination. Those children caught fleeing usually are killed by other children, often with edged handheld weapons, in order to make it more personal for each executioner.

Despite these overwhelming risks, vast numbers of child soldiers run at any opportunity. Some hate their new lives, some do it out of terror, and some just miss their families. Of the thousands abducted, there are also thousands who have escaped. Most of these have fled when a sudden opportunity presented itself, often in the heat and chaos of a military engagement. Their organization’s hold is usually short-term, dependent on the tight observation commanders keep.

### ***Implications of Child Soldiers***

The child soldier phenomenon portends a number of changes in conflict dynamics that should concern US military planners. Unfortunately, none of them can be considered positive.

#### *Increase in Violent Conflicts due to the Ease of Force Generation*

Children are targeted for recruitment because they represent a quick, easy, and, most importantly, low-cost way for armed organizations to generate force. Any organization willing to use children as fighters will be able to field a force well beyond what they would be able to field without them, literally multiplying their fighting numbers. Groups which previously would not have been considered military threats can now field dangerous forces or, at the very least, easily disrupt civil society through the targeting of unarmed civilians.

This ease also affects conflict persistence. Organizations that use children are sometimes able to endure conditions that would break forces that do not. Some state militaries will deploy massive numbers of child soldiers as a stopgap measure to delay defeat, creating valuable breathing space for their regular army to regroup and rebuild. The Ethiopians successfully used such a strategy in 1998 against Eritrea. Likewise, rebel groups that depend on child soldiers are able to rapidly regenerate battlefield losses. Only a small core of adult fighters is needed to maintain the organization. During the 1990s the RUF in Sierra Leone was completely routed in two separate instances, but each time used abducted children to return to strength.

#### *The Proliferation of Violence and the Devaluation of Ideology*

The use of children also means that the connections between the motivations of the group's leaders and its likely success in fielding a combat organization are broken. By pulling in their recruits through abduction, causes that enjoy no grassroots support are still able to mobilize. They are also less likely to die out because of their unpopularity.

Many conflicts fueled by child fighters have been simply about personal greed. The result is that political agendas are increasingly less necessary to the maintenance of warfare, as the examples of Myanmar, Liberia, Uganda, and Sierra Leone graphically illustrate. The groups are also more predatory and destructive in their operations, as they have less incentive to establish good governance and don't depend on the prosperity of their host communities.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the use of child fighters allows fringe movements, which would have been marginalized in the past, now to become quite powerful forces, spurring further conflict. These include even the most bizarre, such as the LRA in Uganda, fighting to bring back respect for the biblical Ten Commandments, which under its leader's interpretation includes the torture, rape, and killing of children, the use of sex slaves, and the prohibition of bicycles.<sup>34</sup> The LRA has a core of 200 believers, but fields a force of up to 12,000 abducted children and has been able to stay at war for over a decade.

### *The Mess that Children Make*

The presence of children on the battlefield also adds to the chaos of war, making greater levels of atrocities more likely. This higher level of bloodshed, in turn, makes conflicts more intractable.<sup>35</sup> While any number of groups use killings, rape, and torture as a part of their tactics to breed fear, using children as soldiers makes these violations an inherent part of the conflict.

The intrinsic methods of recruitment and indoctrination of children entail massive violations of the laws of war. Atrocities play a central role in the methods used to turn children into soldiers. Likewise, the normative protections afforded wounded or prisoners of war are often ignored. Rebel groups with child soldiers typically kill their enemy's wounded or prisoners on the spot or bring them back to camp to kill as instructive victims. Civilians, in particular, bear the brunt of child soldier attacks. This strategy is in opposition to traditional guerilla doctrine of winning local support so as to blend into the environment.<sup>36</sup> The result is that when children are present in a conflict, experience has shown that they are among the most vicious combatants in the war; indeed, the younger child soldiers are, the more vicious they tend to be.<sup>37</sup>

Children are also more likely to suffer greater losses. Many commanders deliberately exploit them in two primary methods: using children as shields or as cannon fodder. The first is the use of children to protect the lives of an organization's leaders and its better trained, and thus considered more valuable, adult soldiers. Children are most often the personnel used to explore suspected minefields, usually through simple trial and error. Children are used as direct shields at checkpoints or when ambushes or battles loom, while commanders remain safely hidden.

Children are also commonly used in suicide missions or "human wave" attacks, where the tactic is designed to overpower a well-fortified opposition through sheer weight of numbers. Their value is that they provide extra targets for the enemy to deal with and expend ammunition on. Those who do not run in the direction of the gunfire are beaten or killed. Such attacks can be quite effective in overwhelming a force. In 1996, the LTTE used them to overrun the Multavi military complex in Sri Lanka, killing 1,173 out of 1,240 government soldiers. The casualty rates for child soldiers have been much higher than those for equivalent adult units. Since 1995, 60 percent of LTTE personnel killed in combat have been children aged ten to 16. Twenty percent were girls.<sup>38</sup>

### *Child Soldiers and the Conflict Merry-Go-Round*

The dangers involved in introducing children into war do not stop at a conflict's termination, for each instance lays the groundwork for future fighting. In many ways, the child soldiers bear greater burdens after the conflict is over than their adult counterparts. Many have been forced to commit atrocities against their own families and communities, or have suffered physical disabilities or psychological scars, which are heightened by their youth. Most have special rehabilitation needs. Or, because they were removed from school at an

early age, they may have no skills other than killing and being able to fieldstrip weapons.

Perhaps, though, the most serious long-term consequence of the phenomenon of child soldiers is how it disrupts their psychological and moral development. The practice plunges them into a system where killing is sanctioned, inculcating a culture of impunity hard to reverse. The resulting tendency for more violence contributes to the difficulty peacekeeping forces experience when trying to integrate hostile groups into a united society.

### ***Opposing Child Soldiers: The Value of Shock and Follow-Through***

The underlying conditions that have led to the use of child soldiers (global poverty and disconnection, the spread of small arms, and weakened states) can be dealt with only in the long term. Norms against child soldiering have proven to be insufficient, so stigmatization of those who abuse children in this manner must be backed up with real punishments. These include prosecuting the use of children in combat as a war crime, and discouraging the practice by denying sponsoring governments or non-state organizations legitimacy and judiciously designing sanctions to proscribe trade with them. Likewise, current US military aid, training programs, and weapon sales to countries that use child soldiers should be suspended until they remove these illegal recruits.<sup>39</sup>

Despite such sanctions, US troops still will likely have to contend one day with facing children in battle, possibly in the near future. Military planners need to recognize that child soldiers are an inescapable new feature of the modern battlefield and make appropriate tactical adjustments. American soldiers need to be prepared for the hard dilemmas they will face in this eventuality.

Operation Barras illustrates the differences between encounters with child soldier units and other regular armed forces. In some ways, child soldier units have certain weaknesses that can be exploited, but only if the professional force makes the proper adjustments. For example, US military doctrine in small wars traditionally has focused on attrition, large amounts of firepower, and the total destruction of the enemy.<sup>40</sup> When encountering child soldiers, these principles may be counterproductive. The resulting negative public reactions could undermine the entire operation.

A key when facing child units is to recognize that the opposition is made up of soldiers who are often looking for a way out. The center of gravity is the hold that leaders have on their troops, with a primary task being the breaking of that chain. Ex-child soldiers reveal that they were often just waiting until fighting broke out to steal away in the confusion, if that was possible. If the adult leader is killed or forced to take cover, the whole organization often breaks down. Some children simply drop their weapons; others flee into the bush. LRA escapees tell of how, if this command link were broken, their entire unit would disappear within seconds.<sup>41</sup> If it were not, they would fight on with fervor.

Traditional targeting and set-piece movement will be less effectual than the creation of avenues and openings. For quick and less-costly results, a force should “fire-for shock” rather than “fire for effect.” Chaos and confusion are more valued than pure destruction, such that heavy use of smoke and demonstrative air, armor, and artillery fires will often be enough to break down a force

based on child soldiers. One is reminded of the axiom that in bush skirmishes, “he who makes the biggest noise wins.” Helicopter gunships have been found to be particularly intimidating and thus most effective, to the extent that many describe the one privately contracted gunship in Sierra Leone as more valuable in stopping the child-based RUF than the entire UN and Sierra Leone armies combined. An emphasis on shock will also likely cost fewer lives on both sides. The possible combination with non-lethal technologies should be explored.

The irony is that such tactics run contrary to the direction many militaries have taken toward lighter and more sophisticated forces. As an observer of the Barras operation noted, “You cannot resolve a situation like this with a laser-guided bomb from 30,000 feet.” Soldiers in peacekeeping operations, which are the most likely situations for Western militaries to come into contact with child soldiers, may be the most ill-equipped of all to respond. They are often lightly armed, lacking in the types of heavy weapons that can shock. Indeed, in each situation where peacekeeping forces have run into the most difficulty, they have been small-arms-based, light-infantry forces, lacking in heavy weapons support.<sup>42</sup>

Militaries currently reconfiguring their forces for intervention, such as the restructuring ongoing in Europe, would do well to remember the continuing importance of having firepower available for deterrence, demonstrations, and, if necessary, use as backup, even in peacekeeping operations. US forces should make certain to deploy only with the equipment packages necessary to accomplish these tasks.

The defeat of a child-soldier-based opposition does not stop at the first encounter, no matter how successful. Measures must be taken quickly to welcome the child escapees, so as to induce others to follow, while at the same time preventing the adult leaders from regrouping. A flaw in Operation Barras was that there was limited follow-through, and a core group of leaders escaped, possibly to regroup. This means that while a fairly passive defense is best suited for the first stage, after contact, active measures must be taken to search out and run down the leadership. This will require both patience and the use of small units of dedicated counterinsurgency specialists.

That fact that units based on child soldiers are most vulnerable to shock tactics should not be interpreted to mean that they do not constitute very real threats. Tactical leaders must be aware that child soldier forces are often well-armed and can cause great damage to an unprepared force. Moreover, when not immediately broken down, they tend to operate with terrifying audacity, taking risks that regular soldiers might not anticipate.

When deployed in an area known to have child soldiers present, forces should take added cautions to counter and keep the threat at a distance, including putting children through the same inspections and scrutiny as adults. Intelligence should be attuned to what method of recruitment the opposition uses and the average child soldier’s period of service. Opponents using impressment tactics or with recent cadres will be more prone to dissolving under shock than those with voluntary recruits or with children having been in service for more than a year. Before deployment, US troops should receive training in

children's rights, and, if possible, operations in areas where child soldiers might be encountered should include personnel with special expertise in this area.

#### Suggested Guidelines When Engaging Child Soldiers

1. Intelligence: Be attuned to the specific makeup of the opposition force.
2. Force Protection: All children are not threats, but may require the same scrutiny as adults.
3. Engagement: Operate with awareness of the situation's dynamics.
  - a. Fire for shock when possible.
  - b. Shape the opposition by creating avenues for escape.
  - c. Leader's control is the center of gravity, so engage adult targets first if possible.
4. Aftermath: Units may require special post-conflict treatment (akin to what police receive after shooting incidents).
5. Break the Cycle: Deployed units should support rehabilitation efforts.

Eventually, US troops will be placed in the difficult position of having to fire on a child for their own protection. Military leaders need to be aware of this terrible dilemma and prepare their soldiers with strict guidelines regarding this scenario. They must also be ready to deal with its aftermath, for this is an added way that the use of child soldiers puts professional forces at a disadvantage. It is especially demoralizing for professional militaries to be forced to fight and kill children. For example, even though there was little dilemma or controversy over actions against the *Hitler Jugend* troops in 1945, the experience was so unsettling that US troop morale was brought to its lowest point, despite the end of the war being in sight.<sup>43</sup>

The effect would be increased in intervention or peacekeeping missions, where the rationale for becoming involved is more open-ended. During its peace intervention into Sri Lanka, the Indian army was so worn down by its experience versus the child cadres of the LTTE that it pressured its leadership into terminating the mission. This last point underscores the proviso that force should be used only when and where the mission objectives warrant it. The eventuality of engaging child soldiers will be a terrible tragedy regardless of the mission rationale. The added misfortune would be if subsequent media images undermine domestic support. Public affairs specialists need to be prepared for the aftermath of such engagements and stress the context under which they occurred and the overall mission's importance.

Finally, troops deployed into operational zones where child soldiers are present should work to break the circle of violence. Forces should make every effort to greet and support escapees in a positive manner. Effective programs should be designed to replace the former organization's negative influence by immediately providing for the children's basic needs—such as food, clothing, and shelter—while at the same working to reunite them with their immediate or extended families. Close cooperation with aid agencies will be required. An additional task is that forces must also provide added protection to recent escapees and holding facilities that are often targeted by raiding parties, such as rehabilitation camps that house a pool of already trained recruits. In Sierra

Leone, no such safeguard was afforded by the UN peacekeeping force, so when the war flared up, the children were simply re-abducted.

## Conclusions

Until recently, there was no need to think about what American forces should do when they encounter armed units made up of children. The practice of using children in battle was not only impractical but also unthinkable. Changes at the turn of the century now mean there is barely a recent conflict that has not seen child combatants. Some conflicts are in fact sustained by their presence.

The ramifications of this new phenomenon are quite dangerous. The use of child soldiers permits a multiplication of potential conflict groups, making wars both more likely and more bloody. It also entails higher levels of atrocities. Simply put, “children with AKs” are a new feature of the modern battlefield, and US forces will have to deal with the dilemmas they present at some point.

The responses made so far have been limited in their effectiveness. Political and military analysts have been slow to study the issue, while governments have been slow to address the underlying conditions that facilitate it. For US military planners, now is the time to pay greater attention to the phenomenon’s unique particularities, so that appropriate responses can be designed. Child soldier incidents will come sooner or later. The pertinent question is whether American troops will be prepared.

## NOTES

1. Marie Colvin and James Clark. “How the Hi-Tech Army Fell Back on Law of the Jungle and Won,” *The Sunday Times*, 17 September 2000, internet, <http://www.sunday-times.co.uk/news/pages/sti/2000/09/17/stifgnaf03003.html>.

2. Major Alan Marshall as quoted in Al Venter, “Sierra Leone: A Disreputable Debacle,” *Soldier of Fortune*, January 2001. In the end, more children died because of this decision, illustrating the dilemmas tactical commanders face.

3. One might even go so far as to suggest that the use of children in war represents an emerging “doctrine” in many regions. “Doctrine is defined as the body of theory within which the armed forces must operate, prescribing the methods and circumstances of their employment. Doctrinal provisions are generalizations gleaned from past experience about what functions well.” David Keithley and Paul Melshen, “Past as Prologue: USMC Small Wars Doctrine,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 8 (Autumn 1997), 88. For other extrapolations on “doctrine” see US Department of Defense, Joint Publication 1-02, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, internet, <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrineljel/doddict/data/d/02018.html>, accessed 15 February 2000; and Gunther E. Rothenberg, “Maurice of Nassau, Gustavus Adolphus, Raimondo Montecuccoli, and the ‘Military Revolution’ of the Seventeenth Century,” in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1986), particularly pp. 40-42.

4. Center for Defense Information (CDI), “The Invisible Soldiers: Child Combatants,” *The Defense Monitor*, 26 (No. 4, 1997), internet, <http://www.cdi.org/dm/1997/issue4/>. The 18-year-old definition is drawn from the UNICEF international standard of age of maturity and is encoded in the international laws of war described later.

5. Human Rights Watch, “Clinton Hailed for Signing Ban on Child Combatants,” press release, New York, 5 July 2000, internet, [www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org). Efforts to stop the use of child soldiers will not only help children internationally, but may ultimately help American forces as well.

6. Guido Knopp, *Hitler’s Kinder* (Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 2000); Philip Baker, *Youth Led by Youth* (London: Vilmor Publications, 1989).

7. New Market was the first and only major battle in the United States to see their use, and involved a total of 257 cadets. No other states in that period rushed to copy the example. “Report on the Battle of New Market Virginia and aftermath, part 1, May 15, 1864,” from the VMI Annual Report, July 1864, General Francis H. Smith, Superintendent, original document in the VMI archives,



internet, <http://www.vmi.edu/~archtml/cwnmrpt.html>. Both sides in the US Civil War, however, had soldiers as young as 16 years old. Regarding the Viet Cong, children were used as spies and sentries.

8. Save the Children, "Children of the Gun," *Children in Crisis* project report, September 2000, internet, [www.savethechildren.org/crisis](http://www.savethechildren.org/crisis).

9. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, "The Use of Child Soldiers in Americas: An Overview," internet, [http://www.us-childsoldiers.org/child\\_soldiers/child-sold.html](http://www.us-childsoldiers.org/child_soldiers/child-sold.html); Human Rights Watch, "Child Soldiers Used by All Sides in Colombia's Armed Conflict," press release, New York, 8 October 1998, internet, <http://www.hrw.org/hrw/press98/oct/childsold1008.htm>. Given the increasing involvement of the United States in the conflict, this must be a concern.

10. The Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *The Use of Children by OSCE Member States*, Human Dimension Seminar on Children and Armed Conflict, Warsaw, 23-26 May 2000, internet, <http://www.child-soldiers.org/>.

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12. Richard Reid, "The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children's Rights," *International Pediatric Association Journal*, 6 (October 1995), internet, [http://www.ipa-france.net/pubs/inches/inch\\_4/reid.htm](http://www.ipa-france.net/pubs/inches/inch_4/reid.htm).

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15. Data from Rädga Barnen, Swedish Save the Children, *Childwar* database.

16. Ibid. These figures also blunt the spurious arguments that the standards against the use of child soldiers are Western-derived. No culture considers its members mature at these young ages, nor do their prior histories of warfare indicate such use of pre-teen warriors.

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18. At the international level, these include the 1945 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Geneva Conventions of 1949, and the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Conventions. The UN Security Council, the UN General Assembly, the UN Commission on Human Rights, and the International Labor Organization are among the international bodies that have condemned the practice, not to mention the global grassroots effort of the nongovernmental sort. At the regional level, the Organization for African Unity, the Economic Community of West African States, the Organization of American States, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the European Parliament have also denounced the use of child soldiers.

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