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THE UTILITY OF FORCE

There is such a thing as seeing another come to grief, yes even to destruction, without being one whit wiser yourself, because you do not understand how it happened; and you do not understand, either because you do not see the principle he has violated, or because you miss the application of it in his case, and consequently to your own.¹

INTRODUCTION

The performance of the U.S. military since the end of World War II has led some to question the ability of the services to defeat an enemy in the event of war. Critics have claimed that the Pentagon cannot devise successful military policies; Korea, Vietnam, the aborted Iranian hostage rescue mission, and the Beirut tragedy are cited as examples of U.S. postwar military malaise. Even the recent Grenada operation has come in for its share of criticism.²

One consequence of such failures has been the emergence of a "military reform" movement, a loose alliance of defense analysts, members of Congress, congressional staff, journalists, and some

¹ Alfred Thayer Mahan, Naval Strategy: Compared and Contrasted with the Principles of Military Operations on Land (Boston, Massachusetts: Little, Brown and Company, 1911), p. 11.

² See, for example, Arthur T. Hadley, "Inside America's Broken War Machine," The New Republic, May 7, 1984; Jeffrey Record, "It's Full of Bureaucrats Instead of Warriors," Washington Post, January 29, 1984; Report on Grenada to Congressional Military Reform Caucus by Bill Lind on April 5, 1984, reprinted in press release of Representative Jim Courter (R-NJ).

military officers. These "reformers" are generally critical of established policy in a number of areas, including strategy, tactics doctrine, force structures, weapons acquisition, and defense organization.

The reform movement is hardly monolithic. Reformers themselves disagree on many fundamental issues. Indeed it is likely that, in some cases, military reform has become a smokescreen for reducing the defense budget. Claiming cutting "fat" in defense spending as their goal, some who don the mantle of military reform simply oppose funding the nation's long overdue rearmament. But it is clear that these so-called reformers are having an impact that cannot be ignored, particularly in the areas of defense organization and weapons procurement.

Despite its lack of uniformity on the issues, the military reform movement is characterized by certain common positions on defense. The reformers' central concern is the "American Way of War," which they say emphasizes massive firepower designed to cause the attrition of the enemy, and which aims at favorable "exchange ratios" in terms of casualties at the expense of flexibility and adaptability to rapidly changing circumstances.

This approach, the reformers argue, has led to the increasing centralization and bureaucratization of the military; the replacement of the bold and imaginative military leader with the cautious military manager; an increasing reliance on technologically sophisticated weapons, which are extraordinarily expensive and often beyond the ability of the average soldier to operate; an emphasis on individual rotation rather than unit rotation, with a concomitant loss of combat effectiveness and a decline in morale; and a system driven by the convenience of the military management system to the detriment of the military's nominal function.

The reformers would replace the firepower/attrition style of warfare with "maneuver warfare." They question the Air Force's self-image as an independent arm capable of decisive action on its own. They attack the alleged preference within the services for high technology state-of-the-art weapons, which for budgetary reasons can never be procured in the necessary quantities, and would prefer cheaper weapons to gold-plated ones. And they would reform the procurement process for weapons, which they claim currently produces improperly tested, ineffective weapons that cost too much.

If taken in isolation, much of what the reformers claim is correct, but the fact is that they have not addressed the root causes of U.S. military problems. No amount of emphasis on organizational reform or on new approaches to tactics and operations, no reevaluation of the methods of procuring weapons, no strengthening of the system of officer education get to the root of the problem. Until the fundamental issues are addressed, there will be no such thing as true military reform.

One of the most important issues to be raised concerns the utility of military force. Most of the issues that the reformers call attention to have their origins not in structural problems, organization, tactics, or even strategy, but in how Americans think about war and force. This has to do with national traditions and how Americans see themselves in the world. Until reformers understand the philosophical roots of the defense establishment and recognize that policy, weapons, and organization derive from these roots, their recommendations will be for naught. For better or worse, the U.S. defense establishment reflects a national consensus on the use of force in a nuclear world.

THE PROBLEM: TREATING SYMPTOMS INSTEAD OF CAUSES

Much of what the military reformers say has merit. But unfortunately even a complete overhaul of the military establishment and implementation of the reformers' programs would not have the desired effect: to improve the prospects of U.S. military success. The reason is simple. Those very defects in the military that the reformers attack are the result of a way of thinking about war and military force that is closely linked with the character of the U.S. government itself, particularly as defined in the years since the end of World War II. The reformers have nothing to say about this way of thinking, indeed most fervently share the assumptions that arise from it. But until this defective understanding of the use of military force and war is addressed, there is no hope for true military reform. And there is danger that, by focusing exclusively on tactics, operations, doctrine, organization, and defense procurement, the reformers will divert attention away from the fundamental issue, to the detriment of national security.

The American Way of War is the consequence of the American character, which in turn derives from the tradition of Western liberalism. Western liberalism is an ambiguous tradition. On the one hand, the founders of the liberal tradition recognized the necessity of war in defense of liberal principles. On the other hand, liberal political philosophy argues that man is perfectible, and that war, along with other types of human misery, was the avoidable consequence of social organization.

Until recently, there has been no more optimistic a people than the Americans. They have tended to believe that war is an aberration, foreign to the human condition, called forth by unreasonable, ancient hatreds, poverty, or in rare cases, a totally evil regime. Unreasonable hatreds can be overcome by negotiation, Americans believe, and poverty, by economic aid. Only when all else fails is war necessary, and then all the stops are pulled out. As General Daniel Graham comments, when

...people are so blind or evil as to wholly disregard their own interests, Americans have decided these aberrations must be utterly destroyed....This facet of the

American character made possible episodes such as Sherman's march to the sea, the bombing of Dresden and Hiroshima. The messianic streak in American history has sometimes been so strong that the American people have believed that if only one particular evil were wiped off the earth, mankind would thereafter live in endless tranquility.³

Though the view that war is caused by poverty or ignorance may appear to share little with the view that it is caused by "evil," there is a remarkable consistency between them. Both see war as contrary to the natural condition of human beings. International problems can all be finally solved, through reasoning or altruism in the one case, or through overpowering force on the other.

Indeed it should be noted that, in an important respect, political liberalism itself leads to the American Way of War. The firepower/attrition style of war is the logical consequence of liberal political science. In order to save lives and treasure and to preserve the material basis of society, the liberal approach to war calls for marshalling all the resources of the state during the time of crisis in which those resources are required. By bringing this massive power to bear, the war can be terminated quickly, and subsequently the citizens can return to the natural state of affairs: peace.

U.S. nuclear policy today is the result of a conscious decision that recognizes the character of the American regime. It is a frequent target of military reform criticism, but it will not be abandoned without a change in that character. The paradox is that the U.S. has come to depend on nuclear weapons because it is not a nation of soldiers.

In two important respects nuclear weapons are quintessentially American. First, the nuclear device is the ultimate firepower/attrition weapon, the purpose of which is to reduce American casualties. Second, nuclear weapons were seen by the postwar generation of policy makers as a way of ensuring peace at a reduced cost. Nuclear weapons, after all, provide "more bang for the buck" than conventional forces with their emphasis on manpower. What is more, nuclear weapons have made the modern welfare state possible because expenditures for defense could be reduced and those resources transferred to the nondefense public sector.

At the same time, the destructiveness of nuclear weapons seemed to change things altogether. War became obsolete, though at the cost of a threat of world annihilation. All parties

³ Daniel O. Graham, Shall America Be Defended? (New Rochelle, New York: Arlington House, 1979), pp. 18-19.

could see, went the argument, that war or force had ceased to be an instrument of policy. Thus optimism could be restored out of a desperate situation based on a terrible weapon. Because of the "bomb," rational statesmen were now in a position to argue that diplomacy alone could solve international disagreements and military force, insofar as it had any use at all, was to be only an adjunct to diplomacy, to be used incrementally to apply pressure or to signal intentions, so that the rational actors on the other side would be persuaded that the costs of their continued policy outweighed the likely benefits. This economic model of human behavior, arising in the wake of nuclear weapons, was the genesis of the academic theory of "limited war" and all its offshoots. The theory of limited war reinforces the traditional liberal optimism that characterizes much of U.S. history. For Americans, it is inconceivable that two parties might have mutually irreconcilable purposes. It is inconceivable that negotiations might be useless because there is nothing to negotiate. It is inconceivable in the nuclear age that military force might, under some circumstances, take precedence over diplomacy.

THE CONSEQUENCE: THE ACADEMIC THEORY OF LIMITED WAR

The great danger in believing that war is an aberration and that there is a discontinuity between war and peace is that a country fails to develop a comprehensive approach to surviving in a hostile world. It fails to develop an understanding of strategy. Without a strategic basis, foreign policy is a hollow shell. The belief that war is an aberration was reinforced in the years after World War II by the view that nuclear weapons had changed fundamentally the nature and conduct of war, and that therefore all past history was irrelevant. This in turn led to the triumph, during the 1950s and 1960s, of the social sciences as to the rationale of national defense. It was manifested in a new doctrine: the academic "theory of limited war." According to this doctrine, military forces were to be used not to fight, but to "signal" certain attitudes, such as resolve and commitment, to the enemy in an effort to achieve not victory but a "negotiated settlement."

The triumph of social science called into question the traditional rationale for war, as taught by military history and science, which reasoned that tactics were the art of fire and maneuver directed toward the goal of achieving victory on the battlefield by massing superior forces at the decisive point in time and space. In turn, tactical success was translated through strategy into meaningful political achievements culminating in a return to peace.

But the "new" way of war argued that deterrence, not the employment of force to achieve "victory," is the primary function of the military. According to this view, any war can escalate into nuclear war. While no sane government in the U.S., USSR, or any other country would intentionally initiate a nuclear war, the possibility exists that nuclear war could begin accidentally, due

to a breakdown in communications between adversaries in which one or both nations misread the other's intentions. Constant negotiations aimed at maintaining a delicate balance of terror must be conducted in order to avoid escalation. Limited military force is permitted only for the purpose of signalling intentions, which will keep up the pressure for negotiations. Traditional military goals such as "victory" are "destabilizing" and must be avoided.

U.S. failure in Vietnam, for example, can be understood as the logical outcome of policies based on the assumptions of limited war. Consider the affect of the U.S. conduct of the war on the military profession and the civilian population. The academic theory of limited war is an economic theory, and led to the use of economic models as the guide to action. In the economic view, the main use of military force was to escalate the means incrementally in order to incrementally inflict pain, so that the North Vietnamese would be willing to negotiate. Military victory, even as defined as merely the maintenance of the status quo ante, as in the case of Korea, could not be pursued because of the possibility that the balance of power would be upset. Certainly it was not acceptable to pursue those measures that victory in this limited sense would have required, such as sustained interdiction of enemy supply lines in Laos and Cambodia or consolidation of territorial gains.

Since victory was not an acceptable goal, an alternate measure of success was required. In keeping with the economic models of warfare that guided U.S. conduct of the war, such a measure had to be subject to quantification. This led to the emergence of the "body count" as the legitimate measure of success on the battlefield through the employment of fire and maneuver, directed toward massing forces in such a way as to break the enemy's will and ability to continue to fight. No longer was tactical success, through strategy, directed toward the attainment of political goals. Military science in Vietnam came to mean nothing more than to kill as many of the enemy as possible, and the military profession, through this debasement of its purpose, suffered a severe crisis in morale, self-esteem, and military effectiveness.

At the same time, the limited war theorists maintained that, to avoid escalating the material means to the level of nuclear war, it was necessary to avoid escalating the moral means as well. This meant that the national will was not to be mobilized and that public passions were not to be stirred up. As Defense Secretary Robert McNamara approvingly observed:

The greatest contribution Vietnam is making--right or wrong is beside the point--is that it is developing an ability in the United States to fight a limited war, to go to war without the necessity of arousing the public ire.⁴

⁴ Quoted in D. H. Rosenberg "Arms and the American Way: The Ideological Dimension of Military Growth," in Military Force and American Society, Bruce M. Russett and Alfred Stephan, eds. (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 170.

But national will, observed Clausewitz, is a most important component of war. It is the moral element. "When we speak of destroying the enemy's forces, we must emphasize that nothing obliges us to limit this idea to physical forces. The moral element must also be considered."⁵

The incremental escalation of the war, and the determination to fight the war without mobilizing the national will, both favored by the limited war theorists, signal the failure of those theorists to come to grips with human nature. There is more to war, including limited war, than items that can be measured, quantified, and computerized.

The limited war theorists, instead of taking human nature as they found it, argued backwards from what they took to be the overriding issue of the day, the requirement to avoid the possibility of an uncontrolled escalation of any conflict into nuclear war. As a result they postulated human beings whose behavior can be predicted in a technical, economic way. A little more force here, and the enemy would see that future resistance was too costly to continue. A little more force there, and the American people would not perceive the slight increment in costliness, and therefore not object to the continuation of U.S. policy in Vietnam. But homo economicus is not the whole man. The limited war theorists overlooked what the Greeks called thumos or "spiritedness" on both the American and communist side.

The graduated employment of force in an attempt to kill enough of the enemy to convince them that the cost was not worth continuing their aggression did not have the effect expected by those who held an economic view of human nature. Instead thumos drove the North Vietnamese to make incredible sacrifices beyond all reasonable calculations of utility. On the U.S. side, the thumos that was not permitted in support of the war, either at home or on the battlefield, erupted instead in the form of protest against the war, once U.S. casualties began to mount. The thumetic outbreak against the war had not been anticipated by such theorists of limited war as Robert E. Osgood who concluded that even if the American people were hostile, because of their national traditions and ideology (to a strategy of limited war), that strategy still should be adopted.⁶

THE PERVASIVENESS OF LIMITED WAR THINKING

In the journals read by political scientists and others in the social sciences, war is depicted as part of a general "strategy of conflict" or "game theory," in which the mechanism of graduated

⁵ Karl von Clausewitz, On War (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 97.

⁶ For an excellent discussion of the effect of economic thinking upon the military profession and the consequences for the conduct of the Vietnam War, see Wendell John Coates, "The Ideology of Arms Control," Journal of Contemporary Studies, Summer 1982.

military response is seen to be the means to a negotiated settlement.⁷ For instance, Kenneth Waltz writes about a "strategy" for limited war in the Persian Gulf area using the same model developed two decades earlier by social scientists such as Robert Osgood and Thomas Schelling.

Again military forces are not to fight but to signal, not to engage in combat in order to defeat enemy forces, but to deter war without engaging in combat. Thus the problem in the Gulf area, says Waltz, is "not to develop a strategy that will help enable us to fight such a war. Instead, the problem is to develop a strategy that will help us avoid having to do so."⁸ Waltz implicitly assumes that the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, whose mission has been described as providing a "trip wire" against Soviet design on the Persian oil fields, will not actually fight. "If, in a crisis, we were to put our troops in the oil fields, it would make the depth of our interest, the extent of our determination, and the strength of our will manifest." The assumption is that, if Americans were placed in the path of the Soviets, were they to covet the oil fields, they would not dare to confront the United States. But war is guided by political objectives, and were it in the interest of the Soviets to move against the oil fields, what would stop them from doing so?

Light infantry and airborne forces are not designed to stop a mechanized, armored force intent on reaching its objective. But the limited war theorist really does not expect a fight to develop, or contemplate the consequences for the men of the Rapid Deployment Force if it does. Robert Jervis repeats the limited war assumption. With regard to conventional forces in Africa or Asia "...using large armies...[is] less important for influencing the cause of battle than for showing the other side that...things will get out of hand."⁹ But as Stephen Rosen of the National Security Council staff has observed,

The old disregard for domestic political factors is implicit in the arguments of both [Waltz and Jervis], since it is assumed that resolve is a fixed quantity, that it does not grow or diminish in the minds of the public or the leadership as combat goes well or poorly, as battles drag on or move us perceptively toward success.¹⁰

What would happen to American resolve, were the Soviets to disregard U.S. "signals" and roll over a lightly armed element enroute to the oil fields?

⁷ For a catalogue of this way of thinking, see Stephen Peter Rosen, "Vietnam and the American Theory of Limited War," International Security, Fall 1982.

⁸ Kenneth Waltz, "A Strategy for the Rapid Deployment Force," International Security, Spring 1981, pp. 57, 64, and 67.

⁹ Robert Jervis, "Why Nuclear Superiority Doesn't Matter," Political Science Quarterly, Winter 79-80, pp. 618-619.

¹⁰ Rosen, op. cit.

Clearly one purpose of the American military is to deter war, but when it comes, U.S. units must be manned, equipped, and trained to fight with the aim of defeating an enemy force in combat. The limited war theorists ignore or minimize the importance of the latter. But as Army Chief of Staff General Edward Meyer recently pointed out in an address at the Army War College, the military faces a threefold task. "The strategic requirements of the 1980s are to prepare for the 'Three Days of War': to deter the day before the war; to fight the day of the war; and to terminate conflict in such a manner that on the day after the war, the United States and its allies enjoy an acceptable level of security."

THE CRUX OF REAL MILITARY REFORM: THINKING ABOUT MILITARY FORCE

The problem with military reform is that most of its advocates have not addressed the central issue of how and when military force is to be used. In many cases, they are still operating within the paradigm of the academic theory of limited war. Even worse, in the wake of Vietnam, they have abandoned faith in the efficacy of military force altogether. It is significant, for instance, that those who have advocated the replacement of the attrition/firepower style of warfare by the maneuver style offer no strategic context within which that operational or tactical style is to be employed.

What does it mean for American policy if any of the various proposals put forward by the reformers are indeed adopted? The problem is that these proposals are often at odds with political or strategic reality, or seem to contradict the reformers' own assumptions. For instance, the adoption of a maneuver-oriented doctrine for the defense of Europe does not accord with Germany's desire for security, since a doctrine of maneuver warfare would require that German territory be relinquished at the outset, and that German soil itself become the whole battlefield. If the reformers reply that they advocate a pullout of U.S. forces from NATO and the establishment of a U.S. "maritime strategy," does their criticism of a surface navy in general and large carriers in particular make sense, given the requirement to project naval power ashore in any strategy based on maritime power? Such debates cannot be resolved until the strategic questions are addressed, until the means advocated by the reformers are examined in the light of the purposes of war.

But even this obvious shortcoming, the failure to consider the strategic implications of their own doctrinal reforms, does not get to the crux of the matter. The fact is there will be no effective reform unless there is a reevaluation of the question of the use of military force.

Many who now are pushing for defense reforms fail to recognize shared assumptions such as a disdain for strategic thinking; a belief that wars cannot be won, because of the possible use of

nuclear weapons; and an emphasis on cost-effectiveness of some sort. If this is the case and if these assumptions are false, the reformers will have little real impact on the success of U.S. forces on the battlefield.

It is too often uncritically assumed in the nuclear age, and in the wake of the American failure in Vietnam, that military force is no longer useful. Those who would even consider employing military force are accused of seeking a military solution-- instead of a political or diplomatic one. The source of this uncritical rejection of military force is the same as the theory of limited war: that the use of military force will always threaten to escalate into general, i.e., nuclear war, and that there is no value worth preserving that can justify such a risk. The attitude is summed up in the famous aphorism of the late Bernard Brodie: "Thus far, the chief purpose of our military establishment has been to win wars. From now on, its chief purpose must be to avert them."

This failure to appreciate the legitimate use of military force under certain circumstances for the attainment of liberal goals lies at the heart of America's military weakness. Without redressing this defect, no military reform can be truly possible. There must be, therefore, a new recognition of the proper relationship between force and international politics, and of the necessity of the military to the attainment of liberal goals.

Military force is one of many instruments for pursuing the nation's foreign policy goals. But it must be purposeful. The differences between the use of force in Grenada and Lebanon are instructive. As Henry Kissinger has remarked, the basic decision regarding force is whether or not to use it, not whether to fire the big gun or the little gun. Force must be adequate to the task and employed relentlessly, if employed at all, until success is achieved. In the words of Philip Gold, "There is no prize for losing with restraint; there is no reward for failing with moderation."

APPROPRIATE USES OF FORCE

Before true military reform can be effected, a reevaluation of the utility of military force is necessary. And that reevaluation must begin by demonstrating something that used to be understood by all U.S. statesmen: that force can be used for good. Force is an instrument, a means to an end. If the end is good, the proportionate use of force to achieve the end is legitimate.

Furthermore, it must be understood what the rejection of military force means for the hope of establishing a liberal world order. To reject the use of military force is to reject an important tool of statecraft, and to provide an incentive for adversaries of the U.S. to use the military option themselves without fear of retaliation. This observation is reinforced by

the fact that, since the end of World War II, every retreat by a democratic nation for want of will to use military force has been followed by the advance of a totalitarian nation. To achieve the goals of a democratic foreign policy, the United States has no choice but to participate fully in world affairs. Such participation may at times require the employment of military force.

It is often asserted that the United States puts too much faith in military solutions, as opposed to political ones. But all solutions in international affairs are political: the military option is just one aspect, and indeed, may be required for the success of other options. For instance, diplomacy often succeeds only when an adversary knows that a nation is willing to back up its claims by force if necessary. Diplomatic or economic options may ultimately depend upon the credible use or threat of military force. Thus in El Salvador, it may be necessary to defeat the insurgents before an economic approach can bear fruit. In Lebanon, it may be necessary to use force to stop the fighting among religious factions before it will be possible to establish the conditions required for any sort of a stable coalition government.

The cost of U.S. involvement in world affairs must not blind Americans to the fact that military force of varying degrees sometimes has great utility in helping achieve the goals of peace and respect for human rights. It was Pascal who observed that force without justice is brutal, but justice without force is impotent. The point is to combine justice and force.

The use of military force sometimes involves the violation of international law, and those who criticize its use on these grounds must be taken seriously. But those who invoke this criticism must acknowledge that prudence sometimes dictates that the form of international law must at times be sacrificed for the sake of that which the law is intended to accomplish: the protection of life and liberty and the maintenance of a democratic world order. Critics must recognize that in the end international law depends for its continued existence on the strength of democratic nations, such as the United States, and their demonstrated commitment to support a world order dedicated to liberty and human rights.

CONCLUSION

It may be regrettable, but wars are sometimes necessary to a nation's honor, if not its very survival. The U.S. must acknowledge that world reality dictates that good can sometimes come of military force, or there can be no hope for true military reform. Organizational or doctrinal changes may have marginal impact on the operational or strategic capability of American military forces, but the assumptions of the political leadership concerning the use of military force are far more fundamental. With all due

respect to those who unconditionally reject the utility of military force, the conflicts raging at any moment around the globe surely indicate that a nation would appear to be at a severe disadvantage in this world of drawn swords, if it were denied the use of that force.

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