

Virtuous Destruction, Decisive Speed

By Ralph Peters

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The next two decades will challenge us with technologies we cannot anticipate, with implacable, anti-Western enemies we cannot dissuade and with no shortage of regional crises we cannot discourage. Yet, the greatest military obstacles facing the United States are, and likely will remain, of our own making: Misconceptions about the nature and demands of warfare as morally obtuse as they are intellectually lazy.

There is no power on earth, nor will there soon be one, that can defeat the United States. But, as we seem determined to prove in Iraq, we are wonderfully adept at defeating ourselves.

This brief paper discusses only three of the obstacles we must overcome, but the fundamental message is that it is never a moral act to allow ourselves to be defeated, and that military behaviors which appeal to the prejudices of the networked classes in the West result, in the long run, in greater carnage, deepened hatreds and, at best, transient solutions.

The lessons of recent wars, which we willfully misread, are many. Among them are that there is no substitute for shedding the enemy's blood in adequate quantities; that an enemy must be convinced practically and graphically that he is defeated; and that speed of resolution in tactical encounters has emerged as a crucial determinant in strategic success.

Attrition Works

The phrase "wars of attrition" calls to mind the slaughter on the Western Front in the First World War. We are conditioned to react with repugnance to the very words. Yet, World War II was also a war of attrition, as are all serious conflicts. Attrition is what warfare is about: killing the enemy. War is a knife fight, not a game of chess. We have entered a new age of attrition warfare which we refuse to recognize. Our unwillingness

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to acknowledge the reality confronting us guarantees flawed results, at best, and, increasingly often, strategic defeat after initial operational success.

Attrition is the essence of warfare, not something to be avoided—and no rule says that attrition must be fairly distributed. The well-fought war inflicts catastrophic attrition on the enemy, while limiting friendly casualties to numbers that can be readily sustained. The notion of bloodless war enabled by technologies is a mirage and will remain so past our lifetimes. An enemy must *see* his ranks reduced until he is helpless—or fears an impending helplessness so profoundly that he bends unconditionally to our will. The problem with bloodless victories, even if they were possible, is that the enemy would not *feel* beaten. Only tangible losses convince an enemy that his cause is doomed. And some enemies—not least religious zealots—cannot be convinced of defeat under any circumstances, but must be killed.

Foolishly, we have allowed ourselves to be lured into visions of warfare as we would like it to be, rather than as it is. We dream of achieving a prowess so daunting to opponents that its initial display provokes the enemy's surrender. But failing the vigorous application of that prowess, what is the incentive to an enemy to surrender if he knows (as Saddam Hussein did) that he has no future in the peace we would impose? Or if the enemy is a terrorist who believes he is fulfilling the will of his god and who regards death as a promotion?

We want a war without serious consequences for either side. But that is not war. Our enemies know it, even if we deny it.

Our enemies are irrational in their goals, but practical in their techniques. We are idealistic in our goals and impractical in the limits we impose upon our own power. Only cataclysmic events are likely to wake us from our intellectual languor—we will not learn to make war consummately again until we have suffered disastrously.

Our enemy's alacrity, pitted against our own reluctance, will continue to shape the coming years and, perhaps, decades. Religion-driven terrorists and other extreme warriors are determined to win at any cost, while we wish to win at a minimum cost. We hope to make war and, at the same time, to make people happy. It is, perhaps, the most illogical strategic position in history, and we end by waging war insufficiently, while

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alienating populations anyway. Despite our latent power, our approach to post-modern conflict is not a formula for American success.

Even the recurring infatuation with the notion of non-lethal weapons is based on a fallacy: non-lethal weapons cannot deter committed opponents; on the contrary, they encourage the enemy to take greater risks. If we do not even intend to kill those who would kill us, why shouldn't they do their best to attack us?

Warfare was, is, and will be about *killing* the enemy until his cause is no longer viable. The enemy must be convinced of his defeat—or, in the case of ultra-terrorists, defeated by being killed to the last man. There is no way to soften the matter. The crucial question is: How long will it take the National Command Authority (NCA) to recognize the requirements of even limited victories?

In 1918, Germany was defeated. It could not carry on the war and had no hope of winning or even of fighting the allies to a stalemate. But war had not touched the German heartlands (except, briefly, in the east). The Germans on the homefront had not seen war. Yes, there were painful casualties, food shortages and common sacrifices. But the Second Reich's propanganda painted a picture of events contrary to reality until the armistice was agreed upon--and the intact state of the country never made the population feel it had been defeated. The military lied, insisting it had been betrayed, not beaten. So we saw the rise of the *Dolchstoßlegende*, the "stab-in-the-back theory," holding that Germany had been a victim of treachery even as its armies were winning victories. The situation made another war inevitable.

On May 8, 1945, the German people knew they had been defeated. The aftermath of that war was profoundly different.

After the end of our first Gulf war, Saddam Hussein could claim he had not been vanquished. And he was correct. He retained power. Afraid of "world opinion" and blinded by the fallacies of obsolete balance-of-power politics, we stopped the war before his army was destroyed. A dozen years later, we reaped the harvest: The need to fight again (as well as the distrust of Iraq's Shi'as).

Incredibly, we talked ourselves into doing all we could to minimize enemy casualties and physical destruction *again* in Operation Iraqi Freedom. We didn't even send enough troops for the comprehensive task we undertook. As a result, cities and towns in the

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Sunni Triangle never saw the war, never tasted defeat. Many didn't even see a U.S. military vehicle for weeks or even months after the war's conclusion—or if they did see one, it drove by in haste. The Sunni Arabs didn't feel defeated, didn't feel a serious occupation presence, and were allowed to do much as they pleased when no patrols were passing. The result was an Iraqi variant of the stab-in-the-back theory.

Now, tragically, we have made a colossal strategic error in the course of a tactical engagement. Our unwillingness to finish the job in Fallujah, to cleanse the city of our enemies (and to live up to our public threats to do so), has not only allowed the insurgents and terrorists to claim success, but has given them a palpable victory. No matter our insistence that we could have defeated them. We didn't. From their perspective, they fought the U.S. military to a standstill. And they are correct. Even if the decision to halt the fight was made on political grounds, they are in control and we are not. The unwillingness of our leadership—including some of those in uniform—to fight has brought us a defeat the implications of which few seem to realize. From the enemy's perspective, we can be beaten—it isn't even difficult. Fallujah was a turning point in Arab and extremist perceptions. We no longer appear militarily invincible (and perception is virtually everything in the Middle East). We will pay for our fumbling in the months and years to come.

A fundamental rule about such conflicts is that, if you are unwilling to pay the butcher's bill up front, it will be much higher in the end.

If we cannot recognize the obvious truth that we must be willing to kill our most implacable enemies whenever and wherever they present themselves to us, all our power will be for naught. If we lack the strength of will to kill our enemies, they certainly do not lack the will to kill us.

Their model is 9/11. Ours is the moral cowardice, confusion, slovenly good intentions and lack of resolve we displayed at Fallujah.

If you do not Mean to Fight to Win, Stay Home

Certainly, there were political considerations at Fallujah. There are always political considerations. And moral considerations. And public-relations considerations. But

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success is forgiven. Failure is not. What we perceive as moderation is seen as our deadliest enemies as weakness. They are right on that count, too.

If we are to prevail in the conflicts with which the coming decades will present us, we must overcome the notion that we can force warfare to conform, psychologically and practically, to a comfortable etiquette. We cannot simply persuade our enemies that they have been defeated. We must convince them.

That Means Attrition

The Global War on Terror is a war of attrition in its essence. If one religious fanatic is left alive, he will continue to try to strike us. This isn't an argument for resignation or an expression of hopelessness—simply of reality. Fundamentalist terrorism, with its roots in catastrophic regional and civilizational failure, is akin to drug abuse or crime in at least one sense: It cannot be eliminated, but aggressive action can significantly reduce it as a threat (fighting crime, especially, has always been a war of attrition). Even if we can't "kill our way out of the problem," we can make the problem a great deal smaller by killing the right people.

But conventional wars also remain wars of attrition. They cannot be resolved without the willingness to shed the enemy's blood. To pretend otherwise is to embrace defeat before the first gun is fired.

Virtuous Destruction

Related to attrition is the need for graphic evidence of an enemy's defeat. In our determination to avoid collateral damage, we have gotten the psychology of warfare exactly wrong: We want to please our enemies before they have been beaten.

There is no formula for how much physical destruction must be on exhibition before an enemy feels hopelessly defeated. In the case of the Germans (and Japanese), the destruction required was extensive. In countries—especially failed states—where the population feels less of a unified identity and is less firm in its allegiance to the government, the amount of destruction may, indeed, be considerably less. Nor do we fully understand the psychology of defeat. But we certainly underestimate the power of creating a visual sense of defeat—despite the hyper-visual age in which we live. Even

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physical deprivation may be less debilitating to the enemy's consciousness than demonstrations of destructive power—and the unflinching will to continue destroying until the enemy's despair paralyzes and disarms him.

None of this is pleasant to contemplate. And, of course, the global media would revel in such destruction (of which more below). But we cannot have it both ways. If fighting a war of serious dimensions is worth our while at all, we cannot shy from the price of victory. If the enemy feels he has escaped the conflict with only a light spanking, he will misbehave again.

Our unwillingness to create a psychological atmosphere of defeat also guarantees us that, if we wish the object population to continue to behave, our troops will have to remain on the scene for years—perhaps decades. America's military can afford the costs of war, but not the ever-rising costs of one flawed peace after another. First whittled down and now devoured by occupation duties, from South Korea (still) to Afghanistan and the Balkans, then on to Iraq, we have robbed our strategic reserve in order to deploy sufficient babysitters with bayonets. Gulliver is presently tied to the ground by the Lilliputians.

How much physical destruction is required to bring conflict X to a decisive conclusion? Again, there is no easy answer. In particularly oppressive states, a thorough, graphic destruction of the military and security apparatus may suffice. When faced with hostile populations, far more destruction may be required to achieve our goals and insure that the achievement will last.

Even the notion that we must preserve the enemy's infrastructure is often misguided. Such a policy not only complicates the achievement of victory, but extracts no serious price from the population. Consequences matter. Enemy populations must be broken down to an almost childlike state (the basic-training model) before being built up again. But war cannot be successfully waged—especially between civilizations, as is overwhelmingly the case at present—without inflicting *memorable* pain on the enemy.

At the same time, we need to break ourselves of the assumption that we must always stay on to rebuild or to nurture the defeated society. When the stakes are sufficiently high, that may well be the case. Generally, though, we are entering a new age of *punitive expeditions*. And a hallmark of a successful punitive operation is its brevity. It leaves a

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deep impression, not a deep commitment. We need not accept responsibility for any society that has attacked our own, directly or indirectly. The assumption that we can leave little Americas behind us is deadly nonsense. It did not even work in Europe. There are times when the wisest course is to leave ruins.

This is a hard message for the American sensibility. But we will come around. Reality will drive us to it. We may wish to wage war by teaspoons, but our enemies have Armageddon on the menu. If we cannot learn on our own, they will teach us what we need to know.

Essential Speed

The global media is occasionally acknowledged as a new strategic factor, but the military—as well as the NCA—has yet to grasp the immediate and enduring implications for combat operations.

Combined with instantaneous communications and the unrealistic expectations of the networked classes, the global media has fundamentally altered the acceptable timetable for tactical combat. Speed of tactical execution has emerged as the new critical demand upon our forces. While much attention has been paid to developing more rapidly deployable forces, virtually nothing has been done in doctrine, training or structure to develop the capability to destroy enemy forces with greatly accelerated speed at the street-fight level. Our current model is fluid strategic power and tactical finesse. The model the future demands is fluid strategic power and swift, devastating tactical effects.

We remain locked in a make-sure-all-the-buttons-are-buttoned approach to warfare. Unquestioningly, we assume that haste must make waste. And, in our present condition, dramatically increasing the pace of tactical encounters would likely produce more friendly casualties (in the short run), while worsening collateral damage. Nonetheless, the present approach is incompetent when faced with the new battlefield equation. We can no longer win by fighting slowly.

We must win fast. Today, a hyper-swift victory that inflicts high enemy casualties (with attendant destruction) would be vastly easier for the world to accept than operations stretching over weeks and months—even if the casualties and level of destruction were markedly lower in the latter case.

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We must win before global opinion can induce second thoughts in decision-makers, at home and abroad. Even the most junior soldier or Marine today fights both against his tangible enemy and against a stopwatch held by the global media. A significant share of world opinion will *always* oppose U.S. military operations, no matter how justified or necessary. Best to act swiftly and deal with the complaints afterward. Hesitation or delay at any level, once the decision has been made to strike, exponentially increases the chances of flawed results or even outright failure.

The power of televised (and internet) images—even if they are utterly unrepresentative of ground truth—is such that a cameraman can now stop a military operation. The most recent example is our self-imposed defeat in Fallujah—although the pattern goes back at least to the “highway of death” that derailed Operation Desert Storm short of decisive victory. Even the most determined American leaders will feel great, ever-increasing pressure to moderate or even abandon U.S. military efforts as they drag on. Foreign heads of state, domestic opinion polls and our return to knife-fight politics in Washington (the loss of our tradition of unity in wartime is grievous) guarantee that the amount of drag inflicted on the system will make it difficult to sustain resolve.

Even more alarmingly, the domestic and global media exacerbate competition between different departments and instruments of our own government. In Iraq, military effectiveness has been seriously degraded by the intervention of the Coalition Provisional Authority, other government departments and even the NCA in low-level tactical engagements. The chain of command is often-vague, unfocused and subject to the intervention of conflicting bureaucratic interests—a situation with which a streamlined media can play havoc, even if it does not consciously intend to do so (we all should dread the day when the global media truly recognizes its power).

Fallujah is an example so perfect it’s paradigmatic. We announced, as biliously as Colonel Khaddafi in his prime, that we were going to avenge the mutilation of the bodies of four U.S. contractors and cleanse the city of terrorists and insurgents. And military operations conducted by the Marines were going very well. But the pace was too slow to allow a military decision under the complex circumstances in Iraq. Too many restrictions were imposed on the Marines (including by their own commanders). Concerns about collateral damage and alienating an already thoroughly alienated population led to

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handwringing worthy of the middle acts of Hamlet. Even senior Marine officers became engaged in political machinations when they should have been winning the battle. Cease-fires reminiscent of Vietnam-era bombing halts were imposed. The enemy regrouped and reinforced. Combat grew more difficult. Results seemed ever more costly. And all the while the global media—with the regional media and al-Jazeera in the vanguard—painted an utterly inaccurate picture of innocent Iraqis suffering (while saying nothing of the Arab expulsion of Fallujah’s Kurdish minority).

In the end, we essentially surrendered. Unwilling to win quickly, we lost slowly. We were not defeated militarily, but as General Giap remarked about an earlier war, that was irrelevant. We turned Fallujah over to senior officers from the old regime, left the terrorists in *de facto* control of the city, and lived up to none of our threats. The message we sent—which our enemies enthusiastically amplified throughout the Muslim world—was that the U.S. military could be fought to a stalemate or even beaten. We will pay for that perception for years to come.

Nor is it sufficient for the military to decry “outside” interference. It is unlikely that we will ever return to battlefields where presidents are not looking over the shoulders of our sergeants. And the media will be looking over the shoulders of the privates.

Our military must learn to win very, very fast. Indeed, that purpose should become the top priority for our tactical experiments. It is going to be very difficult to move forward swiftly without painful mistakes, but there is simply no alternative to reinventing our approach to tactical combat. If we are unable to develop the capability to strike with literally dazzling speed in the tactical arena—urban or otherwise—we will win ever few significant encounters.

The development of the capability to win at hyper-speed (by today’s standards) would do several things: It would relieve pressure on the NCA; rob the innately hostile global media of the time to build a critical mass of negative opinion; reduce the friction of intra-governmental competition; and it would force the NCA to think hard before committing U.S. forces, given that the results would be powerful, swift and irrevocable. While causing a spike of casualties in the short term, swift-win techniques would reduce them dramatically in the long term. Such a capability would help deter all but the most determined enemies.

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Much has been written over the years of the need to operate inside the enemy's decision cycle. Except in the case of terrorists and other irregular forces, with their different operational clocks and calendars, we have become adept at this. But the real requirement today is to operate within the impact cycle of the media—and the brevity of this “global information cycle” will only tighten across the next generation. The longer any encounter goes on, even at the lowest tactical levels, the more drag the media's need for sensational headlines will impose. The equation is straightforward: Lengthy military operations plus increased media scrutiny equals U.S. government internal friction, then entropy.

If we cannot win fast, we will lose. The next decades will only abbreviate the media-driven event-report-cognition-reaction cycle. Despite much progress on many fronts, our military still thinks at a 20th-century pace in tactical encounters. Meanwhile, the global media is defining 21st-century strategic speed.

Second thoughts are the enemy of decisive achievement. Increasingly, presidents live in an age of nearly instant second thoughts, induced by the uncontrollable power of the global media. It will be increasingly difficult for the NCA to see any bloody tactical engagement through to the necessary result—unless it can be finished at hyper-speed. The residual power that has for so long been America's greatest strength is nearly irrelevant in many contemporary conflicts. The power *immediately* applied, the resolve behind that power, and the speed of decision are the essential ingredients of postmodern victory.

This is far easier to write about than it is to address “on the ground.” The practical challenges are many, and the results of our best efforts will be imperfect. But unless we vigorously embrace the need to win swiftly at the tactical level, our strategic advantages will be of slight worth in the decades of conflict to come.

Bemoaning the influence of the media is a waste of time. This is the new strategic reality. Its demands will only intensify. We must conform to the requirements of today's—and tomorrow's—global information environment, or we will lose at the level of strategic decision because we failed to win promptly at the range of the rifle or knife.