


WISHFUL THINKING AND INDECISIVE WARS

— Ralph Peters —

The most troubling aspect of international security for the United States is not the killing power of our immediate enemies, which remains modest in historical terms, but our increasingly effete view of warfare. The greatest advantage our opponents enjoy is an uncompromising strength of will, their readiness to “pay any price and bear any burden” to hurt and humble us. As our enemies’ view of what is permissible in war expands apocalyptically, our self-limiting definitions of allowable targets and acceptable casualties—hostile, civilian and our own—continue to narrow fatefully. Our enemies cannot defeat us in direct confrontations, but we appear determined to defeat ourselves.

Much has been made over the past two decades of the emergence of “asymmetric warfare,” in which the ill-equipped confront the superbly armed by changing the rules of the battlefield. Yet, such irregular warfare is not new—it is warfare’s oldest form, the stone against the bronze-tipped spear—and the crucial asymmetry does not lie in weaponry, but in moral courage. While our most resolute current enemies—Islamist extremists—may violate our conceptions of morality and ethics, they also are willing to sacrifice more, suffer more and kill more (even among their own kind) than we are. We become mired in the details of minor missteps, while fanatical holy warriors consecrate their lives to their ultimate vision. They live their cause, but we do not live ours. We have forgotten

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what warfare means and what it takes to win.

The problem is religion. Our Islamist enemies are inspired by it, while we are terrified even to talk about it. We are in the unique position of denying that our enemies know what they themselves are up to.

There are multiple reasons for this American amnesia about the cost of victory. First, we, the people, have lived in unprecedented safety for so long (despite the now-faded shock of September 11, 2001) that we simply do not feel endangered; rather, we sense that what nastiness there may be in the world will always occur elsewhere and need not disturb our lifestyles. We like the *frisson* of feeling a little guilt, but resent all calls to action that require sacrifice.

Second, collective memory has effectively erased the European-sponsored horrors of the last century; yesteryear's "unthinkable" events have become, well, unthinkable. As someone born only seven years after the ovens of Auschwitz stopped smoking, I am stunned by the common notion, which prevails despite ample evidence to the contrary, that such horrors are impossible today.

Third, ending the draft resulted in a superb military, but an unknowing, detached population. The higher you go in our social caste system, the less grasp you find of the military's complexity and the greater the expectation that, when employed, our armed forces should be able to fix things promptly and politely.

Fourth, an unholy alliance between the defense industry and aca-

democratic theorists seduced decisionmakers with a false-messiah catechism of bloodless war. In pursuit of billions in profits, defense contractors made promises impossible to fulfill, while think tank scholars sought acclaim by designing warfare models that excited political leaders anxious to get off cheaply, but which left out factors such as the enemy, human psychology, and 5,000 years of precedents.

Fifth, we have become largely a white-collar, suburban society in which a child's bloody nose is no longer a routine part of growing up, but grounds for a lawsuit; the privileged among us have lost the sense of grit in daily life. We grow up believing that safety from harm is a right that others are bound to respect as we do. Our rising generation of political leaders assumes that, if anyone wishes to do us harm, it must be the result of a misunderstanding that can be resolved by that lethal narcotic of the chattering classes, dialogue.

Last, but not least, history is no longer taught as a serious subject in America's schools. As a result, politicians lack perspective; journalists lack meaningful touchstones; and the average person's sense of warfare has been redefined by media entertainments in which misery, if introduced, is brief.

By 1965, we had already forgotten what it took to defeat Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan, and the degeneration of our historical sense has continued to accelerate since then. More Americans died in one afternoon at Cold Harbor during our Civil War than died in six years in Iraq. Three times as many American troops fell during the morning of June 6, 1944, as have been lost in combat in over seven years in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, prize-hunting reporters insist that our losses in Iraq have been cata-

strophic, while those in Afghanistan are unreasonably high.

We have cheapened the idea of war. We have had wars on poverty, wars on drugs, wars on crime, economic warfare, ratings wars, campaign war chests, bride wars, and price wars in the retail sector. The problem, of course, is that none of these "wars" has anything to do with warfare as soldiers know it. Careless of language and anxious to dramatize our lives and careers, we have elevated policy initiatives, commercial spats and social rivalries to the level of humanity's most complex, decisive and vital endeavor.

One of the many disheartening results of our willful ignorance has been well-intentioned, inane claims to the effect that "war doesn't change anything" and that "war isn't the answer," that we all need to "give peace a chance." Who among us would not love to live in such a splendid world? Unfortunately, the world in which we do live remains one in which war is the primary means of resolving humanity's grandest disagreements, as well as supplying the answer to plenty of questions. As for giving peace a chance, the sentiment is nice, but it does not work when your self-appointed enemy wants to kill you. Gandhi's campaign of non-violence (often quite violent in its reality) only worked because his opponent was willing to play along. Gandhi would not have survived very long in Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia, Mao's (or today's) China, Pol Pot's Cambodia, or Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Effective non-violence is contractual. Where the contract does not exist, Gandhi dies.

Furthermore, our expectations of war's results have become absurd. Even the best wars do not yield perfect aftermaths. World War II

changed the planet for the better, yet left the eastern half of Europe under Stalin's yoke and opened the door for the Maoist takeover in China. Should we then declare it a failure and not worth fighting? Our Civil War preserved the Union and abolished slavery—worthy results, surely. Still, it took over a century for equality of opportunity for minorities to gain a firm footing. Should Lincoln have let the Confederacy go with slavery untouched, rather than choosing to fight? Expecting Iraq, Afghanistan or the conflict of tomorrow to end quickly, cleanly and neatly belongs to the realm of childhood fantasy, not human reality. Even the most successful war yields imperfect results. An insistence on prompt, ideal outcomes as the measure of victory guarantees the perception of defeat.

Consider the current bemoaning of a perceived "lack of progress" and "setbacks" in Afghanistan. A largely pre-medieval, ferociously xenophobic country that never enjoyed good government or a central power able to control all of its territory had become the hostage of a monstrous regime and a haven for terrorists. Today, Afghanistan has an elected government, feeble though it may be; for the first time in the region's history, some of the local people welcome, and most tolerate, the presence of foreign troops; women are no longer stoned to death in sports stadiums for the edification of the masses; and the most inventive terrorists of our time have been driven into remote compounds and caves. We agonize (at least in the media) over the persistence of the Taliban, unwilling to recognize that the Taliban or a similar organization will always find a constituency in remote tribal valleys and among fanatics. If we set ourselves the goal of wiping out the Taliban, we will fail.

Given a realistic mission of thrusting the Islamists to the extreme margins of society over decades, however, we can effect meaningful change (much as the Ku Klux Klan, whose following once numbered in the millions across our nation, has been reduced to a tiny club of grumps). Even now, we have already won in terms of the crucial question: Is Afghanistan a better place today for most Afghans, for the world and for us than it was on September 10, 2001? Why must we talk ourselves into defeat?

We have the power to win any war. Victory remains possible in every conflict we face today or that looms on the horizon. But, for now, we are unwilling to accept that war not only is, but must be, hell. Sadly, our enemies do not share our scruples.

The present foe

The willful ignorance within the American intelligentsia and in Washington, D.C., does not stop with the mechanics and costs of warfare, but extends to a denial of the essential qualities of our most-determined enemies. While narco-guerrillas, tribal rebels or pirates may vex us, Islamist terrorists are opponents of a far more frightening quality. These fanatics do not yet pose an existential threat to the United States, but we must recognize the profound difference between secular groups fighting for power or wealth and men whose galvanizing dream is to destroy the West. When forced to assess the latter, we take the easy way out and focus on their current capabilities, although the key to understanding them is to study their ultimate goals—no matter how absurd and unrealistic their ambitions may seem to us.

The problem is religion. Our Islamist enemies are inspired by it, while we are terrified even to talk

about it. We are in the unique position of denying that our enemies know what they themselves are up to. They insist, publicly, that their goal is our destruction (or, in their mildest moods, our conversion) in their god's name. We contort ourselves to insist that their religious rhetoric is all a sham, that they are merely cynics exploiting the superstitions of the masses. Setting aside the point that a devout believer can behave cynically in his mundane actions, our phony, one-dimensional analysis of al-Qaeda and its ilk has precious little to do with the nature of our enemies—which we are desperate to deny—and everything to do with us.

We have so oversold ourselves on the notion of respect for all religions (except, of course, Christianity and Judaism) that we insist that faith cannot be a cause of atrocious violence. The notion of killing to please a deity and further his perceived agenda is so unpleasant to us that we simply pretend it away. U.S. intelligence agencies and government departments go to absurd lengths, even in classified analyses, to avoid such basic terms as "Islamist terrorist." Well, if your enemy is a terrorist and he professes to be an Islamist, it may be wise to take him at his word.

A paralyzing problem "inside the Beltway" is that our ruling class has been educated out of religious fervor. Even officials and bureaucrats who attend a church or synagogue each week no longer comprehend the life-shaking power of revelation, the transformative ecstasy of glimpsing the divine, or the exonerating communalism of living faith. Emotional displays of belief make the functional agnostic or social atheist nervous; he or she reacts with elitist disdain. Thus we insist, for our own comfort, that our enemies do not really mean

what they profess, that they are as devoid of a transcendental sense of the universe as we are.

History parades no end of killers-for-god in front of us. The procession has lasted at least five thousand years. At various times, each major faith—especially our inherently violent monotheist faiths—has engaged in religious warfare and religious terrorism. When a struggling faith finds itself under the assault of a more powerful foreign belief system, it fights: Jews against Romans, Christians against Muslims, Muslims against Christians and Jews. When faiths feel threatened, externally or internally, they fight as long as they retain critical mass. Today the Judeo-Christian/post-belief world occupies the dominant strategic position, as it has, increasingly, for the last five centuries, its rise coinciding with Islam's long descent into cultural darkness and civilizational impotence. Behind all its entertaining bravado, Islam is fighting for its life, for validation.

Islam, in other words, is on the ropes, despite no end of nonsense heralding "Eurabia" or other Muslim demographic conquests. If demography were all there was to it, China and India long since would have divided the world between them. Islam today is composed of over a billion essentially powerless human beings, many of them humiliated and furiously jealous. So Islam fights and will fight, within its meager-but-pesky capabilities. Operationally, it matters little that the failures of the Middle Eastern Islamic world are self-wrought, the disastrous results of the deterioration of a once-triumphant faith into a web of static cultures obsessed with behavior at the expense of achievement. The core world of Islam, stretching from Casablanca to the Hindu Kush, is not competitive in a

single significant sphere of human endeavor (not even terrorism since, at present, we are terrorizing the terrorists). We are confronted with a historical anomaly, the public collapse of a once-great, still-proud civilization that, in the age of super-computers, cannot build a reliable automobile: enormous wealth has been squandered; human capital goes wasted; economies are dysfunctional; and the quality of life is barbaric. Those who once cowered at Islam's greatness now rule the world. The roughly one-fifth of humanity that makes up the Muslim world lacks a single world-class university of its own. The resultant rage is immeasurable; jealousy may be the greatest unacknowledged strategic factor in the world today.

When the United States is forced to go to war—or decides to go to war—it must intend to win. That means that rather than setting civilian apparatchiks to calculate minimum force levels, we need to bring every possible resource to bear from the outset—an approach that saves blood and treasure in the long run.

Embattled cultures dependably experience religious revivals: What does not work in this life will work in the next. All the deity in question asks is submission, sacrifice—and action to validate faith. Unlike the terrorists of yesteryear, who sought to change the world and hoped to live to see it changed, today's terrorists focus on god's kingdom and regard death as a promotion. We struggle to explain suicide bombers in sociological terms, deciding that they are malleable and

unhappy young people, psychologically vulnerable. But plenty of individuals in our own society are malleable, unhappy and unstable. Where are the Western atheist suicide bombers?

To make enduring progress against Islamist terrorists, we must begin by accepting that the terrorists are Islamists. And the use of the term "Islamist," rather than "Islamic," is vital—not for reasons of political correctness, but because it connotes a severe deviation from what remains, for now, mainstream Islam. We face enemies who celebrate death and who revel in bloodshed. Islamist terrorists have a closer kinship with the blood cults of the pre-Islamic Middle East—or even with the Aztecs—than they do with the *ghazis* who exploded out of the Arabian desert, ablaze with a new faith. At a time when we should be asking painful questions about why the belief persists that gods want human blood, we insist on downplaying religion's power and insisting that our new enemies are much the same as the old ones. It is as if we sought to analyze Hitler's Germany without mentioning Nazis.

We will not even accept that the struggle between Islam and the West never ceased. Even after Islam's superpower status collapsed, the European imperial era was bloodied by countless Muslim insurrections, and even the Cold War was punctuated with Islamist revivals and calls for *jihād*. The difference down the centuries was that, until recently, the West understood that this was a survival struggle and did what had to be done (the myth that insurgents of any kind usually win has no historical basis). Unfortunately for our delicate sensibilities, the age-old lesson of religion-fueled rebellions is that they must be put down with unsparing bloodshed—the fanatic's god is not

interested in compromise solutions. The leading rebels or terrorists must be killed. We, on the contrary, want to make them our friends.

The paradox is that our humane approach to warfare results in unnecessary bloodshed. Had we been ruthless in the use of our overwhelming power in the early days of conflict in both Afghanistan and Iraq, the ultimate human toll—on all sides—would have been far lower. In warfare of every kind, there is an immutable law: If you are unwilling to pay the butcher's bill up front, you will pay it with compound interest in the end. Iraq was not hard; we made it so. Likewise, had we not tried to do Afghanistan on the cheap, Osama bin Laden would be dead and al-Qaeda even weaker than it is today.

When the United States is forced to go to war—or decides to go to war—it must intend to win. That means that rather than setting civilian apparatchiks to calculate minimum force levels, we need to bring every possible resource to bear from the outset—an approach that saves blood and treasure in the long run. And we must stop obsessing about our minor sins. Warfare will never be clean, soldiers will always make mistakes, and rounds will always go astray, despite our conscientious safeguards and best intentions. Instead of agonizing over a fatal mistake made by a young Marine at a roadblock, we must return to the fundamental recognition that the greatest "war crime" the United States can commit is to lose.

Other threats, new dimensions

Within the defense community, another danger looms: the risk of preparing to re-fight the last war, or, in other words, assuming that our

present struggles are the prototypes of our future ones. As someone who spent much of the 1990s arguing that the U.S. armed forces needed to prepare for irregular warfare and urban combat, I now find myself required to remind my former peers in the military that we must remain reasonably prepared for traditional threats from states.

Yet another counter-historical assumption is that states have matured beyond fighting wars with each other, that everyone would have too much to lose, that the inter-connected nature of trade makes full-scale conventional wars impossible. That is precisely the view that educated Europeans held in the first decade of the twentieth century. Even the youngish Winston Churchill, a veteran of multiple colonial conflicts, believed that general war between civilized states had become unthinkable. It had not.

Bearing in mind that, while neither party desires war, we could find ourselves tumbling, *à la* 1914, into a conflict with China, we need to remember that the apparent threat of the moment is not necessarily the deadly menace of tomorrow. It may not be China that challenges us, after all, but the unexpected rise of a dormant power. The precedent is there: in 1929, Germany had a playground military limited to 100,000 men. Ten years later, a re-armed Germany had embarked on the most destructive campaign of aggression in history, its killing power and savagery exceeding that of the Mongols. Without militarizing our economy (or indulging our unscrupulous defense industry), we must carry out rational modernization efforts within our conventional forces—even as we march through a series of special-operations-intensive fights for which there is no end in sight. We do not need to bankrupt

ourselves to do so, but must accept an era of hard choices, asking ourselves not which weapons we would like to have, but which are truly necessary.

Still, even should we make perfect acquisition decisions (an unlikely prospect, given the power of lobbyists and public relations firms serving the defense industry), that would not guarantee us victory or even a solid initial performance in a future conventional war. As with the struggle to drive terrorists into remote corners, we are limited less by our military capabilities than by our determination to pretend that war can be made innocently.

Whether faced with conventional or unconventional threats, the same deadly impulse is at work in our government and among the think tank astrologers who serve as its courtiers: An insistence on constantly narrowing the parameters of what is permissible in warfare. We are attempting to impose ever sterner restrictions on the conduct of war even as our enemies, immediate and potential, are exploring every possible means of expanding their conduct of conflicts into new realms of total war.

What is stunning about the United States is the fragility of our system. To strategically immobilize our military, you have only to successfully attack one link in the chain, our satellites. Our homeland's complex infrastructure offers ever-increasing opportunities for disruption to enemies well aware that they cannot defeat our military head-on, but who hope to wage total war asymmetrically, leapfrogging over our ships and armored divisions to make daily life so miserable for Americans that we would quit the fight. No matter that even the gravest attacks upon our homeland might, instead, re-arouse the killer spirit among Americans—

our enemies view the home front as our weak flank.

From what we know of emerging Chinese and Russian warfighting doctrine, both from their writings and their actions against third parties, their concept of the future battlefield is all-inclusive, even as we, for our part, long to isolate combatants in a post-modern version of a medieval joust. As just a few minor examples, consider Russia's and China's use of cyber-attacks to punish and even paralyze other states. We are afraid to post dummy websites for information-warfare purposes, since we have talked ourselves into warfare-by-lawyers. Meanwhile, the Chinese routinely seek to infiltrate or attack Pentagon computer networks, while Russia paralyzed Estonia through a massive cyber-blitzkrieg just a couple of years ago. Our potential enemies believe that anything that might lead to victory is permissible. We are afraid that we might get sued.

Yet, even the Chinese and Russians do not have an apocalyptic vision of warfare. They want to survive and they would be willing to let us survive, if only on their terms. But religion-driven terrorists care not for this world and its glories. If the right Islamist terrorists acquired a usable nuclear weapon, they would not hesitate to employ it (the most bewildering security analysts are those who minimize the danger should Iran acquire nuclear weapons). The most impassioned extremists among our enemies not only have no qualms about the mass extermination of unbelievers, but would be delighted to offer their god rivers of the blood of less-devout Muslims. Our fiercest enemies are in love with death.

For our part, we truly think that our enemies are kidding, that we can negotiate with them, after all, if only

we could figure out which toys they really want. They pray to their god for help in cutting our throats, and we want to chat.

The killers without guns

While the essence of warfare never changes—it will always be about killing the enemy until he acquiesces in our desires or is exterminated—its topical manifestations evolve and its dimensions expand. Today, the United States and its allies will never face a lone enemy on the battlefield. There will always be a hostile third party in the fight, but one which we not only refrain from attacking but are hesitant to annoy: the media.

While this brief essay cannot undertake to analyze the psychological dysfunctions that lead many among the most privileged Westerners to attack their own civilization and those who defend it, we can acknowledge the overwhelming evidence that, to most media practitioners, our troops are always guilty (even if proven innocent), while our barbaric enemies are innocent (even if proven guilty). The phenomenon of Western and world journalists championing the "rights" and causes of blood-drenched butchers who, given the opportunity, would torture and slaughter them, disproves the notion—were any additional proof required—that human beings are rational creatures. Indeed, the passionate belief of so much of the intelligentsia that our civilization is evil and only the savage is noble looks rather like an anemic version of the self-delusions of the terrorists themselves. And, of course, there is a penalty for the intellectual's dismissal of religion: humans need to believe in something greater than themselves, even if they have a degree from Harvard. Rejecting the god of their

fathers, the neo-pagans who dominate the media serve as lackeys at the terrorists' bloody altar.

Of course, the media have shaped the outcome of conflicts for centuries, from the European wars of religion through Vietnam. More recently, though, the media have *determined* the outcomes of conflicts. While journalists and editors ultimately failed to defeat the U.S. government in Iraq, video cameras and biased reporting guaranteed that Hezbollah would survive the 2006 war with Israel and, as of this writing, they appear to have saved Hamas from destruction in Gaza.

Pretending to be impartial, the self-segregating personalities drawn to media careers overwhelmingly take a side, and that side is rarely ours. Although it seems unthinkable now, future wars may require censorship, news blackouts and, ultimately, military attacks on the partisan media. Perceiving themselves as superior beings, journalists have positioned themselves as protected-species combatants. But freedom of the press stops when its abuse kills our soldiers and strengthens our enemies. Such a view arouses disdain today, but a media establishment that has forgotten any sense of sober patriotism may find that it has become tomorrow's conventional wisdom.

The point of all this is simple: *Win*. In warfare, nothing else matters. If you cannot win clean, win dirty. But *win*. Our victories are ultimately in humanity's interests, while our failures nourish monsters.

In closing, we must dispose of one last mantra that has been too broadly and uncritically accepted: the nonsense that, if we win by fighting as fiercely as our enemies, we will "become just like them." To convince Imperial Japan of its defeat, we not

only had to fire-bomb Japanese cities, but drop two atomic bombs. Did we then become like the Japanese of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere? Did we subsequently invade other lands with the goal of permanent conquest, enslaving their populations? Did our destruction of German cities—also necessary for victory—turn us into Nazis? Of course, you can find a few campus leftists who think so, but they have yet to reveal the location of our death camps.

We may wish reality to be otherwise, but we must deal with it as we find it. And the reality of warfare is that it is the organized endeavor at which human beings excel. Only our ability to develop and maintain cities approaches warfare in its complexity. There is simply nothing that human collectives do better (or with more enthusiasm) than fight each other. Whether we seek explanations for human bloodlust in Darwin, in our religious texts (do start with the Book of Joshua), or among the sociologists who have done irreparable damage to the poor, we finally must accept empirical reality: at least a small minority of humanity longs to harm others. The violent, like the poor, will always be with us, and we must be willing to kill those who would kill others. At present, the American view of warfare has degenerated from science to a superstition in which we try to propitiate the gods with chants and dances. We need to regain a sense of the world's reality.

Of all the enemies we face today and may face tomorrow, the most dangerous is our own wishful thinking.

