

## **‘Hyper-Power’ vs. ‘Hyper-Freedom’?: A Brief Discussion of Ends-and-Means in US Military Policy**

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### **The challenge of ‘status-quo’**

It almost goes without saying that the ‘New’ American Studies—and especially an entire day focused on American ‘Hyper-Power’—is practically concerned with war. Or America’s ‘War on Terror’; the ‘current situation in Iraq’; and perhaps even ‘the impending crisis in Iran’. The War on Terror is furthermore assumed (perhaps I’m wrong here) to be the *result* of American hyper-power. As an example of this, the historic (though rather skewed) letter which Iran’s president recently wrote to George W. Bush in the White House asked him to consider:

- “...how their names will be recorded in history and...constantly judged in the immediate and distant futures.”
- “Did we bring the world peace and security or [raise] the spectre of intimidation and threats?”
- “If billions of dollars spent on security...were instead spent on investment and assistance for poor countries...would there have been an ever increasing global hatred of the American governments?”
- “The people of the world are not happy with the status quo”, and “pay little heed to the promises and comments made by a number of influential world leaders. Many people around the world feel insecure and oppose the spreading of insecurity and war and do not approve of and accept dubious policies.”

As with many recent criticisms, of course, the current and pervasive *casus belli*, or ‘cause of war’ is *American* power in and of itself; the ‘ruthless’ American pursuit of national security—as if the *war* itself (categorically a conflict between at least two sides) did not actually exist—as if American hyper-power existed in a global power vacuum, and was both the cause and effect of all things

wrong with the world, including, the president of Iran, noted, “increasing corruption” and “the fading of care and compassion”.

The ‘problem’ with America *is*, in other words, American *power*.

Conveniently enough, just as the actual *occasion* for such a letter is omitted (Iran’s nuclear programme and intended defiance of the U.N. Security Council), let alone terrorist outfits themselves (like Al-Qaeda)—while it focuses largely instead on the “phenomenon of Israel”—the implication is that without such power, there would be no war (or certainly no ‘War on Terror’; presumably a very good thing for ‘the people of the world’). Take America (and Israel, and probably Great Britain) out of the world equation, this letter has suggested, and ‘there would be peace’—though again it concludes that “the people of the world are angry about attacks on their cultural foundations...and have no faith in international organisations, because their rights are not advocated by these organisations.” So presumably we’d better scrap the United Nations while we’re at it.

Even still, the real point of this letter is that “Liberalism and Western style democracy have not been able to help realize the ideals of humanity. Today these two concepts have failed.” Only through “faith in God and the teachings of the prophets, [will] people...conquer their problems.”<sup>1</sup> So again, the problem here is not just America, Israel, Great Britain—the ‘West’—and the U.N. General Assembly, but the Age of Enlightenment and possibly also the Renaissance. (And God help those today who worship only football...)

### **What is war?**

Are American aims, however, any less radical?—any less disruptive of a cosy status quo? Probably not. So at this point at least we’d better remind ourselves what war is all about. Now, in ‘War Studies’ we tend to focus a lot on Carl von Clausewitz’s maxim that ‘war is the continuation of politics by other means’. This makes the very act of trying to distinguish a state of war from one of peace very difficult, something we know Leo Tolstoy, writing not long after Clausewitz, illustrated superbly. According to the perhaps the finest military historian Britain has ever produced, Sir Michael Howard, “War consists of...deliberate, controlled, and purposeful acts of force combined and harmonized to attain what are ultimately political objectives.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet this is precisely what made the Bush's declared 'War on Terror' so disastrous, the *Guardian* quoted him saying in October 2001; for Howard could "think of no policy more likely, not only to indefinitely prolong the war, but to ensure that we can never win it", adding "As we discovered in both Palestine and Ireland, the terrorists have already won an important battle if they can provoke the authorities into using overt armed force."<sup>3</sup> Paul Seabury and Angelo Codevilla, in their book, *War: Ends and Means*, also observe that "Affecting ideas is the very essence of war", and that "The essence of war consists primarily of neither words nor deeds, but of *intentions*."<sup>4</sup>

All this rather paraphrases Chinese philosopher Sun Tsu's own often-quoted maxim, that the 'Perfection of the art of war is to win it without fighting'. Contrast this with former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's 1995 book on Fighting Terrorism, which concludes "that there is no other way to fight terrorism—other than to fight it."<sup>5</sup>

Though insurgencies are defined as the "smallest wars of all", when discussing the nature of what they call 'Political Warfare', Seabury and Codevilla describe them as "the most obviously political because insurgents necessarily begin by representing no one but themselves. Their acts in violation of the law begin as private challenges, and therefore as crimes. To the extent that the insurgents are legitimate, the government is not, and vice versa. The insurgent's hope is to wage a 'small war' that will perhaps become a civil war."<sup>6</sup> This leads us back to what Michael Howard was really referring to when he criticized an apparently open-ended—and never-ending—campaign to rid the world of terrorist ideologies, and I'm afraid I'll have to quote him at length here:

...the principle that only 'legitimate authorities', states and their agents, have the right to make war and to claim recognition and protection in war, has been the basis of the whole system of rational, controllable, inter-state conflict. Naturally such a system is biased in favour of the *status quo* and places independent, non-state actors at a considerable disadvantage. But it is easy to forget what an enormous advance was made in the direction of a just, peaceable and orderly society when the chaotic permissiveness of violence in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Europe was codified and limited, over the centuries, into orderly relations between 'perfect states'. The problem is to extend the traditional system to encompass and humanize this new kind of conflict. But it can be done only if the objectives of both sides are moderate and compatible. No amount of legal draftmanship can prevent a quest for total victory from leading to total war.<sup>7</sup>

Is that what American hyper-power has led us to? The pursuit of total victory—or perhaps even total ‘peace’—at the cost of total war? Perhaps. These sorts of logical paradoxes carry an enormous poetic appeal to those of us constantly engaged in peeling the proverbial onion of human nature. “Taking a page from Sun Tsu, if national security includes virtually everything, then it includes nothing,” wrote Sam Sarkesian, in his examination of *U.S. National Security: Policymakers, Processes and Politics*. “In brief, the scope of national security has become so broad in the security landscape of the 1990s that it has lost its meaning and conceptual credibility.”<sup>8</sup> This of course was written well before 9/11, except that, again, American hyper-power represents, at most, only *half* of the equation in any consideration of war. ‘Making the world safe for democracy’—the pursuit of ‘hyper-freedom’, if you will—is arguably more in line with Michael Howard’s call to ‘extend the traditional system’—the principle of the modern state system—than those reactionary forces also at work, ‘not happy with the status quo’. Here the entire process of cause and effect, war and peace becomes difficult to distinguish indeed.

## **Survival & Freedom**

In 1973, American military historian Russell F. Weigley concluded his classic study of *The American Way of War* by observing that “fears of the momentum generated by the unleashing of military violence still seems closer to comprehending reality than do theories calling for the measured control of applications of violence.”<sup>9</sup> In other words, it is far too easy for the ends and means of security and warfare to become entangled; for conflict to become an end in itself. Of course, Weigley was writing at the close of U.S. involvement in Vietnam; a limited attempt to maintain a global status-quo even more unlimited with the collapse of the U.S.S.R. in 1990—Francis Fukuyamas’s turning point for the ‘End of History’.<sup>10</sup> While the end of the Cold War did not necessarily result from American ‘hyper-power’, the threat of totalitarian domination, as envisaged by George Orwell in *1984* (written in 1949)—and represented far more by the Soviet-than American-style ‘Union’—was finally discarded. The biggest sigh of relief we all experienced in the early 1990s—*by* the 1990s—however, was that the overriding threat of a global thermonuclear holocaust initiated by the two superpowers was suddenly no longer there, nevermind their rival political, social and economic systems. Humanity had survived the test of survival and freedom even more than it had in 1945, while the ‘Great Powers’ evolved from ‘Super Powers’ to ‘Hyper-Power’.

But at what price, ‘survival and freedom’? The very existence of *any* hyper-power, even a comparatively benign, American one, has certainly provoked strong reactionary forces, from many western liberals to Al-Quada. ‘You’re either with us or against us’ sounds too much like an ultimatum—and nobody likes an ultimatum. Nevertheless, a Washington-based think-tank, the Center for Security Policy, has recently published *War Footing: 10 Steps American Must Take to Prevail in the War for the Free World* (2006). “Make no mistake about it,” the CSP declares, “There are new totalitarians today. In this book we call them Islamofascists, who, together, with their friends and allies, are every bit as determined as their predecessors to destroy the Free World.”<sup>11</sup> Even the U.S. Minister to Great Britain during the American Civil War wrote that “the American struggle is, after all, the ever-recurring one in human affairs between right and wrong, between labour and capital, between liberty and absolutism.”<sup>12</sup>

Maybe Liberalism and Western style democracy—if not war itself—really is the ‘root of all evil’(?) Commenting on Weigley’s thesis, Reginald C. Stuart, in “War and the American Experience: Some New Perspectives”, suggested “if the American way of war changed after [the beginning of the American Civil War] in one sense, in another it remained the same. Americans still refused to relate military means to political ends. Planning remained essentially improvisational...” Again, even by the 1990s, Sarkesian argued there was “a serious gap between the political rhetoric of national security and the capability and effectiveness of the U.S. military—both as a military institution and a professional system.” Michael D. Pearlman, in his 1999 study of *Warmaking and American Democracy*, went even further in stressing how “military strategy should reflect national policy.” The most obvious case in point, at that point, was U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Here, “[U.S. Army] General [William] Westmoreland complained about being caught between two forces...a President with limited objectives, who merely wanted to discourage the enemy, and ‘the morale of the fighting man, who must be convinced that he is risking death for a worthy cause.’” Furthermore, “because a goal must justify the means...Americans”, wrote Pearlman, “tend to demand utopian war aims like universal democracy and permanent peace”, when “war is really a preventive act to maintain national security, no small achievement itself.” As far as Peter Manicas was concerned, in his 1989 study on *War and Democracy*, chaos and confusion were rather embedded in the whole western liberal process. The more freedom at work in the system—the more democratic—the sloppier the *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*.<sup>13</sup>

However, Manicas, like so many other commentators, can only leave us with the conclusion that “The problem of ‘democracy’, construed as an ideal, cannot be solved...until there is a solution to

the problem of war. Conversely, the human blight of war will not be eliminable until mankind achieves some significant steps in the direction of greater democracy.”<sup>14</sup>

But what *about*, say, U.S. military policy during the American Civil War—that country’s own domestic (if not international) experience with ‘rebel insurgents’? Far from condemning President Abraham Lincoln’s proclaimed ‘War on Slavery’ (about as radically upsetting for Southern society as western liberalism is for Islamic culture), history regards him as a benefactor of the entire human race (hence his statue, next to Churchill’s, in Parliament Square). Yet this was the same figure who defended the totality and carnage of Civil War campaigns by 1864, as well as his somewhat illegal excesses as the nation’s Chief Executive: “Measures otherwise unconstitutional might become lawful by becoming indispensable to the preservation of the constitution through the preservation of the nation.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Taking sides**

This accords with what Michael Walzer describes as the ‘Supreme Emergency’, in his (now classic) analysis of *Just and Unjust Wars*; the ends justifying the means. But whereas the U.S. government suddenly faced a mortal crisis in 1861, the U.S. government of 2001—on 9/11—was presented with an arguably simpler dilemma of national security, though a nasty surprise no less. Indeed, Sarkesian had already warned that “it now seems clear...that there is an inherent and universal struggle between the open systems of the West and the closed systems of other cultures”, and Walzer had declared that “In war, terrorism is associated with the demand for unconditional surrender and, in similar fashion, tends to rule out any sort of compromise settlement.”<sup>16</sup>

This of course, is the whole issue at stake. For in its “modern manifestations, terror is the totalitarian form of war and politics. It shatters the war convention and the political code.” Yet “despite this”, Walzer concludes, “terrorism has been defended, not only by the terrorists themselves, but also by philosophical apologists writing on their behalf.”<sup>17</sup>

This is another crucial case in point, in any discussion of American hyper-power and the demands of hyper-freedom, when assessing ends and means in U.S. military policy. Yesterday, for example, at the University of Wolverhampton, guest lecturer Professor Ted Honderich (Chairperson of the Royal Institute of Philosophy) informed us that:

- “Palestinians have had and now have a moral right to their terrorism in Palestine against the ethnic cleansing of neo-Zionism”;
- That “9/11 was wholly justified in opposition to neo-Zionism” (though, he added, it was admittedly carried out by “monstrously irrational” means);
- And that the “principal friend” of the suicide bombings in London last July was Tony Blair, “a friend of neo-Zionist terrorism.”

Even the popularity for the latest action film *V for Vendetta*, the *Chicago Tribune* recently complained, suggests “we’re ready for a cultured, sophisticated, man-about-town terrorist who espouses the belief that ‘blowing up a building can change the world.’ Finally, a film to unite movie-mad members of Al Qaeda with your neighbor’s kid, the one with the crush on Natalie Portman.”<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps here too, there is no shortage of historical precedent. Michael Howard described “The [British] liberal conscience in the mid-thirties [as] equally revolted by war and by Fascism, and so found it easy to believe that the two were one and the same: that opposition to the one involved opposing the other.”<sup>19</sup>

So maybe what we’re really talking about here is not American hyper-power or the apparent American predilection for absolute aims and total warfare, but the recognition of a *political* war that has been going on for quite some time, and which has, like it or not, been increasingly forcing us to take stock of ourselves, take stock of ‘them’—and take sides on this pressing daily *issue*.

Speaking of surprises, Andrew Sullivan practically reversed his position two weeks ago in the *Times* by conceding that “being in London today is far more like being in America than it was two decades ago. From Starbucks to WiFi, much of Londonland—and I include the vast expanse of England that is essentially a satellite of the capital is indistinguishable from an American blue (Democrat-voting) state city.” Part of this Sullivan, claims, has a lot to do with class—or the absence thereof in contemporary, post-modern British society. And while this doesn’t account for the unquestionable rise of anti-Americanism, he notes *that* sentiment “is as American as its opposite. You will find few foreign countries as hostile to Bush as California. The most successful anti-Americans, like Michael Moore, are home-grown.” Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, the same issue of the *Times* also featured an op from Rod Little calling for the bombing of Iran in thick, black headlines. “I may not want to live in a world with nuclear weapons,” he affirmed, “but I *really* don’t want to live in a world where Iran has nuclear weapons.”<sup>20</sup>

I have to contrast this sentiment with the vaguely uncomfortable yet undeniable feeling I get every time I see footage of gum-chewing American (or British) soldiers patrolling the streets of Baghdad and Fallujah. ‘Freedom’ imposed by a foreign power is still a foreign freedom. The more power that is required to impose it, the more ‘foreign’, and the less ‘free’ it appears to be, right or wrong. And this is almost certainly the same gut feeling many Americans experienced when they watched on TV, for the first time, so many of their young men in South Vietnam.

The United States might currently enjoy (though I doubt many Americans actually ‘enjoy’ it) a unique, almost unprecedented position in world affairs. But even Francis Fukuyama has been recently obliged to recant his thesis that history has come to an end—far from it.<sup>21</sup> If history has been punctuated, if not shaped, by its wars, then the world still has a long, potentially costly way to go before it ever secures a real and lasting—a universal—sense of ‘peace’.

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<sup>1</sup> For an online full-text version see <http://informationclearinghouse.info/article12984.htm> (June 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Howard, *Restraints on War: Studies in the Limitation of Armed Conflict* (Oxford University Press, 1979), 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Guardian*, 31 October 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Seabury and Angelo Codevilla, *War: Ends and Means* (Basic Books, New York, 1990 ed.), 161.

<sup>5</sup> For an online translation of Sun Tsu’s *The Art of War*, see <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/132> (June 2006); Benjamin Netanyahu, *Fighting Terrorism: How Democracies Can Defeat Domestic and International Terrorism* (Farrar Straus Giroux, New York, 1995), 148.

<sup>6</sup> Seabury and Codevilla, *op. cit.*, 179.

<sup>7</sup> Howard, *op. cit.*, 13.

<sup>8</sup> Sam C. Sarkesian, *U.S. National Security: Policymakers, Processes, and Politics* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1995), 222.

<sup>9</sup> Russell Frank Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 476.

<sup>10</sup> See Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1992).

<sup>11</sup> Frank J. Gaffney, *War Footing: 10 Steps America Must Take to Prevail in the War for the Free World* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006), xi. See also Harlan Ullman, *Finishing Business: Ten Steps to Defeat Global Terror* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> See Ephraim Douglass Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, 2 vols. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1925), 2: 283.

<sup>13</sup> Reginald C. Stuart, “War and the American Experience: Some New Perspectives”, in Brian Bond and Ian Roy (eds.), *War and Society: A Yearbook of Military History* (Croom Helm, London, 1977), 249; Sarkesian, *op. cit.*, 223; Michael D. Pearlman, *Warmaking and American Democracy: The Struggle over Military Strategy, 1700 to the Present*

(Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 2, 7; Peter Manicas, *War and Democracy* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> Manicas, *op. cit.*, 1.

<sup>15</sup> See for example, Sean Wilentz, "The Worst President in History?" *Rolling Stone* magazine, 4 May 2006, No. 999.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 203; Sarkesian, *op. cit.*, 223.

<sup>17</sup> Walzer, *op. cit.*, 203.

<sup>18</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 16 March 2006.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Howard, *War and the Liberal Conscience: The George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures in the University of Cambridge, 1977* (Temple Smith, London, 1978), 99.

<sup>20</sup> *The Times*, 30 April 2006.

<sup>21</sup> See *The Times*, 26 March 2006.