ARTICLE

The New Aztecs: Ritual and Restraint in Contemporary Western Military Operations

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> So adamantly can a society, or part of it, desire to force warfare into accepted patterns that the society may replace real war with a Perfected Reality that more completely conforms to the relevant Discourse on War.
>
> John A. Lynn[1]

Roughly half a millennium ago, the Aztecs of Central America fought a series of what were known as Flower Wars. At various times, dependent on the harvest,[2] which limited the windows of opportunity, Aztec armies would be sent forth.

The Aztecs' purpose, however, was not the conquest of their enemy, the expansion of Aztec territory, or some other goal we might term policy today; rather, it was the taking of captives for religious rituals. Restraint was key; killing a foe in battle was of little use. Thus their weapons were designed to cripple, not kill,[3] and Aztec warriors in battle would deliberately avoid lethal blows, thus putting themselves in danger when fighting enemies who had nothing to lose, and fought to kill. Furthermore, the Aztecs, though they had large armies, fought as individuals. The captives would be brought back to the great city of Tenochtitlan (now Mexico City), where they would be sacrificed to one of several Aztec gods, usually through the ripping of the captive's still-beating hearts from their chests. Nor was this restraint limited to native wars, for even when the Aztecs

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fought the Spanish conquistador Hernan Cortes, they continued to fight for captives rather than simple victory.

For us in the West today, these Flower Wars may seem absurd. War is far too serious for us to limit it through rituals and risk death by deliberately restraining our own weaponry. Surely, the West fights logically and rationally,[4] identifying its goals then putting forth the forces required to achieve them. Our way of war is perceived as being dominated by Clausewitz, whose dictums lead so easily to a demand for total war.[5]

And yet closer examination of the evidence suggests that the contemporary Western practice of warfare is far closer in nature to that of the Aztecs than it is to that utilised by the West itself in the World Wars.[6] We are the new Aztecs. We are again fighting for abstract spiritual concepts, and although ours are the basis of reasoned discourse and a lengthy philosophical tradition, they are abstract spiritual concepts nonetheless. We do not have the sinister Tlacaxipeualiztli, Our Lord the Flayed One, but rather the concepts of 'humanitarianism' and 'pacifism'. Our priests are lawyers and United Nations officials, and our goal the sanctity of life, not military victory.

The key argument of this article is that the Western way of war has come full circle and returned somewhat to its primitive roots, of which the Aztecs present a colourful, but not unique, example. That way of war began as glorified hunting, an extension of martial culture, heavily circumscribed by both ritual and restraint. Over time, it developed. While there was no steady evolution in a single direction,[7] by and large warfare became less and less restrained by cultural restraint, and more and more total. Some have argued recently that instrumentality has triumphed.[8] Yet our most recent wars are driven far more by cultural beliefs and moral standards, including respect for international law, than they are by considerations of raw military effectiveness. A secondary argument, linked intimately to the first, is that we in the West, especially the media, do not seem to realise that we are limiting our arms to such an extent. We continue to see contemporary warfare as brutal and extremely deadly.

This article presents its arguments in systematic fashion. It begins by noting briefly the primary factors that shape war. It then studies the evolution of warfare over time. This historical summary shows clearly that the practice of warfare became increasingly total and instrumental. The article then briefly examines a range of recent Western operations that show a clear move away from total war and back towards ritual and restraint.

The article then posits a series of interlinked factors contributing to this re-emergent ritual and restraint. Finally, the article looks at the implications of this return to ritual and restraint. Are the 'new Aztecs' in danger of appeasing the Sun God, but ignoring the conquistadors at the gates?

Claiming that modern warfare resembles primitive warfare in its emphasis on ritual and restraint is a controversial thesis. It flies in the face of many who try to present contemporary warfare as intense, brutal, and existentially dangerous,[9] fought against a foe who seeks nothing less than the destruction of Western civilisation. It also implies that the Hansonesque concept of a decisive, amoral, annihilatory 'Western way of war' is at least temporarily inaccurate.[10]

The Development of Warfare

As with all organised activity, warfare must be preceded by a concept. A society must know how it wants to fight. It is this ideal concept that is the starting point for what occurs on the battlefield.[11] Thus, styles of warfare reflect the culture of the warmaking body, as well as what technology allows and what politics requires.[12] These styles are not fixed, however.[13] There is a constant evolving interaction between how a society wishes to fight, and how it can fight, given at least some degree of the instinct of self-preservation.

There is no historical record of primitive warfare in the West; our evidence begins with the ancient Greeks. It can be validly hypothesised, however, that the warfare of the West's forgotten past resembled much of what passes for warfare in today's primitive tribal world. Because of this, the study of primitive warfare has largely fallen to anthropologists and sociologists,[14] rather than military historians.

Length does not allowed for a closer examination of the styles of war of multiple primitive peoples, but those of the Nguni,[15] Yanomamo,[16] Maring,[17] Iban,[18] and Maori[19] –and of course Aztecs, as already noted – are greatly indicative. Some generalisations – themes that will later be shown to have transcended the long intervening centuries to re-emerge today – can be extracted from these examples.

The first important theme is that primitive societies existed largely in a state of perpetual warfare.[20] Partly because of this, primitive warfare was neither rational nor instrumental.[21] Warfare for primitive warriors was as much an expression of personal identity as anything else. There was a focus on individualism, on reputation and honour, and warfare was felt to define warriors in a way that it does not necessarily define modern soldiers.[22]

Another important element was the heavily ritualised nature of primitive warfare, which in many cases resembled an extremely bloody game.[23] Cultural controls were key to this restraint.[24] Much primitive warfare had a three-stage structure, exemplified by the Maring and Yanomamo, which escalated from feuding through to raiding and thence to formal battle. The last was the least common, and primitive warriors seldom aspired to the

annihilation of their enemies. Close combat was usually avoided, and treachery and hit-and-run attacks were favoured due to their low level of risk.[25] Armies fought with little coordination, and battle was usually more a series of individual duels than a collective activity.[26]

Restraint usually extended to the treatment of civilians, although this did vary, with some tribes treating them more brutally than others.[27] Usually, women, children, and the elderly were exempt from violence;[28] when violence against them did occur, it usually involved inter- rather than intra-tribal war.

Further restraints focused on the justification for war; there was usually a careful consideration of the rationale for any war, and whether said rationale meshed with cultural beliefs. Often, conciliation and arbitration processes occurred simultaneously with the battle, sometimes on the battlefield itself. A final theme of primitive warfare involved conventions limiting the time and place. Often, events such as harvests defined the window for warfare, and the presence of sacred places limited potential battlefields, as did physical geography.

The Warrior Period

It was the ancient Greeks, from approximately 500BC onwards, who first developed what became known as the 'Western way of war',[29] cutting loose from at least some of the constraints of primitive warfare.[30] Greek warfare was waged largely between Greek city-states, small independent actors in a land whose geography favoured such a patchwork political structure. Battles were usually fought in summer, when men could leave their farms, and when the ground was firm enough for fixed battle. Greek warfare was focused on decisiveness, for a quick resolution of any battle would enable the soldier-farmers to return swiftly to their agricultural work. Yet battles seldom ended in annihilation, and there was usually no real effort to follow up success on the battlefield with pursuit. Ritual acts, especially the raising of a trophy on the battlefield demonstrated victory. Alexander the Great developed the Greek style further,[31] stripping away some of the restraints of time and place, even annihilating his enemies at times,[32] yet he was still a recognisably primitive warrior, dominated by superstition and ritual.

The Romans came next, and they present the first major anomaly in the development of the Western way of war, for they were more ruthless and total in their methods than any society for almost 2,000 years.[33] They razed Carthage to the ground and salted its lands, and brought fire and the sword to much of Europe. Yet they were still heavily restricted by cultural beliefs, such as the taking of auguries, the need for a time for commanders to be

appointed for political purposes, and even the loyalty of their soldiers to their commanders, rather than the state itself.

With the Medieval period came some return to ritual and restraint. The Church was at the heart of efforts to restrain warfare in Europe,[34] promulgating strict regulations known as *jus militaire*, that although motivated by theology, bore a strong resemblance to contemporary humanitarian law.[35] Combat often took on a judicial air, being seen as a means to resolving conflict through its indication of God's will.[36] Yet this peaceful message was not always taken onboard, and mounted raids, known as *chevauchées*, brought terror and death to civilians in the pursuit of political gains.[37] Medieval warfare was, however, further limited by the usual absence of battles, with warfare devolving into a series of raids and sieges.

The Grotian Period

The Grotian period, especially from approximately 1631, was dominated by battles – it has been known as the 'Age of Battles' – ritualised tactics, and efforts to restrain the damage inflicted by war. There was an ongoing quest for decisiveness, and yet if anything, warfare became less so.[38]

Ritualised tactics, wherein sides would approach each other to point-blank range then exchange volleys of musket and cannon fire, resulted in extremely bloody battles, with sides sustaining 30 per cent casualties at times.[39] Battles were dominated by a culture of honour and decorum that demanded 'baring the breast' at the enemy, exemplified best at Fontenoy;[40] while there was also a military rationale in exploiting the effectiveness of massed volley firing of muskets, the tactics followed were seldom altered, indicating how ritualised they had become.

Yet even as battles grew bloodier, there were efforts in the legal and political fields to restrict the effects of warfare on society as a whole.[41] It was during the Grotian period that the first legal conventions on restraint in warfare appeared in Europe.[42] Key to these conventions was an attempt to protect civilians, an attempt that proved largely successful. The 18th century was – in the words of one authoritative historian – 'marred by virtually no departures in Europe … from the principle of non-combatant immunity'.[43] Sacking a town, which was regarded as standard practice previously, now became abhorrent.[44]

At the end of the 18th century, the French Revolution altered the face of warfare, introducing new motivations of spirit, will, and nationalism. Building from these new motives, the French reintroduced some of the strategies of annihilation favoured by the Romans almost 2,000 years before.[45] While technology was largely unchanged, nationalism made larger

armies possible, which in turn made an increasingly total style of war possible.

Once the French had been defeated, much of the remainder of the 19th century was marked by attempts to re-impose restraints upon warfare. In the second half of the century, the convergence of international humanitarian opinion, international law, and military modernisation, resulted in further formalisation of the rules of war established by Grotius, expressed in a range of new international conventions.[46] Especial care was taken to forbid certain types of weapons and ensure the protection of civilians.

The Age of Total War

The largely bloodless wars of the late 19th century – with the exception of the American Civil War – led into a new era of war in the 20th: the Age of Total War.[47] Warfare, motivated by mass spirit and will, motivations that had first emerged in the French Revolution, became increasingly divorced from the last vestiges of judicial and ritualistic elements.[48] Picking selectively from Clausewitz, commentators declared that only total war could be successful.[49]

The first of these total wars, World War I, was distinctly un-Clausewitzian in one important regard, however: an astonishing mismatch between political purpose and military design.[50] The sides went to war with seemingly clear aims, and their peoples clamouring for war and blood.[51] However, military technology resulted in stalemate, and as time went on the gap between political goals and military strategy grew wider and wider. The 1914–18 struggle was a brutal war. The strategy of attritional warfare largely followed by all sides, with some late exceptions, demanded sending more and more young men to die in an effort to destroy the reserves of the enemy. World War I saw war become its own *raison d'être*. The Great War was perceived, at first, to have been the last of its kind, the 'war to end all wars'. Moves were soon underway to either outlaw entirely or limit future war.

These attempts failed. World War I was followed by an even more total and longer conflict, World War II, a war that made all the wars that had gone before it seem like the mere exchange of arrows in a Yanomamo 'nothing fight'. World War II was an ideological, industrial, global war. It was fought, especially on the Russian and Pacific Fronts, with few restraints.[52]

The war in Europe ended with Germany's unconditional surrender and occupation. In the Pacific, the war ended with the dropping of the first atomic bombs on Japan. Thus, by 1945, history showed a very clear trend towards unrestrained and total war, a trend made all the more terrifying by the presence of nuclear weapons. As a response to this, there were again

further moves to outlaw or restrict war, largely through the formation of the United Nations.

There was a third total war in the 20th century, albeit one that never erupted: the Cold War.[53] Had this become hot, it would have pitted the Soviet Union against the United States, each with an arsenal of nuclear weapons. It is probable that Clausewitz's dictums would have reached their ultimate extension here, helping justify a global nuclear exchange that would have killed billions. Luckily, this World War III did not erupt; instead, Western states fought only a few expeditionary wars during the period.

Throughout the periods examined above, a discernible Western way of war has emerged, a way of war that has grown more distinctive as it has developed.[54] It is a lethally instrumental and amoral tradition, and over time it has become less shackled by religion, ritual, tradition, or ethical standards. Western armies have pursued the annihilation of their enemies, rather than social recognition, religious salvation, or personal status.[55] This is not to say that the West has always fought fully in such a way; many of these tendencies grew stronger over time.[56] They seemingly reached their culmination in 1945, for recently there has been a shift back towards ritual and restraint.[57]

Recent and Contemporary Ritual and Restraint in Warfare

The following case studies illuminate the ritualistic and restrained elements present in several recent and contemporary conflicts involving the West. The case studies focus on the character of, rather than the rationale behind, that restraint. It should also be noted that although ritual and restraint are usually linked, this is not always the case. It should also be reiterated that there is no intent to make value judgements about the return of primitive warfare traits in recent conflicts.

Somalia

The United Nations established a peacekeeping operation in Somalia in 1992 after the international media had drawn attention to massive suffering in that country.[58] The operation soon proved far more deadly than had been anticipated. Warfare is endemic in Somali history, and it is regarded as an important part of Somali culture.[59] Thus, when peacekeepers arrived, they encountered a militant people, a people that would rather fight than disarm.[60]

Western soldiers in Somalia operated under strict rules of engagement, understandable given the view that the mission was peacekeeping.[61] However, even when the situation deteriorated, and seemed to demand a move to peace enforcement, a low-key approach was maintained.[62]

Peacekeepers were pushed into a defensive posture by Somali attacks, and for a time did not respond assertively.[63]

Eventually, however, the indecisiveness of the conflict began to affect behaviour; this was predictable, given the long history of Western imperial and colonial wars.[64] In an attempt to catch a warlord regarded as a key spoiler of peace efforts,[65] American elite troops were pinned down in the centre of Mogadishu,[66] attacked by a swarming mass of tribal warriors.[67] Eighteen were killed. In a scene that might have taken place before the walls of Troy, 3,000 years before, the corpses were dragged around the streets. Seeming primitivism had triumphed over rational war.

Historically, a Western force would likely have responded to such an event with increasing brutality. But times had changed. Instead of responding vigorously, the United States decided to withdraw. In a manner that would have been familiar to the Nguni or Yanomamo, the Americans fled as soon as a few casualties were inflicted. They did not feel that the cost was justified by the likely benefits of the operation. Withdrawal was partly motivated by negative media attention, but it must be remembered that it was not the media that made the final decision. In stimulating such a rapid withdrawal, the primitive Somalis illustrated brilliantly the resurgence of primitive traits within the American warmaking machine: fighting in a restrained manner, indulging in hit-and-run tactics, and fleeing as soon as a few casualties were inflicted.

Kosovo

Kosovo provides an even finer exemplar of re-emergent primitivism, for unlike Somalia, it was ostensibly an enforcement, rather than peacekeeping action. The war in Kosovo came about due to a belief that Yugoslav forces were waging a campaign of ethnic cleansing within the borders of Kosovo, a province in Yugoslavia. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) offered to place a peacekeeping force in the province; Yugoslavia refused. In response, NATO launched Operation 'Allied Force' on 24 March 1999.

NATO, which combined the military forces of most of the world's strongest states, could have crushed Yugoslavia in a few days had it fully utilised the arsenals at its disposal. Instead, it embarked on a restrained 78-day aerial bombardment, a bombardment that largely succeeded thanks to the efforts of Russian diplomats.[68] At the heart of this restraint was a perceived popular aversion to casualties, both friendly and enemy.[69] Aircraft were forced to bomb from high altitudes to avoid defensive fire, which severely limited their accuracy and effectiveness; during the entire campaign, NATO aircraft destroyed only 30 armoured vehicles and 20

artillery pieces.[70] Offensively effective assets such as the AH-64 Apache attack helicopter, which might have been vulnerable to defensive fire, were not used.[71] Overall, this use of aerial stand-off weapons in a tentative fashion, all the while protected by a massive electronic shield, was strongly reminiscent of primitive warfare, particularly that of the Maring.

There were still criticisms of the perceived 'inhumane' nature of some activities undertaken by NATO.[72] 'Allied Force' did target some civilian facilities, including power and sewage facilities. However, immense care was taken to ensure that any targets struck caused minimum civilian casualties.[73] Micromanagement of operations was standard practice, further complicated by the multinational nature of the committees determining which targets could be struck.[74] Yet there was also a paradox, in that efforts to avoid friendly casualties, such as high-altitude attacks, on some occasions were the cause of civilian casualties.

As the air campaign dragged on, seemingly without effect, some efforts were made to prepare for a ground offensive.[75] The United Kingdom committed 50,000 British troops, and Germany, Italy, and even France seemed increasingly open to the prospect. However, the fact that a ground invasion did not take place within the first 78 days, and indeed was unlikely to have happened within the first six months of the campaign, indicates how much of a last resort such a move was seen as. NATO was extremely unwilling to resort to unrestrained measures, and the mere possibility of a ground invasion – especially given that NATO was not even willing to escalate the aerial campaign – should not be seen as indicating anything to the contrary.

Other elements typical of primitive war were also present in 'Allied Force'. The operation was preceded by a lengthy, complex diplomatic process, which continued in Byzantine fashion throughout the bombing. There were constant concerns about treachery within the alliance, including the possibility that countries within NATO were feeding information to the Yugoslavs.

In the end, NATO sustained zero casualties during Operation 'Allied Force', and achieved its goal of inserting a peacekeeping force. Yet the restrained methods employed, reminiscent of primitive war, substantially delayed the achievement of this goal.[76]

Afghanistan

On September 11, 2001, Al-Qaeda terrorists crashed three airliners into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. American reprisal, assisted by several allies, was swift. Al- Qaeda's leadership was tracked to Afghanistan. When the Taliban government of that country refused assistance in

capturing those Al-Qaeda leaders, America, leading a coalition of the willing, invaded Afghanistan. Given the history of West against non-West conflicts, as well as the fact that American soil had been attacked, one might have expected a brutal war.

Afghanistan, like Somalia, has a culture where war is endemic. For much of its history, Afghan warfare exemplified the themes of primitive warfare noted earlier.[77] Later, largely due to foreign invasion, that traditional code was broken, and Afghan warfare became increasingly brutal.[78] As in Somalia, the invading Americans encountered a militant culture.[79]

Since 2001, Afghan insurgents have fought in a brutal fashion, targeting civilians, and in some ways trying to turn their jihad, or holy war, into a total commitment.[80] Their use of terrorist tactics has contributed to a developing perception that such is the contemporary Arab/Muslim way of war.[81] Such is no Clausewitzian true war, although it is brutal. Violence for the mujahidin ('people who fight a holy war') is ritualised, expressive, and focused on blood.[82]

America, unlike the Afghan insurgents, has the means to wage total war. Yet its operations against the Taliban have been heavily restrained. At first, it sent in only a few small, elite units, usually consisting of Special Forces.[83] These worked closely with local actors, 'buying out' the allegiance of Afghan warlords,[84] relying on the flexible loyalties of many actors in a way that would have been familiar to a feudal baron of the Middle Ages. Since that first phase of operations, despite oscillating levels of insurgent activity, Western occupying forces have engaged in a ritualised and restrained style of warfare that is reminiscent of primitive warfare in many respects.

The theatre is a particularly benign one, if measured by casualty rates. In approximately the first five years, British troops sustained only 16 killed in action, as well as an additional 21 deaths due to accidents or illness,[85] a rate that has increased slightly in the period since.[86] This has been the same for the United States, which for example lost only 52 killed in action for the whole of 2004, or roughly one a week.[87] The casualty rate has increased since, but overall, seven years of operations in Afghanistan have resulted in fewer casualties than a single bad day in either World War. This is partly a result of the character of operations. Rather than engaging in large-scale operations, Western units largely live in fortified outposts and engage in daily patrols.

Restraint is particularly apparent in the strict rules of engagement used by the forces in theatre. The Germans, for example, have a strict principle of proportionality, allowing the use of lethal force only when an attack is taking place or is imminent.[88] From at least 2005, the United States expressed some concerns about the rules of engagement followed by

various countries in the coalition, noting they could prove counterproductive in more dangerous areas.[89] These rules have heavily restricted the use of firepower, limiting civilian casualties: approximately 500 Afghanis died in 2006, and 1,600 in 2007, a very low rate in historical context.[90]

And yet, despite the degree of restraint apparent in Western behaviour, Afghanistan remains perceived as a place where the West is fighting brutally. The Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, has criticised the coalition for accidental civilian deaths, perhaps ignorant of the degree of civilian casualties that was usual for most wars of the 20th century.[91] As a result, in the past year there have been efforts to further tighten the rules in order to restrict the likelihood of collateral damage.[92] When mistakes are made, the media response is astonishing. War, to them, is as it was many thousands of years ago: a ritualised game where none need to die.

Iraq

After the First Gulf War (1990–91), Iraq proved a constant problem in the Middle East, largely due to its perceived weapons of mass destruction (WMD) programme and support for terrorists. A series of limited interventions was undertaken by the United States in an effort to modify Iraq's behaviour.[93] These failed, and in the aftermath of 9/11, Iraq was regarded as an even greater threat. The situation deteriorated, until in early 2003, following a series of ritualistic diplomatic manoeuvres in the United Nations, an American-led coalition invaded Iraq. This steady escalation, from feuding through to raiding and finally to fixed battle, was reminiscent of the three-stage combat undertaken by many primitive groups.

The conventional campaign went brilliantly.[94] The armoured columns pushed through all opposition, soon reaching and seizing Baghdad. Airpower was employed in a calculated manner, with no attempt to flatten cities or destroy infrastructure. Strict rules of engagement were followed; the invasion force moved like some army of the Age of Battles, cutting through the countryside with minimum disturbance to the locals. Only 154 American casualties were incurred during this phase.[95]

Since that conventional campaign, an insurgency – indeed, something more than an insurgency[96] – has developed in Iraq, partly due to the restrained manner in which America waged the conventional phase.[97] Former US Army Colonel Ralph Peters put it aptly, stating that 'We tried to make war on the cheap, only to make the endeavour vastly more expensive – in every respect – than it needed to be.'[98]

Many Iraqis saw foreign intervention as an insult to their collective honour, and in turn responded violently.[99] As with the Somalis and

Afghans, warfare has been endemic in Iraqi culture for many centuries.[100] Again, as in Somalia and Afghanistan, dislocations of traditional structures of society, often caused by external intervention, have had the effect of increasing the brutality of traditional styles of war.[101] The Iraqi insurgency lacks the heavy equipment available to insurgents in other wars.[102] However, what it has lacked in tanks and aircraft, it has made up for in lethal improvised explosive devices and a tendency to target civilians rather than military personnel.

Despite the brutality of their foes, the Western coalition in Iraq has continued to restrain its methods. As in Afghanistan, war in Iraq resembles extreme policing.[103] Crime has been perceived as the greatest threat to security. Indeed, US Marines sent to theatre have been trained by the Los Angeles Police Department in an effort to teach them necessary skills.[104]

There are relatively few troops given the size of the country. The most common activity is the patrol from a fortified outpost. Operations are usually carried out by small units, with the battalion the largest formation frequently used.[105] Where there have been larger operations, such as the First Battle of Fallujah in April 2004, they have not been carried through to a decisive conclusion.[106]

As in Afghanistan, restraint is further evident in restrictive rules of engagement and low casualty rates on both sides. During a major operation involving seven battalions at the end of 2005, not a single death was sustained on either side, despite the operation involving the capture of 377 suspected insurgents.[107] In almost six years, the United States has sustained just over 4,200 deaths in theatre; this works out to be roughly two a day, a very low rate in historical context.[108] Even during the worst periods, the death rate was still less than five a day across the entire theatre.[109] Recently, the death rate has dropped to as low as four a month.[110] In almost two and a half years from the start of 2006, the United Kingdom sustained just two killed in action.[111] Casualties on the Iraqi side have also been remarkably low in historical context.[112]

Despite fighting a frustrating, culturally confusing conflict – a mixture that in the past has led to massacres – Western troops in Iraq have committed an extraordinarily low number of criminal acts.[113] And those that have been committed have been heavily publicised and punished. Yet, as in Afghanistan, public opinion continues to demonise Western forces in Iraq.

Lebanon 2006

In July 2006, tired of constant provocations by the terrorist group Hizballah, based largely in Lebanon, Israel took military action against that country.

This was not the first time this had occurred; in 1982, Israel used tanks and heavy artillery to flatten resistance. Israel's technique changed in 2006.

As with NATO in Kosovo, at first the Israelis relied almost entirely on airpower, reflecting their continuing refusal to countenance even minimal casualties.[114] This tentativeness was also perceived by some as an Israeli refusal to fight 'seriously'.[115] Only after it had become apparent that airpower by itself would be insufficient did the Israelis move to a ground campaign, using special forces at first in seek-and-destroy missions, and then escalating to a larger offensive.[116]

Despite the fact that their homeland was under fire, the Israelis took great care to fight in a restrained manner that minimised civilian casualties. They demanded accurate intelligence before launching strikes, and refused to engage in such damaging activities as large-scale artillery barrages, preferring more surgical attacks.[117] Despite this, as much as 15 per cent of the Lebanese population was internally displaced during the war,[118] as much a result of the constrained size of the theatre as any particularly aggressive Israeli behaviour.

Hizballah, on the other hand, proved far less restrained. It launched random rocket attacks against Israeli towns. Its combatants were more willing to die, its tactics more creative, and its methods more brutal. It often co-located its combatants with civilians,[119] thus presenting Israeli forces with a dilemma. Eventually, Hizballah fought the technologically advanced Israel Defense Forces to a standstill. As in Somalia, supposed primitivism had triumphed; again, however, it had triumphed because of the re-emergent primitivism apparent in the methods of the Israelis. Primitivism had not beaten instrumentalism: a more brutal primitivism had beaten a less brutal type.

The Return of Restraint

Since the end of the Cold War, the West has fought its wars in an increasingly restrained fashion,[120] in defiance of a previous historical trend towards increased totality in war. In many ways, its recent behaviour displays elements strongly reminiscent of primitive warfare. There has been little or no use of massive firepower, nor any attempt to undertake strategies of annihilation.[121] Casualties, both friendly and enemy, have been strongly avoided. Wars have been justified through careful appeals to abstract concepts such as humanitarianism, as well as the concrete manifestations of those concepts, such as international law. Ritualistic elements, especially those related to justification, such as the seeking of a United Nations mandate prior to any operation, have become stronger. Civilians have been

carefully protected, and processes of conciliation, arbitration, and peacemaking have been carried out simultaneous with military operations. At the same time, certain elements of primitive war have not re-emerged, such as its endemic nature, its emphasis on war as identity, and a lack of coordination between combatants.

This trend towards restrained war is not reflected in the military behaviours of non-Western peoples across the globe, which are usually quite brutal.[122] We may thus be seeing an evolving and ahistorical divergence in global military culture. The West may be retreating towards restraint in warfare, whereas non-Western actors may be charging headlong towards unrestrained methods. Again, it must be emphasised that this is not a value judgement. It may well be that restrained methods of war, reminiscent of primitive war, are actually superior, at least from a moral perspective.[123]

Counterfactuals of Total War

Counterfactual history is particularly useful here. It can be used to indicate how some of these recent conflicts might have unfolded, had the West not returned to a ritualised and restrained way of war but rather continued the trend towards totality exemplified by the World Wars. There is no intent to suggest that the counterfactuals described would have been better methods of fighting the wars mentioned.

In Somalia, America might have responded to the 'Blackhawk down' incident with a massive escalation of force. Mogadishu might have been flattened, and the insurgent groups destroyed, regardless of collateral damage. In Kosovo, NATO might have quickly flooded the battlefield with armour from both north and south, accepting the risk of heavy casualties from anti-tank defences in order to achieve a decisive victory.

In Lebanon, Israel might have preceded a massive tank assault with a murderous artillery barrage reminiscent of the Somme, aiming to dig Hizballah out of its holes with high explosive. In Afghanistan, a furious America might have resorted to nuclear weapons; if not, then it might have dispatched a much larger invasion force to secure the border with Pakistan then engage in sweep-and-destroy missions reminiscent of the Boer War, turning the mountains of Afghanistan into a depopulated wasteland. Finally, in Iraq, a much larger multinational force might have advanced more carefully, occupying and securing important cities with large garrisons, pacifying as it went. A large occupation force would then have been maintained, one authorised to kill as many locals as required to ensure security and stability.

There are three broad factors shaping the contemporary Western way of warfare, driving it towards ritual and restraint. The first relates to the existence, or lack thereof, of an existential threat, and related debate over the utility of warfare. The second involves the inter-relationship between contemporary culture, the media, and democracy. The third is the increasing professionalism of Western military personnel.

Existential Threats and the Utility of War

During the Cold War, restraint in war was eminently understandable from a rational, political perspective for one key reason: nuclear weapons. Nuclear weapons, due to their destructive potential, were perceived as having unleashed a 'wholly new and hitherto unbelievable dimension of horror'.[124] They changed the relationship between destructive power and the capacity to recover to such an extent that any damage inflicted by a nuclear war would take much longer to repair than any political actor could choose to wait.[125]

With the end of the Cold War, the threat of nuclear war began to grow less. It might have been hypothesised that in the absence of an existential threat, war would become increasingly unlimited; however, it would also need to be remembered that the aftermath of major wars is often notable for efforts to restrict further conflict. The evidence in this case seems to indicate a complex reaction between the end of the Cold War and the perceived utility of war.

This article began with a quote from John Lynn discussing the interaction between a society's ideal conception of war – its Perfected Reality – and the actuality of war.[126] The stronger a society is, the more it can dominate the 'physical discourse' of war, and the closer will be the relationship between its Perfected Reality and the actuality of war.

With the end of the Cold War, no Western society faces a serious military threat, and as such the West is militarily hegemonic. Terrorism, which justified intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq, appears incredibly deadly when compared to the relative peace into which it has re-emerged, but pales into insignificance when compared to the destructive potential inherent in the Cold War, the World Wars, or the threat of the Ottomans. The nature of military operations carried out by the West since the end of the Cold War is strong evidence for this hegemony, for they are all wars of choice.

In the absence of a serious military threat, questions about the utility of a war – its cost:benefit ratio, both in terms of money and of lives – become absolutely central.[127] Modern warfare, due largely to hyperinflation in equipment costs, has become so expensive that it seldom makes economic

sense.[128] And because there are few serious threats to state security, the motivation of self-preservation is also reduced. As such, war is perceived as less useful a tool of policy than it once was, and fewer resources are allocated to it.

Decision-makers have thus tried to make 'war on the cheap'.[129] They have been seduced by the promises of technology, which has often been promoted as the key to rapid, low-cost success.[130] This has then led into a belief that technology, if sufficiently advanced, is a substitute for quantity, leading to calls for small, advanced forces that can supposedly carry out the missions that previously required much larger forces; this belief was behind the major mistake made in Iraq. In some cases, a skewed attitude has developed – as in Kosovo – that a war is a victory merely because the costs of the war are low, even if the benefits are infinitesimal.[131]

However, a lack of utility is not a sufficient condition for restrained war. After all, one could fight brutally with limited means; there is little cheaper than a single nuclear strike. The key is the interaction between the declining utility of war and cultural beliefs.

Culture, Media, and Democracy

Giving shape to the West's Perfected Reality of war – which, as noted, is possible because of the hegemonic power of the West – is a combination of cultural attitudes on morality, especially humanitarianism; the influence of the media; and the power of democracy.

Western nations have recently attempted to remake war in a more 'culturally correct' form. Freed of the need to ensure its own survival, the West has decided to fight in a self-righteous manner; this has had a strong effect on both its justifications for, and conduct in, war. There have been strong drives to re-humanise warfare, to make it more consistent with perceived widespread moral beliefs including the sanctity of life and respect for international law.[132] This is particularly the case with the Global War on Terror. Because this war has been presented to the public in a way that makes it seem as much about Western values as about military success, it has constrained the methods regarded as acceptable.[133]

The nature of democracies forces leaders to be cognisant of public attitudes towards warfare, which in turn affects the means utilised.[134] Such attitudes are given further impetus by the media, which given its own perceived liberal bias, demands strongly humanitarian behaviour by military personnel.[135] The end result of these attitudes is a democracy-induced 'restrained fighting calculus', a way of war that attempts to balance cultural

demands, military efficacy, and political requirements, and which seldom results in a particularly effective operation.[136]

Contemporary humanitarian attitudes are complex, but can be simplified to two main issues: what happens to our soldiers, and what is done to the forces of the enemy and his civilians. Western societies today impose high standards on how their forces treat their enemies, in stark contrast to historical Western traditions.[137] Three of the most militarily active states, America, the United Kingdom, and Israel, all take great pains to avoid inflicting civilian casualties.[138] They also make it clear that they do not perceive it to be moral to punish a civilian population for the actions of its leaders.[139]

An entirely natural belief that friendly deaths should be avoided has been given additional strength by the perceived lack of utility in contemporary warfare. Because of this, risk aversion has become central to contemporary Western ways of war.[140] Western governments seem relatively willing to send soldiers to war, but extremely unwilling to have those soldiers die.[141]

This latent pacifism is intensified by the technology that, as noted earlier, has deluded leaders into thinking war can be cheap;[142] it has also deluded them into thinking that war can be immaculate, surgical, and kill almost nobody.[143] A single-laser guided bomb hitting a civilian warehouse is seen as a major catastrophe, showing the media's ignorance in understanding the enormous lethal potentialities present in the arsenals of every Western military if they chose to fight in a brutal fashion.

A further cultural element is oscillation in support for the military.[144] In the West, attitudes towards the military have changed dramatically since Vietnam, especially in America.[145] The military heroes of today are not those who storm machine-gun nests and slaughter entire platoons of Taliban, but rather those who save others under fire.[146]

Public attitudes towards the military have also been shaped by the increasing isolation of the military from broader society. Populaces do not understand the Clausewitzian friction of war, and because of that they demand that it be carried out in a way that is unrealistic.

Professionalism

The final factor contributing to resurgent primitivism in warfare is the increasing professionalism of Western military personnel. The above influences are important, but they are not deterministic 'forces of nature'. It does not matter how a President, Prime Minister, or General decides to fight, if the chain of command is not sturdy enough to ensure that those commands are turned into action at the individual level.[147]

Contemporary rules of engagement, for example, require even the lowliest private soldier to have some understanding of the laws of armed conflict, something that was surely not expected among the slave-soldier hordes of Xerxes. Historically, increasing professionalism has contributed to restraint in war, as disciplined soldiers are less likely to commit acts of brutality.[148] In recent years, professionalism has continued to improve,[149] partly as an outcome of the development of military technology, but also partly because of increasing complexity in the tactics and strategy of war.[150]

The Implications of Ritual and Restraint

This article has indicated clearly that the West, turning aside from the progression of history, has returned, at least temporarily, to a ritualised and restrained method of warfare, albeit for very different reasons than those which motivated primitive tribes to behave in such a manner. What does this mean for the West?

A positive implication is the possibility that Western military behaviour will affect the behaviour of other military cultures. This will likely have positive effects for humanity as a whole, strengthening respect for life and reducing the number of people who die from conflict. However, there are other more problematic implications as well. One is that that the West will lose an accurate understanding of the nature of war. The longer it continues to fight in a constrained manner, the more normalised that methodology will become. The decision-making spectrum available to leaders for future military endeavours will be restricted to those low-danger, low-intensity options favoured today.

A sub-element of this loss of understanding will be flawed perceptions about risk in military operations. Today, there is a trend amongst the media to exaggerate the level of danger present in contemporary wars. Continuation of this trend will further contribute to pacifist sentiment among the populace.

Another implication is the prospect of the West losing the moral high ground through attempting to keep the moral high ground; a self-defeating or paradoxical approach. Treating one's enemy with some respect is wise, for it prevents overconfidence. However, if the West continues to demand that its forces treat its enemies with extraordinary respect, the end result may well be an increase in the public cachet of the enemy. Expectations determine perceptions.

The final implications relate to military effectiveness. First there is the question of whether or not ritualised and restrained methods of conflict are actually counterproductive on the battlefield, especially when fighting a foe

whose methods are unrestrained. The second is to question whether or not restrained methods have the unintended effect of extending the duration of wars, which in turn increases the overall harm inflicted by the conflict. If this is so, then by trying to limit the brutality of war, the West may make it worse.

It pays to consider the Aztecs. When a rival appeared – a rival named Cortes, who fought in an amoral, instrumental, rational, unrestrained, and non-ritualised manner – the Aztecs were defeated. Is there a Cortes awaiting the West today?

NOTES

All opinions expressed in the article are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the New Zealand Defence Force.

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