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The Inhumanity of War

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The American military has been constantly engaged since the end of the Cold War. Washington has initiated conflict against Serbia, Iraq (twice), and Afghanistan. U.S. forces have occupied Haiti, Somalia, and the Balkans. There has been much talk of attacking Iran and North Korea. The Bush administration apparently even considered striking Russian forces during Moscow's battle against the country of Georgia.

Most of these wars, interventions, and potential actions were justified as being in America's security interest. When that argument was implausible to start (Kosovo) or collapsed on the ground (Iraq) U.S. policymakers quickly played the humanitarian card. The U.S. military was killing and destroying to promote moral ends.

Unfortunately, war is rarely humane. It certainly has not been humanitarian in either Iraq or Afghanistan.

In fact, we should be ashamed of the horror that the U.S. government has loosed in our name. In Iraq, for instance, estimates of Iraqi deaths since 2003 start at 100,000 and race upward. The number of maimed or injured almost certainly is far greater. Murders, kidnappings, beatings, and theft reached epidemic proportions.

Millions of Iraqis have fled their homes and many their country. The indigenous Christian community has been devastated. The disruption of lives and families has been pervasive. It behooves American hawks to think carefully before extolling their beatific works from the safety of their offices in Washington.

Afghan casualties are fewer, but rising. Estimates of civilians killed start in the low thousands and approach 10,000. Many more have been wounded and social dislocations are widespread. Coalition commanders and Afghan officials routinely call for greater care in military

None of this is surprising. By its nature war is horrible. Even the best efforts to limit harm to civilians--and the U.S. military does a much better job than the armed forces of other nations in past wars--cannot prevent the innocent from suffering.

And one cannot blame American military personnel. If their government is going to send them into combat, then they must be allowed to protect themselves, even when that means noncombatants will be caught in the crossfire.

But the cost of war, especially for those on whose behalf we supposedly are fighting, requires asking whether the conflict can be justified. Consider Afghanistan, where the president's escalation inevitably will result in more civilian deaths.

Gen. Stanley McChrystal, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, recently made an astonishing admission of civilian deaths, so often euphemistically referred to as "collateral damage." At a meeting with U.S. personnel in Afghanistan, Gen. McChrystal discussed the problem of shootings at checkpoints: "We've shot an amazing number of people and killed a number and, to my knowledge, none has proven to have been a real threat to the force." He added that he knew of no case when "we have engaged in an escalation of force incident and hurt someone has it turned out that the vehicle had a suicide bomb or weapons in it."

Just what are we doing in Afghanistan?

Yes, the Taliban are bad news, as was Saddam Hussein. Taliban guerrillas, like Iraqi insurgents, also kill innocents; terrorists have killed indiscriminately in both nations. But it was the U.S. invasions which triggered or spread the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, respectively; it is the continuing American presence which results in shooting "an amazing number of people" in Afghanistan. And that doesn't count the "collateral damage" from bombing missions, drone strikes, and other military actions.

War is sometimes necessary despite its costs. Ousting the Taliban was imperative after the Kabul government provided hospitality to Osama bin-Laden and al-Qaeda as the group

But that is where America's vital interests end. Attempting to build a strong central state allied with the West is a quixotic venture and would offer little value even if achieved. There is no more benefit for the U.S. to wage war, killing partisans and innocents alike, in order to deliver control of Afghanistan to Hamid Karzai and his warlord allies rather than to the

A resurgent Taliban is unlikely to again host a terrorist organization whose activities could bring down the wrath of the American military. Moreover, anti-American terrorists can operate from anywhere--not just failed states like Somalia or weak nations like Pakistan and Yemen, but also countries throughout Western Europe.

These days Afghanistan has little to do with U.S. security in any form. If anything, the conflict exacerbates the problem of terrorism by reinforcing the terrorist meme of Washington warring against devout Muslims.

Finally, the war cannot be justified as a form of humanitarian intervention. The conflict is horrid. It will be horrid without the U.S., as fighting likely would continue. But it would be less horrid for America if U.S. personnel no longer were being killed or shooting "an amazing number of people," none of whom had "proven to have been a real threat."

The Obama administration should be withdrawing U.S. troops, not expanding America's force presence in Afghanistan. When considering war officials should bear in mind the Hippocratic Oath: first do no harm. We are failing to meet that obligation in Afghanistan