

Proportionality in War

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Among most analysts concerned with the morality of warfare, the rule of proportionality—that the seriousness of the damages inflicted must not exceed the seriousness of the injury to be prevented by the war—holds a central place. That rule was prominent in several recent contributions to this magazine, including ones by me and by Paul Ramsey (see the issues of April and November, 1972). In any application of the rule one must take into account damages and benefits to all participants and observers: "our" side, "their" side, those caught in between and the presumed beneficiaries elsewhere.

Similarly, there is a simple rule of prudence requiring—at least for repeated resorts to war—that the damages incurred by one's own side not exceed the benefits reaped. Applying a cost/benefit analysis to one's own side is, of course, hardly a sufficient condition for the broader rule of proportionality, nor is it always inviolate. Certainly there are times when self-sacrifice for a wider interest is morally defensible or even required. But prudence is a precondition for the continued exercise of moral options. One cannot carry on self-sacrifice indefinitely. One must choose the occasions of self-sacrifice in light of some broader calculation of its effects. And the narrower exercise, applied to those objects we presumably know best, may be good practice for the larger exercise.

Obviously no one can perform a precise cost/benefit analysis on any phenomenon remotely as complex as modern warfare. At the same time, neither can one cop out of the effort merely by pleading its difficulty. Two problems need to be faced squarely in any such analysis. The first is that of measurement. It is important to measure, in dollars, casualties or

whatever, as precisely as possible—but not to demand precision wherever precision is not in fact attainable. Thus the second, and related, problem is the need for a comprehensive perspective, a willingness to cast the equation in the broadest possible terms, making the best effort one can to estimate those costs whose precise measurement is impossible. Political and moral costs do not yield to calipers, nor can they simplimindedly be added to one another or onto economic costs. But one's perception of relevance must be sufficiently wide-angled to encompass them. Too often a judgment that a particular war was "worth it" is arrived at by ignoring the less visible costs. Because Justice is blindfolded, ought we to be blind to the consequences of our action?

Although the consensus is still not complete, it is by now an unusual and rather brave person who will argue that the Indochina war has proved to be either just or prudent, according to the above rules. To make the prudential judgment we must consider the obvious costs in blood (55,000 young Americans dead and over 200,000 wounded, many maimed for life) and treasure (\$200 billion, to the neglect of desperate domestic priorities) plus the war's rending of America's domestic political and social fabric, its probable erosion of Americans' moral sensitivities (My Lai, etc.) and its damage to the nation's global prestige and influence. Whatever the war's benefits to us may have been, it is hard to imagine them as worth the damages to us. Failing the test of prudence, one might still hope to procure a judgment of justice by including the benefits of the war to the peoples of Indochina. But with four countries devastated by bombing and defoliation, cultures shattered, hundreds of thousands of Asians dead and millions of women and children wounded or homeless, that too is a hard case to make. Much of this, of course, was inflicted by the "other" side, but that hardly serves as compensation to the victims.

Most instances are more ambiguous. Writing be-

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force World War I, Sir Norman Angell argued (in *The Great Illusion*) that modern warfare could no longer benefit either the winners or the losers. Additions of territory would bring little increment to the per capita wealth of those making the acquisitions, relative to the expense of the war and the wartime disruption of the international economy, and the experience of fighting would feed, not diminish, jingoistic tensions that would lead on to further wars. Although greeted skeptically at first, by the time of his next major book (*The Fruits of Victory*, a bitter retrospective on the 1914-18 war), his thesis acquired many believers. The conviction that the war had failed to bring sufficient benefits to justify it either on grounds of morality or prudence carried great force both in Britain and in the United States.

That belief surely delayed the onset of World War II, allowing Hitler a string of diplomatic triumphs in the late 1930's. As a result, the second great war, when it did come, was far longer and bloodier than it would have been had Hitler's opponents acted with prompter decisiveness. Learning the "lessons of Munich," post-World War II advocates of decisiveness and "preventive" military action controlled the Western governments. Excessive scruples about the advisability or morality of war were in very bad repute.

It seems to me that the injustice of the American war in Indochina, considering what it was inflicting on its victims as well as on the belligerents, should have been apparent even before the prudential argument acquired full force. By contrast, World War II, at least in its European phase, is about the best example one can hope to find of a just war. It is difficult to maintain that the destruction of Hitler's tyranny did not compensate the peoples of Europe for their terrible wartime sufferings. While even the Allies hardly observed all the precepts in principle required for a "just war" (e.g., in consistently humane treatment of prisoners and avoiding deliberate attacks on noncombatants), the balance is a good one. Yet it remains a bit self-serving to overstress the justice of that war. If in retrospect it was so, many of the reasons for that judgment were not apparent in 1939-41. Was what the Nazi government was known to be doing to its minorities, as late as 1941, really of an order of magnitude worse than what the South African government is now doing to its? (We hear relatively few voices now demanding that the United States go to war with South Africa to free the blacks, though it would be a manageable military endeavor.) Despite vicious persecution, a few disquieting rumors of worse and the ravings of *Mein Kampf*, Nazi genocidal acts were not generally known in 1941. In America the primary arguments for war were made in strategic terms rather than in terms of moral principles evoked by the Nazi horrors that subsequently emerged. In a post hoc sense we can congratulate Americans on

the justice of their intervention, but the retrospective attribution of an understanding they did not possess contributed to their delusions of omniscience in the postwar world.

It is one thing to be glad about the outcome, another to claim keen foresight about that outcome. Furthermore, as I recently argued in an heretical book (*No Clear and Present Danger*), the prudence of American actions (although not those of Hitler's European opponents) remains open to some question. While the costs were amorphous and not very visible, and though no one really likes to drag them out in view of the great end served by the war, it is not entirely clear that the United States emerged in better economic, political and moral condition than might have been permitted by a policy of all-out aid, short of war, to the Allies.

That argument is too complex to be presented here, and in any event represents the limiting case of skepticism; one would have to search very hard for a war that more nearly met the criteria of justice and prudence. Nevertheless, the differences between it and other wars of this century are substantial. Let us take another example, the Korean War of 1950-53, appreciably less remote from either spectral extreme than is World War II or Indochina. Writing only three years ago I myself described the American use of force there as "appropriate and restrained." For most Americans it remains on their list of "good" wars.

The catalog of benefits, to ourselves and to others, is well known. While the United States did not "win" the Korean War, in achieving a military stalemate it obtained its major and laudable goal: preventing a Communist takeover of the territory and people of South Korea. In meeting aggression from the North this country served warning on Communist powers everywhere that the United States would defend its allies. Whatever one thinks about the image of monolithic aggressive communism, then or now, conveying this message surely served some generally desirable ends. A more mixed blessing, which will yet be defended by many, is that the war served as a catalyst for preparedness, rearment and effective resistance to the Communists elsewhere. Until the war arrived, many government leaders had felt the need for vast new arms spending but feared the public was too complacent to support the effort. The conflict and rearment also brought full employment. More speculatively, a failure to respond to the North Korean attack might have produced further extreme right-wing charges of softness on communism and an even more virulent McCarthyism than did occur. Finally, it is quite possible that the experience of stalemate in that land war in Asia saved the United States from intervening in Indochina in 1954.

Against these benefits, of varying importance and

certainty, must be accounted some real costs. Although saved from Communist dictatorship, South Korea has not exactly obtained democracy in its place; military dictatorship is instead the rule. Over 400,000 South Koreans died, as did more than 1.4 million North Koreans and Chinese. More than 50,000 Americans were killed, with almost three times that many wounded.

The economic costs to the United States are harder to measure, but a figure exceeding \$50 billion was spent on the war. Since all the resources of the economy were not fully employed in 1950, some of that \$50 billion was produced from slack and came essentially free. Most of it was not, however, and served as an alternative to public and private consumption and investment. In an earlier book (*What Price Vigilance? The Burdens of National Defense*) I introduced a method for estimating the proportion of military spending over the cold war years that has come at the expense of investment rather than of immediate consumption. The estimates are necessarily rough, but it cannot be too far from the mark to figure that 29 per cent came at the expense of fixed capital formation and another 13 per cent from public "social investment" in the form of governmental expenditures for health and education. Applying a little arithmetic to the \$50 billion figure previously given, we come up with foregone expenditures—opportunity costs—amounting to about 35 per cent of what was in fact spent on capital formation and over 15 per cent of actual government spending on health and education during the period. That is, the available "best guess" is that expenditures for those categories would have been that much higher in the absence of the war. While one may quibble about the assumptions and hence the accuracy of such an exercise, there simply is no doubt that Americans paid in two material ways for the war. They paid in foregone consumption at the time, and insofar as private and social investment was not made, all subsequent Americans, including ourselves, pay in the form of a poorer, less healthy and more ignorant population than we might otherwise have.

Finally, we cannot be oblivious to the political costs of the war. To counter the idea that defending Korea may have defused the worst of potential McCarthyism, it seems to me equally plausible that fighting the war actually fanned anti-Communist hysteria and made McCarthyism more severe. It is not at all clear whether the tiger was partly appeased or whether his appetite

was tickled. Internationally, the rearmament so welcomed by cold warriors became the arms race now lamented by many. As a proportion of national income, American defense expenditures seem to have a permanent floor fully 50 per cent above the 1950 level. And perhaps most important, the Korean War ended any hope, still quite reasonable in 1950, of an early accommodation with the then new Communist government of China. A potentially fairly fluid situation froze into the hostility we are only now beginning to thaw.

Everyone will have his own set of valuations to put on each of the benefits and costs enumerated above; doubtless others should be added. The point is not to draw up a definitive balance sheet but to indicate the scope of the effort and the difficulty of arriving at a conclusive statement either way. While many observers consider the Korean War a "good" war, just and prudent, it is not an open and shut case.

For every winner of a war there must be a loser. A loser is just that: one for whom the war did not bring net gains. Despite the jokes we sometimes make about how well those we defeated—Germany and Japan—recovered from World War II, it is doubtful that their people believe themselves better off for having fought. This alone—the 50 per cent chance of being the loser—must give pause to any people or government contemplating war as an instrument of national policy. To this caution must be added some hard thinking about the prospective consequences even of "winning." How likely is it that the winner will in fact be better off (a question of prudence), and how likely that the world as a whole will be better off (a question of justice)? A war of actual self-defense is easiest to justify, but rather few wars, especially of a superpower, are truly wars of direct self-defense: Where survival, or maintaining decent living standards or the retention of basic political and social institutions really are not at stake, it becomes hard to defend the resort to war on the basis of the odds and ambiguities observable even in the more successful episodes of our century.

Finding appropriate criteria by which to decide whether a war is just is an extraordinarily complex matter. No one would want to confine it to a mere exercise in double-entry bookkeeping, ignoring means while concentrating on consequences. Yet no citizen or leader can be oblivious to war's effects. Americans should not forget the "lessons of Munich." But neither should they forget the lessons to be learned from the vast majority of modern wars. Neither justice nor prudence permit apathy or carelessness.