Five Obstacles Facing Military Ethics

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Following World War II, when I was a 21-year-old military intelligence lieutenant in the U.S. Army Reserve, a critical friend asked me “Isn’t ‘military intelligence’ an oxymoron?” A similar question, posed far more seriously, must be asked about the term military ethics.

I applaud Lieutenant Colonel Roblyer’s desire to enter into dialogue with social psychologists in a journal on peace psychology. I am glad he is concerned with international law and avoiding civilian casualties from bombing runs over military targets. And I agree that—under appropriate circumstances—innocent lives might be saved from following his three concluding recommendations.

Unfortunately, I think that Roblyer’s aim to make air warfare ethical in its choice of targets and less injurious to civilians is virtually impossible to achieve. The “appropriate circumstances” that make ethical choices possible are unlikely to occur predictably. Yes, one will kill fewer civilians if one bombs a weapons factory or artillery pieces in a school yard at nighttime than during the day, but such tactical decisions are so heavily outweighed by a multiplicity of contextual influences that they become minor considerations in the overall picture. Despite the injunctions of the Geneva Convention, bomber pilots and air force commanders operate in an environment that powerfully limits their ability to act morally.

I will briefly discuss five contextual factors that minimize the ability of local commanders to make moral decisions during an air war: (a) the historical context of war; (b) the organizational context in which military decisions are made and later defended; (c) the weaponry and delivery context; (d) the current situation of combat, where local militias are often indistinguishable from and intermixed with noncombatants; and (e) the psychological context of war, in which enemies are pictured as evil or inhuman. Given these contexts that strongly affect how air war is waged, I believe that, no matter how personally sincere, no midlevel colonel or
even top general is likely to make changes in bombing decisions that will significantly reduce the harm to civilian lives. I will add a sixth obstacle in an afterthought following my conclusion.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Throughout history, wars have produced collateral casualties among noncombatants. Notable among countless examples are the burning of Troy by Greek warriors, the massacres of city populations by Genghis Khan’s fighters, and the destruction of Constantinople by the Crusaders. Even those civilians who escaped death, physical injury, or homelessness often had their food stores plundered and their valuables stolen. Turning to air war in the 20th century, witness the untold thousands of civilian casualties from the bombings of London or Coventry in England, of Hamburg, Dresden, Leningrad, and many other cities in Germany and Russia, of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan, or of Hanoi in Vietnam. According to Roblyer’s ethical interpretation of international law, those bombings were war crimes, but to my knowledge none of those responsible were ever prosecuted—certainly not among the victors. Instead, they were defended as having acted bravely and out of “military necessity.” Given that history, it is difficult to believe that military leaders put a high priority on minimizing civilian casualties.

Roblyer himself admits—while drawing on the “well established [body of] Just War literature” (this issue, p. 21)—that military doctrine argues that “harm to innocent civilians” is justifiable when the “good effects” for our side are greater than the “bad effects” for the enemy. Who, however, can objectively weigh this balance between these “good” and “bad” effects? In the cases of Hamburg and Dresden, for example, some military ethicists would contend that those bombings expedited the end of the war in Europe, but even those contentions have been called into question (e.g., U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, 1946).

THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

Air force officers are members of an immensely powerful and secretive organization whose primary goal is to win battles and destroy enemy targets. Its decisions and their outcomes are generally protected from outside scrutiny. The U.S. Air Force, like other military forces, is a hierarchical organization where superiors expect strict obedience from their subordinates. In such organizations, information generally flows up and commands flow down. The upward flow of information is generally filtered to please superiors. Meanwhile, the reasons for command decisions are rarely explained or justified, and subordinates down the chain are rarely, if ever, encouraged to question them.
Such hierarchical organizations are efficient for making decisions quickly and carrying out orders strictly but are inefficient for considering decisions deeply or broadly—let alone ethically. Where superiors reward conformity from those beneath them, this is what they usually receive. A hierarchical system blocks the transmission of unwelcome information and often punishes attempts to provide needed criticism. It seeks favorable publicity at the cost of frank critique. It far prefers cover-up to needed feedback or whistle blowing. There are countless examples of this tendency across the spectrum of organizations (e.g., Morgan, 1997). Considering the American military, recent examples include its steadfast refusal to accept the jurisdiction of international courts and Pentagon officials’ unwillingness to acknowledge criticisms of prisoner abuse from the International Red Cross. In the Defense Department, accountability for decisions is generally shielded from outside observers. Even when humanitarian values are affirmed, the affirmation may be attributed to “an anonymous senior defense official” (see Ricks, 2002, p. 112, as cited by Roblyer, this issue).

Accordingly, even if investigations should show that a given bombing has violated agreed-upon ethical standards, the top decision makers are almost certain to be absolved of direct responsibility. Blame is more likely to be directed at people near the bottom of the command chain. For instance, we do not know who, if anyone, was disciplined for the 1999 bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade or for the 2003 bombing of the Baghdad hotel housing foreign journalists, some of whom were believed hostile to U.S. propaganda. When such incidents are defended as having been “accidents,” neutral observers are likely to be skeptical, especially when no identifiable individuals are held accountable.

**THE WEAPONRY OR DELIVERY CONTEXT**

Today’s air war employs a wide variety of weapons, often dropped or fired from widely different distances from their targets. Weapons differ in (a) the distance from which they are delivered, (b) their power and the radius of their damage, and (c) the durability of their longer term effects. Many of these characteristics are beyond the control of the “reasonable commander” (Roblyer, this issue, p. 23) but they do affect their likelihood of injuring or killing noncombatants.

**Distance of Weapon Delivery**

It would seem that the greater the distance between the origin and the target of a bomb or missile, the less is its accuracy or precision. During the bombing campaign against Serbia, U.S. policy was to confine bombing to high altitudes so as to prevent losses of American lives. That goal was achieved successfully, but I have not seen
data concerning its effects on Serbian or Kosovar lives. In any case, because the policy came from the White House and the Pentagon, “reasonable” local commanders had little control over the resultant collateral casualties.

Power of the Weaponry

The more powerful a weapon, the greater its probable radius of impact. If top Pentagon officials, whether military or civilian, decide that high-tonnage bombs be used, no “reasonable commanders” down the line can easily change that command. This too limits their capability of protecting civilian lives. (I hesitate to mention the potential use of nuclear weapons, whose worst-case use would be determined from above.)

Durability of the Effects

Today’s arsenal of U.S. weapons includes antipersonnel cluster bombs, warheads hardened with depleted uranium for greater penetrability, as well as nuclear missiles. All of these—as well as unexploded bombs or mines—have long-term effects on a civilian population. Although whether and how cluster bombs or depleted uranium are used may be left to the discretion of local commanders, their availability and their overall utilization policy come from the Defense Department.

Regardless of the military’s presumed intent, civilians living near target areas are highly likely to be affected by the presence of unexploded bombs or land mines, as well as by the chemical effects from depleted uranium—or, in Vietnam, of Agent Orange. For example, children in Afghanistan and other target countries have been injured from picking up the little booby-trapped bomblets that dropped out of a cluster container. Farmers and homeowners have been injured by larger unexploded ordinance. And, in Iraq, people fear that the long-lasting radiation effects from depleted uranium and its seepage into the water supply will impair the health of Iraqis for generations. (We should not forget that, in Vietnam, the Agent Orange defoliant used more than 30 years ago has already done genetic damage to substantial numbers of Vietnamese—at least to one generation of Vietnamese new borns.)

Beyond that, how can even the most “precise” cruise missile or intercontinental projectile be so accurate as to spare the lives of people who live near a target area? For instance, a cruise missile’s range spans up to 500 miles; it takes a substantial time (often 1 or more hr) between a targeting decision based on satellite photographs and the missile’s hit on or near its assigned target; during that time, people not shown on the original satellite photograph may either enter or leave the target area. How, then, can claims of a missile’s pin-point “precision” be verified?
THE NONDISTINCTIVENESS CONTEXT

In earlier times, warfare was usually conducted between opposing armies whose troops wore differing military uniforms and were relatively easy to distinguish from noncombatants. Today’s warfare often entails battles with local militias or warlord armies that blend into the population and are hard to distinguish from noncombatants. Moreover, such militias operate in urban areas and use homes, mosques, or churches as firing positions. Under those circumstances, any attack with air-delivered munitions is almost certain to strike a residential area occupied by civilians. As a result, collateral casualties are inescapable, no matter how hard pilots try to avoid them.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTEXT

A considerable literature finds that, after hostilities are initiated, opponents are disparaged, dehumanized, or even demonized. The image of the enemy as cruel or treacherous is not limited to their combatants, but to all of “them.” National leaders claim that “We are good and they are evil.” Leaders of the opposite side are equally bellicose. If members of both sides’ armed forces are taught to consider the enemy as less than human, how can they worry much over enemy civilian casualties?

In 1968, a young visitor to our home told us “I don’t want to brag, but I was on one of the first bombing missions over North Vietnam.” My wife answered “I can’t help but think about all those people on the ground.” The former pilot responded matter-of-factly: “Oh, we didn’t see the people. We just got reconnaissance photos the next day that showed what buildings were hit.” This, too, illustrates how easy it is for us to be indifferent to the lives of innocent civilians, even when we do not actually demonize them.

IN CONCLUSION

Altogether, I fear that Colonel Roblyer’s well-intentioned proposals will have little influence on the overall conduct of American air warfare. I agree that air force commanders do often have some room for limiting civilian casualties, and I think he has made a worthwhile attempt to raise moral awareness.

Nonetheless, I believe that the wider contexts of military decision making and its justification far outweigh the ability of individual “reasonable commanders” to adhere to moral standards arrived at through international agreements or even the Air Force’s own protocols. Given the conditions I have outlined, it does appear that military ethics is largely an oxymoron.
AFTERTHOUGHT

After I wrote this commentary, one of my social psychology colleagues asked me “Isn’t there anything that social psychology tells us that might help to make military decisions more moral?” I do believe that social psychology tells us a lot about how “in-group” members tend to devalue out-group members—or people from other societies or cultures—and how devaluation leads to indifference and the justification of cruelty. The training materials proposed by Colonel Roblyer should certainly be infused with relevant social psychological knowledge and principles.

At the same time, I am afraid that acknowledging those principles will run counter to the beliefs espoused within a *sixth* context, that is, the socio-political context of the Defense Department and within our mainstream media and political elite. In that context, the life of a single American is often considered more important and more newsworthy than those of scores or even hundreds of foreigners. For instance, during the current occupation of Iraq we hear a continuous count of the U.S. dead, but we rarely hear any statistics on the ongoing accumulation of Iraqi deaths. Our prevailing nationalism and the Pentagon’s unwillingness to release regular casualty statistics obstruct efforts to give objective scrutiny to our actions in a war zone. Under these conditions, I do not see how social psychological principles or recommendations would be taken seriously by those in power. I think this pessimistic conclusion would require a drastic change in U.S. political leadership to reverse it.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

George Levinger is Professor of Psychology Emeritus at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He served in the U.S. Army in 1945 to 1947, ending as a Special Agent in the Counterintelligence Corps in Tokyo, Japan. From 1948 to 1953, he was a lieutenant in the Military Intelligence in the U.S. Army Reserve.

REFERENCES