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From Saigon to Baghdad: Teaching ‘Ambiguous’ Warfare

Facing A Violent World

By Timothy J. Lomperis

I have been asked to write an article on how to prepare our students for the perplexing challenges to our security arising from places like Iraq, Palestine, Iran, Afghanistan, Somalia, Darfur, and North Korea. In an earlier era, the era of what Tom Brokaw called the “Good War,” the study of war was clear: there were titanic forces of evil, the Nazis in World War II and the Communists in the Cold War, which possessed horrific destructive powers, that had to be countered by a resolute power for good; namely, of course, us! Grounding the courses on these “good wars” was the theology of Reinhold Niebuhr that proclaimed these struggles to be between the “children of light against the children of darkness.”

Along came Vietnam (1960-1975) and spoiled everything. In the 1980s, I began my academic career by teaching a seminar on Low Intensity Conflict and the Lessons of Vietnam. Today, in the new millennium, I teach a seminar on Asymmetric Warfare in Two Eras. Essentially, it is the same course, but the list of cases has been expanded into a Cold War set and a War on Terror set. What is the same is that, unlike the certitudes that one can rely on in larger, more impressive wars; these “small wars” quickly become mired in analytical ambiguities. The goal of this course is to develop generalizations from the Cold War set of interventions, mainly Vietnam, and see which of these generalizations can be applied to the current set of interventions, Iraq and Afghanistan at the moment. If any of them fit, it becomes a lesson. What students quickly find is that not only are these generalizations difficult to come by, but the few that hold up often slip away as lessons for today. Land reform, for example, was an important generalization for counterinsurgency during the Cold War, but it falls off the table for Iraq because the insurgency there is urban. Analytically, it is “a long hard slog.”

As opposed to their Baby Boom elders, new millennial students are confused. They are confused because they have been jerked around by an older generation that has been clawing at each other’s throats since Vietnam. And they have been especially whipsawed by the events of this millennium’s first decade. For most of today’s entering freshman, the first international event to sear their memories was the collapsing Trade Towers of 9/11. Everyone then

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recalled Pearl Harbor, and it seemed as if America was back in World War II. But 9/11 soon “descended” into Afghanistan, and then to the invasion of Iraq, and now back to Afghanistan and even Pakistan, and, within it, to Waziristan. All of these descents have been christened by pundits, professors, and politicians as “another Vietnam.” And so we are back to being haunted by this devilish ghost—and to my course.

Whether today’s students know much about World War II or not, they do recognize it as a compass setting for responding to tyrannies and holocausts. It was a good war, insofar as wars can be good, and met the Just War criteria. Vietnam, and most of the other interventions in the Cold War, as well as those of the current period, do not. Regarding *jus ad bellum*, at a minimum interventions by Great Powers in internal conflicts in smaller countries are seldom wars of “last resort.” For Christians anyway, “wars of choice” like this are morally dubious. This does not mean that these wars are automatically bad—and, therefore, worthy of protest—just because they are dubious. But we do enter into gates of ambiguity where the black and white of good wars blur into mists of gray. Unfortunately, these mists are the medium in which most of politics lie—as does the study of it. In fact, Robert Jervis, of Columbia University, has bluntly called international politics “ugly” because of these moral ambiguities.

Behind these mists, then, lies not Avalon, but wars that are fought in at least three arenas, each with their own set of issues that do not mesh well with the other arenas, which is one of the many reasons why they are called *asymmetric* and contain hosts of analytical and moral contradictions. At the international level or arena, there is a world of relatively sovereign nation states promoting their prosperity and guarding their security in an “anarchic system of self-help” (meaning no world government). Academically, two schools of thought approach this world. Realists accept this world. Idealists hope for something better. Realists are content to deal with the world as they find it, and counsel a moral approach of prudence in terms of favoring actions that are feasible, even if not always morally preferable. Idealists, on the other hand, seek a better world and want to do the “right thing,” whether or not there is an institutional framework in place to practically enable this “right thing.” Idealists, then, would prefer to work through the U.N., rather than this system of states, even though the U.N. lacks resources and is decisionally disabled by the veto power of the five “permanent members.”

Unlike the U.N., states, whatever you may think of them, are made for war. They have citizens for armies, industries for material resources, and governments for foreign policies.

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that integrate warfare into the toolbox of sovereignty. With this societal participation, and supportive military infrastructure, states do inculcate standards of morality into their legitimizing of this “collective violence.” During the Cold War, the two nuclear superpowers invested billions of dollars into destructive arsenals that were not usable. Doctrines, really ideologies, of deterrence rendered nuclear wars unthinkable, even as they rationalized economic investments in gargantuan “military-industrial complexes.” If states wanted to “continue politics by other means,” what the strategist Karl Von Clausewitz called war, limited wars were the only shows in town. As even limited wars between nuclear adversaries became off-limits, great power interventions in smaller countries, asymmetric warfare, were the only ones left.

Despite these limits, these wars have been plentiful, both during the Cold War and now. When we get into these wars on the ground, the second arena, matters truly become asymmetric: militarily, politically, and morally. The rules between the two sides become different. In these interventions, the intervening power comes with a conventional military force tied to state institutions and ready to fight other state supported military forces, but the adversary or adversaries of the intervener is usually a “sub-state actor,” a term, of course, that hides movements of manifold hues. Lacking all the panoply of power available to states, these “terrorist” organizations have to resort to the “weapons of the weak,” which usually involve “irregular forces” striking non-military targets and attacking innocent civilians in spectacular and bloody ways. None of these actions can be squared with the jus in bello criteria of a discriminate selection of targets and a proportionate use of means, nor with the rules for the conduct of war specified by the Geneva Conventions. The Geneva Conventions, however, were established to regulate the conflict of wars between states, not conflicts involving non-state actors. Consequently, on the ground, in addition to the military conflict among unequals, we have a clash of principles, and, of course, politics.

To counterinsurgency strategists, like General David Petraeus who is the current overall commander of the U.S. war efforts in both Iraq and Afghanistan, politics is the heart of these struggles—both in terms of how these wars must be fought and what the objectives are. The 2007 surge in Iraq was not just about a U.S. troop surge into Baghdad, but also involved a patch quilt of political deals with former insurgent groups who became integrated into the U.S. force structure as “sons of Iraq.” This also required national political reconciliation between the three contending sectarian communities in the country—which is still a work in progress.

In my own writings on this subject, the key to both insurgent and counterinsurgent success lies in the principles of political legitimacy that are traditionally embedded in the political issue of each host country as well as in new principles evolving out of the political tempest stirred up by the insurgency and the intervention in it. Generally, there are two factors at play: interveners are usually seen as interlopers and foreign meddlers, but the insurgent tactics of terror, especially suicide bombing, are highly offensive to local publics who will eventually tire of them, and even turn on the insurgents. Insurgencies, then, are a race of time between these contending factors. Thus, in Iraq a recent intelligence study contradictorily concluded that the surge of U.S. forces in Iraq had the effect of centering the global war on terror in Iraq (and hence away from American shores) even as it was the most powerful magnet of international jihadis recruitment.

A s a race of time, the “home front” of the intervening power becomes the critical third arena. Lacking the military power to counter the forces of the intervening power directly, insurgents hope to score their victory eventually on this home front. If they can hang in there long enough, and not totally alienate their own people in the meantime, insurgents can count on the domestic population of the intervener to become divided on the intervention as national attention turns to other issues, and the costs of such “peripheral” enterprises begin to mount up and wear down public support. Again, two things become key: as this support wanes the intervener will need to have a plan in place to build-up local forces, both military and
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political, that they can hard off to. As they do this, they can purchase more time if they can identify the intervention with strategic issues at home. This is what I have called the critical third leg of political legitimacy (the other two being legitimacy in the target country and the international acceptance of the intervention).

In Vietnam, this support fell short. Perhaps because of this lesson, despite the tenuousness of the link to al-Qaeda and the War on Terror, President Bush was determined to keep Iraq linked to Osama bin Laden. To muddy the waters, despite the findings of the 9/11 Commission of the lack of an explicit link between Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden on the 9/11 attacks, there were associations and attempted deals between the two. In Afghanistan, however, the link is much more explicit between al-Qaeda and the now insurgent Taliban, and the Obama Administration has a greater purchase of time to engineer its own quagmire.

As I said, millennial students are confused, and I am not sure my course helps much, except to mire students in the complexity of the political issues involved in these three arenas of struggle. Despite these mists, both as students and as citizens, political and moral judgments have to be made, and my millennial students surprise me with the sophistication of their papers. Most of them are far less ideological than the chants of my peers, who saw Vietnam as the symbolic call for exorcising their favorite devils—whether it was LBJ, the Military-Industrial Complex, commies posing as nationalists, the radical media, or whatever.

A year ago last spring, there was an attempt at an antiwar protest on our campus. Besides putting up poster board tombstones of war casualties, the effort fizzled. One of my students came into my office and told me, “Dr. Lomperis, I wanted to participate in that demonstration, but I just got too confused. I believe it was wrong to call you Vietnam veterans baby killers and fascist pigs. But how can I support the troops by opposing their mission? On the other hand, how can I oppose their mission by supporting the troops?” Somehow, I think she had learned a lot in her confusion, and confusion is not always a bad thing. But it is ambiguous.