Limited vs. Total War

by Captain Brian W. Brennan

Since 1776, the U.S. Government and, more specifically, the U.S. Army have struggled with how best to fight our nation's wars.

Though the terms "total war" and "limited war" are relatively new and were developed to describe the United States' efforts to minimize civilian casualties, prevent global nuclear annihilation, and engage the enemy only in specific, politically driven battlefields, their concepts have been debated for centuries.[1] It is through the lens of military successes that we can truly examine the validity of limited warfare in today's low-intensity conflict laden world. America's lack of success in campaigns and battles on the modern battlefield has been the direct result of a shift in focus from the total war practices of World War II and the American Civil War, to the limited war concepts developed by the Truman and Johnson administrations during the early days of the Cold War, and practiced in the jungles of Vietnam and the deserts of Kuwait and Iraq. If the United States is to retain its dominant role in world affairs, it will have to look back at past total war strategies and incorporate them into future operations.

The concept of total war is fairly simple. Total war is best defined by the old Soviet definition for a "*Total 'Naya Voyna*," or "foreign or total war," which states that a total war is "an all-embracing imperialist war, waged by all manner of means, not only against enemy armed forces, but against the entire population of a nation, with a view to its complete destruction."[2] It is in this kind of war that almost every citizen of that nation is mobilized to drive the war effort. Automobile factories are converted to tank plants; cruise ships become troop transports; food and valuable commodities are rationed; and average citizens are conscripted into the military to become soldiers and sailors. There are no holds barred in total war. Soldiers are killed on the battlefield — as in any conflict — but in a total war, commercial shipping is sunk, factories are reduced to rubble by bombs and rockets, and civilian population centers are targeted to deny the enemy the means with which to do battle and to break his will to continue the conflict.

Limited war is entirely different. At the dawn of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union entered the nuclear age, the Truman and Johnson administrations were concerned that a war of any kind would risk global nuclear annihilation, so a limited warfare policy was developed.

The policy's goal was "to exact good behavior or to oblige discontinuance of mischief, not to destroy the subject altogether."[3] This type of warfare, however, was not at all in accordance with what had become America's way of war. In fact, its citizens and its military were appalled by what political scientist Robert Osgood called the "galling but indispensable restraints" they encountered in limited war.[4]

Total Victory

The validity of the limited war political philosophy is best seen when examining the victories and defeats of the U.S. military. Over the past 200 years, the U.S. Army's war record is testimony to the importance of the total war

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philosophy. Numerous battles and campaigns have been won or lost simply because the combatants either were or were not able to completely destroy the enemy or render him incapable of mounting military operations.

World War II is one of the best examples of the total war philosophy's success. During World War II, the United States mobilized every asset available to meet the demands of the immense military machine it fielded to meet the Japanese-German threat. By 1945, the U.S. Army had 891,663 officers and 7,376,295 enlisted personnel, and was producing over 2,400 tanks per month — a far cry from the mere 14,186 officers and 175,353 enlisted personnel it had in 1939, while spending a mere 2 percent of the nation's gross national product on defense.[5]

The total war goal for World War II was the unconditional surrender of Italy, Germany, and Japan. No other options were acceptable. The United States and its allies could not, and would not, be defeated. The degree to which the allies pursued their goals is best summarized in a 1944 British report that states: "In five years of drastic labor mobilization, nearly every man and every woman under fifty without young children has been subject to direction to work….The hours of work average fifty-three for men and fifty overall; when work is done, every citizen…has had to do forty-eight hours a month duty in the Home Guard or Civil Defense."[6]

Civilian and economic mobilization, however, were not the only aspects of the allied campaign that adhered to the total war philosophy. The strategic military planning involved in World War II also demonstrated total war characteristics. Not only did the Allies bomb major German and Japanese industrial centers to cripple their respective war machines, they also fire bombed major population centers, such as Hamburg, Dresden, Nagasaki, and Hiroshima, to break the population's will. In Hamburg alone, British efforts to "dehouse" the German population resulted in the deaths of 30,000 to 40,000 civilians as the city reached temperatures in excess of 1,000 degrees and winds blew at over 300 miles per hour.[7] This seemingly large number of civilian casualties paled in comparison to the 90,000 civilians killed in Hiroshima when the United States dropped the first nuclear device, and the 35,000 killed in Nagasaki when they dropped the second one.[8] By bombing these cities, the United States and her allies showed the Axis Powers that they were willing to go to any length necessary to achieve complete and total victory. There would be no negotiated peace. There would be total, unconditional surrender, or the Allies would continue to fight, as was necessary in the case of Adolf Hitler's Germany, where the Soviet Red Army was forced to fight all the way through Berlin.

America's Civil War can also be used to demonstrate one of the many successes the U.S. Army has had using total war philosophy. The United States' transition from limited to total war can be seen by reviewing the Union's losses in the early days of the war when the government was, according to General William T. Sherman's memoirs, "extremely wavering and weak."[9]

American losses at battles, such as Ball's Bluff and Bull Run, revealed a Union Army unwilling to go completely to war with the Confederacy. At the onset of the war, Congress was unwilling to admit that Union forces were going to have to adopt a total war strategy to defeat the Confederates and restore the Union. This was possibly due to the fact that at the very beginning of the war, "many of the Southern representatives remained in Congress, sharing in public councils, and influencing legislation."[10]

Regardless of the causes of this policy, such political decisions as the government's refusal to immediately adopt Winfield Scott's "Anaconda Plan" that entailed naval blockades and the seizure of the Mississippi River, served to lengthen the war.[11] The strategy that finally ended the war was that of total war. As Grant's army held the Confederacy at bay in the eastern United States, General Sherman's army penetrated deep into the southern states, destroying every Confederate military and economic asset along the way. When offered the chance to save themselves from "the devastations of war preparing for [them], only by withdrawing [their] quota out of the Confederate Army, and aiding [General Sherman] to expel [the Confederate Army] from the borders of the State," the Georgian government remained indignant.[12]

Sherman then razed Atlanta and proceeded on his historic march to the sea, again, destroying everything in his path. As Sherman's march continued, he slowly eroded the Confederacy's ability to wage war, and in April 1865, General Lee, finding himself and his army between two Union Armies, surrendered to General Grant at Appomattox Court House. The Army of the Confederacy laid down their arms, parked their artillery and went home, never again to take up arms against the Federal Government.

Limited Defeat

The United States has not always adopted the total war philosophy for various reasons. The U.S. military adopted a limited war strategy for the Korean War in the early 1950s. The fear of escalation and global nuclear war between communist China and Western Allies caused the U.S., under the leadership of President Harry S. Truman, to refuse the use of nuclear weapons against North Korea and its Chinese allies, as well as refuse to invade China. After 3 years of fighting, the U.N. forces, under which the U.S. fought, were only able to reestablish prewar conditions along the 38th parallel.

Today, this cease-fire agreement remains fragile, occupying a great deal of U.S. military power, and allowing North Korea's government to retain its adversarial role in Western politics. For the first time, U.S. military leaders were restricted in both the weapons they were permitted to bring to bear against the enemy, and the geographic areas in which they were permitted to operate.[13] Politicians and multinational organizations now dictated strategic and, at times, tactical decisionmaking. War was now conducted to meet political goals and create conditions necessary to negotiate agreements and attain certain

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political concessions from the enemy, not to destroy it and render it incapable of future operations.

The U.S. followed a similar strategy during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and early 1970s. So great was the fear of escalation and nuclear reprisals from the Soviet Union during this era, that the United States proceeded with a limited war strategy to suppress the communist North Vietnamese attacks on South Vietnam.[14] The U.S. policy of gradual escalation operated under the assumption that a steady increase in the amount of military presence in the region, coupled with an equal increase in the intensity of the conflict, would eventually convince the enemy to comply with U.S. demands.[15] Against an opponent that was able to match each U.S. escalation and stood defiant in the face of increased conflict intensity, this strategy was doomed from its inception.[16]

U.S. forces were not permitted to enter known North Vietnamese refuges and attack supply lines in Cambodia and Laos. Hanoi, the North Vietnamese capital city, was not bombed, and its harbor not mined. Finally, on 30 April 1975, South Vietnam fell after the United States stopped military and financial support to the region. Henry Kissinger, in his book *Years of Renewal*, very adeptly summarizes the United States' inability to continue combat operations in this environment, "Idealism had propelled America into Indochina, and exhaustion caused us to leave."[17] The defeat was not only a major embarrassment to the U.S. military, but also signified a major step back for the Western Allies in their continuing struggle to combat Soviet communist influence around the globe.

Even the Gulf War was limited in strategy and success. Many people believe that due to the relatively disproportionate losses dealt the Iraqis by U.S.-led coalition forces, this conflict should be seen as a total war-type success. This, however, is not the case when one examines both the political restraints placed on the military during the Gulf War, and the current state of affairs that exist due to certain unrealized or misplaced goals. Though the Gulf War did resemble the total wars of the past, in that all aspects of the Iraqi military machine were attacked during the 41-day air war, the fact that a large amount of the Iraqi Republican Guard and other units were allowed to escape from Kuwait into Iraq, and Saddam Hussein was permitted to remain in power, attest to the limiting factors during this operation.[18]

Today, Saddam Hussein is still allowed to play a role in the world community. His refusal to allow U.N. inspection teams into Iraq, his continuing attempts to smuggle oil out of his country and into the global economy, and his constant efforts to develop weapons of mass destruction continue to plague the post-Gulf War world community. The U.S. military may have cured the symptom of Iraqi aggression, but it has yet to cure the disease, that is, Saddam Hussein and his maniacal foreign and domestic policies.

The Future of Total War

Today the United States stands in a relatively complicated position. Though history has proven that limiting military efforts during conflicts rarely provides the options necessary to achieve success on the battlefield and to achieve all of the desired political goals, the U.S. military must now deal with issues that were nonexistent in the 1800s and early to mid-1900s. Today, the military is forced to deal with issues such as low-intensity conflict, an all-volunteer force, and maintaining the moral-ethical high ground in the world community. Either a decision must be reached regarding the management of these pressures, or a vast overhaul of the U.S. military must occur to maintain a force that is capable of sustaining total war operations.

The all-volunteer force is the first issue that the U.S. military must address. Since the end of the draft in the mid 1970s, the U.S. military has relied on volunteers to fill its ranks. This has caused a rather complicated problem — the military needs to put soldiers in harm's way to achieve its goals, but in doing so, risks eliminating its recruitment source. In an army in which 41 percent of incoming recruits enroll in the Army College Fund, it is obvious that service to one's country is not the overwhelming desire of most young soldiers.[19] As soon as the military begins to show casualty numbers, the Army's image as a relatively safe way to pay college tuition becomes flawed, causing young people to opt for other means to finance their educations. In this situation, not only does the military lose recruits, it then becomes necessary to initiate stop-loss programs to retain soldiers.

With an army of finite size, "if victory, and even a repeated victory do not bring an end to the war, the question then arises whether the expense of restoring an army damaged by its victory is not as important as the victory itself."[20] The most successful way, then, of maintaining a large, dedicated force with which to fight these types of modern conflicts would be to reestablish the draft to some degree. The U.S. Government selective service programs have been shown to be less than adequate. With the problems experienced during activation of National Guard units during the Gulf War, the U.S. Army would be hard-pressed to demand service from someone who has no intention of serving and does not feel contractually obligated to do so. By maintaining a moderately sized conscripted force, the military would have a constant influx of new personnel during times that the idea of serving in the military does not seem like a life-enhancing opportunity to average 18 to 25 year olds. Currently, many European countries have man-

datory 2- to 3-year service obligations, and with the current war on terror, it may be time for the United States to follow suit.

The war on terror is the next problem facing today's military. Globally, the U.S. military finds itself conducting numerous peacekeeping and peace-enforcement operations, in what have become known as operations other than war, support and stability operations, and low-intensity conflicts. Conflicts such as regional wars, ethnic hatred, insurgencies, and terrorism, will not be viewed by the public or the media as war, but these conflicts will still interrupt global tranquility and U.S. interests in the global community.[21] Conducting total war in this arena becomes a bit more complicated because there is not a specific nation-state to attack.

Problems in places such as Afghanistan, Bosnia, and Kosovo do not readily present total war solutions; however, the total war principles remain the same. Eliminating the enemy's ability to make war and create problems in his native region and globally, is in keeping with the overall intent of total war. This does not, however, mean that the intervening country maintains a peacekeeping force in the region. By following total war doctrine, the intervening country seeks to militarily eliminate the combat power and political leadership of the aggressors in these regions. Removing heads of state, such as Slobodan Milosovic in Yugoslavia, is a key part in the eventual success or failure of these operations. The United States must aspire to make peace in these regions, not simply settle for keeping peace if it plans to decrease its OPTEMPO and increase its preparedness for large-scale operations in future global hot spots.

Finally, the military must maintain the moral and ethical high ground in the world community. While this stance does require doing away with targeting innocent civilians during times of conflict, it does not necessarily dictate that soldiers be placed in more danger to safeguard enemy civilians. One of this country's founding fathers intimated that it was not only the right of the people to do away with a government that they believed to be criminal or morally and ethically devoid, but it was their obligation as citizens of that nation, and as men. During the Civil War, Sherman's forces evacuated the city of Atlanta prior to razing it. U.S. forces in Bosnia and Kosovo routinely assist refugees and other people hurt by the war.

These are all fine examples of doing the right thing, however, when civilians allow themselves to be pulled into the fight, they forfeit their rights as civilians. If there are command and control facilities beneath a childcare facility, such as there were in Iraq, then the civilians in that area assume the risk inherent with those conditions. The United States needs to realize, as does the media, that it is the responsibility of the opposing government to safeguard its citizens according to the guidelines set forth in the Geneva and Hague Conventions. Churches, hospitals, and historical monuments must be honored as safe areas, and it is the responsibility of both parties to refrain from targeting civilians to the utmost of their abilities, but only to the extent that those structures and locations do not represent viable military objectives.

In 1945, 95,000 Japanese civilians were killed to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers during World War II. This should be the model for total war of the 21st century. No longer can the U.S. military be placed in a situation like the one in Somalia. It cannot allow the feelings of the world community to dictate the policies involved with its military deployments. Had the Rangers in Somalia been equipped with the armor support they so desperately needed, more young men would have come home from Mogadishu, and the U.S. may have even realized its goals.

Throughout the past 200 years, total war philosophy has shown itself to be a highly successful means for conducting war. Limiting oneself to specific weapons, regions, and practices has proven to be costly in terms of human and collateral loses, and ineffective in ending aggression toward the United States and its allies. If the United States continues to pursue limited warfare objectives in areas such as Somalia, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and Bosnia, it will continue to have only limited successes. Total war methods not only provide a means with which to end conflict and eliminate enemies, but also to serve as a deterrent to others, who would attempt to disrupt global tranquility, interfere with U.S. interests abroad, or attempt to attack the sovereignty of the United States. The United States has been truly successful only when it has completely destroyed the enemy and forced unconditional surrender. By limiting war, one risks fighting the same enemy again and again, and in the worst-case scenario, one risks defeat.

Notes

[1]Robert A. Doughty, et al., *Warfare in the Western World: Volume II*, D.C. Heath and Company, Lexington, MA, 1996, p. 913.

[2]John I. Alger, *The United States Military History Series: Definitions and Doctrine of the Military Art Past and Present*, Avery Publishing Group Inc., Wayne, NJ, 1985, p. 1-2.

[3]Doughty, p. 913.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid., p. 719.

[6]Ibid., p. 720.

[7]Ibid., p. 732.

[8]Ibid., p. 838.

[9]William T. Sherman, *Memoirs of General William T. Sherman*, Da Capo Press, Inc., New York, 1984, p. 382.

[10]Sherman, pp. 382-83.

[11]Timothy H. Donovan, et al., *The West Point Military History Series: The American Civil War*, Avery Publishing Group Inc., Wayne, NJ, 1987, p. 11.

[12]Sherman, p. 139.

[13]Doughty, p. 873.

[14]Ibid., p. 913.

[15]Ibid., p. 914.

[16]Ibid., p. 920.

[17]Henry Kissinger, *Years of Renewal*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1999, p. 463.

[18]General Robert H. Scales, *Certain Victory: The U.S. Army in the Gulf War*, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Press, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1994, p. 315.

[19]Ibid., p. 17.

[20]Hans Delbruck, *History of the Art of War, Volume IV: The Dawn of Modern Warfare*, trans. Walter J. Renfroe, Jr., University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE, 1990, p. 296.

[21]Donald M. Snow, *The Shape of the Future: The Post Cold War World*, 2d ed., M.E. Sharpe, Inc., Armonk, New York, 1995, p. 212.

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