

'From Augustine to Grotius': Weinberger on the just war

Remarks prepared for delivery by the Honorable Caspar W. Weinberger, Secretary of Defense, at the Conference on Low-Intensity Warfare, Fort McNair, Washington, D.C., Jan. 14, 1986.

Tonight, one out of every four countries around the globe is at war. In virtually every case, there is a mask on the face of war. In virtually every case, behind the mask is the Soviet Union and those who do its bidding.

Much has been written about low-intensity warfare, but it remains an open question how much is understood. Of greater certainty is the fact that little of what is understood has been applied effectively in the effort to contain the slow erosion of human liberty and self-determination around the globe.

We may see the protean nature of this phenomenon in the welter of descriptions attached to it: low-intensity warfare, low-intensity conflict, insurgency, guerrilla war, and others. What we can agree on, I think, is that the least accurate term is the one popularized by the Soviet Union, and that is "war of national liberation."

We in this land take special exception to so Orwellian a corruption of language, for we are ourselves the children of revolution, and we well know what liberty means. It has nothing to do with guns and searchlights and barbed wire and censorship and labor camps. In fact the object of their activities is not liberation at all, but subjugation. . . .

When the Second World War was ended, those of us who served in it and the families of those who were lost believed, and had a right to do, that we had seen the last of the great wars of conquest, and that our children might live in a better world, at peace. We were not complacent that such a hope would consummate itself through some mystical mutation driven by the numbers sacrificed, the pain suffered, or the hardships endured. Rather, we were prepared, even anxious, to work to assure that what had been achieved should be nourished and sustained. . . .

Yet even as compassion and faith and common sense worked to keep the better world we fought to build, another power sought to go another way. As the lights went on again in the Pacific and Western Europe, they flickered out, one by one, in Eastern Europe. As old colonies became new nations, old nations—Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria,

Romania, and half of Germany—became new colonies.

We were witnessing, though we did not know it, a new kind of warfare. At length we called it the cold war, but it was hotter than we knew, and insidious.

In the pre-industrial age, the object of those at war was to destroy the opponent's army. In the industrial era, it was to destroy not only armies but that economic infrastructure by which armies were fed, armed, transported, and supplied. And this we called total war, so brutal in its exigencies that we believed the art and science of war could not go further, but must impress itself and its dangers so profoundly upon the minds of men that they would turn away from it, and seek some other means to resolve their differences.

The opportunity was there. The mechanisms were there. God knows the need was there. Yet in the face of it all, we were presented with a further step in the evolution of a phenomenon we prayed had run its course. Where once it was the goal of aggression to destroy armies, and later to destroy the fruits of men's labors, now we saw a form of warfare directed at the destruction of hope itself.

As the Soviet Union, unhindered, was consolidating its hold over its neighbors, the emergence of new nations in the aftermath of colonialism created a new international political phenomenon, which we came to call the Third World. And as it emerged, so too did the opportunity for the extension of a strategy proven in the takeover of Russia herself, and refined in the enslavement of Eastern Europe.

It was a strategy which benefitted from the confluence of a number of new circumstances and old realities. On one hand, the expectations of communist dogma for the collapse of capitalism and the automatic "economically-determined" spread of communism had itself long since collapsed. Thus, the justification for the very existence of the ruling party of the Soviet Union had no force. Against this backdrop, there could certainly be no pretense that communism would expand through some inevitable, dialectical process. If it were to expand, it must expand by aggression.

On the other hand, the advent of nuclear power, and the means to deliver it, gravely increased the risks of open aggression. While the West monopolized that power, it presented no threat to world peace, and certainly no monopolized that power, it presented no threat to world peace, and certainly no threat to legitimate Soviet interests. It did, how-

ever, present a threat to Soviet expansionism. Thus if the Soviets were to expand, they would have to do so below thresholds that would trigger a free world response. Not to expand meant for them to sit in a global backwater, among the dust and ashes of a governing theory without political dynamism or historical validity. . . .

Taken whole, the situation offered constraints and opportunities. Poor and ill-prepared peoples were reaching for nationhood. Within them, men and women avid for power, and willing to pursue it with violence and keep it by force, could be co-opted at bargain basement prices. And the process could be represented to the industrialized democracies as the liberation of nations—a process not merely of no threat to us, but one congruent with our values. So we saw the exploitation by brute force of the efforts of others to free themselves from oppression. It is not necessary here to recount each event. A cruel consistency links the betrayal of the Russian Revolution and the betrayal of the Nicaraguan Revolution.

Nowhere have communist governments acquired and maintained power through the freely expressed will of the governed.

The world today is at war. It is not global war, though it goes on around the globe. It is not war between fully mobilized armies, though it is no less destructive for all that. It is not war by the laws of war and, indeed, law itself, as an instrument of civilization, is a target of this peculiar variety of aggression. It benefits from the pernicious sophistries of those who wish to construe these wars as the efforts of sovereign people to pursue their own destinies and, as such, no business of our own.

Yet, in a world as small as our own, the destruction of human liberty anywhere resonates everywhere, and affects all of us. So it matters that we understand the means by which such destruction comes, and that we trouble ourselves to discover not merely how to end the destruction of liberty, but how to reverse it, and to recover and restore what has been destroyed. Because if it is proper and just that we should help those who wish to remain free, then we can hardly turn our backs on those who have lost their freedom and want it back. It is certain that we cannot co-exist with the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine—an impudent diktat that argues like a bullying child cheating at marbles: "Whatever I can get, I get to keep." Nothing is brought to life with bullets and bombs, least of all an absurd doctrine dead before the dictator who proclaimed it, and buried by the brave people of Afghanistan, Angola, Nicaragua, Kampuchea and others who look to us to look to our heritage. We cannot ignore their aspirations without betraying our own. . . .

This is the work in which we are now engaged, and the purpose that brings us to this occasion. It is no small task. From Augustine to Aquinas to Grotius, and coming forward to successive efforts of various conventions at Geneva and elsewhere, men have labored to contain war, to limit its ferocity, to hold harmless the innocent, to mitigate destruc-

tion, to infuse mercy. We share in, and are instructed by these civilizing impulses. Every American officer, soldier, sailor, airman and marine is indoctrinated in the principles flowing from them, and is held accountable for the most rigid adherence to them.

The conflict we face today violates, by design, these principles.

'Wars of national liberation'

In those depredations known as wars of national liberation, any effort to improve the lot of peoples is a target. A nation's stability is a bar to its capture; its stability is a product of its prosperity and the means of broadening access to its prosperity; as is the educating of its people, and their health, and their conveniences, their progress and their hope. Therefore, in these obscenely misnamed "wars of national liberation," it is not a nation's military forces that are attacked. Instead, agricultural assistance teams are murdered, as are medical assistance teams, teachers, judges, union leaders, editors, and priests.

It is not a nation's military structures that are targeted, but its clinics and classrooms, its power and transportation systems, its livelihood, its possibilities, its hopes for a better future. . . .

The social and economic dimensions of these conflicts are of paramount importance. For the sake of their own lives, people are intimidated into a mute tolerance of subversion in their midst. Among the means to this end are disinformation and propaganda—including what is euphemistically known as "propaganda of the deed." Such deeds may include assembling an entire village to watch the village headman disemboweled, proving thereby that the established government cannot assure anyone's physical safety, and that the better part of wisdom consists of resignation to the will of the insurgents, be they ever so small in number, brutal in behavior, or unrepresentative in their goals. The object is to instill fear, to institutionalize anxiety, to rob men of their manhood, and make of craven survival the ultimate value.

On the economic front, people are coerced into paying taxes to support their alleged liberation; crops are burned, marketing systems destroyed, and people living on the economic margin are further impoverished. So the burden on the established government grows, the presumption that it cannot provide for the security of its people grows; people move into the urban areas for greater security or better economic circumstances, the land is abandoned and the cities become more and more crowded, with more pressure on the urban infrastructure and, withal, the creation of better targets for urban attacks.

In its early stages, much of this activity is like nothing so much as garden-variety crime—vandalism, arson, kidnapping, extortion, murder: thuggery flying under the specious legitimacy of "political liberation."

Against such actions, well-integrated societies interpose police forces. But targeted nations are not well-integrated

societies, and their police are rarely equal to the threat. We *should* be able to assist in improving the police capabilities of threatened nations, but we are now prohibited by law from doing so. And so long as this prohibition stands, the threats to others will be permitted to grow unimpeded until the violence is sufficiently great and sufficiently well organized that the use of overt military assistance finally can be justified. This gives to aggression an advantage we should not give it, and virtually assures a more protracted violence and greater bloodshed. . . .

What is the role of the U.S. military in all this? The question has existed and propounded itself in varying configurations, most especially during the Vietnam War and since. It has given rise to disagreements ranging from the philosophical to the visceral, and has generated criticism of our military, and its willingness and capacity to confront the conflict before us.

Let me say, on behalf of the most self-less segment of America's public servants that, contrary to what some have said, it is not pre-eminently the role or the object of our military to preserve hallowed doctrine, nor to preserve honored traditions, nor to preserve budgets. It is to preserve freedom. And they need no instruction as to that obligation. . . .

On another occasion, I expressed my thoughts on the general question of those criteria which ought to govern the use of military force. Some have questioned whether the assurance of support is a reasonable criterion. But the assurance of support is a function of the national will in the area of low-intensity conflict, far more than it is the capacity of our adversaries to prevail in that arena. And the strength of the national will depends, as it always has, on how far our cause is just, and seen to be; on how vital it is to our interests for us to be engaged, and, on how far our efforts in such endeavors are conducted in accordance with our national values.

It will readily be seen, in the framework of a conflict which is prosecuted in such a way as to erode and destroy the values of civilization itself, that we have a special obligation to act so as to uphold those values. The strategy of low-intensity conflict is such as to make a liability of that obligation. Yet we dare not, for the sake of expediency, abandon it. For example, to pursue terrorism we cannot commit acts of blind revenge that may kill innocent people who had nothing to do with the terrorism. This necessity complicates our task, as it is intended to do. So we must think carefully, and in certain respects re-think entirely, what are the imperatives and exigencies of this war, as it now reveals itself to us.

It is among the highest skills of the medical profession to be able to diagnose an illness in its earliest stages, and then to act to cure it before it becomes dangerous. Low-intensity conflict presents a similar challenge to our skills at diagnosing political and geo-strategic ills at their incipient stages. Such troubles do not begin in advanced, educated, stable, and

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prosperous nations which are well-led and which, even if badly led, have the means, peacefully, to change their leadership. Nor do they begin in nations of little or no geo-strategic significance. . . .

Analyzing the situation at even so elementary a level, we will have little difficulty determining prospective targets for communist subversion through low-intensity conflict. Superimpose over this matrix other indicators: weapons thefts, assassinations of police and other officials, attacks on critical infrastructural nodes, and further, more refined, conclusions may be drawn. It is at the critical point at which these conclusions can be drawn that some basic decisions must be made, and not years later when whole populations are polarized, and countrysides set aflame.

We must decide if our interests justify intervention. We must decide if the leadership of the country threatened is capable of using our assistance to proper effect, which is to say for the security and well-being of the nation, rather than merely to sustain itself in power, and to reinforce those abuses which may have contributed to the nation's difficulties from the beginning. We must decide whether an existing leadership is better or worse for its people and our interests than possible alternatives. We cannot permit our disdain for some imperfect regimes to bring forth far worse alternatives. We must decide what form intervention should take, if we are to intervene, and by what means, and through which agencies it should come. If our involvement is warranted, we must be prepared to act alone.

We have had at times an unfortunate tendency to believe it is essential to multilateralize every exertion on behalf of freedom in the international arena, as though our judgment must be validated by others before we could trust it ourselves. Yet it remains a fact that for the most part, where freedom is in jeopardy, it is to us that the world looks for leadership.

We are belabored in some quarters with being too "interventionist." And yet we remember, and those who belabor us remember too, other times and other places in which our earlier intervention must have saved the world from monstrous crimes and profligate destruction and bloodshed.

Finally, as a pacific people, we cling fiercely to the hope that solutions to international aggression may be found short

of the use of power, and by this tendency delay in the recognition of aggression for what it is, and of our duties for what they are.

There is a place for power in responding to low-intensity conflict. What is important is to understand the role of military force, and the role of other responses and how these fit together.

Those particular skills and supporting capabilities which the military offers to the prosecution of low-intensity conflict are chiefly to be found in our special operations forces. . . .

As one looks at the strategy of low-intensity conflict, however, in all its multiple dimensions, it is clear that defending the nation is only one part of the required response, and a highly problematical part at that. For this conflict strategy is one of destruction, and it is always easier to destroy than to build up, and easier too, to destroy than to defend against destruction. So we must assist in the business of building and, by doing so, of providing the nation's people with a stake in their future—a stake they themselves will choose to protect in the face of all efforts at destruction.

Our special operations forces play a role here as well, through civic action: the construction and restoration of infrastructure, the assisting of others in the improvement of their own lives, whether by restoring land, building roads, digging wells, or helping to provide medical and educational services. In the past, such work was not thought to be the work of the military. This is the popular wisdom, at any rate. But here popular wisdom fails, for it divorces us from our own history—from the memory of the Minuteman, standing by his plow, with his musket in his hand; and the pioneer defending what he built even as he built it.

The need for nation-building

There is, in short, no gainsaying the argument that we know something about nation-building, having built one ourselves. Nor is it deniable that the larger conflict—or, the competition, for those who prefer it—has everything to do with those political and economic constructs which form the skeletons of nations. The question then is what forms of government, what kinds of economic systems, are most in accord with human realities and conduce to the betterment of mankind? On our own terms, we can compete with shovels and win. Our adversaries require guns. It is an instructive difference. The greater share of our assistance to the lesser developed nations is in economic aid and, of our security assistance, in non-lethal aid. The Soviets offer relatively little in foreign economic assistance; virtually all of their subventions go to the provision of weapons.

So our military can help with the contemporary equivalent of the use of plows and muskets. But that help must be designed into a strategy which involves diplomacy, and economic leverage, and the proper management of our technological riches, and the proper, unashamed and unremitting willingness to make our case at the bar of public opinion

abroad and at home. Absent such a strategy, the use of military assets alone will be reckless, wasteful, and unfair.

The private sector that is the wellspring of our power and prosperity must see the greater long-term economic advantage of access to marketing opportunities in a broad and stable world market, rather than in the short-term benefits to be derived from those whose aim it is to prevent the emergence of a broad and stable world market. The self-serving notion of tempering Soviet aggressiveness through trade is the most fraudulent excuse for making a quick dollar that can be imagined; Lenin himself recognized that that proclivity would help the Soviets survive the ravages of their own self-imposed economic incapacity. He said that

The capitalists will supply us with the materials and technology which we lack and will restore our military industry which we need for our future victorious attacks upon our suppliers. In other words, they will work hard in order to prepare their own suicides.

We must not gratify that expectation, or fulfill that prediction. . . .

Those who mold public opinion in America, and who should refresh our convictions and thus save us from a smug complacency and the slow unwitting betrayal of our founding values, must see the failing in a fatuous objectivity which affects to judge the ambitions of the wolf and the lamb by an equal measure. There is still the obligation to distinguish right from wrong, and as we have no reluctance to judge ourselves by standards we set for ourselves, we should not, out of a misplaced sense of fairness, refuse to judge others merely because they have no standards. We know what are criminal means to the acquisition of power, and we know, with Burke, that "criminal means, once tolerated, are soon preferred." To be tolerant for the sake of an intellectual fastidiousness is to be an accessory to the behavior at issue.

The servants of public opinion and founding conviction, by which we are admirably governed for more than two centuries, must see the fragility of our freedom, and that national longevity is not divinely assigned but is a product of alertness and selflessness, which selflessness must extend even to the sacrifice of political advantage from time to time. "It wonders me," as the old Pennsylvania Dutchman said, when I hear the defense budget attacked on the basis of what the attackers are pleased to call a "fairness doctrine," as though our security is merely one of a competing set of national priorities. When nations place their comfort before their security, they end with neither.

These are some of the concerns we must take into account and the adjustments and sacrifices we must be prepared to make, as we consider the role to the military in the very real conflict we face today. What is important is that we never lose sight of the fact that the military is an instrument of the national will, and not a substitute for it.