



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

War by Any Other Name Is War

by Jason Whiteley

In *Starship Troopers*, Robert Heinlein wrote that, “War is controlled violence, for a purpose.” After the recent military intervention in Libya there has been a rush in some circles to distinguish the purpose of this most recent episode of ‘controlled violence’ from those military offensives launched by the United States against Iraq and Afghanistan in 2003 and 2001, respectively. Analysts aplenty have published observations on the normative use of military force and even provided frameworks for analyzing the latter half of Heinlein’s quotation. However, to better inform ourselves on the context of the question of whether or not to initiate ‘controlled violence,’ we, as citizens, must also be certain that we have a common understanding of what is meant by war.

War is hell. It is fitting that General Sherman made this timeless observation during a commencement address at the Michigan Military Academy in 1879, because the people who most understand this sentiment are those who actually fight in it. War is not a legal definition; it is a human condition that must be experienced to be fully appreciated. At the height of World War II, the Army had nearly 16 million members (about 11% of the population), today’s military makes up only 3 million (or .93% of the general population). The relatively small size of the military lends itself to marginalization from the population at large.

While Americans frequently reiterate their support for the troops, very few have a meaningful attachment to someone who serves. This is not an indictment of Americans generally, but rather a mathematical fact that flows from the observation above. If the military only represents 1% of the population, then it cannot be said that a significant number of civilians are capable of having a meaningful connection to a service-member. Often, people compensate for this lack of connection by loudly proclaiming that they think the troops are heroes. This adulation is symptomatic of a public that does not understand that the Army represents ordinary Americans. Believe it or not, soldiers also get scared, miss home, and have occasional moments of brilliance. Yet, American civilians are prepared to wave yellow ribbons and project support for soldiers while remaining comfortably ensconced in cozy lifestyles. In this way, American civilians can feel supportive of those who wage war on their behalf without personally experiencing the effects.

There is a similar philosophical phenomenon which begs the question “What compels people to undertake charitable works?” Is it because they want to help others, or because they want to feel better about themselves? I believe the unquestioning praise is most similar to the latter. Few people understand soldiers or their problems, but there is no need to get truly involved when you can simply lavish praise and move on. This disconnect can only create an aura of irresponsibility. As long as the troops are supported, why should we care about what they actually do? Consider that the average American consumes only a few minutes of news per day

and that news tends to be sensational or highly anecdotal. Soldiers have missions that are routine and, hopefully, boring. Their day to day activity does not excite America.

War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it. Staying with General Sherman for a bit longer, we learn that there is an irreducible truth about how soldiers wage war. They close with and destroy the target by whatever means necessary. It is an intensely personal and highly offensive act that is as unrelenting as it is unavoidable. Recently, a spate of coverage has described certain killing teams in Afghanistan who engaged in sport killing of civilians. These actions seemed deplorable, as were the pictures taken at Abu Ghraib.

Notably, both actions were universally condemned. However, the lesser incursions into the rights of others that occur daily in war zones remain acceptable. Ask any Iraqi or Afghan what it means to have American soldiers in their neighborhood, and you will hear tales of uncertainty, random searches, countless barriers and arbitrary curfews. As Americans, we enjoy unprecedented rights in our homeland. Imagine what would happen if these rights did not exist at all. Better yet, imagine that these rights are arbitrarily bestowed and revoked by a foreign Army that purports to liberate you. It sounds cruel, but the resulting latent anger and tortured psychology describe well the cruelty of warfare. Admittedly, our Army today is much more professional than Sherman's men ever were. However, the very professional way that we cordon and search in Iraq, for example, causes no less distress or lack of dignity in the minds of Iraqis than Sherman's troops inflicted on Atlanta. While there may be a continuum of cruelty at play here, we are not talking about apples and oranges - just different colors of orange.

War may be diplomacy by other means, but fighting wars is not an exercise in statecraft. Soldiers are defined by their mission, which is designed to be simple and well-understood. In recent years, the Army has adapted to its increasingly diverse role by developing the capacity to execute a number of long-term humanitarian and stabilization tasks using existing soldiers and equipment.

While there is little doubt that an individual soldier can diversify his skills to accomplish a myriad of tasks, the cumulative impact of these increased responsibilities cloud the role of the military. One hundred years ago, an expert could reasonably be described as a doctor, an engineer, a botanist, and one of several other occupations that we refer to as specialties today. Soldiers meanwhile were separated by task according to function, e.g. infantry, cavalry, and quartermaster. Now, when societal expectations dictate that professional aspirants tailor their education and experience on a certain field, soldiers are, conversely, being asked to diversify their skills. If the nature of warfare is unchanged, then what benefit can we derive from having soldiers masquerade as aid workers, especially given the societal acknowledgements in favor of single-purpose professions? The resulting muddled expectation inevitably results in disaster leaving disillusioned soldiers and confused local populations.

For all the debates about the just use of force and normative applications of military interventions we should never lose sight of the role of the soldier and the nature of his job. In respect of the application of "controlled violence" we return to Heinlein for the final thoughts on how to justify war: "The statesmen decide why and how much; the generals take it from there and tell us [soldiers] where and when and how. We [soldiers] supply the violence."

Jason Whiteley is a West Point graduate and an Iraq veteran. He has been widely quoted on building governance capacity in post-war countries. He is author of the forthcoming book Father of Money: Buying Peace in Baghdad (Potomac Books, 2011)

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2011, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license per our [Terms of Use](#).

No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.



Please consider [supporting Small Wars Journal](#).