



A Different Kind of War: The message bombs send

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Generals prefer to fight the last war for a good reason: The last war can be studied and understood. In the current conflict, by contrast, we seem to be wrestling a ghost in a fog.

We can't even name this war. Is it really a "Global War on Terrorism"? Is Iraq - where terrorists kill civilians every day - part of this war or not? And who is the enemy? Are they terrorists or "gunmen" or Militant Islamists or Islamo-Fascists or Radical Jihadis? We don't appear to know, or at least we can't agree on the answers.

Previous wars were less ambiguous. Certainly, their outcomes were conclusive. When Robert E. Lee handed his sword to Ulysses S. Grant, there could be no dispute over who had prevailed. When the Germans and

Japanese surrendered, the Allies could confidently dance in the streets.

Today, victory and defeat in conflicts such as that recently fought in Lebanon is a matter of debate. To say it another way: Who wins the clash of arms is determined by who wins the clash of ideas and perceptions.

In this war, the physical battlefield is not as significant as it once was. Those waging what they call a holy war against the United States target uniformed soldiers only opportunistically; more often they are content to slaughter civilians.

That may not win hearts and minds but it does weaken knees, it does frighten people into submission. Equally, the terrorists are manufac-

turing images they know the media will distribute for them – instantaneously and around the world thanks to the advent of 24-hour cable and satellite television, and the Internet.

Such images are intended to chip away at the political will of Americans and Europeans. It turns out Pentagon strategists were wrong: The more effective means of producing “shock and awe” is not with fireworks in the sky but with bodies in the streets.

In recent days, the *Lancet*, a medical journal, published a study suggesting that at least five percent of the Iraqi population has been killed and wounded over the past two years. The methodology of the study has been challenged and the timing of its release criticized as partisan. But what may be more revealing is the spin, the implication that Americans – not the bombers and those who dispatch them – should be held responsible for the carnage.

Over and over, I’ve heard journalists assert that if the casualty figures are anything like what the *Lancet* estimates, the arguments for a speedy U.S. withdrawal from Iraq must be given added weight.

Seldom discussed is the possibility that -- dire as the situation may now be -- it would become worse were peaceful Iraqis left to the tender mercies of the foreign terrorists, Saddamist insurgents and sectarian militias who have been committing the mass murders.

Also given scant attention: How many of those killed may have been foreign terrorists, Saddamist insurgents and members of sectarian militias?

One reason these questions can be elided is that in Iraq, the media have adopted the strange practice of not naming the perpetrators of killings – unless the perpetrators might happen to be Americans. As the scholar Michael Rubin has pointed out, the use of the passive voice in the media has become routine. For example, a recent *McClatchy* story read: “Nearly 2,700 Iraqi civilians were killed in the city in September.”

“Well, who killed them?” Rubin asks. “Baathist insurgents or Iranian-backed militias? If the public read that Iranian-backed militias killed nearly 2700 civilians, we might be less willing to reward their murderers.”

Another example, this one from *The New York Times*: “Most of the 500 municipal workers who have been killed here since 2005 have been trash collectors.” Rubin notes: “Again, someone did the killing. Why hide it? It’s important to know what we are up against.”

Not identifying the killers makes it hard for people to direct outrage against them -- and easy to direct it against Americans. Has there ever before been a war in which journalists have given such a gift to their country’s enemies?

But this war is different. In this war, bullets and bombs are used at least as much to send messages as to kill and maim. And the media are for manipulating. One side makes full

use of these changes. American political leaders seem not yet to fully comprehend what they are up against; much less have they begun to respond effectively.

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