[**18**]

The Role of Barbarism

Be stirring as the time: be fire with fire;
Threaten the threatener and outface the brow
Of bragging horror.

SHAKESPEARE, *King John,* Act V, Scene I

There was an interesting contrast between film-making during the course of the Iraq War and that during Vietnam. Whereas the main film that was made during the Vietnam era, *The Green Berets*, was propagandistic, no comparable film was made on Iraq, although there were regular rumours about the possibility of one being made about the 2004 battle for Fallujah. Unlike Vietnam many other films were made about how the war was being fought while it was still underway—Martin Barker identifies twenty-three Iraq war films. Some, like *The Hurt Locker* (2008), about a bomb disposal specialist, gained critical acclaim and Oscar success, though that was largely apolitical. Most were barely noticed and often lost money. They were caught up in the contradictory emotions prompted by Iraq. The 9/11 aftermath stimulated patriotic feelings but these were coupled with deep misgivings about the necessity for and likely outcome of the war. The reaction to Vietnam had been to challenge the legitimacy of US motives and the role of the military. With Iraq doubts about the government's strategy were unavoidable but it was more problematic to challenge the competence and motives of the military. This meant that discussion of

brutal behaviours towards Iraqis were rationalised as responses to the stress of combat. 'The crisis over America's role in Iraq is being played out', observed Barker, 'more than anything, through cracks in the image of the American "soldier".' The soldiers might appear 'crude, misogynistic and racist' when off-duty, but 'the moment they step out onto the streets of Iraq they become innocent, bewildered and desperate'. The net effect, as with Vietnam, was to emphasise the damage that war did to individuals as much as countries, however much veterans might complain about being habitually portrayed as 'drugged out, burned out, stressed out.' [1]

The more positive accounts of both the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns tended to reflect the accomplishments of individuals and small units, acting against specific targets, often at the edges of a larger battle or on some special mission, accepting personal risk while using superior skill and technology to best a vicious enemy. This literature began with CIA operatives working with anti-Taliban forces in Afghanistan in late 2001 and peaked with memoirs of the killing of Osama bin Laden in his hideaway in Pakistan by a Navy SEAL unit a decade later. It provided an opportunity to highlight confrontations that had clarity and personal meaning against the backdrop of campaigns that otherwise had so many uncertain and confusing elements. It also demonstrated how the need to avoid harming the wider population was encouraging efforts to identify and track the deadlier individuals, using biometrics (iris recognition, DNA, as well as fingerprints). In one of the best books of the genre, Brian Castner's *All the Ways We Kill and Die*, this material becomes part of an effort to humanise an enemy that has helped design and plant so many bombs resulting in the deaths of a particular comrade. The man responsible, something of a composite figure, he described as 'The Engineer'.[2]

These more personalised operations made it possible in principle if not always in practice to avoid actions that hurt innocents. Given a counter-insurgency strategy that precluded punishing the wider population for allowing militants to live in their midst, the trend was bound to be one of increasingly identifying and taking out militants. This approach emphasised the break from the past. In earlier wars it was understood, if regretted, that they had to be won by whatever means necessary, and

sometimes that might mean inflicting harm on civilian populations. Now that approach was as unnecessary as it was unacceptable.

TERRORISING POPULATIONS INTO SUBMISSION HAD LONG been part of the logic both of conquest and of maintaining order. Twentieth-century air power allowed civilians to be attacked independently of campaigns of conquest, motivated by an urge for revenge or a determination to intimidate. This led to nuclear weapons with their complete detachment of destruction from conquest. Their use supposed the destruction of that which might be conquered. They were kept as a form of intimidating reserve, rationalised by deterrence theory, available to inflict terrible destruction on other societies, but there was no evident strategic value other than deterrence. The deliberate slaughter of civilians was discredited as serving no military purpose. Analysis of the effects of the great air raids of the Second World War, confirming that bombing urban centres had achieved little, reinforced this judgement.[3] The key lessons were that societies absorbed pain in preference to surrendering, and if innocents were killed then populations would be turned against the perpetrators. In this way the moral dilemmas were eased. A vicious and uncontained approach to war would not only be reprehensible but also counterproductive.

A similar line of thought developed with civil wars. Although there were many precedents from earlier centuries, the view that at times populations must be treated cruelly developed in the context of nineteenth-century colonial campaigns and the American Civil War.[4] The coercive properties of air power were first explored in dealing with colonial rebellions (the first bombs were dropped from aircraft during an Italian struggle with the Ottoman Empire for control of Libya in 1911). When facing an uprising in Iraq in 1920 the British lacked sufficient troops to quell it so they opted for air power instead. The strategy was described as one of 'identifying the most inaccessible village of the most prominent tribe which it is desired to punish'. That a 'relentless and unremitting' attack on people, houses, crops, and cattle was brutal was acknowledged, but this was the way to ensure that a lesson was learnt. The draft manual for *The Use of the Air Arm in Iraq* observed that in 45 minutes 'a full-

sized village… can be practically wiped out, and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured, by four or five machines which offer them no real target and no opportunity for glory or avarice'. Sir Aylmer Haldane, the Commanding Officer, took the conventional view that only harsh punishment would impress Arabs. His favoured method was burning villages. The best way to do this was discussed in an appendix to his memoir of the campaign, advising on the need for separate parties to fire houses and dig up and burn grain and loot, and noting that it could take as much as an hour to do the job properly.[5] Even after the Second World War, Western powers could be quite severe when countering insurgencies, whether the French in Algeria, the British in Kenya, or the Americans in Vietnam.

Counter-insurgency doctrine shifted over time. 'Population-centric' strategies came into vogue, abjuring arbitrary killing and collective punishment. Yet the circumstances often challenged the doctrine. Whatever the intentions, civilians got caught up in fire-fights or struck as a result of poor intelligence or stray bombs. To allow for this possibility the concept of 'collateral damage' began to be employed during Vietnam. It recognised that there was such a thing as 'non-combatant immunity' that meant that civilians should be spared but also that even weapons directed at purely military targets could affect people with no combat role. If civilians were killed unintentionally it was somehow more acceptable than if there had been an intention, and so was 'literally beside the point'.[6] But over time, the excuse that 'this is what happens in war' became less acceptable because of the expectation that in contemporary conventional warfare the fortuitous discrimination made possible by new weapons meant that commanders were expected to exercise an extraordinary amount of control. Any civilian deaths therefore were likely to be castigated as premeditated choices rather than inadvertent accidents.[7]

International humanitarian law was focusing increasingly on the rights of individuals over those of states. Whereas the laws of war were largely utilitarian, and bowed in the direction of military necessity, human rights law was much more rigorous on behalf of individuals.[8] It took their side even if the actions that were threatening them were legal under the customary laws of war. For Western armies the shift was problematic. In

2001 Air Force Colonel Charles Dunlap introduced the term 'lawfare' to capture the way which he believed that strict rules on targeting and the need to avoid civilian hurt were being used to hamper Western military operations. He evolved the definition into a 'strategy of using—or misusing—law as a substitute for traditional military means to achieve an operational objective.' This would be done by creating an impression, even if unwarranted, that the distinction between combatants and non-combatants was being violated. In this respect it appeared as a form of asymmetric warfare, allowing militants to exploit the values—and courts —of their Western opponents while taking no notice of the same normative framework in their own operations. As an example Dunlap cited a 2007 NATO statement in Afghanistan that promised that its forces would not 'fire on position if they knew that civilians were nearby'. This, he argued, gave the Taliban comfort that if they chose their positions carefully they could continue with their operations without interference.[9]

If Western countries were shown to be responsible for civilian suffering then that risked undermining claims that their campaigns were animated by a desire to protect innocents. The reasons for Western intervention during the 1990s was the harsh treatment meted out by the Iraqi government to Shiites and Kurds, and then the 'ethnic cleansing' in the former Yugoslavia. This humanitarian focus had strategic consequences. Addressing the problem of war in terms of the suffering caused, and justifying any intervention as protecting the vulnerable, shifted the focus from causes to consequences, from the politics to the violence. The rights and wrongs of a conflict were reduced to the question of whose behaviour was the most outrageous. The judgement could shift with the latest atrocity and become totally confused when yesterday's victims turned into today's villains. Ending the fighting might be the vital objective of the detached but caring observer, with no stakes in the fight, but to other states, with their own stakes in the conflict, what mattered was who won rather than who had the most brutal methods.[10] The focus also inevitably encouraged the warring parties to stress their own vulnerability and victimhood.

If the prime rationale for intervention was civilian suffering, this created its own perverse incentives for those who wanted outside help.

With little choice but to fight alone, the aim would be to persuade the enemy that it was not a soft touch, that it would fight fiercely and inflict blows upon those who wished it harm. But a party with a chance of external support could make known weakness, especially if a key factor would be perceptions of suffering shaped by media reports. This tendency was evident with the 1991 defence of the Croat city of Vukovar when there were suggestions that it was not properly defended against Serb attack as it served the government's strategic purpose more to use it to gain international sympathy. In the former Yugoslavia, the need to demonstrate victimhood meant that, in Gow's words, 'media manipulation became not so much a complement for military engagement as a substitute for it.'[11] Evident massacres, such as those in 1995 in the Bosnian city of Srebrenica, meant that the West was more ready to escalate. When NATO went to war against Serbia in 1999 because of its actions in Kosovo, much of the controversy surrounded just how bad the authorities had been in their persecution of the Muslim population.

THUS DESPITE THEIR OWN HISTORY OF PUNITIVE STRATEGIES Western countries had come to assume that such strategies were as inhumane as they were ineffectual and deserved to be opposed. The consensus position, supported by academic research and embraced by the senior US military leadership, was that 'if the desired objective is long-term political control, barbarism inevitably backfires'.[12] In the debate over Field Manual 3-24 critics charged that this was naïve. Given the difficulties of winning a disaffected population over by political reforms, which they were unlikely to find credible, the optimum way to deal with a rebellious population was to make lives as miserable as possible until there was a return to docility. When the West had taken this view, in colonial campaigns and with unrestricted air raids, the rationale was that this was a way to get wars over quickly. Even if this involved a few massacres that might still be better—in some disturbing accounting—than a prolonged war that never quite came to a conclusion. The critics acknowledged that democracies would 'find it extremely difficult to escalate the level of violence and brutality to that which can secure victory',[13] and also that such a strategy was contrary to international humanitarian law. But was it really so clear

that it was bound to fail?

The strategic rationale, going back to the classics of revolutionary warfare, started with the dependence of guerrilla groups on the local population. The most famous formulation was that of the Chinese leader Mao Zedong, who spoke of the people as being the 'water' and the troops 'the fish who inhabit it'.[14] For those struggling with a rebellion, especially one moving beyond the point where it was possible to appeal to the loyalties of the people, the idea of 'draining the sea' had some appeal. The civilian population were fixed while the militants were mobile. If only the civilians could be moved the militants would be exposed. Such a strategy risked international condemnation and stored up trouble for the future. But for desperate governments, with a greater capacity for massacre than their opponents, and bereft of better alternatives, it could still make strategic sense.

Most governments facing substantial insurgencies over the 1945–2000 period did not go down this route, but about a third (24 out of 75) did. In Chapter 14 we noted the role of population attacks in the former Yugoslavia. Another example was Guatemala, in a war that began in the late 1970s, when the wide civilian support for guerrillas left the army floundering. Eventually the government vowed to 'dry up the human sea in which the guerrilla fish swim.'[15] The result was civilians were treated as though they were combatants. The killings were not 'accidental "abuses" or "excesses"; rather, they represented a scientifically precise, sustained orchestration of a systematic, intentional massive campaign of extermination'.[16] In some areas about a third of the local population was slaughtered, with about 750,000 killed in total. In another example, which underscored the instrumentality of the approach, in Eritrea's war with Ethiopia for independence the civilian population was targeted by the government, essentially forcing it into starvation.[17] After Eritrea gained independence in 1991 there was in 1998 another war with Ethiopia, which, though bloody, was largely between competing armies.[18] Valentino et al considered the efforts by guerrilla groups who terrorised civilians in Algeria during the 1990s. The violence was not driven by a radical 'ideology that justifies the extermination of a category of people' or by senseless bloodlust, as many observers had suggested. Instead, it was

calculated to push people away from supporting the government.[19] The instrumentality of mass killings lay in their role as a way of removing political opponents, as in the purges undertaken by communist countries, or in removing hostile populations, especially when it was difficult to expel them in sufficient numbers, or as a means of intimidating civilian sources of support.[20]

THE EXAMPLE THAT GAINED MOST ATTENTION DURING THE 2000S, and which was used to show that a harsh approach could be successful, was the Sri Lankan Civil War. Its origins went back to British colonial rule and the early days of independence which saw discrimination against the minority, and increasingly resentful, Tamils. Fighting began in 1983 with demands for an independent Tamil state, led by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, or the Tamil Tigers. The tactics of the Tamil Tigers were vicious while Sri Lankan forces were hardly restrained. In the late 1980s India sought to keep the peace, but disengaged after a Tamil assassinated Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi in 1991. The Tigers were ruthless against non-Tamils in their areas, and even against alternative militias, using suicide bombing as a regular tactic. A ceasefire agreement was brokered in 2001, but hostilities soon resumed. In the end the government launched a remorseless offensive in 2006. The Tigers were pushed out of the east of the country and then the north until they accepted defeat in 2009 with a deal which granted Tamils more autonomy but not secession.

After the conclusion of what were described as 'humanitarian operations' in 2009 a Sri Lankan model was identified, under the name of President Rajapaksa. Its basic premise was that 'terrorism has to be wiped out militarily and cannot be tackled politically'. Among the 'eight fundamentals of victory' were 'political will' to eliminate the enemy, a readiness to tell the international community to 'go to hell' when negotiations were proposed as an alternative, a refusal to negotiate because ceasefires had been used in the past by the enemy to get time to refresh and recuperate, and then a readiness to shut the world out by maintaining silence about operations and regulating the media to make sure they did not provide the reports of civilian casualties that might lead to more international pressure.[21] The Sri Lankan government's

determination to resist pressure to negotiate may well have allowed the campaign to proceed unimpeded, but the LTTE collapsed as much because it was already weak as because of the ruthlessness of the onslaught. The area the LTTE dominated was impoverished and the organisation was now 'a shadow of its former self, bankrupt, isolated, illegitimate, divided, and unable to meet an invigorated government offensive of any kind.'[22]

ANOTHER INFLUENTIAL CAMPAIGN WAS THAT WAGED BY RUSSIA in the province of Chechnya against secessionist rebels. From 1994 to 1996 Russian forces fought a hard and ultimately futile battle against secessionists. A settlement left the Chechen capital, Grozny, in secessionist hands, although with an agreement on any new constitutional settlement delayed. In August 1999, with a new prime minister, Vladimir Putin, at the helm, the Russians decided that firm action needed to be taken. There was a risk of contagion as a band of Chechen rebels moved into neighbouring Dagestan. There were also exploding apartment buildings in Moscow blamed on Chechens (although there were deep suspicions that this was an operation by Russian security forces).[23] This time the Russian methods were unrelenting: air raids followed by armoured columns. After a series of defeats in battle the insurgents resorted to guerrilla tactics, but they suffered from internal divisions, largely between Islamist and Nationalist factions. Gradually the resistance subsided, with the occasional acts of terrorism.

There were a number of reasons for the success of Russia the second time round. One was turning the conflict into more of an intra-Chechen war, engaging a local leadership who understood the country and were also able to take control and deal ruthlessly with any residual opposition.[24] A second factor was an uncompromising use of firepower. In the first war the Russians tried to take the city with tanks and infantry, and then got caught up in urban warfare for which they were poorly prepared. In the second war Grozny was battered with artillery and air power, against which the defenders had no response.[25]

In 2011 Bashar al Assad had refused to compromise with a reform movement in Syria and civil war began to take root. The West did little more than provide tentative support for some rebel groups. The regime

showed no compunction in seeking to blast away civilian resistance, especially once it was apparent that there was little chance that with more restrained tactics they could regain popular support. In September 2015 Russian forces intervened in Syria to keep Bashar al-Assad in power. Mark Galeotti described their tactics as implementing a lesson learnt in Gozny: 'All war is terrible; sometimes the art is to be the most terrible.'[26] In late 2016 after a ceasefire quickly broke down, Russian aircraft attacked an aid convoy bringing relief to the besieged city of Aleppo. As they moved to force the rebels out of the city they worked to make life as difficult for all inhabitants, including systematically bombing hospitals. Eventually both the residents and rebel fighters evacuated the city. The Russian air campaign underlined a point often neglected in the discussions of the impact of the development of weapons of improved precision. This not only meant that civilian sites could be easier avoided: it also meant that if so desired they could be targeted more effectively.

There was no law which insisted that casualties would encourage people to continue with a tough fight just as there was no law that suffering would cause them to give up. Individuals who otherwise may have kept their heads down or given passive support to the government might be turned into militants because of the loss of relatives. On the other hand, communities giving insurgents vital support might feel that they had little choice but to flee. Micro-studies on attacks on civilian populations tended to confirm that they could be successful. In one meticulous piece of research Jason Lyall demonstrated that when the Russians employed indiscriminate violence in Chechnya, by shelling villages, the effect was to suppress the insurgency. It weakened their local organisation and ability to deploy forces, showed that the insurgents could not protect their people, and caused division among their ranks. Lyall found that in the aftermath of artillery strikes there was a decrease in insurgent attacks when compared with nearly identical villages that had not been struck.[27] Building on this, Souleimanov and Siroky undertook further research on those caught up in the Chechen War. They distinguished between random violence which hardened popular attitudes against the Russians, while 'retributive' violence in response to actions by the insurgents was more instrumental and effective, although the effects were largely short-term and often had

the effect of displacing the retaliatory violence to other areas.[28]

Other studies showed that it made a difference to popular attitudes when foreigners perpetrated violence against civilians, even when it was not intended.[29] There appeared to be a less forgiving attitude towards casualties caused by foreigners than those caused by local forces. One study in Afghanistan showed that when Western forces inflicted harm then their support went down and that of the Taliban went up. The reverse, however, was not the case. Taliban violence made little difference either way. The Taliban had a 'home team discount' and were more likely to be forgiven.[30]

The question of the effectiveness of the strategy was in some respects beside the point. By and large, to the extent that it was even considered, the conclusions followed the general view in Western political and military circles that a strategy involving deliberate attacks on civilians was likely to stiffen the resolve of the victim population. Any short-term benefits would be contradicted by a bitter legacy and a popular desire for revenge.[31] It was normally chosen for want of anything better by beleaguered governments rather than because they were sure that it was effective. Once they started they had little choice but to see the strategy through, given the bitterness generated, and if they could see it through then at one level the strategy could be said to work. A regime prepared to use terror to sustain its position could do so, providing they had no compunctions about being utterly ruthless and there was no foreign interference.

In a rare study of why insurgencies often succeeded Seth Jones stressed the importance of external support, in the form of intelligence and air power but not conventional forces. He found no benefit from tactics 'that inordinately punish the local population'.[32] Barbarism caused anger and bitterness, so once it failed to shut down a rebellion then the government would be in even deeper trouble. A 2010 RAND study considered thirty cases of counter-insurgency since 1978 of which only eight were unequivocal victories for the government, with others producing more mixed results, for example significant concessions to the insurgents. The study showed that repression and collective punishment on occasion produced temporary benefits for the government but they tended not to

last. What made a real difference was tangible support, such as from neighbouring countries, whether personnel, materiel, financing, intelligence, or sanctuary. Ideally this would be coupled with popular support, but on its own tangible support would trump popular support.

As this study came at the end of a decade in which the US had been involved in two thankless operations, there was a big lesson for the US government. A lot depended on the 'host-nation government'; that is the one that would go under if the insurgency succeeded. The study described 'democracy, government legitimacy, [and] strategic communication' depending on this host-nation government. Without them there would be no guarantee of victory. 'The United States should think twice before choosing to help governments that will not help themselves.'[33] Most students of the problem came back to the limits of what a foreign power could do in a country when the regime they supported lacked legitimacy. One scholar, who had been developing hypotheses about the importance of organisational cultures in armies tackling insurgencies, got the opportunity to serve in Afghanistan. After working with Afghan local police and US special forces, he concluded that getting the command structures, doctrine, and training right made little difference without effective local allies: 'time and again the program ran up against the local reality that the government was unpopular and intransigent'.[34]