

Chapter 23

An Appropriate Use of Force*

James H. Webb, Jr.

The differing responsibilities of civilian and military control have not always been fully appreciated by those in the operating units who are responsible for implementing policy. I remember my own frustrations in this regard, and in fact the problem has timeless dimensions. The Duke of Wellington, while fighting the French in 1812, wrote the following message to the British Foreign Office in London:

Gentlemen:

While marching from Portugal to a position which commands the approach to Madrid and the French forces, my officers have been diligently complying with your requests which have been sent by His Majesty's ship from London to Lisbon and thence by dispatch rider to our headquarters.

We have enumerated our saddles, bridles, tents and poles, and all manner of sundry items for which His Majesty's government holds me accountable. I have dispatched reports on the character, wit and spleen of every officer. Each item and every farthing has been accounted for, with two regrettable exceptions for which I beg your indulgence.

Unfortunately, the sum of one shilling and ninepence remains unaccounted for in one infantry battalion's petty cash, and there has been a hideous confusion as to the number of jars of raspberry jam issued to one cavalry regiment during a sandstorm in Western Spain. This reprehensible carelessness may be related to the pressure of circumstance, since we are at war with France, a fact which may come as a bit of a surprise to you gentlemen in Whitehall.

This brings me to my present purpose, which is to request elucidation of my instructions from His Majesty's government, so that I may better understand why I am dragging an army over these barren plains. I construe that perforce it must be one of two alternative duties, as given below, I shall pursue either one with the best of my ability but I cannot do both:

1) To train an army of uniformed British clerks in Spain for the benefit of the accountants and copy-boys in London, or, perchance

* Reprinted from the Naval War College Review Winter 1988.

2) To see to it that the forces of Napoleon are driven out of Spain.

One can hardly have experienced combat without some recollection of similar frustrations. As a rifle platoon commander in Vietnam, one of the most ridiculous tasks I had to perform was to fill out a "Mine and Booby Trap Report" every time someone detonated a booby trap. The bomb explodes, people are screaming; imagine trying to clear lanes to your casualties so that other booby traps would not be detonated as you treated the wounded, calling to arrange a Medevac, placing your men into a defensive perimeter to protect against ambush so the Medevac would land, and at the same time entertaining the string of questions from higher authority: What kind of booby trap was it? What size ordnance was involved? What was the actuating device? Trip wire, pressure, pressure release, other? How was it hidden?

And, of course, the accurate response was, if we had known all of that, we would not have set the thing off. But the demands of statisticians and historians prevailed, so what we did, inevitably, was make up some standard responses in order to get people off our backs. If only one or two people were wounded, with no amputations, it was a Mike-26 grenade. If there was an amputation, or if someone was mangled, it was a mortar round. If someone was killed or if there were several people seriously wounded, including amputations it was some form of artillery shell. If someone got blown to smithereens and you could not find very much of him, it was a 250-pound bomb. And so on.

Of course, the bureaucracy and, I imagine, historians as well, took all of this quite seriously, so that while I was in Vietnam a startling tabulation of these reports was made—their results so alarming that a specially printed message was sewn inside our flak jackets: "Don't leave your grenades lying about. Fully 69 percent of all booby traps are caused by our own Mike-26 grenades."

The point of this, I suppose, is that there are areas in defense policy where the needs of the policymakers and the realities of the implementers diverge, and the two separate elements must seem foreign to each other. However, this cannot be said of the development and continual refinement of our military strategy. The proper definition of our strategic goals is the true meeting place of military and civilian priorities. Our strategy places the proper military means to guarantee the Nation's political objectives. Within the Department of Defense it shapes the nature and extent of our resourcing and dictates the general positioning of our forces and our equipment. That is to say, it often places you and your compatriots face-to-face with the myriad of problems we face around the world.

These are more than intellectual and military issues, especially in a democracy. The importance of a well-defined and properly articulated strategy assumes the realm of moral obligation in a society that nurtures and protects free debate. The defense of a free society depends upon support freely given by its citizenry. That

support depends in turn upon understanding a government's purposes and trusting in its intentions. A democratic government must articulate clearly the ends and means of defense if that trust is to endure.

There are many examples throughout history of democratic governments forgetting this vital, *moral* aspect of strategy and losing the support of loyal citizens who despaired over clouded strategic thinking. One of the most poignant to me was that of Siegfried Sassoon, a talented British poet. After almost 3 years of fighting during World War I, having been wounded several times, and awarded the Military Cross, Sassoon quit the Army in late 1917, causing national headlines. This was not an act of cowardice; Sassoon had been wounded so badly that he would have been kept at home if he had stayed in the service. Rather, it was an act of immense frustration with the leadership of a country he loved and had defended.

Sassoon wrote, "I am making this statement as an act of wilful defiance because I believe that the war is being deliberately prolonged by those who have the power to end it. . . . I believe that the purposes of which I and my fellow-soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation. . . . I am not protesting against the conduct of the war, but against the political errors and insincerities for which the fighting men are being sacrificed."

Sassoon's objections were classic. The war had begun for Britain, completely without strategic objectives, in response to the violation of Belgium's neutrality. The Germans were implementing an inflexible strategy called the "Schlieffen Plan" and believed the war would be over in exactly 39 days. Instead, it would eventually cost almost a million dead among British Empire soldiers, the deaths of 1 1/2 million French soldiers, and almost 2 million German soldiers. From beginning to end, except for the first 4 days on the part of the Germans, and for Winston Churchill's ill-fated Gallipoli Campaign, the war lacked strategic focus.

Citizens in free societies are unique in this regard: they have the right to know what they might be dying for. This was true in World War I, it was true in Vietnam, and it is true today. If we cannot tell our people what our objectives are around the world, and clearly indicate to them why these objectives are important to our Nation, we cannot expect them to invest the lives of their sons and fathers in the national interest.

I would suggest another key element: in the evocation of U.S. military strategy, the sea services are, and always have been, the linchpin. We are not a continental ground power, except on our own continent, and never have been. In fact, we have never truly fought a continental war, except the Civil War. In contrast to the horrendous figures just mentioned, we lost 55,000 men in combat during World War I and another 50,000 died from illness. In World War II, we basically fought a rearguard action against the Germans while defeating the

346 Readings on International Law

Japanese through seapower projection. The Germans and the Russians slaughtered literally millions of each others' soldiers—3.7 million Germans and 7 million Russians. We suffered 290,000 combat deaths in all services and in all theaters of the war. We do not know the price of this kind of warfare because, thankfully, we have never been required to pay it in order to guarantee our national security, except for the horrible bloodletting of the Civil War here on our own continent.

I would say also that, in wartime or in these periods that we now call a violent peace, our Nation's ability to affect world events, either positively or negatively, is most often measured by the size and capability of its Navy. As with Great Britain, who for centuries was Queen of the Seas, and with Japan, who has alternately attempted maritime power or appended itself to the dominant navies of its region over the last century, this is driven by economic and geographic necessity. By contrast, as we all know, nations who concentrate on naval power without such geographic and economic necessity, such as prewar Germany and today's Soviet Union, give us cause for alarm.

The disturbing realities are that, since World War II, allied navies have declined around the world and the Soviet Navy has dramatically expanded. We say this frequently, some of us taking this shift for granted and others not quite believing its enormity, but consider a few examples:

In 1946—and this is after demobilization—the U.S. Navy retained, among other assets, 106 aircraft carriers, 34 of them actively deployed, and 798 larger surface combatants, 220 of them in the active fleet. The British actively operated another 29 aircraft carriers worldwide and 419 larger surface combatants. Five years later, during the Korean war, we were operating 33 aircraft carriers and 308 larger surface combatants in the active fleet, while the British numbers had dropped to 10 carriers and 74 surface combatants. By 1961, we were operating 23 carriers and 262 surface combatants, while the British had been reduced to only 1 aircraft carrier and only 71 surface combatants. The trend continued, with slight undulations, until today when we have been able to rebuild our navy to 14 active carriers and 217 surface combatants, while the British, once the mightiest navy in the world, operate 3 aircraft carriers and 54 surface combatants.

By contrast, the Soviet fleet has steadily emerged from a coastal force with only 62 larger surface combatants and no carriers in 1964 to a force of 4 aircraft carriers and 284 larger surface combatants today, while at the same time maintaining a huge numerical lead in submarines, minesweepers, and small combatants.

These changes dramatically affect a nation's ability to impact events. For example, there were 418 allied ships in the Mediterranean in 1947 at the time of the crisis that occasioned the proclamation of the Truman Doctrine. There were no, repeat, no Soviet ships. By the time of the 1967 Arab-Israeli War there were 66 U.S. and 21 British ships present in the Mediterranean, and the Soviets

operated 29, for the first time creating a permanent presence in the region. By the 1973 Yom Kippur War, however, there were 59 U.S. ships, only 7 British ships, and 95 Soviet combatants. This is a trend that has replicated itself throughout the globe. We see it in the Pacific, where the Soviets operate their largest fleet and where on any given day at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, there are *two dozen* Soviet combatants. We see it in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf. We see it in the Caribbean, and we see it off of our own shoreline.

Luckily, our country has built up a vast reservoir of experience in the uses of the sea services to influence events. Strategically, we know, first, that our strategic submarine force provides the greatest deterrent to the Soviet nuclear threat, as it provides half of the country's nuclear capability at one-fourth of the overall cost of this element of national defense.

We know, secondly, that our carrier battle groups and amphibious forces have vast maneuverability which allows power projection to occur at key crisis points irrespective of either the need for expensive base rights or the vulnerability that goes along with long-term static positions.

And we know, thirdly, that the battle at sea can often be decisive to the battle on land. I am reminded of Liddell Hart's depiction of the historic race for Tunis during the North African Campaign of World War II, when the Germans moved 250,000 occupation troops from France, principally by airlift, and were unable to control the sea in order to equip and resupply their soldiers. The end results were disastrous on a strategic level: we captured more than 200,000 of these troops when we took Tunis, and we did not have to fight them when we invaded Normandy. Without control of the sea, the Germans lost twice. We should not forget this as we contemplate our own reinforcement plans in the NATO arena.

Despite the record, however, we are still afflicted by the persistent illusion that somehow we can remake these fundamentals of maritime strategy through technological breakthrough or mental gymnastics. Sometimes, policymakers seek relief through strategic amnesia, which is perhaps the only way we might explain what happened to the Navy during the 1970s. Twenty years ago we had a thousand ships. By 1979 the fleet had dropped to 479 combatants and was burdened with expanding commitments driven by the crises in the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. The 600-ship navy we have been building since 1981 represents less an innovation of strategy than simply the long overdue effort to close the gap between political ends and military means. By revisiting a maritime strategy driven by historic demographics, we remind ourselves that we must have maritime supremacy over any threat to our seagoing communications, and that we must be supreme on the sea if we are to have a chance of prevailing on the land. This is not an option, it is a prerequisite, the very basis of our national strategy.

Any military strategy worthy of the name chooses the means, ordains what we procure and why. The critics of today's strategy claim that 15 deployable

348 Readings on International Law

carrier battle groups are too weak to deal with the Soviets, yet not flexible enough to deal with other contingencies. Our main business, in this view, is to convoy supplies to NATO in a long war. The Navy, this view concludes, is irrelevant in a short war.

I would venture two very careful reactions to such logic. First, if you examine any short war in recent history, you will see that the sea services have been predominant. And if you examine any European war during this century, you will find that, despite a myriad of predictions beforehand, it has never been short. Take your pick; unless a war were to escalate quickly to a nuclear exchange that destroyed the world as we know it, you could not fight it without a strong and capable Navy.

And of course, our purpose is to be so strong that we will not have to fight. The military means at our disposal are dedicated to the prevention of war because we believe that our political objectives are so attractive to other countries that they inevitably will be obtained in peace. This, too, is a strategy. It is called deterrence and requires both military strength and a clear national will. But we have a problem here. Deterrence is often described as a spectrum. We have been most successful at the most dangerous end of that spectrum. And yet, while we have avoided direct confrontation with the Soviet Union, since World War II more than 100,000 Americans have died in the unofficial conflicts at the lower end of the spectrum. This may be a failure of our overall strategy, or it may be a sort of leakage that is uncontrollable in the wake of successfully controlling all-out war. In any event, the fate of our generation has been to learn a new lexicon of warfare, terms like low-intensity conflict, fear of escalation, diplomatic presence, political mission, avoidance of provocation, proportionate response, protective reaction, and rules of engagement.

Such equivocations are in many ways a sad function of our very strength. Our military units are often more vulnerable than they should be because political rules have given an enemy a weird sort of equality by reducing our own level of power to the point that the enemy can compete. We call this restraint. There have been times when our political system has placed combat forces into combat situations and precluded their having a combat mission in the name of gaining a political objective. Too often, as all of us know, military action is taken against these forces, political objectives fail, and our highly competent military leaders are ridiculed because of situations they did not fully control. This may be the most difficult strategic question of the moment: how do we, as a nation, deter military action on the lower end of the scale? Or, if deterrence is not possible, when do we shoot, and how much force do we use to accomplish political objectives that include the containment of hostilities?

Today's sea services are highly capable and highly flexible. We are developing the ability to cross-fertilize our warfare specialties, utilizing a combined arms approach to many varied situations. Within weapons systems we are developing

the capability for multiple missions. But all of this technology is meaningless unless our commanders know that if they take a considered risk in the field, they will be backed up at home. We must not use military force unless we are prepared to see it through in a way that makes military as well as political sense.

Nor should we be confined, in the name of proportionality, to responding to an attacker's aggression at the time or place of his choosing. Tit for tat responses have their uses, but as we have learned over the past 35 years through our frustration and suffering, these uses are narrow. The objective of military forces is to prevail, to punish an attacker beyond his ability to respond yet again, to exact a political and, at times, a human cost that will in fact deter future acts.

Our sea services, as I mentioned earlier, are the very symbol of our international commitments. We have long been at the cutting edge of our country's actions abroad. Where we operate and how we operate cause us to be the most exposed forces in this confused, semipolitical, semimilitary era of violent peace. Our response to the challenge of this era is therefore of utmost concern to the Nation. I have suggested that there are things we need to do. We must establish a better balance between our political objectives and our military forces. We must clarify for ourselves and for the world that we know when to shoot and how much to shoot. And, above all, we must review the vital bond between the commander in the field and the Nation at home.

The Nation must understand why our sailors and Marines are out there on the far-flung edges of the world, what it is they are defending, and the value of that effort. And our commanders must know that, above all, should they be required to use force in this era of violent peace, while performing a military mission, they will be backed by their leadership.

And, not incidentally, our political leaders must make the conscious judgment that the introduction of military units carries with it the rather high risk that they will be called upon to use force, and that the appropriate use of this force must be ratified in advance.

These understandings would comprise the basis of a strategy that will address the most troublesome aspect of our ability to deter. And this era might have less violence and more peace.

James Webb, Jr. was serving as the Secretary of the Navy at the time he made this address to the Naval War College. This article is a version of Secretary Webb's address to the 1987 Current Strategy Forum at the Naval War College.