

Chapter IX

Low-Intensity Conflict in the Post-Cold War World: The American Moral-Cultural Environment

by
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I. Introduction: Taking Chesterton Seriously

The public debate on American policy options that took place between the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990 and the suspension of Operation Desert Storm on February 28, 1991, was loud, raucous, impassioned, sometimes confused, often insightful — in a word, “democratic.” Moreover, that debate was frequently couched in explicitly moral terms drawn from the classic categories of the just war tradition. Cabbies and subway riders, barbers and bartenders, talk show hosts and talk show callers, op-ed pundits and religious leaders, Members of Congress and Executive branch officials all argued in terms of questions like these: Was ours a just cause? What were our intentions—what were we really after? Who was the authority competent to authorize the use of force against Iraq: the President, the President authorized by Congress, the President authorized by the United Nations? Did we have a reasonable chance of success? Could we discriminate between combatants and noncombatants? Was military force a last resort?

Not all of the participants in that six-month long public seminar argued as wisely as they might have done.¹ But let us not dwell here on the irony of a situation in which the Chairman of the House Armed Services Committee had to explain the meaning of certain key just war criteria to the archbishop chairing the U.S. Catholic bishops’ international policy committee (and on national television!). Rather, let us focus on the fact that the American people and their political leaders instinctively reached for just war categories — which is to say, for moral categories — in their attempt to sort out the options available to the United States after the Iraqi invasion, occupation, and attempted reduction of Kuwait. Indeed, the instinctive consensus that these were the relevant categories was so widespread that when other rationales were bruited — such as Secretary of State James Baker’s defense of the possible use of U.S. military force to eject

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Saddam Hussein from Kuwait as a matter of “jobs, jobs and jobs” — the public reaction was swift and negative, and the attempt to appeal to what were deemed baser motives was quietly (and quickly) abandoned.

Indeed, and admittedly without the benefit of careful survey research, I would suggest that the sourness in the national spirit these days, even on the matter of Desert Storm, has at least something to do with an intuition that, in the war’s end-game, the United States abandoned its larger moral purpose in the Gulf War and fell back into policymaking according to the seductive (and deceptive) categories of *realpolitik* — with disastrous consequences for the Kurds and Shi’ites, and with the singularly unsatisfactory result of Saddam Hussein still in power and still busily pursuing a nuclear weapons capability.

Be that as it may, the key point is this: the debate between Desert Shield and Desert Storm demonstrated that foreign and defense policy in the American context does not exist *here*, and moral reasoning somewhere over *there*. Americans understand that there is one human universe of thought and action, in which “morality” and “politics” are inextricably intertwined. That national understanding is more often reflexive than reflective, to be sure. And no doubt there continue to be residual problems caused by the moralism bequeathed to the national political culture by our Puritan and 19th century evangelical forebears, who frequently identified the norms appropriate to social ethics with the norms appropriate to personal and business relationships. But the larger, and more significant point is that America remains, as G.K. Chesterton famously described it, a “nation with the soul of a church.”

Put another way, *realpolitik* is not simply a poor guide to policymaking (and particularly in a revolutionary period such as ours, in which a realist emphasis on “stability” as the overriding norm in the policy calculus can help produce precisely . . . instability). *Realpolitik* calculations and *realpolitik* rationales for policy are also a sure prescription for discord and disunity within a body politic than understands (once again, instinctively) that *realpolitik* is not an escape from moral reasoning, but rather a debased form of moral reasoning.

That is not the way other countries are. Indeed, one cannot imagine the kind of debate that took place here between August 1990 and March 1991 taking place in the French fifth republic prior to one of its occasional African adventures; nor, at the time of the Falklands/Malvinas war, was there anything in Great Britain resembling the public moral argument in America over Desert Shield/Desert Storm. But that is the way we are. And that is why political and military leaders dare not ignore Chesterton’s insight into the American character. The moral argument has to be engaged.

And in terms of the kind of world in which we are likely to be living for the foreseeable future, that means engaging the moral argument lodged within the broader debate about low-intensity conflict.

II. The Necessity of Leadership

Engaging that moral argument is not an exercise in abstraction. The kind of morally reflective statecraft suggested by the logic of the just war tradition requires that we take careful stock of our empirical circumstances. That means, among other things, taking the temperature of the American body politic.

It is not always pleasant to have one's forecasts vindicated. And those of us who were writing, in the late 1980s, that *the* foreign policy debate of the 1990s was likely to be a reprise of the 1930s contest between internationalists and isolationists (or "non-interventionists," or "new nationalists," or whatever) would just have soon have been proven wrong. Alas, we were right.

This debate is, quite obviously, crucial to the future of the debate over low-intensity conflict. If the isolationists win, much of the debate over low-intensity conflict will become moot. There may be residual support for certain anti-terrorist and counter-terrorist activities, and perhaps for a modest U.S. role in such contingency operations as disaster relief and shows of force. But that will be about it.

What would it mean for the new isolationism to "win?" It is difficult to imagine the circumstances in which the American people buy the new isolationism whole hog, and retreat into the kind of demi-hemispheric Fortress America proposed by Patrick J. Buchanan.² But it would not require so comprehensive a victory by the new isolationists to push the low-intensity conflict option to the far nether reaches of the policy menu. "Winning," in this political-cultural sense, means simply that the American people decline to take up the burden of leadership in a newly unipolar world and that the United States becomes, in consequence, a reactive, rather than pro-active, power in world politics: content with guarding its interests (rather narrowly construed), and resolutely eschewing any serious attempt to shape a new world security system in the aftermath of the Cold War.

The American people have every reason to want a break at the end of the Cold War. If we think of the Cold War (as I believe we should) as the second stage of the great anti-totalitarian war that began in 1939, the United States was in something resembling a state of war for over fifty years (from the point at which President Roosevelt began the clandestine war against German U-boats in the North Atlantic in 1940, until August 21, 1991, at which point the USSR ceased to exist as an effective political entity). And no doubt there are reasonable arguments for scaling back some of our commitments — political and budgetary — in the aftermath of our victory.

But the end of the Cold War has not seen the sudden outbreak of "multipolarity," as many in the international relations guild seemed to expect. "Europe" does not exist as a meaningful political reality, as the ruins of Dubrovnik mutely attest. Nippobashing aside, Japan is a great power in economic terms alone; and

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while that is nothing to be sneered at, it does not translate into the capacity to bend the grand politics of nations to one's will (or, perhaps less brutally, to shape the basic trend lines of world politics). The Soviet Union no longer exists, and the successor Commonwealth of Independent States is in no position to do much of anything beyond trying to dig out from under the economic, ecological, and spiritual rubble of the totalitarian system. China is quite probably headed for a period of internal disarray, after the collapse of the Maoist/Dengist gerontocracy. The United Nations remains what it has been since 1945: a stage on which a script written elsewhere is played out.

In sum, the end of the Cold War has not brought us back to the Europe of the 19th century, i.e., a multipolar world of five or six great powers; nor has it ushered in a new era of internationalism in which international legal and political organizations are the primary actors and the primary political reference points in world politics. Rather, the end of the Cold War has seen the emergence of a unipolar world in which there is but one Great Power — the United States — with the requisite combination of political, ideological, cultural, economic, and military strength to determine, if it chooses, the ground rules for the immediate future of world politics and economics. Moreover, as the Gulf crisis and the debacle in Yugoslavia should have taught us, the alternative to American leadership in the world is not multipolar leadership but chaos.

The key question, of course, is, whether the United States — which is to say, the American people — will choose to exercise the leadership role which history has thrust before us.

I cannot tell you whether we will, in fact, accept the burden of leadership in a unipolar world. But I can say, with some assurance, that we will most certainly not take the lead in shaping the ground rules of international life in the post-Cold War world until we are summoned to do so by our political leaders. Which, to put it briefly, we have most assuredly not been summoned to do.

The failure of U.S. political leadership on these questions in the year since Desert Storm has been comprehensive. The national Democratic Party has never grappled seriously with its leadership's massive misreading of the signs of the times from the early 1970s on. There has been no intellectual and moral reckoning with the pattern of failure exhibited by Congressional Democrats on five of the defining foreign policy issues of the past decade: the nuclear freeze proposal, the question of economic sanctions against South Africa, support for the Nicaraguan democratic resistance, assessing the reform communism of Mikhail Gorbachev, and "giving sanctions a chance" in the Gulf. Until that reckoning takes place — and there has been very little of it evident on the campaign trail these past several months — we need not expect the Democratic Party to call the American people to the leadership role that could be theirs in a unipolar world.

Nor should it be thought that things are in much better shape on the other side of the partisan fence. President Bush's celebration of victory in the Cold

War in his January 1992 State of the Union address was welcome. But it was also at least five and a half months too late; it followed hard on the heels of a sour pattern of administration deprecation of the reformist forces in the Soviet Union; it ill fit with the administration's curious (and, to my mind, unbecoming) nostalgia for the uncomplicated days when all one had to do was deal with Mikhail Gorbachev (to the tune of "Moscow Nights," in the East Room of the White House); and it was incongruent with the administration's singular lack of energy in devising effective support for the processes of democratic and market consolidation in the new democracies of central and eastern Europe. Nor did the President take the occasion of his first public acknowledgment of freedom's victory in the Cold War to lay out a new design for American leadership in the post-Cold War world; rather, reacting to the current political wisdom instead of aggressively shaping the public agenda, the President left the implications of our Cold War victory dangling, so to speak, and spent the rest of his address on (admittedly pressing) domestic issues.

Historians of the future will find much of this simply bizarre. Think about it: at no point between the Revolution of 1989 in central and eastern Europe and the aftermath of the New Russian Revolution of August 1991 did the President of the United States address the American people to define, publicly, the moral and political meaning of the end of the Cold War, or to sketch the contours of an active American engagement in shaping the future course of world politics and economics.³ Moreover, in an election year, no challenger to the President tried to fill that astonishing gap. The challengers from the opposition party would not do so—or could not, without alienating key parts of their constituency, which had long since found the Cold War distasteful and were thus not in much of a mood to celebrate American victory in it. The challenger from within the President's party chose to look backward rather than forward. And thus the gap remained. And the country, not unpredictably, decided that it was in a malaise.

It is, as they say, passing strange indeed.

There is no way to think seriously about the relationship of American political culture to the problems of low-intensity conflict without confronting this horizon-setting issue of internationalism vs. isolationism. And there is no way to confront that issue without addressing the issue of political leadership. Just as credible and persuasive political leadership is recognized (in all the literature I have reviewed, at least) as an essential condition for a successful low-intensity conflict policy, so is persuasive and aggressive political leadership necessary if America is to take the leadership role of which it is capable in world affairs.

Only when our political leadership has defined our new role in the new post-Cold War world—which, in my judgment, means only when the political leadership has explained to the American people the facts of life about unipolarity—will we be able to defend any broad-scale low-intensity conflict

policy, beyond some very “domestic” issues like narcotics interdiction and anti-terrorism.

III. The New Moral Debate

As Martin Luther instructs us in his Small Catechism, we should always try to put the best construction on things: so let us assume that such political leadership emerges, and that a new consensus on the inescapability of an active American leadership role in world politics and economics becomes the political-cultural baseline for policymaking. Remembering what was said above about Chesterton’s adage and the need for the policy-maker to take it seriously, what will be some of the moral issues that the low-intensity conflict planner will have to confront in the 1990s?

Here we return to the classic categories of the just war tradition. The *jus in bello* principle of *discrimination* (and its prohibition of the direct targeting of noncombatants) is, at one and the same time, the just war norm that virtually all reflective people intuitively grasp and one of the more difficult norms to observe in low-intensity conflict situations. This is particularly true in counterinsurgency operations, where the insurgent forces typically hide within the indigenous population (like fish in the sea, in Mao Tse-tung’s famous metaphor) and not infrequently use the indigenous civilian population as defensive shields of one sort or another. But similar difficulties present themselves in anti-terrorism and counter-terrorism operations, as the U.S. experience in attacking Libya and the experience of the State of Israel in militarily confronting Palestinian and Hezbollah terrorism readily attest.

The just war panel will doubtless go into the refinement of the principle of discrimination in light of these distinctive circumstances. So let me simply say here that, if our concern in low-intensity conflict operations is both to do the right thing and to have the support of the American people in the doing of that, great care must be taken to resist the temptation to abandon the principle of non-combatant immunity because of the enemy’s perfidious use (and abuse) of the civilian population.

Americans understand, as the just war tradition understands, that there are going to be unintentional civilian casualties in war: that is one of the reasons why war inevitably carries with it an element of moral tragedy, no matter how noble the cause. But Americans also want the principle of non-combatant immunity to remain intact. Nor should we think that Americans are incapable of thinking in rather complex terms about these issues. The country is able to understand that the commander on the scene often has to make excruciatingly difficult choices at those points at which scrupulous observance of the principle of non-combatant immunity is in tension with the commander’s moral responsibility for the safety of his own forces. But that understanding has to be brought

to the surface by the political and military leadership in its public presentation of the situation in question. [That was done, I would argue, in Desert Storm, both in terms of reporting the rules of engagement during the air war and the consequent (and risky) return of unexpended ordnance when target recognition was below minimum requirements, and in the discussion of the bombing of the Iraqi command center/bunker/shelter in Baghdad.]

At a more fundamental level of the debate, and looking once again to the classic categories of the just war tradition, the most significant public moral argument about possible future low-intensity conflict scenarios and operations is likely to be focused on the orienting *jus ad bellum* norm of *just cause*. The outlines of this debate began to emerge during the argument between August 2, 1990 and January 16, 1991. In a post-Cold War world, what constitutes a morally acceptable *casus belli*? A cross-border invasion in violation of the bedrock principle of sovereignty? Massive and flagrant human rights abuses? The threat posed by Iraq's efforts to obtain weapons of mass destruction and the means to project them far beyond its borders? The threat to the international economy posed by the possibility of Iraqi control of over 40% of the world's proven oil reserves? The instability and danger to world peace that would inevitably follow from an Arab Middle East dominated by Saddam Hussein? All of the above? Some of the above? None of the above?

On this matter of "just cause," the classic tradition taught that one or more of three conditions had to be met for the criterion to have been satisfied: defense against attack, punishment of evil, or the recovery of something wrongly taken. Contemporary just war thinking has tended to reduce these to "defense against attack," although, as Professor Johnson points out, the other two conditions have not simply disappeared but "have been subsumed within a gradually broadened concept of defense that allows retaliation for an attack launched and completed (punishment of evil) and defines wrongful occupation of territory as a state of 'continuing' armed attack."⁴ Still, the U.S. Catholic bishops' commentary during the Gulf crisis debate stressed that the only possible *casus belli* in that situation was the cross-border invasion and occupation of Kuwait. Even more comprehensively, and insofar as one can successfully parse the complex signals coming from various parts of the Holy See over the past eighteen months, the Vatican (while insisting that it has not become pacifist in its basic moral reading of war and peace) does seem to have reduced the components of *casus belli* to a narrow construal of "defense against an attack already launched."

Here, on this matter of the substantive components of "just cause," is precisely where a public moral argument needs to be engaged, and with a very careful eye to the empirical evidence on the likely future of international conflict. Consider three hypothetical scenarios for U.S. military action in the 1990s under the low-intensity conflict rubric: nuclear non-proliferation, counter-terrorism, and humanitarian intervention in the case of massive human rights abuse.

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1. Perhaps the most serious threat to security in the post-Cold War world arises from the intersection of three distinctively modern phenomena: crazy States (Libya, Iraq, Iran, etc.) + weapons of mass destruction + ballistic missile capability. This lethal equation puts great stress on those who wish to define a just *casus belli* as simply “defense against an attack already launched”—and precisely because of the “crazy State” factor. No morally serious just war analyst would defend a preemptive strike on the French *force de frappe* or on Britain’s nuclear submarine pens. Why? Because we have confidence in the regimes that have launch control over those nuclear weapons. We have no such confidence (to put it gently) in the leadership of Libya, Iraq, or Iran. How, precisely, does this effect the moral equation?

I would argue that our knowledge of the intentions of the leaders of such regimes has to be weighed carefully into the moral calculus. Thus the issue is not just one of capabilities. It is capabilities plus intentions, measured against a calculus of relative dangers and consequent American responsibilities. Preemptive action runs certain risks, to be sure. But is there not a grave moral responsibility assumed by those who would risk massive civilian casualties, and massive regional destabilization, by leaving a man like Saddam Hussein with an intact nuclear capability?

2. Similar questions arise when one faces the question of preemptive action against terrorists. There is something inherently implausible about the moral weight of the claim that one can only act militarily against terrorists in “defense against an attack already launched.” The tactics of hit-and-run (or hide-the-bomb-in-the-suitcase-and-run) are the essence of terrorism, which has an essentially political goal rather than the goal of territorial occupation that we associate with the classic cross-border attack. Our intuitive sense that this is too narrow a concept of “just cause” should lead us to consider the possibility of a careful expansion of the “just cause” criteria. Were this to be done, I should not think it impossible to refine our concept of “just cause” to include (proportionate and discriminate) pre-emptive action against terrorist capabilities—to prevent the deaths of innocents on a large scale, and to enforce some minimum ground rules of acceptable international behavior in an inescapably interdependent world. But we have to do that refining in public: and in this case the “public” is the international community as well as the American body politic. And we have to do it in such a way as to prevent a general erosion of the moral-cultural boundaries that the just war tradition has laid down for centuries.

3. Perhaps the hardest case under “just cause” in the post-Cold War world has to do with situations in which human rights are being massively and flagrantly abused, and there seems to be no indigenous force capable of ousting the brutal regime committing those abuses.

It should be said here (and the same caution applies to the non-proliferation and counter-terrorism scenarios as well) that one should not lightly erode the

taboos surrounding the principle of sovereignty. The principle evolved at the Peace of Westphalia, after all, in an effort to prevent Europe from degenerating into a continental free-fire zone with ecclesiastical approbation for the sundry combatants. Tampering with that principle should not be done blithely, for in international politics as well as in personal life, there is always the risk of letting loose seven devils worse than the first.

In the just war tradition as I understand it, and in modern Catholic moral theology (in the exegesis of which I may have, as the lawyers say, some “standing”), the principle of sovereignty has never been understood to have absolute value: which is to say that the norm of the inviolability of sovereignty was never understood as an exceptionless norm. But it was understood to be an important norm, and the situations in which it could be overridden had to be grave indeed. All in all, the principle of sovereignty has served the world rather well, and if it is taken perhaps a bit too absolutely in modern international law, then it is probably better to err on the side of caution than to risk the dissolution of the principle altogether.

On the other hand, consider this scenario: One of the new democracies of eastern Europe implodes under economic and social pressures, and a fascist/nationalist dictatorship emerges. The dictatorship attempts to consolidate its power by persecuting minority group X, which had done reasonably well during the economic restructuring that followed the communist crack-up. The persecution includes the whole range of repressive evils: discriminatory laws, penal camps, torture, executions. There is even the possibility of genocide. Are we to say that the international community—or, to sharpen the issue even more directly, the United States, perhaps in conjunction with regional allies—has no recourse other than diplomatic pressure and economic sanctions to stop the killing? On the other hand, how does an American President explain to American parents, at the funeral, that their son had to be put in harm’s way for the sake of achieving a humanitarian good in a faraway land which posed no threat to our national security?

There are no simple answers—moral answers or political answers—to these dilemmas. It cannot be the case that the United States is under a moral obligation to intervene militarily in every situation in which human rights are being systematically and brutally abused. On the other hand, and in situations in which there has been no cross-border violation of sovereignty, can the “human rights criterion” ever push the calculus of “just cause” to fulfillment? What obligations do we incur to help stabilize the future of the country in question, having removed the abusive government?

Perhaps here is where the discussion of national low-intensity conflict and special operations capabilities bumps up against the question of international or regional interposition of forces. For it does seem as if there is not so great a breach of the principle of sovereignty if military action is taken by a regional force or

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international force (or, as in the case of certain actions in the old French West Africa, by the former colonial power). But whether we are thinking of unilateral or multilateral intervention, we have to think through more carefully, and as a matter of public moral argument, the question of when, if ever, the gross brutalization of innocent and defenseless people constitutes a legitimate *causus belli*: which is to say, when, if ever, are we morally justified in overriding the principle of sovereignty and using military force as a means of humanitarian assistance.

In terms of gauging the public temperature on low-intensity conflict matters, I would guess that there would be considerable public support (much of which would show an impressive level of moral sophistication) for the proportionate and discriminate use of U.S. military force as an “energetic” means of enforcing nuclear non-proliferation: especially if it were clearly understood that other means of redress had been tried and had failed, and that our action had the support of the saner elements in the international community. I should think that the same general approbation would meet the preemptive use of low-intensity conflict and/or special operations capabilities against known terrorists and terrorist facilities. I am less persuaded that the country would support an extensive use of American military force in situations where there is no direct threat to American interests but in which grave human rights abuses are being systematically perpetrated. Would the American public support the use of international forces, possibly including U.S. forces, in such circumstances? Perhaps.

IV. Problems in the High Culture (So To Speak)

If the American people have shown a generally impressive ability to calibrate the moral and political arguments involved in low-intensity conflict (or in conventional wars, such as the Gulf War), the same cannot be said for what are often thought of as the “teaching centers” of our culture: our religious institutions, our institutions of higher education, and the mass media. The continuing intellectual and moral distress in these arenas will doubtless have an effect on the “constraints” under which low-intensity conflict policy is developed and executed.

On the question of the religious institutions: the hard fact is that the just war tradition as a method of moral reasoning is quite probably taken more seriously at the service academies and the war colleges than in our largest seminaries. During the Gulf crisis, the leadership of mainline/oldline Protestantism, as exemplified by the National Council of Churches (NCC-USA), showed itself to be functionally pacifist. This was not the pacifism of high moral principle. Rather it was a political pacifism born of the conviction that American military power can serve no good end in world politics. One need not look for much leadership in sorting out the moral questions sketched above from these quarters.

But since these are dying institutions (demographically speaking), their impact on the public argument is likely to be minimal in any case.

The Gulf crisis was the occasion for the growing part of American Protestantism — the “evangelical” world which is itself a complex amalgam of doctrinally conservative mainline dissidents, fundamentalists, and charismatics — to enter the foreign policy debate on explicitly just war grounds for perhaps the first time. The key group here is what we might call, broadly, the “conservatives”: the Southern Baptist Convention, and the evangelical (and doctrinally serious) remnants of the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Episcopal churches. There is considerable agreement among these parties on several points: that the quietism that marked the evangelical churches from the days of the Scopes trial to the mid-1970s is inappropriate for Christians; that the Christian church has public obligations larger than its obligation to help form the consciences of its congregants; and that there is no developed evangelical social ethic capable of sustaining this new public engagement in an intellectually serious way. Thus, during the Gulf crisis, one found the “conservatives” beginning to grapple with the just war tradition as a moral template for thinking about public policy, in active conversation with Catholic and secular just war scholars. This is a development of potentially historic importance for the reinvigoration of just war thinking in American Christianity, given the fact that conservative or evangelical Protestantism has supplanted the traditional mainline/oldline institutions as the center of demographic gravity in the churches of the Reformation in the United States. If followed through, this new evangelical Protestant interest in the just war tradition would certainly play a significant role in shaping the moral-cultural environment in which American policymakers operate.

The future of the Catholic debate is difficult to discern. The Catholic bishops' record during the Gulf crisis was considerably better than that of their NCC-USA conferees. The bishops' congressional testimony was built around the classic just war criteria, and in that respect, the bishops helped deepen the public moral argument. [They most certainly did not, as some of them insisted, introduce the moral element to the wider public debate; the moral argument was alive and (reasonably) well from the outset, as anyone with a car radio and the patience to listen to talk shows could readily attest.] On the other hand, the bishops' testimony was also driven in part by certain readings of the political situation in the Middle East that proved to be sadly mistaken: a pattern of analysis that was sadly reminiscent of the bishops' fundamental misreading of the politics of U.S./Soviet relations in the 1980s.

In the short term, and in the wake of Desert Storm, the future of the American Catholic debate will probably center on two issues, one of which has serious implications for low-intensity conflict planning. There has been much debate in Catholic circles since Desert Storm about the degree to which U.S. military policy in the Gulf observed the principle of proportionality; the focus here tends

to be on the relatively high numbers of Iraqi combat deaths and on the damage done by the allied air campaign to the economic and technical infrastructure of Iraq. Those are grave questions with important implications for the future of conventional war, but they do not bear directly on low-intensity conflict. On the other hand, the post-Gulf Catholic debate about the components of just cause certainly will shape the low-intensity conflict argument in the future. The bishops' tendency seems to be to hold the line, so to speak, at cross-border attacks; there is little evidence that non-proliferation, or anti-terrorism, or humanitarian assistance will be defended by the United States Catholic Conference as legitimate *casus belli*. That inclination will be reinforced, or so it would seem, by the Vatican's narrowing of the boundaries of just cause. Yet, as I argued above, there really are serious, and in many respects unavoidable, issues to be engaged here. We may thus be heading for a period of some brisk intellectual confrontation in Catholic circles.

As for the American academy, the dreary stories of the impact of "political correctness" on our campuses are too familiar to have to be rehearsed here. That the campuses will provide recruits for any possible movement that seeks to restrict U.S. low-intensity conflict capabilities seems wholly predictable. But whether that movement will have any real political impact seems a more dubious proposition, at least in light of the Desert Shield/Desert Storm experience: for here, as in recent elections, students often proved politically wiser than their presumed (and tenured) betters. Of more immediate concern than these potential agitations, though, is the state of international relations theory in American higher education. Read through the scholarly and technical literature here, and you may well be reminded of Newton Minow's famous description of television as a "vast wasteland." We are living in a revolutionary period, in which the power of ideas and passions to shape events — sometimes in wholly unexpected ways — has been decisively demonstrated in venues ranging from east Asia to Kiev. And yet we find ourselves burdened by a professoriate that stopped taking political ideas and passions seriously two generations ago. Think of the vast amount of energy (and money, and ink) expended in 1990-1991 on the so-called "Grand Bargain" devised by the brahmins at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government: the deal in which the United States and its western allies, in return for major Soviet military cut-backs, would agree to finance the reform communism of Mikhail Gorbachev. Somehow, amidst all the equations, the basic political fact of the situation never got taken seriously: that what the people of the Soviet Union wanted was to get rid of communism, reform or otherwise, and sooner rather than later.

A similar intellectual paralysis pervades much of the establishment foreign policy community. Some months ago, editors at *Foreign Affairs* were lamenting, to the *New York Times* correspondent Thomas Friedman, that no one had yet sent them the post-Cold War equivalent of George Kennan's famous "Mr. X" article, which provided the doctrinal foundation for containment and the Cold

War. The real question, I submit, and given the current, sad, disoriented state of the received wisdom in the foreign policy establishment, is whether the editors would recognize such an article if it came over the transom.

Thus I fear that we are headed for a period of intellectual instability and fragmentation in our foreign policy thinking. The public debate, such as it is, will likely be *ad hoc* and case-by-case, rather than conducted against the horizon of a broadly agreed-upon doctrine. This does not rule out the possibility of a national consensus emerging on a low-intensity conflict policy. It does suggest that any such policy is likely to be rather limited in its vision.

Finally, there is the fourth estate. It had a bad war in the Gulf. When reporters become targets of satire on "Saturday Night Live" ("Tell us, general, if there was one secret you wouldn't want the Iraqis to know, what would it be?"), something of the post-Watergate aura of the media has dimmed. And yet there seems to have been little self-examination in the prestige press after the Gulf War. Rather, the focus has been on challenging the press access rules that were enforced during that conflict. Moreover, in the aftermath of the Soviet crack-up, the overwhelming majority of media attention to the Defense Department has been focused on, yes, the budget — which is to say, on what is going to get cut. I have discerned very little interest to date in the broader questions of post-Cold War strategy, including low-intensity conflict strategy: despite the fact that the resolution of these questions would be necessary for rational force structuring and weapons procurement planning.

This is not, I should say, wholly the media's fault; it surely has something to do with the failures of political leadership noted above. And that fact, combined with what seems to have been widespread public support for the ground rules set for the press by the Department of Defense during Desert Storm, suggests again that there are ways around a potential media "problem" with low-intensity conflict planning and programs: if the political leadership has the wit and will to assert itself.

V. Concluding (and Decidedly Unscientific) Postscript

The collapse of communism brought to an end what can be construed as a two hundred year-old fantasy in the Western world, the attempt to remake (and perfect) the human condition through politics: an enterprise that began with Rousseau's speculations in pre-revolutionary France and that led, along a complex historical path that proved the bitter wisdom of Richard Weaver's observation that "ideas have consequences," to Auschwitz-Birkenau and the Gulag. In the aftermath of this struggle to re-assert the priority of the individual human being, culture, and society over the polity (which, in the West, included the struggle to resist more benign forms of governmentally-sanctioned social engineering), we may well be headed, at least in the developed world, for what we might call a "post-political" era. That shift in the historical templates has been reinforced by our own domestic experience: many of the great questions on our

national social agenda — crime, drugs, welfare reform, the urban underclass, education — are increasingly understood, and by liberals as well as conservatives, to be primarily questions of character, in the addressing of which government is a singularly clumsy and singularly inefficient actor. Thus, the end of the Rousseau-inspired tyranny of the political in grand world politics has intersected with a rediscovery of the crucial importance of the virtues in a democratic republic and with an era of budgetary restraint to produce, as I say, a “post-political” era in American public life.

There is much in this that we should welcome. The danger, as I see it, is that our political leadership, reinforced by the ideological convictions and trendiness of both the press and the academy, will conclude that, under these circumstances, a gentle isolationism really is the way to go. And that would be a mistake.

It would be a mistake because the world is inextricably “interdependent” — or at least inextricably interconnected — and any attempt to withdraw from it will inevitably make the task of tending our own republican garden even more difficult. It would be a mistake because we do have, at the end of this bloodiest of centuries, the opportunity to set a pattern for international relations that is something other than Hobbes’s war of all against all. And it would be a mistake because it would be morally demeaning: for nations, as well as for individuals, to set themselves up as islands, entirely unto themselves, is to choose for a crabbed and narrow conception of their responsibilities.

Should we summon the will to assume the leadership in world affairs that could be ours, a careful public moral exploration of the problems and prospects of low-intensity conflict will be essential — for these are precisely the kinds of conflicts that seem likely to dominate the post-Cold War international arena. But that exploration will not take place at the level of seriousness it deserves unless and until the prior question — America First, or America first among the leaders of the world? — is settled, and in favor of the latter understanding of who we are and what we should be. *That*, and nothing less than that, is the key issue of “constraint” that low-intensity conflict planners face in the next period.

Notes

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1. Weigel, *War, Peace, and the Christian Conscience*, in *JUST WAR AND THE GULF WAR* (Johnson and Weigel eds. 1991).

2. Buchanan, *America First: A Foreign Policy for the Rest of Us*, in *FJB FROM THE RIGHT* (September 1991).

3. President Bush did, in the main, do an exceptionally fine job of explaining what was at stake in the Gulf crisis, and in defining the nation’s short-term interests and goals in resisting Iraqi aggression. But there was little attempt to relate this crisis to the larger scheme of things in the post-Cold War world. Thus the emblematic phrase for the administration’s putative grand design and its doctrinal replacement for “containment” — the “new world order” — remained essentially without content.

4. Johnson, *The Just War Tradition and the American Military*, in *JUST WAR AND THE GULF WAR* at 22 (Johnson and Weigel eds. 1991).