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When War Isn’t Hell: A Cautionary Tale

STEPHEN WRAGE

After months of stalking, a phone message in Yemen is intercepted. Identities are determined and plans are overheard. Fifteen-thousand feet overhead a drone aircraft is maneuvered into position above a vehicle. It stays on station, circling for as long as 24 hours. Its “pilot,” operating from a ground station hundreds of miles away, waits to see his targets enter the vehicle, then tracks them by radar and camera as they travel a hundred miles east of the capital city of Sanaa. Hours later, when the car is alone on a remote stretch of open road, the drone’s operator releases a Hellfire missile, which delivers 14 pounds of explosives to the interior of the vehicle.

Qaed Salim Sinan al-Harethi, who the CIA says was behind the attack on the USS *Cole* in October 2000, is in the car. Kamal Derwish, a United States citizen believed to have been the head of an Al Qaeda sleeper cell near Buffalo, New York, is with him, along with four other Al Qaeda associates. All six are killed, burned beyond recognition.

This is powerful, Olympian vengeance out of an empty sky. Such high-tech weapons are seductive,

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¹Philip Meilinger, “A Matter of Precision,” *Foreign Policy*, March–April 2001.

²Precision-guided munitions include air- and sea-launched cruise missiles, laser-guided bombs, and bombs delivered to their targets with the aid of Global Positioning System satellites. “Precision war” refers to the use of these weapons in combination with stealth, night, and all-weather delivery capabilities; with satellites, drones, eavesdropping planes, and ground spotters for target acquisition; and with streamlined orders and target-approval procedures run with exceptional regard for avoiding unintended deaths.

and Americans are inclined right now to be seduced. They need to strike back at terrorists who likewise struck out of an empty sky. They want to dispense justice as benevolent hegemony, the successors of the Romans, but where the Romans “made a desert and called it peace,” Americans want to do justice the American way, like the “good guy” from the old television westerns. As one writer recently put it, the “good guy—the one in the white hat—never killed the bad guy. He shot the gun out of his hand and arrested him. Modern air power may not solve every military problem, but thanks to the innovations of the last decade, it is the weapon in the U.S. arsenal that comes closest to fulfilling that goal.”¹

While this enthusiasm is understandable, it needs to be countered with a touch of sobriety. New ways of delivering force from the air certainly offer policymakers some very good options, but these new methods may be *too good* if the dramatic reports from Kosovo and Afghanistan lead Americans to believe that they can keep order and dispense justice around the world the way Matt Dillon did in Dodge—doing only what is right, saving the weak from the wicked, shooting almost magically straight, and never getting too badly hurt themselves. We instead need to consider carefully under what conditions, for what purposes, and in the context of what strategic assumptions precision-guided munitions are likely to—or should—be used in the next few years.

IMMACULATE WAR

Precision-guided munitions obviously confer greatly increased power on the states that possess them.² Military historian Paul Kennedy is impressed enough to declare that “nothing has ever existed like this disparity of power; nothing. . . . One hears the

distant rustle of military plans and feasibility studies by general staffs across the globe being torn up and dropped into the dustbin of history.”³

Kennedy is correct if he is speaking solely of those powers that employ general staffs to draw up military plans and that support large military establishments to produce feasibility studies. Opponents who are less well staffed and equipped and who do not have the high-value fixed assets that precision-guided munitions are most capable of destroying may be less intimidated. The Iraq, Kosovo, and Afghanistan campaigns have shown that precision-guided munitions are most effective against fixed civilian infrastructure targets, less effective against opposing military forces, and least effective against irregular forces operating without established bases and home societies that can be put at risk.⁴

Russia is one of those powers with a general staff and war plans. To the Russians, precision-guided munitions possess two deeply troubling features: they are quite useable, and they are largely without effective conventional countermeasures. The use of precision-guided weapons does not cross any fire-break like the one between nuclear and conventional weapons. Indeed, these weapons are more useable than much less accurate and less effective conventional weapons since their unintended effects can be better controlled. Moreover, they can be employed against nuclear facilities in preemptive attacks. And they have proved to be largely immune to countermeasures, meaning that one must attempt to deter rather than defeat their use. Brigadier General Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., an air force legal officer, has noted that “Russian generals fear that, in a gen-

eral war, Western nations could employ such ‘smart munitions’ to degrade Russian strategic forces without ever having to go nuclear themselves. Consequently [a Russian general has noted, his country] ‘should enjoy the right to consider the first [enemy] use of precision weapons as the beginning of unrestricted nuclear war against it.’”⁵

America’s adversaries might not be the only ones to consider some characteristics of precision weapons unsettling. American allies and Americans themselves might find reasons to worry about precision weapons precisely because they are so exceptionally controllable. Why should weapons of near-surgical precision raise concerns? Because they may tempt their possessors to try to apply a little elective surgery on foreign regimes, forgetting that it is not medicine they are practicing, but war.

During the Civil War, General Henry Halleck, President Abraham Lincoln’s chief of staff, recommended a much less surgical sort of weapon. In a letter to Dr. Francis Lieber, Lincoln’s expert on the ethics and laws of war, Halleck warmly praised the minié ball.⁶ This kind of bullet, which was fired from a rifle rather than a musket, was more accurate, traveled farther, and produced larger, more frequently fatal wounds than the traditional round musket ball.

In contrast to today’s precision weaponry, the minié ball dramatically increased casualties and magnified the horror of war. This, to General Halleck, was a virtue, since it made resort to war a more extreme and dangerous choice and the continuation of a war a more costly and unpopular option. Knowing battles would be terrible, a country did not lightly embark on war. Finding war costly, a nation sought to end it. By contrast, if future leaders expect the wars they start to be as brief, low cost, and low risk as the campaigns against Kosovo and Afghanistan, they will likely use force too often and too recklessly.

General Halleck would add that another reason a country did not embark on war was that its government never knew where war would lead. Prussian General Karl von Clausewitz, author of the classic treatise *On War*, taught that the logic of war is to escape attempts to limit it, and the somber wisdom of Clausewitz (who had seen a good deal of war) would counsel great skepticism with regard to any weapon that its controllers believed could be used in a surgical manner.

A LACK OF REALISM

One does not have to be Clausewitz to have concerns about precision warfare. Many realists, who as

³“The Eagle Has Landed,” *FT.com*, February 1, 2002.

⁴See Darryl Press, “The Myth of Air Power in the Persian Gulf War and the Future of Warfare,” *International Security*, Fall 2001.

⁵*Technology and the 21st Century Battlefield: Recomplicating Moral Life for the Statesman and the Soldier* (Carlisle, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, 1999). Dunlap notes that in the Persian Gulf War, the Iraqis responded to precision-weapons attacks by setting oil fields afire, perhaps hoping the smoke would blind the missiles and protect their troops and vehicles as they fled Kuwait. Since then, Saddam Hussein may have acquired some weapons of mass destruction—chemical, biological, and perhaps nuclear. America’s precision weapons apparently have given him, and other leaders who fear they may come under the American crosshairs, an additional powerful incentive to try to achieve mass destructive capability.

⁶Lieber produced the famous “General Orders 100” on the law of armed conflict; Halleck commissioned the study that led to the order. Lieber and Halleck are discussed in James Turner Johnson, *Just War Tradition and the Restraint of War: A Moral and Historical Inquiry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

a group are less averse than most to the exercise of military power, express their reservations. For realists, the guiding principle is that sovereignty ought to be respected, but these weapons transgress sovereignty with particular ease, stealth, and irresistibility. Aggression once meant armies crossing borders. Now an unseen cruise missile can profoundly violate sovereignty, and the bar for a decisionmaker contemplating such a violation is much lower than it was in the days when initiation of war required a major, highly visible mobilization. Think of how momentous a decision it was for Tsar Nicholas II to begin loading his forces on trains and moving them to the front in 1914 and compare the ease with which President Bill Clinton was able to order a brief flurry of air attacks on Afghanistan in reprisal for the embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998. Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger would echo Clausewitz and warn that violations of sovereignty, especially acts of war, bring special risks. The missile attacks on Afghanistan were complete before anyone outside a small circle even knew they were being contemplated, and although it seemed that the matter then was closed, the events of September 11 suggest that acts of war have a way of spawning consequences impossible to foresee.

The ability to designate oneself the hegemon and to go about setting the world aright is as enticing to some as it is disconcerting to others. Madeleine Albright, when she was America's permanent representative to the United Nations, was committed to restraining Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and pushed for military measures against him. General Colin Powell, then chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, counseled against this. "What's the point of having this superb military that you're always talking about if we can't use it?" she asked, according to Powell's account in his memoirs. "I thought I would have an aneurysm," he reported.⁷ The lesson: if there are unusually useable weapons in the arsenal, there will be unusual pressures to use them.

⁷*My American Journey* (New York: Random House, 1995).

⁸*Virtual War: Kosovo and Beyond* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000).

⁹JDAMs are inexpensive, all-weather-capable weapons bearing 1 ton of explosives. In Kosovo the "\$14,000 JDAM outperformed laser-guided bombs and cruise missiles that are 10 to 70 times more expensive, and became the weapon of choice for the most sensitive targets." Michael G. Vickers, "Revolution Deferred: Kosovo and the Transformation of War", in Andrew J. Bacevich and Eliot A. Cohen, eds., *War over Kosovo: Politics and Strategy in a Global Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

The ease, speed, low risk, and high degree of detachment associated with these weapons allow policymakers to brush aside such questions as "Does some vital national interest require us to fight?" "Do we need a major commitment of forces?" "Do we have a clearly defined and achievable objective?" "Are Congress and the American people behind this move?" and "Have all other means of dealing with this problem been exhausted?" With precision-guided munitions in the American arsenal, it was possible for Albright, in her new position as secretary of state, to prevail in her calls for 2 or 3 days of airstrikes to bring Milosevic back into line over the situation in Kosovo, and it was those 2 or 3 days of strikes that grew unexpectedly into 78 days of bombing and 38,000 sorties.

Yet the vast disparity of power that Paul Kennedy speaks of will not be permanent. "The technologies involved," Harvard human rights scholar Michael Ignatieff argues, "are neither abstruse nor expensive, and in time, America will lose its monopoly over them."⁸ The American monopoly over nuclear technology, which was both more elaborate and more tightly held, did not last five years (the United States first tested nuclear weapons in 1945; the first Soviet test followed in 1949). Long before rival countries can match Americans' technological feats with precision weapons, they will develop devices to neuter them. It will only be a matter of time before jamming devices are produced to block or alter the weak signals broadcast by Global Positioning System satellites. If GPS signals are blocked, JDAMs (joint direct attack munitions)—the most useful and cheapest precision weapons—will stray from their targets and produce unacceptable unintended damage and deaths.⁹ Commanders will have no choice but to suspend their use.

Or perhaps rapid innovation—for example, simply strengthening GPS signals—may keep precision weapons ahead of the efforts of those who would jam or otherwise defeat them. One measure of the rapidity of innovation is that the JDAM did not even exist in the American arsenal at the time of the Desert Storm campaign and was created out of dissatisfaction with the performance of laser-guided weapons in that dusty, frequently humid setting.

Perhaps the greatest barriers to other countries employing precision-warfare capabilities will prove to be the high levels of skill and coordination required of the pilots, flight crews, intelligence officers, and all other personnel involved in planning and carrying out air missions. These demands,

along with the considerable costs involved, have been enough to bar all but a few countries from the ability to deploy and operate aircraft carriers. The same factors may prolong American dominance in precision air power.

WAR AND THE CITY

After Desert Storm, it was not uncommon to hear military officers voice variations on “We do deserts; we don’t do mountains,” referring to a then-likely upcoming deployment to Yugoslavia to deal with the war in Bosnia. Many officers recalled that Marshall Josip Tito’s partisans had stopped divisions of the Wehrmacht and that the rough country and bad weather of the Slovene Alps offered many advantages to a defender. Later, after various innovations brought success in the Kosovo war, the refrain became “Afghanistan will be harder” when it became clear that a war would be fought in that country to root out Al Qaeda. Afghanistan was described as a graveyard for the Russians, and for the British long before them—and for Alexander, too, for that matter. But pioneering adaptation, particularly coordination with ground forces, brought good results. Now, with the possibility of war in Iraq, one hears the military caution that “We do rural, we don’t do urban warfare.” Although many lessons have been learned since American intervention in the Somalia capital city of Mogadishu in the early 1990s, the unavoidable realities of urban warfare tend to cancel the advantages precision weapons may bring. It is difficult to see how precision weapons can be useful in an urban environment, or how urban fighting can be avoided, and if they cannot, the pattern of future uses of force will differ grimly and dramatically from the recent pattern. It would seem hasty to assume, as the enthusiasts for the frequent application of American force apparently do, that future wars necessarily will follow the patterns set in Iraq, Kosovo, and Afghanistan.

The targeting strategies for a second Iraq war seem to rely heavily on precision air power yet appear to assume that the perils, complexities, and

casualties of urban warfare will be avoided. This would be accomplished by launching “mass precision” attacks in the first hours of the war. According to the strategy, if hundreds of nearly simultaneous precision strikes are directed against “regime targets” like presidential palaces and police facilities as well as command and communication sites and storage and production facilities for possible weapons of mass destruction, the Iraqis should be stunned into a rapid surrender. This would represent yet another major innovation in the use of precision weapons, and a dramatic departure from the slow-build approach taken in Kosovo and the gradual hundred-strike-per-day pace of the campaign against Afghanistan. It is not clear, however, why Saddam Hussein would refrain from surrounding high-value targets with civilians or from locating his command centers in refugee shelters, as he did in the Iraq war of 1991.

Finally, there is the lesson an Indian general drew from watching the one-sided contest of Desert Storm unfold. He declared: “Don’t fight the Americans without nuclear weapons,” and “In any war with the Americans, use your weapons of mass destruction early.”¹⁰ The preemptive national security strategy announced by the Bush administration in September 2002 would seem to commit the sins of hubris and strategic immodesty, but perhaps the current national security team has concluded that it must ensure that Saddam Hussein and others do not have an opportunity to take the Indian general’s advice. The Bush administration may suppose that the key lesson from experience to date is “strike early and often”—use your powers of precision warfare earlier rather than later, and do not fail to strike when weapons of mass destruction threaten to emerge.

This is an ambitious and aggressive strategy—one that puts great faith in the powers of precision weapons. These devices are seductive, but in a setting where schoolchildren line the rooftops of Saddam’s palaces and jamming devices interfere with guidance mechanisms, they may prove more seductive than productive. Indeed, they may prove largely unusable. As the president and his advisers draw up their war plans, they should maintain a healthy skepticism about the more sensational aspects of the promise of precision air power. ■

¹⁰The Indian general is quoted in Lawrence Freedman, *The Revolution in Strategic Affairs* (London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, 1998), p. 45.