

What is a humanitarian war?

War is an extraordinarily blunt instrument of foreign policy.

By Robert B. Adolph Jr.

Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina — This seems a different kind of war: a war fought for humanitarian purposes; a war unsullied with pragmatic self-interest; a war heavily laden with the trappings of western liberal democracy. Do those who fight define the conflict, or does the conflict end up defining those who fight it? What does "humanitarian war" mean?

Gen. Douglas MacArthur once said, "War's very object is victory." Of course, MacArthur was fired by President Harry Truman because Truman was more concerned with preventing World War III than with achieving victory over the North Koreans and their allies, the Chinese Communists. Truman was willing to settle for less than total victory in order to keep the war from spreading.

War's objective is key to its prosecution. The ends desired often determine the means that are used. In military parlance we call this knowing the "Commander's intent." Once every soldier is thoroughly familiar with the Commander's intent, all military means can be brought to bear to accomplish that intent, even without additional orders.

President Clinton clearly intends that the war in Yugoslavia be conducted with the least possible loss of civilian life among the Yugoslav population. He also clearly intends to conduct the war with the least possible loss of life among U.S. and NATO forces. That humanitarian intention creates a very real problem for those responsible for conducting the war, the military.

U.S. and NATO forces are designed for



wars of attrition. Such wars are heavily dependent upon mass and overwhelming firepower. Mass and overwhelming firepower are not particularly useful when conducting a war where target discrimination is essential. Hence, the unintended destruction of a train crossing a bridge in Yugoslavia and the attack upon a refugee convoy.

War is an extraordinarily blunt instrument of foreign policy. War kills soldiers and innocents alike. Shot and shell do not discriminate between combatants and noncombatants. Attempting to correctly identify your target while traveling at many hundreds of miles per hour, at thousands of feet above ground level, in marginal weather conditions, is problematic at best.

Clinton clearly intends that the Serbian leaders withdraw all of their military forces from Kosovo. The U.S. and NATO armies could accomplish this intent in a relatively short time, if they were permitted by their political masters to engage in real warfighting — where their strengths in mass and fire-

power, in the air and on the ground, could be brought fully to bear. But since this is a humanitarian war, fought for humanitarian purposes and with limited humanitarian objectives, real warfighting means are not permitted. War's ends may be humanitarian, but war's means are not currently so designed. War kills, maims, and scars.

There is nothing humane about war. It cannot be made humane.

War cannot be conducted without killing, and risking death or dismemberment.

There is an obvious dichotomy between classical western warfighting, where the object is victory, and the current conflict in Yugoslavia, where the limited objective is to compel a Yugoslav military withdrawal from Kosovo. What happens when the Serbian leadership refuses to comply with U.S. and NATO demands?

Do humanitarian impulses then give way to the classical western warfighting approach — meaning the overwhelming use of mass and firepower on the ground as well as the air? Moreover, what will be the cost in

lives then?

The attempt to conduct war humanely is a noble if unrealistic endeavor. Humane war suggests that killing is moral so long as it is done with the best of intentions.

The Balkans region has been the site of more wars than just about any other place on the planet. Ethnic and religious hatreds are age-old here. It is the height of arrogance to think that the United States and NATO can "fix" the Balkans.

Even if the United States and NATO are ultimately successful to some degree in their current prosecution of the war against Yugoslavia, it will require a multi-year commitment of soldiers to enforce the peace in Kosovo once the fighting is over. An enforced peace is a negative peace. It is negative because it is enforced and not a result of the honest and heartfelt desire on both sides of a conflict to find non-violent ways to resolve conflict. An enforced peace, in fact, is no peace at all.

It is difficult to make the case that there are any self-interested rationales for fighting this war. It is perhaps better for NATO's political leaders to stick with their humanitarian claims. Obviously, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and Javier Solana are trying to put their stamp on this war. They intend to define it in their terms and based on their humanitarian goals. Unfortunately, the means available to them are the same means that have often confounded so many of their predecessors: war. This dichotomy will not be easily resolved.

What does "humanitarian war" mean? I don't know. Let's hope it is not an oxymoron.

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