



Morality and Modern Air War

By JEFFREY L. GINGRAS and TOMISLAV Z. RUBY

The Armed Forces should promote morality in warfare, consistent with our cultural norms and national strategy of advancing democracy and the rule of law. Air operations can be conducted on the strategic and operational levels under just war principles while minimizing casualties on both sides and bringing a swift end to conflicts. This may require the military to institutionalize certain changes, develop new weaponry, and reconsider some operational procedures.

There are two fundamental areas of just war theory: *jus ad bellum* (justification for going to war) and *jus in bello* (just conduct of war). In executing air campaigns, dilemmas revolve around the latter and focus on questions of military necessity and proportionality.

Targets must not be attacked unless they are necessary to the outcome of a war. According to one writer, the necessity for war “can only justify the killing of people we already have reason to think are liable to be killed.”¹ This precept requires that noncombatant casualties be avoided. Non-combatants are personnel who do not directly serve in or support the military, such as those working in industry, supply, or administration. Bombardment that adversely affects noncombatants disproportionately to the necessity of destroying the intended targets is deemed immoral. Such effects range from targeting and striking noncombatants directly to inflicting short- or long-term detrimental effects on them.

Simply stated, proportionality means that commanders must use appropriate weapons and tactics for the task at hand. Weapons that produce more damage than is required are prohibited. Proportionality is not only about excessive harm but weighing “injury to the permanent interests of mankind against the contribution that mischief makes to the end of victory.”²

Major Jeffrey L. Gingras, USAF, is assigned to the U.S. Air Force Doctrine Center and Major Tomislav Z. Ruby, USAF, is a member of the faculty at the Air Command and Staff College.

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Recent Perspective

Operation Allied Force, the NATO bombing campaign in Serbia, presented two especially compelling moral questions. The first was translating political objectives into military strategies for effects-based targets within moral guidelines. The second was the need to be honest and consistent in selecting military objectives to carry out the strategy.

On March 24, 1999, President William Clinton stated three objectives:

- to demonstrate the seriousness of NATO opposition to aggression and support for peace
- to deter the Serbs from attacking helpless Kosovar Albanians and make them pay if they continued
- to damage Serbia's capacity to wage war against Kosovo by diminishing its military capabilities.

The joint force air component commander (JFACC), Lieutenant General Michael Short, USAF, was tasked to transform the objectives into targeting guidance. One of his first challenges was a glut of assets. According to one report, "By late April, NATO had more combat planes than targets to hit. Both [General Wesley Clark, USA, Supreme Allied Commander Europe] and the airmen putting together each day's tasking orders were frustrated."³ NATO began the conflict over Kosovo with a master file of 169 targets. It ended with 976 filling six volumes. Initially, with so few targets and more planes flowing

threatened the lives of airmen and noncombatants on the ground.

In addition, further analysis suggests that joint planners should never have sent many of the targets forward because of a lack of military significance to the stated objectives and the likelihood of disproportionate collateral damage. Moreover, while persistence is a tenet of aerospace power, it does not require that targets be reattacked after the desired effects are achieved.

Attacking numerous targets may have made a powerful statement of coalition resolve but at a cost to Allied credibility. Through television, newspaper photos, and the Internet the world saw numerous incidents of collateral damage and noncombatant death in Serbia. Was it worth the risk to reattack targets near concentrations of noncombatants? Evidence emerged from interviews with witnesses that raised questions. For instance, an apartment block was hit on May 31 reportedly killing 11 people and injuring 20. The targets were a publishing house and regional television and radio offices near a hospital and bus station. At a press briefing the next day, NATO spokesman Jamie Shea said one bomb went 60 meters long. Although 19 of the 20 bombs hit their targets, did those targets justify dropping 20 bombs so close to an apartment block, bus station, and hospital? In another case, NATO repeatedly bombed a barracks in Leskovac, which was empty six months before the hostilities started. The attacks left few windows on nearby homes and disrupted medical care at a hospital for the duration of the conflict. Repeated strikes against certain targets whose necessity did not outweigh collateral damage may have been legal but not morally justifiable.

Much of the difficulty in determining appropriate targets came during planning. According to remarks by one senior officer at the Air Force Doctrine Symposium in March 1999, the joint air operations planning process didn't take the steps to ensure noncombatant protection. Rather, it skipped from determining objectives directly to picking targets without matching desired effects with weapons or platforms. The NATO chief of targets agreed, stating that targets were added so quickly in order to build a large list that there was not time to do a proper workup on them. This process wasted lives and resources without returning operational or strategic advantages.

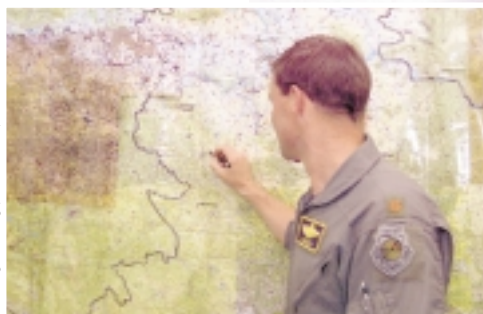
In fact, regular Serbian forces, moving into Kosovo and conducting the worst atrocities after the first night of Allied Force, were garrisoned outside Kosovo and parked in cantonments as NATO flew the initial sorties into Serbia. Had

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Tracking target aboard USS Theodore Roosevelt (William L. Vandermate)

into the theater, the list of approved targets grew. Even then, approved targets were attacked after being functionally or totally destroyed. It appeared the Allied objective was a particular sortie rate rather than a desired endstate. From a moral standpoint, this wasted resources and needlessly

110th Fighter Wing (Cham Devers)

A-10 pilot checking map before mission over Kosovo.



F-14 preparing for strike, Allied Force.

USS Theodore Roosevelt (Jason Scarborough)

NATO flown against those forces the first night rather than targets in Belgrade, the Allies might have achieved all three stated objectives in far less time while minimizing (likely eliminating) nonproportional collateral damage and leaving infrastructure intact. However, NATO initially ignored forces in favor of infrastructure. But destroying bridges in Novi Sad, hundreds of miles north of Kosovo, had no impact on forces in the province. NATO claimed that the result was that residents were inconvenienced by losing easy access to Belgrade. Again, morality requires that targets be relevant. Inconveniencing was not a stated objective. The linkage between targeting the bridges and the strategic goals of the campaign were highly debatable.

Beyond hurting people, destroying bridges on the Danube and along the main north-south line of communication in the region adversely affected commerce and trade in Central and Eastern Europe. Thessalonica in Greece, once the major port for goods entering Central Europe, has been seriously impacted since the destroyed bridges made roads through Yugoslavia impassable.

Political Disconnect

As target selection became an issue so did approving them. As noncombatant casualties rose, civilian leaders asked what was being hit and why. When they were not satisfied that target necessity was being proportionately balanced against noncombatant casualties, they exercised

their control over the military. French Prime Minister Jaques Chirac, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and President Clinton all determined to “review targets that might cause high casualties or affect a large number of civilians.”⁴

Had General Short structured the air effort, according to one BBC report, he would have arranged for the Serbian leadership to wake up “after the first night . . . to a city that was smoking. No power to the refrigerator and . . . no way to get to work. He believes that in very short order, Milosevic’s staunchest supporters would have been demanding that he justify the benefits of ethnic cleansing, given the cost.”⁵ Such a strategy would not have been moral in the context of this war, which is why civilian leaders from the United States, United Kingdom, and France retained target approval authority.

The real question, however, was why more appropriate targeting guidance and supervision were not implemented at the outset? That leads to a second and broader issue: selecting objectives in war that can be achieved justly, and conveying them down the chain of command to planners as well as to the public at home. Both military and civilian leaders must be consistent in articulating and transmitting objectives. That should drive planners to justly accomplish stated goals.

This was not the case in Allied Force. The objectives stated by the President did not match those stipulated by NATO Secretary General Javier Solana on April 1, 1999:

- stop the killing in Kosovo
- end the refugee crisis; make it possible for exiles to return
- create conditions for political solutions based on the Rambouillet Accord.

The contrast in wording from an address by Clinton nine days earlier was enough to cause a serious difference of opinion regarding how to conduct the war. American planners, ordered to damage the capacity of Serbia to wage war, subjected a range of targets to attack. Other members of the Alliance did not recognize that U.S. objective as a NATO aim and would not agree to certain targets. This dispute over guidance inserted friction into the process of coordinating multinational planning staffs and into the operations of the coalition as a whole.

Another issue was a lack of forthrightness with both the military and the public. The media repeatedly quoted NATO leaders who remarked

that harming civilians was never an objective. For example, on March 25, 1999, General Clark told reporters that the air campaign was “not an attack against the Serb people” and NATO

“was taking all possible measures to minimize . . . damage to innocent civilians or nearby property that’s not associated with the target.” Yet although the Allied struggle was with Milosevic, not his people, Serb civilians viewed the war in a very different light. Bombs dropping from NATO planes were hostile regardless of their political purpose. In fact, as the war continued, NATO put greater pressure directly on the Serb people. Press coverage reveals that later in the conflict the Allied leaders accepted the notion that, while avoiding civilian deaths, they needed to inflict a degree of pain on the populace. “The West hopes that Serbs, seeing hospitals and businesses without water and electricity, will turn their wrath on [Milosevic].”⁶ This shift in policy failed to match NATO rhetoric and thus undercut the credibility of military operations.

The changes in Alliance operations not only lacked transparency but were of questionable military value and hence perhaps not morally defensible. Karl Mueller of the School of Advanced Airpower Studies says “attacks on electrical power

mainly serve to damage the economy. It is not clear that this goal is worth pursuing because damage to electrical power has very serious collateral damage effects due to its impact on medical care and other essential services for civilians.”⁷

Future Operations

Overall the NATO effort was troubled. Whether anything was learned from shortfalls in the campaign is unclear. Official lessons learned from Allied Force failed to mention how to reduce noncombatant casualties.

Future operations must pay greater attention to minimizing this peril. Today societies are largely interconnected and interdependent both within and among countries. Attacking one part of a society will impact elements not related to the war effort. This presents a moral dilemma America cannot shy away from.

Destroyed factories no longer produce goods for an enemy state, but neither do they make goods for export. Economies that are closely tied together, such as Yugoslavia and Greece (which is a NATO member), have serious impact on neighbors when shut down in wartime. The Greeks, for example, have noted the effect of the conflict over Kosovo on their economy and the need for the European Union to rebuild the infrastructure of Yugoslavia to return commerce and industry to pre-war levels. As this example illustrates, the long-term consequences of targeting must be given greater weight in an increasingly interdependent world.

To apply morality to aerial bombardment, we must employ available technology to wage effective campaigns while minimizing the impact of weapons on noncombatants. For targets close to noncombatants, we must use nonlethal means which only affect military capabilities or develop lethal methods to destroy targets while reducing collateral damage. Several concepts, such as small smart bombs (SSBs), have either been successfully tested or are under development.

The Air Force Research Laboratory Armaments Directorate is developing precise weaponry with very small warheads. SSBs could deliver a hardened weapon with extreme precision using diminutive warheads that increase lethality with reduced explosives. No longer must weaponeers select multiple large blast/fragmentary weapons in the 500 to 2,000-pound range for point targets.

In Allied Force, the avowed goal of dropping major bridges in Yugoslavia was to destroy the fiber optic cables running over them. SSB technology might have hit the cable pipe but left the bridge standing. It might also have had the accuracy to strike a media facility across the street from a hospital while leaving patients uninjured.

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1st Combat Camera Squadron (Jeffrey Allen)

F-16 with KC-135
over Kosovo.

The Air Force also has small unpiloted combat aerial vehicles under development that have extended range and precision locating capability. Such weapons can deliver a small warhead onto a hardened target over extremely long distances while keeping friendly aircrews out of harm's way and greatly reducing noncombatant casualties.

Achieving military objectives with both minimal risks to friendly forces and zero collateral damage conforms to several principles of war, especially economy of force and security. While achieving objectives initiated by political leaders and refined by operational commanders is the military mission, it can be argued that, given available technology, such objectives can be reached with fewer risks to friendly forces and noncombatants. Requirements must be written to achieve a certain effect, but not necessarily the total destruction of a target set along with numerous civilians.

One authority noted that "airpower is targeting, targeting is intelligence, and intelligence is analyzing the effects of air operations."⁸ Many planners of joint aerospace operations instinctively increase the number of bombs to be dropped on a target because they think the mission requires it. They don't trust bomb damage assessments and find it easier to ensure that a target is completely destroyed than to look for the effects. This is an

operational practice that must be changed. Perhaps with new technology planners will become more discriminating in the use of fires.

To maintain the Nation's role as a global leader, the Armed Forces must conduct wars with a high degree of morality. We have allowed ourselves to accept a certain level of civilian casualties as inevitable. But many may not be necessary. There is no obligation to threaten the majority of a population with death, injury, or loss of livelihood when their country or a neighboring country is engaged in a conflict with the United States.

While not all noncombatant casualties can be avoided, it is immoral to produce casualties disproportionate to the necessity of attacking a given target. To wage moral operations, we must choose objectives that rapidly lead to the desired end-state. If it is likely that noncombatants will be affected when striking targets, the proportionality decision should be made at no lower than the JFACC level to create appropriate linkage between operational requirements and strategic objectives. Moreover, technologies should be fielded that can achieve desired effects with less collateral damage.

American decisionmakers must recognize that military actions have consequences that reach far beyond the battlefield and affect people outside the borders of an enemy state. Certain actions are simply wrong and must be avoided. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), p. 144.

² Ibid., p. 128.

³ Dana Priest, "Target Selection Was Long Process," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 1999, A-11.

⁴ Priest, "Bombing by Committee," *The Washington Post*, September 20, 1999, A-1.

⁵ John A. Tirpak, "Washington Watch: Short's View of the Air Campaign," *Air Force*, vol. 82, no. 9 (September 1999), p. 43.

⁶ Rowan Scarborough, "Bombing Utilities Could Backfire, Experts Warn," *The Washington Times*, May 25, 1999, A-14.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Phillip Meilinger, *10 Propositions Regarding Airpower* (Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air Force History and Museums Program, 1995), p. 20.