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A Note from the Editors

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

The most disadvantageous peace is better than the most just war.

ERASMUS, *ADAGIA*, 1500

Few military professionals, or the states they serve, can in the present state of the world follow Erasmus to his logical conclusion—never to resort under any circumstances to war. Even the most peaceable and democratic governments too often face dilemmas in which, in light of information then at hand, the prospect of war seems not the worst possible outcome. Military people, at least in states where civilian control is firmly instituted, also do not have the decisive voice in the matter.

Military leaders, like their civilian counterparts, find themselves on such issues in the midst of numerous, pressing, and conflicting debates. Since the time of Erasmus, and especially since the onset of the technological revolutions of the nineteenth century, whole scholarly disciplines have grown up to determine the aspects of the right or just use of force—legal, moral, ethical, philosophical. The basic documents—treaties, charters, learned writings in numerous languages—are abstruse and rarefied, seemingly far from the usual daily agendas. And yet the underlying issues are also thrashed out, as a matter of the most direct and personal urgency, in destroyer wardrooms, under canvas in the field, on flight lines—just as in seminars, board rooms, and parliaments.

The Naval War College stands, and has always stood, at the intersection of these debates and considerations; it regularly calls upon students, alumni, and friends to examine these fundamental issues. To that end, the President of the College has established a chair of leadership and ethics (occupied by Dr. Thomas B. Grasse, former editor of the Naval War College Press, and of this journal). The provost, Dr. James F. Giblin, Jr., invites speakers of diverse backgrounds and convictions, some quite challenging to military ears—and also, as the dean of Academics, offers such electives as “The Foundations of Moral Obligation” (established in 1978 by Admiral James Stockdale). Finally, the Center for Naval Warfare Studies has taken a leading role in organizing annual formal symposia,

addressed by leading scholars and practitioners, and attended by the entire student body, on the moral and ethical aspects of the military profession.

The fifteenth such conference occurred on 12–13 November 2003, a time when those aspects were, as they remain, particularly cogent. By November, it was clear that the remarkable efficiency and effectiveness of the military campaign that toppled Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq had not smoothly translated into the swift reconstitution of the Iraqi state, nor had it decisively set into irreversible motion the reshaping of the Middle East along the stable and democratic lines that had been hoped for. Issues of ethics, morality, and the law of war and armed combat presented themselves, then as now, with an urgency not known since the Vietnam War, which had led the American military to reshape itself as an all-volunteer, highly professional force.

It therefore seems wise to devote much of this present issue to this range of questions as now posed within the U.S. national security communities, military and civilian. We have not here simply reprinted addresses and panel remarks from November; we, and the original speakers, have revised and edited extensively to bring out the underlying arguments and issues. We have also drawn in a relevant paper by an author (James P. Terry) who was not present at the conference, and have invited an analysis from an expert Naval War College faculty scholar who was, Commander (and Dr.) Susan D. Fink.

It is in the nature of things that when issues of ethics, morality, and legality assume a high profile, it is because things are not going well or because there is deep community dissensus. A number of the essays presented here are quite challenging and critical of fundamental decisions and actions. But all the authors are highly qualified by training, position, and experience to advance their respective viewpoints; and all offer resources, tools, and information that we believe will be invaluable to our readers as they—as, by definition, they must—form their own views and choose their paths.

The Editors