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Fighting for the Future: Will America Triumph?

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who are interested in the challenges of the information age.

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Peters, Ralph. *Fighting for the Future: Will America Triumph?* Mechanicsburg, Penna.: Stackpole Books, 1999. 210pp. \$19.95

The introductory pages of this book are suffused with a disagreeable arrogance and condescension. Speaking of the U.S. Army in which he spent his career, Ralph Peters states that he is “loyal to it still, much as one might care for an old lover felled by drink and bad decisions.” With a metaphorical sad shake of the head but his face set nobly toward a higher truth, he sets out on a twelve-essay description of his vision of the future and the blindness of today’s military leaders. This reviewer was quite prepared for an annoying slog through a tententious book.

Yet *Fighting for the Future* turned out to be a provocative, if strident, collection of essays (published separately between 1994 and 1999). Although Peters’s intellectual arrogance does not lessen throughout, he offers many cogent arguments and observations on a variety of themes that ought not to be dismissed out of hand, even if some ultimately are not persuasive. They directly address core issues underlying many of the most difficult problems facing today’s civilian and military leadership.

Peters depicts a dark and violent future. In the opening essay, “The Culture of Future Conflict,” he argues that “future wars and violent conflicts will be shaped by the inabilities [*sic*] of governments to function as effective systems of resource distribution and control, and by the

failure of entire cultures to compete in the postmodern age. . . . Basic resources will prove inadequate for populations exploding beyond natural limits. . . . There will be fewer classic wars but more violence. . . . Intercultural struggles, with their unbridled savagery, are the great nightmare of the next century.”

The post–Cold War U.S. military is singularly unprepared to deal with this future. Politicians and military leaders alike fundamentally misunderstand this brave new world. As a result, we will “face a dangerous temptation to seek purely technological responses to behavioral challenges” and will “need to struggle against our American tendency to focus on hardware and bean counting to attack the more difficult and subtle problems posed by human behavior and regional history.” The forces we are buying today at exorbitant cost may prove unusable against actual future threats. Peters argues that against a broad range of emerging threats, new rules of engagement rather than new weapons are needed, since no nation or other entity can face us head to head in conventional terms. “We are constrained by a past century’s model of what armies do, what police do, and what governments legally can do. Our opponents have none of this baggage.”

One essay takes issue with the notion of a technologically based revolution in military affairs (RMA). Though to a degree he argues against straw men, Peters’s main point is that technological issues are secondary to understanding the human nature of future foes—no argument there. On the other hand, in another essay he claims that “current and impending technologies could permit us to reinvent warfare,” allowing us to attack instigators of violence rather than their populations. Ironically, two other essays

deal with future urban combat and armored warfare in futuristic terms that some leading RMA proponents would endorse gladly.

The essay “A Revolution in Military Ethics?” is perhaps the best in the book. It is a hard-nosed look at “ethics” as a crutch: “Ethics in war on the part of a Western society do not so much protect the objects of our violence as they shield us from the verity of our actions.” Peters argues that current Western “ethics” have separated combatants from directly seeing the consequences of their actions, in essence “dehumanizing” warfare through stand-off precision. There are other perverse “ethics.” We are unwilling to assassinate Saddam, but we are willing to strangle the Iraqi population in vain hopes of undoing him. “We might discover that our current military ethics are the least humane thing about us.”

Peters makes a compelling argument that Americans are psychologically unprepared to understand the nature of their future foes. The United States will face implacable forces in nationalism and fundamentalism. Americans cannot imagine the level of brutality required to deal with “warriors,” as opposed to soldiers. Peters’s warriors are “erratic primitives of shifting allegiance, habituated to violence, with no stake in civil order,” and their defeat will require a toughness and seriousness of purpose that may be inconsistent with the moral values for which we claim to fight. Part of the problem is a feckless multicultural relativism. “What of all that self-hobbling rhetoric about the moral equivalency of all cultures? Isn’t it possible that a culture (or religion or form of government) that provides a functional combination of individual and collective security with personal liberties really does deserve to be

taken more seriously than and emulated above a culture that glorifies corruption, persecutes nonbelievers, lets gunmen rule, and enslaves women? Is all human life truly sacred, no matter what crimes the individual or his collective may commit?” Unless the United States stops fooling itself about the nature of its foes, it risks defeat, or at best military ineffectiveness.

Fighting for the Future, for all its provocative arguments and pithy language, sometimes borders on the apocalyptic. Its culminating essay is positively messianic. Peters argues for a “Strategic Enforcement Initiative” to assure American global dominance. “The goal, initially, is not to interfere in the affairs of foreign states, as long as they behave humanely toward their populations. The first . . . step is to force an end to interstate warfare. We alone will have the wealth and power to do it—plus, we could collect defense taxes from states that benefit from our actions. As the world’s only extant empire of law and justice, we also have the right and responsibility to do it. We need have no moral reservations about outlawing aggression and then enforcing that prohibition.” In short, the United States should “dominate the earth for the good of humankind.” Notwithstanding the fun of making French (and Chinese) readers hyperventilate, advocating aggression in pursuit of a “higher good” is unacceptable; the world has had enough recent experience with utopianism. Peters might better have reserved this essay for his novels.

For all its stridency, however, *Fighting for the Future* offers thought-provoking arguments and is well worth reading. If Peters is too convinced he knows the future, that is still a lesser sin than smug,

Luddite, self-assurance that tomorrow will look just like today.

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Osiel, Mark J. *Obeying Orders: Atrocity, Military Discipline & the Law of War*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1999. 398pp. \$39.95

It is a fundamental belief of thoughtful military personnel that what they do, even in the heat of battle, remains a moral enterprise. This important and careful volume critically assesses an important legal pillar of that belief: that moral soldiers are to obey only *lawful orders*. It is often said that soldiers are expected to disobey unlawful orders, especially those ordering atrocities or violations of the laws of war. Since Nuremberg, it is held that “superior orders” do not constitute a defense against charges of war crimes. Osiel makes it abundantly clear that these nostrums are far from certain or legally reliable as presently understood.

Mark J. Osiel is a professor of law at the University of Iowa and the author of *Mass Atrocity: Collective Memory and the Law* (Transaction, 1999). He knows whereof he speaks: he has interviewed extensively the perpetrators and the victims of Argentina’s “dirty war,” and his grasp of the relevant literature (legal, philosophical, and military) on the subject of obedience is capacious.

With care and precision, the author challenges the present standard, which requires soldiers to disobey orders that are “manifestly” illegal. This standard, he argues, is fraught with unclarity and is far too permissive of illegal acts in war.

The book is much more than a dry legal treatise about a point of law. Osiel writes with real passion and breadth. He includes important chapters on the psychology of small military units and the requisites for their cohesion and combat effectiveness. He is careful throughout to acknowledge the limitations of law as a constraint on combat behavior. He argues with zeal for the legal and practical possibility of doing better than the present legal standard in encouraging moral responsibility in officers and soldiers. In the end, Osiel transcends the genre of legal analysis entirely, grounding his ethical appeal in the very nature and basis of the military profession itself. He is Aristotelian when he closely links moral conduct in war with the virtues that define excellence in the profession of arms itself.

In addition, Osiel is helpful in a practical sense. He suggests how best to use Judge Advocate General advisers on military staffs, and he offers concrete examples of subordinates who, faced with unclear orders (deliberate or otherwise), managed by means of requests for clarification to avoid committing war crimes.

Osiel dissects the various ways in which atrocities are committed: “(1) by stimulating violent passions among the troops (‘from below’); (2) through organized, directed campaigns of terror (‘from above’); (3) by tacit connivance between higher and lower echelons, each with its own motives; and (4) by brutalization of subordinates to foster their aggressiveness in combat.” Since the causes are diverse, each type will require its own unique approach to control it; but Osiel’s overall point is profound: “The evidence examined here suggests that effective prohibitions against atrocity depend much less on the foreseeability to soldiers of criminal prosecution after the fact