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Personal Reflections on the Use of Military Force and Its Relevance to National Security Strategy

Admiral Charles R. Larson, U.S. Navy

As I REFLECT ON MY PERSONAL CAREER in the field of military force and national security, I wish I could offer a simple vision, sharply refined and clarified by decades of experience. But such a vision eludes me. These are topics of immense scope and complexity—my personal reflections on the past few decades are a bit kaleidoscopic.

• I have seen the *diverse tools* of military force: the cockpits of aircraft, the control rooms of submarines, the frenetic buzz of command centers.

• I have seen the *disparate levels* of force application: the gripping suspense of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the painful grind of the Vietnam War, the relentless rush of Desert Storm.

• And I have seen the *variant purposes* for the application of military force: from humanitarian operations, saving thousands of lives on the cyclone-swept lowlands of Bangladesh, to Cold War deterrence, threatening millions of lives with nuclear devastation.

Is this complex perspective merely the price we pay for having lived—as the Chinese curse would have it—through "interesting times"? Are things settling down? I'm afraid we all know the answer to that. These times may be the most "interesting" of all, and the public policy debate on the role of military force in our national security rages unabated. The questions are all around us.

• How do you use military force in a post–Cold War world?

• When should force be committed? Are we committing it properly in Bosnia? Or are we too late? Should we have strict rules for when to commit force?

Admiral Larson, as the Commander in Chief, Pacific Command, delivered this address to the Secretary of the Navy's Current Strategy Forum at the Naval War College on 15 June 1994. Admiral Larson left that post on 11 July 1994 to assume his present duties as Superintendent of the U.S. Naval Academy.

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• How much force is appropriate? Did we have too much going in to Somalia? Did we use it properly while there?

• How much force structure do we need? Why do we need decisive, overwhelming force?

The torrent of current debate can even spill beyond current questions, to issues of the past or future. From the comfortable vantage point of historical retrospect, some are asking if military force—or at least so much military force—was really needed to win the Cold War. Others are asking if we are maintaining an obsolete force, ill prepared for a future when "war will be transformed," "civilizations will clash," and nation-states will either be subsumed by ultranational forces or disintegrate into ethnic fragments.

If there is any humor in all of this, it may lie in the frustration of a New York newspaper article reporting that General John M. Shalikashvili did "not believe that you can bring peace [to Bosnia] through the barrel of a gun." Highly incensed, the newspaper ran a headline that read, "The Pentagon is Crawling with Pacifists." If you're a military person who lived through the Vietnam era, you can't help but chuckle.

But in the end we all have to make sense of this confusion. How can we understand it? Are there *any* useful guidelines? What is the use of military force and its relevance to national security strategy? And how do we approach this examination? Do we put national security strategy under a microscope? That's problematic, because national strategy continues to evolve. Do we look for unifying threads among the clamor of ideas on military force? That is equally daunting. If it is hard to grasp the elements of this issue, perhaps we will do better if we address its context, the general notion of conflict. I am speaking of conflict in a most general sense that includes not only war but all forms of international competition. I do not have a grand theory of conflict to lay out—just three very simple observations. I think you will agree that they are simple—perhaps so simple that we tend to overlook them. My hope is that insights on this phenomenon called "conflict" may help us understand the complex topic of military force and its relevance for national security strategy.

My first observation on conflict is this: *ideas*—ideas in competition—are the basis of conflict. Are there alternative perspectives on conflict? Of course. Conflict can be viewed as a balancing of power, an outgrowth of economic competition, or even a clash of civilizations. But power protects and projects ideas of value and interest; economic relationships advance ideas of individual and group profit; and clashing civilizations are best defined by the ideas that distinguish them. Ideas are the common denominator in conflict. Ideas matter, because they are the stuff of decision, and decisions—by either individuals or groups of individuals—permeate every aspect of conflict.

We now describe our Cold War victory, for example, as a victory of ideas. Free markets and democratic pluralism prevailed in a protracted competition with command economies and totalitarianism. Although ideas are the basis of conflict, however, not all ideas are defined to the point of ideology. The Cold War was exceptional in that sense: we enjoyed, and endured, a competing set of ideas well defined in theory and miserably demonstrated in execution. Today the competing ideas can be ambiguous, arcane, or—from our perspective—bizarre. We are turning to regional strategies because we face regional ideas, ideas that we find more confusing than enlightening.

- Is General Aideed the rightful controller of the port of Mogadishu?
- Is the Tutsi minority a lethal threat to the Hutus of Rwanda?
- Do Bosnian Serbs have "historical justification" for ethnic cleansing to seize a secure, contiguous territory?

Frankly, Americans do not know much about these ideas. They have not had decades—as in the Cold War—to learn about them. Until they learn about them, they won't care. Some cynics might scoff and say that Americans rarely care about ideas. I disagree completely. A few weeks ago I read an interview exploring the "typical American" with Gish Jen, a young Chinese-American writer. In Ms. Jen's opinion, "the nature of being American has to do with having certain shared ideas. We're 'the great experiment.' We're a country that's built on thoughts and conceptions. . . ." Ms. Jen has it exactly right. Americans will go to war for the ideas of a Washington or a Lincoln. They tend to be indifferent to the pragmatic arguments of *realpolitik*. Anyone attempting to understand the use of force for United States national security must understand this resonance in the mainsprings of American motivation—to Americans, *ideas matter*.

My second observation on conflict deals with the mechanism for this competition of ideas. How is conflict resolved? My observation is simply this: there are two components to conflict resolution—*logic* and *violence*. That is a rather stark statement. The philosopher Ayn Rand put it rather bluntly as well: "There are only two means by which men can deal with one another: guns or logic. Force or persuasion. Those that know that they cannot win by means of logic, have always resorted to guns."

Americans are comfortable seeing logic as a component of conflict resolution. Our instincts are that reason should prevail. That was certainly our strategy for the Cold War—and it worked. Through decades of containment and daily demonstration that ours was the superior system, the element of logic prevailed. As Michael Howard puts it, "The Cold War was not won by Western armed forces. . . . The war was won by Western market economies. . . ."

Americans are less comfortable with the role of violence in conflict. We aim for a rule of law, and the paradox of our violent society is abhorred as our greatest failure. But in conflict, violence is a reality and not an aberration. We are a bit

bewildered that people could favor violence over logic in the competition of ideas. But as events from Somalia, Bosnia, Haiti, and Rwanda demonstrate, the world is filled with people prepared to "resort to guns." That is why we must be engaged—and that is why we must be prepared.

If you find the violence and logic components of conflict resolution a bit too much of an "either-or" proposition, then you are ready for my third and final observation on conflict: the violence and logic components of conflict resolution are totally *interdependent*—they cannot be applied in isolation. Although we accept the role of logic in our Cold War victory, for example, the potential violence of Western military strength was the enabling factor that made a containment strategy feasible. Today we see that logic would have the North Koreans voluntarily give up their nuclear program to reap the economic benefits that would accrue to their people. We know that Kim Il Sung is no stranger to violence, and we dare not rely on logic alone in dealing with the North Koreans.*

Military force, properly applied, is not pure violence. It is the measured application of violence to encourage a favorable course of logic on the part of our opponents. For military force to be effective, violence does not have to be applied, but merely credible. The violence you threaten must induce a compelling logic for your opponent in which he foresees a situation that is even more unpleasant than the concession you seek. That situation must be or appear to be inevitable and permanent—otherwise the enemy will not give in but will wait for things to improve. Winston Churchill recognized this synergy of violence and logic in a note to the First Sea Lord: "*Superior force is a powerful persuader.*"

So my observations on conflict are really quite simple: *ideas* are the basis of conflict; there are two components to conflict resolution, *logic* and *violence*; and these components of conflict resolution are *totally interdependent*. As I said, they are pretty simple—perhaps so simple that we tend to overlook them. What implications do they carry for the use of military force in our national security?

Turning first to the post–Cold War environment, we have already noted that in the post–Cold War world, the ideas in competition are diffuse and diverse. Although communism was a frightening ideology, in retrospect it was clearly defined and relatively easy to understand. Today, new and unfamiliar issues vault into our consciousness. The ambivalence of ideas is not confined to overseas—the hierarchy of our own ideas is changing also. During the Cold War, the idea that our very national existence was daily at risk propelled national security concerns to the top of our agenda. But national security is no longer first among equals. It competes, internally, with ideas of economic security and human rights. The internal competition of ideas further complicates our external dealings, as demonstrated in our experiences with China over the last several

* The North Korean leader died on 8 July 1994, three weeks after this address was delivered.

months. From the perspective of our immediate national security, it is a safer but a much more complex world.

From the perspective of so many other countries, it is *not* a safer world. As the great competition between communism and democracy leaves center stage, scores of other conflicts gain increased attention. We fool ourselves if we think that our Cold War victory is a global win for democracy. And we delude ourselves if we think that our relatively bloodless Cold War strategy is a model for all other conflicts. Logic will not always be heard. All over the globe, people who cannot win by logic are prepared to resort to guns.

Post–Cold War strategists may need to resurrect a Cold War term: *linkage*. The art of effective use of military force will certainly be the art of linkage: among ideas, among the components of conflict resolution, and among opposing forces. The linkage among ideas—the basis of conflict—will be a fundamental consideration. We will need to understand the ideas that underlie regional tensions and crises. We will need to draw the logical links between those ideas and our own interests and values. We will need to prioritize those links, because our ideas and interests are not equal. A firm understanding of our own ideas and values will be the first consideration in security strategy. Our national ideas and interests should be a prominent feature of our National Security Strategy document. The linkage between violence and logic—the components of conflict resolution—must be understood. To consider either in isolation is a futile exercise. If our current debate on the use of military force has a singular deficiency, it is a propensity to treat violence and logic as completely independent aspects of conflict resolution. We are particularly prone to mistake fighting, or the cessation of fighting, as an end rather than a means. But if your goal is to end the violence, and you do not assess the ideas and reasoning process behind the violence, you will be disappointed. People who have resorted to violence have already decided that the logic of the competing ideas was not compelling. How do you change their reasoning? How can military force offer them an alternative future so unpleasant that logic will prevail? Will the violence of bombing losses outweigh Serb commitment to the idea of a "Greater Serbia," driving them to the negotiating table? Or will it merely stiffen their resolve? Determining the linkage between violence and logic is the art of military strategy.

Finally, strategy will always be an art rather than a science, because there is a linkage among opposing forces. There are two sides in a competition of ideas. Actions beget reactions. If we conduct aerial raids, can Aideed introduce a countermeasure? If we bomb Serb artillery, can it be moved to hospital yards? Such calculations dominate the thinking of the military professional. When we commit military force, we must have already answered the next question: if this doesn't work, then what? This linkage between opposing forces is the reason

the military professional hates gradualism. Gradualism gives the enemy time to react effectively. The military professional favors decisive, overwhelming force, not because he loves violence but because he wants the logic of the enemy's situation both to be, and appear to be, immediately hopeless.

If we view the use of military force from the context of our three simple observations on conflict, the role of the media comes into focus. In a competition of ideas, the role of the media—the communicator of ideas—is central, not peripheral. Global and instantaneous telecommunications offer both opportunity and challenge. The opportunity includes the frequent and pervasive communications of our capabilities and intentions, giving an opponent every chance to pursue logic in resolving a crisis. The concomitant challenge, however, is that internal doubts, disagreements, and misgivings are equally communicated—in fact, amplified—lending embarrassing transparency to our actual will and staying power. This is especially true for democracies, and this transparency seriously limits the utility of military force for symbolic or demonstrative purposes.

None of my personal reflections leads me to see a decrease in the utility of our military forces. We generally recognize and accept the uses of military forces for both deterrence and what Tom Schelling of Harvard calls *compellence*, the actual use of armed force to make people do things. However, there is another role for military force that is not so widely understood—what Michael Howard calls *reassurance*. Reassurance provides a general sense of security that is not specific to any particular threat or scenario. I stand before you with over three years of personal experience in the use of military force for reassurance. As Commander in Chief, Pacific Command, I pursued a theater military strategy I called Cooperative Engagement—"cooperative" because it emphasized our military cooperation with friends and allies, and "engagement" to underscore U.S. resolve to remain engaged throughout the region. This strategy was not threat-specific. It reassured the countries of the region with every means at our disposal. We did not just think in terms of planes, ships, and tanks; we thought about humanitarian and nation-building programs, emergency disaster relief, security assistance, training assistance, and a host of other "engagements." In all of them we continuously and effectively communicated U.S. ideas, interests, and values. We maximized the transparency of capabilities and intentions, thereby minimizing the likelihood of a resort to violence. Although any two nations can be very different, they invariably share at least one idea: the imperative of national security. As nations try to understand each other, their respective militaries offer an excellent starting point. In Pacific Command, we demonstrated the stabilizing, reassuring role of military forces—their utility not only in war but in peace as well.

Is the Pentagon crawling with pacifists? The Pentagon is crawling with people who have a lifetime of experience and study in the science of military force. They understand the capabilities of violence, but they understand its limitations as well. They know, for example, the limits of air power. They know the risks to pilots. They know the influences of weather and terrain. They understand the potential countermeasures of passive and active air defense, and they know too well the capabilities of enemy "pacifists" to determine these countermeasures.

But violence is not the only calculation of military force. Either explicitly or implicitly, these "Pentagon pacifists" are analyzing the ideas in competition. Does the American public understand them? Does the American public understand the linkage to the things they hold dear? Do they value that linkage to the extent that they will bear the cost? If the answers are "no," then these Pentagon pacifists will be inclined to submit a judgment against the use of military force.

One of our more interesting media side-debates is whether military men should make such judgments, judgments that appear so political. Edward Luttwak, for example, complains that our security structure now suffers a "paralyzing reversal of roles, in which the military simply refuses to offer military options when asked for them and is not disciplined to do so." Mr. Luttwak believes the Pentagon is crawling with pacifists and that they should leave the domestic logic to the politicians. Mr. Luttwak has the courage of his convictions, but I believe he asks the wrong thing of today's senior military leadership. We all went to Vietnam with the courage of our convictions. In sad retrospect, we would have rather had the support of the American people. *The components of conflict resolution are totally interdependent.* You can not separate the political from the military. At the senior military level, our "Pentagon pacifists" must consider the entire interaction of military, political, economic, and diplomatic factors. Purely military advice—if such advice is possible—can mislead.

So, having laid out my conceptual framework and some of its more obvious implications, I will summarize my personal reflections on the use of military force.

• Don't look for "the end of history," and don't wait for the "end of conflict." As long as there are human beings on this planet, there will be ideas. Ideas will compete, and military force will always be needed, because some human beings will choose violence over logic.

• The ideas of others will often be in direct conflict with our own ideas and interests. Even if they are not, the violence that occurs will contradict our societal commitment to peaceful resolution of conflict. In both cases, there will be pressure to "do something."

• We must strive to understand the competition of ideas that drives the violence, and what conditions must be established so that logic will prevail.

• We must maintain superior force, Churchill's "powerful persuader." Absent a specific threat, we still must have a force capable of deterring, compelling, and reassuring. We must not size this force on the basis of the actual violence it imposed in the past, using such measures as "1.5 Desert Storms." Rather, we must size the force so that future competitors will measure its potential violence and accept a logic that deters, compels, and reassures.

• "Surgical strikes" are tempting. But when we apply force, we must have a goal in mind and be ready to take the next step, and the next after that, if we do not achieve our expected result. In our transparent democracy we must project a resolve that convinces our adversary that we can create a situation more unpleasant than the concession we seek, so that logic will prevail. We must have the will to continue. Our people must understand what we are doing and accept going all the way to the goal we have chosen.

I recall a wonderful sequence from the film *Lawrence of Arabia*. T.E. Lawrence has just encountered the culture of Arabia, a world of very different ideas. During a desert trek, one of the Arabs is separated from the group. His companions are resigned to this act of God: "Allah wills it—it is written." Lawrence risks his own life and saves the straggler. Upon returning to the camp he confronts his companions: "See? Nothing is written! *We write*!" As we confront the future, we must remember that nothing is written. Are we doomed to a clash of civilizations? Will military force lose its utility to the nation state? We do not know. But it's a good bet that conflict will continue to be a competition of ideas. Those ideas will compete through logic and violence. Most importantly: nothing is written—*we write*. Through cooperation and careful study we can shape the future, achieving, we hope, a world where logic is more common than violence.

Ψ

A mind is an officer's principal weapon.

Major General Paul K. Van Riper, USMC