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The Death of Conquest

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THERE HAVE been at least two elephants in the room since September 11, 2001. The one nobody wants to arouse is Islam; the one nobody wants to acknowledge is conquest. We don't "do" conquest anymore. Our presumptions seem to be that we shouldn't do it, and that we can't do it. Thus in the polymorphous scholarship and commentary that have appeared since last September 11, those who would influence policy argue over the lures of pre-emption and the limits of power. They debate a putative U.S. imperial role and reflect on the predicates of American history. But old-fashioned conquest, in which ground is seized and populations are controlled against their will for extended periods, is never raised as a policy option. The world community, such as it is, has come to oppose utterly wars fought overtly and permanently to occupy, subjugate or seize another country or its population. This represents a genuine if frequently overlooked new norm of international politics.[1]

World War II is the obvious watershed for this new norm. That war was initiated by those bent on literal conquest on the grandest scale, and once they were beaten the Allies came up with all sorts of safeguards to prevent conquerors from ever again being able to contemplate such a project. Nuclear weapons soon came to represent another deterrent in our anti-conquest arsenal, and the creation of the United Nations yet another. Indeed, the UN exists only because member states agree that territorial sovereignty is so inviolate that cross-border invasion should be a punishable offense. The rapid dissolution of the vast British and French colonial empires after World War II was to some degree a result of the new anti-conquest norm, but it also contributed to it by illustrating the impermanence and costly trouble of imperial control.

The very nature of the Cold War drove a further nail in conquest's coffin. Given the specter of mutually assured destruction, both we and the Soviets realized, privately at least, that neither side could pursue the outright conquest of the other; thus all military competition shifted toward the proxy (in places like Vietnam) and the symbolic (with arcane calculations of warheads and throw-weight). Besides, it was communism we opposed, so that "to win" the Cold War came to mean undermining (or overwhelming) an ideology and its trappings, not conquering Russia

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[1]Coral Bell's insightful essay, "Normative Shift", in the Winter 2002/03 issue, mentions several new 20th-century norms—but not the death of conquest.

or subjugating Russians. The very fact that international politics at its most consequential level was conducted for over half a century without reference to the possibility of literal conquest had huge implications that we have yet to recognize, let alone fully digest.

The broad consensus against conquest has not, of course, abolished entirely the urge to conquer—witness the Argentine invasion of the Falklands and Iraq's incursion into Kuwait. But it has made clear that international wars of conquest stand an excellent chance of being forcefully sanctioned or opposed by powers acting under the aegis of "the international community."

Other factors, too, have discounted the relative significance of sheer military force—and one of these is the way today's greatest power, the United States, conceives of military force relative to other forms of power. We are a corporate republic, a capitalist juggernaut whose expansionist impulses are gladly sublimated in capturing markets and extending our economic reach. Like the Hellenes before us, we tend to colonize via commerce and culture, no matter how shamelessly materialist our version of the latter may be.

Whether our particular genius to show others how they, too, can release their inner consumer selves makes us economic imperialists is debatable. But we are clearly not conquerors in the classic imperial sense. We do not seek permanent physical control. We are neither interested in forcibly subjugating nor in forcibly absorbing foreign populations. We do not exact tribute. Nor do we force anyone to labor on our behalf. Perhaps most significant but least appreciated, we also do not militarily seize or appropriate anything without offering compensation. Together, these attitudes and the behaviors they sire reflect as profound a shift in the nature of human relations, never mind the *modus operandi* of the pre-eminent global power, as any that has occurred since the debut of conquest thousands of years ago.

The fact that literal conquest is no longer an imaginable war aim has had all sorts of unintended consequences. In a cruel twist of irony, there is even a way to connect Al-Qaeda's aims—and its methods—to *our* abolition of conquest. Let us now tend to these effects and connections.

Conquest, the West and the Rest

TO EXPLAIN what a radical disjuncture our antipathy toward conquest truly represents requires a brief foray through the historiography of warfare. Military historians usually present this history in terms of a singular progression: first came stone tools, then bronze, then iron, then steel, and now we've got beams of light. According to this line of thinking, different peoples have simply gotten stuck at different places along this trajectory, which explains why Masai warriors still carry spears and the Yanamamo cannot sufficiently defend themselves or their rainforest. Even when military historians turn to organizational issues, like the recruitment and deployment of a military, they usually make it seem as though humans have steadily moved on a single track from the simple to the complex.

Some historians do occasionally take a less evolutionary tack and aver that, lurking beneath all of this technological and organizational advancement, the essence of war really hasn't changed: humans fight for the same old reasons and to accomplish the same old goals.

Neither view quite fits the ethnographic evidence, however.

The anthropologist H.H. Turney-High first pointed out more than fifty years ago that, until World War II, two

types of warfare had co-existed for millennia.[2] One involved conquest, the other raiding. Those who fought below the "military horizon", as Turney-High called it, could not engage in conquest because they could not field permanent forces or engage in sustained warfare. They had no surpluses with which to support troops nor leaders who could compel warriors to fight (let alone fight in strategically smart ways). Turney-High never explained why or how primitive peoples came to be stuck below this horizon, though he did note the extent to which their warfare became ritualized as a result: they took trophies, stole women and counted coup in a never-ending round of raids and counter-raids. Beyond this, they did not progress. The proof? They never turned into us. Nor, as popular military historians like John Keegan and Victor Davis Hanson point out, could they beat us at our own game.[3]

But they weren't playing our game. Not only do those who write about the Western way of war mostly fail to differentiate among non-Westerners, but worse, by failing to grasp the difference between raiding and conquest forms of warfare, they elide all sorts of critical differences. Were we to re-examine the distinction Turney-High makes between people who did not progress and those who did, we would notice that those he calls primitive were not just non-Western, they were often nomadic. They were stateless hunters and gatherers, livestock raisers or shifting cultivators. They were not the least bit interested in waging war in order to control or subjugate a foreign population. Yes, they were often happy to acquire captives and some indulged in vicious raids and may well have wanted to wipe out their closest rivals. But so long as they preferred a nomadic lifestyle, none of these peoples had reason or inclination to sit in one place for long enough to exert permanent control. The great North African historian, Ibn Khaldun, already saw this in the 14th century: where permanence was an alien concept, control was not just impossible, but meaningless.[4]

In contrast, wherever people have been able to exploit a fixed resource base permanently, or were stuck having to do so, we see arms competitions aimed either at advancing or preventing conquest. The rule seems to be: the more people invest in fixed property, the more valuable that investment becomes; and the more valuable it becomes, the more enticing the conquest of it becomes, too. Why else fortify a settlement except to protect what it contains? Fortification itself, though, sends the message that riches are to be had within. Once fortified, settlements were bound to invite sieges, sieges countermeasures, and countermeasures better siege engines. Along with arms races came organization races. Armies were mustered; taxes were raised; rulers were empowered; dynasties were founded; states were consolidated. And the more often national armies fought, won and improved, the better they did subsequently. This process composes, so to speak, the birth of conquest.

Now pit these two social types of war-

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[2]Turney-High, *Primitive War: Its Practice and its Concepts* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991 [1949]).

[3]Jeremy Black is one of the few military historians to argue that Westerners triumphed due more to others' socio-political weaknesses than to Western strengths. See his *War and the World: Military Power and the Fate of Continents, 1450–2000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

[4]The Mongols and other steppe nomads might appear to be exceptions, but they are not. See Thomas Barfield, "The devil's horsemen: steppe nomadic warfare in historical perspective", in S.P. Reyna and R.E. Downs, eds., *Studying War: Anthropological Perspectives* (Langhorne, PA: Gordon & Breach, 1984).

fare against one another. It should be evident that whenever people keen on conquest fought those who were not, the latter could not possibly prevail. By definition, societies in which stateless peoples lived tended to be decentralized and so lacked the ability to organize or sustain a military. Such peoples, too, were unfamiliar with the social form they were up against and so, not knowing how a state or a government operated, they could not recognize its vulnerabilities. At best, they could take advantage of gaps in the security of invading militaries at the tactical level, but there was no way for even the toughest mobile tribal fighters to penetrate successfully to the core of the state itself. States, in contrast, hit tribal peoples right where they lived—and often attacked *how* they lived.

The Rest Strike Back

SUCH CONDITIONS, however, hardly describe most stateless people or non-state actors today. For one thing, few non-Western societies remain nomadic. More important, those who do not share our values (since this is what we really mean by "non-Western") hold at least two increasingly powerful advantages.

First, they now know us better than we know them, and have penetrated our world far better than we have penetrated theirs. They understand very well indeed how our states and governments work.

Second, by definition, those who do not ascribe to Western values are not bound by our conventions and constraints. We may prevent them from indulging in cross-border invasions, but this only encourages them to discover new tactics, techniques and procedures that bypass overt conquest. Indeed, not abiding by our conventions frees them to engage in behavior that is not only reprehensible (by our standards), but, even more seriously, that defies easy redress. Here is where real innovation in the realm of warfare has occurred over the past several decades, and where our real challenges lie.

Consider, for instance, the phenomenon of child soldiers. Their prevalence across the African combat belt represents a completely organic development. John Garang reportedly began absorbing orphans into the Sudanese People's Liberation Army in the early 1980s. At first he offered them security, food and shelter in exchange for their help around camp. Before long he was using some as soldiers. Shortly thereafter, Youweri Mouseveni in Uganda also "discovered" orphans, whom he likewise turned into soldiers. Then, less than a decade after their appearance as combatants in Sudan, we find Charles Taylor (of Liberia) and Foday Sankoh (of Sierra Leone) pushing the use of eight, nine, ten and eleven year-olds toward the next logical step: murdering parents in order to create orphan children who can then be turned into soldiers.

If we could suspend our moral sensibilities for a moment, we might marvel at how imaginative people can be and note the horrible irony that has occurred. What some West Africans have achieved with child soldiers is something that Western researchers have sought for years: the Universal Soldier who needs little sleep, can withstand tremendous hardship, and is still able to fight.[5] The fear among many military psychiatrists has been that even if pharmaceuticals could be developed to keep American military personnel awake and functioning, these drugs would rob them of their consciences, leaving us with super-soldiers as capable of committing atrocities as of being effective agents of state power. As it

[5]See Richard A. Gabriel, *No More Heroes: Madness and Psychiatry in War* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1987).

happens, this is a good description of what child soldiers are made to do—commit atrocities before they have matured enough to have developed consciences. In the process, of course, there is every likelihood they will never develop consciences, and will remain wedded to violence for life.

Child soldiers represent just one diabolically clever development that has been enabled by the death of conquest. As has been much remarked recently, suicide bombers who, while not children, are also not fully-formed adults, comprise another. They are utterly low-tech yet hugely effective. Indeed, how many billions have we spent on precision-guided smart weapons, compared to how little Hamas or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka has invested in martyr-based munitions delivery systems? The purposes of both systems are roughly similar, and both are, or can be, very effective. They differ, however, in one important regard: precision-guided munitions are technologically sophisticated, most being properly described by the phrase "fire and *forget*"; suicide bombers, in contrast, iconize memory. With photos of martyred bombers plastered all over bedroom and living room walls, who *can* forget?

Like orphans, alienated youth are an unintended but inevitable consequence of conflict. They may be slightly harder to "weaponize", but the fact that they can be used to target random civilians specifically, rain terror and recruit new martyrs all in one sets a whole new standard for military parsimony.

Terror has always been a fear multiplier, but over time people grow inured to chronic acts. For those wielding terror, then, surprise matters and novelty counts. Both can be achieved by varying the timing, location or scale of what is done. Al-Qaeda operatives could not bring down the World Trade Center towers with a method we have come to consider conventional—a car bomb. So they brought them down unconventionally, using our own airplanes. To do so they also hijacked assumptions about hijackings, which further indicates the distance we have traveled since militants first started taking over civilian aircraft in the early 1970s. Yet another novel trend was illustrated on September 11, 2001: no one claimed explicit credit for the attacks. Nor has anyone claimed responsibility for blowing up the Khobar Towers, or ramming the U.S.S. *Cole*, or setting off bombs in those Russian apartment complexes. Anonymity for attacks of this magnitude would have been unheard of and indeed unthinkable decades ago. But for those seeking to undermine and overwhelm rather than capture or seize, nothing makes more sense.

Other fairly recent practices represent the flip side of killing civilians anonymously. These include the use of civilians as human shields. In 1982 the PLO purposely put its anti-aircraft guns in apartment buildings in Beirut, thus turning local residents into safeguards for its weapons. In 1991 Saddam Hussein took Westerners hostage to shield certain sites. In both cases what was done was based on the premise that neither Israel nor the United States would knowingly sacrifice groups of civilians. Similarly, although scorched-earth tactics have been used since the advent of agriculture, Saddam Hussein clearly meant to offend our environmental sensibilities when he befouled the Persian Gulf; his intent was not just to cripple Kuwait financially, but to maximize a form of aesthetic shock.

Without question, such actions can be viewed as variations on old themes. In previous ages children were conscripted, hostages were taken, and Samson sacrificed himself to kill others. But the intent with which such things are done today suggests that more than just past practices

are being violated. *We* are being violated. Western conventions regarding what should or should not be done in war are being consciously, purposely flouted.

At the same time, violence is not being put to quite the same uses it once was. When conquerors in the past laid waste entire communities and obliterated whole peoples, this was almost always done for its demonstration effect—to show others what would happen to them if they, too, refused to submit or chose to rebel. The aim was, still, to subjugate. Not so today, as we see most vividly with ethnic cleansing—itself a direct consequence of our anti-conquest sentiments. Not only did World War II finish off the colonial empires, much as World War I did the landed empires, but by 1945, with overt imperialism clearly on the way out, political and military entrepreneurs had to find new ways to secure loot and booty for their supporters. This was easy during the Cold War, when the United States and USSR (or their proxies) could be counted on as patrons. But when those sources of largesse dried up, leaders and aspiring leaders had to find alternative sources. Unable to invade or absorb other countries, they did what hard-pressed leaders have always done to generate wealth: cannibalize their own. They discovered they could "right" long-standing ethnic wrongs, create *lebensraum*, and liberate resources simply by getting rid of people from within their own borders—something Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe is only the most recent leader to do.

But there is also another way to interpret ethnic cleansing: as a "strategic improvement" on genocide. Unlike genocide, the aim of ethnic cleansing is to remove people, not to annihilate them. Even had the Nazis won World War II in Europe, they could not have rid the world of Jews; final solutions are impossible in a world of diasporas. Removal is easier than murder, and has been made easier still thanks to the existence of UNHCR, the corporatization of humanitarian relief, and the proliferation of governmental and non-governmental aid agencies. One of the most striking instances of a leader using relief to further his own ends occurred during the mid-1980s, when Ethiopia's Haile-Mariam Mengistu used feeding camps as traps. With families flooding in to receive famine relief, he was able to cull males from ethnic groups and factions he wished to suborn or eliminate. He did much of this with the tacit complicity of relief agencies that were much more anxious to maintain a presence in Ethiopia than to expose Mengistu's manipulation of them.[6]

Learning Curves

CUNNING people have always been able to turn adversity into advantage, as well as wring narrow opportunity from the best-intentioned acts of others. We often winked at this during the Cold War, when we viewed most conflict through communist/anti-communist and insurgency/counter-insurgency lenses. At the time, Marxist tactics received far more attention than did Maoist tactics, while we tended to consider tactics developed by anyone else as not tactics at all. We therefore learned nothing from militias in Lebanon or *mujaheddin* in Afghanistan, but, as we now know, others did. Take Velupillai Prabhakaran, long-time leader of the LTTE. Prabhakaran was so impressed with the damage done by the 1983 truck bomb in Lebanon that killed 241 U.S. Marines that he set about collecting enough explosives so that the LTTE could blow up a truck of its own in Sri Lanka, which it finally did in 1987. Over time, Prabhakaran progressed from suicide drivers to suicide bombers, and then to

[6]Editor's note: This theme is discussed below in Alan J. Kuperman's "Suffering."

suicide boats. No one has done more with suicide tactics than he has, while others, in turn, seem to have learned from *his* example—as we saw with the U.S.S. *Cole*.

Not only have we failed to study and understand a lot of ruthless tactical brilliance over the past half century, we have also discounted the proliferation and perfection of new strategically destructive means. Although weapons of mass destruction have long worried us, more labor-intensive lesser forms—like amputation, rape and mutilation—really have not. We have dismissed these acts as atavistic behavior of no real strategic significance. We did not see that such forms of destructiveness signified a new logic. We forgot that, thanks to conquest, the vanquished often survived—even if to be enslaved, sold or made to pay tribute. With the death of conquest, that is no longer possible. The unforeseen consequence? Enemies, targeted populations, victims—all might as well be considered of no use, so why not just abuse or eliminate them?

Couple this change with the fact that novel destructive forces, once unleashed, are extremely difficult to rein in, and we suddenly recognize a series of spiraling dangers before us that are much harder to reverse than any associated with conquest. As it is, halting conquest took us two world wars and a cold war to achieve. To do so required us to outwit, outproduce and outlast any that opposed us. Industry, technology, science and ingenuity were our strong suits; and moral argument our idiom. But now what do we do? How do we redeem child soldiers or glue suicide bombers back together? How *do* we stop this ever more threatening and demonic learning curve?

Worse than just being up against Al-Qaeda and other extremists, we are up against "progress" of a most pernicious sort. Al-Qaeda has managed to marry the local to the global better than any other anti-Western movement so far, and not just in technological and organizational terms, but ideologically as well. Islam is Osama bin Laden's ideological weapon of choice as he urges the *umma* of the world to unite. But he wields Islam not to conquer or subjugate, or even to convert—the uses to which Islam has historically been put—but to utterly destroy. Al-Qaeda has adopted our opposition to conquest and pushed it to its logical conclusion: can't conquer, so kill.

Al-Qaeda mimics our very nature, as well. The West, and the United States, is at once everywhere in the world and nowhere. Our culture and general influence are pervasive, even though no centralized effort has (or can) be made to order, control or directly manage that influence. Turning the tables on us, Al-Qaeda also strives to be everywhere in the world and nowhere. It is everywhere that members of the transnational *umma* live and plot, and it is nowhere in the sense of having—after the fall of the Taliban—as low-profile a logistical center as possible. Yet its aims represent a radical twist. Freed from the difficulties attendant on fighting to subdue, never mind subjugate, it can concentrate instead on causing unrecoverable collapse and destruction.

Not only does the structural logic to Al-Qaeda's aims and methods grow directly out of the death of conquest, but we have inadvertently handed our opponents a number of advantages while hamstringing ourselves. We have done this, first, by advertising, pre-emptively as it were, what we will not do: fight to conquer. Second, by refusing to directly control anyone or any place, we free people to do things that we then lack the physical presence to stop.

The most glaring (and grating) example of this at the moment is Saddam Hussein. He would not now be developing weapons of mass destruction had we taken over—never mind invaded—Iraq a

decade ago. Nor does it matter whether—strategically, tactically or even logistically speaking—we could have done this at such a distance from the United States. The fact that we never even considered such an option, and can still barely bring ourselves to do so, reflects a shift in how we think about power—and it illustrates the extent to which we have unwittingly boxed ourselves in. Up until fifty years ago, humans who generated power did so in order to be able to coerce others, whether pre-emptively or defensively. Now it is all we can do to exert even temporary control. Instead, we seek out locals to trust—like a Marcos or a Mobutu, a Pahlavi or a Karzai. We no longer just fight (sometimes) with a vengeance, we subsequently delegate with a vengeance.

On a certain level, this aversion to exerting ourselves is what some iconoclastic historians, strategists and pundits rail against when they tell us that our leaders should adopt the warrior politics of the ancient Greeks and Romans, or that we should behave more like an empire in order to make the world safe for the civilization we represent.[7] They would have us act. Yet, in addition to misreading significant differences between then and now—should we revive slavery, too?—curiously, none promotes a return to village-by-village conquest, or systematically fighting until every community in our path sues for peace. This is how empires used to be established and maintained.

In part, this lapse in not connecting control to physical conquest must be because we no longer wage war that way; air supremacy obviates the need for slow, grinding, old-fashioned land campaigns. With speed, too, we do less damage. (Never mind that less damage done over longer periods helps convince people to adopt new ways of resistance.) We increasingly believe, too, that all we need do is remove megalomaniacal leaders and their populations will reform themselves after our image of what good governments and healthy societies should be.

There is even a school of thought that considers the significance of territory itself to be *passé*. But this school misunderstands something that is of the essence. Wars of conquest in the past were rarely fought over territory or resources as such. Conquest was about taking people and doing something with them; one usually aggrandized for the sake of supporters or to gain more subjects, or both. That is what used to define imperialism. We reject that approach, of course, but we may soon be forced to reconsider it. That is because it may turn out that fighting to own, and not just to win, may be the only way to secure effective control in many cases, and to truly turn hearts and minds away from gratuitous destruction and depopulation. Think back to any of our lengthy military engagements over the past century. In how many of these did we take and hold ground? How many can be considered unqualified successes? The answers to these questions tend to run parallel, and with all due respect for the impresarios of novelty among us, this is probably not a coincidence.

WHAT CAN we do, then, now that we have not only rendered conquest institutionally impossible, but made being conquered unacceptable for others, as well? One thing we need to do is rethink *again* the nature of our military capabilities, those of our army in particular.

No matter how much reconfiguring has been done since the end of the Cold War, all armies remain institutionally geared for conquest. This, after all, is what they were designed to do—to pur-

[7]For example, Roger Kimball, "Freedom and Duty: Pericles and Our Times", *The National Interest* (Spring 2002).

sue and thwart hostile territorial takeovers. Small wonder, then, that between the end of the Cold War and the onset of the war on terrorism, the U.S. Army found itself unsure of its role. Most of what it was tasked to do were military operations other than war. Even so, its parts were never substantively rearranged, nor has any of the new technology adopted since 1991 caused it to change its fundamental orientation. Its design still predisposes it to excel at taking and holding ground.

That is the first irony we confront. The second is that when it comes to being able to squelch others' desire for autonomy or liberation—especially autonomy and liberation from us—what could a successfully reformed army do then? Not much. Thus, as we try to transform a force that actually knows how to conquer and subjugate into a force that can do less clear-cut, nobler and even harder things, we may be heading in exactly the wrong direction. To root out and obliterate our enemies, and to subdue and re-orient their supporters, may well require the kind of thorough military approach, permanent control and reconstruction of society from the ground up that we have consigned to history.

So here the Western world is, having forsworn military conquest, and having made conquest by military means an impossible war aim for anyone else. What a tremendous achievement. It is revolutionary. But the attendant consequences—child soldiers, suicide bombers, ethnic cleansing, addressless terrorism—are revolutionary, too, and where they are leading us is not entirely within our control. This should give us pause, for how we might reconcile our anti-conquest ideals with such realities remains to be seen. □

Greatness and War

In our century, dominance brings loss more often than gain. The source and measure of wealth is rational labor in common. Europe, contemplating a world in the process of adopting a civilization that Europe itself generated, need not feel vanquished by its own victory. Greatness is no longer indissolubly linked to military force, because the superpowers can no longer use their weapons without causing their own destruction by way of reprisal, and because no society need rule over others in order to give its children a decent life.

Europe has two reasons for refusing to feel decadent. It is Europe that, first by its achievements, then by its warlike follies, helped humanity cross the threshold into the nuclear age. In this age, when because of the exploitation of natural resources men need no longer tyrannize over one another, Europe can still be great while conforming to the spirit of the new era and assisting other peoples to cure themselves of the childhood illnesses of modernity. Realizing its ideas at home, with a task to perform abroad—why should Europe brood over a bitterness that is explained by the recent past but for which the prospects of the future give no reason?

Never have men had so many reasons to cease killing one another. Never had they had so many reasons to feel they are joined together in one great enterprise. I do not conclude that the age of universal history will be peaceful. We know that man is a reasonable being. But men?

—Raymond Aron
"The Dawn of Universal History" (1960)