War Needs a Warning Label

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War is hazardous to human health and is increasingly regulated as such. War kills and maims civilians as well soldiers. Its dangers linger on in the form of unexploded ordnance, crippled minds, broken bodies, and trashed environments. And for most in the Western world, war’s horrors are becoming intolerable because war no longer serves any vital interest. Their security is not at risk. Conscription has been abolished so that much of war’s dangers has become voluntary. And most Western militaries deploy only to undertake humanitarian missions, often trying to prevent others from fighting, not always successfully and hardly ever through the use of weapons.

The American military is the exception. Never returned home after the Cold War, it has become a worldwide intervention force and a frequent fighter. Because it is the Western military that fights, the American military is subject to high expectations and much regulation. Several other militaries also fight a lot, but draw little international criticism for their often horrible acts. In Africa armies and their rebel opponents regularly rape, mutilate and murder civilians, but without much international concern. The same apparently is true in Chechnya, Kashmir, and Sri Lanka. But wherever the American military goes so go the critics. It’s getting so that the American military does not even loads its weapons these days without consulting its lawyers.

There are two main sources for the increasing regulation of warfare and weapons. One is the effort to reduce the dangers to innocents imposed by armed conflict. A good example of the danger is the indiscriminate casualties area bombing can cause among civilians. The second is the effort to reduce the lingering effects of war for military personnel as well as civilians. The supposed long term health effects of exposure to Agent Orange, the herbicide US forces used in the Vietnam

War, is an obvious example. Some weapons are doubly suspect because they can have both indiscriminate and long lasting effects. Anti-personnel landmines indiscriminately kill or maim on contact and can function years after the battle is over.

Because of these efforts the cost of war is going up. We paid a lot to fight the Vietnam War. Then we paid its veterans for their war related disabilities. And now thanks to Department of Veterans Affairs rulings on Agent Orange we are paying for the disabilities of their children and grandchildren. When something goes wrong for veterans or their descendants, as is certain to happen to some, war is increasingly likely to be cited as the cause.

War is also getting harder to conduct. Our commanders have long wanted to keep American casualties to a minimum and to avoid civilian harm where possible. But now they must consider the consequences for civilian life of attacks on infrastructure.
targets such as bridges, power stations and transportation facilities that have clear military importance. As their weapons have become more precise, the enemy has moved targetable military equipment closer to local populations and off-limits religious sites and cultural treasures. And lurking in the back of the minds of commanders is the threat of international condemnation and possible calls for prosecution when errors are made, as they inevitably will be in the confusion of battle.

No Solace in Precision
The American way of war is to substitute capital for labor. The central role that airpower plays in American military doctrine is due to the fact that it offers a hopeful alternative to high casualty, manpower-intensive ground combat. The promise of being able to defeat an enemy without having to have our soldiers sacrifice their lives taking his land trench by trench is irresistible to a society that is both democratic enough to worry about soldiers’ lives and rich enough to develop effective combat aircraft.

Of course, the exercise of airpower has hardly been costless in terms of American casualties. Tens of thousands of aircrew members died in the air campaigns against Germany and Japan in the Second World War. Thousands more died during the Korean and Vietnam wars. The technological quest became the discovery of ways to reduce this toll. The aircraft were improved, but much of the emphasis was placed on making the weapons more precise in the
belief that the fewer needed to eliminate targets the fewer the aircraft and aircrews exposed and thus lost to defensive actions.

Television guided, radar guided, laser guided and more recently Global Positioning System (GPS) guided weapons were all developed to use against ground targets. Whereas once literally dozens of sorties and many losses were required to destroy a bridge, now a single aircraft firing from a safe distance can do the same. In the Second World War the average CEP (Circular Error Probability—the distance from a target that half of the bombs dropped will land) for what are now called dumb bombs was measured in miles. Today the CEPs for many US air dropped weapons are measured in a few meters. If a target is known and immobile these days, it is likely to be easily destroyed.

Precision has another important advantage. Bombing with imprecise weapons often killed or injured many innocent civilians. Collateral damage was for many years one of the unavoidable costs of the use of airpower. We bombed to save American soldier lives, but had to bear the moral burden of innocent lives taken or harmed in the process. With the development of precision guided weapons the civilian toll has diminished greatly. Bombs can be precision guided and so too can artillery shells, naval gunfire, cruise and ballistic missiles. Warfare is not yet as precise as surgery, but it is becoming so.

There is, however, little purchase in this for American commanders. To begin with, standards escalate for American forces. If they can be precise sometimes, they must be precise all of the time. And if they can be precise at this level, they can be precise at a higher level. For some observers every civilian death as a result of American military action becomes an avoidable death. This is an impossible standard because of intelligence failures in locating targets, weather effects, human and equipment errors and enemy defensive efforts. But as we advertise precision capabilities to show our good intent we raise expectations about our operational effectiveness among our critics. Doing better is not good enough for those who oppose our goals.

Some resent our technological advantage. Technology is in large part the key to our military strength. We spend vastly more on weapons research and development activities than do other nations to keep an edge in all forms of warfare. For example, anticipating humanitarian concerns about the use of anti-personnel landmines, we redesigned our systems to self destruct at set times after being placed so that they would leave no battlefield hazard either for returning farmers or our own soldiers on the move. But when some of our allies and other nations at the behest of a coalition of nongovernmental organizations pushed an international treaty to ban anti-personnel landmines they included our farmer safe mines along with the persistent landmines because these nations did not want us to have a military advantage. We did not sign the treaty so as to be free to protect our forces with temporary mine fields only to discover that our allies, having eagerly signed the treaty, will not join our coalitions if we dare to use them. Want to bet that we have used our last anti-personnel landmine?

The Sum of All Middle Class Fears
One of the consequences of growing affluence is an increasing concern about minor health risks. When bread is no longer in short supply people worry about jam. For most citizens of western nations the last century offered improving income and health. Life expectancy at the beginning of the 20th century was low with infectious diseases being the leading causes of death. Improved sanitation and nutrition yielded a rapid improvement in longevity. The longer people lived though, the greater the cull of the chronic diseases—heart disease and cancer, the diseases of aging. These diseases now top the list of the leading causes of death. The affluent demand explanations about their risk exposures and protection from all identifiable hazards. They were told by medical science to show some self-discipline and they did. Fewer of them smoke cigarettes, drive without fastening seat belts, or drink to excess, avoiding the most dangerous of the bad habits, and yet they still die. This unhappy fact has generated a search for the remaining hazards to life, particularly in the United States but elsewhere as well.

The worried well of the West have many institutions to serve their interests. Government agencies lead the quest for environmental health hazards and happily
cite all discoveries as a priority case for abatement. The news media love to feature health risk stories because they are much more popular than the repetitious squabbling of local, national and international politics. Health advocacy groups compete for resources by championing campaigns to alleviate dangers to the public’s health no matter their relative importance. And scientists know that rewards exist for those discovering the latest health danger. Tort lawyers and politicians muddy the already murky waters even further by seeking substantial compensation for identifiable victims. Lost in the cacophony of claims about risk is the information needed to rank them. How dangerous in fact is asbestos or Dioxin? You have to pay very close attention indeed to the parade of risks to know. Most of us have no time for this and yet want to avoid deadly exposures.

Many citizens, including surely some soldiers, acquire through this process the fear of chemicals as Sanford Weiner has called it. They worry about their low dose exposures to chemicals, often with difficult to pronounce names, embedded in the products that they must use or that were dumped secretly near where they live or work. They hear the accusations, but can not track the complex explanations. Previous exposés have limited their trust in government or industry monitors. Compounding this for military personnel is the fact that they operate exotic equipment often composed of and/or consuming exotic materials and fuels. They can easily believe that the military’s obsession with the mission at hand might lead to their exposure to very dangerous substances notwithstanding the official assurances to the contrary.

Every recent major commitment of US forces has had a significant health risk controversy——Agent Orange in the Vietnam War, the Gulf War Syndrome, and the Depleted Uranium controversy in the Balkan interventions. More are certain to follow in future US actions as deploying troops now line up for multiple inoculations and to be issued chemical protection suits in anticipation of possible biological and chemical weapon attacks.

Government sponsored scientific studies attempting to explain the relative risks for US forces and others supposedly exposed and made victims have almost no impact on the controversies. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been invested in research to identify and measure the risk in the apparently false belief that the truth matters. For example, work done over decades has showed that Agent Orange...
exposures during the Vietnam War produced essentially no discernable health effects except to those airmen who were actually handling the herbicide, and yet the government— the federal courts, the Congress, and the VA— has ordered widespread compensation supposedly based on the results. These are political decisions masked as scientific ones with potentially terrible consequences because the scientific facts are reshaped for political expediency. Every veteran who has a claim for some other exposure denied through the government’s studies will likely feel that the true science is being covered up and that it can only be revealed by political intervention.

The fear of chemicals spreads. American forces have used depleted uranium (DU) for tank and aircraft ammunition because DU rounds have great ability to penetrate armor. US tanks also have the super-hardened, slightly radioactive material in boxy layers applied to their armored sides for protection against enemy fire. Not a single US tank was lost to Iraqi tank fire during the Gulf War, but thanks to DU rounds our tanks and the A-10 aircraft destroyed many an Iraqi tank. After the war the Iraqi officials complained to the UN that there were increases in birth defects and cancers due to the over 300 tons of DU ammunition American forces reported using. American forces also fired DU rounds in Kosovo. The Serbs repeated the claims of the Iraqis that there were serious health risks associated with DU exposures. Soon our allies were hearing complaints from their returned soldiers that they had health problems from fathering children with birth defects to trouble holding jobs because of their supposed contacts with DU.

Great efforts were taken by American defense officials to reassure our allies and others that DU was environmentally safe. Yes, it was surely deadly when penetrating a tank, but soldiers or civilians passing the hulks would not be harmed. Old studies proved this and new ones confirmed. Every charge or questioned was answered. Still the fears prevail. A senior scientist for a European military recently confided that his military boss inquired how he could protect his troops from the long-term health risks of DU exposure if they were to join an American lead coalition. Reference to the studies did not reassure him.

Apparently the American military is skeptical also. The Navy and the Marine Corps have already abandoned DU for other armor penetrating rounds. A-10 pilots report only limited domestic training opportunities because the Environmental Protection Agency has restricted use of the DU firing range. Both the Army and the Air Force have announced that they are developing tungsten rounds as their next generation anti-armor weapons. A weapon challenged as a health risk, even if initially by one’s enemies, is a weapon too controversial to be used much longer by the politically sensitive managers of modern warfare.

Unacceptable Weapons
There are many motives for describing the use of particular weapons or military tactics as unacceptable. Chemicals used in military equipment or weapons can have unintended and unknown long-term health effects. Forgotten battlefields can be littered with unexploded ordnance waiting the visit of unsuspecting children or farmers. And some weapons cause injuries that are just too horrible to contemplate, blinding lasers for example. But there are also military equities
Wars are terrible events, but at times necessary and unavoidable. Death and destruction are inherent to warfare and militaries are designed to inflict them. Weapons, like them or not, are the military’s tools.

The protection of American military equities means more than commissioning epidemiological studies of the exposure of soldiers and others to particular weapons, paying for battlefield cleanups, and equipping weapons with timed self-destruct mechanisms. It requires also the willingness to question the motives of those who undermine the military’s use of its tools. Veterans groups’ narrow pursuit of additional benefits should be challenged when their greed unfairly taints legitimate tools of war. Peace advocacy groups should not be allowed to use their moral outrage over the horrors of war selectively against the United States.

The job of defending the equities is both for the soldier and the politician. Given their own limited or nonexistent military experience, most American politicians can not deny the political demands of veterans, but will not admit it. And the soldier has no credibility with peace advocates who often mistake the professional warrior with one who loves war. Just as the possession and intent to use nuclear weapons had to be defended during the Cold War so too do the possession and use of conventional weapons need to be defended today.

In the end, however, what protects American military equities is the domestic popularity of the causes for which wars are being fought. We did not stop building nuclear weapons during the Cold War despite much protest because most Americans believed that their freedom depended upon the maintenance of at least nuclear parity. In November 2001 a senior naval officer speaking to a military audience predicted in answer to a question that we would not use fuel air explosives (FAEs) in Afghanistan because of the likely public protest. But only a few months later it was announced that we did use thermobastic weapons, which have similar properties to FAEs, against suspected al Qaeda targets in the Shah-e-Kot mountain range of Afghanistan. Apparently, the operational decision was that the public reeling from the Trade Center and Pentagon attacks where aircraft were used as fuel filled bombs would not mind a bit of reciprocity. The complaints foreign and domestic were muted.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING


Harvey M. Sapolsky is the Director of the MIT Security Studies Program. This paper is based in part on the proceedings of a conference titled “Unacceptable Weapons” that the Program sponsored in March 2002 that was held at the Commanders Mansion of the Watertown Arsenal, Watertown Massachusetts.