

Old and New Wars: “Dehumanizing” War. Armies facing Armies no longer happens?

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Theme: [Militaryization and WMD, US NATO War Agenda](#)

Do we want a generation of veterans who return without guilt? Prof. Jonathon Moreno

Last November global governance expert Professor Mary Kaldor gave a lecture at the Imperial War Museum*, London. Her theme was *Old and New Wars* – how the nature of warfare and the organisation of its participants have changed. Old wars, she said, were essentially a battle of wills between two states or leaders. A war of two sides, two armies, can be vicious as it progresses but sooner or later one side wins, one loses, and some kind of treaty is negotiated. In a literal sense the war ends but, as any good historian knows, each war has carried *and planted* the seeds of the following war.

However, armies facing armies no longer happens. There is a halfway stage between old and new wars – such as happened in Vietnam and now in Iraq and Afghanistan – where an invading army finds itself at a loss as to how to fight what is essentially a guerrilla war fought by people trying to rid their country of a force that has come in from outside and is trying to impose its own solution on their state’s difficulties. But when, politicians having realised they are never going to ‘win’ this war, the invading troops are pulled out, the fighting goes on. It morphs into a ‘new’ war. Afghanistan does not have a good outlook, and Iraq is still at war with itself, where no such divisions existed before the invasion. Nor does the imported heavy battlefield equipment do that well against insurgents with roadside bombs or hand-held rocket launchers – which must be a sore disappointment to those who love big machines.

There is no clear way to end new wars, something which we should take account of. They are far more complicated in the make-up of combatants, but *all* are seeking some form of power. And money (or more accurately, profit) plays a large part. Nor is it easy to tell who is raising money to fund the war, or who is fighting the war to raise money to further their aims. There are too many actors – soldiers in uniform, freedom fighters, religious fighters, Mujahideen, war lords, mercenaries and, of course, men who simply love killing and migrate from country to country, conflict to conflict. They went to Iraq and now they are part of the Syrian Free Army. Foreign passports proliferate in modern conflicts. So – too many competing interests, with scant attention paid to those who are truly ‘on the ground’, the little people living in little villages, growing little amounts of food for their little families and sadly fertilising their fields with their blood.

How many of these combatants have a natural right to be there, in that country or that province? How many are interfering in someone else’s conflict? How many are making the situation worse while justifying their actions by claiming they are there to sort things out? How many are fighting for power and control over their countrymen? How many are fighting

because they have a particular vision of their country and are trying to force that vision on others? For each and every one of these fighters one has to ask: what is that one trying to gain? It is a far cry from the old wars with kings or politicians deciding to go to war to protect their 'interests' and sending off hapless soldiers to do the killing and dying. Or is it? Is the difference between the old wars and the new simply that the old wars were mostly fought by national armies, not coalitions of convenience like ISAF and not splinter groups representing different interests? The desire for power, control and profit never alters.

All soldiers, across all time, can and often do act in an inhumane way, committing appalling acts of cruelty. One only has to read some of the evidence given at the [Baha Mousa Inquiry](#) to understand that war insists that other people are 'the enemy' and that soldiers feel, as they did in Iraq, that they have the right to torture and beat those whose only crime is to live in the invaded country. But now soldiers are taking that one step further, too far, treading beyond the line. The tools and training of modern warfare are dehumanising them. Take drones.

It is hard to believe that the first armed drones were used in Afghanistan in 2001. In less than ten years they have become an essential part of fighting war. They are controlled from half a world away by people who have never been to the country they are targeting; who have no knowledge of the way of life, the culture of the little blobs of humanity they track in their monitors; who have no understanding of the political and corporate background to the 'war' they are fighting; and, most importantly, by people who are in no danger of having their own blood spilt. The deaths they cause are meaningless to the hand that presses the button. They have meaning enough for the people on the ground, gathering what they can of shattered bodies for burial, and unsurprisingly their use creates more so-called terrorists.

Killing at a distance dehumanizes those doing it – it is not killing but a computer game. Scoring a 'hit' that involves no blood, no entrails, no broken lives brings no guilt, no remorse and no proper awareness of the hurt inflicted on others. But with the physical damage being inflicted on Western forces (in the [US Army](#) alone 73,674 soldiers have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and 30,480 soldiers have returned from combat with traumatic brain injury). This in itself is a good enough reason to use nothing but drones, and if both sides use them then the only casualties will be absolutely guaranteed to be civilian. It is bad enough that the US thinks it is fighting a global war on terror, so all the world is a battlefield. What price the world if another state takes that attitude thinking, quite rightly, that the US drones are a form of terrorism?

Using drones also dehumanizes the people they kill. These are not fellow humans but terrorists, not civilians but collateral damage, not 8-year-old boys or old men of eighty but potential combatants. The enemy becomes nothing more than a fly to be swatted, a worm to be stepped on. President Obama has to personally authorise US drone strikes, more than 300 of them in his first four years of office. That many of the deaths were of children cannot be disputed, regardless of the fact that the US insists that only 'combatants' are killed. But at the beginning of December last year a senior US army officer speaking to the Marine Corp Times said that troops in Afghanistan were on the lookout for "[children](#) with potential hostile intent" – in other words, children could be deliberately targeted. Yet a few days later, there was Obama weeping on camera over the shocking deaths of the Connecticut school children. Afghan children obviously don't rate tears.

Having gone past the old form of war of charging into battle against another army, it is

inevitable that soldiers should be expected and trained, when fighting 'terrorists' – aka: freedom fighters, resistance fighters, insurgents, supporters of 'regimes', religious fundamentalists (non-Christian of course) – to operate in the same way as drones, with targeted assassinations, raids on homes or farmers out in fields. We are told – and oh, am I tired of this being parroted by politicians justifying murderous actions by their forces – that the terrorists are 'hiding' in civilian areas, using women and children, even their own families as human shields. If they are not regular soldiers but people resisting occupying forces, they are not using their families as human shields; the houses are their homes, where they live, where they and their families belong. They are all civilians. And in much of the Middle East the prevailing culture is that most men, particularly in rural areas, own guns. Before the West visited so much war upon them, the guns appeared mostly to be used for firing shots into the air at weddings and other celebrations. But they own guns therefore they must be terrorists. By that logic, many US citizens are also terrorists.

And now we have the possibility of [super-soldiers](#), the ultimate killing machines. Not satisfied with the vulnerability of soldiers to fatigue, stress, madness, drug addiction and worse, a sudden sense of morality, the Pentagon and others are researching ways of bypassing all that humanity. According to bioethicist Professor Moreno, the military co-option of neuroscience is now the fastest growing area of science. Millions of dollars are being spent in researching the soldier's brain, testing drugs that will wipe out unpleasant memories of dark deeds done, quell the fatigue, mask pain and eliminate feelings of guilt. It is not so much using robots (which in one sense is what drones are) as turning humans into unfeeling robots.

But if armies become mere operators of drones, or the 'super soldier', guilt-free and heartless, becomes reality, then there really is no end to war. For the publics' reaction to damaged soldiers coming back home and being a drain on families' emotions and the public purse because of PTSD or multiple disablements will be the only thing that just might finally persuade the politicians that war is not worth the fighting.

* This was the annual Remembrance Day Lecture for the Movement for the Abolition of War (MAW)

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