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The Civilian or the Soldier? An Answer to Critics

by Scott McPherson

In response to my January 12 commentary, "[Enola Gay, Just War, and Mass Murder](#)," a number of people wrote me to complain about the following statement: "Can the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima be justified on the grounds that many thousands of U.S. troops would have been killed in an invasion?"

"Certainly not. A soldier is, like it or not, a tool of the government whose army he serves in. Soldiers are aware, when they put on a uniform, that the ultimate sacrifice may be asked of them. They are in the service to kill enemy soldiers. If they have to give up their lives in order that a noncombatant — even if he is a citizen of the very nation the soldier is fighting — should live, then that is the price that they may have to pay."

The gist of the complaints can be summed up in the following question: "Do you value the lives of foreign civilians over those of U.S. soldiers?" The short answer is: it depends.

Let me first say that my position should not in any way be interpreted as a sign that I hold the lives of American soldiers in low esteem. My maternal grandfather, Ed Byrne, survived the attack on Pearl Harbor and served with distinction as an infantry machine gunner in the Northern Solomons and Guadalcanal campaigns. Had the United States invaded Japan instead of incinerating a hundred thousand of its innocent civilians, my grandfather probably would have been one of those storming the beach.

This was, of course, long before I was born. But I know firsthand what it means to be a soldier. I spent three years on active duty with the First Armored Division as a forward observer. My older brother spent three years in the army as an infantryman, a year of which was spent on the DMZ in Korea. My father spent three years in the army in the late 1950s. I have two uncles who served in Vietnam.

Since some like to try to discredit libertarian anti-militarist ideas by suggesting that those of us who hold them should spend a little time in uniform, let us dispense with such groundless antagonism.

Before we proceed, ask yourself this question: why are the members of al-Qaeda called terrorists and not soldiers?

The answer is simple: they do not wear an identifiable military uniform; they are not members of the recognized army of any government; and they attack civilian targets to spread terror and cause massive loss of life.

Furthermore, remember that war, by definition, is the act of governments. It is the attempt of one government to impose its political will on a rival government. This may be done for either legitimate or illegitimate reasons.

Recognizing that war is a dispute between governments, certain rules — the laws of war — have been formulated to constrain the brutality of war, as much as possible, so as to limit its destructive tendencies *only* to the opposing government and its agents.

To this end, *governments create armies of uniformed soldiers* who, theoretically at least, meet in battle to establish military supremacy. Why? *Because warfare is meant to be conducted between soldiers*, who know from the outset what is expected of them.

Putting on a uniform, then — in times of both war and peace — means this: the soldier becomes a military representative of his government. *He becomes the means by which his government will fight war and the target of those who wish to fight a war against his government.*

Civilians, on the other hand, are not a valid target — *they don't wear a uniform.*

If someone isn't happy with this position, ask whether he'd prefer the alternative: no soldiers — just governments lobbing high explosive missiles at one another's homelands until someone cries "Uncle." Hardly a civilized standard of conduct. And when I think of my wife and two small children, I imagine I'd prefer that the enemy limit himself to just shooting at my government's soldiers.

Does this mean I value soldiers less than civilians?

Do I value the life of the coal miner who works under highly dangerous conditions to dig for the fuel that will keep me warm or the policeman who patrols the unpredictable streets outside my home? The question is moot. That's what they're *there* for! That's how they draw their paychecks. It's why we have coal miners and policemen!

And that's why we have soldiers: *to fight our wars.* Against other soldiers.

Some argue that it is the government's responsibility to protect the lives of its soldiers, even if it means killing civilians. That depends on the circumstances. When civilians are "collateral damage" resulting from an attack on a legitimate military target in the hope of bringing the war to a close, such deaths are an unfortunate consequence of warfare.

But as an intentional desire to destroy human lives, just because they are of the same nationality as the soldiers we are fighting? Absolutely not. If I'm wrong, Lieutenant William Calley is a hero (see the article at www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/mylai/MyI_intro.html), and the 101st Airborne Division's "Tiger Force" (see the article at

http://abcnews.go.com/sections/WNT/Investigation/vietnam_tiger_force_031112-1.html) was a model of the proper way to wage of war. Their actions were actually a microcosm of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Soldiers wear a uniform to provide a target for the enemy. Had the United States invaded Japan rather than drop nuclear bombs on women, children, and old people, the soldiers lost in that fighting would not have been sacrificed for the good of foreign civilians — their lives would have been lost fighting to defend their country against an aggressor government. In short, they would have been doing their job.

When soldiers stop fighting other soldiers, armies become no better than civilians armed with high-powered weapons targeting other civilians in order to cause massive loss of life and spread terror.

Just like al-Qaeda.

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