

Can the United States Wage Existential Warfare Without Foundational Principles or Truths?

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For many Americans, the idea of waging existential warfare is the stuff of dystopian films. In the years following the Second World War, the United States emerged as one of two global superpowers whose ability to exercise its influence and will was challenged only by the Soviet Union. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, however, the U.S. has maintained global superiority—or dominance—in every domain of warfare, enjoying a unique status as the world’s only superpower. Over the past three decades, the military prowess of the United States has been largely without peer, thus the notion of existential warfare is inconceivable for many Americans. Further adding to this collective American naiveté is the fact that the last time the United States fought foreign forces on American soil was during the War of 1812, a time so far removed from the American conscience that it is difficult to imagine. Though the United States has suffered isolated attacks since then at Pearl Harbor and again on 9/11, the U.S. always has taken the fight to its enemies in their homelands, sparing our own the destruction and suffering war inevitably brings. Consequently, the possibility of waging a truly existential war is difficult at best for the average American to consider. The reality however is that if war were to break out tonight between the United States and an alliance of Sino-Russian forces, the U.S. likely would lose.

In simulated wargames conducted by the RAND Corporation, the U.S. continues to lose catastrophically against Russia and China as its bases, warships, and aircraft are decimated.¹ RAND analyst, David Ochmanek, confirms that there is no situation under current conditions in which the United States emerges victorious in a war with Russia and China.² With Russia touting hypersonic, precision-guided intercontinental ballistic missiles, the repercussions of consolidating personnel and equipment under Base Realignment and Closure, as well as staging large numbers of personnel and aircraft on a few large airbases and aircraft carriers translates to catastrophic loss of life and strategic assets within minutes for United States forces.³ China poses an equally devastating threat to communication networks, effectively employing a superior cyber and electronic warfare campaign against U.S. satellites, network, and communication systems.⁴ According to Robert Work, a former deputy secretary of defense and wargaming expert, the U.S. has wargamed cyber and electronic warfare in field exercises, but “the simulated enemy forces tend to shut down United States networks so effectively that nothing works and nobody else gets any training done.”⁵ Assuming U.S. forces somehow were able to organize and wage land warfare after these initial devastating assaults, United States ground forces would not fare much better. According to another recent RAND study, both Russian and Chinese rocket systems match or outrange current U.S. capabilities.⁶ Similarly, Russian field artillery outranges anything currently within the U.S. arsenal.⁷ Thus the reality is that should the U.S. to go to war today against a Sino-Russian force, our current forward-deployed and expeditionary-focused military forces would be destroyed or severely damaged, resulting in the Nation suddenly finding itself in it what would be an existential war conducted under large-scale combat operation conditions.⁸

In addition to the strategic and tactical disadvantages facing the U.S., the very nature of large-scale combat operations in a multi-domain environment where battles will be brutally fought in mega-cities creates a significant moral dilemma for American political and military leaders. The expected catastrophic loss of civilian and military lives undoubtedly will result in enormous public pressure to develop weapons and

tactics to quickly end such a conflict, positing that the achieved victory will justify the means.⁹ Yet the cost of waging such war—one which would abandon the restraint of foundational American principles—would signal the death of the very democratic principles American armed forces fight to defend, even if the United States emerged victorious on the battlefield.

When an American service member swears an oath of enlistment or commission, he or she pledges to support and defend the Constitution. Commitment to this oath is not relative; it is absolute. U.S. service members cannot abandon this oath to which they are bound merely on the basis of the level and intensity of warfare. If waging an existential war requires one to abandon the principles of the Constitution, then one has failed to uphold that oath. Even if subsequent military action achieved victory, America nonetheless would suffer political and moral defeat by having chosen a course of action that required it to deny the very ideals it claims to uphold. As Lieutenant General (Retired) John Miller states, “True victory is not achieved simply by physically defeating the enemy. True victory is moral ascendancy over one’s enemies.”¹⁰

Achieving such moral victory however creates an inherent tension between defense of the Constitution and the defense of territorial borders and the population. This tension poses an ethical dilemma as one attempts to understand the practical implications of service as a warrior. When faced with an existential threat by adversaries who give little heed to the Law of Armed Conflict, the Geneva Conventions, democratic values—such as liberty, equality, and justice for all—or even basic humanity, human tendency is to value survival above all else, abandoning moral principles for existential pragmatism.¹¹ Shannon French explores this tension:

[The problem of] American warriors upholding constitutional values is that it might lose force for the warriors themselves when they believe the actual survival of their nation is threatened... In other words, if the choice were between staying true to the values of the Constitution in order to save the country from annihilation, they would choose to commit the violation, save the nation, and try to restore constitutional order when peace returned.¹²

It is here that French highlights the inherent tension of what defense of the Constitution means. She illustrates the need for the U.S. to clarify specifically what the function of the warrior is and their moral obligations to that function.

Warriors who think their job is to defend the nation, understood in terms of preserving territorial integrity and protecting the population, will have a different code than those who think that their duty is to preserve constitutional values at all costs (including the cost of the nation itself), even if both subscribe to the function argument.¹³

Given the inherent tension that arises as a result of different interpretations on what it means to defend the Constitution, French’s argument identifies the need for clarification. As if to highlight the moral tension of the function argument she identifies, T.R Fehrenbach posits “if war is to have any meaning at all, its purpose must be to establish control over peoples and territories.”¹⁴ Later in his book however, Fehrenbach writes, “a free government must be prepared to do the unpopular thing, even if it destroys itself. Governments are not important; nations and peoples *and what they stand for*, are.”¹⁵ In other words, true victory is not just physical; it is also moral.

When faced with existential warfare against the most powerful army in the world at that time, the Founding Fathers of the United States frequently struggled to make their fight a moral fight for their beliefs as much as it was a fight to secure American independence from Great Britain. In a letter to his wife, John Adams writes:

...These incarnate Daemons say in great Composure, “[that] Humanity is a Yankey Virtue. — But that they [are] governed by Policy.” — Is there any Policy on this side of

Hell, that is inconsistent with Humanity? I have no Idea of it. I know of no Policy, God is my Witness but this — *Piety, Humanity and Honesty are the best Policy*. Blasphemy, Cruelty, and Villany have prevailed and may again. But they wont prevail against America, in this Contest, because I find the more of them are employed the less they succeed.¹⁶

Despite leading his army in battle against better-trained, better-equipped, and numerically superior forces, George Washington “often reminded his men that they were an army of liberty and freedom, and that the rights of humanity for which they were fighting should extend even to their enemies.”¹⁷ David Fischer explains that “the esteem of others was important to them mainly because they believed that victory would come only if they deserved to win. Even in the most urgent moments of the war, these men were concerned about the ethical questions in the Revolution.”¹⁸ Thus, according to Washington and Adams, upholding foundational principles in existential warfare does more than retain the integrity of American identity and values, it enables the American armed forces to maintain global legitimacy as an agency of a democratic government fighting a just cause.

Upholding foundational principles in existential warfare elicits continued sympathy and support, and distinguishes the American service member from illegitimate forces or even war criminals. Though highly plausible that the enemies of the United States will not adhere to the same principles of U.S. forces when engaged in such a conflict, Americans must guard against the temptation to reciprocate on grounds of moral relativism.

When posed with this moral dilemma during the Second World War, U.S. forces chose to treat Japanese prisoners of war in accordance with the Geneva Conventions in the hopes of improving conditions for their own prisoners of war suffering under Japanese interment, rather than retaliating with the same brutality and dehumanizing treatment suffered by American prisoners of war at the hands of the Imperial Japanese Army.¹⁹ That principle of dignified and humane treatment of prisoners of war continues to this day. The United States continues to treat prisoners humanely and in accordance with the Geneva Conventions, even when it is clear that these would not reciprocate, such as in the case of ISIS, Al Qaeda, or the Taliban. In those situations in which the U.S. did abandon its own principles, such as the case of “enhanced interrogation” during the Global War on Terrorism, even those considered “hawkish,” such as the late Senator John McCain, were indignant at this breach of American values in the execution of war. When the United States fails to treat prisoners of war humanely and with dignity, it holds those entrusted with their care accountable.²⁰ Existential warfare does not change the moral imperative to treat prisoners of war humanely and with dignity. To do so amplifies the nobility of democracy to America’s enemies and the world. Failure to do so, however, would reflect the perceived ignobility of America’s national character and squelch any sympathies the U.S. might hope to elicit from its allies.

History provides countless examples of how upholding foundational principles in existential warfare elicits the respect of allies and even one’s enemies. One compelling example is found in the account of the recapture of Jerusalem by Saladin in 1187. In July of 1099, the Crusader army broke through the walls of Jerusalem to liberate it from Muslim rule. Contemporary accounts of the battle record the massacre that took place within the walls of Jerusalem. Many Muslims sought shelter in the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the Dome of the Rock, and the Temple Mount area. According to the *Gesta Francorum*, the Temple Mount area was the sight of indescribable bloodshed. One Crusader recounted how his peers “were killing and slaying even to the Temple of Solomon, where the slaughter was so great that our men waded in blood up to their ankles...”²¹ Raymond of Aguilers, an eyewitness to the aftermath, writes of the sight in and around the Temple Mount area stating, “in the Temple and porch of Solomon men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins.”²² Another contemporary, Fulcher of Chartres, records the approximate number of those slaughtered in the Temple Mount area. Fulcher writes, “In this temple 10,000 were killed. Indeed, if you had been there you would have seen our feet coloured to our ankles with the blood of the slain. But what more shall I relate? None of them were left alive; neither women nor children were spared.”²³

In the aftermath of the battle, the *Gesta Francorum* offers a picture of the sheer scale of the dead Muslim inhabitants of Jerusalem:

[The Crusaders] also ordered all the Saracen dead to be cast outside because of the great stench, since the whole city was filled with their corpses; and so the living Saracens dragged the dead before the exits of the gates and arranged them in heaps, as if they were houses. No one ever saw or heard of such slaughter of pagan people, for funeral pyres were formed from them like pyramids, and no one knows their number except God alone.²⁴

The vast majority of the Muslim inhabitants in the city of Jerusalem—who lived their entire lives in Jerusalem in relative peace—were offered no quarter that day, only the sword.

Some 90 years later, in 1187, Saladin led his army back to the city of Jerusalem to retake this holy city. Well-aware of the massacre that had occurred, one would expect Saladin to seek vengeance and offer no quarter in return. In fact, established conduct of warfare at that time assumed that there would be no quarter, for once city walls fell, commanders believed it impossible to control the enraged and rapacious soldiers who poured through the breaches. Shakespeare illustrates the merciless nature of siege warfare in *Henry V*. In a speech given by Henry V to the governor of Harfleur, King Henry proclaims:

How yet resolves the governor of the town?
This is the latest parle we will admit;
Therefore to our best mercy give yourselves;
Or, like to men proud of destruction
Defy us to our worst: for, as I am a soldier,
A name that in my thoughts becomes me best,
If I begin the batt'ry once again,
I will not leave the half-achieved Harfleur
Till in her ashes she lie buried.
The gates of mercy shall be all shut up,
And the flesh'd soldier, rough and hard of heart,
In liberty of bloody hand, shall range
*With conscience wide as hell, mowing like grass.*²⁵ (Emphasis added.)

Surprisingly however, Saladin's army did not engage in acts of revenge for the massacre of 1099. Stephen Runciman observes "where the Franks, eighty-eight years before, had waded through the blood of their victims, not a building now was looted, not a person injured. By Saladin's orders, guards patrolled the streets and gates, preventing any outrage on the Christians."²⁶ Saladin later permitted most of the Christian inhabitants of Jerusalem to leave the city unmolested, though he kept a few thousand who were unable to pay a ransom as slaves.

Later, in a spontaneous act of magnanimity, Saladin and several of his lieutenants set free several thousand of those destined for slavery. Furthermore, he gave money and gifts from his treasury to the widowed and orphaned Christians. Runciman poignantly notes "his mercy and kindness were in strange contrast to the deeds of the Christian conquerors of the First Crusade."²⁷ Though fighting what arguably may be described as an "existential war" to reclaim land he believed rightly belonged to the Muslim people, Saladin did not fall prey to moral relativism. He chose instead to live and fight in accordance with his beliefs and values and in doing so, won the respect and admiration of his enemies.²⁸ So must it be with the United States as well.

Failing to adhere to such foundational principles as the rule of law,²⁹ Just War tradition, and the American values of democracy, liberty, equality, and justice for all not only nullifies any claims to moral legitimacy, but likely causes moral injury to U.S. service members. Litz et al. define moral injury as "perpetrating,

failing to prevent, bearing witness to, or learning about acts that transgress deeply held moral beliefs and expectations.”³⁰ It shares many symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but it has several distinct differences, including the fact that there is no formal diagnosis for the condition. While one can have moral injury without being diagnosed with PTSD, those diagnosed with PTSD often have moral injury.

Larry Dewey, a psychiatrist who has worked extensively with combat veterans in the Veterans’ Affairs system, writes of a former patient named “George” who served in Luzon, Philippines during the Second World War. George held 100 Japanese prisoners of war in custody. The Imperial Japanese Army demanded that he surrender the prisoners and himself to them. Should he refuse, the Japanese would execute one citizen of Luzon a day until he complied, beginning with the mayor of the city. George refused and the Japanese executed the mayor. The next morning, the Japanese awoke to find ten heads of Japanese prisoners of war in the town square, a silent message from George that for every citizen killed, he would execute ten Japanese prisoners. The Japanese left that day and did not return. George, however, returned to the U.S. after the war and, later in life as he began to face his wartime experiences, ended up being a long-term patient of Dewey because of the moral injury he suffered in the Philippines.³¹

While George’s case is an extreme example of moral injury, it can occur in numerous other ways on the battlefield when foundational principles and morals are abandoned. In 2005, members of the 1st Battalion, 502nd Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division raped a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl and murdered her along with her family. Specialist Justin Watt, who had no prior knowledge of the assault, heard about it after the fact from one of the perpetrators of those crimes. When confronted with the knowledge of these crimes, Watt was faced with the dilemma of either covering up the crimes to protect his platoon, or informing the authorities of a crime. Watt determined that if he covered up the crimes, he would share in the guilt of those crimes and decided that he could not live with such guilt. Watt then chose to inform attorneys at his division headquarters, as well as his medical providers.³² Shortly after redeployment, Watt was medically retired from service due to PTSD, in part as a result of his connection to the war atrocities committed by his platoon members.³³

When faced with moral injury, some are unable to continue effective service. In an academic study of 5,671 cases of medical evacuation reports during Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom, researchers discovered that psychiatric problems were among the leading causes of medical evacuations during this period of time.³⁴ While the breakdown of specific psychiatric problems is not available in the report, it is reasonable to assume that some are the result of moral injury. In other words, moral injury contributes to premature culmination, thus increasing the risk of defeat in a situation in which replacements cannot be assumed. Thus the connection between the necessity to maintain foundational principles and morals in existential warfare goes beyond merely defending the Constitution. Because of the connection between moral injury and culmination, fighting a war in a manner consistent with the rule of law, Just War tradition, and the American values of democracy, liberty, equality, and justice for all is an issue of soldier readiness.

If existential warfare does mean more than simply defending those who share the same nationality and instead also means defending the very ideals that define that nation, then the U.S. must never abandon the foundational democratic principles of our nation in order to gain a position of relative advantage. The cost of violating those principles would adversely affect much more than soldier readiness. Even if the United States were to emerge victorious on the battlefield, waging an existential war without the restraining fundamental principles of rule of law, Just War tradition, and the American values of democracy, liberty, equality, and justice for all would signal the death of the very ideals American armed forces have sworn to defend.

End Notes

1 David A. Shlapak and Michael Johnson, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics,” RAND Corporation, (accessed March 14, 2019), 1, http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1253.html. See also David Ockmanek, “Improving Force Development within the US Department of Defense: Diagnosis and Potential Prescriptions,” RAND Corporation, (accessed March 14, 2019), 2-3, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE302.html>.

2 Sydney J. Freeburg, Jr., “United States ‘Gets Its Ass Handed To It’ In Wargames: Here’s A \$24 Billion Fix,” *Breaking Defense*, (accessed on March 14, 2019), <https://breakingdefense.com/2019/03/United-States-gets-its-ass-handed-to-it-in-wargames-heres-a-24-billion-fix>.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, “Outnumbered, Outranged, and Outgunned: How Russia Defeats Nato,” *War on the Rocks*, (accessed on March 14, 2019), <https://warontherocks.com/2016/04/outnumbered-outranged-and-outgunned-how-russia-defeats-nato>.

7 Ibid. Shlapak and Johnson observe that “existing Army tube artillery can generally fire at targets 14 to 24 kilometers (9 to 15 miles) away. Unfortunately, the most common Russian self-propelled howitzer NATO forces would encounter in the Baltics has a range of 29 kilometers (or 19 miles).”

8 John Gordon IV et al., “Comparing U.S. Army Systems with Foreign Counterparts: Identifying Possible Capability Gaps and Insights from Other Armies,” Rand Corporation, (accessed March 14, 2019), 21, 29, & 30, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR716.html. Gordon et al report that though initial tests of the US Army’s Extended Range Cannon Artillery (ERCA) promise to regain that tactical advantage, the ERCA remains in the testing phase. Furthermore, the M777 howitzer is in testing phase for the M777ER (Extended Range), which essentially doubles the current range capabilities of the M777. For more information, see Captain Steve Draheim and Major Paul Santamaria, “Long Range, Short Term,” *Army AL&T*, July-September 2018, 32-36.

9 This consequentialist understanding of the nature of war is reminiscent of Thucydides, who wrote “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” Thucydides, “The Melian Dialogue,” *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Chapter XVII, Mt Holy Oak College, accessed on March 17, 2019, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/melian.htm>.

10 Lieutenant General (Retired) John Miller, personal discussion over lunch, in response to a question by Chaplain (Major) Eric Dean, Fort Leavenworth, KS, March 25, 2019.

11 This line of reasoning as the doctrine of extreme necessity; a belief that there are certain conditions under which the U.S. must abandon the rule of law in order to achieve the victory necessary for preserving the Constitution and the American way of life. Many, however, critique this position on moral, philosophical, or legal grounds, citing concerns about abuse of power, potential human rights violations, and Constitutional violations. For an analysis of concerns about the doctrine of extreme necessity, see Richard A. Posner, *Not a Suicide Pact: The Constitution in a Time of National Emergency*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.

12 Shannon French, *The Code of the Warrior: Exploring Warrior Values Past and Present*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, 9.

13 Ibid.

14 T. R. Fehrenbach, *This Kind of War*, Omaha: Potomac Books, 2008, 161. Fehrenbach appears to understand the role of a service member as one limited to the defense of territories and populations.

15 Ibid., 456. Emphasis added by author. Here Fehrenbach appears to expand his previous understanding of the role of the service member to both defend the Constitution and secure territories and protect the population. Thus his previous statement on page 161 about simply exercising physical control over peoples and territories seems lacking. His revised understanding appears to imply defense of the ideals of the Constitution, thus exercising what Lieutenant General Miller described as “moral ascendancy over one’s enemies.”

16 John Adams, “Letter to Abigail Adams,” February 17, 1777, Masshist.org, (accessed on March 14, 2019), https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17770217ja&bc=%2Fdigitaladams%2Farchive%2Fbrowse%2Fletters_1774_1777.php. Emphasis added by author.

17 David Hackett Fischer, *Washington’s Crossing*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004, 276.

18 Ibid.

19 S. P. MacKenzie, “The Treatment of Prisoners of War in World War II,” *The Journal of Modern History* 66:3 (Sep., 1994): 512, The University of Chicago, (accessed on March 14, 2019), <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/abs/10.1086/244883>.

20 CNN, “Iraq Prison Abuse Scandal Fast Facts,” *CNN*, (accessed on March 14, 2019), <https://www.cnn.com/2013/10/30/world/meast/iraq-prison-abuse-scandal-fast-facts/index.html>.

21 August C. Krey, *The First Crusade: The Accounts of Eyewitnesses and Participants*, (Princeton: 1921), 256-57. [Last paragraph from Brundage, *Crusades: A Documentary History*, (Milwaukee: 1962), 64], Fordham University, (accessed on March 16, 2019), <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/gesta-cde.asp#jerusalem2>.

22 Ibid., 262.

23 Fulk (or Fulcher) of Chartres, *Gesta Francorum Jerusalem Expugnantium* [The Deeds of the Franks Who Attacked Jerusalem], in Frederick Duncan and August C. Krey, eds., *Parallel Source Problems in Medieval History* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1912), 109-115, Fordham University, (accessed on March 16, 2019), <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/cde-jlem.asp#fulcher1>.

24 Ibid.

25 William Shakespeare, “Henry V,” Act 3, Scene 3, *Open Source Shakespeare*, (accessed on March 14, 2019), http://www.opensourceshakespeare.org/views/plays/play_view.php?WorkID=henry5&Act=3&Scene=3&Scope=scene.

26 Stephen Runciman, *A History of the Crusades: Volume II The Kingdom of Jerusalem and the Frankish East, 1100-1187*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 446.

27 Ibid.

28 For further reading, see James Reston, *Warriors of God: Richard the Lionheart and Saladin in the Third Crusade*, New York: Doubleday, 2001.

29 For the purposes of this article, “rule of law” encompasses all legal requirements of American forces. These include, but are not limited to: the Geneva Conventions, the Law of Armed Conflict, treaties and Status of Forces Agreements, the Constitution, rules of engagement, and regulations.

- 30 Brett T. Litz, Eileen Delaney, Leslie Lebowitz, Shira Maguen, William P. Nash, Caroline Silva, and Nathan Stein, "Moral injury and moral repair in war veterans: A preliminary model and intervention strategy," *Clinical Psychological Review* 29 (2009): 695.
- 31 Larry Dewey, *War and Redemption: Treatment and Recovery in Combat-related Posttraumatic Stress Disorder*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004, 89-90.
- 32 Joshua Hammer, "Death Squad," *New York Times*, (accessed on March 15, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/14/books/review/Hammer-t.html>.
- 33 Jim Frederick, *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in the Triangle of Death*, New York: Crown Publishing, 2010, 368.
- 34 Melba C. Stetz, Robert K. Gifford, Joshua J. McDonald, and Brian J. Lukey, "Psychiatric diagnoses as a cause of medical evacuation," *Aviation Space and Environmental Medicine* 76(7 Suppl): (August 2005), C15.