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*A review of social and political trends and events
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AMERICA' S FIRST POST-MODERN WAR

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By all accounts Bill Clinton spends a lot of time fretting over how history will judge him and his presidency. This is far too complicated a question to address in one article. But I think it is becoming clear that one dubious honor that he will certainly have earned is being the first president to start, develop the tactics for, fight, and “win” America’s first post-modern war.

I began thinking about this last week as I was reading Arizona Senator John McCain’s scathing attack on Bill’s military actions in Kosovo. Unhappy about the administration’s refusal to employ ground troops, McCain charged that Bill “is prepared to lose a war rather than do the hard work, the politically risky work, of fighting it as the leader of the greatest nation on earth should fight when our interests and values are imperiled.”

In the old “modern” sense, McCain may well be correct. But in the post-modern world of the Clinton presidency, McCain’s concerns have no meaning. Lose? What does lose mean exactly? The opposite of win? So what does win mean? After all, what does “is” mean? Or how about “alone?”

During the Monica Lewinsky mess, Bill noted that whether he committed perjury or not depends on word definitions. He put it this way.

It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is. If the--if he--if 'is' means is and never has been, that is not--that is one thing. If it means there is none, that was a completely true statement. . . . Now, if someone had asked me on that day, are you having any kind of sexual relations with Ms. Lewinsky, that is, asked me a question in the present tense, I would have said no. And it would have been completely true.

It depends on how you define 'alone' . . . There were a lot of times when we were alone, but I never really thought we were.

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Thus, what McCain misses, I believe, is that Bill will not “lose” in Kosovo. No matter what the outcome, he will “win.” For in the post-modern world in which Bill operates, words such as “win” or “lose” can be “deconstructed” to mean whatever he intends them to mean on any given day. This is not a new concept for the American left. During the 1960s, one of the favorite bromides of Bill and many of his fellow protesters against the war in Vietnam was that the United States should simply “declare victory and leave.”

By traditional standards, such an action would have been immoral, being based, as it was, on a lie. In the same sense, I believe it will be a lie, and thus immoral, if, as now seems likely, Bill claims “victory” in this dispute while Milosevic remains in power and Yugoslavia retains control over Kosovo.

Why? Because I believe that whether or not it made sense for the U.S. to intervene on the side of the Kosovars in the civil war in Yugoslavia with massive bombing attacks on the Serbs, the fact is that Bill did it. And in doing so, I believe that he assumed a moral obligation on behalf of the United States to see that when the dust settles the Kosovars are no worse off than they were when he decided to “help” them. This is similar, in my opinion, to the moral obligation the United States assumed, and later abandoned, in South East Asia almost 40 years ago, when we chose sides in a similar local civil war and later supported “our” side with massive bombing attacks on the other.

Time will tell, whether Bill recognizes that America has indeed assumed a long-term moral obligation to its new found “allies,” the Kosovars, and whether, if he does, he takes it any more seriously than he did the similar obligation to our South East Asian allies when he was leading antiwar protests in London. But if I were the Kosovars, I would be concerned about the fact that in Bill’s post-modern world, words like “moral obligation,” “honor” and even “victory” are highly subjective.

And this brings us to what I believe is the real threat of post-modern warfare, namely that moral considerations are meaningless, given that the term “moral” is meaningless.

“Aha,” you say. “How naive you are, Mark. Every war that has ever been fought has been called ‘moral’ by those who led their nations into battle. The concept of *justum bellum* has always been subjective. Winners determine whether the action was ‘just.’ The ‘just war’ debate is an academic one, meaningless in the real world.”

To which I respond. That’s not true, at least not for the United States. No nation is perfect, of course. But most Americans have traditionally cared deeply about the morality and legality of their military actions, because America has traditionally been a religious nation where moral values and the “rule of law” are recognized as founding principles.

In fact, the theological and legal concept of “just war” was at the center of the controversy over America’s involvement in and conduct of the war in Vietnam. The concept of “just war” has been debated, and honored in Western society since St. Augustine raised the issue early in the 5th century in his remarkable book, *City of God*, in response to questions of whether Christians can go to war in a just cause.

It is a concept that occupied the minds of a host of canonists in medieval times, Martin Luther in the 16th century, and later such thinkers in the field of international law as Francisco Suarez, Francisco de Vitoria and, of course, Hugo Grotius.

This was not, and is not, a mere academic debate, at least in America. There was nothing academic about Lincoln's anguish and doubt over the justness of the Civil War. There was nothing academic about the debate over the morality of Truman's use of the atomic bomb to end the war in the Pacific. Nor, I should add, was there anything academic about the actions of the kids who protested the war in Vietnam in the 1960s. Some of those kids undoubtedly acted for selfish, even cowardly reasons. But to tar the entire 1960s antiwar movement with that brush is, in my opinion, to miss a very important moment in American moral discourse.

People can argue endlessly about whether American actions in Vietnam were moral. But they can't deny that the debate over this issue was sincere, and that it was an honorable one that honored America's founding principles. Like Lincoln, Americans lost a great deal of sleep over the issue of *justum bellum* during the Vietnam experience. And it was, I believe, well that they did.

Today, in Bill's post-modern America, it would appear that few if any citizens are losing sleep over whether the United States should be bombing the living hell out one side in a civil war in a remote nation that has little if any strategic importance to the United States. In America's first post-modern war it appears to be enough for Bill to simply declare that this war is being fought for the highest moral principles in the most moral of all fashions. After all, what does "moral" mean anyway?

To quote a recent piece by syndicated columnist Tony Snow, "I don't want to downplay Mr. Milosevic's treachery, but it is important to remember that Kosovo was relatively peaceful until we decided to help. According to one Senate leader, intelligence experts put the ethnic-cleansing death toll for the first three months of this year at about 65 -- not 6,500, or 65,000, but three score and five. We have killed more than that many Serbian civilians during Operation Allied Force."

Furthermore, Snow notes, "the refugee crisis in the Balkans is awful, but not unprecedented. Croats uprooted 1.5 million Serbs earlier this decade, a quarter million over a long weekend in the Krajina Province. The difference between then and now is that we didn't like the Serbs, and so didn't intervene."

In any case, my point is not to question the morality of American operations in Kosovo, but to call attention to the troubling, at least for me, fact that for most Americans today, it doesn't seem to matter.

Much public debate has taken place since the bombing began over the prudence of the intervention, over the wisdom of the tactics, and over the cost of the action. But there has been virtual silence over whether the cause is "just." In short, no one is asking, in the words of modern "just war" theory, such questions as whether waging this war was a last resort used only after all other means were exhausted? Are the means employed proportionate to the ends? Was the decision to go to war an act of redress of rights actually violated or defense against unjust

demands by an enemy backed by the threat of force? Was the war openly and legally declared by properly constituted government? Is there a reasonable prospect for victory? Will the victorious party refrain from requiring the “utter humiliation” of the vanquished?

And finally, in light of Bill’s military strategy of keeping combatant casualties to an absolute minimum by relying almost exclusively on “smart bombs” fired from ships off shore and high flying planes, is the war being waged in such a way as to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants?

Does it matter? I believe it matters a great deal. Why? Because I believe that if America, which controls the most powerful military force that the world has ever known, ever comes to believe that moral principles do not apply to its use of this military strength, that “might makes right” so to speak, then both the United States and the world will be in very deep trouble.

More specifically, I believe it matters a great deal because I believe the moral high ground is important. On the practical side, I believe that Americans fight better when they believe that they are fighting on the moral side. This is important because it appears to me that the world is going to become exceedingly more dangerous in the next decade, as China begins to make use of the enormous store of nuclear technology it bought and stole from the Clinton administration, both by modernizing its own nuclear weapons systems and selling the information to other nations.

On a less practical side I believe, as Lincoln did, when asked whether he thought God was on the side of the North in the Civil War and he replied: “I am not at all concerned about that, for I know the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I an this nation should be on the Lord’s side.”

I am hopeful that America hasn’t abandoned the moral ground. I am hopeful that the American public will eventually demand that Bill justify his actions in Kosovo on moral grounds, in the same way that he and virtually his entire foreign policy team demanded in the 1960s that Presidents Johnson and Nixon defend their conduct of the war in Vietnam. I am hopeful that the American public still cares about the moral use of American military force, even if most members of Congress in both parties are to politically frightened or to stupid to raise the issue. I am hopeful, but I am worried.

To put some additional flesh on my concerns, I will close with a few quotes from the German legal scholar and political scientist, Carl Schmitt’s classic study, *Concept of the Political*. This remarkably thoughtful book was first published in 1932, but has enjoyed a rebirth in interest in the academic community during the past several years. My paperback edition was published in 1996 by the University of Chicago press, along with comments by the well-known American philosopher Leo Strauss.

The paragraphs I have selected address the issue of warfare in a world where moral considerations are trumped by high sounding rhetoric from leaders who hide from their individual moral responsibilities behind the cloak of organizational decision making and rhapsodize about “defending “humanity” while waging war in the name of “peace.”

I think Americans can be thankful that the United States has not reached this point. But I believe Americans should keep Schmitt's thoughts in mind as this first post-modern war continues, a war in which the leaders of the Western nations involved, in the words of Tony Snow, "dodge responsibility for troop deployments by citing such abstractions as 'the consensus of the international community' or 'the need to ensure the viability of NATO.'"

That wars are waged in the name of humanity is not a contradiction . . . quite the contrary, it has an especially intensive political meaning. When a state fights its political enemy in the name of humanity, it is not a war for the sake of humanity, but a war wherein a particular state seeks to usurp a universal concept against its military opponent. At the expense of its opponent, it tries to identify itself with humanity in the same way as one can misuse peace, justice, progress, and civilization in order to claim these as one's own and to deny the same to the enemy.

The concept of humanity is an especially useful ideological instrument of imperialist expansion, and in its ethical-humanitarian form it is a specific vehicle of economic imperialism. Here one is reminded of a somewhat modified expression of Proudhon's: whoever invokes humanity wants to cheat. To confiscate the word humanity, to invoke and monopolize such a term probably has certain incalculable effects, such as denying the enemy the quality of being human and declaring him to be an outlaw of humanity; and a war can thereby be driven to the most extreme inhumanity . . .

If, in fact, the will to abolish war is so strong that it no longer shuns war, then it has become a political motive, i.e., it affirms, even if only as an extreme possibility, war and even the reason for war . . . Such a war is necessarily unusually intense and inhuman because, by transcending the limits of the political framework, it simultaneously degrades the enemy into moral and other categories and is forced to make of him a monster that must not only be defeated but also utterly destroyed. In other words, he is an enemy who no longer must be compelled to retreat into his borders only . . .

The Geneva League of Nations does not eliminate the possibility of wars, just as it does not abolish states. It introduced new possibilities for wars, permits wars to take place, sanctions coalition wars, and by legitimizing and sanctioning certain wars it sweeps away many obstacles to war . . . A league of nations which is not universal can only be politically significant when it represents a potential or actual alliance, i.e. a coalition. The *jus belli* would not thereby be abolished but, more or less, totally or partially, transferred to the alliance.

An imperialism based on pure economic power will naturally attempt to sustain a worldwide condition which enables it to apply and manage, unmolested, its economic means . . . Pure economic imperialism will also apply a stronger, but still economic, and therefore (according to this terminology) nonpolitical, essentially peaceful means of force. A 1921 League of Nations resolution enumerates as examples: economic sanctions and severance of the food supply from the civilian population. Finally, it has sufficient technical means to bring about violent death. Modern means of annihilation

have been produced by enormous investment of capital and intelligence, surely to be used if necessary.

For the application of such means, a new and essentially pacifist vocabulary has been created. War is condemned but executions, sanctions, punitive expeditions, pacifications, protection of treaties, international police, and measures to assure peace remain. The adversary is thus no longer called an enemy but a disturber of peace and is thereby designated to be an outlaw of humanity. A war waged to protect or expand economic power must, with the aid of propaganda, turn into a crusade . . .

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