



The U.S. Bombing and Ramadan: The Real Problems We Face Because of Our Failure to Understand Asymmetric Warfare and Mistakes that Turn "Information Dominance" into a Self-Inflicted Wound

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There is something a bit ironic about the fact that U.S. military doctrine stressed "information dominance" long before the Gulf War, and that dominating information warfare is seen as a key part of the "Revolution in Military Affairs." So far, the United States has lagged badly in trying to win "information dominance" in its battle with the Taliban and Al Qaeda—at least in the Islamic world, Middle East, and Pakistan, where winning matters most.

There are many reasons for this failure, and some of the most important are beyond the control of the Department of Defense: The backlash from the Second Intifada, the backlash from the hardships of the Iraqi people, the fact the U.S. is the natural proxy for all of the inequities in global economic development, language skills and differences in culture, and the fact that good words about Islam cannot transform the United States into an Islamic state.

There is nothing new, however, about the problem of explaining the use of airpower in ways that communicate U.S. concern for civilian casualties and collateral damage, that minimize the impact of such damage when it occurs, and that provide a military and political justification for U.S. actions. All of these problems emerged even during World War II. They were issues in Vietnam and the Gulf War, and became steadily more important in Bosnia, Desert Fox, and Kosovo. They are also issues that the United States has failed to properly address in military planning and doctrine and in far too many of its public information efforts.

The U.S. Air Force and Pentagon Air Campaign Against the U.S. Military

It is also clear that the Pentagon has been responsible for many of these problems, and has created a cumulative public relations disaster that goes far beyond the immediate problem of Islamic sensitivities to Ramadan. This is scarcely the fault of the current leadership of the Pentagon but it has become a major strategic liability and reflects a critical failure to understand the political nature of asymmetric warfare.

As a result, it is important to consider the complex mix of the deeper causes of our problems in dealing with civilian casualties and collateral damage:

The U.S. military has developed a targeting doctrine that ultimately places a very heavy emphasis on strategic and interdiction targets in populated areas. It is far from clear that this doctrine achieves military results proportional to the priorities given to logistic and military industrial targets, sustainability and maintenance targets, leadership targets, and C4I. It also often means bombing buildings and area targets that require repeated restrikes, and even then, an inability to assess the importance of the resulting damage in many cases. The resulting civilian casualties and collateral damage are only part of a broader problem, but they are certainly increased as a result of the fact that much of U.S. targeting and battle damage assessment for bombing in populated area is not an art form, much less a science. In fact, U.S. targeting and battle damage assessment comes closer to being military doctrine practiced as witchcraft.

Ironically, the flip side of our bombing doctrine is that it implies we know enough to bomb steadily at relatively limited levels and with an almost mathematical understanding of the cumulative effect of our strikes, in ways that severely limit our

effectiveness. The political and psychological impact of very large-scale initial bombing, and "shock and awe," is given comparatively little value. At its worst, this is compounded by exercises in political symbolism that lead us to launch very limited numbers of bombs or cruise missiles for political purposes, knowing that the military impact is likely to be negligible. The small strikes on Iraq, and strike on the pharmaceutical plant in the Sudan during the Clinton Administration are examples of cases where deliberately symbolic military ineffectiveness still managed to compound the collateral damage problem.

Perhaps more importantly, we do not seem to understand that it is the perception of bombing civilians over time that creates hostility and not the body count per se. The idea that we pay the same political price for limited levels of bombing in populated areas over time that we do for large-scale bombing does not seem to sink in. Neither does the fact that massive initial bombing at the point when a war begins, and getting the job over with in populated areas, may be critical.

We do not see bombing in broader perceptual terms. We do not understand that most reporters cannot tell the difference between an attack with 10 weapons delivered in a broad urban area and an attack with 100 in the most populated area. We do not seem to understand that shifting the focus of bombing and air power to the field and directly striking enemy forces away from populated areas has a major strategic value simply because it is both less visible and does not affect civilians. There is a certain absurdity to the idea that drafting rural teenagers or using ideological pressure to put them in uniform makes them legitimate military targets while the privileged civilian power elites in urban areas that use them are not. But this is the practical reality.

The U.S. (and NATO in Kosovo) have tended to try to communicate an image of perfect war: We know exactly what we are doing, we almost never miss, precision weapons are almost perfect, and we have virtually no casualties. Yes, there are many qualifications in Pentagon briefings, but in the process the cumulative image is one of technical perfection and forces that do not take risks going into combat against those that are bombed. Day after day, gee whiz photos or film is shown of perfect strikes. We grossly understate the fog of war, that civilian casualties are an inevitable price, and that at least 10 percent of even the best precision weapons still miss. We do not explain the hardships our pilots face, the difficulties in weapons delivery, and the risks. This image of "Teflon warfare" may seem like a good idea from data to day, and reflect military imaging building and pride, but the cumulative impact is to lead the world to expect perfection in targeting, no civilians casualties, and no casualties.

There is nothing approaching a meaningful set of non-lethal weapons at this point in time, but we have been far too slow to see the need to minimize the risk of collateral damage as a critical part of modern warfighting and asymmetric warfare. We are developing smaller precision guided bombs and weapons to minimize the damage to the level needed for given targets. And the British, at least, are attempting to redesign weapons with reliability and accuracy criteria focused as much on avoiding major misses and collateral damage as accuracy against the target. We have not, however, given these aspects of weapons design, avionics design, reconnaissance and target methods and procedures and BDA the needed priority.

We have gone from issuing body counts to issuing absurdly precise statistics on physical damage to things, to issuing virtually no battle damage data at all. We have no way to communicate the purpose of our bombing in terms of measures or progress and success. Equally important, the continuing, decades-long problems in our crude methods of battle damage assessment are compounded by the fact that we have no method for collateral damage assessment, and measuring civilian casualties, other than to wait for the enemy to issue its propaganda and hope we can somehow learn the truth. This effectively cedes one of the most important battles in asymmetric warfare to the enemy and compounds all of our other military and credibility problems.

The Particular Problem of Ramadan

We should have no illusions about the particular problem of bombing the Taliban and Al Qaeda during Ramadan. Those that already dislike and distrust us will do so whether we pause or not. The impact on public opinion and leaders will be marginal, particularly if we have to launch a massive new wave of bombing after Ramadan to compensate or we are increasingly seen as being weak or defeated as a result. At the same time, nothing a non-Islamic power says about Muslims and Arabs fighting during Ramadan is going to influence those who oppose us. The situation is also almost certain to be made worse by the course of the Second Intifada and constant war talk about Iraq.

We do need to explain to our friends and allies, and those who can still be influenced. We need to show we are using restraint, and we need to explain that any pause amounts to a unilateral ceasefire:

It allows the Taliban to resupply through smuggling from Pakistan with minimal interruption.

It allows the Taliban to recover its damaged capabilities and disperse them.

It allows new facilities to be imbedded in populated areas.

It allows reinforcement and resupply of Taliban garrisons in hostile ethnic areas on the edge of winter.

It ensures that opposition forces will make limited gains in the North before winter, and allows the Taliban to crack down with force against hostile populations and factions.

It will raise expectations about not resuming the bombing and future limits on our use of force that will create major problems-not only in this war but in future ones.

Ironically, therefore, the Ramadan issue is a relatively minor subset of the much broader problems discussed earlier, and a case where the United States virtually must continue bombing to be effective both politically and militarily. Any pause would not solve any of our military and political problems in carrying out air and missile campaigns, it would simply compound them.

Solving the Problem of Collateral Damage and Civilian Casualties: Preparing for Asymmetric Warfare

We cannot solve our problems simply by improving our public relations or taking action during Ramadan. We fundamentally need to rethink the importance of civilian casualties and collateral damage in modern warfare. There are, however, ways in which we could make things better during Ramadan:

Move as much of the bombing outside of populated areas as possible, even at the cost of some paper loss of effectiveness.

Use imagery to prove our case that the Taliban and Al Qaeda are sheltering in populated areas.

Explain the reasons our targeting and weapons are anything but perfect.

Hit key targets thoroughly the first time and explain why. Get it over with, don't linger.

Revise the daily maps in our strike briefings to show how many munitions are being delivered outside populated areas. Provide cumulative maps as well. Prove we are not targeting civilians.

Use the Afghan opposition as much as possible in forward targeting. Make it clear that Afghans are helping us target.

Systematically refute Taliban lies, and issue full details in Arabic and Pakistani and Afghan languages. Make this as least as important an effort as Pentagon briefings for the Western media.

Bring our allies more fully into the loop. Give briefings on this aspect of our operations to the Afghan, Pakistani, Central Asian, Middle Eastern and NATO military.

Give similar briefings to the regional military.

Half measures, however, are scarcely enough. The previous list of broad problems in our approach to using air and missile power, and our dismal failure to develop the new forms of "information dominance" needed for asymmetric warfare, is a clear list of priorities for the kind of changes in doctrine, military operations, technology and tactics, and public information we need to win.

We need to address each issue on this list as soon as possible, and do so during this conflict to the extent possible. In the process, we need fundamental changes in the way the U.S. military approaches targeting and air doctrine, and in the approach the Pentagon and the West take to public information.

Afghan War Topics

11/06/01	The Evolving US Strategy in Afghanistan
11/05/01	The Uncertain Status of the War
11/02/01	Defining "Carpet Bombing" in the Afghan War
11/01/01	The Problems in Major U.S. Ground Options in Afghanistan: It May Not Be Over When It's Over
10/31/01	The Taliban and its Afghan Opposition: Why the "Bad Guys" May be Less Fragile than The "Good Guys" and Why a US Ground-Air Option May Be Necessary

10/30/01 [The Growing British Role in the War Against the Taliban and Al Qaeda: Force Contributions and Chronology](#)
10/29/01 [A Long War? Weather as a "Four-Edged Sword"](#)
10/25/01 [The Lack of Battle Damage Assessment Data](#)
10/24/01 [Background to the War](#)