Just and Unjust Wars: A Diplomat's Perspective

BY RICHARD HOLBROOKE

I AM not a philosopher, a scholar, or even a journalist; I am a practitioner of diplomacy who holds great respect for the academy and for the work of the conference at which this collection of papers was presented.

I would comment at the outset about the paper in this volume by Michael Walzer, which he ended by pointing out that we have to deal with a world where members of the military think, or at least talk, like theoreticians. And, we might add, where theoreticians think and talk like generals. It is no accident that some of the most aggressive and belligerent people in the United States government, in the 40 years that I have been in and out of it, are people who have never seen combat. Let me therefore offer a few thoughts of perspective from the battlefield itself, if you will allow that—some random observations based on the issue addressed in these papers.

The kind of discussion held at this conference is all too rarely, if ever, heard in Washington. The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Brookings, the American Enterprise Institute, the United States Senate and House of Representatives—they do not usually hold seminars, symposiums, and hearings on issues like just versus unjust wars. The subject has never been raised in any meeting I attended at the State Department, the Defense Department, or the White House. By saying this, I do not wish to discourage the contributors to and readers of this volume from continuing the discussion. On the contrary, in some intangible way it will ultimately reach the minds of policymakers.

A rare exception to my generalization was a series of public Millennium Lectures that President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hilary Clinton held at the White House between 1999 and 2000. I remember especially Elie Wiesel's talk in the East Wing before the president, the Cabinet, and invited officials that was broadcast on C-SPAN. In such moments the issues we are addressing here momentarily penetrate into the so-called corridors of power. But such moments are rare.

It is particularly appropriate that we discuss this issue today, with American troops in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Bosnia, Uzbekistan, Pakistan, Georgia, the Philippines, Colombia, and perhaps elsewhere in the world, including Yemen and the countries in the Horn of Africa. Each one of these must be approached on a case-by-case basis, but absent some logical, coherent framework and a case-by-case analysis, we could stumble into mistakes. There is little evidence that this has been done in most of our engagements over the last half-century.

It needs to be stressed that one person's "just war" can be another's terror campaign or genocide. One person's terrorist may be another's freedom fighter. Bosnia, Kosovo, the intifada—even Osama bin Laden's murderous activities—have this in common: that those committing the most barbarous acts invoke religion, God, or a sense of thwarted nationalism to justify the most evil actions.

The acts themselves—the murder of innocent civilians, premeditated rape, the destruction of entire communities—are, without doubt, evil. Yet the people committing them do not consider them evil. They believe that, since their war is "just," the means they used are justified. We disagree with them strongly, and, for that matter, so does international law, but they do not see it the same way.

I wish, therefore, to underscore my deliberate use of the word evil. When I was starting out in Washington this word was never used, except in reference to events long over, especially the Holocaust. I spent three and a half years in Vietnam as a civilian mem-

ber of the war effort. As others can attest, particularly the president of the New School University, my friend Bob Kerrey, we never heard the word evil used with regard to the people we were fighting.

A relativism had settled over American foreign policy. By the time we got to Bosnia in 1991-1992, it was very hard for most of my colleagues in government to recognize that one side was, by our standards, truly evil. Martin Peretz's magazine, *The New Republic*, worked hard to make that point, as did other brave and impassioned observers and journalists, some of whom are contributors to this volume. Samantha Power particularly comes to mind as someone who saw this instantly, at a young age. We should have recognized, as I wrote in *To End a War* (1998), that evil really does exist in the world.

Relativism is not always applicable, as we saw on September 11. But we should have seen this earlier. Stalin and his regime were evil, as President Ronald Reagan pointed out. The theory that everyone has an equally valid point of view and you just have to sit down and figure it out may apply to a lawyer trying to settle a civil suit, or a divorce, or a case between a plaintiff and a defendant, but there are times in the world when it just does not apply. This was the case in Bosnia.

Because the essay by Michael Walzer deals with conventional wars, I want to stress that what we think of as traditional war rarely exists in the world today. There are still armies, they still use weaponry, the weaponry has changed—but it is rarely a war between two countries. Recent exceptions—the United States and Iraq, Iran and Iraq, India and Pakistan, the United Kingdom and Argentina over the Falklands—are dramatic, but relatively rare. Most modern conflicts are quite different.

The only traditional war between two countries that I can think of in the last decade, a "clean" war between two sovereign states, was the fighting in which Ethiopia and Eritrea engaged in 1998 and 2000. It was a very nasty piece of work. Between 50,000 and 100,000 people died for nothing—for empty, almost uninhabited,

land on the border of two of the world's poorest nations. It could have easily been settled by diplomacy. Although not on a specific peace mission, I shuttled back and forth between Asmara and Addis Ababa three days before the second phase of the war exploded while in the region heading a UN Security Council delegation looking into the Congo war, a more typical modern war. The Security Council asked us to go to Addis and Asmara to see if we could stop it. The two leaders, Ethiopia's Meles Zenawi and Eritrea's Isaias Afwerki, were articulate, street-smart men who had been former allies. They were determined to have a war over this worthless territory, essentially for bragging rights. But this is rare in the world today. It is worth noting that the Ethiopia-Eritrea War was incredibly expensive. Two of the poorest countries on earth, one carved out of the other, had spent their limited means on the fighting, but the international community is now spending money for reconstruction and on UN border patrols to prevent war from breaking out again. This is money that is being thrown away in countries where the per capita income is $200 a year. It was, by my standards, an unjust war.

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The greatest dilemma that we must address when discussing just and unjust wars is the nature of modern wars. They are not wars between states, with the rare exceptions just mentioned. They are between nonstate actors and established authorities.

At the conference where these papers were delivered, the Reverend J. Bryan Hehir, a participant on the panel on just and unjust war, pointed out that if we start with the presumption that states, but not others, are authorized to make war under certain circumstances, every war in the world today violates that precept. Every one of them. For every Ethiopia-Eritrea there are 10 Congos, Bosnias, Sierra Leones, Angolas, Afghanistans, Cambodias, and Colombias. And sometimes, as in the case of Colombia, we

are not sure if it is a war or a war against drug lords (although the definition matters little to the people who are being killed or made homeless).

In these internal wars—for they are wars to the people who are being killed in them—the outside world's role is complicated. Thus, a related question to that of just wars is how to define a just intervention. I need to be very clear on this: I have absolutely no question that American intervention to stop the wars in Bosnia and later in Kosovo were legitimate, even though they involved thousands of air sorties and were opposed by most United States military officers. Moreover, the interventions worked.

This does not mean we can always intervene, or should. But this volume should contain a consideration of the role of outside intervention in these conflicts. Of course I believe we must be ready to do this, but only under two conditions (and this is where we return to a case-by-case analysis): first, when it is morally justifiable, as it certainly was in Bosnia and Kosovo, and second, when it is possible to succeed. If it is not possible to succeed, no matter how morally justifiable, the consequences of a failed intervention could be worse than not intervening (for example, in Vietnam).

We have much more responsibility, when we intervene, than just war-fighting. Let me address briefly two important recent cases: Bosnia and Afghanistan (Kosovo fits within the rubric of Bosnia here). In neither Bosnia nor Kosovo did the United States have ground troops in combat. Troops went in only after air power succeeded. And that in itself needs to be emphasized, because prior to the successful use of air power in Bosnia, in September 1995, and the use of air power again in Kosovo in 1999, it was widely believed by almost everyone, except the United States Air Force and some Navy pilots, that air power could never succeed on its own merits. In his 1995 memoirs, which came out the same month as the air attacks took place in Bosnia, General Colin Powell, now the country's secretary of state, flatly stated that air

power would not work in Bosnia. Of course he was wrong, and he was gracious enough to admit it afterward.

In Bosnia, an American-led NATO intervention stopped a war. The kind of action that ultimately succeeded was opposed both by liberals and conservatives on various grounds: "we shouldn't intervene," "it doesn't matter," "we won't be able to succeed," "not our problem," "Bosnia is not a nation," "it's not really a genocide." The combination was hard to overcome. It took the massacre at Srebrenica, where 7,700 people were slaughtered by the Bosnian Serbs, before we could get a consensus to act, and even then the House of Representatives voted three to one to oppose the United States military deployment after the Dayton accords that ended the fighting were reached. I mention this because you need domestic support for action. But this was the House of Representatives under the control of Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. It did not support us, but President Clinton went ahead anyway—in an act of some courage, which has not been adequately recognized by his critics.

Now let us consider Afghanistan. As Professor Walzer said at the conference, all of us support what has happened in Afghanistan since September 11. There is no question that the military action in Afghanistan was morally justified, that it is a just war, and, I might add on a more practical basis, that it will succeed militarily. But there are two questions that I want to raise. The first is: What would the public or Washington have said, prior to September 11, 2001, about the kind of action we are now taking in Afghanistan?

On a moral basis, the case should have been the same before or after September 11. Everyone knew how odious the Taliban were, not only in their treatment of women and in their destruction of their own artistic heritage, but in what they were doing to the country. We also knew Al Qaeda was there, and how dangerous it was. In fact, in August 1998 the United States had bombed Al Qaeda camps and missed bin Laden by just a couple of hours in the one explicit attempt to target him. But I am sure that had

the Clinton or Bush administration, before September 11, sought to create a national consensus that a preemptive military action against the Taliban and bin Laden was justified and necessary—whether this had been done on humanitarian grounds, moral grounds, political grounds, or strategic grounds—there would have been no support for it in Washington. Congress would surely have opposed it. If there was so much opposition over Bosnia, which was in the heart of Europe, and in which an active genocide was taking place, it is clear that there would have been virtually no support for preventive war in Afghanistan before September 11.

Does this mean we have to wait for a catastrophe in order to respond? In the 1930s we had to have Pearl Harbor. The act itself, whether it is Pearl Harbor or the World Trade Center, is a very high price to pay before action is taken, and I think we have to look harder when it is necessary in the modern world to act.

This brings me to the questions of means. Even when it is correct to act, one constantly needs to question not just whether a war is morally justifiable, but what means are to be used in the fighting itself. Even in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan, some of the actions taken were not, in my mind, acceptable or necessary. For example, land mines and cluster bomb units are almost always unnecessary, and they were used frequently in Kosovo and Afghanistan. A cluster bomb unit, which is even nastier than a land mine, is a group of tightly packed nails that explodes and maims people without seriously damaging buildings. Unlike a land mine, it cannot be defused, but must be detonated to be made harmless. Millions of these devices are lying in fields in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Angola, the Balkans, and elsewhere. We used them, unnecessarily, during the wars we undertook because—and this is a point that needs to be understood—once a war is started, the military invariably are left to determine the tactics and details of the fighting, not civilians.

The second question I want to ask is: What happens after the war? A war, no matter how successful, is only as good as the peace that follows it. America's military strength today is so overwhelming that we can win any military engagement in any part of the world at any time.

But if the United States does not accept our political, economic, humanitarian, strategic, and moral obligation to stick around and help stabilize the country, Afghanistan will slip back into the abyss from which we are trying to rescue it. The country will go back to the warlords and drug lords who controlled it before the Taliban took over in 1996 (usually the same people, since somewhere between 70 and 95 percent of all the heroin in Europe and the United States comes from Afghanistan). And the caves, which we have tried to clean out, will fall back into the hands of terrorists, who will, after a period of quiet—which could be several years—strike out against their enemies in the West. As we all should understand now, their goal is to destroy us, not just to damage us. And while they will not succeed, they will use any murderous means they can.

So I am distressed when I see the Pentagon rule that it will oppose expanding the international peacekeeping force, led in 2002 by the British; that the United States has opposed expanding it beyond the capital city of Kabul; that the United States has voted, at the UN, to limit it to 5,000 people; and that the United States is not participating in this force. By contrast, six years ago in Bosnia, after the Dayton peace agreements, the United States sent 20,000 troops to Bosnia as part of a 60,000-man NATO-led troop contingent. We flooded the country—Bosnia is one-twelfth the size of Afghanistan—pacified the country, and then began the rebuilding process, which admittedly is far from perfect. We succeeded, however, in achieving our basic objective: to end the war. Tens of thousands of people are alive today who would otherwise be dead, the fire in South-Central Europe is no longer raging, and the total cost in American and NATO lives in the six and a half years since the Dayton agreements is zero.

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In his paper, Michael Walzer discusses just wars. I therefore want to mention just interventions to keep the peace. As I have noted, I am mystified at the opposition of those at the Pentagon to undertake a similar responsibility in Afghanistan. Their explanations vary, but the stated reason is they want to build a national army, a goal I support, and something we are trying to do in Bosnia and Kosovo. But this is a goal that will take years to reach. In the meantime, the warlords are carving up the country. Moreover, the warlords in the west are in an area that is increasingly controlled by Iran. We are allowing western Afghanistan to fall into the hands of Iran, while weakening President Hamid Karzai—the same Karzai who sat next to First Lady Laura Bush during the State of the Union, the Karzai whom the president correctly described as our indispensable ally. He is in control of that part of downtown Kabul that British troops are patrolling, and the United States has ignored his public pleas for a larger force. That we are not supporting postwar Afghanistan like we supported the postwar Balkans is deeply distressing.

Politics affects all these debates, and the underlying cause of part of this is that the incoming administration set itself very publicly, during the campaign, against what it thought the Clinton administration had done in the Balkans. It did not actually understand what had happened in the Balkans; not understanding it, the administration set out to do the opposite. But the new administration was doing the opposite of something that was only in its imagination. We thus have a situation in Afghanistan where a morally justified war could fail because of what follows it that we must avoid.

War and intervention—especially in the modern world, in the kind of conflicts we will fight in the future and are fighting now, no matter how successful—are only going to be as good as the peace that follows. If we fail at the peace, it is a moral fail-

ure as well. We could have a just war followed by a failed peace. There are many lessons from history, but only one is necessary: 1919 and the Treaty of Versailles, which laid the groundwork for future wars, injustice, and tragedy lasting to this day.

References

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