The Hard Realities of War

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Among the many horrors of war, the death of noncombatants has always stood apart as a special kind of tragedy. Thus the world reacted with great emotional intensity to the news on July 3 that the US Navy had shot down an Iranian airliner in the Persian Gulf.

As this is written in early July, information about what happened is still trickling in. Various facts are in dispute, and the comprehensive inquiry has just begun. Nevertheless, the instant analysts were out early and in full force.

A predictable contingent of them quickly interpreted the event, variously, as an instance of military bungling, a failure of technology, or reckless disregard for human life. More than anything else, these judgments are an extension of pet theories held previously by the analysts or, in some cases, a demonstration of a weak grasp of military matters. For the moment, we will leave the conclusion-jumpers to their sport and comment in a broader context on some hard realities of war.

One such reality is that modern technology may be able to reduce the ambiguity of battle, but offers little hope of eliminating it completely. It may seem to those who develop their opinions introspectively that the radar and computers on the missile cruiser Vincennes ought to have made everything perfectly clear in a flash on July 3. Operational military systems are nowhere near so omniscient. IFF (Identification, Friend or Foe) still depends on a combination of radar data and other information, much of it subjective. Radar is getting better, too. But these capabilities do not promise to remove the element of uncertainty from warfare, and neither does anything else.

Given the speed and range of modern weapons, fighting forces cannot wait to see the whites of the enemy’s eyes before opening fire. They must make the best decision they can with the information they have, and they must do it fast. In May 1987, the US destroyer Stark hesitated in the face of ambiguity in the Persian Gulf and was hit by an Exocet missile that killed thirty-seven seamen.

A second reality of war is that it is terrible. Once military power is unleashed, it is seldom possible to control—or even foresee—what comes next. The leadership of the armed forces, sometimes accused of excessive reluctance about ventures that might lead to combat, understands this. Others, who are more willing to commit forces for symbolic reasons or who think that military power can be applied in carefully measured increments, may not. Losses and casualties are inherent parts of war. Unfortunately, inadvertent death and destruction are probable, too.

There is no such thing as warless war. Military force is the most awesome of all instruments of power and should not be employed with casual thought.

This was the message of the 1984 “Weinberger Doctrine,” named for the then-Secretary of Defense Caspar W. Weinberger, which warned the nation to be very sure of the necessity and firm in its intentions before committing forces to combat. It should not need restating, but perhaps it does, that the Persian Gulf is in the middle of an active war zone. Eight years of fighting there have taken more than a million casualties. There have been hundreds of attacks on ships in the Gulf itself, and minutes before firing on the airliner, the Vincennes had been engaged against Iranian gunboats.

It is foolish to expect life to go on as usual in a war zone. This perspective seems to have escaped some air traffic controllers in the vicinity, though. They say they are annoyed by US Navy challenges to airliners flying overhead and that this causes inconvenience to normal operations. One official complained that American warships “don’t understand how to operate around civilian traffic.”

Despite the casualty toll, the Gulf War is widely perceived as a “low-intensity conflict” because nuclear weapons have not been used and the battlefield tactics are reminiscent of an earlier era. It is a mistake—and a potentially dangerous one—to think of any armed conflict, low-intensity or otherwise, as a thing apart from the regular spectrum of warfare. This miscalculation is further evident among those who are enthusiastic about Special Operations forces for the wrong reason: They see them as a comparatively safe means of conducting war on the cheap and keeping the casualties down. Anyone who has watched an AC-130 Special Operations gunship at work is likely to hold a different opinion.

The circumstances surrounding the destruction of Iran Air Flight 655 will be explored endlessly in the months ahead. There will also be much soul-searching about whether American warships ought to be in the Gulf at all. Clearly, the resources of this suffering region are vital to our national interest. That has been recognized in policy at least since January 1980, when the Carter Doctrine pledged that the United States would defend its interests in the Gulf “by any means necessary, including military force.”

The question is whether the nation is prepared to accept the consequences and risks that go with such a policy. And that is not a hot potato that the politicians can toss to the Pentagon. As former Secretary of the Navy James H. Webb, Jr., once said, “Nations make war. Soldiers merely fight them.”

Eighty percent of the Americans responding to a Washington Post-ABC News poll soon after the shootdown accepted the incident as a mistake. It will be instructive to see if this opinion shifts as we analyze at our leisure a decision that the captain of the Vincennes made in a few minutes under combat pressure.

We will no doubt learn more about what happened in the Gulf on July 3. But we may also discover some fundamental truths about how well we as a nation comprehend the hard realities of war.