

Maneuvering Hell for Our Advantage

By [Robert C. Koehler](#)

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When the mainstream media writes about war, even critically, the image that often comes to mind for me is an infant wrapped in plastic. That infant is naked reality, a.k.a., the present moment, suffocating and screaming for its life; the plastic smothering it are the journalistic euphemisms by which murder and terrorism turn into abstract acts of national necessity.

Thus, the recent news that the United States clobbered war-torn Afghanistan with a record number of bombs and missiles in 2019 came to us via [Stars and Stripes](#) in language protecting all concerned from raw awareness and flying shrapnel:

“American aircraft released 7,423 munitions in the country in 2019, according to figures published Monday by U.S. Air Forces Central Command. Coalition aircraft flew nearly 8,800 sorties during the period, over a quarter of which carried out strikes.

“The tally surpasses the previous record set last year when 7,362 munitions were released and comes amid ongoing discussion between American and Taliban officials aimed at ending America’s longest war.

“Talks between the two sides continued for most of 2019 as American bombs were dropped.”

This is, basically, the language of gamers. I bring it up not to criticize a single story but to throw a wild question into the wind: What if the media suddenly denied war its free moral pass? What if acts of military mayhem were not discussed as chess moves in a global game of competing national interests but sheerly for what they were: acts of slaughter, blood and psychological hell?

Maybe there was a time when war could be seen as rational and contained. After all, the major wars of the 20th century were neatly distinguished by Roman numerals. Peace prevailed for the rest of the century, right?

In point of fact, war begets nothing but war, a reality that’s getting harder and harder not to acknowledge here in the 21st century. But the language of war — “releasing munitions,” let us say, rather than blowing the arms and legs off children — lets the game proceed, at least beyond the national borders and national consciousness. If something awful happens on the home front, the reporting’s a bit different, of course. The events of Sept. 11, 2001, for instance, were covered for what they were, not from al-Qaeda’s strategic point of view. Compare that, let us say, to the shock-and-awe bombing of Iraq a year and a half later.

Here, for instance, was [CNN](#) reporting on March 22, 2003, shortly after the invasion was underway. We were in the process of killing 6,000 people in the initial bombing campaign, but the U.S. strategic (and humanitarian!) viewpoint was the prime focus of the coverage:

“Rumsfeld said that the strike had taken place ‘on a scale that indicates to Iraqis’ that Saddam and his leadership were finished. He added that the allies would work to search for, capture, and drive out terrorists who had found safe harbor in Iraq, as well as to deliver humanitarian relief to the Iraqi people.”

Perhaps the media can’t be blamed because things didn’t work out the way the pols said they would, but when does enough become enough? Are we at the point where, as endless war consumes ever larger segments of Planet Earth, it’s now time to declare that it’s out of control and stop writing about war in the same terms used by those who wage it? War is not a chess game. Whatever strategy it employs involves killing people, mostly civilians, and we should at least begin acknowledging that the ramifications of doing so are never strategically contained.

Back to Afghanistan and the fact that we bombed this ravaged country more heavily last year than we have since we started keeping count, which was in 2006. Why? We’ve been pummeling Afghanistan since 2001.

Luke Mogelson, writing last year in [The New Yorker](#), pointed out:

“In 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared, ‘We clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability.’ Since then, more than a hundred and fifty thousand people have been killed in Afghanistan, and about seven hundred and fifty thousand Americans have served there. The U.S. has spent about eight hundred billion dollars on military operations and on a multitude of economic, governance, education, health, gender-equality, and counter-narcotics initiatives. Today, most Afghans live in poverty, corruption is endemic, literacy and life-expectancy rates rank among the lowest in the world, approximately a third of girls become child brides, and no country exports more illicit opium. The Taliban control or contest more than half the country.”

There’s more going on here than strategic failure. War is hell in all directions, and perhaps it’s time to question the sanity of trying to maneuver hell for your own advantage.

One way that hell comes back home is via veterans’ suicides, which continue at a rate of about [20 per day](#). More and more people studying the matter are clutching hold of the term “[moral injury](#)” to describe the cause. Moral injury means a damaged conscience, a pierced sense of self, often due simply to following orders and helping inflict hell on a dehumanized enemy. Indeed, waging war requires dehumanizing fellow human beings. We couldn’t have released 7,423 munitions last year on people we valued.

But a dehumanized enemy can suddenly rehumanize herself in a veteran’s conscience. As [Tyler Boudreau](#) has pointed out: “Moral injury by definition includes the memories of those who have been harmed.”

The dehumanization process of war comes home in other ways as well. Domestic mass murders — which are growing ever more commonplace here in the greatest country on

Earth — borrow the morality of war. The killer, avenging whatever grievance haunts him, employs the “principle of social substitutability” to kill people he doesn’t know, because for whatever reason they stand for the enemy he has chosen to punish.

And eighteen years on, we’re bombing Afghanistan more savagely than ever. We’ve already destroyed the country, but we can’t stop trying to save it.

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