

AN EMPTY PLEDGE TO CIVILIANS?

By Sarah Sewall

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CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — In an effort to assuage public concern over civilian casualties in Iraq, President Bush has pledged that America will do its utmost to "spare innocent lives."

The military has shown similar concern, publicly detailing for the first time its significant efforts to limit what it calls "collateral damage." Officials are briefing reporters about collateral damage simulations, ordnance and delivery options and stressing their intentions to avoid harming noncombatants.

Despite these reassuring statements, and the fact that the United States has the technology and the sensibility to fight the cleanest war in town, the Pentagon does not study how military force actually affects civilians. For all of its computer simulations and painstaking planning, the Department of Defense has never undertaken a systemic evaluation to determine whether its efforts to spare lives succeed or fail — or what might be done to improve them.

Having worked in the Pentagon for three years, I can understand the reason for this. The Pentagon doesn't want to own responsibility for civilian casualties because it fears further constraints on the way it fights wars. The paradox, however, is that the military already operates under restrictions intended to protect civilians.

Lack of understanding about collateral damage creates a vacuum — restrictions on military force run the risk of reflecting political sensitivities rather than sound judgment. It is possible, in fact, that political constraints can undermine American military efforts, increase the risk to our forces and, in the end, hurt more civilians.

Consider that American forces in Iraq will not be able to choose targets freely because of the need to preserve roads and buildings that serve civilians and that are needed for reconstruction. Similar constraints applied in Afghanistan, where even dirt roads were spared attack. It's likely that Taliban leaders escaped as a result. If efforts to fight "nicely" let the bad guys get away, then don't the sensibilities that produce these efforts increase human costs by prolonging conflict?

In the case of Iraq, political leaders may be tempted to avoid relying heavily on air strikes for fear of killing civilians. But if the alternatives are bloody hand-to-hand combat, or a siege that starves the weakest, then precision bombing looks a lot more humane.

In Afghanistan, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld attributed the lack of information about civilian deaths to the fact that the United States couldn't always verify what had happened on the ground. When American troops occupy Iraq, they will have that opportunity. President Bush can make good on his pledge to spare the innocent by committing the United States to evaluating and improving the Pentagon's efforts to spare civilians.

A complete collateral damage assessment would include fully investigating serious incidents during the conflict and following up with a public postwar survey of the campaign's impact on civilians. The Department of Defense should integrate civilian collateral damage into the formal "lessons learned" process, so that it can refine planning, training and weapons requirements — something that it has never done before. Civilian casualties are not just a political issue, they are an operational challenge.

We can't claim good intentions and leave it at that. If humanitarian groups exaggerate civilian deaths, the Pentagon needs to answer them with the facts. If the military is serious about limiting civilian casualties, it needs to dissect the causes and develop new tools and policies to protect noncombatants. When it does that, the United States may be able to claim the humanitarian high ground in its conduct, if not always its choice, of war.

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