

Lives Lost and Lives Saved in the War Against Terrorism

Mark Harrison

Professor of Economics
University of Warwick
Coventry CV4 7AL
+44 24 7652 3030 (tel.)
+44 24 7652 3032 (fax)

Mark.Harrison@warwick.ac.uk

A first unofficial summary of innocent civilian deaths resulting from American bombing in Afghanistan, just published, estimates their number at approximately 3,800. Coincidentally the official estimate of deaths in the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center has just fallen below 3,000. Let's assume for the sake of argument that these figures will stand the test of time. Taking into account the 800 or so deaths at the Pentagon, the total of September 11 victims now stands at the same level as the number of victims of the American response. How should they affect our view of the war against terrorism?

Some will argue from such figures that the war should now stop, or should never have been begun. The action against the World Trade Center was a terrible crime. But if the counter-action has now taken as many lives as the action that prompted it, how can more be justified? Surely the counter-action should now come to an end, whether or not it should have been begun in the first place.

Such thoughts are rightly troubling, but need to be put into perspective by considering the purpose of warfare that they imply. The argument that the war should now stop, since it has cost as many lives as the cause of the war, implies that a purpose of the war was to take a life for a life, in other words to exact Old-Testament retribution. It implies that, as long as the victims of American bombing were outnumbered by the dead of Manhattan, a continuation of the war was justified; now that the piles of corpses on each side are evenly balanced, the war should stop. If revenge is a bad reason for making war, then the war should never have been begun.

A specific historical parallel is to be found in World War II. Germany began the bombing of British cities in 1940, and German bombing eventually took 60,000 British civilian lives. The subsequent Allied bombing of German cities took 300,000 German lives — five times as many. Following the same lines of thinking as for the war in Afghanistan, it may be asked whether the taking of life by Allied bombing in World War II was either disproportionate or morally wrong in itself.

Another purpose of warfare may be not to take lives but to save lives; killing may not be an end in itself but a means to this end. What was missed from the calculations above was the lives saved as a result of military action. For example the Allied bombing of German cities, although both bloody and in some respects misjudged, forced Hitler to devote extraordinary resources to air defence. By 1944 one third of German war production took the form of anti-aircraft guns and interceptor aircraft that were necessitated purely by the Allied bombing campaign. Thus, even though Allied bombing reduced the *total* of German war production by much less than anticipated, it profoundly affected its *composition*. It greatly reduced the supply of weapons to the German forces on the front line of battle, with the result that the Red Army in the East and the Allied invasion forces in the west had a much easier time of it. Tens, possibly hundreds of thousands of Allied lives were saved.

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In a wider context it may be seen that many lives were lost in World War II so that other lives could be saved. How many lives were lost in total? The war gave rise to approximately 55 million premature deaths, of whom 20 millions were soldiers leaving 35 million civilian victims. Of the latter 32 millions were on the Allied side, mainly in Russia, China, Poland, and Yugoslavia, and 3 millions were on the Axis side, mainly in Germany. How many lives were saved? These are not exactly known but probably also numbered millions. Hitler's plans for a colonial empire in the East envisaged an immediate reduction of the population just in the part of Russia to be occupied by 40 millions through starvation and resettlement. If the Thousand-Year Reich had been established throughout Europe, an endless flow of additional deaths would have resulted from Nazi occupation plans that combined economic exploitation with selective murder based on ethnicity, disability, and sexual orientation.

In the same way the war against terrorism has taken many lives, many of them civilian. However, if western inaction permitted terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda to continue to flourish, other innocent lives would certainly be lost in the future as a result. In this context the idea of going to war to save lives sometimes goes under the heading of defending the "right to life". If we did not go to war in defence of the right to life some people would presumably die as a result and many more would live in fear, so the lives saved by going to war measure the value of defending this right.

Accounting for lives lost and lives saved in this way gives rise to three moral problems. First, *the lives saved by military action are uncertain and anonymous*. Lives saved are just statistics. In contrast every life lost is a precious individual who is personally identifiable, for whom friends and communities grieve, and whose families can hire lawyers. The lives saved are just as real but no one person whose life has been saved is individually identified. As a result there is no elected representative, victims' lobby, or publicity agent to speak for them. For the same reason it can rarely be established that more lives were saved than were actually lost. For example, it is possible that a failure to resist Hitler would have cost more than the 55 million lives lost in World War II, but it cannot be proved. The same must be true of a failure to resist Osama bin Laden.

A second problem is that *military action destroys many lives without apparent justification*. In war it is usually difficult or impossible to show that it was necessary to take any one individual's life in order to save another. Wars are intrinsically fraught with mistakes and opportunistic actions. The people making the combat decisions are always trying at the same time to serve the interests of the war effort and their own self-interest, which means their careers, their pockets, or their own survival. They make stressful decisions based on incomplete information while tired, hungry, or frightened. These decisions have lethal consequences for others as well as sometimes for themselves. This means that many lives are lost for reasons that not immediately connected with ultimately attainment of the war's objectives. In a statistical sense all the deaths are a necessary accompaniment to the conduct of a war, yet many individuals die for no better reason than that a soldier blinked, jumped, or looked for excitement or a medal.

A third problem is that *balancing lives saved against lives lost creates injustice*. The lives lost and saved belong to different people. Two groups of innocent people are involved. The first group is of those whose lives are saved by military action. The second group is of those whose lives are taken by it. At first sight this is a problem familiar to economics. There are many situations in which a particular change, for example, in technology or social organisation leaves some people with a gain and others with a loss. If the gains outweigh the losses it is possible, at least in principle, to organise government taxes and benefits so that the winners compensate the losers

out of their gains and still have something left over: everyone is better off as a result. In the case of war the group that lives gains at the expense of the group that dies. However, no compensation is possible.

It is sometimes suggested, incidentally, that the unfairness is still more grotesque when conditions of life are taken into account. For example the war in Afghanistan has taken the lives of some of the poorest people on earth in order to defend the lives of some of the richest. In my opinion, however, this is a red herring: the unfairness would not be less if rich people were being killed to save poor people.

The unfairness involved in who lives and who dies may also be seen in terms of another familiar economic problem: a conflict between equity and efficiency. It was deeply unfair that innocent people in Afghanistan with very little to start with should have been faced with the destruction of what little they had, including even their lives, just because a foreign terrorist organisation had made an evil pact with their unpopular rulers and settled among them. However, it was efficient to offer the Afghans powerful incentives to get rid of Osama bin Laden and the Taliban, and the incentives had to be negative ones. The ability of the United States to offer positive inducements was limited while the Taliban remained in power, and besides the wisdom of rewarding those whose rulers behave badly may be doubted in terms of the precedent it may create. Probably negative sanctions enforced by external military intervention were the only way of ensuring that the Afghans themselves would destroy the Taliban regime.

In short, the logic of military action requires us to trade some people's lives against others'. For those who are willing to do so, the war against terrorism may be justified if it will have saved more lives than it takes away. This seems possible given what we know now about the ambitions of Osama bin Laden, although it cannot be known for sure. Sceptics may retort that much of what we know now about the plans of al-Qaeda was not known on September 12 and cannot be used to justify decisions taken then. The same was also true in World War II: that war was not waged to prevent or punish Hitler's plans for ethnic cleansing in eastern Europe, since he set about them only during the war and took considerable care to keep them secret. But that's what history's like: most of the time, most of us live it blindly, and we find out what it was all about only after the event.