



Sebastian Kaempf, *Saving Soldiers or Civilians? Casualty-Aversion versus Civilian Protection in Asymmetric Conflicts*. **Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018.**

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This is one of the most important books about modern war in decades. Masterfully argued and meticulously researched, the book introduces a paradox: that international humanitarian law (IHL) requires militaries, rightfully, to avoid civilian harm, yet goes silent on how to reduce the risk of soldiers' lives to ensure such civilian protection.

To understand this tension, the book's author, Sebastian Kaempf of Australia's University of Queensland, unpacks three macro trends in how America fights its wars: first, the dehumanization process of yesteryear has been reversed so that soldiers must respect the lives of noncombatants. Unrestricted warfare no longer is justified. Second, a "post-heroic" America has become considerably more casualty averse, going so far as to limit media coverage of coffins of dead soldiers arriving to Dover Air Force base. Third, humanistic notions of individual valor and honor, embedded in a warrior ethos going back to the Greek hoplites and knights of the Chivalric Age, are being eroded as modern industrial warfare becomes "spiritually disenchanting and alienating" (57).

"Death in modern war came from a distance and at random," Kaempf writes. "There is nothing Homeric about industrial killing at either the Somme or Iwo Jima" (61). A humanistic interpretation of war places greater emphasis on the self-realization of the warrior ethos and acceptance of sacrifice. Death is not something to be avoided but embraced. Today's citizen-soldiers are mere vessels of the state, thus making warfare more depersonalized and anonymous.

Yet IHL, especially the Geneva Conventions, is vague on the subject of reducing soldier harm. The law calls on military leaders to do "everything feasible" (42) to spare civilians, yet go mum on some of the tradeoffs, such as increasing the exposure of one's forces to enemy fire. To be certain, the converse is also true: reducing soldier harm may increase the risk of civilian harm. In response, some legal scholars say IHL does not go far enough to reduce civilian harm in wartime and have called on "due care" to be taken, which lays out moral, not legal, guidelines.

At the core of this book is how military technology and norms of casualty avoidance have reshaped modern warfare. Throughout the 20th century, Americans morphed from generally accepting high rates of casualties to studiously avoiding them, to the point where politicians trip over themselves to avoid ever mentioning "boots on the ground." This begs the question, however, over who bears the costs of this casualty aversion. "Does the US, in making war more riskless for itself, make it less humane for non-combatants?" Kaempf asks (79).

This is a worthwhile question, especially given that the US military trains militaries across the globe on doctrine, strategy, and tactics. Field manuals in, say, the

Philippines bear more than a passing resemblance to those of the US Army. As such, the legal-moral tension that the question above addresses has ramifications beyond just Iraq or Afghanistan.

The book, while impeccably organized, does have its gaps. First, civil-military relations are barely mentioned. Where is casualty aversion coming from principally – the military brass or lawmakers on the Hill seeking reelection? Or is it a checked-out public uninformed about the wars fought in their name, that supports its troops yet also does not want to be burdened with bad news from the frontlines? It would appear the latter, given the author's heavy sourcing of Andrew Bacevich. Moreover, is there something *sui generis* about the United States, given its civilian control over the military and the general military professionalism we assume in a Huntingtonian sense? Or should we expect casualty aversion and troop harm reduction among non-democracies as well? I've never seen a book on this subject and of this magnitude not even nod to Huntington's *The Soldier and the State*.

Second, the book surprisingly does not delve into recent literature on the shifting *nature* of casualties, especially with respect to advances in military medicine. I'm thinking here about Tanisha Fazal's pioneering work on how casualties are increasing even as fatalities are decreasing. Without addressing debates over PTSD or moral injury, I wonder how this empirical reality squares with Kaempf's theory of the anonymity of modern warfare (a topic he briefly discusses in relation to the malaise that followed the Vietnam War and introduction of the all-volunteer force). The book could have been improved by parsing what he means by casualties (which is sometimes used interchangeably with fatalities).

Finally, at times Kaempf comes off almost naïve of the transformational effects of modern technology, yet callous on the role of individual agency in modern war. Yes, war is industrialized and impersonal – a complex jumble of Clausewitzian chance with Jomminian scientific precision. But further down the food chain, aren't there still great tales of individual daring-do and Homeric-like episodes? I bet those who fought in Mogadishu or Falluja would disagree with the thesis that modern war has eliminated humanism. If anything, the greater decentralization of decision-making to the battalion or platoon level has only *increased* agency among junior officers. A case in point was the Battle of 73 Easting during the first Gulf War, which put a young H. R. McMaster on the

map. Books about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are littered with similar stories of individual agency and heroism.

What's more, even though the actual risks of serving in uniform are far reduced from previous centuries, being a member of the US military still confers great status and respect among American society. Just because policymakers are less inclined to put soldiers in harm's way does not make them any less heroic in the public's eyes.

The book also suffers from some logical inconsistencies. On page 59, the author writes, "With modern warfare driving millions to death, it became largely impossible for the individual soldier to set himself apart," citing the 400,000-plus deaths of World War II as an example. Yet four pages later he juxtaposes the Vietnam era with "those Americans who had come of age in the heroic triumphant atmosphere of the Second World War." So which is it? If World War II is Exhibit A of industrialized warfare, why did it vault its commanders into the pantheon of greatness? Isn't the Greatest Generation who defeated Hitler living proof that modern warfare and individual glory are not mutually exclusive?

The author takes great pains to address some Clausewitzian notions of modern war: that war is interactive and "never waged on a lifeless object" but rather the "enemy has a vote" (79). Yet, it is unclear what is so special about asymmetric warfare that gives it this tension between casualty aversion and avoiding civilian harm. I was left unconvinced from the evidence cited that small or asymmetric wars are special in this regard. There are nonstate actors who abide by the rules of warfare and states who ignore them and use human shields. Presumably these types of war tend to rely disproportionately on Special Forces, which are presumably the last bastions of humanism in the US military. The most enjoyable part of the book is Chapter Two, which explores the agency, subjectivity and intersubjectivity of modern war. I wish the author had explored this clash of perspectives between those who hold up and embrace the "warrior ethos" of America's elite fighters versus those who embrace the everyday (and more risk-averse) civilian-soldier.

War is still an experience that gives meaning and authenticity to its participants. This book tackles an important tension between how Americans fight to reduce troop exposure while avoiding also civilian loss of life, two variables that are often negatively

correlated. Indeed, the public still celebrate notions of heroism among its soldiers, holding them up as a special caste of warriors separate from the rest of us, even as it simultaneously seeks to prevent them from coming into contact with the enemy or suffering casualties, the very things for which they are put on a pedestal. Drone operators are presumably less heroic than fighter pilots wearing Aviator shades in cockpits, yet it begs the question of how technology might shape our notions of the warrior class going forward. The concept of heroism and humanism during wartime is being reimagined yet has not been eliminated from the modern battlefield.

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