

Mar. 8, 1945  
Germany

Darling,

I want to talk to you a minute about my present status in the everlasting problem of adjusting to war and its implications. This particular discussion is, perhaps, somewhat abstract and non-personal, and, I suspect, leads to no very startling conclusions. But if we can clear away some of the paradoxes and conflicts in our thinking about war in general, it may clear the stage for more stable attitudes on practical, immediate problems of policy and action. The idea on which to focus your attention is that implied by the words "Total War."

We are told that we are fighting a "total war"; and, at the same time, we undertake to follow certain rules of warfare, ("The Geneva Convention), and we feel righteously indignant when our enemy began to bomb civilians, and we have an innate feeling that certain weapons, - for example, - gas, - are "inhumane" or "immoral." Now it appears to me that this is manifestly both illogical and impossible. "Total war" cannot be a gentleman's war. Let us examine these rules.

There are rules about how it is "civilized" or "humane" to kill your enemy. Thus it is permitted to sear him with flame-throwers, or to crush him with shell explosions or bombs, but it is not "humane" to gas him or to poison his water supply. How dead does one have to be to be dead? How many twisted, shattered limbs and punctured guts are more "humane" than a mustard burn? There are the rules about the "non-combatants," specifically the medical installation. This we have discussed before. A hospital engaged in treating and rehabilitating wounded soldiers so that they may return to the battle line, is clearly as integral a part of the strength of that line as is the ammunition supply depot, or the ordnance repair shops. As a matter of fact, the concept of a total war implies that anyone whose efforts contribute to the war effort is to be regarded as a "combatant", though he be out of a military uniform. This idea is swallowed vaguely by most people, but not applied. The rules about legitimate bombing targets brings this into sharper focus. When the Germans hit Coventry and London we were loud in our denunciation of the barbarous killing of innocent civilians. When our bombers first began to range the Reich we were careful to point out that we were hitting only factories or rail-yards. Then we began to branch out until we have seen such things as the massive saturation raids on the center of Berlin. This we accept as "honorable" warfare. If the shoe were on the other foot, and they were doing it to New York and Washington we would be screaming our denunciations of their barbarity. But, obviously, there is no basic difference. Let the armchair philosophers who have never been bombed, who have never seen the destruction, and death and pain, or heard the screams of fear and torture in a city bombed - let them not talk loosely about these things. The child with his eyes blown out, the home in rubble, disease, and famine and terror - these are the aftermath of civilian bombing. These things are terrible and repugnant to our concepts of what is "civilized." But this is an integral part of

total war. We must learn to really accept this idea; that it is part of war as we now know it, whether it happens to us or to our enemy. We must be hard and strong in our thinking about this. (Ask your friends this question: "Would the saturation bombing of New York be justified?" You will find out if they really know what kind of a war we are fighting.) This whole discussion so far has really led us to a proposition and a corollary, but before stating them, let's look at another approach.

Wars are obviously of different sorts and how they are waged depends largely on the motivation or aim. Indeed, the "how" is a function of the "why." Thus, ascending the scales of war, we can list a few of the types.

(1) War as a "game" - i. e. hobby or business. The Indian tribes largely fought this type of war. To mercenary troops, war is a business, (though occasionally they became involved in a war of more violence than their code accepts as reasonable). This concept of war is no longer reasonably tenable, but it is used as the basis for powerful propaganda: i. e. the German youth are taught that war as such is fine & good, to fight for the fuhrer is the finest expression of one's worth. War is an aim in itself.

(2) War as an investment, i. e. a profit-making venture. The profit may be material or geographical aggrandisement, or may be "power" or "prestige." The wars of imperialism are of this type. These are, therefore, limited in scope and violence, unless the conquest is extensive, or unless the powers are relatively, evenly watched.

(3) War as a crusade: i. e., to impose an idea. Religious wars are of this type. There have been many, and strangely, they have frequently been the most wantonly violent and cruel.

(4) War as a revolt, i. e., to escape an idea. These may be religious, economic, or spiritual - abstract - usually a little bit of all three. But, once escape is established, the aim is accomplished.

(5) War as a resolution of the conflict of powerful and mutually incompatible ideas. This is the type of war termed "self-preservation" and implies the most complete and supreme type of conflict. Note that the result, often, is the diminution in the power of the defeated idea to dominate, not a destruction of the idea itself.

This is a listing of the basis of war: i. e. their real or true, (if usually unexpressed) aims. If we examine their aims it would appear that #5 alone can be a "total war" - in all the others the theory of limitations applies. War is worth so much of our effort, but beyond that, we will abandon our aims. In "total war" there can be but one end - the destruction of the power of one idea or the other.

So, if you will agree to any of the above, let us formulate some statements as regards "total war", and then see where they apply at the moment.

A. The basic aim of a "total war" is to impose our ideologic will upon our enemy. (This aim alone is sufficient to produce a "total war").

B. In total war there can be no reasonable humane, moral, or aesthetic rules. (Total war is inhumane, immoral, and ugly.)

As sub-headings or corollaries to the above, we can add the following:

(1) To render our enemy impotent we must destroy his capacity to impose his idealogical will, i. e. to fight, at any and all levels. To destroy his war effort is our strategic aim. Any part of it is a legitimate target. No individual contributing to the power of his ideology is a non-combatant.

(2) The only reasonable "rules" in total war are self-imposed and are pragmatic. (Thus you will treat prisoners you take as well as you want your own prisoners to be treated. You will not employ weapons which, if used against you, will do the enemy more good than they do you, etc.) This is the Golden Rule applied in war and is based on an appraisal of the effects of retaliation.

Now take time out for a minute or two and chew those over. If you are really able to believe them to be true and are willing to make them the basis for action or policy you are willing to do some pretty tough thinking. You are willing to uncloak war from its aura of sentimental ambiguities and expose its ugly, naked inhumanity. You are willing to say, "The Geneva convention is nonsense." You are willing to say "The wholesale bombing of cities is a legitimate, strategic maneuver." You are willing to say, "One should use gas, if one feels that he can do so more effectively than the enemy can." And so on --

Now, more specifically, transform these statements to ourselves and this War. It is "total war." Don't use those terms lightly. They lead to terrible conclusions.

Perhaps if everyone would force himself and herself to think along these lines, war might appear so odious to so many that it would actually be outlawed. These considerations also give us a sound base on which to stand as we view our post-war relation to Germany. To be able to impose our will on Germany we have spent billions and sent a million men to die. We must now proceed to impose it. (Last time, we signed a paper, and came home.)

Notice how immediately the whole situation changes the second the enemy surrenders! We are now no longer in a state of war, total or otherwise. There is the victor and the vanquished. Actions, which in war were legitimate, now become crime. The rules and laws of social intercourse must at once prevail. The imposition of our will must be done with justice and order. The struggle between the power to impose the ideological wills is over; but the struggle between the ideas themselves is just beginning! And our eventual victory must depend really on the merit of the ideals for which we profess to have fought. It is what the victor does to the vanquished which will eventually test the real merit in his ideology. If he has conquered to enslave, to proselyte, to plunder, his victim will eventually arise to throw him off. His idea will have lost. Let us hope that we will find the leadership to guide the application of our "ideology in action"; we feel so strongly that, if given a decent chance, our ideas will triumph, for we feel that they are basically right, and human, and just, and lasting. And if they are, the manner in which we impose our will, the clarity of our own conception of it, will be the measure of our success in this war. This is "winning the peace," which everyone talks about but is unwilling to define.

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