

## **Drawing battle lines over war**

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London Free Press Aug. 20, 2011

The reason that countries, tribes, ethnic groups, religions, and those who hold varying political or philosophic ideas fight wars with each other are complex. Nevertheless, it is a common aim of war to assert one group's power and ideology over those with whom they disagree. These disagreements may be over the acquisition of land, property, resources or ideas, and ironically over convictions concerning which course of action is more ethically correct.

Civilized societies try to resolve arguments through logic, reasoning and persuasion. Whenever opposing sides have a good measure of respect for their fellow human beings, they stand a reasonable chance of resolving their disagreements. In one sense, going to war often means that more peaceful methods have broken down or have not been tried. In most cases, it is when better ways of behaving toward others have failed that we consider war as a last resort. Sometimes leaders talk about preventive wars. That is wars that, if they were not fought, would lead to more injustices. But those who know war well remain hesitant as did President Eisenhower. In his words, this military commander of the Allied forces in World War II said, "When people speak to you about a preventive war, you tell them to go and fight it. After my experience, I have come to hate war. War settles nothing."

Because wars involve suppression, violence and killing, making one side winners and the other side losers, wars often include secrecy, intimidation, lying, deceit, and cruelty. War is a blunt ineffective means of persuading dictatorships to adopt democracy or improve education or religion, or develop a more inclusive political system.

Some thoughtful people say that war is not justified when the initiators stand to gain at the expense of the defenders. They claim that war can be justified only when one is fighting to defend oneself. But the situation can be more complicated than that. Sometimes countries start wars in order to assist other countries to defend democracy, promote freedom of speech, support citizens facing harsh dictatorships, or to change extreme religious beliefs which have gone astray. In these cases the perpetrators of war believe they are defending an ethical path towards justice.

I have two brothers who have served in the military. When I ask them or their comrades about the ethics of war they state that, for the most part, soldiers follow

strong ethical principles. They cite examples of courage, determination, bravery, trustworthiness, duty, self-discipline, responsibility and comradeship as the essential qualities of good soldiers, even though they know that their opponents feel they too are on the side of justice. They may not fully understand or agree with the principles of their enemies, but they know that people do not willingly put their own lives at risk without believing that what they are fighting for is a just cause.

So what are some conclusions about war that rational, caring, ethical people can accept? One is that war is a very blunt, brutal and expensive way to solve disputes. If we can find other ways to resolve disagreements the world would be a better place.

Also, it is a very easy mistake for countries that have the strongest armies, the most sophisticated military equipment, and the belief that they are well-prepared for war, to find reasons to use their military might against weaker countries whose customs and cultures are different from their own. Countries which are most likely to win a war are the most likely to start a war. When one country is much stronger than another it is easier for the stronger country to believe that they are on the side of justice. They feel they are acting out of pure ethical principles. For them, might makes right. On the other hand, militarily stronger countries such as China, United States, or Russia are more willing to tolerate the differences they have with their formidable adversaries.

When we think about going to war, let's first make sure that we are considering it as a last resort. In conclusion, I very much agree with the words of another United States President, Barack Obama: "War is never glorious. It's a manifestation of human folly."