


3-9-2001

Crowd-Dispersal Weapons and the Psychology of the Crowd

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (2001) "Crowd-Dispersal Weapons and the Psychology of the Crowd," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 10 : Iss. 9 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol10/iss9/2>

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Title: Crowd-Dispersal Weapons and the Psychology of the Crowd

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Volume: 10

Issue: 9

Date: 2001-03-09

Keywords: Brainwashing, Electromagnetic Interrogation, Psychological Warfare, Radiation, Torture, Weapons

Abstract. This article describes the peculiar psychology of popular reactions to the development and employment of technologies of military force.

Recently, the United States (US) Department of Defense announced the development of an "active denial system" to employ for many military activities that have become known as operations other than war. The system uses electromagnetic energy to disperse crowds (allegedly with little if any injury)--a consequence that could be useful on humanitarian, peacekeeping, and police actions.

Opponents of the system view it more as a high-powered microwave antipersonnel weapon that needs more testing. Others view it analogous to the laser that at one time also was similarly touted as essentially noninjurious or leaving no permanent damage--until some applications were discovered to induce blindness. Still others view it as yet another insidious development with indefensible moral and ethical standing.

Briefly reviewing popular reactions to several weapons in the last fifty or so years, one can conclude that there is no easily discernible correlation between the lethality and severity of weapons sequelae on the one hand and the associated moral and ethical outrage (or acceptance) on the other.

One example involves so-called "brainwashing" and variants of psychological warfare and psychological operations employed by representatives of the People's Republic of China during the Korean War. These were often described and explained by US mass media as the insidious products of godless Communism, the Devil's own handiwork, and as unnatural and unfair practices contrasted with the correct conventional warfare of the United Nations forces. Yet, the latter warfare certainly caused more physical and psychological casualties.

Another example involves the breaking of bones employed by Israelis during interrogation of actual and alleged terrorists and terrorist support cadre who might have additional information about impending terrorist operations or the means to implement them. The breaking of bones caused less physical and psychological casualties than the terrorist operations that had lethal consequences or even other Israeli military activities but led to more expressed outrage by the international mass media. And, of course, the proximal consequences of terrorist operations lead to more expressed outrage by the international mass media than those of conventional warfare.

Yet another example involved the international controversy over the neutron bomb. Even though the applications recommended by its creators and many of its supporters would have led to nonlethal injuries, the moral and ethical outrage dwarfed that against existing fusion- and fission-based nuclear warheads on intercontinental ballistic missiles and on strategic bombers. Some of this outrage even waxed on the rationale that neutron weapons left a terrain's physical infrastructure undisturbed, while conventional weapons and other nuclear weapons destroyed infrastructure as well as people!

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

As long as weapons are viewed as necessary to the security of political entities, research on the psychology of popular reaction to weapons development and employment might help ensure that what is needed gets funded and fielded, what is not does not. Apparently, for those who base moral and ethical concerns on number and severity of casualties, this may prove a blessing. (See Colman, A.M. (1991). Crowd psychology in South African murder trials. *American Psychologist*, 46, 1071-1079; Dao, J. (March 2, 2001). Pentagon unveils plans for a new crowd-dispersal weapon. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Geen, R.G., & Stonner, D. (1975). Primary associates to 20 verbs connoting violence. *Behavior Research Methods and Instrumentation*, 7, 391-392; Horvath, P. (1996). Nuclear weapons concerns, agency beliefs, and social responsibility values in disarmament activism. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 2, 17-35; Nesse, R.M. (2000). How selfish genes shape moral passions. *Journal of Consciousness Studies*, 7, 227-231; Polley, R.B. (1984). Subjectivity in Issue polarization. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 14, 426-440; Sagan, L.A., & Jonsen, A. (1976). Medical ethics and torture. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 294, 1427-1430; Weine, S.M. (1999). Against evil. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 5, 357-364; Wellman, D. (2000). From evil to illness: Medicalizing racism. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 70, 28-32.)(Keywords: Brainwashing, Electromagnetic Interrogation, Psychological Warfare, Radiation, Torture, Weapons.)