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# The Political Psychology of Collateral Damage

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**Abstract.** This article provides commentary on how a government purporting to be representative democracy might best approach the construct of collateral damage.

The construct of collateral damage often denotes unintended and undesired death, destruction, and damage effected by military intervention. It is the unintended and undesired death of humans that is most often a focus of public discourse.

Some observers posit that the very construct of collateral damage is indicative of reverence for human life and of humane compassion and intention. Moreover, it is posited that such reverence, compassion, and intention can most often translate into less unintended and undesired death, destruction, and damage.

However, other observers posit that the construct necessarily induces a dehumanization of the construct's proponents. This dehumanization is elaborated as viewing targets of military intervention--intended or unintended, desired or undesired--as less than human. A posited logical consequence is more death, destruction, and damage of all kinds. Another consequence is assumed to be the lowering of the threshold for war and other military interventions.

This latter stance that links collateral damage to dehumanization intrinsically manifests a basic self-contradiction. For proponents of this stance are left with the conundrum of asserting that the very use of the term is harmful even as they are asserting to be employing the term in a non-harmful manner. The differential self-privileging of the benign and other-demonizing of the malignant are often not made explicit and, in any case, cannot be easily defended by common epistemological approaches.

Nevertheless, one might still seek to develop a stance on collateral damage for the government of a self-professed representative democracy. And if the government, indeed, approaches in the concrete the abstract principles of a representative democracy--and if democratic values are based on common notions of human and civil rights and liberties, the integrity of the individual and larger groupings, and the sanctity or reified secular privileging of human life--this stance might actually serve as a behavioral guidon.

It might seem easiest to advance a moral rationale based on highly valued personal behavior and an ethical rationale based on highly valued behavior in social roles such as those of political and military leaders and followers. Not only would these rationales be consistent with what is deemed worthy of compliance by the sort of representative democracy described above, but they also would provide a self-reinforcing nature leading to greater cognitive, emotional, and behavioral congruence and compliance.

It might seem most difficult to advance a national strategic rationale supporting the espousal of and compliance with minimizing what is commonly denoted by the construct of collateral damage. This is because supporters of both the political and military objectives related to a conflict wherein military

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force is to be employed might deem minimizing collateral damage to be but a needless constraint--and a very possible impediment to political and military success.

However, there are strategic benefits to minimizing collateral damage. First, a forthright attempt to minimize collateral damage can yield less relevant data for adversary propaganda assets to exploit. Second, the forthright attempt also can support and further one's own national values that are desired to be transmitted and accepted internationally. Third, the forthright attempt can increase the probability that others may accept one's political and military case in the conflict--with the assumption that these others do, indeed, embrace the goal of minimizing collateral damage. Following from the third benefit, one might find more allies and less adversaries during the conflict and in the important military aftermath.

Based on these benefits, it would behoove the military establishment of a government purporting to be a representative democracy to carry out ongoing research on how to effect a minimization of collateral damage much as it would already be engaging in research about optimal methods of death, destruction, and damage. Part of the collateral damage research would involve data collection and analysis during war and about wars of the past. The result might be a future with less casualties who are innocent in a world wherein no one may be innocent and wherein a world with and at war may never have had innocence to lose. (See Eviatar, D. (March 22, 2003). *Civilian toll: A moral and legal bog*. *The New York Times*, pp. A17, A19; Finlay, B., & Love, G.D. (1998). *Gender differences in reasoning about military intervention*. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 22, 481-485; Geneva Conventions. <http://www.redcross.lv/en/conventions.htm>; Kelman, H.C. (1995). *Decision making and public discourse in the Gulf War: An assessment of underlying psychological and moral assumptions*. *Peace & Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 1, 117-130; Kirkland, F.R. (1996). *Psychological purposes served by war: Three perspectives*. *Journal of Psychohistory*, 24, 53-63; Linn, R. (1996). *The emergence of Holocaust memories in the moral dilemmas of objecting Israeli soldiers during the Intifada*. *Social Behavior & Personality*, 24, 133-141.) (Keywords: Collateral Damage, Ethics, Morality, War.)