



Rape as an Instrument of Total War

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Louise Arbour, the UN Commissioner for Human Rights, recently announced her decision to resign her position and not seek a second term. Reading behind the formal language of a well-respected diplomat, it's clear the Arbour quit out of disgust with the UN's failure to seriously address the international moral crises precipitated by the Bush administration's "war on terror."

Arbour had a now-famous dust-up with the U.S.'s former UN representative, John Bolton, in 2006 over Israel's invasion of Lebanon. She suggested that Israeli leaders could be charged with war crimes. "You know, in America," Bolton retorted, "prosecutors are not supposed to threaten people in public based on press reports." Contemptuously, he added, "I would just say as one lawyer to another, that to Mrs. Arbour, that she should consider her professional ethics and responsibilities very carefully here before threatening criminal charges based on press accounts."

Arbour, the former Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (responsible for the indictment of Slobodan Milosevic) and former Justice on Canada's Supreme Court, knows war crimes when she sees them. Clearly, she had enough of the double-speak masquerading as justice. Traditional prohibitions against war crimes, torture and, most scandalously, sexual terror against girls and women have seriously eroded over the last seven years. She had enough.

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The rape of female (and occasionally male) non-combatants by male soldiers during a war is a feature of human social relations since the earliest times. The Old Testament is replete with stories of the rape of women by conquering tribes. They have long been raped and kidnapped as "spoils of war" and often forced to marry their captors to survive. The abduction of Helen of Troy remains, after two-and-a-half centuries, a testament to the consequences of male conquest.

Reported rapes of female non-combatants by U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq appear to be limited. However, given the U.S. military's inherent secrecy and repeated

cover-ups, the true story of war rape will likely not be revealed until well-after the occupation ends.

Charges of rapes of Vietnamese women by U.S. soldiers were made by Susan Brownmiller and others during the war (e.g., "Against Our Will," 1975). It wasn't until only quite recently that the full scale of confirmed atrocities by American forces in Vietnam was revealed to be more extensive than previously known. Reports in the *Toledo Blade* [October 19, 2003] and the *Los Angeles Times* [August 6, 2006] discuss more than three hundred atrocities (including rapes) that were finally substantiated by Army investigators, and this does not include the most notorious U.S. war crime, the 1968 My Lai massacre.

While incidents of rape by today's U.S. male soldiers appear relatively few in number, one cannot say the same for other military forces operating throughout the world. Conflicts in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Darfur, like earlier ones in Rwanda as well as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Myanmar and Somalia, were scarred by innumerable documented incidents of rape. Rape as an instrument of war was also reported in recent conflicts in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Côte d'Ivoire, Cyprus, East Timor, Haiti, Liberia, Peru and Uganda.

Rape is the most traumatic invasion one person can inflict on another. It has long been misconceived as a sex act. Although one of the most forceful physical engagements, often involving the genitals and other body parts, rape is not erotic, not sensual, not pleasurable. It is violence and terror masquerading as passion.

The inherent violence and terror of rape finds its most barbaric realization during war, especially under conditions of modern total war. The Civil War general, William Tecumseh Sherman, pioneered total war during his infamous "march to the sea" in 1864. His campaign effectively destroyed his enemy in both physical and spiritual senses; it ended America's most consequential military engagement.

Sherman believed that war should be total, that it should be extended from a conflict between recognized combatants to a conflict involving an enemy's entire society, including its natural resources, farming and food supply, utilities and other aspects of civilian life.

This shift in military strategy only got worse during the 20th century. The first and second World Wars added airplanes and toxic gases and then gas chambers, fire bombings and nuclear weapons to the arsenal of total war. This enhanced weaponry extended Sherman's model of military engagement from the destruction of the civilian infrastructure to the terrorization of the civilian population. And, in the euphemistic

language the so distinguished last century's bureaucratic denial, the targeted civilian casualties of total war came to be known as "collateral damage."

A new era of warfare is underway. It differs significantly in terms of a number of the defining features of 20th century military strategy. First, warfare today seems constrained in the deployment of vast military forces, mass armies; the first Gulf War was a glorified police action in which a mass-mobilized "coalition" slapped down a wayward, second-rate state. Second, warfare appears restricted in the employment of the most powerful weapons available through the military-industrial complex; victory in World War I and II was predicated on the maximum deployment of the most advanced technologies of mass slaughter.

Our new era of warfare seems to be defined by contained conflicts, battles restricted to collapsed nation-states, limited in the use of advanced weaponry and rarely involving multiple-state alliances mercilessly contesting one another. In this new era of total war, collateral damage has become a legitimate target of free-fire conflict.

One consequence of this new era of military conflict is the changing role of rape. First, there has been an increase in the number of reported rapes; this increase is reflected in (a) the number of reported rapes taking place during a specific conflict and in (b) an overall number of conflicts taking place throughout the world. Second, more militaries have adopted rape as an (unofficial) operational technique in their total war campaign. While the enemy male combatant is beaten or shot, sometimes tortured, raped or even murdered in detention, the systematic rape of girls and women appears to be an innovative and accepted technique of today's total war culture.

Fulfilling Sherman's gruesome vision, the line between the warrior and the noncombatant, the soldier and the civilian, has been formally obliterated. As this happened, warfare had but one unexploited territory to systematically plunder, the enemy's physical being, its living body.

Adult males are plundered through torture; some boys and females of all ages are plundered through rape. For females, plunder, invasion, rape both harms and stigmatizes. Some believe that rape signifies pollution, of both the woman and the "fruits" of her conquest. Rape has become a defining feature of total war in these early years of the 21st century.

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Last summer, the third U.S. soldier from Company B, First Battalion, 502nd Infantry, 101st Airborne Division, was sentenced for his part in the rape and murder of an Iraqi family in Mahmudiya, a Sunni town 20 miles south of Baghdad. As some might recall,

these soldiers broke into a family home, raped the teenage Abeer Qassim al-Janabi while her parents and a 7-year-old sister were locked in a back room, and then killed her and her family. For their crimes, the soldiers received a combined total prison sentence of over three hundred years.

This third soldier is Jesse Spielman, a 23-year-old U.S. Army private; he was sentenced to 110 years. Earlier this year, Sergeant Paul Cortez was sentenced to 90 years and, in November 2006, Specialist James Barker got a 100 year sentence. Each was found guilty of four counts of murder, rape, conspiracy to commit rape, housebreaking with the intent to commit rape and conspiracy to commit rape. In March 2007, Pfc. Bryan L. Howard, 19-years-old, pleaded guilty to monitoring radio communications and received 27 months confinement.

Steven Green, described as the ringleader, was discharged in May 2006 on psychiatric grounds apparently before the army learned of the Mahmudiya episode and is awaiting trial. Court testimony indicates the following sequence of horror: Cortez and Barker raped the girl; Green shot the parents and younger sister; he then raped the older girl, killed her and they poured kerosene on her body and set it on fire. Earlier this year, Federal prosecutors in Louisville announced their intention to seek the death penalty in Green's case.

The teenage rape victim was Abeer Qassim Hamza al-Janabi; Abeer means "fragrance of flowers." Pictures of the perpetrators show very young men who seem not only inexperienced with the ways of the world, but profoundly unprepared for the horrors of war that awaited them in Iraq. Green told a journalist: "This war is different from all the ones that our fathers and grandfathers fought. Those wars were for something. This war is for nothing."

The soldiers seem as much victims of Bush's total war as Abeer and her poor family.

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On July 29, 2007, a particularly gruesome case of human slaughter took place in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). According to a UN report, a soldier in North Kivu province allegedly raped and then chopped to death a Hutu woman and her three-month-old baby.

A UN press release says the rape was emblematic of "violations by the Congolese national police and by armed rebel groups, including the murder and rape of villagers and the extortion and robbing of civilians." Yakin Ertürk, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, denounced the sexual violence in the DRC as the worst she has ever seen.

According to the UN, 27,000 sexual assaults were reported in 2006 in South Kivu province and this is understood as just a fraction of the total number of rape casualties across the country. "The sexual violence in Congo is the worst in the world," said John Holmes, the UN's under secretary general for humanitarian affairs. "The sheer numbers, the wholesale brutality, the culture of impunity--it's appalling."

Other Western observers are equally shocked by what appears to be an unprecedented level of sexual violence. Malteser International, a relief agency of the Sovereign Order of Malta and working in the eastern Congo, reports that in one town, Shabunda, 70 percent of the women admitted being sexually brutalized. André Bourque, a Canadian consultant who works with aid groups in eastern Congo, warned that "sexual violence in Congo reaches a level never reached anywhere else. It is even worse than in Rwanda during the genocide."

Perpetrators of sexual violence include Congolese government troops, who are judged among the worst offenders. They also include the so-called Rastas, paramilitary groups who terrorize the rural countryside by kidnapping and raping women, burning babies and slaughtering anyone who challenges them. They are mostly former Hutu militias that fled Rwanda after the genocide wars of 1994 and survive deep in the forest, recognized by their dreadlocked, shiny tracksuits and Los Angeles Lakers jerseys. In addition, there are the local militias called the Mai-Mai who invoke a far older military mythology: they slick themselves with oil before marching into battle. [New York Times, October 7, 2007]

Since 2003, the Darfur region of western Sudan has been the site systematic terror. According to Amnesty International, "In these attacks, men are killed, women are raped and villagers are forcibly displaced from their homes which are burnt; their crops and cattle, their main means of subsistence, are burnt or looted." [AI, "Darfur: Rape as a weapon of war: sexual violence and its consequences," 19 July 2004]

To date, in Darfur an estimated 2.5 million people have been displaced, more than 400,000 have died and an untold number of women and girls have been raped and sexually terrorized. A 2007 report by Refugees International found that "the raping of Darfuri women is not sporadic or random, but is inexorably linked to the systematic destruction of their communities." It claims that the government-backed janjawid militiamen, the "armed men on horses or "Arab militia," practice rape as a weapon of ethnic cleansing. [RI, "Laws Without Justice: An Assessment of Sudanese Laws Affecting Survivors of Rape"]

Most recently, a March 2008 report by Louise Arbour found that there were "strong indications" that members of the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) committed rapes of women and girls in Sirba, north of West Darfur's capital, El Geneina. The report stated

that one eyewitness saw "four girls being escorted to an abandoned hut and raped at gunpoint by a group of soldiers belonging to the SAF."

Two additional examples document the growing use of sexual terror on women and girls since the end of the Cold War. In Rwanda, the UN estimated that as many as 500,000 women and girls suffered brutal forms of sexual violence, including gang-rape and sexual mutilation, of which many were infected with HIV/Aids. In Bosnia, more than 40,000 Muslim women were estimated to have been raped and some impregnated girls were forced to bear "the enemy's" child. These examples suggest the increased use of rape as a technique of total warfare.

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In his elegant meditation, "War Is A Force That Gives Us Meaning," Chris Hedges grasps the dehumanizing role of war:

War breaks down long-established prohibitions against violence, destruction, and murder. And with this often comes the crumbling of sexual, social, and political norms as the domination and brutality of the battlefield is carried into personal life. Rape, mutilation, abuse, and theft are the natural outcome of a world in which force rules, in which human beings are objects. ["War," p. 103]

A war can be a social revolution or an ethnic genocide, a clash of vast armies or a civil conflict. War can set people free or subject them to the worst mass vengeance. In either case long-established prohibitions, what Freud called the superego, brake down. People become other than themselves. Yet, the vengeance of war can be rationalized, focused into an accepted tactic of military doctrine.

General Sherman, who introduced total war, once observed: "We are not only fighting hostile armies, but a hostile people, and must make old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war." He urged his fellow Unionists that they must "make the war so terrible ... [and] make them [non-combatants] so sick of war that generations would pass away before they would again appeal to it."

Sherman developed the strategy of total war from his experience during the Second Seminole War of 1835-1842, serving under General (and future President) Zachary Taylor. He was most galled by the Native people's innovative use of mobile attacks which permitted them to quickly strike and disappear.

In the face of such unorthodox warfare, he called for the total eradication of the Seminole people. "I want you to be bold, enterprising, and at all times full of energy,"

he told his soldiers, "when you begin, let it be a campaign of annihilation, obliteration and complete destruction. ..." In particular, he singled out the destruction of Seminole enclaves and the indiscriminate killing of warriors; he targeted farms at harvest time and buffalo herds to eliminate the Seminole's food source.

Over the last century-and-a-half, total war has been systematically extended from food stuffs to innocent collateral victims to anyone who, in Sherman's words, is part of the "hostile people." Louise Arbour's decision to resign her UN position is testament to how Bush administration policies of total war are fostering international moral crises.

The military targeting of girls and women for sexual assault and rape has become the most extreme expression of this crisis. Whether involving U.S. grunts in Iraq or janjawid in Darfur, rape is an instrument of total war. Rape is a form of torture, especially targeted at females. It is intended to not only inflict pain, but to shame the victim by undermining her sense of personal dignity and self-identity.

In addition to rape during total war, girls and women have been subject to increased reported incidents of forced prostitution and sex trafficking in non-war enclaves of intensifying globalization. These crimes illustrate how the scope of total war is expanding to everyday life. War is migrating from the remote battlefield to the urban downtown; from recognized conflicts between hostile armies to but another aspect of illicit commerce wrecking havoc on developing nations throughout the world. Total war is modernity's self-negation.

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