"The Ethical Use of Military Force"
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Two thousand years ago the Roman poet Horace wrote, "Force without wisdom falls of its own weight." Nothing that I do as the secretary of defense is more important than my role in advising the president on when and how to use military force in this post-Cold War world.

Today we no longer face the monolithic threat from the Soviet Union. Today the threats to American interests stem from ethnic conflicts, nuclear proliferation, and humanitarian crises. Responses to these complex and diverse situations require flexibility, hard choices, and sound judgment. In short, they require wisdom.

Wise decisions about the use of force have a political, a military, and an ethical element. The political element involves a judgment as to the nature of the interests at stake and whether the use or the threat of use of military force is the most appropriate way to protect those interests.

The military element involves a judgment as to the capability of the US military forces to achieve our goal and the probable losses entailed.

The ethical element involves a judgment as to whether achieving our goals by military force is in keeping with America's fundamental respect for human life—the lives of our military personnel and the lives of people of other nations.

One of the most profound decisions that a president must make is whether to risk the lives of our people or threaten the lives of the people of another nation. The courage, the loyalty and the willingness of our men and women in uniform to put their lives at risk is a national treasure. That treasure can never be taken for granted, yet neither can it be hoarded like miser's gold.

You and your colleagues are in uniform for a purpose—to defend our nation and its interests against threats here at home and abroad.

As the secretary of defense, it is my job to help the president decide when and where military forces should be employed. First of all, by making clear what national interests are at stake. Then, by asking what level of force is necessary to effectively advance those interests. And by asking the ethical question—should force be used for those purposes?

Over 50 years ago President [Franklin D.] Roosevelt faced this awesome decision. He

decided to deploy America's fullest military power to help defeat the forces of tyranny and aggression around the globe. That decision was clear-cut. America's interests were not in question. Indeed, our very survival as a nation was at stake.

Some decisions about the level of force in the Second World War have been debated by historians. President [Harry S.] Truman's decision to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima was perhaps the most dramatic. The political element of this decision was sharply focused—namely, to end the war quickly, once and for all.

The ethical element was more complex. By dropping the bomb, as Truman put it, "The force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed." But by ending the war quickly the bomb would save tens of thousands of American lives and hundreds of thousands of Japanese lives who would have died in the ensuing combat. Truman made the decision, the ethical decision and, I believe, the correct decision, to save those lives.

Today, unlike during World War II, most of the current and foreseeable threats do not threaten the survival of the United States, so we do not face the level of political and ethical questions about using force that FDR and Truman faced. But the problems we face are still very complex and very dangerous, so they still require us to think clearly about the use of military power.

Today I believe there are basically, three different cases in which we may use our armed forces, all of which involve political and ethical questions.

The first category is when our vital national interests are threatened. Our second category is when important, but not vital, national interests are threatened. The third category is when a situation causes us deep humanitarian concern. I want to consider each of these in turn.

A threat falls into this first category of vital interest if it threatens the survival of the United States or key allies, if it threatens our critical economic interests or if it poses a danger of a future nuclear threat. If we determine that we face such a threat, we must be prepared to use military force to end that threat, and we must be prepared to risk a military conflict to protect our vital interests. But we also must be prepared to weigh our political aims with our ethical responsibilities and to do that balance with great wisdom.

Our confrontations with Iraq these past few years involved our vital national interests. Indeed, they involved all three of the threats which I mentioned. They were a threat to key allies; they were a threat to critical economic interests; and a future nuclear danger.

In 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait and threatened Saudi Arabia. It verged on controlling all of the gulf's oil, which amounts to two-thirds of the world's proven reserves. Control of that much oil would allow a hostile state to blackmail the industrial world and threaten the health of the world economy, and the revenues from that much oil would allow Iraq to renew—and to renew with vigor—its plans for building a nuclear bomb. So in 1990 we knew that our vital interests were at stake. Our political aim was to blunt the threat to those interests quickly, so we marshaled our forces and sent them to the gulf, but it was

six months before we actually used military force. Why did we wait the six months?

First of all, we wanted to prepare our forces so that victory could be assured with a minimal loss of life. Also, we had an ethical responsibility to exhaust all possibilities for a peaceful resolution: to make war the last resort and not the first resort. We did exhaust these possibilities.

The decision to start the war was, indeed, a decision of great moment. We as a nation made a political decision that we had to respond, but we also made an ethical decision: that the cost of not stopping Saddam Hussein's aggression outweighed the potential risk to American, allied and, indeed, even Iraqi lives. We also faced a tough ethical decision when victory was near at hand. President [George] Bush decided, for political and for ethical reasons, not to make Baghdad and the capture of Saddam Hussein the goal. There were many reasons, but the paramount one for the president was that the cost in casualties from all sides would have been too high. He has received much criticism for that decision, but it was the ethical and, I believe, the correct decision.

Last October Saddam Hussein posed another threat when Iraqi forces again massed near the Kuwaiti border. We marshaled overwhelming forces in the gulf, deploying troops to augment the troops already there. That decision, I can assure you, was not taken lightly. The president and I fully recognize that sending troops to the gulf under those conditions again risk conflict and risk American lives. But once again the cost of not deterring Iraqi aggression outweighs the potential risk. This time our quick action served as a deterrent, and the Iraqi forces returned to the garrisons without a fight.

The political and the ethical questions are difficult when we have vital interests at stake—as those cases illustrated—but they're even more difficult in the second category when we have important, but not vital, interests at stake. These cases are more difficult because we have an obligation to weigh the risks against the interests involved and because the threats are not always clear-cut. But we must be willing to consider the use of some level of force commensurate with our interests. We want to influence the outcome in these cases because some outcomes will advance our interests while others can harm them, but our use of force must, therefore, be selected and limited, reflecting the relative importance of the outcome to our interests.

We have a range of options here, from using US military assets for logistical operations to using US combat forces. The decision of what to use, whether it's a C-130 transport or an Army combat division, will reflect the costs that we are willing to pay to achieve the outcome that we want.

Our military action in Haiti fell into this category. Haiti's elected government was overthrown by a military dictator. This threatened important, but not vital, US national interests. It threatened our interest in protecting democracy in this hemisphere, in preventing the flow of refugees and in our deep concern in putting a halt to a cruel systematic reign of terror over the Haitian people.

We could have used military force to protect those interests, but initially the risks

outweighed the benefits. Over time, economic conditions and diplomatic efforts failed to resolve the threat, and indeed, the threat to our interests began to increase. So there came a time, a significant moment, when the president decided that the threat to our interests was great enough that we needed to take action. But we were prepared to call off the invasion up to the moment the first paratrooper left the plane, because we had an obligation to prevent the loss of lives if we could.

As in Iraq last October, the threat—just the threat—of military action was sufficient to avoid the use of military force. However, in this case, the threat only became fully credible after the invasion forces were actually launched. The planes were actually in the air with their paratroopers on the way to Haiti when the Haitian government finally agreed to allow the forces in. So when the military junta finally stepped down, at the 11th hour, we did call off the invasion, and we arrived in Haiti then as friends rather than as invaders.

Bosnia is another case where important, but not vital, US interests are threatened. It may be the toughest security question we face today, both from a political and from an ethical standpoint, even though it is clear who the aggressors and who the victims are. Bosnian Serbs are the aggressors. The Bosnian government and its supporters are the victims.

The atrocities perpetrated by the Serbs, in particular the ethnic cleansing, are abhorrent. Therefore, some say that America has an ethical obligation to solve the Bosnian tragedy by entering the war on the side of the Bosnian government.

We have rejected that advice, because America does not have enough at stake to risk the massive American casualties—and they would be massive—as well as the casualties to other parties and civilians that would occur if we participated in a wider war. Therefore, that course is unacceptable.

At the other end of the spectrum are those who say that America should do nothing—that Bosnia is a tragedy, but it is not our tragedy. Doing nothing is unacceptable, too. It's not only unacceptable from an ethical point of view, but it's unacceptable from a national security viewpoint as well, because we do have a security interest in preventing the violence from spreading and stimulating a broader European war. We do have a security interest in limiting the violence. We certainly have a humanitarian interest in mitigating the effects of the violence and the human suffering. We have been able to achieve those goals in Bosnia and achieve them at an acceptable risk to Americans.

It is a tough ethical decision to stand aside when we perceive that evil is being done, but we have decided to not commit US combat troops to Bosnia to end the war. The cost in American lives, not to mention the cost in Bosnian lives, would be too great, especially when weighed against the limited US interests at stake. But we have decided to commit US military forces to the region to prevent the spread of the war, to limit the violence and to mitigate human suffering.

For example, we have placed troops in Macedonia, under U.N. command, to help

prevent the spread of the violence. We are enforcing the no-fly zone, which keeps the Serbs from bombarding cities in Bosnia. We are supporting the heavy weapons exclusion zones around cities. We're airlifting food and medical supplies for humanitarian purposes. These actions have been effective.

To date the violence has been contained to Bosnia. We have seen civilian casualties drop from 130,000 in 1992 to around 2,500 in 1994, and thus far in '95 there have been fewer than 100 civilian casualties. That is not to say that we are happy or satisfied with 100 civilian casualties, but it is an enormous difference from the over 100,000 that occurred there in 1992.

We are engaged in the longest humanitarian airlift in history—three years long, 15,000 sorties, longer than the Berlin airlift. In spite of these efforts, nobody can feel satisfied from an ethical standpoint about Bosnia. The cases where we weigh our interests against our risks are, by their very nature, ethically unsatisfying.

Ironically, this also holds true when America is faced with a call to respond to humanitarian crises, and we in the Defense Department get those calls about once a month. On the surface, deciding whether to respond to earthquakes, starvation, disease or civil wars may seem easy, but it is not, because our forces cannot, and should not, be sent to resolve every humanitarian crisis in the world.

Generally the military is not the right tool to meet humanitarian concerns. There are other organizations—government and private—that exist to do this work. We field an army, not a salvation army. But under certain conditions the use of our armed forces is appropriate, and in other conditions it is not appropriate. I'd like to give you a criterion for when we use them and when we don't.

Let me go to Rwanda as a classic example. The civil war in Rwanda was a human catastrophe of massive proportions, yet intervention of US forces would not necessarily have been effective, but certainly would have involved very large casualties. Like many other nations, we decided to concentrate on using diplomatic tools until the military and civil contact exhausted itself. Those diplomatic tools proved to be ineffective. That conflict and the resulting exodus of the more than 2 million refugees created a human tragedy of biblical proportions. The starvation, the disease and the death dwarfed the ability of the normal relief agencies to cope, and the need for relief was urgent.

At that point and under unique conditions we were able to act. In the entire world only the United States military had the capability to jump start a relief effort and begin saving lives in the short term. Only the US military could conduct a massive airlift over long distances on short notice to bring in the specialized equipment needed to relieve its suffering. And we did.

The joint task force quickly set up an airlift hub at Entebbe [Uganda], and the 24-hour airlift operations at Goma [Zaire] and Kigali [Rwanda], and the relief flights surged. American planes delivered nearly 15,000 tons of food, medicine and supplies to the refugees. US troops were called from Europe. At one time we had almost 2,000 troops in

Rwanda. Before two nights passed they began making clean water for the refugees at Goma. What had been a cholera epidemic that was taking 5,000 lives a day was stopped overnight.

The lesson learned from Rwanda is that there are times when we can, and we should, intervene in humanitarian crises. But Rwanda also gave us a set of criteria which we use for looking at future humanitarian issues. The first of those is if we face a natural or manmade catastrophe that dwarfs the ability of normal relief agencies to respond. ... The second test is if the need for relief is urgent and only the military has the ability to jump start the effort. Third, if the response requires resources unique to the military. And finally, if there is minimal risk to lives of the American troops.

Rwanda met all of those tests, and so I recommended to the president—and the president accepted the recommendation—that we would go in there with humanitarian efforts. We did. We saved probably 50,000 to 100,000 lives with that relief effort. We finished it in three or four weeks, then we pulled out and came home again—turning the water purification equipment we'd taken in over to the relief agencies.

Choosing the right thing to do in a chaotic world is not as simple as some may think, particularly when it comes to using military force. It's not merely a matter of asking our heart. We also have to ask our head. We have to ask, "Can American interests be protected without resorting to using military force?" We have to ask, "Is it truly worth it to risk the lives of our men and women in uniform?"

There's a painting that hangs outside my wall in the Pentagon. It depicts a poignant scene of a serviceman with his family in church. Clearly he is praying before deployment and a long separation. Below the painting is a wonderful quote from Isaiah in which God says, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" And Isaiah replies, "Here am I. Send me."

When we talk about using military force, we are talking about risking the lives of people who say, "Here am I. Send me." Many times in history we have accepted that offer. We will have to accept it again. But we must never, never misuse it.