In the Name of Freedom Comes a Totalizing War-Machine

Photographs of dead children regularly appear in the world press. The killing of Anas bin Nazir, shot in the back by the Indonesian military as he ran through a rice paddy in Aceh, is a recent example (23 May 2003). However, there is a one syndicated photograph that I cannot get out of my mind. Taken in 2001 after an exchange of gunfire at a checkpoint near Jerusalem, the photo stands out as carrying something beyond the usual image of simple tragic death. It is poised at a moment of contradictory truth. It depicts a Palestinian youth lying prone and half-naked in the middle of a dusty street. A dog-sized robot — camera-eyed and remote-controlled — checks to see whether or not the boy terrorist is dead or still dangerous. To one side of the photograph a woman carrying a shopping bag begins to cross the street. The human moment is frozen at the point of a technical question. The woman, and the body politic of an imposed nation, waits as the necroscopic machine checks on a technicality: ‘Is the potential risk neutralized, or does it still present a threat?’

Certainly this act of technological mediation ameliorates risk for the unseen soldiers. However, at the same time it also dehumanizes the threat and safely objectifies the ‘enemy’. No one mourns the dead person — not even the bystander. There is no rite of passage to mark the passing of life from his body. The emotional
power of the photograph works off that very contradictory abstraction, contrasting the post-human intervention with the banal humanity of an old woman engaged in one of the necessary transactions of everyday life. It just so happens that she wants to cross a street where someone has been killed. The photograph thus subjectively counterposes instrumental mediation, human mortality and quotidian necessity, even as it carries this condensed moment of tragedy to us, the newspaper readers thousands of kilometres away — mediated tragedy, breakfast toast and momentary effect. To the extent that the photograph still works emotionally, we do not live in a post-human world. Nevertheless, I want to argue that the lines between the human and the means of technical mediation are being blurred. Every time that instruments of the abstract war-machine are used — even if ostensibly to protect us — or every time we glance at yet another image of violence and the emotional effect is diminished by even a shade, we are allowing our world to be overlaid by a strengthening level of the post-human.

Just as the image invokes a tension between the technologized post-human and the mortal human, this article works across the same field of concern. It addresses, in particular, the tension between the rationalized deployment of technologies of death and the putative motivation of their use to project the ‘humanitarian’ values of liberty and security. I will argue three main points. First, I suggest that the hope of ‘freedom from fear’, defined in its broadest sense, has been drawn into a tragic association with a new kind of war-machine. Second, I suggest that the techniques and technologies of the war-machine are built upon a generalizing practice of increasingly abstract engagement, both physically, in terms of the nature of the delivery of force, and emotionally, in terms of how we relate to those against whom the force is being directed. The widening war on terrorism threatens to carry us towards a condition where we are dangerously abstracted from those defined as ‘Other’ — terrorists, warlords, mullahs, and children overboard. This process of abstracting the Other has long been with us ideologically, but it has become qualitatively more dangerous as the processes of technical mediation have

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1. The concept of the ‘war-machine’ is used here to denote the institutionalization of the means of military violence and control, organized in the contemporary period usually by a state. It is thus used antithetically to G. Deleuze and F. Guattari’s notion. The war machine is the invention of nomads (inner as it is exterior to the State apparatus and distinct from the military institution). See their Nomadology: The War Machine, Semiotext(e), New York, 1986, p. 56. The only resonance of their approach in this article is my argument that the modern war-machine is being overlaid by postmodern techniques of organization and extension of force that emphasize the advantages of de-territorialization outside of its own borders. The compound concept of the ‘abstract war-machine’ is intended to emphasize this new layer of effecting power in a way that aims to overcome the friction of distance and time.

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compounded the possibilities of controlling, killing and knowing from a distance. This is further compounded by the way in which we vacillate between active paranoid fear of the Other and passive acceptance of the machine that promises to moderate that fear.

In the third main thrust of the discussion I suggest that in the context of the War on Terror the abstract war-machine is being developed with the intention of projecting a *totalizing effect*. While total control is by definition impossible, and the unwieldy machines of ‘totalizing effect’ have a tendency to generate chaos rather than calm, the resources of the war-machine are being generalized across both the international and the domestic spheres with the goal of total control. This is the other side of the promise to win the War on Terror.

**The Multiplier Effect of Terror and the Face of the ‘Other’**

We now fear potentially threatening strangers in ways that lead us to consent compliantly to the deployment of a permanent war-machine across an undefined theatre of war. We now countenance technologies of violence that kill from high in the sky, and special forces that operate secretly across the ground, forces from above and below especially trained to operate in those undefined zones where no war has been declared and civilians and social infrastructure are targeted as often as are combatants. Although this process has historical roots in the twentieth century going back to Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, under the cover of this War on Terror a new stage of ‘humanitarian’ state terror has been extended, with a devastating multiplier effect. How has this consent taken hold? Alongside the image of the necropsic robotic, let me present another image, an image that we are supposed to recognize as dehumanized evil: the pudgy face of the Serbian politician, Slobodan Milosevic. Along with Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden, he is presented as one of the reasons that the new totalizing military machine is necessary.

I recently sat in the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague and watched the section of the trial of Slobodan Milosevic pertaining to a little village in Kosovo called Racak. In that village a massacre of forty-five persons occurred, and, as I will discuss later, part of its importance lies in the fact that NATO seized upon the massacre as a turning point in its decision to bomb Serbia and Kosovo.\(^2\)

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2. With thanks to Monika Maelund, Victims and Witness Support Section, International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.
3. On 17 June 1999, the British Foreign Office Minister Geoff Hoon, the man who also talked
Slobodan Milosevic sits to one side of the Court Room No. 1, acting as his own defence. He sits alone, except for a surprisingly alert armed guard, changed at regular intervals. The courtroom is small, divided in half by bullet-proof glass, with the public gallery on one side and the proceedings occurring on the other. What struck me about the trial were some strange cross-overs with the situation that Hannah Arendt described in the trial of the convicted Nazi war criminal Otto Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann’s trial was held in Jerusalem in April 1961. (It incidentally takes us back to the city where our discussion started, in which the Israeli government and its soldiers have now become oppressors in their ill-fated attempt to totalize freedom from fear.) Back in the post-war years, Jews were trying to come to grips with the horror of their own oppression by the most brutally efficient totalitarian regime the world has seen.

Otto Adolf Eichmann was rightly found guilty of crimes against humanity, but not for the right reasons. He was in charge of efficiently transporting people across the countryside — mostly Jews and Gypsies. The only indication of an order to kill that the prosecution was able to produce in that trial was a scribbled note, written in 1941, by a ‘Jewish expert’ in the German Foreign Office after a telephone conversation. It says, ‘Eichmann proposes shooting’, but it has little status as evidence. (By chilling coincidence, this note was written in relation to a state-organized massacre in German-occupied Serbia in the very year, and country, in which Slobodan Milosevic was born.) Eichmann claimed that he ‘never gave an order to kill either a Jew or a non-Jew; I just did not do it’, and he probably didn’t. He did, however, admit to ‘aiding and abetting’ the commission of crimes through organizing the transport of Jews to concentration camps, and it is on this basis that he should have been indicted.

The problem is that because the victors were searching for a personalized explanation of the systematic horror, the court was reduced to a Star Chamber. If the question had been posed in terms of taking responsibility for the effects of a war-machine — including the effective use of its rail system — the Allies would also have logically had to interrogate their decision to extend their machinery of war into fire-bombing and dropping nuclear bombs on civilians. The evidence shows that British and American policy makers effectively employed state terror against civilians in

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Dresden, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, using their mass deaths as a form of exemplary accountancy to show the military power of the Allied forces to the Axis powers.

The circumstantial, testified evidence is similarly overwhelming that during the period that Milosevic was President of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, his forces were involved in widespread mass killings. But it is even less clear-cut that he directly ordered the attacks against civilians than was the case of Allied bombing during World War II. The tragedy is that given the nature of his trial the process is certain to remain more a mediated spectacle of personality politics than an elaboration of the complex truths of contemporary war. Upholding the principle of individual culpability continues to be important, but here, unfortunately, it is being tethered to the desire of the winners to explain away the horror as the machinations of criminality.

Milosevic protests that all he was doing was directing his war-machine to counter terrorism in his own country. Like Eichmann, it seems that he will rightly be found guilty of crimes against humanity, but not for the right reasons. If we admit to ourselves that what Milosevic is guilty of is letting loose a war-machine in an attempt to totalize state security against a putative threat of terrorism, then Henry Kissinger, Ariel Sharon, George Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush are similarly indictable. And, on these grounds, so they should be. In all these cases, crimes against humanity were perpetrated while these leaders had both de jure and de facto responsibility for questionable military operations. Let them face the words of one of the wiser judges in the Eichmann trial:

> these crimes were committed en masse, not only in regard to the number of victims, but also in regard to the numbers of those who perpetrated the crime, and the extent to which any one of the many criminals was close to or remote from the actual killer of the victim means nothing, as far as the measure of responsibility is concerned. On the contrary, in general the degree of responsibility increases as we draw further away from the man who uses the fatal instrument with his own hands.  

This particular judgement relates to one side of my second argument. However, the lines of the technocracy of command have

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5. Indictment: Slobodan Milosevic.
6. A dangerous juxtaposition. I know, but it is important to make. At the same time, in making these large and general claims we need to stay acutely aware of both subtle and profound differences. For example, I have already juxtaposed the Nazi total solution for the Jews and the Jewish attempt at totalizing control in Palestine. However, I do not intend to suggest that Israel's so-called 'security fence' and its use of tanks and helicopter gun-ships to effect control in the Palestinian ghettos can be grouped in the category of 'genocidal' along the lines of the systematic holocaust in the 1940s that wrenched people out of parallel ghettos.
7. Cited in Arendt, p. 98.
However, I find their metaphor of a society of control presiding over a new plurality unconvincing. It misses out both on the different structural levels of sovereignty and the different formations that in one setting throw up, for example, the traditionally conceived notion of martyrling one’s body for a sacred cause, while engendering in another setting the postmodern confidence that a National Missile Defence System will bring freedom from rogue states.

While the contemporary projection of control continues to carry with it modern techniques of efficiency and organization conceived decades ago, it is now overlaid by various postmodern features: totalizing organizational security (funding a massive warmachine so that, supposedly, we can be free from fear of attack upon our bodies); totalizing capital (advocating that the commodity be completely unregulated so that we can be ‘free’ to fetishize our deepest desires); and totalizing techo-science (granting scientists the unfettered freedom to reconstitute nature so that we can dream of being free of want and disease).

The first is most relevant to this article, and here we find an apparent paradox. The only way potentially to enhance totalizing control is to totalize the freedom of ‘us, the good guys’ and to objectify the others as abstract strangers and a potential threat. Ronald Reagan expressed it beautifully as a divine assignment to spread the ‘sacred fire of human liberty’. George W. Bush, speaking in the context of images of falling statues of Saddam, proclaimed ‘We have witnessed the arrival of a new era ... everywhere that freedom stirs, let tyrants fear’ (3 May 2003). It is an apparent paradox because this particular concept of ‘freedom’ entails a new tyranny, including developing the infrastructure to defend the free movement and operation of some, and to strictly curtail the freedom of others. Examples abound. The US Patriot Act of 2001 is a massive document extending powers that were already more than adequate for the purpose. Since September 11, there have been secret hearings and detentions of 1200 people in the United States, mostly Muslims arrested on immigration charges under the Act. Others have been detained without recourse to legal representation in Guantanamo Bay, a US-controlled section of another nation’s territory. And, on 5 June 2002, we heard the announcement of an intention to revive the long-dormant powers of the 1952 immigration law which would see tens of thousands of visitors from Islamic countries fingerprinted, potentially increasing to 5 million persons per year by 2005.

Just as it is counterproductive to dehumanize the perpetrators of crimes against humanity, so too is developing techniques and technologies of totalizing control. Every technology that has been developed has become part of an escalation of the need for new
techniques of ‘totalizing’ control. The technologies either fall into the ‘wrong hands’ or set up the conditions for a counter-technology that renders them less totalizing, with the subsequent rationalization that we need a new level of protection.

For example, after the invention of the atomic bomb, the politics of the abstracting war-machine went through a number of overlapping stages:

1. An atomic bomb named ‘Little Boy’ was used pre-emptively to free us from an evil war-maker, Japan, subsequently spurring the Soviet Union to develop a comparable capacity.

2. The hydrogen bomb and an intercontinental ballistic missile system was developed to free the West from the Soviet threat, leading to the doctrine and untenable reality of Mutually Assured (totalizing) Destruction, and thus making the technology at least potentially unusable.

3. Nuclear weapons were further developed technologically, to make limited battlefield use possible (leading to the fear of other states using the weapons as they too acquired nuclear capacity), and to project a totalizing missile defence system — Star Wars and Star Wars II.

4. With the new technological possibilities, we have been overcome by images of terrorists carrying suitcase bombs, denoting ‘dirty bombs’, or flying domestic aeroplanes into buildings, thus getting underneath any potential missile shield by putting their own bodies on the line. This has prompted the development of the most active and engaged peace-time military machine that the world has ever seen.

Re-securing the Home of the Free

The failure of ‘totalizing control’ to ever attain static or comfortable ascendancy gives us a way of explaining why the big sell of the concept of ‘freedom’ is so important. Whether we are talking about the polarity of ‘freedom/fear’, ‘freedom/terror’ or ‘global free trade/national closure’, the concept of ‘freedom’ has become paramount. In the United States, as the home of the free, all of those terms have become linked. Writing in the days after September 11, one New York Times journalist talked epochally of prior times when normality, security and freedom were found in the small rhythms of routine. Now, being at home does not automatically bring freedom or security.

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Although the wound is obviously deepest there, it is not the only country that has been altered. But of course, America is not only a place. America is also an idea. The knowledge of this secure ‘elsewhere’ was what kept freedom and hope alive for millions around the globe for two centuries, so we are told. It was the force that broke the stalemate in the first Great War, the place from which the world dared to hope for peace after 1918. It was the beacon toward which countless immigrants travelled, in order to leave their somewhere behind. It was the rock upon which Churchill summoned the will from his people’s terrified hearts to go on and win against the darkest forces that freedom had ever encountered. It was the symbol that ultimately brought down the Berlin Wall and faced terror in Tiananmen Square.10

In this account, America is freedom. Hence, for the sake of the world, totalizing security has to be projected both outward, through going to war, and inward, as ‘homeland security’. This has involved organizational co-ordination and breathless announcements (6 June 2002) of a new single permanent department to secure the American homeland. The Secretary of Homeland Security is in the cabinet, and co-ordinates with the FBI and CIA, but the most crucial task is to be seen to be re-establishing the nexus between freedom and ultra-security. Even the titles of bits of associated legislation exhibit intriguingly careful language use: the title of the ‘USA Patriot Act’, for example, acts as a form of cultural closure on the possibility of criticizing the intended changes as curtailing freedoms. More than that, the title of the Act, an acronym for Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT), ties together the act of being American and the act of going to War to Defend Freedom. Speeches for home consumption continually posit a fight between willed freedom and weak fear, with repetitive use of phrases such as ‘weapons of mass destruction’, ‘rogue states’ and the ‘need for pre-emptive strikes’. The logic of pre-emptive intervention, combating rogue states, makes the world safe from ‘WMD’. George W. Bush’s State of the Union address in January 2003 is a case in point:

Our war against terror is a contest of will in which perseverance is power. In the ruins of two towers, at the western wall of the Pentagon, on a field in Pennsylvania, this nation made a pledge, and we renew that pledge tonight. Whatever the duration of this struggle and whatever the difficulties, we will not permit the triumph of violence in the affairs of men. Free people will set the course of history ... Now, in this century, the ideology of power

and domination has appeared again and seeks to gain the ultimate weapons of terror. Once again, this nation and all our friends are all that stand between a world at peace and a world of chaos and constant alarm. Once again we are called to defend the safety of our people, and the hopes of all mankind… Whatever action is required, when action is necessary, I will defend the freedom and security of the American people… We exercise power without conquest, and we sacrifice for the liberty of strangers. Americans are free people, who know that freedom is the right of every person and the future of every nation. The liberty we prize is not America’s gift to the world, it is God’s gift to humanity. (30 January 2003)\(^{11}\)

Even when projected externally and globally, much of the rhetoric is for domestic consumption in the West. The ‘Axis of Evil’ notion deliberately echoes Reagan’s ‘Evil Empire’, and both have their origins in the Second World War period. Similarly, the concept of global action in the name of humanity has a history going back to the middle of the twentieth century. For example, the use of images of globalism has long been part of US institutions of war-making or space exploration. The official icons of the US Department of Defence, the Navy SEALs and the Joint Special Operations Command, the Strategic Computing Program and DARPA as a whole, take the globe as their symbol of territorial reach. The war on terrorism is predicated on a rhetoric legitimizing attacks against the source of evil wherever it might spring up. In George Bush’s terms, ‘We must be ready to strike at a moment’s notice in any dark corner of the world’ (West Point speech, 1 June 2002).

Overlaying that rhetoric is a newer claim about the legitimacy of pre-emptive strikes to protect our way of life against totalizing evil. Donald Rumsfeld, speaking at the NATO headquarters in Brussels (6 June 2002), opened up this convergence of the notions of the ‘freedom to act’ and the necessity of taking the initiative to control a source of risk. ‘Absolute proof cannot be a precondition for action’, he said. He was supported by the British Defence Secretary who talked about the possibility of using nuclear weapons against the threat of chemical and biological attack, prescient, in view of the May 2003 vote by US Congress lifting a ten-year ban on developing tactical-use nuclear weapons, including the ‘robust nuclear earth penetrator’.

Over the last century, pre-emption and retaliation became illegal as rationales for action under the conventions of modern international law. It became illegitimate to strike first in case something might happen, or to respond to a single act of aggression by retaliating in kind in order to send a message. That

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is, older notions of an 'eye for an eye' were rejected. However, in these contradictory times retaliation has made a come-back in reconstituted form — this time as a pastiche of floating and ad hoc rationalizations. In the aftermath of September 11, it was claimed that the attack was so massive that it could be taken as, in effect, a declaration of continuous war thus warranting continuous defence. This was despite the fact that no one declared such a war, no one even took responsibility for the act of terror, and only circumstantial evidence was available to decide upon whom the retaliation should be effected. Within no time the terrorists had a name, they were all Islamic, and they were found in every primeval corner of the globe.

**Conclusion**

War, or more technically, 'militarized peace', continues to prevail in Iraq, Afghanistan and Israel-Palestine. In Kosovo they are still rebuilding their devastated social infrastructure with limited support and in North Korea new tensions are developing. In short, the application of massive force has not brought about a positive peace anywhere. Nevertheless, the headlines point to the United States preparing for new zones of military engagement. The accompanying war of words has been ratcheted up as the self-designated 'allies' continue the cultural legitimation of further acts of state terror.

It is fitting that Australia's Foreign Affairs Minister, Alexander Downer, gets the penultimate word. Attempting to find an explanation for the extension of war to Iraq, Mr Downer likened the situation to the choice the Allies had in the Second World War in response to the totalitarian regime of Nazi Germany: appeasement of the bad guys, or deployment of the good warmachine. The problem, as I have been concerned to argue, is that world politics and the consequences of military action are rarely that simple. Even the evidence from the tiny Kosovan village of Racak produces more questions than answers. Racak, the site of a massacre of forty-five people, was presented as a trigger for the NATO intervention. As it turns out, of the massive list of offences listed against Milosevic by the International Criminal Tribunal, Racak provides the only indictable evidence of a massacre in Kosovo prior to that fateful day, 24 March 1999, when far away some NATO generals and politicians decided the only answer to the military activities of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was a deluge of bombs. As time goes on, it seems less and less likely that the advocates of total security will deliver positive peace. The answer is much more likely to come from politically engaged people, living in a diversity of places — from Jerusalem, Belgrade and Kabul to New York and Melbourne — working across all
levels of the social from the local and regional to the global. By contrast, hoping that the war-machine will bring peace has its parallels half a century ago in those who hoped that, on balance, the Third Reich would bring world stability.