

The New Children of War

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As US forces advanced into Saddam Hussein's Iraq in April 2003, the fighting had turned out to be far more intense than planned. One of the unexpected holdups came in Karbala, a city of roughly 550,000 located 50 kilometers southeast of Baghdad. Karbala was expected to be an easier take than most cities since its population consisted largely of Shiites, who had long opposed the dictator. Indeed, Karbala was considered one of Shia Islam's most holy cities—the site of a historic battle in 680 AD, in which Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, and his entire family were killed.

Before the war, Vice President Cheney would famously repeat in many speeches the prediction made by historian Fouad Ajami that the American troops would be greeted with “kites and boom boxes.” On that April afternoon, no kites were flying, and the booms filling the air certainly weren't from music. As they worked their way, street by street, through the residential neighborhoods of Karbala, the troops of the 101st Airborne Division—the famed “Screaming Eagles”—had been under intense fire from machine guns and rocket-propelled grenades (RPG) for the whole day. Gunfight followed gunfight, several

troopers were wounded, and assorted vehicles, including a Bradley armored fighting vehicle, were knocked out of action.

In the midst of the fighting, a young boy scrambled from an alleyway. An American machine gunner saw that the boy, later found to be 10 years old, was carrying an RPG. In a nanosecond, in the midst of bullets flying at him, the 21-year-old Soldier had to make what would surely be the toughest decision of his life. “I took him out,” [he later] said. ‘I laid down quite a few bursts.’” The boy fell dead.

After the battle ended, when there was time to think, the Soldier reflected on the episode. “‘Anybody that can shoot a little kid and not have a problem with it, there is something wrong with them,’ he said, taking a drag off a cigarette. ‘Of course I had a problem with it. [But] after being shot at all day, it didn't matter if you were a soldier or a kid; these RPGs are meant to hurt us. . . . I did what I had to do.’”¹

The Short History of Children and War

When we think of warfare, children rarely come to mind. Indeed, we assume that war is a place for only the strong and willing, from which the young, the old,

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the infirm, and the innocent are not only excluded, but also supposedly afforded special protections.

This exclusion of children from warfare held true in almost every traditional culture. For example, in precolonial African armies, the general practice was that warriors typically joined three to four years after puberty. In the Zulu tribe, for instance, not until the ages of 18 to 20 were members eligible for “ukubuthwa” (the drafting or enrollment into the tribal regiments).² In the Kano region of West Africa, only married men were conscripted because the unmarried ones were considered too immature for such an important and honored task as war.³ When children of lesser ages did serve in ancient armies, such as the enrollment of Spartan children into military training at ages seven through nine, they typically did not serve in combat. Instead, they carried out more menial chores, such as herding cattle or bearing shields and mats for the more senior warriors. In absolutely no cases were traditional tribes or ancient civilizations reliant on fighting forces made up of young boys or girls.

This exclusion of children from war was not simply a matter of principle but raw pragmatism. Adult strength and often lengthy training were needed to use pre-modern weapons and would continue to be needed well into the age of firearms. It also reflected the general importance of age in many political organizations. Most traditional cultures relied on a system of age grades for their ruling structures. These were social groupings determined by age cohorts, and they cut across ties created by kinship and common residence. Such a system enabled senior rulers and tribal elders to maintain command over their younger—and potentially unruly—subjects.

Although warfare has long been the domain of adults, there were times in military history when children did appear. Boy pages helped arm and maintain the knights of medieval Europe; drummer boys and “powder monkeys” (small boys who ran ammunition to cannon crews) were a requisite part of many an army and a navy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The key is that these boys fulfilled minor or ancillary support roles and were not considered true combatants. They neither dealt out death nor were considered legitimate targets. Indeed, Henry the Fifth was so angered at the breaking of this rule at the Battle of Agincourt (1415), where some of his army’s boy pages were killed, that he, in turn, slaughtered all of his French prisoners.

Indeed, perhaps the most well-known use of supposed child soldiers in history, the famous “Children’s Crusade,” is something of a myth. The reality is that the “crusade” was actually a march of thousands of unarmed boys from northern France and western Germany who thought they could take back the Holy Land by the sheer power of their faith. Most never left Europe, and of those who did, all but a few were sold into slavery by unscrupulous ship captains.

The rule held that children were not to be soldiers, but there were some exceptions in the grand span of history. Small numbers of underage children certainly lied about their ages to join armies. In addition, a few states sent out children to fight in their last gasps of defeat. Perhaps the most notable instance in American history was the participation by Virginia Military Institute (VMI) cadets at the Battle of New Market during the Civil War. In May 1864, Union forces marched up the Shenandoah Valley, hoping to cut the Virginian Central railroad, a key supply line. Southern general John Breckenridge found himself with the

only Confederate force in the area, commanding just 1,500 men. So he ordered the corps of cadets from nearby VMI to join him. Two-hundred-forty-seven strong (roughly 25 were 16 years or younger), they waited out most of the battle until its final stages. Then, in a fairly dramatic charge, they overran a key Union artillery battery. Ten cadets were killed, and 45 were wounded. Ultimately, though, their role was for naught. Within the year, the Union would capture the Shenandoah and with it soon the rest of the Confederacy.⁴

Similarly, and most recently, the Hitler Jugend (Hitler Youth) consisted of young boys who had received quasi-military training as part of a political program to maintain Nazi rule through indoctrination. Through most of World War Two, the youths joined German military forces (including the SS, for which the Jugend was a feeder organization) only when they reached the age of maturity. However, when Allied forces invaded German territory in the final months of the war, Hitler's regime ordered these boys to fight as well. It was a desperate gambit to hold off the invasion until new "miracle" weapons (like the V-2 rocket and Me-262 jet fighter) could turn the tide. Lightly armed and mostly sent out in small ambush squads, scores of Hitler Youth were killed in futile, small-scale skirmishes, all occurring after the war had essentially been decided.⁵

However, these were the exceptions to what the rule used to be—that children had no place in war. Throughout the last 4,000 years of war as we know it, children were never an integral, essential part of any military force in history. Their use as soldiers was isolated in time, geographic space, and scope. No one rushed out to copy these examples, and they did not weigh greatly in how wars began, were

fought, or ended. At best, they were footnotes in military history.

The Rise of Child Soldiers

The nature of armed conflict, though, has changed greatly in the past few years. Now the presence of children is the new rule of standard behavior in war, rather than the rarity that it used to be. The result is that war in the twenty-first century is not only more tragic but also more dangerous. With children's involvement, generals, warlords, terrorists, and rebel leaders alike are finding that conflicts are easier to start and harder to end.

The practice of using children, defined under international law as under the age of 18, as soldiers is far more widespread and more important than most people realize. There are as many as 300,000 children under the age of 18 presently serving as combatants around the globe (making them almost 10 percent of all global combatants). They serve in 40 percent of the world's armed forces, rebel groups, and terrorist organizations and fight in almost 75 percent of the world's conflicts; indeed, in the last five years, children have served as soldiers on every continent but Antarctica. Moreover, an additional half-million children serve in armed forces not presently at war.⁶

Some individuals try to quibble by raising questions of the cultural standards of maturity, that child soldiers are not actually children. The problem with this tack is that the 18-year cutoff is not simply a Western construct, as many warlords and apologists for child-soldier users would have it, but actually the international legal standard for childhood, agreed upon by over 190 states. It is also the age that almost every state in the world uses in its own legislation for awarding or withhold-

ing public rights and responsibilities such as when one can vote or when one receives free education or health care. Finally, it was also a standard for a range of premodern armies and modern armies (such as the 1813 regulations of the US Army).

More importantly, the youth in question cover a range that no sane person would deny is both underage and inappropriate for involvement in war. Eighty percent of those conflicts in which children are present include fighters under the age of 15; 18 percent of the world's armed organizations have used children 12 years and under. The average age of child soldiers found by two separate studies, one in Southeast Asia and one in Central Africa, was just under 13. The youngest-ever child soldier was an armed five-year-old in Uganda.

The mass presence of girls in many forces also distinguishes the present trend from any historic parallels. Although no girls served in groups like the powder monkeys or Hitler Youth, roughly 30 percent of armed forces that employ child soldiers also include girl soldiers; underage girls have been present in the armed forces in 55 countries. In 27 of these, girls were abducted to serve, and in 34 of these, they saw combat. These girl soldiers are often singled out for sexual abuse, sometimes by their own commanders, and have a hard time reintegrating into society when the wars end.

With the rise of this practice, Western forces have increasingly come into conflict with child-soldier forces. The first notable instance was the British Operation Barras in Sierra Leone in 2000. There, British Special Air Service (SAS) special forces fought a pitched battle against the "West Side Boys," a teen militia that had taken hostage a squad of British Army troops. As an observer noted, "You cannot resolve a situation like this with a laser-

guided bomb from 30,000 feet."⁷ Ultimately, a helicopter raid led by elite British SAS troops ended the hostage crisis. The hostages were rescued, but the subsequent battle was, as one observer put it, "brutal." One British soldier was killed, and 12 more were wounded. Estimates of dead among the West Side Boys ranged from 25 up to 150.

However, after 11 September 2001 (9/11) this issue became a pointed problem for Americans. Just as terrorism is the "weapon of the weak," so have the weakest of societies been pulled into this realm as well. Captured al-Qaeda training videos reveal young boys receiving instruction in the manufacture of bombs and the setting of explosive booby traps. Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas have recruited children as young as 13 to be suicide bombers and children as young as 11 to smuggle explosives and weapons. At least 30 suicide bombing attacks have been carried out by youths since the fighting in Israel-Palestine sparked up again in 2000.⁸ The most tragic example perhaps was a semiretarded 16-year-old who was convinced by Hamas to strap himself with explosives. Israeli police in the town of Nablus caught him just before he was to blow himself up at an army checkpoint.⁹

It is important to note, though, that neither terrorism nor children's roles in it are a uniquely Muslim or Middle Eastern phenomenon. For example, the youngest-ever reported terrorist was a nine-year-old boy in Colombia, sent by the National Liberation Army (ELN) rebel group to bomb a polling station in 1997.¹⁰ Likewise, when Muslim groups began to use child suicide bombers, they were not actually breaking any new ground. Instead, they were following the lead of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), also known as the "Tamil Tigers," in Sri Lanka, which has consistently been one of the most in-

novative of terrorist groups. The LTTE—which utilized suicide bombers to kill both the Indian prime minister and the Sri Lankan president and pioneered the tactic of crashing planes into buildings, later repeated on 9/11—has even manufactured specialized denim jackets designed to conceal explosives, specially tailored in smaller sizes for child suicide bombers.¹¹

Child Soldiers in the Western Hemisphere

In the Americas since the 1990s, child soldiers have served in fighting in Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico (in the Chiapas conflict), Nicaragua, Paraguay, and Peru. The most substantial numbers reported are in Colombia. There, as many as 11,000 children have been used as soldiers, meaning that one out of every four irregular combatants is underage. They serve in both the rebel side, in the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and ELN organizations, and with rightist paramilitary groups (such as the United Self-Defense Forces). As many as two-thirds of these children fighters are under 15 years old, with the youngest recruited being seven years old.¹²

Child soldiers in Colombia have been nicknamed “little bells” by the military, which uses them as expendable sentries, and “little bees” by the FARC guerrillas because they “sting” their enemies before they know they are under attack. In urban militias, they are called “little carts” because they can sneak weapons through checkpoints without suspicion. Up to 30 percent of some guerrilla units are made up of children. Child guerrillas are used to collect intelligence, make and deploy mines, and serve as advance troops in ambush attacks against paramilitaries, soldiers, and police

officers. For example, when the FARC attacked the Guatapé hydroelectric facility in 1998, the employees of the power plant reported that some of the attackers were as young as eight years old. In 2001 the FARC even released a training video that showed boys as young as 11 working with missiles.¹³ In turn, some government-linked paramilitary units are 85 percent children, with soldiers as young as eight seen patrolling.¹⁴ There has also been crossborder spillover of the practice. The FARC reportedly recruits children from as far away as Venezuela, Panama, and Ecuador, some as young as 10.¹⁵

The experiences of these children are both brutal and heart rending. As told by one 15-year-old FARC fighter (who had been recruited at age 12),

They bring the people they catch . . . to the training course. My squad had to kill three people. After the first one was killed, the commander told me that the next day I'd have to do the killing. I was stunned and appalled. I had to do it publicly, in front of the whole company, fifty people. I had to shoot him in the head. I was trembling. Afterwards, I couldn't eat. I'd see the person's blood. For weeks, I had a hard time sleeping. . . . They'd kill three or four people each day in the course. Different squads would take turns, would have to do it on different days. Some of the victims cried and screamed. The commanders told us we had to learn how to kill.¹⁶

The US Contact with Child Soldiers

With the global deployment of US forces after 9/11, from Afghanistan to the Philippines, child soldiers are present in every conflict zone in which US forces now operate. Indeed, the very first US Soldier casualty in the war on terrorism was a Green Beret killed by a 14-year-old sniper in Afghanistan. At least six

young boys between the ages of 13 and 16 were captured by US forces in Afghanistan in the initial fighting and taken to the detainee facility at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.¹⁷ They were housed in a special wing called “Camp Iguana.” As the Pentagon took more than a year to figure out whether to prosecute or rehabilitate them, the kids spent their days in a house on the beach converted into a makeshift prison, watching DVDs and learning English and math.¹⁸ In addition, several more who are 16–18 years old are thought to be held in the regular facility for adult detainees at “Camp X-Ray.” US Soldiers continue to report facing child soldiers in Afghanistan to this day; the youngest on record is a 12-year-old boy captured in 2004 after being wounded during a Taliban ambush of a convoy.¹⁹

In Iraq the problem has quietly grown worse. Under Saddam’s regime, Iraq built up an entire apparatus designed to pull children into the military realm and bolster his control of the populace. This included the Ashbal Saddam (“Saddam’s Lion Cubs”), a paramilitary force of boys between the ages of 10 and 15 that acted as a feeder into the noted Saddam Fedayeen units. A paramilitary led by Saddam’s son Uday, the Fedayeen proved more aggressive than the Iraqi army in fighting US invasion forces; the remnants of these units now make up one of the contending insurgent forces. During the invasion, American forces fought with Iraqi child soldiers from these groups in at least three cities (Nasiriya, Mosul, and Karbala).²⁰

Beaten on the battlefield, rebel leaders then sought to mobilize this cohort of trained and indoctrinated young fighters for the insurgency. A typical incident took place in the contentious city of Mosul just after the invasion and provided a worrisome indicator of the threat to come.

Here, in the same week that Pres. George W. Bush made his infamous “mission accomplished” aircraft-carrier landing, an Iraqi 12-year-old boy fired on US Marines with an AK-47 rifle.²¹ Over the next weeks and months, incidents between US forces and armed Iraqi children began to grow, ranging from child snipers to a 15-year-old who tossed a grenade in an American truck, blowing off the leg of a US Army trooper.²²

By the time fighting picked up intensity, starting in spring 2004, child soldiers served not only in Saddam loyalist forces but also in both radical Shia and Sunni rebel groups. Radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr directed a revolt that consumed the primarily Shia area south of Iraq, with the fighting in the holy city of Najaf being particularly fierce. Observers noted multiple child soldiers serving in al-Sadr’s “Mahdi” Army. One 12-year-old boy proudly proclaimed, “Last night I fired a rocket-propelled grenade against a tank. The Americans are weak. They fight for money and status and squeal like pigs when they die. But we will kill the unbelievers because faith is the most powerful weapon.”²³ Indeed, Sheikh Ahmed al-Shehani, al-Sadr’s spokesman, didn’t try to deny the war crime of using children but publicly defended the practice: “This shows that the Mahdi is a popular resistance movement against the occupiers. The old men and the young men are on the same field of battle.”²⁴

Coalition forces also have increasingly faced child soldiers in the dangerous “Sunni Triangle.” Marines fighting in the battle to retake Fallujah in November 2004 reported numerous instances of being fired upon by “children with assault rifles” and, just like the Soldier during the invasion, wrestled with the dilemmas it presented.

The overall numbers of Iraqi children presently involved in the fighting are not known. But the indicators are that they do play a significant and growing role in the insurgency. For example, at one point, some 107 Iraqi juveniles determined to be “high risk” security threats were held at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison.²⁵ US forces have faced particular problems with groups using children as spotters for ambushes and as cover for infiltration, such as having children sit in what troops call “VBIEDs” (vehicleborne improvised explosive devices). When children are present, such car bombs look less suspicious and are more likely to make it through checkpoints. A new development during the 2007 “surge” of forces is that Soldiers have reported that Shiite militias in Baghdad have organized gangs made up of more than 100 kids as young as six years old. The children throw rocks, bricks, and firebombs at convoys but are actually coordinated with snipers for the purpose of drawing any responding patrols into ambushes.

The Causes and Processes of Child Soldiers

The new presence of children on the twenty-first-century battlefield emerged from three intertwined forces. The first is how the dark side of globalization has led to a new pool of potential recruits. We are living through the most prosperous period in human history, but many are being left behind. Demographic changes, global social instability, and the legacy of multiple civil and sectarian conflicts entering their second and third generations all act to weaken states and undermine societal structures. Just as examples, more than 40 million African children will lose one or

both of their parents to HIV/AIDS by 2010, while the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that there are more than 25 million children uprooted from their homes by war.²⁶ Such orphans and refugees are particularly at risk for being pulled into war.

However, although there have always been dispossessed and disconnected children, it is changes in weapons technology that act as an enabler, allowing this pool to be tapped as a new source of military labor. In particular, the proliferation of light, simple, and cheap small arms has played a primary role. Such “child-portable” weapons as the AK-47 have become lighter, thanks to plastics; can be bought for the price of a goat or chicken in many countries; and are deceptively easy to learn to use. With just a half hour’s worth of instruction, a 10-year-old can wield the firepower of an entire Civil War regiment.

Finally, context matters. We are living through an exceptional period of flux and breakdown of global order, especially with the spread of warlordism and failed states. This change has made possible a new mode of war. Wars are driven less by politics than things as simple as religious hate or personal profit through seizing diamond mines. From Foday Sankoh in Sierra Leone to Mullah Omar in Afghanistan, local warlord leaders now see the new possibility of (and, unfortunately, advantages in) converting vulnerable, disconnected children into low-cost and expendable troops who fight and die for their own causes. The groups pull in children through recruiting techniques that take advantage of children’s desperation, and sometimes immaturity, or just through good, old-fashioned kidnapping and abduction.

Those of us living in stable, wealthy states have difficulty understanding how children can be convinced to join and

fight for an army, especially if they don't even understand or believe in the cause. But try to imagine yourself as an orphan, living on the street, not knowing where your next meal will come from. A group then offers you not only food and safety but also an identity, as well as the empowerment that comes from having a gun in your hand. Or imagine the temptation you might have if a group of older boys wearing natty uniforms and cool sunglasses were to show up at your school and force all the teachers to bow down to show who is "really in charge." They then invite you to join them, with the promise that you too can wield such influence. Or imagine what you would do if you experienced what happened to this seven-year-old boy in Liberia when a group of armed men showed up at his village. "The rebels told me to join them, but I said no," he later recalled. "Then they killed my smaller brother. I changed my mind."²⁷

When children are brought into war, they are usually run through training programs that range from weeks of intense, adult-style boot camp to a few minutes' instruction in how to fire a gun. Indoctrination, political or religious, can include such "tests" as forcing the kids to kill animals or human prisoners, including even neighbors or fellow children, both to inure them to the sight of blood and death and disconnect them from their old identity. Many are forced to take drugs to further desensitize them. As Corinne Dufka of Human Rights Watch describes the practice in West Africa, "It seemed to be a very organized strategy of . . . breaking down their defenses and memory, and turning them into fighting machines that didn't have a sense of empathy and feeling for the civilian population."²⁸

The result is that kids, even those who may have once been unwilling captives, can be turned into quite fierce and skilled

fighters. A typical story is that of a young boy in Sierra Leone, who recounts, "I was attending primary school. The rebels came and attacked us. They killed my mother and father in front of my eyes. I was 10 years old. They took me with them. . . . They trained us to fight. The first time I killed someone, I got so sick, I thought I was going to die. But I got better. . . . My fighting name was Blood Never Dry."²⁹

The Consequences of Children on the Battlefield

Beyond just the raw human tragedy, the ramifications of this "child soldier doctrine" for war itself are quite scary. First and foremost, it means that unpopular armies and rebel groups are able to field far greater forces than they would otherwise, through using children as a cheap and easy way to obtain recruits. Indeed, many groups little larger than gangs have proven able to sustain themselves as viable military threats through the use of child fighters. For example, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda is led by Joseph Kony, who styles himself the reincarnation of the Christian Holy Spirit. Kony's own spin of the Ten Commandments, though, is that the Bible allows the ownership of sex slaves but declares that riding bicycles is a sin punishable by death. Effectively, he is a David Koresh-like figure who leads a cult with a core of just 200 adult members. But over the years, Kony and his LRA have abducted over 14,000 children, using them to fight a decade-long civil war against the Ugandan army, considered one of the better forces in Africa, leaving some 100,000 dead and 500,000 refugees.

Child soldiers also present great difficulties during battle itself. Experiences from around the globe demonstrate that

children do make effective soldiers and often operate with terrifying audacity, particularly when infused with religious or political fervor or when under the influence of narcotics. I once interviewed a former Green Beret who described a unit of child soldiers in Sudan as the best soldiers he had seen in Africa in his 18 years of experience there. He recounted how they once ambushed and shot down a Soviet-made Mi-24 attack helicopter, a feared weapon that has put many an adult unit to flight.

They also present a horrible dilemma for professional forces. No one wants to have to shoot a child, yet a bullet from a 14-year-old can kill you just as dead as one from a 40-year-old. Children carrying guns are legitimate targets, but that doesn't make it any easier on the Soldiers who have to fight them. Soldiers often experience morale and post-traumatic stress disorder after such incidents.³⁰

Conflicts in which children are present tend to feature not only massive violations of the laws of war but also higher casualty totals, among both the local populace and child soldiers, in comparison to adult compatriots. These conflicts on average have higher levels of atrocities, and the children tend to be used as cannon fodder by their adult commanders. For example, in some places, rebel groups have taken to calling their child soldiers "mine detectors" because they will send them forward first to step on any hidden land mines.

Lastly, the effect of plunging children into a culture of war creates problems even after the war is over. For the individual children, long-term trauma can disrupt their psychological and moral development. For the wider society, the conversion of a generation of children into soldiers not only bodes future cycles of war within the country but also endangers regional stability. The case of Liberia is instructive. Through-

out the 1990s, Liberia went through multiple rounds of civil war, during which children would switch armies without much thought. But even after the fighting ended there, many former child soldiers from Liberia could later be found fighting in Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire. Some since have marched thousands of kilometers to find work as soldiers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

In sum, when children are present, warfare is not only more tragic, but the conflicts tend to be easier to start but harder to end, cost more lives, and lay the groundwork for recurrence in following generations.

We Must Respond

Action to end the terrible doctrine of child soldiers is thus a moral obligation as well as a strategic mandate. Although an international alliance of nongovernmental organizations (NGO)—the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers—has brought increasing attention to the issue, governments now need to step up. Those seeking to end the practice must move beyond trying simply to persuade those who use children as soldiers, akin to trying to shame the shameless, and instead alter the underlying causes and motivations that enable its spread. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, once said, "It is immoral that adults should want children to fight their wars for them. . . . There is simply no excuse, no acceptable argument for arming children."³¹ There may be no moral excuse, but it is a dark reality of present-day war that we must face.

The key to stopping the practice of child soldiers is to shrink the recruiting pool and limit conflict groups' willingness and ability to access it. Remedies include

investing in heading off global disease and conflict outbreaks, offering greater aid to special at-risk groups like refugees and AIDS orphans, helping to curb the spread of illegal small arms to rebel and terrorist groups who bring children into the realm of war, criminalizing the doctrine by prosecuting those leaders who abuse children in this way, taking the profits out of the practice by sanctioning any firms or regimes who trade with child-soldier groups (including American firms like those that traded with the Liberian and Sudanese governments for private profit), and providing increased aid to programs that seek to demobilize and rehabilitate former child soldiers, thus ending the cycle. In each of these areas, unfortunately, US action has been lacking; certainly this is not the stance of a world leader.

In turn, the issue of children is often treated as a “soft” security matter, but it is now as hard a security problem as one can imagine. Political and military leaders must start to wrestle with the difficult dilemmas that our Soldiers now face in the field, rather than continuing to ignore them at greater costs. Child soldiers are now a regular feature of the modern battlefield. The only question is whether troops will be properly equipped, trained, and supported to deal with this dreadful change in contemporary warfare. The onus is on government and military leaders to do all that they can to reverse the doctrine’s spread and end this terrible practice.

Preparing Soldiers to Confront Child Soldiers

With the rise of groups using child soldiers, military forces must prepare themselves for the thorniest of dilemmas. To

put it simply, troops will find themselves in a situation in which they face real and serious threats from opponents whom they generally would prefer not to harm. They may be youngsters, but when equipped with the increasing simplicity and lethality of modern small arms, child soldiers often bring to bear a great deal of military threat. Therefore, mission commanders must prepare forces for the tough decisions they will face, in order to avoid any potentially lethal confusion over rules of engagement or split-second hesitations because of shock at the makeup of their foe or uncertainty about what to do. Historical experience has demonstrated a number of effective methods to handle situations when professional troops are confronted by child soldiers. These include the following:

Prepare and Utilize Intelligence

Rather than wishing the problem away, one should develop official policies and effective solutions to counter the dilemmas that child soldiers raise. Better to deal with them in training than make ad hoc decisions in the midst of crisis. At the same time, the intelligence apparatus must become attuned to the threat and ramifications of the child soldier. This is important in forecasting broad political and military events; moreover, knowledge of the makeup of the adversary is also a critical factor in determining the best response. Intelligence should be sensitive to two aspects in particular: the method of recruitment utilized by the opposition and the average child soldier’s period of service. Child soldiers recruited by means of abduction techniques or those in recent cadres will be more prone to dissolving under shock than voluntary recruits or children who have been in service for many years.

Recognize the Threat

Whenever forces deploy into an area known to have child soldiers present, they must take added cautions to counter and keep the threat at a distance. All children are not threats and certainly should not be targeted as such, but force-protection measures must include the possibility—or even likelihood—of child soldiers and child terrorists. This includes changing practices of letting children mingle among pickets and even putting children through the same scrutiny as adults at checkpoints.

Use Fear to Supplement Firepower

When forces do face engagement with child-soldier forces, best practice has been to hold the threat at a distance and, where possible, initially fire for shock. The goal should be to maximize efficiency and prevent costly casualties (and the resulting negative side effects) by attempting to break up the child units, which often are not cohesive fighting forces. In a sense, this is the microlevel application of “effects-based warfare,” just without the overwhelming dependence on high technology. Demonstrative artillery and mortar fires (including the use of smoke), rolling barrages (which give a sense of flow to the impending danger), and helicopter-gunship passes have proven especially effective in breaking up child-soldier forces.³²

Target the Leader

When forced into close engagement, forces should prioritize the targeting and elimination of any adult leaders if at all possible. Experience has shown that their hold over the unit is often the center of gravity and that units will dissolve if the adult leader is taken out of a position of

control. As forces seek to mop up resistance, they should focus their pursuit on the adult leaders who escape. Failure to do so allows their likely reconstitution of forces and return to conflict, as has become a recurrent theme in child-soldier-fueled conflicts like those in northern Uganda or Liberia.

Use Nonlethal Weaponry for More Options

An important realization is that total annihilation of the enemy in these instances may actually backfire. Thus, wherever possible, military commanders and policy makers should explore options for using nonlethal weapons (NLW) in situations that involve child soldiers. Armchair generals often ignorantly mock NLWs, overlooking the fact that they in no way eliminate a resort to deadly force. Rather, their availability provides troops in the field with added choices and options. NLWs frequently are a welcome alternative that not only may save lives on both sides but also may prove more effective in meeting mission goals. Unfortunately, development and distribution of such weaponry have fallen well behind pace. Indeed, out of the mere 60 NLW kits in the entire US military, only six were deployed to Iraq in the first year of operation there. Many international peacekeeping operations lack even one kit.

Employ Psychological Operations

Psychological operations (PSYOP) should always be integrated into overall efforts against local resistance and be specially designed for child-soldier units. They should seek to convince child soldiers to stop fighting, leave their units, and begin the process of rehabilitation and reintegration into society. At the same time, we should ensure that adversary leaders know

that their violation of the laws of war is being monitored and that they will face dire consequences for using this doctrine. PSYOP should also seek to undercut any support for the doctrine within local society by citing the great harms the practice is inflicting on the next generation, its contrast to local customs and norms, and the lack of honor in sending children out to fight adults' wars.

Ensure Success with Follow-Up

The defeat of a child-soldier-based opposition does not take place just on the battlefield, no matter how successful. A force must also take measures to welcome child-soldier escapees and prisoners of war quickly, so as to dispel any myths about retribution and induce others to leave the opposition as well. This also entails making certain preparations for securing child detainees, something for which US forces have had no doctrine or training, even down to not having proper-sized handcuffs. Once Soldiers have ensured that the child does not present a threat, they should meet any immediate needs of food, clothing, and/or shelter. Then, as soon as possible, the child should be turned over to health-care or NGO professionals. The business of imprisoning juveniles is not the mission of the military and is certainly not conducive to the health of the organization.

Protect Our Own

A force must also look to the health of its own personnel. Forces must be ready to deal with the psychosocial repercussions of engagements with child-soldier forces, for this is an added way that the use of child soldiers puts professional forces at a disadvantage. Units may require special postconflict treatment and even individual counseling; otherwise, the conse-

quence of being forced to engage children may ultimately undermine unit cohesion and combat effectiveness.

Explain and Blame

Public-affairs specialists must be prepared beforehand for the unique repercussions of such engagements. In explaining the events and how children ended up being killed, they should stress the context under which such events occurred and the overall mission's importance. The public should be informed that everything possible is being done to avoid and limit child soldiers' becoming casualties (use of NLWs, PSYOP, firing for shock effect, etc.). At the same time, the public should be made aware that child soldiers, although they are children, are just as lethal behind an assault rifle as adults. Most importantly, they must seek to place blame where it should properly fall—on those leaders that not only illegally pull children into the military sphere but also send them out to do their dirty work.

At a broader level, governments that want to stay ahead of the issue should mobilize the United Nations, as well as local political leaders and religious experts, to condemn the practice for what it is—a clear violation of both international law and local cultural and religious norms.

As disturbing as this trend is, we can see one silver lining by looking back in the past. Countless doctrines and modes of warfare have come and gone over the long march of history. It was once thought that religion could be strengthened by calls to war. Now we look at those who call for crusades as extremists. Well into the Middle Ages, captured soldiers were considered not prisoners but personal property to be ransomed or sold as personal slaves. Little more than a century ago, it was considered an obligation, a so-called

white man's burden, to invade other lands to lift them up to "civilization" or, more honestly, to bring them into colonial domains.

Hopefully, the child-soldier doctrine will someday soon join these and the many other practices of war whose time has passed. Perhaps, history will look back

upon this period as an aberration, a short phase when moral norms broke down but were quickly restored. But that will happen only if we match the will of those leaders who do such evil to children with the will to do well. □

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