



FIGHTING IDENTITY: Why We Are Losing Our Wars

Michael Vlahos

THE PLACE: The River Frigidus, in a country we now call Bosnia. The time: autumn, 394. Two Roman emperors, Theodosius I and Eugenius, are at war, with the world in the balance. A deciding factor: Alaric's Gothic tribal militia. His shock troops storm the laager where Eugenius's soldiers shelter, defeating them and reuniting the empire under Theodosius. But reveling in their strength, the Goths soon take on the imperial state itself. Rome contains them only when the emperor's sister, Galla Placidia, weds the Gothic leader and Visigoths are made Roman in Aquitaine.¹

Nine centuries later. A wholly extravagant man, Roger de Flor, seals a deal with Andronicus II, *basileus* of a much-shrunken *Romaioi*. Roger's soldier-company—7,000 Catalans, women and children, too—sets out against the Turks. Nothing can stop this skirmishing, ferocious light infantry. But there is not enough gold in the Byzantine treasury to pay them. Catalan anger against an empty-pocket state (that betrays them!) starts an empire-wide, seven-year rampage that comes close to bringing down Constantinople itself.²

Two snapshots in history: two “non-state actors” seizing the greatest states of their day by the throat—and taking what they want. For all of its unpalatable irony, this is our world today.

We Americans, 21st-century Romans, find ourselves ineffective against the barbarians we call non-state actors. The non-state fighters are like Melville's *Moby Dick*: they “heap” us, they task us. Yet we can achieve nothing against them.

Something is happening here, and we need to take it onboard. But doing so means throwing off our narcissism and certainty of entitlement. It is a heavy burden to shrug off. But shrug it we must.

The “American Way of War” enshrines triumph through military “transformations.”³ They are divine tokens of our superiority. Even better, “like-us” challenges from others are met by all-out U.S. out-performance. German combined arms innovation between the world wars led to “Patton beats Rommel.” Ditto Japanese carrier aviation. Ditto Soviet atomic rockets. Ditto too the Soviets' vaunted “military-technical revolution.” How we outdid them! But our paradigm of military “revolution” is steadfastly both technology-driven and self-focused. The American way of war is all about “like-us” or “kin-enemies” also doing like us. We always win out in the end, and win big.

Today's transformation, however, has nothing to do with us, except perhaps in how the new innovators take on our technologies—and target our vulnerabilities. The innovators here are emerging societies and alternative

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PAINTING: Invasion of the Goths into the Roman Empire, Battle of Adrianople. (O. Fritzsche)

communities—not “kin-enemies” but aliens, “stranger-enemies.” They drive this transformation of war.

History’s Legacy

Since classical antiquity there have been two eras in which non-state actors dominated war. One was the time of antiquity’s end, from the 5th to the 7th centuries. The second was at the end of the Middle Ages and the very beginning of modernity, in the 13th and 14th centuries. These were tumultuous times, of course, but also periods in which identity was shifting and migrating. Specifically, these eras track the morphing identity of the Greco-Roman world and the late-medieval transformation of the Mediterranean world (the emergence of the Ottomans as successors to both the Byzantine and Sunni Arab commonwealths).

These were transition periods, between-times, bridging old establishments to new. Consider what was happening:

- International relationships were marked by migrations of peoples, economic big changes, and “outside” shocks like grand pandemics and abrupt climate change.
- Societies were shaken by new ideas and new movements, leading to new collective consciousnesses and thus new identities.
- The very nature of ruling authority was shifting in people’s minds, moving rapidly from established forms to new claims.

If we look at late antiquity and early modernity, we see two very different, but also two very change-oriented times. Big change was not simply material. Essential social and cultural relationships, too, were being upended and thrust into creative turmoil.

In late antiquity, the Roman Empire was formally divided, but more practically it was becoming fissiparous—splitting constantly into local governance that took the form of rebellion and civil war. But this was less about imperial insurgencies than it was about rising non-imperial identities. New identity was also taking an international, ecumenical shape. Thus Christianity was effectively a new Roman “nation” operating within and then taking over the institutional forms and ruling authority of the empire itself.

Two critical functions of state power were also declining: tax revenue and military effectiveness. Increasingly, Roman order was dependent on a tiny and expensive elite of mobile shock forces—the

age’s high-tech expeditionary forces. The empire had a single, perfect, and magnificent, but small, army with which to tamp down an unruly world.⁴

In early modernity, the “imperial” ventures of a grand crusading era were dissolving. The great states that dreamed such imperial pretension—France, the Holy Roman Empire, Naples/Sicily, and the Byzantine state—were in decline. Defiant new governance was rising. Civic associations had muscled into city-states, and stubborn principalities were flouting unwieldy kingship and imperial systems. This was also a time of exuberant economic growth and innovation. New “global networks” of commerce and banking were creating tiny but vital nodes of power that could defy an atrophying feudal order.

And this transformation also applied to war. The serf-empowered chevalier and his scythe-armed levies were suddenly no match for highly trained and well-paid soldier-companies, armed and accoutered in the super-tech of the day, from trebuchet to arbalest to high-castled cog.⁵

Simply, older state structures and their authority were under stress and in decline. Moreover, local identities were rising, including many connected



The “global network” of the Hanseatic League, a non-state actor, circa 13th century. A confederation of merchant associations based in towns and cities from Poland west to Bruges in Belgium, the Hansa formed its own deliberative body and waged wars against Denmark and Holland.

I. NARRATIVE BOUND

We are at the mercy of our own, rigid (nation-state) “rule sets.”

The “fit” between us and the enemy works to his advantage.

America paradoxically comes to embrace the role of enabler.

American denial—the threat of our identity defeated—immobilizes us.

not to any notion of “state,” but tied rather to their communities. Finally, there was a functional “equalization” of military capabilities in both technology and operational art. This permitted non-state groups to challenge “old state” military institutions.

The Basis of Non-state Military Authority

We have entered another such world environment. The key features of non-state ascendance in war are—

- Ineffectiveness of the nation-state order in deploying and using military force.
- Greater energy and battle focus among non-state actors than nation-states.
- Selective technology equalizations that, combined with tactical creativity, make non-state fighters equal to our Soldiers on the battlefield.

Nation-state ineffectiveness. In war we focus on the enemy and how to defeat him. We pay little attention to how our needs and expectations shape war, and almost none to how our relationship with the enemy shapes war’s outcome.

Our needs and expectations in war take the form of “rule-sets” that not only define how we do military operations, but also how we understand our enterprise as a success. We assume the validity of rule-sets because we believe we make the rules when it comes to war. The very height of our pride came at the turn of the new millennium. We were so sure we owned the very laws governing war that we declared, like Ovid’s Olympians, that we could “transform” war at will.

But we forgot one thing. What we do in war will always mesh with what the enemy does. Our “fit” with the enemy is never wholly in our control.⁶ Thus success is all about how our rule-sets mesh with the enemy. We are most comfortable when the enemy tries to match our rule-sets—when the fit is tight. In fact, enemy buy-in to our war-frame *has always*

been the critical and unacknowledged factor in American battle success. Here we have been lucky. Enemies who shared our way of fighting ensured our biggest war successes.

In our minds and imaginations, we made the wars we fought. They were our wars: our rules, our vision of victory. But with Confederates and Germans and Japanese and Russians, victory was also very much their gift to us.

Now our hallowed rule-sets have been overturned. The enemy makes us fight to their rule-sets—to our loss.

The way we do things in war now works against us. This is because how we do things now “fits” enemy practice in ways that make non-state resistance more productive. Our battle “fit” with the enemy actually advances their goals. But we cannot admit this because we are committed to the belief that what we do is the only possible recipe for “victory.” We are stuck working against ourselves.

Thus our “fit” with the enemy fills us with uncertainty and hesitation. We not only cannot control the outcome of military intervention, but we cannot describe practically how to achieve “victory” or even military effectiveness. For example, we are told—years after we were promised a military victory in Iraq—that “success” now is not really military, but political. Does this mean we “win” (after tens of thousands of casualties) when the insurgents we were fighting finally take political power?

The “American Way of War” is locked into a sacred dramatic narrative culminating in “victory.” This is because American wars are at root celebrations of identity. Victory is the fulfillment of war’s liturgy, where sacrificing the purest among us somehow renews and strengthens us.⁷ Therefore, if victory is redefined as the equivalent of giving the enemy what he wants—even if that is clearly the best and most realistic outcome for the national interest—then even Orwell’s *NewSpeak* will fold and collapse

II. TRANSCENDENCE VS. MANAGEMENT

**They are overflowing with identity-power—ours is in short supply.
War for them is a celebration of identity—battle is a transcendence.**

**The American Way of War has been transformed
into a management ethos.**

**In the war of identities, we are a hook to their fit—
and our identity is weaker.**

in the act of spinning black into white. If our wars are rituals of American religious nationalism, then liturgy's sacrifice simply cannot be in vain.⁸

However we spin our non-state wars, we feel we have lost, because in terms of our expectations and mythos, we have. Perceived battle and campaign failure in turn creates even higher levels of anxiety and greater loss of confidence. This is pure strategic opportunity for all-or-nothing non-state fighters.

Non-state energy and battle focus. The wars of our non-state “between-times” are, above all, wars of identity. Because we put our faith in controlling rule-sets where technology is the talisman of victory, we cannot see how identity-power instead is the decisive factor in war today.

Identity-power has come into full play. It is not simply that Western military units are forced to fight the enemy's war, and in the enemy's battle environment. Far more significantly, we fight as world managers against mythic heroes sacrificing themselves for “the river” of their particular humanity.⁹ Entering into their “fit” means also entering into a world where we cannot escape the role they create for us in their grand drama.

In their drama of identity, the role we play—evil, weak, even inhuman—is central to a cultural ritual almost primitive in its emotional intensity and passionate symbolism. We come (on the surface at least) bearing “policy” and “administration” into a world (as described in classic ethnographies) of *primitive warfare*.

But that warfare is primitive only in the sense that its connection to the sacred ties today's fighters to the earliest human societies. In terms of how such warfare affects us, *it is highly sophisticated*. To an extent undreamed of in classical war, where we “fit” an enemy mirror-image of ourselves, in the *stranger-milieu* we are at their mercy. Furthermore,

our weapons' sophistication is less a factor today than it has been in two centuries—due in part to a surprising leveling of technology. In the warrior face-to-face, their meaning trumps our meaning. Their passion and piety overrules our dispassion and reason.¹⁰ Above all they make us their enablers. In the new “fit,” we become agents of their story. Moreover, our world authority legitimates and anoints them among those they seek to convert. We become their secret weapon.¹¹

Why can we not see this? Here, the enemy creates another paradox: by challenging our own identity, they pull us into an emotional co-dependency. We may have gone in thinking clinical experience, clinical outcome. But their riposte is a manhood challenge. Their very resistance inflames our nation's spiritual need to prove its battle-worthiness and warrior ethos. We cannot resist their challenge. They hook us into their “fit” . . . and we are finished.¹²

We are finished because our angry lash-out makes us even better helpmates. Practically, this means that we sustain what motivates them—the evil other, the American dark enemy. Yet we also ratify their necessary story: that they are the frontline struggle against the evil invaders of Islam.

The passion of it all obscures our essential opportunity: building relationships with the enemy. This is surely a daunting challenge. A non-state community is perfectly suited to fight as a people, where all take up the stress of the effort in some way. This convergence of willingness and availability permits the non-state community to shape its battle environment organically. But we could change that picture. We could engage them in ways that begin to deconstruct their “all against the stranger” existential reality.

Unfortunately, our military culture is simply incapable of this. We deploy a culturally ignorant battle element into their environment. Moreover,

III. TECHNOLOGY

Western technology becomes their identity-enhancer, their mobilization.

Western technology is worked selectively to shape their “fit.”

A looser and less rigid culture of war means more adaptability, more creativity.

The U.S. response as “technical solution” is a waste that works against us.

more than half of this battle element is not about battle at all; it's a support-umbilical. It is umbilical because it seeks to sustain an American sanctuary where fighting troops inevitably seek relief not only from the battle but also from the alien-ness of the evil stranger society. Engaging the enemy thus becomes a daily foray-dynamic that our own logistical structures work daily to reinforce. Out there: the Red Zone. Back here: Burger King.

Our energy is all in the sortie, followed by the flight back to sanctuary. In contrast, they inhabit the battlespace. Their sanctuary is the very ground they fight on.

Technology equalizations. Technology is our talisman. It is both our fetish of victory and the very bringer of victory. How then can we see that we have given our sworn enemy the very tools with which he savages us daily? When the Mahdi annihilated Colonel Hicks's Egyptian army, the righteous captured 10,000 Martini rifles and millions of rounds, plus a nice tranche of field artillery. Even though it counted for exactly nothing years later at Omdurman, a precedent was set.

Now it counts. For all of our talk about “network-centric operations,” it is the enemy who is delivering. Moreover, they console themselves that this was exactly how it happened in the age of Ur-victories against the original 7th century superpowers: Persia and Rome. “First Muslims,” too, took what they needed from superior but spiritually degraded civilizations as they proceeded to defeat them.

Today, these tools are the lifeblood of new consciousness—they are a touchstone to identity-mobilization. The *ummah* has never been stronger, *despite* takfiri influence. Everywhere our cherished high-tech is their cathartic enabler. Enemy operational art infused by our technology provides a constant boost to their renewed identity.

We have given our enemy tools their prayers could only have cried out for. It is almost casually common to assume Muslim backwardness—as Bernard Lewis does in *What Went Wrong?* In fact, Muslims show us every day that where it counts, *nothing went wrong*. They are beating us with our own technology.

A quick sketch shows how this goes. Cell phones are the essential C4ISR network.¹³ The Internet nurtures fighter communities and ummah consciousness alike. The improvised explosive device (IED) and suicide bomber equal American precision ordnance or even surpass it—with a human not just “in the loop,” but there at target-closure.

The enemy has taken our technology and used it to better effect than we, the creators, could in our war against him. But like ancients deserted by the Gods, we return again and again to the fetish-temple of technology to seek succor.

Myth tells us that cracking Enigma turned the tide in the Battle of the Atlantic, and there are scores of similarly cherished (if not holy) stories replayed 24/7 on cable's *History* and *Military Channels*. So as the IED grew into the greatest killer of our Soldiers, we turned again to divinely inspired engineering solutions—the true *deus ex machina* of our war liturgy. And so billions pour into the IED-Defeat crusade. Yet the god has not emerged, not this time, from the machine.

What our IED response really shows is how we continue to fit ourselves, however unconsciously, into the enemy's battlespace and their rule-sets. Thus they incorporate our technology to enhance the battle prowess of their people. Their rule-sets seek to create an entire experience of identity realization moment-to-moment. They understand that it is in the living of war's mythic passage that identity will be truly realized.

We, in contrast, use technology as a tool to tame the phenomena of war: i.e., to better kill enemy fighters. But this ignores the larger nature of the war: that it is a war of the whole people; that it is a war of identity.

War as Phenomenology

We misunderstand war because, for us, thinking about war is an exercise in phenomenology. War is all activity and effects, and all about observed energies and material outcomes. War is the sum of its phenomena.

Hence we classify wars on heavy material scales, like “limited war” vs. “total war,” or by litmus tests, like “just war” vs. “terrorism,” or by how well others play by our rules, like “conventional war” vs. “irregular war.”

We lack a holistic approach to human conflict. We have no access to the religious dimension of war, and so no way to assess the inner dynamics of wars of identity. Because we are chained to the mental construct of war-as-phenomenology, we can only adapt to today’s transformation of war by superficially adapting to its changing phenomena.

Thus we have after years of denial re-anointed counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine. Yet we do not really know why COIN only works in a few situations. Instead, we believe that COIN works when it effectively addresses the phenomena of insurgency. As a result, COIN doctrine today—*no less than in the 1960s*—operates as a sort of secret recipe. Do this and then this and at the right moment add this and . . . you win.

The smart line among the cognoscenti a couple years ago, as new-kindled ardor for COIN ramped-up, was that Malaya was the “gold standard” for COIN.¹⁴ But here is why the British COIN approach worked in Malaya:

- The Malayan communist insurgency was a tiny movement removed from the people.
- The British had tight relationships with local rulers.
- The people were politically passive.

Malaya looks like a classic colonial campaign. But saying that we can only win in well-greased, low-key, neo-colonial situations is not the full and necessary takeaway. The magic key to Malaya-like insurgencies was the identity-power of the colonial masters.

The British had a century-long, club-cozy relationship with Malaya’s sultans. The princes even

sprang for a brand new British super-dreadnought in 1912—hardly the stuff of anti-colonial angst. Moreover, the status of the Malay people was not a political issue. There were no rising peoples’ movements, no compelling new visions of identity.

The big identity was the one sold by Mr. Kipling. Marginal merchant princes clinging to the edges of the Victorian Indian Empire happily embraced Britain’s generous protection racket. They did, and they still do. The cultural counterparts of the Malayan sultans are our clients today: Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, the “Trucial Coast” (or UAE), and they have been under Anglo-American protection now for over a century.¹⁵

We take our phenomenology of COIN from a long-lost Western *zeitgeist* flush with dominant identity, easily and everywhere able to lay down terms for patron-client relationships. Ultimately, COIN’s “gold standard” in Malaya should not be confused with a lost “golden age” that we might hope to recapture.

Many officers today might argue that COIN thinking has really advanced in the last couple of years. Citing FM 3-24, they maintain that each insurgency is unique, that COIN can only be a guide and a start point for the particular culture, enemy, and environment of the conflict. But the essence of the recipe is not in its ingredients or in the *brio* of the cookbook. The problem with COIN is the concept itself. It whispers to our unshakeable faith in powers that no longer exist. Hence COIN is a window into our deepest beliefs about ruling identity: it is a pledge to sustain its magical realism at all costs.¹⁶

Not only is there no secret recipe, but the very possibility of counterinsurgency is, in itself, bankrupt and corrupt. Certainly we can continue, if we are selective, to prop up littoral princes, perhaps forever. But we cannot help authoritarian allies hold down peoples in the central societies of Islam—Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt—forever. In these societies, *as we surely know*, any insurgency that trumps the tender mercies of a tyrant’s police *apparatus* will be like Roman Italy with Spartacus loose. We cannot grandly stage-manage the big societies of a civilization: witness Iraq.

Many will say that recent developments in Anbar contradict this. But is this triumphant COIN or simply expedient cooptation, desperately embraced after years of casual American denial? It is all very well to say that “the Marines’ version of COIN here stresses the desire of locals to control their own identities and fates,” yet what it really means



Members of Task Force Ranger under fire in Somalia, 3 October 1993, Operation Code Irene, the Battle of Mogadishu. Eighteen Soldiers were killed, and the U.S. withdrew from Somalia less than a week later.

is making Marines helpmates in the Sunni struggle against the Sh'ia other. This may be the only practical thing to do, but it is no longer COIN, because it no longer lives within the ruling concept of control: that at some irresistible, string-pulling level, we are in charge. Rather, improvisation in Anbar may be the first glimmer of a new strategic path: toward a doctrine of cooptation over counterinsurgency. It is also a sign that the era of control is over.

Kipling's time, the time when Europeans and Americans could do as they willed, was the high tide of Western identity, the time of European religious nationalism unbound. That was when globalization's first wave—pure creative destruction—washed over traditional societies. They did not stand up well. Old identities lacked technology and the insight to use it against a West on identity-steroids.

Today it is the nation-state that is on the defensive. Emerging societies are responding to modernity's second wave of globalization. But non-state resistance did not simply emerge out of the wreckage of wave one. It is also a response to the failure of "Western" successor models to take root. Thus whole swathes of humanity, lacking the backstop of traditional meaning but also without a working Western reality to take its place, are inevitably forging new models of identity.

Emerging societies and alternative communities almost always represent a high demand for identity in human places where it has been stripped away or degraded. What makes these new models powerful is their promise of collective realization and transcendence—and the popular energy this unleashes.

What makes non-state identity difficult for nation-states to comprehend is that it does not look anything like colonial-era tribalism or sectarianism.¹⁷ Back then, Ashanti or Zulu could be locally defeated and co-opted. Even hot revivalist movements like the Sudanese mahdists could be slaughtered and contained before they spread.

What phenomenology cannot encompass is how dramatically all this has changed. What we see as battles against "bad guys" in Somalia, Afghanistan, Lebanon, and Iraq are also now templates for community resistance everywhere. Armed resistance in today's world is a renewed path to realization and transcendence. And not just for Muslims anymore.

This message tramples the West's old declaration: that globalization is unstoppable and that you should make your peace with it. We need to focus on the new message and not just on the downstream phenomena of battle.

The new message tells us that identity-power has changed hands. What do we do when the force is no longer with us?

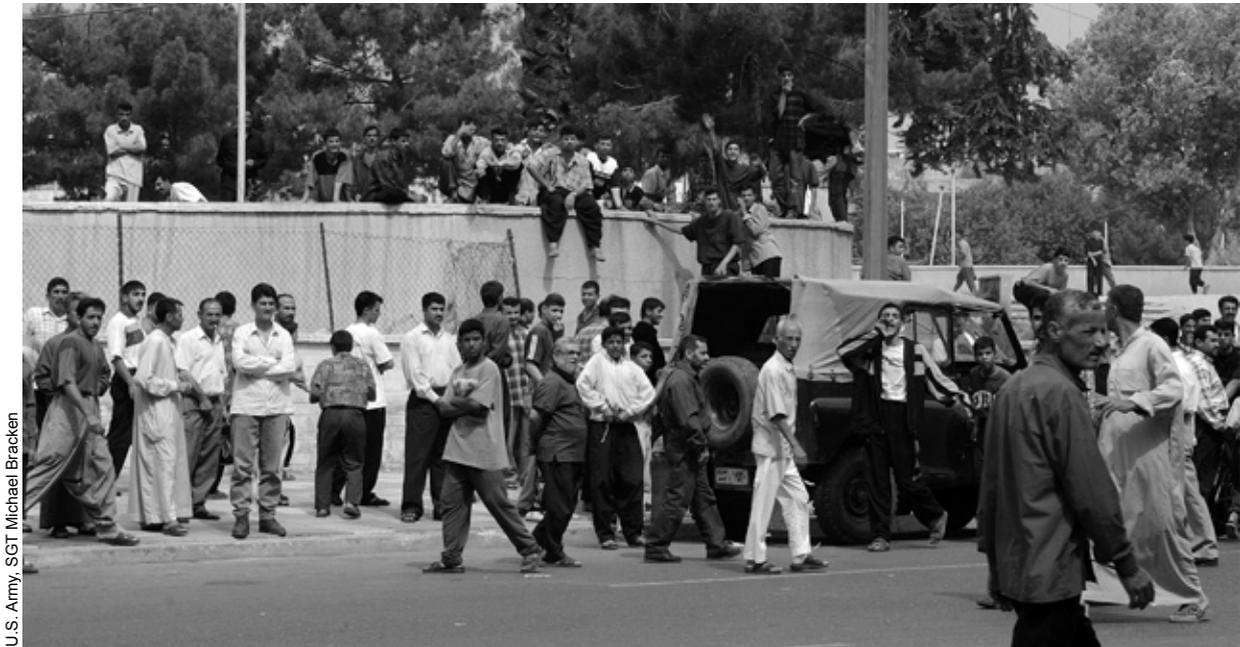
The Significance of This Historical Period

New identities flourished too in late antiquity and early modernity. Late antiquity was a time of recession—economically and culturally—so new communities carved out their spaces within the grand edifice of old civilization. Early modernity, in contrast, opened up new possibilities through economic growth and an absence of regulatory authority.

What history shows is what happens in a world environment where alternative communities and non-state societies can take root and grow. This is how our world today is like times unimaginably long ago.

Today, alternative communities are transnational and even virtual, rooting and spreading identity through the world network. There are quintessentially local communities, like the Tamil in Sri Lanka, but there are also global societies in the making. The most challenging communities are locally rooted but also plugged into a world community. This describes the challenging paradox of the Islamic revival perfectly.

It would be convenient to say that people are seeking out new identity because of a "failure" of nation-state ideology, or because of globalization's inability to meet "basic human needs." But this



U.S. Army, SGT Michael Bracken

The new Iraqi identity? A surly crowd watches Soldiers take Iraqi males into custody for throwing bricks and instigating violence, in Mosul, Iraq, 13 June 2003.

presupposes that other peoples want to join us, and that given a sufficiently robust consumer culture and Western electoral norms, they would enthusiastically embrace America's world vision.

But we are helpless to address their "meaning-identity" problem. The warning for us is that for many of the world's peoples, we now represent the evil against which their hopes for identity must contend.¹⁸

The truth: peoples stripped of meaning necessarily seek out new meaning. It is the urgent task of their lives. We are not even in contention when it comes to offering new meaning. For them all we have done with globalization is strip them of their old meaning. Ignoring their cries, we set ourselves up as the evil-other, the stranger, that so helps make us their enabler.¹⁹ We thus rob ourselves of alternative—and potentially far more productive—relationships.

We are stuck with a rhetorical, self-defeating counter-argument as our conventional wisdom—and that is our terminal narrative of modernity. Thus globalization, the story goes, is unstoppable. Non-state societies merely represent the chaotic margins that always accompany great historical change.

But the wisdom of this story is limited to the people it serves—and globalization serves at most only half of humanity. In 20 years it may be only a third. Globalization serves our world, the realm of robust nation-states and market capitalism. What of the billions left behind

by formal labor markets and discarded by the state systems that represent our official national identities?

Three billion people, adrift in a world of personal disorder, are searching for new meaning. This represents an iron demand for new identity. It is inevitable in today's chaotic schema of human need that new offers will be made. It is also inevitable that people will passionately embrace these offers.

Islamism is simply a single world data-point for new identity. The surge of Pentecostalism, for example, is equally compelling. Emerging identities that are hardly criminal, or deviant, are often still pushed effectively to the shadowy margins of official national life, a twilight zone they thus share with the riotous proliferation of drug principalities and urban gangs worldwide. But we should see the authenticity of their identity-offer for what it portends. Because in a world of the stripped and left-behind—of one-half about to become two-thirds of humanity—we do not have a counter-offer.

We offer only lordly altruism, while denying our own identity problem. Western identities too are shifting. New societies and their identities are emerging *within us*. This is no simple problem of the nation-state getting weaker and non-state competitors getting stronger. Nation-states claim airtight regulatory control—on the surface. Certainly their military power far outstrips any non-state actor.

But the identity-foundation of today's nation-states is arguably far weaker than it was even a generation ago. Western states rely on tiny enforcement agencies to protect their societies rather than on the citizenry as a whole. What are we to make of this? A mobilized citizenry is no longer needed by a militarily supreme Western world.

Yet our modern identity at root is based on collective, even sacred, civic commitment. Thus an armed citizenry is not so much the sinew of national defense as it is simply the ratifying expression of collective identity—of our national religion. Any pre-Vietnam American battle monument celebrates this. And that tie has been severed, perhaps forever.

This single lost tradition suggests a weakening of Western civic “self” at the very moment emerging societies are making civic commitment and sacrifice the basis of theirs.

This is not an academic issue. Identity-politics in Western modernity are relatively weaker than those of emerging non-state societies. In this situation, our ability to morally and physically assert Western ideas and practice is similarly eroded.

Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq show us the harsh touch of a new era. The wretched of the earth have found their *métier* of battle. Historical periods in which non-state actors have battle leverage tend to be transition periods, or bridges between “worlds,” because world identities and their power relationships are changing. In these transition times, non-state societies are often stronger and more empowered than established states.

But should we worry that our identity is weaker in the sense that it is less bloody-minded? Like Romans in late antiquity or 14th-century Byzantines, we inhabit a universe of civilization. We are no longer blood-simple: we are in the fraternity of civilization. Ironically, perhaps, we may feel a bit more like late Romans or Byzantine *Romaioi* than we might care to admit.

We feel superior to what we see as primitive non-state fighters, but we are also more than a little afraid that we cannot stand up to them. Maybe this is

why America's most bloodthirsty political commentators continually exalt the killing of large numbers of the enemy. How often they admiringly point to the Romans at their muscular, martial peak.²⁰

Forgetting for a moment that these same Romans not only exterminated barbarian tribes, but almost literally wiped Israel “off the map,” and forgetting too that Roman policy at its best preferred co-optation as much as risky battle, we should confront our Roman rhetoric for what it is: a chilling open window into our own fears.²¹

We fear that we are too weak to prevail. In battle we urgently seek affirmation that we have what it takes to win. Hence battle serves the same deep needs as any church liturgy.²²

What we really see in this war is the abandonment of strategy for the sake of liturgy. We long ago gave up on making our original war rule-sets work, while at the same time we have not seriously tried to adapt to the enemy's battlespace. The war remorselessly morphed into a political testament tied to a desperate vision of triumphant American religious nationalism.

The need for a national-emotional positive—a shred of collective transcendence—finally

came to cancel out any sort of effective response. Thus in Iraq, rather than withdrawing and regrouping, we redoubled our effort by exalting the necessity of our good works, the purity of our ideals, and the sacrifice of our “next greatest generation.”

We came at last to stay there because we were caught in our own trap. We cannot leave until we seize victory, but victory by any non-Orwellian definition is beyond our grasp. This is why we fight the enemy's war and continue to serve as the enemy's enabler.

But here is where our great nation faces a deadly vulnerability. As we fight identity, we are not merely weakening our own. We should also be mindful of how few of our own—like late Rome and late Byzantium—are willing to fight for us.

We have assigned the entirety of our security to a demographic slice, a society of Soldiers, a noble



warrior-class. It is superbly equipped and lavishly accoutered, yet, notwithstanding and above all, it is so small. And it is also all we have.

What Romans discovered in the later 4th century is that risking such an army is existentially dangerous. The emperor Julian took Rome's most superb army ever into the place of the two rivers, the place we call Iraq. There, he lost that army. Fourteen years later, a scratch-built force and a bad leader lost whatever was left at Adrianople—the beginning of the end.²³

The mind-numbingly huge world of emerging global non-state humanity can suck us dry as surely as 4th-century Iraq did Rome, and with equally

prefigured consequences. We, in contrast, are no longer prepared to do battle collectively, as a people, like in prehistorical times. Some of us are, and they fight daily for us.

This is the lesson, is it not? Fighting our enemies' fight means fighting their identity and helping them on the path to realization. But their path may also be our road to ruin. We must conserve our strength and so preserve our way of life.

This war has been a warning. We should take it.

MR

The views expressed in this article are entirely the author's.



Fighting in the “place of the two rivers”: U.S. Soldiers advance through the streets of Samarra during Operation Iraqi Freedom, 21 December 2003. (SPC Clinton Tarzia)

NOTES

1. The battle of the Frigidus lasted two days and the Goths were central to the East's victory. They suffered staggering losses, which only heightened their reputation. A good description of the battle is in Arthur Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986). The heavy use of non-state forces in Roman civil wars is thoroughly treated in Hugh Elton, *Warfare in Roman Europe, 350-425* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996).

2. The best analysis of the Byzantine state's response to the Catalan Company is still Angeliki Laiou's *Constantinople and the Latins: The Foreign Policy of Andronicus II, 1282-1328* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1972).

3. This banderole was first hoisted in Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

4. A wonderful thumbnail summary of transforming identities in the late Roman west is in Patrick Geary, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 3-38. While Elton details late Roman military institutions, J.E. Lendon, *Soldiers and Ghosts: A History of Battle in Classical Antiquity* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2005), captures superbly its ethos. He describes a force eerily evoking our own: “The Romans still managed, until Adrianople, to field a professional army, soldier by soldier not demonstrably inferior in any respect to the Roman army of the earlier empire, and in some respects superior. In straitened times, whether by decision or default, numbers on the battlefield and usable reserves had been sacrificed to quality” (308).

5. The non-state dimension of this transformation comes through in powerful

granularity in Mark Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army: Arms and Society, 1204-1453* (Philadelphia: U. Penn Press, 1992) and also in Kristian Molin, *Unknown Crusader Castles* (Hambledon and London, 2001). Both texts help us understand the remarkable strategic leverage of small but “high-tech” non-state military units in early modernity.

6. Martin van Creveld, *Technology and War: From 2000 B.C. to the Present* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1991), 319-320, treats the fit of opposing military technologies. But Van Creveld's concept applies more broadly to the very fit of ethos in battle: “It was not the technical sophistication of the Swiss pike that defeated the Burgundian knights, but rather the way it meshed with the weapons used by the knights at Laupen, Sempach, and Granson. It was not the intrinsic superiority of the longbow that won the battle of Crecy, but rather the way in which it interacted with the equipment employed by the French on that day and at that place.” The fit is a mesh as much of thinking as of technology. It is an elusive meeting of needs, expectations, and imagination between combatants.

7. As we gather like a congregation to Ken Burns's latest series, does this not tell us how the passion of World War II still lives?

8. For example, Barack Obama instantly issues multiple apologies for saying, “We have seen over 3,000 lives of the bravest young Americans wasted.” See <<http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/story?id=2872135&page=1>>.

9. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty has produced a stunning report on Iraq insurgent propaganda—what we call “public diplomacy.” It is with a shiver that we

see slick insurgent magazines with banner-titles like "The Knights"—as in "Jedi." This is the enemy's idealized vision of themselves.

10. T.X. Hammes cautions that "our fighters have as much passion as theirs [although] much of our passion is directed at saving our buddies rather than the greater goal." But this is not just about Soldiers; it's also about the emotional battle bond between fighters and their society as well. Battle has always been at some level, even if only through song and story, a collective national experience. Here insurgent video makes that connection daily, while American society is as coolly removed as a people can be, collectively, from the passion of their own war.

11. World Public Opinion/PIPA poll, "Muslims Believe U.S. Seeks To Undermine Islam," 23 April 2007, <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/home_page/346.php?nid=&id=&pnt=346&lb=hmpg1>.

12. Hence the repeated, ringing appeals from the right conjuring the most sacred, sacrificial moments of American battle—Iwo Jima and The Bulge, especially. These are thrown down like a challenge: Are we no longer worthy of our own ancestors? This is a response encoded in American DNA. It can be sensed even in the deep symbolic power, say, of Halo 3.

13. C4ISR is the unwieldy acronym for command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance.

14. See, for example, Eliot Cohen's NPR interview, "Scoring the War on Iraq: Who's Winning?" 1 July 2005, <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4726795>>.

15. Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Dave Kilcullen introduced me to this cultural analogy in imperial relationships across time and ocean.

16. Magical realism is a celebrated Latin American literary genre. Alejo Carpentier's "conception was of a kind of heightened reality in which elements of the miraculous could appear while seeming natural and unforced."

17. This becomes a backward-looking stained-glass rosette explaining non-state resistance: "See, insurgencies are but primitive tribal energy!" See Ralph Peters, "Return of the Tribes," *The Weekly Standard*, 4 September 2006, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/Utilities/printer_preview.asp?idArticle=12616&R=ED>.

18. Michael Vlahos, "The Fall of Modernity," *The American Conservative*, 26 February 2007, <http://www.amconmag.com/2007/2007_02_12/feature.html>.

19. There is a symmetry of irony too, for as globalization strips them of old narrative, it also transforms our own. They become the evil-other for us as we do for them: "The worlds left behind morph from our moral responsibility into dark forces we must subdue. Rather than an American story of global deliverance and redemption, this war substitutes its own story of good against evil, of civilization against the night." Vlahos, "The Fall of Modernity."

20. The warm embrace of Rome spiked before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, as this 2002 report highlights: Emily Eakin, "It Takes An Empire" Say Several U.S. Thinkers," *New York Times*, 2 April 2002.

21. With the Jews of Judea scattered to the winds after Bar Kokhba's revolt, Hadrian officially wiped "Judea" off the map, replacing it with "Syria Palaestina."

22. The liturgical dimensions of American war ritual are everywhere with us, from the Gettysburg Address and our national anthem, to the sacred statues lining Washington's Mall almost as though they were national stations of the cross, to our own Elysian Fields with their forever-warrior-honor-guard and flame.

23. Lendon's contention of "the best" Roman army (fn 1) leads him to a singular epitaph: "There were men who knew how to lead an army like this, men like Valens's general Sebastianus, men like those who had pleaded with Julian not to march east into the realm of the Persians. The army of the fourth century needed to be treasured, to be commanded with care and circumspection, not risked unnecessarily. It needed to be wielded with calculated finesse, like a rapier: its tragedy was to be commanded by men like Julian and Valens, men who used it like a mace, as Roman commanders always had." Remembering that American forces are also "commanded" by their head of state, we might reflect on these lines: "Late antique commanders were lashed on by history . . . What commanders knew (and were told by those around them) is that leading their armies boldly at the enemy was expected and admired behavior . . . There was, in short, a dangerous mismatch between the capabilities of the Roman army of the fourth century and the culture of its commanders, visibly or invisibly guided by the tradition in which they fought" (Lendon, 308).

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