
26 Children on the Battlefield: The Breakdown of Moral Norms

P. W. Singer

As U.S. 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 that is 50 kilometers to the southeast of Baghdad. Karbala' was expected to be a more easy take than most cities as its population was largely Shiite, who had long opposed the dictator. Indeed, Karbala' was considered one of the most holy cities in Shia Islam, being the site of a historic battle in AD 680, 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 boomboxes." 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 machine-gun and

Peter Warren Singer is senior fellow and director of the 21st Century Defense Initiative at the Brookings Institution. He is the youngest scholar named senior fellow in Brookings's 90-year history. He has written for the full range of major media and journals, including the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Foreign Affairs*, *Current History*, *Survival*, *International Security*, *Parameters*, and the *World Policy Journal*. He has provided commentary on military affairs for nearly every major TV and radio outlet, including ABC's *Nightline*, Al Jazeera, BBC, CBS's *60 Minutes*, CNN, FOX, NPR, and the *NBC Today Show*. His first book, *Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry* (Cornell University Press, 2003), was the first to explore the new industry of private companies providing military services for hire, an issue that soon became important with the use and abuse of these companies in Iraq. Dr. Singer's most recent book, *Children at War* (Pantheon, 2005), explores the rise of another new force in modern warfare, child-soldier groups. This was the first book to comprehensively explore the compelling and tragic rise of child-soldier groups and was recognized by the 2006 Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Book of the Year Award. His commentary on the issue was featured in a variety of venues ranging from NPR and Fox News to *Defense News* and *People* magazine. Dr. Singer has served as a consultant on the issue to the U.S. Marine Corps and Congress, and the recommendations in his book resulted in changes in the UN peacekeeping training program. An accompanying A&E/History Channel documentary, "Child Warriors," was broadcast in 2008. Prior to his current position, Dr. Singer was founding director of the Project on U.S. Policy towards the Islamic World at the Saban Center at Brookings. He has also worked for the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University, the Balkans Task Force in the U.S. Department of Defense, and the International Peace Academy. Singer received his PhD in government from Harvard University and previously attended the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. Dr. Singer's next research project, "Wired for War," will look at the implications of robotics and other new technologies for war in the 21st century.

rocket-propelled-grenade (RPG) fire for the whole day. Gunfight followed gunfight and 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, who would later turn out 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, and 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, smoking a cigarette. “Of course I had a problem with it. [But] [a]fter 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, war is assumed to be a place for only the strong and willing, from which the young, the old, the infirm, and the innocent are not only excluded but supposed to be 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 the warriors typically joined three to four years after puberty. In the Zulu tribe, for instance, it was not until the ages of 18 to 20 that members were eligible for *ukubuthwa* (the drafting or enrollment into the tribal regiments).² In the Kano region of west Africa, only married men were conscripted, as those unmarried 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 to 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 premodern 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.

But while warfare has long been the domain of adults, there were times in military history that children did appear. Boy pages helped arm and maintain the knights of medieval Europe, while drummer boys and “powder monkeys” (small boys who ran ammunition to cannon crews) were a requisite part of many an army and navy in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The key is that these boys fulfilled minor or ancillary support roles and were not considered as true combatants. They neither dealt out death nor were

considered legitimate targets. Indeed, Henry V 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 his French prisoners.

Indeed, perhaps the most-well-known use of supposed child-soldiers in history, the famous "Children's Crusade," is somewhat 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 that did, all but a few were sold into slavery by unscrupulous ship captains.

While the rule held that children were not to be soldiers, 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 cadets at the Civil War battle of New Market. 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 the nearby VMI military academy to join him. They were 247 strong (roughly 25 were 16 years or younger) and 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

Most recently, the *Hitler Jugend* (Hitler Youth) similarly were young boys who had received quasi-military training as part of a political program to maintain Nazi rule through indoctrination. Through most of the Second World War, the youths only joined German military forces (including the SS, for which the *Jugend* was a feeder organization) once 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 forces 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 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 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 decade, 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 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 cut-off is not simply a Western construct, as many warlords and apologists for child-soldier users would have it. Rather it is the international legal standard for childhood, agreed upon by over 190 states and the most widely signed international law. It is also the age that almost every state in the world uses in its own legislation for the award or withholding of public rights and responsibilities such as when one can vote or when one receives free education or health care. Finally, it was also a historic standard for a range of premodern armies and modern armies (such as the 1813 Rules and Regulations for the U.S. Army).

More important, 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 where 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 ages 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 differs the present trend from any historic parallels. While no girls served in groups like the powder monkeys or Hitler Youth, roughly 30 percent of the armed forces that employ child soldiers today 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, including by their own commanders, and have a harder time reintegrating back 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 SAS (Special Air Service) 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 thirty thousand feet."⁷ Ultimately, the hostage crisis was ended by a helicopter raid led by elite British SAS special forces. The hostages were rescued, but the subsequent battle was, as one observer put it, "brutal." One British soldier was killed and 12 more wounded. Estimates of dead among the West Side Boys ranged from 25 up to 150.

Much as terrorism is the “weapon of the weak,” so have the weakest of society 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 semi-retarded 16-year-old, who was convinced by HAMAS to strap himself with explosives. He was caught by Israeli police in the town of Nablus, 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 East phenomenon. For example, the youngest-ever-reported terrorist was a nine-year-old boy in Colombia, sent by the ELN rebel group to bomb a polling station in 1997.¹⁰ Likewise, when radical 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 innovative 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, even has manufactured specialized denim jackets designed to conceal explosives, tailored in smaller sizes for child suicide bombers.¹¹

THE U.S. EXPERIENCE WITH CHILD SOLDIERS

With the global deployment of U.S. military force after 9/11, from Afghanistan to the Philippines, child soldiers are present in every conflict zone U.S. forces now operate in. Indeed, the very first U.S. soldier killed 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 U.S. forces in Afghanistan in the initial fighting and were taken to the detainee facility at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba.¹² They were housed in a special wing entitled “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.¹³ In addition, several more in the 16- to 18-year range are thought to be held in the regular facility for adult detainees at “Camp X-Ray.” U.S. soldiers continue to report facing child soldiers in Afghanistan to this day; the youngest on the record is a 12-year-old boy, who was captured after being wounded during a Taliban ambush of a convoy.¹⁴

In Iraq, the problem has quietly grown worse. Under the regime of Saddam Hussein, 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. The *Fedayeen* were a paramilitary organization led by Saddam’s son Uday and proved more aggressive than the Iraqi Army in fighting U.S. invasion forces; their remnants 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 (Nasariya, Mosul, and Karbala').¹⁵

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 President Bush made his infamous "Mission Accomplished" aircraft carrier landing, an Iraqi 12-year-old boy fired on U.S. Marines with an AK-47 rifle.¹⁶ Over the next weeks and months, incidents increased between U.S. forces and armed Iraqi children—ranging from child snipers to a 15-year-old who tossed a grenade in an American truck, blowing off the leg of a U.S. Army trooper.¹⁷

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 south of Iraq, with the fighting in the holy city of An 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."¹⁸ Indeed, Sheikh Ahmad al-Shebani, al Sadr's spokesman, didn't try to deny the war crime of using children but publicly defended the practice, stating, "This shows that the Mahdi are a popular resistance movement against the occupiers. The old men and the young men are on the same field of battle."¹⁹

Coalition forces also have increasingly faced child soldiers in the dangerous "Sunni Triangle" as well. Marines fighting in the battle to retake Falluja 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 this 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, in 2004, some 107 Iraqi juveniles determined to be "high risk" security threats were held at the infamous Abu Ghraib prison.²⁰ In 2007, there were some 800 juvenile detainees between the ages of 11 and 16 held at coalition facilities in Iraq, and an al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) video showed young boys being trained in assassination and kidnapping.²¹ U.S. forces have faced particular problems with groups using children as spotters for ambushes, and also as cover for infiltration, such as having children sit in what are called by the troops "VBIEDs," short for vehicle borne 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 fire bombs at convoys, but are actually coordinated with snipers, with the idea to draw any patrols that respond 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 the dark side of globalization, which 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 from HIV-AIDS by 2010, while the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that there are more than 25 million children uprooted from their homes by war. Such orphans and refugees are particularly at risk for being pulled into war.

However, while there have always been dispossessed and disconnected children, changes in weapons technology 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 have played a primary role. Such “child portable” weapons as the AK-47 have been lightened by 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 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 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.”

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 to disconnect them from their old identities. 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 organised strategy of . . . breaking down their defences and memory, and turning them into fighting machines that didn’t have a sense of empathy and feeling for the civilian population.”

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 tells, “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.”²²

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 be otherwise, through using children as cheap and easy-to-obtain recruits.

Indeed, many groups little larger than gangs have proved able to sustain themselves as viable military threats through the use of child fighters. For example, the Lord’s Resistance Army in Uganda is led by Joseph Kony, who styles himself as 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, which is considered one of the better 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 easily as one from a 40-year-old. Children carrying guns are legitimate targets, but that doesn’t make it any easier on the soldiers that have to fight them. Soldiers often experience morale and post-traumatic stress disorder after such incidents.²³

Conflicts where children are present tend to feature not only massive violations of the laws of war but also higher casualty totals, both among the local populace and among 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,” as 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, it is long-term trauma that can disrupt their psychological and moral developments. 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. Throughout the 1990s, Liberia went through multiple rounds of civil war, where 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, harder to end, and greater in loss of life, and lay the ground for recurrence in following generations.

WE MUST RESPOND

Action to end the terrible doctrine of child soldiers is thus not only a moral obligation but a strategic mandate. While an international alliance of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the International Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, has brought increasing attention to the issue, governments are now needed 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 alter the underlying causes and motivations that enable its spread.

The Nobel Peace Prize winner Archbishop Desmond Tutu 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.”²⁴ 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 of potential child soldiers and limit conflict groups’ willingness and ability to access it. These include investment in heading off global disease and conflict outbreaks; giving 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 even American firms, like those that traded with 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, U.S. action has been lacking—certainly not the stance of a world leader.

In turn, the “soft” issue of children is now as hard a security problem as they come. 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 leaders, in government and the military, to do all that they can to reverse the doctrine’s spread and end this terrible practice.

PREPARING SOLDIERS FOR CHILD SOLDIERS

With the rise of groups using child soldiers, military forces must prepare themselves for a dilemma that is as thorny as they come. To put it simply, troops will be put into a situation where they face real and serious threats from opponents whom they generally would prefer not to harm. While they may be youngsters, when combined 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 that they will face, in order to avoid any confusion over rules of engagement (ROE) or the microsecond hesitations, because of shock at the makeup of their foes or uncertainty on what to do, that can prove lethal. An effective response will also take away some of the perceived advantages of the child-soldier doctrine, making it less likely to be used.

Historical experience has demonstrated a number of effective methods to handle situations when professional troops are confronted by child soldiers. These include the following:

Preparation and Intelligence

Official policies and effective solutions should be developed to counter the dilemmas that child soldiers raise rather than wishing the problem away. It is better to deal with them in training, rather than making ad hoc calls 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 not only important in forecasting broad political and military events, but 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: what method of recruitment the opposition utilizes and the average child soldier’s period of service. Those using abduction techniques or with recent cadres will be more prone to dissolving under shock than those with 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.

Fear Supplements 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 externalities 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 been proven especially effective in breaking up child-soldier forces.²⁵

The Leader Is the Linchpin

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 holds over the units are often the center of gravity and 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 that escape. Failure to do so allows the likely reconstitution of forces and return to conflict, as has become a recurrent theme in child-soldier-fueled conflicts like northern Uganda or Liberia.

Nonlethal Weaponry Gives 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 weaponry (NLW) in situations that involve child soldiers. Armchair generals often ignorantly mock NLW, overlooking that it in no way eliminates the option of deadly force. Rather its availability provides troops in the field with added choices and options. NLW frequently is a welcome alternative that may not only save lives on both sides but prove more effective to meeting mission goals. Unfortunately, development and distribution of such weaponry has fallen well behind pace. Indeed, out of the mere 60 nonlethal weapons kits in the entire U.S. military, only six were deployed to Iraq in the first year of operation there. Many international peacekeeping operations lack even one kit.

Employ PsyOps

Psychological operations should always be integrated into overall efforts against local resistance, including being specially designed for child-soldier units. Their aim should be to convince child soldiers to stop fighting, leave their units, and begin the process of rehabilitation and reintegration into society. At the same time strategy should be developed that ensures that adversary leaders know that their violations of the laws of war are being monitored and the dire consequences they will face in using this doctrine. PsyOps 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.

Follow-Up Yields Success

The defeat of a child-soldier-based opposition does not just take place on the battlefield, no matter how successful. A force must also take measures to welcome child-soldier escapees and POWs quickly, so as to dispel any myths on retribution and to induce others to leave the opposition as well. This also entails certain preparations being made for securing child detainees, something U.S. forces have had no doctrine or training for, even down to not having proper-sized cuffs. Once soldiers have ensured that the child does not present a threat, any immediate needs of food, clothing, and/or shelter should be provided for. 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 certainly not positive for 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 consequence 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 they 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 nonlethal weapons, psychological operations, 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 important, public affairs specialists must seek to turn blame on where it should properly fall, on those leaders that not only illegally pulled 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 international law as well as local cultural and religious norms.

CONCLUSION

As disturbing as this trend is, there is one silver lining we can see by a look 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, 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 this will only happen if we match the wills of those leaders who do such evil to children, with our own will to do good.

NOTES

1. Matthew Cox, "War Even Uglier When a Child Is the Enemy," *USA Today*, 8 April 2003.
2. T. W. Bennet, *Using Children in Armed Conflict: A Legitimate African Tradition?* (Institute for Security Studies, 2000), available at www.essex.ac.uk/armedcon/Issues/Texts/Soldiers002.htm.
3. John Paden, *Muslim Civic Cultures and Conflict Resolution: The Challenge of Democratic Federalism in Nigeria* (Brookings Institution Press: 2005).
4. "Report on the Battle of New Market Virginia and Aftermath, Part 1, May 15, 1864," *VMI Annual Report*, July 1864, available at www.vmi.edu/~archtml/cwnmrpt.html.
5. Guido Knopp, *Hitler's Kinder* (Munich: C. Bertelsmann, 2000); Philip Baker, *Youth Led by Youth* (London: Vilmor Publications, 1989).
6. For greater details on child-soldier figures, please see P. W. Singer, *Children at War* (New York: Pantheon, 2005), especially chap. 2.
7. Marie Colvin and James Clark, "How the Hi-Tech Army Fell Back on Law of the Jungle and Won," *Sunday Times*, 17 September 2000, available at www.sundaytimes.co.uk/news/pages/sti/2000/09/17/stifgnaf03003.html.
8. CNN, "Palestinian Teen Stopped with Bomb Vest," 25 March 2004.
9. Gul Luft, "The Palestinian H-Bomb," *Foreign Affairs*, July 2002, 5; Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, *Child Soldiers: 1379 Report* (London, 2002), 54; Suzanne Goldenberg, "A Mission to Murder," *The Guardian*, 11 June 2003; Johanna Mcgeary, "Inside Hamas," *Time*, 28 March 2004.
10. U.S. State Department, "Colombia," *Report on Human Rights*, 1997; UNICEF-Columbia, *Situation Report* (22 April 2003).
11. Rohan Gunaratna, "LTTE Child Combatants," *Jane's Intelligence Review*, July 1998.
12. "National Roundup," *Miami Herald*, 23 April 2003; Human Rights Watch, "U.S. Guantanamo Kids at Risk," 24 April 2003; Bruce Auster and Kevin Whitelaw, "Terror's Cellblock," *U.S. News and World Report*, 12 May 2003; Michelle Faul, "U.S. Defends Detaining Teens," Associated Press, 28 June 2003.
13. Nancy Gibbs, "Inside 'The Wire,'" *Time*, 8 December 2003.
14. Interviews with U.S. Army officer, March 2004; Keith Richburg, "Taliban Maintains Grip Rooted in Fear," *Washington Post*, 9 August 2004, 9.
15. Cox, "War Even Uglier When a Child Is the Enemy"; "Report: Marines Wounded in Fighting Late Wednesday in Iraq," Associated Press, 27 March 2003; Alex Perry, "When Kids Are in the Cross Hairs," *Time*, 21 April 2003.
16. Mary Beth Sheridan, "For Help in Rebuilding Mosul, U.S. Turns to Its Former Foes," *Washington Post*, 25 April 2003.
17. "Enemy Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (TTP) and Recommendations" (briefing document, 3rd Corp Support Command, LSA Anaconda, Iraq, September 2003); Joseph Galloway, "Hurt Still Arriving at Army Hospital," *Charlotte Observer*, 3 November 2003; interviews with U.S. Army officers, November–December 2003.
18. As quoted in "Child Soldiers Square Up to U.S. Tanks," *London Daily Telegraph*, 23 August 2004.
19. As quoted in *ibid.*

20. Neil Mackay, "Iraq's Child Prisoners," *Sunday Herald*, 1 August 2004; Richard Sisk, "Teen Held, U.S. Admits Juveniles in Abu Ghraib," *New York Daily News*, 15 July 2004; U.S. Army Lt. Col. Barry Johnson, as quoted in Sisk, "Teen Held, U.S. Admits Juveniles in Abu Ghraib."
21. Jim Michaels, "Al Qaeda Video Shows Boys Training to Kill, Kidnap," *USA Today*, 5 February 2008.
22. As quoted in "Child Soldiers," Radio Netherlands, 21 January 2000, available at www.rnw.nl/humanrights/html/general.html.
23. Marten Meijer, "Child Soldiers: Transactional Analyses of Child Warriors of the Opposing Force" (Panel on Executive Human Factors and Medicine, NATO Research and Technology Agency, 2007).
24. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, as quoted in remarks to the Children and Armed Conflict Unit, a joint project of the Children's Legal Centre and the Human Rights Center of the University of Essex in 1999, www.essex.ac.uk/armedcon/.
25. Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities, *Child Soldiers: The Implications for U.S. Forces*, Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory Seminar Report (November 2002).