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Hemphill: Three ways to wage war

War happens, and the algorithm to fight wars in democratic countries is a fairly set formula. All that nations can do is make a few decisions, the first being, "Will we fight or surrender?"

If we decide to fight, will we fight in manner A, B or C?

If we have overwhelming power, and are prepared to use it, will we kill all of "them" at the loss of few of "us," but at the cost of world opinion. This is option A.

Option B: Make nice and win more slowly, or not at all, but accept a stalemate at a high price to our troops.

Option C: Sacrifice still more of our troops, exacerbate the loss of many innocent people on both sides, and wear the enemy down through attrition but win international approval and Nobel Prizes for everyone.

All of these options are available to nations with immense power, and in the case of this nation we have, at one time or another, exercised each option. President Truman exercised Option A at Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Vietnam was Option B.

As a nation, we vacillate between options based on public support at home and international support in Europe. As a matter of national security we are in no particular risk of losing a war because we have so great a military power that we can win ANY war by 8 a.m. tomorrow, regardless of how many runs we are down in the bottom of the ninth.

It is more a question of how much pain we are willing to share between our enemies and ourselves in order to placate our conscience. The world, which shares none of our costs, demands that we not exercise our power in an "unfair" manner.

The cost then falls to our fighting force. During the Vietnam War I often had calls from a Midwest congressman who probed my opinions on various things, including the war. I once told him that I had a plan to approach the NVN and propose that each week each nation takes its brightest and best trained young men into rice and corn fields on a known ratio, and we machine-gun our own troops – saving HUGE logistical costs.

The congressman was rightly shocked, but I told him that was what we were already doing – losing troops for no possible victory and at high economic cost. The least we could do is reduce the cost if we were unwilling to address the cost/benefit of carnage.

I had a Haiphong Harbor Dredge in my crosshairs, 1,000 yards, 90 angle on the bow and no permission to shoot. Sinking that one barge would have closed Haiphong Harbor to Russian and Chinese replenishment to NVN in

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weeks. One torpedo! A single fighter-bomber could have done the job the day before, or a week before, or a year before. No one ever did it.

One of my roommates at the academy was a great Navy fighter pilot, invited to the Blue Angels, but he resigned his commission because he had to fly over Hanoi palaces fitted with SAM missiles he was forbidden to hit. My roommate was crazy, but he was not stupid, so he quit.

Somehow our military keeps drawing the card that reads: "March in straight lines wearing red coats, while preceded by a marching band with drummers..."

Military heroism. Political cowardice.

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