
Apt Violence

By Major Richard L. Scott

It is estimated that, by the 1950s, nearly half of all wartime casualties were noncombatants.¹ It is also estimated that the number had reached 80 percent by the 1980s.² Given the complexities of irregular warfare and the likelihood that it will continue to dominate near-term operations, the development and deployment of nonlethal weapons (NLWs) may result in an increased capability at a lower risk to noncombatants and deployed forces. How, then, might the United States employ a nonlethal approach to warfare, rather than the “kill or be killed” tactic commonly associated with conventional military operations?

Noncombatant deaths and unnecessary collateral damage could be reduced by augmenting the existing U.S. arsenal with NLWs. For example, the incorporation of NLWs into U.S. military operations might have minimized civilian casualties, significantly decreased the damage, and prevented the extensive looting associated with the conclusion of major combat operations in Iraq in 2003.

In a joint statement issued with Great Britain Prime Minister Tony Blair in April 2003, President Bush stated, “Coalition forces take great care to avoid civilian casualties. . . . We are taking every step possible to safeguard Muslim holy sites and other protected places in Iraq that are important to the religious and cultural heritage of Islam and of Iraq. . . . We reaffirm our commitment to protect Iraq’s natural resources, as the patrimony of the people of Iraq, which should be used only for their benefit.”³ The use of NLWs might have significantly improved the effectiveness of Soldiers in supporting the President’s goals; it might still aid forces in future conflict and postconflict operations.

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There are two primary categories of NLW technologies—counterpersonnel and countermateriel. Counterpersonnel technologies include tools used in crowd and riot control situations, personnel debilitation, area denial to personnel, and facility clearance. Countermateriel technologies include tools designed to deny access to vehicles and vessels and to obstruct facilities. A third, less significant category involves counter-capability tools designed to neutralize or disable buildings or mechanical or electrical facilities.

Field Manual (FM) 3-24 states, “The military forces that successfully defeat insurgencies are usually those able to overcome their institutional inclination to wage conventional war against insurgents.”⁴ NLWs represent a resource that can be used by the military to achieve its objectives without the unintended secondary effects associated with conventional lethal weapons. All categories of NLW technologies—counterpersonnel, countermateriel, and counter-capability—could be incorporated into the existing arsenal and used in appropriate situations by trained professionals.

The ability to effectively convey the message that the United States is committed to reducing noncombatant deaths and unnecessary collateral damage is contingent upon the clear communication of senior leaders through information operations. This is particularly important in counterinsurgency operations, where winning hearts and minds remains a strategic objective.

Imagine a scenario in which Soldiers who are armed only with lethal weapons enter the domicile of a person who is guilty of nothing more than consuming too much alcohol. Think of the actionable intelligence that may be gathered by isolating, capturing, and interrogating the inebriated person, rather than killing him. Whereas one approach involves nuances and subtleties, the other involves only blunt-force trauma. NLWs allow for intangible results that lethal weapons do not.

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Surprisingly, the U.S. military deployed in support of more than fifty irregular-warfare operations between 1992 and 2001.⁵ Since 2001, U.S. involvement in irregular warfare has come under a much more intense public spotlight—particularly due to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. But, although the United States has demonstrated proficiency and success through many years of conducting irregular-warfare operations, a very real risk of failure still exists. The risk of deploying poorly equipped and improperly trained Soldiers into irregular warfare can be measured by claims of excessive use of force and the erosion of public support. Comprehensive discussions with senior military leaders regarding the application of nonlethal technologies for strategic objectives must occur. If the use of NLWs limits civilian casualties and adverse consequences of kinetic operations and provides security to environments that are prone to conflict, then the United States has a responsibility to deploy them.

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Endnotes:

¹Bethany Lacina and Nils Petter Gleditsch, “Monitoring Trends in Global Combat: A New Dataset of Battle Deaths,” *European Journal of Population*, Vol. 21, Nos. 2–3, Springer, Netherlands, 2005, <<http://www.springerlink.com/content/1826g1412943w55w/>>, accessed on 14 October 2010.

²Joseph Siniscalchi, “Non-Lethal Technologies: Implications for Military Strategy,” Occasional Paper No. 3, Center for Strategy and Technology, Air War College, Air University, March 1998, <<http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/cst/csats3.pdf>>, accessed on 14 October 2010.

³“Joint Statement by President Bush, Prime Minister Blair on Iraq’s Future, April 8,” White House press release, 8 April 2003, <<http://www.patriotfiles.com/forum/showthread.php?t=26809>>, accessed on 19 October 2010.

⁴FM 3-24, *Counterinsurgency*, 15 December 2006.

⁵“U.S. Military Deployments/Engagements, 1975–2001,” Center for Defense Information, <<http://www.cdi.org/issues/USForces/deployments.html>>, accessed on 19 October 2010.

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