

'Why is television obsessed with armed conflict?'

**New College Lectures 2003
Dr Tom Frame, Bishop to the Australian Defence Force
Tuesday, 2 September
New College, UNSW**

I first want to thank Professor Cairney and the New College Lecture Trustees for honouring me with an invitation to deliver the 2003 annual lectures, twenty years after I was a student at the University of NSW and a resident of this College. It is hard for me to accept that some of you here tonight may not have been born then. My memories of this place are varied: the stocks located in the courtyard for annoying residents; the varied and excellent food with the surplus collected by the pig man; nearly being killed by a ball bowled by Geoff Lawson when walking past the less than adequate cricket nets behind the college; covert warfare waged against Warrane College, telephone duty and the parking infringement notices left under the windscreen wiper of my old gold Holden Gemini forlornly forgotten on the Anzac Parade clearway after 4pm. I suspect that much has changed. But some things remain the same, including the prevalence of violent armed conflict in the world, although it is handled differently now.

We live in a world where war is entertainment; it is the ultimate reality TV. The recent Iraqi war received top-billing on prime time television with embedded reporters, accredited representatives, expert commentators, in-depth analysis, live crosses, background briefings, hourly updates, nightly summaries, detailed maps and computer-generated graphics. The war even had its own network logo. Even when there was little or nothing to report, the coverage continued. Why? Because it rated well. Audiences switched on rather than off. People wanted news and views of what had happened, was happening and might happen with concise assessments and precise judgements of what it all meant for the victors and the vanquished, in both the short and the long term. The dust hadn't settled before the networks were writing the history. And apparently, we loved it and couldn't get enough of death and destruction.

Our appetite remains and when there isn't a real war underway (if Liberia or Palestine are not sufficiently interesting), we can still get our share of war. We can go to the cinema or to the local video store where there is likely to be a feast of war movies. Every major war since the Caesars [I am thinking here of *Gladiator*] has been the subject of at least one major movie. We Australians are generous contributors. Australians make films about fallen men and failed campaigns like *Breaker Morant* and *Gallipoli*. But we also devour films in which disastrous wars are transformed into stunning successes, such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Black Hawk Down*.

Oscar Wilde was right: we seem to get tired of most other things before we tire of war. Why? Because it is dramatic and dangerous, tense and exciting? Because many of us fantasize over killing or because we are violent voyeurs at heart? Because we marvel at technological advances and human creativity in finding new ways of delivering death and destruction? Because we observe people under extreme stress, confronted by acute moral challenges? Because it is the most extreme kind of reality TV ... and only if it could become interactive?

Whether the fighting is real or staged, the news media and the entertainment industry (I am not actually sure they are different things) are obsessed with armed conflict because they have evidently decided that we are as well. But what about the subject matter? Should it be treated in this manner? I know from experience of Northern Ireland and East Timor that wars are real and always serious. People die and property is destroyed. It is estimated that 50 million people were killed in 20th century wars. Of that number 100,000 uniformed Australian men and women lost their lives on active service in addition to those civilians killed in by enemy action at sea, on land and in the air. War leaves widows, orphans and broken people, and the seeds of the next conflict. Lives are disrupted and hopes dashed. Your generation and mine are the first to have reached adulthood without the prospect of conscription. But is the world safer? Is our prosperity more secure? And what of conflicts beyond our shores?

While military spending worldwide has declined over the last twenty years the number of conflicts has increased. There were 47 international conflicts in progress when the Cold War ended in 1989. The number increased to 54 in 1990, 65 in 1991 and peaked at 66 in 1992. The number has fallen to within 20-30 each year with the majority occurring within national boundaries. Of course, developed nations no longer tend to launch military attacks on other developed nations. Wars are extraordinarily costly, incredibly destructive and rarely enhance the interests of affluent nation-states. The Germans, the French and the British have finally discovered ways to live in peace and they have become more prosperous. Hence, the paucity of 'traditional' wars. Poor nations attack their poor neighbours, such as Rwanda and Burundi, the Congo and Zaire, Uganda and Tanzania, while intra-state conflicts (or civil wars) have distracted a number of militaristic states, such as Indonesia and Russia, from engaging their neighbours in offensive operations. While the character of armed conflict has changed, an end to state sponsored violence is neither imminent nor likely. This is a continuing tragedy.

While we have discovered an ability to fight disease and reverse once fatal medical conditions, we still develop weapons of war. While we fight poverty, malnutrition and environmental depredation, we divert a great deal of money to weapons and devise plans to destroy property and infrastructure. While we have devoted a great deal of time and energy to the promotion and preservation of peace, we are constantly engaged in hostilities and seem to accept its reality and its inevitability. We know so much yet understand so little. While microbiology and astronomy have helped us to understand the smallest and largest units of matter, we are still unable to comprehend the pathology of the spirit that makes for war or a remedy for our aggressive madness. We have made enormous progress in developing conventions for arbitrating international disputes and protocols governing the conduct of armed conflict but we have made little progress in banishing war itself. It seems all we can do is to limit its effects. We now expect there to be wars and rumours of wars ... and we have lost our hope of living in peace, lost our resolve to find non-violent means of conflict resolution, and lost our determination to eradicate war.

In the movie *Terminator II*, the young John Connor says to Arnold Swartznegger: “you can’t just go around killing people”. To which the Terminator replies: “Why?” It is still not self-evident to some people or some nations that killing people is indeed wrong.

Over the next few days I will present a series of lectures with the theme - “Living by the sword: the ethics of armed intervention”. Why talk about *ethics* instead of *law* and why use the term *armed intervention* rather than *war*? To answer the first question, both the legitimacy of resorting to force and the way in which that force is delivered have changed. This has created the need for continuing discussions about justifications for resorting to force. When is it right to risk human life and why? This is a matter of values and virtues – ethics - before it is a matter for law. Get the ethics right and the law will evolve. And ‘armed intervention’? As the majority of conflicts in the modern world are either civil wars, insurrection or rebellions, the involvement of nations such as Australia usually via the United Nations or other multinational bodies, needs to be assessed as ‘interventions’. Determining the ethical character of an ‘intervention’ is frequently more complicated than making a moral judgement about whether a war or its conduct is justified.

The focus of these lectures is the unique Australian experience of armed conflict. In the past, we didn’t start wars - we joined them. In the last 15 years, however we have seen a rapid expansion in the number of so-called “peace operations” around the world in which Australia has taken a lead. These missions have become the stock-in-trade for the Australian Defence Force. Recent missions to Namibia, Lebanon, the Western Sahara, Rwanda, Somalia, Cambodia, Bougainville and East Timor are examples of ‘armed interventions’. As one mission concluded in Bougainville, another commenced in the Solomon Islands. Military operations of the type seen in Afghanistan and Iraq – activities more closely resembling war – have become atypical. While they happen from time to time, there is a much greater demand for ‘armed inventions’; they involve more Australians than any other activity; and, they are kind of operations that will persist into the future.

While I will address the morality of wars and warfare, the main focus will be on the ethics of 'armed intervention' and peacekeeping missions. I will also consider conscientious objection to military service (something your predecessors at this university protested about in the 1960s) and whether nation-states and nationalism are banes rather than blessings. These are subjects we cannot avoid. The media has made us all bystanders if not participants. How is this so?

The first media campaign was the Boer War fought in South Africa a century ago with press reports sent all over the world by journalists. The first TV war was fought in Vietnam just forty years ago. The first conflict with embedded reporters has just ended. Television doesn't just record war; it depicts suffering and grief. It also presents an argument either for or against its commencement and its continuation. We all have a grasp of what wars are like. We know how deathly and destructive they can be. Although we might not have worn a military uniform, we are all war veterans.

Television has confronted us with moral questions about war that we cannot ignore. The graphic visual imagery of dead Iranian soldiers and civilian men, women and children killed by Iraqi poisonous gas during the 1980-88 war led many to support immediate military action against Saddam Hussein following his brutal invasion of Kuwait in 1990. The premature ending of the Kuwait War on the Basra Road in January 1991 had much to do with the impact of televising yet more cold-blooded slaughter as precision bombs destroyed retreating trucks, buses and cars. The Clinton Administration toyed briefly with launching air strikes against the Bosnian Serbs in mid-May 1993 in response to the 'moral force' generated by television images of the horrors of Srebrenica and elsewhere. Shortly after 18 American soldiers were killed in Mogadishu and their bodies were dragged through the streets, the shocking images led to the withdrawal of 34,000 American troops and the collapse of a UN mission. Because CNN cannot cover the fighting in the Sudan, Chechnya or Aceh, the fighting goes on with little restraint. The belligerents recognise that no-one but the victims see what they are doing. The media makes bystanders of us all.

In the wake of September 11 and the Bali bombings, controversial wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, genocides in Rwanda and East Timor, the most pressing questions facing us and our times concern violence and coercion, individual rights and national sovereignty, religion and morality. We cannot avoid these questions; nor should we try. Nor should we become party to the television treatment of war. It ought to become a source of entertainment; it ought to be a cause of reflection. Having emerged from the most destructive century in human history, we have a shared responsibility to civilise and pacify this world – a world not of our own choosing but the only world we live in. I do hope you might find time to join us over the next few days; I would certainly be grateful for your insights and perspectives.