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The Good Fight

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On April 14, American warplanes flying at 15,000 feet over Kosovo mistakenly destroyed a convoy of the very civilian refugees U.S. forces had been sent to the Balkans to protect. To avoid Serb anti-aircraft weapons, the United States used fast, high-flying planes (rather than the slower, low- flying aircraft designed for such tactical bombing). This protects our pilots but puts civilians at heightened risk by increasing the difficulty of identifying targets on the ground. It would seem that we are trying so hard to avoid the loss of even one American life that we have adopted tactics that considerably raise the chances that we will destroy Kosovar lives.
This contradiction is, of course, a consequence of the Clinton administration's short-term political calculations and the Pentagon's self- protective bureaucratic instincts. But, at a deeper level, it reflects the inherent moral tension built into the first principles of American liberal democracy. Our politics is built on the notion of the natural freedom and equality of all human beings. By putting freedom and equality–not duty or virtue–first, our public philosophy appears to sanction a limited and relatively unexacting form of government, a state that lets us live as we choose as long as we don't hurt anyone else. Yet, at the same time, it gives rise to a humanitarian ideal. If all men and women are created equally free, then individuals everywhere are essentially like us, poverty and oppression are wrong abroad as well as at home, and government not based on the consent of the governed must be unjust wherever it is found.

Also, our liberal democracy needs virtue. Of course we are reluctant to legislate morals. Yet still it is crucial that citizens exercise certain necessary virtues. As Mill observed, the most important factor on which good government depends

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is "the qualities of the human beings composing the society over which the government is exercised." For a liberal democracy, the most important of these qualities include the capacity of people to take care of themselves, their families, and their communities; to exercise their rights vigorously and wisely; and to administer institutions fairly and effectively.

In a society that puts individual freedom first, nourishes a humanitarian ideal, and depends on the cultivation of certain necessary virtues, a strong and resolute response to the crimes of a Slobodan Milosevic is bound to be both urgent and elusive. A strong and resolute response–meaning ground troops risking their lives to smash Serb forces and protect ethnic Albanians– is urgent because of the moral imperative, arising from the heart of liberalism, to respect the dignity of the individual. It is elusive because the wide latitude we give to individual freedom provides plenty of room for individuals to choose the less arduous path. If all people in the world are equally entitled to freedom and equality, how can we not take up arms against oppression everywhere? Yet, if ethnic Albanians' humanity is no more valuable than our own, why should any American die for them, especially if no vital national interests are at stake?

Perhaps the way out of this conundrum is to recall that, for all the ambiguities inherent in the humanitarian ideal, we have a national interest in upholding it. In an increasingly interconnected world where atrocities are reported in real time and the U.S. military alone has the means to deploy soldiers and equipment on short notice around the globe, coming to the aid of individuals abroad may become critical to respecting ourselves at home. This does not mean that we must be the world's policeman or intervene wherever violence breaks out; the full range of costs and benefits must always be weighed. However, this would require that, when we do intervene, as we have in Yugoslavia, we take all the military measures necessary to affirm our principles, not just those approved by yesterday evening's polls.

How can we respect ourselves otherwise? This is not a metaphysical point but a practical one. Can citizens in prosperous liberal democracies get used to passively accepting the degradation and destruction of whole communities of human beings without weakening their own commitment to the very principles that make liberal democracy possible? Can we vigorously and in full faith uphold the rule of law at home, can we genuinely respect the rights of our fellow citizens, and can we respect ourselves and trust others if together we tolerate massive outbreaks of savagery and suffering that are within our power to halt or at least substantially diminish? By letting the killing continue and allowing the cleansing to stand, do we not teach ourselves to disbelieve in the principle of individual dignity on which our own political system rests?

In short, there are times when our democracy vitally depends on the exercise not just of the necessary virtues but of the noble virtues, too. The distinction between the two is, admittedly, rough and imperfect. Yet we owe it to ourselves to recognize that sometimes courage, sacrifice, and generosity become necessary to vindicate the principles that give sense and substance to our lives. On certain occasions, we must summon as a nation the wherewithal to fight those, at home or abroad, who would flout the standards our politics teaches us to regard as universal. Kosovo is such an occasion.