

# War without death? How non-lethal weapons could change warfare

Using non-lethal weapons in Iraq and Afghanistan would support US efforts to demonstrate restraint and would reduce the catastrophic effects associated with war.

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Which is better in war? Wipe out a nation completely and start fresh? Merely disarm the enemy through aggressive tactics? Or subdue through nonaggressive means altogether?

Philosophers from Niccolo Machiavelli to Carl von Clausewitz to Sun Tzu have been debating the most effective means to approach warfare for centuries.

Today, the United States has been actively fighting two wars with high casualty rates for both sides. It would be valuable for the commander in chief and senior military leaders to consider the merits of a nonlethal approach to warfare.

The term “nonlethal weapon” generally refers to weapons intended to be less likely to kill or to cause great bodily injury than a conventional weapon, i.e., guns, missiles, bombs, etc.

Nonlethal weapons can include chemical and biological agents, electroshock devices, acoustic devices, optical munitions, blunt or rubber projectiles, traction modifiers, nets or rapid-hardening rigid foam, radio frequency or microwave technologies, computer viruses, noxious smells, and acoustical interference technologies.

It wouldn't be difficult to have soldiers learn to use these weapons more regularly, as these types of weapons are already used in any number of operations.

Experience points to the fact that nonlethal weapons (NLW) are not only appropriate for use, they could be the most effective strategy and save thousands of lives.

Consider, for example what happened in [Somalia](#) in 1995. Lt. Gen. Anthony Zinni anticipated the need to fill the void between verbal warnings and lethal force for unarmed hostiles while extracting United Nations peacekeepers (over 6,000 soldiers) from Somalia. He used intelligence operations to ensure the local population was informed that his forces were armed and ready with nonlethal grenade launchers and other equipment such as shotguns that fired pepper spray.

In the end, not a single shot was fired and all troops and equipment were withdrawn without suffering a casualty. “[Our experience in Somalia](#) with nonlethal weapons offered ample

testimony to the tremendous flexibility they offer to warriors on the field of battle,” Zinni explained later.

So what prevents the military from using more tactics such as the one Zinni used? A general lack of understanding of the methods used by of torturers among watchdog groups.

Groups such as the International Committee of the Red Cross have strongly opposed the proliferation of many nonlethal weapons, even going so far as campaigning to have banned them outlawed altogether, mainly due to abuse of such nonlethal weapons.

However, as the broad definition of nonlethal weapons shows, it is a user’s intent, not the tool, that is problematic. After all, there is no shortage of objects that can be used as instruments of torture.

The effectiveness of nonlethal weapons reducing noncombatant deaths and collateral damage and bridging the gap between lethality and a show of force depends on intention, not capability.

Now, more than ever, soldiers understand the types of wars being fought and the enemy they are facing. Ground forces are expected to demonstrate maturity and discipline and feel confident handling their weapon systems, but confidence can only be attained as a result of training.

Only through familiarization, qualification, testing, simulations, and exercises will forces confidently and responsibly employ NLWs.

Senior military planners need to consider the ramifications of sending soldiers into a hostile environment armed only with lethal weapons. The resulting destruction means dealing with political, economic, social, infrastructural, and information challenges. NLWs allow for intangibles that lethal weapons do not.

Some still assert that a nonlethal approach to warfare is foolish. But this is an age when stories and images are transmitted in real time all over the world by way of cellular telephones, satellite communications, Internet access, and 24-hour news outlets. Having so many casualties caused by the US is what seems foolish.

When combined with well-trained and well-placed ground troops, using more nonlethal weapons could have a profound effect on how wars are fought.

Miscommunications and misunderstandings might not yield more than a bruised or hurt ego, and mistakes will not result in death. Reestablishing structures and services would require minimal resources, communities would remain intact, and coalition efforts could be directed toward investments and improvements, rather than rebuilding and damage control.

If the US integrates NLWs into its doctrine and operations, it is likely that our allies and other nations will follow. And that would be a good thing. If the US casts doubt on the efficacy of NLWs in irregular warfare, it is likely to significantly impede further NLW development.

Neither the president nor the National Security Council has weighed in on the debate and issued a formal policy on NLWs. The Department of Defense issued the Directive Policy for Non-Lethal Weapons in 1996, and although it is a well-intentioned effort, support from the president or National Security Council would provide a significant boost for NLW proponents and support US efforts to demonstrate restraint, and would reduce the catastrophic effects associated with war.

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