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The War Metaphor in Public Policy

Some Moral Reflections

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In this essay I want to offer some moral reflections on both war as reality and war as metaphor. I will begin with some reflections on the morality of real war, but I will concentrate on the morality of using war as a metaphor. Military professionals are often told that they should learn about the limits of war from nonprofessionals—that is, the public—but my theme here is different. My claim is that military professionals have a tremendous responsibility to help society think about both the moral use of war and the moral use of war as a metaphor. I will examine the relation between our moral discourse about real war and our moral discourse about social policies and practices, which we often discuss in the language of war.

Throughout I will stress the following point: In debating social policy through the language of war, we often forget the moral reality of war. Among other lapses, we forget important moral limits in real war—both limited objectives and limited means. In short, we forget the just-war tradition, with its moral conditions for resorting to and waging war. We are tempted by seedy realism, with its doctrine that might makes right, or we are tempted by an equally dangerous mentality of crusade or holy war, with its doctrine that right makes might of any kind acceptable. In either case, we neglect such constraints as right intention, discrimination, and proportionality, which protect the humanity of all parties in war.