

**Disarming Politics:  
Arms, Agency, and the (Post)Politics of Disarmament Advocacy**

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## **Abstract**

An interesting though yet under-interrogated aspect of the so-called ‘revolution in military affairs’ is the re-siting of agency from those who use the weapons to the weapons themselves – a phenomenon evinced in the idea of the ‘smart bomb.’ Much more revolutionary than the deployment of precision-guided munitions, however, is the deployment of a rhetoric that has wrought a broad popular expectation of ‘costless war.’ These developments give rise to unsettling questions regarding who, in various public imaginaries and in the estimation of policymakers, can and cannot bring force to bear legitimately. The significance of this is signaled in new exceptionalist discourses and the idea of the ‘unlawful combatant.’ This article explores these issues with a view to revealing how disarmament advocacy may have unwittingly become implicated in (re)producing these important ideational bases of contemporary US military conduct in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.

## **Introduction**

In December 1997 representatives of 122 states gathered in Ottawa, Canada to sign a disarmament agreement that was in many ways unprecedented and unique. What was extraordinary about the ‘Ottawa Convention’<sup>1</sup> banning antipersonnel landmines was not that it inaugurated what would become a binding prohibition on an entire class of weapons; that had been done before.<sup>2</sup> Rather, its uniqueness inhered in what has come to be known as the ‘Ottawa Process’ – a qualitatively different approach to disarmament and one that proved remarkably successful against what had seemed overwhelming odds. Initiated outside the usual circuits of

state diplomacy and eschewing apposite institutions like the Conference on Disarmament, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) carried the issue of these pernicious weapons' tragic failure to distinguish between combatants and noncombatants from widespread state intransigence to a binding treaty with broad franchise in just a few short years. In the main, this was achieved via the raising of a landmines taboo which recast an inveterate staple of most militaries' arsenals as an inherently indiscriminate and morally indefensible humanitarian scourge. But however progressive the cause and notwithstanding the potency of the rhetorical/discursive moves that enabled its fulfillment, there are important senses in which humanitarian and peace activism expressed through disarmament advocacy may have unwittingly become implicated in (re)producing key ideational bases of the legitimizing rhetorics of (in particular) US military action in places like Afghanistan and Iraq.

An almost inestimably important development since the 1991 war against Iraq wrought the imaginary of 'Nintendo War' and the popularization of the so-called Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) is the centering of quasi-anthropomorphized weapon systems in contemporary war narrative. This owes much to the careful management of access to images from the war zone and the concomitant ascendancy of the briefing video both as the principal window on war and as fetishized artifact of material culture. These developments have been accompanied by a palpable shift in the ascription of agency, increasingly away from those who use the weapons and toward the weapons themselves – a phenomenon evinced in the idea of the 'smart bomb' and, more so, in emergent discourses around 'autonomous weapons.' While the technological feats and marvels of advanced weapon systems have received considerable attention, the most revolutionary techne of the current RMA may well turn out to be this mystification of agency and the particular ways in which it is affecting a burgeoning sense of who, in various public

imaginaries and in the estimation of policymakers, can and cannot bring force to bear legitimately. The significance of this, signaled in new exceptionalist discourses as much as in the idea of the ‘unlawful combatant,’ can scarcely be overstated. Recognizable as practical expressions of what Slavoj Žižek describes as post-politics, disarmament advocacy strategies of the sort that worked to such great effect for the mine ban movement both share and contribute to the conditions of possibility that sustain these watershed developments. Before this claim can be properly elaborated, however, something of the as yet underinterrogated aspects of the RMA and the advent of weapon-agents bears closer scrutiny.

### **Arms, Agency, and the Hyperreality of War**

In his *Vom Krieg* (1832) Prussian general and military theorist Carl von Clausewitz famously described war as ‘the continuation of politics by other means.’<sup>3</sup> This oft-quoted maxim is, among other things, a salutary reminder of the embeddedness of military affairs in a broader social world by dint of which war and preparation for war become intelligible. To speak of a ‘revolution in military affairs,’ then, necessarily entails its situation in the social world(s) with which it is co-constitutive. Understood from this perspective, the current RMA is itself a social phenomenon, no less determined by socio-political and historical contingencies than by new technological marvels (see Latham 2002). As much as the objective properties and range of capabilities of this or that weapon system, the social meanings derived from and inscribed upon them bear on the political possibilities they variously advance and foreclose. Discerning the significance of precision-guided munitions (PGMs) in a broader socio-political context therefore requires that we venture beyond the technical specifications of weapons and the doctrinal-

procedural details of new ways of war and inquire also into realms where popular perception is conditioned: among these are rhetoric, discourse, and aesthetics.

### *Briefing Videos and Popular Imaginaries of War*

If there is a paragon of the most revolutionary aspects of contemporary military affairs, it is the comfortably generic briefing video that has reached an advanced stage of perfection as a virtual stand-in for war itself. It is also an important nexus of the rhetorical/discursive and aesthetic renderings of the RMA and what has been characterized as the ‘new American way of war’: a fast-paced and highly mobile form, fully exploiting the unprecedented superiority made possible by PGMs and new information handling capabilities (Boot 2003). The briefing videos that epitomized popular perspectives on the 1991 Gulf War gave us our first and most poignant glimpses of this, revealing the devastating accuracy that allowed US forces to selectively target their hopelessly outclassed Iraqi adversaries with virtual impunity – revealing too that the latter frequently could not even see the enemy whose panoptic information dominance could nevertheless render them wholly visible. In their daily briefings, US General Norman Schwarzkopf and his subordinates fed a steady diet of short video clips to an international media contingent starved for news by exceptionally tight control over access to the war’s battlespaces.<sup>4</sup> Absent the opportunity to document much of the war firsthand, media outlets became dependent upon the release of these compelling images, each confirming the unerring destruction of a predetermined target. Even the video supplied by the comparatively small number of Western journalists who reported from Baghdad amidst Coalition air strikes derived essential meaning directly from the briefing videos. Had it not been for the repetitive demonstrations of the

devastating accuracy of PGMs, the Baghdad correspondents' contributions could scarcely have been more than a collection of indeterminate flashes of light and plumes of smoke. The briefing videos, many of them transmitted from cameras onboard the weapons themselves, settled such ambiguities, underwriting confidence that fires on the horizon signaled the destruction of an intended militarily-significant target.

Debuting in the Gulf War and seen again in connection with Kosovo in 1999, Afghanistan in 2001, and once more in Iraq in 2003, the briefing video has become war's avatar. Though more recently complemented by the innovation of the 'embedded journalist,' these familiar images remain central to popular imaginaries of contemporary warfare as practiced by the US and, to a lesser degree of perfection, a very small number of others (chiefly, the US's closest allies). Indeed, we have grown so accustomed to these images that we have ceased to be astounded by them, increasingly accepting the most extravagant claims made on behalf of PGMs and taking for granted the potential to single out even a particular window on a targeted building (see, for example, Smith 1995). These are the ideas and impressions that give content to what we now commonly know as 'shock and awe' – a strategy that involves the combination of massive firepower and multivalent approaches to confounding an enemy's ability to understand what is unfolding, thereby overwhelming not only the ability but the will to resist (see Ullman and Wade 1996). But, as we have come to understand it, this is not reducible to anything akin to the terror bombing of, for example, the Second World War. Rather, the discourse of 'shock and awe,' whose popular intelligibility owes much to well-cultivated perceptions of PGM infallibility, has become inseparable from the now equally familiar notion of 'surgical strikes' that leave no quarter to enemy forces but are nevertheless taken to discriminate meaningfully between combatants and noncombatants.

These are ideas borne in official rhetorics which highlight the indiscriminate practices of the enemy but are loath to make any easy admission of the incidental killing of civilians or destruction of critical civilian infrastructure by US forces. Making sense of this entails no great interpretive leap: it is a function of increasing popular intolerance of civilian casualties.<sup>5</sup> As important as domestic US sentiment in this regard are the at least equally sensitive publics in other countries, most particularly key US allies. It is therefore telling that the rhetorics of the RMA and the new American way of war emerged as the discriminatory norm was suddenly in rapid ascendancy, and this after a century of its precipitous decline saw the erstwhile civilian immunity from violence in war utterly erased (Kaldor 2001: 8; Beier 2003: 415-19). Thus, at the same time as PGMs raised the promise of meaningfully discriminating between combatants and noncombatants, the political costs of any failure to do so were rising (Mets 2001: 39).

Reminding us that 'war is injury,' Elaine Scarry (1985: 65) notes that 'conventional war entails the participation of a massive number of people, only a small fraction of whom are engaged in the active verbal advocacy of either the elimination or the perpetuation of war; and if injuring disappears, it is its absence in their informal conversation that is perhaps most important.' Official denials of reported civilian casualties, then, are less telling than the popular expectations that make them seem plausible. Though it was during the 1991 war that the sanitized language of 'collateral damage' first came into common parlance as a depoliticizing signifier of particular instances of the failure to discriminate, the most memorable images and semiotics foregrounded the weapon systems brought instantly to fame by way of the briefing videos. This stands in remarkably stark contrast with the visual legacy of the Vietnam War, enduringly marked by images of dire human consequences: perhaps most famously, by the haunting 1972 Pulitzer Prize winning photograph of nine-year-old Kim Phúc running naked from

her village of Trang Bang following a napalm attack. The disjuncture speaks to the potency of the briefing videos that have brought PGMs into popular consciousness in ways that are inseparable from a broad expectation that noncombatants should – and, importantly, can – be preserved from harm even when war is carried into the midst of their everyday environs. It also signals something of the military’s acute awareness that the control of media images is integral to the viability of contemporary recourse to what Clausewitz so astutely described as politics’ ‘other means.’<sup>6</sup>

### *Weapon-Agents, Celebrity, and the Re-Framing of Legitimacy*

The Gulf War saw something akin to celebrity status conferred on a variety of weapon systems, many of which seemed to disturb popular reckoning of the line between science fiction and science fact. From stealth bombers to Patriot missiles, new marvels of then-leading edge arms technology moved rapidly not only into popular consciousness but into popular culture as well. Complementing the briefing videos, feature stories in both print and electronic media profiled all manner of these systems, uncritically echoing many of the most extravagant promotional claims made by their manufacturers. This no doubt had much to do with tight restrictions on media access to the war itself and the particular ways they played out in 1991. The bitter experience of the media’s role in souring American public opinion to the US involvement in Vietnam had led the military, by the time of the 1983 US invasion of Grenada, to completely ban journalists from the island for several days from the beginning of the operation, intercepting and detaining reporters who attempted to reach the war zone in rented boats (McLane 2004: 80; see also Schanberg 1991). Responding to harsh criticism of these measures, the Pentagon instituted a



press pool system which saw its first real test during the 1989 US invasion of Panama. But this too drew condemnation when reporters were sequestered until the bulk of the fighting was over, during which time they were not adequately briefed on events in the war zone or otherwise provided with newsworthy content for submission to their editors (Hoffman 1991: 92-3). This did nothing to allay media distrust of the military and fuelled subsequent suspicions of a cover-up of civilian casualties. But during the Gulf War, scarcely more than a year later, the press pool system seemed to function very smoothly. Despite tight restrictions that, among other things, denied journalists unfettered direct access to the war zone and compelled them to submit all content through military censors, surprisingly little was heard in the way of complaint (see Taylor 1998). This time, however, videos and other briefing content featuring exotic weapon systems seemed to make the relative isolation of the press hotel somewhat less galling, answering the essentially sequestered war correspondents' imperative need for attention-grabbing substance on which to report.<sup>7</sup>

Even more so than the particular purposes to which they were being put, arms *were* the story in the Gulf War. Television news segments and full-page feature stories in newspapers profiled particular systems with the accent on their stated capabilities, not on the dire human consequences of their use or even the particular political objectives of such use. So too a proliferation of cable documentaries – whose popularity spawned a whole new genre in educational entertainment programming, complete with strangely vivacious comparative assessments of various weapon systems conducted in a manner evocative of excited automotive reviews – typically confined their treatment of wartime applications to the replay of quintessentially familiar briefing video content and the occasional slow-motion replay of a weapon performing to expectations under the controlled conditions of a testing range. Utterly

devoid of conspicuous human presence, these short clips may permit a glimpse of the instant of a weapon's arrival at a building that has been singled out for destruction, but they offer no comment on the fate of those within or who they might have been. In this sense, they are profoundly depoliticized, placing at issue the remarkable capabilities of the weapon to the exclusion of the politico-ethical dimension of its use. Importantly, the increasingly familiar lingo and semiotics of PGMs and other advanced arms have also found expression in more mundane sites of material culture: picture books, t-shirts, replica toys, and even trading cards.<sup>8</sup> Worth noting in this regard, a Tomahawk cruise missile bearing inscriptions of its name and that of its manufacturer hangs in the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in the same atrium that features an exhibit on the 1975 Apollo-Soyuz 'Handshake in Space'<sup>9</sup> – casual observation will readily confirm that the former elicits many more expressions of recognition from visitors than the latter. By way of these and other appearances in the everyday of public spaces, PGMs and their subsumed claims of discriminatory are normalized and embedded in popular consciousness in ways that frame expectations and condition emergent 'common senses' about contemporary warfighting practices as at least potentially more just and humane.

The rhetorical/discursive centrality of weapons, severed from their broader politico-ethical contexts and meanings, has given rise to an anthropomorphizing impulse that sees them increasingly imbued with agency. First in official rhetoric and then in public discourse, they have come more and more to be rendered as the acting subjects of lexical verbs: Patriot missile batteries, for example, have become simply 'Patriot,' a less contingent designation as proper noun than 'Patriot missile' or even 'the Patriot.' Accordingly, 'Patriot' and other systems thus personified lend to grammatical schema that assign to them a subject position. Employing common sense and routine ways of apprehending and expressing their apparent agency, this

practice reflects the ascription of that agency in popular imaginaries. The bases of this reside not only in official rhetorics, but also in complementary renderings of PGMs and other advanced weapon systems in myriad and mundane moments of daily life: from television newscasts to trading cards and in anything that reinforces the notion that they are ‘smart.’ Not to be overlooked, meaning is also powerfully and persuasively borne in the aesthetics of discriminatory: the mostly indecipherable telemetry characteristic of the ‘bomb’s eye view’ and now-familiar green hue of night vision imaging encode all the claims made on behalf of precision-guided munitions. Recognizing the aesthetic that accompanies claims of discriminatory thus urges that new images be interpreted with reference to pre-existing scripts and narratives – in this way, even indeterminate images cast off ambivalence and, merging with what is already ‘known,’ come to speak an account consistent with official rhetorics. In this and other ways, the briefing videos are already imbued with meaning and message from their very first frames and even before their more explicit demonstration has played out for us. They are part of how we ‘know’ that the weapons *do* that which has been attributed to them.

### *Confounding Indeterminacy*

As compelling as it is, however, the discourse has exceeded the reality while raising the standard of legitimate conduct significantly. That is to say, popular perceptions notwithstanding, there is considerable indeterminacy in PGM use and this does not at all sit well with the expectation of meaningful discriminatory between combatants and noncombatants that has been so deeply implanted by discourses of ‘smart bombs’ and ‘surgical strikes.’ And while there is certainly merit to the argument that the US military has shown itself able to meet and exceed international

legal obligations concerning the avoidance of civilians and critical civilian infrastructure (see, for example, Canestaro 2004; Borch 2003), this is to miss the point that popular sensibilities imagine a higher standard still. The notion of ‘surgical strikes,’ in particular, is a demanding and unforgiving arbiter of actual conduct, inviting as it does the expectation that legitimate military targets can, like malignancies, be selectively eliminated without causing undue harm to that which surrounds them. The claims so vociferously made on behalf of PGMs and, no less, the unwillingness to acknowledge instances of the manifest failure to discriminate have fashioned a broad expectation of precisely this capability as the defining feature of contemporary US warfighting. Completing the picture, these representations are regularly contrasted with unambiguous examples of the inherently indiscriminate practices of the enemy: in the 1991 Gulf War, notoriously inaccurate Iraqi Scud-B missiles falling in and around population centres; in the current war, the terrifyingly indiscriminate attacks carried out by those now marked as ‘unlawful combatants.’ The legitimacy of warfighting practices is variously conferred and denied according to these opposed renderings and the image of the world thus constructed – an image of a world that turns out to be a world of images.

Retaining a legitimate subject position in contemporary warfare turns vitally on these increasingly important bases of legitimacy. The idea of the ‘unlawful combatant’ most readily exposes this, explicitly denying legitimate subjectivity as either a combatant entitled to the protection of the laws of war or a non-combatant deserving of the safety from harm promised by discriminatory. The further implication, of course, is that US conduct is, by contrast, legitimate: a position sustained in everyday rhetorics with reference to questions of discriminatory. Unfortunately, however, imaginaries that are essential to sustain this ideational edifice do not stand up well to critical scrutiny. The problem is that the new American way of war regularly

fails to meet the standards of infallibility set in place by the idea of ‘surgical strikes’ and backed up by the (re)play of briefing videos. In the first instance, PGMs do not account for the sum of practices imperiling noncombatants in the war zone – in 1991, some 93 percent of ordnance expended against Iraqi targets was not precision-guided (Krishna 1993: 398), and even PGMs proved far from infallible. This was highlighted in 1996 by a US General Accounting Office audit which found that, although they performed with vastly greater reliability than ordinary ‘dumb’ bombs, they nevertheless had failure rates well in excess of popular impressions (see United States General Accounting Office 1996; Wiener 1996; Kaplan 1998). And while improvements have undoubtedly been made since the early-1990s<sup>10</sup> that is not as much as to say that the legitimizing rhetoric has been vindicated: in 2003, weapons aimed at targets in Iraq missed the country entirely, striking both Iran and Syria instead. It should also be borne in mind that in this more recent war, as in Afghanistan, soldiers using small arms play a much more central role, so that even the promise implied by the most optimistic assessments of PGM capabilities is, in many instances, largely moot.

It is with similar revelations in mind that Jean Baudrillard (1995) has provocatively argued that ‘the Gulf War did not take place.’ Baudrillard does not, of course, mean to say that the war literally did not happen. Rather, his more particular point is that the popular understanding of a war of smart bombs and surgical strikes is profoundly at odds with how accounts of the war might have been framed from other perspectives, not least those of many of the weapons themselves. Though those that missed their marks or whose intended targets betrayed a conspicuous human presence must also have furnished at least some useable video content, none of it was included in the wartime briefings; nor has it been seen since. As a stand-in for the whole, then, what was shown is a misrepresentation – a decontextualized,

depoliticized, and depopulated assemblage of fragments. Still, in their apparent fidelity to reality the briefing videos carefully selected for popular consumption have nevertheless come to fashion an account of the war that has been widely accepted as an authentic representation of its sum and substance. The Gulf War which, following Baudrillard, did not take place is therefore an example of what Umberto Eco (1986) calls hyperreality: the apparently authentic expression and experience of a reality that has never truly existed. And it is simultaneously a key ideational constituent of the hyperreality of the current RMA and mainstream understandings of the new American way of war that have made possible the truly revolutionary developments of our time: the assignment of agency to weapons and the denial of a subject position to those against whom they are targeted.

### **A Post-Political Moment in Disarmament Advocacy**

No matter their undeniably impressive capabilities or other sources of their emergent construction as agents, the weapons of the RMA are nothing of the sort. Where this comes most fully into relief is in considering how the ascribed agency of weapons puts out of sight the vitally important role of human operators who, at some point, select targets, input guidance information, and make the crucial decision to fire. Inquiring into this reveals at once the inherently political bases of the rendering of weapon-agents inasmuch as it has the effect of obfuscating an important cause of indeterminacy in PGM use: human fallibility (see McKenna 2005). Moreover, even bearing ascriptions of agency, weapons neither are nor are expected to be ethical subjects; they simply perform their assigned missions as though those were pre-given. This, in turn, forecloses thinking about the political to the extent that it focuses our attention on what is,

in effect, *after* politics. That is, the manner in which agency is ascribed to weapons severs the connection between action and its politico-ethical bases – treating weapons as agents that nevertheless lack these other vital elements of complete subjectivity draws our gaze away from important sites of political and ethical judgment. It erects a discursive ‘firebreak’ between politico-ethical choices and the consequences of those choices as they are visited upon human bodies. This is fast becoming a powerful and yet underappreciated modality of viable recourse to organized political violence. It is also one in which disarmament advocacy risks becoming entangled, as it arguably already has via the rhetorical/discursive strategies employed to such great effect in the campaign for a ban on landmines. While the dominant framings of PGMs and the RMA have worked to depoliticize the dire human consequences of war, the mine ban movement has consciously striven to accomplish precisely the opposite. Its own nominal ascription of agency to weapons, however, reveals a post-political terrain of engagement with many of the same implications.

### *Weapon-Agents and the Landmines Ban*

If the briefing videos of recent wars have decentered humans or rendered them invisible (as at target sites) and have sorely lacked for any indication of the human consequences of war, precisely the opposite has been true of the campaign to ban antipersonnel landmines. Whether from the umbrella ICBL that has coordinated the campaign or the hundreds of NGOs that are its members, activist representations on the issue have been replete with images and accounts of the dire effects of landmines and of their inability to discriminate between combatants and noncombatants. Certainly, these cannot be gainsaid, and the campaign’s approach is part of a

much needed corrective to simplistic imaginaries of ‘costless war.’ Landmines make no distinction between the boot of a soldier and the small foot of a child – whosoever is unlucky enough to step on any of the over one hundred million landmines that lie in wait in more than 80 mine-affected countries will be made a victim no matter their relationship to the conflicts in which the mines were sewn. Landmines know nothing of their intended purpose in any temporal sense either, remaining every bit as perilous long after wars that saw them implanted have ended. Highlighting this inherent indiscriminacy, the mine ban movement managed in a startlingly brief span of just a few years to overwrite the traditional state security discourse of landmines as sentinel-like protectors with a potent humanitarian counter-discourse (de Larrinaga and Sjolander 1998: 369-79). Persuasively recasting mines as a humanitarian scourge, these activist disarmament advocates constructed a new moral high ground that was not only powerful enough to attract 122 initial treaty signatories, but which proved irresistible even to many states that, while refusing to sign on to the ban, nevertheless affirmed its central validity claims in their own stated concerns about landmine indiscriminacy.<sup>11</sup> As Richard Price has argued, the mine ban movement essentially shifted the ‘burden of proof’ such that hold-out states found themselves compelled to justify their refusal to accede to the ban in light of and on terms issuing from these powerful moral claims (Price 1998a: 631-7).

Enabling this remarkable turn was the raising of a landmines taboo<sup>12</sup> premised on an understanding of their inherent indiscriminacy together with the normative position that the resulting dire human consequences of their use outweigh any arguable military utility (see, for example, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 1997; Cooper 1997). In short, they do not meet accepted standards of legitimate conduct in war which call for reasonable precautions against harm to noncombatants and the weighing of any such harm against the significance of the



military objectives in respect of which they are incidental. This position was powerfully presented precisely by re-peopling the (post)conflict zone in ways that worked to advance the humanitarian counter-discourse of mine ban advocacy. Accordingly, child-sized prosthetic limbs became important semiotic markers of the cause while images in presentations, and promotional materials, on websites, and in publications featured women and children most prominently in the effort to re-centre humans and human suffering.<sup>13</sup> This reflected a parallel rhetoric emphasizing that women and children account for the majority of landmine victims – that this turns out not to be the case (de Larrinaga and Sjolander 1998: 376-77) only highlights the centrality of the operant moral claims, women and children lending less ambiguously in popular imaginaries to the constitution of noncombatants menaced by mines. Yet, as Andrew Latham (2000) points out, landmines are just one of many conventional weapons that might have been singled out for their inherent indiscriminacy and for the dire consequences they all too often visit upon civilian noncombatants. And this signals that something more must be in play in the case of landmines inasmuch as objective properties of indiscriminacy have not been sufficient to underwrite proscriptive measures where other weapons have been concerned. Indiscriminacy, it seems, is not enough.

The indispensable missing element is found in the particular ways in which the mine ban movement has, like the rhetorical/discursive construction of PGMs, reworked and re-sited agency. If a total and universal ban on antipersonnel landmines was to be realized, that meant that states could not be permitted a space within which to seek exemptions on the basis either of military necessity or any claim to ‘best practices’ that could be alleged to minimize the consequences of mine use for noncombatants. The contexts of landmine use could not, therefore, be left open to consideration or debate as having any bearing on the central validity

claims of the ban. In keeping with this, mine ban advocates have rejected the legitimacy of some states' insistence on military necessity as a basis for their ongoing refusal to accede to the Ottawa Convention. Similarly, they have steadfastly refused any suggestion that a workable solution lies with so-called 'smart mines' which either self-destruct or render themselves inert after a predetermined period. In both cases, the central validity claims of the ban are endangered, military necessity having been ruled out *a priori* as outweighed by the consequences suffered by noncombatants and 'smart mines' having proved too unreliable and, in any event, every bit as deleterious to civilian populations during their intended periods of activation. With the more recent emergence of 'self healing' landmine technology,<sup>14</sup> the unrelenting insistence on a total and universal prohibition seems well advised lest any gains made be eroded in response to developments as yet unimagined.

To fulfill their aims, mine ban advocates had first to stigmatize landmines as inherently indiscriminate – an imperative fulfilled to great effect on the terms of the taboo and its attendant rhetorical/discursive and semiotic expressions of dire human consequences. To foreclose exceptions, however, it was also necessary that landmines be essentialized both as irredeemably indiscriminate and as a humanitarian scourge. This move rules out of hand the possibility of preserving any measure of legitimacy in landmine use, but it does so in a way that disembodies agency and confounds the identification of subjects. Even as the central validity claims of the ban re-center a human presence, they omit to imbue it with agency. Mine victims confront us as just that, victims: the objects acted upon by those subjects whose practices result in dire human consequences.

Where, then, do we locate agency in the tragic play of landmine indiscriminacy? In the rhetorical/discursive framing of the taboo, the weapons themselves are its referent object and

therefore the agents of dire human consequences. The militarized practices in furtherance of which landmines have been used are not visible from this vantage point with the result that agency (and, through it, subjectivity) is revealed not in the laying of mines but in the mines' detonation. The indefensible, indiscriminate 'behaviour' of the mines themselves is placed at issue in the essentializing rhetorics that so effectively render them a humanitarian scourge. It is killing by landmines that is marked out as bad, but not killing per se – and, recalling that other indiscriminate weapons have not been similarly stigmatized, this applies to the killing of noncombatants as much as combatants. The effect is, once again, to place the politico-ethical dimension of militarized practices squarely behind the firebreak erected by imagined weapon-agents.

#### *Post-Politics and Disarmament Advocacy*

Novel though it may be, the re-siting of agency taking place at the heart of the RMA does not bring subjectivity fully into view. Claims made on behalf of PGMs have yet to go so far as to suggest that the weapons decide on the terms of their own use – though the crucial role of those who actually despatch them is mystified, it is not denied. Key to how imaginaries founded in and sustained by briefing videos and like (re)presentations depoliticize war, then, is that the effect has been to cast weapons as agents, but without completing the anthropomorphic turn that would inscribe them also as sites of ethical responsibility. However, this does not merely imply a bifurcation of the subject, the sum of which is nevertheless as visible as divisible. Rather, the severed whole has become something less than the sum of its parts in the alienation of the purposive subject from the operant site of agency: a crucial element of whole subjectivity is lost

to the extent that a deep ambivalence about responsibility is engendered. A cruise missile, it should be remembered, *intends* nothing. Our gaze is therefore fixed on a weapon-agent that can be no more than a grammatical subject separated from ethical subjecthood in what appears at first as a profoundly depoliticizing move. But more than this, the mystified site of ethical subjecthood is insulated from responsibility for any dire consequences that might be visited upon noncombatants. Read through the imaginaries of the RMA, such events become the exceptions in which something has gone awry. ‘Responsibility’ consequently lacks for an intelligible tether to either the weapon-agent or the fragmented subjectivity associated with it, but does not fully become a free floating signifier since it may yet plausibly attach to the victims.<sup>15</sup>

Although turned to a more progressive purpose, the rhetorical/discursive strategies of the landmine ban effort and work through a similar disturbance of sites of responsibility. The success of the mine ban movement owes in no small measure to the marking of antipersonnel landmines as ‘bad’ weapons – a move that has enabled even states that have widely used mines to join in denouncing them as a humanitarian scourge without simultaneously repudiating recourse to militarized violence more generally. At the campaign level and with the specific practical objective of securing the broadest possible ban on landmines, this was a very well conceived approach. Indeed, had this strategy not been adopted, it is unlikely that the movement would have swayed many – if any – states to the cause. But practically expedient though it may be, it is also contingent on putting responsibility out of sight. Like errant cruise missiles, landmines intend nothing. What makes them bad, then, speaks not of disposition, but rather a technological limitation resulting in an objective property of indiscriminacy. While this might at first seem suggestive of the need for a technological solution, the mine ban movement quite rightly worked to foreclose the possibility of recourse to ‘smart mines’ in deference to the goal

of a complete prohibition. This would appear to mark it quite decidedly apart from the war-enabling technologies of the RMA and their part in refashioning the bases of legitimacy in contemporary warfare. The mystification of responsibility so crucial to the ban, however, reveals some disturbing points of intersection.

On first gloss, the approach of the mine ban movement seems quite clearly to disavow any recourse to 'better' technology as a fix for landmine indiscriminacy. The importance of this cannot be overstated since, as has been the case with the RMA, distinguishing between 'good' and 'bad' weapons raises the specter of a like distinction in terms of the conduct of those who use them – a distinction not always well sustained by the actual consequences of their use. In refusing to concede that some mines might be less pernicious than others, therefore, the movement has simultaneously denied all bases of legitimacy in mine use that might otherwise have been claimed by the technologically advantaged. But things become rather more problematic when considered from without the narrow context of the landmines issue. While the rhetorical casting of mines as bad proved a remarkably effective strategy in pursuit of a ban, it only makes sense if it in fact *is* imagined that there are somewhere 'good' weapons. Since it is not killing per se but killing with landmines that is rendered indefensible, the use of other presumably more discriminating weapons is lent a certain legitimacy it might not otherwise have enjoyed. And this is revealing of the important sense in which the core claims of the mine ban contribute to the reproduction of essential ideational bases of the 'new American way of war.' Inviting none of the cynicism about motives that might have attached to a wholly state-led initiative, the central involvement of civil society actors in the mine ban movement – well known and respected peace and human rights advocacy groups among them – both naturalizes and

valorizes a much larger constellation of claims to meaningful discriminatory, whether overt or subsumed.

Pressing for a ban on landmines thus involved the complete disaggregation of this one issue not only from peace activism in general but from the more particular realm of disarmament advocacy as well, parceling it off in such a way as to suggest that there are more effective ways to do the sorts of things landmines are intended to do. Although the success of the campaign is often tied to the support given it by the late Princess of Wales, that really speaks more to its public face and the winning of popular opinion. Much more important in making the case to states was a group of retired high-ranking US military officers – including General Norman Schwarzkopf – who backed the ban on grounds that landmines, besides resulting in unintended dire human consequences, were no longer appropriate to contemporary warfare and could even frustrate its prosecution; other weapons, they argued, could do the job much more effectively.<sup>16</sup> Espoused by the general who came to international fame alongside Gulf War briefing videos, this position is inseparable from popular imaginaries about PGMs and surgical strikes – indeed, its very intelligibility owes to them. And while it would certainly be too much to suggest that unequally shifting arbiters of legitimacy in war are sustained by this form of disarmament advocacy, the mine ban movement's foregrounding of the dire human consequences of indiscriminacy nevertheless merges neatly with the imaginaries of the RMA. In combination with this, the movement's enthusiastic endorsement of Schwarzkopf's position is telling of the post-political frame in which efforts to ban landmines have been confined.

As Žižek (1999) describes it, post-politics is, in essence, the obliteration of the political through the reduction of the overall demand of a particular group to just that demand. That is to say, it is the reduction of a call for better working conditions, for example, to that very specific

issue alone, divesting it of its politicized content as part of a broader push for social justice and therefore also divesting it of the potential to, as Žižek (1999: 204) puts it, ‘function as a metaphoric condensation of...opposition...so that the protest is no longer actually just about that demand, but about the universal dimension that resonates in that particular demand.’ This is key to an understanding of politics as something more than ‘administration of social matters’ – for Žižek (1999: 199; emphasis in original), ‘the political act (intervention) proper is not simply something that exists well within the framework of the existing relations, but something that *changes the very framework that determines how things work.*’ Post-politics takes place within the status quo framework, containing particular demands – even to the extent of answering them – in such a way as to prevent their ‘metaphoric universalization’ (Žižek: 204). The rhetorical/discursive disaggregation of landmines from state practices of organized violence more broadly finds it on just such a post-political terrain, severing at least this particular exercise of disarmament advocacy from any appeal against militarism writ large. The central validity claims of the ban, having cast landmines as the agents of dire human consequences, also divorce it from appeals against the killing of noncombatants with other weapons, including errant PGMs.

### **Conclusion: Disarming Politics**

At base, the essence of the case advanced by the movement to ban them was that antipersonnel landmines are bad weapons because they do not discriminate – that is the position that ultimately accounts for the remarkable success of the campaign to ban them. But the idea of bad weapons, as opposed to bad practices, has some important implications and effects. First, and most fundamentally, it confines disarmament advocacy to a decidedly post-political terrain of

engagement whereon it is possible to imagine a ban on landmines without in any way disturbing the militarized practices that led to the circumstance that there are presently more than a hundred million mines lying in wait in conflict- and post-conflict zones around the world. Indeed, militarized practices are not only moved off the critical agenda, but are actually reinforced to the extent that the crux of the case turns on the idea that landmines are problematic for their *unintended* consequences. That has the effect of reconfirming as legitimate both their *intended* effects and the broader purposes they had been intended to serve by those effects. The demand that landmines be banned is therefore reduced to just that particular demand. And perhaps the best indication of this is that the movement has been unable to parlay its success with landmines into a much hoped-for ban on small arms and light weapons.

But what is perhaps the most troubling implication of the mine ban rhetoric follows from this: agency is shifted to weapons themselves in casting landmines as ‘bad’ and as the site of responsibility for the dire human consequences that have been associated with them. That mystifies the site of responsibility such that when a ‘good’ weapon – a cruise missile, for example – hits other than its intended target questions about responsibility stop at the weapon itself and can be resolved by pointing to a malfunction. In this way, responsibility is contained and managed. The broader significance of the shifting of agency toward weapons comes more fully to light via the rhetorics of the RMA and the imaginaries it sustains: in particular, well popularized understandings of smart bombs and surgical strikes. The whole discourse of ‘smart bombs’ also ascribes individualized agency to weapons. That they are not actually smart matters little when popular imaginaries take at face value the discursive and aesthetic renderings together with attending rhetorics. In instances of implausibly deniable ‘collateral damage’ the weapon is at fault because it has been rendered an autonomous agent. Similarly placing blame for dire



human consequences on weapons, mine ban rhetoric upholds the viability of this. In common with the landmines taboo, the new American way of war turns also on the matter of meaningful discrimination between combatants and noncombatants and of who, or, more precisely, *what* fails to discriminate.

All that is unique, important, and laudable about the Ottawa Process raises urgent questions about disarmament advocacy. What seems clear is that the rhetorical/discursive and aesthetic renderings of the RMA are key to understanding both the successes and the limits of the campaign to ban landmines and, with it, something of the future of disarmament advocacy more broadly. The extent to which it stands as a workable model for future initiatives would seem to be contingent upon the degree to which its success owes to the nexus between a re-emergent discriminatory norm and the advent of weapon-agents. As the frustrated hopes for a follow-on success in the area of small arms and light weapons suggest, this might not be easily replicable. In any event, it would seem to fix quite restrictive limits on the range of weapons that might be singled out for prohibition, whilst ironically depopulating war once more by objectifying victims and confounding the easy identification of whole subject positions whence issue the injuring practices of war.

Confined to a post-political terrain of engagement, the most profound limitation of the approach taken in the landmine ban resides in the forfeiture of any thoroughgoing critique of militarized practices. As noted above, it is probably too much to say that the mine ban movement's adoption of weapon-agent discursive strategies played any significant part in preparing the ideational ground for the sanitized rhetorics of discriminatory in Afghanistan and Iraq. It is, however, implicated in the very imaginaries that sustain those rhetorics and may, no less, have been enabled by them. Besides mystifying sites of agency and responsibility, this

undergirds claims to meaningful discriminatory that have become an increasingly important part of cultivating legitimacy in recourse to war. What is more, it also effectively abandons those bodies marked as combatants, unlawful or otherwise. And while it is widely accepted that combatants, by virtue of their direct participation in Clausewitz's 'other means,' enjoy no special right of protection, this may be to lose sight once more of the ineluctable fact of war's embeddedness in broader socio-political contexts and practices. It is imperative, from this perspective, to bear in mind that the ascription 'combatant' may be no less socially and politically contingent than that of 'unlawful combatant.' We are thus enjoined to consider the significance of conscription and the unequal social determinants characteristic and enabling of much recruitment. These are just some of the thornier implications of undertaking efforts toward disarmament on the terms of the RMA and new ways of war – implications that call for careful reflection on the fundamental values and ultimate objectives of activist and advocacy work in this important area. Such are the disarming politics of our moment.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Officially, the 'Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction.'

<sup>2</sup> The 1987 Soviet-US agreement to eliminate intermediate-range nuclear weapons and the Chemical Weapons Convention which entered into force a decade later are but two then-recent examples.

<sup>3</sup> 'Krieg ist die Fortsetzung der Politik mit anderen Mitteln.' While 'Politik' could be translated as either 'policy' or 'politics,' read in context it is clear that Clausewitz intends the latter, encapsulating not only the ends/means calculus of policy but also a broader terrain of more visceral motives and appetites.

<sup>4</sup> Though the Gulf War did see major confrontations on 'battlefields' as traditionally understood, the possibilities unlocked by relatively reliable standoff weapons also allowed the US military to very selectively take the war to particular spaces at moments of its choosing and in ways that defied containment to a definable field of battle. Even the parceled spatial contiguity of mass bombing raids of the sort carried out since the Second World War was exceeded by the ability to accurately deliver a weapon against a specific target from distances well beyond the range of anything available in the Iraqi arsenal.

<sup>5</sup> The salience of this has been tellingly evinced in other equally striking developments since the end of the Cold War, perhaps most notably in the emergent norm of humanitarian intervention whose most explicit articulation has come as the 'Responsibility to Protect.' For a detailed treatment of the ethical bases of noncombatant immunity in war, see Primoratz (2005). On Iraqi civilians' right to immunity in the Gulf War, see in particular pp. 50-53. The case made here applies equally well to the present wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

<sup>6</sup> On the US Army's inclusion of 'public affairs' as part of 'information operations,' see Payne (2005: 84-5). For a disapproving perspective on US military planners' sensitivity to the political consequences of civilian casualties, see Mueller (2000).

<sup>7</sup> That this same media fascination has not been seen in recent wars is revealing of the extent to which we now take PGMs and their capabilities very much for granted. Indeed, attention has been much more devoted to the surprising circumstance that organized Iraqi resistance did not collapse quite as immediately as we have come to expect.

<sup>8</sup> Gulf War trading cards profile particular weapon systems in the same manner as they do political and military leaders. Briefing video content taken from the perspective of weapons descending to targets that give no indication of human presence is also featured. Underscoring the move into everyday material culture and popular consciousness, the company that produced and marketed the Gulf War trading cards has linked a reissued set as 'pop culture > flashback' on its website where it is featured amongst other card sets devoted to popular television series, movies, and pop music stars. [<http://www.topps.com/Entertainment/Flashback/index.html>], accessed 6 March 2006.

<sup>9</sup> An accompanying placard notes that Tomahawks were 'used extensively in the 1991 Persian Gulf War' and that the display piece was a gift from Tomahawk manufacturer General Dynamics. The same placard contrasts the accuracy of the Tomahawk with the decidedly inaccurate German V-1, noting the latter's extensive use against cities during the Second World War. The implication of meaningful discriminatory between combatants and noncombatants in the case of Tomahawk use is palpable.

<sup>10</sup> In the 1999 Kosovo air strikes the proportion of PGMs had risen to 30 percent and, in the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the number climbed to 60 percent and 70 percent respectively (Canestaro 2004: 452). Whatever the ratio, however, PGMs have dominated briefing content.

<sup>11</sup> Having initially seemed amenable to the idea of a ban and later indicating that it would accede once a workable alternative to antipersonnel landmines was available, the position of the United States is exemplary in this regard. On the more complicated but still pertinent case of India, see Beier (2002). On the role of the taboo in reversing Japan's opposition to the ban, see Adachi (2005).

<sup>12</sup> On the landmines taboo and its broader implications, see Price (1998b).

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, the cover images of the ICBL's annual *Landmine Monitor*, each edition of which has featured a photograph of a child landmine victim.

<sup>14</sup> This emergent technology threatens noncombatants and humanitarian deminers alike with its promise of a new generation of 'smart' mines that will communicate with one another and reposition themselves accordingly to resolve any breach in the minefield. See Marcoux (2003). See also the website of the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) at [http://www.darpa.mil/ato/programs/SHM/ts\\_llnl.html](http://www.darpa.mil/ato/programs/SHM/ts_llnl.html).

<sup>15</sup> The July 2002 air strike that killed as many as 48 guests at a wedding in Afghanistan and injured scores of others is instructive in this regard. In this instance responsibility has been tied to the celebratory firing of small arms by some of the guests. See 'US justifies Afghan wedding bombing' [[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south\\_asia/2242428.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/south_asia/2242428.stm)] accessed 9 March 2006.

<sup>16</sup> See 'An Open Letter to President Clinton', *New York Times* (3 April 1996): A9.

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