

BOISI CENTER INTERVIEWS



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GENERAL JAMES DUBIK is professor of the practice and director of teaching at the Center for Security Studies at Georgetown University's Walsh School of Foreign Service. He spoke with Boisi Center interim director **Erik Owens** before a panel discussion on just war theory in the modern world.

OWENS: Could you tell me a bit about your experience as a soldier, what your career was like, and your experience with war?

DUBIK: I didn't expect to stay in the Army. I expected to come in for three years and leave. It ended up being a bunch of troop assignments and then academic assignments. I spent three-and-a-half years in the 82nd Airborne Division, then three-and-a-half years in the 2nd Ranger Battalion, and then a year as an exchange officer with the Marine Corps. I spent the next seven years in school or teaching. After that I went back to the Ranger Battalions for two-and-a-half more years and back to the infantry for three-and-a-half more years, and then two years in school.

I've had kind of an odd career that was a combination of traditional infantry and line commands. I've commanded everything from 20 to 446,000 people. I've had overseas assignments in Haiti and Bosnia and in Iraq. I had some minor roles to play in Afghanistan, though I was never stationed there. I worked in the Pentagon—again not a standard job. I was selected by the Chief of Staff of the Army as a young lieutenant colonel to write about the end of the Cold War, the beginning of the information age, how those two trends would affect the future of the Army. I did that for two years and

then went back to be infantry brigade commander and worked in Haiti.

My career has been both academic and lecture work (theoretical work in some sense) and practical application have been required.

OWENS: Do you see a disjunction between the academic threads of ways of thinking about just war? You've been to



military academies as well as non-military universities, and you have your Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins. I wonder about the alignment or misalignment that you see between the academic study of the morality of war and the conversations and experience that you had inside the military.

DUBIK: I would say that there is sometimes a gap. Not all theorists, but some theorists forget that it's not really just

a theory. It is a practical guide to using people's lives. When you understand just war theory as that, it takes on a little different hue than merely an academic exercise. I would like to be able to contribute to the set of civilian security specialists who understand that thinking about war is thinking about using lives and putting lives at risk. It inherently has a moral dimension because it's linked to life. We call it just war theory, but I don't view it like that at all.

OWENS: Is the rotation in and out of further educational environments a typical process for people who are promoted?

DUBIK: No.

OWENS: What inspired you to choose to put yourself in further education?

DUBIK: I had a love for philosophy that my professors instilled in me, as an undergraduate, as a searcher for truth. I wanted to figure out a way to do both. I never thought I would have that chance. Once I got in the Army—I love jumping out of airplanes, I love being an infantryman—I thought that kind of life would prevent me from ever going back.

One day in 1977, I got a phone call saying "There's been a big cheating scandal at West Point, and the Army conducted an investigation, and the conclusion of the investigation is we want people who are

good line officers to teach ethics at West Point. You're one. Would you be willing to go back to get a degree in philosophy and teach at West Point?" I thought it was a joke. When I found out it wasn't, I signed up immediately. It was a good thing for me, personally. Later in my career it came in very handy to be the kind of rigorous thinker that philosophy demands. It was also tremendous for my family. Spending two years at Johns Hopkins and three years at West Point during the formative years of my two daughters' lives bonded us together as a family. It would not have happened had I kept my standard career going back to paratroopers and troop units and doing that kind of thing.

OWENS: There's a tradition of warrior-philosophers or philosopher-warriors across the world who have reflected on the morality of war and also the other aspects of war that those of us who haven't been in conflict can't understand. When you look at that sort of literature or conversation, do you connect with it?

DUBIK: Yes, I connect with it. I've read a lot of World War II fiction, Vietnam fiction, Korean War fiction, as well as firsthand accounts. There's an unsettling consistency in every one of them. It's the same kind of feeling I get when I study philosophy. When you see the same kind of idea pop up—when Socrates says it, and Aristotle says it, and then Hume—when you see that consistency, you know you have something that's really important in human experience. When you see the same consistency pop up war after war after war, whether soldiers are talking about it or leaders are talking about it, you get the same kind of powerful association with something deeply human.

OWENS: How would you say that just war thinking has been embedded in the military from your experience?

DUBIK: There are several ways. First, Michael Walzer's book,* which is the seminal book for those modern Western

thoughts, has been used at West Point for years and years. You have generations of officers who, as part of their core curriculum, have to study not just ethics, but ethics within the context of just war theory. That was the course that I taught when I was there. You have that kind of base. The same is true in ROTC, but it's not as rigorous because ROTC, you have a variety of majors and places.

Second, it's embedded in the rules of engagement that are taught at the Command General Staff College and at Army War College—as in other services, but I'm familiar more with the Army. Those

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rules of engagement are the rules that govern behavior on the battlefield, and the rules of engagement are reflective of *jus in bello* principle, as well as the 'law of land warfare.'

OWENS: Actually, I think many civilians don't appreciate that, and the friends I have in the military or who teach at mil-

itary academies constantly engage morality or rules of engagement, as well as strategic thinking as part of their regular routine. Civilians frequently need to be reminded that this is a moral enterprise, not simply a technical enterprise from within the military, as well.

DUBIK: I don't want to transition to the book too quickly, but when you look at the traditional *jus in bello* principle, you don't find principles to govern actions at the strategic level. The gap gives the impression that morality of war applies to soldiers on the battlefield, but not so much to political leaders and senior generals and the captains. That's a little different space, and I want to explore that space.

OWENS: Can you lay out again in a little more detail the lacuna that's missing in moral reflection on this?

DUBIK: Traditional just war theory has two parts, now there are three. *Jus ad bellum*, *jus in bello*, *jus post bellum*—justice in going to war, justice in the conduct of war, and justice after war.

Traditionally, the first one, justice in going to war, has been the realm of political leaders. They decide to go to war. The principles that Walzer, Brian Orend, and other people lay out, historically and contemporaneously, are the realm of political leaders. Justice in the conduct of war, almost universally, is the realm of military leaders. That's when you're talking about tactics, what happens on the battlefield—fighting, combat. But the conduct of war is more than just fighting. War has to be waged at the strategic level, and that's what I was trying to highlight in the book. Waging of war is related to, but separate from, the fighting of war.

Waging war includes setting strategic aims, and laying out military and civilian strategies, policies and campaigns that will lead to achieving those strategic aims. Battles have meaning only within the context of their contribution to the strategic aim. If you don't wage the war

**Just and Unjust Wars*, Basic Books, 1977

correctly, you can fight all day long, but you're not going to accomplish anything.

The question is, how are you using those lives? Traditional just war theory handles the use of force at the tactical level. However, at the strategic level, there's no discussion of the moral dimension of using lives well or poorly.

OWENS: There are some that put a category of proportionality in the strategic side of things, not simply in the tactical side of things. Would you say that reflects a portion of what you're talking about?

DUBIK: In the criteria for going to war, *jus ad bellum*, you can argue that in the criteria of proportionality and in the criteria of probability of success, that embedded in those decisions is at least some seed of understanding of execution. I would give you that. But the extent of the execution is being linked to the *jus ad bellum* cases. That's good that they're there. That's necessary but insufficient because decisions are then executed, and in the execution, the conduct of war is the execution of initial decisions.

Those decisions have an effect on the battlefield. The decisions for war aims for strategies, for policies, for campaigns, and for resource allocations. How the strategic level is organized to decide and adapt during the war, how well the strategic side continues through legitimacy or lets legitimacy erode—those are unique to the strategic level, and related to what happens on a battlefield. I couldn't find even many seeds of those in traditional *jus in bello* principles. That's where I focused.

OWENS: You have several case studies in the book that you're using to highlight this. Does one of those resonate most clearly with you?

DUBIK: Several resonate for different reasons. The Civil War and World War II resonate with me because they're good examples of action at the strategic level that illustrates the kind of responsibilities that have to go on at the waging war level.



We don't usually read our history that way.

Interestingly, there have been four or five books from the war-waging perspective that have just come out in the last two years. They show, in both of those cases, the Lincoln administration and the Roosevelt administration took the war waging responsibilities seriously. They organized themselves, they argued about aims, they argued about strategy, and they adapted their strategy. They set up organizational bureaucracies to make decisions and carry them out, to prepare them. That was as much part of the conduct of World War II and the conduct of the Civil War as the battles were. Now the battles get all the media play, I think that's fair, but the battles have no meaning without more context. Those two resonate with me because they're great examples of what we should be doing when we wage war.

Of course, then you've got the not so good examples. Vietnam is the prime example. The Johnson administration did everything except organize for a war. They did not focus on strategy, policies, and campaigns that achieved war aims. They had clear war aims—that's pretty clear when you read the history—but the dialogue among the civil and military leaders was anything but legitimate. They were hiding things from one another. As

one book said, they were derelict in their duty at the strategic level.

The Gulf War is another example where we did relatively well. It's hard to say for sure because it's such a short war. It's almost not a war, it's more like a decisive battle. But you see the seeds of organization, you see the seeds of argument, you see the seeds of dialogue, of linkages, of strategies and campaigns to a strategic aim. Most of that has been absent for the last fifteen years. That's the tragedy. We've continued to use lives and fight well, but we have not really taken our war-waging responsibilities well.

OWENS: How does this relate to the tensions between counterterrorism and counterinsurgency? You were at the center of this conversation operationally in Iraq during the surge.

DUBIK: It's an argument that happened over time in both administrations. It was never resolved. You continue to fight the war with these two competing understandings of what you're doing. However, you can't attain an aim that you can't agree on, and you have competing strategies. You have competing resources because the resources required to do a counterinsurgency are different than those of counterterrorism.

Personally, I don't see why we couldn't have come to some agreement, but we

haven't. We now have a global revolutionary movement going on. Al Qaeda and ISIS, by their own documents, want to overturn what they call apostate governments, replace governments with fundamentalist Islamic states along their idiosyncratic understanding of Islam, and change the international environment. If a state tried to do that, we would clearly say, this is a revolutionary state, but for some reason we can't have a conversation to understand that this is what's occurring. I've been disappointed with the results of the dialogue that has occurred, if any has occurred at all.

OWENS: Given the context that we're speaking today, and the early days of the Iraqi-led move on Mosul to retake that part of ISIS's territory, what sort of wisdom do you think comes from your argument, looking forward the next five years of this conflict, because it's not going to go away quickly.

DUBIK: It won't go away. I hope it's five years. What happens after we defeat ISIS? What's the strategic aim? Defeating ISIS is not a strategic aim. Defeating Al Qaeda is not a strategic aim. That's a military objective as a means towards something. What is that something? I don't see it; I haven't seen it yet. My buddy General Petraeus, when he was a two-star asked the question, how does this end? Is anybody going to answer that?

Again, we have a situation. Now maybe it wasn't as clear in 2001 and '02 and '03. By 2004 it was very clear, that we were fighting a revolutionary movement. We just don't want to admit that because it's too hard. So we're fighting a counterterrorist—occasionally a counterinsurgency, but mostly a counterterrorist—campaign against someone who's fighting a revolutionary campaign. As long as you have two different visions of what's going on, the chances of success are really low. Chances of our success are really low, chances of their success are increasing.

OWENS: What's the gap between a terror-based regime and a revolutionary-based regime?

DUBIK: If you're a revolutionary, you have a political goal. You're not just terrorizing for terrorism's sake. You have a political goal and your political goal, in this case, is eliminate states run by apostates. That's why Syria is under attack, that's why Iraq is under attack, and that's why Jordan is going to be under attack. This is not an accident. In 1996, they published their political aims. They're using terror and insurgencies to achieve their political goal to change political regimes. That's what's going on.

OWENS: That's helpful. Sometimes on our end we talk about terrorism being, by definition, political. But you're talking

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terror-based regimes having small-scale political aims, whereas revolutionary-regimes use terror and other means for the larger political goal.

DUBIK: Yes, for the larger political goal.

OWENS: Looking back to World War II, one of the questions at this level of thinking has always been the strategic and tac-

tical relationships around the bombing campaigns, the firebombing campaigns, and of course, the use of nuclear weapons. How does your vision of this reflect on those sorts of conversation?

DUBIK: I stayed away from nuclear weapons because that's a whole separate case altogether. In retrospect, almost everyone understands that at some point our WWII bombing campaigns crossed the line from legitimate acts of war to illegitimate acts of war. That's already covered well in traditional just war theory, *jus in bello* principles—the principal of proportionality, the principle of double effect, and the principle of due care. These are all well-established principles to handle that kind of stuff.

OWENS: Given the arc of your career—you've had a long and distinguished military career—what sort of change over time do you see in this thinking? Is there an arc of progress?

DUBIK: I don't see an arc of progress. I see two arcs—one arc that connects with conventional war, in which World War II is the prime example. In general, the United States has done better at the strategic level in conventional war. For examples in irregular, non-conventional war, that arc is at best a sine curve, with good and bad, within wars and between wars.

Part of the problem is this distinction that war equals conventional combat. If you're not doing conventional combat, then you're not doing war, you're doing something else. Since you're doing something else, the things that we would do in war don't apply. That thinking gets us into the wrong conceptual space. When you're in the wrong conceptual space, you make the wrong decisions, you take the wrong actions, and you can't adapt because you don't have the right framework in which to adapt. In general, you're more confused.

I see that in Vietnam. I see that in the wars that are going on now. I see that in the discussion of the supposed gray zone

war, which I don't buy. And in hybrid war, which again, I understand the categories from a technical, professional sense. These are unhelpful categories because you are tempted and seduced to believe they're not war, so you're searching for some other set of principles about which to act. Really, they may not be war legally, socially, or politically, but conceptually, they're war.

OWENS: And for the people who experience it on the ground...

DUBIK: Oh, there's no doubt that's war.

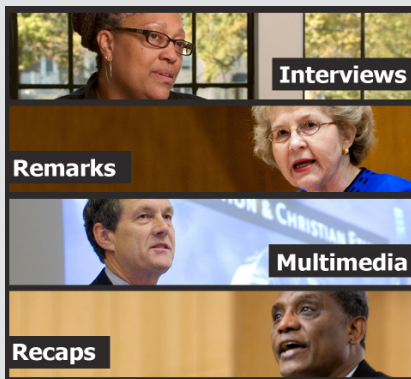
OWENS: This speaks, of course, to this question of CIA involvement in some of this work, as well as many other things. That's a real challenge.

DUBIK: The country has yet to decide, are we at war with Al Qaeda and ISIS? Is this a police action that's got bigger bombs? If it's a police action, you take one set of criteria by which you judge actions. If it's war, you take another set. If it's both, which I think it is, then where is the conceptual work done by our diplomats, our lawyers, and our philosophers on stitching the two together? We have been ignoring it for 15 years, trying to act as if you can pick: well this is a war act and this is a not-war act, and this is a



crime act. It has not led us to the conceptual rigor or the strategic rigor necessary to use lives well. We're putting the political community at risk, us, we're putting the innocent at risk, we're using the lives of our citizens without really having done the upfront intellectual work or strategic work.

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