



# IDSS COMMENTARIES (89/2006)

*IDSS Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of IDSS.*

---

## **Breda and Guernica: Two Images of War in South Lebanon**

*Paul T. Mitchell\**

25 August 2006

IN 1638, Spanish Renaissance painter Diego Velasquez unveiled his masterpiece “The Surrender at Breda”, commemorating the capture of the Dutch town of Breda by Spanish forces under their general Ambrosio Spinola in 1625. Nearly 300 years later, the cubist maestro, Pablo Picasso, painted “Guernica” to memorialize the Nazi bombing of that eponymous village during the Spanish Civil War. Together, these paintings are bookends to our understanding of modern warfare. Indeed, the messages that each render to the modern viewer play out currently in the present struggle in Lebanon.

### **The Rules of War: The End of the Siege of Breda**

The Siege of Breda took place in the midst of the bloodiest war Europe had experienced until the Second World War. The city of Breda was part of the “Spanish Netherlands” that had fought and won its independence at the close of the sixteenth century. The truce between Spain and the Netherlands ultimately collapsed and after a seven-month siege, the Dutch commander, Maurice of Nassau, surrendered the city to Spinola in February of 1625, thus saving it from the customary sack.



Vasquez’s painting is interesting from a number of points of view. The vanquished and the victor appear on the same plane, conveying a sense of equality that is often missing in paintings treating the subject of surrender. Indeed, Spinola, the central figure appearing on the right hand side, extends his hand magnimoniously to the shoulder of Maurice on the left, as if to reassure the gentleman that while he has lost the battle, he has done the “right thing” by surrendering the town before a final Spanish assault and the murderous chaos of a sack that would inevitably accompany such an action.

For his part, Maurice appears positively grateful that Spinola has offered such advantageous terms, avoiding the typical humiliation of defeat. In the side areas and the background we see both armies in relative order, their pennants flying. Soldiers of both sides are still carrying

their firearms, although they are across their shoulders in a position of rest, pointed away from each other.

The painting conveys a very specific sense of the nature of warfare. The relationship that is depicted between the victor and the vanquished demonstrates an attitude of the legitimacy of war in the relations between nations, and the rule-based order that underlies its practice. It is a highly ritualized portrayal of conflict, with roles and behaviour strictly codified. Each side has accepted these rules and is behaving accordingly; indeed, one could easily transpose the image into a scene from a sporting event, with each team leaving the playing field after shaking one another's hands.

### **War as Chaos: Guernica**

Picasso gives us a very different picture of war. His *Guernica* was painted in 1937, the same year as the German air raid and was exhibited by the Spanish Republican government at the Paris World Fair, later the same year. To a German officer inquiring if he had created the painting, Picasso reportedly said that he had thought, rather, that the Germans had something to do with it. *Guernica* has since entered the iconography of the peace movement. During Vietnam, it was the scene of quiet protest by those opposed to the war, in its home at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.



The painting departs radically from the classical style of Velasquez. Its cubist style fits naturally with the ugly and chaotic form of warfare itself. In the painting, we see the tortured bodies of men, women, and children, as well as animals, all appealing to an impassive sky dominated by the sun in the form of a light bulb. It is as if the world has gone mad, descending into a form of Hell itself, made manifest by the cruel reason of modern technology. There are no rules here, no polite forms of society. Nor is there any hope of response: the only man in the scene lies dead with a broken sword in his palm.

### **Rules and Chaos: Israel and Hizbullah**

Both of these scenes describe a reality about war. As Clausewitz teaches us, war as the continuation of policy, is subject to the rules that states establish for its conduct. War is a continuation of a dialogue between belligerents where the use of force has replaced words. Were war the untrammelled descent into violence that some imagine it to be, our wars would

be far worse than we can imagine. As terrible as the action of some American troops have been, the actions of the US military in Iraq pale beside those of the Waffen SS in Poland and the Soviet Union. Still, as events in South Lebanon have shown, war is fundamentally brutal and at its most basic, it is irreducibly about barbaric destruction: of the enemy and all his sources of support.

In nations that have enjoyed the relative stability of the Cold War and the brief spring that followed its end, we have forgotten both Picasso and Clausewitz's commentaries on warfare. We have sought to transform warfare into a bureaucratic process, governed by rationality and rules as if the existential struggle between Hizbullah and Israel could be run like some bizarre debating society of the Hague. Each pursues incompatible objectives; there is no common ground between them. A pause in violence is only a pause, not a step towards a solution, as long as Israel remains committed to its continued existence, and Hizbullah, to its destruction.

Thus, the precarious UN-brokered ceasefire agreement in Lebanon *must* ultimately break down. It would be well that it does so before hapless and helpless peacekeeping troops are drawn into the fray. Were this war more like the image of Velasquez, a limited conflict between two parties accepting the legitimacy of the other, they might have a role to play.

Sadly, sooner or later, peacekeepers will be forced to make a choice in terms of preventing Hizbullah from attempting to rearm, or ignoring such action. In either case, they will have declared sides and the pretence of any peacekeeping neutrality will be shattered. Into the fray steps the madness of Guernica, willing order through the brutal application of violence. It's not desirable, it's not rational, but as the American scholar Stanley Hoffman once observed: "War burns a way through when no other means will suffice."

---

\* Paul T. Mitchell is an Associate Professor with the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies, Nanyang Technological University