

Comment

An end to Tournaments

The desire to harm, cruelty in vengeance, an implacable spirit, unquenched ferocity in revolt, the desire to dominate and other similar attitudes, if there are any, that is what the law condemns in warfare.

St Augustine

Many preachers have felt, at one time or another, that their sermons fall on deaf ears and closed or hostile hearts. The fourteenth-century English Dominican friar, John Bromyard, makes frequent reference in his *Summa Predicantium*, a guide for preachers, to the imperviousness of the English to the Word of God: 'Not only the queen of Sheba, but all the nations of Christendom can rise in judgement against the English, for there is not a Christian people which so rarely or so unwillingly hears the word of God.' Any communicator is faced with the challenge of how to present a message in popular terms without obscuring or deforming its integrity. Bromyard criticised many aspects of contemporary life, but had a particular aversion to tournaments, a pastime in which ritualised violence was turned to entertainment for the rich and the powerful. Tournaments were not foolish and vain exercises in sham conflict, they were seen as ways of channelling the bellicose energies of the warrior class into a productive exercise for war. Bromyard saw them simply as distractions which obscured the fact that, in the end, it was always the poor who paid for the nobility's pleasure. The modern equivalent of the tournament is, of course, the ritualised conflict fought out by differing political and ideological power blocs in the territories of smaller nations. Today, as in Bromyard's day, it is the poor who suffer.

It is a commonplace to describe war as the continuance of diplomacy by other means. However, the increasing sophistication of mass-media techniques has incorporated military adventurism into the vocabulary of domestic politics. One of the lessons of the Vietnam war was the importance of controlling the reporting of military conflict. The Vietnam experience encouraged the tight rein kept on the press during the British reconquest of the Falkland Islands and the the American invasion of Grenada, a policy that was equally obvious during the Gulf War. It is ironic that although the launching of 'Desert Storm' precipitated an unprecedented intensity of news coverage around the world involving, in some countries at least, more or less non-stop reporting of the war very little solid fact emerged. More journalists reported the conflict in the Gulf than perhaps any other similar engagement, but their activities were rigorously controlled, they were kept away from the front and received the bulk of their information from

carefully packaged briefings from highly-qualified military personnel who presented elegantly etched accounts of what was not really happening. Newspapers could have saved a great deal of money on journalists' expenses by keeping their reporters in London and sending them to briefings at the Ministry of Defence. They might have been better-informed, if no wiser.

John Bromyard, the medieval preacher, has many useful pieces of advice for those attempting to communicate a particular message. The preacher, he says, should carefully observe the reactions of the congregation whilst he is addressing them. 'Just as a stone thrown into a crowd makes him cry out upon whose head it falls, and by the cry may be known where it fell, so when the word of the preacher is cast at random into a multitude of people, murmurs and abuse show who has been touched.' In other words, once you have hit a seam mine it carefully. Modern wars are fought not simply to ensure the triumph of diplomatic interests abroad, but to secure domestic political advantage. Wars, like medieval tournaments, are often presented as chivalric exercises in defence of right during which concepts of honour, shame and heroism are brought into play. The appeal to such notions proves popular at home, as the overwhelming consensus in favour of censorship of the press in wartime discloses. Governments in trouble seldom find the appeal of short-term political advantage resistible. The Kuwaiti government showed itself keenly aware of this by its employment of Hill and Knowlton, the prestigious American public relations firm, to assist them in their lobbying of American opinion. War is now the continuance of public relations by other means; diplomacy is outmoded.

This year there will be elections in the United Kingdom and the United States, two of the most belligerent powers in the Gulf War. Both countries are in serious decline, with their administrations in varying degrees of difficulty. Even now candidates for office are closely observing the reactions of their audiences, tossing pebbles into the pool to see which causes the most significant ripple. Already pressure is mounting for renewed military activity in some part of the Arab world. President Bush must find it difficult to forget that during the Gulf War he stood higher in the opinion polls than any previous American president. During a campaign in which his opponents seem to be finding the issues, the attractions of a triumph may outweigh prudent counsels. Already Colonel Gaddafi is beginning to shift uneasily in Libya, whilst Saddam Hussein must feel that the next blow will not be long delayed. Perhaps the Iraqi dead during and after the Gulf war, conservatively estimated at 100,000, might be allowed the traditional message to triumphant generals: *sic transit gloria mundi*.

AJW