

The Strategic and Political Impacts of Collateral Damage from Strike Warfare

Naval Postgraduate School



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It is hard to argue that there is a more prevailing issue than collateral damage when discussing strike warfare today. The outlook of the United States and other militaries regarding bombing operations, particularly concern about collateral damage, is a historically contingent process. This book examines three case studies—the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Kosovo air campaign—to examine the impact of concern about collateral damage on U.S. policy and strategy. It analyzes the disparity between collateral damage effects at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels over the span of a half century. A significant amount of research on the effects of collateral damage from strike warfare focuses on legal, humanitarian, and moral issues. To oversimplify, killing non-combatants is bad, but it happens, and not always by accident. Therefore, it is instructive to gain knowledge on how it affects policy and strategy. Depending on the conflict and time period, U.S. administrations and war strategists have put the priority of mitigating collateral damage at different levels. Understanding the reasoning and timing behind the political and military attitudes toward collateral damage is helpful to understanding how the potential for civilian casualties fits into military strategy as a whole.

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