Beyond Just War: Joan of Arc and Fighting Without Malice

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There is much to learn about how to judge armed conflicts from a teenager who lived during the Middle Ages. The youngest general of either sex to ever command an army, the military leadership of Joan of Arc (1412-1431) is a great, and vastly underappreciated, resource for thinking through if, when, and how armed conflict should proceed. Such questions are often addressed by just war theorists, whose advocates position themselves between realists (all is fair in love and war) and pacifists (armed conflict is depraved and always wrong). Just war theorists expect that humans will encounter aspects of a Thucydian or Hobbesian lived reality in which innocents are rendered vulnerable to attack. They thereby seek to provide some moral criteria for armed conflict if it arises. They are wont to claim it will. The strengths of just war doctrine notwithstanding, the case of Joan of Arc offers an opportunity to explore some of its limits. Joan’s military behavior goes beyond just war doctrine. Does this mean she supersedes the criteria without fundamentally altering it? Or does this “going beyond” qualitatively change how we ought to be thinking about armed conflicts? I contend that her challenging example is not merely supererogatory, but indeed offers a compelling alternative to some dominant precepts of just war doctrine.

Joan of Arc’s military activities are a rich resource for exploring the theoretical claims of just war doctrine, yet she has received scant attention in this regard. Perhaps she is perceived as too distant to be relevant for today. Feudal times seem remote, this is true. Yet Augustine (354-430) and Aquinas (1225-1274), the chief architects of just war doctrine, hail from distant eras. Aquinas precedes Joan by about two centuries while Augustine lived during the decline of ancient Rome. These two political thinkers’ framings of just war doctrine continue to influence leading scholars on the subject. For example, Michael Walzer takes many of his bearings from these theologians in his widely discussed Just and Unjust Wars. It is, as he says, a very old
argument. The two saints’ criteria has not much changed over the centuries. There is, however, a third saint of old, namely Joan of Arc, an examination of whose military behavior challenges the established doctrine. Unlike Augustine and Aquinas, Joan did not theorize about rules of war, but rather fought in one. Thus, I explore Joan’s actions on the battlefield to show the inadequacies of just war doctrine. I limit myself to how she engaged with her enemies on the battlefield, specifically the English soldiers during what came to be known as the Hundred Years’ War (1337-1453).

Joan famously entered into this long conflict in 1429, the 92nd year of fighting between English and French dynastic factions. She was just 17 when she began to lead the French army, the one aligned with the southern Armanacs against the occupying English and their Burgundian collaborators in some northern French territories, including Paris. Joan was a peasant from Domrémy in the province of Lorraine. Situated in the northeast, it was between the borders of the two opposed French forces.

Adding to the drama was the fact that Charles VII, the uncrowned king to be--thus his title of dauphin--was disinherited by his father in 1420, suggesting he was not his biological son. Meanwhile, his mother made a pact with the English (the treaty of Troyes) to have Henry V’s heir assume the French throne, which he did from Paris in 1422 when Joan was ten. Moreover, Joan grew up with the prophecy ascribed to Merlin that the French territories would be lost by one woman and gained by another. Joan believed she was the one to come to the rescue. And she did.

Despite Charles’s questionable status in regard to claiming the French throne, Joan saw his coronation as a necessary step to stop the English assaults on France. However tenuous a French king he would make, an English king in French land was thoroughly unacceptable. The
English had been ravaging her homeland all her life and for about 75 years before she was born.

Mark Twain, who spent 12 years researching Joan’s life, describes the state of the French during Joan’s time:

Ah, France had fallen low - so low! For more than three-quarters of a century the English fangs had been bedded in her flesh, and so cowed had her armies become by ceaseless rout and defeat that it was said and accepted that the mere sight of an English army was sufficient to put a French one to flight” (Twain).

Thus was the situation when Joan intervened in the political and military spheres of her day. A failure to intercede would lead the French to complete capitulation, a disaster that would mean the French would be forever under English rule. Joan believed it crucial that the dauphin be established as the king of her nearly resigned people. And she would insist that this happen in the customary fashion and time-honored place. The crowning event would occur in the church at Reims, where French kings had been traditionally crowned, replete with the anointing and symbolic oil that his predecessors received. This highly charged place, along with full pomp and circumstance, would serve to solidify his legitimacy, which was questioned. This event would also help restore French morale in the face of the encroaching English. The French were still suffering heavy losses estimated at 2,500 from the English victory over the French in Agincourt (1215). The Anglo-Burgundian alliance followed in 1216.

Joan remained determined to drive out the invading English from French territories, and have the dauphin crowned, though Charles VII would prove a most ungrateful king, failing to aid Joan in her hours of need. Indeed, he turned her over to the Anglo-Burgundian side to do with what they would. Her burning at the stake in 1431, made so famous throughout the ages, occurred because of the cowardly king and the avaricious bishops of Burgundy, particularly
Pierre Cauchon from Beauvais, who sought to curry favor with the English. Both conspired against her.

I have no doubt that Joan surely would have welcomed the English if they were not vying for the French throne and killing scores of French people to win it. She was kind to all, strangers included, but the English were exploiting the French squabbles for their own dynastic gain. She was compelled to stop this aggression. It is important to make these points about Joan’s generous nature in light of how today’s Le Pen party in France seeks to claim her as their symbol of French nationalism. This is an abomination.

Just as the Vichy government misappropriated Joan during the Nazi occupation, so too Le Pen misappropriates Joan today. Marine le Pen is frequently photographed with statues of Joan in the highly visible background. Joan’s sense of France grew out of defending an attacked people, namely her neighbors and friends. There was not a xenophobic or jingoistic bone in Joan’s body. This will be clearly demonstrated as I discuss how she treated her enemy combatants with a tenderness not generally seen in generals.

Like Socrates’ famed claim that the true sign of a philosopher-king or queen is the fact that they do not want the job (while the self-interested or ill-guided rush to fill it), the best generals will not fight, save for worthy causes. While Joan preferred to continue domestic and simple chores than to throw herself into the political and military battles of her day, she was driven to perform the latter as a matter of course. Her position is recorded by Jean de Metz who testified at her trial. Metz knew her well and served as one of her knights. Metz told the court that Joan said the following:

I must be at the King's side... there will be no help (for the kingdom) if not from me. Although I would rather have remained spinning [wool] at my mother's side... yet must I go and must I do this thing, for my Lord wills that I do so (Pernoud 35).
She said she was inspired by her voices, which she started to hear by about age 12. At first these welcome intrusions led her to prayer and piety. A few years later, they instructed her to stop the English forces from pulverizing the French. When she was 16, the voices of Saints Catherine, Michael, and Margaret led her to Vaucouleurs in May 1428 to request a meeting with the dauphin. Rebuffed in her appeal to join his cause, she returned a year later. Joan’s persistence paid off. This time she won his ear. Knights began to pledge their allegiance to her. The dauphin took his chances on her and she was soon leading the Armanac troops. She was a very effective military strategist and commander. Under her direction, her forces circumvented the English siege of Orléans. This was a decisive turning point and Joan was now material for legends.

Some claim Joan never lost a battle. Whether this is true or not, one thing is certain. She never lost her humanity while in battle. Her military acumen is astonishing because she had no formal training. This is truly remarkable. But much more remarkable than this was that she never demonized her enemies. This is a rare, if not a singular, feat for a general. This most noble of her storied activities led Twain to call Joan the most just human being to have ever lived. This was not a hasty judgment on Twain’s part. As already noted, he thrust himself into a deep study of Joan’s time period and her life in particular. This included ten years in the French archives researching Joan’s life. He combed through the records of her two trials which have remained intact, making her the most documented person of her time. His work culminated in what he regarded as his best book, a fictionalized memoir about Joan as told by her page in the year 1492. Not the celebrated *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* did he regard as his best

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work, but the one on Joan. This masterpiece, little known, is entitled *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc*. Twain’s superlative praise for Joan and her sense of justice invites me to think through how her actions relate to just war theory.

For those familiar with just war theory and its several tenets, it is apparent that Joan would pass the standard requirements for having fought a just war. Moreover, she would pass with flying colors. Here are the primary conditions for Just War, as stipulated by its leading theorists: just cause, right intention, last resort, proportionality, reasonable prospect, and right authority. One could readily claim that Joan is the poster child for just war, if one wanted to do this. Despite a large and growing literature on both Joan and just war theory, I am not aware of anyone who has brought the two together. My purposes in doing so here are two-fold. First, to demonstrate that Joan’s military actions exceeded the prevailing criteria. But the second thing is much more pertinent and connects to the crux of my own claim. I maintain that Joan challenges the just war criteria in important ways. That she fought without malice invites a re-thinking of just war doctrine. I will discuss her capacity to mourn her enemies immediately following my demonstrated claim that it is easy to show that Joan meets and exceeds the demands for just war.

According to just war theory Joan’s cause was just (*jus ad bellum*) primarily because she led an army in a war of defense, not one of aggression. Only fighting back against monstrous aggression can be justifiable. Joan loved family and friends and was merciful. She would never have started a fight with anyone, her nature so very generous. It was the reality of the aggressive forces around her that rallied her spirit to defend all she knew and treasured. If you like, it was the spirited part of her soul, in Plato’s understanding, that was rising to the occasion of righteous indignation. She desired to fight a wrong, to press back against an aggressive force. The English
were claiming French territories and ravaging her people. She felt a compulsion to fight back. She did not begin what became known as the Hundred Years’ War. She wanted only to end it.

In addition, one could also credibly point out that her actions on the battlefield accorded with criteria for rules of war or military conduct (*jus in bello*). More specifically, she achieved her purposes of driving the English out of France, but she also exercised great restraint in her military decisions to defeat the offending enemy. Joan fought against aggression, but she maintained her deep regard for all human beings, friend and foe. This goes beyond what just war demands. Some just war theorists call for rules to regulate the treatment of prisoners of war. Prohibiting torture would be an example. There is no call to mourn the loss of one’s enemies, however.

The fact that Joan mourned her enemies, even though she defeated them, is little known and not much remembered. Joan never lost her humanity as her actions demonstrate so movingly. I think that her care for the welfare of her enemies is the reason for this. Clausewitz’s nineteenth century claim that those in charge must demonize the enemy would be a complete anathema to Joan. In his review of Michael Walzer’s *Aguing About War*, Gary Wills writes the following:

> Andrey has attained the state Clausewitz says is necessary to war—*Hass*, hatred for the foe. There is in all sane people a hesitation to kill, whether from timidity, disorientation, or scruple. That is why so many bullets are fired in war but not at the target, why so many bombs are dropped but not where they were supposed to be. It is the task of those in charge of war to override these hesitations, and the only sure way of doing that is to demonize the enemy, so that hating him is not only condonable but commendable (Wills).

Joan was a great mixture of what Machiavelli thought unalloyed. She was a woman of action and decisiveness, thus exhibiting *virtù*. She was out to beat *fortuna* as best she could, for to remain inactive against aggression would spell ultimate defeat. But she was also full of virtue,
understood as *arête* or moral excellence. What the Florentine diplomat and political thinker thought to pull apart, Joan would not separate. She brought both together in her leadership. This made her very effective in the best sense of taking action, but she never lost her strong moral core for all her decisiveness. In addition to her *effective* leadership, she was deeply *affective* on the battlefield.

She demonstrated genuine grief for the losses on all sides. No human being was ever rendered superfluous for Joan. In Arendtian terms, Joan never converted her enemies into “the what,” nameless, thing-like, utterly disposable. They ever retained the status of “the who,” named, human, grievable.

That Harry Truman could claim he never lost any sleep over his decision to drop the Atom Bomb on Nagasaki and Hiroshima is the opposite of Joan of Arc’s understanding of her enemies. Truman converted humans into utter things. More recently, George Bush the younger would say similar things about his decisions. Joan was haunted by the deaths of her enemies. To not be very troubled by the losses on all sides is a clear sign of trouble. Joan even extended her grief and her mercy to her enemy combatants.

With tenderness, Joan comforted and mourned the deaths of many an English soldier as they died in her arms. Often moved to tears, she descended from her horse to hold a dying Englishman in her arms. On her final day she would experience a similar gesture of compassion from an Englishman, who broke a stick in two to make a cross for her as she called out for one from her famed stake. Not the spineless King Charles VII, ungrateful and treacherous to the young woman who delivered him to the throne, but a kindly Englishman met her last wish. These kinds of relations show that humanity transcends divisions while barbarity can exist on all
sides. Joan’s challenge to just war theory, while she surpasses all its requirements, take us into
new territory. Could it be that in mourning our enemies we learn to have far fewer?

Joan lifted up her own people, but she never belittled the English. She fought
without malice. By showing how she treated her enemy combatants, I have sought to
stress this as a key component for how we think about armed conflicts.

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