

The Danger of Unfatal Wounds

by George Friedman - October 28, 2024

“If you must wound someone, it is better to kill him.”

I’ve encountered some version of this missive throughout the course of my career. And like any good quote, this one’s precise origin is unimportant, but its meaning is instructive: If you need to hurt your enemy, hurt them so badly that they can’t or won’t seek revenge. An unfatal wound, conversely, is the worst course of action because it would fail to end the conflict and would almost certainly provoke a response, which could be immediate or delivered at a time most harmful to the original attacker. The original attacker might retaliate in kind, responding at the worst possible time to inflict the most pain on the original victim. In the long run, an unfatal wound would engender extreme actions from both sides, resulting in action that is much more serious than the original wound. Both sides would content themselves by preparing for the next round and causing more wounds that accelerate violence without bringing it to a close. In all this, rage fuels more suffering and more wounds. Rather than a missive of malice, the quote argues that killing the enemy is both kinder and more effective than wounding them – kinder in that killing one enemy early on obviates the need for future, wider conflict. The original attacker wins, the loser dies, and resentments are forestalled.

I have been thinking of the condition of the world today, and it seems to me that this concept can explain at least some of its daily horrors. It would not interrupt any particular cycle of cruelty, but it could at least have brought an end to some wars. In World War II, Japan wounded the United States when it attacked Pearl Harbor. In response, the U.S. chose to not simply wound Japan but utterly crush it. The logic here is repulsive, so it should evoke repulsion. But if we look at the U.S. response to what the Japanese saw as a minor wound, it was for everyone’s benefit. Little wounds didn’t bring the war to an end. But when it did end, Japan eventually emerged wealthy and happy. Again, the use of atomic weapons to end the war is at the very least morally questionable, but it accelerated the end of a war in which both sides become allies.

In the Middle East today, as Hamas and Israel are locked in a cold-blooded conflict, one could argue that Hamas merely wounded Israel on Oct. 7. Israel’s response is to try to kill Hamas so that it cannot wound Israel again.

This is not to say that the quote has no moral or realistic weaknesses. It has both. We should always distrust clever sayings. But when I think about it, it may explain decisions being made with increased

frequency in today's conflicts. The choice may not be between killing and wounding, but when a nation goes to war and chooses its strategy, in the grim moment in the command centers around the world, it seems that inflicting a wound must be answered with killing.

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