

## Collateral Damage

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When Americans hear the innocuous term "collateral damage," the implications are not always clear. Nonetheless, according to the USAF Intelligence Targeted Guide (1998) "collateral damage is unintentional damage or incidental damage affecting facilities, equipment or personnel occurring as a result of military actions directed against targeted enemy forces or facilities." Accordingly, such damage can occur to friendly, neutral, and even enemy forces.

In essence, collateral damage occurs when military action does not coincide with the intended military target or the non-military target is expendable. For example, military planners may consider some civilian deaths or damages to civilian assets resulting from military actions an acceptable option. Similarly, government officials may consider the internment of non-whites an acceptable by-product of the war effort.

Thus, often the term "collateral damage," is devoid of language imagery. As a result, the public is oblivious, or uncaring, to the loss of life, or the violations of individual rights, exercised in their name. However, to the victims and their families the term has a lifetime meaning and will engender a generation of animosity. Therefore, "collateral damage" does not have the same meaning to the assailant and the assailed. Therefore, it is an imprecise communication term. Apparently, government officials and some in the media seldom use the term to provide the public with full and accurate information.

Consequently, imprecise messages often lead to perceptual distortion causing the public to experience assimilation and contrast effects. For instance, receivers that identify with the sender will initially assimilate the message and conversely those that do not identify with the sender will initially reject the message. Thus, the further the receivers' position is from the sender's, the greater is the contrast effect. Therefore, receivers that experience contrast effects may conclude that either the sender is purposefully deceiving them or the sender communicates poorly. The sender, however, can minimize assimilation and contrast effects by conveying messages that clearly, and truthfully, describe the events that are occurring.

Imprecise communication can, over time, diminish the assimilation effect. The receivers may no longer perceive a strong identification with the sender, particularly if they discover that the sender might have deliberately omitted foreseeable and predictable outcomes. Likewise, the public can experience less contrast if they discover that the sender's message is true.

Thus, if the truth is absent from the communication process, it is difficult for the message sender to influence the receivers. This is particularly true if the sender restricts and withholds information from the receivers. Similarly, when messages and actions of individuals, or institutions, signal that they are unconcerned about the welfare of the receivers by exchanging without just reciprocity, they signal their beliefs that they have unbounded authority to impose their will on them.

However, such an attitude merely creates a climate of mistrust, lessening the sender's ability to use dialogue as an influence tool.

Therefore, if there are indications from others that our pattern of behavior is questionable, it is irrational to casually dismiss, or accept, their opinions. Rather, we should subject their claims against us to rigorous scrutiny. Thus, we may ask, do our past or present actions or policies diminish their opportunities? Are we exchanging without just reciprocity?

If our actions, intentionally or unintentionally, diminishes the utility of individuals, then mutually beneficial exchanges with these individuals will diminish. And, in extreme cases, malevolent exchanges may surface. Moreover, the belief that we can introduce Madison Avenue type advertisement to compensate for individuals, and nations, diminishing utilities is naïve and foolish. We must influence their utilities by enhancing their welfare. That is, establishing a more equitable mechanism for allocating factors (world citizens) among products and for distributing products among the world's citizens.

It is foolish to let arrogance and exploitation become the seeds of a worldwide uncooperative game. For instance, when American policies push individuals, or nations, to extreme positions, it is difficult to change how they view America, no matter how slickly Madison Avenue advertisers package behavioral messages.

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