Chapter Ten

Killing Many to Save a Few?
Preliminary Thoughts about Avoiding Collateral Civilian Damage by Assassination of Regime Elites

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I open my books about rights and morals. I listen to scholars and legal experts, and inspired by their suggestive discourses, I deplore the miseries of nature, admire the peace and justice established by the civil order, bless the wisdom of public institutions and find consolation for being a man by seeing myself as a citizen. Well instructed as to my duties and my happiness, I close the books, leave the lecture room, and look around me. There I see a miserable people groaning under an iron yoke, the whole human race crushed by a handful of oppressors, and an enraged mob overwhelmed by pain and hunger whose blood and tears the rich drink in peace. And everywhere the strong are armed against the weak with the formidable power of the law. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The State of War (1756–1758; unfinished fragment)

1. Introduction

When I was a child, I loved to read the comic books about the Gaul warrior Asterix by René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo. One of my favourites was a volume called ‘Asterix and the Big Fight’,¹ in which the chieftain of the village

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¹ Original title: Le combat des chefs, 1964.
of Asterix is formally challenged to a duel by another chieftain, who is under the influence of the Roman occupying forces. The Gallic tradition, or so it is said, demanded that the tribe of the loser accept the winner as its new leader. After a wild goose chase and many complications, the good guy wins, but the Romans will not accept defeat and attack Asterix’s village anyway but, of course, they are resoundingly beaten by the newly invigorated Gaul tribe. I do not profess to have read Asterix for its potential subliminal messages in political science then (or now), yet at that time the tradition struck me as a very sensible one: Why should the mere members of two tribes have to slug it out between themselves when it is their bosses who want more power and influence? It was only fair that they should be the ones to slug it out. Rather than drag many families into chaos by fighting in an all-out full-scale tribal war that the tribes-people themselves may have had no real interest in, it appeared preferable that, if there was a conflict about territory and power, that conflict should be solved with as little bloodshed as possible, and that submission to a new ruler was better than death and mayhem for the whole tribe.

Of course, that approach immediately evokes the memory of the famous anti-communist slogan from the Cold War era ‘Better Dead than Red’ and its communist comeback version of ‘Better Red than Dead’. It is very simplistic and avoids many issues, such as, for example, the question of how political dissidents in the conquered tribe would be treated by the new chief, and it does not sit well with our modern individualistic approach to life choices, either. However, after all those years since I first read the comic book, I still found myself going back to this somehow very attractive idea. It resurfaced for good on my now hopefully matured research agenda during and since the US-led aggression against Iraq in 2003. I wondered why it was that innocent Iraqi civilians would have to die in their tens of thousands² because the Americans and their Allies thought it prudent to bomb the country’s cities to rubble before they risked the lives of their own ground troops, and gambled on the very real dangers of destabilisation and ensuing sectarian violence, not to speak of the effects a destabilised Iraq would have on the whole region. None of these civilians had given any cause to be so treated. More to the point, I wondered why the cities had to be bombed at all. Could not the all-powerful United States have employed the services of its so-called ‘black-ops’ specialists and simply assassinated Saddam Hussein and his top henchmen as the real (or perceived) root of the problem? Surely that was better than making all those innocent and helpless people suffer? I am not

² The estimates of Iraqi deaths resulting from the occupation after 2003 by some, as of June 2007, rank from roughly 65,000–71,000. See the Iraq Body Count website at www.iraqbodycount.net/database.