

Setson Reporter

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Mining for professional experience and for a various political answers

On Saturday, March 19, I took a day trip to the Nation's Capital—actually I was only there an hour, and I never really left town. I testified at a Model Senate hearing, and for a few moments, it felt a little bit like being in Washington.

The experience reminded me of a magazine commercial that shows a photograph of young people doing everyday things; a hand sketch overlaying the photo has that same person a few years later as an adult doing a job based on the same positions and motions depicted in the original photograph.

It is a reminder of a basic truth: every achievement began with a person who was young once—and uncertain and exploring new fields and probably often confused. I was testifying to a group of "Senators" of the Foreign Relations Committee who were trying on some professional roles, and perhaps imagining that future into existence.

I did some role-playing, too. I played a forty-something university professor with a little too much book learning and very little actual expertise on my topic. The issue at hand was a 2001 bill to reduce the use of land mines, encourage their defusing, and support assistance programs for the victims. Good legislation, and I did my best to speak in its defense.

I started with some background: no one wants war (those who actually want to commit organized violence have psychological problems); even those who advocate military preparedness, talk about it for peaceful purposes: "peace through strength." Land mines are weapons of war, and we want to keep mines and war to a minimum.

The problem is that land mines serve some military purpose that keeps Americans and others using them. However, even for military purposes, they are not often the best weapon; what's more, after their military utility, they keep destroying civilians and creating debilitating fear for years. It is the ghastly gift that keeps on giving.

In my testimony, I did not like letting go of the ideal, but as with the student Senators, I tried to think like a politician weighing various interests. I advocated the gradual phasing out of land mines: 1. land mines in use for military purposes: reduce their use where they do not serve a very directed purpose, and 2. lands mines still in place after they have served their military purpose: the ideal goal is to eliminate. In order to reach that goal, we must gradually eliminate those easiest to find first, then keep going to eliminate more and more. Like pouring batter from a bowl, the first step is both the easiest and the most effective,

even though there is still plenty of work to do get the rest of batter out of the bowl.

Objections emerged on the committee. There were fears that the US would be giving up power. I argued that the US can use its undisputed military leadership to insist that land mines be reduced and defused, and we can start with our own. In fact, we can use our work in this direction as a public relations coup: look at the American giant acting gently for the good of the world (Madison Avenue could not write a better script!)

There were other objections: if we do not sell landmines, then other countries and the black market will. My response was that this is conceding power to those other, lesser powers; why should we give up our world leadership to smaller states (who would readily follow our lead) or to illegitimate forces (that we readily consider immoral or illegal).

Many also say that we need to keep our forces strong (a chief example in our use of land mines is Korea, where an irrational dictator could launch a strike at the US and allied forces); but an argument from force does not mean only brute force. The best use of force involves smart force, so that we would use the force that we need, that works best, and that is most targeted to the purpose at hand. As students, your teachers don't just tell you to work hard; they also teach you to work smart, so that you direct your efforts to the best research material, and that you use your time most effectively.

In addition, technological improvements may help. Perhaps land mines can be less deadly and easier to remove if we use mapping and sensors to keep track of where they are planted. If we can mail a package cross country and keep track of its whereabouts by the minute and know exactly when it will arrive, then surely we can keep track of land mines. And there are alternatives to land mines, weapons that do the work that land mines do (protect against sneak attacks) without outlasting their military functions the way land mines do: night vision glasses can protect against night attack; heat- and motion-sensitive equipment can protect against sneak

attacks. When the military engagements are over, these technologies do not stay around, leaving the potential to kill and maim. Pest-control companies used to broadcast pesticides to a whole house and the area around it, which killed all the bugs, killed other things too, and left toxins for people to touch and breath, but now they have smaller bait systems that are more targeted to the particular bug under attack. If people are going to use killing machines, let's use technology that does what it is designed for, and not still more indiscriminate killing.

After thinking about mines for my testimony, I was curious to know what had happened to the real-life legislation. I found that there have been no recent bills on the subject and that the US has not signed the Ottawa Convention that would work toward some of the goals I outlined. Although 152 nations have signed the treaty, no presidential candidate from either major party has endorsed it. In the current climate of fear of terrorism, there is little public interest in reducing land mines. And yet they are nasty instruments of war that will destroy countless lives and also damage our foreign relations around the world as the US is identified as a supporter and seller of landmines.

The Model Senate is a great learning experience for students. It was a learning experience for me as well. And it was a reminder that there is a lot for us all to learn about the US role with land mines. If you are against land mines, vote for candidates who think as you do, or better yet, write to your elected officials asking them for their views.

The US does contribute millions of dollars to efforts to defuse mines, but the budget is in constant danger of being cut. If you are in favor of land mines, think about why: is it for a plausible reason? If not, think twice or more times about whether those blow-'em-sky-high video games are clouding your judgment; or better yet, go to the university with a values commitment nearest you to take a course or two to let you examine your own values commitments.

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