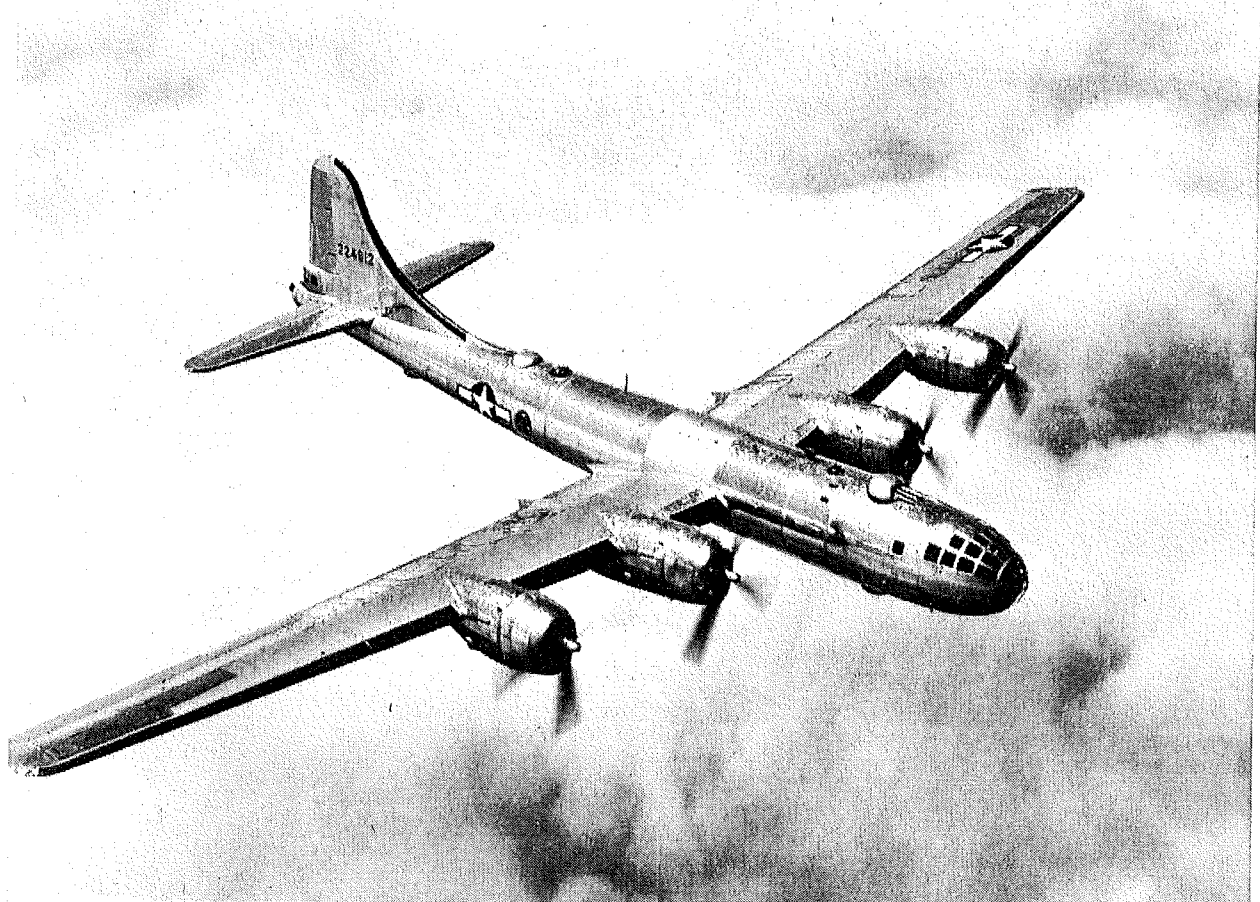


A Slippery Slope in the Sky:
Bombing in Principle and in Practice



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After the first World War, the American war machine had a vision of the future of war: As one fought from the air.¹ Generals imagined armies in the sky dropping bombs on strategic targets until the enemy on the ground capitulated. Military planners felt this scenario was much preferable to the horrible trench warfare of WWI, with its shelling and gassing of soldiers trapped in wet, muddy encampments.² In WWII, the decision to embrace this new aerial warfare strategy caused the nascent United States Army Air Forces and the British Royal Air Forces to take center stage.³

Along with this attitude of enlightened warfare came the idealism of strategic bombing. Non combatants would be spared from the Royal Air Force's wrath from the sky. In June 1940, a directive "specifically laid down that targets had to be identified and aimed at. Indiscriminate bombing was forbidden."⁴ Practical issues became apparent quickly, however. Bombing was far too imprecise for attacks on strategic targets to be effective. One report in August 1941 documented that "only about one bomb in five landed within even a five-mile radius of the designated target."⁵ In November, "Bomber Command was instructed simply to aim at the center of a city [...] The aiming points are to be built-up areas, *not*, for instance, the dockyards or aircraft factories."⁶

What caused the Royal Air Force's change of heart was what Michael Walzer called a "supreme emergency". That is, "the decision to bomb cities was made at a time when victory was not in sight and the specter of defeat ever present. And it was made when no other decision

¹ Richard B. Frank, *Downfall* (Penguin Books, 2001), p. 38-39.

² Bob Carruthers, *Trench Warfare: Contemporary Combat Images from the Great War* (Pen & Sword Books, Ltd., 2016), pp. 28-35.

³ The United States Army Air Forces did not formally become a separate branch of the U.S. military – the United States Air Force – until the implementation of the National Security Act of 1947 on September 18, 1947. See, Bernard C. Nalty, *Winged Shield, Winged Sword: A History of the United States Air Force*. Vol. I, 1907-1950 (Progressive Management Publications, 1997), Chapter 11.

⁴ Noble Frankland, *Bomber Offensive: The Devastation of Europe* (New York, 1970), p. 41.

⁵ Frank, *Downfall*, p. 41.

⁶ Frankland, *Bomber Offensive*, p. 41.

seemed possible if there was to be any sort of military offensive against Nazi Germany.”⁷

Somehow, the immense crisis faced by Britain justified foregoing the idealism from the start of the war. It was imminently impractical to abandon “the only force in the West which could take offensive action ... against Germany, our only means of getting at the enemy in a way that would hurt at all.”⁸ It would have seemed to the island nation fighting the Nazi beast ridiculous to give up the only advantage they had found since the start of the war.

The U.S. Army Air Force joined the war with the same idealism that the Royal Air Force began with. A series of raids on Hamburg by the Royal Air Forces “killed nearly 45,000 human beings, all but about eight hundred of them civilians.”⁹ The American air force joined them in the Battle of Hamburg “with two strikes at the city’s shipyards by day. These raids killed fewer ... but they inflicted little damage on war production at a relatively steep cost.”¹⁰ Through a series of attacks in late 1943 and early 1944 on various German allies, the U.S. Army Air Forces came to the conclusion that strategic bombing was ineffective and morale bombing was effective in inducing capitulation. The difference with Britain’s decision to bomb here was the lack of a supreme emergency. Although the Nazis could still be considered a monstrous foe, at the point where the U.S. Army Air Forces began bombing indiscriminately, and even at the same time with the British Royal Air Force conducting the same bombing runs with America, there was no longer an imminent danger of the collapse of democracy in the West. The tides of war had turned, at least at some point, and yet the Allies did not let up. Instead of pulling back, on February 3, 1945, two plans code-named Clarion and Thunderclap came to fruition when nearly a thousand Allied

⁷ Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, 5th Edition (Basic Books, 1977), p. 258.

⁸ Sir Arthur Harris, *Bomber Offensive* (London, 1947), p. 74.

⁹ Frankland, *Bomber Offensive*, p. 41.

¹⁰ Frank, *Downfall*, p. 41.

bombers attacked Berlin. Some officers protested the plan, noting that it moved “unequivocally into the business of area bombardment of congested civil populations” and some further, saying “Clarion and Thunderclap would so embitter the German populace as to lay seeds of future strife.”

¹¹ The U.S. Army Air Force had doubled down, and now it was killing innocent civilians, just as had the RAF before them, and the Axis attacks on Guernica and Ethiopia before them.

This decision can be seen in multiple ways. First, the precedent set by the Royal Air Force may have prompted the U.S. Army Air Force to adopt the same strategy, them being allies in war. Second, again, with the American investment in air power, the most reasonable choice was to give greater priority to attacks that have significant impact—city center bombings. While there was always the option to avoid bombing altogether, such a concept would have been unthinkable to leaders at the time. It would have been a blow to the pride of the U.S. Army Air Forces and to all the generals that had hyped up air power as the next arena of warfare to abandon the strategy that had been worked on for several years, and abandon the impressive force that had been built up to accommodate the strategy.

Of course, this fiery path would not subside, but would continue into the Pacific war. With no reservations, the air force incinerated Japanese city after city, killing nearly a million. This finally leads to the climax, which, from its striking aesthetic, draws plenty of historians to comment. On August 1945, again there was an opportunity *not* to use a bomb, and yet again such a idea was not seriously discussed by senior military officers or any within Truman’s circle. Part of the reluctance to refrain from using the atomic bomb came from the fact that no one could fully embrace the thought of abandoning the Manhattan Project after spending billions of dollars and

¹¹ Ibid.

committing years of advanced scientific research toward the singular goal of producing an advanced weapon. Failing to use the atomic bomb now would be tantamount to ignoring that scientific research, wasting those taxpayer dollars, and was simply inconceivable to virtually all the military and political leaders who had advocated for its development. So, on August 6th another hundred thousand innocent Japanese were killed. Historians latch onto the A-bomb because it was a single bomb, and it was new, it was big, and it was strange. In terms of the morale bombing strategy it was nothing new, because the U.S. had already killed hundreds of thousands of innocent Japanese; although, it is worth noting that the Japanese surrendered only after this bomb was dropped.

This story is one of new technologies developing more rapidly than the ethics can be developed surrounding their use, and this same description is applicable to today's bombing in the Middle East, with the U.S.'s unmanned drones and improved RADAR. These days the U.S. does not face the same limitation of low precision that the U.S. Army Air Force suffered in WWII, nor do they have the justification of a supreme emergency. Therefore, what excuse does the U.S. have for bombing noncombatants? Perhaps it is just a legacy of those fateful lessons learned in 1944 in Europe, or perhaps there is a more fundamental reason unlying both cases: Military utility. We know why Bomber Command abandoned the practice of designating small, strategic targets, but why bomb cities? What purpose does morale bombing serve? As its name suggests, it is to inspire shock and devastation in the minds of the enemy people: "The purpose of the raids was explicitly declared to be the destruction of civilian morale." Another purpose is to ruin the enemy's productive capacity: "Following the famous minute of Lord Cherwell in 1942, the means to this demoralization were specified: working-class residential areas were the prime targets. Cherwell

thought it was possible to render a third of the German population homeless by 1943.”¹² Looking to the Pacific war situation, the Committee of Operations Analysts, created to identify important targets for bombing in Japan in 1943, listed “urban industrial areas” among its targets.¹³ It is indisputable that bombing had an impact on the people—hundreds of thousands were killed and wounded, but also millions were displaced by the destruction; in the case of the firebombing of Tokyo in March 1945, “Japanese calculation ultimately totaled the destruction at 261,000 houses, leaving 1.15 million homeless.”¹⁴ If the goal of bombing was to eliminate important targets such as factories that produce armaments, then there were two options: The impractical strategy of directly bombing the factory, or the proven technique of killing, maiming, or rendering poor and homeless the factory’s workers.

This line of reasoning should be alarming for any reader: What prevents a military force from killing any person among the enemy? Even if it can be proven that such a person is far enough removed from the war to have no strategic value, such a proof would be costly during a war, and it would be much more useful and reasonably accurate to assume that any civilian of the opposing nation contributes in some way to the war effort, especially when that opposing nation is an Imperial Japan that trains its children to fight an invasion with bamboo sticks. So why is this line of reasoning undesirable? The answer must lie in turning towards the fundamentals of ethics. Let us evaluate a moral framework to work from.

John Rawls gives a promising framework that supposedly shows the dropping of the A-bomb on Japan to be immoral, but it ultimately fails to resolve the aforementioned line of reasoning. His framework goes like this: The goal of a just war fought by a democratic state is to

¹² Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 256.

¹³ Frank, *Downfall*, p. 48.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 17.

take down an anti-democratic state. Since state's ideology is most directly influenced by those at the top, only the leaders of the anti-democratic state are taken to be truly guilty—everyone else, even soldiers, are taken to be innocent. The only reason the democratic state is allowed to kill or imprison the enemy soldiers is that they impede the progress of the democratic state towards the war goal of taking down the enemy leaders.¹⁵ Here lies the issue that bombing in particular seems to reveal: What distinguishes an enemy soldier from an enemy civilian? One could reasonably argue that a worker in an airplane parts factory is impeding the progress of the war by contributing to an airplane that will eventually be used by the military to combat the democratic state with greater effectiveness than if the military did not have that plane. Even a farmer could be considered a strategic target because they provide food for soldiers. There is a pattern here: Military necessity seems to justify all.

Just war theory, the origin of John Rawls's framework, answers this dilemma in the concept of Jus In Bello. In essence, there are two opposing forces: 1) discrimination, that those who cannot cause harm should not be harmed; and 2) military necessity, that all military action should be informed by what will advance progress towards the war goal. This is what creates our dilemma. There is another principle called proportionality: That any suffering inflicted on noncombatants by some action should be balanced in some proportion by the amount of advancement that action achieves. John Rawls failed to comment on this, but this was likely part of his reasoning. Somehow, according to Rawls, the killing of a conventional Japanese soldier would have been balanced by the impact it would have on advancing the democratic state towards its goal of taking down the anti-democratic state. On the other hand, the progress that the action of dropping the

¹⁵ John Rawls, "50 Years After Hiroshima." *Dissent Magazine* (Summer 1995), pp. 323–327.

A-bomb on Hiroshima made towards the unconditional surrender of the Japanese was insufficient to account for the nearly one hundred thousand killed by the bomb. Of course this introduces the far more complex issue of how much exactly the A-bomb contributed to the surrender by Japan; it may have been a week after the bomb, but it was also several days after the entry of the Soviet Union into the war. So, as with many moral issues, there is not a line to be drawn on some objective or nice looking plane, such as the one containing soldiers and civilians. However, there is a line to be drawn.

Michael Walzer draws this line between “a class of people, loosely called ‘munitions workers,’ who make weapons for the army or whose work directly contributes to the business of war [...and] all those people who ... are not fighting and are not engaged in supplying those who are with the means of fighting.”¹⁶ Supposedly, farmers or even workers making nothing but rations for the military are considered safe by virtue of their utility being more general than simple war making. Food is used to keep soldiers alive, while armaments are used to help soldiers fight the war. Walzer recognizes the lack of nuance in even this line; however, the fact remains that a line must be drawn, and this particular line certainly precludes the bombing of city centers from being called ethical.

Although this argument is a bit unsatisfying in its vulnerability to subjectivity, it is good to know that, any time two parties disagree on the moral acceptability of, for instance, dropping the A-bomb on Hiroshima, the disagreement is a product of disagreeing on where to draw the line between soldiers and civilians, rather than on some more fundamental difference of moral frameworks; although, it is worth noting, in this case, that the disagreement requires one party to

¹⁶ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, p. 145.

decide that a majority of the civilians that lived in Hiroshima prior to its bombing have no right to live.

There is a reason I wanted to avoid talking of Hiroshima in particular; one might claim that civilians living in Hiroshima have a right to live just as much as the other civilians all over Japan that would have continued to receive the U.S. Army Air Force's brutal blows had Japan not surrendered. This is not a complete argument, because it does not justify why the continued bombing strategy would have been necessary in the case where the bomb was not dropped. The U.S. was under no obligation to procure an unconditional surrender from Japan, let alone procure it so hastily using such deadly tactics. The argument also does not consider alternatives for bomb usage that, in all likelihood would have achieved surrender just as well. I am loathe to delve into the mechanics of the A-bomb decision because doing so is not important to the moral argument, and it invites another world of criticism; however, I would like to point out a significant argument that is commonly not fully countered by the Orthodox view: The A-bomb could have been dropped somewhere near a city, rather than on one, and this is brushed off using the same excuse that planners supposedly used during their target selection—that there was a risk the bomb would malfunction and have no effect, leaving them with only one bomb to potentially actually use on a city center. This is a confusing argument, as it does not balance this scenario with the parallel scenario of using the first bomb, as the U.S. did, on Hiroshima and also experiencing a malfunction. It seems as though this scenario would be equally embarrassing to the military and the A-bomb scientists and engineers. The only conceivable argument is again that somehow actually killing the civilians rather than simply threatening to kill them would be more effective at shocking the government into capitulation.

Another potential argument I considered making, but will not pursue here is that of the morality of pursuing the war in general. Specifically, was it moral for the U.S. to even pursue the unconditional surrender it sought? In the context of this moral framework, it should seem reasonable, as the purpose of war is for a democratic state to overthrow an anti-democratic state, and ostensibly erect a democratic one in its place. One might imagine the deposition of the Emperor, who, remember, is taken to be guilty under the framework, to be a key component in this. That said, in hindsight it seems deposing the Emperor was entirely unnecessary to establishing a Japanese democracy, because the U.S. preserved the *kokutai* as a ceremonial or cultural institution and Japan became a democracy at the same time. It is hard to say, however, whether this result would have been obvious to the U.S. government at the time. Whether or not the war itself was immoral is beside the more contemporarily relevant point of whether the Pacific war bombing strategy was immoral.

Regardless, we are now left with a moral framework that convinces us that the only ethical targets for bombardment are military installations such as encampments, bases, and aircraft carriers, and civilian factories that specifically produce weapons or weapon parts for war. There are quite a few nuances here: for instance, if a few Red Cross medics are present in a military base, it is still reasonable to consider the base a target on the grounds of the principle of proportionality: The overall effect of bombing such a target is to destroy the enemy's military capacity, whilst casualties of noncombatants are relatively few. Here is another nuance: We consider a civilian to have the right to be left out of the brutality of war if they contribute to society something that is not of utility to the war, or if the utility they contribute to the war can be considered a necessity of life, like food rations or medical supplies. However it is permissible to kill a cobbler, for instance, if they also

work at the airplane parts factory part time. More precisely, as Walzer sees it, “they can be attacked only in their factory (not in their homes), when they are actually engaged in activities threatening and harmful to their enemies.”¹⁷ So, to put it more practically, it is okay to bomb a factory that supplies armaments, even though it may contain civilian workers.

There are more nuances, but it is probably not worth arguing over all of them; for instance, would it be permissible to bomb an oil refinery? In modern times oil is quite a bit more ubiquitous, but during WWII oil was instrumental to mechanized armies, navies, and the airforce. One might imagine taking particular stances on each of these issues, but it is not important at the moment. Already we have identified by this moral framework many ethical failings of WWII bombing strategy, and, to motivate my point, there are yet more to identify in contemporary U.S. bombing strategy, particularly in the Middle East. The U.S. is again up against an enemy that holds relatively little power over them; they are not under any great pressure to defeat their enemy. Not only that, but the U.S.’s technology enables them to have considerably more ability to put this moral framework into practice and actually focus only on morally permissible targets without worry of sending a stray bomb off-target by five miles into a nearby city. Therefore again I ask what excuse the U.S. has to designate such unethical targets, and the answer is likely that Just War Theory is not widely accepted among the U.S. Army Air Force.

So it is pertinent to motivate acceptance of the moral framework I have discussed here. Suppose one failed to adopt the framework, and it was morally permissible to kill some noncombatants without serious regard to proportionality. Let us take the example of Japan, in which the Allied Forces forced the Emperor to choose between two equally repugnant alternatives:

¹⁷ Ibid., 146

1) surrender unconditionally; or 2) suffer the destruction of the kokutai and extinction of the Japanese people. It is important to note that genocide is something the American government was threatening; it was not something solely the Japanese were bringing upon themselves. Therefore one must be accepting of the conclusion that causing this extinction would be ethical. This is the bottom of a slippery slope, of course, and so one might argue that it is reasonable to accept the extinction of Japanese only up to some point. Perhaps it is reasonable to exhaust the Japanese of 50% of their population before giving a second thought to retracting the indiscriminate bombing tactic. But let us return to the purpose of war as seen by John Rawls, which is an admirable purpose if you are a supporter of democracy: Just war is fought by a democratic state against an anti-democratic state for the purpose of deposing the enemy's leaders. In this case there is no purpose in extinguishing the people of the anti-democratic state; in fact, it works against the cause, because the purpose of the war is to give the people a chance at a democratic state and relieve them of the supposed oppression of their anti-democratic leaders. Killing civilians decreases the number of people that are able to live under a democratic system by the end, and certainly extinguishing the Japanese people leaves the island of Japan with no people to form a democratic society. From a Deontological perspective, since the repeated action of killing non-combatants until there are no more non-combatants leaves us with an undesirable outcome, it is also the case that killing any number of non-combatants creates an undesirable outcome. Of course, as we have discussed, there must be some allowance made to the killing of active supporters of the war who could not be simply classified as combatants, but this leaves us with a clear picture of the ideal. The killing of non-combatants is to be avoided.

One might imagine the impact of displaying such idealism in the battlefield would be encouraging to civilians of the enemy state who fight for their nation out of loyalty but are subconsciously or silently thirsty for the fairness of democracy and the freedom of the U.S. that is supposedly to be provided. To fail to demonstrate the principles of American ideology is to make one question whether America is not just the same authoritative entity that Emperor Hirohito and his cabinet was. It is the case that this moral framework discussed here was directly and continuously violated throughout the Pacific war, and yet the U.S. international image could be argued to have survived with no issues. It is unclear, however, how much stronger that image would have been had the bomb not been dropped. Today, nuclear non-proliferation seems a distant dream; however, had the A-bomb remained simply experimental, who knows how well the escalation of violence in the Cold War would have been contained. Its use certainly did not succeed in preventing that arms race.

So, it is with this reasoning that I implore the U.S. government, that has failed to live up to an honorable standard of action in war time and time again in the Pacific war, in the Korean war, in the Vietnam war, and in many Middle Eastern wars up until the present day, to consider establishing itself once more as a beacon of hope to the oppressed of the world by building a new reputation as a humane, yet powerful, warden of justice.

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Bibliographic Essay

The ethics of war making is a well-explored topic, especially in the context of Just War Theory. Specific to ethics surrounding the Pacific war, Richard B. Frank in his *Downfall* gives a perspective on WWII leading up to the fall of the Imperial Japanese empire that is objective in the sense that he takes no overt stance on the history. He served a tour of duty in Vietnam, and went on to graduate from Georgetown University Law Center and become a lawyer.

I essentially have not made any new argument, other than to contextualize and condense, because of Michael Walzer in his *Just and Unjust Wars*, which, as the title suggests, explores the ethics of war in general, drawing from historical evidence throughout WWII, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, and various other modern wars. The two *Bomber Offensive* sources come from Walzer. Michael Walzer is a co-editor of *Dissent Magazine*, specializing in political theory. To get

a similar concise analysis of the ethics of the Pacific War and the A-bomb in specific, see John Rawls's "50 Years After Hiroshima" from the same *Dissent Magazine*.

Finally, to get a sense for where the stance of Americans lies on the dropping of the A-bomb, and thus on the Pacific war bombing strategy in general, see Scott D. Sagan and Benjamin A. Valentino's study "Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran: What Americans Really Think about Using Nuclear Weapons and Killing Noncombatants." *International Security*, vol. 42, no. 1, Summer 2017, pp. 41–79. It turns out, unsurprisingly, that Americans are not, in general, either aware of, concerned with, or in agreement with the moral framework I described in my paper, which makes me all the more excited to write about it.