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War and Violence:
The Use of Nuclear Warfare in World War II

by

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August 6 and 9, 1945 are two linked dates that will forever live in infamy. These are the dates of the first and only use of nuclear bombs by the United States toward the Japanese. These events were so impactful that all debates on the topic of nuclear warfare to this day derive from these two occasions. Nuclear weapons cannot be discussed without the consideration of how impactful the bombings were on not only Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also the world. Such an inescapable topic is important to analyze ethically and morally.

The United States was drawn into World War II on December 7, 1941. A surprise Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor sunk eight battle ships, destroyed 350 aircrafts, and claimed the lives of over 2,400 Americans. The following day, Franklin D Roosevelt declared war against the Japanese Empire. The subsequent war in the Pacific theater claimed the lives of over 100,000 American soldiers and an even greater number of Japanese lives.

In 1945, Harry Truman took office just in time to witness the surrender of Germany. Although Germany had just surrendered, Truman still faced a great challenge: waging war against Japan. The death toll was rising and public morale was quickly waning. To make matters worse, the possibility of America participating in a land invasion of Japan was guaranteed to be a long and drawn out battle. The Japanese had a strong defensive position and would fight to the very last man. According to Harry Truman's memoirs, estimates suggest that over one million people would die in such a land invasion.

Upon swearing in, Truman learned of the Manhattan Project and was desperately seeking a solution. The project had begun in 1942 when a German scientist was found performing a science experiment in which he was splitting uranium atoms. Over the next three years America had managed to weaponize this discovery into a bomb of unknown destruction. Truman and his inner cabinet came to the conclusion that this bomb could be used to intimidate Japan into an

expedited surrender. This option could result in the protection of numerous lives and prevent Japan from being torn apart.

On August 6, 1945, the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, instantly killing 80,000 people. Three days later, the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki, promptly killing 70,000. On August 15, 1945, the Japanese Empire announced their surrender. However, the effects did not end there. Spanning the next year, over 150,000 Japanese citizens died from complications relating to the nuclear bomb.

Such a drastic measure to end the war has created an ongoing controversy among ethicists, theologians, and policy makers alike. Even the Catholic Church is divided amongst itself. The Church uses a set of standards entitled the Just War Tradition to analyze the legitimacy of violent acts and acts of war. By definition, the Just War Tradition is “a doctrine of military ethics of Roman philosophical and Catholic origin, studied by moral theologians, ethicists, and international policy makers. It states that a conflict ought to meet philosophical, religious, or political criteria” (“What is a Just War?”). The Just War Tradition states that although war is intrinsically wrong and can never be good, sometimes, military action is crucial to promote peace. There are two categories of the formal Just War Theory: *jus ad bellum*, and *jus in bello*.

The criteria in *jus ad bellum* are to be implemented before the war has commenced. First, the war must possess a just cause. The protection of innocent lives and the restoration of social order from political chaos are examples of a legitimate reason to commence a war. Second, war must be declared by a legitimate and lawful authority. Illegitimate governments are not authorized to commence a war. Third, the intentions of war must be to restore social order or the promotion of other similarly just causes. Fourth, war must be a last resort. All diplomatic and

political efforts to resolve conflict must be drained before a war is commenced. If it is possible for an issue to be resolved without the implementation of war, then war will be rendered inapplicable. Fifth, there must be proportionality in the war. There are copious evils and perils that accompany a war. The potential good must outweigh the bad of the destruction, economic, and personal effects on those affected by the war. Finally, the party going to war must have a reasonable chance of success in the war. If there is strong doubt or uncertainty about the party's ability to prevail, then war should not be implemented.

Jus in bello is the criterion for moral conduct to be implemented once an issue has met all of the criteria of jus ad bellum and has become a war. There are two criteria for jus in bello. First, the army at war must differentiate between the enemy and civilians. It is indispensable for civilians to be protected and for limited harm to be done. Civilians cannot be purposefully targeted for any reason. In the criterion of proportionality, the positive outcome of any military action must exceed any negative aftermath.

Saint Thomas Aquinas further advanced the Christian doctrine of the Just War Tradition. He aided in the modern understanding and interpretation of war through his insights. He asserted three conditions. War must be declared by a sovereign, have a just cause, and a right intention. While the first and the last condition have already been examined, Aquinas contributed the notion of just cause. He believed that those being attacked should be deserving of the sanction of war. This notion ensures that the party being attacked is unequivocally guilty before violent actions take effect.

After reading these basic guidelines of the Just War Tradition, it is clearly noted that the issue at hand is not black and white. There are many contrasting interpretations of the use of nuclear warfare in World War II. One article that strongly embodies the beliefs of many

Catholics who find the bombing of Japan unjust is entitled “Mr. Truman’s Degree.” This article was written by G.E.M. Anscombe, a Catholic philosophy professor at the University of Cambridge.

Anscombe’s first argument against Truman’s actions contends that he did not pursue diplomatic actions of peacekeeping to the fullest extent. Anscombe wrote, “But what were the conditions? The unlimited objective, the fixation on unconditional surrender. The disregard of the fact that the Japanese were desirous of negotiating peace” (3). By saying this, the author suggests that Truman wanted to use this weapon to prove a point, and not because it was necessary. The Just War Theory clearly states that violent acts should only be used as a last resort, and many Catholics believe that demanding unconditional surrender was a failure to seek out all diplomatic options. Anscombe continues her scrutiny by attacking Truman’s failure to give the Japanese an ultimatum before dropping the second bomb. Anscombe believes that if Truman had found a solution without dropping the second bomb, 140,000 lives could have been saved.

Another strong argument by Catholics is that the attacks purposefully targeted civilians. This completely goes against the Just War Tradition’s requirements of only targeting combatants. Anscombe goes as far to say, “to choose to kill the innocent as a means to their ends is always murder” (2). This means that the end did not justify the means because innocent people were purposefully killed.

Anscombe takes a universal approach to this issue of the use of nuclear warfare. Her beliefs are more deontologically rooted because she is guided by her moral duty and obligation to do the right thing. She is concerned with following rules and guidelines, and does not condone the death of innocent people for a war. She argues that choosing to kill the innocent is

murder, which goes against God's commandments. She prefers to adhere to God's Divine Command and exactly follow the rules that He has given us. She would rather face the unknown outcomes of a land invasion than use nuclear bombs to put a quick end to the war.

An additional attitude historically used by Christians and Anscombe with regard to the issues of war and violence is pacifism. Pacifism is the theological position that states that we, as Christians, must model our lives after Jesus. To use any form of violence is to go against what Jesus taught us through his own actions. In the practice of pacifism, parties must implement alternative methods of resolving conflicts. Any actions taken must be to promote justice. During the era of the first to the third centuries, most Christians were identified as pacifists.

Two different types of pacifism are applicable in modern times. In Witness Pacifism, we use the account of Jesus's death and resurrection as a witness to the world that He is able to redeem our evil and injustice through His suffering. The second form of pacifism is termed Pragmatic Pacifism. Non-violence and civil disobedience is practiced in Pragmatic Pacifism. Historically, a group that demonstrated Pragmatic Pacifism with success was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his followers during the Civil Rights Movement. Although Anscombe knows this type of pacifism would have been unable to solve all of the conflict in Japan during World War II, her writings indicate that pacifism is a key part of her moral compass.

Standing on the other side of the issue is Fr. Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., a history professor at the University of Notre Dame. In his book, *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan*, he analyzes Truman's decision to use the atomic bombs against Japan. Unlike Anscombe, who attempts to disrepute Truman's choices, Miscamble defends Truman. The main difference between Miscamble's views and Anscombe's is that unlike Anscombe he believes the end does justify the means.

Miscamble believes that the Japanese military adhered to the idea called Ketsu-Go. Ketsu-Go is the idea that if the defender inflicts enough pain and punishment that the attacker would sue for peace. The Japanese military leaders utilized this idea to instill hope in their soldiers and the citizens of Japan. The military so strongly believed they could stalemate the war this way, that even after the atomic bombs were dropped, the military still desired to fight. This Japanese mentality would ensure a long-lasting and bloody war.

A military study done right after the attack on Pearl Harbor suggested that a land invasion would result in 200,000-300,000 total lives lost every month. This number includes all military and civilian persons involved in the Pacific War. Because of these terrifying statistics, Miscamble believed that President Truman made a hard call, but the appropriate call, and in the long run, saved countless lives.

Miscamble also takes a universal approach to the issue of the use of nuclear warfare in Japan. However, his focus is more on consequentialist ethics. Miscamble is critical of Anscombe's stance of deontological ethics because it does not adequately address the consequences of moral actions taken. Consequentialism is concerned with producing good or right outcomes. In consequentialism, sometimes an evil act can be justified if it results in a greater good. This coincides with the theory of proportionality, where the good outcomes must outweigh the bad.

Even though both Miscamble and Anscombe identify with opposing sides of the controversy, they are both searching for what is ethically right and what causes the least harm. This common theme aligns with the desires of most people as well. Both make valid points, but the real death toll of a land invasion (which did not take place) will never be known. Therefore, this controversy will never cease to exist.

Personally, I side with Miscamble. In my opinion, Anscombe disregarded the fact that if there were a land invasion, even more innocent civilians would die. She also made false statements regarding Japan's willingness to negotiate for peace. This discredits her article since an extensive part of her argument was grounded in Truman disregarding Japan's willingness to negotiate.

To drop an atomic bomb is a horrific thing to do, but to extend a war is also not a good option. I believe that a long, drawn out war would not have produced a better outcome for either side. Both parties had been at war for many years and had already lost many citizens and soldiers alike. Japan was also experiencing a famine, which resulted in many of their people starving to death. In addition to this struggle, innocent civilians were already being killed because of collateral damage from the war.

To take a side on this issue is to attempt to choose the lesser of two evils, but I stand by President Truman's decision. I have sympathy for him because he had to bear the weight of such an impactful decision on his shoulders. Truman did not take the decision lightly and ultimately experienced guilt afterward which led him to become a nuclear pacifist.

In conclusion, we must remember what happened on August 6 and 9, 1945 in Japan. By remembering these events and evaluating them through ethical and moral lenses, society can learn from the mistakes and controversies of the past. The world must continue to face the difficult questions in order to improve, because creating a better future is the ultimate goal for our society.

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