

Total War Drives out Ethics

"It would be futile - even wrong - to try and shut one's eyes to what war really is from sheer distress at its brutality."

In this talk, I would like to explore the problems politicians and commanders face trying to draw ethical lines when their populace face subjugation and even potential extermination.

I make no claims to deep knowledge, wide reading, or to first hand experience of war. I am 'the man on the Clapham omnibus'. I was, however, at an early age, expecting to go to war, and would have been called up to serve in apartheid South Africa's military had my stepfather not dragged me to England at thirteen. I expected to find myself in Namibia or Angola, possibly Mozambique or what was then Rhodesia. I don't think it occurred to me that I might end up 'policing' Soweto, or to ask "Are we the bad guys?" as that great Mitchell and Webb sketch has it.

For this topic, I was interested in questions like:

What defences are available to politicians and commanders? and

What means can they use?

My research left me with Clausewitz's problem – a shapeless mass of ideas. The more I read, the less I knew. So this talk is in some way a plea for help – I'm looking forward to hearing your responses and perhaps even a clash of swords to help inch towards a considered view one way or the other.

The nature of war

A key problem with war is that it gets out of hand, and it does so in deeply unpredictable ways. Even the most powerful militaries find control evaporates and chaos escalates. Civilians are killed, horrors are multiplied, and one's own are put at risk. Moral considerations become blurred, if they were not already.

Clausewitz:

"Kind-hearted people might of course think there was some ingenious way to disarm or defeat an enemy without too much bloodshed, and might imagine this is the true goal of the art of war.

*Pleasant as it sounds, it is a fallacy that must be exposed: war is such a dangerous business that the mistakes which come from kindness are the very worst. The maximum use of force is in no way incompatible with the simultaneous use of the intellect. If one side uses force without compunction, undeterred by the bloodshed it involves, while the other side refrains, the **first will gain the upper hand** that side will force the other to follow suit; each will drive its opponent toward extremes, and the only limiting factors are the counterpoises inherent in war."* (p.75)

Clausewitz seems to be suggesting that defenders should be prepared to use force without compunction, lest the aggressor gain the upper hand first. The race is to the swift, and devil take the hindmost. It's not hard to see how escalation is built in to the nature of warfare.

Clausewitz wrote of there being two types of war: the kind that leads to a decision, win or lose, Absolute War, and 'war of observation' - Limited War.

Per Clausewitz a commander must always keep in mind the possibility of Absolute, All Out War, because all wars have the potential to escalate. Similarly the statesman must keep a close eye on his commanders, lest they push too far and escalation moves things over the edge, beyond the point of control. Beware the warmongering politician, lest you get what you wish for.

Under conditions of Limited War, jockeying for position, manoeuvring for balance of power, there seems room for ethical considerations. Total War, however, is an all out battle for survival. The defender is subjected to brutal, unimaginably bloody extremes and has no room for controlled, ethical, limited responses. These are all or nothing situations. Or are they?

Force without compunction

What kinds of forms might "force without compunction" take? Examples of means used, supposedly in extremis include:

- destruction of crops (Boer war, and many other "laying waste")
- urban bombing (Area Bombing Directive 1942, Hamburg, Hiroshima and Nagasaki)
- siege and its modern equivalent, sanctions
- the sinking of the Belgrano
- suicide bombers
- drone attacks on suspected combatants
- preventing Ukraine grain exports (potentially starving millions in 3rd countries)

I considered adding Nelson Mandela and the ANC here, but their calls for violence were really quite limited – acts of sabotage at night.

Precision and drone strikes are notorious for killing civilians – wedding parties, women, children, innocent farmers. The quality of the intelligence seems poor and highly questionable, especially when paid for. Estimates suggest many times more civilians are killed than combatants (source needed).

On siege and sanctions – more civilians died in the siege of Leningrad than in the infernos of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined (per Walzer p160). Child deaths in Iraq due to sanctions have been estimated at 500,000 (much disputed and a topic subject to heavy propagandising).

I considered addressing the execution of combatants, having in mind not least wounded enemy in Iraq. The closing of ranks – what goes in the regiment stays in the regiment – rankles, bothers me. I've left it out and focused on the bombing of civilians instead. The first is carried out in the heat of the moment, or so it is claimed, while the latter is a much colder calculation.

Or is it?

A strategy commonly used in war across the centuries is to intentionally break the morale of civilians in the opposing country. This will disrupt military supplies, cause the loss of political support, and undermine recruitment and morale amongst fighting forces. Let us take a closer look.

The Area Bombing Directive

In 1917 Churchill saw the use of aerial bombardment, specifically in order to terrorise civilians, as strategically ineffective, merely serving to arouse "*combative spirit*" and leaving "*the national fighting power unimpaired*". He advocated striking at structures upon which the fighting power of the enemy depends. (JFC Fuller, *The Conduct of War*)

Jump to 1940 and Churchill is actively pursuing the objective he has previously spoken against, terrorising civilians, particularly with the Area Bombing Directive of 1942. Churchill said that he desired '*To make the enemy burn and bleed in every ways*' (Fuller p286). Remember this.

Churchill was advised by Frederick Lindemann, a physicist, later Lord Cherwell. Lindemann had strong views on an aristocratic ruling class served by helots (a sort of slave class). He advocated bombing working class areas, as middle class houses were too far apart, therefore wasteful of bombs. Churchill and he were close friends, and Churchill appointed him to advisory positions after the war.

How does this look against the Just War maxims?

It is a case of *Jus In Bello*, so we can step past justification for the war itself.

Attacks on civilians as redress? Hard to see a justification here – which is not say justifications do not exist (eg see Gore Vidal's controversial essays).

Making war winnable – by attacking industrial workers and morale, perhaps, but in direct contradiction to the protection required for non-combatants.

This brings us to means should be proportionate. If less violence will achieve the aim, then the lesser path should be taken.

Let's look at the strategic aims of the Allied bombing campaign. Major General Fuller argues that there are five possible strategic objectives:

- 1) Military
- 2) Industrial
- 3) Urban
- 4) Energy
- 5) Transport

We are not concerned with direct military targets here, and focus on the latter four. Fuller argues that destruction of industrial and urban targets offers little strategic advantage – industry being "*a vast and scattered target*" requiring far too much resource. Attacking coal and oil, and the means to transport them, however, could paralyse both the German economy and its war machine. On the face of it, a set of less violent tactics were available, at least as far as civilians go.

"nevertheless, it was only during the final twelve months of the war that they became the dominant targets. Instead of concentrating on them, between May 1940 and May 1944, they were seldom bombed, and urban bombing with increasing violence was continued to the close of the war." (JFC Fuller, *The Conduct of War* p282)

As an aside, Fuller's WW1 experience enabled him to develop the strategy and tactics of tank warfare, unfortunately used to devastating effect by the Nazis in WW2.

Why was urban bombing given such precedence? Well, we have Lord Cherwell's advice to Churchill, and we have Air Marshall "Bomber" Harris's description:

"The aim of the Combined Bomber Offensive ... should be unambiguously stated [as] the destruction of German cities, the killing of German workers, and the disruption of civilised life throughout Germany ... the destruction of houses, public utilities, transport and lives, the creation of a refugee problem on an unprecedented scale, and the breakdown of morale both at home and at the battle fronts by fear of extended and intensified bombing, are accepted and intended aims of our bombing policy. They are not by-products of attempts to hit factories." (via Wikipedia)

It seems clear that British command thought that attacking civilians was a means of winning the war, and not just winning, but shortening, thereby saving lives. Churchill and his commanders and advisers abrogated civilians' rights.

An aside. Despite Harris taking the rap for this after the war, we know Churchill instigated the policy, and that it had strong support amongst the leadership. Churchill's attempts to distance himself later ring hollow. As we saw above, the policy ran throughout the war, from when Churchill took charge. The more strategically effective targets received little attention till late on.

To justify this we must weigh the available means, weigh targeting civilians with targeting energy and transport resources. British high commanders believed the right choice was civilians, or claimed to. At the start of the war bombers could only operate at night, and rarely got within five miles of their target. The technology at the time did not facilitate targeting the more strategic objectives. In addition, for some time bombing was the only realistic means of striking at the enemy in any meaningful way.

The suggestion is that the British couldn't hit energy and transport targets even if they tried. They faced death and dictatorship at the hands of the Nazis. They were up against it, facing Absolute War.

Come 1942, however, the game had changed. The US had entered the war.

Some 300,000 Germans were killed by the bombing campaign, and 780,000 seriously injured. More importantly this served as a precedent for Truman's bombing of Japan (Walzer p255).

With hindsight it seems obvious that energy and transport were the means to hamstring Germany. Surely British command saw this too? Were the technological difficulties really the reason energy and transport weren't targeted? Were they instead blinded by hatred of Germans? This seems all too possible. They claimed them to be reprisals. That is not the language of defence in extremis. Remember Churchill's *"make the enemy bleed"*.

Here's Walzer again:

"it does seem to me that the more certain a German victory appeared to be in the absence of a bomber offensive, the more justifiable was the decision to launch the offensive. It is not just that such a victory was frightening, but also that it seemed in those years very close; it is not just that it was close, but also that it was so frightening. Here was a supreme emergency, where one might well be required to override the rights of innocent people and shatter the war convention" (Walzer p259)

We can't quite seem to see our way off the moral (mortal?) fence here.

Japan - the Atom Bomb

"They all accepted the 'assignment' and produced The Bomb. Why?"

"Because they thought of themselves as specialists, technicians, and not as complete men"

So wrote Dwight Macdonald in August 1945, quoted by Walzer. Walzer argues against Macdonald. They sought it out because they were "complete men". Because they knew what they were up against. Many were refugees from the Nazis. By the time they were ready, Germany was as good as defeated, and they knew it did not have the nuclear capacity.

When Truman dropped the bomb, he justified it on the grounds that the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbour without warning, they executed American soldiers, and that it would shorten the war. Truman used a sliding scale of utilitarian calculations, as Walzer put it. Hiroshima was chosen because it was "*devoted exclusively to war production*", Truman's defence for attacking civilians.

Walzer asks what American city was devoted exclusively to war production? His point being that we justify it when it is the enemy, but if the positions were reversed we would not allow the same justification to them. Were those civilians really "exclusively devoted to the war effort"? We wouldn't say the same of a US city. Why do the civilians of Hiroshima forfeit their rights, when the same cannot be said for those of Denver, Colorado, or New York?

Walzer tries to leave room for a utilitarian justification, a calculation "without a sliding scale". The war might already have been lost by the Japanese, but they had no intention of bowing to the US demand for **unconditional surrender**, and had two million troops to help force a negotiated peace.

The Allies faced a long struggle and great loss of life to bring the conclusion about. The US were already bombing civilians, following the British precedent, and had set fire to Tokyo for huge loss of life.

So the argument balances the lives of the people of Hiroshima with the lives of soldiers on both sides, and the lives of non-combatants in other Japanese cities, for the alternative, in Truman's calculation, includes firestorms across other cities.

"To avert a vast, indefinite butchery ... at the cost of a few explosions" said Churchill in support of Truman.

But what vast butchery is being averted? Walzer argues that this is not like the position Britain faced. The war against Japan was coming to a close. These bombs were being dropped not to defend against a supreme emergency, the risk of a Nazi win in Britain's case, but rather to avert our own plans to bomb even more civilians in Japanese cities. The continuation of the struggle was not forced on us. Rather, it was a product of our own war aims. Truman was demanding unconditional surrender of the Japanese. He didn't have to. Japan's war aims were not the same as those of the Nazis. They were merely expansionary.

Here's Walzer:

"If people have a right not to be forced to fight, they also have a right not to be forced to fight beyond the point where war might justly be concluded. Beyond that point there can be no supreme emergencies, no arguments about military necessity, no cost-accounting in human lives. To press the war further than that is to recommit the crime of aggression."

Walzer is allowing the utilitarian calculation, but only in the realm of necessity. When it is but the speed or scope of victory at stake, then a crime is being committed.

Fuller backs this up (p.303). If they hadn't pressed for unconditional surrender, intelligence suggested the war could have been over in May, not August, when the atom bombs were dropped.

Walzer didn't buy Roosevelt and Churchill's "unconditional surrender" demands, saying:

"there is really no such thing (in the moral world) as the unconditional surrender of a nation, for conditions inhere in the very idea of international relations as they do in every idea of human relations – and they are roughly the same in each ... the law recognises rights"

Close: on nuclear deterrence

We've been talking about bombing of civilians. The nuclear deterrent is the ultimate weapon against civilians, the threat of total destruction. The point of it is that there is no rational situation in which it can be used, thereby making it effective merely by existing as a possibility. It is a pure utilitarian calculation, no legal or moral consideration is necessary. Its use guarantees oblivion for all.

The problem with this is that it is predicated upon rational leaders. A stalemate, akin to peace, can last only so long as both sides are in the hands of the rational. Reason, said Hume, is the slave of our passions. We are not rational beings.

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Bibliography

Clausewitz, On War (via Fuller below)

Fletcher and Ohlin, Defending Humanity – When Force is Justified and Why

JFC Fuller, The Conduct of War

Appendix – justifications

The Just War maxims

- War should be a last resort
- War can only be justified as redress for violations of rights (defence against aggression)
- Should be declared openly
- Should be winnable
- The means should be proportionate to the ends
- Non-combatants are off limits
- There should be no humiliation of the vanquished

(Aquinas, via BBC In Our Time)

An aside: “winnable” – so a small nation against an empire should just give up?

Aquinas is quite dated. A more modern approach is presented by Fletcher and Ohlin in *Defending Humanity* – when force is justified and why. They present the case for “legitimate defence”, presuming rule of international law, arguing it has six elements:

- 1) The attack must be overt
- 2) Unlawful
- 3) Imminent; and
- 4) The defence must be necessary
- 5) Proportionate
- 6) Knowingly or intentionally in response to the attack

Note civilians do not get a mention in the headlines.