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The Limits of Calculation: Hiroshima
by Michael Walzer

JPRI has thought hard about how it should commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II and advance both historical and moral reflection on that cataclysm. We are distributing two new monographs to our members--one by Advisory Board member Professor John Dower ("The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory," Diplomatic History 19:2, Spring 1995) and the other by Dr. Herbert Bix on the role of the Emperor ("Japan’s Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation," also from Diplomatic History, Spring 1995).

In this Occasional Paper, we are also reprinting a somewhat older perspective on Hiroshima by the moral philosopher Michael Walzer. It is an excerpt from Walzer’s classic study Just and Unjust Wars (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), pp. 263-268. Walzer concluded that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was a war crime. Whether one agrees with him or not, his analysis stimulates thought about Japan and Japanese government and society fifty years later. He writes, "The Japanese case is sufficiently different from the German so that unconditional surrender should never have been asked. Japan’s rulers were engaged in a more ordinary sort of military expansion, and all that was morally required was that they be defeated, not that they be conquered and totally overthrown. Some restraint upon their war-making power might be justified, but their domestic authority was a matter of concern only to the Japanese people." Had this course been pursued, it is quite likely that Japan would have undergone a postwar revolution--but its present government might well enjoy greater legitimacy than the one currently holding forth in Tokyo.

We believe that Walzer’s analysis, together with the works of Dower and Bix, reopens in a productive way what World War II was about and its legacy in the contemporary world. We thank Michael Walzer and Harper Collins Publishers for granting us permission to reprint Walzer’s essay and Nakamoto Yoshihiko, who first suggested the idea.

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“They all accepted the ‘assignment’ and produced The Bomb,” Dwight Macdonald wrote in August 1945 of the atomic scientists. “Why?” It is an important question, but Macdonald poses it badly and then gives the wrong answer. “Because they thought of themselves as specialists, technicians, and not as complete men.” In fact, they did not accept the assignment; they sought it out, taking the initiative, urging upon President Roosevelt the critical importance of an American effort to match the work being done in Nazi Germany. And they did this precisely because they were “complete men,” many of them European refugees, with an acute sense of what a Nazi victory would mean for their native lands and for all mankind. They were driven by a deep moral anxiety, not (or not most crucially) by any kind of scientific fascination; they were certainly not servile technicians. On the other hand, they were men and women without political power or following, and once their own work was done, they could not control its use. The discovery in November 1944 that German scientists had made little progress ended their own supreme emergency, but it did not end the program they had helped to launch. “If I had known that the Germans would not succeed in constructing the atom bomb,” Albert Einstein said, “I would never have lifted a finger.” By the time he found that out, however, the scientists had largely finished their work; now indeed technicians were in charge, and the politicians in charge of them. And in the event, the bomb was not used against Germany (or to deter its use by Hitler, which was what men like Einstein had in mind), but against the Japanese, who had never posed such a threat to peace and freedom as the Nazis had.*

*In his novel The New Men, C. P. Snow describes the discussions among atomic scientists as to whether or not the bomb should be used. Some of them, his narrator says, answered that question with “an absolute no,” feeling that if the weapon were used to kill hundreds of thousands of innocent people, “neither science nor the civilization of which science is bone and fibre, would be free from guilt again.” But the more common view was the one I have been defending: “Many, probably the majority, gave a conditional no with much the same feeling behind it; but if there were no other way of saving the war against Hitler, they would be prepared to drop the bomb.” The New Men, New York, 1954, p. 177 (Snow’s emphasis).

Still, it was an important feature of the American decision that the President and his advisors believed the Japanese to be fighting an aggressive war and, moreover, to be fighting it unjustly. Thus, Truman’s address to the American people on August 12, 1945: We have used [the bomb] against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war,
against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare. We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war. . .

Here again, the sliding scale is being used to open the way for utilitarian calculations. The Japanese have forfeited (some of) their rights, and so they cannot complain about Hiroshima so long as the destruction of the city actually does, or could reasonably be expected to, shorten the agony of war. But had the Japanese exploded an atomic bomb over an American city, killing tens of thousands of civilians and thereby shortening the agony of war, the action would clearly have been a crime, one more for Truman’s list. This distinction is only plausible, however, if one renders a judgment not only against the leaders of Japan but also against the ordinary people of Hiroshima and insists at the same time that no similar judgment is possible against the people of San Francisco, say, or Denver. I can find, as I have said before, no way of defending such a procedure. How did the people of Hiroshima forfeit their rights? Perhaps their taxes paid for some of the ships and planes used in the attack on Pearl Harbor; perhaps they sent their sons into the navy and air force with prayers for their success; perhaps they celebrated the actual event, after being told that their country had won a great victory in the face of an imminent American threat. Surely there is nothing here that makes these people liable to direct attack. (It is worth noting, though the fact is not relevant in judging the Hiroshima decision, that the raid on Pearl Harbor was directed entirely against naval and army installations: only a few stray bombs fell on the city of Honolulu.)

But if Truman’s argument on August 12 was weak, there was a worse one underlying it. He did not intend to apply the sliding scale with any precision, for he seems to have believed that, given Japanese aggression, the Americans could do anything at all to win (and shorten the agony of war). Along with most of his advisors, he accepted the “war is hell” doctrine; it is a constant allusion in defenses of the Hiroshima decision. Thus Henry Stimson:

As I look back over the five years of my service as Secretary of War, I see too many stern and heartrending decisions to be willing to pretend that war is anything else but what it is. The face of war is the face of death; death is an inevitable part of every order that a wartime leader gives.

And James Byrnes, Truman’s friend and his Secretary of State:

. . . war remains what General Sherman said it was.

And Arthur Compton, chief scientific advisor to the government:

When one thinks of the mounted archers of Ghengiz Khan . . . the Thirty Years War . . . the millions of Chinese who died during the Japanese invasion . . . the mass destruction of western Russia . . . one realizes that in whatever manner it is fought, war is precisely what General Sherman called it.

And Truman himself:
Let us not become so preoccupied with weapons that we lose sight of the fact that war itself is the real villain.

War itself is to blame, but also the men who begin it . . . while those who fight justly merely participate in the hell of war, choicelessly, and there are no moral decisions for which they can be called to account. This is not, or not necessarily, an immoral doctrine, but it is radically one-sided; it evades the tension between just ad bellum and jus in bello; it undercuts the need for hard judgments; it relaxes our sense of moral restraint. When he was choosing a target for the first bomb, Truman reports, he asked Stimson which Japanese cities were “devoted exclusively to war production.” The question was reflexive; Truman did not want to violate the “laws of war.” But it wasn’t serious. Which American cities were devoted exclusively to war production? It is possible to ask such questions only when the answer doesn’t matter. If war is hell however it is fought, then what difference can it make how we fight it? And if war itself is the villain, then what risks do we run (aside from the strategic risks) when we make decisions? The Japanese, who began the war, can also end it; only they can end it, and all we can do is fight it, enduring what Truman called “the daily tragedy of bitter war.” I don’t doubt that that was really Truman’s view; it was not a matter of convenience but of conviction. But it is a distorted view. It mistakes the actual hellishness of war, which is particular in character and open to precise definition, for the limitless pains of religious mythology. The pains of war are limitless only if we make them so—only if we move, as Truman did, beyond the limits that we and others have established. Sometimes, I think, we have to do that, but not all the time. Now we must ask whether it was necessary to do it in 1945.

The only possible defense of the Hiroshima attack is a utilitarian calculation made without the sliding scale, a calculation made, then, where there was no room for it, a claim to override the rules of war and the rights of Japanese civilians. I want to state this argument as strongly as I can. In 1945, American policy was fixed on the demand for the unconditional surrender of Japan. The Japanese had by that time lost the war, but they were by no means ready to accept this demand. The leaders of their armed forces expected an invasion of the Japanese main islands and were preparing for a last-ditch resistance. They had over two million soldiers available for the fighting, and they believed that they could make the invasion so costly that the Americans would agree to a negotiated peace. Truman’s military advisors also believed that the costs would be high, though the public record does not show that they ever recommended negotiations. They thought that the war might continue late into 1946 and that there would be as many as a million additional American casualties. Japanese losses would be much higher. The capture of Okinawa in a battle lasting from April to June of 1945 had cost almost 80,000 American casualties, while virtually the entire Japanese garrison of 120,000 men had been killed (only 10,600 prisoners were taken). If the main islands were defended with a similar ferocity, hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of Japanese soldiers would die. Meanwhile, the fighting would continue in China and in Manchuria, where a Russian attack was soon due. And the bombing of Japan would also continue, and perhaps intensify, with casualty rates no different from those anticipated from the atomic attack. For the Americans had adopted in Japan the British policy of terrorism: a massive incendiary raid on Tokyo early in March
1945 had set off a firestorm and killed an estimated 100,000 people. Against all this was
set, in the minds of American decision-makers, the impact of the atomic bomb—not
materially more damaging but psychologically more frightening, and holding out the
promise, perhaps, of a quick end to the war. “To avert a vast, indefinite butchery . . . at the
cost of a few explosions,” wrote Churchill in support of Truman’s decision, “seemed, after
all our toils and perils, a miracle of deliverance.”

“A vast indefinite butchery” involving quite probably the deaths of several million people:
surely this is a great evil, and if it was imminent, one could reasonably argue that extreme
measures might be warranted to avert it. Secretary of War Stimson thought it was the sort
of case I have already described, where one had to wager; there was no option. “No man,
in our position and subject to our responsibilities, holding in his hand a weapon of such
possibilities for . . . saving those lives, could have failed to use it.” This is by no means an
incomprehensible or, on the surface at least, an outrageous argument. But it is not the same
as the argument I suggested in the case of Britain in 1940. It does not have the form: if we
don’t do x (bomb cities) --they will do y (win the war, establish tyrannical rule, slaughter
their opponents). What Stimson argued is very different. Given the actual policy of the
U.S. government, it amounts to this: if we don’t do x, we will do y. The two atomic bombs
caused “many casualties,” James Byrnes admitted, “but not nearly so many as there would
have been had our air force continued to drop incendiary bombs on Japan’s cities.” Our
purpose, then was not to avert a “butchery” that someone else was threatening, but one that
we were threatening, and had already begun to carry out. Now, what great evil, what
supreme emergency, justified the incendiary attacks on Japanese cities?

Even if we had been fighting in strict accordance with the war convention, the continuation
of the struggle was not something forced upon us. It had to do with our war aims. The
military estimate of casualties was based not only on the belief that the Japanese would
fight almost to the last man, but also on the assumption that the Americans would accept
nothing less than unconditional surrender. The war aims of the American government
required either an invasion of the main islands, with enormous losses of American and
Japanese soldiers and of Japanese civilians trapped in the war zones, or the use of the
atomic bomb. Given that choice, one might well reconsider those aims. Even if we assume
that unconditional surrender was morally desirable because of the character of Japanese
militarism, it might still be morally undesirable because of the human costs it entailed. But
I would suggest a stronger argument than this. The Japanese case is sufficiently different
from the German so that unconditional surrender should never have been asked. Japan’s
rulers were engaged in a more ordinary sort of military expansion, and all that was morally
required was that they be defeated, not that they be conquered and totally overthrown.
Some restraint upon their war-making power might be justified, but their domestic
authority was a matter of concern only to the Japanese people. In any case, if killing
millions (or many thousands) of men and women was militarily necessary for their
conquest and overthrow, then it was morally necessary--in order not to kill those people--to
settle for something less. [. . .] If people have a right not to be forced to fight, they also
have a right not to be forced to continue fighting beyond the point where the 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 re-commit the crime of aggression. In the summer of 1945, the victorious Americans owed the Japanese people an experiment in negotiation. To use the atomic bomb, to kill and terrorize civilians, without even attempting such an experiment, was a double crime.

These, then, are the limits of the realm of necessity. Utilitarian calculation can force us to violate the rules of war only when we are face-to-face not merely with defeat but with a defeat likely to bring disaster to a political community. But these calculations have no similar effects when what is at stake is only the speed or the scope of victory. They are relevant only to the conflict between winning and fighting well, not to the internal problems of combat itself. Whenever that conflict is absent, calculation is stopped short by the rules of war and the rights they are designed to protect. Confronted by those rights, we are not to calculate consequences, or figure relative risks, or compute probable casualties, but simply to stop short and turn aside.