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## **Enola Gay, Just War, and Mass Murder** **by Scott McPherson**

On December 15, 2003, the new Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center at Dulles International Airport, part of the National Air and Space Museum, was opened to the public. The Center boasts a number of high-profile attractions. The SR-71 Blackbird, the Air France Concorde, Russian MIGs, and even the Spaceshuttle *Enterprise* can all be found in this 294,000-square-foot, 10-story hangar on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. In all, a total of 82 racers, gliders, helicopters, warplanes, and airliners are on display.

But the most historical aircraft to be found there — and certainly the most controversial — is the *Enola Gay*, the massive B-29 Superfortress that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, on August 6, 1945. Piloted by Major Paul Tibbets, *Enola Gay*'s nuclear payload left more than 40,000 Japanese civilians dead, most of them women, children, and senior citizens, and mutilated or irradiated many thousands more, as it exploded 1,890 feet above the ground. Three days later, another atomic bomb was dropped from the B-29 *Bockscar*, on the Japanese city of Nagasaki, killing another 40,000 civilians or more.

Japan surrendered unconditionally in less than a week. The Second World War was finally over.

More than 230,000 people would lose their lives, both directly and indirectly, as a result of the two bomb attacks, and emotions run high when discussing those two days in August almost 60 years ago.

Some question the wisdom of an act which left so many innocent people dead. When the new wing of the Air and Space Museum opened its doors, protesters, including survivors of the two bombings, were waiting to highlight this fact. "If they want to show these planes, that's fine, but we can't help but also demand that they show the damage and the stories that take place behind these weapons," said Terumi Tanaka, a 71-year-old Nagasaki survivor. Minoru Nishino, a 71-year-old Hiroshima survivor, told in vivid detail his own experience: "I was 13 when I saw this airplane crossing the sky, just before I was blown to the ground with my skin peeling off," he said.

Yet apologists for the bombings remain unfazed by any criticism. For them, the war against Japan was a “good war.” Japan had initiated hostilities against the United States, and drastic measures were essential to defend the United States from possible annihilation.

Furthermore, claim the supporters of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, the U.S. government was actually acting in the interests of the Japanese people by bringing the war to a close using nuclear weapons, as many more civilians would probably have been killed in an invasion of the Japanese mainland than were killed in the atomic bombings. Hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers could also have been killed in that invasion.

The trouble is, these positions don’t stand up to moral scrutiny. There is no excuse for attacking innocent people.

Governments exist solely to defend the individual rights of citizens within a determined political boundary — they serve no other rightful purpose. On the domestic front, this entails the employment of police to respond to emergency calls from crime victims and the establishment of courts of law to determine the possible guilt and punishment of those who have been accused of violating the rights of fellow citizens. Civil courts are needed to settle private disputes that arise from honest misunderstandings and disagreements, such as breach of contract.

The duty of government to protect individual rights also extends to protecting citizens from *foreign governments*. Should one nation-state decide to attack another, the government of the defending nation has an equally important moral responsibility to shield its citizens from the aggressor, by deploying its military in their defense.

Repelling immediate attack may prove sufficient to put an end to any such threat, as happened when the Continental Army forced the British to surrender their hold over the 13 American colonies or as could have happened if the Confederacy had succeeded in driving back Union forces in the War Between the States in 1861. No further action was or would have been needed to end those conflicts. Still, greater measures may be required to protect a populace from a foreign menace, such as the total destruction of the rival nation’s ability to make war. Consequently, in the interests of national or collective self-defense, the theory of “just war” arises. (See Patrick Stephens’s commentary, [“The Justice of War.”](#))

The just-war theory holds, among other things, that if one nation attacks another, *and nothing less than complete destruction of the foreign war machine — total war — will suffice to restrain future acts of violence*, then moral responsibility for casualties — military and civilian — must lie at the feet of the attacking, not the defending, nation. After all, the defending government has a duty to protect the rights of its citizen.

An analogy provides the perfect example: If a gunman began shooting at you from the cover of a crowd of people and, with nowhere to escape, you respond by firing back to kill your attacker, then any damage you may inflict on the bystanders is the fault of the gunman.

“Just war” or not, there are immutable moral restraints placed on all participants in any conflict. “War,” wrote Herbert Spencer, “is a great evil,” visiting carnage, ruin, and loss of life on untold numbers of human beings. For centuries, it has been understood that noncombatants should be spared the hell of war, as they are its innocent bystanders. Warfare is meant to be conducted only against those who are actively participating in the conflict. “Old-fashioned international law had two excellent devices to accomplish this goal,” says Murray Rothbard: “the ‘laws of war,’ and the ‘laws of neutrality.’ ... The laws of neutrality were designed to keep any war confined to the warring States themselves, without attacks on nonwarring States.... The ‘laws of war,’ for their part, were designed *to limit as much as possible the invasion by warring States of the rights of civilians.*” [Emphasis added]

To continue with the analogy: The victim of the gunman’s attack in the crowded place nonetheless retains a moral responsibility to avoid killing innocent people *if possible*. For instance, he should not be allowed to fire indiscriminately into the crowd. To be considered within the realm of justifiable *defensive* action required for self-preservation, his efforts should be concentrated solely on defeating his attacker. (Of course, if feasible, he should retreat, which is consistent with self-preservation while totally eliminating any possibility of “collateral damage.”)

In other words, it has long been considered the moral responsibility of warring governments to avoid, *wherever possible*, inflicting harm on civilians who are not directly part of the war effort. They are as much the victims of war as the defenders. To deliberately attack a civilian, non-combat-related target, such as a city, is considered outside the scope of legitimate defensive action in wartime. It is a violation of the laws of war.

It should be emphasized that not *every* civilian death that resulted from U.S. attacks on Japanese targets during the war is morally condemnable. On the contrary, taking those actions necessary to prevent further possible attacks on the United States, e.g., destruction of Japan’s military capabilities, were not only legitimate but essential if the U.S. government was to fulfill its responsibility to the American people. Nations do not have the privilege of fleeing from an invader to safer ground. Moral responsibility for any civilians who were accidentally killed during counterattacks on *justifiable military targets* rests rightly with the Japanese government.

Aside from dropping nuclear bombs on large civilian populations, other options were available to America’s military planners to finish the war. By August 1945, Japan was completely on the ropes. Japanese forces had been successfully repelled, by conventional means, from Iwo Jimo, Okinawa, the Philippines, and the Solomon Islands. Japan was so beaten that in the last months of the war thousands of kamikaze pilots were actually flying suicide missions against American navy ships, and little effort was made to defend against regular U.S. air raids on Tokyo and elsewhere. U.S. forces were poised to invade Japan itself, and there was little the Japanese could have done to prevent this eventuality.

Can the bombings of Nagasaki and Hiroshima be justified on the grounds that many thousands of U.S. troops would have been killed in an invasion?

Certainly not. A soldier is, like it or not, a tool of the government whose army he serves in. Soldiers are aware, when they put on a uniform, that the ultimate sacrifice may be asked of them. They are in the service to kill enemy soldiers. If they have to give up their lives in order that a noncombatant — even if he is a citizen of the very nation the soldier is fighting — should live, then that is the price that they may have to pay. (Conscription, as a coercive act, makes a victim of the individual forced into service, but does not justify making victims of noncombatants.)

Of course, defenders of the bombings find final refuge in their claim that an invasion of Japan would probably have killed more civilians than the nukes did. That is pure speculation. It also sounds a lot like an Orwellian “we had to kill innocent people in order to possibly save other innocent people” argument. There is no way of knowing for sure what would have happened under those circumstances.

It is highly improbable that the Japanese emperor would have fought to the last man. Most likely, the government would have surrendered when the cost or probable cost became “too high.” (as it did after Hiroshima and Nagasaki). How do we know that, with an armada of troop ships entering their ports, or following a successful beachhead, the Japanese government would not have surrendered in the face of inevitable defeat, saving many thousands of lives?

And here “just war” advocates who support the bombings will find that they are entertaining an inconsistency. On the one hand, they want to blame Japan, or at least absolve the U.S. government, for the civilian deaths caused by the U.S. atomic bombs, because Japan had started the war. At the same time, they do not see that all innocent people killed in an invasion would have been the fault of the Japanese government, and so cannot exonerate, in moral terms, the U.S. government’s blatant attack on civilians.

Another possible solution could have been military containment. Given Japan’s desperate measures at the end of the war, it is highly likely that U.S. armed forces could have prevented Japan from posing any further threat to the United States by sealing off the Japanese military to prevent further strikes.

No amount of patriotic fervor, excuse-making, or rationalization can change this simple truth: the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima were targeted *specifically* because of their large civilian populations, and *precisely* to maximize the number of civilian casualties and force a Japanese surrender without invasion. Adding insult to injury, this was done at the very time that Japan’s military might was in total decline. There was *no military advantage* to leveling those two cities. Dropping massive nuclear bombs on those locations can only be considered a violation of the laws of war, and a war crime. It is the *deliberate* pursuit of civilian deaths in the A-bomb attacks that rightly deserves condemnation. Those 230,000 deaths did not constitute an unfortunate consequence of “just war” — it was mass murder.

It is important to note that none of the foregoing should be construed as a criticism of the “just war” theory. Actually, this theory is a sound libertarian solution to what is essentially a nonlibertarian predicament. In the modern age of warfare, avoiding civilian deaths is very difficult, if not impossible. Libertarians hold as their highest principle that individual rights should be paramount above all else. The “just war” position on noncombat casualties is meant to bolster this principle, not provide an exception to the rule. Every government has the duty of protecting the rights of the citizens it was formed to defend — even if this requires killing people.

The point here is that the *Enola Gay*’s mission was not consistent with a “just war” policy. It was meant to cause massive destruction and loss of life, not wipe out any legitimate military targets that posed a danger to the people of the United States. In this sense, the U.S. government is responsible for the largest act of terrorism in the history of the world.

War is indeed hell, and all attempts should be made to prevent it. When the United States is engaged in a defensive war, however, all lawful means should be used to protect American lives — but it *does not* allow for an open season on innocent civilians. Even in wartime, governments have a moral responsibility to avoid unnecessary civilian deaths, as prescribed in the laws of war that have guided military conduct for centuries. *Enola Gay* played a major part in the two darkest days of the U.S. government’s history — a tool of mass murder in an otherwise just war.

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