
War is Hell: The Moral Case for Nuclear Weapons

Courtesy of The Washington Times

Christopher Nolan released his artistic biopic, “Oppenheimer” near the 78th anniversary of the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The movie tells two intertwining stories about polymath J. Robert Oppenheimer - - one about his leading role in the development of the nuclear weapons that ended World War II - - the other about his antics that ultimately led to the loss of his security clearance a decade later.

The movie depicts his angst over his complicity in killing approximately 200,000 people. He asked himself, and we ask ourselves now, was the deployment of nuclear weapons of unprecedented lethality a moral action?

Indiscriminately killing defenseless civilians might seem to constitute prima facie evidence of then-President Harry S. Truman’s immorality. But the question is not whether the actions were moral but whether they were moral compared to other options available. If body counts are determinative, the other options for winning the war — incessant firebombing and invasion of the Japanese homeland — were no better.

Firebombing killed more people than nuclear weapons in WWII, as the horrors of Dresden and Tokyo remind us. War is hell, and often there are no desirable choices, only the least undesirable of bad options. The nuclear bombings ought, therefore, to be understood as an accommodation or a balancing of triumphalism and necessity, a balance that Mr. Nolan imparts on his conflicted Oppenheimer.

While basking in the halcyon glow of Pax Americana and with the luxury of time to second-guess Mr. Truman’s decision, it has become commonplace to speculate about Mr. Truman’s motives and criticize his decision.

Many now conclude that the bombings were unjustified. In making that judgment, they are guilty of evaluating 1945 through today’s lenses, just as many people unfairly judge our Founding Fathers the same way. In doing so, they fail to grasp their accomplishment in creating the greatest, freest, most prosperous, most just, and most diverse nation in history.

Was Mr. Truman a racist? Was the use of nuclear weapons vengeance for Pearl Harbor? Was he trying to save American lives, given that one million casualties were forecast for the invasion of Japan? Was he trying to end the war? Was he trying to exclude Russia from the treaty negotiations with Japan? We may never know. History does reveal, though, that Mr. Truman never second-guessed his decision. He recognized that nuclear bombs were about ending wars, not fighting them.

Three generations and a Cold War removed from the only use of nuclear weapons in wartime, and we continue to seek insight into the morality of nuclear weapons. The nuclear deterrence architecture constructed during the Cold War avoided nuclear

conflict. Since the end of WW II, nuclear deterrence has de-escalated conflicts and eliminated wide-scale, destructive warfare, such as the world wars. So far, major wars have been replaced with proxy wars, regional conflicts, civil wars, and insurgencies, all of whose death tolls were markedly lower. The advent of nuclear weapons has probably saved lives since 1945; 60 million people died in WW II. Since then, the number of war dead worldwide is a tiny fraction of that total. Today, some advocate for abolishing nuclear weapons. The U.S. could support global nuclear abolition if it were permanent, stable, and verifiable. With our partners and allies, we have the most formidable conventional power projection capability in world history. Yet the requisite parameters for nuclear abolition remain out of reach. This necessitates that the U.S. maintain its nuclear deterrent.

After the peace dividend following the Cold War, Sept. 11, 2001, brought reality back. National security has become more complex, moving from a unipolar world to a bipolar world to the current multipolar world. Russia's nuclear modernization with its 10:1 advantage in nonstrategic nuclear weapons over the U.S., China's rapid nuclear breakout, the Russo-Chinese "friendship without limits," and the possession of nuclear weapons by North Korea (and possibly Iran) all require a strong American nuclear deterrent.

Our reluctant acquiescence to a nuclear arsenal instantiates the natural moral ambiguity that it evoked in J. Robert Oppenheimer in 1945 as it does in us in 2023. But the prudent answer is now, as it was then, that the United States must maintain – and be prepared to use – nuclear weapons.

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