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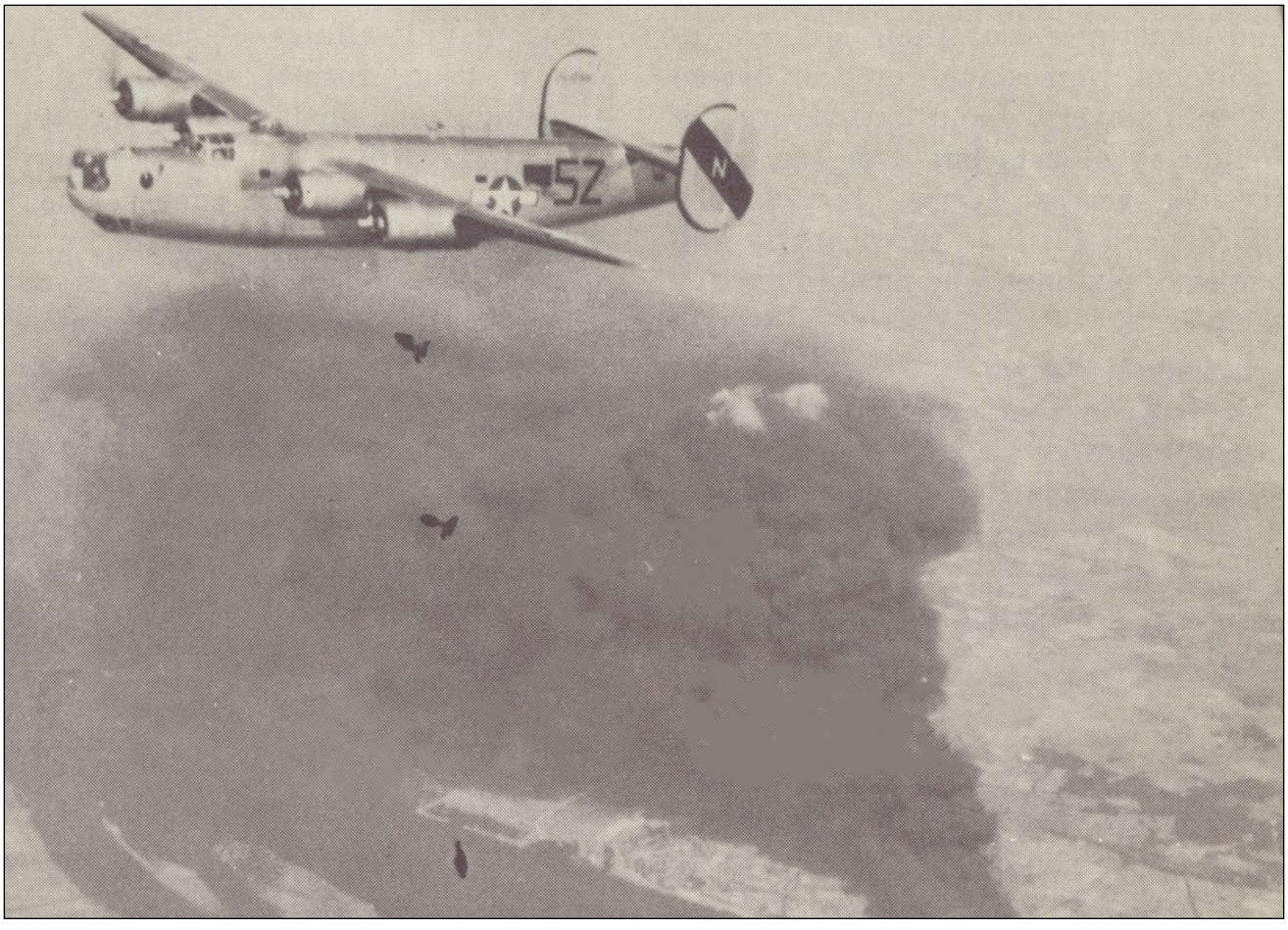

The Ethics of Bombing

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The subject of air bombardment is seldom discussed objectively and reasonably. It arouses all kinds of illogical antagonisms and emotional responses. Even when used against a leaking and derelict tanker aground near the Scillies, napalm bombs cause shudders of horror.

These irrational feelings are strongest among the young and the so-called progressives, and are usually directly proportional to their ignorance of the subject. When these people descend to the level of rational argument, the commonest objection to air bombardment is that it involves civilians in war, whereas they have a right to be treated as noncombatants.

Civilian populations have always, to a degree, been involved in hostilities. A glance at the history of war will suffice to make this clear.

From the earliest days of civilization, cities and towns have been besieged, bombarded, sacked, pillaged, and burned. Often their defenders, and sometimes also their civilian inhabitants, were slaughtered or driven off

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into slavery. Land battles are not fought in deserts but over the countryside, across farms, houses, orchards, and gardens, the property and homes of civilians who have to flee for their lives.

Conventional Warfare

It is true that, with the gradual merging of the feudal into the monarchical order in Europe in the Middle Ages, there came into being for a time a system of conventional warfare waged by standing armies of professional soldiers. During this period, the usages, forms, and ceremonies of war were taken seriously.

Generally speaking, a fairly clear distinction was drawn between combatant and noncombatants. This was comparatively easy because the ordinary people did not take sides as they cared little who won or lost the war. Usually, no religious or ideological principles were involved in those struggles for territory between the petty kings, dukes, and counts. The civilian population did its best to carry on with its normal affairs and avoid trouble.

The conventions of war were rather like a set of trade union rules, drawn up to make the profession of soldiering tolerable. Campaigns were normally conducted during only the summer months, and armies went into winter quarters to escape the trials and discomforts of frost, snow, and floods. The campaigns themselves were mainly affairs of maneuvering for position, formal sieges, and investitures, all conducted in a regular manner according to the rule book.

It was against the conventions to try to take unfair advantage by unorthodox actions. Thus, it was contrary to the usages of war to attack the base camp or baggage train of an enemy.

But even the professional soldier expected a bonus now and then in the form of loot or repine, and there were occasiona when the civilian inhabitant were plundered, ill-treated, and even slaughtered. Cities were sacked, and countrysides laid waste. But such lapses were unusual, and, on the whole, material destruction was avoided and the rights of noncombatants respected as far as was practicable.

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Character of War Altered

At the end of the 18th century, a great change occurred. The French Revolution, followed by the rise to power of Napoleon Bonaparte, completely altered the whole character of war. It became the affair of the whole people, and in France the professional army, devoted to conventional warfare, was replaced by the *levée en masse*, the nation in arms. The *Grande Armée* disregarded most of the conventions, and all over Europe the professional armies of other states went down before its onslaught.

The whole system of conventional war was rapidly swept away, and all nations began to raise large conscript armies. War became far more serious and pervaded the whole life of the nation. A new and much more realistic concept of military strategy appeared.

This fundamental change in the character of war made a great impression on contemporary students of military affairs, and the German General Karl von Clausewitz clothed in words the theory of war originated by Napoleon. Clausewitz believed that war had finally escaped the bonds of convention, and that, in the future, when great powers were engaged, it would be total and absolute. It would involve not only the armed forces, but the whole nation, and its successful prosecution would, therefore, need the support of public opinion. He insisted that war, whether one liked the idea or not, was now a violent clash between nations in arms which could never be humanized or civilized, and that, if one side attempted to do so, it was likely to be defeated.

Clausewitz had no faith in the reliability, in time of war, of any international rules or agreements since no nation facing the possibility of defeat would allow itself to be bound by them. It was clear that in general war the distinction between combatants and noncombatants was bound to become blurred.

Alone among the countries of Europe, Britain was able, by virtue of her seapower and island situation, to avoid the creation of a large conscript army. One of her main weapons was the sea blockade, a legal and internationally recognized method of sea warfare which aimed at starving the enemy nation into submission.

Since armed forces and essential workers had to be fed and clothed those who suffered most were the women and children, the infirm and the aged. Britain's blockade of Germany in World War I caused the death from malnutrition of far more civilians than died in all the air attacks on Britain in both World Wars.

troops; paying extra taxes; knitting cardigans, mittens, and balaclava helmets; and submitting to a few minor inconveniences.

This comfortable view was shaken by German air attacks on Britain during World War I and completely shattered by the all-out onslaught from the air in

Damage inflicted by Allied bombers on Hanover, Germany, during World War II. (US Army)

There is abundant evidence that, more often than not, the civilian population is deeply involved in war. However, British civilians have tended to regard themselves as privileged noncombatants. Since the Norman invasion of 1066, except for a few civil wars, all Britain's fighting has been on the high seas or in other countries.

British Seapower Protection

From the end of the 17th century to the beginning of the 20th century, British seapower completely sheltered Britons from the direct impact of war. This encouraged the view that war was exclusively the business of the armed forces which were paid to fight and risk their lives, while civilians were noncombatants who had a right to be left unmolested to go about their lawful affairs. Their part in the war, they believed, should be limited to waving goodbye to the

World War II. The coming of the third dimension into war brought about great changes, and another and even more realistic concept of military strategy emerged. The conventions of war that Britons had come to believe in were annihilated.

The main focus of British indignation was against air bombardment. It is a curious thing, but condensation and criticism of bombing began with the first occasion on which an explosive weapon was dropped from an aircraft. Four converted Swedish hand grenades were dropped by an Italian pilot on 1 November 1911 during the Italian-Turkish War in Libya. Several more grenades were dropped during the next few days.

Before long, Turkey protested against the bombing of a hospital at Ain Zara by Italian aircraft. Extensive inquiries failed to establish the existence of a hospital there, but it is possible that some Turkish military tents

may have been used as a casualty clearing station. The Italians pointed out, not unreasonably, that they had shortly before bombarded the encampment at Ain Zara with 152 heavy naval shells without any protest from the Turks.

There followed in the Italian, Turkish, and neutral press a considerable discussion about the ethics of "air bombardment–a discussion which has continued, more or less violently, ever since. It is astonishing that the first feeble attempt at air bombardment should have provoked an illogical pretest, suggesting that a few tiny bombs were more dangerous and destructive than a large number of heavy naval shells.

Air Control System

In Iraq and Transjordan, large land forces were replaced in 1922 by small air forces, and a very successful system known as the air control of developing countries was instituted. It did not involve a direct attack on the tribesmen or their houses, but was a form of air blockade. Unlike sea blockade, however, it did not seek to achieve its aim by starvation, but by unacceptable discomfort and inconvenience.

The system proved to be so effective and so economical in money and in casualties to both sides that in 1928 it was extended to the Aden Protectorate where it was an immediate success. The North West Frontier of India was ideally suited to this humane and efficient form of control, and, whenever it was tried there, it produced excellent results. The army, however, with its system of punitive expeditions, was too strongly entrenched and was able to frustrate all attempts to introduce the air method.

Protests in Great Britain

As might be expected, there was considerable opposition in Great Britain to the idea of air control. Its opponents had predicted that its reliance on the bomb–which they stigmatized as violent, horrible, and inhumane–would leave a legacy of hatred and ill will. This prediction proved to be the reverse of the truth. Nevertheless, the system continued to be bitterly attacked by many people who had an instinctive horror of any form of air bombardment.

During the years between the two World Wars, the alarm felt by civilians at the prospects of air bombardment led to determined efforts to outlaw or restrict it. At the League of Nations Disarmament Conference held in Geneva in 1932-34, the British Government proposed a convention to prohibit all forms of bombing from the air, to which it later added a rider permitting its use under certain conditions in developing countries. Further amendments from various sources were added to permit the attack of strictly military targets in support of land and sea operations. But the difficulty of defining what was, and what was not, a military target eventually proved insuperable.

Britain then tabled another proposal limiting the unladen weight of military aircraft to 3,000 pounds. This would have ruled out everything but the defensive fighter and the very short-range light bomber. Armies and navies of many countries welcomed this proposal, and, for a time, there seemed to be a chance that it might be accepted. But eventually, the Disarmament Conference broke up without achieving any result whatever.

At the outbreak of World War II, both Britain and France gave instructions that only strictly military targets were to be attacked. The Royal Air Force was not even allowed to attack German warships in docks or at quaysides for fear of causing casualties among civilians.

What Is a Military Target?

This again raised the question of what a military target is and how it can be defined. It is generally agreed, for example, that the man who loads or fires a field gun is a military target. So is the gun itself, and the ammunition dump that supplies it. So is the truck driver who transports ammunition from the base to the dump. So–in the last two World Wars—was the man who transported weapons, ammunition, and raw materials by sea.

But, then, are not the weapons and warlike stores on their way from the factories to the bases, and the men who transport them, also military targets? And what about the weapons under construction in the factories, and the men who make them? Are they not also military targets? And if they are not, where does one draw the line?

If they are military targets, are not the industrial areas, and the services—gas, water, and electricity—that keep industry going also military targets? Again, where can one draw the line? Or is it permissible to

starve these civilian workers by blockade, or shell them if you can get at them, but not to bomb them from the air?

As World War II went on, Britain and the United States followed the German lead in attacking from the air the industrial areas, power stations, railway centers, and other essential services, and accepting the certainty of a considerable number of civilian casualties. With few exceptions, Britons warmly supported this policy during the war. As soon as the war was over, many tried to ignore the vital contribution made by the Allied bombers, and to dissociate themselves from the policy.

Britain's Bomber Command was denied the 1939-45 star or other campaign star, and given the mainly civilian defense medal instead. Its commander in chief was, in the opinion of many people, slighted, and the command's achievements were commemorated in an official history written in a singularly equivocal and lukewarm style.

In progressive circles nowadays it is fashionable to assert that the strategic bombing campaign was a mistake and a waste of valuable resources. Yet even the official history is compelled to admit that:

> *Strategic bombing and, also in other roles strategic bombers, made a contribution to victory that was decisive. Those who claim that the Bomber Command contribution to the war was less than this are factually in error.*

The truth is that it is war itself that is wrong and immoral—or, more accurately speaking, aggressive war—for it must be right to defend one's country and oneself against attack. By this standard, the war waged by North Vietnam, backed by the Soviet Union and Communist China, against South Vietnam—fought in South Vietnamese territory, be it noted—is wrong and immoral. On the other hand, the defensive war against the attack from the north—fought by South Vietnam with backing from the United States, Australia, and New Zealand—is right and proper. No twist of argument, no sophistry, and no emotional outcry against bombing can controvert those two plain facts.

It is certainly not intended to imply that all actions, even in a just war against aggression, are necessarily permissible. The test is whether the action in question genuinely furthers the aim and main strategic concept of the war. Thus, taking revenge on civilians by mass slaughter does not help to win a war and is not permissible. But the diminution of an enemy's power to continue the war by the destruction of industrial areas, power stations, dams, railway centers, and depots is legitimate, even though such action must cause civilian casualties. It goes without saying, however, that all practicable steps, short of prejudicing the success of the operation, should be taken to minimize the risk to civilians.

A study of the ethics of bombing cannot fail to remind one that man is an illogical creature, still far more swayed by emotion than by calm reason. Man has wonderful powers of self-deception, and of the uncritical suppression of unwelcome facts; he is still capable of believing what he wants to believe, in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary. Indeed, there are none so blind as will not see, or so deaf as will not hear.

It is, therefore, no doubt unrealistic to hope for the general acceptance of rational views about such an emotive subject as the ethics of air bombardment. ■