Weighing Utilitarian Calculation:

M. Waltzer's Critique of the Atomic Bombing of Japan

by Eric Downes

The "Supreme Emergency" chapter of Michael Waltzer's Just and Unjust Wars [1] has two easily identifiable purposes. The global purpose is to determine what ethical metric should take precedence when utilitarianism (weighing the foreseeable results of one's actions: the likely number of dead soldiers of action A verses action B) and pro facie moral standards (the international rules of war) are in conflict. Stated another way, Waltzer wishes to identify the "Limits of Calculation". When a utilitarian ethical calculation is inappropriate. The second purpose is to apply this meta-argument to a specific case: the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. My purpose here is to review and critique the second, but an understanding of the first is preliminary.

Concisely albeit ambiguously stated, Waltzer's meta-argument is that "Utilitarian calculation can force us to violate the rules of war only when we are face-to-face not merely with defeat, but with defeat likely to bring disaster to a political community." [1, p.268] This can be understood by looking at the primary example Waltzer gives for a decision that used a utilitarian calculus which violated the laws of war might be permissible: 1940 Britain, in which the bombing of German cities was necessary to prevent what appeared to be an impending Nazi victory.
Thus, according to Waltzer, utilitarian calculus is an acceptable derivational metric applied to war only on the margins - when one is faced with certain doom and there is simply no other choice. I shall not discuss the general practicality of the application of this metric to warfare here. Instead let us proceed with the application to the Atomic Bombing of Japan.

America in 1945, Waltzer argues was no such case of imminent doom as was Britain in 1940. Imminent defeat by the Nazis or Japanese Imperialists was not at hand, rather what was at hand was a perceived mass slaughter of Japanese and American troops that would arise if America invaded Japan.

This perceived mass slaughter, and the arguments for use of the atomic bomb to "shock" the Emperor into surrender are made in Stimson's "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb" [2]. Here I repeat the gist. The Japanese military forces, all counted, were about five million strong. The Japanese showed no intention of complete surrender, which was a central point of US policy toward Japan. The Japanese were using every means at their disposal - suicide attacks with aircraft and fighting literally to the death. It was estimated that over a million US casualties would occur if America invaded Japan, and extrapolating from past encounters, Japanese casualties would be higher still. [2, p.101-102. See also 3, 4, and the End Note *]

For Waltzer, the last part is key: if America invaded Japan. Waltzer asks us to step back for a moment and view the (very likely) massive loss of life that would result from an amphibious landing on
Japanese soil in context: as a result of an American action. The situation was not: If we do not drop the bomb, they will invade America. the situation was: If we do not drop the bomb, we will invade Japan. One might argue this as the international analog to a police officer arguing "If I do not fire-bomb this man's house, then he will seriously hurt me when I try and enter it." The existential weight of responsibility still lies on the police officer - he is always free to choose not to invade the man's house.

Although the above is the central hinge, there is more to Waltzer's argument. Waltzer views war not as a conflict between peoples but as a conflict between governments. The United States had no right, Waltzer argues to press war beyond the point where it could be concluded. Thus the continuation of the war beyond that point was a crime against the people of Japan and America. Waltzer disingenuously downplays the US' attempts at negotiation -- as a reading of the key features of the Potsdam Ultimatum in Stimson's Harpers article [2, p. 104-105] will show. What is true however, is that the US made no attempt to negotiate anything short of the complete surrender described in the Potsdam Ultimatum. Thus, the ethical nature of the decision to use the bomb again comes down to the question of whether it was necessary for the United States to invade Japan if Japan did not surrender unconditionally.

Before pursuing this question I must note that another important issue is whether or not there were other means to ensure a Japanese surrender. Reading Stimson makes this seem doubtful. As Stimson notes [2, p.105], more Japanese were killed in the American air-raids over Tokyo, than in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. It was not the
death toll, but the psychological impact which was the key in assuring Japanese surrender. As Compton notes: [2, p.106]

"It was not one atomic bomb or two which brought surrender, it was the experience of what an atomic bomb will actually do to a community, plus the dread of many more, that was effective."

Walker notes that the view held by Stimson et al., that the Bomb was the only viable option is held in doubt by scholars, as revealed in Walker's historiographic work "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb" [3, p.110], but we will not deal with these doubts. The reason is simple, albeit ex post facto: even after the first bomb was dropped the Japanese did not surrender unconditionally. If an atomic bomb was not enough of a shock, how could one detonated on a non-military target, say as a demonstration, have had any effect?

My point here is not to justify the dropping of the Bombs, but to point out that such alternatives as we estimate in retrospect would have been successful, are not acceptable in Waltzer's argument. If one accepts the argument that what was needed to force Japanese surrender was not just an extension of current tactics, or a peaceful warning, a high death toll, or a war of attrition with the US and Russia, but rather what was needed was a novel psychological shock. If one so reasons, then one may reasonably conclude that any such shock would have involved such a great price (even greater than the fire-bombing of Tokyo), such that Waltzer would find it unethical. Thus, while Waltzer criticizes what may be termed the United States' lack of due diligence in pursuing alternate solutions which would
bring about an unconditional surrender, his primary argument centers around the unethical nature of the US insistence on the invasion of Japan. The US, Waltzer, argues had an ethical responsibility to the people of Japan and its own citizens to negotiate a conditional surrender, rather than considering invasion a necessity.

This concludes Waltzer's argument. I will now comment personally.

Why was the invasion of Japan so important to America, or more specifically, to Truman? One of the primary answers to that question, I feel, can be summarized in Truman's own words, as quoted by Henry Kissinger. In 1961 Kissinger (then a junior professor at Harvard) asked Truman which foreign policy decision he most wanted to be remembered by. Truman's response is instructive: "We completely defeated our enemies and made them surrender ... And then we helped them to recover, to become democratic, and to rejoin the community of nations. Only America could have done that." [5, p.425]

The obligation of freeing the Japanese people and the rest of the world community from the totalitarian regime of "terrorists" (as Stimson calls the Japanese military government [2, p.103]), is weighed against the cost of killing some of those very same people. This ethical cross-roads is open to much personal interpretation.

The idea of killing people in order to free them is, I believe absurd, but at the same time, ex post facto, I cannot deny the incredible success of the democratization of Japan. I thus adopt a moderate position. The only ethically responsible position for the government of the United States to have pursued was one which would lead to a
democratic civilian Japanese government, along with the (at least temporary) demilitarization of Japan, including the turn-over of Japanese officials for war-crimes tribunals for their actions in China, Korea, Viet Nam, and elsewhere. It is a further necessity that these things must be carried out under the oversight of international observers -- promises from deposed military juntas under coercion, are not sufficient.

I agree with Waltzer that the US should have more vigorously pursued negotiations and not demanded unconditional surrender, but I also find it extremely doubtful that the Japanese would have agreed to the above terms. If they did not agree to these terms, the only route left open to the US would be to use military force to strengthen it's bargaining position, preferably at the minimum cost of lives. This is, I believe, what was ultimately done.

**End Note**: J. Samuel Walker, in his historiographical work "The Decision to use the Bomb" [3], cites evidence that the figure 'over a million US casualties' quoted by Stimson was inflated -- and notes it has been suggested they may even have been fabricated by Truman to assuage his guilt. More recent work has determined that this is not such a clear matter, and in fact these numbers may not have been unrealistic.

As documented in "Casualty Projections for the Invasion of Japan" [4], estimates of 1 million casualties were not uncommon, and the estimates of Operation Olympia and Operation Downfall (The Invasion of Japan consisted of these two) changed weekly as new intelligence arrived.
Furthermore, while there most certainly were reports saying that a projected number of 500,000 America deaths were "gross overestimates", there were also reports that viewed such a number as a "gross underestimate". To quote D. M. Giangreco [4]:

"Researchers look at the forest of documents created over fifty years ago and almost immediately become lost during their hunt for extreme comments and inconsistencies. The fundamental truth, however, was that the Army and War Department manpower policy of 1945--- in all its aspects--- was established in such a way that the Army could sustain an average of 100,000 casualties per month from November 1945 through the fall of 1946 and still retain relatively fully manned and combat-effective units through its use of new Selective Service inductees and reassigned soldiers from demobilized units. That casualties would be massive was so basic an understanding, that it was functionally a "self-evident truth" held by decision makers at virtually all levels. Little or no paper discussion was required or conducted within the Army, and events beyond its purview rendered an invasion unnecessary." (italics added by author)

Sources


