

## MORAL DIMENSIONS OF WORLD WAR II: A FORUM

THE MORALITY OF WAR IS AN ENDURING QUESTION HISTORIANS cannot avoid. In recent issues we have run pieces by Niall Ferguson, Sir Max Hastings, and Harry Stout that explore some of the moral dimensions of modern warfare. And in this issue we again take up the topic. We asked Michael Bess, author

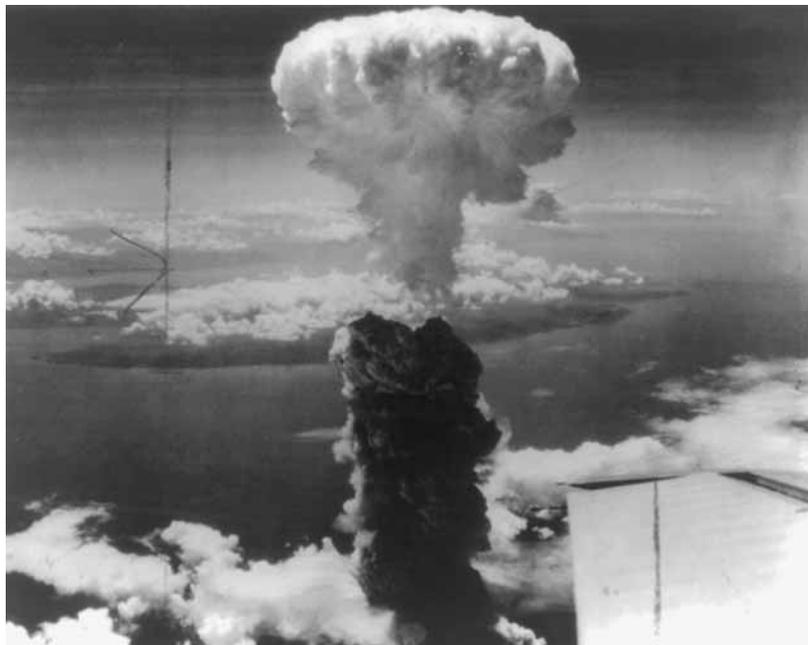
of *Choices Under Fire: Moral Dimensions of World War II* (Knopf, 2006), to open our forum with an essay drawn from his book. Sanford Lakoff, Eric Bergerud, Michael Kort, and Harry Stout offer their responses to *Choices Under Fire*, followed by Bess's rejoinder.

### POPULAR CULTURE VERSUS ACADEMIC CULTURE IN NARRATING WORLD WAR II

Michael Bess

In 1994, when the Smithsonian Museum attempted to display the B-29 bomber *Enola Gay*, one of the most interesting aspects of the fierce ensuing controversy lay in the fractures it revealed among the stakeholders in the proposed exhibit—a set of fractures that arguably reflect deep divisions in the broader American society. When it comes to World War II, we find an unusually wide variety of persons who feel a direct connection to the events under discussion: war veterans versus professional historians, politicians versus academics, journalists versus museum staffers, left-wingers versus right-wingers. One of the most significant of these fractures is the rift between popular culture and academic culture in remembering the war. Indeed, the entire fiasco at the Smithsonian can be partly understood as a failure of these two very different worlds to find a common language through which to frame the events of August 1945. The closing act of World War II became a highly charged symbolic vector for deeper moral and political questions about the meanings of national honor, about America's role in world politics, and about America's very self-image as a nation.

Most academic writers on World War II, while highly diverse in their approaches and interpretations, do not hesitate to subject wartime deeds to harsh critical scrutiny. A good example is the Pulitzer-prizewinning study by David Kennedy, *The American People in World War II*, which concludes its wide-ranging and eloquent overview of the war years with a moral balance sheet that can only be described as trenchantly critical in nature. Kennedy somberly lays before the reader many of the morally questionable acts (or sins of omission) committed by the United States between 1939 and 1945. One cannot help but imagine the mounting outrage felt



The mushroom cloud from the atomic bomb, Nagasaki, Japan, August 9, 1945. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-36452].

by some war veterans or conservative politicians on reading Kennedy's words. Indeed, the journalist George F. Will promptly described the book as "a stinker of a Pulitzer," dismissing its severe concluding judgments as a typical "coagulation of late-20th-century academic conventional wisdom."

On the other side of the great divide lies the vast popular literature about the war—the books one finds selling like hotcakes at Borders or Amazon or Barnes & Noble. Though some of these books do delve quite seriously into the more controversial or ambiguous aspects of World War II, many tend to fall into a different category. They are books that narrate wartime events from a perspective that never questions—and more importantly, never challenges the reader to question—the overall righteousness of Allied conduct and policy. Some of these books are fairly measured and judicious in their analysis, others border on cheerleading. But what they have in common is that they reinforce the underlying virtuous-

ness of "our side." They are books that make the reader feel straightforwardly good about being an American, a feeling unclouded by any reservations or troubling afterthoughts regarding the grey areas of the war's history.

My book, *Choices Under Fire*, was written with the aim of bridging the divide between these two literatures, or at least of bringing them closer to a common language of historical analysis. I hope to convince a general readership of the inherent complexity and ambiguity of many key moral issues raised by the war, while staying true to those central threads in the conflict's story that still elicit awe in us today and deserve celebration. Exploring these moral complexities does not necessarily mean undermining our appreciation for the heroism and self-sacrifice of those who fought in the war. On the contrary, the heroic deeds of that era come out even

more vividly when we place them in the full richness of their actual historical context. World War II was really two kinds of conflict at the same time: a morally straightforward war of defense against unprovoked aggression, and a morally complex conflict pervaded by painful dilemmas, uneasy trade-offs, awful but unavoidable compromises. This dual nature of the war, I argue, requires a delicate balance between what I call the "stance of celebration" and the "stance of critical scrutiny."

At a broader level, my goal in this book is to persuade a general readership that ambiguity and messy complexity are important for understanding history—not just other nations' histories, but our own as well. Unfortunately, there is a growing tendency in contemporary public discourse to force simplicity and clarity on issues that are actually extremely complicated. In an age of sound bites and dueling pundits on TV, many of us have become accustomed to having the key questions of public policy boiled

down into comfortable little packages of straightforward either-or choices. But this is dangerous, because the real world does not work this way. More often than not, the real world is baffling, fragmentary, intricate, and riddled with paradoxes: it presents us with alternatives that entail difficult compromises or trade-offs. *Choices Under Fire* seeks to flesh out this kind of complexity in the context of a war that is too often considered morally cut-and-dried. My hope is that, by doing this, it will also make a contribution toward greater acceptance of ambiguity and nuance in discussing the important issues of today.

*Choices Under Fire* offers a *tour d'horizon* of the war's moral "hot spots"—those areas around which the most intractable (and often acrimonious) debate has tended to emerge. A good example of the approach I take is my treatment of strategic bombing. I seek to lay out as persuasively as possible the best arguments of all sides in the debates over this issue, from those who defend wartime bombing practices to those who consider them war crimes. I thread my way between the philosophical questions that cannot be avoided in this subject matter and a close analysis of the evolving historical circumstances through which the bombing campaign developed. At the same time, I do not hold back from offering judgments of my own, and what gradually emerges is a picture in which trenchant *a priori* moral distinctions unavoidably give way to countless nuances, intricacies, and ambiguities. Some bombardment practices are solidly justifiable according to the traditions of just war theory, while others (such as firebombing civilian centers) demonstrably flunk the moral test. In the chapter on atomic bombing, I conclude that the nuclear incineration of two Japanese cities constituted a major violation of the principles of *jus in bello*; yet I also conclude that all the most plausible *alternative* courses of action for ending the war would probably have resulted in far greater loss of human life. Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in other words, were atrocities that probably saved many more lives than they cost. At the risk of infuriating the more ardent partisans of the moral extremes, I try to show that the sheer complexity of the wartime context—the concrete situation swiftly evolving from month to month—rendered simple judgments impossible, both at the time and in retrospect. Ambiguity and moral trade-offs continually forced themselves on the war's decision makers, and we need to respect that fundamental fact in framing our own historical judgment.

A very different example of moral complexity in *Choices Under Fire* lies in the subject of racism. When we bring up this topic in the context of World War II, our strongest association tends naturally to be with Nazi anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. I argue, however, that race actually constituted an even more disturbingly ubiquitous concept in this war than we are usually led to believe. Racial ideas shaped both German and Japanese war aims, and helped spur these two peoples to take the aggressive actions that precipitated military hostilities. Racial prejudices

on the Allied side led to a gross underestimation of Japanese capabilities in 1941—a misperception for which Britain and the United States paid dearly in December 1941 and the early months of 1942. Racial distinctions permeated the American war economy and the American military. They also led to one of the greatest breaches of constitutional governance in the nation's history, the forced internment of a racially demarcated subset of American citizens. Racial hatreds animated soldiers on both sides in the Pacific War, leading to unprecedented levels of brutality in the conduct of combat and the treatment of prisoners. And racism, of course, lay at the heart of the Nazi genocide that has marked this war as a chapter of unique horror in human history. Race, in short, is arguably one of the central concepts of the entire conflagration that we call World War II, both in causing the conflict and in de-

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termining its course and outcome.

Making distinctions among these far-flung racisms is important. But it is equally important to recognize the underlying commonalities among them. The black GI thrown out of a segregated mess hall did not face the same dangers as a Jewish father cradling his child at the ravine of Babi Yar: but for all their differences, they were victims of a fundamentally similar gesture, rooted in unflinching dehumanization. It is certainly necessary to recognize the distinctions between the lynch mobs of the American South, the rampaging Japanese in Manila, the Vichy French police at the Vélodrome d'Hiver, and the coldly methodical SS in the Ukraine. But it is also too easy to classify these phenomena as totally separate, totally removed from each other. They were not. They were part of the same deep disease, erupting simultaneously all over the planet. We, as Americans, are falsely comforting ourselves if we fail to see the common lines that connect all these things beneath the surface and link our clean, bright, familiar hometowns to the ghastly hellholes on the other side of the world.

Another moral theme that I single out for particular emphasis in the book—precisely because it is commonly forgotten today—is the wave of fervent internationalism that emerged in the war's immediate aftermath. We often refer to the people of that era by using Tom Brokaw's famous expression: the Greatest Generation. But that generation's achievement was far more than just a military one. It also possessed a crucial political and diplomatic dimension. Not only did the men and women of the 1940s do a superb job in defeating fascism; they also did an equally remarkable job in creating a new system

of world governance to structure the postwar peace. Some of the innovative institutions they built were primarily political in nature (United Nations, Council of Europe); some were economic (International Monetary Fund, World Bank, Marshall Plan, European Economic Community); some were military (Western European Union, NATO, Warsaw Pact, SEATO); some were juridical (Nuremberg and Tokyo Trials, International Court of Justice, Fourth Geneva Convention, Universal Declaration of Human Rights). What is undeniable is that the late 1940s constituted one of the all-time high points of global internationalism under vigorous and determined American leadership.

This aspect of the "Greatest Generation's" achievement tends to get elided in many recent accounts, mainly because the United Nations and the other institutions built by the victors of World War II have fallen into disrepute in some circles. Yet such an elision amounts to an unwarranted erasure of the *peace-oriented* elements that played an equally fundamental role in defining that generation's worldview. Here, too, moreover, it is important to underscore the profound ambiguity of humankind's post-Hiroshima predicament as it presented itself to the leaders of 1945.

One such figure, for example, was General George C. Marshall, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff. On October 29, 1945, Marshall was invited to present his ideas on "the future of peace" at the *Herald Tribune* Forum in New York:

For centuries man has been seeking, I believe, to extend [political order] to the level of the entire planet. There are two ways in which this has been manifest: we might say one is by way of cooperation and the other by way of operation. Hitler, whether he knew it or not, sought to establish one kind of order in the world when he precipitated the recent [war]. This would be by way of operation. The League of Nations, on the other hand, sought to establish a global order by cooperation. . . . It would appear that one or the other of these methods will prevail. Time and space have been so shrunken that the world must, I believe, establish definite global rules. Community and national rules no longer suffice. They by themselves are no longer realistic.

Marshall was not the kind of man who could be accused of being a woolly-headed idealist who indulged in wishful thinking. He was among the chief architects of Allied victory, and he now cast a sober eye on the war's aftermath and the challenge that humankind faced. The future peace, he concluded, would require a radically new system of international conflict resolution, centered on the United Nations. The core premise of traditional Realpolitik—a world of independent nations pursuing their own distinctive interests in isolation from each other—had become in many ways a thing of the past. In Marshall's

view, only a global system of governance, complementing and in some ways *superseding* national power, would suffice.

Yet he was also keenly aware of how difficult this new order would be to create and sustain. When he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1953, he made it clear in his acceptance speech that military force would unavoidably continue to play a key role in world politics for the foreseeable future, and that the best way to avoid war with the Soviet empire was to present it with a strong and united front in the West. At the same time, though, he also insisted that the old Realpolitik of the past simply made no sense for the long haul. His words are striking, coming from a man we associate so automatically with the greatest military enterprise in history:

For the moment the maintenance of peace in the present hazardous world situation does depend in very large measure on military power, together with Allied cohesion.

But the maintenance of large armies for an indefinite period is not a practical or a promising basis for policy. We must stand together strongly for these present years, that is, in this present situation; but we must, I repeat, we must find another solution.

Here, too, we return once again to the recurring theme of nuanced ambiguity that dominates *Choices Under Fire*. In assessing the long-term legacy of World War II, just as in narrating the deeds that shaped the war itself, the only way to do justice to this conflict is through the lens of irreducible moral complexity. Marshall's vision was one of international bodies operating under global laws, of collective security, economic cooperation, and the uncompromising defense of human rights—all in the hair-raising context of an emerging Cold War rivalry that threatened humankind's very survival. World War II, in Marshall's estimation, had inaugurated a new era of unprecedented urgency in the

long history of tension between pragmatism and idealism. The boundary between these two had shifted: strategies for security that had counted as realistic in the past now promised nothing but self-destruction. Yet new strategies, and new rules, were still in the process of being worked out. Such was the strange paradox that defined this new phase of history: the very grimness of the nuclear arms race made the idealism of an internationalist stance seem pragmatic by comparison with the unthinkable alternative of another world war.

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## COMMENTS ON *CHOICES UNDER FIRE*

Sanford Lakoff

**D**uring the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to the United States in 2007, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks remarked that whereas Britons are constantly reminded of their storied past by the glitter of monarchy, Americans, lacking a living link to their national pageant, are more disdainful of all that has gone before. (We ex-colonials, he might have added, must now pay for our *lèse majesté* by making do with Burger Kings and Dairy Queens.) Brooks is surely right about this. We may wax nostalgic about the country's pioneering origins, admire the practical wisdom of the founding fathers, and even reenact Civil War skirmishes, but as an art critic once observed, the tradition that is most venerated in American culture is the "tradition of the new." The dollar bill proudly proclaims that ours is *novus ordo seclorum*, a "new order of the ages." Henry Ford, a prototypically irreverent innovator, famously declared that "history is bunk." Among the possible reasons for this disdainful attitude toward both history and historical studies may be that ours is a relatively young country and that we are a nation of immigrants, many of whom came to this "New World" anxious to shuck off the constraints of the Old. But whatever the reasons, a refusal to be bound by the burdens of the past is surely a pronounced feature of the American psyche.

This characterization holds for the serious reading public no less than for *hoi polloi*. American book

buyers relish biographies of tycoons, presidents, generals, and celebrities, and gripping accounts of military engagements from Bunker Hill to Baghdad, but, with rare exceptions (like the works of Barbara Tuchman, Garry Wills, and David McCullough), more general historical studies are likely to be tar-

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getted to the academic rather than trade market.

In some ways, collective amnesia is psychologically healthy. In the Middle East, where history is a constant point of reference, ancient hatreds are nursed and serve as warrants for holy wars. "Good Europeans" must struggle to keep memories of national animosities from spoiling their vision of a united, all but borderless continent. Many Japanese stubbornly refuse to admit that during World War II, more than half a century ago, their army committed atrocities in China and forced captive women in all the Asian areas they overran into prostitution. By contrast, Americans treat history like a palimpsest, overwriting everything. We have shrugged off the memory of the Malmedy massacre and the Bataan

death march and now drive German and Japanese cars and eat bratwurst and sushi without a twinge of conscience. We readily acknowledge and apologize for such sins of the more distant past as Indian removal, slavery, nativism, and patriarchalism, but feel no need to pay reparations for the wrongs committed by previous generations. None of that happened on our watch! Instead, we focus on the need to "move on" by trying to realize ideals previously honored in the breach. We interpret the old treaties, so often travestied, to let Indian tribes build gaming casinos in otherwise Puritanical precincts, and we elect and appoint to high office people whose color, ethnicity, or gender would once have been the political equivalent of a mafioso's kiss of death.

Every people, to be sure, embellishes its sense of nationhood by embracing cultivated narratives of heroic achievement calculated to cover up sordid or embarrassing episodes in the national epic, and conscientious historians have labored diligently, from Thucydides onward, to make fresh generations mindful of the trespasses of their predecessors. In America, revisionists of all sorts have sought to expose as counterfeit every glittering bauble in the national treasure chest, from Parson Weems's idealized portrait of George Washington to Lincoln's image as The Great Emancipator and now even the conventional view that FDR's New Deal brought the country out of the Great Depression. Similarly,

David Kennedy's sharply critical view of American conduct in World War II took some of the sheen from hagiographic eulogies of "the greatest generation."

Michael Bess's account of the war is revisionist only in the sense that it aims to show the real complexities that are masked by oversimplified accounts of it as nothing more nor less than a gallant struggle of freedom-loving people against the barbarian hordes of modern totalitarianism. Much as he agrees that this was a "good war," i.e., a defensive struggle pitting the Allies against regimes that committed monstrous crimes against humanity, he also shows that in some ways the noble cause was sullied. The fact that Stalin's Russia, itself very much a totalitarian dictatorship, was a key member of the Allied coalition muddies the contrast between the Allies and the Axis. Our own war effort was tainted by racism, evident in the segregation of our armed forces, the internment of citizens of Japanese extraction, and the refusal in the run-up to our entry into the war to allow entry to desperate Jewish refugees. The conduct of the war involved the unnecessary killing of civilians in "area bombing" raids. In the aftermath, standards of judicial legality were bent to some extent to allow the conviction of enemy leaders, and cynical expediency spared some who committed terrible crimes.

Bess's account of the decision to use the atomic bomb against Japanese cities is particularly good. It is meticulous, unsparing, and a brilliant case study in the complexity—but also the necessity—of coming to moral judgments even in a time of "total war." He effectively refutes the contentions that this decision was used mainly to forestall Russian entry into the Pacific War, that the Japanese high command was at the point of surrendering even if the bomb had not been used, that the dropping of the second bomb was clearly superfluous, etc. He also shows that the option of staging a demonstration outside Japan, to which Japanese representatives would have been invited, was not given the attention it deserved. It is of course easy in hindsight to criticize wartime leaders for not understanding how different in its destructiveness and potential danger the atomic bomb was from horrendous "conventional" weapons (like the incendiaries that killed so many thousands in Hamburg and Tokyo) and for not trying something other than a military exhibition of its devastating power and novelty. There were only two bombs available; using one in a demonstration would have meant having to wait a couple of weeks for a replacement. What if the bomb had proved to be a dud? Would the demonstration against an uninhabited atoll with no man-made structures have been effective enough? Would the fanatical Japanese militarists have sent witnesses or allowed their pub-

lic to hear from them? Still, as Bess contends, a demonstration would have been well worth trying, if only to justify the terrible step of actually dropping the bomb on a city.

In some respects—in particular, one at the outset and another at the end—Bess's interpretations are open to criticism. In the first chapter he contends that the Germans, Italians, and Japanese were all motivated by Social Darwinism. This is much too simple. In England and America, Social Darwinism



General panoramic view of Hiroshima after the bomb, August 1945. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-134192].

mainly reinforced the doctrine of economic liberalism by adding that if competition were allowed to take its natural course, a blissful future of plenty would be assured. Herbert Spencer and William Graham Sumner argued that millionaires were actually great benefactors rather than robber barons and that in order to assure "the survival of the fittest" (a phrase coined by Spencer) the state must not interfere in the market. Only when Social Darwinist survivalism was fused with racism, nationalism, and imperialism, as Hannah Arendt, Richard J. Evans, and others have shown, did it yield the belief that the superior Germanic or Teutonic race represented the height of human evolution and should dominate the world. Hitler was also obviously influenced by the modern form of anti-Semitism, a sentiment not intrinsic to Social Darwinism but virulent in Vienna, where he experienced early frustrations. Italian fascism was another hodgepodge, mixing the anti-parliamentary elite theories of Mosca, Pareto, and before them Gumpowicz, the aesthetic Futurism of Marinetti, the socialism that had earlier been embraced by Mussolini, Sorel's teachings on violence and political myth, and the old Italian fixation on *grandezza*. Japanese militarism, as Bess points out, was to some extent an imitation of Western imperialism, but it also had indigenous roots in the Samurai code of Bushido and a mystical vision of Japan as divinely inspired. Social Darwinism was hardly as

influential in the Far East as it was in Europe.

In the penultimate chapter Bess contends that the war "changed the moral stakes surrounding the challenge of global peace" by leading to the creation of the United Nations as the new global guarantor of "collective security." Bess makes clear that the UN cannot serve this goal unless the great powers that control the Security Council allow it to, but instead of confining himself to a realistic appraisal of its strengths and weaknesses, he allows himself to succumb to moralistic exhortation. Thus "if the world's peoples come to recognize the benefits of that flow from such supranational structures, and prove willing to nurture their growth, then the practice of cooperative conflict resolution can become a regular feature of global politics." As FDR liked to say, that is indeed an "iffy" proposition. Bess would have done well to heed the warning about the deficiencies in the structure of the UN issued by Hans J. Morgenthau in his *Politics among Nations* (first published in 1948). The UN Charter, he pointed out, was built on several assumptions, including the belief that "the great powers, acting in unison, would deal with any threat to peace and security, regardless of its source." In practice, however, the main threat to global peace and security emanated from the great powers themselves. "Thus the constitutional scheme of the Charter

has been defied by the political reality of the postwar world." More recently, the enlarged General Assembly has become the instrument of a malevolent gang of authoritarian regimes, and the UN bureaucracy has been utterly ineffective in dealing with crises in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and Sudan, as well as a cesspool of corruption in the Iraqi oil for food program. When it comes to the UN and the prospects for an international rule of law, moral exhortation is no substitute for realistic analysis and reform proposals.

But these criticisms are peripheral to the central preoccupations of the book. Parents and teachers anxious to rear the young to think and behave morally and courageously could assign no better text. Hegel said that the only lesson history teaches is that history teaches no lessons. Bess shows that this is quite wrong. There is much to be learned from the history of World War II, if it is examined as thoughtfully as it is here.

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## CRITIQUE OF *CHOICES UNDER FIRE*

Eric Bergerud

Michael Bess begins his disappointing book *Choices Under Fire* with a familiar story. On June 4, 1942 during the Battle of Midway three American officers led their torpedo bomber squadrons on futile attacks against Japanese aircraft carriers. All three air commanders perished along with most of their men. The attack, according to Bess, drew Japanese fighters low and left the carriers vulnerable to the American dive bomber strike that demolished three of the four Japanese fleet carriers sunk that day. Bess argues that the courage shown by torpedo bomber airmen was beyond training and military loyalty—instead they made a larger “moral choice” and “sacrificed themselves” for higher ideals, presumably because they somehow knew or hoped that their destruction would open the way for American victory. A stirring tale, but not true to either the men or the time.

Bess bases his picture of Midway on obsolescent sources, including a piece from novelist Herman Wouk. Had he taken the time to consult more serious works, he would have confronted a very different picture. The American forces were superior in number of aircraft and in radar. U.S. torpedo planes in the Battle of the Coral Sea had done well and suffered no casualties. In the event, as was typical among the airmen on both sides, all evidence indicates that American flyers looked forward to the battle with, if anything, a kind of cockiness. In practice, Midway, like all carrier battles of 1942, was a madman’s night out during which both sides committed glaring errors. Far from being a miracle, the result at Midway was well within the range of probabilities given the balance of forces. Naturally, the men aboard the torpedo squadrons realized they flew into danger. But there is no reason to think that they were on a suicide mission. Nor is it at all obvious that the sacrifice of at least the first two torpedo attacks interrupted Japanese defense other than to add to general confusion. More to the point, the real moral choice made by these men was the same as that made by every airman in the U.S. Fleet in mid-1942: they volunteered to fight in the most violent war of the modern era. Risking life went without question—certain death was not part of the bargain.

Bess attempts to “offer the reader a vivid tour d’horizon of the war’s moral ‘hotspots,’” “shed new light on the forces that shaped this epochal conflict, and [come to] fresh conclusions about its far-reaching legacy.” Ambitious goals no doubt. To achieve them he relies entirely upon secondary works in English. Notably absent are the official histories. The bibliography is good as far as these things go, but an examination of the notes shows a heavy reliance on



Tuskegee airmen at a briefing in Ramitelli, Italy, March 1945. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-DIG-ppmsca-13260].

anthologies, popular histories, and a very select list of historians that look with jaundiced eye on the Allied war effort.

One wonders what is the book’s intended audience. There is nothing in the book that could be considered new either in content or interpretation, leaving little or nothing of interest to serious students of World War II. I think it more likely that Bess is aiming his arguments at those new to the subject. What results is a book—aimed at an audience lacking the background to separate wheat from chaff—by a scholar outside the field of military or diplomatic history relying on thin resources and casting an extremely wide net over very sensitive issues of one of the most thoroughly covered fields in all of historiography. Obviously this cannot be done in depth (it is a “tour d’horizon”), so what is sacrificed is nuance. The work is made thinner by the author’s frequent long tangents into a number of topics that could have been summarized in a paragraph or sentence. The result is a mishmash of simplification and error punctuated by seriously flawed conclusions.

Lucky is the author whose manuscript doesn’t include some silly error. However, mistakes appear in numbers large enough to make one question Bess’s command of the chronology or nature of World War II battle. Bess claims that the American 99th Fighter Squadron of the Tuskegee airmen “downed more than a thousand German aircraft.” In reality, the 99th claimed fifty victories. The entire 332nd Fighter Group claimed 109. (One must conclude that Bess does not know what a World War II fighter squadron was or where the air war was fought. This

is no small matter as he devotes a chapter to the subject.) Bess claims that the Japanese occupation of Indochina in July of 1941 triggered the American oil embargo. In fact the northern sector of Indochina was occupied in September 1940 with no strong American protest. It was the occupation of Cochin, indicating that a Japanese attack on Southeast Asia was imminent, that caused the embargo. In 1932 the Nazis became the largest, not the second largest party in the Reichstag—no small matter in Germany. Lastly, the United States never, as claimed by Bess, ratified the treaty establishing the International Criminal Court. Although he claimed not to support the treaty, President Clinton signed it hoping its terms could be renegotiated. When it became obvious that renegotiation was not going to happen, Bush withdrew altogether.

Bess compounds outright errors with a series of reckless statements on peripheral matters. For instance, do historians of the Soviet Union today continue to argue the possibility that Trotsky could have made the Soviet experiment “richer and more humane” and that Stalin was an accident of history? Do contemporary diplomatic historians describe Versailles as “notoriously punitive”? Considering the avalanche of books concerning the Russo-German war in the past generation, not to mention the very keen appreciation of Soviet sacrifice in the Allied press during the war, is it possible to maintain that the Eastern Front “remains strangely muted in the awareness of Americans and most Western Europeans.” This list could go on, but I will conclude with one assertion that really had me scratching my head. Bess claims that the Western Allies launched Overlord in 1944 because it was necessary to prevent Stalin from overrunning all of Europe. Bess, without any supporting citations, describes the invasion of France as “a race—an undeclared race, because the two competitors were ostensibly allies fighting on the same side. But beneath the surface, no one had any illusions: this was a high-stakes contest to defeat the Germans and liberate as much European territory with one’s own armies as possible.” This is an odd way to describe an operation that was implicit in the secret Combined Chiefs talks before Pearl Harbor. The final “go” for Overlord was given early in 1943 at a time when the German position in the East appeared very strong. Indeed, Stalin had been pressuring the Allies publicly and privately for a “second front” since 1941 and was delighted to hear of the invasion. The only “race” in Europe was a potential Allied attack on Berlin, and it was one the Americans chose not to run.

I disagree deeply with Bess’s analysis of each of

the “moral highlights” he has chosen. As it is impossible to deal with them all, I will challenge the arguments I find most misguided. A good place to start is the place Bess gives World War II in history. According to Bess,

The Second World War so drastically expanded the scope of war’s violence that it scarcely resembled what had always been meant by the word “war” in the centuries and millennia that had gone before it. Even apart from the advent of the atomic bomb, this conflict utterly transformed the very nature of war, and in this sense, it amounted to a genuine revolution in the history of human society.

It is certainly true that World War II lacked precedent in aggregate violence. This is because it was an existential war, virtually eliminating the chance of compromise or peace, fought on a world arena with industrial means. It is very wrong, however, to look at the relative level of violence between military forces or directed at civilians as being at all unique. It is true that for a historically brief period between the late 17th century and 1914 warfare in the West largely spared the civilian population from wanton violence. This was hardly so in prior epochs. Indeed, in many times and places in world history seizing civilians was a major war aim. If not killed or enslaved, the populace often faced the fearful prospect of feeding rampaging armies. Wars might be limited by religious doctrine or more likely lack of means, but many large wars of the past fully matched the wretched quality of 20th-century conflict. Even in the era of the Enlightenment the boundaries of “just war” were mocked in practice. When the population scale is factored in, the military casualties of the wars of the French Revolution rival those of World War I. Napoleon’s campaigns in Spain and Russia sparked frightening partisan warfare that brought the civilian population back into the middle of the violence. Bismarck saw the possibility of the same thing happening in 1871 and hurried a peace with France. Outside the West violent orgies broke out. In South America the War of the Triple Alliance led to something close to the annihilation of Paraguay. The Taiping Rebellion in China caused 20 million deaths. As Bess notes, the First World War showed signs that a new era in European industrial war was beginning, with unprecedented military losses, submarine warfare, and aerial bombardment of cities. Typically, however, Bess misses the major departures of the Great War. In arenas away from France civilians were subjected to vicious violence. More important was the British blockade, aimed squarely at the civilian population of Central Europe, which created on a grand scale the crudest of urban sieges of earlier epochs. The result was misery, gross malnutrition, and famine averted only by timely delivery of American relief supplies. But the war on Germany’s civilian population had worked handsomely for the democracies, preventing outright defeat or at least sparing them

from another year of butchery in the trenches. This lesson was not lost on either side in the years after 1918.

Indeed, during the interwar period almost all nations assumed that the next war would be another bloody bout of attrition. This was, of course, as Bess notes, why appeasement was so favored in the West—it was not so much defeat as war that they feared. Were it to come, however, Britain had already decided to pin its military plans not on land warfare but a combination of blockade and aerial bombardment on a mass scale. American planners, working with tabletop exercises because of isolationist budgets, planned for a large land army. U.S. admirals prepared plans for gigantic fleets. airmen were intoxicated by Billy Mitchell’s belief that war could be won without armies or navies and hoped for permission to build air fleets of unprecedented size. Soviet forces followed the Russian pattern of more is

### Like a moral accountant with an ethical abacus, Bess adds up which parts of the Allied air campaign were just and which were not.

better. The foundation for the military bloodbath that took place between 1939-1945 was well laid. World War II should best be thought of as an amplification of World War I and, like its predecessor, a return to existential war common in the past.

Hitler, wrongly in the event, believed that history could be rewritten in a series of brutal but short wars. It was Hitler, however, who instigated what was genuinely revolutionary about World War II—the adoption of the premeditated and total genocide of an entire people as a major war aim. This astounding notion was something truly new under the sun. In treating the Holocaust, Bess plunges into the middle of one of the most complex and important debates of the past generation, armed only with a few case studies and a large dose of confusion. Bess claims to recognize the uniqueness of the Holocaust while also maintaining that the deeper impulses that caused it lurk in the hearts of all men. (Bess, for instance, describes the Milgram experiments at length. I participated in a variation on the Milgram theme at the University of Minnesota in the summer of 1966. In my humble opinion it is grotesque to conclude that because confused and gullible teenagers would obey men in white coats, humans have mass murder lurking closely under the skin. For what it is worth, the Milgram experiment intentionally isolated subjects and thus prevented exploration of any kind of the group dynamic described by Bess. Milgram, in my view, deserved the contempt with which he was held by many psychologists around the world. No experiment using his techniques would be considered in a civilized country today.) It is legitimate to debate the measure of condemnation deserved by those who caused, participated in, or did nothing to stop the Nazi slaughter of Europe’s Jews. Yet one gains nothing by confusing the Holocaust with

atrocities or racism. Both have been a constant in human affairs. Obviously it would be good to remove the words from the political lexicon and perhaps some day that will happen. Until that time, however, if one wishes to prevent another Holocaust, it may be wise to put aside abstract considerations of human nature and take seriously nations that threaten to kill Jews or applaud Hitler’s failed effort to exterminate them. Hitler was above all, a literalist, something his enemies discovered very late.

I also take exception to the explanation given by Bess for the origins of the war. Bess is correct to mention the foul intellectual atmosphere in Europe as important in shaping World War II. Yet he puts an undue emphasis on Social Darwinism. Twisting the ideas of natural selection to fit industrial capitalism could—but did not necessarily—imply either racialism or approval of war. Indeed, Social Darwinism was approved by many “Business Pacifists” in the United States and England. Not mentioned by Bess is the vogue in the geopolitical thought of that time for the vital importance of “autarky”—a condition that could be achieved by countries like Germany or Japan only by war. Also missing are the various “scientific” theories that specifically singled out Nordic Europeans as a master race and related intellectual travesties like eugenics. And Bess does not describe the remarkably crude and chilling ideas of early 20th-century anti-Semitism. No longer were the Jews infidels but welcome to the community of believers through conversion. Instead, the Jews were pictured as a manipulative race pulling strings across the world and at perpetual war with true civilization. It was ideas such as these, profoundly different from the ugly chemistry of bigotry and fear found on the West Coast of the U.S. and Canada in 1942, that differentiated Auschwitz or Treblinka from a Japanese internment camp in Idaho.

Bess misses the dynamics of Japanese aggression by a greater margin and flirts dangerously with “moral equivalency.” According to Bess, Japanese imperialism was both a response and an emulation of the European imperialism Tokyo confronted in Asia during the 19th century. This interpretation misses what was important. First, it was the tragedy of Japan that it entered the imperial competition just at the time when influential circles in the West were beginning to doubt the value of the “Great Game.” More important, because of geography and the perceived need for new homes for the “overpopulation” of the home islands (an idea very akin to Hitler’s *Lebensraum*), Tokyo integrated their empire much more deeply into the Japanese polity than did any European country to their imperial holdings. (The closest analogue in Europe is perhaps France and Algeria.) This impulse grew ever stronger in the 20th century and was driven by the ersatz Bushido pounded into every Japanese schoolchild—an indoctrination so successful that it turned the Pacific War into something resembling a war of annihilation. By the 1930s Japanese imperialists envisioned an industrial heartland made up of the Home Islands, Manchuria, Korea, and bits of China either directly

controlled by Tokyo or integrated in every degree into the imperial economy. Supporting the industrial core would be Japanese-dominated client states in Southeast Asia providing raw materials and markets. China would be a client state. The complete picture resembles greatly the Nazi idea of a German-dominated Western Europe working in tandem with conquered and enslaved lands between Prussia and the Urals. Indeed, what is missing completely in Bess's analysis is the central role played by Hitler in Japanese expansionism. Not only were the two countries marching, admittedly for somewhat different reasons, to the same drummer, but they were allies. The Pearl Harbor gamble and the "move South" initiated by Tokyo in late 1941 would have been incomprehensible without Hitler's victories in Europe and Tokyo's assumption that their ally would defeat the USSR. The major difference between the two poles of the Axis was the absence in Japan of any desire or intention to annihilate entire peoples as part of expansion. That difference was and is, quite obviously, of the greatest importance.

Despite the popularity of appeasement in Britain and isolationism in the U.S., both nations ultimately found themselves in a war with Hitler and Japan. For a brief period, mentioned by Bess, both countries feared for their existence as they understood it. After the crisis passed in 1942 both faced the problem of forcing Germany and Japan to face "unconditional surrender." One means to achieve this goal, believed in deeply by many American and British airmen, was through air attack on enemy urban targets. The resulting campaign consumed extraordinary resources, and its effectiveness and morality have been argued about since 1945. Bess comes to conclusions about this subject that vary between convoluted and wrong.

Rather like his imaginary "race" to occupy Europe in 1944, Bess suggests that a driving force behind the Allied air bombardment campaign against Germany was a desire to please Stalin. According to Bess, the U-boat campaign had prevented the Allies from launching a 1943 offensive against France, thus leaving them with only Torch to appease an indignant Moscow. (Modern research shows that the U-boat menace was far less than Churchill imagined and barely—if at all—hindered the American buildup.) In fact, both the UK and the U.S. were committed to strategic bombing from the outset: only the details were in doubt.

Bess, however, realizes that the Nazis were wicked and helped pioneer terror bombing against cities. Consequently, like a moral accountant with an ethical abacus, he adds up which parts of the Allied air campaign were just and which were not. Along the way, Bess follows Michael Schaller in seriously simplifying American attitudes toward strategic bombing. Despite public protestations that long-range planes were only for coastal defense, the reality among the Air Corps officers was always the opposite: they had faith that at some time in the near future America would build huge air fleets of bombers to deliver the hammer of God against their enemy. Bess shows his profound misunderstanding of this institution when he argues that few Allied air-

men would have agreed with Curtis LeMay's famous statement: "I'll tell you what war is about. You've got to kill people, and when you've killed enough they stop fighting." In point, almost every American officer of every branch of the services would have agreed, including those in the Air Force. Indeed, the argument over "precision" versus "area" bombing in American circles was above all a matter of doctrine not ethics.

Perhaps Bess's most egregious error is his implication that the men leading the bombing campaign knew how best to conduct the campaign from the outset. In retrospect, it is all too clear that both the RAF and the USAAF underwent a painful process of on-the-job training. Bess concludes that by 1945 the Allies understood that an extremely discriminate bombing campaign against strictly military targets was both ethical and effective. The opposite was the case. On the American side of the ethical ledger, the 8th Air Force gets high marks from Bess for the raids against the Schweinfurt ball-bearing factories in late 1943. There was little "collateral damage," and the results promised a serious blow to wicked Hitler. And in fact these raids gave a real scare to Albert Speer and other Nazi war economists. Missed, though, is that however clever the idea behind the raids, they simply relayed to the Germans the potential problems of a bottleneck in war production. The result was dispersion and duplication—a drag on the German war effort, but not a serious obstacle. And, if it matters, more American airmen died in the raids than Germans of any kind—not a conclusion that offered a future for the high hopes of the U.S. airmen.

But it is exactly the Schweinfurt model that Bess accepts as legitimate, as opposed to raids that helped demolish Hitler's war machine. Bess maintains that the Allies should not have attacked Germany at all or they should have done it stupidly. Attacks against German military production factories, regardless of how "precise" they could be, were found to be the least effective of all raids and among the most costly. The great advantage of the American style of "precision bombing" in early 1944 was not the elimination of factories but, because U.S. planes arrived in daylight, the elimination of German fighters sent to attack them. During the phase of war preceding Overlord both American and British forces came to realize that mass attacks on rail targets not only "isolated the battlefield" but would also lead to the end of German war production because they blocked the movement of both goods and the coal required to produce them. Add into the mix an attack by the USAAF on German coal gasification factories, and German industry and German armed forces were fighting a war largely without fuel by early 1945. In other words, both the U.S. and RAF bomber campaigns moved increasingly toward attacks on communication hubs that guaranteed a very high degree of "collateral damage." These same attacks put the Wehrmacht increasingly into the 19th century as the war neared the end game. As for the principle of "proportionality" employed by Bess, it is hard to understand how to use it when judging the Allied air campaign against Nazi Germany, which killed per-

haps 500,000 civilians at the enormous cost of 100,000 Allied lives, all this against an enemy that used the *Einsatzgruppen* in the East and killed perhaps 1,500,000 Jews and communists at point-blank range with infantry weapons.

On the subject of the atomic bomb, Bess avoids some of the most extreme positions of atomic bomb "revisionists"; but he replaces these with a Byzantine argument. Bess finds the views of Gar Alperovitz "quite solid" but rejects them in favor of the newer slant from Tsuyoshi Hasegawa. But there is a serious difficulty in giving both men a pat on the back. Alperovitz argued that Truman and Byrnes consciously kept the war going by sabotaging the "Mikado clause" at Potsdam so that the U.S. could drop the atomic bomb and scare Stalin. Hasegawa argues that Truman ordered the bomb dropped because, above all, he wanted to end the war before Soviet intervention. I think it's obvious that either Truman wanted the war over as soon as possible or he did not. More bothersome is the cavalcade of "counterfactuals" that Bess wants readers to consider. One is reminded of the "just war" theories of the Middle Ages, particularly the list of "do's and don'ts" compiled by Honoré Bonet in the 15th century. With his moral abacus going in full gear, Bess distorts a number of facts. For instance, it is not at all true that the figure of a half-million American casualties is "completely discredited." He fails to cite the important articles of D.M. Giangreco that explain how "worst case scenario" figures were reasonably reached. Bess misinterprets the findings of Richard Frank, who does not dismiss fears of a military doomsday on Kyushu in the least; indeed, Frank argues that Marshall was getting cold feet as fresh intelligence arrived concerning growing Japanese strength on Kyushu. Bess takes the figure of 545,000 estimated Japanese defenders of Kyushu in June and uses it to explain American policy in August, when American intelligence believed the number of defenders was close to 800,000. Nowhere does Bess substantiate his claim that the endgame in the European war had any influence on the overall atmosphere in the Pacific. Indeed, the Japanese hawks had a much more rational belief for carrying on the war than did the Nazis after February 1945. I can see no reason to find the Allied decision not to "reconsider" the use of the bomb "astounding." As Bess himself points out, the entire military and scientific leadership of the U.S., as represented in the Interim Committee, endorsed the bomb's use. What Bess does not mention is that the war had not taken a holiday after the fall of Okinawa. American air and naval forces continued combat operations, and American, British, and Australian ground troops were engaged in operations against Japan in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific. The Allied blood tax was paid until VJ Day, something at the time much more apparent to Truman and others than it is in retrospect.

This leads to a broader theme that runs throughout Bess's book. The Western Allies—and, for the most part, the Soviets—did not gratuitously kill enemy civilians. The Allies took prisoners of war and treated civilians in occupied areas with mercy if

not kindness. (One might point out that surrender was not an option to Europe's Jews when facing the Nazis, yet another factor putting their plight in a separate category.) Nor did Allied airpower intentionally target the helpless (although the idea was considered by the 9th Air Force in 1945 in Europe.) We can mock the concept of "collateral damage," but it was taken most seriously at the time as a by-product of the destruction of industrial areas in cities. Allied governments accepted the killing of civilians for military purposes because their leaders believed that the lives of their citizens were worth more than those of their enemies. From Washington's point of view, did it really matter if the invasion of Kyushu would have cost "only" 20,000 American lives if these same lives possibly could be saved by killing 120,000 Japanese at Hiroshima and Nagasaki? The answer was quite the contrary. Indeed, the Western Allied military apparatus was designed to generate huge amounts of firepower at every level to kill the enemy. There was no moral quandary if fewer of "us" died relative to "them." Had Bess wanted to

get aggressive, he might have inquired whether Western air forces were justified in killing thousands of French and Italian civilians. It is very possible that more of them died from Allied bombs than British perished from German bombs. De Gaulle knew this, and never raised a protest.

I find it almost incomprehensible that anyone would claim to discover moral ambiguity in World War II. As Herodotus reminds us, war is unnatural because fathers bury their sons. World War II was an obscene bloodbath that poisoned the hearts of everyone involved. The degradation of civilized life was all too obvious from one end of the northern hemisphere to the other. And it is a credit to the civilized nations of the Earth that many grew to regret both the pain inflicted on the vanquished and the means used to inflict that pain. This was particularly true as time began to blur the moral calamity that overcame the world during the war. In Stimson's famous article in 1946 explaining the use of the atomic bomb, it is very clear that the wise old man knew, above all, that some of his countrymen would forget

what the world looked like in 1945 and how people acted in 1945. I wish more historians of today understood Stimson's point.

The general public in the West, however, does not seem to suffer any major ethical quandary concerning the war. The gut-wrenching argument that Bess sees inside the West concerning the conduct of World War II exists, in my view, between a small number of people in academics against the vast bulk of the population who may regret the violence of the war but do not question for a minute its necessity. Machiavelli, criticized by Bess, was quite right when describing a necessary war as a just war. If World War II was not necessary, no war has been.

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## COMMENTS ON *CHOICES UNDER FIRE*

Michael Kort

In *Choices Under Fire* Michael Bess critiques key Allied decisions during World War II, offering assessments of what he sees as their moral complexities. The book has received extensive attention and favorable commentary because Bess is scrupulously fair-minded and judicious in examining the complicated evidence and conflicting arguments pertaining to these issues. He will make almost anyone who reads his book with an open mind consider at least a few of the choices he discusses in a new light, regardless of whether one ultimately agrees with him or not.

It is appropriate that the longest chapter in *Choices Under Fire* concerns the most controversial American act of the war, the use of the atomic bomb against Japan in August 1945. Bess is convincing when he adheres to two standards that he accepts as essential in judging the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The first is the need to keep in mind that the decisions made by both the Japanese and the American governments in the summer of 1945 can be understood and fairly judged only within the context of the "fog of war"; neither side had a clear sense of how to bring the war to what it regarded as an acceptable conclusion. Second, to properly understand how American lead-



The Second Battalion, 27th Marines land on Iwo Jima, February 19, 1945. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-105512].

ers viewed the bomb in 1945, it is essential not "to project backward" the knowledge and dread of nuclear weapons we acquired during the Cold War. Bess usually toes that line. He wisely relies on Richard B. Frank's *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (1999), which is justly widely regarded as the standard work on the end of the Pacific War. I find myself dissenting from Bess's analysis when he strays from the above-mentioned standards, and

when he overlooks some of the most important scholarship on the bombing of Hiroshima.

Bess divides his chapter on the American decision to use the atomic bomb into a series of questions, a useful approach that has been adopted by other scholars.<sup>1</sup> There is much to agree with in this chapter. Bess ably defends the Allied demand for unconditional surrender, pointing out that modification of that demand most likely would have encouraged the hardliners in Tokyo to resist more strongly than ever any moves toward making peace on terms acceptable to the Allies. He cogently argues that the use of the atomic bomb speeded up Japan's surrender and maintains that by shortening the war the atomic bombing of Japan resulted in a net saving of lives (Japanese, other Asian, American, other Allied, etc.), a position that is overwhelmingly supported by the evidence. He accepts the necessity of bombing Nagasaki because of the crucial role that second attack played in undermining the hardline military leaders who dominated the Japanese inner war cabinet and could block any move toward surrender. With good reason, Bess lays the primary blame for Nagasaki on Japanese army and navy leaders. Having pointed out that the Allies threw every-

thing they had at Germany prior to May 1945 and that there is no evidence the United States would have refrained from using the atomic bomb to defeat the Nazis, Bess also dismisses the untenable notion that racism was behind the American atomic bombing of Japan. He also rejects Gar Alperovitz's baseless claim that the United States used atomic weapons against Japan in order to wage so-called "atomic diplomacy" against the Soviet Union with an eye to the postwar era.

Bess's discussion of atomic diplomacy, however, is one instance where he overlooks some vital scholarship. It is difficult to see how, on the one hand, Bess can reject the atomic diplomacy thesis and, on the other, find that Alperovitz's evidence is "quite solid." Alperovitz's thesis is built on sand; moreover, it is sand that Alperovitz has shifted for his own purposes. Bess would know this had he consulted diplomatic historian Robert James Maddox, an expert on Truman's foreign policy and the bombing of Hiroshima. More than three decades ago, Maddox demonstrated that Alperovitz's footnotes could not be trusted; Alperovitz repeatedly misled his readers about the context of important statements and used ellipses to change the meaning of others. Maddox updated and expanded his critique of Alperovitz in *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later* (1995), a succinct and insightful monograph that did not make it into Bess's bibliography but which belongs on any list of mandatory works on the bombing of Hiroshima.<sup>2</sup>

Bess seems uncomfortable endorsing the atomic bombing of Japan, and in the end he does so with caveats. The one that receives the most elaborate treatment is his contention that the United States should have warned Japan about the atomic bomb by staging a demonstration on an "uninhabited target other than a city." He dismisses the reasoning behind the rejection of this idea: the test might be a dud ("a very silly argument"); a demonstration on an uninhabited target would fail to produce the necessary shock value; the U.S. had only two operational bombs and would have no more for several weeks. All these considerations, Bess insists, are outweighed by the "moral advantage" the U.S. would have gained by first demonstrating the bomb's power to the Japanese. I believe that in taking this position Bess violates his vital "fog of war" and do-not-project-backward standards that serve him so well in dealing with other issues. It is notable that that while some of Bess's other "possible alternatives" for achieving surrender without invading Japan or using the bomb (modifying the demand for unconditional surrender, relying on bombing and blockade) did receive official discussion at some point by America's decision makers, this one did not. For good reason, it never made it beyond an informal conversation during lunch by members of the Interim Committee on May 31, 1945, and therefore is not even a part of the official minutes of that meeting.

Some of what Bess has to say on this point is fanciful. He does not seem worried that the test weapon might have been a dud, a failure that would have been a public-relations disaster and a terrible

blow to American morale. It is crucial to remember that American morale, both among the troops facing the prospect of invading Japan and among civilians at home, already was perilously low. Bess is confident that a second demonstration could have followed quickly, since the scientists who built the bomb—who, given security imperatives, could not have been transported to the Pacific to witness the demonstration—would "swiftly" have diagnosed and fixed "any technical glitches," after which there could have been a second demonstration. How Bess can assert this when he has no idea what might have gone wrong on the most complicated weapon ever built at that time, one based entirely on new science and engineering, is a mystery to me. That Truman and his advisors, already badly burned, would have

## When in the history of warfare has one side revealed to the other its most secret and powerful weapon before it could be used in combat?

risked a second demonstration is inconceivable. Nor is Bess moved by other formidable objections raised to the demonstration idea: the Japanese, for instance, might have brought American prisoners of war to the demonstration site or shot down the plane carrying the bomb.

Bess is far more convincing when, in discussing other matters, he in effect argues against the idea of a demonstration. For example, having repeated the injunction against projecting backward in judging what America's leaders did in 1945 as they focused on ending the war as soon as possible, Bess points out that America's leaders at the time were not looking for a way to avoid using the atomic bomb. For one thing, not all of them appreciated how qualitatively different it was from weapons they had used before. Indeed, on May 31, 1945, when the demonstration option was rejected, no one, from Robert Oppenheimer on down, really knew how powerful the bomb would be. The answer to that did not come until a plutonium device was tested on July 18. Prior to that test, in a betting pool with senior Los Alamos scientists, Oppenheimer guessed the explosive yield would be equal to 300 tons of TNT; the actual yield was 18,000 tons, which means the earliest point for even beginning a serious discussion about whether to arrange a demonstration could not have come until then. To suggest that anything of the kind could have happened—Hiroshima was bombed three weeks later—is, to quote Bess regarding the idea that President Truman might have decided against using the bomb, to "step completely out of the context of 1945," something Bess consistently avoids throughout most of *Choices Under Fire*.

Speaking of contexts, when in the history of warfare has one side revealed to the other its most secret and powerful weapon—not just its existence but the full extent of its capabilities—before it could be used in combat? Or consider the inescapable con-

text of the spring and summer of 1945. It includes a wartime peak of 20,325 American battle deaths in March; the bloodbath on Iwo Jima, which in the first six days of fighting produced ten times the expected casualties; and the Battle of Okinawa, the single costliest battle of the Pacific War in terms of American lives and the costliest battle in lives in the history of the United States Navy. It was not a time for staging demonstrations for the benefit of the Japanese.

Bess suggests that there is a "significant possibility" that the Potsdam Declaration, a nuclear demonstration, and the bombing of Hiroshima together might have avoided the bombing of Nagasaki because Hirohito "would have made up his mind that it was time to surrender." In fact, Hirohito made up his mind after Hiroshima alone; it was the military hardliners in the inner war cabinet who opposed surrender after Hiroshima. Bess himself correctly argues that the Nagasaki bomb "dramatically undermined" their position. Had that bomb been used for a demonstration, another atomic bomb would not have fallen on Japan until August 19, at the very earliest. Who knows how long the war would have dragged on because of that? What is certain is that, at an estimated 10,000 deaths per day in Asia, one additional month of war would have exacted a toll greater than that of Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

Bess does not confine himself to the war years in considering the bombing of Hiroshima. He devotes part of his chapter "The Politics of Memory" to historiography, in particular the ill-fated exhibit planned by the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum (NASM) for 1995 that was intended to commemorate the bombing of Hiroshima but was cancelled because of a hail of criticism—justified in my view—that it was overly sympathetic to Japan and unfairly critical of the United States. I believe that in discussing the exhibit and the debate surrounding it Bess is off the mark on several points, in part because he has overlooked some key literature on both the historiography of Hiroshima and the exhibit itself. Bess maintains that the exhibit's curators "carefully" took into account "the findings of a broad range of scholarship." Had he consulted Robert P. Newman's *The Enola Gay and the Court of History* (2004), he would know that they did not. Newman demonstrates that the NASM curators relied almost exclusively on revisionist academic scholarship critical of the Hiroshima decision in particular and the foreign policy of the Truman administration in general. Newman's list of historians they failed to consult is telling. It includes, but is far from limited to, Ronald Spector, a leading scholar of the Pacific War whose office was five minutes from the Smithsonian; David Holloway, the leading authority on the Soviet nuclear program; Sadao Asada, the leading authority on the decision making of the Japanese war cabinet; and *all* of the scholars who had written comprehensive biographies of Truman. What these scholars have in common is that their work does not comport with revisionist versions of Hiroshima. The NASM curators also ignored military historians, an inexplicable oversight given the event to be commemorated. When the

head of the NASM finally consulted a leading military historian, months after the disastrous original script became public knowledge, he was informed that “your history is bad: unbalanced, skewed, misapplied.”<sup>3</sup>

As the NASM exhibit was being cancelled, one of its defenders opined that the dispute over Hiroshima was between “memory and history,” the former being the flawed recollections of aging veterans and the latter unbiased and reliable research of up-to-date scholars. Whatever its self-serving pretentiousness, the comment became a rallying cry in revisionist circles. But by then the tide had turned decisively against revisionism and Truman’s critics regarding Hiroshima. During the 1990s a succession of scholarly publications demonstrated convincingly that those who allegedly had relied on “memory” during the Smithsonian debate possessed accurate recall after all. Some of those works came from academics, including Robert H. Ferrell’s and Alonzo Hamby’s respective biographies of Truman and the Maddox and Newman monographs mentioned

above. Others were pathbreaking works by military historians such as Edward J. Drea, D. M. Giangreco, and, of course, Richard B. Frank.<sup>4</sup> These and subsequent works demonstrated that the real fracture in remembering Hiroshima was not what Bess calls “the rift between popular culture and academic culture” but the gap between revisionist scholarship and so-called orthodox scholarship. Fortunately, in *Choices Under Fire* Bess almost always comes down on the latter side.

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<sup>1</sup> See Robert P. Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult* (Michigan State University Press, 1995), one of the essential studies on

the bombing of Hiroshima that Bess unfortunately overlooks, and my *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb* (Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Robert James Maddox, *The New Left and the Origins of the Cold War* (Princeton University Press, 1973), chapter 3; Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later* (University of Missouri Press, 1995), 2, 3, 49, 120-21, 153-54, 183, 191. See also Maddox, “Gar Alperovitz: Godfather of Hiroshima Revisionism,” in Robert James Maddox, ed., *Hiroshima in History: Myths of Revisionism* (University of Missouri Press, 2007), 7-23, which was published too late for Bess to consult.

<sup>3</sup> Robert P. Newman, *The Enola Gay and the Court of History* (Peter Lang, 2004), xiii-xv, 97-133. The quotation, from military historian Richard Kohn, is on page 122. On page 120 Newman writes that overlooking Ronald Spector “has to be called obscurantism.”

<sup>4</sup> See Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (University of Missouri Press, 1994); Alonzo Hamby, *A Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (Oxford University Press, 1995); Edward J. Drea, *MacArthur’s Ultra: Codebreaking and the War Against Japan, 1942-1945* (University of Kansas Press, 1992); D.M. Giangreco, “Casualty Projections for the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1946: Planning and Policy Implications,” *Journal of Military History* 61 (1977): 521-581. I would add all of these scholars to the list of historians whose insights would have enriched Bess’s discussion of the Hiroshima decision.

## A COMMENTARY ON *CHOICES UNDER FIRE*

Harry S. Stout

No 20th-century American war looms larger in moral and mythic grandeur than World War II. In the course of vanquishing fascism and tyranny in Europe and Asia, World War II stands in American history as the emblem of American values and deep nobility. World War II established the “Greatest Generation” in American history according to Tom Brokaw, and most Americans would agree with him.

So why, in his provocative book *Choices Under Fire*, isn’t Michael Bess cheering? In this deeply researched and extraordinarily well-written moral analysis of World War II, Bess offers a nuanced and complicated account of British and American behavior in World War II. He doesn’t hesitate to praise American and British behavior where praise is due, but at the same time he raises hard questions that will compel Anglo-Americans to hold the accusing mirror upon themselves as well as their vanquished enemies. Other historians, most notably David Kennedy, have raised moral issues about World War II, but always in a larger context. Bess devotes all 369 pages of his book to exploring one trenchant question: Were the choices that governments and soldiers made in World War II just? As befitting the moral



Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, December 7, 1941. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USW33-018433-C].

grey zone of war, his judgments are complicated, but compelling.

Historians often write histories with a view toward just supplying “the facts,” leaving the judgments to their readers. Not Bess. His is explicitly a moral history in which he is not afraid to make judgments of right or wrong alongside the standard of

“just war theory,” originating with Augustine and running through the fourth Geneva Convention. Alongside “the facts” of, say, Hamburg or London or Tokyo, he attaches words like “wrong,” or “horribly wrong.” To be sure, there are also words like “noble,” “altruistic,” and “just,” but these are not the terms that give the book its edge. It is in the dark spaces of war where Bess is at his best. His point is clearly not to bash the United States (a nation he clearly applauds), but to show the ambiguities and evils of war—even of good wars.

In determining the justness of America’s going to war with the Axis powers (*jus ad bellum*), Bess departs from drum and bugle denigrations of Japan as all wrong at Pearl Harbor. The West, and the United States in particular, dealt Japan a brutal and humiliating “memory” going all the way back to “gunboat diplomacy” in the early 20th century. Western imperi-

alist aggressors instilled an insatiable cultural need in Japan to gain respect and even global hegemony. But Japan was no innocent either. Bess relates the sordid tale of Japanese imperialistic butcheries in the 1930s and 1940s that led to Pearl Harbor and concludes: “The United States was absolutely right to oppose them.”

In turning from questions of just cause to questions of just conduct (*jus in bello*), Bess—and his readers—emerge far more conflicted. Three moral issues are of special interest to Bess in holding American political and military behavior alongside just conduct standards: firebombing civilian targets, dropping two atomic bombs, and American racism. None of these issues is new, and, indeed, all were actively debated (by some) during the war itself. But Bess brings a balance and nuance to them that, frankly, this reviewer has not encountered before.

On July 27, 1943, 787 British bombers passed over Hamburg dropping a mix of incendiary bombs and high explosives designed to maximize destruction of buildings and people. Fires erupted everywhere in the city, and 45,000 melted German civilians lay dead and horribly contorted. The inescapable fact was that these charred bodies were not soldiers dying in combat, but utterly innocent men, women, and children who had absolutely no idea what hit them. Allied commanders justified the carnage by arguing that the deliberate destruction of civilian lives would hasten the end, so it was “just.” Even more outrageous, they argued that the intended targets were not the people but unspecified military targets; regrettable civilian casualties were “collateral damage” and, according to the just war principle of “double effect,” just. This patent British and American lie completely glossed over the fact that Hamburg was an entirely defenseless city.

Two years later on February 14, 1945, 900 British and American bombers ignited a firestorm over Dresden that burned for a week and killed at least 60,000 noncombatants. No one can read Kurt Vonnegut’s classic, *Slaughterhouse Five*, without a deep sense of revulsion about the firebombing of Dresden. Vonnegut would know. Taken prisoner at the Battle of the Bulge, he was transferred to Dresden and imprisoned in a meat locker under a slaughterhouse. That “prison,” in fact, allowed him to survive amid the indescribable destruction he witnessed above ground. For days Vonnegut did nothing but dig up civilian corpses that would be embedded in his memory and fictionalized in his novel.

A month after Dresden, 350 American bombers dropped incendiaries over Tokyo, killing between 90,000 and 100,000, mostly innocent civilians. Was this just conduct? For Bess, the answer (and judgment) is clear. Employing the just war concepts of proportionality and discrimination, he concludes that in all of these instances the Allies miserably failed every moral test: “To kill even one such [civilian] person is to incur a heavy moral burden: it is, from one perspective, tantamount to murder.” Then,

lest the reader miss his point, he goes on: “There can be no excuse, in the end, for the practices of large-scale area bombing and firebombing of cities: these were atrocities, pure and simple.” One is left to conclude that the only reason the planners of these “atrocities” were not themselves put on trial for war crimes was because they were the winners.



Working on a plane at the Naval Air Base, Corpus Christi, Texas, August 1942. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-DIG-fsac-1a34915].

With the Enola Gay debacle at the Smithsonian as his context, Bess explores the morality of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and is perhaps at his nuanced best. Recognizing that the participants did not know what we know, he musters a plausible rationale for the first bombing of Hiroshima, while at the same time regretting that other options were not really considered, such as staging a demonstration of one bomb on an uninhabited target. Bess’s conclusion: “The United States was in effect choosing to target large numbers of noncombatants for destruction, without giving a serious chance to an alternative course of action that might possibly have rendered the atomic bombing of a city unnecessary.” Nevertheless, in the end, he does not render blanket judgment on the Americans. Given the ongoing determination of the Japanese high command to continue the war until there were no soldiers standing, “the destruction of two cities, cruel as it was, could be construed as a morally justifiable act because it probably resulted in a net saving of human lives on an immense scale.”

We are now accustomed to the racism of the Germans in Europe and the Japanese in Asia, but what about America? Again, to see our face in the mirror is to see an ugly visage. Bess asks why Americans did not place German and Italian Americans in internment camps as they did to Japanese Americans. His answer: unvarnished Euro-American racism. Just as American militaries segregated African-American troops for racist reasons, so the

internment of Japanese Americans reflected widespread racist assumptions that permeated all ranks of white America.

Bess is surely right as far as he goes, but it seems to me that it is also worth asking what religion may have had to do with the more, dare I say it, demonic dimensions of World War II? Bess does not explore the religions of the “other,” but if he had, he would have discovered a parallel cravenness. Put bluntly, Japanese were not Christians, hence fair game for oppression in a way that Germans and Italians were not. Likewise, in Germany, Jews were not Christians, making a holocaust conceivable in ways that went beyond ethnicity. And looking forward to the Cold War, Soviet Russians were atheists, and the Cold War was very much a religious morality play, with good—and God—against evil—and atheism. In many ways the history of Western imperialism is really a history of Christian Western imperialism, with the two linked so closely they cannot easily be uncoupled.

We have to ask ourselves how did it come to this? How did well-meaning patriotic American boys come to be reduced to such levels of wanton immorality? Bess’s answer is clear: history provided the receptive soil for unspeakable barbarisms. Bess rightly rejects genetics or innate national character traits of good or evil as explanatory factors. It is rather in the concrete and particular historical experiences of the warring parties that we find the answer to the “how could this have happened?” conundrum.

Where do we find the roots of American behavior and morality in World War II? World War I offered unparalleled destruction of soldiers in the field, but it did not issue in the deliberate attempt to draw civilians into the intimate horror of war or in an extraordinarily high number of American casualties. The clearest precedent—indeed the paradigm—for Americans at war is, I believe, the American Civil War.

While it’s true that the Civil War lacked atomic weaponry and napalm bombs, it was a far costlier war for Americans than World War II (with over 1 million casualties). The Civil War represented America’s “baptism in blood” and made us who we are as a nation-state, for better and worse. The Civil War instilled habits of thought and passion, both lethal and millennial, and established a national identity so powerful that Americans have never looked back. It is no coincidence that the Mall in Washington, D.C. is dominated by the memorials to World War II and the martyred Abraham Lincoln.

The Civil War bequeathed many moral lessons about war that Americans have never forgotten, but

four are especially significant and relevant to the behaviors that Bess discovers in World War II. First, and most striking, the Civil War forged a nation around the identity of a “redeemer nation,” which rendered America “exceptional” and not necessarily bound by the usual conventions of war. When President Lincoln commissioned Francis Lieber to create a code of conduct for the Civil War, Lieber defended an “anything goes” permissibility under the guise of “military necessity.” Ordinarily, Lieber wrote, restraint is desirable, but if the survival of the nation-state (because it is sacred) is at stake, then military necessity trumps all other moral considerations, so that nothing need be spared to insure its perpetuation, and no leader would be called to account for war crimes.

Second, both wars were fought in the name of “freedom,” even as they were intoxicated with racism. In the case of the Civil War, the great tragedy lay in the way the white North and South forged a postbellum reconciliation on a foundation of segregation, hatred, and entrenched racism. The very people who had been liberated by the war were effectively resubjugated.

Third, both wars perfected a rhetorical sleight of hand in which the war was reinterpreted midway through as a war for “freedom” or “liberation,” which was then read back into the supposed origins of the war. For Lincoln, it came with the Emancipation Proclamation, and in World War II it came with the liberation of the Jews.

With freedom as the rationale, no escalation could be too great, including war brought directly on the backs of civilians. Indeed, this is how Lincoln justified the decision to wage total war on the Confederacy, and this meant that women and children must feel its pain. An estimated 50,000 civilians died during Sherman’s March to the Sea and Sheridan’s

gambol through the Shenandoah Valley.

Fourth, the Civil War gave birth to an American “civil religion” whereby the nation-state became the object of religious devotion. Before the Civil War, no coherent nation-state existed. Identities were local and regional, and there was virtually no direct exposure to the federal government. Americans would routinely say that “the United States *are* a republic.” After the Civil War, the nation-state became the site of identification and sacralization; Americans would reflexively say that “the United States *is* a republic.” The glue holding this vast and sprawling nation together would be the religion of patriotism, replete with sacred days (for example Memorial Day), sacred places (for example the Mall), and a sacred totem (the American flag).

Lessons learned in the Civil War were applied immediately thereafter by the chief Civil War perpetrators. Lincoln’s assassination rendered him the enduring Messiah of America’s civil religion, and his Gettysburg Address and 2nd Inaugural two of America’s four sacred texts (the others being the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution). With Lincoln gone, Grant became the next elected president, while William T. Sherman assumed Grant’s old position as commander of the army, and Philip Sheridan became commander of the Western army tasked with the extermination of the Plains Indians. As he did with Confederate women and children during the Civil War, Sheridan defined the Indians as the “aggressors” deserving destruction. In a letter to Sherman in 1873, Sheridan drew on their Civil War experiences as justification:

In taking the offensive, I have to select that season when I can catch the fiends; and, if a village is attacked and women and children killed, the responsibility is not with the sol-

diers but with the people whose crimes necessitated the attack. During the [Civil] war did any one hesitate to attack a village or town occupied by the enemy because women or children were within its limits? Did we cease to throw shells into Vicksburg or Atlanta because women and children were there?

The answer, of course, was no, and so it has remained ever since.

The lesson was so well learned that we are seeing it today in Iraq. “Collateral damage” is inflicted on a massive scale at the expense of American soldiers’ safety. The rationale has shifted just as in earlier wars. Originally a war fought for WMDs, it has become redefined midway through as a war for “freedom,” which administrators then read back into the origins of the invasion as the “real” reason we went to war in the first place. Presumably, posterity will judge the war as a war for Iraqi freedom and not a war for WMDs.

By situating Bess’s project in a larger context, the moral stakes of his argument become even higher. Sadly, the norm for the United States is not peace, but war, and we delude ourselves if we think otherwise. Thanks to Bess’s analysis, the blinders are taken off and America’s “good war” is seen in its more ambivalent actual light.

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## RESPONSE TO COMMENTS BY HARRY S. STOUT, MICHAEL KORT, ERIC BERGERUD, AND SANFORD LAKOFF

Michael Bess

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I would like to thank fervently the four scholars who took the time to read my book and to offer such thoughtful, probing comments. One of the benefits of an academic career is that one never stops learning—and I have certainly learned a great deal through the critical reflection offered here by these four distinguished colleagues.

The main point made by Harry Stout in his commentary had never actually occurred to me before, and I must admit it came as a sort of revelation. To link U.S. deeds

and decisions of World War II to a distinctively American tradition of violence extending back as

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far as the Civil War struck me as a highly original and provocative insight. My eyebrows went up

as Stout persuasively enumerated the moral parallels between the two conflicts: the notion of America as a “redeemer nation,” the paradoxical interweaving of an ideology of freedom and a widespread practice of racism, the war as enacting a sort of civil religion, and the use of a national emergency to justify atrocious violence against non-combatants. These four factors were certainly major features of the American experience between 1941 and 1945, and no one is better placed to make this judgment

vis-à-vis the Civil War era than Stout himself.

My only hesitation lies in characterizing these factors as being *too* distinctively American in nature. As a European historian, I can easily come up with examples of all four factors in the histories of many other nations. Both France and England, for example, have famously characterized themselves at various points in their long histories as the standard-bearers for a righteous crusade on behalf of moral values and “civilization”—where these ideals were understood in unblushingly self-serving terms. The White Man’s Burden and *mission civilisatrice* were but two of the most recent exemplars of this tradition. The soldiers in Napoleon’s armies, singing the Marseillaise as they carried the values of the French Revolution to other peoples (at gunpoint), would not have flinched at describing themselves as a “redeemer people.” Hegel’s vision of Prussia as the highest embodiment of the idea of freedom marching triumphantly through history certainly fits the bill as well. Soviet Russia explicitly adopted the mantle of a redeemer nation, and put it to highly effective use in drumming up recruits to its global cause. Thus, while it is true that Americans have a propensity to see their society as the shining city on the hill, they cannot claim much originality in this tradition of self-righteous chauvinism. Through the centuries, both our friends and our enemies have also done the same thing with great gusto, albeit in their own distinctive cultural idioms.

The same might be said for the contradictory coexistence of liberal ideas with racist practice. In France and Britain, where Enlightenment liberalism was born, explicitly racist ideologies continued to animate large portions of the population well into the 20th century. World War I, ostensibly fought on behalf of democracy and liberty, saw the French and British armies using colonial troops from Asia and Africa in exactly the same kinds of systematically subordinate positions as the U.S. Army did with blacks in the Second World War. British and French colonial practices well into the 20th century were explicitly (and unapologetically) racist in nature. Here once again, therefore, I would hesitate to claim any special ignominy for the American government’s policies regarding blacks and Japanese Americans during World War II. These policies were certainly racist, and certainly reprehensible in the extreme, but they were not, alas, unique to America.

As for the war giving birth to a kind of civil religion, resulting in worship of the nation-state, a good case can be made that this is the rule in modern times rather than the exception. France under Napoleon and again in the decades following the Franco-Prussian War; Italy under Mussolini in the aftermath of World War I; Britain in any number of wars from the Napoleonic Wars to Crimea to the Boer War to World War I; Russia under Lenin and then Stalin; Japan in the 1930s; Germany under Kaiser Wilhelm, and again under Hitler—the list could go on and on. While Stout makes a persuasive case that war constitutes

a defining feature of American history, and his linkage between the Civil War and World War II is powerfully illuminating, this insight forms but one striking exemplar of a much broader—perhaps nearly universal—phenomenon.

Stout’s final factor, the use of emergency security threats to justify atrocities, arguably constitutes an equally common occurrence, extending beyond the modern era even into the ancient world. One cannot read Sherman’s arrestingly cold-blooded words, quoted to such great effect by Stout, without harking back to the equally chilling words of Thucydides as he describes the pitiless treatment of the Melians by the Athenians in his account of the Peloponnesian War. *C’est la guerre*, we hear again and again throughout history (in a hundred different languages), as people use the exigencies of wartime to excuse their brutal treatment of their fellow humans. To be sure, this does nothing to mitigate the moral gravity of American transgressions during the Second World War, but it does put the cruel arguments of the Shermans and LeMays appropriately into their world-historical context. Here, once again, Americans are far from unique.

Michael Kort concentrates his insightful comments on my long chapter about the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One place where Kort appears to have slightly misread my intentions is in my discussion of Gar Alperovitz’s thesis about the U.S. allegedly using the bomb to intimidate the Soviets. I meant no ambiguity in my position here: Alperovitz’s thesis has been roundly rejected by most historians, and I am fully persuaded by their arguments. I used the words “quite solid” to describe more broadly the evidence amassed by other revisionist historians, such as Barton Bernstein (whose use of evidence has not, to my knowledge, been questioned). Bernstein’s arguments are far more complex, nuanced, and interesting than Alperovitz’s. He claims, broadly speaking, that American and British leaders were keenly aware of potential trouble with the Russians over the coming years, and that they were equally keenly aware that possession of the bomb would elicit respect from the Soviets and help curb their aspirations to export communist revolutions throughout the globe. Unlike Alperovitz, Bernstein does not make the exaggerated claim that the *primary* Allied purpose in developing the bomb lay in anti-Soviet designs; rather, he argues that the bomb—once developed as a weapon against Germany—ultimately came to figure as one important factor in the equations of power, particularly after Roosevelt died and Truman (and Byrnes) took up the reins. I think we have plenty of evidence (some of which I quoted in the chapter) to support this more moderate reading of Allied leaders’ intentions vis-à-vis the Soviets.

One of Kort’s most detailed criticisms focuses on my discussion of the possible demonstration of the bomb on an uninhabited site. Here, again, I wish to be clear: I do not believe that such a demonstration would have made any

difference by itself for the state of affairs within the Japanese leadership. (What it would have done, rather, is greatly strengthen the American moral position by showing that we had given the Japanese a fair warning of the nature of the weaponry that was about to be deployed against them.) Nor am I at all sure that a demonstration would have made any practical difference under *any* circumstances: I merely lay out one possible sequence (explicit warning, demonstration, nuclear bombing of one city) that *might* plausibly have resulted in surrender. My main point is a purely moral one. When one knows one is introducing a radical new weapon into human affairs; when one knows this weapon will almost certainly kill tens of thousands of noncombatants if dropped on a city; when one knows that more of these weapons will be available in due course; then it is morally irresponsible not to *consider* a noncombat demonstration as a possible way of saving lives.

This is, indeed, an abstract and historically decontextualized argument, and Kort is right to reemphasize the twin principles of hindsight and context that I myself adopt as mitigating factors in understanding the Allied decision. Nevertheless, even with these two factors weighing in, I believe it was incumbent on the Allied leaders to take the possibility of a demonstration much more seriously than they did. We have documentary evidence (I quote Stimson directly on this point) that they were acutely aware that this was a revolutionary new weapon of unprecedented destructiveness. They therefore also knew that tens of thousands would likely die from its use on a city.

Here one might object that Allied leaders were already assenting to conventional bombing practices that were daily incinerating cities throughout Germany and Japan. Why, therefore, should they have been expected to take any special care in considering the case of the atomic bomb? Ten thousand dead by napalm, 10,000 dead by uranium fission: what’s the difference? This objection, I believe, gets the argument backward. Just because Allied leaders had become inured to the deaths of thousands of noncombatants through conventional bombing, this does not in itself constitute a morally coherent position. I argue that the conventional firebombing of large urban areas was, in fact, an atrocity—in some ways an even more serious atrocity than the atomic bombings, because in the cases of Hamburg, Dresden, and Tokyo one cannot bring in the mitigating argument about decisively shortening the war through the introduction of a revolutionary new weapon that forces swift surrender. Therefore, I argue that in both cases—conventional firebombing and nuclear bombing—it was morally incumbent on political and military leaders to take noncombatant deaths very seriously, even in wartime. That, in a nutshell, is the essence of the just war tradition of thought. The extreme context of wartime does not, in itself, justify indiscriminate butchery of innocents.

In our well-intentioned effort to see things contextually, we risk being too lenient on the Al-

lied leaders. In any war it is possible identify “wartime context” as a mitigating factor for explaining brutal behavior. But it is one thing to *explain* brutal behavior, and quite another to justify it. The just war tradition insists that even in warfare the sanctity of human life should still be considered terribly important, and that every reasonable effort should be made to respect it. For this reason, I return to the question: Is it right to expect that the Allied leaders would have made *every* effort, including seriously considering a nuclear demonstration shot, in order possibly to spare the lives of thousands of noncombatants?

If we do not answer “yes” to this question, then I believe we are opening up a very dangerous doorway for the political and military leaders of today. In effect, we are saying to them: “Whenever you decide that national security is in play, you may significantly loosen your moral concerns about harming non-combatants, and future historians will condone even the most brutal policies because they will understand that you had to act amid the fog of war.” This is not the sort of message I believe we should be sending to our leaders. Rather, we should insist that they abide by the standard of “every reasonable effort,” precisely *in wartime* and *under threat* when this is most difficult to do. That is what greatness in moral leadership is all about. Staying true to our values is relatively easy in peacetime; but it is precisely in times of danger and crisis that our commitment to our deepest ideals is truly tested.

This is not to deny the greatness in political, military, and moral leadership that was embodied in so many ways by FDR, Truman, and Churchill. But after the foregoing reflection, I cannot avoid the conclusion that these great men, when it came to the specific policies of firebombing and the nuclear demonstration shot, fell short. They were human; we can easily empathize with the enormity of the decisions they faced, and understand *why* they fell short. But it is important to be clear about the fact that they did.

I remain unconvinced by Kort’s more practical (as opposed to moral) objections to my arguments about the demonstration shot. The possibility that the bomb might be a dud had been greatly reduced by the successful Trinity test at Alamogordo. The possibility that the Japanese would bring American POWs to a demonstration site to deter our delivery of the weapon would have been easy for American authorities to get around. If the Japanese had done this, the United States could have gone ahead with the nuclear bombardment of a city, claiming with full justification that the Japanese had stubbornly blocked our sincere attempt to carry out a relatively harmless demonstration. Kort also points out that never in the history of warfare has one side ever warned the enemy before introducing a radical new weapon. But this weapon was different, and

we knew it. We were inaugurating a qualitatively new era in warfare, and we knew it. The whole subsequent history of the Cold War nuclear arms race is filled with mutual warnings and carefully modulated demonstrations of power between the two hostile camps—all in the interest of avoiding the actual use of this kind of weapon. It is not unreasonable to expect that American and British leaders would have understood the gravity of what they were doing (we have plenty of evidence to suggest that most of them did) and given a warning to their enemies. Kort suggests that this was “not a time for staging demonstrations for the benefit of the Japanese.” My point is that

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such a demonstration would have been primarily for the benefit of the Anglo-Americans themselves—so that they could have looked at themselves in the mirror the morning after Hiroshima knowing that they had truly made every reasonable effort to spare the lives of noncombatants. This is not a trivial point, not a mere punctilious insistence on abstract moral niceties. It flows from the fact that humans are, at core, moral beings, and that this quality of our nature cannot be lightly shucked off when exigencies seem to require it. The cost of ignoring the moral dimension, or taking it lightly, is immeasurably high.

Eric Bergerud did not like my book at all, and I think I have been able to figure out why. The clue lies in the last two paragraphs of his commentary, in which he states, “I find it almost incomprehensible that anyone would claim to discover moral ambiguity in World War II,” and a little further on, “Machiavelli, criticized by Bess, was quite right when describing a necessary war as a just war.” The implication here is that Bergerud does not accept the standard distinction made by just war theorists between *jus ad bello* and *jus in bello*, which I describe on pages 243-46 of my book. The former concerns the moral issues involved in launching a war—origins, causes, provocations, aggression, and so on—while the latter concerns the means used to conduct the war once it has begun. If one accepts this fundamental distinction, which dates back to the Middle Ages, then it is quite possible to envision a war that is fought for justified reasons but conducted in unjustifiable ways. Simply to conclude that a war is necessary (i.e., justified) does not amount to a blank check that allows a defending nation to butcher indiscriminately the helpless noncombatants of the other side.

Bergerud clearly objects to this distinction, and that is why he claims to find no ambiguity

whatsoever in the conflict that engulfed the world between 1939 and 1945. On one side lay the aggressor nations, and on the other side lay the victim nations seeking to defend themselves. They fought it out. The defending nations ultimately prevailed. End of story. To argue, as I have done at great length in my book, that the story is actually much more complicated and messy, and that the defending nations did some awful things in this war, is apparently intolerable for Bergerud. He therefore sets about finding every possible argument he can muster to discredit the entire project.

He does a thorough job. Not a single positive feature emerges to redeem *Choices Under Fire* even a tiny bit in his eyes. Thus, for example, he finds a factual error on page 39, where I mistakenly state that the Tuskegee airmen “downed more than a thousand German aircraft.” The correct number is 109, and the figure of a thousand a relatively simple and silly error introduced by me. How-

ever, Bergerud then draws the following inference: “One must conclude that Bess does not know what a World War II fighter squadron was or where the air war was fought.” This seems to be stretching the evidence regarding my ignorance a bit far.

Similarly, Bergerud claims that my argument regarding the origins of the Pacific War “flirts dangerously with moral equivalency.” This is puzzling, given what I wrote on page 56 of *Choices Under Fire*:

An apologist for Japan could presumably use this logic to make a cynical argument: “At Pearl Harbor, the Japanese were merely paying back the United States for the aggression of Commodore Perry ninety years before.” We need to reject this preposterous argument just as firmly as we reject the self-righteous image of the Europeans and Americans as paragons of international virtue. The fact of European and American aggression against Asians in the 1800s does not justify in any way the Japanese aggression of the 1900s: but it does help us to understand how it came to pass. We need to be able to state both truths at the same time:

- The Japanese were engaged in a monstrous enterprise in the 1930s and 1940s, and the United States was absolutely right to oppose them; and

- Japanese imperialism did not come out of nowhere: it was rooted several decades earlier, in the searing experience of helplessness before European and American domination.

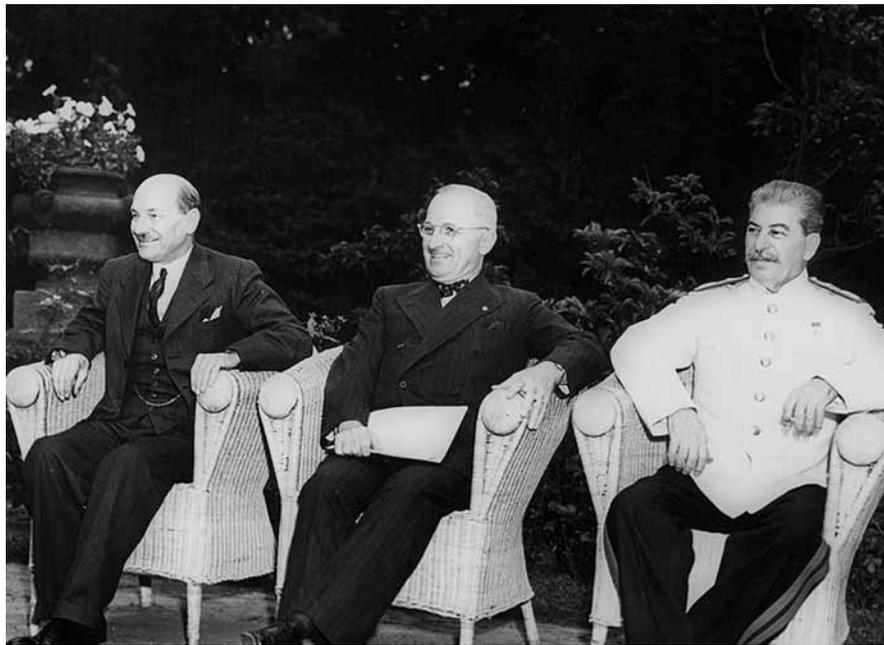
I do not see how I could possibly have presented my argument against moral equivalency any more clearly than this, but it is apparently not clear enough to satisfy Bergerud.

Bergerud describes *Choices Under Fire* as a book “aimed at an audience lacking the background to separate wheat from chaff, by a scholar outside the field of military or diplomatic history.” Leaving aside the insulting assumption being made here about the critical skills of a general readership, this statement seems to be saying to other historians, “Stay out of the field of military history, unless you spend years and years specializing in it as I have done.” I object to this sentiment, for two reasons. First, I think that the study of history is all the richer when it is approached in a cross-disciplinary and methodologically eclectic manner—and this certainly applies to reaching out across sub-disciplines within the field itself. When nonspecialist scholars try their hand at new topics, there is always a risk of conceptual problems, lacunae, and other weaknesses. But, in my view, the risk is more than justified by the many stimulating and successful examples one can find that result from such excursions into each other’s fields of specialty. Second, I think that war (to paraphrase the old adage) is too important a subject to be left to military historians alone. Wars—especially colossal ones like the conflict of 1939-1945—powerfully affect every area of human life, from politics and economics to science and philosophy. They are rightly everyone’s concern, because they touch all of our lives. Thus, while it is vitally important to remain grounded in the field of military history when studying a conflict like World War II, it is also equally important to bring to bear the critical and analytical tools of other historical subfields, and indeed of other disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, and philosophy, in seeking to understand this phenomenon. This should not be a subject reserved to specialists.

I strongly agree with Bergerud’s eloquent characterization of World War II as “an existential war, virtually eliminating the chance of compromise or peace, fought on a world arena with industrial means.” Bergerud’s observations in this regard are illuminating and helpful, because they frame this cataclysm of violence in a longer tradition of conflict going back for centuries, and indeed for millennia. This adds a dimension of historical depth and broadly comparative analysis that I believe is lacking in my book’s characterization of the war. It is a dimension that a military historian like Bergerud is well positioned to offer, and he does an excellent job of it with his extended discussion ranging impressively over many

centuries and continents.

On one factual point I would like in turn to correct Bergerud. He states that “the Milgram experiment intentionally isolated subjects and thus prevented exploration of any kind of the group dynamic described by Bess.” This is incorrect. Milgram repeated his experiment using many different kinds of settings and configurations of



Clement Attlee, Harry Truman, and Joseph Stalin, seated outdoors at the Berlin Conference, August 1, 1945. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division [reproduction number, LC-USZ62-11988].

subjects, including, most significantly, groups of subjects arrayed in such a way as to test specifically for the effect of peer pressure. The results were dismayingly clear. Peer pressure rendered the authority of the experimenter almost irresistible, bringing compliance with the cruel commands up to a remarkable level of 92 percent.

Finally, I would like to note several spots in which Bergerud *thinks* that he disagrees with my book, but only because he is apparently unaware of the statements I make in the text that are in full agreement with his own positions! Thus, for example, Bergerud identifies a key error in my alleged “implication that the men leading the bombing campaign knew how best to conduct the campaign from the outset.” My chapter on this topic, however, argues the exact opposite: the discussion identifies four distinct phases of the Allied bombing campaign, with each phase characterized by different levels of technology and different kinds of experience with the techniques of aerial bombing. The essence of my argument is precisely to emphasize the gradual learning process through which Allied airmen passed.

In discussing the atomic bomb, Bergerud notes, “What Bess does not mention is that the war had not taken a holiday after the fall of Okinawa. American air and naval forces continued combat operations, and American, British, and Australian ground troops were engaged in operations against Japan in Southeast Asia and the

Southwest Pacific. The Allied blood tax was paid until VJ day, something at the time much more apparent to Truman and others than it is in retrospect.” This, of course, is precisely one of the points I make in my chapter on the bomb. In considerable detail, between pages 231 and 235, I describe how many men, women, and children (American, British, Japanese, Russian, Chinese, and other) were dying every day throughout Asia, and how many more such deaths could plausibly have been expected if the war had continued past early August and into the fall of 1945. In a separate part of the chapter, I state this point more concisely: “The days went by, after the proclamation of the Potsdam ultimatum. The killing continued.” In order to underscore the point that lives were being lost with every passing day, I then describe the sinking of the heavy cruiser *Indianapolis*, with its grievous loss of American lives. Clearly, Bergerud and I are in agreement on this point as well.

Overall, however, I think that Bergerud and I will have to accept that our philosophical positions regarding the moral complexity of this war remain fundamentally incommensurable. I thank him for his detailed critique of my book, and for the insights that I have derived from debating with him.

Sanford Lakoff’s generous and perceptive commentary offers two main suggestions for improving the arguments of *Choices Under Fire*. The first pertains to my use of the term “Social Darwinism” in chapter one, and I entirely agree with his criticisms. I adopt an excessively loose and generalized definition of the term, one that elides key distinctions among the various currents within the Social Darwinist family of ideologies and that I conflate too easily with racist thought. My intention in this chapter was to underscore the important commonalities underlying the motivations of Germany, Italy, and Japan in launching aggression during the 1930s; but in my effort to do so I think I glossed over the equally important qualifications and distinctions laid out so well by Lakoff. This would be a set of corrections I would definitely want to make in revising the book for another edition.

As for Lakoff’s second main criticism, I am of two minds about it. On one hand, I can certainly see why my discussion of “the problem of peace since Hiroshima” might sound like pious moralizing. All the talk about collective security and cooperative conflict resolution can easily appear as wishful thinking, particularly when the historical context is the bitter international rivalry of the Cold War years. On the other hand, I remain convinced that Hiroshima did profoundly alter the meaning of the word “realism” in international

relations. For a statesman to make realistic decisions after 1945 required a very different sort of calculus of risks and consequences than it did in a pre-nuclear world.

We encounter here a fundamental tension between the real and the ideal, a tension that has existed throughout history, but that has acquired far more urgent overtones in the world of weaponry inaugurated since 1945. Realism before 1945 meant basing one's judgments and calculations primarily on the state of power relations that currently existed: in this framework, all-out war was something to be avoided, if possible, but also something to be seriously considered as a viable and rational option if the vicissitudes of international politics required it.

All this changed with the advent of nuclear weaponry. All-out war, in this new framework, came to mean by the mid-1950s the swift and thoroughgoing destruction of the entire society on behalf of which the war was supposedly being undertaken! In this very different situation, war could no longer play the role it had always played, as the ultimate arbiter of international relations. The use of unlimited force was now patently irrational, and could not form part of a realistic strategy for achieving national security. In this historically unprecedented situation, the new imperative of rational statesmanship became twofold: to avoid all-out war for the short term and middle term, while simultaneously working as vigorously and creatively as possible, on a longer time horizon, to bring into being new structures and procedures of conflict resolution that would render the use of force truly obsolete. What had once been deemed utopian—an international system of stable peace—had now become urgently necessary.

This is precisely how men like George C. Marshall regarded the United Nations. This institution, he knew, had to operate simultaneously in the realm of the real and in the realm of the ideal. It had to provide a forum for conflict resolution in a world still rife with weaponry and great power rivalries; and it had to provide the starting point for a process of transformation that would ultimately result in a qualitatively different international system. The main point of my concluding chapters is to argue that this new system is far from being unrealizable. Although it is certainly different from what has come before, it is not “pie in the sky.” The key premise for such a system starts with a cold, logical assessment of the suicidal risks posed by military conflict in today's world, and with an equally sober evaluation of the ecological, economic, and security challenges that increasingly bind the world's peoples together, for better or for worse. On this basis of shared vulnerability and profound common interests, I argue in my book, we can rationally posit the possibility of building institutions and procedures for a cooperative global system of conflict resolution.

At no point in this argument do I suggest that human beings will have to become “better”

people, more generous or virtuous than they have always been. That would be truly unrealistic! Rather, I maintain that humankind, *taken as it is today*, is already prepared to institute highly effective new structures and practices of cooperative conflict resolution. The proof that such a state of affairs is attainable lies in the Europe of today: a region that has moved beyond its narrow rivalries of the mid-20th century, beyond the obsolete mentalities based on the threat or use of force. It is a region that has opted instead to build (incrementally, over the past fifty years) a profoundly different system based on negotiation, compromise, and collective security. This is not a utopia, in other words: it is right there, in front of our noses, a living example of a successful transition out of one international system (based on military power) and into another system (based on cooperation).

I recently read Paul Kennedy's excellent book, *The Parliament of Man*, which lays out the dual nature of the United Nations. On one hand, Kennedy soberly enumerates the many flaws and failings of the UN: its structural weaknesses, the conundrum of the Security Council's role, the power struggles and ideological tensions in the General Assembly, the abject failures this body has experienced in places like Yugoslavia and Rwanda. But Kennedy does not stop here. He also lays out the many important achievements of the UN over the past half-century in the domains of building an international civil society, of peacekeeping operations, of arbitration and negotiation. These achievements, he notes, are probably not as significant as the UN's failings. But that is precisely the main point. The UN as it exists today is a starting place, a stepping stone down a path of change toward something different. The UN, in other words, should not be seen as a static *thing*. It is a process. It constitutes humankind's workshop for building, at the global level, the kind of structure that the Europeans have succeeded so well in creating for their own region: a different way of living together.

I would argue, therefore, that the rationalist, down-to-earth spirit of Hans Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* is best served in the contemporary world by a policy that sees the United Nations in both these lights at the same time. The UN today remains a necessarily limited and flawed instrument; but it is also a work in progress, a remarkable first step in a vitally important process of innovation. And so I wholeheartedly agree with Lakoff when he advocates a cool, levelheaded assessment of the daunting challenges we face. Wishful thinking is always dangerous. But I believe that the practice of cooperative conflict resolution, enacted at the international level, is not at all wishful thinking. On the contrary, it embodies our most sober, rational, *pragmatic* basis for ensuring our civilization's survival over the long term.

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