

Chapter 1

The Opening Salvo

The pressing question at the beginning of this study is: *May a Christian scripturally function as a punitive agent of the state?* In answering this question, the Pacifist/Anti-War position responds with an emphatic “No!” The “My Country Right Or Wrong” position of unrestrained patriotism answers with an unqualified “Yes!” However, it has been my experience that simple answers rarely, if ever, do justice to complex questions. Therefore, the answers I will be giving to this and other questions during this study will be a bit more complex. After careful study, I hope you will find these answers to be honest, informative, and scriptural. But whether they are or not is a decision you’ll have to make for yourself.

I will be arguing that (1) war is a moral enterprise, and (2) those who participate in it, if they do so justly, operate as servants of God and, as such, even in the extreme circumstances of war, stand before God’s judgment and under His law. Unfortunately, these are ideas mostly lost on a culture consumed with the anti-war/pacifist consensus—a consensus that says war is always evil. Consequently, many Americans, and this includes more than a few Christians, view war as a conflagration of raw savagery to which no moral code applies. In other words, many believe that “War is Hell,” as General William Tecumseh Sherman said in his attempt to justify the targeting of civilians in the Civil War siege and bombardment of Atlanta and his subsequent scorched-earth “march to the sea.” Many today, like Sherman, see war as an evil, albeit a “necessary evil,” that must, at times, be engaged in so worse evils are not inflicted. The General’s concept of “Total War,” as it has come to be known, eventually led to the direct targeting and bombing of civilians in World War II, including the

ultimate decision to drop atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In his justification for doing so, Truman said in an address to the American people on August 12, 1945:

We have used [the bomb] against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare. We have used it to shorten the agony of war...¹

Yes, it seems that all Truman said about the Japanese was true, but it is interesting to note that Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, although a dastardly deed, as Roosevelt called it, was directed entirely against naval and army installations, with only a few stray bombs falling on the city of Honolulu. Now, whether the Japanese military would have targeted our cities on the mainland, if they would have had the ability, is not doubted. Nevertheless, it disappoints me that our leaders, when they had the opportunity, did not take the moral high ground but, instead, *intentionally targeted civilians*, as did Sherman and others before them. But even prior to his decision to drop the atomic bombs, Truman, along with his advisors, had already bought into the "War is Hell" thinking, lock, stock and barrel. This is evidenced by the March 1945 fire-bombing of Tokyo in which incendiary bombs set off a fire-storm that killed an estimated 100,000 people. As James Byrnes, Truman's good friend and Secretary of State, said, "...war remains what General Sherman said it was."² And Arthur Compton, who was chief scientific advisor to the government, confirmed this when he said, "...one realizes that in whatever manner it is fought, war is precisely what General Sherman called it."³ Finally, in his own defense, Truman said, "Let us not become so preoccupied

¹ Michael Walzer, *Just And Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument With Historical Illustrations*, 1977, p. 264.

² Walzer, p. 265.

³ *Ibid.*

with weapons that we lose sight of the fact that war itself is the real villain.”⁴

So, to this way of thinking, wars, and not necessarily those who fight them, become the real villains. Therefore, it is then argued, any means to end a war, even when it involves incinerating hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children, becomes an unpleasant, but legitimate, tool. Such thinking led otherwise decent people, like Charles “Chuck” Yeager, to believe that once war is forced upon them, there are no limits, and therefore they are obligated to engage in any means, even atrocities, to end it. This is made clear from the following excerpt from Yeager’s biography in which he describes a disturbing mission he was ordered to fly in World War II:

Our seventy-five Mustangs were assigned an area fifty miles by fifty miles inside Germany and ordered to strafe anything that moved. The object was to demoralize the German population.... We weren’t asked how we felt zapping people. It was a miserable, dirty mission, but we all took off on time and did it.... By definition, war is immoral; there is no such thing as a clean war. Once armies are engaged, war is total. We were ordered to commit an atrocity, pure and simple, but the brass who approved this action probably felt justified because wartime Germany was not easily divided between “innocent civilians” and its military machine.... In war, the military will seldom hesitate to hit civilians if they are in the way.... I’m certainly not proud of that particular strafing mission against civilians. But it is there, on the record and in my memory.⁵

Unfortunately, this kind of thinking did not stop with World War II. In defense of our nuclear strategy during the Cold War, General Omar Bradley argued that “war itself is immoral,” and therefore in retaliation for attacks on our cities, it would be both

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Chuck Yeager and Leo Janos, *Yeager*, 1985, p. 63.

moral and militarily useful to attack enemy cities.⁶ And in response to the question of whether he had opposed the hydrogen bomb on moral grounds during hearings on J. Robert Oppenheimer, George Kenna, the former ambassador to what was then called the Soviet Union and a prominent Sovietologist, responded, "...I didn't consider that. After all, we are dealing with weapons here, and when you are dealing with weapons you are dealing with things that kill people, and I don't think the considerations of morality are relevant."⁷

Looking back on it now, it should not come as a surprise that such thinking led ultimately to the "search and destroy" tactics used by our military during the Vietnam War—tactics that caused our returning soldiers to be referred to by some as "baby killers." As much as it grieves me to say so, these charges were not totally unfounded. The "rules of engagement" in Vietnam were: (1) A village could be bombed or shelled without warning if American troops had received fire from within it; and (2) Any village known to be "hostile" could be bombed or shelled if its inhabitants were warned in advance, either by the dropping of leaflets or by helicopter loudspeakers.

Ironically, rules which were designed to separate noncombatants (civilians) from combatants (guerrillas) and therefore minimize casualties, actually provided the justification for attacking innocent men, women and children, as evidenced by the following incident which was typical in Vietnam—so typical, in fact, that it must have happened numerous times: "An American unit moving along Route 18 [in Long An province] received small arms fire from a village, and in reply the tactical commander called for artillery and air strikes on the village itself, resulting in heavy civilian casualties and extensive physical destruction."⁸

The policy underlying these rules of engagement (the so-called "pacification project") actually encompassed the uprooting and resettlement of a large number of the rural population in

⁶ See Robert W. Tucker, *The Just War*, 1960, p. 59, note 52.

⁷ Tucker, p. 77, note 70.

⁸ Jeffery Race, *War Comes to Long An*, 1972, p. 233.

Vietnam: literally millions of men, women and children. Leaving aside the possible criminality of this project, it is safe to say that such uprooting and resettlement was, from its inception, simply an impossible task doomed for ultimate disaster—a disaster that caused, in the end, more violent death for Vietnamese civilians. Further, there never was more than a pretense that sufficient resources would be made available to accomplish the task. Therefore, it was inevitable that civilians would be living in the villages to be shelled and bombed. The following is an example of what happened:

In August 1967, during Operation Benton, the “pacification” camps became so full that Army units were ordered not to “generate” any more refugees. The Army complied. But search and destroy operations continued. Only now the peasants were not warned before an air-strike was called on their village. They were killed in their villages because there was no room for them in the swamped pacification camps.⁹

Yes, war is hell, particularly when we feel justified in doing *whatever it takes* to win one. Whether we should have been in Vietnam in the first place is a debate that will, no doubt, continue to be hotly contested (I believe we had both the right and obligation to be there); but it is especially our conduct in prosecuting that war that is destined to remain a deep scar on the American conscience. The truth is that otherwise decent American soldiers did become baby killers, not because they wanted to, but because they thought they had to. We are, as a people, better than this, and if we cannot rise to a better standard, then no Christian can hope to serve this country without sin. Unless we are able to honestly consider where General Sherman’s concept of “Total War” ultimately took us, then we will forever be torn between pacifism or the unrestrained patriotism of Total War. I believe there is a better way.

⁹ Orville and Jonathan Shell, letter to *The New York Times*, Nov. 26, 1969; quoted in Noam Chomsky, *At War With Asia*, 1970, pp. 292-293.

No doubt, pacifists will argue that, writing as I have, I have already surrendered my position, providing *prima facie* evidence for why a Christian cannot, under any circumstances, participate in war; namely, that even among the best of governments there are a multitude of sinful acts that prove, conclusively, the “fallenness” of all civil governments. Therefore, these argue, a Christian, who is obligated to keep himself unspotted from the world,¹⁰ cannot under any circumstances serve his government as a soldier without sinning. And if I held to the pacifist position, which says that any and all use of deadly force is inherently evil, I would be forced to recant my position. However, I do not believe any and all use of deadly force to be evil. On the contrary, I believe that to refrain from using such force, when justice demands it, would be the very thing that is inherently evil. That is, I believe that force, even when deadly, can be used justly and well in a good cause and that such acts bear no stain of evil.

At the same time, I readily admit that many, perhaps even most, of those who bear governmental authority are unworthy of it, stained openly, as they frequently are, with their own sin and crime. However, this reality does not negate their God-given responsibilities to protect the innocent and punish the evildoer. And therefore if fighting wars is part of the government’s repertoire in these matters, and I will be arguing that it most certainly is, then governmental authorities are duty-bound (i.e., morally obligated), when justice demands it, to engage the enemy (foreign or domestic). When they do so, they operate as servants of the Most High God, the Ruler of the nations of the earth.

If our government has oppressed and abused other nations, then we ought to stop it, and those of us who are Christians ought to be praying God’s mercy on our guilty country. But to argue, as some do, that our country can’t now do what is right because of past failures is to advocate nothing short of dereliction of duty—a duty commanded by God. In point of fact, there is no coherent Biblical relationship between the acknowledgment of *past sins* and

¹⁰ See Jas. 1:27.

the refusal of *present duty*. In other words, any government that today fails to safeguard its citizens because of past crimes will only be adding to its catalog of sins and, as such, will clearly be in neglect of its God-given responsibilities.¹¹

Thankfully, the geopolitical experience that was Vietnam, a traumatic episode in our country's history that deeply wounded and splintered our nation, caused our government to stop and reflect on policies that had become divorced from the moral principles that ought to govern war—principles of which I'll have more to say as this study continues. Particularly, it learned that the public's perception of *how* a war is fought is as important as *why* it is fought. As a result, our government's renewed emphasis on accurate and precise targeting, along with a concerted effort to kill as few noncombatants as possible, and none intentionally, reflects a view of warfare that was manifested in the Gulf War (1990-91) and the current excursions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Although "collateral damage"¹² was an unfortunate reality in the Persian Gulf, Afghanistan and Iraq theaters, the small number of civilians killed was, and continues to be, absolutely amazing. These conflicts, at least on our side, represent the most cleanly fought modern wars on record and are more in line with the Just War principles developed down through the ages, particularly in Western civilization. I am delighted by this development and applaud those who have had a hand in causing it to happen, for without such an emerging consensus, I think there could be little hope of God's continued bountiful blessings upon our country, for as the Scriptures make abundantly clear, "Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people."¹³

I am not a warmonger, and will take umbrage to anyone who says I am. War must always be the last resort. This means if justice can be accomplished any other way, then war is not warranted. It should be clear from what I've said so far that I will not

¹¹ See Rom. 13:1-7.

¹² "Collateral damage" is the term the military uses to deal with the death and destruction of unintended targets.

¹³ Prov. 14:34.

attempt to justify the evils that are all too frequently manifested in war. Nor will I defend, or in any way attempt to excuse, the unrestrained patriotism that always manifests itself when our country is threatened, as it now most certainly is. The state, even when it's the United States of America, is not superior to God's law. In fact, the state is what it is supposed to be *only* when it recognizes a Law above the law. Anything else is idolatry. The proof that the government of the United States of America views this principle correctly is manifested in the conscientious objector status it grants to its citizens who hold deeply felt, demonstrable, religious convictions that it would always be wrong to take human life, no matter what the circumstances.

In closing this introduction, I realize I haven't touched every nook and cranny of this issue. Even so, I hope I have whetted your appetite for a study of this most difficult and fundamentally important subject. It is to that study that I now direct your attention.