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Final Paper

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1. On August 6, 1945, an atomic bomb was dropped on the Japanese city of Hiroshima. A second bomb was dropped on the city of Nagasaki two days later. These two attacks combined killed as many as 220,000 people by the end of that year. The order to deploy these two bombs was given by Harry S. Truman, who at the time of the first bombing had held the office of President of the United States for less than five months.

Truman took the oath of office on April 12, 1945 after the death of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. On May 8, the Allied Forces accepted the unconditional surrender of the Axis forces in Europe. Roughly one month later, the United States bombed Japan supposedly in an effort to bring the fighting in the Pacific to a quick close and thus bring World War II to an end.

Truman, and supporters of his decision, are confident that the use of atomic weapons in this case was necessary and helped to save the hundreds of thousands of lives that would have been lost due to an all-out invasion of mainland Japan. Others stand firm that the use of nuclear weapons is never justified, especially since there seemed to be alternatives. A demonstration of the new weapon’s destructive capabilities could have been offered, for instance. Also, the motivations for the attacks are questionable. Many feel that the real reason the United States used this level of force was to encourage their allies, namely Russia, to not forget their place during the post war clean-up and restructuring.

When applying this historical event to the “Dirty Hands” theory of Michael Walzer, one comes to three similar, yet fundamentally different views. The three lenses through which Walzer views various moral dilemmas are the perspectives of Niccolò Machiavelli, Max Weber and Albert Camus. Each of these three points of view offers an interesting solution to “The Problem of Dirty Hands.”

Machiavelli would tell us that Truman, like all great leaders, had to do, “Terrible things to reach his goal.” According to this theory, a politician’s dirty hands are justified by the good that is accomplished. In other words, good men must learn how to do the bad things that good men are normally against in order to help the constituents which he serves. The historical case in question when viewed through this filter would read as such: Truman made the decision to commit mass murder (not once, but twice) not because it was the right thing to do, but because it was the action that would work the greatest good. But there is no punishment needed here, nor any guilt. To Machiavelli, the ends justify the means.

According to Max Weber, Truman is a tragic hero. By making the hard decision to sin in order to do good, he sacrificed his own righteousness so that others might benefit. Weber believed that all leaders who eventually have to get their hands dirty must also bear the guilt that comes with wrongdoing. Just because a “bad” action has a “good” outcome does not mean it is without consequences. Weber would say that Truman made the hard choice because it was the duty of his station to bear the guilt of unspeakable acts so that others could live blamelessly.

Albert Camus would call Truman a “Just Assassin.” His deeds, while unequivocally wrong, he did while not only expecting, but welcoming the punishment. Camus equates this to civil disobedience. With this theory, the punishment is almost as important as the crime. Camus believed that a just assassin would kill a certain person because the death of that one person would better the lives of countless others. Then, the assassin would welcome the coming punishment as the just response to his actions. As a “Just Assassin,” Truman would have acted knowing not only that he was making a bad decision, but that he would be punished openly for doing so. Guilt doesn’t come into play much with this theory since the assassin is making a conscious decision that is as much a political statement as it is a murder, but there is punishment aplenty.

Walzer believes Camus’ view to be the best of the three. His reasoning is that it is the only filter through which we can view “The Problem of Dirty Hands” that requires the subject to have a just punishment. I like that with this theory there is a punishment for wrongdoing, even if it is imaginary. But, I can’t say that I like this model more than either of the other two. Machiavelli’s model is right in saying that ours leaders have to make the hard decisions so that the rest of us won’t have to, but dangerous in the fact that it supports them also having carte blanche to do whatever they like as long as the ends justify the means. I like that Weber’s model requires the leader to at least feel bad because of his wrongdoing. But is this enough? Run-of-the-mill murderers aren’t set free just because they feel bad. Camus’ model at least supports that leaders who make the hard “bad” decisions should expect to suffer the consequences. But it is also very similar to Machiavelli’s model where a leader can do as he pleases as long as he does some good along the way. Ultimately, I begrudgingly agree with Walzer that Camus’ model is the best. At least Camus believed that leaders, or anyone for that matter, should at least know that they did wrong and should be punished.

2. I do not believe that the ends justify the means. I think Walzer is wrong that in politics the cost-benefit ratio is all that is important. There is no such broad reaching rule as the “categorical imperative,” but actions are inherently right or wrong without consideration of the circumstances. Murder is wrong. Stealing is wrong. Taking bribes is wrong. Politicians use a lot of excuses to justify their actions, but what is wrong for us is wrong for them. According to the three models put forth by Walzer, every action is okay as long as it does some measure of good and as long as the doer knows he did wrong. The acknowledgement one’s of wrongdoing does not justify it. Having guilt because of one’s wrongdoing doesn’t justify it either. And, despite Walzer’s arguments to the contrary, accomplishing good through “bad” actions do not make the actions themselves okay.