

Is the Use of Force Ever Morally Justified?

A Response from Americans to Colleagues in Germany

August 8, 2002

Dear Colleagues:

We received your recent letter, *A world of peace and justice would be different*, which 103 of you publicly released from Germany in May of this year, in response to our letter, *What We're Fighting For*, which 60 of us publicly released in Washington, D.C. in February of this year.¹ We are grateful to you for taking the time to write to us, and wish to continue the dialogue.

We note with appreciation and agreement your statement that “there can be no moral justification for the horrible mass murder on September 11” and your recognition that the inherent and equal dignity of human persons is a necessary foundation for serious moral reflection on this subject.

Our overall reaction to your letter is that, although you describe it as a “response,” you respond only indirectly to our central argument. Above all in *What We're Fighting For*, we seek to draw upon the just war tradition to argue that the use of military force against the murderers of September 11 and those who assist them is not only morally justified, but morally necessary. You apparently disagree with that conclusion, but, apart from calling the just war tradition “an ill-starred historical concept,” you never coherently articulate any position on the morality of the use of force.

Let us review. Moral and intellectual approaches to war divide into four basic categories. Pacifism says that all war is morally wrong. Realism says that war is essentially about power and self-interest, and that moral analysis is therefore largely irrelevant. Holy war or crusade says that God, or some secular ideology of ultimate concern, can authorize the coercion or killing of non-believers. And just war says that universal moral criteria should be applied to specific situations to determine whether the use of force is morally justified.

¹The two letters, *What We're Fighting For: A Letter from America* and *A world of peace and justice would be different*, can be read in English in their entirety (along with other related responses and analyses) at www.americanvalues.org and at www.propositionsonline.com

Which of these positions is yours? You never tell us. If you are pacifists, you should say so. It's an honorable position, although one with which we respectfully disagree. Your statements about the use of force in Afghanistan after September 11 strongly suggest an essentially pacifistic orientation. Yet you also describe U.S. participation in the Second World War as "an outstanding contribution."

If you are realists who disdain moral arguments about war, you should say so, although we doubt that you are, since your letter is full of moralistic assertions. We assume that you reject the principle of holy war. Regarding the just war tradition, the only remaining intellectual option available to you – a tradition, we remind you, that primarily seeks to *limit* rather than extol the use of force, and that has strongly influenced international law and international institutions such as the United Nations – you dismiss this entire school of thought in one contemptuous phrase, as a prelude to your harsh attack on the decision by the U.S. and its allies, including Germany, to use force against Qaeda and Taliban fighters in Afghanistan.

So which is it for you? Is the use of force ever morally justified? If not, why not? If so, what are the proper moral criteria for the use of force? And how would these criteria, as you understand them, apply to the current crisis? Simply denouncing the United States for nearly everything that it has done in the world since 1945, while certainly your prerogative, does not relieve you from the responsibility of taking a clear position on these questions. We await your response.

In alarmist tones, you declare that "fundamentalist forces," which foster racism, nationalism, and religious fanaticism, are gaining ground in the U.S. and have now extended their influence "all the way to the White House." Rather than attempt to evaluate this assessment, we will simply point out that nowhere in your letter do you express alarm about "fundamentalist forces" gaining ground in the Muslim world. Quite the contrary. In your letter you suggest that the U.S. should withdraw all military personnel from Saudi Arabia, since the mere presence of these troops "is obviously regarded by many Muslims as a thorn in their flesh and an attack on their culture and self-esteem."

Why this discrepancy? Is it only "fundamentalism" in the U.S. to which you object? Is it your contention that "fundamentalist forces" in the Muslim world – groups that, in addition to disliking U.S. military personnel in their midst, prevent women from voting and even from driving cars, seek to murder novelists whose writings are perceived as critical of their religious teachings, and periodically declare war on foreigners and unbelievers – pose a lesser threat to the world today than do the "fundamentalist forces" that you fear are gaining ground in the United States?

This same indifference to the threat posed by Muslim radicals is also evident in your advice to us about how our government should have responded to the events of September 11. You recommend that criminal justice systems now operating at the national level should in the future be “extended globally,” an idea that is not only vague, but also blurs the distinctions between an individual crime and an act of war. You further advise us that there are “various ways” that people who are attacked can defend themselves, but you fail to mention even one of these ways.

You describe the rise of Islamicist violence in the world as “a consequence of the instability of the balance of power in the present unipolar world order.” If we understand this viewpoint correctly, you are suggesting, at least in part, that if the U.S. and its allies had less power and influence in the world, and if states such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and other states in the Middle East and in the Muslim world had *more* power and influence in the world, then the world would become a safer, less violent place. Recognizing that many (though not all) of these states whom you regard as insufficiently powerful and influential in the world are run by unelected authoritarians who oppress their own people and frequently nurture and export the terrorist violence that now threatens the world, including the Muslim world, we disagree with your prescription.

Your letter raises the subject of civilian casualties in the war in Afghanistan. The subject is a serious one, which concerns us deeply, but your treatment of it is not serious. Your factual claims are, at best, unsubstantiated. Conceptually, you conclude that civilian casualties in the war in Afghanistan constitute an example of U.S. “mass murder” that is, in moral terms, exactly the same as the murders of September 11 in New York, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania. You tell us that no moral calculation can “justify one mass murder by another.” We are saddened by these comments. For you to equate unintended civilian casualties in a theater of war, in which the cause is just, and where the goal of the combatant is to *minimize* the loss of civilian life, to the intentional killing of civilians in downtown office buildings, in which the cause is unjust, and where the goal of the combatant is to *maximize* the loss of civilian life, is an act of moral blindness.

Near the end of your letter, you write: “Only if the view that the West, as the most economically and militarily powerful group of cultures, is serious about the universality of human rights and dignity, that this is not merely a phrase trotted out when convenient, [and it] becomes accepted throughout the world, [including] the economically and militarily weaker nations, only then will the likelihood increase that terrorist suicide bombings will not find the intended response, but encounter vehement rejection in all countries.” Notwithstanding our disagreements with you in other areas, we find

important elements of insight in that statement, which may serve as one basis for future dialogue.

Thank you again for writing to us.

Signed,

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