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Moral Obscenity

by Zachary Slayback

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Secretary of State John Kerry has called the civil war in Syria “a moral obscenity” on the grounds that the al-Assad regime has resorted to the use of chemical weapons like sarin gas and wants to declare war . For the record, sarin gas was banned in 1997 after the United Nations Chemical Weapons Convention was signed by 162 member countries in 1993. The use of the weapon is horrific and causes choking, burns, and neurological damage. Sarin is considered up to 500 times more lethal than cyanide and targets the nerve receptors that signal muscles to turn on and off, usually leading to choking and failure to inhale. The use of any such weapon is horrific and should be seen as such by the international and moral communities. Despite this, American intervention in the Syrian civil war would also be a moral obscenity.

Not only has the United States government failed to prove its case for intervention, it also *totally lacks* any and all moral authority to make that call. Humanitarian interventions are generally accepted in Just War Theory as wars of defense, with interveners engaging in a “war of other-defense,” defending the targeted political community within the civil war against its aggressor. Ignoring for a moment that rebels against the al-Assad regime consist of many different political, religious, and ideological communities; and ignoring for a moment the atrocities these rebels themselves have committed; and ignoring for a moment the fact that the United States government has failed to prove that the al-Assad regime has actually used these chemical weapons; and ignoring for a moment the arbitrariness of setting a red line at the use of chemical

weapons only *after* hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children have been slaughtered by both sides, the United States government has yet to show why it ought to intervene in Syria.

Again, the use of chemical weapons (and the starting of a war more generally) is a moral obscenity, but it does not necessarily follow that the United States ought to intervene to correct this obscenity. Kerry and Obama have failed to show why the best way to correct a moral obscenity like the use of chemical weapons is to lob conventional weapons (probably rather indiscriminately, as past US-bombing missions have shown) into a hotly contested and civilian dense war zone. War is state-sanctioned mass killing, and this usually involves the killing of innocent civilians. This places a strong moral presumption *against* war of any sort in a given scenario. Simply saying, “chemical warfare is bad, mmmkay?” does not override that presumption against the war, and fails to show why the United States ought to intervene. Rather, Kerry and Obama are obligated to show that the benefits of intervention are *so great* that they override the costs, which may, and probably will, include the murder of innocent women and children. To show this, the United States would have to suppose near-perfect knowledge of what is happening on the ground in Syria, which even the world’s largest and most invasive surveillance state cannot guarantee. Not only this, but the Obama administration must show that war is *the best option* on the table, rather than some sort of international convention, aid, open immigration to allow refugees to flee, or a myriad of other options.

As George Mason University economist Bryan Caplan has pointed out, this essentially creates a case for pacifism. At the very least, the Obama administration has not even attempted to address these points.



Rubble in the Japanese city of Nagasaki after Americans dropped the second atomic bomb on it.

But let us suppose they do attempt to address these points and argue that American intervention in Syria would work, be effective, be swift, and would not kill any civilians. Would they then have a case? I argue no, as the United States government totally lacks the moral authority to enforce such an obligation because the United States government is one of the world’s most guilty users of chemical weapons and weapons of mass destruction.

One need not hold an advanced degree in International Relations or History to know that the only political entity to ever use a nuclear weapon on a civilian population is the United States, and the case that this use constituted a war crime in its own time is strong and still being made today.

Say one excuses the use of nuclear weapons on civilian populations, though, noting the destructiveness of the bombs had yet to be seen and the technology was new. For the sake of argument, let's accept the use of nuclear weapons on civilians. One need not look much further to see the use of poison by the United States in other campaigns.

In Vietnam, the United States used herbicides and defoliants in order to starve out and poison the North Vietnamese and the Laotians. These herbicides, most infamously, "agent orange," led to the maiming of innocent men, women, and children, as well as starvation and poisoning. The children of these civilians, as well as the soldiers who deployed the chemicals, are born with horrific deformities to this day (Warning: GRAPHIC). The Vietnamese government estimates more than half-a-million children have been born with such birth defects, leading to lives of suffering and misery. Approximately half-a-million civilians were maimed during the war due to these compounds.

It's not merely herbicides against civilians which the United States government deployed in these decades. Reports from *Time Magazine* and CNN allege that the US government *gassed its own defectors* in Laos in Operation Tailwind in 1970. The weapon of choice? Sarin gas.

The US government has engaged in the use of horrific chemical weapons as recently as the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan. US troops in Iraq used white phosphorus, which is a chemical weapon that causes burning of the skin and death, in offensives in cities such as Fallujah. Despite being a generally malicious weapon (though, all weapons are by definition malicious...), white phosphorus is considered a chemical weapon and frowned upon by the international community. It has also been connected to a huge spike in birth defects in cities in which it was deployed.

Similarly, though slightly-less indiscriminate, the United States actively uses depleted uranium ammunition in its efforts abroad. This ammunition is primarily used as an anti-armor round and is known for its armor-piercing qualities. The use of such a weapon may be justified if it provides great tactical benefits, but it has also been connected to sickness among civilians and soldiers, as well as birth defects and cancer among the civilian populations of the cities in which it was deployed. A responsible use of depleted uranium ammunition would include clean-up efforts after operations were successful in order to prevent such undue suffering among the civilian populations.



American-administered freedom in Libya.

It is obvious that the United States doesn't possess the moral authority to enforce its objections to the moral obscenities being committed in Syria. It has compromised this position time and time again. US regime leaders from FDR & Truman through Bush & Obama have led the country through maiming, slaughtering, and poisoning civilian populations. To think such an institution possesses the moral authority to enforce against others rules it often exempts itself from is ridiculous at best and evil at worst.

At the end of the day, though, it should be remembered that it does not take the use of specific chemical weapons to make war a moral obscenity, as war is itself the greatest moral obscenity. State-sanctioned mass murder with the veil of legitimacy and moral authority is hell incarnate, waged by the powerful elite and fought by the common man and woman. May I humbly recommend that President Obama and Secretary Kerry arm themselves and fight the war they seem so eager to send others to fight?