

## Michael Walzer, "A Dissenting View"

[Excerpted from Michael Walzer's response *The New Republic*, (Sept. 23, 1981), pp. 13-14.]

Paul Fussell's defense of the bombing of Hiroshima (*TNR*, August 22 & 29) is written, as he tells us repeatedly, from the standpoint of the ordinary GI. And that standpoint is human, all too human: let anyone die but me! There are no humanitarians in the foxholes. I can almost believe that. But Fussell's recital does remind me a little uneasily of the speech of that Conradian villain Gentleman Brown (in *Lord Jim*): "When it came to saving one's life in the dark, one didn't care who else went — three, thirty, three hundred people. . . ."

. . . With Fussell, it seems, there are no limits at all; anything goes, so long as it helps to bring the boys home. . . . The bombing of Hiroshima was an act of terrorism; its purpose was political, not military. The goal was to kill enough civilians to shake the Japanese government and force it to surrender. And this is the goal of every terrorist campaign. Happily, none of today's terrorist movements have yet been able to kill on the scale of the modern state, and so they have not enjoyed successes as dramatic as the one Fussell describes. But their ordinary members, the terrorists in the foxholes, as it were, must think much as he does: if only we could kill enough people, not a dozen here and there, in a pub, a bus station, or a supermarket, but a whole city full, we could end the struggle once and for all, liberate our land, get the British out of Ireland, force the Israelis to accept a PLO state, and so on. To the boys of the IRA, to young Palestinians in Lebanon, that argument is surely as attractive as it was to the young Paul Fussell on his way to the Pacific in 1945. It is the same argument.

What is wrong with it? If war is indeed a tragedy, if its suffering is inevitable, then nothing is wrong with it. War is war, and what happens, happens. In fact, however, war imposes choices on officers and enlisted men alike. "There wasn't a single soldier," says an Israeli officer who fought in the Six-Day War, "who didn't at some stage have to decide, to choose, to make a moral decision. . . ." Fussell, who has written so beautifully about the literature of war, must know this to be true. And he must also know that there is a moral argument, different from his own argument, that shapes these military choices. Perhaps that argument is most often expounded by those professors far from the battlefield for whom he has such contempt. But it is an argument as old as war itself and one that many soldiers have believed and struggled to live by. It holds, most simply, that combat should be a struggle between combatants, and that noncombatants — civilian men, women, and children — should be protected as far as possible against its cruelties. "The soldier, be he friend or foe," wrote Douglas MacArthur, "is charged with the protection of the weak and the unarmed. It is the very essence and reason of his being a sacred trust." Like policemen, firemen, and sailors at sea, soldiers have a responsibility to accept risks themselves rather than impose risks on ordinary citizens. That is a hard requirement when the soldiers are conscripts. Still, they are trained and armed for war and ordinary citizens are not; and that is a practical difference that makes a moral difference.

Consider how the risks of police work might be reduced, and how many more criminals might be caught, if we permitted the police to ignore the rights of ordinary citizens, to fire indiscriminately into crowds, to punish the innocent relatives of criminals, and so on. But we don't grant such permissions. Nor are soldiers permitted comparable acts, even if they carry with them the promise of success.

There is a code. It is no doubt often broken, particularly in the heat of battle. But honorable men live by it while they can. Hiroshima was a violation of that code. So was the earlier terror bombing of cities — Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo — but Hiroshima was worse because it was even more terrifying. Its long-term effects were literally unknowable by the men who decided to impose them. And the effects were not imposed, any more than those of the earlier bombing, in the heat of battle, face-to-face with enemy soldiers who aim to kill and have already killed comrades and friends. Though there were soldiers in Hiroshima, they were not the targets of the attack (or else we would have attacked a military base); the city was the target and all its inhabitants.

Fussell writes (again) as a democrat, on behalf of "the low and humble, the quintessentially democratic huddled masses — the conscripted enlisted men manning the fated invasion divisions." Given that standpoint, one might have expected him to question the US demand for unconditional surrender that made the invasion of the Japanese islands seem absolutely necessary. There were people in the US government in 1945 who thought a negotiated settlement possible without an invasion and without the use of the atomic bomb. Surely some attempt should have been made not only for the sake of our own soldiers, but also for those other "huddled masses," the civilian inhabitants of Hiroshima (and Nagasaki too). Why don't they figure in Fussell's democratic reckoning! If Harry Truman's first responsibility was to American soldiers, he was not without responsibility elsewhere; no man is. And if one is reckoning, what about all the future victims of a politics and warfare from which restraint has been banished? Given the state of our political and moral order, with which Hiroshima probably has something to do, aren't we all more likely to be the victims than the beneficiaries of terrorist attacks?