Adam Gincel

HST 495

The Rules of Civilized Warfare

Nuclear weapons raised a ton of questions for everyone. Moral concerns, technical curiosities, political motives – there was a lot to discuss around 1945, especially in the United States. The ultimate decision to launch bombs on the primarily civilian centers of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to shock the Japanese into surrendering was not made easily, and was a subject of great debate up until the event, and far beyond it.

Reading about the deliberations that went into the US’s decisions, and analysis of the Truman administration’s “schizophrenic” views on the Atomic Bomb, was very fascinating to me personally. By the time I was smart enough to even remotely understand world issues, the more pressing matters of nuclear policy had long since been settled and swept under the rug, so to speak. Reading back, it’s both profound and ridiculously obvious to realize that people had to deal with nuclear weapons being the forefront of new technology – that one nation essentially had the power to reduce entire cities to rubble almost instantly. These conversations were heated, with many separate opinions, each with some logic behind them. One side wanted to focus exclusively on military targets, to avoid killing countless innocent people. Another wanted to target civilian centers, to “shock” the target population into surrendering as quickly as possible.

The article discusses the moral quandary Truman faced, bringing up the guilt he eventually faced about “killing those kids.” It also explores the consequences of the conventions set in 1945. The article brings up the first SIOP, or Single Integrated Operational Plan, which would have killed over half a billion people, and how most of them being civilians can be tied back to the decision to bomb civilians in Japan.

This article doesn’t take a solid stance on the issue, though it does bring to light the consequences wrought by Parsons and the others at Los Alamos, when they suggested and advocated for cities as nuclear targets. The world felt the ramifications as, for the next fifty years, the US and the Soviets held the world at gunpoint with their collective nuclear arsenal. The groundwork set in the forties lead to the Cold War we came to know, and to the unrest we still see today. In a sense, the shock factor worked as intended. We just never expected we’d still be shocked decades after the fact.