

Logic of the Bomb

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The GBU-43/B Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) or “Mother of All Bombs” was dropped in Afghanistan at a time of great international tension. Sarin gas had filled Syrian hospitals with civilians, threatening to draw Russia, the United States, and their allies into direct war. U.S. warships retaliated by striking one of Assad’s air bases while Donald Trump shared dessert with China’s President Xi Jinping. Hot on the heels of their meeting, Trump (erroneously) declared that another set of warships were en route to intimidate North Korea and its allies. Alarming rates of Syrian and Iraqi civilian casualties from coalition airstrikes were dominating headlines and before the dust had settled, the largest non-nuclear bomb in the U.S.’s mighty arsenal incinerated an ISIS encampment in eastern Afghanistan.



The bomb’s spectacle dominated conversation. With the phrases “Mother of All Bombs” and “largest non-nuclear bomb” repeated throughout headlines, people came to know little more than that it was big and mighty. MOAB was reported as a singular event, isolated even from its immediate historical context as the cymbal crash to a sudden rise in imperial bravado. Instead, an exaggerated profile emerged that celebrated its immensity.¹

MOAB is a weapon of psychological warfare; that it terrorizes from afar is a part of the attraction. And while the West enacted its imperial theater, Afghans experienced a spectacle of their own.

“I thought my house was being bombed,” said Mohammad Shahzadah, a resident of the Achin countryside in eastern Afghanistan. “Last year a drone strike targeted a house next to mine, but this time it felt like the heavens were falling.” Children’s ears had gone deaf from the blast. Windows and doors were blown out. The land inside the one-mile blast radius was left scorched and barren. The Achin mayor couldn’t see why the U.S.’s largest conventional bomb was dropped on such an insignificant target. “My relatives thought the end of the world had come. Every day fighter jets, helicopters, and drones are in the area.” Public council representatives in the eastern Nangarhar province simply called the bombing for what it was: the testing of new and dangerous weapons designed to spread fear.

In a joint statement, the Nangarhar council deputy declared that the attack was against international norms. He was half right. A conventional bomb of that magnitude had never been used before, but viewed in historical context, it was not so unusual. Lost in the singularity of the spectacle is a long history of imperial powers using occupations to test military weapons and develop new strategies.

In November of 1911, Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti of the Italian forces conducted the world’s first aerial bombardment over Libya. Late to the game of carving up Africa into colonies, Italy looked to Libya as a convenient land grab. Gavotti was an ambitious pilot, and one afternoon he had an idea. “Today I have decided to try to throw bombs from the aeroplane. It is the first time that we will try this and if I succeed, I will be really pleased to be the first person to do it,” he wrote to his father. His plan was simple. Strap a box of 1.5kg grenades to a primitive airplane, fly over an enemy encampment, and drop the explosives. “It will be very interesting to try them on the Turks.”

Watching bombs explode from the sky pleased him and in turn pleased his superiors, who thought its

“wonderful moral effect” made it a clever tactic to fight natives. The media excitement was palpable in the first headline wired across the world: “Aviator Lt. Gavotti Throws Bomb on Enemy Camp. Terrorized Turks Scatter upon Unexpected Celestial Assault.” The initial attack resulted in few casualties, but the spectacle of terror from the sky captured imperial imaginations anyway. By 1912, the Italian Air Force was conducting a variety of missions over Libya including reconnaissance, bombing runs, intercepting camel trains, and dropping propaganda leaflets.

Soon after World War I, the Kurds of modern day Iraq rebelled against British rule. It was with this challenge that Winston Churchill, along with Air Marshall Trenchard, matured Italy’s nascent vision into the doctrine of “control without occupation.” A strategy where the ever-present threat of aerial bombardment, instead of troops on the ground, would be the main force of coercion. Trenchard was convinced that “strong and continuous action of this nature must in time inevitably compel the submission of the most recalcitrant tribes” through the “dislocation of living conditions and the material destruction caused by heavy and persistent [bombing].” Using aircrafts to terrorize a people into submission was thought to be especially effective against the “ignorance of the native mind” in lands so removed from the British public’s moral consideration.

Churchill, for his part, argued that terroristic tactics could save lives compared to bombing with conventional explosives. “I do not understand this squeamishness about the use of gas. I am strongly in favour of using poisoned gas against uncivilised tribes,” he explained. “The moral effect should be so good that the loss of life should be reduced to a minimum.” Careful not to endorse lethal gas, Churchill suggested that they should merely use “some kind of asphyxiating bombs” and “spread a lively terror” throughout the Iraqi rebels. A year later, in 1920, he urged Trenchard to continue “experimental work on gas bombs, especially mustard gas” on the “recalcitrant natives.” Though preparation was made for a gas campaign, the revolt would be contained before it was necessary to rely on such measures. In the end, conventional bombing and village burning proved sufficient to quell the Iraqis.

Not only were these tactics intended to save the lives of reserve British soldiers, but the British economy as well. Churchill was acutely aware that the Empire was overextended, and he employed aerial bombardment as a means of finding “some cheaper form of control” in a war-wearied nation. Its success, in military terms abroad and with public opinion at home, met the demands of capital and set the stage for the state’s reliance on air power. After the High Commissioner for Iraq concluded that control without occupation was a cost effective success, Trenchard prophetically wrote that a continued demonstration of the air control doctrine would have far reaching results and even “lead to still further economies in defense expenditure, not only in Iraq, but also in other Eastern territories.”

These foundational arguments have underwritten imperial action ever since. While the vernacular changes over time, the logic is consistent: those deemed “uncivilized” have diminished human value and may be terrorized, experimented on, and abused for the benefit of “civilized” lives and their related economies. From Agent Orange in Vietnam, to napalm in Japan, to depleted uranium in Iraq, examples of military abuses in the Global South are many.

The Mother of All Bombs is only the latest example of such imperial tactics. MOAB is evidence that the U.S. military will continue to test the limits of what counts as conventional weaponry. This is no less the case than with white phosphorous, a weapon of ambiguous legality that the U.S. and its allies routinely flirt with.

The U.S. government does not consider white phosphorous (WP) to be a chemical weapon because its deadly effect is achieved through the heat byproduct of the chemical reaction, rather than the chemical reaction itself. WP burns extremely hot and so generates large amounts of white smoke,

while the plasma itself melts anything it touches from metal to flesh. The U.S. government claims they merely deploy WP as a smoke screen, and any harm to humans is unintentional collateral damage.² The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), an international organization tasked with enforcing chemical weapon prohibitions, acquiesces to this argument with a caveat. WP's legality depends also on the intent of use. While permissible as a means of creating smoke, if "the toxic properties of white phosphorus, the caustic properties, are specifically intended to be used as a weapon [against humans or animals], that of course is prohibited," OPCW spokesperson Peter Kaiser explained.

In 2004, the US was caught using WP munitions for just that purpose. "WP proved to be an effective and versatile munition," reported a team of U.S. Army officers upon reviewing the attack on Falujah, Iraq. "We used it for screening missions at two breeches and, later in the fight, as a potent psychological weapon against the insurgents." Too valuable to waste as a smoke screen when non-incendiary alternatives existed, the WP munitions were instead saved for "lethal missions." Department of Defense spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel Barry Venable explained these missions involved launching the chemical fire at covered positions where "the combined effects of the fire and smoke — and in some case the terror brought about by the explosion on the ground — [would] drive [enemy combatants] out of the holes so that you can kill them with high explosives." The OPCW turned a blind eye, and the international community was silent.

Four years later, Israel dropped WP over Gaza indiscriminately. Civilians, including children, were burned alive. Hospitals and relief shelters were turned to ash. Initially denying that it had used WP, Israel was eventually forced to both admit this was an intentional, deliberate act and argue for its legality. A fact-finding report issued by the UN concluded that Israel was "systematically reckless in determining [WP] use in build-up areas" and Human Rights Watch reported that their own Israel Military Industries produced non-lethal smoke screen alternatives. Both statements strongly urged WP be considered for prohibition. The U.S. and its allies again remained silent.

Flash forward to sarin gas in Syria and how America found its voice.

When Trump ordered fifty-nine Tomahawk missiles to strike Assad's air base, it was ostensibly because the U.S. red line had been crossed — a policy inherited from Obama that said chemical weapons would not be tolerated. Taken in context, the farce of the line is clear. America is interested neither in restraining the use of weapons nor lessening the suffering of innocents. When Trump's heart breaks for the children of Syria, it is nothing more than the legitimization of further imperialist violence. Where are his concerns for the forgotten children of Afghanistan who die at record rates year after year? Humanity is not a subject of concern in these faraway, "uncivilized" places. The use of MOAB was not about their people at all. It was about sending a message to Russia and China: We will use our weapons.

Since MOAB dropped, Congress has written a blank check to generals presiding over the Afghanistan conflict to the tune of \$23 billion. No arbitrary timelines for withdrawal will be set, and there is no deadline for a new strategy. Clearly, there is no rush to end the war in Afghanistan, and fighting will undoubtedly escalate as the Pentagon decides what to do with its slush fund.

Meanwhile, Trump has vowed to work with Russia's Vladimir Putin to find a negotiated end to the Syrian war. Russia has itself profited from testing over 162 modern weapons in Syria, as Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu gushes. Among them has been WP, demonstrating Russia's own flirtations with controversial weapons. Far from constituting an alternative to the West's imperial logic, Russia is a competitor. Any peace brokered between the U.S. and Russia may quell all-out war, but it will neither deliver Syria from occupation nor fulfill its own demands for popular liberation. Russia may find itself wanting to test its own MOAB someday.

Footnotes

1. Foreign Policy claimed that MOAB had an explosive yield comparable to the first nuclear weapons when in fact it was magnitudes smaller. The New York Times reported that it cost \$16 million to produce each bomb when the Air Force had actually estimated \$170,000, and many more news outlets, including CNN, used explosive 2003 test footage to picture the attack when actual cockpit footage proved unsatisfying. Soon after, a video went viral that falsely claimed to be ground-level leaked footage of MOAB's destruction. The video depicted a giant firestorm explosion in a nondescript Middle Eastern countryside that no doubt satisfied people's expectations for what the Mother of All Bombs should look like. The media's sensational reporting of MOAB reveals the bomb's true terroristic function.

2. White Phosphorous is classified as an incendiary by international law under most circumstances and thus is governed by Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons Protocol III. This protocol prohibits incendiary weapons being used against civilians in any circumstance, even if enemy combatants are present. Drafted in 1980, the Obama Administration eventually signed it in 2009, after the Iraq war. Israel is not a signatory to this date.

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