

## More Than Moralism: How Values Matter to Nuclear Security

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I am triply honored and grateful to be here today: thank you to Joan Brown Campbell for inviting me. It is wonderful to be at this Chautauqua Institution—I've been here once before, but it was in winter, and I just thought it was a charming, if underpopulated, town. I'm glad to know the truth. And I am honored to be part of a week of extraordinary speakers, many of whom I am proud to call colleagues and friends.

I have been working on nuclear weapons since I graduated from college—and, by way of personal confession, today is my thirty-third birthday. So this means that I have been dealing with this topic for a third of my life. I thought that was pretty good, until I realized that Senator Nunn and Ambassador Duarte between them have about a century of experience. Also, thirty-three is traditionally the age assigned to Jesus when he concluded his earthly ministry, so it's really one of those birthdays where you have to ask, "what have you done with *your* life?"

I also want to commend all of you for coming out to hear talks on a challenging subject. If the whole of the Chautauqua summer was a Jewish wedding, this week would be the part where you stomp on the glass to remember that the world's still broken.

But it has led to some amusing headlines in the *Chautauqua Daily*. I like this juxtaposition on Monday's paper: "Nunn to speak on threat of catastrophic nuclear terrorism," and, right next to it, a headline about the production of *La Boheme*: "It'll end in tears." And today's paper: "Allison addresses imminent threat of nuclear attacks," right beside, "Dreams from a beautiful world." We've gone from "catastrophic" to "imminent"—I suppose that by Friday, when Joe Cirincione speaks, the headline will be, "Cirincione tells Chautauquans to hold tight to everyone they love, then sits and rocks back and forth in silence."

The genesis of this talk actually began with Joe, who I highly recommend seeing, when he invited me to speak to his graduate class on nuclear policy at Georgetown. For my guest lecture, he said he wanted me to address the question, "Does morality matter to nuclear weapons?"

Now, as someone who makes his living at the intersection of faith and politics—which makes me pretty much the worst dinner guest ever—I have a vested interest in the answer to this question being a resounding "yes!" But asking the question of the relationship between morality and nuclear weapons, and security more broadly, is illuminating, and what I'd like to discuss today.

So: what does morality have to do with security? What difference does it make? Or does it make a difference at all—do generals and politicians need ethicists like a fish needs a bicycle?

The short answer to the latter question, “does it make a difference at all,” is a clear, resounding, and—if we consider the alternative—self-evident yes. Because no matter how hard we try we cannot imagine an amoral security. An immoral security, yes—but not an amoral one.

This is because security, properly understood, is a means to an unavoidably moral end. Security is the work of preserving a given human society from external threats. And all human societies, even the most depraved, have some form of moral architecture to which they are internally accountable. Human societies are moral *things*.

Digging a little deeper: the moral structure of a society—the thing which security exists to, well, secure—is fundamentally grounded in that society’s sense of *what it means to be a human being*.

So, I’m suggesting that a moral consideration of security reveals the vision of the human that the security mechanism seeks to defend.

As an example and illustration of this, listen to this trio of statements that could be made about the practice of torture in the name of national defense. Consider what assumptions each one makes about what it means to be human, and the sort of society that comes from that understanding.

First: “If we torture the enemy, we have already lost.”

Second: “Enhanced interrogation may be necessary in certain cases to preserve our freedoms.”

Third: “If it makes the country safer, do it. Anything goes.”

The first statement reveals a vision of society based around a human person who is possessed of an intrinsic or at least inalienable dignity. If the society, in seeking to defend itself against an external threat, acts in a way that denies this dignity, it has defeated itself from within.

The second statement gets a little more pragmatic with the human person. The stated goal is freedoms for many, yes, but it’s willing to sacrifice the human dignity of outsiders in the pursuit of the physical security of insiders.

The third statement has absolutized the state to the point where human beings’ only value is their value to the country. Security has been decoupled from any external moral standard. In fact, security has been transformed from the means of securing a moral end into an end unto itself. This is, fundamentally, totalitarianism.

Of course there are many more options—these are just three that stake out a spectrum of possibilities. But what they point to is to bring morality to security is to talk about what it

is, existentially speaking, that we think is worth defending, and how that bears on the ways that we can defend it.

In this understanding, to describe a certain pursuit of security as immoral is not simply to find it lacking against some arbitrary standard of right and wrong. To say that some weapon or policy is immoral is really to say that it constitutes a betrayal of who we understand ourselves to be.

So, let's bring this thesis to the topic at hand. The way we usually answer the question, "are nuclear weapons moral," is either "no," or "they're a necessary evil," or "they're just the natural evolution of the gun," or some other nuanced point on the line between bad and good. But to answer this way is really to be doomed from the start, because it takes the question—"are nuclear weapons moral"—as a question about means, not ends.

Nuclear weapons are devices. They are means to a variety of ends. And to begin a question of morality with *means* is to invite a search for a plausible moral end. Like, "well, they're bad, but let's say Kim Jong Il buried his nuclear missiles really deep in a mountain, and he threatened to launch them if anybody prevented him invading South Korea, and the only thing that could take his nukes out was our nukes..." You get the idea: it's easy to get lost in casuistry.

But moral questions in general should not begin with means. Moral questions should begin with ends.

The contribution that morality has to make to the question of nuclear weapons is this focus on ends. In other words, when you are asked "are nuclear weapons moral," I'm suggesting that your response should be to evaluate your vision of what it means to be a human person, and what is required for her flourishing—and then see whether and how nuclear weapons can be reconciled with that vision.

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This brings us to our second point: In our 21<sup>st</sup> century, post-Cold War, post-9/11 context, a Christian sense of our human ends points clearly and undeniably to the imperative of abolishing nuclear weapons.

I feel pretty safe in assuming that anybody who chooses to spend any part of their summer at Chautauqua doesn't believe that security is its own end, morally justifying any means. But I am equally sure that there is a diversity of opinion represented here today about what it means to be human, and what constitutes human flourishing. And even if I had time, I wouldn't have the capacity to account for them all.

So, for the sake of argument, I want to use the Christian Just War tradition as a case study of the sort of moral reasoning I'm suggesting—that is, to consider the human ends of a given society, and reflect on the ramifications of that understanding for nuclear weapons.

(Let me note here two asides: first, I hope that an examination of the Christian Just War tradition will have enough overlap with Jewish and Muslim teaching that it may have a broader applicability. Second, my focus on Just War is not intended to discount the pacifist position. But it's not really a surprise to find out that pacifists are opposed to nuclear weapons, and I think that the Just War tradition might yield more surprising fruit for our time together.)

The Just War tradition, for those who aren't familiar with it, dates back as a somewhat formal system to St. Augustine. The essential understanding of what it means to be a human being that undergirds the Just War tradition is that we are created in the image of God—regardless of gender, tribe, or class—and thus to be inviolably sacred. But we are also understood to be corrupted by sin, and thus oriented—both willfully and biologically—toward death, and in need of salvation through Jesus Christ, whose kingdom is not contained by any human system.

Unfortunately, this combination means that people made in the image of God are also always trying to kill each other. And this means that the goal of society should be, fundamentally, to create peace, which Augustine defined as “the tranquility of order.” This is in the same vein as St. Paul's letter to the Romans, in which he described the pagan Roman government as the “ministers of God.” But neither Augustine nor Paul was writing human government a blank check to pursue security as its own end. Rather, government existed to benefit the flourishing of good and the suppression of evil—it is the pursuit of security, *disciplined by the complicated moral end* that is the flourishing of sinful people made in God's image.

The fundamental argument of the Just War tradition as it has evolved is that given this understanding of the human being, the greater good of peace may, in certain circumstances, morally justify the limited use of force. But because the Just War tradition presupposes such a high view of the human being as God's image-bearer—entailing the absolute and categorical prohibition of murder, or innocent bloodshed—there is a strong presumptive bias against force, and both the circumstances and methods of its use are strictly circumscribed. This has resulted in what have come to be known as the criteria of Just War.

In sum, they are a matrix for morally evaluating the decision to use force, as well as its conduct, in light of the end of peace. When deliberating whether to use force (*jus ad bellum*), it must always be a last resort; the damage that war will avert must be certain and profound; there must be a serious prospect for success; and the damage averted by taking up arms must exceed the damage that war will cause.

Likewise, the conduct of war (*jus in bello*) must discriminate between combatant and innocents; the minimum level of force must be used; the losses incurred must be proportional to the gains achieved.

Before we consider how the tradition bears on nuclear weapons, it is important to remember when looking at the criteria that—contrary to popular understanding—the

criteria are no more the point of the Just War tradition than is the finger of a man pointing at the moon. A war is not morally justifiable simply because one can tick off a set of boxes; the criteria are not hoops that a war must jump through in order to receive clerical benediction. Rather, the criteria are a normative set of judgments about the means of seeking security that *orient* us to the particular, morally-grounded end of peace, which is itself rooted in a particular understanding of the human person.

Consider the criterion of discrimination, for example: it is not an free-floating moral standard, but rather reflects a conviction in the absolute value of human life that undergirds the entirety of the Just War tradition—to the point that the lives of enemy non-combatants must be equally valued with those of our fellow citizens.

So: what are the ramifications of Just War for nuclear weapons? Three of the criteria in particular are, to put it plainly, irreconcilable with the use of nuclear weapons: discrimination, proportionality, and macro-proportionality, which is the principle that the unavoidable negative effects of war must not outweigh the positive effects, if we can call them that.

Discrimination and proportionality are fairly obvious. Nuclear weapons are categorically indiscriminate, both in their immediate blast and uncontrollable fallout patterns, and only in the most precise circumstances could we be assured that a nuclear weapon was not killing civilians. Likewise, it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the use of even one nuclear weapon would not be radically disproportionate to the existing conflict—a limitation which points back to the aim of preserving life and maintaining a tether to the end goal of peace by refraining from escalating the harm of a conflict.

But even if one could imagine an absurdly precise scenario in which a nuclear weapon was used only on a military installation and proportionate to a massive conflict—such scenarios tend to do better in the sterile, laboratory quality environments offered by the minds of tenured theological ethicists than they do in the real world—the soon-to-be 65-year taboo against the use of nuclear weapons means that any such use would risk radical escalation. This is why the use of nuclear weapons categorically violates the term of macro-proportionality: their introduction into a conflict risks unimaginable escalation and harm that far exceeds *any* plausible rationale for their use. And this is why the Just War tradition is categorically irreconcilable with the use of nuclear weapons.

Now, here's where it gets tricky. If you think the point of the Just War tradition is the criteria—that is, the evaluation of the moral restrictions on the means of force—you wind up with a prohibition of nuclear use. But the criteria do not speak to the costs of nuclear weapons that are incurred regardless of whether the devices are ever used, like:

- The public health cost of nuclear weapons, including the historical injustices done in nuclear testing, both in the Pacific and in the American Southwest with the Utah “downwinders.”

- The financial cost of nuclear spending, such as the \$5.8T the U.S. spent on our nuclear weapons complex between 1940-1996, which is of course just a portion of the global total.
- The ongoing environmental cost of the nuclear infrastructure, especially to the poorer communities in which these tend to be situated.

These costs are not covered by the criteria of Just War. But if we think beyond the criteria alone, and consider the *ends* of the Just War tradition—the goal of peace, and the vision of the human person which grounds it—these costs of the nuclear system would surely seem to mean that we have constructed a system of security which betrays our sense of who we are as a people.

And yet: to play devil’s advocate, there would appear to be one final loophole. That is, though these costs are certainly terrible, if the *threat* of nuclear weapons is in fact the only reliable deterrent against their use, then are not the terrible costs of the nuclear weapons complex outweighed by the good of preventing nuclear warfare? In our imperfect world, couldn’t this balance be reconciled with the peaceful, life- and order-seeking moral ends of the Just War tradition?

In other words, even if our moral ends forbid the use of nuclear weapons, isn’t there room to accept at least the moral *plausibility* of nuclear deterrence—i.e., that a good-faith and compelling moral claim could be made on its behalf?

During the Cold War, the U.S. Catholic Bishops said yes, in their 1983 pastoral letter on peace. While categorically condemning nuclear war, they believed that the circumstances of the Cold War meant that deterrence, under strict conditions, could be reconciled with moral ends as an “interim ethic.” Deterrence, they said, was better than nuclear war, and if those were the alternatives, you have to admit they have a point.

On the other hand, the United Methodist Bishops argued in their “In Defense of Creation” that it was simply immoral to threaten that which would be a sin to do. And you have to admit that they have a point, too.

Well, this was a dilemma. But I am pleased to report that the movement of history has closed this loophole for us: in a forum earlier this year at Georgetown, the Vatican representative to the UN, Archbishop Celestino Migliore, said “the conditions that prevailed during the Cold War, which gave a basis for the Church’s limited toleration of nuclear deterrence, no longer apply in a consistent and effective manner.”

This is because for nuclear deterrence to have a claim at morality, nuclear deterrence must plausibly work. But in our post-Cold War, post-9/11 context, nuclear deterrence has become self-defeating as a security strategy.

Unlike the Cold War, with its relatively simple, essentially bipolar, and fundamentally *state*-centered nuclear geopolitics, our security environment is increasingly multipolar and characterized by asymmetric threats from non-state actors, like terrorist groups. In this setting, the continued reliance on nuclear weapons by some nations, even to deter, has a doubly damaging effect on nonproliferation.

First, continued reliance on nuclear weapons by some establishes nuclear weapons as *the* normative criterion to great power status, incentivizing nuclear development by other nations.

Second, this same continued reliance inhibits the international cooperation needed to prevent the expansion of the nuclear club. No-one sane thinks that if we abandon our nuclear weapons, Iran will magically abandon their program. But without the commitment to disarmament, we will certainly not be able to constrain the Iranian program, because nobody wants to listen to a sermon on nuclear temperance delivered from a plutonium barstool.

The consequence of deterrence as an indefinite strategy, therefore, is the spread of nuclear know-how and materials around the world. This means that more regional conflicts will become nuclear. And because the control of nuclear material is inversely proportional to its spread, it means that a terrorist group will someday acquire bomb material—the one component that such a group cannot manufacture from scratch. Once terrorists have the bomb, the risk of nuclear catastrophe approaches 100%, because there is no reliable way to deter or interdict such an attack.

So, to connect the dots: the indefinite reliance on deterrence means inadequate progress on disarmament, which results in proliferation, which results inevitably in nuclear attack, or the very thing that deterrence was supposed to prevent in the first place. Relying on nuclear deterrence in these is kind of like trying to ward off a winter chill by setting fire to your carpet.

To recap: when we begin with our moral ends—a Christian vision of the human person and the aim of human society—we see that any use of nuclear weapons in pursuit of security would constitute self-betrayal. Even further: though in a previous era we could make a case for the reconciliation of our moral ends with the practice of nuclear deterrence, the shift of historical circumstances has eliminated this possibility. There is no conceivable future in which the existence of nuclear weapons does not result in their use.

This is something far more powerful than simply saying that nuclear weapons are bad because they kill a lot of people. It means that the only posture concerning nuclear weapons which can be reconciled to our human ends—to *who we believe ourselves to be*—is abolition.

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So we arrive at our third and final point: that moral activism is not simply right and good, but actually necessary and efficacious in the pursuit of nuclear weapons abolition.

In a nutshell, our world needs our moral intervention.

Since the advent of nuclear weaponry there has been a nuclear system designed to control it. With this phrase, “nuclear system,” I mean the political, technical, and military architecture designed to constrain and direct the fundamentally destructive power afforded by explosive fusion and fission.

For the most part, the purpose of this system, this architecture, has been to prevent the use of nuclear weapons. But the architecture we developed for this purpose was actually based in straining toward their use—the way the two sides of a stone arch, by perfectly balancing the strength and design of the opposing sides, hold the entire structure up by falling against each other with equal weight.

This “nuclear arch,” if we can call it that, was, if not laudable, at least comprehensible in the essentially bipolar world of its construction. With the U.S. and NATO on one side, and the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact on the other, and both bristling with nuclear weapons and ready and able to use them at a moment’s notice, it was thought that the two sides would hold each other up.

But it is easy to forget, looking at the seeming permanence of such an arch, that we are looking at a structure in a state of interrupted collapse. It is easy to forget that we are looking at falling stones.

This inherent attribute of an arch may never be revealed if the two sides remain stable, with pressure being applied in equal and opposing measure. But today, the architecture of nuclear control is coming under new strains it was never designed to bear. The threat of proliferation, the expansion of the nuclear club, the danger of nuclear terrorism—all of these push in ways that undermine the structure. This is what I mentioned earlier with deterrence becoming self-defeating. And when and if the structure collapses, it will collapse toward use—the use of nuclear weapons which it was designed to prevent, but toward which it has always strained.

Furthermore, the technicians who maintain the nuclear system cannot be expected to correct it from within. They are there to ensure its smooth functioning, not to question its rationale. But the problem with the Titanic was not that its rudder didn’t function or that its screws failed to turn.

Now, we should note that the does not mean that we should disregard or disrespect the nuclear technicians who maintain it, for their work and their expertise is vital. We need nuclear scientists to dismantle weapons and design verification mechanisms. We need nuclear diplomats to negotiate arms treaties. We need nuclear soldiers to ensure stability and security as we move toward the unfamiliar terrain of a post-atomic age. But it does

these technical experts no disservice to say that it cannot fall to them to recalibrate the fundamental purpose of the system that it is their job to maintain.

Rather, the responsibility for that recalibration—the development of a new architecture oriented toward abolition—falls to those of us who outside the system. It falls to those of us who are ordinary people, not nuclear experts—but whose peaceable ordinariness is the exact human end that our security mechanism is supposed to serve.

Perversely, however, the very humanity required to recalibrate the nuclear system is precisely the thing that nuclear system views as a profound threat. The whole thing falls apart if the people involved start acting like human beings instead of parts in a well-oiled machine. Imagine building nuclear security around a deterrent if at every point in the process of command and control you had an individual deciding whether a given action conformed to their moral scruples! That's the opposite of a reliable system. The whole thing falls apart. So the nuclear system is biased toward excluding human considerations.

This is why the call to moral intervention is fundamentally a call to courage, because the nuclear system is deeply hostile to being called to account to the human ends which it serves. And yet history bears out that it is not the smooth clockwork of the nuclear system which moves us by leaps and bounds toward security—instead, it is only this unwelcome, radical, alien courage that brings about transformative change.

Consider, for example, Presidents Reagan and Gorbachev at the Reykjavik summit, where for one sublime moment they seemed on the verge of an agreement to eliminate all nuclear weapons within ten years—to the absolute horror of the nuclear experts on hand to advise them. Here are Reagan's words summarized by the rapporteur:

“Ten years from now, [President Reagan] would be a very old man. He and Gorbachev would come to Iceland and each of them would bring the last nuclear missile from each country with them. And they would give a tremendous party for the whole world.... [Reagan] would be very old by then, and Gorbachev would not recognize him. The President would say, ‘Hello, Mikhail.’ And Gorbachev would say, ‘Ron, is it you?’ And then they would destroy the last missiles.”

“A tremendous party for the whole world?” These are not the words of a head of state of a nuclear power. These are not the words of someone who is completely resigned to his assigned role, however lofty, in the upkeep of the nuclear system. These are the words of men who have remembered their humanity. Who have recalled that we do not live so that we can serve a nuclear security mechanism, but that the mechanism exists to serve life.

And in Gorbachev's response—“we can do that. We can eliminate them,” and George Shultz's passionate intervention—“let's do it!”—we see humanity breaking into that room in Hofdi house like a child's errant baseball shattering the window of a funeral home. When reports of this conversation were made public, there was a reason for the horror of those like Margaret Thatcher, who believed in the autonomous validity of the

nuclear system, who believed it to be a fact of nature, something that could no more be questioned than gravity.

I hope that many of you got to see the film *Nuclear Tipping Point* yesterday, which tells the story of these four remarkable former Cold Warriors—George Shultz, Sam Nunn, Henry Kissinger, and Bill Perry—who have emerged as champions of the elimination of nuclear weapons.

In one of the movie's most extraordinary scenes, Mr. Shultz recounts the appeal made by one of his colleagues, Ambassador Max Kampelman, about the "power of the ought." Ambassador Kampelman looks at the Declaration of Independence and says, rightfully, that the statement "all men are created equal" was laughable in a 1776 where slavery existed, and women and landless individuals could not vote. Nevertheless, it was a banner raised high of what *ought* to be, and over time we have struggled to conform what *is* to that standard. The moral, Mr. Shultz says, is that "If you're always mired in what *is*, you're never able to think about what *ought* to be. And," he continues, his voice breaking a little, "we ought to have a world without nuclear weapons."

What the film does not note, however, is that the ought is not simply a distant destination toward which we are forever journeying. It is that, yes, but it is also more. For the ought can break into history like an alien presence out of time—like the statement "all men are created equal" in 1776; like a proposal to eliminate all nuclear weapons at Reykjavik—and transform the present *is*. The *ought* to the *is* can be like yeast falling into dough, quickening a dull, flat substance into life.

Students of the New Testament will readily recognize the metaphor here. For the power of the ought is nothing less than the kingdom of God breaking into the principality of death like a white-hat sheriff come to an outlaw town. It is a tiny mustard seed transforming a barren landscape with a great bush. It is a lamp lit in a darkness that evaporates before the light. It is the Word of God taken on flesh, transforming our decaying mortal bodies into the seeds of immortality.

Lest you imagine that this is simply high-minded talk, I can testify to the fact that I have seen the actual, transformative effect when one brave soul has the courage to remember their humanity in the face of an inhuman nuclear system. I have seen it at nuclear conferences, which are dreadful affairs in the best of circumstances: solemn assemblies of dark suits and dry eyes and respectability in spades, at which the death of millions is discussed as if that possibility belonged to the species of reasonable events. At best, these things yield enhancements that make the system safer—like sealing seams on the Titanic to guarantee that we'll hit the iceberg intact.

And then somebody has the guts to be more than their suit and their technical expertise. Somebody has the guts to mention their grandkids, or a mountaintop worth the summiting, or the Declaration of Independence. And instead of their being discounted or disregarded, the gathered experts jump on that proffered crumb of humanity like starving men lunging for the bread of heaven, and they find there food sufficient for the gathering,

with baskets remaining. And because most of these guys—and they are mostly men—are pretty old, before you know it you discover that it's grandkids who are the steam driving this whole abolition engine.

So, this is my conclusion: if you have grandkids, you've pretty much got the secret weapon. You've got a reason to demand without a hint of fear or embarrassment that our means of security be oriented toward the ends you wish for them—it doesn't matter who you're talking to, from your neighbor to your senator to the president of the United States.

I know that it can be hard to hear these messages of nuclear catastrophe. It makes sense to despair of what any normal person might do to make a difference. Here's the secret: the way to make a difference—whether or not you have grandchildren—is to stand for humanity and demand, with whatever channels of influence are available to you, that our nuclear security bend to humanity's service. And as I look around today, I see a lot of influence. You have a voice. You have a vote. You have assets of relationships, of finance, of power. Go and use them. And regardless of any of these things, if you have the courage to be human and an ardent heart, then I can tell you with absolute sincerity that you have the quantity that this work desperately needs.