

# Conservatives Once Condemned Dropping of Hiroshima Bomb

President Obama's [speech at Hiroshima](#) on May 27 has predictably sparked much controversy. Without parsing it all, I suggest that the key message so many dislike is this:

*"Hiroshima teaches this truth: Technological progress without an equivalent progress in human institutions can doom us. The scientific revolution that led to the splitting of an atom requires a moral revolution as well."*

The "moral revolution" appears to consist, most pertinently, of refusing to target civilians in warfare. In point of fact, the U.S. military rarely if ever does that anymore. When civilians *are* killed by an operation, it is considered "collateral damage"—an unintended consequence of an operation, not its point. But many Americans believe it's going too far to insist that we should *never* kill a lot of civilians.

For one, they argue, without the credible *threat* of using nuclear weapons, we cannot deter other nuclear powers from using such weapons against us. Actually using such weapons would inevitably mean a huge number of "enemy" civilian deaths and injuries, whether or not civilians are directly targeted. But that's what "deterrence" must credibly threaten to do. So, to forswear that threat as a matter of policy would expose our own civilians to undue risk.

As to Hiroshima (and Nagasaki) in particular, the argument goes like this: If we hadn't destroyed those cities with atomic bombs, the human cost on both sides of ending the war by invading Japan would have been far greater. Thus compelling Japan into surrender, by killing hundreds of thousands of civilians with a weapon against which it had no defense, actually *saved* many lives in the long run.

Obviously, I can't resolve the debate here. Substantively, I confine myself to pointing out that the arguments in favor of using, or being prepared to use, nuclear weapons are [consequentialist](#). But it's worth noting that the debate cuts across the usual ideological lines.

Thus you can not only find people on "the Left" who supported dropping the bomb on Japan, as a necessary weapon against "fascism"; you can also find people on "the Right" who opposed it. Some would find the latter surprising. But it shouldn't be.

For instance, the Catholic Church, which is socially conservative and, in *some* contexts, politically conservative as well, is [on record](#) as opposing *even the possession* of nuclear weapons.

But the church has plenty of company.

In [this fascinating article](#) at *Rare*, editor Jack Hunter reminds us how two key intellectual founders of the postwar "conservative movement," Richard Weaver and Russell Kirk, harshly condemned the bombing—even going so far as to say that God would judge America for it.

Indeed, soon after *National Review* was founded by William F. Buckley, Jr., the soon-to-be conservative flagship went [on record](#) in moral opposition to the bomb, with Medford Evans emphatically denouncing the bombing: "The indefensibility of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima is becoming a part of the national conservative creed."

You can [add Pat Buchanan](#) and [other](#) prominent or once prominent conservatives to the mix.

Why does this matter?

Perhaps because many conservatives today seem to take it for granted that using the bomb to end World War II in the Pacific

was the right thing to do.

More importantly, we should realize that the debate about Hiroshima is truly a *moral* one where positions cannot be staked out based on pre-established ideological commitments. One could argue that makes the discussion especially interesting and worth pursuing.

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