
Dynamite and Legitimate Warfare

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The average man — that is to say, the man with the average amount of common sense, intelligence, and conscience accepting the dictum of rulers, at once perceives that “legitimate warfare” is that kind of warfare which they choose to engage in. The term “legitimate,” is at once robbed of its relations to right and justice, and is made to do duty in the interest of those who decree war, without the slightest regard for the motives which influence their decisions. The warfare is legitimate because the supreme governing power so determines. “Legitimate” means lawful, according to law. Hence, if a powerful country or government decides to make war upon a country or people unable in men and materials to cope with it, for the purpose of subduing it, it is denominated “legitimate warfare” though the purpose is to rob the weaker people of their lands, their homes, their rights, liberties, and privileges. It does not require a labored effort to comprehend, under such circumstances, the fact that the term “legitimate” is made to signify wrongs and curses, for the proper characterization of which, the English language is totally inadequate,

We are not unmindful of the fact that war is generally regarded as a calamity, a scourge, and by not a few, as an exhibition of divine wrath, sent as a punishment for the sins of those who are the victims of its devastations. We have no inclination to explore for testimony for or against such fanciful propositions. We are inclined to the belief that there is such a thing as “legitimate warfare,” and our convictions are equally firm, that wars, generally, have been waged in the interest of oppression, to perpetuate wrong, to crush liberty, to degrade humanity and strengthen despotism in the world.

No more interesting question engages the attention of thoughtful people, than the triumph of liberty in the world. The emancipation

of the oppressed from the tyranny of despots is the question of questions. It means ceaseless agitation — it means war, legitimate warfare. The question arises: Is liberty worth what it costs? Is it better to die free or live in bondage? Is it better to live the crawling, abject, manacled, degraded helot, or die robed and crowned with all the rights and prerogatives of citizenship? He who does not know that such questions are being asked throughout the civilized world, and that they are to be answered if necessary, by political convulsions for which the past furnishes no parallels, is totally disqualified to comprehend the logic of events.

It should be noticed, that in conducting what is termed “legitimate warfare,” nations are anxious to discover the most terrible death-dealing forces, and never, from the beginning till the present, have sticklers for “legitimate warfare.” cared a farthing who of the enemy they killed or made homeless, and the records demonstrate conclusively, that as science has developed new and more destructive agents, those in favor of “legitimate warfare” are quick to avail themselves of the discovery, that human slaughter might be more expeditious and the banquet of death more imposing. To assume that these advocates of legitimate warfare have hesitated, because their death-dealing agents killed innocent people, or subjected them to the horrors of destitution, is so astoundingly preposterous, that an ebony statue of a Goth or Vandal, would blush crimson in the presence of such hypocrisy. Those who doubt, may read in sacked and burning cities, fruitful fields laid waste and happy homes wrecked and desolate, confirmations strong as Holy Writ.

The idea of “legitimate warfare” is to conquer, regardless of consequences — to weaken the enemy, and “enemy” includes all within the boundaries of the enemy’s country. Women and children, old and infirm — and these are subject to the horrors of war, in a majority of instances, that men, who, by the latest revision of the Bible, were created “a little lower than God,” shall never know the joy of liberty.

Hitherto the triumphs of science in the discovery of death-dealing agents have been such as only nations could appropriate — iron-clad ships, torpedoes, Krupp and Gatling guns, etc., but the discovery of dynamite is working a revolution. It is easily, cheaply, and expeditiously made, and in the matter of power it astonishes by the majesty of its performances. It has set the world to thinking. It is giving despots untold anxiety. Their sleep is disturbed and even in their palaces and strongest fortresses, they realize insecurity. At the mention of dy-

namite, the Tsar calls all Russia to order and demands of his slaves extra vigilance. His countenance is changed and the joints of his loins are loosed and his knees knock against each other. He sees the skeleton hand writing his doom on his palace walls. Dynamite is forever saying to despots, Let the people have freedom. Let the people rise from their prostrate condition. It is the old demand made by Moses to Pharaoh, "Let my people go," and Pharaoh's stubbornness should teach despots of the present age a lesson of prudence.¹

Legitimate warfare should be warfare for the right, warfare against oppression, warfare for liberty and equality. Such warfares stand the test of criticism. The more they are examined the better men like them. But it is noticeable that those who prate of "legitimate warfare" most are opposed to the use of dynamite except by themselves. Kings and potentates demand a monopoly of dynamite. They do not propose that the plebeian shall expand to the proportions of the patrician. Power, if they can have their way, is to forever remain in the palace on the hill, never to be known in the hovel at its foot. The children of slaves are to be slaves through all succeeding generations. Such are not the signs of the times. The world is invited to contemplate a far different picture. Legitimate warfare in the future is to be in the interest of the weak, the oppressed, those who aspire to be free. Dynamite is to be a potent factor in the contest, and the world is to recognize the truth of Peter's declaration that "God is no respecter of persons,"² and that other self-evident truth that "all men are born equal." When despots, from the little tyrant who lords it over the few to the autocrat, who counts his slaves by millions, are willing to break their scepters and fling away their crowns and titles, dynamite will have accomplished its supreme mission in the world. Till then no decree, no combination of forces, will be able to retire dynamite from the conflict.

¹ Reference is to *Exodus*, chapter 9, verses 1-6: "*Then the Lord said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh, and tell him, Thus saith the Lord God of the Hebrews, Let my people go, that they may serve me. For if thou refuse to let them go and wilt hold them still, Behold, the hand of the Lord is upon they cattle which is in the field...: there shall be a very grievous murrain.... And the Lord did that thing on the morrow, and all the cattle of Egypt died: but of the cattle of the children of Israel died not one.*"

² Reference is to *Acts*, chapter 10, verses 34-35: "*Then Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.*"

It is the friend of the slave, nor is there on the face of the earth a
victim of oppression who deplors its advent. For:

When a deed is done for Freedom, through the broad earth's
aching breast,
Runs a thrill of joy prophetic, trembling on from east to west;
And the slave, where'er he cowers, feels the soul within him
climb
To the awful verge of manhood, as the energy sublime
Of a century bursts full-blossomed on the thorny stem of Time.³

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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³ From "The Present Crisis" (1845) by **James Russell Lowell** (1819-1891).
Checked to the original.