

## HONORS THESIS

### “Bomb and Burn ‘Em till They Quit”: The Line Between Unjustifiable Civilian Deaths and Military Necessity During the Incendiary Bombing of Japan, 1945

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#### Abstract

This thesis confronts the historical and moral implications of the incendiary bombing of Japan during World War II in order to suggest a practical approach to the balance between military necessity and human rights during the conduct of war. Scholars have been notably hesitant to draw conclusions on whether this military action was justified by military necessity in order to help the Allies win World War II in the Pacific, or if this



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action resulted in an unjustifiable number of civilian casualties. However, it is essential to resolve this historical puzzle, and determine if this event was a war crime, in order to clarify how history should be evaluated retrospectively, and to refine how human rights can be practically protected in real-world combat situations. In order to meet these goals, this project will create a model-trial against General Curtis LeMay, the air commander who planned and ordered the incendiary attacks against Japan. To create the necessary components of the trial, this thesis will explain the history of American incendiary bombing to establish the facts of the case both for and against LeMay, and also formulate a legal framework by which to judge LeMay. The thesis will conclude with an assertion of whether LeMay's actions were legal or illegal, and therefore whether they were justifiable, or unjustifiable. In the end, it will be shown that even when moral grey area exists, scholars should not shy away from drawing conclusions on difficult topics: this will hold military leaders accountable to their decisions, and deepen the understanding of how human life should be protected in war.

### **Recommended Citation**

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