

The Role of Humiliation and Dignity for the History of the Use of Napalm in War

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Napalm was invented at Harvard on Valentine's Day 1942 in a top secret weapons research collaboration between the university and the U.S. government. The first napalm bomb was tested that Independence Day on the Harvard College soccer field. The weapon was adopted by the Army as its primary incendiary munition in the summer of 1943 and pressed into immediate service, first in Europe and later in Asia. The invention was spectacularly successful. On 10 March 1945 it accomplished the greatest military victory in history when firebombs killed 83,793 or more residents of Tokyo in a few hours. Napalm bombs incinerated 66 of Japan's 68 largest cities, except for Kyoto, over subsequent weeks. The weapon has been used in virtually every subsequent military conflict, from the 1948 Greek Civil War to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The incendiary was largely accepted by the world for the first approximately 25 years of its life. Massive deployments by United Nations forces in Korea, for example, produced horrific and widely reported civilian suffering that elicited little protest. In 1966, however, opponents of the Vietnam War chose the gel as a symbol of their discontent with the war. A small group of protesters picketed a napalm plant in Redwood City, California in 1966. An article about napalm's effects on civilians in Ramparts magazine followed in 1967 and led to nationwide campus protests against manufacturer Dow Chemical. Improved communications technology publicized the effects of the weapon. The U.S. defeat in 1975 stigmatized the war and the weapon with which it was closely associated. Popular culture produced a stream of books, poems, songs and films from the 1970s through the 1990s that made napalm a synonym for brutality and the failure of American military power.

International legal norms followed. International law arguably prohibited incendiary bombing of civilians prior to World War II. Martial law was less restrained. Germany conducted the first incendiary bombing of a city in 1937 when the Luftwaffe attacked the Spanish city of Guernica. Japan dropped firebombs on Shanghai later that year. Germany later attacked London. The British burned Hamburg and Dresden among other cities. The U.S. firebombed Japan as discussed. International law had little to say on the subject for almost three decades after 1945. The U.N. condemned napalm for the first time in 1972, in the waning years of the Vietnam conflict. In 1980, the General Assembly adopted Protocol III of the Treaty on Certain Conventional Weapons which prohibited the use of incendiary bombs against "concentrations of civilians." The U.S. Congress ratified the treaty in general but initially refused to accept Protocol III. Bill Clinton was the first U.S. President to urge that the Senate accept the protocol. George W. Bush agreed, but fewer than 67 Senators accepted his argument.

The 9/11 attacks prompted renewed enthusiasm for napalm in some segments of the U.S. population. Films, books and commercial advanced its case. Nonetheless, U.S. military commanders refused to acknowledge the infamous gel was in their arsenal, even when presented with compelling evidence. The stigma associated with napalm remained. On 23 September 2008 the Senate ratified Protocol III, subject to a substantial reservation. President Obama signed the Protocol on his second day in office.

Napalm is an example of U.S. power constrained by popular disapproval, supported by changes in technology, codified in international law. The weapon remains in the U.S. arsenal, despite some claims to the contrary, and the arsenals of numerous other military powers, but its use has declined enormously since the end of the Vietnam War.