

The Moral Void at the Heart of War

Adam Tugwell | 14 March 2026



We've reached a point where legality is used not to restrain power, but to excuse it. [In a recent blog post](#) I explored the increasingly indistinguishable relationship between morality and legality - a relationship that politicians now exploit to legitimise deeply questionable policies, behaviours, and acts.

By making what is morally wrong *legal*, they imply that legality itself confers moral authority. It doesn't.

And yet legality is routinely used as a shield, either to excuse inaction or to justify actions that, outside the narrow frame of law, would never be accepted.

I previously touched on the slow response of the current Labour government to open U.K. airfields - and even Diego Garcia - to support the U.S., as well as the reluctance to commit military resources to defend RAF Akrotiri in Cyprus. The vulnerability of this base was obvious, and it has since been attacked. But I didn't explore the deeper question: the morality of war itself.

War is not moral. It cannot be. Every war begins with a fundamentally immoral cause, no matter how convincingly those in power package the narrative for public consumption.

The instigation of war is the legitimisation of killing on a collective scale. The idea that industrialised killing can be justified while an individual with a weapon cannot is a reflection of how dehumanised our world has become. At the individual level, there is no freedom to learn from wrongdoing; at the centralised, hierarchical level, those in charge can do whatever they like simply by writing a law that makes it "right".

History is full of examples. Iraq is widely accepted as a spurious war, but it is far from unique. Western powers have repeatedly involved themselves in regime change under the banner of removing tyrants who were presented as imminent threats to the West, when the real purposes were considerably different. Legality was used to sanitise actions that were, at their core, driven by interests rather than morality.

And this is the real danger. Whether on a personal level or at the scale of dictators and governments, conflict begins with people who want to take from others, dominate others, or assert difference for their own benefit. We have allowed a system to unfold that can be manipulated and abused for exactly those purposes, all while being presented as operating in humanity's best interests.

Human nature leans toward self-interest, and its impact is often overlooked. This reality means that even the most enlightened communities require systems of protection. Today, that usually means military capability. Protection and security are necessary. But possessing the means to defend ourselves does not make it acceptable to repurpose those means whenever those in power encounter a situation they dislike.

True power is not the ability to destroy nations while offering flimsy public justifications. True power is the ability to hold force responsibly - and to choose not to use it. If legality is to mean anything, it must be rooted in morality rather than used to escape it.

Further Reading:

<https://adamtugwell.blog/2026/03/05/when-legality-replaced-morality/>

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