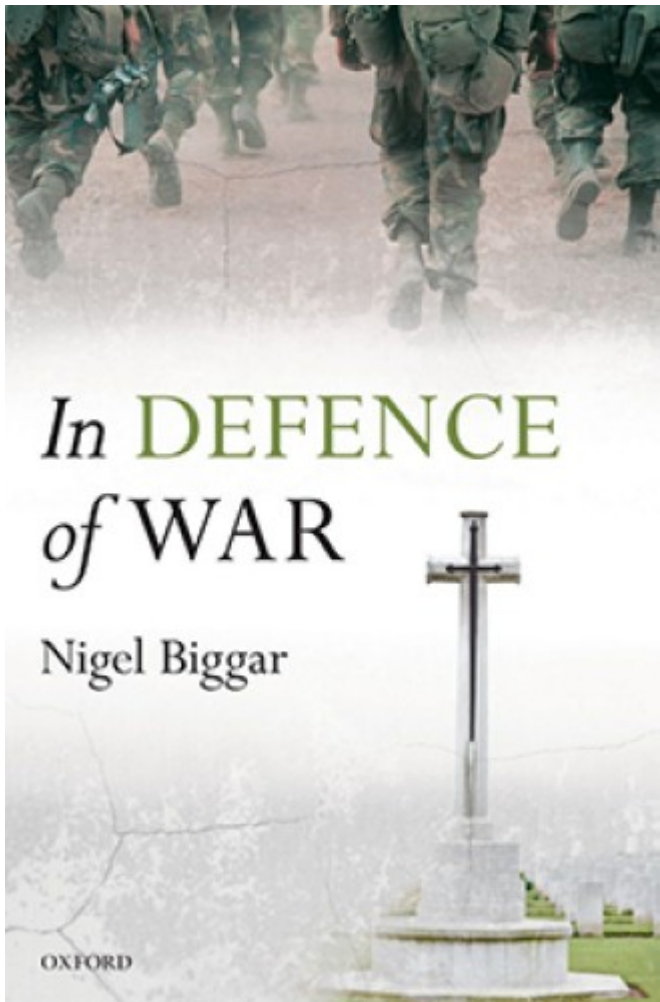


In Defence of War, by Nigel Biggar

reviewed by [John P. Burgess](#) in the [April 16, 2014](#) issue

In Review



In Defence of War

By Nigel Biggar

Oxford University Press

Many North American Christians have become skeptical of U.S. military interventions. Since World War II, our nation has engaged in sustained conflicts in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq and more briefly fought in the Dominican

Republic, Grenada, Panama, Lebanon, Libya, and elsewhere. The Pentagon budget now exceeds the combined military expenditures of the next ten nations and supports U.S. forces in more than 150 countries. As Boston University professor Andrew Bacevich has declared, “Washington rules” by its own rules to justify “permanent war.”

Nigel Biggar, pastor of moral and pastoral theology at the University of Oxford, counters that Western Christians have become too skittish, too cynical. They have succumbed to the virus of wishful thinking, willfully ignoring the fact that soldiers and military action, like police officers and law enforcement, are essential to social peace and justice. Military power guarantees what Americans too often take for granted: a high standard of living and civil liberties. War can sometimes help us extend these blessings to peoples who suffer under tyrannous regimes.

Biggar is no militarist. He knows that war inevitably leaves inexpressible loss and sorrow in its wake. He is nevertheless persuaded that war can sometimes be just. Moreover, he believes that U.S. and other Western leaders care deeply about just war principles. If Biggar is right, the Christian tradition has insights that can help them—and all of us—to think more responsibly about war and peace.

Much of *In Defence of War* is directed to specialists, but general readers will find several chapters well worth their effort. Biggar makes his case by appealing to what appears most central to the New Testament and to Christian pacifists: the love of neighbor that Jesus commands and embodies on the cross. This kind of love, says Biggar, may sometimes require us to prosecute war against evildoers. Compassion for the victims of injustice, not fear or hatred of their victimizers, can guide war and render it just. To be sure, we must be very cautious; every war is tragic and results in unintended harm. Nevertheless, an unjust peace that protects a murderous regime may be even worse.

Just war is also a matter of Christian concern for those who perpetrate evil. A just war aims to punish the victimizers, not to destroy them (although, says Biggar, their deaths may result “secondarily” or “unintentionally”); its purpose is to open up space in which they come to see the folly of their ways and repent. Holding others accountable for their wrongdoing can be an expression, not a denial, of Christian love.

Biggar carefully examines and orders the key criteria of a just war. In considering going to war (*ius ad bellum*), a nation must attend to questions of just cause, legitimate authority, right intention, last resort, proportionality (ensuring that the costs of war will not outweigh the benefits), and prospect of success. In prosecuting war (*ius in bello*), two additional criteria obtain: proportionality (avoiding excessive force) and discrimination (minimizing casualties among innocents).

Biggar then applies these criteria to three deeply disputed wars of the past hundred years—the First World War, NATO's intervention in Serbia in 1999, and the U.S.-British invasion of Iraq in 2003. Carefully weighing arguments for and against, he evaluates how well the Allies met each criterion of just war, argues that just cause was of central importance, and concludes that all three wars were just.

Biggar's chapter on Iraq is especially provocative. Many readers will wonder how he can make a case for a war that they regard as a disastrous fiasco. Biggar demands that we look more carefully at the evidence. Saddam Hussein had killed hundreds of thousands of his own citizens, had launched wars against Iran and Kuwait, and had refused to cooperate with one UN resolution after another. Economic sanctions and no-fly zones had no effect. The West could reasonably expect more of the same. As far as Biggar can see, no alternatives to military force remained if Saddam were to be eliminated as a clear and present danger.

The U.S. is responsible for disastrous mistakes that it made in conducting the war, especially its failure to provide for political stability after its lightning-quick victory, but allowing millions of Iraqis to languish in fear and political oppression would have been a far graver ill. Most Iraqis may not have greeted the American and British invaders as liberators, but whatever the deficiencies of the new government, very few of its people long for the good old days of Saddam Hussein.

Biggar's arguments are carefully researched and meticulously argued. He analyzes the most important classical and contemporary theological and philosophical literature, and he draws insights from novels, movies, diaries, interviews and personal visits to war memorials. His case for just war is deeply heartfelt. Even readers who remain unconvinced will value his book for challenging them to think more clearly about war and peace.