

WWII - Hiroshima-Nagasaki: the Crime That Keeps on Paying, But Beware the Reckoningj

The decision to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a political not a military decision

Friday 5 August 2016, by [JOHNSTONE Diana](#) (Date first published: 6 August 2016).

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On his visit to Hiroshima last May, Obama did not, as some had vainly hoped he might, apologize for the August 6, 1945 atomic bombing of the city. Instead he gave a high-sounding speech against war. He did this as he was waging ongoing drone war against defenseless enemies in faraway countries and approving plans to spend a trillion dollars upgrading the US nuclear arsenal.

An apology would have been as useless as his speech. Empty words don't change anything. But here was one thing that Obama could have said that would have had a real impact: he could have told the truth.

He could have said:

“The atom bombs were not dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ‘to save lives by ending the war’. That was an official lie. The bombs were dropped to see how they worked and to show the world that the United States possessed unlimited destructive power.”

There was no chance that Obama would say that. Officially, the bombing “saved lives” and therefore, it was worth it. Like the Vietnamese villages we destroyed in order to save them, like the countless Iraqi children who died as a result of US sanctions, the hundreds of thousands of agonizing women and children in two Japanese cities remain on the debit side of the United States accounts with humanity, unpaid and unpunished.

“It Was Worth It”

The decision to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a political not a military decision. The targets were not military, the effects were not military. The attacks were carried out against the wishes of all major military leaders. Admiral William Leahy, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, wrote in his memoirs that “the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender...” General Eisenhower, General MacArthur, even General Hap Arnold, commander of the Air Force, were opposed. Japan was already devastated by fire bombing, facing mass hunger from the US naval blockade, demoralized by the surrender of its German ally, and fearful of an imminent Russian attack. In reality, the war was over. All top U.S. leaders knew that Japan was defeated and was

seeking to surrender.

The decision to use the atom bombs was a purely political decision taken almost solely by two politicians alone: the poker-playing novice President and his mentor, Secretary of State James F. Byrnes. [1]

President Harry S. Truman was meeting with Churchill and Stalin in the Berlin suburb of Potsdam when secret news came that the New Mexico test of the atomic bomb was a success. Observers recall that Truman was “a changed man”, euphoric with the possession of such power. While more profound men shuddered at the implications of this destructive force, to Truman and his “conniving” Secretary of State, James Byrnes, the message was: “Now we can get away with everything.”

They proceeded to act on that assumption – first of all in their relations with Moscow.

In response to months of U.S. urging, Stalin promised to enter the Asian war three months after the defeat of Nazi Germany, which occurred in early May 1945. It was well known that the Japanese occupation forces in China and Manchuria could not resist the Red Army. It was understood that two things could bring about Japan’s immediate surrender: Russia’s entrance into the war and U.S. assurance that the royal family would not be treated as war criminals.

Both these things happened in the days right after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

But they were overshadowed by the atom bomb.

And that was the point.

That way, the U.S. atom bombs got full credit for ending the war.

But that is not all.

The demonstrated possession of such a weapon gave Truman and Byrnes such a sense of power that they could abandon previous promises to the Russians and attempt to bully Moscow in Europe. In that sense, the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki not only gratuitously killed hundreds of thousands of civilians. They also started the Cold War.

Hiroshima and the Cold War

A most significant observation on the effects of the atomic bomb is attributed to General Dwight D. Eisenhower. As his son recounted, he was deeply depressed on learning at the last minute of plans to use the bomb. Shortly after Hiroshima, Eisenhower is reported to have said privately:

“Before the bomb was used, I would have said yes, I was sure we could keep the peace with Russia. Now, I don’t know. Until now I would have said that we three, Britain with her mighty fleet, America with the strongest air force, and Russia with the strongest land force on the continent, we three could have guaranteed the peace of the world for a long, long time to come. But now, I don’t know. People are frightened and disturbed all over. Everyone feels insecure again.” [2]

As supreme allied commander in Europe, Eisenhower had learned that it was possible to work with the Russians. US and USSR domestic economic and political systems were totally different, but on the world stage they could cooperate. As allies, the differences between them were mostly a matter of mistrust, matters that could be patched up.

The victorious Soviet Union was devastated from the war: cities in ruins, some twenty million dead. The Russians wanted help to rebuild. Previously, under Roosevelt, it had been agreed that the Soviet Union would get reparations from Germany, as well as credits from the United States. Suddenly, this was off the agenda. As news came in of the successful New Mexico test, Truman exclaimed: "This will keep the Russians straight." Because they suddenly felt all-powerful, Truman and Byrnes decided to get tough with the Russians.

Stalin was told that Russia could take reparations only from the largely agricultural eastern part of Germany under Red Army occupation. This was the first step in the division of Germany, which Moscow actually opposed.

Since several of the Eastern European countries had been allied to Nazi Germany, and contained strong anti-Russian elements, Stalin's only condition for those countries (then occupied by the Red Army) was that their governments should not be actively hostile to the USSR. For that, Moscow favored the formula "People's Democracies" meaning coalitions excluding extreme right parties.

Feeling all-powerful, the United States sharpened its demands for "free elections" in hope of installing anti-communist governments. This backfired. Instead of giving in to the implicit atomic threat, the Soviet Union dug in its heels. Instead of loosening political control of Eastern Europe, Moscow imposed Communist Party regimes - and accelerated its own atomic bomb program. The nuclear arms race was on.

"Have Our Cake and Eat It"

John J. McCloy, labeled by his biographer Kai Bird as the informal "chairman of the U.S. establishment", told Secretary of War Henry Stimson at the time that: "I've been taking the position that we ought to have our cake and eat it too; that we ought to be free to operate under this regional arrangement in South America, at the same time intervene promptly in Europe; that we oughtn't to give away either asset..." [3] Stimson replied, "I think so, decidedly."

In short, the United States was to retain its sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere, claimed by the Monroe Doctrine, while depriving Russia of its own buffer zone.

It is necessary to recognize the sharp distinction between domestic policy and foreign policy. The nature of the Soviet internal regime may have been as bad as it is portrayed, but when it came to foreign policy, Stalin scrupulously respected deals made with the Western allies - abandoning, for instance, the Greek Communists as they were crushed by the Anglo-Americans after the war. It was the United States that reneged on the deals made at Yalta, which were then stigmatized as sellouts to "communist aggression". Stalin had absolutely no desire to promote communist revolution in Western Europe, much less to invade those countries. In fact his failure to promote world revolution was precisely the basis of the campaign against "Stalinism" by Trotskyists - including Trotskyists whose devotion to world revolution has now shifted to promotion of US "regime change" wars.

There is a prevailing Western doctrine that dictatorships make war, and democracies make peace. There is no proof of that whatsoever. Dictatorships (think of Franco Spain) may be conservative and inward-looking. The major imperialist powers, Britain and France, were democracies. Democratic America is far from peaceful.

As the Soviet Union developed its own nuclear arsenal, the United States was unable to interfere effectively in Eastern Europe and fell back on lesser enemies, overthrowing governments in Iran and Guatemala, getting bogged down in Vietnam, on the theory that these were surrogates for the Soviet

communist enemy. But now that the Soviet Union has collapsed, abandoning Russia's buffer zone in Eastern Europe, there appears to be a resurgence of the sort of confidence that overcame Truman: a euphoria of limitless power. Why else would the Pentagon undertake a trillion dollar program to renew America's nuclear arsenal, while stationing troops and aggressive military equipment as close as possible to the Russian border?

In his 1974 book about his relations with his brother Dwight, *The President Is Calling*, Milton Eisenhower wrote: "Our employment of this new force at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was a supreme provocation to other nations, especially the Soviet Union." And he added, "Certainly what happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki will forever be on the conscience of the American people."

Alas, the evidence so far is all to the contrary. Concerned critics have been marginalized. Systematic official lies about the "necessity to save American lives" have left the collective American conscience perfectly clear, while the power of the Bomb has created a lasting sense of self-righteous "exceptionalism" in the nation's leaders. We Americans alone can do what others cannot, because we are "free" and "democratic" and they - if we so decide - are not. Other countries, not being "democracies", can be destroyed in order to liberate them. Or simply destroyed. This is the bottom line of the "exceptionalism" that substitutes in Washington for the "conscience of the American people" which was not aroused by Hiroshima, but asphyxiated.

The Moral Sleep

As a guest in Hiroshima, Obama pontificated skillfully:

"The wars of the modern age teach us this truth. Hiroshima teaches this truth. Technological progress without an equivalent progress in human institutions can doom us. The scientific revolution that led to the splitting of an atom requires a moral revolution as well."

Well yes, but no such moral revolution has taken place.

"...the memory of the morning of Aug. 6, 1945, must never fade. That memory allows us to fight complacency. It fuels our moral imagination. It allows us to change. "

"Change" is an Obama specialty. But he did nothing to change our nuclear arms policy, except to beef it up. No sign of a "moral imagination" imagining the devastation that this policy is leading us toward. No imaginative ideas to bring about nuclear disarmament. Just promises not to let the bad guys get ahold of them. They belong to us.

"And since that fateful day," Obama continued, "we have made choices that give us hope. The United States and Japan have forged not only an alliance but a friendship that has won far more for our people than we could ever claim through war."

This is sinister. As a matter of fact, it was precisely through war that the U.S. forged this alliance and this friendship - which the United States is now trying to militarize in its "Asian pivot". It means that we can wipe out two of a country's cities with nuclear weapons and end up with "not only an alliance but a friendship". So why stop now? Why not make more such "friends" in the same way, for instance in Iran, which Hillary Clinton has expressed willingness to "obliterate" if the circumstances are right.

"That is a future we can choose," said Obama, "a future in which Hiroshima and Nagasaki are known not as the dawn of atomic warfare but as the start of our own moral awakening."

But so far, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are very far from marking the “start of our own moral awakening”. On the contrary. The illusion of possessing limitless power removed any need for critical self-examination, any need to make a real effort to understand others who are not like us and don’t want to be like us, but could share the planet peacefully if we would leave them alone.

Since we are all-powerful, we must be a force for good. In reality, we are neither. But we seem incapable of recognizing the limits of our “exceptionalism”.

The bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki plunged the United States leadership into a moral sleep from which it has yet to awaken.

Diana Johnstone

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<http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/08/05/hiroshima-the-crime-that-keeps-on-paying-but-beware-the-reckoning/>

* Diana Johnstone is the author of *Fools’ Crusade: Yugoslavia, NATO, and Western Delusions*. Her new book is *Queen of Chaos: the Misadventures of Hillary Clinton*. She can be reached at diana.johnstone@wanadoo.fr

Footnotes

[1] All of that is known to experts. The documentary proofs were all laid out by Gar Alperovitz in the 800 pages of his 1995 book, *The Decision to Use the Atom Bomb*. However, official lies outlive documented refutation.

[2] Alperovitz pp 352-3.

[3] Ibid p.254