

It Seems to Me Howard Zinn

The Bombs of August



Near the end of the novel *The English Patient* there is a passage in which Kip, the Sikh defuser of mines, begins to speak bitterly to the burned, near-death patient about British and American imperialism: "You and then the Americans converted us. . . . You had wars like cricket. How did you fool us into this? Here, listen to what you people have done." He puts earphones on the blackened head. The radio is telling about the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Kip goes on: "All those speeches of civilization from kings and queens and presidents . . . such voices of abstract order . . . American, French, I don't care. When you start bombing the brown races of the world, you're an Englishman. You had King Leopold of Belgium, and now you have fucking Harry Truman of the USA."

You probably don't remember those lines in the movie made from *The English Patient*. That's because they were not there.

Hardly a surprise. The bombing of Hiroshima remains sacred to the American Establishment and to a very large part of the population in this country. I learned that when, in 1995, I was invited to speak at the Chautauqua Institute in New York state. I chose Hiroshima as my subject, it being the fiftieth anniversary of the dropping of the bomb. There were 2,000 people in that huge amphitheater and as I explained why Hiroshima and Nagasaki were unforgivable atrocities, perpetrated on a Japan ready to surrender, the audience was silent. Well, not quite. A number of people shouted angrily at me from their seats.

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Understandable. To question Hiroshima is to explode a precious myth which we all grow up with in this country—that America is different from the other imperial powers of the world, that other nations may commit unspeakable acts, but not ours.

Further, to see it as a wanton act of gargantuan cruelty rather than as an unavoidable necessity ("to end the war, to save lives") would be to raise disturbing questions about the essential goodness of the "good war."

I recall that in junior high school, a teacher asked our class: "What is the difference between a totalitarian state and a democratic state?" The correct answer: "A totalitarian state, unlike ours, believes in using any means to achieve its end."

That was at the start of World War II, when the Fascist states were bombing civilian populations in Ethiopia, in Spain, in Coventry, and in Rotterdam. President Roosevelt called that "inhuman barbarism." That was before the United States and England began to bomb civilian populations in Hamburg, Frankfurt, Dresden, and then in Tokyo, Hiroshima, Nagasaki.

Any means to an end—the totalitarian philosophy. And one shared by all nations that make war.

What means could be more horrible than the burning, mutilation, blinding, irradiation of hundreds of thousands of Japanese men, women, children? And yet it is absolutely essential for our political leaders to defend the bombing because if Americans can be induced to accept that, then they can accept any war, any means, so long as the warmakers can supply a reason. And there are always plausible reasons delivered from on high as from Moses on the Mount.

Thus, the three million dead in Korea can be justified by North Kore-

an aggression, the millions dead in Southeast Asia by the threat of Communism, the invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965 to protect American citizens, the support of death squad governments in Central America to stop Communism, the invasion of Grenada to save American medical students, the invasion of Panama to stop the drug trade, the Gulf War to liberate Kuwait, the Yugoslav bombing to stop ethnic cleansing.

There is endless room for more wars, with endless supplies of reasons.

That is why the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is important, because if citizens can question that, if they can declare nuclear weapons an unacceptable means, even if it ends a war a month or two earlier, they may be led to a larger question—the means (involving forty million dead) used to defeat Fascism.

And if they begin to question the moral purity of "the good war," indeed, the very best of wars, then they may get into a questioning mood that will not stop until war itself is unacceptable, whatever reasons are advanced.

So we must now, fifty-five years later, with those bombings still so sacred that a mildly critical Smithsonian exhibit could not be tolerated, insist on questioning those deadly missions of the sixth and ninth of August, 1945.

The principal justification for obliterating Hiroshima and Nagasaki is that it "saved lives" because otherwise a planned U.S. invasion of Japan would have been necessary, resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands. Truman at one point used the figure "a half million lives," and Churchill "a million lives," but these were figures pulled out of the air to calm troubled consciences; even official projections



for the number of casualties in an invasion did not go beyond 46,000.

In fact, the bombs that fell on Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not forestall an invasion of Japan because no invasion was necessary. The Japanese were on the verge of surrender, and American military leaders knew that. General Eisenhower, briefed by Secretary of War Henry Stimson on the imminent use of the bomb, told him that “Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary.”

After the bombing, Admiral William D. Leary, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, called the atomic bomb “a barbarous weapon,” also noting that: “The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender.”

The Japanese had begun to move to end the war after the U.S. victory on Okinawa, in May of 1945, in the bloodiest battle of the Pacific War. After the middle of June, six members of the Japanese Supreme War Council authorized Foreign Minister Togo to approach the Soviet Union,

which was not at war with Japan, to mediate an end to the war “if possible by September.”

Togo sent Ambassador Sato to Moscow to feel out the possibility of a negotiated surrender. On July 13, four days before Truman, Churchill, and Stalin met in Potsdam to prepare for the end of the war (Germany had surrendered two months earlier), Togo sent a telegram to Sato: “Unconditional surrender is the only obstacle to peace. It is his Majesty’s heart’s desire to see the swift termination of the war.”

The United States knew about that telegram because it had broken the Japanese code early in the war. American officials knew also that the Japanese resistance to unconditional surrender was because they had one condition enormously important to them: the retention of the Emperor as symbolic leader. Former Ambassador to Japan Joseph Grew and others who knew something about Japanese society had suggested that allowing Japan to keep its Emperor

would save countless lives by bringing an early end to the war.

Yet Truman would not relent, and the Potsdam conference agreed to insist on “unconditional surrender.” This ensured that the bombs would fall on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It seems that the United States government was determined to drop those bombs.

But why? Gar Alperovitz, whose research on that question is unmatched (*The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, Knopf, 1995), concluded, based on the papers of Truman, his chief adviser James Byrnes, and others, that the bomb was seen as a diplomatic weapon against the Soviet Union. Byrnes advised Truman that the bomb “could let us dictate the terms of ending the war.” The British scientist P.M.S. Blackett, one of Churchill’s advisers, wrote after the war that dropping the atomic bomb was “the first major operation of the cold diplomatic war with Russia.”

There is also evidence that domestic politics played an important role in the decision. In his recent book, *Freedom From Fear: The United States, 1929-1945* (Oxford, 1999), David Kennedy quotes Secretary of State Cordell Hull advising Byrnes, before the Potsdam conference, that "terrible political repercussions would follow in the U.S." if the unconditional surrender principle would be abandoned. The President would be "crucified" if he did that, Byrnes said. Kennedy reports that "Byrnes accordingly repudiated the suggestions of Leahy, McCloy, Grew, and Stimson," all of whom were willing to relax the "unconditional surrender" demand just enough to permit the Japanese their face-saving requirement for ending the war.

Can we believe that our political leaders would consign hundreds of thousands of people to death or life-long suffering because of "political repercussions" at home?

The idea is horrifying, yet we can see in history a pattern of Presidential behavior that placed personal ambition high above human life. The

tapes of John F. Kennedy reveal him weighing withdrawal from Vietnam against the upcoming election. Transcripts of Lyndon Johnson's White House conversations show him agonizing over Vietnam ("I don't think it's worth fighting for. . .") but deciding that he could not withdraw because: "They'd impeach a President—wouldn't they?"

Did millions die in Southeast Asia because American Presidents wanted to stay in office?

Just before the Gulf War, President Bush's aide John Sununu was reported "telling people that a short successful war would be pure political gold for the President and would guarantee his reelection." And is not the Clinton-Gore support for the "Star Wars" anti-missile program (against all scientific evidence or common sense) prompted by their desire to be seen by the voters as tough guys?

Of course, political ambition was not the only reason for Hiroshima, Vietnam, and the other horrors of our time. There was tin, rubber, oil, corporate profit, imperial arrogance.

There was a cluster of factors, none of them, despite the claims of our leaders, having to do with human rights, human life.

The wars go on, even when they are over. Every day, British and U.S. warplanes bomb Iraq, and children die. Every day, children die in Iraq because of the U.S.-sponsored embargo. Every day, boys and girls in Afghanistan step on land mines and are killed or mutilated. The Russia of "the free market" brutalizes Chechnya, as the Russia of "socialism" sent an army into Afghanistan. In Africa, more wars.

The mine defuser in *The English Patient* was properly bitter about Western imperialism. But the problem is larger than even that 500-year assault on colored peoples of the world. It is a problem of the corruption of human intelligence, enabling our leaders to create plausible reasons for monstrous acts, and to exhort citizens to accept those reasons, and train soldiers to follow orders. So long as that continues, we will need to refute those reasons, resist those exhortations. ♦

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