

Hope from Ashes: Why Remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

A talk presented by Dennis Rivers
1996, 2006 and 2016

Every August 6th people around the world gather to mark the deaths and injuries of the inhabitants of the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And once again we join them, gathering in this memorial garden, surrounded by folded paper cranes, and struggling to find an appropriate response to one of the world's great catastrophes.

Death in war is horrible to contemplate even when all the participants are willing combatants. The victims of the first atomic bomb attacks were, to a large degree, children, women and non-combatants, which makes this particular episode in American history even more difficult to think about. In spite of the passing of more than half a century, some Americans are still unreconciled to the tragic events of World War II, and especially to those of August, 1945. Still unreconciled, precisely because so many other Americans still believe that America was right to use nuclear weapons in 1945 and is right *to build more of them today and threaten to use them*: new ones, better ones, the final solution to all that threatens us in a threatening world!

Over many years of August 6th memorials I have asked myself the question, What could we learn from this painful issue, that might prevent us from creating new tragedies? In that question I find hope, although it is a hope heavily surrounded with warnings.

The aspect of World War II that I find most disturbing is that, *as concerns the methods of war*, I cannot resist the conclusion that Hitler won World War II. The war was portrayed at the time by the Allied powers as a conflict over high principles, a conflict of decency and democracy against tyranny and evil. But although the Allies won the war in some ways, sober reflection suggests that they lost the war in others. In the end one of Hitler's most important principles prevailed: the mass murder of civilians in order to achieve military and/or political goals. Early in the war Hitler began gassing, incinerating or otherwise killing large numbers of civilians. By the end of the war American and British air forces were fully engaged in the mass murder of civilians through the fire-bombing of entire cities in Germany and Japan. That these fire-bombing campaigns began partly as righteous revenge (for Hitler's air raids against British cities, and for the attack on Pearl Harbor) only demonstrates *how quickly the opposing participants in war can come to resemble one another*.

The atom-bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki represented a stunning leap forward in the technology of murder by fire and radiation poisoning. By August, 1945, massive fire-bombing air raids had already burned sixty-six of Japan's largest cities to the ground, and burned to death many of their inhabitants.¹ But these raids required thousands of planes and days of conflagration. Now it could be done in a moment, with a single B-29: a portable Auschwitz that the United States could inflict on anyone, anywhere.

Well, you may say, that was half a century ago. Why should we continue to think about these tragic and unfortunate events when there are plenty of current tragedies to lament?

For me, the answer is that we Americans have still not acknowledged our capacity for mass murder, which we continue to euphemize and depersonalize with such terms as "collateral damage." Collateral damage consists of all the people we have killed or injured, whom we did not particularly intend to kill or maim, but who just happened to be in the way, and whose presence we have consistently refused to acknowledge. There were *millions* of such casualties in Japan, *millions more* in Vietnam and Korea, and who knows how many in Afghanistan and Iraq. It seems to me, as an American, that Americans have taken the moral principle that intentions matter and applied it mind-numbingly backwards. Since we can tell ourselves that we did not specifically intend to kill these many persons, the tragedy of their deaths does not seem to matter to us. What disturbs me most here is the ease with which we close our eyes to not see those whom we have injured, wronged, killed.

The technologization of violence plays a key role in making these victims invisible. High technology weapons *intoxicate* their possessors with God-like powers of destruction, *distract* their possessors with the complex details of their operation, and *remove* their possessors from the scenes of injury and death. Thus for decades the United States, from a giant, electronics-packed bunker carved into a mountain, has targeted its complex and all-powerful missiles on various military installations in what was the Soviet Union, willfully ignoring the fact that a nuclear strike on those targets would result in the death by incineration and radiation poisoning of millions of nearby civilians. It just did not seem to matter. A more recent example concerns depleted uranium. Depleted uranium is a metal so hard that it cuts through tank armor and reinforced concrete like a knife cutting through an apple (and burns to a fine dust while doing so). Thrilled by our success in making perfect anti-tank and "bunker-buster" weapons, we have used depleted uranium munitions in all our recent conflicts, and have left spread across the lands

of Kosovo, Afghanistan and Iraq a layer of uranium dust that will be both poisonous and radioactive to all the inhabitants of those lands and all their descendants for, literally, millions of years. Tell me, then: Although we had the Nuremberg war crimes trials, and announced fine principles about not injuring civilians, whose rules of war prevailed after World War II? Ours, or Hitler's?

If a team of evil geniuses had come to Harry Truman in August of 1945 with a dozen Japanese babies and a blowtorch, and said, "Mr. President, just take this blowtorch in your hands and burn these infants to death one at a time, live on worldwide radio, and we guarantee that the Japanese will surrender right away," Truman, I'm sure, would have turned away in disgust. But, under the multiple spells of revenge, racism, weapons-intoxication, and self-deceiving abstractions like "the enemy" and "military target," Harry Truman and his earnest, sober colleagues consigned thousands of infants and children to their fiery deaths. ("To avoid a bloody invasion of Japan," some say, even to this day, perhaps not realizing the grisly pragmatism they are espousing: kill the children and you can bend the adults to your will.)ⁱⁱ

Unfortunately, the same hypnotic spells and fevered rationalizations that led to the first use of nuclear weapons continue to circulate in the collective psyche of the entire world, tempting people everywhere to try to resolve their conflicts or defend their interests with the latest whiz-bang, laser-blinding death ray, land mine, Stealth fighter, poison gas or supposed "smart bomb," never mind who's down there on the ground. Mechanized violence is a sort of underground religion of the twentieth century, a cult of the explosion, worshipped in a thousand movies and ritually enacted each day by millions of video game players exulting in virtual mayhem.

Not a year goes by in the United States without some group within the military-industrial complex proposing yet a new generation of nuclear weapons, some new design that will *finally* keep us safe, *finally* obliterate our enemies. When one considers that six *trillion* dollars spent over sixty years on nuclear weapons and their delivery systems have still not made America safe, one would have to conclude, I believe, that there are some deeply irrational thought processes going on here. Paradoxically, admitting that our defense planners are irrational about nuclear weapons would be a truly significant step toward sanity. (Some courageous military officers have taken exactly that step.)

Only by acknowledging how vulnerable we all are to these murderous enthusiasms, confusions, self-numbings, self-deceptions, and fantasies of infinite power, to which the souls of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki dead bear silent

witness, can we avoid repeating the moral catastrophes of our past and present.

Why remember Hiroshima and Nagasaki? If the memory of those who suffered there continues to remind us of *how easily we can slip into the blind trance of violence*, then those who suffered the agonizing death such as is caused by nuclear blast radiation sickness may yet save the lives of innumerable others, perhaps even our own lives. Although the events of August, 1945, cannot be changed, the lessons we can learn from those events can continue to evolve and deepen over many decades and centuries.

Hope from ashes.



Hiroshima, August, 1945.

References:

ⁱ For a review of the firebombing of Japanese cities in World War II, see Kenneth P. Werrell, *Blankets of Fire: U.S. Bombers over Japan in World War II*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1996.

ⁱⁱ For a review of the rationales invoked to justify the use of the atomic bomb in World War II, see Gar Aperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*. London: Harper-Collins. 1995.

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