

Dellinger on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

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[David Dellinger](#), the great American militant pacifist, was one of the most prominent opponents of the U.S. government's involvement in World War II. Dellinger spent more than three years in prison in the 1940s because of his opposition to the war and the military draft (photo, right, shows mug shot of Dellinger after his arrest for failing to report for his World War II draft physical).

At the end of the war, Dellinger helped to launch a magazine called *Direct Action*. In the magazine's first issue, which appeared in September 1945, Dellinger wrote an editorial that examined the significance of the atomic bombs that the U.S. government had dropped a month earlier on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

As reprinted in his autobiography, *[From Yale to Jail: The Life of a Moral Dissenter](#)*, the editorial, titled "Declaration of War," read:

The atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki destroyed whatever claims the United States may have had to being either "democratic" or a "peace-loving" nation. Without any semblance of a democratic decision—without even advance notice of what was taking place—the American people waked up one morning to discover that the United States government had committed one of the worst atrocities in history.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki were atomized at a time when the Japanese were suing desperately for peace. The American leaders were acting with almost inconceivable treachery by denying that they had received requests for peace, rumors of which had been trickling through censorship for months.

The atom bombs were exploded on congested cities filled with civilians. There was not even the slightest military justification, because the military outcome of the war had been decided months earlier. The only reason that the fighting was still going on was the refusal of American authorities to discontinue a war which postponed the inevitable economic collapse at home,* and was profitable to their pocketbooks, their military and political prestige, their race hatred, and their desires for imperialist expansion.

The "way of life" that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki (and is reported to have roasted alive up to a million people in Tokyo in a single night) is international and dominates every nation of the world. But we live in the United States, so our struggle is here. With this "way of life" ("death" would be more appropriate) there can be no truce nor quarter. The prejudices of patriotism, the pressures of our friends, and the fear of unpopularity, imprisonment or death should not hold us back any longer. It must be total war against the infamous economic, political and social system which is dominant in this country. The American system has been destroying human life in peace and in war, at home and abroad, for decades. Now it has produced the

crowning infamy of atom bombing. Besides these brutal facts, the tidbits of democracy mean nothing. Henceforth, no decent citizen owes one scrap of allegiance (if he ever did) to American law, American custom or American institutions.

There is a tendency to think that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was an excess that can be attributed to a few militarists and politicians at the top. That is the easy way out. It enables us to express our horror at the more obvious atrocities of our civilization while remaining "respectable" supporters of the institutions which make them inevitable. But obliteration bombing by blockbusters, incendiaries and atom bombs was a logical part of the brutal warfare that had been carried on for nearly four years with the patriotic support of American political, religious, scientific, business and labor institutions. The sudden murder of 300,000 Japanese is consistent with the ethics of a society which is bringing up millions of its own children in city slums. The lives of 300,000 "enemies" are distant and theoretical to business and labor leaders who find excuses for enjoying \$15,000 incomes (and \$150,000 incomes) while hiring workers for less than \$1,500. Workers who passively accept starvation wages, periodic employment and relief checks, at the order of private owners and civic authorities, will also accept orders to put on a uniform and mutilate their fellow men.

No, the evil of our civilization cannot be combated by campaigns which oppose militarism and conscription but leave the American economic and social system intact. The fight against military conscription cannot be separated from the fight against the economic conscription involved in private ownership of the country's factories, railroads and natural resources. The fight against the swift destruction of human life which takes place in modern warfare cannot be separated from the slow debilitation of the human personality which takes place in the families of the rich, the unemployed and the poor. The enemy is every institution which denies full social and economic equality to anyone. The enemy is personal indifference to the consequences of acts performed by the institutions of which we are a part.

There is no solution short of all-out war. But there must be one major difference between our war and the war that has just ended. The war against the Axis was fought as a military campaign against people, with the destructive fury, violent hatred regimentation and dishonesty of military warfare. The combatants were conscripts rather than free men. Every day that war went on they were compelled to act in contradiction to the ideals which motivated many of them. Therefore, "victory" was predestined to be a hollow farce, putting an end to killing that never should have been begun, but entrenching white imperialism as the tyrant of the Pacific, and contributing unemployment, slums, and the class hatred to the United States. The American people won half the world and lost their souls.

The war for total brotherhood must be a nonviolent war carried out by methods worthy of the ideals we seek to serve. The acts we perform must be the responsible acts of free men, not the irresponsible acts of conscripts under orders. We must fight against institutions but not against people.

There must be strikes, sabotage and seizure of public property now being held by private owners. There must be civil disobedience of laws which are contrary to human welfare. But there must be also an uncompromising practice of treating everyone, including the worst of our opponents, with all the respect and decency that he merits as a fellow human being. We can expect to face tear gas, clubs and bullets. But we must refuse to hate, punish or kill in return. We must respect the owners, policemen, conservatives and strike-breakers for what they are—potentially decent people who have been conditioned by a sick society into playing anti-social roles, the basic inhumanity of which they do not understand.

This is a diseased world in which it is impossible for anyone to be fully human. One way or another, everyone who lives in the modern world is sick or maladjusted. Slick businessmen and bosses, parasitical coupon clippers, socially blind lawyers, scientists and clergymen are as much victims of “a world they never made” as are the rough and irresponsible elements of America’s great slums. The only way we can begin to break the vicious cycle of blindness, hatred and inequality is to combine an uncompromising war upon evil institutions with an unbending kindness and love of every individual—including the individuals who defend existing institutions.

This is total war. But it is a war in which our allegiance transcends nationalities and classes. Every act we perform today must reflect the kind of human relationships we are fighting to establish tomorrow.

*I was wrong on this one. The collapse didn’t come until much later than I had anticipated.

Dellinger died May 25, 2004 at the age of 88.

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