

From Helen to Hillary: Women in War

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[War Is A Crime](#)

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [Militarization and WMD](#), [Women's Rights](#)

Accepted wisdom in U.S. culture, despite overwhelming evidence, holds that the two nuclear bombs dropped on Japan shortened World War II and saved more lives than the some 200,000 lives they took away.

And yet, weeks before the first bomb was dropped, on July 13, 1945, Japan sent a telegram to the Soviet Union expressing its desire to surrender and end the war. The United States had broken Japan's codes and read the telegram. U.S. President Harry Truman referred in his diary to "the telegram from Jap Emperor asking for peace."

Truman had been informed through Swiss and Portuguese channels of Japanese peace overtures as early as three months before Hiroshima. Japan objected only to surrendering unconditionally and giving up its emperor, but the United States insisted on those terms until after the bombs fell, at which point it allowed Japan to keep its emperor.

Presidential advisor James Byrnes had told Truman that dropping the bombs would allow the United States to "dictate the terms of ending the war." Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal wrote in his diary that Byrnes was "most anxious to get the Japanese affair over with before the Russians got in." Truman wrote in his diary that the Soviets were preparing to march against Japan and "Fini Japs when that comes about." Truman ordered the bomb dropped on Hiroshima on August 6th and another type of bomb, a plutonium bomb, which the military also wanted to test and demonstrate, on Nagasaki on August 9th.

Also on August 9th, the Soviets attacked the Japanese. During the next two weeks, the Soviets killed 84,000 Japanese while losing 12,000 of their own soldiers, and the United States continued bombing Japan with non-nuclear weapons. Then the Japanese surrendered.

The United States Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that, "... certainly prior to 31 December, 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November, 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated." One dissenter who had expressed this same view to the Secretary of War prior to the bombings was General Dwight Eisenhower.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral William D. Leahy agreed: "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."

It was with knowledge of these undisputed but collectively ignored facts that I recently read [a review](#) of a book called *The Girls of Atomic City: The Untold Story of the Women Who Helped Win World War II*. The women or girls involved did not in any way help win World

War II, and the author and publisher surely know that. These women worked in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, producing the bombs that would kill, injure, traumatize, and destroy on a scale never before imagined — leaving us decades later in serious danger of accidental or intentional apocalypse. But the idea that they helped win or end a war is a lie.

That the atomic girls didn't know exactly what they were building is no excuse any more than the Nazi's "I was just following orders" was an excuse. But these women's ignorance of what they were making would, I think, diminish their heroism had they done something at all heroic. In reality, they blindly participated in mass-murder by knowingly assisting a war effort, and were willing to do so without being given any of the details. In other words, they proved capable of doing just what millions of men have done. Should we be proud?



The point of the book and the article seems to be that young women did something. The author describes them as "brave" and compares their bravery to that of U.S. soldiers off obediently killing and dying in the war. The review describes the U.S. government's eviction of 1,000 families from their homes in Tennessee to make room for the nuclear bomb making. "Only something of the magnitude of saving the nation could possibly justify causing such heartbreak," writes the reviewer. Really? What could justify the mass-slaughter of some 200,000 people? And what exactly was the nation saved from? Shouldn't such language ("saving the nation") be made to mean something rather than being tossed around carelessly? And hadn't the U.S. government just 10 years earlier evicted 500 families to build Shenandoah National Park, neither to save the nation nor to kill lots of foreigners, but just because?

The relationship of women to war has changed dramatically in recent decades, even while remaining the same. Attractive women recruiting young men into the army can trace their lineage to Helen of Troy. Women [raped](#) and killed in war have a history as old as war. Women resisters to war are as old as war as well. But there are at least four big changes. First, women now participate in war, as well as in weapons production, in a major way. (Why the great ineluctable forces of genetics and destiny that always justify evil in weak minds will allow women to join in war but not allow men to abandon war is not clear to me.) Second, women — to a limited extent — participate in making the decision to wage wars. Third, women are not just secondary victims of war anymore; rather, female babies, toddlers, girls, women, and grandmothers make up about half of wars' casualties, 90% of whom are civilians. And fourth, with wars no longer solely advertised as ways to seize territory or develop manhood or bring glory to a flag, it has become common to advertise them as a way to bring women their rights and freedoms.



Not the right not to be bombed, of course. But the right, if they survive the war, to work and drive and vote and endure invasive ultrasounds, or whatever the West believes a woman's rights should be. In 2001, the United States was told that Afghanistan would be bombed for revenge. But since revenge is barbaric and vile, and since the criminals being punished were already dead, and since most of the people in Afghanistan had nothing to do with 9-11 and wished no part in any war, it was helpful to add another motivation. Afghanistan would also be bombed, we were told, for women's rights — rights that had indeed been devastated following U.S. efforts to provoke the Soviet Union and then arm religious fanatics against it. Five weeks into the bombing, Laura Bush, the U.S. "first lady," proclaimed: "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women."



Of course, when U.S. special forces burst into a home and shot pregnant women, and then dug the bullets out with their knives in order to blame the murders on the women's husbands, the goal was not the advancement of women's rights. But the war had nothing to do with that in reality. The U.S. empowered the warlords of the Northern Alliance, whom the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) denounced as "brethren-in-creed of the Taliban and Al-Qaida." RAWA reported: "The war in Afghanistan has removed the Taliban, which so far does appear to be an improvement for women in certain limited parts of the country. In other areas, the incidence of rape and forced marriage is on the rise again, and most women continue to wear the burqa out of fear for their safety." After over a decade of U.S./NATO liberation, Afghanistan remains one of the worst places to be a woman or to become a mother. Child marriage, rape in marriage, and prosecution of rape victims for adultery remain legal and accepted. It was in this context that Amnesty International put up big posters on bus stops in Chicago during a NATO meeting, reading — without intended irony: "Human rights for women and girls in Afghanistan. NATO keep the

progress going!”

“Progress” is rolling ahead in liberated Iraq as well, where the legal age of marriage is [being lowered](#) from 18 to 9. Similarly in liberated Libya, women are worse off. Similarly in monarchies and dictatorships that the U.S. government chooses to arm rather than overthrow because of their cooperative behavior: women are not enjoying the blessings of freedom unimpeded in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, et cetera — although many women are struggling admirably to advance their rights by nonviolent and effective means.

Another place women’s rights are suffering is in the U.S. military, where studies have found that [a third](#) of women are sexually assaulted or raped by their fellow soldiers and commanders. One expert [believes](#) that the frequency of such attacks on male recruits is just as high but less often reported. Of course, if that’s true, it does nothing to mitigate the horror, but simply adds to it. So young women reading about the glories of “saving the nation” by building nukes should think hard before joining the military — hard enough, perhaps, to oppose it on the grounds that it’s mass murder.

There’s another story from Oak Ridge that ought to be read more widely, [the story](#) of one woman and two men just sentenced to prison for nonviolently protesting the nuclear weapons facility still found there. Here’s a story of heroism and inspiration with no falsehoods, a story of wisdom and thoughtful action requiring incredible bravery and selflessness. Why we strain so hard to find such stories outside of nonviolent activism would be a mystery to me, were the reasons not readily to be found in the massive investment that war profiteers make in selling the idea of war.

There’s a broader story, as well, of heroic women advancing a movement against war and toward a culture of peace. Here’s proof aplenty of that:

<http://codepink4peace.org>

<http://nobelwomensinitiative.org>

<http://wilpfus.org>

<http://worldwidewamm.org>

<http://wand.org>

And here’s what we’re up against: the coming promotion of [a woman warmonger](#) as a token carrier of progressive liberalism. Don’t fall for it.



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