

Harry Truman and Memory of Mass Murder

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Harry Truman spoke in the U.S. Senate on June 23, 1941: "If we see that Germany is winning," he said, "we ought to help Russia, and if Russia is winning we ought to help Germany, and that way let them kill as many as possible."

Did Truman value Japanese lives above Russian and German? There is nothing anywhere to suggest that he did. Yet we debate, every August 6th or so, whether Truman was willing to unnecessarily sacrifice Japanese lives in order to scare Russians with his nuclear bombs. He was willing; he was not willing; he was willing. Left out of this debate is the obvious possibility that killing as many Japanese as possible was among Truman's goals.

A U.S. Army poll in 1943 found that roughly half of all GIs believed it would be necessary to kill every Japanese person on earth. William Halsey, who commanded the United States' naval forces in the South Pacific during World War II, thought of his mission as "Kill Japs, kill Japs, kill more Japs," and had vowed that when the war was over, the Japanese language would be spoken only in hell. War correspondent Edgar L. Jones wrote in the February 1946 *Atlantic Monthly*, "What kind of war do civilians suppose we fought anyway? We shot prisoners in cold blood, wiped out hospitals, strafed lifeboats, killed or mistreated enemy civilians, finished off the enemy wounded, tossed the dying into a hole with the dead, and in the Pacific boiled flesh off enemy skulls to make table ornaments for sweethearts, or carved their bones into letter openers."

On August 6, 1945, President Truman announced: "Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of T.N.T. It had more than two thousand times the blast power of the British 'Grand Slam' which is the largest bomb ever yet used in the history of warfare." Hiroshima was, of course, a city full of people, not an Army base. But those people were merely Japanese. Australian General Sir Thomas Blamey had told the *New York Times*: "Fighting Japs is not like fighting normal human beings. The Jap is a little barbarian.... We are not dealing with humans as we know them. We are dealing with something primitive. Our troops have the right view of the Japs. They regard them as vermin."

Some try to imagine that the bombs shortened the war and saved more lives than the some 200,000 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. 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.”

Whatever dropping the bombs might possibly have contributed to ending the war, it is curious that the approach of threatening to drop them, the approach used during a half-century of Cold War to follow, was never tried. An explanation may perhaps be found in Truman’s comments suggesting the motive of revenge:

“Having found the bomb we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, and against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international law of warfare.”

Truman doesn’t say he used the bomb to shorten the war or save lives. He says he used the bomb because he could. “Having found the bomb we have used it.” And he provides as reasons for having used it three characteristics of the people murdered: they (or their government) attacked U.S. troops, they (or their government) brutalized U.S. prisoners, and they (or their government) — and this is without any irony intended — oppose international law.

Truman could not, incidentally, have chosen Tokyo as a target — not because it was a city, but because we (or our government) had already reduced it to rubble.

The nuclear catastrophes may have been, not the ending of a World War, but the theatrical opening of the Cold War, aimed at sending a message to the Soviets. Many low and high ranking officials in the U.S. military, including commanders in chief, have been tempted to nuke more cities ever since, beginning with Truman threatening to nuke China in 1950. The myth developed, in fact, that Eisenhower’s enthusiasm for nuking China led to the rapid conclusion of the Korean War. Belief in that myth led President Richard Nixon, decades later, to imagine he could end the Vietnam War by pretending to be crazy enough to use nuclear bombs. Even more disturbingly, he actually was crazy enough. “The nuclear bomb, does that bother you? ... I just want you to think big, Henry, for Christsakes,” Nixon said to Henry Kissinger in discussing options for Vietnam.

I just want you to think, instead, about this poem:

Hiroshima
by Sherwood Ross

I am the Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto
A graduate of Emory College, Atlanta,
Pastor of the Methodist Church of Hiroshima
I was in a western suburb when the bomb struck
Like a sheet of sunlight.
Fearing for my wife and family
I ran back into the city
Where I saw hundreds and hundreds fleeing
Every one of them hurt in some way.
The eyebrows of some were burned off
Skin hung from their faces and hands
Some were vomiting as they walked
On some naked bodies the burns had made patterns
Of the shapes of flowers transferred
From their kimonos to human skin.
Almost all had their heads bowed
Looked straight ahead, were silent
And showed no expression whatever.
Under many houses I heard trapped people screaming
Crying for help but there were none to help
And the fire was coming.
I came to a young woman holding her dead baby
Who pleaded with me to find her husband
So he could see the baby one last time.
There was nothing I could do but humor her.
By accident I ran into my own wife
Both she and our child were alive and well.
For days I carried water and food to the wounded and the dying.
I apologized to them: "Forgive me," I said, "for not sharing your burden."
I am the Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto
Pastor of the Methodist Church of Hiroshima
I was in a western suburb when the bomb struck
Like a sheet of sunlight.

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