

Obama and the “Legal Crimes of War”: Hiroshima was Destroyed. “It was an Act of God”

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“Why do we come to this place, to Hiroshima? We come to ponder a terrible force unleashed in a not-so-distant past. We come to mourn the dead, including over 100,000 Japanese men, women and children, thousands of Koreans, a dozen Americans held prisoner.” - [President Obama at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, May 27, 2016](#)

The sterile language of a detached president illustrates how far we are from facing the reality of our own government’s deliberate atrocities. Hiroshima was certainly destroyed, abstractly, with “a terrible force unleashed” – but *by no one*? In the president’s passive parsing, it’s as if he thought it was an “act of God.” More honestly told: [President Truman approved](#) the atomic bombing of Japan, which was [carried out on August 6, 1945](#), by a Boeing B-29 named *Enola Gay*, after the pilot’s mother, that dropped a uranium-235 fission bomb [cutely nicknamed “Little Boy”](#) on a [largely civilian city, killing an estimated 140,000 people](#) (thousands of whom were vaporized without a discoverable trace, while thousands more died from radiation effects over ensuing years, a death toll made worse by US denial of radiation danger and strict censorship of any public discussion during the occupation). Hiroshima was [one of the greatest military massacres](#) in history, eclipsing [American massacres of Native Americans](#) by several orders of magnitude.

In [his initial announcement](#) of the Hiroshima bombing, President Truman said, misleadingly, that the bomb had “destroyed [Hiroshima’s] usefulness to the Army.” In a [radio broadcast three days later](#), Truman falsely characterized Hiroshima as “a military base.” Hiroshima was not a military base, though it had some relatively unimportant military installations. Hiroshima was chosen as the A-bomb target in part because it had so little military significance that it was one of the few Japanese cities that had gone almost un-attacked by the daily American bomb runs. Because it was largely intact, Hiroshima was ideal as a place to demonstrate the A-bomb’s total destructiveness.

The US chose an almost undamaged city full of civilians as the target that would best bring the Japanese to their knees. Now *that* is something to “ponder,” as Obama suggested, but chose not to do. It doesn’t take much pondering to begin to wonder whether incinerating thousands of civilians might not be a war crime. It would be, if it happened today. During World War II, the laws of war made it a war crime for armies on the ground to attack, harm, and kill civilians. The laws of war did not specifically apply to aerial warfare, and so all sides cheerfully murdered civilians from the air with the kind of legalistic self-righteousness only corrupt lawyers can create. That’s why there were no war crimes trials for any of the horrendous bombings of the war – Rotterdam, Shanghai, Coventry, Cologne, Warsaw, Tokyo, to name a few.

Are war crimes actually war crimes until they're illegal?

The Anglo-American [firebombing of Dresden](#) in February 1945 burned tens of thousands of people alive, including mostly civilians and prisoners of war (one of whom was Kurt Vonnegut, who survived). The actual death toll is unknown, with good faith and politically-motivated estimates ranging from 25,000 to 500,000. The [US firebombing of Tokyo](#) in March 1945 killed more than 100,000 people and destroyed more than 15 square miles of the city. By any reasonable moral reckoning, all these air campaigns were war crimes, crimes against humanity in the most obvious sense. American history teaches us that World War II was a just war, "the last good war," and there's a case to be made for that. It was also, on all sides, a ruthless criminal enterprise.

None of this very real history was part of Obama's speech in Hiroshima. American presidents are not expected to be truthful, and would likely be crucified if they were. Once Obama acknowledged the "terrible force unleashed" out of nowhere by nobody, he shifted to a conventionally maudlin but politically shifty call "to mourn the dead," whom he listed by category. First he somewhat lowballed the Japanese dead, consistent with US policy for 71 years now. Then he mentioned "thousands of Koreans," a reference to Korean forced labor that would play well in Seoul if not Tokyo. And then he referred to those [12 "Americans held prisoner,"](#) for decades an official secret, in part because other POWs who survived were suffering from radiation sickness and the US government didn't want anyone to know about that.

Now the first sitting president of the US has visited Hiroshima, has solemnly visited a scene of American crime, and has been greeted with equally hypocritical solemnity by a Japanese government whose own hands are just as dirty and whose own current ambitions are as imperial as America's in Asia. Obama's speech would have you believe that that his goal is to "eliminate the existence of nuclear weapons" and to mark "the start of our own moral awakening." That doesn't fly when he's making nice with Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, whose goal is to re-militarize Japan and eliminate all pacifist tendencies from its constitution. Obama is an enabler of Japanese militarization, not only for the sake of arms sales, but also as a "response" to China's agitation over US provocations under the strategic umbrella of Obama's "[pivot to Asia.](#)"



President Obama lays a wreath at Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park. (photo: AP)

Why does Obama address Hiroshima in the passive voice?

The conventional wisdom and mainstream media call Obama's trip to Hiroshima "historic" because he's the first US president to go there, not because there's anything actually historic about the visit. Politically, the Hiroshima event appears to be pretty reactionary on both sides. Before Obama in 2016, Richard [Nixon went to Hiroshima](#) in 1964, before he was president, and former president Jimmy Carter went there in 1984 when he, too, pledged to "eliminate nuclear weapons from the face of this earth." Early in his presidency in 2009 in Prague, [Obama echoed this sentiment:](#)

So today, I state clearly and with conviction America's commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons. [Applause.] I'm not naive. This goal will not be reached quickly - perhaps not in my lifetime. It will

take patience and persistence. But now we, too, must ignore the voices who tell us that the world cannot change. We have to insist, "Yes, we can." [Applause.]

But this was only a sentiment, expressed in campaign rhetoric. America had made no such commitment, even if the president was sincere. America is a long, long way from making such a commitment. American presidents and candidates still talk about using nuclear weapons as if that were a sane option. Yes, the Obama administration negotiated a new treaty (START) in which the US and Russia each agreed to deploy no more than 1550 strategic nuclear warheads and bombs each. That's a cap, but a high cap. And it applies to no one else, leaving the UK, France, Israel, China, India, Pakistan, and even North Korea a rational basis for each having its own 1550 nukes. The US currently says it has 1528 warheads and bombs deployed, ready to use. The [US also says it can](#) "maintain a strong and credible strategic deterrent while safely pursuing up to a *one-third reduction in deployed nuclear weapons* from the level established in the New START Treaty." [Emphasis added.]

Both Bushes reduced nuclear weapons more than Obama

At its peak in 1967, the US had more than 30,000 nuclear warheads, both deployed and in reserve. By September 30, 2014, the total was 4766 warheads. This represents roughly a 10% reduction since Obama took office. [Among other presidents](#), Reagan maintained the US nuclear arsenal at well over 20,000; George H.W. Bush cut the greatest number of warheads of any president (41% of more than 20,000); and George W. Bush cut the greatest percentage, 50% of slightly more than 10,000 when he took office).

To get Republican support for the START treaty in 2010, President Obama had to promise to improve and expand the US nuclear arsenal in other, creative ways. Obama's nuclear "modernization" plans, insofar as they're known, will cost the US an estimated \$1 trillion over the next 30 years (more than \$30 billion a year). "Modernization" includes things like nuclear-tipped cruise missiles or [new, "smaller" bombs](#) that might be politically easier to use. By today's standards, the Hiroshima bomb is "small." (Nuclear modernization is also intended to upgrade "a command and control unit tasked with coordinating the operational functions of the nation's nuclear forces [that] [still uses 8-inch floppy disks](#) and runs on an IBM / Series 1 computer ... first produced in 1976" even though the Pentagon says "it still works.")

[Factors like these](#) - the slow pace of reducing redundant weapons and the willingness to risk [a renewed arms race](#) with nuclear "modernization" were enough to arouse one Democratic senator - but only one, [Edward J. Markey of Massachusetts](#) - to criticize the president:

If Obama wants to keep the pledge he made in 2009 to "reduce the role of nuclear weapons in our national security," he must rein in this nuclear spending insanity. The lesson of Hiroshima is clear: Nuclear weapons must never be used again.

If the United States wants other countries to reduce their nuclear arsenals and restrain their nuclear war plans, it must take the lead. It cannot preach nuclear temperance from a bar stool.

Preaching nuclear temperance has been done to inebriation, as it were

Picturing Obama preaching from a bar stool might seem harsh. But the [United Nations' Open-Ended Working Group](#) on multilateral nuclear disarmament, with more than 100 countries, has been working for two years – without US participation. Also without participation by China, France, Russia and the UK – and they don't even preach from barstools. Nor do many of them [visit Hiroshima](#). The vision of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial is the complete international abolition of all nuclear weapons and the [promotion of world peace](#). It's where officials go to engage in lip services.

If Obama had wanted to be genuinely historic, he could have visited Nagasaki. There was no excuse for Nagasaki; it was a pure war crime. Unlike Hiroshima, there's no credible military argument that Nagasaki had to be destroyed to get Japan to surrender. Hiroshima on August 6 was probably enough. The [Soviet invasion of Manchuria](#) and declaration of war on Japan on August 8 was surely enough. The class was done, all the grown-ups had to do was collect the papers and start grading them. [Japan's Emperor Hirohito](#) publicly accepted the terms of unconditional surrender on August 15. The Soviets, who had been begged by the Allies for months to enter the war, continued fighting till the official surrender on September 2.

[Some historians argue](#) persuasively that the US used the atomic bomb more as a warning to the Soviet Union than as a military necessity, although these are not mutually exclusive – not for Hiroshima in any case. The bombing of Nagasaki was gratuitous overkill with no demonstrable military value in the field. But testing the Nagasaki bomb had real value as a military experiment. Unlike the uranium fission bomb that obliterated Hiroshima, [the Nagasaki bomb](#), nicknamed “Fat Man,” was the last atomic bomb the US had, and it was different: it was [an implosion bomb with a plutonium core](#). Its prototype had worked in the first atomic explosion in a controlled test at Alamogordo, New Mexico, less than a month earlier. But would it work operationally? Military planners wanted to know and, without any order from the president, they successfully destroyed Nagasaki and some 70,000 people (even though the bomb was two miles off target). The experiment proved that the US could build two kinds of atomic bomb, and both worked.

Truman had his fill of killing “all those kids,” as he said

Apparently surprised by the gratuitous wiping out of Nagasaki, Truman issued an [order that no more A-bombs be used](#), apparently unaware that the entire US atomic arsenal had been expended.

Obama seems to hope, like any rational person, that nuclear weapons will never again be used, but he has done little to change the governmental reality that holds nuclear weapons high on its list of final military solutions. Obama could have gone to Nagasaki and talked about Truman's order to use no more. He could go to Alamogordo and express sadness that the first test worked. He could go to Bikini and finally make things better for Marshall Islanders who were victims of US nuclear testing. He could go to the Nevada proving grounds where the US government used American soldiers as guinea pigs in assessing the effects of ionizing radiation, and he could apologize for that and so much more. But he didn't, he hasn't, and probably he won't. Crocodile-tear rhetoric is the best we're likely to get. And maybe that's because the dream of nuclear disarmament is impossible to realize in a world where the US can't be trusted.

Even as the president was all hopey-changey in Hiroshima, his government was in its

second year of participating in a criminal war in Yemen, where the US is helping the Saudis and their allies slaughter civilians from the air. It took over a year for the US to stop selling internationally condemned cluster bombs to the Saudis. And every time this president orders another drone strike on someone he decides with no due process is an enemy, he commits another of his own war crimes. "We may not be able to eliminate man's capacity to do evil," Obama said at Hiroshima – a homily he illustrates with his failure to confront evil. As the country approaches the 2016 election, Obama has created a context where the president can act as assassin-in-chief with impunity and where the development of miniaturized nuclear warheads for drones is a possibility. Sounds like the ingredients for making America great again.

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