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## *The American Narrative of Hiroshima is a Statue that Must be Toppled*



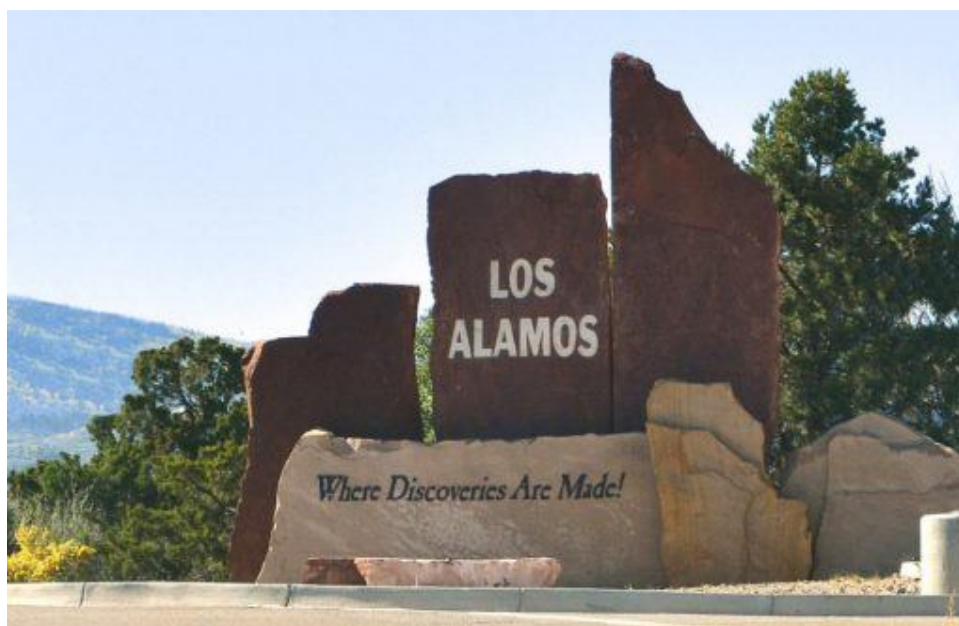
A photograph of Hiroshima seen from a US airplane after the attack, autographed by Enola Gay pilot Paul Tibbets.

In August 1945, the United States attacked two cities in Japan with nuclear weapons in the last days of World War Two. The US used weapons of mass destruction against a primarily civilian population, instantly killing over 100,000 human beings, with tens of thousands of wounded and irradiated people who would die in the subsequent months and years. The American narrative of the nuclear attacks was formalized in a piece written by former Secretary of War Henry Stimson in Harper's in 1947. Stimson wrote that the use of nuclear weapons ended the war, and in making an invasion of the Japanese home

islands unnecessary, saved millions of lives on both sides. He actually wrote that the use of weapons of mass destruction against urban centers saved lives.

The American telling of the nuclear attacks focuses on the astonishing accomplishments of scientists involved in developing the weapons, on industrial manufacturers producing the weapons, politicians “deciding” what to do with the revolutionary technology, and the highly trained military personnel who “dropped” the bombs (always a passive construction) on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It seems that every year someone finds another way to tell the story that celebrates the inclusiveness prioritized in modern American narration. Some tell the story of children expressing pride in their parents involvement in creating this weapon. Others find “inspiring” angles of inclusiveness such as gender, or of minority racial groups, leaving unmentioned the enforcement of Jim Crow style discrimination in employment practices in the Manhattan Project production workforce. But the central players in the story are Americans, there are no Japanese people in the story. Japanese people are included only as statistics: how many dead; how many wounded. It is a story of the mass murder of hundreds of thousands of human beings in which those murdered are a footnote. No Japanese person is named.

This is a continuation of the war time erasure of Japanese humanity. In its practice of “urbacide” the US military turned human urban settlements, which were full of innocent civilians, into “kill zones,” “target areas,” and “workers dwellings,” or simply equations or statistics of burned area and bomb tonnage. Hiroshima was the culmination of a campaign that saw up to 350,000 civilians bombed, burned and strafed by the US 20<sup>th</sup> Air Force. Yet, we treat the people who executed these raids as tortured souls who hated what they were doing. That is if we think about them at all.



City sign as you enter Los Alamos (CC BY 2.0) by M McBey.

The fire raids are completely obscured by the A-bombs in American and Japanese memory. Historian Mark Selden called these, somewhat provocatively, a forgotten Holocaust. The comparison with the Holocaust is problematic for contemporary Americans. Even obscene. But, this was not always so. Already in August 1945, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Felix Morley, not exactly a Marxist firebrand, wrote “At Nazi concentration camps, we have paraded horrified German civilians before the piled bodies of tortured Nazi victims...It would be equally salutary to send groups of representative Americans to Hiroshima. There, as at Buchenwald, there are plenty of unburied dead.” We still have not heeded Morley’s advice. We are still refusing to look at the crimes we committed during our last good war. If Morley could say this in 1945, right after the liberation of the camps, American patriotism at its highest point, we should be able to think about the implications of the comparison now.

But we rarely do. The American narrative of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki—which are by definition, war crimes—focuses entirely on the perpetrators. When it is being recounted by experts, it often obsesses over them. Who said what to whom on what day? What materials were moved from place A to place B on what day? How were the weapons of mass destruction assembled? Who did what? The American narrative of the nuclear attacks is an obsession with the killers, and with their weapon. To the degree that the war crime itself is discussed, the focus is on the physical effects and dynamics of the weapon. The presence beneath this process of thousands of schoolchildren is unnoted.



Replica of the Fat Man bomb (used in the nuclear attack on Nagasaki) at the Bradbury Science Museum in Los Alamos.

Even amongst those of us on the left who are sympathetic to Hiroshima, the willful blindness endures. What American (and Japanese) liberals mostly renounce is not the US actions but “nuclear weapons.” As if the A-bomb “dropped” itself rather than having two billion 1945 dollars and hundreds of thousands of workers and the full power of the state behind it. So, we march for the abolition of nuclear weapons, we may learn how to fold paper cranes, even visit the peace museums in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but we never name names. Never point fingers. We still marvel at the technological achievement while we condemn the monster it midwived.

Some hibakusha were happy and grateful for this sympathy. Some of this was genuine thirst for peace with America and a desperate need for a silver lining. In an extreme example, one hibakusha told a Life Magazine reporter, “something good must come out of this. I now want to be sent to the U.S. so doctors can experiment with my body. It does not matter if I die as a result, as long as I can be of some use to the world of peace.” Such gestures were part of an emotional theater that Americans expected from both Holocaust survivors and Hibakusha, which always ended in a Hollywood like happy ending. Hiroshima wrapped itself in emotion. And we loved to participate and hug its survivors. President Obama hugged survivors and shed tears in his visit to the city. He did not offer compensation, nor help with treatment for the death, misery and decades-long radiogenic diseases we inflicted. He brought the “nuclear football,” the mobile command center used

by the US President to authorize launching nuclear weapons, into the Peace Park with him.



Leslie Groves Park in Richland, Washington.

So, yes, we like a good cry. We like to hear heart wrenching stories about the last train to Hiroshima, or the inspiring struggle of someone's grandma in law. All of this emotion (and these stories ARE heart breaking) actually serves to take our gaze away from the dead and into the inspiring stories of survival and reconciliation. Of course, we need to hear the stories coming out of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But we also need to go a step further. We still have not heeded Morley's advice and still have not, like the Germans, been paraded through the dead. We'd rather not look.

We have not redefined for ourselves the relationship between our Manhattan Project heroes and those whose stories we sympathize with. We somehow manage to keep these stories in separate silos.

This is not a question of simple amnesia. It is more an issue of misremembering and of pointing the torch of historical enquiry in the completely wrong direction. From the 1960s onwards, scholars have deconstructed the narrative that the nuclear attacks "saved lives" and were entirely focused on ending the war. Truman and his Secretary of State James Byrnes were clearly focused on the Soviet Union as they moved through the authorizations for the attacks. Truman did not so much make a "decision" as approve plans drawn up by others that had already been set in motion. Some Manhattan Project scientists did actively oppose the use of the weapons in Japan. This is essential



scholarship in understanding the history of the attacks, the end of World War Two, and of the initial dynamics of the Cold War. The contributions of the scholars who have explored these issues are notable.

However, the annual process of reveling in the details, of “live tweeting” the various steps and movements of materials as they are put into place to commit the war crimes, seems a little disturbing at this point. Yes, it is important to inform people who may only now be paying attention to the story about the historical background, but the perennial limiting of this retelling to the actions and thoughts of the perpetrators perpetuates the American narrative—that the story is about the feelings, thoughts and actions of those who committed a war crime, not on the actual crimes or the victims. Having one final tweet, or mention of the number of human beings killed and showing one last photo of the mushroom cloud or of the vaporized sections of the cities, seen from the air—the perpetrators’ perspective—reinforces the view that those acting are important, and those being acted upon are...statistics. It is time to move past detailing the minutia of committing the war crimes and begin to expand our focus to the actual crimes and those who were attacked. Telling half of the story tells a disturbing tale about the storytellers.

Any political leader who would suggest today that the use of weapons of mass destruction against a civilian population would “save lives” because it would compel a surrender would be understood to be advocating war crimes. Why do we consider this justification worthy of anything but contempt when looking back at the spring and summer of 1945? Why do we obsess over the communications and preparations to commit these war crimes rather than clarify that what was being done was ghastly and inhumane? When we recount the history of slavery in the United States, we do not limit our focus to the “owners” of other human beings. We see the institution as the horror it was, and we recount the brutalities that people endured and how they resisted. When we recount the Holocaust we don’t obsess over the communications of Nazi leaders and the minutia of constructing the concentration camps and of transporting the Zyklon B gas (when was the purchase order written? When was the delivery received? And what about the woman guards?). While these details are an important aspect of the historical record, the story we tell is of the atrocities, and of those who suffered. If we talk about the perpetrators it is to understand how to prevent such historical events from happening again. In Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is as though we tell the story of slavery, or of the Holocaust, with the victims remembered only as a statistical footnote at the end.



Author Jacobs outside of Richland High School, Home of the Bombers.

While many in America have directly faced, and opposed the horrors of using nuclear weapons against human beings, our annual social media storytelling around the anniversary obscures the war crimes and casts a glowing light on the war criminals. This may be one reason that today, 75 years later, American society still embraces nuclear weapons as a valid military tool, and is preparing to spend trillions of tax dollars on “modernizing” them over the coming decades. Maybe if we call a war crime a war crime, we can more effectively resist committing our society to policies which sleepwalk us closer to what Noam Chomsky has called the “very severe threat of nuclear war.”

The American narrative of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki as celebrations of American technological prowess needs to be toppled. All of the historical nuance to the development, manufacture and use of nuclear weapons must remain an important part of the historical record, and further research must be done. However, the annual “real

time” recitation of those facts, driven in part by the nature of social media, serves only to reinforce a triumphal fascination with the killers and the obfuscation of the killed.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki were part of a brutal war. But, it is a war crime to kill a mass population because some of those among the dead are defined as legitimate targets in war. If we want to work towards a world liberated from the threat of nuclear weapons and nuclear war, we must stop fetishizing the mechanics of their single use directly against human beings.

We are currently in the midst of a historical awakening in this country regarding the historical injustice and systematic violence perpetrated against African-Americans. This violence was not confined to American shores. There is a direct line running between oppression at home and nuclear violence abroad. African-American activists were often among the first to recognize these connections. We are now toppling statues erected to honor those who perpetuated historical violence, and fighting back against those who celebrate the history of that violence. Meanwhile, in the midst of this awakening, this historical reckoning, one of the largest war crimes in American history is once again being celebrated. Now is the time to awaken from the American narrative of the “great technological achievement” of nuclear weaponry, and the footnoted mass murder of 100,000s of civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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