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Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the U.S. Terror State

by Anthony Gregory

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Being a U.S. war criminal means never having to say sorry. Paul Tibbets, the man who flew the Enola Gay and destroyed Hiroshima, lived to the impressive age of 92 without publicly expressing guilt for what he had done. He had even reenacted his infamous mission at a 1976 Texas air show, complete with a mushroom cloud, and later said he never meant this to be offensive. In contrast, he called it a “damn big insult” when the Smithsonian planned an exhibit in 1995 showing some of the damage the bombing caused.

We might understand a man not coming to terms with his most important contribution to human history being such a destructive act. But what about the rest of the country?

It’s sickening that Americans even debate the atomic bombings, as they do every year in early August. Polls in recent years reveal overwhelming majorities of the American public accepting the acts as necessary.

Conservatives are much worse on this topic, although liberals surely don’t give it the weight it deserves. Trent Lott was taken to the woodshed for his comments in late 2002 about how Strom Thurmond would have been a better president than Truman. Lott and Thurmond both represent ugly strains in American politics, but no one dared question the assumption that Thurmond was obviously a less defensible candidate than Truman. Zora Neale Hurston, heroic author of the

Harlem Renaissance, might have had a different take, as she astutely called Truman “a monster” and “the butcher of Asia.” Governmental segregation is terrible, but why is murdering hundreds of thousands of foreign civilians with as much thought as one would give to eradicating silverfish treated as simply a controversial policy decision in comparison?

Perhaps it is the appeal to necessity. We hear that the United States would have otherwise had to invade the Japanese mainland and so the bombings saved American lives. But saving U.S. soldiers wouldn't justify killing Japanese children any more than saving Taliban soldiers would justify dropping bombs on American children. Targeting civilians to manipulate their government is the very definition of terrorism. Everyone was properly horrified by Anders Behring Breivik's 2011 murder spree in Norway – killing innocents to alter diplomacy. Truman murdered a thousand times as many innocents on August 6, 1945, then again on August 9.

It doesn't matter if Japan “started it,” either. Only individuals have rights, not nations. Unless you can prove that every single Japanese snuffed out at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was involved in the Pearl Harbor attack, the murderousness of the bombings is indisputable. Even the official history should doom Truman to a status of permanent condemnation. Besides being atrocious in themselves, the U.S. creation and deployment of the first nuclear weapons ushered in the seemingly endless era of global fear over nuclear war.

However, as it so happens, the conventional wisdom is an oversimplification at best. The U.S. provoked the Japanese to fire the first shot, as more and more historians have acknowledged. Although the attack on Pearl Harbor, a military base, was wrong, it was far less indefensible than the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki's civilian populations.

As for the utilitarian calculus of “saving American lives,” historian Ralph Raico explains:

[T]he rationale for the atomic bombings has come to rest on a single colossal fabrication, which has gained surprising currency: that they were necessary in order to save a half-million or more American lives. These, supposedly, are the lives that would have been lost in the planned invasion of Kyushu in December, then in the all-out invasion of Honshu the next year, if that was needed. But the worst-case scenario for a full-scale invasion of the Japanese home islands was forty-six thousand American lives lost.

The propaganda that the atomic bombings saved lives was nothing but a public relations pitch contrived in retrospect. These were just gratuitous acts of mass terrorism. By August 1945, the Japanese were completely defeated, blockaded, starving. They were desperate to surrender. All they wanted was to keep their emperor, which was ultimately allowed anyway. The U.S. was insisting upon unconditional surrender, a purely despotic demand. Given what the Allies had done to the Central Powers, especially Germany, after the conditional surrender of World War I, it's understandable that the Japanese resisted the totalitarian demand for unconditional surrender.

A 1946 U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey determined the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nukings were not decisive in ending the war. Most of the political and military brass agreed. “The Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing,” said Dwight Eisenhower in a 1963 interview with *Newsweek*.

Another excuse we hear is the specter of Hitler getting the bomb first. This is a non sequitur. By the time the U.S. dropped the bombs, Germany was defeated and its nuclear program was revealed to be nothing in comparison to America's. The U.S. had 180,000 people working for several years on the Manhattan Project. The Germans had a small group led by a few elite scientists, most of whom were flabbergasted on August 6, as they had doubted such bombs were even possible. Even if the Nazis had gotten the bomb – which they were very far from getting – it wouldn't in any way justify killing innocent Japanese.

For more evidence suggesting that the Truman administration was out to draw Japanese blood for its own sake, or as a show of force for reasons of *Realpolitik*, consider the United States's one-thousand-plane bombing of Tokyo on August 14, the largest bombing raid of the Pacific war, *after* Hirohito agreed to surrender and the Japanese state made it clear it wanted peace. The bombing of Nagasaki should be enough to know it was not all about genuinely stopping the war as painlessly as possible – why not wait more than three days for the surrender to come? But to strategically bomb Japan five days after the destruction of Nagasaki, as Japan was in the process of waving the white flag? It's hard to imagine a greater atrocity, or clearer evidence that the U.S. government was not out to secure peace, but instead to slaughter as many Japanese as it could before consolidating its power for the next global conflict.

The U.S. had, by the time of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, destroyed 67 Japanese cities by firebombing, in addition to helping the British destroy over a hundred cities in Germany. In this dramatic footage from *The Fog of War*, Robert McNamara describes the horror he helped unleash alongside General Curtis LeMay, with images of the destroyed Japanese cities and an indication of what it would have meant for comparably sized cities in the United States:

“Killing fifty to ninety percent of the people in 67 Japanese cities and then bombing them with two nuclear bombs is not proportional – in the minds of some people – to the objectives we were trying to achieve,” McNamara casually says. Indeed, this was clearly murderous, and Americans are probably the most resistant of all peoples to the truths of their government's historical atrocities. It doesn't hurt that the U.S. government has suppressed for years evidence such as film footage shot after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yet even based on what has long been uncontroversial historical fact, we should all be disgusted and horrified by what the U.S. government did.

How would it have been if all those Germans and Japanese, instead of being burned to death from the sky, were corralled into camps and shot or gassed? Materially, it would have been the same. But Americans refuse to think of bombings as even in the same ballpark as other technologically expedient ways of exterminating people by the tens and hundreds of thousands. Why? Because the U.S. government has essentially monopolized terror bombing for nearly a century. No one wants to confront the reality of America's crimes against humanity.

It would be one thing if Americans were in wide agreement that their government, like that of the Axis governments of World War II, had acted in a completely indefensible manner. But they're not. The Allies were the white hats. Ignore the fact that the biggest belligerent on America's side was Stalin's Russia, whom the FDR and Truman administrations helped round up a million or two refugees in the notorious undertaking known as Operation Keelhaul. We're not supposed to

think about that. World War II began with Pearl Harbor and it ended with D-Day and American sailors returning home to kiss their sweethearts who had kept America strong by working on assembly lines.

In the Korean war, another Truman project, the U.S. policy of shameful mass murder continued. According to historian Bruce Cumings, professor at the University of Chicago, millions of North Korean civilians were slaughtered by U.S. fire-bombings, chemical weapons and newly developed ordnance, some of which weighed in at 12,000 pounds. Eighteen out of 22 major cities were at least half destroyed. For a period in 1950, the US dropped about 800 tons of bombs on North Korea every day. Developed at the end of World War II, napalm got its real start in Korea. The US government also targeted civilian dams, causing massive flooding.

In Indochina, the U.S. slaughtered millions in a similar fashion. *Millions of tons* of explosives were dropped on Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. These ghastly weapons are literally still killing people – tens of thousands have died since the war ended, and three farmers were killed not long ago. Among the horrible effects of the bombing was the rise of Pol Pot's regime, probably the worst in history on a per capita basis.

The U.S. has committed mass terrorism since, although not on quite the scale as in past generations. Back in the day the U.S. would drop tons of explosives, knowing that thousands would die in an instant. In today's wars, it drops explosives and then pretends it didn't mean to kill the many civilians who predictably die in such acts of violence. Only fifteen hundred bombs were used to attack Baghdad in March 2003. That's what passes as progress. The naked murderousness of U.S. foreign policy, however, is still apparent. The bombings of water treatment facilities and sanctions on Iraq in the 1990s deliberately targeted the vulnerable Iraqi people. Once the type of atrocities the U.S. committed in World War II have been accepted as at the worst debatable tactics in diplomacy, anything goes.

American politicians would have us worry about Iran, a nation that hasn't attacked another country in centuries, one day getting the bomb. There is no evidence that the Iranians are even seeking nuclear weapons. But even if they were, the U.S. has a much worse record in both warmongering and nuclear terror than Iran or any other country in modern times. It is more than hypocritical for the U.S. to pose as the leader of global peace and nuclear disarmament.

The hypocrisy and moral degeneracy in the mouths of America's celebrated leaders should frighten us more than anything coming out of Iran or North Korea, especially given America's capacity to kill and willingness to do it. Upon dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, President Truman called the bomb the "greatest achievement of organized science in history" and wondered aloud how "atomic power can become a powerful and forceful influence toward the maintenance of world peace." Nothing inverts good and evil, progress and regress, as much as the imperial state. In describing the perversion of morality in the history of U.S. wars, Orwell's "war is peace" doesn't cut it. "Exterminating civilians by the millions is the highest of all virtues" is perhaps a better tagline for the U.S. terror state.