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Happy Nuclear Anniversary!

By Brian Cloughley
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On 1 September 1939, at the beginning of the Second World War, the President of the United States of America, Franklin D Roosevelt, wrote to “the Governments of France, Germany, Italy, Poland and His Britannic Majesty” saying that

“The ruthless bombing from the air of civilians in unfortified centres of population during the course of the hostilities which have raged in various quarters of the earth during the past few years, which has resulted in the maiming and in the death of thousands of defenceless men, women, and children, has sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman, and has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity.”

He was rightly appalled about the aerial slaughter of civilians and desired each country to which he addressed his appeal “to affirm its determination that its armed forces shall in no event, and under no circumstances, undertake the bombardment from the air of civilian populations or of unfortified cities, upon the understanding that these same rules of warfare will be scrupulously observed by all of their opponents.”

We are now marking the seventieth anniversary of the explosion of the atomic bombs that destroyed the Japanese cities of Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 and Nagasaki three days later, killing a total of over 100,000 “defenceless men, women, and children,” prompting the nuclear scientist Robert Oppenheimer to quote from the Bhagavad Gita, the Hindu religious and philosophical text, that “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.”

Development of the atomic bomb began in 1939 but went into high gear as the Manhattan Project three years later. What is intriguing is that President Roosevelt approved the programme on October 9, 1941, a full two months before the Japanese attacked America at Pearl Harbor killing 2,403 people — including civilians. The subsequent declaration of war by the US resulted in concentration on war-winning by any means, and resulted in development of the ultimate weapon.

Even before the atomic explosions it was apparent that the major nations involved in the Second World War had no qualms about inflicting devastation. The British considered that their “aim is, therefore, twofold: namely, to produce (i) destruction, and (ii) the fear of death” and to that end mercilessly bombed German cities. One justification for the onslaught was that it was the Germans who started it and who in 1940-41 subjected London to a non-stop 60 days and nights of aerial bombardment that killed 30,000 people.

In a macabre game of explosive ping-pong the nations at war sought more and deadlier ways to wreak havoc on their opponents, and it would have been difficult to have found a citizen of any of these countries who would have failed to agree with the offensive actions of their government. Project Manhattan received massive impetus, and in an amazing display of technical prowess and organisational proficiency its scientists designed and produced the Atom Bomb in total secrecy.

It was astonishing that President Roosevelt had not told his Vice-President, Harry Truman, one single thing about the bomb project which some well-informed people believed was a potentially catastrophic venture. The first weapon was tested on 16 July 1945 at Alamogordo in New Mexico and caused concern among the scientists who had been involved in its development, 70 of whom sent a letter to President Roosevelt pointing out that use of the atomic bomb would likely presage “an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale” and that “a nation which sets the precedent of using these newly liberated forces of nature for purposes of destruction may have to bear the responsibility of opening the door to an era of devastation on an unimaginable scale.”

Their letter wasn't allowed to reach the President. He never knew of its existence, but in any event was convinced that the A-bomb was essential and had written to Oppenheimer, who had grave doubts about the military's attitude to nuclear developments, that “whatever the enemy may be planning, American science will be equal to the challenge.” The Bomb was going to be used, no matter the consequences, although the president who gave the order to drop the bombs in August 1945 was Harry Truman, who learned of the project's existence on 13 April, the day after Roosevelt died.

As recorded by Eric Schlosser in his edifying and terrifying book *Command and Control*, there had been air attacks on Japan of staggering intensity in the months before the atom bombs were employed. On the night of 9 March 1945, for example, “American planes struck Tokyo with 2,000 tons of bombs containing napalm and jellied gasoline . . . Within hours the firestorm consumed one quarter of the city. It killed about 100,000 civilians . . .” Worse was yet to come because Truman icily warned that the Japanese “may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth.”

There were not many large concentrations of Japanese that had not been subjected to firebombing, and choosing the ultimate victims was not easy. Kyoto was removed from the list of four targets because the Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, pointed out that it was a major cultural centre of great importance to Japanese art and history — and Nagasaki was chosen instead. By such decisions are the fates of human beings decided. Countless thousands of Kyoto citizens were spared, but 39,000 in Nagasaki were condemned to death.

First came Hiroshima, where on 6 August “a firestorm engulfed the city” and 66,000 people were killed. Next on the target list was Kokura, and in yet another horrible twist of fate the city was covered in smoke and haze and the plane was diverted to Nagasaki where the second bomb, hideously named Fat Man, was dropped on 9 August.

The war against Japan then ended, but it should be remembered that between the destruction of the two cities there was a Charter was being approved, on 8 August in the German city of Nuremburg, signed by the victorious allies, that included guidelines for the forthcoming trial of German war criminals by the International Military Tribunal. In an alarming example of double standards, the judges were informed that

“The following acts, or any of them, are crimes coming within the jurisdiction of the Tribunal for which there shall be individual responsibility . . . (b) War Crimes: namely, violations of the laws or customs of war. Such violations shall include . . . wanton destruction of cities, towns, or villages.” It did not include the words of President Roosevelt, that it was sickening to “undertake the bombardment from the air of civilian populations or of unfortified cities,” but made it clear that such attacks were against the laws of war.

The Nuremburg Charter steered the Nuremburg Tribunal to convict German war criminals, and it is hideous coincidence that it was signed at the very time when “Death, the destroyer of worlds” was thundering down on Japan in what Truman called “a rain of ruin from the air.”

Which goes to show that justice is reserved for those who win wars.

Happy Nuclear Anniversary.