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## Truman Lied, Hundreds of Thousands Died

By David Swanson

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On August 6, 1945, President Harry S 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."

When Truman lied to America that Hiroshima was a military base rather than a city full of civilians, people no doubt wanted to believe him. Who would want the shame of belonging to the nation that commits a whole new kind of atrocity? (Will naming lower Manhattan "ground zero" erase the guilt?) And when we learned the truth, we wanted and still want desperately to believe that war is peace, that violence is salvation, that our government dropped nuclear bombs in order to save lives, or at least to save American lives.

We tell each other 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 could not, incidentally, have chosen Tokyo as a target -- not because it was a city, but because we 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 Christ's sake," Nixon said to Henry Kissinger in discussing options for Vietnam.

President George W. Bush oversaw the development of smaller nuclear weapons that might be used more readily, as well as much larger non-nuclear bombs, blurring the line between the two.

President Barack Obama established in 2010 that the United States might strike first with nuclear weapons, but only against Iran or North Korea. The United States alleged, without evidence, that Iran was not complying with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT), even though the clearest violation of that treaty is the United States' own failure to work on disarmament and the United States' Mutual Defense Agreement with the United Kingdom, by which the two countries share nuclear weapons in violation of Article 1 of the NPT, and even though the United States' first strike nuclear weapons policy violates yet another treaty: the U.N. Charter.

Americans may never admit what was done in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but our country had been in some measure prepared for it. After Germany had invaded Poland, Britain and France had declared war on Germany. Britain in 1940 had broken an agreement with Germany not to bomb civilians, before Germany retaliated in the same manner against England -- although Germany had itself bombed Guernica, Spain, in 1937, and Warsaw, Poland, in 1939, and Japan meanwhile was bombing civilians in China. Then, for years, Britain and Germany had bombed each other's cities before the United States joined in, bombing German and Japanese cities in a spree of destruction unlike anything ever previously witnessed. When we were firebombing Japanese cities, Life magazine printed a photo of a Japanese person burning to death and commented "This is the only way."

By the time of the Vietnam War, such images were highly controversial. By the time of the 2003 War on Iraq, such images were not shown, just as enemy bodies were no longer counted. That development, arguably a form of progress, still leaves us far from the day when atrocities will be displayed with the caption "There has to be another way."

Combating evil is what peace activists do. It is not what wars do. And it is not, at least not obviously, what motivates the masters of war, those who plan the wars and bring them into being. But it is tempting to think so. It is very noble to make brave sacrifices, even the ultimate sacrifice of one's life, in order to end evil. It is perhaps even noble to use other people's children to vicariously put an end to evil, which is all that most war supporters do. It is righteous to become part of something bigger than oneself. It can be thrilling to revel in patriotism. It can be momentarily pleasurable I'm sure, if less righteous and noble, to indulge in hatred, racism, and other group prejudices. It's nice to imagine that your group is superior to someone else's. And the patriotism, racism, and other isms that divide you from the enemy can thrillingly unite you, for once, with all of your neighbors and compatriots across the now meaningless boundaries that usually hold sway.

If you are frustrated and angry, if you long to feel important, powerful, and dominating, if you crave the license to lash out in revenge either verbally or physically, you may cheer for a government that announces a vacation from morality and open permission to hate and to kill. You'll notice that the most enthusiastic war supporters sometimes want nonviolent war opponents killed and tortured along with the vicious and dreaded enemy; the hatred is far more important than its object. If your religious beliefs tell you that war is good, then you've really gone big time. Now you're part of God's plan. You'll live after death, and perhaps we'll all be better off if you bring on the death of us all.

But simplistic beliefs in good and evil don't match up well with the real world, no matter how many people share them unquestioningly. They do not make you a master of the universe. On the contrary, they place control of your fate in the hands of people cynically manipulating you with war lies.

And the hatred and bigotry don't provide lasting satisfaction, but instead breed bitter resentment.