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PERSPECTIVES ON HIROSHIMA

## Targeting of Civilians Is Now the Ugly Norm

Mass bombing was made possible by technology, which still dictates policies of callous disregard for life.

**By ROGER JOHNSON**

*Blood and destruction shall be so in use,*

*And dreadful objects so familiar*

*That mothers shall but smile when they behold*

*Their infants quartered with the hands of war.*

*“Julius Caesar,” Act 3*

***William Shakespeare***

The bombing of the Federal Building in Oklahoma City brought out the suffering that can be caused by a single bomb detonated in the middle of a city. Magnify the Oklahoma City devastation by 25,000 times and you have the equivalent of one Hiroshima bomb. Imagine a freight train 300 miles long loaded with Oklahoma City bombs. That’s the equivalent of one modern nuclear warhead, just one of tens of thousands poised all over the world.

The policy of destroying cities with bombs deserves some reflection as we mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the most destructive bombing that the world has ever known. The firebomb raids on Dresden in February, 1945 and on Tokyo the following month killed at least as many as the atomic bombs that incinerated

Hiroshima and Nagasaki. From May to August, 1945, the United States dropped 158,000 tons of bombs on Japan, roughly the equivalent of 300,000 Oklahoma City explosions.

The deliberate killing of civilians is a relatively new practice in the conduct of war. World War II was the first major war in which the majority of the victims were civilians. Today, civilian casualties vastly outnumber military deaths in Bosnia, as they did in Chechnya. Paradoxically, as the efficiency of killing civilians has increased, the moral outrage has decreased.

There is a long and mostly forgotten history of the problem that the Pentagon euphemistically calls "collateral damage". In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, St. Augustine wrote in "The City of God" that peace may require violence against evildoers, but warriors should kill only with anguish and regret. This "just war" doctrine became elaborated over the ages in the Christian world, but it always held that the deliberate killing of civilian noncombatants must be forbidden. Today, the targeting of civilians is routine. How did this dramatic change in morality come about?

Indiscriminate killing was greatly advanced when airplanes became weapons of war. The first use of airplanes to deliberately kill civilians took place right here in the U.S. in June of 1921 during the infamous race riots in Tulsa, Oklahoma. White racists commandeered U.S. postal service planes and dropped turpentine bombs on black churches and residential neighborhoods. The firebombing resulted in widespread death and destruction.

On April 26, 1936, Nazi planes flew over Guernica, Spain and dropped primitive explosives on residential areas. This act drew immediate public outrage all over the world and inspired the painting that has become a classic anti-war statement: Picasso's monumental "Guernica." The following year, Italian pilots did the same thing to Barcelona. There was widespread sentiment at the time that pilots who kill innocent civilians should be tried as war criminals.

On Nov. 14, 1940 the *Luftwaffe* bombed Coventry, England, killing 554, mostly civilians. The Germans coined the word *Coventrisieren* (to raze to the ground) to describe the tactic. Outraged, the Royal Air Force retaliated a month later by destroying the city of Mannheim. And so it began.

The master of such planning was Arthur Harris, commander of the Royal Bomber Command. In July, 1943, he monitored the weather patterns over Hamburg until they were just right for creating a firestorm. When conditions were optimal, his bombers dropped thousands of 4-pound phosphorous firebombs designed to set roofs on fire. As planned, a catastrophic firestorm of hurricane proportions engulfed the city and killed at least 30,000. Twenty per cent of the victims were children.

As the war in Europe was drawing to a close, hundreds of thousands of refugees fled from the Russians toward the undefended German city of Dresden. This historic and cultural treasure was of little military significance and was one of the few German cities unscathed by bombings. This was because the British and Americans "saved up" Dresden so they could later totally destroy it to impress Stalin with British and American ruthlessness.

On the night of Feb. 13, 1945, the RAF dispatched a wave of 245 bombers that carpet bombed the medieval city with hundreds of thousands of incendiary fire sticks. A few hours later, a second wave of 550 bombers was sent in to magnify the blaze. The next day the city was attacked a third time by 450 B-17 Flying Fortresses from the U.S. 8<sup>th</sup> Air Force.

Official estimates of casualties have ranged from 30,000 to 250,000. Some military analysts called Dresden one of the major atrocities of the war. Others shrugged it off and argued that civilians can no longer be immune in airborne war. As one American navigator who took part recalled, "It was just a normal type of raid." After the war, RAF General Harris was knighted and became Sir Arthur Harris. In 1992, the British erected a monument in London to honor his achievements. But many now remember him by his other name: "Butcher Harris."

In spite of the terrible destruction in Europe, the technique of saturation bombing was still in its infancy. With the larger and faster B-29 Stratofortresses deployed over Japan, the U.S. Air Force turned carpet bombing and firebombing into a science. In the closing months of the war, 75% of the munitions dropped on Japan were incendiary bombs, designed primarily to ignite wooden homes. The firebombing of Tokyo in March, 1945 killed 100,000 people, destroyed 267,171 structures and left 1 million homeless.

The killing of civilians by the hundreds of thousands was now commonplace, and this made the decision to drop the atomic bomb even easier. Accounts of the atomic bombings usually show the pretty mushroom cloud from above rather than the incinerated city below littered with burned corpses. The U.S. has always been eager to justify and minimize this barbaric event, the only time in history that nuclear weapons have been used in war.

Gen. Leslie Groves, head of the Manhattan Project, trivialized the suffering by telling the U.S. Senate in 1945 that high-dose radiation exposure is "without undue suffering" and "a very pleasant way to die." After the bombing, the U.S. was quick to assert that the A-bomb ended the war and prevented countless future casualties by making an invasion of Japan unnecessary. While this cover story is still believed by many, most scholars have concluded that the war was already over and the A-bomb was totally unnecessary.

History now reveals that Japan and the U.S. had already been meeting secretly for months to negotiate an end to the war. Japan had agreed to surrender but negotiations were stuck over the Japanese demand that the Emperor be spared, a provision that the U.S. eventually agreed to. As for the dreaded invasion of the mainland, it was not scheduled until the spring of 1946, hardly a major consideration in August when surrender was weeks away.

After the war, a long list of generals, admirals, and high U.S. government officials insisted that the atom bombs were not necessary. The list included generals MacArthur and Eisenhower and fleet admirals Nimitz and Halsey. Did dropping the bomb really end the war or were there other reasons for dropping the atom bombs?

Many scholars discard the cover story and instead cite three other reasons. As the war was drawing to a close, top U.S. officials worried about the next great threat: Joseph Stalin and the communist empire. One of the reasons for the horrific firebombing of Dresden near the end of World War II was to send a message to Stalin to beware of American might, determination, and ruthlessness. The same reasoning was behind the decision to drop the A-bombs.

Evidence of this comes from a personal conversation in March of 1944 between Gen. Groves and physicist Joseph Rotblat. Groves explicitly stated that the real purpose of the A-bomb was not to defeat Japan but to scare the Russians. Upon learning about the real purpose of the bomb, Dr. Rotblat promptly quit the Manhattan project. He was the only senior scientist to do so, and recently he was awarded the Nobel Prize.

The second reason for dropping the bomb was the intense political pressure which resulted from diverting enormous amounts of war funding into the Manhattan Project. Both critics and defenders of the

project demanded results. There would be all hell to pay if all that money was spent and the bomb was never used.

The third reason was the technological imperative. The military wanted to know more about what the bomb did to cities and how it killed people. Scientists were eager to learn more about atomic weaponry and in particular they wanted to study the difference between a uranium bomb (Hiroshima) and a plutonium bomb (Nagasaki). Everyone feared that the war would end before they could use the new “gadget,” as Truman called it. Like Dresden, the military wanted to bomb an intact city rather than a partially destroyed city. Thus, Hiroshima was seldom attacked during the war to “save” it so that it could be totally destroyed with the new weapon.

The military objected to a demonstration (like creating a tidal wave in Tokyo Bay or blowing off the top of Mt. Fuji) because they wanted to experiment with a populated city. Of great interest was the effects of radiation on human beings, something that would be difficult to study after the war. In order to learn more, the U.S. formed the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission after the war to study radiation effects on the *hibakusha*, the Japanese on the outskirts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki who managed to survive. The *hibakusha* were tested and examined, not to help them but to document incidence of cancer and other radiation-induced diseases. The result was the heavily-flawed Hiroshima Survivor Study which was manipulated by authorities to trivialize the effects of radiation. It is still widely cited by the nuclear industry to claim that radiation from nuclear power plants is not harmful.

The fascination with the effects of radiation on humans continued for three decades after the war with 4000 secret experiments conducted on unsuspecting people in the U.S. and in the Marshall Islands. It was not until 1995 that the U.S. government finally confessed to these Nazi-doctor experiments with the publication of the 925 page report entitled *Advisory Committee on Human Radiation Experiments*. In order to apologize and admit guilt, the U.S. Congress passed the Radiation Exposure and Compensation Act (RECA) which has awarded billions to tens of thousands of victims of the radiation experiments.

In Japan, the suffering from Hiroshima and Nagasaki continued long after the A-bombs were dropped. By 1950, over 200,000 Japanese had perished from the bomb with civilians constituting ninety-five percent of the casualties. Those who died from cancer and other medical complications in the following half century are generally not counted. The Japanese government estimates that over 2,000 citizens continue to die every year, not from old age, but from medical effects related to when they were irradiated as children in 1945 on the outskirts of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Meanwhile, the use of new technology to kill civilians continued to advance. In the Viet Nam War, carpet bombing techniques were made even more deadly with the greater payloads of the B-52. More bombs were dropped in Viet Nam than in all theaters of World War II combined. Unexploded cluster bombs and anti-personnel munitions continue to kill and maim civilians, 40% of them children.

In the Persian Gulf War, the public was led to believe that most of the allied air attacks involved “smart” bombs with pinpoint accuracy aimed at military targets. After the war, we learned that the vast majority of the ordinance consisted of old-fashioned “dumb” bombs that often missed their targets. The Pentagon insisted that it was not targeting civilians, yet it deliberately destroyed water supplies, knowing full well that the suffering would be borne mainly by women, children and the elderly. American public health officials estimated that more than 100,000 Iraqi children died from war-related causes.

In the British War Museum, a special clock tallies the number of human beings who have died from wars in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. The toll is fast approaching 100 million, 12 times higher than that of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and

22 times greater than the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. At this rate, we might expect 1 billion people to die in the wars of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Military analysts believe that a nuclear war could easily generate 500 million casualties.

Where is the outrage? Are our national priorities in the future going to be as militaristic as they were in the past? Fifty years after the war that made targeting civilian populations routine, bomber pilots are celebrated as heroes. The search for more terrible weapons continues. Today, the current conservative Congress has censored a Smithsonian exhibit critical of the suffering at Hiroshima. Congress has slashed funding for education, the environment, health and the arts, and voted huge expenditures for long-range nuclear attack B-2 bombers. The American public appears to be supportive since 3.9 trillion tax-payer dollars have been sunk into nuclear weapons programs alone since 1945. By this measure, all the ingredients are in place to guarantee that the future will be worse than the past.