

## **Confronting the Crime: The Shadow of Hiroshima on the Path to Peace**

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Sixty-three years ago today, at 8:15 on a cloudless morning, eleven men on a single aircraft dropped a bomb on the city of Hiroshima. The B-29 (named by the pilot, Paul Tibbets, after his mother, Enola Gay) banked sharply away as the weapon, christened 'Little Boy' – holding an apple of uranium – drifted slowly, suspended by parachute, from 31,000 to 2,000 feet above ground. "Then," a woman recalled, "there came a brilliant flash...and everything turned bright blue"<sup>1</sup>; "the sky," a man said, "split open," then turned "pitch dark."<sup>2</sup> "Within seconds," historian Peter Kuznick writes, "tens of thousands were dead. Tens of thousands more would die over the next few days and weeks. Others would suffer from the effects of the blast, burns, and radiation for the rest of their lives. Many still do today."<sup>3</sup>

In the forty-three seconds of Little Boy's descent, the *Enola Gay* raced nine miles from the city. Only one man on board, Staff Sergeant Bob Caron, sitting in the back of the aircraft, witnessed the moment the warhead exploded – with greater force than the combined yield of all the bombs hitherto dropped by the US in the War. Like the rest of the crew, under orders from Tibbets, he recorded his impressions – his "peep into hell," as he said – on tape: "A column of smoke is rising fast. It has a fiery core. A bubbling mass, purple grey in colour... It's all turbulent. Fires are springing up everywhere, like flames shooting out of a huge bed of coals. I'm starting to count the fires... It's impossible. There are too many... Here it comes, the mushroom shape... It's coming this way... The city must be below that." After some initial confused exclamations from the rest of the crew – "Look at that!" Tibbets remembers himself, and others, repeating – Captain Robert Lewis cried out: "My God, what have we done?" After that, as the radar operator, Joe Stoborik, recalled, a "stunned silence" took hold: "Remember, nobody had ever seen what an A-bomb could do. Here was a whole damn town nearly as big as Dallas," – Stoborik's home – "one minute in good shape, and the next? Disappeared..." The men ate sandwiches and drank coffee, watching the mushroom cloud, visible for over 300 miles, rise and writhe, in Tibbets' phrase, "like something horribly alive."<sup>4</sup>

Paul Tibbets died, aged 92, on November 1 last year. To the end of his life, like almost all those who flew under his command, he declared himself free of guilt and remorse, convinced that the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and, just three days later, Nagasaki – at the cost of over a third of a million lives, the vast majority civilian – was a price worth paying for ending the war. In *The Men Who Brought the Dawn*, a documentary released on

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in *A City of Corpses*, by Ōta Yōko, published in 1948; English translation by Richard H. Minear, in *Hiroshima: Three Witnesses*, Edited by Richard H. Minear, Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 246.

<sup>2</sup> Toyofumi Ogura, *Letters from the End of the World: A Firsthand Account of the Bombing of Hiroshima*, published in 1948; English translation by Kisaburo Murakami & Shigeru Fujii, Kodansha International, Tokyo, 1997; quotes from 'Letter 1, *A Pageant of Clouds and Light*,' p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Peter J. Kuznick, 'Defending the Indefensible: a Meditation on the Life of Hiroshima Pilot Paul Tibbets, Jr.,' *Japan Focus*, January 2008: <http://japanfocus.org/products/topdf/2642>.

<sup>4</sup> Crew quoted in Kuznick, *op. cit.*

the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attacks, Tibbets stated: “I was anxious to do it. I wanted to do everything I could to subdue Japan. I wanted to kill the bastards.” And he added: “It would have been morally wrong if we’d had that weapon and not used it and let a million more people die.”<sup>5</sup> This figure, for the number of lives likely to have been lost in any invasion of Japan, is, as we will see, a matter of fierce dispute; but let us just note here that Tibbets cites it *after* producing a very different justification: exacting revenge on Japan. Interestingly, when Tibbets was asked, in a 2002 interview, how he would respond to the September 11 terrorist attacks, he replied in near-identical language: “We’ve got to get into a position where we can kill the bastards.” The interviewer continued: “When you hear people say, ‘let’s nuke ’em,’ ‘let’s nuke these people,’ what do you think?” Answer: “Oh, I wouldn’t hesitate if I had the choice. I’d wipe ’em out. You’re gonna kill innocent people at the same time, but we’ve never fought a damn war anywhere in the world where they didn’t kill innocent people. If the newspapers would just cut out the shit: ‘You’ve killed so many innocent civilians.’ That’s their tough luck for being there.”<sup>6</sup>

The American psychologist Robert Jay Lifton describes Tibbets’ stance as a particularly sick example of “psychic numbing”, defined as “a diminished capacity or inclination to feel”; a refusal to admit (to yourself or others) the atrocious consequences of your actions.<sup>7</sup> “After the first death, there is no other,” Dylan Thomas wrote, in memory of a child killed in an air raid on London. But such awareness of irredeemable offence can sometimes desensitize the perpetrator to the costs of future crime: ‘after the first death, there is no taboo,’ or, as the Russian proverb has it, “only the first sweep of the scythe is difficult.” Here is Tibbets, speaking to a reporter in 1942, on the eve of his first bombing mission over Europe: I feel, he said, “sick with thoughts of the civilians who might suffer from the bombs dropped by [my] machine.” During the mission, he later confessed, one thought dominated: “My God, women and children are getting killed!” Back at base, Tibbets learned that he had missed a number of important targets. The lesson? “[I was so] intent on what was going to happen on the ground...[I] didn’t do my job right.”<sup>8</sup> Thirty years after he ‘did his job right’ in Hiroshima, Tibbets’ reflected: “The doctors who are failures are the doctors who begin assuming the symptoms of the patient. They begin to identify too much with them. [For me] to think about what was happening on the ground was like the doctor identifying with the patient.”<sup>9</sup>

Here, the distorting mirror produces its greatest illusion: murderer as healer, taker- as saver- of life. But what lies behind the mirror – what provides backing and support to such grotesque reflections – is the simple, honeyed lie spoon-fed to millions of Americans and others for sixty-three years and counting: ‘the Bomb ended the war, and saved more lives than it took.’ In 1995, Tibbets claimed that the pressure of keeping his atomic mission secret trained him, quote, “to be the world’s best liar”<sup>10</sup> – a habit, he admitted, he never quite shook. In Lifton’s view, the official justification for the attacks constitutes, if not the best, the *only possible* lie that America could afford to tell – itself and others – about the

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in ‘Paul W. Tibbets, Pilot of *Enola Gay*, Dies at 92,’ *New York Times*, November 2, 2007.

<sup>6</sup> ‘One hell of a big bang,’ Paul Tibbets interviewed by Studs Terkel, *The Guardian*, August 6, 2002. Full transcript available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2002/aug/06/nuclear.japan/print>.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: A Half Century of Denial*, Avon Books, 1996, p. 337.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Lifton & Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Kuznick, *op. cit.*

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Kuznick, *op. cit.*

supremely defining moment in its history. The Lie, as Lifton and Greg Mitchell wrote in their 1995 study *Hiroshima in America*, was a “*cordon sanitaire...transmitted, as official policy, throughout American society. One was supposed to be numbed to Hiroshima.*” “It became,” they added, “politically correct (before the expression existed) to remain numbed – politically suspect if one was troubled or inclined to make a fuss about it. In that way, as a people, we developed a *habit* of numbing toward Hiroshima, a sustained tendency toward, one way or another, avoiding feeling in connection with what happened there.”<sup>11</sup>

What, then, was the untellable truth? Given the almost complete collapse of the Japanese war effort, classified American estimates of total casualties – killed and wounded – in a US ground invasion lay between 20-60,000. In all probability, however – as Stalin told President Truman at the Potsdam Conference in July 1945 – such an invasion would be led not by the US but the Soviet Union. Truman wrote in his diary: “[The Russians] will be in the Jap war on August 15<sup>th</sup>. ‘Fini’ Japs when that comes about.” Robert Kuznick writes: “As many historians now recognize, it was the Soviet invasion,” which actually took place on August 10, the day after Nagasaki, “even more than the atomic bombings, that effectively undermined Japanese diplomatic and military strategies and convinced Japanese leaders to surrender.”<sup>12</sup> Many historians, in fact, also argue that Japan, anxious to save the Emperor and the Monarchy from destruction, was signaling its willingness to surrender even before Potsdam; and that, for different reasons, those overtures were spurned by both Washington and Moscow.

So *why*, given their clear strategic avoidability, did the attacks proceed? ‘Payback’, however disproportionate, for Pearl Harbour, was obviously a factor; but what else were the massive conventional ‘firestorm’ raids, killing hundreds of thousands in Tokyo and elsewhere, if not a whirlwind of revenge? The real message of the Bomb may in fact not have been directed at Japan at all, but at Russia, already designated as America’s principal post-War adversary. And within this hidden agenda there may well lurk another: the perceived expediency of demonstrating, and thus justifying, the enormous costs and scope of the Manhattan Project, the Allied A-Bomb programme kept secret not just from the public but also Congress, and even – until the death of President Roosevelt – from Vice President Truman. We should remember here the original motive of the Project, as urged on Roosevelt by Albert Einstein and other concerned scientists: to deter or respond to any German A-Bomb. By January 1945, however, the US had concluded that the Nazi programme had failed to progress beyond basic research. The physicist responsible for making this determination was Samuel Goudsmit, a Dutch Jew whose parents were exterminated at Auschwitz. In 1947, Goudsmit recalled his intense relief when he realized the “full significance of” his “discovery”: “Isn’t it wonderful that the Germans have no atom bomb?’ I said [to my military commander]... His answer...took me by surprise. ‘Of course you understand, Sam,’ he said, ‘if we have such a weapon, we are going to use it.’”<sup>13</sup> In 1941, then, the ‘unthinkable’ was the use – with impunity, against cities – of a new superweapon by the fascists; four years later, it was unthinkable *not* to use such a weapon, targeting mass populations, against an opponent unable to strike back.

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<sup>11</sup> Lifton & Mitchell, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

<sup>12</sup> Kuznick, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> Samuel Goudsmit, *Alsos*, Henry Schuman, Inc., 1947, p. 76. ‘Alsos’ was the name of the secret US scientific mission to Europe, charged with determining the status of the German atomic research programme.

Whatever the full, complex truth behind the attacks, the inevitable consequence of the lies told on their behalf was the desire not to ban but *embrace* the Bomb. Addressing the nation on August 6, 1945, President Truman asked Americans to “be grateful to Providence” that the “harnessing of the basic power of the universe” had been accomplished by the forces of good, and used against the forces – the axis powers – of evil.

In this appeal to give thanks, can we not already hear the subliminal plea – *be numb* – that served as the secret key to the nuclear arms racing, testing, proliferation and waste (environmental and financial) of the next six decades? And not just in America, but all those states claiming *their* share of ‘Providence’: Russia, Britain, France, China, Israel, India, Pakistan and North Korea, with many others able, and increasingly disposed, to join them. Because it is simply another form of numbing to say that it was the US, not us, that crossed the fatal line in the sky over Hiroshima. ‘America’ didn’t drop the Bomb on ‘Japan’: *human beings* dropped the Bomb on human beings, which is not to argue that the mushroom cloud somehow exposed ‘human nature’ as vicious and depraved but rather to agree with Albert Einstein and Bertrand Russell, in their famous anti-nuclear manifesto of 1955, that, to survive, we need to *remember* our humanity, and “forget the rest” – to realize that we cannot, as meaningfully moral beings, allow ourselves to co-exist with (which means, necessarily, *depend upon*) the Bomb, the negation and antithesis of all that is worth defending in ourselves and the world.

What fruits has such compromise, the deal with our own devil, so far borne? One hundred thousand bombs, most tens or even hundreds of times more powerful than Little Boy; enough uranium and plutonium to make a hundred thousand more; a worldwide, poison archipelago of nuclear test sites, waste dumps, and factories; and trillions and trillions of dollars spent to stay comfortably numb in a world which sees (or doesn’t) the preventable deaths of 29,000 children a day. Even when we don’t use the Bomb, it horribly deforms us, distancing us further from our common, human core; and all in the name of ‘deterrence,’ ‘strategic stability,’ peace through ‘strength.’ Because of the trust we’ve lost in ourselves (and placed in the monster we created), because of how morally *weak* we’ve become, the conclusion we’ve drawn is that only the Bomb can save us from the Bomb; that as long as we keep hold of it, we’ll never have to drop it again. But remember the answer that so shocked Samuel Goudsmit: “if we have such a weapon, we are going to use it.” What would al Qaeda say or do, faced with a similar ‘opportunity’ to make a city like Dallas ‘disappear’? Would such a non-state group – impossible to isolate geographically or threaten with massive retaliation – be dissuaded by America’s 10,000 more powerful weapons? And remember Tibbets: “Oh, I wouldn’t hesitate” to ‘nuke’ again “if I had the choice.” Well, one day, somewhere, a tiny number of human beings *will* be presented with such a choice: and, whether we call them soldiers or terrorists – ‘them’ or ‘us’ – they’ll make the only professional decision they *can*. The Bomb will tell them what to do.

It is, I believe, inconceivable that we will ever escape from this trap without confronting – all of us, not just Americans – the full evil and horror of August 6 & 9, 1945. But this does *not* mean, fortunately, that we need to confront the past *before* we can at least start to take steps to a sane, rehumanized future. In recent years, indeed – in response to a set of new, demonstrably unmanageable challenges to the status quo – a powerful consensus in favour of nuclear disarmament (*complete* nuclear disarmament) has begun to emerge, even among those who remain ‘numb’ to the events we mourn today. The most dramatic illustration of

this trend – and there are many others – is the campaign launched in January 2007 by four giants of the American nuclear landscape: Henry Kissinger, Secretary of State under Presidents Nixon and Ford; George Shultz, Secretary of State under President Reagan; William Perry, Secretary of Defence under President Clinton; and Sam Nunn, the former Democratic Chair of the Senate Armed Services Committee. “We stand,” they wrote “on the precipice of a new and dangerous nuclear era,” in which “the world” cannot and *must* not expect to “be as fortunate...as we were during the Cold War.” The only viable strategy left, they concede, is the one they shunned so long: “adopting the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons” and embracing “practical measures toward achieving that goal.”<sup>14</sup> In a second joint statement, issued earlier this year, a “world free of nuclear weapons” is compared to “the top of a very tall mountain”: “From the vantage point of our troubled world today, we can’t even see the top of the mountain, and it is tempting to say we can’t get there from here. But the risks of continuing to go down the mountain or standing pat are too real to ignore. We must chart a course to higher ground where the mountaintop becomes more visible.”<sup>15</sup>

To judge by the initial reaction to their appeal (which they describe as “extraordinary”, from both policy makers and “people all over the world”) there now seems a realistic possibility of a major change of course from the nuclear-weapon states – including, and perhaps even led by, the White House – in coming years. Whether, after so much damage and denial, such a movement can still hope to succeed is an open question. But one thing, I would argue, is certain: as the ‘summit’ comes into view – as the abolition of our slavery to the Bomb approaches – so, too, will the truth about Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

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<sup>14</sup> ‘A World Free of Nuclear Weapons,’ *The Wall Street Journal*, January 4, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Toward a Nuclear-Free World,’ *The Wall Street Journal*, January 15, 2008.