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## HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI: 75<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY REFLECTIONS

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### **Abstract**

August of this year is the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first and only use of atomic weapons in war, the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The essay recounts the changes in the historical account of the bombings since then, and the evidence suggesting that the bombings were unnecessary to end the war. Using the revised history, there is a moral assessment of the decision to drop the bombs. Employing norms that are common to the just war tradition, the author argues that the decision to attack the Japanese cities was morally flawed. Based on the standards of innocents being immune from direct attack, the inappropriateness of a demand for unconditional surrender according to right intention, and the idea of proportionality in causing harm, there is a serious case against the justice of the atomic bombings. The essay concludes by noting evidence that many Americans continue to uphold military practices that violate basic ethical norms.

**Keywords:** Atomic Bomb; Innocence; Just War Tradition; Proportionality; Non-combatants; Unconditional Surrender

“In August, 1945 American aircraft dropped two atomic bombs on Japan in the space of three days. That they should do this was the decision of President Harry S. Truman, and there is no evidence that

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Truman found the judgment a hard one.”<sup>1</sup> McGeorge Bundy’s assessment of Truman’s decision not being difficult has been widely supported by historians of the era and by President Truman’s own comments: “I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used.”<sup>2</sup> At the time, there was widespread support among the American citizenry for the bombing, and little questioning about the decision within the small circle of civilian and military officials responsible for the development and use of the weapons.<sup>3</sup>

On November 24, 2019 Pope Francis spoke on a rainy morning in Nagasaki and later that evening, spoke again at Hiroshima. The pope was direct in his judgment: “I wish once more to declare that the use of atomic energy for purposes of war is today, more than ever, a crime not only against the dignity of human beings but against any possible future for our common home.” Toward the end of his remarks, Francis stated, “we cannot allow present and future generations to lose the memory of what happened here.” It must be “an expansive memory, capable of awakening the consciences of all men and women.”<sup>4</sup>

It is now seventy-five years since the atomic bombings and the public mood about them in the U.S. has undergone change. A substantial minority, but no longer a majority, of Americans approve of Truman’s decision; a 2015 poll revealed that 46% of the nation considers “the atomic bombing of Japan as ‘the right thing to do.’”<sup>5</sup> When Barack Obama became the first President to visit Hiroshima since the atomic attack, he offered no apology nor words of explanation. There was something of a public debate about whether such an apology was appropriate for an American president, or even desired by the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.<sup>6</sup> More important than official apologies, however, is the request of Pope Francis, that

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<sup>1</sup>McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb in the First Fifty Years*, New York: Vintage Books, 1988, 54.

<sup>2</sup>Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs by Harry S. Truman*, vol 1 *Years of Decisions*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co, 1955, 419.

<sup>3</sup>Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 54-97.

<sup>4</sup>Francis, “Address of the Holy Father at Peace Memorial (Hiroshima),” Sunday, November 24, 2019.

<sup>5</sup>Peter Moore, “A-Bomb Legacy: Most Americans Negative about the Invention of Nuclear Weapons,” Redwood City, CA: YouGov, July 22, 2015, <https://today.yougov.com/news/2015/07/22/a-bomb-legacy/>.

<sup>6</sup>Uri Friedman, “Hiroshima and the Politics of Apologizing,” *The Atlantic* (May 26, 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/05/obama-hiroshima-apology-nuclear/483617/>.

we not lose the memory of what happened and that such a memory awaken the consciences of people.

In what follows, I will first review key elements of the historical narrative, both what became of the dominant narrative and then later the revisions to that narrative as more archival evidence came to light. Then I will situate the Hiroshima-Nagasaki attacks within the broad context of the just war tradition and discuss the specifics of the decision to employ atomic bombs.

### **The Historical Narrative**

By late 1944 it was clear to the allied nations that Hitler did not have a plan to create an atomic weapon, and that the supposed race to develop such a weapon was not a competition at all. As a result, the focus of the U.S. became to shorten the war. Had the bomb been available to use on Germany, it almost certainly would have been. But as the months of 1945 passed, and Germany surrendered in early May, it became evident that when the bomb was ready it would be used not against Germany but Japan.

After Truman succeeded President Franklin Roosevelt in mid-April of that year, he received his first real briefing on the atomic bomb project on April 25. It had been Roosevelt's decision to keep the entire atomic program secret from all but a necessary few, and that secrecy continued under his successor. The briefing that Truman received presented the new weapon as just that, a weapon, and one that should be used as soon as it was available. The fact that the likely availability was coincident with the decline in Japan's chances of winning the war in the Pacific meant that the bomb would be employed to shorten a war that Japan was no longer a threat to win.<sup>7</sup>

Japan was, however, still a despised enemy. For many Americans the decision to drop the bomb was legitimated by the intensity of the continuing Japanese resistance, the outrage over Pearl Harbor, and the anger regarding the Bataan Death March.<sup>8</sup> That the first item might necessitate an American invasion of the Japanese mainland raised fear about U.S. military casualties and annoyance at the Japanese commitment to a lost cause. The campaign of Japanese kamikaze pilots only added to the popular view among Americans that the Japanese military was fanatical and not open to reason. When the conflict ended, the belief was that the bombings shortened the war and avoided the horrendous casualties of a land invasion. Two

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<sup>7</sup>Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 54-59.

<sup>8</sup>Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 61.

opinion polls taken in the fall of 1945, after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing showed only marginal opposition, about 4-4.5% of Americans flatly opposed the use of the weapons. A far higher percentage in both polls, about 23%, thought that the U.S. should have bombed more or all Japanese cities before accepting their surrender.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the decision by Truman and his advisors seemed to be popularly supported and militarily advisable, given the situation as it was understood at the time.

Since then, however, a number of historians with access to archives and papers not available in the immediate aftermath of the war, have brought new insight into the way that history should remember the events of August 1945. "Scholarship about Japan's decision to surrender can be divided into three phases. During the first twenty years after Hiroshima, historians and strategists rarely questioned the necessity of using the atomic bomb or the decisive role it played in bringing World War II to a close." Around 1965 some revisionist readings of the history began to raise "moral questions about the use of nuclear weapons," asking "probing questions about the motives of U.S. leaders," even though they accepted the idea that the bombing was instrumental in ending the war quickly. "Since 1990 new scholarship, including recently declassified documents and extensive research into Japanese, Soviet, and U.S. archives, has led to new interpretations" of the role of the atomic bombings in ending the war. Often a greater role is now given to the entry of the Soviet Union into the Pacific war as being decisive.<sup>10</sup>

What the third phase of historical scholarship has done is rewrite the historical narrative in the following way.

By the summer of 1945, Japan had two possible negotiating strategies for ending the war. The first was to convince the Soviets, who were still officially neutral at the time, to mediate a surrender to the U.S. The second strategy was to fight one last decisive battle that would cause such massive American casualties that the U.S. would settle for more lenient terms than the demand of unconditional surrender. Both of the options were still possible after the atomic bombings; neither was possible after the Soviets invaded Japanese territory on mainland Asia.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Scott Sagan and Benjamin Valentino, "Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran," *International Security* 42, 1 (2017) 41-79 at 42.

<sup>10</sup>Ward Wilson, "The Winning Weapon? Rethinking Nuclear Weapons in Light of Hiroshima," *International Security* 32, 4 (2007) 162-79, at 162-63.

<sup>11</sup>I rely on Ward Wilson's account for the above paragraph, "The Winning Weapon?," 162-63.

Archival records of meetings among the top Japanese leaders suggest that the Hiroshima bomb did not lead to panic or a rush to surrender. The Japanese had already endured the fire-bombing of Tokyo, Hiroshima was seen as another population centre levelled, though a much smaller one than Tokyo. If the Japanese had not surrendered after Tokyo, it was unlikely that Hiroshima would force their hand.<sup>12</sup> In fact, “three full days elapsed after the bombing of Hiroshima in which the Supreme Council did not meet to discuss the bombing. When the Soviets intervened on August 9 and word of the invasion in Manchuria reached Tokyo at around 4:30 am, on the other hand, the Supreme Council met by 10:30 that same morning.”<sup>13</sup> Emperor Hirohito took no decisive action following Hiroshima except to ask for more details, but when word of the Soviet invasion came to him, “the emperor immediately summoned Lord Privy Seal Kido and told him, ‘In light of the Soviet entry... it was all the more urgent to find a means to end the war.’”<sup>14</sup>

The Japanese leadership’s reaction to the August events suggests strongly that “the Soviet intervention touched off a crisis, while the Hiroshima bombing did not.”<sup>15</sup> An imminent invasion by a large Russian force that was preparing to attack the home islands from the north would be catastrophic, as most of the Japanese forces had amassed in the south to fight the expected U.S. invasion.

The belief that the atomic bombings were what ended the war, however, became widely accepted by Americans. It also was the interpretation of events that Japan’s leaders accepted. For what reason? Historians now suggest two main motivations were behind the Japanese not disputing a narrative about the decisive nature of the atomic bombings. First, the Japanese leaders understood that they would be facing trials for war crimes and “it was in their interest to present a view of history that was congenial to their U.S. captors.”<sup>16</sup> Second, and perhaps more importantly, using the atomic bombing as the explanation for the surrender “offered a convenient explanation to soothe wounded Japanese pride: the defeat of Japan was not the result of leadership mistakes or lack of valor.”<sup>17</sup> Being defeated by an unexpected power of science was acceptable in a way that defeat due

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<sup>12</sup>Gareth Cook, “Why Did Japan Surrender?” *Boston Globe* (August 7, 2011), [http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2011/0807/why\\_did\\_japan\\_surrender/?page=full](http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2011/0807/why_did_japan_surrender/?page=full)

<sup>13</sup>Wilson, “The Winning Weapon?” 172.

<sup>14</sup>Wilson, “The Winning Weapon?” 172.

<sup>15</sup>Wilson, “The Winning Weapon?” 171.

<sup>16</sup>Wilson, “The Winning Weapon?” 175.

<sup>17</sup>Wilson, “The Winning Weapon?” 175.

to error or character flaw was not. The comments of Japanese leaders that are now accessible to historians supports this interpretation.<sup>18</sup> But it was not only the leadership that benefited from the earlier version of the history. For the Japanese people, Hiroshima quickly became “a potent symbol of their nation as victim, helping obscure their role as the aggressors and in atrocities that included mass rapes and beheading prisoners of war.”<sup>19</sup>

For Americans, the rationale for employing a weapon of mass destruction was simple yet powerful, it would end the war. That was the hope that drove the decision to use the bomb, shortening a war that had become the deadliest conflict in human history. So the early historical narrative was formulated in a context where there was a predisposition to see the bomb as the answer to the question, “why did Japan surrender?” And as we now know, the Japanese were willing to mislead the Americans for the reasons noted above, to please their occupiers and to mask the actual motives for surrender.

One of the important arguments used by those who would justify the American decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki was that it was necessary to save a bloodbath resulting from an American land invasion of the home islands. The figure of one million casualties, American and Japanese combined, has even been claimed.<sup>20</sup> A common figure that was used by President Truman and other U.S. officials after the war was half a million American casualties. Based on actual war planning, those figures would appear grossly exaggerated.

The invasion plans of stage one, to occur in November of 1945, estimated “a possible cost of 31,000 casualties in the first 30 days and a total estimated death toll of about 25,000.” The second part of the invasion plan for March of 1946 “estimated 15,000-21,000 more American dead.” The bottom line is that “in the spring and summer of 1945, no American leader believed—as some later falsely claimed—that they planned to use the A-bomb to save half a million

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<sup>18</sup>Remarks by Navy Minister Yonai, Lord Privy Seal Kido, and Cabinet Secretary Sakomizu all speak of dissembling in order to disguise the real reasons for surrender and to shift blame away from the emperor or the military. See Wilson, “The Winning Weapon?” 175-176.

<sup>19</sup>Cook, “Why Did Japan Surrender?”

<sup>20</sup>Wilson Miscamble, “Was It Wrong to Drop the Atom Bomb on Japan?” PragerU.com, [https://assets.ctfassets.net/qnesrjodfi80/3LwwBWbg4MwWEqQsGo22Cs/764c5d02a0a39079aa368e8a79434d1c/miscamble-was\\_it\\_wrong\\_to\\_drop\\_the\\_bomb-transcript\\_0.pdf](https://assets.ctfassets.net/qnesrjodfi80/3LwwBWbg4MwWEqQsGo22Cs/764c5d02a0a39079aa368e8a79434d1c/miscamble-was_it_wrong_to_drop_the_bomb-transcript_0.pdf)

Americans.”<sup>21</sup> According to American military planning estimates during the summer of 1945, the use of atomic bombs would not have saved 500,000 American lives but fewer than 50,000.

At the time of the bombing, however, with the American longing to end the war, the harsh view of the Japanese, and the patriotic fervour supporting the troops, “there was no hesitation about using A-bombs to kill many Japanese in order to save the 25,000-46,000 Americans who might otherwise have died in the invasions. Put bluntly, Japanese life – including civilian life – was cheap.”<sup>22</sup>

Some early revisions of the historical narrative suggested a motive for the bombings that was overlooked in the original version: an American desire to send a message to the Soviets. Coming as it did in the mid-sixties, in the midst of Cold War tensions, the revisionist suggestion of an anti-Russian motive seemed plausible to some.<sup>23</sup> Certainly, there were various expectations held by the American leadership about the use of the bomb. “It would help win the war, save U.S. lives, punish Japan for Pearl Harbor and war atrocities, help impose American terms in a surrender, justify the secret expenditures and, as a possible bonus, also frighten the Soviet Union and make the Soviets more tractable in the postwar period.”<sup>24</sup> That the Soviet factor played a part in the decisions of Truman and his war advisors seems at least possible, but subsequent historical scholarship suggests the anti-Soviet motive “did not make the crucial difference in U.S. decision-making.”<sup>25</sup> Rather, the overwhelming rationale for using the bomb was to shorten the war and avoid a land invasion by American troops of the Japanese home islands.

There are two points to emphasize after this review of the historical narrative surrounding the decision seventy-five years ago to use atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. First, the American

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<sup>21</sup>Barton Bernstein, “The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered,” *Foreign Affairs* 74, 1 (Jan-Feb 1995) 135-52 at 149.

<sup>22</sup>Bernstein, “The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered,” 149.

<sup>23</sup>Perhaps the best known revisionist account that focused on the Russian motive was Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965.

<sup>24</sup>Barton Bernstein, “Why We Dropped the Bomb,” History News Network (July 31, 2005), <https://historynewsnetwork.org/article/13531>

<sup>25</sup>Bernstein, “Why We Dropped the Bomb.” Bundy’s assessment is even more forceful; with regard to the claim that, “the desire to impress the Russians with the power of the bomb was a major factor in the decision to use it. This assertion is false, and the evidence to support it rests on inferences so stretched as to be a discredit both to the judgment of those who have argued in this fashion and the credulity of those who have accepted such arguments.” *Danger and Survival*, 88.

view that the atomic bomb was the decisive event that ended World War II is not supported by the historical record. Second, the initial popular enthusiasm within the U.S. for the bombings made it easy to avoid moral reflection on the nation's actions. That ought not be the case seventy-five years later.

### **The Atomic Bombings and Moral Reflection**

It is evident to any thoughtful person that reconciling the gospel ideals of Christian belief with the use of violent force and killing is not easily achieved. The process of moral reasoning that has tried to do that has been called the just war tradition. While there are many internal debates within that tradition—indeed the just war tradition may be considered a long, ongoing argument—there are foundational elements that are shared by adherents to the tradition. And one of those basic tenets is that violent force must be limited if it is to be legitimate; that is, violence must be restrained by ethical norms if it is to be morally permissible. Because violence is evil, there is a moral duty to avoid it as much as possible.

To understand the just war tradition's approach to thinking about the violence of war, it may be compared to two other approaches to war. A commentator on the viewpoint of the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe puts it this way: "The pacifist who abhors any killing in war and the realist who will accept any killing in war are both engaged in a similar project: the pacifist turns every such killing into murder; the realist turns every such murder into something justified by necessity." According to this view, both pacifist and realist regard all killing in war as simply murder. "The only difference is that the pacifist wants to draw from it the conclusion that you should never kill, while the realist wants to draw from it the conclusion that sometimes you should regard yourself as forced to murder."<sup>26</sup> Those who work with the just war tradition may have a variety of differences with each other, but what will unite them is the conviction that some killing in war is morally justifiable but not all killing is, and some killing in war is a crime but not all killing is a crime.

A danger often accompanying war is the onset of a moral blindness that prevents those on one side of the conflict from seeing the full humanity of those on the opposite side in the war. From biblical accounts of war to medieval crusades, and from obliteration bombing to terrorist assaults, there has always been the risk in war that we will

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<sup>26</sup>Brandon, Siris, <http://branemrys.blogspot.com/>

see some others as not being members of a common humanity that entitles them to moral respect and places restraints upon how a conflict should be conducted. It is the debates of the just war tradition where we find morally serious people attempting to discern what are the norms that guide us when armed force becomes an option: why and how may war be morally possible?

### **Determining and Protecting the Innocent**

When determining how to conduct war justly, a norm that has been at the heart of the just war tradition is that the innocent are to be immune from direct military attack. Originally, the idea of innocence under discussion was that of a subjective state, a person was not guilty of wrongdoing that might provide justification for an attack. This seems to be the way that Augustine and Aquinas thought about innocence, but neither went into detailed treatment of the innocent in war. After Aquinas, there is a lessening of interest in establishing subjective guilt or innocence and a shift to the objective fact of bearing or not bearing arms, of aiding or not in a war effort. And that eventually led to the international law norm of noncombatant immunity.

Hartigan summarizes the complex history: within the legal principle of noncombatant immunity is a strict moral norm, which has been held from Augustine through Vitoria<sup>27</sup> to our time and it is that “the innocent may never be directly slain under any circumstances or for any reason... at most their death may be an unintended simultaneous result of some other legitimate action.”<sup>28</sup> The influence of various humanitarian and religious movements, such as the Peace of God that identified protected social classes, e.g. serfs, monks, children, gradually led to a consensus by Vitoria’s time that the innocent who may not be directly attacked were identified as members of a class of persons called civilian non-combatants. It was possible to join the two groups, innocents and non-combatants, because in Vitoria’s time non-combatants were physically removed from active conflict across defined battlegrounds.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Francisco de Vitoria, a Spanish Dominican, was the founder of the Salamanca school of Thomist thinking. Among his important writings was *On the Law of War*, which influenced both Francisco Suarez and Hugo Grotius and the origins of international law on war. See F. Vitoria, “On the Law of War,” in A. Pagden & J. Lawrance, ed., *Vitoria: Political Writings*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, 293-328.

<sup>28</sup>Richard S. Hartigan, “Noncombatant Immunity: Reflections on Its Origins and Present Status,” *The Review of Politics* 29 (1967) 204-20, at 218.

<sup>29</sup>Hartigan, “Noncombatant Immunity,” 218.

In modern war, it has become far more difficult to presume the union of the two groups. Needed, it is argued, is a reexamination of just who should be presumed innocent among an enemy population. To claim all civilians are innocent is no longer adequate in an era when participation or non-participation in a conflict is difficult to parse. Is the civilian manager of a munitions factory or the civilian engineer designing tanks or fighter planes really a non-participant in a war effort? At the same time, "unless it is accepted that every single person in an enemy's population is per se 'guilty,' then it must be conceded that some are 'innocent,' and the imperative to refrain from slaying them intentionally becomes operative and obligatory."<sup>30</sup>

Writing more than two decades before Hartigan's historical argument for distinguishing between innocents and civilians engaged in the war effort, the moral theologian John Ford acknowledged the reality of modern war and the various degrees of participation that civilians may play in a nation's wars. Ford's focus was on obliteration bombing such as what happened at Dresden at the hands of the English RAF and American Air Force. The Jesuit moralist rebuked those "who seem to think that because we do not know exactly where to draw the line, therefore we have to act as if there was no line at all between innocence and guilt." Ford wanted to uphold the traditional ban on direct killing of the innocent and challenged the "common fallacy... that all is lost because there is a field of uncertainty to which our carefully formulated moral principle cannot be applied with precision."<sup>31</sup>

Echoing Ford's opinion about the necessity of drawing lines of distinction in modern warfare, the Oxford philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe expressed her opposition to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In reply to those who would claim it is impossible to draw such exact lines of discrimination in contemporary warfare, she wrote: "This is a common and absurd argument against drawing any line; it may be very difficult, and there are obviously borderline cases. But we have fallen into the way of drawing no line... Wherever the line is, certain things are certainly well to one side or the other of it."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Hartigan, "Noncombatant Immunity," 219.

<sup>31</sup>John Ford, SJ, "The Morality of Obliteration Bombing," *Theological Studies* 5 (1944) 261-309 at 281.

<sup>32</sup>Elizabeth Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree," was a privately published pamphlet by the author in 1957. Anscombe wrote her essay to protest Oxford University's decision to grant an honorary degree to President Truman. Anscombe opposed the award on the basis of Truman's decision to drop the A-bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The essay was re-published in Elizabeth Anscombe, *Ethics*,

To her mind, “with Hiroshima and Nagasaki we are not confronted with a borderline case. In the bombing of these cities it was certainly decided to kill the innocent as a means to an end.”<sup>33</sup>

In his article, Ford provided a long list of people in civilian roles that he suggested could not reasonably be included in the ranks of legitimate targets of aerial bombardment. Is a dressmaker a war participant? A piano tuner? Should upholsterers be viewed as permissible targets? How about window dressers? Sculptors? Are librarians to be treated as combatants? What about domestic servants or janitors? Ford provided a lengthy list that he thought constituted a significant portion of the population that ought to be presumed innocent and therefore immune from direct attack.<sup>34</sup>

Again, Anscombe makes a similar point to Ford about the “totalization” of war, implicating entire national populations as contributing to a war effort and thereby open to direct attack.

The civilian population, we were told, is really as much combatant as the fighting forces. The military strength of a nation includes its whole economic and social strength. Therefore the distinction between the people engaged in prosecuting the war and the population at large is unreal... The upshot was that it was senseless to draw any line between legitimate and illegitimate objects of attack... I am not sure how children and the aged fitted into this story.<sup>35</sup>

By the summer of 1945, the context for thinking about the decision to use atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was deeply flawed due to the abandonment of a fundamental claim of the just war tradition, that there is a line to be drawn between innocents and those liable to deliberate attack. During the course of World War II, civilian masses in cities had already become targets. Ford’s article in protest of obliteration bombing came before Hiroshima and was aimed mainly at the allied practice of bombing German cities indiscriminately. And Churchill’s use of the tactic was in response to the earlier actions of the German Luftwaffe over London. “The firebombing of Dresden had helped set a precedent for the U.S. air force, supported by the American people, to

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*Religion and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991, 62-71 at 67.

<sup>33</sup>Anscombe, “Mr. Truman’s Degree,” 64.

<sup>34</sup>For the full list, see Ford, “Obliteration Bombing,” 283-84. Ford also pointed out that categorizing as war participants, and therefore legitimate targets, any and everyone who plays a role in a nation’s war effort means, “that the civilian population of neutral countries are also aggressors on this theory—for they supply food and raw materials to the enemy—and so on *ad infinitum*” (see 284, note 52).

<sup>35</sup>Anscombe, “Mr. Truman’s Degree,” 63.

intentionally kill mass numbers of Japanese citizens. The earlier insistence on noncombatant immunity crumbled during the savage war."<sup>36</sup>

So it is no surprise that in the Pacific theatre, the U.S. operated under a policy that had become virtually total war. In the weeks prior to the atomic bombing, there had been a murderous air campaign of fire-bombing waged by the U.S. against many of the population centres in Japan. In fact, one of the reasons the targeting committee selected Hiroshima and Nagasaki to be on the potential target list was that so many other Japanese cities were already severely damaged and the bomb's psychological impact would not be as great if used on already devastated sites.<sup>37</sup>

A foundational norm within the moral reasoning process we call the just war tradition is that of discrimination, avoiding the intentional killing of innocents. Or, to put it in blunt terms, to fail to discriminate between innocents and legitimate targets of intentional killing is murder. To be clear, by innocents is meant "all those who are not fighting and not engaged in supplying those who are fighting with the means of fighting."<sup>38</sup> The term "innocent" in the just war tradition refers to those people who are "not harming," while those who are fighting are "harming" and "so they can be attacked; but if they surrender they become in this sense innocent and so may not be maltreated or killed."<sup>39</sup> This is why it is a war crime to kill prisoners of war.

Theorists within the just war tradition may argue over where precisely to draw the line as to what individuals or groups may belong to the innocent who are protected from direct attack, but there were surely thousands of such innocents in Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the time of the bombings. And those most intimately involved understood what was being targeted. When General Leslie Groves, the military head of the Manhattan Project, "laid down his

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<sup>36</sup>Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," 140; also see Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 63-68 for a more detailed narrative of how the bombing of innocent civilians at the outset of the war was seen "by American leaders to be both moral wickedness and military folly" and by the end of the war civilian deaths were "simply taken for granted or ignored" as the goal was to shorten the war (63, 65), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/08/hiroshima-nagasaki-atomic-bomb-anniversary/400448/>

<sup>37</sup>Paul Ham, "The Bureaucrats Who Singled Out Hiroshima for Destruction," *The Atlantic* (August 5, 2015).

<sup>38</sup>Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree," 67.

<sup>39</sup>Anscombe, "Mr. Truman's Degree," 67.

requirement for military targets big enough to show the power of the weapon, he clearly meant cities” in his instructions to those on the Target Committee. No one on that committee ever suggested another type of target, “and while every city proposed had quite traditional military objectives inside it... the true object of attack was the city itself.”<sup>40</sup> The obliteration bombings of Dresden and Tokyo, the two most destructive conventional attacks of the war, had psychologically prepared the Truman administration for doing what was thought to be necessary to shorten the war.

Accounts of the decision-making process reveal the moral issue never loomed large in the discussions. Even those with some sense of the troubling nature of city-bombing, like Secretary of War Henry Stimson and President Truman, managed to deceive themselves into thinking the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were focused on military targets not the cities’ populations.<sup>41</sup>

There are, of course, multiple theories of a just war within the tradition, but none simply ignores or eschews the standard of discrimination; that is, distinguishing between those who can be directly attacked and those who cannot be. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki made total nonsense of that vital moral norm for any supporter of the just war tradition. Granted the political pressures were heavy and the principal actors were making their decision in an already skewed moral context. And even if one grants that war often presents actors with choices, none of which are simply free of a measure of guilt, one must ask: “are there still a few moral nonnegotiables that set a line against evils for which guilt should not be accepted, and that can thereby rule out some choices? Killing massive numbers of people who are innocent, in the sense of not posing a proximate danger to anyone else, would seem to be an excellent candidate.”<sup>42</sup>

It is clear that a basic norm of the just war tradition was disregarded as the war continued and the American people, not only the military and civilian leadership, did not engage in notable dissent or moral debate in 1944 or 1945. It was not an environment in which careful moral reasoning was on display either in the policy debates among members of the Truman administration or in the public forum. The American people wanted to end the war as

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<sup>40</sup>Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 67

<sup>41</sup>Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 79.

<sup>42</sup>Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers*, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019, 295.

quickly as possible for that meant saving the lives of American soldiers. If the atomic bombings of two cities could end the conflict, there would be no real opposition to pursuing that path to Japan's surrender.

### **Terms of Surrender and Right Intent**

In addition to disregard for the innocents' right to immunity from direct attack, another serious concern to examine was the American demand for unconditional surrender to end the war. This was a major obstacle for the Japanese since there was a strong commitment to protect the emperor. We now know that during the summer of 1945 Foreign Minister Shigenori was seeking to communicate that for him and others, the only obstacle to peace was the absence in American statements about assurance on the emperor. Truman seemed open to the idea but his advisors were divided.

Preserving a role for the emperor would not have been a popular condition of surrender with the American public. A poll in late June of '45, asking what should be done with the emperor revealed 44% of Americans voting for execution or life imprisonment with another 11% calling for a war trial to decide his fate.<sup>43</sup> It cannot be known for certain as to whether the Japanese would have agreed to surrender if the Americans had made the offer to preserve the emperor, but what is known is that the offer was not made prior to dropping the bombs that killed so many.

What we also know is that the very demand for unconditional surrender violates a second traditional norm of the just war tradition, that of right intention. The aim of a just war is to fight no more war than is necessary, that is, to fight a limited war with no demand for absolute conquest of an enemy along with unconditional surrender. John Courtney Murray, the noted Jesuit theologian, has commented that one reason some critics of the just war tradition dismiss it, is because "it has not been made the basis for a sound critique of public policies and as a means for the formation of a right public opinion." He then cited as "a classic example," the lack of sustained criticism of the policy of unconditional surrender during World War II.<sup>44</sup> For Anscombe, "the insistence on unconditional surrender was the root of all evil," for it led to a willingness to countenance the "most ferocious methods of warfare." In her mind, "the proposal of an unlimited

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<sup>43</sup>Bundy, *Danger and Survival*, 83.

<sup>44</sup>John Courtney Murray, SJ, *We Hold These Truths*, Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1988, 265.

objective in war is stupid and barbarous.”<sup>45</sup> Yet, in 1945 that sort of criticism was rarely heard.

The cruel irony is that the end-result of the war was much the same as terms available before the use of the atomic bomb. The post-surrender terms of the treaty with Japan included a guarantee of a role for the emperor that might well have brought an end to the war without Hiroshima and Nagasaki being bombed. Truman, after the surrender, accepted the treaty’s terms and General Douglas MacArthur, too, wanted a role for the emperor if the post-war occupation was to succeed.

The idea of attaining a surrender from the Japanese without the use of atomic weapons is not limited to the issue of the role of the emperor. Besides modifying the terms of unconditional surrender, there were two other avenues to consider for ending the war. One was to continue “the strangling naval blockade” that was causing economic ruin for the Japanese. And this could have been paired with continued conventional bombing, although the firebombing of cities was also morally dreadful and should have been excluded in any strategy. The second avenue was to wait for the Soviet entry into the war. Stalin had promised to join the war in Asia by late summer and this, as was discussed earlier, would have collapsed Japan’s hopes for settling with the U.S. on more favourable terms. As Bernstein has suggested, “taken together, some of these alternatives – promising to retain the Japanese monarchy, awaiting the Soviets’ entry, and even more conventional bombing – very probably could have ended the war before the dreaded invasion.”<sup>46</sup>

Although it cannot be claimed as certain that such alternatives would have brought about Japan’s surrender, the historical fact is that no package of inducements to Japan was ever tried. And Bernstein, the Dean of American historians on the topic, apart from his view about the probability of stopping Hiroshima, also claims, “whatever one thinks about the necessity of the first A-bomb, the second – dropped on Nagasaki on August 9 – was almost certainly unnecessary.” Archival research on the Japanese government deliberations at the time makes that clear. And he concludes, “at least 35,000 Japanese and possibly almost twice that number, as well as several thousand Koreans, died unnecessarily in Nagasaki.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Anscombe, “Mr. Truman’s Degree,” 62.

<sup>46</sup>Bernstein, “The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered,” 150.

<sup>47</sup>Bernstein, “The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered,” 150.

### **The Myth of Proportionality**

Besides the gross violation of the duty to distinguish between innocent civilians and combatants, the unnecessary U.S. demand for unconditional surrender, and the failure to seriously pursue alternative measures to end the war, there is yet another troubling factor in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is the mythology surrounding the land invasion of Japan and the use of it as a case of “the end justifies the means” to argue for the American bombings. The revised historical narrative is clear that military planners did not envision anything close to the 500,000 American casualties alleged to be at risk, despite statements by Truman and others after Nagasaki. Recall, the invasion planners were working on the basis of two waves of invasion with a total of 25,000 to 46,000 American deaths envisioned.

The twin bombings brought on far more deaths, the vast majority of them civilian, and even if one grants not all civilians fall into the category of innocents, a large percentage did. In Hiroshima, “we have no real idea of how many died. Here statistics become mere guesswork. Estimates range from 80,000 to 200,000.” In the case of Nagasaki, “as at Hiroshima, we cannot compute the precise death toll. The guesstimate is between 50,000 and 100,000.” These numbers go higher if one counts subsequent years and those who died from radiation poisoning and other delayed bomb-related causes. Some accounts claim, “by 1950 the combined number of those killed by the blasts was 340,000,” with “half of those killed [dying] instantly.”<sup>48</sup>

The atomic bombings of two urban centres was a deliberate targeting of hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians in the name of saving what was assumed to be less than 50,000 American military. That is the true ratio that justified the bombings for those involved in the decision. By even the crassest utilitarian calculus, it is a hard sell. Hence, even on the basis of proportionality, an admittedly controverted principle within the just war tradition, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki would be morally condemned for their disproportionality in deaths caused versus those saved. Once the myth of a half million American casualties is acknowledged, the atomic bombings fail even by the standard of the end justifying the means.

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<sup>48</sup>Jonathan Tullock, “When Little Boy and Fatman Brought Hell to Japan,” *The Tablet* (August 10, 2019) 6-7.

## Conclusion

Over the course of seventy-five years there has been a clear decline in support among Americans for the atomic bombings. In 1945 a large majority of Americans approved of the use of the bombs, but that number, according to a recent study, stands at less than one-third of the public now in support of the bombings. The passage of time since the events, the death of veterans and the generations most affected by World War II, and the emotional distance from the horror of the war, all help to explain the decline in support. Some have suggested that in general, Americans have become less enthralled with nuclear weapons since the end of the Cold War.

Yet, the same essay that reported the decline in Americans' support for the first and only use of atomic weapons in war, also reveals that there remains a willingness among a majority of Americans to use nuclear weapons against a modern threat to the American military.<sup>49</sup> When asked a series of questions about a fictional scenario in which a war with Iran could be ended by using nuclear weapons against Iranian cities and thereby reducing American military casualties, it was clear to the interviewers that "the U.S. public's willingness to use nuclear weapons and deliberately kill foreign civilians has not changed as much since 1945 as many scholars have assumed."<sup>50</sup>

If U.S. military lives are at stake, the American public does not consider the first use of nuclear weapons to be a taboo, and also demonstrates a weak commitment to protecting the innocent. "Instead, a majority of Americans prioritize winning the war quickly and saving the lives of U.S. citizens, even if that means killing large numbers of foreign noncombatants."<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the researchers who set up the various scenarios found that a majority of Americans were willing to support a ratio of 1 American soldier saved for 100 Iranian civilians. "They were willing to kill 2 million Iranian civilians to save 20,000 U.S. soldiers."<sup>52</sup>

When Pope Francis called upon people to maintain the memory of what happened in Japan during August of 1945, he thought remembering those events would be able to awaken the conscience of humanity. Sadly, it has not been the case. There are only scattered small gatherings of Americans who commemorate the bombings each August. The United States has never acknowledged any wrongdoing

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<sup>49</sup>Sagan and Valentino, "Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran."

<sup>50</sup>Sagan and Valentino, "Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran," 75.

<sup>51</sup>Sagan and Valentino, "Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran," 77.

<sup>52</sup>Sagan and Valentino, "Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran," 78.

by its bombing, the nation has never betrayed any significant sense of guilt for the deliberate killing of innocents, and it was not until 2016 that a sitting President visited Hiroshima, yet made no apology.

The just war tradition is an ongoing debate about why and how war may be fought. Despite the numerous theories within the tradition that try to answer those questions, the intellectual challenge that the idea of a just war presents is not the major problem before us. Recalling the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we are reminded that the real problem is finding people who are so committed to the idea of limits to war that the act of deliberately killing innocents is unthinkable and never to be regarded as unfortunate collateral damage.

As J.C. Murray observed, the just war tradition must be a resource for moral formation not only of the military but the general population of a nation. Helping people resist ideas of retribution, hatred, ethnocentrism and nationalism should be a necessary aim for any formulation of the just war tradition. On the seventy-fifth anniversary of the atomic bombing, it is lamentable that “today, as in 1945, the U.S. public is unlikely to serve as a serious constraint on any president who might consider using nuclear weapons in the crucible of war.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup>Sagan and Valentino, “Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran,” 79.