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# 50 YEARS AFTER HIROSHIMA

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**I**n 1989 a young scholar named Jeff Smith published a book entitled *Unthinking the Unthinkable: Nuclear Weapons and Western Culture*, a book that received too little attention at the time or subsequently, for that matter. Dissatisfied with economic and psychological analyses of “the bomb,” Smith decided the discussion of nuclear weapons needed to be placed in a much longer historical perspective than the past fifty years. Beginning with the startling and nigh obscene fact that the first atomic test was code-named Trinity and was thought of by at least some of its participants in quasi-religious terms (the release of “forces heretofore reserved to the Almighty”), Smith notes that such language “expresses the feeling that atomic weapons are a radically new thing, so different from all other weapons and devices in the magnitude of their power as to be indescribable in everyday terms.” This tends to place nuclear weapons outside the bounds of rational discourse—we murmur about the ineffable, about horrors no words can describe.

But describe them we must and, in the process, engage in acts of demystification that put nuclear weapons back into history, back into the sphere of political contestation and debate. That I took to be Smith’s most salient point: take nuclear weapons off their quasi-metaphysical pedestal. Oddly enough, what might be called “nuclear exceptionalism” spurred a good bit of anti-nuclear politics. There is nothing more dangerous, many people argued, nothing more psychically corrupting, nothing more to be abhorred, and the like. This tended to draw a sharp line between nuclear weapons and all other kinds. Nuclear weapons were in a class by themselves, contrasted with the

all-purpose category of “conventional weapons.” As a result, these latter seemed less awful, despite the fact that the body counts from conventional destruction in World War II were far higher than those caused by the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

This brief argument against nuclear exceptionalism is meant to remind us of the multiple routes to high body counts. Consider, for example, the hideous bloodletting in Rwanda carried out by machete, a very old-fashioned instrument for hacking people to death. Consider concentration camps, systematic rape, rounding up and “disappearing” people, mass shootings in the forests—old fashioned methods of destruction, recently revived for the purpose of ethnic cleansing.

Why focus on nuclear weapons, then? If one strips away the eschatological fever that such a focus seems to invite, there is still ample reason to be interested, in part because of the very uniqueness of the weapon’s use—two times, fifty years ago, not since. In the meantime, our weapons technology has grown less blunt, less clumsy. The truth of the matter is we can now be much more precise in targeting, much more cautious in what we destroy and what we spare. The bombs used on Japan were not “smart” bombs: they obliterated in a horrific way. More horrific than the fire storms that ravaged Tokyo or Dresden? Not by an actual calculus of immediate loss of life. Yet we remain uniquely fascinated and horrified.

**A**s World War II recedes into the historic distance, the tendency for certain events to stand out, even to stand alone and somewhat untethered to

politics, grows apace, especially, or so I shall suggest, regarding the Hiroshima event. But stripped of their situatedness in time and place, terrible happenings become awfully abstract, grist for many mills. For example: in today's climate of cultural criticism, one hears the question: Who has a right to speak? Will it be revisionist historians or World War II vets; victims or victors; participants or bystanders? Who is authorized to define the bomb's meaning and purpose?

The Smithsonian Institution skirmish over the Enola Gay exhibition is but the latest, and one of the most bitter, of many controversies. But the question, in one form or another, has been there for a long time. I am sympathetic to the concerns expressed by veterans over the way in which the original text for the Smithsonian was cast—for the Japanese were by no means "innocent" defenders of a unique culture and nothing more in this matter. Still, a hard version of their claim—say Paul Fussell's insistence that only soldiers who were about to be sent to invade the Japanese mainland are now in a position to make strong arguments ("Thank God for the atom bomb")—goes too far. Fussell mocks historians who were infants in prams in 1945, who make pronouncements on the bomb today. But if one pushes this idea, it would mean the end of history and intellectual life altogether.

John Keegan wasn't at Agincourt, but has written vividly and brilliantly about it. As I note in my book, *Women and War*, Fussell's argument means that women by definition cannot write about wars since they haven't fought in them. They are history's prototypical noncombatants. (That is changing, in the United States at least, but not by much.) It would mean whites couldn't write about slavery—Eugene Genovese's classic would never have appeared. In truth, no one can claim to have a privileged position from which to proclaim the "last word" in the matter of the atomic bomb. We rightly accord great weight to what veterans and survivors have to say, but that isn't the same thing as giving them the only word or the final one.

What kept our preoccupation with nuclear weapons alive for so long was our ongoing fear that they *might* be used in a major strategic exchange between the two great superpowers. By contrast, the Holocaust, or the matter of genocide, is ever more vivid because we have seen so many subsequent genocidal initiatives—not abstractly

cast but concretely manifest. Inevitably, when we read about ethnic cleansing, our minds are carried back to events in Central Europe a half century ago. But, in part because of the embrace by so many of nuclear exceptionalism, the massive use of conventional weapons—say U.S. carpet bombing of Iraqi forces in the Gulf War—is dwarfed by comparison. (To be fair, our use of airpower in Iraq was designed to kill combatants, not non-combatants, but the sheer number of sorties and tons of ordnance was mind-boggling, yet all this quickly disappeared from our mental radar screens.

The victory of nuclear exceptionalism tends to decouple the use of "conventional" weapons from the use of atomic weaponry. Here the dominant discourse has virtually guaranteed discontinuity. In the matter of genocide, however, we routinely situate subsequent events in a comparative continuum with the horror of Nazi genocide. We don't say that we care less about what is happening in the Balkans because it comes nowhere near to what happened in Nazi-occupied Europe. But there is a distinct tendency to put conventional weapons and atomic weapons on two altogether separate tracks. This is very odd on the face of it.

**P**erhaps the best one can do so many years later is to keep atomic bombs in one's sight as a historical and political phenomenon. Without indulging in counter-factual games, it is important to ask whether things might have gone differently; what other options might have been present. How large a role did sheer technological drive play—"We've got these things and by god we're going to use them"—or our commitment to unconditional surrender, long suggested as a reason for U.S. slowness to respond to possible peace overtures? What ethical restraints persisted despite the war's toll on our collective moral wits? For example, *Commonweal*, the Catholic lay journal, condemned terror bombing in 1942, as did many other Catholic journals of opinion—on moral grounds. Before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Reinhold Niebuhr called the total war mentality "nauseous self-righteousness." The dropping of the bombs was an occasion for sorrow and criticism on the part of several leading Protestant and Catholic writers. *Commonweal* concluded its editorial condemning the atomic bombs in these words.

## 50 Years After Hiroshima

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For our war, for our purposes, to save American lives, we have reached the point where we say that anything goes. That is what the Germans said at the beginning of the war. Once we have won our war, we say that there must be international law. Undoubtedly. When it is created, Germans, Japanese, and Americans will remember with horror the days of their shame.

Well, we do not look back in horror, not as we should. We are not the Germans and not the Japanese, and we have less to answer for. But answer we should and must. The minority favoring ethical restraint was not the dominant voice, but it was an important voice and it should not be forgotten. Now that an era has ended—now that we have entered the long tunnel at the end of the light, as Václav Havel puts it—my hunch is that how we remember and what we remember of events in mid-century is bound to be altered. The civic energy that sustained our dominant “reading” of events is depleted.

Hiroshima seems long ago and far away. As the World War II generation dies—that generation of Americans that served so well and gave so

much—the passion will perhaps go out of this and other issues, like air escaping a punctured tire. The debates will become more abstract, more depersonalized, less interesting. Because Hiroshima, however hideous and—in my view—unjustified, can still be seen as an act of war, whereas the Nazi machinery of mechanized death seems something else altogether, my own sense is that interest in the bombings will wane over the next quarter-century. There will be good and bad reasons for that. The bad reason is the deepening of the view that what is done in the heat and fog of a terrible war cannot and should not be revisited critically and ethically (by contrast to tendentiously and with an eye to setting up new demons and angels—as in the Smithsonian fracas, which has only reinforced militant self-exculpation by those angered at the arch-revisionists). The good reason is that Hiroshima and Nagasaki must inevitably become reinserted in the warp and woof of history, not viewed as symbols hovering above the bloody ground that was World War II but as particularly powerful and tormenting events on that very ground.

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## John Rawls

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**T**he fiftieth year since the bombing of Hiroshima is a time to reflect about what one should think of it. Is it really a great wrong, as many now think, and many also thought then, or is it perhaps justified after all? I believe that both the fire-bombing of Japanese cities beginning in the spring of 1945 and the later atomic bombing of Hiroshima on August 6 were very great wrongs, and rightly seen as such. In order to support this opinion, I set out what I think to be the principles governing the conduct of war—*jus in bello*—of democratic peoples. These peoples<sup>1</sup> have different ends of war than nondemocratic, especially totalitarian, states,

such as Germany and Japan, which sought the domination and exploitation of subjected peoples, and in Germany's case, their enslavement if not extermination.

Although I cannot properly justify them here, I begin by setting out six principles and assumptions in support of these judgments. I hope they seem not unreasonable; and certainly they are familiar, as they are closely related to much traditional thought on this subject.

1. The aim of a just war waged by a decent democratic society is a just and lasting peace between peoples, especially with its present enemy.

2. A decent democratic society is fighting against a state that is not democratic. This follows from the fact that democratic peoples do not wage war against each other;<sup>2</sup> and since we are con-

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