

Ronald Takaki

“I would have dropped the bomb to save even one American life,” a fellow scholar argued at a conference. The comment stunned me into silence. In fact, I did not fully comprehend it until I returned to my hotel. Was there anything I could have said in reply, I wondered; was the moral divide between the two of us so deep that there was no possibility of discussion? As I flew home that afternoon, reflecting on that incident at 35,000 feet, I thought about the ferocious controversy at the Smithsonian and its debate over numbers. How many American military deaths would have been incurred in an invasion of Japan? One, forty thousand, or half a million?

“One” was my colleague’s hyperbole. “Half a million” was Harry Truman’s claim, made in the memoirs he published ten years after Hiroshima. “Forty thousand” was the estimate made by the Joint War Plans Committee in its top secret report of June 15, 1945. The Joint Chiefs of Staff met with Truman to discuss this report, and on the basis of the low casualty estimates, he authorized the invasion of Japan.

But, as I gazed at the continent below, I decided I did not want to get mired in the numbers debate. Wasn’t there a difference between civilian and military casualties? Japan, Germany, England, and the United States had blurred that line during World War II, before Hiroshima—at Nanjing, Coventry, Dresden, and Tokyo. The problem with the numbers game is that the massive and indiscriminate killing of civilians is never morally justifiable. And why argue over numbers when an invasion and the atomic bombing itself might not have even been militarily necessary?

Actually, at the time, General Dwight D. Eisenhower, General Douglas MacArthur, and Chief of Staff Admiral William Leahy agreed that an atomic attack on Japanese cities was militarily unnecessary. All of them believed that Japan had already been beaten and that the war would soon end. As early as June 1945, what remained to be resolved was how quickly and in what way. The

United States controlled both the timetable and the choice of means for ending the conflict.

By then, American policymakers knew that Japan was asking the Soviet Union to help negotiate a peace and was ready to surrender if it were allowed to keep the emperor. The demand for “unconditional surrender” had become a popular slogan, but within policymaking circles, the thinking on this issue was not inflexible. In June, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had approved a proposal for a conditional surrender.

But after the successful atomic explosion at Alamogordo on July 16, Truman and Secretary of State James Byrnes chose not to explore the possibility of a negotiated peace. They knew that they had a powerful weapon that they could deploy not only to defeat Japan but also to bully the Soviet Union into cooperation, even submission—a strategy that Gar Alperovitz has termed “atomic diplomacy.”

This cold war explanation, however, overlooks the significance of race in America’s history as well as in the decision to drop the bomb. What made it possible for Truman and Byrnes to think of unleashing a “combat demonstration” against Japanese civilians in order to show the new weapon to Stalin?

At the center of the fateful decision was Truman. Like many Americans, he found himself swept into the wartime maelstrom of anti-Japanese rage, driven by a fierce memory of Pearl Harbor and images of the Japanese as demons, savages, and beasts. But the hostility against the Japanese was pervasive in American culture long before December 7, 1941, and Truman was part of this culture. As a young man, Harry Truman had harbored prejudices. In a letter to his future wife, Bess, he wrote on June 22, 1911: “I think one man is as good as another so long as he’s honest and decent and not a nigger or Chinaman. Uncle Will [Young, a confederate veteran] says that the Lord made a white man of dust, a nigger from mud, then threw up what was left and it came down a

Chinaman. He does hate Chinese and Japs. So do I. It is race prejudice I guess. But I am strongly of the opinion that negroes ought to be in Africa, yellow men in Asia, and white men in Europe and America."

Truman had little in his social and intellectual experiences to challenge his stereotypes and prejudices. After the bombing of Hiroshima, Truman justified the devastation: "When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast."

After the war, Truman claimed he never lost any sleep over his decision, but actually he felt a troubling ambivalence. Although he had prejudices, Truman was aware of the fact that America, despite its history of racism, stood for certain great principles that had been forged in the American Revolution and the Civil War. Nazism, with its ideology of Aryan racial supremacy, was compelling Americans to rededicate themselves to their nation's highest principles.

President Roosevelt understood this imperative when he framed the country's war purpose: America stood for the "four freedoms" (freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear). Our commitment to these freedoms, Roosevelt explained, buttressed America's condemnation of racism. "The principle on which this country was founded and by which it has always been governed is that Americanism is a matter of mind and heart. Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry." Truman reaffirmed these American ideals. When he welcomed home the Japanese-American soldiers of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, he told them: "You fought for the free nations of the world . . . you fought not only the enemy, you fought prejudice—and you won."

After the destruction of Hiroshima, Truman showed a seemingly inordinate need to justify his decision, again and again, suggesting that it nagged at him. He seemed to be unable to deny completely the humanity of the enemy.

On August 9, after he had been urged to destroy Japan completely, Truman responded soberly in a private letter: "I know that Japan is a terribly cruel and uncivilized nation in warfare but I can't bring myself to believe that, because they are beasts, we should ourselves act in that same manner. For

myself I certainly regret the necessity of wiping out whole populations because of the 'pigheadedness' of leaders of a nation, and, for your information, I am not going to do it unless it is absolutely necessary. My object is to save as many American lives as possible but I also have a humane feeling for the women and children in Japan."

That very day, however, an atomic bomb destroyed Nagasaki. At Potsdam, Truman had told Stimson he hoped only one bomb would be dropped. He had not expected a second bomb to be dropped so soon after the attack on Hiroshima, and immediately ordered the military not to drop a third. He told Henry Wallace that "the thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible." He did not like the idea of killing "all those kids." For days afterward, Truman complained of terrible headaches. Wallace asked: "Physical or figurative?" Truman replied: "Both."

Truman's anguish was understandable. A thoughtful and sensitive man, he had seen that the world was hurtling toward an uncertain and fearful future. On July 16, while waiting for word from Alamogordo, Truman described in his diary the "absolute ruin" and the terrible scenes of war refugees he had witnessed in Berlin as he traveled to Potsdam. Truman then recorded his reflections on the world's long grim history of warfare: "I thought of Carthage, Baalbek, Jerusalem, Rome, Atlantis, Peking, Babylon, Nineveh, Scipio, Rameses II, Titus, Herman, Sherman, Jenghis Khan, Alexander, Darius the Great. But Hitler only destroyed Stalingrad—and Berlin. I hope for some sort of peace—but I fear that machines are ahead of morals by some centuries and when morals catch up perhaps there'll be no reason for any of it. I hope not. But we are only termites on a planet and maybe when we bore too deeply into the planet there'll [be] a reckoning—who knows?"

Haunted by a similar fear, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson also struggled to gain clarity on the moral issues. He had been a member of the Interim Committee, which made the recommendation to drop the bomb. During a meeting of this committee on June 1, 1945, according to J. Robert Oppenheimer, Stimson seemed melancholy. The secretary of war expressed dismay at the "appalling" lack of conscience and compassion ushered in by the war, reported Oppenheimer. Stimson

stated that he was disturbed by the “complacency, the indifference, and the silence with which we greeted the mass bombings in Europe, and, above all, Japan.” He said that he could not feel “exultant” about the bombings of Hamburg, Dresden, and Tokyo. At Potsdam, the secretary of war tried to persuade Truman to pursue a negotiated peace. Stimson refused to be driven by a rage for revenge, and did not want to add unnecessarily to the horror of the war.

Four days after the bombing of Hiroshima, Stimson reflected on the tragedy of the avoidable killing of so many people. In his diary, he recalled how at Potsdam he had advocated the “continuance” of the emperor with certain conditions. But “the President and Byrnes struck that out” of the Potsdam Declaration. Then Stimson noted the terrible influence of stereotypes: “There has been a good deal of uninformed agitation against the Emperor in this country mostly by people who know no more about Japan than has been given them by Gilbert and Sullivan’s ‘Mikado,’ and I found today that curiously enough it had gotten deeply embedded in the minds of influential people in the

State Department.” That day, the United States accepted an offer from Japan to surrender that implicitly allowed the emperor to remain.

Today, in our increasingly multicultural society, Hiroshima continues to intrude upon our consciousness: it is a past that is not even past, to borrow from Faulkner. The bombing of Hiroshima was the culmination of a crossing to a new level of international violence: the rules of warfare had been radically redefined during World War II. Recognizing this horror, Truman and Stimson experienced painful ambivalence: they sensed the tragic meaning of the destruction they were helping to unleash. They possessed a complexity of thought and a broad range of feelings that many of us, like my colleague at the conference, seem to lack. They had a perspective on the moral issue of war—what the acceptable conduct of warfare was *before* Hiroshima. Whether we will be able to recover that memory remains a challenge. Still we must make the effort—to examine as many of the facts as possible and also to make our own moral judgments about Hiroshima. Not to do so is to avoid responsibility.

Michael Walzer

Though I have argued for many years that the American use of atomic bombs against Japanese cities was wrong, I do not find myself much engaged by one of the questions it raises: should U.S. leaders apologize now to the Japanese people for what we did in 1945? Nor by the questions raised recently in Japan about apologies to the Korean and Chinese people. The wrongs that were done need to be admitted and confronted, but official apologies somehow seem an inadequate, perhaps even a perfunctory, way of doing this. Better, I think, that the U.S. government devote itself to creating the conditions for nuclear disarmament or, more immediately, to stopping the slaughter of civilians in places where we have influence or power. Better that the Japanese government act

strongly against anti-Korean prejudice and discrimination in contemporary Japan.

As Ian Buruma reports in his new book *The Wages of Guilt*, a large number of the victims of the Hiroshima bombing were Korean slave laborers at work in the city—who are unmentioned in any of the Japanese memorials. Surely Japan’s leaders should address that piece of their history before carrying diplomatic regrets to Seoul. Our own very belated decision to pay reparations to Japanese families interned during World War II is morally more important than any message that President Clinton might deliver even in Hiroshima itself.

But maybe this question about apology is simply a way of stirring up debate and reflection here