

Atomic Anniversary

by Allen Mendenhall

SIXTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, on August 6, the United States dropped the first offensive nuclear weapon in history. This bomb, code-named "Little Boy," killed around 140,000 people in Hiroshima, Japan. The U.S. military dropped the second and last nuclear weapon ever used in war, "Fat Man," three days later on nearby Nagasaki, killing approximately 39,000 people.

Whether these bombings were justified is a matter of dispute. As of 2005, only 57 percent of Americans approved of the attacks. Although a Democratic president (Harry Truman) authorized the bombings, more Republicans (87 percent) than Democrats (47 percent) support his decision.

Some believe that the use of atomic bombs on Japanese civilians was unnecessary, if not downright immoral. "If terrorism is the massacre of innocents to break the will of rulers," Pat Buchanan once asked, "were not Hiroshima and Nagasaki terrorism on a colossal scale?" Others contend that the bombings prevented further deaths (both Japanese and American), thwarted Soviet occupation, and unsettled Japanese nationalism, which was bound up with faith in the emperor's divinity. In the July 2009 issue of *Chronicles*, for instance, Roger D. McGrath argued that the bombings were justified because they immediately ended Japanese fighting, which would have persisted for months and possibly years. McGrath concluded that the bombs ultimately saved thousands of American and Japanese lives.

Perhaps so. One needn't look further than Guadalcanal and the like to see the disasters that a massive land invasion of Japan could have wrought. But McGrath's interpretation merely begs the question:

What were the moral implications of the bombings—not just for the United States and Japan but for the world?

The bombings represent a human tragedy on many fronts. By virtue of the fact that 180,000 people died in August 1945, the bombings stand as two of the greatest catastrophes in the history of the world. Yes, the Japanese were conditioned to fight to the very last soul, even to commit *hara kiri* rather than surrender or shame their country and themselves. And yes, the Japanese government was largely to blame for insisting on a course of action that was certain to lead to the mass deaths of both soldiers and civilians. But were the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki necessary? I suppose one could argue that. For them to have been necessary, however, speaks poorly of humanity itself. Among the trillions of lifeless spheres in the universe, Earth teems with life, and yet its history is full of killing. Perhaps, in the end, some good came from the fact that the bombings deterred future nuclear warfare. The world has suffered the use of atomic bombs, and never should again. On this atomic anniversary, we ought to consider the moral implications of war. We also ought to consider how the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki continue to shape American policy toward Japan.

After the bombings, the United States, in the person of Gen. Douglas MacArthur, and the Japanese, in the person of Prime Minister Kijuro Shidehara, inserted Article 9 into the new Japanese constitution. The clause explicitly renounced the maintaining of Japanese military forces. Japan, it proclaimed, could not resort to war to resolve foreign conflict. Japan's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) repeatedly tried to eliminate Article 9—or, failing that, to

reinterpret its language as banning offensive but not defensive weapons. The LDP's efforts failed, over and over.

U.S. troops have remained in Japan since World War II, although they now occupy peripheral territories such as Okinawa, which became part of Japan during her imperial ventures. Because Article 9 forbids most of the practices of a traditional military, the Japanese have watched the United States carry out activities that, if executed by the Japanese, would have violated the Japanese constitution. Nuclear-armed U.S. vessels docked in Japan during the Cold War, for instance, and not until former prime minister Yukio Hatoyama took office did the Japanese government reveal this secret. Previous prime ministers refused to release this information for fear of civil unrest. Paradoxically, the only country to have used nuclear weapons against its enemy was shipping nuclear weapons into the one-time enemy's borders.

Japan, perhaps more than any other nation, looks to history and tradition to explain and understand today's phenomena. Of course, Japan has been guilty of historical amnesia and, worse, revisionism. But most Japanese citizens maintain a respect for the past. Japan's 20th-century history was horrific, but the Japanese have learned from their mistakes and as a result have adopted a sober approach to international relations and a modest foreign policy. In a recent poll, Japan ranked second among nations in having a positive world influence.

Ashamed of their violent past, Japanese leaders since 1951—with the notable exception of proto-nationalist and historical-revisionist prime minister Shinzo Abe, whose tenure was short-lived (2006-07), in part because of his jingoism—have worked to reestablish Japan's credibility in the world and to promote and adhere to pacifist principles. The same cannot be said of the United States, which has used the successes of World War II as justifi-

cation for one foreign invasion after another. As Japan has become a satellite of U.S. power, the U.S. military has, in various ways, colonized or occupied other countries (in South America, the Pacific, the Middle East) and has presumed the willingness of Japanese citizens to host foreign troops within the borders of their country.

Okinawans and their neighbors have demanded the withdrawal of U.S. military forces. The current dispute over Marine Corps Air Station Futenma has drawn international attention to U.S. exploits in Japan—including rape, sexual assault, and other crimes—and has cost Hatoyama his job.

With regard to Futenma, compromise with Japan is not a last resort for the Obama administration. Obama may be even more delighted by war than his predecessor. As John Feffer explains (at *Tom-Dispatch.com*),

Under an agreement the George W. Bush administration reached with the previous Japanese government, the US was already planning to move most of the Marines now at Futenma to the island of Guam. Nonetheless, the Obama administration is insisting, over the protests of Okinawans and the objections of Tokyo, on completing that agreement by building a new partial replacement base in a less heavily populated part of Okinawa.

For 50 years, the U.S. government has taken Japanese support for granted, while the Japanese government has bent over backward to please the United States, going so far as to lie to its own people about secret deals that violated the national constitution. The United States has treated Japan like a pet, condescending to her on nearly all matters international. Japan, however, is one of the most powerful nations in the world, and one of the few whose retalia-

tions against the United States, economic or otherwise, would have devastating consequences for Americans.

Faced with the choice of appeasing her Asian neighbors or ignoring them in favor of the United States, Japan has opted for the former—in particular, for mending relations with China. The United States, having overextended herself in the Middle East and offended the majority of the world, has lost credibility in Asia. The Japanese do not wish to be associated with her—not anymore. And who can blame them? When American politicians on both the left and the right believe that colonialism is still a viable policy, when they invade sovereign countries, when they couch their rhetoric in terms of crusading ideological zeal, the world watches, listens, and turns its back.

For 50 years, Japan has stood with us, and U.S. leaders have taken advantage of this deference. But as a small group of disgruntled “conservatives” in Japan demands an amendment to Article 9 to allow for armament and militarization of their country, Washington should bear in mind one word: blowback. A time will come when the United States is no longer on top, when the now-passive Japan grows tired of serving a foreign nation. We have already seen the effects of blowback in the Middle East. We have yet to see how far-reaching these

effects can be when our allies and not just our enemies have had enough.

Americans still look to World War II to justify their military presence in Japan. Instead, we must own up to the present. We must work with Japan, listen to Japanese interests, and learn from Japan's vexed past. If Japan wants to elect left-wing DPJ leaders who will burden the Japanese economy, weaken Japanese industry, and embarrass the Japanese government, so be it. We should not use the occasion to deepen our involvement in a region that we don't, and don't care to, understand.

Imperial Japan, which lasted from roughly 1868 to 1945, is not a model to mimic but one to avoid. It brought about war, invasion, mass death, torture, rape, and occupation. The Empire of Japan fell long before my generation. And I'm afraid my generation has forgotten the evils of empire and has embraced imperialism as the American way.

On this atomic anniversary, it's not enough to remember those who died in Japan, or in the Pacific, or during World War II. We must honor them by learning from their mistakes.

Allen Mendenhall, an LL.M. candidate in transnational law at the Temple University Beasley School of Law, has lived, studied, and taught in Japan.



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