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‘Killing is Easy’: The Atomic Bomb and the Temptation of Terror

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‘The lesson we should learn from all this’, the atomic physicist Isidor Rabi remarked shortly after the explosion of two atomic bombs in August 1945, ‘[is] . . . how easy it is to kill people when you turn your mind to it. When you turn the resources of modern science to the problem of killing people, you realize how vulnerable they really are.’¹ While Rabi was referring specifically to advances in the technology of war, he was also painfully aware of the simultaneous collapse of morality that had allowed those technologies to be used.

The atom bomb is rightly seen as a weapon that revolutionized war and diplomacy. Analysis of its impact has, however, been confused by the context in which it emerged, namely the Cold War. It is not entirely clear whether the peaceful stalemate that characterized the period 1945–91 was the consequence of nuclear deterrence or simply a manifestation of older notions of the balance of power. Recently, for instance, John Mueller has argued rather convincingly that the United States and the USSR would have been unlikely to go to war with one another even had the atom bomb not existed.² While counterfactuals should perhaps be avoided, Mueller’s argument raises intriguing questions about the bomb’s actual impact. That impact should become clearer as time passes and distance from the Cold War lengthens. Rather than analysis being dominated by issues characteristic of a bygone era (like counterforce strategy), it could be that, over the longer term, the most important impact of the bomb will seem to be its seminal role in making killing easy. In other words, its true importance might lie in the fact that it represented a final surrender to barbarity—a climactic assertion of the right of a nation to slaughter civilians for purposes of national security.

So how did the world arrive at this terrible terminus? The process arguably began in the Great War, when bombs were first used for the sole purpose of

killing civilians. The war was not yet three weeks old when a Zeppelin hit Antwerp, killing six. Raids quickly intensified, with the British enduring the brunt of this menace. Since, however, cumbersome airships were prey to ground-based fire and fighter aircraft, a more effective method of delivering death soon emerged in the form of the Gotha bomber. A glimpse of the future was provided on 20 June 1917, when eighteen tiny coffins were arranged in front of the altar at All Saints Church, Poplar, London. The victims, most of them 5 years old when they died, were killed when a Gotha dropped a single 110-pound bomb on the Upper North Street School.

The War Minister, Lord Derby, reassured the British public that the Gotha raids, while tragic, were militarily insignificant since no soldiers had been killed. This was not simply bluster. The argument had some logic at a time when battlefields were still paramount. Since the Germans lacked a bomber force large enough to destroy British civilian morale, the bombs were simply canisters of spite. Nowadays, however, Derby's logic seems rather quaint.

The Gotha raids convinced the Italian General Giulio Douhet that a new type of warfare, dominated by air power, had emerged. 'To have command of the air means to be in a position to wield offensive power so great that it defies human imagination', he wrote in 1925. 'No longer can areas exist in which life can be lived in safety and tranquillity . . . the battlefield will be limited only by the boundaries of the nations at war, and all of their citizens will become combatants, since all of them will be exposed to the aerial offensives of the enemy. There will be no distinction any longer between soldiers and civilians.'³ Rather than interpreting Douhet's logic as a calamity to be avoided, nations saw instead a capability to be developed. Civilians first became targets not because it was sensible to kill them but because it was suddenly possible to do so. The British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin typified the easy acceptance of savagery: in future, he argued in 1932, war would mean that 'You have to kill more women and children more quickly than the enemy if you want to save yourselves'.⁴

International law was hastily formulated to try to close a barn door from which a warhorse had already bolted. Civilized war, it was still argued, should not involve civilians. The 1923 Hague convention prohibited 'aerial bombardment for the purpose of *terrorizing* the civilian population'. (The present participle is noteworthy.) Bombing cities was not, however, absolutely proscribed. Aerial bombing was 'legitimate only when directed at a military objective', which was defined as 'military forces; military works; military establishments or depots; [munitions] factories . . . lines of communication or transportation'.⁵ Through that loophole, a bomber could easily fly.

Once the possibility of killing civilians arose, justification was quickly formulated. War, it seemed, had evolved into a contest not between armies but between peoples. As the Great War had demonstrated, success required an efficient system of organizing the productive capacities of the nation. The

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concepts of 'total war' and the 'home front' emerged. Once the latter was defined, it became a target. Strategists argued that an enemy might be defeated by starving his people—or by killing workers in their beds. Failing that, it might be possible to frighten the enemy population so completely as to destroy their will to persist. Bombs seemed an efficient means of delivering terror.

On 1 September 1939, Franklin Roosevelt expressed concern about aerial bombing in the impending war. He feared that, if bombing went unchecked, 'hundreds of thousands of innocent human beings who have no responsibility for, and who are not even remotely participating in, the hostilities . . . will lose their lives'. He asked combatants 'to affirm [their] determination that [their] armed forces shall in no event, and under no circumstances, undertake the bombardment from the air of civilian populations'.⁶ Both Britain and Germany expressed agreement, the latter as it laid waste to Warsaw.

A fine line exists between indiscriminate—or 'terror'—bombing and the 'strategic' variety. Indiscriminate bombing means killing civilians for purposes of attrition—the killing is the object. Strategic bombing, on the other hand, arises from the logic that a nation's industry consists of both its factories *and* its workers. Thus, bombing homes can cripple industry in the same way as bombing plant. Two strategies are delivered by the same means, but one seems morally bankrupt, the other grimly sensible. The difference often comes down to perspective. In the Second World War, General Curtis LeMay justified the saturation bombing of Tokyo by arguing that there were no civilian areas; the city was one giant factory. Because children made fuses, it made sense to kill them.

The British claimed that Luftwaffe raids on London were barbaric. RAF raids on German cities, on the other hand, though much more intense, were presented as legitimate attacks upon the enemy's productive capacity. Air Marshal Arthur Harris, the *eminence grise* of British Bomber Command, also applied biblical logic: he who sows the wind should reap the whirlwind. Evil was defined by the first blow struck; guilt lay in initiative, not response. Thus, to bomb Germany day and night for four years seemed fitting retribution for the comparatively short blitz on Britain. That same logic would eventually characterize the 'war on terror', an asymmetric response to the atrocities of 11 September 2001.

Air strategists assumed that a sufficient number of bombs would break an enemy's spirit. When early raids failed to cause collapse, the tactic was not abandoned but intensified. Evidence that terror bombing did not work was ignored; air strategists convinced themselves that the enemy's breaking point would eventually be reached. This logic led seamlessly to the conclusion that an ideology or regime could be defeated if a sufficient number of its supporters were killed or terrorized. Missing from the analysis was any awareness of the fact that bombing might be counterproductive—terror might convince the wavering to support an otherwise loathsome regime. Though her evidence is

admittedly anecdotal, Christabel Bielenberg, an Englishwoman living in Germany during the war, found that support for the Nazis rose after each Allied air raid.⁷

Strategy was adapted to fit capability. People became legitimate targets because bombers were imprecise. While factories were difficult to hit, neighbourhoods were impossible to miss. The vulnerability of their bombers to German defences forced the British to bomb at night, with an inevitable decline in precision. The bombing campaign against Germany therefore evolved into a pattern of the British striking cities indiscriminately at night and the Americans attempting to hit precise military targets by day. Even though they were not entirely successful, Americans took moral pride in the fact that they had not lowered themselves to area bombing. That approach did not, however, work in Japan, where weather conditions made precision bombing virtually impossible. General Henry Arnold, the US Army Air Forces commander, grew increasingly frustrated at his arm's impotence. In desperation, he brought in LeMay, a man who, like Harris, felt no qualms about killing civilians. LeMay decided to bomb Japanese cities with B-29 bombers from low altitude at night. This implied an acceptance that the purpose was to kill people. In line with this strategy, a high proportion of incendiary bombs were dropped, in the interests of setting fire to Japanese houses, built primarily of wood. A morally questionable strategy was justified as preferable to invasion.

Progress in the technology of killing clearly demonstrated the importance of the laboratory to victory. An understanding of that importance inspired the race to harness atomic power. The first breakthroughs in this field indicated that a nuclear bomb constituted a decidedly different weapon from bombs already in existence. The differences were material *and* moral. Stated simply, the yield of an atomic weapon was too large for the pretence of precision to be maintained—its only legitimate target could be a city. That in turn implied that its main purpose was to kill civilians. As early as February 1940, the physicists Otto Frisch and Rudolf Peierls forecast that 'the bomb could probably not be used without killing large numbers of civilians, and this may make it unsuitable as a weapon'. They additionally warned that the radioactivity produced would continue to kill long after the moment of explosion. It was, they concluded, 'a weapon of unparalleled violence, a weapon of mass destruction such as the world had never seen'.⁸ Though the moral issues were vexing, power of that magnitude proved alluring.

The Manhattan Project scientists and engineers who developed the atomic bomb thought in terms of a deterrent, not a weapon. The device was, they convinced themselves, the only logical response to the grim possibility that the Germans might develop a Bomb of their own. Politicians, however, had difficulty imagining a hugely expensive weapon used only for deterrence. The Secretary of War Henry Stimson insisted that it was always Roosevelt's

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intention to use the Bomb as soon as it became available. 'At no time, from 1941 to 1945, did I ever hear it suggested by the President . . . that atomic energy should not be used in this war . . . on no other ground could the war-time expenditure of so much time and money be justified.'⁹ If Stimson's claim is true (and one suspects it is), the President who in 1939 had urged world leaders to avoid the wanton slaughter of civilians was, within a couple of years, fully prepared to use a weapon that had no other realistic purpose than to kill civilians.

When Harry Truman first learned of the bomb a few days after the death of Roosevelt in April 1945, he heartily welcomed this 'almost unbelievable destructive power'. The new president thought that 'the bomb might well put us in a position to dictate our own terms by the end of the war'.¹⁰ In other words, even before the first weapon was tested, Truman was already thinking of its potential as a tool of coercion. It could kill, yes, but it also promised to be a massive version of the pistol displayed prominently on the lawman's gunbelt. That seemed useful to a nation aspiring to be the world's policeman.

The first atomic bomb was tested at the Trinity site near Alamogordo, New Mexico, on 16 July 1945. While most Manhattan Project scientists rejoiced that the war in Japan was essentially over, a few worried about the Faustian deal they had struck. 'This is not a pleasant weapon we have produced', the metallurgist Cyril Smith remarked, 'a city is henceforth not the place in which to live'.¹¹ Leo Szilard, the driving force behind the effort to convince Roosevelt to commission the project, now felt deep dismay. 'In 1945, when we ceased worrying about what the Germans would do to us, we began to worry about what the . . . United States might do to other countries.'¹² He feared that using the bomb would weaken the American moral position and make it 'more difficult for us to live up to our responsibility of bringing the unloosened forces of destruction under control'.¹³

While some scientists felt moral torment, politicians saw only a new weapon in need of a role. When the Danish physicist Niels Bohr counselled Churchill against using the new device, the latter replied: 'I cannot see what you are talking about. After all, this new bomb is just going to be bigger than our present bombs. It involves no difference in the principles of war.'¹⁴ Szilard meanwhile sought out James Byrnes, shortly to become Secretary of State, only to find him excited about using the bomb to manipulate the Soviets. 'I was completely flabbergasted by the assumption that rattling the bomb might make Russia more manageable.'¹⁵ Byrnes was not alone in thinking along these lines. Stimson thought that the bomb might provide 'the opportunity to bring the world into a pattern in which the peace of the world and our civilization can be saved'.¹⁶ That delighted Truman, who was pleased that Stimson 'seemed at least as much concerned with the role of the atomic bomb in the shaping of history as in its capacity to shorten this war'.¹⁷

The extension of Soviet power as a result of the war frightened the Americans. At the Yalta Conference, Roosevelt and Churchill had secured a promise of Soviet participation in the Pacific War by granting Stalin important concessions including the maintenance of communist rule in Outer Mongolia, the lease of Port Arthur, and the annexation of the Kurile Islands. Byrnes privately regretted what seemed a swindle: 'somebody had made an awful mistake in bringing about a situation where Russia was permitted to come out of a war with the power she will have'.¹⁸ To the Truman administration, the bomb offered a magical way to escape the straitjacket of diplomacy. 'We have got to regain the lead and perhaps do it in a pretty rough and realistic way', Stimson argued on 14 May. Thanks to the bomb, the United States now held all the cards. 'I called it a royal straight flush and we mustn't be a fool about the way we play it.'¹⁹

Running parallel to the game of atomic poker was the more immediate concern of defeating Japan. Here, the advantages of the bomb seemed self-evident. General Leslie Groves, military head of the Manhattan Project, told Truman on 25 April 1945 that dropping the bomb on Japan would nullify the need for an invasion, and therefore save 1.5 million lives. That figure was plucked from mid-air. No less an authority than General George Marshall had estimated that an invasion might cost 40,000 American lives. But, as Truman saw it, that was 40,000 more than would die if the bomb was used to end the war. No other justification was needed.

Groves was already busy on the logistics. The Interim Committee advised on 31 May that 'we could not concentrate on a civilian area; but . . . we should seek to make a profound psychological impression on as many of the inhabitants as possible . . . the most desirable target would be a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers' houses'.²⁰ That recommendation straddles the old world and the new. The committee pretended that the bomb would be used on a military target, but widened the definition to accommodate extraordinary power. In other words, the committee had approved terror bombing but called it something else.

Mixed motives were even more clearly apparent in the recommendations of the Target Committee. It drew up four requirements. Firstly, since the effect of the bomb would primarily be blast and, secondarily, fire, the target had to consist of dense, highly flammable construction—namely houses. Secondly, the target should contain a built-up area of at least one square mile, as that would be the area of greatest explosive effect. That implied a city. Thirdly, it should have important strategic and military value, a requirement conveniently defined in vague terms. Finally, the target should have escaped earlier bombardment, so as to facilitate measurement of the bomb's effect. That suggested a site of low military importance, since strategically significant places had already been hit. Groves added a final proviso: the target should be a place 'the bombing of which would most adversely affect the will of the Japanese people to continue the war'.²¹

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Planners assumed that the atomic bomb would achieve what had previously proved impossible—it would kill with such ruthless efficiency that a resurgence of morale after the raid would be unlikely. The emphasis upon civilian morale is evident in three Target Committee recommendations: (a) that aiming points need not be specified, (b) that industrial targets need not be given high priority because they were too small and highly dispersed in Japan, and (c) that the bomb should be dropped in the centre of a city since bombing on the outskirts (where militarily important facilities were usually concentrated) would waste the bomb's power on sparsely inhabited areas. In other words, talk of military targets was mere window dressing designed to assuage the guilt of those who found terror bombing distasteful. This bothered Stimson, who had difficulty keeping pace with the erosion of morality. Worried that the United States might 'get the reputation for outdoing Hitler in atrocities', he wanted the bomb used exclusively on industrial targets.²² Marshall shared Stimson's unease, arguing that the bomb should be used on a specifically military target and only after a precise warning. Their wishes, however, were incompatible with the strategic consensus, not to mention with the comprehensive power of the bomb.

News of the Trinity test reached Truman while he was meeting Churchill and Stalin at Potsdam. At that summit, Stalin promised that the Soviets would attack Japan on 15 August. 'I've gotten what I came for', Truman wrote to his wife. 'We'll end the war a year sooner now, and think of the kids who won't be killed!'²³ Though reassured by Russian promises, he remained confident that the 'Japs will fold up before Russia comes in. I am sure they will when Manhattan appears over their homeland.'²⁴ That was Truman's dream scenario. Churchill noticed how he was a 'changed man' after hearing news of the Trinity test. 'He told the Russians just where they got on and off and generally bossed the whole meeting.'²⁵ The Prime Minister sensed ulterior motives. 'It is quite clear that the United States do not at the present time desire Russian participation in the war against Japan.'²⁶

'We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world', Truman told his diary. It seemed 'the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful'. In order to be useful, however, it had to be used. 'I have told . . . Stimson to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children.'²⁷ That entry suggests deep confusion on Truman's part about the power of his new weapon. He seems to have been unaware (or perhaps reluctant to accept) that, even if a 'purely military' target could be found, heavy civilian casualties would result.

In view of the way bombing had escalated during the war, using the bomb against Japan was not illogical. There remained, however, a crucial confusion of purpose. On the one hand, the Americans spoke of destroying important military targets; on the other, they confessed to a desire to destroy Japanese morale. Had the former aim been paramount, it seems unlikely that Hiroshima

would have been targeted and even less likely that the bomb would have been dropped in the residential centre of the city. Assessment of motives is further muddled by the additional aim of manipulating the Soviets—firstly, preventing their entry into the Pacific War, and, secondly, impressing upon them the unbridled nature of American power. While that aim might not have been predominant, neither was it insignificant. Two important questions hovered in mid-air, never explicitly stated. How many bombs would it take to destroy Japanese morale? Probably just one. How many bombs were necessary to frighten the Soviets? At least two.

As if to underline the terrible nature of total war, the atomic bomb dropped on 6 August 1945 exploded directly above Shima Hospital in Hiroshima. Assessments of its impact made no mention of industrial targets destroyed, but instead concentrated on the scale of human tragedy, with estimates hovering around 80,000 dead. As in any instance of bombing, there was no shortage of horror stories associated with the strike. What made the atomic bomb different, however, was the efficiency with which horror was produced.

Truman's thoughts about the bomb were no clearer after the first one was dropped. 'I know that Japan is a terribly cruel and uncivilized nation', he wrote to Senator Richard Russell on 9 August, 'but I can't bring myself to believe that, because they are beasts, we should ourselves act in the same manner'. He added: 'I certainly regret the necessity of wiping out whole populations because of the "pigheadedness" of the leaders of a nation . . . I am not going to do it unless it is absolutely necessary'.²⁸ On that same day, the President interrupted a long speech to the American people with two bizarre sentences about Hiroshima: 'The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians.'²⁹ The description of Hiroshima as a military base has continued to perplex historians. Could it be that he did not know that Hiroshima was a city? Or was he simply reluctant to face the reality of atomic power used for purposes of terror?

If, as seems likely, the Hiroshima bomb was intended to destroy the enemy's will, logic suggests that the Japanese should have been given time to digest the atomic message. Doing so was complicated because the communications system was in chaos. The Americans helped realization along by dropping leaflets on Japanese cities. But this took time, and the United States was in a hurry, since the date of the Soviet invasion was rapidly approaching. In any case, in order to demonstrate limitless power (to the Soviets in particular), the Americans had to suggest that they possessed a limitless supply of atomic weapons. One bomb alone would not send that message, but two might. The original intention was for a second strike on 11 August. It is entirely likely that five days of reflection would have caused the Japanese to surrender, especially since they had shown a willingness to accept conditional terms *before* Hiroshima. Since, however, bad weather was

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forecast from 10 August, the mission was moved forward two days, to 9 August.

On that day, Nagasaki was hit. Perhaps 40,000 were killed instantly; another 30,000 died by the end of the year. On 10 August, the Japanese agreed to surrender, though they refused to accept American demands for the Emperor to be deposed. On the assumption that Japanese terms would be rejected, Groves prepared a third strike. Truman was at first inclined to allow Groves to go ahead, but on reflection decided to stop the bombing. According to Henry Wallace, his Commerce Secretary, 'He said the thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible. He didn't like the idea of killing, as he said, "all those kids".'³⁰ Truman accepted conditional surrender, in other words, the same terms the Japanese had been prepared to offer before Hiroshima.

Back in America, the news brought profound relief. Polls showed about 85 per cent approval of the bombings, with some enthusiasm for further strikes. Significant reservations were, however, expressed. The left-wing commentator Dwight Macdonald regretted America's 'decline to barbarism' while, on the right, David Lawrence argued that 'Military necessity . . . will never erase from our minds the simple truth that we, of all civilized nations . . . did not hesitate to employ the most destructive weapon of all times indiscriminately against men, women and children.'³¹ The prominent clergyman Samuel McCrea Cavert protested to Truman that the 'necessarily indiscriminate' effect of the atomic bomb 'sets [an] extremely dangerous precedent for [the] future of mankind'. Truman replied with characteristic bluntness, reminding Cavert of Pearl Harbor and the Bataan death march. 'When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast.'³²

A year after the bombing, Admiral William Halsey, the Third Fleet commander, publicly argued that the scientists 'had a toy and they wanted to try it out . . . The first atomic bomb was an unnecessary experiment. . . . It was a mistake ever to drop it.'³³ That was fair criticism wrongly targeted, since it was not the scientists, but politicians and soldiers, who had pushed for deployment. That was certainly General Dwight Eisenhower's judgement; he protested that 'the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing'.³⁴ The Strategic Bombing Survey (SBS), released in June 1946, similarly concluded that 'certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated'.³⁵ If the authors of the SBS were right, the bombs shortened the war by at most a few months. In this light, Hiroshima seems unnecessary, perhaps even wanton. Nagasaki, on the other hand, seems an atrocity. With typical acuity, Szilard proposed a scenario in which Germany beat the Americans to the bomb, dropped two of them, but still managed to lose the war. 'Can anyone doubt that we would then have defined the dropping of atomic bombs on cities

as a war crime, and that we would have sentenced the Germans who were guilty of this crime to death at Nuremberg and hanged them?’ Telford Taylor, the chief prosecutor at Nuremberg, confessed that he had ‘never heard a plausible justification of Nagasaki’. To him, it seemed a war crime.³⁶

Truman repeated a standard refrain: ‘Dropping the bombs ended the war [and] saved lives.’ As for alleged ulterior motives, he insisted that ‘My objective was . . . a military blow to create a military surrender . . . That is all I had in mind.’³⁷ As the years passed, the number of lives supposedly saved remained monumental. ‘I knew what I was doing when I stopped the war that would have killed a half million youngsters on both sides if those bombs had not been dropped’, Truman wrote in 1963. ‘I have no regrets and, under the same circumstances, I would do it again.’³⁸ Like Truman, most Americans took solace in the assumption that, while their power was ruthless, their cause was just. As the *Chicago Tribune* put it: ‘Being merciless, [we] were merciful.’ A cartoon showed a dove flying over Japan, an atom bomb in its beak.³⁹

Stalin saw things differently. ‘Hiroshima has shaken the world’, he remarked. ‘The balance has been destroyed.’ His foreign secretary Vyacheslav Molotov felt that the bombings ‘were, of course, not against Japan, but against the Soviet Union’. He thought Truman was essentially saying ‘see, remember what we have. You don’t have the atomic bomb, but we do’.⁴⁰ Alexander Werth, the *Sunday Times* correspondent in Moscow, recalled that Hiroshima and Nagasaki ‘had an acutely depressing effect on everybody. It was clearly realized that this was a New Fact in the world’s power politics, that the bomb constituted a threat to Russia, and some Russian pessimists . . . dismally remarked that Russia’s desperately hard victory over Germany was now “as good as wasted”’.⁴¹

Stalin understood that the atomic bomb was a weapon of terror from which the Americans would extract maximum advantage. That strategy was apparent when Foreign Ministers met in London in early September 1945 to discuss the post-war settlement. Before the conference, Stimson expressed unease that Byrnes ‘[has] the bomb in his hip pocket, so to speak, as a great weapon to get through the thing’.⁴² With remarkable synchronicity, during the conference Byrnes sneered at Molotov: ‘You don’t know southerners. We carry our artillery in our pocket. If you don’t . . . get down to work, I’m going to pull an atomic bomb out of my hip pocket and let you have it.’⁴³ Molotov, under strict instructions from Stalin not to show fear, simply chuckled. A short time later, he warned the United States that ‘there can be no large-scale technological secrets that can remain the property of any one country . . . therefore the discovery of atomic energy must not encourage . . . enthusiasm for using this discovery in a foreign-policy power game’.⁴⁴ In other words, bombs would breed bombs.

Byrnes subsequently concluded that the Soviets were ‘stubborn, obstinate, and they don’t scare’.⁴⁵ Rather than abandoning the terror tactic, however, the Americans decided to intensify it through a bold demonstration of their

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might. In July 1946, two tests of atomic weapons were carried out in Bikini Atoll, with hundreds of foreign observers invited along for the show. The official explanation held that the tests were designed to amass data about the new weapon. Cynics, however, suspected that the real purpose was swagger. Several members of Congress openly condemned the tests, and disgruntled scientists criticized the government for flexing its nuclear muscles at a particularly sensitive time. Even Byrnes complained that Bikini rendered negotiation with the Soviets much more complicated.

The American decision to explode the bombs among surplus ships in the atoll badly backfired because deep water masked the weapon's true power. That, however, did not prevent the Soviets from expressing annoyance at the Americans' manipulative tactics. 'The atomic bomb at Bikini . . . explode[d] something more important than a couple of out-of-date warships', a Soviet observer complained. 'It fundamentally undermined the belief in the seriousness of American talk about atomic disarmament.'⁴⁶ Had they been sufficiently perceptive, the Americans might have learned a valuable lesson about using fear to coerce. Stalin correctly calculated that the United States did not have enough bombs to destroy the Soviet Union. 'They cannot decide the outcome of a war', he argued. 'Atomic bombs are quite insufficient for that.'⁴⁷ American intimidation simply encouraged greater Soviet intransigence, with Stalin even more determined to join the nuclear club.⁴⁸ As Stanley Baldwin recognized well before the advent of nuclear weapons: 'Fear is a very dangerous thing. It is quite true that it may act as a deterrent in people's minds against war, but it is much more likely to act to make them want to increase armaments to protect them against the terrors that they know may be launched against them.'⁴⁹

The Americans were struggling to come to terms with the new world that had dawned. On 30 June 1947, the Joint Chiefs of Staff Evaluation Board for Operation Crossroads directed its attention to the Bomb's potential, both as a threat and as a tool. Its report, entitled *The Evaluation of the Atomic Bomb as a Military Weapon*, foretold the way the United States would wield power in the post-war world. To the authors of that report, the bomb was, quite simply, a 'threat to mankind' which had fundamentally altered conventional standards of risk assessment.⁵⁰ Huge advantage seemed to lie in striking first with nuclear weapons. This implied:

a consequential revision of our traditional attitudes toward what constitutes acts of aggression . . . Our policy of national defense must provide for the employment of every practical means to prevent surprise attack. Offensive measures will be the only generally effective means of defense, and the United States must be prepared to employ them before a potential enemy can inflict significant damage upon us.⁵¹

In the past, American military power had been deployed in response to actual attacks. But since a single attack could now kill 100,000 people in

seconds, it seemed prudent to be more proactive. 'It is necessary that, while adhering . . . to our historic policy of non-aggression, we revise past definitions of what constitutes aggression.' The duty of the military would henceforth be 'to defend the country against imminent or incipient atomic weapon attack'.⁵² The mere manufacture of nuclear weapons by another power, or even the procurement of fissile materials, seemed grounds for action.⁵³ In line with this thinking, Groves advocated pre-emptive nuclear strikes against any hostile power about to develop a nuclear capacity. In time, the logic of pre-emption would be extended towards other threats, not specifically nuclear ones. In other words, the rationale that justified the 2003 attack on Iraq was first explicitly expressed in 1947.

With obscene understatement, the Crossroads report concluded that 'From a military viewpoint, the atomic bomb's ability to kill human beings or to impair, through injury, their ability to make war is of paramount importance.'⁵⁴ In other words, the Bomb implied acceptance of the notion that civilian populations were now legitimate targets. To this end, the Bikini tests provided guidance on maximizing savagery:

TEST BAKER gave evidence that the detonation of a bomb in a body of water contiguous to a city would vastly enhance its radiation effects by the creation of a base surge whose mist, contaminated with fission products, and dispersed by wind over great areas, would have not only an immediately lethal effect, but would establish a long term hazard through the contamination of structures by the deposition of radioactive particles.⁵⁵

The advantage of radiation, the report suggested, was not just that it killed but also that it demoralized those it did not immediately kill. Analysts cast a cold eye on the implied opportunities:

multiple disaster . . . would befall a modern city, blasted by one or more atomic bombs and enveloped by radioactive mists. Of the survivors in contaminated areas, some would be doomed to die of radiation sickness in hours, some in days, and others in years. But, these areas, irregular in size and shape, as wind and topography might form them, would have no visible boundaries. No survivor could be certain he was not among the doomed and so, added to every terror of the moment, thousands would be stricken with a fear of death and the uncertainty of the time of its arrival.⁵⁶

The bomb's effect would quickly spread to areas not immediately affected by blast or heat. Panic would extend inexorably outwards on a tide of shattered refugees. 'Thousands, perhaps millions . . . would rush from the city in panic, breaking down remaining transportation facilities, congesting highways, and creating in their flight new hazards to life.' These fugitives would expand the chaos; their 'contaminated clothing and any goods they carried could establish in others the fear of dangerous radioactivity, thus creating a unique psychological hazard'.⁵⁷

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Throughout the report, strategic possibilities were discussed with respect not only to the threats Americans might face but also to the opportunities they might exploit. It is not entirely clear, for instance, whether the following paragraph sought to expose a danger or to explore an option:

It cannot be assumed that in a future war, a participant, with a range of choice, will rely altogether upon a single weapon of mass destruction. Driven by the necessity of overwhelming his adversary, lest he himself be overwhelmed, a combatant might well choose to compound the horror of an atomic bomb attack with the simultaneous delivery of pathogenic agents which would insure that frightened fugitives would spread, not only their panic, but epidemic disease as well.⁵⁸

In a massive nuclear attack, the report concluded, 'of primary military concern will be the bomb's potentiality to break the will of nations and of peoples by the stimulation of man's primordial fears, those of the unknown, the invisible, the mysterious'.⁵⁹

The Crossroads report reveals, in striking fashion, the easy acceptance of a level of barbarity that would have been considered abhorrent only a few years earlier. Strategists dispensed with the attempt to justify civilian casualties with reference to military necessity; killing kids was no longer accident but object. Those who criticized this descent into savagery were dismissed as naïve or un-American (Szilard and Oppenheimer were early additions to the FBI's list of suspected subversives). The need to prepare for this new type of warfare, including the stockpiling of chemical and biological weapons, was justified by the assumption that evil enemies were already doing so. That need to pre-empt had originally been the driving force behind the building of the atomic bomb, and would continue to fuel the relentless proliferation of armaments in the post-war period. Moral qualms were smothered under a blanket assumption that desperate measures were necessary to defend American ideals.

When opportunities for setting a moral example occasionally arose, the United States chose instead cold, hard scepticism. A case in point was the decision to develop the hydrogen bomb, or 'Super'. On 30 October 1949, the General Advisory Committee (GAC), chaired by Oppenheimer, expressed unanimous opposition to the thermonuclear bomb for the simple reason that it had no purpose other than to kill civilians. 'It is clear', the GAC argued, 'that . . . it is not a weapon which can be used exclusively for the destruction of material installations of military or semi-military purposes. Its use therefore carries much further than the atomic bomb itself the policy of exterminating civilian populations.'⁶⁰ The GAC argued that the hydrogen bomb had no strategic utility since the Soviet Union had only two cities—Moscow and Leningrad—of sufficient size to justify such a large bomb. In other words, everything the Super could achieve could be done more effectively by smaller and cheaper atomic weapons.

The GAC argued, with considerable logic, that weapons were being developed not because they made strategic sense but simply because of their unbridled capacity to kill. Enrico Fermi and Isidor Rabi voiced the fiercest outrage, arguing that ‘by its very nature’, the Super ‘cannot be confined to a military objective but becomes a weapon . . . of genocide’. For that reason, it ‘cannot be justified on any ethical ground. . . . Its use would put the United States in a bad moral position relative to the peoples of the world’.⁶¹ The other committee members agreed that the United States stood on the banks of a moral Rubicon:

Let it be clearly realized that this is a super weapon; it is in a totally different category from an atomic bomb . . . reasonable people the world over would realize that the existence of a weapon of this type whose power of destruction is essentially unlimited represents a threat to the future of the human race which is intolerable. Thus we believe that the psychological effect of the weapon in our hands would be adverse to our interest.⁶²

The GAC thought that the weapon offered an opportunity to reject escalation of the arms race—to provide ‘by example some limitations on the totality of war and thus of limiting the fear and arousing the hopes of mankind’.⁶³ Rabi and Fermi thought that the President should ‘tell the American public, and the world, that we think it wrong on fundamental ethical principles to initiate a program of development’.⁶⁴ An American refusal might, they believed, kick-start arms control negotiations by setting an important moral example. The gesture seemed worth the risk because the weapon itself carried no strategic advantage. For that suggestion, Rabi and Fermi were dismissed as hopelessly naïve.

Truman’s decision to develop the Super was based on very simple logic: the weapon—no matter how horrific it might be—should be built not because it was necessary but because it was possible. That brought a blistering rebuke from the eminent nuclear physicist Hans Bethe:

The usual argument . . . is that we are fighting against a country which denies all the human values we cherish and that any weapon, however terrible, must be used to prevent that country and its creed from dominating the world. It is argued that it would be better for us to lose our lives than our liberty; and this I personally agree with. But I believe that . . . we would lose far more than our lives in a war fought with hydrogen bombs, that we would in fact lose all our liberties and human values at the same time, and so thoroughly that we would not recover them for an unforeseeably long time.

We believe in peace based on mutual trust. Shall we achieve it by using hydrogen bombs? Shall we convince the Russians of the value of the individual by killing millions of them? If we fight a war and we win it with H-bombs, what history will remember is *not* the ideals we were fighting for but the method we used to accomplish them. Those methods will be compared to the warfare of Genghis Khan, who ruthlessly killed every last inhabitant of Persia.⁶⁵

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These criticisms were shouted into a vacuum. For most Americans, the logic of bigness was inescapable. In an atmosphere of virulent anti-Communism, an open debate about military power could not thrive.

The Cold War had a way of vaporizing subtlety. The simple logic of the playground usually prevailed. At the time, developing the hydrogen bomb made perfect sense, since naked power seemed all-important. Twenty years after the end of the Cold War, however, it is possible to separate atomic rationale from the weapons themselves and, in the process, recognize the momentous nature of decisions made. While the atom bomb was never again used in anger after 1945, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are nevertheless important as a surrender to the temptation of terror. The striking feature of the period 1945–9 is the number of times the United States, when offered an opportunity to step back from the brink, chose instead to enhance its capacity for terror. American assumption of virtue provided redemption for what once seemed barbaric.

On 1 March 1955, Churchill remarked on the 'sublime irony' that, in the Cold War, 'safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation'.⁶⁶ Churchill was talking about the balance of terror which, thanks to atomic weapons, seemed the best guarantee of peace and security. In time, however, the faith in terror encouraged an uninhibited and unilateral deployment of it as an instrument of state policy. In this sense, Hiroshima and Nagasaki confirmed a new way of war in which it had become perfectly acceptable to slaughter innocent civilians for purposes of national security. Running parallel to that belief was the supposition that America was justified to attack pre-emptively if a threat was perceived. Strategic planners took solace in the assumption that evil rested with the first sin, never with the response to it. The implications of those beliefs, barely discussed at the time, are painfully evident today. Bethe's protest quoted above seems agonizingly relevant to the twenty-first century. 'Shall we convince the Russians of the value of the individual by killing millions of them?', he had asked. For Russians, substitute Vietnamese, Iraqis, or Afghans. 'What history will remember is *not* the ideals we were fighting for but the method we used to accomplish them.'⁶⁷ At the time, it seemed that Bethe was writing about hydrogen bombs. In fact, he had something more fundamental in mind.

NOTES

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