

THE MORAL LESSON OF HIROSHIMA

by John David Lewis | 29 Apr 2006

On August 6, 1945 the American Air Force incinerated Hiroshima, Japan with an atomic bomb. On August 9 Nagasaki was obliterated. The fireballs killed some 175,000 people. They followed months of horror, when American airplanes firebombed civilians and reduced cities to rubble. Facing extermination, the Japanese surrendered unconditionally. The invasion of Japan was cancelled, and countless American lives were saved. The Japanese accepted military occupation, embraced a constitutional government, and renounced war permanently. The effects were so beneficent, so wide-ranging and so long-term, that the bombings must be ranked among the most moral acts ever committed.

The bombings have been called many things—but moral? The purpose of morality, wrote Ayn Rand, is not to suffer and die, but to prosper and live.

How can death on such a scale be considered moral?

The answer begins with Japanese culture. World War II in the Pacific was launched by a nation that esteemed everything hostile to human life.

Japan's religious-political philosophy held the emperor as a god, subordinated the individual to the state, elevated ritual over rational thought, and adopted suicide as a path to honor. This was truly a Morality of Death. It had gripped Japanese society for three generations. Japan's war with Russia had ended in 1905 with a negotiated treaty, which left Japan's militaristic culture intact. The motivations for war were emboldened, and the next generation broke the treaty by attacking Manchuria in 1931 (which was not caused by the oil embargo of 1941).

It was after Japan attacked America that America waged war against Japan—a proper moral response to the violence Japan had initiated. Despite three and a half years of slaughter, surrender was not at hand in mid-1945. Over six million Japanese were still in Asia. Some 12,000 Americans had died on Okinawa alone. Many Japanese leaders hoped to kill enough Americans during an invasion to convince them that the cost was too high. A relentless “Die for the Emperor” propaganda campaign had motivated many Japanese civilians to fight to the death. Volunteers lined up for kamikaze “Divine Wind” suicide missions. Hope of victory kept the Japanese cause alive, until hopeless prostration before American air attacks made the abject renunciation of all war

the only alternative to suicide. The Japanese had to choose between the morality of death, and the morality of life.

The bombings marked America's total victory over a militaristic culture that had murdered millions. To return an entire nation to morality, the Japanese had to be shown the literal meaning of the war they had waged against others. The abstraction "war," the propaganda of their leaders, their twisted samurai "honor," their desire to die for the emperor—all of it had to be given concrete form, and thrown in their faces. This is what firebombing Japanese cities accomplished. It showed the Japanese that "this"—point to burning buildings, screaming children scarred unmercifully, piles of corpses, the promise of starvation—"this is what you have done to others. Now it has come for you. Give it up, or die." This was the only way to show them the true nature of their philosophy, and to beat the truth of the defeat into them.

Yes, Japan was beaten in July of 1945—but had not surrendered. A defeat is a fact; an aggressor's ability to fight effectively is destroyed.

Surrender is a decision, by the political leadership and the dominant voices in the culture, to recognize the fact of defeat. Surrender is an admission of impotence, the collapse of all hope for victory, and the permanent renunciation of aggression. Such recognition of reality is the first step towards a return to morality. Under the shock of defeat, a stunned silence results. Military officers no longer plan for victory; women no longer bear children for the Reich; young boys no longer play samurai and dream of dying for the emperor—children no longer memorize sword verses from the Koran and pledge themselves to jihad.

To achieve this, the victor must be intransigent. He does not accept terms; he demands prostrate surrender, or death, for everyone if necessary.

Had the United States negotiated in 1945, Japanese troops would have returned to a homeland free of foreign control, met by civilians who had not confronted defeat, under the same leaders who had taken them to war. A negotiated peace would have failed to discredit the ideology of war, and would have left the motivations for the next war intact. We might have fought the Japanese Empire again, twenty years later. Fortunately, the Americans were in no mind to compromise.

President Truman demonstrated his willingness to bomb the Japanese out of existence if they did not surrender. The Potsdam Declaration of July 26, 1945 is stark: "The result of the futile and senseless German resistance to the might of

the aroused free peoples of the world stands forth in awful clarity as an example to the people of Japan . . . Following are our terms.

We will not deviate from them. There are no alternatives. We shall brook no delay . . . We call upon the government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces . . . The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction.”

The approach worked brilliantly. After the bombs, the Japanese chose wisely.

The method was brutally violent, as it had to be—because the war unleashed by Japan was brutally violent, and only a brutal action could demonstrate its nature. To have shielded Japanese citizens from the meaning of their own actions—the Rape of Nanking and the Bataan Death March—would have been a massive act of dishonesty. It would have left the Japanese unable to reject military aggression the next time it was offered as an elixir of glory.

After the war, many returning Japanese troops were welcomed by their countrymen not as heroes, but with derision. The imperial cause was recognized as bankrupt, and the actions of its soldiers worthy of contempt.

Forced to confront the reality of what they had done, a sense of morality had returned to Japan.

There can be no higher moral action by a nation than to destroy an aggressive dictatorship, to permanently discredit the enemy’s ideology, to stand guard while a replacement is crafted, and then to greet new friends on proper terms. Let those who today march for peace in Germany and Japan admit that their grandparents once marched as passionately for war, and that only total defeat could force them to re-think their place in the world and offer their children something better. Let them thank heaven—the United States—for the bomb.

Some did just that. Hisatsune Sakomizu, chief cabinet secretary of Japan, said after the war: “The atomic bomb was a golden opportunity given by Heaven for Japan to end the war.” He wanted to look like a peaceful man—which became a sensible position only after the Americans had won.

Okura Kimmochi, president of the Technological Research Mobilization Office, wrote before the surrender: “I think it is better for our country to suffer a total defeat than to win total victory . . . in the case of Japan’s total defeat, the armed forces would be abolished, but the Japanese people will rise to the occasion during the next several decades to reform themselves into a truly splendid people . . . the great humiliation [the bomb] is nothing but an admonition

administered by Heaven to our country.” But let him thank the American people—not heaven—for it was they who made the choice between the morality of life and the morality of death inescapable.

Americans should be immensely proud of the bomb. It ended a war that had enslaved a continent to a religious–military ideology of slavery and death.

There is no room on earth for this system, its ideas and its advocates.

It took a country that values this world to bomb this system into extinction.

For the Americans to do so while refusing to sacrifice their own troops to save the lives of enemy civilians was a sublimely moral action. This destroyed the foundations of the war, and allowed the Japanese to rebuild their culture along with their cities, as prosperous inhabitants of the earth. Were it true that total victory today creates new attackers tomorrow, we would now be fighting Japanese suicide bombers, while North Korea—where the American army did not impose its will—would be peaceful and prosperous. The facts are otherwise. The need for total victory over the morality of death has never been clearer.