

THE MORALITY OF DROPPING THE ATOMIC BOMB ON HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI

by Thomas Sowell | 9 Aug 2005



Every August, there are some Americans who insist on wringing their hands over the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, so it was perhaps inevitable that such people would have an orgy of wallowing in guilt on the 60th anniversary of that tragic day. *Time* magazine has page after page of photographs of people scarred by the radiation, as if General Sherman had not already said long ago that war is hell.

Winston Churchill once spoke of the secrets of the atom, “hitherto mercifully withheld from man.” We can all lament that this terrible power of mass destruction has been revealed to the world and fear its ominous consequences for us all, including our children and grandchildren. But that is wholly different from saying that a great moral evil was committed when the first atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

What was new about these bombs was the technology, not the morality. More people were killed with ordinary bombs in German cities or in Tokyo. Vastly more people were killed with ordinary bullets and cannon on the Russian front. Morality is about what you do to people, not the technology you use.

The guilt-mongers have twisted the facts of history beyond recognition in order to say that it was unnecessary to drop those atomic bombs. Japan was going to lose the war anyway, they say. What they don’t say is — at what price in American lives? Or even in Japanese lives?

Much of the self-righteous nonsense that abounds on so many subjects cannot stand up to three questions: (1) Compared to what? (2) At what cost? and (3) What are the hard facts?

The alternative to the atomic bombs was an invasion of Japan, which was already being planned for 1946, and those plans included casualty estimates even more staggering than the deaths that have left a sea of crosses in American cemeteries at

Normandy and elsewhere. “Revisionist” historians have come up with casualty estimates a small fraction of what the American and British military leaders responsible for planning the invasion of Japan had come up with.

Who are we to believe, those who had personally experienced the horrors of the war in the Pacific, and who had a lifetime of military experience, or leftist historians hot to find something else to blame America for?

During the island-hopping war in the Pacific, it was not uncommon for thousands of Japanese troops to fight to the death on an island, while the number captured were a few dozen. Even some Japanese soldiers too badly wounded to stand would lie where they fell until an American medical corpsman approached to treat their wounds — and then they would set off a grenade to kill them both.

In the air the same spirit led the kamikaze pilots to deliberately crash their planes into American ships and bombers.

Japan’s plans for defense against invasion involved mobilizing the civilian population, including women and children, for the same suicidal battle tactics. That invasion could have been the greatest bloodbath in history.

No mass killing, especially of civilians, can leave any humane person happy. But compared to what? Compared to killing many times more Japanese and seeing many times more American die?

We might have gotten a negotiated peace if we had dropped the “unconditional surrender” demand. But at what cost? Seeing a militaristic Japan arise again in a few years, this time armed with nuclear weapons that they would not have hesitated for one minute to drop on Americans.

As it was, the unconditional surrender of Japan enabled General Douglas MacArthur to engineer one of the great historic transformations of a nation from militarism to pacifism, to the relief of hundreds of millions of their neighbors, who had suffered horribly at the hands of their Japanese conquerors.

The facts may deprive the revisionists of their platform for lashing out at America and for the ego trip of moral preening but, fear not, they will find or manufacture other occasions for that. The rest of us need to understand what irresponsible frauds they are — and how the stakes are too high to let the 4th estate succeed as a 5th column undermining the society on which our children and grandchildren’s security will depend.