

The Immunity of Non-Combatants and the Myth of Good Intentions: Sixty-One Years After Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Herbert P. Bix

The Immunity of Non-Combatants and the Myth of Good Intentions: Sixty-One Years After Hiroshima and Nagasaki

By Herbert P. Bix

In late 1945, in a context of restored peace, American leaders set about constructing the postwar international order. Among the issues they confronted were the establishment of the United Nations and the reaction of U.S. citizens to the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The latter especially provoked a short-lived mood of uncertainty about the future of humankind in the nuclear age.

The questions on American minds at the time were: Would atomic bombs someday be turned against us? Would this new “postwar” end, as the one that followed World War I had, with some great power rejecting the restraints of international law and morality and enfeebling the new world body? [1] In June 1950 President Harry S. Truman, a firm believer in the primacy of power politics over law, gave his definitive

answer to the second question by trampling on the letter and spirit of the UN Charter. Specifically, he illegally committed the U.S. to war in Korea on his own authority, without Congressional approval or prior authorization from the UN Security Council, and his Sec. of State, Dean Acheson, dismissed the UN Charter as “impracticable.”



Truman and Acheson (left)

Hiroshima and Nagasaki posed a more intractable problem. Neither the media nor the American people objected publicly, as some in Britain did, to the carpet bombing of European and Japanese cities and the mass killing of Japanese or German civilians. Rather, most Americans registered the news of area bombing and atomic bombing approvingly. A Gallup poll in August 1945 found that 85 percent of respondents (who knew nothing about the radiation effects of the atomic bomb) endorsed its

use against Japanese cities. The massacre of 200,000 innocent Japanese civilians evoked neither pity nor remorse. Indeed, 22.7 percent of Americans expressed genocidal sentiments right after the atomic bombs were dropped, regretting that more hadn't been used to slaughter the Japanese. Fifty years later roughly the same percentage—24 percent—“strongly approved” dropping the first atomic bombs. [2] The majority, however, were uncertain how to respond to the nuclear destruction of whole cities. Nevertheless, a tiny minority of religious leaders, social critics, scientists, and antiwar activists labeled the destruction of the two cities a war crime, and charged that the government had trampled on the lofty ideals which were supposed to serve as the moral basis of U.S. foreign policy.

Image-conscious American political and military leaders quickly stepped in to fine tune the official government line. The generals claimed, disingenuously, that when the planes of the US Army Air Force burned down Tokyo and sixty-five other Japanese cities, they had aimed to achieve the goal of accuracy by “alternate means” so as to protect civilian lives while breaking Japanese morale. [3] As for Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Truman initially “attempted to minimize the impression that civilians had been attacked with the atomic bomb.” His first press release had identified Hiroshima as “an important Japanese military base,” ignoring that

the bomb had targeted the city's civilian center in order to maximize civilian casualties. In his radio broadcast a few days later, on August 9, 1945, Truman re-emphasized “that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, in so far as possible, the killing of civilians.” [4] American newspaper journalists and magazine writers dutifully amplified Truman's blatant lie by passing quickly over the details and writing their stories “in terms that ignored or obscured civilian deaths.” [5] Photographic images reinforced this impression: the mushroom cloud, not ruined cityscapes and corpses, told the official story.

Long before Secretary of War Henry Stimson's article in Harper's Magazine (February 1947) attempted to stifle further criticism from scientific leaders and ordinary citizens of Truman's first use, without warning, of atomic bombs, U.S. officials introduced the counter-argument that the bombs had saved the lives of large numbers of Americans who had been scheduled to invade the Japanese home islands. Precisely by adding the saved-U.S.-combatant-lives-argument to Truman's claim of having respected the norm of “non-combatant immunity,” American leaders were able to elicit uncritical public support for the atomic bomb project and to avoid public debate over terror bombing.

Yet criticism and doubts over how the U.S. and Britain had fought World War II continued. A small minority of Americans went on questioning the practice of killing large numbers of defenseless civilians. They yearned for a moral world free of war, militarism, and armaments. In foreign policy, however, the dominant elites believed that the rule of international law as framed primarily by the U.S. should prevail, and that world security should be guaranteed by the military power of the United States and Britain, acting to check the power of the Soviet Union.

Apprehension and hopefulness mingled. In the background was a troubled feeling that the country would remain in Roosevelt's proclaimed state of unlimited national emergency (May 1941) and never emerge psychologically from its war crusade. Reinforcing this fear by some of an American counterpart to the Hitlerian "state of exception" was the growing worry that the U.S. with its nuclear monopoly might hold humankind itself captive to its expansionist designs.

Truman's Democratic administration sought to offset such fear and uneasiness about massive civilian casualties and inordinate executive power by demonstrating that the U.S. was using its God-like power beneficently, to enforce the rule of law rather than the rule of the most powerful. The U.S. would try, rather than summarily execute, the surviving Axis war

criminals at the first international war crimes trials at Nuremberg and Tokyo. These would be political show trials in the best sense, not like Stalin's show trials. They would enhance U.S. prestige and present the U.S., a nation deeply scarred by centuries of slavery and racism, as the champion of human dignity.

But the more important method of allaying fear was government propaganda and rhetoric to blind Americans to the war crimes committed in their name by the U.S. military. This was coupled with a compliant, uncritical news media that kept the citizenry ignorant of international law concerning the use of force and poorly informed about foreign affairs. The problem, as historian Sahr Conway-Lanz described it, was how to reconcile the Pentagon's commitment to massively destructive, indiscriminate bombing of cities and towns, purportedly designed to save American combatant lives, with the norm of immunity for civilian non-combatants, upon which the laws of war are predicated. Eliminate the combatant/non-combatant distinction and all notions of international humanitarian law and justice die.

Thus, in order to achieve consistency between the reality of U.S. war-making and international law, American leaders were forced to deny any contradiction between U.S. war policies, techniques, and instruments of warfare on the one hand, and the massive civilian casualties that

necessarily resulted from them on the other. When the military services discussed bombing and nuclear strategy, the generals, admirals, and their civilian bosses repeatedly assured the public that the U.S. military exercised restraint, and neither advocated nor practiced systematic destruction of urban areas and civilian peoples, their homes and infrastructure. While never explicitly claiming that the lives of noncombatant civilians counted for nothing when weighed against the lives of U.S. soldiers, the U.S. concealed massive civilian casualties resulting from air strikes, or from war atrocities regularly committed by American soldiers on the ground.

To maintain the nation's self-image as a uniquely humane power that cared about and acted to minimize civilian casualties, yet at the same time developed and deployed the world's most destructively cruel weapons, U.S. leaders, as Conway-Lanz shows, brought into play two other linguistic devices: "elastic definitions of military targets" in enemy countries, and an emphasis on intention and premeditation that concealed the truth about how the Pentagon actually waged war. When the U.S. military loosed its air power on Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Afghan or Iraqi cities, towns, and villages; when it dropped "conventional" bombs and napalm, fired artillery, or used anti-personnel weapons such as cluster and phosphorous bombs that necessarily harmed civilians, it did not do so with the wicked

intention to direct those weapons against them or against non-military objects. It did not knowingly commit war crimes, violate international law, or put civilians at risk. But if civilians not directly participating in fighting died, well, that was unintended "collateral damage," the outcome of a righteous action, dictated by special conditions on the battlefield, not uncontrollable American firepower in the hands of gung-ho pilots or trigger-happy, war-stressed soldiers.

The key element was the intention. The proclaimed intention made the result--the killing of noncombatants—tolerable to the American conscience. What counted was the motive, not the consequences of the act or the nature of the weapons used. This extraordinary emphasis on intent in U.S. public discourse on warfare had its roots in both Christian notions of evil and sin as well as U.S. and international criminal law. [6] Collateral damage is a euphemism of World War II and the nuclear age, coined within the Pentagon, to conceal the deliberate killing of civilians. The military invokes this term as a way of exempting the U.S. from moral and legal culpability for such killing. [7] In short, collateral damage is all about intent, and the avoidance of responsibility for murdering the innocent. It is the military's way of saying: judge the commander, the pilot, the combat soldier, even the U.S. mercenary and torturer not by what he did but by his subjective state of mind when he did it.

For over sixty-one years American leaders, firm in the belief of their moral superiority to others, have sought to avoid moral judgments on their conduct of warfare and its close link to war atrocities. Their aim has been to preserve the myth of American good intentions by highlighting the primacy of humanitarian sentiments in restraining the use of violence. Whether in times of peace or war, they propagate the myth of good-intentions in order to reinforce the larger myth of American exceptionalism. The latter is the view of the United States as the embodiment of Western virtue, the deliverer of ‘freedom’ to oppressed peoples, God’s model of the world’s future—in brief, a chosen nation with an inherent right to lead others and set the world aright by waging war for the global good. [8] But since World War II, modern warfare has been more destructive of civilian than of combatant soldiers’ lives; while determining who is the enemy has grown impossibly difficult.



Firebombing Tokyo

On the Japanese home islands alone, in the savage last months of the war, U.S. conventional bombs and nuclear bombs incinerated an estimated 600,000 to 900,000 noncombatants. Japanese civilians killed overseas bring that total

to well over one million. The initial response of the American people and their leaders was to turn away from war crimes, and to avoid public debate about conventional bombing and the human consequences of the uranium bomb dropped on Hiroshima and the plutonium weapon exploded over Nagasaki. The same turning away from the human consequences of warfare was evident in 1949-50, during the public discussion of the building and testing of the hydrogen bomb, and again in 1951, when advocates of nuclear weapons argued that they could be redesigned for the battlefield and would be deployed only against targets of military significance.

Throughout most of the Korean War (1950-53) the U.S. relied on “strategic bombing” and used disproportionate, indiscriminate force against civilian targets and economic infrastructure. After Chinese troops entered the fighting, U.S. generals, under Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s operational control, not only replicated in Korea the 1945 carpet-bombing campaign against Japan. They also expended more “surface-delivered munitions” on Korea than the U.S. had used in all theaters of World War II. [9] American forces burned down virtually every city, town, and village in North Korea. They bombed and killed noncombatants both north and south of the 38th Parallel, taking the lives of an estimated 2 million Korean civilians. American commanders actually issued direct orders for their soldiers to shoot

refugees clogging roads and bridges, splashed napalm over the civilian population, and throughout the Korean peninsula destroyed civilian property without restraint. While the Pentagon concealed incidents of U.S. atrocities against Koreans, it assuaged the Christian conscience by allowing token aid to refugees and repeatedly affirming America's good intentions. When the shooting stopped, an armistice was signed but the troops and bases remained, and half a century later no peace treaty has been signed.

Nine years after the Korean armistice the U.S. began another undeclared presidential war in its artificially created puppet-state of South Vietnam. The Air Force bombed and strafed cities and countryside in South and North Vietnam. It sprayed chemical defoliants on jungle foliage, rice fields, gardens, and orchards, and declared large parts of the countryside in the south "permanent free-fire zones" in which anything that moved could be killed. According to recently released U.S. Army investigative records, U.S. soldiers committed hundreds of massacres of Vietnamese civilians. Substantiated incidents of mass atrocity numbered 320; another 500 incidents the Army deemed "alleged" atrocities; and, because all war crimes were not reported, the estimates of atrocities ranged from about one thousand to one thousand five hundred per month. And the "[a]buses were not confined to a few rogue units . . . They were uncovered in

every Army division that operated in Vietnam." [10] An estimated 4 million Vietnamese civilians died in the war. Yet back in the United States, the White House and Pentagon brass managed to affirm America's good intentions. As in Korea, no policy-makers were, or ever could be, brought to justice for having violated international humanitarian law, and the U.S. press, with but few exceptions, contributed to the false impression of a humane, well-intentioned war effort.



U.S. aircraft spraying Agent Orange in Vietnam

Truman's decision to drop atomic bombs on the two purposely spared Japanese cities symbolized liberal America's optimistic belief in its military technology, its disregard of the laws of war, and willingness to murder civilians indiscriminately in order to force Japan's rulers to surrender "unconditionally." When George W. Bush, Dick Cheney, and the top Pentagon officials approved "Operation Iraqi Freedom," Hiroshima and Nagasaki were on their minds as metaphor. In March 2003, Air Force and Navy jets, firing cruise missiles, dropping huge, precision-guided bombs and napalm, spearheaded the Iraq invasion. The

“shock” they delivered to the Iraqi leaders was supposed to have been “the non-nuclear equivalent of the impact that the atomic weapons dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki had on the Japanese,” which in turn was supposed to have forced Japan’s leaders to surrender unconditionally. [11] What a gross misunderstanding of history that was. Using overwhelming conventional force, American commanders and troops quickly toppled the regime of Saddam Hussein; but instead of inducing “awe” in the Iraqi people, their excessive use of firepower and racist brutality ignited the Iraqi nationalist resistance. The Iraq war became a re-run of the colossal Vietnam debacle, which, in part, was a rerun of the earlier Korea debacle—except that the nature of the resistance in Iraq is very different.

Long habituated to using force in disregard of international law, and to operating in a delusional world of military euphemism, the U.S. leadership embarked, self-confidently, on all three wars without any plan for ending them. That these illegal wars debased the American people and widened the boundaries of their permanent state of exception should not be surprising.

Most recently, the U.S. and Israel have taken the World War II pattern of city and infrastructure bombing and applied it to Lebanon. On July 12, 2006, Israel launched an air and limited ground

attack on the sovereign state of Lebanon, using as a pretext the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by Shiite Hizbollah fighters in south Lebanon. The Israeli plan, cleared months in advance with the Bush administration, was to destroy Lebanon’s communications system, roads, bridges, oil depots, factories, buildings and homes, and kill large numbers of Lebanese civilians—all in the mad hope of turning the Christian and Sunni populations against Hizbollah. [12] The high tech weapons and munitions that Israeli forces used to commit these war crimes were put in their hands by U.S. taxpayers. But Hizbollah resistance fighters held their ground against the invaders and retaliated with rockets aimed at Israeli military and civilian targets. In 33 days of fighting Israeli forces displaced from their homes nearly a million Lebanese and killed an estimated 1,000 to 1,300 (mostly civilians), including many women and children in Qana. Israel’s final war crime—committed shortly before a truce went into effect—was to drop cluster bombs in urban areas, near hospitals, and on civilian homes, cars, and fields throughout southern Lebanon. [13]

The Bush administration, together with the U.S. Congress, enabled Israel’s air strikes, defended unconditionally its killing of noncombatants, and for weeks prevented a cease-fire. The Israel-Lebanon war has further alienated public opinion against Israel and the U.S., while revealing yet again the self-delusion inherent in American

“good intentions.”

August 21, 2006

[1] Eric F. Goldman, *The Crucial Decade—And After: American, 1945-1960* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 5.

[2] Editor and Publisher, Staff, “Poll Shows Americans, For First Time, Divided on Use of A-Bombs in 1945,” *E & P*, July 24, 2005.

[3] Sahr Conway-Lanz, *Collateral Damage: Americans, Noncombatant Immunity, and Atrocity after World War II* (Routledge, 2006), p. 11.

[4] Conway-Lanz, p. 13; Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1995), p. 5.

[5] Conway-Lanz, p. 13.

[6] Conway-Lanz, pp. 13, 21, 229.

[7] Horst Fischer, “Collateral Damage,” available at Crimes of War Project (<http://www.crimesofwar.org/collateral-damage.html>)—The Book,

[8] Herbert P. Bix, “The Faith that Supports U.S.

Violence: Comparative Reflections on the Arrogance of Empires,” posted on Z-net website and japanfocus.org, Sept. 2, 2004.

[9] Herbert P. Bix, “War Crimes Law and American Wars in 20th Century Asia,” *Hitotsubashi Journal of Social Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (July 2001), pp. 119-132.

[10] Nick Turse and Deborah Nelson, “Civilian Killings Went Unpunished: Declassified Papers Show U.S. Atrocities Went Far Beyond My Lai,” *The Los Angeles Times* (Aug. 6, 2006).

[11] Cited from Introduction to Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade, *Shock & Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* (National Defense University, ACT 1996), n.p.

[12] See Seymour M. Hersh, “Watching Lebanon: Washington’s Interest in Israel’s War,” *The New Yorker* (Aug. 26, 2006), pp. 28-33.

[13] Declan Walsh, “Unexploded Cluster Bombs Prompt Fear and Fury in Returning Refugees,” *The Guardian UK* (Aug. 21, 2006).

Herbert P. Bix, author of Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan
(<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0060931302/sr=>

8-1/ qid=1156261627/ ref=sr_1_1/ 104-2527566-08063A Japan Focus associate, he prepared this article for 10?ie=UTF8), writes on problems of war and empireJapan Focus. Posted August 20, 2006