

Bin Laden And Hiroshima

by
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The decision to incinerate Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not taken in anger. White men in grey business suits and military uniforms, after much deliberation, decided the US “could not give the Japanese any warning; that we could not concentrate on a civilian area; but that we should seek to make a profound psychological impression on as many of the inhabitants as possible... [and] the most desirable target would be a vital war plant employing a large number of workers and closely surrounded by workers’ houses.”¹ They argued it would be cheaper in American lives to release the nuclear genie. Besides, it was such a marvelous thing to show Soviet leader Josef Stalin.

Headlines like “Jap City No More” soon brought the news to a joyous nation. Crowds gathered in Times Square to celebrate; there was less of the enemy left. Rarely are victors encumbered by remorse. President Harry Truman declared: “When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast. It is most regrettable but nevertheless true.”² Not surprisingly, six decades later, even American liberals remain ambivalent about the morality of nuking the two Japanese cities. The late Hans Bethe, Nobel Prize winner in physics of Manhattan Project fame and a leading exponent of arms control, declared that “the atom bomb was the greatest gift we could have given to the Japanese”³.

Even as the United States dusted off its hands and moved on, elsewhere the radioactive rubble of the dead cities spawned not only a sense of dread, but also an obsessive desire for nuclear weapons. Stalin raced ahead with his program, while Charles de Gaulle conceived his “force de frappe”. Mao Tse Tung quietly decided that he too wanted the Bomb even as he derided it as “a paper tiger”. In newly independent Israel, Prime Minister David Ben Gurion apparently “had no qualms about Israel’s need for weapons of mass destruction,” writes Avner Cohen, the historian of Israel’s nuclear bomb. Ben Gurion ordered his agents to seek out East European Jewish scientists who could “either increase the capacity to kill masses or to cure masses”.⁴

The wind blew the poisonous clouds of fear and envy over other third world countries as well: In 1948, while arguing to create India's Department of Atomic Energy, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru told parliament, “I think we must develop [nuclear science] for peaceful purposes.” But, he added, “Of course, if we are compelled as a nation to use it for other purposes, possibly no pious sentiments of any of us will stop the nation from using it that way.”⁵ Just three years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, those “other purposes” were all too clear.

Days after Pakistan's nuclear tests in May 1998, Japan invited the country’s foreign minister to visit Hiroshima’s peace museum. The minister was visibly moved after seeing the gruesome evidence of mass devastation. His reaction: We made our nukes precisely so that this could never happen to Pakistan.

One wonders what bin Laden – and others of his ilk – learnt from Hiroshima. The New York Times reported that before September 11 the US had intercepted an Al-Qaeda message that Bin Laden was planning a “Hiroshima” against America.⁶ In a later taped message, released just before the US attack on Afghanistan, Bin Laden called up the image of the bombing of Japan, claiming:” When people at the ends of the earth, Japan, were killed by their hundreds of thousands, young and old, it was not considered a war crime; it is something that has justification. Millions of children in Iraq is something that has justification.”⁷

One important bin Laden supporter was perfectly clear about how he felt. In a recent and widely watched nationally televised debate between myself and General Hameed Gul—an influential Islamist leader and former head of the country’s powerful intelligence agency (ISI)—my opponent snarled at me: “Your masters (that is, the Americans) will nuke us Muslims just as they nuked Hiroshima; people like you want to denuclearize and disarm us in the face of a savage beast set to devour the world”. Gul then vented his anger at those – like myself – who oppose Pakistan’s Bomb as agents of America, apostates, enemies of Islam and the Pakistani state.

I will not burden readers with my replies to this extremist general. But he was making a point that resonates around the globe and puts on defensive all those who oppose nuclear weapons on moral grounds. The United States has bombed 21 countries since 1948, and recently killed tens of thousands of people on the pretext of chasing weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. It claims to be a force for democracy and rule of law despite a long history of supporting the bloodiest of dictators and rejecting the International Criminal Court. And now it threatens its adversaries – those with and without nuclear weapons – with nuclear attack. George Bush’s “Nuclear Posture Review 2002” identifies as possible targets China, North Korea, Iraq, Iran, Syria and Libya. The review also recommended new facilities for the manufacture of nuclear bombs, research into bunker busters, a new ICBM in 2020, and much more.

Imperial America On The Move

With 12 battle carrier groups and hundreds of military bases spread around the world, the US currently will spend \$455 billion on its armed forces in 2005, with another \$82 billion to be spent on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is more than the total sum spent by the next 32 countries down the list, and is close to 50% of total world military spending. US military doctrines have shifted away from deterrence to pre-emption, unilateral military intervention, and simultaneously fighting several local wars overseas. The US military has put in place a 2004 “Interim Global Strike Alert Order” from Donald Rumsfeld requiring it to be ready to attack hostile countries that are developing weapons of mass destruction, specifically Iran and North Korea. The military claims to be capable of carrying out such attacks within “half a day or less” and to use nuclear weapons for this purpose.⁸

There are demands from the US Air Force for authority to put weapons in space. A former Secretary of the Air Force explained “We haven’t reached the point of strafing and bombing from space... nonetheless, we are thinking about those possibilities.”⁹ Full

spectrum dominance – in land, sea, air, and space – is necessary to achieve the goal of total planetary control.

US foreign policy in the Post Cold-War world owes much to “The Project for the New American Century” (PNAC), a Washington-based neo-conservative think-tank founded in 1997. PNAC was clear that the US must rule the world: “ [the new world order] must have a secure foundation on unquestioned US military preeminence ...The process of transformation is likely to be a long one, absent some catastrophic and catalyzing event – like a new Pearl Harbor.”¹⁰ That serendipitous Pearl Harbor-like event came on 11 September, 2001.

After 9/11 there was no lack of spokesmen for the American Empire. In unabashedly imperial language, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who initiated the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan, writes that the US should seek to “prevent collusion and maintain dependence among the vassals, keep tributaries pliant and protected, and to keep the barbarians from coming together”¹¹.

To keep the “barbarians” at bay, Pentagon planners have been charged with the task of assuring American control over every part of the planet. Major (P) Ralph Peters, an officer responsible for conceptualizing future warfare in the Office of the Deputy Chief of Staff for Intelligence, is clear about why his country needs to fight¹²:

We have entered an age of constant conflict.

We are entering a new American century, in which we will become still wealthier, culturally more lethal, and increasingly powerful. We will excite hatreds without precedent.

There will be no peace. At any given moment for the rest of our lifetimes, there will be multiple conflicts in mutating forms around the globe. The de facto role of the US armed forces will be to keep the world safe for our economy and open to our cultural assault. To those ends, we will do a fair amount of killing.

Now, reasonably speaking, “a fair amount of killing” can be done rather well by the US with its fuel-air bombs, conventional explosives, artillery shells, and so forth. And so it is difficult to understand why the US should hunger for nuclear weapons in addition to all else that it has. Why does it want to goad other nations towards also craving nukes? And what does it seek to achieve by announcing that it may, if need be, target even non-nuclear adversaries?

The answer is obvious: imperial hubris, runaway militarism, and the arrogance of power. Nuclear weapons, in the revised US view under George W. Bush, are now to be viewed as weapons for fighting wars with. They may even be used as a first-strike – no longer are they to be thought of as weapons of last resort.

But there is a downside to this. And the long-term consequences will not be to the advantage of the US because the nuclear monopoly is breaking down. The making of

atomic weapons – especially crude ones – has become vastly simpler than it was at the time of the Manhattan Project. Basic information is freely available in technical libraries throughout the world and simply surfing the internet can bring to anyone a staggering amount of detail. Advanced textbooks and monographs contain details that can enable reasonably competent scientists and engineers to come up with “quick and dirty” designs for nuclear explosives. The physics of nuclear explosions can be readily taught to graduate students. By stealing fissile materials present in the thousands of ex-Soviet bombs marked for disassembly, or even a tiny fraction of the vast amounts of highly enriched uranium and separated plutonium present in research reactors and storage sites the world over, it is unnecessary to go through complex processes for uranium enrichment or plutonium reprocessing.

Can The Islam-US Clash Go Nuclear?

Anger in Muslim countries at the United States has never been higher than today: torture and prisoner abuse in Abu-Ghraib and Guantanamo by American interrogators, and instances of Quran desecration have added on to already existing resentments, most particularly the unequivocal US support for Israeli occupation of Arab lands. The desire for an atomic weapon to seek vengeance – utterly immoral, foolish and suicidal though it be – is not limited to extremists. The Islamic Bomb is a concept that is becoming ever more popular.

The notion of an Islamic Bomb had existed long before 911. Addressing posterity from his death cell in a Rawalpindi jail, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, the architect of Pakistan's nuclear program, wrote in 1977: “We know that Israel and South Africa have full nuclear capability. The Christian, Jewish, and Hindu civilizations have this capability. The communist powers also possess it. Only the Islamic civilization was without it, but that position was about to change.”

Another Muslim leader stressed the need for a bomb belonging collectively to Islam. Addressing an Islamic conference in Teheran in 1992, the Iranian vice-president, Sayed Ayatollah Mohajerani said, “Since Israel continues to possess nuclear weapons, we, the Muslims, must cooperate to produce an atomic bomb, regardless of U.N. efforts to prevent proliferation.”

In the celebrations following the 1998 nuclear tests, the Jamaat-e-Islami paraded bomb and missile replicas through the streets of Pakistani cities. It saw in the Bomb a sure sign of a reversal of fortunes and a panacea for the ills that have plagued Muslims since the end of the Golden Age of Islam. In 2000, I captured on video the statements of several leaders of jihadist, right-wing political parties in Pakistan – Maulana Khalil-ur-Rahman and Maulana Sami-ul-Haq – who also demanded a bomb for Islam.¹³

Nonetheless, it is impossible to conceive of any Muslim state declaring that it has an “Islamic Bomb” that would be used for defense of the “ummah” against the United States or Israel (but it is worth recalling that this kind of “extended deterrence”, as it was called, was practised aggressively by both superpowers in the Cold War, including during the Cuban Missile Crisis). From time to time, the media reports the speculation

that Pakistan would provide a “nuclear umbrella” for Arab countries in a crisis. But nothing in the history of Pakistan has shown a substantial commitment to a pan-Islamic cause. Pakistan, so far the only Muslim nuclear state, is unlikely to risk devastating retaliation from Israel or the United States if it did attempt to provide nuclear weapons for use in the Middle East. Its earlier clandestine nuclear cooperation with Iran – officially attributed to the antics of Dr. Abdul Qadeer Khan and his network – came to an end a decade ago. This was followed by similar sales to Libya that continued till 2003 and the exposure of the network, leading to a public confession by A.Q. Khan in early 2004.

In my opinion, the danger of a nuclear conflict comes not from Muslim states, but from radicalized individuals within the states. Post September 11: although Pakistan’s military government insisted that there was no danger of any of its nuclear weapons being taken for a ride by some radical Islamic group, it wasn’t taking any chances. Several weapons were reportedly airlifted to various safer, isolated, locations within the country, including the northern mountainous area of Gilgit. This nervousness was not unjustified – two strongly Islamist generals of the Pakistan Army, close associates of General Musharraf, had just been removed. Dissatisfaction within the army on Pakistan’s betrayal of the Taliban was (and is) deep; almost overnight, under intense American pressure, the Pakistan government had disowned its progeny and agreed to wage a war of annihilation against it.

Fears about Pakistan’s nukes were subsequently compounded by revelations that a high-ranking nuclear engineer, Syed Bashiruddin Mahmood, and a materials specialist, Chaudhry Majid, had journeyed several times into Afghanistan in 2000. Both scientists were well known to espouse radical Islamic views. Mahmood had even been photographed with Osama Bin Laden.

Preventing Doomsday

Today, the United States rightly lives in fear of the Bomb it created because the decision to use it—if and when it becomes available—has already been made. But this time around business suits will be absent. Pious men with beards will decide when and where on American soil atomic weapons are to be used. Shadowy groups, propelled by fanatical hatreds, scour the globe for fissile materials. They are not in a hurry; time is on their side. They are doubtless confident they will one day breach Fortress America. Shall it will be by the end of the century? Sooner?

The possibilities for nuclear attack are not limited to the so-called suitcase bomb stolen from the arsenal of a nuclear state. In fact, this is far more difficult than the use of improvised nuclear devices fabricated from highly enriched uranium, constructed in the very place where they will eventually be detonated. Still more likely is an attack on a vulnerable nuclear reactor or spent fuel repository.

Some nuclear weapon experts (who I am not at liberty to name) privately believe that it is not a question of if but when the attack is to happen. This may be too pessimistic, but obviously tight policing and monitoring of nuclear materials (and rapid reduction of stockpiles) and nuclear weapons knowledge must be the first step. There

should not be the slightest delay in moving on this. But this is far from sufficient. If nuclear weapons continue to be accepted by nuclear weapon states as legitimate instruments of either deterrence or war, their global proliferation – whether by other states or non-state actors – can only be slowed down at best. Coercive non-proliferation will only serve to drive up demand. Non-proliferation by cooperation and consent cannot succeed as long as the US is insistent on retaining and improving its nuclear arsenal – by what reasonable argument can others be persuaded to give up, or not acquire, nuclear weapons?

If we accept that religious fanatics are planning nuclear attacks and that they may eventually succeed, then what? The world shall plunge headlong into a bottomless abyss of reaction and counter reaction whose horror the human mind cannot comprehend. Who will the US retaliate against? Will the US nuke Mecca? The capitals of Muslim states? What will the US and its allies do as their people fear more attacks, will they expel Muslims from the US and Europe or like the Japanese Americans in World War II, herd them into internment camps?

Hiroshima signaled a failure of humankind, not just that of America. The growth of technology has far outstripped our ability to use it wisely. Like a quarrelling group of monkeys on a leaky boat, armed with sticks of dynamite, we are now embarked on an uncertain journey. Humanity's best chance of survival lies in creating taboos against nuclear weapons, much as already exist for chemical and biological weapons, and to work rapidly toward their global elimination. We cannot afford to live in a savage dog-eat-dog world. Instead, we must dare to imagine and work urgently towards a future that is based on universal, compassionate, human, secular values. For this to happen, the civilized world will have to subdue the twin ogres of American imperialism and Islamic radicalism.

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- ¹ Notes of the Interim Committee, May 31, 1945, in Martin Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and the origins of the Arms Race*, (Vintage Books, 1987), Appendix L, p.303..
- ² Martin Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and the origins of the Arms Race*, (Vintage Books, 1987), p. xvii.
- ³ I heard Bethe say these words at a meeting organized by the Union of Concerned Scientists at Cornell University in June, 1997. They provoked outrage among some in the audience. Bethe responded that more Japanese lives would have been lost if the fire-bombing of cities had continued.
- ⁴ Avner Cohen, *Israel and the Bomb* (Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 11.
- ⁵ Cited in e.g. Zia Mian, "Homi Bhabha Killed a Crow", in Zia Mian and Ashis Nandy, *The Nuclear Debate- Ironies and Immoralities* (RCSS, 1998), p. 12-13.
- ⁶ James Roisen, Stephen Engelberg, "Signs of Change In Terror Goals Went Unheeded", *The New York Times*, October 14, 2001.
- ⁷ Anthony Shadid, "Bin Laden Warns No Peace for US" *Boston Globe*, October 8, 2001.
- ⁸ William Arkin , "Not Just A Last Resort? A Global Strike Plan, With a Nuclear Option", *Washington Post Sunday*, May 15, 2005.
- ⁹ Tim Weiner, "Air Force Seeks Bush's Approval For Space Arms", *The New York Times*, May 18, 2005
- ¹⁰ *Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for A New Century*, Project for A New American Century, September 2000, p.51, On the web at <http://www.newamericancentury.org/RebuildingAmericasDefenses.pdf>
- ¹¹ Charles William Maynes, "Two blasts against unilateralism", in *Understanding Unilateralism in US Foreign Policy*, RIIA, London, 2000.
- ¹² Ralph Peters, *US War College Quarterly*, summer 1997.
<http://carlisle-www.army.mil/usawc/Parameters/97summer/peters.htm>
- ¹³ *Pakistan and India Under the Nuclear Shadow*, a video production of Eqbal Ahmad Foundation, 2001, available from zia@princeton.edu