



Preventing Nuclear War in a Nuclear World

On August 6 and 9, 1945, the United States dropped two nuclear bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These weapons were used to bring to a conclusion a global war that caused the deaths of approximately 50 million people. The two bombings killed 129,000 people. The destruction caused by these two nuclear bombs brought an immediate surrender by Japan. This was the last time nuclear weapons were used in war. The realization that nuclear war threatened mankind itself prevented their use over the last seventy years.

Today, however, the world stands arguably closer to nuclear war than ever before, even at the height of the Cold War. We live in a world in which nuclear proliferation has grown, with hostile foreign powers including North Korea and Iran having developed or standing close to developing nuclear weapons and missiles capable of attacking their neighbors and potentially the United States itself in the near future.

On this anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, we examine the threat of nuclear war today. North Korea and Iran pose serious threats to the United States and our regional allies. The response by the Trump administration to these threats will be of vital importance to the future of the United States and the world. Many Americans, especially young people, hardly remember the tragedy of World War II and the millions of people, civilians and soldiers, who suffered and died in that global conflagration. A generation of young Americans has been mis-educated to think of war in morally relativistic ways. Many students have been taught that President Truman ordered the use of nuclear weapons not to end a war, but as a means of intimidating Stalin and the Soviet Union.

The lesson taught to students today is that the United States is no better than any other nation, perhaps even worse. Students are asked misleading questions: If the United States has nuclear weapons, why shouldn't every

other nation have nuclear capacity? The United States is a superpower with the nuclear capability to destroy the world, so why don't we set a moral standard by declaring unilateral nuclear disarmament? Surely, other nations will follow, right? President Trump's belligerent stance toward North Korea and Iran is only dangerous saber-rattling that is going to lead to an accidental mishap, so why isn't his administration pursuing serious international diplomacy?

The Smithsonian and Revisionist History

The first public signs of moral relativism about President Truman's decision to use nuclear weapons came in the mid-1990s when the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum (NASM) proposed an exhibition of the Enola Gay, the B-29 Superfortress plane used to drop the nuclear bomb on Hiroshima. A group of veterans concerned about the deterioration of the Enola Gay, which had been put into storage by the Smithsonian, asked that the plane be restored and put on public display for the 50th anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima.

The issue of restoration and exhibition of the Enola Gay was under discussion when Martin Harwit became the new director of NASM in 1987. Harwit shared a belief common to a new generation of museum directors that museum exhibits should be representations of public conscience and opportunities for public debate.¹

While the Enola Gay exhibit was being discussed within the bowels of NASM's bureaucracy, Harwit proceeded with another exhibit, "Legend, Memory, and the Great War in Air." The purpose of this exhibit was to demystify the myths of World War I. Specifically, the exhibit sought to show the public that air power is just another instrument of death and should not be glorified. This exhibit came under criticism for projecting revisionist history. Criticism of the First World War airplane exhibit set the backdrop for the proposed Second World War exhibit, which would feature the Enola Gay.

A planning committee for the Second World War and Enola Gay exhibit developed a 300-page text and illustrations. The committee opened discussions with Japan to get artifacts from Hiroshima and Nagasaki to show the destruction of the two cities and to offer a balanced account of the bombings. In reviewing the script, the executive director of the Air Force Association, Monroe W. Hatch, was outraged. He contended that the exhibit did not present an accurate picture of the war and treated Japan and the United States as if they were morally equivalent. In fact, he accused the Smithsonian of giving greater benefit of the doubt to Japan, the aggressor in the war. Hatch's letter set off a mobilization of veterans' and military groups, including the American Legion, protesting the proposed exhibit.

In response, Harwit took to the *Washington Post* to defend the exhibit. He claimed that the exhibit was intended to honor the American soldiers who made the ultimate sacrifice by giving their lives in the Pacific war against Japan. He maintained, however, that the exhibit required an accurate portrayal of the reality of the atomic war and its consequences. Under increased pressure, the Smithsonian proposed removing photos of Hiroshima and Nagasaki victims, which angered Japan. As the controversy continued, the Smithsonian announced that it was downsizing the exhibit and not including commentary text. In May 1995, Harwit resigned his position as director.

Charges of Anti-Japanese Racism

For the left, Harwit became a martyr, a victim of right-wing historical cleansing. Academic historians took up the cause that their expertise and understanding of the complexities of history were being once more ignored by an ignorant public. By the mid-1990s, academic historians were already developing a literature about American racism in the Pacific campaign, articulated by John W. Dower in *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (1997).

Dower argued that the war waged in the Pacific by American soldiers was especially brutal because of white racism toward Japanese soldiers. He maintained, joined by others in the academy, that Japanese soldiers were treated more brutally than German soldiers were treated in the European theater. The implication was that the decision to drop the bomb on Japan was made easier because the Japanese were seen as subhuman, unlike Germans on the western front. (The imputed racism of American soldiers in Vietnam was also appearing in academic literature.)

The controversy of Truman's decision to use nuclear weapons in Japan as a diplomatic instrument to intimidate Stalin reemerged. Revisionist historians asserted that Truman overstated his claim that tens of thousands of American lives would have been lost in a planned invasion of Japan if the atomic weapon had not been used. These revisionist arguments are debunked by University of Notre Dame historian Fr. Wilson Miscamble in *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bomb and the Defeat of Japan* (2011). Truman's decision was determined by a single standard: Save American lives. Ending the war and saving American lives was his obligation as commander-in-chief.

Fr. Miscamble was not alone in challenging revisionist foreign policy and Cold War history. Challenges to revisionist Cold War history have been provided by Yale University historian John Gaddis on the origins of the Cold War, and the extent of Soviet spy activity in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s has been detailed in important studies by scholars Harvey Klehr and John Haynes.² Whether these scholarly challenges have made a full impact in college and high school classrooms is doubtful, given that these days teachers give more attention to abuses of minorities, women and gays than to political or diplomatic history.

In most college and high school classrooms, abuses by other nations and cultures of human rights is placed within a relativistic moral, cultural and historical context, except when it comes to the United States. The lesson taught is that everyone shares a blame for war and there is no justification for any war. The concept of a just war—the justification of war if a nation is attacked or about to be attacked—is omitted due to its Christian origins.

Obama Deserted Missile Defense

Nations have the right to protect themselves. For the United States, this means having well-developed nuclear defenses. Missile defense remains absolutely critical to American defense and to our European and Asian allies. The recent successful testing of an intercontinental missile by North Korea on July 4 gave new urgency to installing missile defense systems in South Korea and Japan.

One of Obama's first actions as president was to abandon the Pentagon plan to build a missile defense system in Europe.³ This marked a sharp break with policies developed by the previous President George W. Bush administration. President Obama's decision to abandon the development of a missile defense shield in Europe was a direct response to and an attempt to appease Putin's

protest against the missile defense shield, which he described as a “direct threat” to Russia. Putin expressly condemned the placement of the missile defense shield in Poland, a nation that had once been part of the Soviet bloc. In 2009, Obama and his new Secretary of State Hillary Clinton were determined to repair U.S.-Russian relations, which had soured under the Bush administration. In his first days in office, President Bush, too, had tried to accommodate Putin, only to realize that Putin’s charm was deceptive and that Russia should be considered an American foe.

Obama came into office convinced that he could succeed in winning Putin over as an American friend. Like presidents before him, dating back to Franklin Roosevelt and initially Harry S. Truman, Obama was convinced that Russia was by nature insecure and that if the right reassurance was given, Russian leadership would realize that American and Russian interests were compatible. Obama and his new foreign policy team set out to “reset” relations with Russia. The new Obama team believed that Russia had been unnecessarily antagonized by the United States and its allies by the expansion of NATO to include former Soviet bloc countries such as Poland. Putin had not been shown enough respect as a world leader, so the task of the new administration was to allay Russian insecurities. The first step was to abandon the planned missile defense system.

Allies Felt Betrayed by Obama

The decision not to build a missile defense system in Europe caused political trouble for our allies. In Poland and the Czech Republic, the proposed missile defense system had created a great deal of controversy which had entered into Polish domestic politics. Those Polish and Czech leaders who had cast their lot with the Americans were left high and dry by the Obama administration. Negotiations over the placement of the missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic had occurred over the previous six years. Czech and Polish officials involved in these negotiations felt that Obama’s announcement was a complete betrayal.

In announcing his decision, Obama declared that a new approach, one “stronger, swifter, and smarter” was needed.⁴ Obama told the press that a more modest missile defense system would be installed aimed at Iran’s short-range and medium-range missiles. Obama declared that updated intelligence revealed that Iran’s development of long-range missiles and a nuclear program was progressing

more slowly than previously thought. Unnamed sources in the Obama administration suggested that Obama’s decision to abandon the missile defense system would help the new president secure Moscow’s cooperation on a possible new sanctions package against Iran and further arms reduction with Russia.

A World Without Nuclear Weapons

While North Korea develops nuclear weapons and long-range delivery missiles, the United Nations continues to pursue a global treaty to ban nuclear weapons. In May 2017 the United Nations disarmament panel presented the first draft of a treaty to ban all nuclear weapons. The United States has boycotted the negotiations for such a treaty, calling its goals naïve and unattainable.⁵ Treaty supporters, however, believe that if enough countries sign on to the treaty, political and moral mobilization will force nuclear powers to agree to the treaty.

The treaty draft commits nations to “never use nuclear weapons” or “develop, produce, manufacture, otherwise acquire, possess or stockpile nuclear weapons or other explosive devices.” The draft remains in negotiation. Heading the effort is Elayne G. Whyte Gomez, Costa Rican ambassador to the United Nations in Geneva. Nikki R. Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, publicly rejected negotiations when they began two months ago.

The United States’ opposition to the treaty was criticized by Daryl G. Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association, an advocacy group in Washington, DC. He avowed, “The vast majority of world states say nuclear weapons are not essential for security, and that we want to reduce their salience by banning them. That is a contribution to the goal of a world without nuclear weapons.”⁶ He was supported by Beatrice Finn, executive director of the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons, a coalition of more than 440 pro-disarmament groups in 100 countries.⁷ Finn took to the internet with an extensive interview with VICE magazine, a popular web site for young people.

The mayor of Hiroshima, Kazumi Matsui, was brought out to testify before the U.N. disarmament panel concerning “the earnest wishes of *hibakush* [atomic bomb survivors] for the elimination of nuclear weapons.”⁸ The disarmament activists, much like environmentalists, social justice warriors, and anti-hunger and anti-homelessness folks, are good at

pulling heartstrings. After all, who is really pro-nuclear war? Who believes the use of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima did not cause suffering?

Americans were not buying into the nuclear-ban project. Nor were any of the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, including Britain, China, France or Russia. India, Pakistan, North Korea and Israel did not enlist either. Instead, conservatives such as Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) warned that “It’s better to win an arms race than lose a war.”⁹ Indeed, Cotton proposed legislation to ramp up the development of intercontinental ballistic missile interceptors and space-based sensors to detect launches. Given the rapid development of a nuclearized North Korea, acceleration of American nuclear missile defenses makes sense—much more sense than trying to ban nuclear weapons or debating whether nuclear weapons should have been used to end the Second World War.

Historical Lessons of War

The lessons of history can be as stern as any biblical lesson from the Old Testament. These lessons cannot be refuted by social justice rhetoric. The lessons of World War II are these and apply to all modern wars:

1. War leads to unforeseen and tragic consequences and should be a last resort.
2. Victory in war is usually the result of technological superiority, whether it be in the form of a steel sword, a chariot, a tank or a nuclear weapon.
3. A nation prepared for war often avoids war. This lesson was captured by Ronald Reagan in the motto “peace through strength.”

Moral equivalence, the belief that all cultures and nations and governments should be valued equally, might be satisfying to social justice warriors in our classrooms and to UN delegates meeting in Geneva. History teaches us that wars sometimes cannot be avoided in a world of tyrants, aggressors and dangerous actors such as North Korea.

Moral equivalence is not only irrelevant in such a world; it is actually destructive. Moral equivalence creates the conditions for war by encouraging pacifist sentiment. Pacifism can be misperceived by aggressors as weakness. United States learned this in the Second World War after the Japanese became convinced that Americans were a weak people unwilling to fight for their principles, who would fold after the attack on Pearl Harbor. After the Second World War, Americans decided that never again would we be unprepared to defend the nation. Our enemies should understand this today. Indeed, “peace through strength” should be our renewed motto.

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- 1 A good summary of the Enola Gay controversy is found in “Controversy Over the Enola Gay Exhibit,” October 17, 2016, www.atomicheritage.org/history/controversy-over-enola-gay-exhibition. Martin Harwit presents his defense in his book, *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of the Enola Gay* (1995). An academic defense of Harwit and the alleged shutting down of public debate is found in David Thelan, “History After the Enola Gay Controversy: An Introduction,” *The Journal of American History*, 82:3 (1995).
 - 2 John Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History* (2007), and John Haynes and Harvey Klehr, *Decoding Venona: Soviet Espionage in America* (1999).
 - 3 Andrew E. Kramer, “Russia Calls New Missile Defense System a ‘Direct Threat,’” *New York Times*, May 12, 2016.
 - 4 Luke Harding and Ian Traynor, “Obama Abandons Missile Defense Shield in Europe,” September 17, 2009.
 - 5 Rick Glastone, “U.N. Panel Releases Draft of Treaty to Ban Nuclear Arms,” *New York Times*, May 22, 2017.
 - 6 Quoted by Rick Glastone, “U.N. Panel Releases Draft of Treaty to Ban Nuclear Arms,” *New York Times*, May 22, 2017.
 - 7 Mark Hay, “It’s Time to Ban Nuclear Weapons,” *VICE* magazine, June 14, 2017.
 - 8 “Hiroshima Mayor Calls on U.N. to Adopt Nuclear Weapons Ban Treaty,” *The Japan Times*, June 16, 2017.
 - 9 Joel Gehrke, “Tom Cotton: U.S. Has to Win Nuclear ‘Arms Race’ with Russia and China,” *Washington Examiner*, June 26, 2017.
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