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HOW THE UNITED STATES REVERSED ITS POLICY ON BOMBING CIVILIANS

BY

[SHERWOOD ROSS](#)

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A NOTE TO THE READER:

Sherwood Ross wrote and published this important essay three years ago—in *The Humanist*—in observation of Hiroshima Day 2005. It has, since then, appeared in many places, and Sherwood, in his generosity and in his dedicated work toward the doing of good, is happy to have it appear in even more. Therefore, I am replicating it here.

I beg of you, please read it. Americans are denied [most](#) of their [history](#). It behooves us all to work against so heinous and ruinous a denial in the best—and only—ways we can.

[Eric Larsen](#)

August 24, 2008

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HOW THE UNITED STATES REVERSED ITS POLICY ON BOMBING CIVILIANS

When Adolf Hitler's Luftwaffe destroyed the Spanish town of Guernica on April 26, 1937, more than 1,650 people were killed and nearly 900 wounded. This

slaughter of civilians was broadly condemned in the United States and Great Britain.

Arriving in Guernica, *New York Times* correspondent G. L. Steer reported, “The object of the bombardment seemingly was demoralization of the civilian population.” Destroyed in this historic citadel of Basque culture, “not a military objective,” were all but one of the town’s churches as well as both of its hospitals. “The whole of it was a horrible sight, flaming from end to end” from a rain of high explosive bombs and incendiary projectiles. So many buildings collapsed, “the streets were long heaps of red, impenetrable ruins” and farmhouses “burned like little candles in the hills.”

Historian Robert Dallek observes in *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy, 1932-45*, “In the United States prominent Americans from all walks of life and a large portion of the press joined in a denunciation of ‘the monstrous crime of Guernica,’ while congressional leaders renewed their appeal for the application of the Neutrality Act to Berlin and Rome” so as to embargo the sale of munitions to Germany and Italy.

Rising in Parliament, Archibald Sinclair, the liberal leader in the House of Commons, aptly portrayed the bombing as “a deliberate effort to use air power as an instrument of terrorism” British Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden said the nation “deeply deplores the bombardment of the civil population in the Spanish Civil War, wherever it may occur and whoever may be responsible.” Along the same lines, Lord Cecil of Chelwood, who the *New York Times* described as the leader of “a chorus of protest in the House of Lords over the atrocity” declared, “There is no precedent in the history of civilized nations for anything like the bombing of Guernica.”

But there was.

During World War I, in response to a series of French bombing raids on German cities, Germany struck back with a zeppelin bombing of Paris on March 21, 1915, which killed twenty-three and injured thirty. A similar bombing of London on May 31 killed seven and wounded thirty-five. By war’s end 670 Londoners had been killed by bombs from zeppelins and airplanes.

The British, for their part, used bombers in Egypt, Northwest India, and the Sudan early in the war, bombed Constantinople in 1917, and carried out a major strategic bombing campaign against Germany from late 1917 to late 1918 under the direction of Major General Hugh Trenchard, “the father of the Royal Air Force.” According to John Keegan in *The Second World War*, Trenchard used bombing as a way to “achieve the maximum effect on morale by striking at the most sensitive part of the German population—namely the working class.” Sven Lindqvist in *The History of Bombing* adds that, instead of just focusing on infrastructure

targets like railway stations, his pilots were instructed to, in Trenchard's words, "drop their eggs well into the middle of the town generally."

Trenchard influenced American air commander Billy Mitchell, who claimed that bombing cities would speed the end of a conflict and was "more humane" than cannon fire and bayonets. Indeed, after the war Trenchard, Mitchell, and Italy's first air commander, Giulio Douhet, each published articles arguing for strategic bombing of industrial centers and other civilian targets as a way of destroying enemy morale in future wars.

The British quickly put those ideas to work. In 1920 they used bombers to quell the dervish uprising in East Africa led by Somali leader Mohammed Hassan, striking their decisive blow by tricking "the mad mullah" into preparing for an official visit. While Hassan, his lieutenants, and his family duly waited under a ceremonial canopy at Taleex, Trenchard's bombers attacked, killing most of Hassan's family and pursuing him and his followers through the desert.

For the Third Afghani war of 1919 the British bombing effort was organized by Squadron Leader Arthur "Bomber" Harris, who subsequently, in 1924 in Iraq, pioneered a new method of governance, "control without occupation," which included dropping fire on straw-roofed huts. In his report at the end of hostilities, Harris wrote:

Where the Arab and Kurd had just begun to realise that if they could stand a little noise they could stand bombing they now know what real bombing means, in casualties and damage. . . that within forty-five minutes a full-sized village can be practically wiped out and a third of its inhabitants killed or injured by four or five machines which offer them no real target, no opportunity for glory as warriors, no effective means of escape.

Because of these developments, a number of national leaders issued in February 1923 *Draft Rules on Aerial Warfare*, a treaty aimed at prohibiting "aerial bombardment for the purpose of terrorizing the civilian population, of destroying or damaging private property not of military character, or of injuring non-combatants." But it never went into effect. The primary existing international law approaching the issue remained the First Article of the Hague Convention, adopted October 18, 1907, which forbade "the bombardment by naval forces of undefended ports, towns, villages, dwellings, or buildings." This wasn't enough to prevent the continuation of aerial bombing of civilian populations.

Thus in 1925, in a joint French and Spanish effort to put down a Berber uprising in Morocco, American volunteers under French command bombed the city of Chechaouen (Chefchaouen), similar in size and defenselessness to Guernica. That same year, in putting down a Druse revolt, the French bombarded Damascus, Syria, with aircraft, artillery, and tanks. Then, from 1926 to 1928, United States

Marines utilized air power to force a regime change in Nicaragua. Through all of this there was no public outcry.

Early in 1932, however, Japanese Admiral Kiochi Shiozawa's bombardment of Shanghai, China—an attack which claimed thousands of civilian lives—brought a “literal avalanche of denunciation” upon Japan, observed the *New York Times*. Stella Dong writes in *Shanghai: The Rise and Fall of a Decadent City* that the carnage caused Americans “to view the Japanese as ‘butchers’ and ‘murderers’.”

Beginning in August 1937, when Japan again bombed Shanghai, it was, as David McCullough writes in *Truman*, “viewed as an atrocity of the most appalling kind.” The autobiography of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's secretary of state, *The Memoirs of Cordell Hull*, says:

The League of Nations Advisory Committee, in resolution adopted September 27, solemnly condemned the bombing of open towns in China by Japanese planes and declared that “no excuse can be made for such acts which have aroused horror and indignation throughout the world.” In a statement the following day we at the State Department supported this finding and said we held “the view that any general bombing of an extensive area wherein there resides a large populace engaged in peaceful pursuits is unwarranted and contrary to principles of law and of humanity.”

Between these two attacks on Shanghai, Italian dictator Benito Mussolini's pilots commenced raining mustard gas on innocent Ethiopians in 1935. In his futile appeal to the League of Nations in June 1936, Emperor Haile Selassie denounced Italy's bombings as “a refinement of barbarism.” He recounted how “soldiers, women, children, cattle, rivers, lakes and pastures were drenched continually with this deadly rain. . . In tens of thousands, the victims of the Italian mustard gas fell.” This was followed in April 1937 by the German attack on Guernica.

Only as a result of the combined effect of all these atrocities did the League of Nations act. On September 30, 1938, a unanimous resolution was passed to outlaw “the intentional bombing of civilian populations.” Then, on September 1, 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, U.S. President Roosevelt beseeched the belligerents to refrain from the “inhuman barbarism” of bombing civilian centers, acts which had “sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman,” and “profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity.” In response, Hitler pledged he would confine his air arm to attacking only military targets. And British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain asserted, “Britain will never resort to the deliberate attack on women and children, and other civilians for the purpose of mere terrorism.”

But all these ideals and pledges would soon be scrapped.

As early as May 11, 1940, the British War Cabinet approved “indiscriminate” bombing of civilian objectives. But it wasn’t until August 24 of that year that the abandonment of humane pretense got fully underway. Hitler’s Luftwaffe had accidentally bombed East London, triggering an RAF reprisal against Berlin the following night, which in turn prompted Hitler, in Keegan’s words, to “take the gloves off.” Hitler required little encouragement to do so; his pilots had already killed thousands of civilians in Spain, Poland, and Holland.

So the Luftwaffe and Bomber Command exchanged raids on population centers. After the British struck Munich, Germany, on November 8 the Luftwaffe hit Coventry, England. The British then struck Mannheim. And on December 29 Luftwaffe bombers ignited 1,500 fires in London.

After that, British MP Harold Nicolson wrote in his diary that popular feeling was growing that “similar treatment of the Germans is the only thing they will understand.” Indeed, American journalist Quentin Reynolds sensed “a new and intensified hatred of Germany in the people of London.”

So on February 14, 1941, according to Keegan:

The [British] Air Staff issued a directive emphasizing that henceforward operations “should now be focused on the morale of the enemy civilian population and in particular of industrial workers.” Lest this point not be taken, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal wrote the following day: “I suppose it is clear that the new aiming points are to be the built-up [residential] areas, not, for instance, the dockyards or aircraft factories.”

Then on July 8 British Prime Minister Winston Churchill wrote, “There is one thing that will bring [Hitler] down, and that is an absolutely devastating exterminating attack by very heavy bombers from this country upon the Nazi homeland.” Note the use of the word exterminating, as if Germany’s civilian population were so many vermin.

In February 1942 the goal of pulverizing German cities was further advanced with the appointment of Chief Air Marshal Arthur “Bomber” Harris to head Bomber Command. James L. Stokesbury, in *A Short History of Air Power*, writes:

Abandoning the futile attempt to strike at individual targets, they [the British] said, “operations should now be focused on the morale of the enemy civil population.” This meant adoption of what the British chose to call area bombing and the Germans called terror bombing. It was a conscious, albeit supposedly temporary, acceptance of the thesis that if you could not hit the German worker’s factory, you could lessen his efficiency by bombing him out of his house.

In this spirit, on March 28 Harris commenced an offensive that targeted German residential areas, hitting Lübeck with incendiary bombs at night. In May Bomber Command struck Cologne, destroying nearly 20,000 homes, killing five hundred citizens, and driving almost half a million people into the streets. According to Stokesbury, Churchill wired Bomber Command his congratulations for a raid that was a “herald” of things to come.

In July Bomber Command struck Hamburg’s residential areas, triggering a firestorm in which civilians, even in underground shelters, were incinerated by flames moving at hurricane force speeds of 150 miles an hour, generating temperatures of 1,400 degrees Fahrenheit. The bombers left behind “6,000 acres of smoking ashes and rubble, 41,800 people killed, and another 37,000 injured,” Stokesbury reports.

By contrast, the United States during this time was still maintaining its original official policy. For example, General James Doolittle, in his autobiography, *I Could Never Be So Lucky Again* (Bantam Books, 1991)—significantly in the portion of the book devoted to his April 18, 1942, surprise raid on Japan—pointedly declares his opposition to bombing civilians:

One pilot asked me if they should deliberately head for residential areas to drop their incendiaries. I said, “Definitely not! You are to look for and aim at military targets only, such as war industries, ship-building facilities, power plants, and the like. There is absolutely nothing to be gained by attacking residential areas.”

And even though, at their Casablanca conference in January 1943, Churchill and Roosevelt agreed on a strategic bombing offensive that included reducing the morale of the German people “to the point where their capacity for armed resistance is fatally weakened,” the United States clung for the time being to its policy of destroying military targets only.

Germany’s Inspector General of Fire Prevention Hans Rumpf makes the distinction between initial British and American strategies in his 1963 book, *The Bombing of Germany*, writing that the British night attacks systematically struck Hamburg’s neighborhoods with incendiaries and “were dearly of a terrorist nature” while, “during the day, the U.S.A.F. bombers attacked military and industrial targets in the dock areas and, in particular, the shipyards and submarine yards” with high-explosive bombs.

Then Walt Disney entered the picture. In *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art, and Commerce of Walt Disney*, Richard Schickel describes how Disney embraced the strategic bombing philosophy of Major Alexander de Seversky in producing a 1943 film *Victory Through Air Power*. This hour-long work of propaganda gave a tremendous boost to the argument for terror bombing. Critic James Agee wrote of the film, “I noticed, uneasily, that there were no suffering

and dying enemy civilians under all those proud promises of bombs; no civilians at all, in fact.” In the closing scene the battle is between an American eagle and an octopus with its tentacles gripping a map. Agee felt he couldn’t “contentedly accept the antiseptic white lies” of the movie.

This film at first proved more popular among British policymakers than those in the United States. But that would change. According to H. C. Potter, one of the film’s directors, Disney personally told him that Churchill had screened the film for Roosevelt at their Quebec Conference of August 1943 and thus induced Roosevelt to warm up to long-range strategic bombing.

In his public speeches, however, Roosevelt still clung to the concept of striking only military targets. Addressing Congress in September 1943 he said, “We were not bombing tenements for the sadistic pleasure of killing as the Nazis did, but blowing to bits carefully selected targets—factories, shipyards, munitions dumps.”

Colonel Robert Morgan, who piloted the first bomber to complete twenty-five missions over Europe and who later flew a B-29 over Japan, writes in *The Man Who Flew the Memphis Belle: Memoirs of a WWII Bomber Pilot*:

I will always be proud of the restraint shown in the United States Army Air Forces in those early months of the European air war—the time of the Memphis Belle. The ordnance carried by the B-17s of the Mighty Eighth reflected the humanitarian hopes of our government and our strictly defined and limited mission, which was to attack only military installations, never civilian centers.

Of the later switch to civilian targets, however, Morgan writes, “Nothing and no one was safe—combatants, civilians, women, children, cities, churches, the great historical monuments” and “no physical or moral boundaries would be able to check the spread of slaughter.”

In this context, on March 6, 1944, the *New York Times* gave page one coverage to a protest by twenty-eight prominent Americans, mostly clergy, against “obliteration raids” on German cities. The protestors called upon Christians “to examine themselves concerning their participation in this carnival of death” and to acquaint themselves with “the realities of what is being done in our name in Europe”

But the shift from pinpoint bombing of military targets to strategic, or area, bombings by the United States got another push from Churchill in 1945 when he pressed for cities in eastern Germany to be made high-priority targets. According to Geoffrey Perret in *Winged Victory: The Army Air Forces in World War II*, General Carl Spaatz, “commander of the Strategic Air Force, obliged by ordering the Eighth [Air Force] to strike Berlin. Not the industries of Berlin, not the

marshalling yards of Berlin, but the city center—the heart of German government and an area of high population density.” Perret writes that General Doolittle “protested that such an attack would be terrorism, without any justification on military grounds. . . Spaatz, however, wasn’t prepared to discuss it. He insisted the attack go ahead.” On February 3, 1945, nearly 1,000 bombers struck Berlin’s city center, killing 3,000 Berliners and rendering 120,000 homeless.

Then, ten days later, in the evening, the British struck the German city of Dresden with 2,700 tons of bombs, half of them incendiaries. They ignited a firestorm that killed between 40,000 and 60,000 civilians in the refugee-crowded city. Two days later American B-17s, unable to find an oil refinery target, plastered Dresden’s smoldering ruins for good measure.

Kurt Vonnegut, later to pen a novel about the Dresden bombing, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, but then an American prisoner of war in the city, recalls:

Every day we walked into the city and dug into basements and shelters to get corpses out, as a sanitary measure. When we went into them, a typical shelter, an ordinary basement usually, looked like a streetcar full of people who’d simultaneously had heart failure. Just people sitting there in their chairs, all dead.

Lee Kennett in *A History of Strategic Bombing* writes that, toward the end of the war in Europe, the United States showed “an increased interest in attacks directed specifically at the German people.” R. J. Overy in *The Air War, 1939-45* writes,

“The most striking moral paradox of the war years was the willingness of ostensibly liberal states to engage in the deliberate killing of hundreds of thousands of enemy civilians from the air.” Indeed, Visser t’Hooft, Secretary of the World Council of Churches, wrote at the time, “These bombardments create the impression that the whole world has gone totalitarian”

Meanwhile, in the Pacific theater of operations, Major General Curtis LeMay took over the U.S. XXI Bomber Command in January 1945 and decided the high-altitude precision daylight bombing of Japanese military targets had achieved only limited success. So he changed tactics. On February 25 his bombers showered incendiaries on one square mile of Tokyo, destroying some 28,000 buildings. These incendiaries were a mixture of magnesium and jellied gasoline that clung to the surface of whatever they struck—human beings included—and burned slowly at a high temperature. According to Colonel Robert Morgan, who flew a B-29 over Tokyo:

We were bombing with the very latest in the grim technology of death by fire—the incendiary M-69 and napalm-packed M-17. Tens of thousands of these projectiles were now falling on the center of Tokyo, turning it into a hell on earth. . . As the fires spread and conjoined, the stampeding crowds grew. They choked

the narrow streets, fleeing from one incinerated block only to collide with another throng streaming in the opposite direction. Great tongues of fire reached out to roast them en masse, like the breath of massive dragons. As the fires surged into vacuums created by the eaten-up oxygen, wind velocity increased, and scrambling human herds were overtaken by hundred-mile-an-hour firewinds. In their desperation, thousands of men, women, and children flocked towards the rivers and canals that cut through Tokyo, but these only yielded other forms of hideous deaths. Jumpers drowned, were asphyxiated, or were crushed to death by succeeding waves of jumpers. Soon the steel girders of bridges spanning the waters grew white-hot, forcing refugees to jump into water that was itself beginning to boil.

The *New York Times* reported that, between November 24, 1944, and August 15, 1945, American B-29 bombers flew more than 28,500 sorties in 315 missions on which about 159,000 tons of bombs and mines were dropped on sixty-four Japanese cities. Referring to the bombing of Tokyo on March 9, reporter W. H. Lawrence wrote, "It marked the first all-out effort to burn down a great city and destroy its people." In this Tokyo raid, 334 B-29's leveled 16 square miles of the city containing 267,000 structures, killing 83,000 people, injuring 41,000 more, and prompting Japanese radio to condemn the United States for butchering civilians.

Thomas Coffey in his biography *Iron Eagle: The Turbulent Life of General Curtis LeMay* writes that the general began his incendiary bombing campaign believing the destruction of Tokyo, Nagoya, Osaka, and Kobe would speed the end of the conflict. LeMay's approach was so effective, however, that he quickly ran out of cities to incinerate. By June 1945 nearly all the major cities of Japan had been reduced to rubble.

But was this a sensible strategy, either for the war in Europe or Asia? Robert Batchelder, in *The Irreversible Decision, 1939-50*, reports that, after the end of the war, strategic bombing surveys by the Department of Defense revealed that the military value of bombing civilian populations was minimal or even negative. Regarding Germany, *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey: Summary Report (European War)* of September 30, 1945, concluded:

The mental reaction of the German people to air attack is significant. Under ruthless Nazi control they showed surprising resistance to the terror and hardships of repeated air attack, to the destruction of their homes and belongings, and to the conditions under which they were reduced to live. Their morale, their belief in ultimate victory or satisfactory compromise, and their confidence in their leaders declined, but they continued to work efficiently as long as the physical means of production remained.

For all the bombs dropped on German cities, the military and the people remained resourceful enough to minimize the damage to their infrastructure and hold out for years. This was in part because, as bombing became a weapon of terror against civilians, it strengthened the German will to resist. This is logical. In the face of an attacker that proves itself inhumane, surrender isn't an option; only resistance makes sense. The same held true for Japan. And the lesson was learned again in the Vietnam War. That tiny country received more bombs than Europe, yet it was able to advance its war effort until the United States withdrew.

The starkest example of the terror bombing of civilians is, of course, the use of atomic weapons against two cities in Japan. This story takes us back before the war.

Drafted by atomic physicist Leo Szilard, Albert Einstein's famous letter of August 2, 1939, alerted President Roosevelt to the concept and power of atomic weapons, declaring: "A single bomb of this type carried by boat and exploded in port might very well destroy the whole port together with some surrounding territory" Because of the letter's warning that the Germans might develop such a weapon, Roosevelt moved forward on an American program.

"Roosevelt consistently supported the manufacture and use of the atomic bomb, or A-bomb, weapon deriving its explosive force from the release of atomic energy through the fission (splitting) of heavy nuclei (see nuclear energy). The first atomic bomb was produced at the Los Alamos, N.Mex., laboratory and successfully tested on July 16, 1945. This was the culmination of a large U.S. army program that was part of the Manhattan Project, led by Dr. Robert Oppenheimer." writes Ted Morgan in *FDR: A Biography*. David McCullough states in *Truman* that the atomic bomb was Roosevelt's project, "his decision, his venture." Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson wrote: "At no time, from 1941 to 1945, did I ever hear it suggested by the President, or by any other responsible member of government, that atomic energy should not be used in the war." And Cordell Hull, who didn't hesitate to condemn Japanese atrocities, praised Roosevelt "for making the tremendous decision to go the length of spending \$2 billion in developing the atomic bomb."

By June 1942 a British-American partnership was forged to develop the weapon, with the Manhattan Project established in August under command of Brigadier General Leslie Groves, who previously directed construction of the Pentagon. Then, on December 2, 1942, Szilard's team at the University of Chicago produced the first self-sustained nuclear chain reaction. Two years later, "At a meeting with Stimson on December 30, 1944, FDR approved the production and testing of the bombs, and the training of the crews of the 509th Composite [bomber] Group," Morgan writes.

After the American firebombing raids in 1945, however, Szilard became disillusioned. In an interview with *U.S. News & World Report* on August 15,

1960, he said, “Prior to the war I had the illusion that up to a point the American government was different” from other countries that “are guided by considerations of expediency rather than by moral considerations. . . Then, during the war, without any explanation, we began to use incendiary bombs against the cities of Japan. This was disturbing to me and it was disturbing many of my [scientific] friends.” So in June 1945 Szilard and other scientists published *Second Thoughts About Atomic Power: Report of the Committee on Social and Political Implications* in which the Allies were urged not to use the weapon, not only for the horror it would produce but because it would launch a nuclear arms race.

At the Potsdam conference in July 1945, Supreme Allied Commander in Europe Dwight D. Eisenhower expressed the hope that the United States wouldn’t initiate the use of something as “horrible and destructive as this weapon was described to be,” writes David Eisenhower. Churchill, however, told a different story. “The decision to use the atomic bomb to compel the surrender of Japan was never an issue. There was unanimous, automatic, unquestioned agreement around our table; nor did I ever hear the slightest suggestion that we should do otherwise” Indeed, McCullough states that Roosevelt had left behind no policy in writing concerning the atomic bomb other than a note to Churchill stating, “It might perhaps, after mature consideration, be used against the Japanese, who should be warned that this bombardment will be repeated until they surrender.”

Yet there were alternative strategies to defeating Japan other than by obliteration from the skies. By early 1945 virtually all of Japan’s Imperial Navy and merchant fleet had been sunk and the U.S. Navy had a stranglehold on an island nation that relied on imports to survive. In time this might have forced surrender. Again, the Soviet Union had previously agreed to hurl its military might against Japanese troops in Manchuria in early August, and did—an action that further undermined Japan’s will to resist. Japan knew from pitched battles in an undeclared war in Mongolia in the late 1930s its army was no match for the Red Army’s superior tanks and artillery. Finally, in the weeks before the nuclear blasts, the Japanese urgently attempted to convince Moscow to broker peace with the United States, but Moscow stalled them. The United States—which had broken the Japanese secret code—knew of this but was determined to use its atomic weapons anyway.

“The final decision of where and when to use the atomic bomb was up to me,” Truman said, according to McCullough. He ordered Stimson to use it “so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children”—a statement McCullough says Truman “knew to be only partly true.”

So on August 6, 1945, the first atomic bomb obliterated five square miles of Hiroshima and claimed 70,000 lives, including a score of American prisoners of war held captive there. Within two weeks about 90,000 were dead and the final count has been put as high as 200,000. On August 9 an atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki killed 74,800 more people, according to Japanese officials. Russia declared war on Japan the same day and six days later Japan surrendered.

The Vatican condemned the new weapon as a “catastrophic conclusion to the war’s apocalyptic surprises” notes Gordon Thomas and Max Witts in their history, *Enola Gay*, named for the plane that dropped the Hiroshima bomb. And, according to Ronald E. Powaski in *March to Armageddon: The United States and the Nuclear Arms Race, 1939 to the Present*, Eisenhower told Stimson, “It wasn’t necessary to hit them with that awful thing.”

By contrast, Doolittle wrote that using the two atomic bombs on Japan was the right thing to do. “In my opinion, it was, for one very simple reason: it saved lives. A land invasion of Japan would have cost both sides hundreds of thousands of casualties.” Like many others, Doolittle apparently gave no thought to whether innocent civilians should be sacrificed to spare military personnel. Was it ethical to incinerate Japanese children to spare American fighting men the risk of battle?

LeMay was even more bold, defending the nuclear detonations as essentially no different from his previous fire bombings: “We scorched and boiled and baked to death more people in Tokyo on that night of March 9-10 than went up in vapor at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.” He added, “But to worry about the morality of what we were doing—Nuts. . . I can recognize no more depravity in dropping a nuclear weapon than in having a V-2 rocket equipped with an orthodox warhead, and shooting it vaguely in the general direction of London, as the Germans did. No difference whatsoever.” Thus LeMay unwittingly confirmed that the United States had stooped to the level of the Nazis.

In assessing culpability for the indiscriminate slaughter of civilians by aerial bombardment, the fascist governments of Germany, Italy, and Japan must be held to account. But so, too, must Great Britain and the United States. Their leaders wouldn’t have lied to their publics if their consciences had been clear.

By the end of the war, more than seven million Germans and eight million Japanese had been bombed out of their homes, and estimates of the German and Japanese dead have been put as high as one million in each country. Of these victims, perhaps 20 percent were children.

Before the outbreak of World War II, the United States condemned the terror bombing of Spanish civilians by Hitler. By 1945 it was inflicting the same horror on the Axis. One of these two contradictory positions had to be wrong. In fact, the United States slid from the moral high ground at the outbreak of World War II to nuclear ground zero by the end of it. Thus, while Americans rightly deplore the failure of the Japanese to apologize to China for its war crimes or to cite them in the historical record taught to Japanese schoolchildren, Americans cannot gloss over their country’s own record of terror bombing in World War II and beyond.

Indeed, the failure of Americans in general to recognize this fault has impaired their moral vision so that reckless interventions abroad invariably are colored to

appear noble. This is why Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon could lay waste to Vietnam and George W. Bush can launch a war of aggression against Iraq on the pretext of destroying nuclear weapons while at the same time warning other nations not to develop them at their peril. Only when the United States rediscovers its moral compass will it once again be able to regain the moral high ground in international affairs.

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