



11350 Random Hills Road, Suite 800, Fairfax, Virginia 22030 Phone (703) 934-6101 Fax (703) 352-3678

[fff@fff.org](mailto:fff@fff.org) [www.fff.org](http://www.fff.org)

## **Targeting Civilians at Hiroshima and Nagasaki** **by Anthony Gregory**

The U.S. government has killed civilians for well over a century. During the Civil War, General William Tecumseh Sherman waged war on civilians in Atlanta. During the Philippine Insurrection at the turn of 20th century, U.S. forces killed about 200,000 civilians, and even had a policy to shoot anyone more than 10 years old who dared to resist the U.S. occupation of the Philippines. During World War II, the Allies ruthlessly firebombed Dresden and Tokyo and other cities in Germany and Japan, killing hundreds of thousands of innocent noncombatants.

But there was nevertheless something special about Hiroshima and its sequel of mass horror, Nagasaki.

People still defend Harry Truman's atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on pragmatic grounds. Truman's defenders say that the bombings saved far more lives than they extinguished. They concede that the bombing was an act of targeting civilians, but insist that it was for the worthy goal of ending the war.

Before even examining the plausibility of this argument, we have to acknowledge the argument's essence. In effect, to rationalize the targeting of noncombatants as the best method of bringing about a greater good is to make excuses for state terrorism. Terrorism, if it means anything, is a method by which civilians are the targets of violence for the purpose of achieving political goals. Having Imperial Japan surrender, even if a worthy goal, was nevertheless a political one, and the targeting of innocents to achieve that goal was an act of terrorism.

Indeed, it was terrorism on an incredibly large scale. Hundreds of thousands of innocent Japanese were instantaneously wiped off the earth on August 6 and August 9, 1945. Many more died in the following years from the radioactive climate left behind by the bombings.

So the questions remain: Was this a case where terrorism was justified? Can there be other circumstances where the overt targeting of civilians can be justified, so as to bring about a greater good?

In the case of Hiroshima, no substantive evidence exists that the bombing was “necessary” to make Japan surrender. In fact, the Japanese had already attempted to sue for peace in July and were only hesitant because they distrusted the terms of unconditional surrender that the Allies demanded. They specifically wanted to keep their emperor, which, after the atomic bombings, they were allowed to, anyway. The military estimated before Hiroshima that invasion would cost as many as 20,000 American lives, but not nearly the half million lives that Truman later claimed had been the estimate. Even without invasion, Japan was utterly defeated by the war and U.S. blockades prevented the island nation from getting the necessary food to survive, much less maintain any type of threat against America.

Truman’s decision to use nuclear weapons against civilians has not gone without [criticism from the political and military elite](#) of his time. Truman’s chief of staff, Admiral William D. Leahy, wrote in his book *I Was There* that using the “barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons.” He lamented that the U.S. government “had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages” and that he “was not taught to make war in that fashion.” In 1963 Dwight Eisenhower told *Newsweek* that “the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn’t necessary to hit them with that awful thing.” Although many Americans revere Truman and think he made the right decision, that was not the universal opinion among the top brass.

Why did the U.S government even develop such a ghastly weapon? The conventional history dictates that a reasonable fear of Hitler's acquiring nuclear bombs forced the U.S. government to develop them first. Albert Einstein wrote Franklin Roosevelt on August 2, 1939, and warned about Germany’s potential development of nuclear weapons. Even the master physicist Einstein seemed to have no idea how potent and deadly the atom bomb could be, as he wrote:

A single bomb of this type, carried by boat and exploded in a port, might very well destroy the whole port together with some of the surrounding territory. However, such bombs might very well prove to be too heavy for transportation by air.

So Roosevelt, if he took Einstein's advice and assumed the worst, had good reason to worry about a Nazi nuclear weapons program. But this is not the whole story.

After Germany surrendered to the Allies, the Alsos Mission (American Science Intelligence Unit) dismantled the German nuclear effort in April 1945. In May, the Allies confirmed there had been no German atomic threat, but the Manhattan Project continued unabated.

The Manhattan Project employed 180,000 people who worked for several years with a clear mission and a \$2 billion budget, whereas the German nuclear operation had nothing remotely near that manpower or level of organization. In fact, the scientists who had worked on Germany's nuclear program had believed as early as 1941 that the atomic bomb was virtually unattainable, and were stunned to see the "success" of the Hiroshima bombing.

We know this because in July 1945 the British brought the top ten scientists in Hitler's nuclear program to Farm Hall, near Cambridge, England. Confined to a house until January 1946, the scientists were monitored and much of their dialogue was recorded and transcribed. The transcripts became declassified in 1992, and are now available in the books *Operation Epsilon: The Farm Hall Transcripts* and *Hitler's Uranium Club*, which present the British and American translations of the transcripts, respectively.

Hitler would have doubtless loved to have had the atom bomb, but from the Farm Hall transcripts it becomes clear that the German scientists had lacked the resources, personnel, and understanding to build it. Germany's most brilliant physicist, Werner Heisenberg, reacted with complete disbelief that the Allies achieved what the Germans never hoped to accomplish. Heisenberg did not fully understand the science that went into the isotope separation, had made arithmetic errors, and, upon hearing of Hiroshima, rightly conjectured that to pull it off the United States must have used tens of thousands of people — many times more than what the Germans had. The scientists pondered among themselves how the Allies had done it, even wondering which fissionable element had been used. At times, Heisenberg assumed the Allies were bluffing about Hiroshima.

Several of the scientists expressed horror at the Hiroshima bombing. Otto Hahn said, "I am thankful that we didn't succeed," and Max von Laue cried out, "The innocent!" Walther Gerlach expressed sorrow that the Germans had failed to do what the Allies had done, prompting Hahn to reply, "Are you upset we did not make the uranium bomb? I thank God on my bended knees we did not make the uranium

bomb.”

Heisenberg voiced a similar sentiment that we hear today: “One could equally say [the atomic bomb was] the quickest way of ending the war.” Some have wondered if Heisenberg knew how to develop nuclear weapons, but sabotaged the Nazi program out of a sense of morality. We cannot be totally sure, but we do know that he insisted until his death that he had been completely clueless that the weapons could feasibly be made. We know that the Germans were light years from attaining them and that it took 180,000 people working on the Manhattan Project to develop them – and that the Allies continued the project even after they knew the Germans had never come close.

Truman has been quoted as saying, “The atom bomb was no ‘great decision.’... It was merely another powerful weapon in the arsenal of righteousness.” He also called the bomb the “greatest achievement of organized science in history,” and wondered aloud about how “atomic power can become a powerful and forceful influence toward the maintenance of world peace.”

We cannot know whether Truman believed this or exactly why he chose to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some still insist that the president genuinely thought it was the least deadly way to end the war; others think that he was trying to intimidate Stalin or even prevent the USSR from invading and conquering Japan before the United States could.

But we do know that the bombings did accomplish a number of things. They ushered in a new era of warfare, in which targeting civilians became an acceptable strategy. The advent of the nuclear bomb brought on decades of Cold War between the U.S. and Russian superpowers, whose subjects lived in constant anxiety under the perennial threat of nuclear annihilation. It encouraged the Russians to accelerate their production of weapons of mass destruction. It further consolidated power in the executive branch of the U.S. government — what power even compares with the power to destroy so many lives at the push of a button? And it launched civilization toward the ultimate collectivism, whereby civilian lives became expendable fodder for the sufficiently empowered governments of the world. More than half the fatalities in World War II were civilian, and the apocalyptic finale of the war in Hiroshima and Nagasaki drastically altered the formula for waging war, henceforth branding civilians as legitimate targets to achieve higher, collectivist purposes.

Since Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the U.S. government has continued to treat civilians and combatants as roughly indistinguishable. During the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon carpet-bombed Cambodia, killing hundreds of thousands of peasants.

The first Bush and Clinton administrations devastated the lives of Iraqi civilians, bombing civilian infrastructure and imposing UN sanctions with the express policy goal of destroying civilian water treatment facilities and starving the Iraqi people into submission, in hopes to incite them to rise up and overthrow Saddam.

On *60 Minutes* in May 1996, Leslie Stahl asked Clinton's UN Ambassador, Madeline Albright, point blank: "We have heard that a half million children have died [from the sanctions]. I mean, that's more children than died in Hiroshima. And — and you know, is the price worth it?"

Albright replied, "I think this is a very hard choice, but the price — we think the price is worth it."

Perhaps there has never been a clearer case of a U.S. official rationalizing the targeting of countless foreign civilians in the context of what happened at Hiroshima. The precedent had been set, and what decades ago may have been considered an immeasurable but necessary evil to stop Imperial Japan has more recently been invoked as a proper way of dealing with as negligible a threat to the United States as Saddam Hussein.

Surely, Albright's words were well publicized in the Islamic world, where Muslims saw little concern whatever on the part of U.S. officials for the civilian lives of Middle Easterners, as long as expending such lives achieved "higher" policy goals. Reciprocally, Islamist terrorists have had little concern for American civilian lives in their quest to change U.S. policy.

Three years after Albright's frightening admission, Clinton went on to drop cluster bombs on Serbia, knowing full well that civilians would endure the most suffering. In regard to Gulf War II, the U.S. government has shown a complete apathy toward civilian dead in Iraq, refusing even to keep and publicize an accurate body count.

Some Americans have celebrated Hiroshima, as though it was a necessary end to the madness of World War II in which 50 million people lost their lives. They perceive the atomic bombings the way one might look at a peace treaty. Several years back, the Post Office even commemorated the event with a stamp depicting the image of the mushroom cloud that took hundreds of thousands of lives.

Instead, Hiroshima and Nagasaki should be remembered with solemn and thoughtful reflection as atrocities that reinforced collectivist attitudes toward war and sparked the beginning of a fearful era of cold and hot war with the United States and its proxies against the USSR and its proxies.

Instead of making excuses for past U.S. war crimes, we need to remember

them for the great evils that they indeed were. We cannot undo history, but with determination, we might possibly prevent such horrendous crimes from ever again being done in our name. The worst way to guarantee a brighter future is to look at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and draw the lesson that sometimes the government needs to kill hundreds of thousands of civilians for the sake of humanity. Indeed, it is that conventional lesson that has helped solidify the United States in a state of perpetual war since the end of World War II, and that dangerously faulty lesson might still one day be invoked to facilitate such terror and atrocity that we can now hardly imagine.

*Anthony Gregory is a writer and musician who lives in Berkeley, California. He earned his bachelor's degree in history at UC Berkeley, where he was president of the Cal Libertarians. He is an intern at the Independent Institute and has written for [RationalReview.com](http://RationalReview.com), the [Libertarian Enterprise](http://Libertarian Enterprise), [LewRockwell.com](http://LewRockwell.com), and [LewRockwell.com](http://LewRockwell.com). See his webpage, [AnthonyGregory.com](http://AnthonyGregory.com), for more articles and personal information.*

**This article was originally published in August 2004.**