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## **War Crimes at Hiroshima and Nagasaki**

**by Jacob G. Hornberger**

Reports of killings of noncombatants during the Vietnam and Korean Wars have recently caused Americans to reflect upon the concept of war crimes, and specifically those committed by their own military forces. But why stop with those two wars? Why not use the opportunity to revisit what U.S. military forces did to the Japanese at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, at the end of World War II?

The central idea behind the concept of war crimes is that even with the brutality of war, there should be limits on the behavior of combatants. Thus, over the centuries, warring nations have developed the notion of what might be called “civilized rules of warfare.” While the rules have evolved and changed over time, soldiers are expected to abide by them even while doing their best to win the war by destroying the enemy.

For example, under civilized rules of warfare, a soldier is not permitted to rape either civilians or captive enemy soldiers. Any soldier who commits a rape is guilty of a war crime and is subject to being punished, either by his own government or by enemy forces.

Part of the rationale for the concept of war crimes is utilitarian — if one side begins doing it, the other side might very well follow suit. For example, if one army starts to torture and kill prisoners of war, it knows that the other side might reciprocate. But another rationale involves fundamental moral principles. While the argument can certainly be made that war is hell and that victory should come at any cost, a civilized people recognizes that oftentimes it is important to maintain a sense of moral perspective even within the horrors of war. Thus, even though barbarians on the other side might begin torturing, mutilating, and raping their prisoners, a civilized nation would refuse to follow their lead.

Torture and rape, however, are not the only forms of behavior that have become known as war crimes. As we were reminded in Vietnam with the My Lai killings and in Korea with the killings at No Gun Ri, the concept of war crimes also precludes the intentional killings of noncombatants, that is, unarmed civilians, including women and children. Most everyone agrees

that if soldiers round up defenseless civilians and indiscriminately shoot them, the killings are morally reprehensible and criminal.

But why should the principle be any different for a bomber pilot than it is for an infantryman? If a foot soldier cannot rightfully kill defenseless women and children, why should it be permissible for air force personnel to do so? Aren't women and children and other noncombatants just as dead whether they're killed by a bullet or a bomb?

The atomic bombs that U.S. military forces dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki are estimated to have killed more than 200,000 Japanese people, including women and children. Hardly anyone argues that these two cities were targeted because of some special military purpose. They were targeted to kill a large portion of the Japanese civilian population in the hope of bringing about a quick surrender by the Japanese government.

For more than five decades, U.S. government officials have justified the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by saying that the bombings saved the lives of tens of thousands of American GIs by shortening the war. But since when is that a justification for what is ordinarily considered a war crime? If an infantryman is prohibited from intentionally killing noncombatants, even to shorten the war, why should air force personnel be treated any differently?

When a government commits a nation to war, it means that its soldiers are going to have to fight and that some of them are going to have to die. That's the nature of war. And the intentional sacrifice of defenseless women and children and other noncombatants in order to save the lives of military personnel is cowardice, pure and simple. And it's a war crime as well.

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