

By H. Patricia Hynes

From Portside

The saturation firebombing of German and Japanese cities during World War II seasoned the US government for dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. After the first blast on August 6, 1945, which killed 100,000 residents of Hiroshima immediately, the grievous radiation sickness of Japanese survivors was not anticipated, nor was it believed when reported. Without any reconsideration, a second bomb - this one plutonium - was dropped on Nagasaki three days later, killing 70,000 people outright. The American military censored all documentation and photo images of the two bombs' unparalleled human devastation,[1] sheltering Americans from the horrors of what our government perpetrated on mainly Japanese civilians: women, men, and children instantly reduced to ashes. Likewise, the post-war US occupying authority forbade Japanese citizens, under penalty of law, to own pictures of the atomic bomb destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

American military leaders from all branches of the armed forces, among them Generals Eisenhower, Arnold, Marshall and MacArthur; and Admirals Leahy, Nimitz, and Halsey strongly dissented from the decision to use the bombs - some prior to August 1945, some in retrospect - for the following military and moral reasons. Japan was already defeated and in peace negotiations with Russia; surrender was imminent. Moreover, Russia was willing to enter the war against Japan, if necessary. Bombing dense human settlements was barbarous, immoral and would shock world opinion; and a demonstration bombing away from residential areas (also suggested by some atomic bomb scientists) could be used instead to force immediate surrender. The top military commanders concurred that the decision to use the atomic bomb was political, not military.[2]

Dropping the atomic bombs in World War II launched an arms race in nuclear weapons, now spread to nine countries, with the ever-present specter of their use. In the May 2012 Vienna meeting on the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the nuclear-armed countries explicitly stated their intention to maintain a nuclear arsenal for security. The same month, NATO countries convening in Chicago pronounced, "Nuclear weapons are...essential...for defense and dissuasion."

Of all post-war presidents and leaders of any country, Eisenhower - who as Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe was repulsed by the atomic bombs dropped on Japan - fast-tracked building the world's largest arsenal of nuclear weapons and recklessly threatened their use when conflicts arose in Korea, the Suez, and elsewhere. In 1960 he approved a plan for a simultaneous Sino-Soviet strike in the event of war, with a projected death toll of 600 million. By the early 1960s, authorizations he had set in place filled the US arsenal with more than 30,000 nuclear weapons, the equivalent of nearly 1.5 million Hiroshima bombs.

To divert the attention of a world terrified by our arms race with the Soviets and to dispel the resultant taboo around nuclear weapons, Eisenhower's administration devised the "Atoms for Peace" program. Nuclear power was fraudulently marketed as the peaceful, beneficent, safe and clean counterpart of nuclear weapons, even though it was well-known in government that

uranium mined for nuclear power reactors and the reactors' spent fuel could be re-processed to make nuclear bombs. This bargain with the devil has led us to Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Fukushima; an estimated 150 significant radiation leaks at nuclear power plants across the world even before Chernobyl; and the current threat of war with Iran.

The Fukushima Dai-ichi nuclear power plant explosion in March 2011 was caused by a trifecta of risk inherent in every nuclear power plant: unplanned for natural disaster, defective technical design, and failed industry and government oversight. Fukushima opened a Pandora's box of ills and risks for the country of

Japan and the world. Radioactive iodine, cesium and plutonium were carried by air masses across the entire Northern Hemisphere. And the worst may yet happen. Extremely radioactive spent fuel rods at Fukushima are now exposed to the outside environment. According to a recent geological study, another similarly strong earthquake could strike the area again in a reactivated fault nearer to Fukushima and cause the meltdown of the exposed fuel rods, releasing immense amounts of radioactive contaminants across the Northern Hemisphere.

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[1] A History of Bombing. Peter Wyden. 1984. Day One: Before Hiroshima and After. New York: Simon and Schuster.

[2] Gar Alperovitz. 1995. The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth. New York: Knopf.