Giving thanks for Hiroshima: sixty years later, Andrew Kenny says that the atomic bomb saved millions of lives.

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'A dragonfly flitted in front of me and stopped on a fence. I stood up, took my cap in my hands, and was about to catch the dragonfly when...'

...when there was a flash of white light in the blue sky above Hiroshima. This was at 8.15 a.m. on 6 August 1945. Then followed a new kind of thunder and a new kind of hellfire. A minute later those who were still alive, those whose flesh was not falling off their bodies, blinked into a changed world, like a traveller waking and finding himself on a different planet. Through the glare of flames and the darkness of smoke, they saw that their city had vanished and been replaced by a blackened desert, empty of everything except fire, charcoal, corpses and the concrete skeletons of buildings. Some of the dead had become small: shrivelled lumps of charred meat sticking to pavements and bridges. Some of the living had become big: swollen red monsters with pits in their faces where their eyes and mouths had been. A man without feet walked on his ankles; a woman without a jaw stood with her tongue hanging out of her head; a naked man sat holding his eyeball in his hand. One of the crew of the bomber, describing what he had seen below, said, 'Did you ever go to the beach and stir up the sand in shallow water and see it all billow up? That's what it looked like to me. Sixty-six thousand people died instantly, 120 thousand by the end of the year."

I visited Hiroshima last month. I was in Kyoto to attend an energy conference where, somewhat ironically I suppose, I gave a talk on South Africa's new nuclear power reactor, the Pebble Bed Modular Reactor. (It was well received.) After the conference I took the train to Hiroshima, swishing through the Japanese countryside at 160mph in a spotlessly clean and comfortable carriage. A conductor in a demure uniform bowed to us upon entering and leaving it. I looked out at the low hills of Japan with their feathery covering of light green trees and at the neat grey towns with factories and paddy fields in their midst. At Hiroshima station I took the tram to the most haunting ruin in the world and then walked through a graceful park to the 'Peace Museum' (the War Museum).

The museum is sombre, informative and horrifying. Models and large mural photographs show the city before and after the bomb. There are statistics of death, heat, pressure and radiation, eyewitness accounts of children watching their mothers die in front of them, anecdotes, such as the man about to catch the dragonfly, and little household relics, such as molten spoons and a wristwatch stopped at 08.15. But the most evocative remnant stands outside the museum on a riverbank. It is the ruin of the 'Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall', usually known as the 'Atomic Dome'.

Hiroshima is built on a large delta consisting of seven rivers. At its centre is the T-shaped Aioi Bridge, which provides a three-way crossing where one river divides into two. This T was the target for the atomic bomb. He was slightly out and the bomb exploded about 200 yards to the south, 600 yards above the ground. The Promotion Hall is close to the bridge. It was built in 1915, designed by a Czech architect, and consisted of cylindrical shapes joined together into a four-storey block with a small green dome on the top. It looked like half an apple on top of a jukebox. The atomic bomb vastly improved it as an aesthetic object, changing it from a mundane ugly building into a masterpiece of stricken form. I gazed at it for a long time from every angle and then paced out the distance south to where the bomb had gone off. In an act of compulsive...
foolishness I stared upward to look for the spot in the air.

Was Truman right to drop it? I have no doubt he was. However I look at it, I cannot see other than that the bomb saved millions of lives, Allied and Japanese. All British combatants in the second world war that I have ever spoken to, including my parents, described the same reaction when they heard of the Hiroshima bomb: tremendous relief. A foreman, Tommy, at a factory I worked at in Lancashire in 1980, told me that in July 1945 he was in the Pacific doing exercises for the invasion of Japan. He expected to die. He thanked the bomb that he became a grandfather.

The most effective soldiers in the war were the Germans. The only way the Allies could beat them was to outnumber and outgun them. They seemed to have a limitless supply of officers with quick, flexible minds who could read a battle and make a swift and intelligent assessment of the best tactics required. For the opposite reason, the Japanese were among the most ineffective soldiers in the war. Tough, brave and stoical, they became useless as battle winners if you killed their commander. They could not think for themselves and, without orders and leaders, became a ferocious and implacable mob, hopeless for securing victory but terrifyingly dangerous in refusing defeat. They would not surrender. The casualties when the Americans invaded the outlying islands in the Pacific held by the Japanese were sickeningly high because they just would not surrender. The invasion of Japan itself would probably have been the bloodiest episode in human combat. Expecting it, Japanese Imperial Headquarters called for ‘100 million deaths with honour’.

Making things worse was the chaotic leadership of Japan. Japan’s ‘15-Year War’ had not been started by political leaders but by two mad colonels in Manchuria. We shall never know what happened at command level in Japan during the war, because documents were destroyed before the Allied occupation, but there certainly was murderous conflict between generals, admirals and politicians. The Emperor was the only one with supreme authority, even if he lacked will, and we are lucky he survived. Killing Hitler would have shortened the war; killing Emperor Hirohito would have lengthened it. He was for making peace but needed a special reason for doing so, something so overwhelming that he could face down his generals who wanted to continue the war. The threat of the Soviet Union’s joining the war against Japan was not enough. The atomic bomb was.

The first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August. The second was dropped on Nagasaki on 9 August. Was it necessary? I’m afraid so. There was still dithering and defiance after the first bomb and the American idea was to keep on blowing until the enemy’s flame went out. I have taken some descriptions from Richard Rhodes’s superb book The Making of the Atomic Bomb. In it he quotes the historian Herbert Feis, who explains the mood of American people then. They had ‘impatience to end the strain of war blended with a zest for victory. They longed to be done with smashing, burning, killing and dying --and were angry at the defiant, crazed, useless prolongation of the ordeal.’

The Americans hurried to roll out the Nagasaki bomb, wanting to give an impression of continued, massive and irresistible destruction. The third bomb would be ready to fall by 17 August. But on 15 August the Emperor announced the surrender.

Then there was a large-scale experiment on human beings that gave spectacular confirmation of the principle that institutions and not race determine the virtues and well-being of mankind. The USA forced democracy on Japan. It worked like a charm and, with enduring peace, achieved a happy wonder. The Japanese, always industrious and inventive, became model democrats--tolerant, peaceful and considerate. The grandsons of men who abused British prisoners in PoW camps now treat their grandsons with respect and decency. There is an obvious improvement in health in Japan. One glance at a Japanese crowd shows a striking difference between generations: those over 60 are very short; those under 40 are of Western heights, with six-footers not standing out at all. Japan has reached new levels of manufacturing prowess and efficiency, improving the whole world with its marvellous products.
The casualties of Hiroshima were mainly from blast and heat. Radiation killed far fewer and these mostly suffered acute damage from the massive direct radiation that struck fast-growing cells in the gut, skin, marrow, blood and in feotuses, causing hideous deaths and abnormalities. Chronic radiation effects, the long-lasting effects, were quite small. By 1990 the total number of the survivors from both bombs who died from cancer caused by the radiation was estimated at 428—an average of 10 a year since the bombs were dropped. The figure for genetic damage done by the radiation is more precisely known. It is zero. No increase in genetic defects in children born to survivors who conceived after the bomb has ever been seen.

The London bombs went off while I was in Japan and dominated the headlines there. With them on my mind, it was disturbing to read in the Hiroshima Museum that the amount of uranium which had exploded, i.e., actually underwent fission, was about a kilogram—a piece of uranium the size of a plum (although you need more to ensure fission). What if the London terrorists had had atomic bombs? There are two fuels for an atomic bomb: highly enriched uranium (HEU), which was used on Hiroshima, and weapons-grade plutonium, which was used on Nagasaki. Even with this plutonium, it is very difficult to make a bomb. With the HEU, it is very easy. The Americans made both in 1945 but only had to test the plutonium bomb. They knew the HEU one would work, and dropped it untested on Hiroshima. HEU is the most dangerous explosive material in existence and the prospect of its falling into the wrong hands is appalling. The only way to stop this happening is by concerted, honest, open political endeavour.

There is little connection between atomic weapons and nuclear power. Sweden, Switzerland and Japan have nuclear power but no weapons. Israel has atomic weapons but no nuclear power. The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) came into existence to allow nuclear power and to stop the spread of atomic weapons. Technically, this is very simple to do: have an outright and worldwide ban on any uranium enrichment above 10 per cent (weapons need above 80 per cent) and the same ban on weapons-grade plutonium. The problem is political. The countries that possess the atomic weapons, including the USA, would refuse this ban. Other countries are judged not by their compliance to NPT but by political prejudice. Iran does not have atomic weapons and has a good record of compliance with NPT. India does have atomic weapons and refuses to sign it. Yet Iran is vilified by the US, and President Bush has just agreed to help India’s nuclear programme. This staggering hypocrisy endangers the world.

Among the distinguished visitors who are photographed visiting the Hiroshima Peace Museum is the last white president of South Africa, F.W. de Klerk, who went there in 1993. There is great symbolism here because the apartheid regime had made six Hiroshima-style bombs. De Klerk ordered them to be dismantled and the plant that had made the HEU to be demolished. De Klerk deserves his Nobel Peace Prize twice over, once for ending apartheid and once for showing the world what to do with atomic bombs.
In the history of human sorrow, the atomic bombs on Japan must be ranked large but by no means largest. More people were killed in the conventional bombing of Germany and Tokyo. More than twice as many were killed with machetes and clubs in Rwanda in 1994. Mao Tse-tung killed a hundred times more in a single episode simply by denying people food. A medieval torturer could easily match any individual horror of Hiroshima, and personally I should prefer to face an atomic bomb than a man with a red-hot poker and a pair of pincers. The only different thing about the bomb is that so much destruction can be caused so quickly from one source. This is why it ended the second world war.

We do not know what happened to that dragonfly 60 years ago. Without the bomb she might have ended that day as a decorative corpse, stuck to a board with a pin through her chest, dead before she could have children. Perhaps, like Tommy, the bomb saved her life and her descendants now fit into the future just above the gentle plains of Hiroshima.


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