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Why Agonize Over Hiroshima, Not Dresden?

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As we celebrate the 55th anniversary of the end of World War II, we might well look at America's fascination with guilt feelings about selected past sins. Why do some Americans feel guilty about our justified bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which immediately killed 120,000 Japanese (some estimates are significantly higher), and not about the unjustified bombing of Dresden, which killed 135,000 Germans?

City bombing is always brutal, but sometimes it is a tragic necessity. In a just war, and certainly the Allied cause was just, all military action should be designed to destroy the enemy's capacity and will to continue fighting.

First, the key facts about the bombing of Dresden on the night of February 13-14, 1945, 10 weeks before Germany's surrender, when everyone knew that Germany was beaten: Dresden was a beautiful Baroque city known as the Florence of the north. It had no war industry and little military value. Its population of 630,000 had been doubled by German refugees, mainly peasants from Silesia fleeing the Red Army.

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The concerted British and American attack dropped 650,000 incendiary bombs, causing a firestorm engulfing eight square miles and killing an estimated 135,000 men, women and children.

Why visit such carnage on the cusp of Germany's defeat? Some analysts say it was merely a continuation of the Allied strategy to bring Germany to its knees, but a postwar U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that such bombing did little to erode civilian morale or impede war production. Others say it was vindictive anger over Hitler's bombing of London and other British cities.

But Hitler's barbarity did not justify the fiery destruction of Dresden. Dresden was not a legitimate military target. British historian Paul Johnson has called the bombing "the greatest Anglo American moral disaster of the war against Germany." Yet few Americans have expressed shame or guilt.

So why do guilt-prone Americans continue to fault their government for Hiroshima while ignoring Dresden? Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft recently called Hiroshima a satanic act, placing it in the same moral category as Auschwitz, the Bataan Death March, the Gulag, the Ukraine famine, the Rwanda tribal massacres, Pol Pot's killing fields and Mao's Great Leap Forward.

Most historians render a different verdict. They agree on the basic military situation in August 1945:

- * America had broken the Japanese military code and President Truman had no substantial evidence that Japan was about to surrender.

- * Though Tokyo and many other Japanese cities had been firebombed, Japan had made elaborate plans to resist an American invasion. It had assembled a Kamikaze suicide armada and mobilized 1 million soldiers and civilians equipped with a variety of suicide devices to stop the Americans on the beaches. Japan had a vast arsenal of chemical and bacterial weapons it likely would have used.

- * The atom bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed 120,000 civilians and military personnel immediately, according to Paul H. Nitze's postwar bombing survey. But these terrible weapons ended the war. Japan's expansionist empire, which had slaughtered millions of innocent Chinese and other Asians, was brought to its knees.

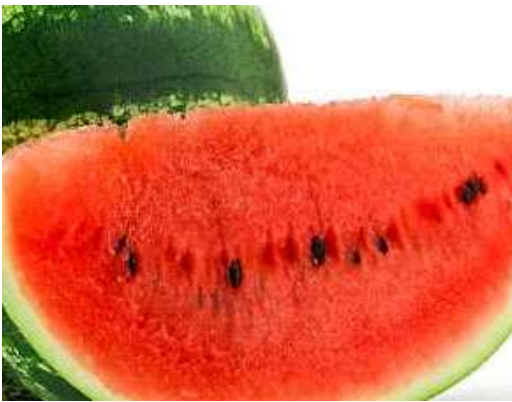
- * The war's abrupt end spared some 400,000 American prisoners of war and civilian detainees in Japanese hands, all of whom were to be executed had the U.S. invaded. The U.S. Pacific command estimated that at least 500,000 Americans and three times as many Japanese would have died in an invasion. Thus, the atom bombs may have saved 2 million lives, mostly Japanese.

Why, then, is the atom bombing demonized when the March 9, 1945, firebombing of Tokyo, which killed 85,000 Japanese in one night, is not? The Tokyo raid and other U.S.

air raids already had claimed some 500,000 Japanese victims. What is the moral distinction between killing people by an atomic blast or by a rain of fire bombs?

All war is hell, but our cause was just. We should be proud that America and its allies liberated hundreds of millions from the brutal empires of Hirohito and Hitler. Beating our breasts over Hiroshima distorts history, but an expression of contrition over the unnecessary firebombing of Dresden redeems it and us.

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