ARMAGEDDON AND PARANOIA

THE NUCLEAR CONFRONTATION

RODRIC BRAITHWAITE
'Is there either logic or morality in believing that if one side threatens to kill tens of millions of our people our only recourse is to threaten killing tens of millions of theirs?'

Ronald Reagan, Second Inaugural Address, January 1985

'I too was involved in the remarkable scientific and engineering achievements which enabled humanity to master a practically inexhaustible source of energy. But I am no longer certain that humanity has matured enough to manage that energy.'

Yuli Khariton, Director of the Soviet weapons programme, 1995
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— PROLOGUE —

THE SWORD OF DAMOCLES

‘Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident, or miscalculation, or by madness. The weapons of war must be abolished before they abolish us.’

John F. Kennedy, 1961

Nate: How can you live like that? I mean, what if you found out you were going to die tomorrow?

Brenda: I’ve been prepared to die tomorrow since I was six years old.

Nate: Well, why since you were six?

Brenda: ‘Cause I read a report on the effect nuclear war would have on the world and it was pretty clear to me at that point that this was definitely going to happen.

Nate: When you were six?

Brenda: And I wake up every day pretty much surprised that, um, everything’s still here.

Nate: Well, I don’t understand how you can live like that.

Brenda: Well, I thought we all did.

Six Feet Under, American TV comedy, 2001–5

On 8 August 1945 I was travelling on a train with my parents to our summer holiday when I read in the Times newspaper that Hiroshima had been wiped out by an atomic bomb two days earlier: ‘Official reconnaissance photographs of Hiroshima show clearly that four and one-tenth square miles of the city, of a total area of almost seven square miles, were completely destroyed by one atomic bomb,’ said the report. “Destroyed” is the word used officially, but it appears that “obliterated” might be a better word.”
Three days later, a second bomb destroyed another Japanese city. Sitting in the Conservative Party’s leather-upholstered Carlton Club, John Watson wrote to the editor of *The Times*: ‘Now that the dust that was Hiroshima and Nagasaki is subsiding, there must be countless men and women [able to] observe in its stark reality the unparalleled horror that is being perpetrated in their name … Two great cities and all who lived within them have been deliberately seared from the earth.’ Posterity would condemn those who had first used atomic power for such a purpose. It was ‘the most dreadful precedent in the history of mankind’.

Germany was as comprehensively destroyed by war as Japan. The Soviet Union lost far more people, Poland and Yugoslavia a far larger proportion of their people.

Yet the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did usher in a new era, despite the lingering feeling among some that the atomic bomb was just another weapon, different in degree but not in kind from the weapons of war that mankind had used throughout history. From that moment politicians and ordinary people alike – even in the nominally atheistic Soviet Union – began to use an old-fashioned language to speak about the new world. They talked of God and the Devil, of Apocalypse and Armageddon, and of the final confrontation between Good and Evil. Statesmen and commentators around the world hurried to agree that the atomic weapon would have to be banned if humanity were not to destroy itself. Some kind of world government would have to be set up to enforce the ban.

It did not happen, of course. The paranoia, the poisonous ideological fervour, the mutual demonisation with which the Soviet Union and its Western allies regarded one another, had been masked by the need to preserve a common front against Hitler. Now it broke out into the open. Neither the Americans, nor the British, still less the Russians, were prepared to be blackmailed by an opponent brandishing a bomb. Within the three governments, intelligent, decent and honourable men (there were very few women) planned the weapons and the systems that would enable them to wipe one another out at a blow. It was hard to argue that what they were doing was either rational or moral.
It was not that the politicians were unaware of their appalling responsibility. They hoped to deter war by making it clear to their adversary that any nuclear attack would inevitably be met by an equally destructive counterstroke. They called it ‘deterrence’, a policy of Mutually Assured Destruction, or MAD. Their critics sneered at the acronym.

There was not much that ordinary people could do about it. Some protested, without much effect. Others agreed with their governments that if the other fellow had the bomb they had to have it too. Most got on with their lives, like the inhabitants of Pompeii, and hoped the volcano would never blow up. As Fred Iklé put it before he became a hawkish Under Secretary in Ronald Reagan’s Pentagon: ‘We all turn away … from the thought that nuclear war may be as inescapable as death, and may end our lives and our society within this generation or the next.’

From time to time governments skirted catastrophe; but when it came to the crunch, they always stepped back. Despite their mutual suspicion, they tried to reach out to their adversaries to find ways of taming the monster. Mikhail Gorbachev and Ronald Reagan eventually found the political courage and the imagination to end the confrontation. In 1994 Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin agreed that their missiles would no longer be targeted against one another: a symbolic gesture to mark the formal end of nearly fifty years of hair-trigger confrontation. The prospect of Armageddon receded. But it did not disappear.

At the height of the Cuban missile crisis in October 1962 I went into the Foreign Office each morning wondering if I would see Jill and my children again. Some people were more phlegmatic. When a BBC reporter asked one woman arriving at Charing Cross station what she thought of the crisis, she replied, ‘I’m sorry, dear, I don’t know. I’m only up in London for the day.’

My daughter Kate, like Brenda in the American sitcom, grew up duly aware that her existence might be blotted out in a flash. In Moscow, on the other side of the Iron Curtain, ten-year-old Vlad Zubok had nightmares when a school friend told him what a nuclear bomb could do. But he was an optimist and imagined that he would
survive with his grandparents in the country even when Moscow was incinerated.

The atom bomb did not, as some had hoped, force the human race to abandon warfare altogether. Nuclear weapons proliferated; but those who had them were terrified to use them. Tens of millions of people went on dying in what now came to be called ‘conventional’ wars.

Throughout the decades after that train journey in 1945 I wondered what the scientists, the weapons designers, the military men, the officials, and the politicians thought they were doing. I decided to try to work it out for myself while I still had time.

Hence this book.
PART I

PROMETHEAN FIRE
— ONE —

THE DESTRUCTION OF JAPAN

‘All belligerents in all conflicts are morally compromised, but this does not render all causes equally worthless.’

Max Hastings

There was never much doubt about it: when it came to the crunch, the first atomic bomb would be dropped without warning on a city.

On 7 December 1941 Japanese aircraft attacked the American Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor without warning, sank three American battleships, damaged three more, and left 2,500 Americans dead. It was a stunning military operation, the culmination of decades of growing hostility between Japan and the West.

The Western imagination had long been filled with images of barbarian hordes from the East: Attila and his Huns, the Mongols ‘like demons loose from Tartarus’, fanatical oriental despots ‘educated to be inscrutable and false … like us in practically nothing’. But it was Kaiser Wilhelm II, the German emperor, who first talked of ‘The Yellow Peril’. In America, prejudice was fed by Chinese and Japanese immigration into California. One populist politician declared immigration would ‘soon convert the fairest State in the Union into a Japanese colony’. A series of excitable novels prophesied war.

Meanwhile the Japanese reinvented themselves as a modern power. They conquered Korea, defeated the Russian Empire, and fought alongside the British and the Americans in the First World War. They sought their reward at the Versailles peace negotiations: equal treatment in the fledgling League of Nations. The British and the Americans rejected their plea. American politicians warned of serious consequences for the white race. The British feared the precedent for their Indian subjects.
The Japanese did not forget. They believed themselves descended from the gods, distinct from all other races, innately superior, purer. They saw Westerners as overbearing, oversexed, malodorous, decadent, racist and determined on world domination. Their politics dominated by soldiers, they decided to gamble on war in order, they claimed, to liberate the oppressed peoples of the East from Western imperialism. In 1931 they invaded Manchuria and then China. Western powers with Far Eastern interests – America, Britain, Australia, the Netherlands – reacted by slapping an embargo on Japanese imports of iron ore, steel, and above all, oil.

To the Japanese, the attack on Pearl Harbor seemed a justified if desperate response.

**Demonising the Enemy**

In wartime you unite your people by persuading them that their enemy threatens their very existence. Atrocity propaganda multiplies: wives and mothers violated, children spat upon, men tortured, prisoners executed wholesale, sacred buildings burned to the ground. Differences of race, religion, and political ideology inflame passions still further.

For the Americans it was a war of revenge from the start. At first they and the British were contemptuous of the new enemy: Japanese pilots were short-sighted, their aircraft frail, their warships top-heavy, their soldiers without initiative, their generals incapable of planning a complex campaign. ‘You can take it from me,’ said one British general on the eve of the Japanese attack, ‘that we have nothing to fear from them.’

Within days the British and Americans were suffering one defeat after another. The Japanese treated civilians and prisoners of war with great brutality: evidence, said General George Marshall, the US Army Chief of Staff, of ‘the shallow advance from savagery which the Japanese people have made … the future of the Japanese race itself depends entirely and irrevocably upon their capacity to progress beyond their aboriginal barbaric instincts’. The Australian General Thomas Blamey told his soldiers, ‘Your enemy is a cross between the human being and the ape. You know that we have to exterminate these vermin if we and our families are to live. We must go on to the end if civilization is to survive.’

Back home in America comic strips showed clean-limbed
young American soldiers rescuing American girls from their stunted, myopic, bucktoothed, barely human Japanese captors. In May 1944 Life magazine published its Photo of the Week: Natalie Nickerson is writing to her boyfriend, a naval lieutenant in the Pacific, to thank him for his gift. The gift – on the table as she writes – is the skull of a Japanese soldier.\(^6\)

In November 1944 the American Office of Public Opinion Research conducted a nationwide poll in which they asked, ‘What do you think we should do with Japan as a country after the war?’ Thirteen per cent of those asked answered, ‘Kill all Japanese.’\(^7\)

**Trial by Fire**

Only a few years earlier both Britain and America had emphatically condemned the Japanese and the Germans for bombing cities. It was, the Americans said, ‘a violation of the most elementary principles of humane conduct which have been developed as an essential part of modern civilization’.\(^8\)

But, when it came to the crunch, none of the belligerents restrained themselves. All pleaded military necessity or the right to retaliate. British and American airmen had always believed passionately in the ability of strategic air power to win wars. Now they could put theory into practice. The Royal Air Force bombed Germany by night, deliberately targeting working-class areas in German industrial cities, a process described by a charming euphemism as ‘de-housing the workforce’. The American Air Force in Europe tried bombing their targets accurately by day. In practice their bombs often fell wide and their targeting became increasingly indiscriminate. Even before Pearl Harbor American airmen were planning for ‘general incendiary attacks to burn up the wood and paper structures of the densely populated Japanese cities’.*

*Some of their military and naval colleagues were unhappy. Brigadier General Bonner Fellers, an aide to General MacArthur, the American commander in the Pacific, thought that the air campaign against Japan was ‘one of the most ruthless and barbaric killings of non-combatants in all history’. Admiral Leahy, then the most senior officer in the American military, thought that the strategic bombing of civilians was ‘barbarism not worthy of Christian man’ (J. Dower, *War without Armageddon and Paranoia*).*
At first the Americans had no satisfactory airbases within range of Japan. In 1942 they asked the Russians for bases around Vladivostok. The Russian were unenthusiastic. After their defeat by the Japanese in 1905, they had had to surrender their imperial possessions in the Far East. ‘This defeat of the Russian troops,’ Stalin said later, ‘left a bitter memory in the minds of our people. Our people waited and believed that this blot would some day be erased.’

But now was not the moment. That winter the Russians were fighting for their lives outside Moscow after six bitter months of retreat before the Germans. To throw them back, they had pulled in their reserves from the Far East. Stalin had a treaty of neutrality with Japan, and he had no intention of denouncing it until he was quite sure that German power was broken. Not surprisingly, when the Americans turned to him for help, he prevaricated.

By the summer of 1944, however, both the Germans and the Japanese were in retreat. The Americans began to plan the invasion of Japan itself. Russian armies, they hoped, could pin down the large Japanese force in Manchuria. Russian airfields could support American bombers in the final assault. The Chiefs of Staff told Roosevelt that ‘Russia’s entry at as early a date as possible is necessary to provide maximum assistance to our Pacific operations’. When they met in Yalta in February 1945, Stalin promised Roosevelt that he would join the war in the East three months after he had beaten the Germans in Europe. In return he wanted the territories Russia had lost after 1905. Roosevelt agreed.

Meanwhile the Americans tried other ways of bombing the Japanese mainland. In April 1942 General James Doolittle raided Tokyo with aircraft from the carrier USS Hornet. American bombers flew from India through China to reach their targets. The military results were negligible. In December 1943 the Americans decided on a new tack. They would capture an island base in the Pacific from which to bomb Japan direct with their revolutionary new B-29 bomber, the

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Mercy, New York, 1986, p. 40). Similar moral objections were later also voiced by British admirals. They ceased abruptly when both countries sent a main part of their deterrent to sea in submarines under naval command.
Superfortress, the most powerful and sophisticated bomber of the war.

By the middle of 1944 one Pacific island after another was falling to the Americans as they advanced relentlessly towards the Japanese homeland. The Japanese fought back with suicidal bravery, dying in their tens of thousands and inflicting heavy losses on their attackers. In the summer of 1944 nearly 3,000 Americans died on the island of Saipan in the Mariana archipelago. So did almost the whole garrison of 30,000; more than 1,000 Japanese civilians – whole families – committed suicide. The battle of Okinawa began the following April and lasted eighty-two days. Over 12,500 Americans were killed, nearly 80,000 Japanese soldiers, and perhaps as many as 150,000 civilians. It was the first Japanese island to fall, and a terrifying foretaste of what the Americans might expect if they invaded the Japanese homeland.

By the autumn of 1944 the Americans’ island bases in the Marianas were ready. The Superfortresses were now well within range of Japan. It was the beginning of a crucial new phase in the war.

The first attacks were launched at the high altitudes for which the Superfortresses had been designed, and they were aimed at industrial facilities. In November 1944 the bombers attacked Tokyo. Other raids followed in rapid succession. But they did little significant damage and the results were far below expectation. Then General Curtis LeMay arrived to command the campaign.

LeMay was a blunt, sarcastic, quiet-voiced, uncommunicative man, with very few social graces and a damp cigar permanently stuck in his mouth. He possessed a bull-like obstinacy, determined ruthlessness, and undoubted courage. He flew with the Flying Fortresses in the early months of the American bombing campaign in Europe, when the losses were tremendous. He was relentlessly demanding of his men. In return they feared but trusted him. By 1943 he had become the youngest general in the US Army.

LeMay’s military philosophy was simple enough: ‘I’ll tell you what war is about,’ he once said. ‘You’ve got to kill people, and when you kill enough of them they stop fighting.’ Many were unnerved by this brutal logic. During the Vietnam War he is supposed to have said that the Vietnamese should be bombed back into the Stone Age.
It was not quite true, but the accusation stuck. He was said to be the original for General Buck Turgidson in the film *Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*.13

But whatever else he was, LeMay was a formidable military commander. He decided to abandon the ineffective high-level attacks. Much Japanese manufacturing was carried on in small workshops and private homes rather than in large-scale factories. So from now on the bombers would deliberately go in low and at night, raining incendiary bombs down upon the wood and paper houses in which most Japanese city dwellers lived.

On the night of 9–10 March 1945 the Superfortresses struck Tokyo again. The centre of the city was levelled by fire. Some 100,000 people – perhaps many more – were killed. Crews in the last aircraft over the target reported that they could smell burnt human flesh.14 It was the most deadly raid of the Second World War: even more deadly than the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In the campaign that followed, sixty-six Japanese cities were largely destroyed. Somewhere between 220,000 and 500,000 people were killed. Industrial production plummeted. Japan’s cities were being destroyed in a rain of fire which continued until the very last days of the war.15

By the summer of 1945 Japan was assailed on all sides. The Japanese Air Force had virtually ceased to exist. American bombers roamed Japanese skies almost at will. The navy had been decimated in a series of epic sea battles, its remaining ships now mostly disabled or out of fuel. The coastal traffic that linked the Japanese islands and supplied the Japanese armies in China, Manchuria, and South-East Asia had ground to a halt. The economy was in ruins. Japan had gone to war to secure its oil supplies. Then it had more than 12 million barrels in reserve; now it had only 200,000.16 Defeat was simply a matter of time.

But the Japanese generals were determined to go down fighting and to take as many Americans with them as they could. They armed tens of thousands of civilians with bamboo lances, and trained them to die in a forlorn last stand and share the honour of a glorious defeat. If enough Americans died in the assault, the generals hoped, they might abandon their policy of unconditional surrender and agree on terms that would allow the Japanese Army to preserve its honour.
The Most Terrible Weapon
This was fantasy, even if the Americans had not had a terrifying card up their sleeves.

The atom bomb was originally intended for the Germans: the British and Americans began work on it in 1940–41 lest Hitler get it first. But by the autumn of 1944 it was clear that the German nuclear project had failed and that Germany was nearing defeat. By then the Americans’ massive Manhattan Project was ten months away from testing a bomb. When Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt met that September, they decided that, when it was ready, the bomb ‘might perhaps, after mature consideration, be used against the Japanese, who should be warned that this bombardment will be repeated until they surrender.’

When Roosevelt died in April 1945, Harry Truman, his Vice President and successor, knew nothing about the Manhattan Project. Now he learned from Henry Stimson, Secretary of War, that within four months ‘we shall in all probability have completed the most terrible weapon ever known in human history, one bomb of which could destroy a whole city. With its aid even a very powerful unsuspecting nation might be conquered within a very few days by a much smaller one. Modern civilization might be completely destroyed.’

In May 1945 Stimson set up an Interim Committee to discuss how the bomb should be used. Its members included James Byrnes, a former senator who became Secretary of State, and a number of distinguished academics. Attached to it was a Scientific Panel, which consisted of Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi, Arthur Compton, and Ernest Lawrence, all of whom had been involved in the Manhattan Project. After some agonised discussion, they had little doubt that the bomb would have to be dropped on a city.

The thinking of Truman and his military advisors was heavily coloured by the shadow of the Okinawa battle, now in its final bloody days. Some argued that conventional aerial bombardment and economic strangulation would force the Japanese to give in, without using the bomb and without an invasion. The Japanese were

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*This is an amendment to the fiercer language originally drafted, which said that ‘when a “bomb” is finally available, it should be used against the Japanese.’
already trying to negotiate a settlement through the Soviets: when the Soviets invaded Manchuria, as they had promised, even the Japanese generals might be shocked into accepting that further resistance was useless. General Marshall, the US Army Chief of Staff, believed that the Russian attack ‘might well be the decisive action’.20

Some countered that Russian help no longer looked necessary or even desirable: might the Russians not simply exploit victory in the Far East to impose their control there, as they had done in Eastern Europe? Why should the Russians have a share in the spoils of victory which America had earned throughout the long Pacific campaign?

Others believed that the Japanese would give up if the Americans modified their policy of unconditional surrender and allowed them to keep their Emperor. Without the Emperor’s authority, indeed, the more fanatical Japanese soldiers might be impossible to control.21 But, some said, this was an uncertain course. Even if some Japanese civilians were putting out peace feelers, the Japanese military were determined to fight to the death.

All agreed that Operation Downfall, the proposed invasion of Japan, could be a very bloody affair. The initial assault on the southernmost island of Kyushu was due in November. The final battle on the Tokyo plain would take place five months later. There was wide disagreement about the likely cost in American casualties: pessimists put it at between 1.7 and 4 million, including 400,000–800,000 dead.22 For Truman the exact figures were unimportant. He was anxious above all to keep American casualties down to a minimum at this, the very last stage of the war.

Many involved in the discussions worried about the moral implications of using the new weapon and revisited ideas that had been discussed in the Interim Committee. Japanese observers should be invited to witness a demonstration explosion. Or a bomb should be dropped on a purely military target, far from civilian habitation. Or it should be dropped on a city, but only after the Japanese had been given time to evacuate the people. General Marshall feared ‘the opprobrium which might follow from an ill-considered employment of such force’. Henry Stimson ‘did not want to have the United States get the reputation of outdoing Hitler in atrocities’.

But these ideas were rejected. For General Groves, the head of the
Manhattan Project, the matter was simple enough. Some $2 billion had been spent on the bomb. If it was not used the American taxpayer would wonder why. However destructive it might be, it was just another weapon: it should be used in whatever way made military sense. If the Japanese were invited to a demonstration, they might not be impressed; and suppose the thing failed to go off? If they were warned to move people from target cities, they might simply replace them with American prisoners. The meeting concluded that there was no alternative to hitting a city, one with a large war industry, and without any warning.

Truman himself grappled inconclusively with the moral dilemma. He consoled himself in advance with the hopeful thought that the bomb would be used ‘so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leaders of the world for the common welfare [are not]. The target will be a purely military one.’ That was, of course, a fantasy: no such target existed. On the day Nagasaki was bombed he spoke in a broadcast of the ‘tragic significance’ of the bomb. And when the possibility of dropping further bombs was mooted, he told his advisers ‘that the thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible’; he didn’t like the idea of killing ‘all those kids’. But in later life he maintained that he never doubted that the bomb would have to be used.

The discussion then became specific: which city should be hit? Kyoto, Japan’s ancient capital and a major cultural centre, was on the generals’ list: they held that its destruction would have exactly the shattering effect on Japanese morale that was intended. Stimson insisted that it be struck off.

The Americans successfully tested their nuclear device on 16 July. Nine days later the order was given to deliver the first special bomb ‘as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945 on one of the targets Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata, and Nagasaki’. The military were authorised to drop further bombs as they became available.

The 509th Composite Group, under the command of Captain Paul Tibbets, a veteran of the American bombing campaign in
Europe, had been specially trained to drop the atomic bomb. In June they moved to Tinian, by then the largest airbase in the world. They were joined at the beginning of August by a uranium bomb, coyly named ‘Little Boy’, and a plutonium bomb, ‘Fat Man’.*

On Saturday 4 August Tibbets briefed his men. ‘The moment has arrived,’ he told them. ‘This is what we have all been working toward. Very recently the weapon we are about to deliver was successfully tested in the States. We have received orders to drop it on the enemy.’ This one bomb, the men were told, ‘is the most destructive weapon ever produced. We think it will knock out everything within a three-mile area.’ They listened in ‘shocked disbelief’. The next day Tibbets ordered his plane to be named after his mother, Enola Gay. That night the crews were blessed at a service for Catholics at ten o’clock and for Protestants at ten thirty. One airman is said to have asked for absolution.27

On Monday 6 August 1945 the Enola Gay took off for the twelve-hour flight to Hiroshima and back. At 8.15 a.m. Hiroshima time ‘Little Boy’ exploded 600 metres above the city centre with a blinding flash. A mushroom cloud of radioactive dust rose eight miles into the sky. Tibbets told his men, ‘Fellows, you have just dropped the first atomic bomb in history.’ Robert Lewis, Tibbets’ co-pilot, had kept a diary throughout the flight. Now he wrote, ‘My God, what have we done?’†

President Truman heard the news as he was crossing the Atlantic on his way home from meeting Stalin at Potsdam. He issued a statement: ‘Sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese army base. That bomb had

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*The heavy cruiser Indianapolis, which had brought some of the components, was sunk soon after she left Tinian by a Japanese submarine, with heavy loss of life. It was an entirely legitimate act of war. But when the news got through – to Truman, and to the men on Tinian itself – their determination to punish the Japanese became even more incandescent.

† Lewis kept the diary at the request of William Laurence, the science correspondent of the New York Times, who had been refused permission to fly at the last minute. Laurence was, however, allowed to go with one of the bombers which attacked Nagasaki.