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US Firebombed Tokyo as Last Option: a response to David McNeill

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[*This is part of a continuing series of reports and assessment of the US firebombing of Japan from March through August, 1945.*]

The air armada of B-29 planes, their silver skins gleaming under a Japanese moon, thundered over Tokyo on March 10th, 1945 to scorch that sleeping city and Japanese empire's headquarters.

Some adjudge that the US fire bombing raid was an unpardonable crime because it murdered civilians. Others riposte that the raid was the logical next step which US planners unhappily took following other futile measures that kept the Japanese war machine geared. In short, the attack was a necessary evil that Tokyo's fanatical war supporters provoked. Recent commentary favors the first perspective. For instance, David McNeil declaimed at Japan Focus (March 10th) that the purpose was "maximum carnage." The Japan Times (March 13th) quoted Japanese scholar Rinjiro Sodei insisting that the mission was "really aimed at mass killing".

One easily understands these condemnations. After all, some 100,000 civilians perished within hours. Survivors recall people jumping into the Sumida River to escape the howling firestorm only to find the water broiling from the flaming bank. It scalded them to death. The inferno sucked air into its center so forcefully that it yanked babies out of their mothers' arms. The pilots -- flying at low elevation -- smelled human flesh burning. About 16 sq. km. of Tokyo itself was left smouldering. From the Ginza one could see Mt. Fuji. What a bitter luxury.

How can one defend such carnage? Sober analysis reveals that American planners were not madmen, but vexed strategists reluctantly climbing the options ladder toward firebombing. Why? Because less bloody, risky methods had conspicuously failed. At first, Washington deployed the cigar-shaped B-29 to pound Japan from bases in far off western China in 1944. Although the plane boasted cutting edge fuel injected engines, the missions yielded little as they carried extra propellant, meaning lighter payloads. Out of 68 bombers, only 47 nailed their targets.Later that year, the war planes whirled in from the western Pacific after the Marines occupied island specks such as Guam and Tinian in the Marianas chain easily converted to airfields. In November, 1944, the first such mission transpired under General Hap Arnold -- but was it worth celebrating?

Eighty-eight bombers flew in daylight at 30,000 feet. From on high, they aligned their cross hairs on the tiny factories chugging out war material dispersed throughout the conurbation below because the Japanese spurned industrial parks. Post-war American inspectors were stunned that such miniscule plants could outfit an army. In addition, high winds -- some sources assert the planes discovered the jet stream -- tossed, flipped or even pushed the bombers backward. What a valiant attempt at point countervalue targeting. "Point" denotes precision strikes on a small bulls eye while "countervalue" signifies soft targets such as people and factories. As some bombs exploded 1,000 feet from their targets, the crews' success rate was about ten percent. Within each airplane, ten young men risked their lives.

Was it worth it? The no nonsense General Curtis LeMay said "no!" He and his 21st Bomber Command assumed responsibility for the air war in January 1945. LeMay crafted a novel strategy of night missions at elevations as low as 7,000 feet, dropping incendiary or napalm bombs to set wide swaths of Tokyo's paper and wood homes ablaze, along with the war industries.

LeMay reasoned that if the city burns down, then the tiny factories that fuel Japan's aggression will be ruined -- i.e. to destroy a few select blades of grass, set the field alight. This was "area countervalue" targeting. "Area" designates striking a large bulls eye and "countervalue" still means people and industry. When Tokyo experienced LeMay's brutal logic, 334 bombers stripped of their anti-aircraft guns so they could carry heavier payloads rained 1,700 tons of ordnance on their targets. The Japanese -- respecting and fearing their nemesis -- nicknamed the plane "B-san."How to judge the Tokyo raid's morality?

Yes, a vibrant city became an ashen graveyard. LeMay himself famously admitted that, "If I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal." His p.r. suffered because a congenital birth defect froze his face into a scowl -- he may have inspired the Dr. Strangelove character. However, LeMay expressed few regrets, adamant that the firebombings shortened the war, saving many more lives than were lost. Japanese Premier Konoe Fumimaro confessed that the aerial assault boosted the peace faction within Japan.

As for students of Japanese political culture, we know that the fire from the sky constituted airborne "gaiatsu", or external coercion. It made surrender the new binding consensus in a groupist dictatorship because "naiatsu" or internal pressure was too anemic.Clearly, the B-29 mission over Tokyo, Osaka and other cities from late 1944 onward was an option that American strategists -- eager to end the war against a steely foe -- exercised because previous policies were dismal and dangerous. Can arm chair critics offer alternatives?

The lack of any deliberate intent to perpetrate radical evil on civilians may exonerate LeMay from war crimes charges. The devil here is not the cigar smoking air power mandarin per se, but the phenomenon of total war: Men must choose awful options they normally eschew. But winning ugly is unlike winning dirty. Surely the cardinal lesson is that Japan and America, both so adept at war, must live in peace. Ironically, LeMay organized Japan's post war air force. Tokyo awarded him the First Class Order of the Rising Sun. Even then, he did not smile much.

Victor Fic is a freelance writer/broadcaster, CBS News radio, Seoul expressing his own views contra David McNeill's "The night hell fell from the sky." Japan Focus, May 23rd, 2005. Posted at Japan Focus on December 8, 2007.