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The Nagasaki Principle

By James Carroll

Today is the anniversary of what did not happen. Sixty-one years ago yesterday, the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. The scale of nuclear devastation was apparent at once. The next day, no decision was made to call off the bombing of Nagasaki. Why? Historians debate the justification of the Hiroshima attack, but there is consensus that Nagasaki, coming less than three days later, was tragically unnecessary. President Harry Truman's one order to use the atomic bomb, given on July 25, established a momentum that was not stopped.

"The 509 Composite Group, 20th Air Force, will deliver its first special bomb," the order read, "as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945 on one of the targets: Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata, and Nagasaki." The order instructed the Air Force to deliver "additional bombs . . . as soon as made ready by the project staff." The second bomb was the only other one ready, and because it was ready, it was used. If others had been ready, pity Kokura and Niigata. Truman's order was written by the project director, General Leslie Groves, who compared the new president here to a man jumping on a toboggan that was already speeding downhill. Watch out!

It is commonly said that war operates by the law of unintended consequences, but another, less-noted law operates as well. War creates momentum that barrels through normally restraining barriers of moral and practical choice. Decision makers begin wars, whether aggressively or defensively, in contexts that are well understood, and with purposes that seem proportionate and able to be accomplished. When destruction and hurt follow the outbreak of violence, however, and then when that destruction and hurt become extreme, the context within which war is begun changes radically. First assumptions no longer apply, and original purposes can become impossible. When that happens, what began as destruction for a goal becomes destruction for its own sake. War generates its own force in which everyone loses. This might be called the Nagasaki principle.

The Nagasaki principle comes in two parts. It can operate at the level of close combat, driving fighters to commit atrocities that, in normal conditions, they would abhor. It operates equally at the level of the commanders, leading them to order strikes out of desperation, frustration, or merely for the sake of "doing something." Such strikes draw equivalent responses from the other side until the destruction is complete. After the fact, massive carnage can seem to have been an act for which no one is responsible, like the result of a natural disaster.

That's when a second aspect of the Nagasaki principle comes into play -- the refusal to undertake a moral reckoning with what has been done.

Across the decades, the United States has had a case of what the historian Marc Trachtenberg calls "nuclear amnesia," a profound forgetfulness about the context and consequences of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The context included the prior destruction of dozens of Japanese cities, most notably Tokyo, that relativized the damage done at the two atomic sites. The consequences included the mutation in human consciousness that now foresaw the end not merely of individual life, but of civilization itself. Shame and dread defined the deepest part of the American psyche, even if no explicit confrontation with these feelings was ever undertaken.



Nagasaki near the hypocenter days after the bombing

Thus, what I am calling the Nagasaki principle consists in momentum, which obfuscates responsibility before the fact, and denial, which prevents a necessary moral reckoning afterward.

This may seem like airy theorizing, but the psychologically unfinished business of the Nuclear Age, dating to the day after Hiroshima, defined the American response to the trauma of Sept. 11, 2001. The nation had lived for two generations with the subliminal but powerfully felt dread of a coming nuclear war.

Unconsciously ashamed of our own action in using the bomb, we were waiting for pay-back, and on that beautiful morning it seemed to come. The smoke rising up from the twin towers hit us like a mushroom cloud, and we instantly dubbed the ruined site as Ground Zero, when, as historian John Dower observes, the only true Ground Zeros are the two in Japan.

Our unconscious shame was superseded by an overt sense of victimhood. We launched a war whose momentum has carried the world into the unwilling and unforeseen catastrophe that unfolds today. Our denial of nuclear responsibility, meanwhile, embodied in our permanent nuclear arsenal, licenses other nations that aim to match us -- notably Iran. Momentum and denial combined to destroy Nagasaki, which was, alas, not the end, but the beginning.

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