

Should we apologize for Hiroshima?

Anthony J. Marolda

After the Group of Seven economic summit meeting, to be held this week in the Ise-Shima region of Japan, President Obama will be visiting the city of Hiroshima, and will be accompanied by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. He will be the first sitting U.S. president to make such a stop. He said recently in an interview with the Japanese press that he will not apologize for the United States dropping the atomic bomb on that city. However, it's not that he didn't want to apologize. The Japanese government insisted that he not do so.

We know this because in September 2009, during his series of apology tours, Obama was preparing for a visit to Japan and secretly raised the idea of making an apology to the Japanese for Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese response was contained in a secret cable sent to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, dated Sept. 9, 2009 that was released by WikiLeaks in 2011. The cable reported that Japan's vice foreign minister, Mitoji Yabunaka, told John Roos, the U.S. ambassador to Japan, "the idea of President Obama visiting Hiroshima to apologize for the atomic bombing during World War II is a 'nonstarter.'" The Japanese were concerned about the internal political ramifications of such an apology. So, Obama didn't visit Hiroshima on that November 2009 trip, but he did make world headlines when he became the first U.S. president to make a full bow to the emperor of Japan.

But does the United States have anything to apologize for? Not when you take the development and use of the first atomic bombs into historical context of the events that led the United States to undertake the Manhattan Project, and then the decision that President Truman made to use the weapons.

In the fall of 1938, it was clear that the Third Reich was on a course of expansionism that could ultimately lead to a World War. Earlier that year, the Nazis had occupied the Sudetenland, a region of Czechoslovakia, with the pretext of aiding German nationals living there. Then in March of 1938, under the threat of invasion, the Anschluss (Annexation) of Austria to Nazi Germany was enacted.

During that same period, scientists in several countries were working on physics experiments, using neutrons to bombard uranium. They were trying to understand the interaction of the neutrons with the uranium atoms. Two German chemists, Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann, used a new technique to analyze

the results and found an astonishing and unexpected result. They found that the interaction resulted in the presence of barium atoms along with the release of high-energy neutrons. Now, barium is another element whose atomic number is 56 compared to 92 for uranium. Hahn and Strassmann were not theoretical physicists, so they needed help in explaining what was happening. They turned to Lise Meitner and her nephew, Otto Hirsch, two former German scientists who had escaped to Denmark under threat from the Nazis. The two nuclear physicists were intrigued and set to work to understand the results. They came up with a nuclear model that fit the experiment. They concluded that the uranium atoms were being split into two pieces, creating the barium, along with the release of a huge amount of energy. When they published the results in a physics journal, the scientific world suddenly realized that this phenomenon had the potential to make a weapon with unimaginable destructive power.

In the United States, physicists saw that potential and worried the Nazis would develop a bomb first. These scientists included Albert Einstein, who was living in the United States and was a professor at Princeton University. It was Einstein's Theory of Relativity that helped to explain the great amount of energy that was released from the fission of the uranium atom. He signed a secret letter to President Roosevelt urging him to undertake the development of the bomb. The result was the super-secret Manhattan Project.

The Nazis did indeed also launch their own secret program, Uranprojekt, to develop a nuclear weapon. Fortunately, their effort did not go as well. Many of the most competent scientists, engineers and mathematicians had left Germany starting in 1933, concerned with the Nazi interest in purging Jewish scientists from Academe. In addition, the Allies had been successful in launching a black ops action that further slowed their efforts. By the end of the war in 1945, the Nazi nuclear weapons program was still ongoing, but they were far from achieving success.

What would have happened, however, if the Nazis were successful before the United States? The outcome of the war would have, most likely, been very different. It is easy to imagine scenarios where the Nazis would demonstrate the potential for such a weapon on a Western city, say in England. This could have convinced the Allies that they had no choice but to surrender to the Third Reich or

risk massive destruction. So, the United States' preemptive development of a nuclear weapon literally saved the civilized world.

Meanwhile, the Allies were also waging a war with the Japanese. In 1943, the enemy was being forced back across the Pacific. The Marines fought bloody battles from atoll to island across the whole region. It was a difficult and deadly war with highly trained Japanese soldiers dug in across the islands and willing to fight to the death.

By the summer of 1945, the Japanese were finally cornered in and around their homeland. But they showed no sign of capitulating. So, the Allies planned to invade their islands with large-scale forces that they called Operation Downfall. Seven hundred thousand Allied troops were being readied to land on Kyushu, the southernmost of the big four Japanese islands. This would have been an operation even larger than D-Day. And the U.S. military expected a bloody slaughter with high casualties on both sides.

It was in this context that President Harry Truman had to make a decision. Either drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki or authorize Operation Downfall. Today, many people say that it was a mistake to drop the bombs on those two cities, killing about 200,000 Japanese civilians. But to Truman and his advisors at the time, it was a "no-brainer" -- 36 million people, military and civilian, had already died in the war in the Pacific. The U.S. had lost 111,000 troops and 253,000 wounded. The Japanese had demonstrated their willingness to die rather than surrender, and Truman didn't want to take the risk of another 500,000 casualties (both Allies and Japanese) as was estimated at the time. So, he issued the order for the Enola Gay to embark on her deadly mission.

Polls of the American people taken at the time showed overwhelming support for Truman's decision. And all of those hundreds of thousands of families who might have lost their sons in the invasion thanked Truman for his courage. As the years went by, and the memories faded of the horrific battles fought in the Pacific, more people showed disapproval in later polls, but the majority still approves the decision as the necessary action for the time and circumstances.

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