

## The Greatest Gift

8 September 2004

While we were in western Japan last week, we made the obligatory “American in Japan” pilgrimage to Hiroshima to view the atomic bomb museum and monuments.

I went with a little trepidation and a great deal of curiosity. My trepidation related to the level of overt anti-Americanism I’d find and my curiosity overflowed regarding how the Japanese would present this chapter of their history.

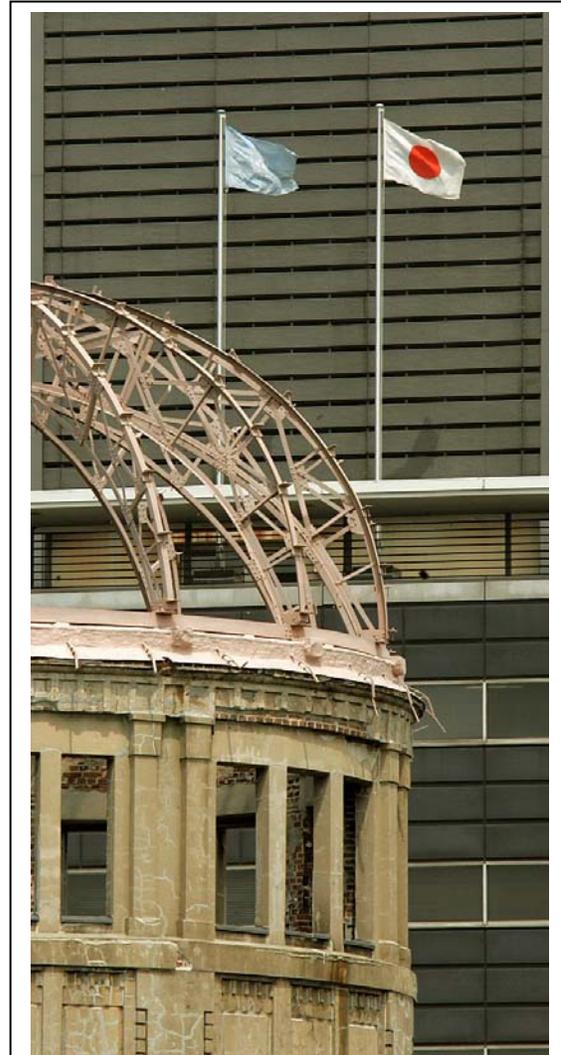
The Hiroshima Memorial complex consists of the ruins of a building destroyed in the bombing on the bank of the river, while the remaining memorials and museums are located on an island in the river.

The remains of the building that housed the ministry of industrial development and promotion, the iconic Genbaku Dome (A-Bomb Dome), are a stark and meaningful memorial. They are also a good reminder of the practical limits to any explosive device. The atomic bomb that leveled central Hiroshima, which equaled the power of 15,000 tons of TNT, exploded less than 1,500 feet above the building, yet it and a few other nearby buildings were left somewhat structurally intact, albeit burnt out.

The park that surrounds the Genbaku Dome and fills the entire island is studded with memorials and houses the Hiroshima Peace Museum. Among the memorials are ones dedicated to various groups of casualties, such as students and employees of various industry segments.

Perhaps the most striking memorial in this area is the one dedicated to the Korean casualties. Nearly one in ten casualties of the atomic bomb used on Hiroshima was a Korean slave laborer brought from their homeland to Japan. Due to lingering discrimination, the Korean memorial was located outside the boundaries of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park until 1999, when the mayor of Hiroshima had it moved to its current location.

The most ironic thing I found in this area was the plaque commemorating the date the Genbaku Dome was awarded World Heritage Site status by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO): Dec. 7, 1996. If the date itself, the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor, wasn’t a big enough slap in the face, the inscription, which speaks of the “tragedy of suffering,” proved to be enough to generate official protests from both the U.S. and China, whose comments included “... lack of historical perspective” and “it was the other Asian countries and peoples who suffered the greatest loss in life and property during World War II, ... this inscription might be misused by people who deny this fact” respectively.



The United Nations and Japanese flags fly over the ruins of the Genbaku dome. There is very little overt nationalism in today’s Japan. We saw fewer than a dozen Japanese flags during a 30 day tour of the country.

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The memorial to Korean casualties. About 10% of the casualties of the Hiroshima Atom Bomb were Korean slaves. Due to lingering discrimination, the Korean memorial was located outside the boundaries of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park until 1999.

The main element of the area, the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, was a well organized, clearly labeled, modern museum complex containing a history of the Hiroshima metropolitan area, the story of the delivery of the bomb, understandable and accessible background on the design, construction and operation of nuclear weapons, detailed accounts of the burst, thermal energy, and blast wave, artifacts from the post bombing ruins, long term studies of those exposed to radiation, oral histories from survivors and the obligatory museum store.

The museum was the main focus of my curiosity regarding how the Japanese would present this chapter of history. Japan is renowned for its collective amnesia and societal state of denial of this period of their history, so I was quite interested in the breadth, depth and balance of the presentation.

However, to give credit where credit is due, I think it important to note that Hiroshima's historical role as an important military command, logistics, ship production and personnel base were given a complete airing. The fact Hiroshima was used as the organization and disembarkation point for every Asian army campaign in Japan's history was clearly told. The military headquarters, administrative and logistics support facilities were also clearly illustrated. The evacuation of the vast majority of the children of the city to the surrounding countryside is described, and the story of the work groups conscripted to demolish civilian structures around military and administrative buildings to create fire breaks is told in some detail. Overall, I found that up to the point of the bomb's release by the Enola Gay, the museum's story was fairly well balanced.

After that point, the museum adopts the modern world's favorite mantle of victim. Anyone who visits hoping for the faintest hint of societal responsibility will be disappointed. I could not locate one syllable even remotely related to the concept of "we brought this on ourselves" nor one of "we killed orders of magnitude more civilians in Manchuria alone, to say nothing of the rest of Asia, often by brutal, prolonged torture or indescribably horrible biological war experiments." At the point of the explosion of the bomb, Hiroshima and Japan become victims, and the remaining flow of the museum beats this drum relentlessly.

Every casualty of the bombing is referred to as a victim. Students and children are featured prominently in the displays, including one diorama depicting life sized children with their melting skin dripping off their bodies. Not one mention is made of the number of military or military support casualties, only the metronome-like repetition of "140,000 victims by the end of December 1945."

Post bomb, the United States is portrayed as an entity just short of baby eating devil worshipers, with the dropping of the bomb presented as a cynical ploy to justify development spending and to address domestic and post-war international political concerns.

If you knew nothing of modern world history, nothing of the history of Asia from 1910 to 1945 and nothing of Japan's role in WWII, you would leave the museum convinced the innocent Japanese victims were begging for peace but the vengeful, bloodthirsty Americans instead roasted 140,000 innocent children alive, with American military and civilian leaders reveling in the images of the victims' dripping skin and charred bodies.

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Unfortunately, most young people today know little to nothing of world history in the years from 1910 to 1945. In fact, most young Americans don't know who Dwight D. Eisenhower was, much less Admirals Nimitz and Yamamoto. It can be safely presumed that most people born around the world in the last thirty to forty years have an equally weak grasp of this period of history and the actions of the protagonist nations in that period.

Not surprisingly, the visitor comment books at the exit of the museum had liberal doses of anti-U.S. frothing mixed with pleas for world peace. In fact, I saw more examples of anti-U.S. rhetoric there than I did in two months in the Middle East. I found that a powerful comment on the tone and content of the messaging in the latter parts of the museum.

In today's world of revisionist history and the relentless anti-America tone of the Western media, it is trendy to adopt the perspective of the museum and consider the use of atomic weapons on Japan a permanent stain, an irrevocable sin, and an incontrovertible and permanent criminal conviction of America, its leaders, its character and its people. In this school of thought an Allied invasion of the home islands would have cost as few as 30,000 casualties, Japan was begging for surrender and the use of the atomic bomb was completely unnecessary.



The Peace Flame and the Memorial Cenotaph. The Peace Flame will burn until there are no remaining nuclear weapons in the world. It is my hope that inspection and verification will be executed by a more competent organization than the one that was clueless as to the extent of the nuclear programs of Libya, Iran and North Korea.

I have a different perspective on the dropping of the first atom bomb on Hiroshima than the organizers of the museum and the revisionist historians. Again, giving credit where it is due, buried in the fine print of one display, a small quote revealed the real story of the bomb and why it was used, "In 1945, Imperial Headquarters foresaw that the Japanese mainland would become a battlefield and called for '100 million deaths with honor'." Based on the context of the times and my direct experience here, there is little doubt that the Japanese military and civilians would have provided them.

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The older generations of Japan still exhibit the incredible strength of will that built this country into a world superpower. This is a country where people sit under freezing waterfalls for days at a time as a cleansing experience to build inner strength and purity of spirit. This is a people with older generations of men who would never consider screaming in pain. As it was explained to me by a member of that generation, "Saying 'my hand has been cut off' is enough. Screaming is unnecessary. We all know of the injury." This is a country who, in WWII, considered the Emperor a god, and a death in his service a guaranteed ticket to heaven. This is a country who, in WWII, had been indoctrinated in thought, training and action by nationalist military leaders for generations. This is a country who would have, like the mothers clutching their children who jumped off the cliffs of Okinawa when the Americans invaded, committed mass, society-wide suicide before surrender.

The context of the times and the overwhelming majority of evidence clearly demonstrates that far from the cynical, vote counting political scenario the museum depicts, the leaders of the United States, both civilian and military, made the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan to prevent millions of American and Japanese military and civilian deaths that an invasion of the mainland would have caused. It is shameful and tragic that the events are portrayed any other way.

As a Korean politician recently stated when protesting the adoption of new Japanese high school history textbooks that omit any Japanese responsibility, atrocities or negative actions of the WWII era, "We can all have different opinions, but there can only be one set of facts. It is imperative that Japan recognize and accept the facts as they are."

The use of atomic weapons to end WWII saved countless Allied, American and Japanese lives. Given the number of lives that would have been lost and the physical devastation that would have resulted from a ground invasion of the home islands of Japan, it is likely that the dropping of the two bombs essentially saved Japan as a self-governing and self-sustaining nation. In this regard, they literally saved the Japanese from themselves.

In the end, far from the tools of evil they are depicted as by revisionists, the bombs were, ironically, the greatest gift ever given to another nation.

The timeline:

July 16, 1945: First atom bomb exploded in a test at Alamogordo, NM

July 26, 1945: Potsdam declaration demands Japan's unconditional surrender or face "prompt and utter destruction."

August 6, 1945: Hiroshima bombed

August 9, 1945: Nagasaki bombed

August 10, 1945: Japanese government offers to surrender

August 15, 1945: Radio broadcast by Emperor Hirohito announcing surrender

Text and photos by Douglas Hackney

This essay is located at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel/japan/index-japanjournals.htm>

Sources:

Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, UNESCO, World Book Encyclopedia, Frommers Japan, Lonely Planet Japan, U.S. Archives, and a lifetime of reading of books on the events of the era