

“Who could tell us apart?
Who would be left to tell us apart?”:
Thinking the Unthinkable on the
70th Anniversary

KUZNICK Peter¹⁾

The 70th anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has come and gone in the United States with disappointingly little fanfare, certainly not nearly as much as these tragic and cataclysmic events deserve. It was only 16 years ago that the experts assembled by the Newseum in Washington, DC voted the atomic bombings the most important news event of the 20th century. But, once again, the mainstream U.S. media coverage has, for the most part, done little to educate the American public about the real meaning of the atomic bombings and what they should tell us about the damage the United States was and remains willing to inflict in order to achieve its foreign policy objectives. As a result, most Americans, like most Japanese, still know little of the real history of end of the Pacific War as their knowledge is distorted by erroneous or at best partial accounts offered in school textbooks, movies, and television presentations.

The official narrative, which has been promulgated for seventy years, remains largely unchallenged. According to that narrative, dropping the atomic bombs was a necessary and ultimately humane act. If they had not been dropped, we are told, the United States would have invaded Japan and the results would have been nightmarish. President Harry Truman reaffirmed the assertions of science advisor Karl Compton and Secretary of War Henry Stimson that U.S. casualties would have been astronomical. In his 1955 memoirs,

Truman claimed that General George Marshall predicted that a half million U.S. lives would have been lost in an invasion. Given that that was more than had been lost by the U.S. in the entire war to that point, the numbers were frightening. Although the basis for that assertion has never been found and Marshall's own calculations actually placed the total at a small fraction of that estimate, there is no doubt that an invasion would have been costly. In subsequent years, defenders of the atomic bombings would also point to the millions of Japanese who would likely have perished in an invasion and even the numbers of other Asians suffering and dying under Japan's brutal colonization. This reasoning has resonated most with older Americans, who have heard such justifications repeated for 70 years.

When I make public presentations about the atomic bombings, often coupled with screenings of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki episode of *The Untold History of the United States*, the documentary film series (and book) that I co-authored with filmmaker Oliver Stone, I begin by asking audiences whether they think Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs was the right one. College students, especially those who are knowledgeable about the subject, are almost always opposed to use of the bombs, sometimes overwhelmingly so. But that is not the case with older Americans. When I asked a group of 80 and 90 year olds at a senior assisted living center this past summer how many thought Truman did the right thing, hands of 26 of the 27 people in the room immediately shot into the air. That response might have been a little extreme, but it is not totally out of line for members of the World War II generation, especially the veterans themselves who are overwhelmingly convinced that Truman saved their lives by using atomic bombs to preempt the invasion.

That this idea has taken such hold is understandable given the widespread belief that the Japanese were planning to fight to the bitter end rather than surrender. There is an eerie similarity between today's depictions of fanatical Islamists and yesterday's depictions of

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fanatical Japanese. Both irrationally clung to and were motivated by their perverse religions. Both would fight to the death rather than surrender, finding their reward in death rather than life. Both were capable of inconceivable levels of viciousness, including not only the wholesale rape of female victims but delight in beheading of male captives. But it was the cruelty and single-minded devotion to their cause that made them most different than us—the Americans and some, though obviously not all, Europeans.

The Associated Press conveyed the impressions of an 18 year old Marine who saw combat in Iwo Jima. According to the reporter, the marine viewed the Japanese as “fanatical, brutal animals with no respect for life.” “The Japanese exhibited no compassion,” the marine reflected. “We saw them as the terrorists of the time.”

This fanatical terrorist mindset proved that rational appeals were pointless and only overwhelming force—the invasion or the bomb—would induce surrender. Given the alternatives of sacrificing a half million American lives or dropping a couple atomic bombs, the reasoning goes, Truman had no choice. As *Washington Post* columnist Richard Cohen put it, “What could Truman have said to Americans who lost a loved one in an invasion of the Japanese home islands if they knew he had a weapon that could have ended the war and not used it? What, in the dead of night when sleep did not come and he stared at the ceiling, could he have said to the American dead? I chose Japanese lives over yours? Truman did what he had to do. No apology is needed.”

In a certain warped universe, Cohen’s logic is impeccable. Privileging American lives over Japanese lives in wartime makes perfect sense. It is his facts that are wrong and his moral context that is lacking. Like most Americans, Cohen believes the time-honored myth that the atomic bombs forced Japan’s surrender and ended World War II. Americans have clung doggedly to this comforting perception for 70 years and have done an admirable job of not letting the facts stand in

the way of their convictions.

In reality, the Soviet invasion of Manchuria, which began at midnight on August 8, had far more to do with forcing Japanese leaders to surrender than did the atomic bombs. The United States had been firebombing Japanese cities on a regular basis since March. The number of cities attacked, we now know from Yuki Tanaka, was actually more than 100. Even before Japan had attacked at Pearl Harbor, U.S. leaders had decided on a policy of burning Japanese cities to the ground. On November 15, 1941, Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall informed seven senior journalists of U.S. plans to firebomb Japan in the event of war. According to the summary prepared by *Time Magazine's* military affairs correspondent, Marshall said that "if war with the Japanese does come, we'll fight mercilessly. Flying fortresses will be dispatched immediately to set the paper cities of Japan on fire. There won't be any hesitation about bombing civilians—it will be all-out." Four days later, he ordered his staff to investigate plans for "general incendiary attacks to burn up the wood and papers structures of the densely populated Japanese cities." Although the onslaught from the air was delayed, it proceeded along the lines Marshall laid out. Destruction reached a frightening 99.5 percent in the city of Toyama. Others were not far behind as Japanese cities were turned into veritable infernos in what Brigadier General Bonner Fellers called it "one of the most ruthless and barbaric killings of non-combatants in all history."

American indifference to the Japanese people's suffering was more than matched by the cruelty of Japan's own leaders. U.S. firebombing of Japanese cities had done little to persuade them to end the war. Nor had widespread hunger and other miseries inflicted on the people. Incredibly, the atomic bombings, while impactful, did little to change the thinking of Japanese leaders who already accepted that the U.S. could wipe out their cities almost at will. Whether it was one plane and one bomb or 200 planes and thousands of bombs seemed

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to make little difference. Even Japanese Army Minister Korechika Anami's erroneous report to the Cabinet on August 9 following the Nagasaki bombing that the U.S. had 100 more atomic bombs and the next target was Tokyo changed no one's mind when it came to surrender. Some Japanese leaders expressed a willingness to sacrifice almost the entire population if that would forestall capitulation and all that entailed, including the likely execution of the emperor.

But most Japanese leaders not only rejected the thought of committing national suicide, they were aware that the empire's days were numbered. Following defeat in the Battle of Saipan in July 1944, most understood that military victory, in the traditional sense, was beyond reach. In February 1945, Prince Fumimaro Konoe broke the bad news to the Emperor. “I regret to say,” he wrote, “that Japan's defeat is inevitable.” He added, revealingly, “we should not be worried about defeat itself. What we must worry about is a Communist revolution that might accompany defeat.”

Tied to this fear of communism, what Japanese leaders most dreaded was invasion by the Soviet Union's mighty Red Army, which had just, in Winston Churchill's words, “tore the guts” out of Nazi forces. Little more than a week after German surrender, in May 1945, Japan's Supreme War Council stated, “At the present moment, when Japan is waging a life-or-death struggle against the U.S. and Britain, Soviet entry into the war will deal a death blow to the Empire.” Conditions only worsened over the next few months. Allied intelligence, having long since broken Japanese codes and regularly intercepted Japanese cables, understood that most Japanese leaders had seen the handwriting on the wall and were looking for an “honorable” way to end the war. The July 6 top secret report on the “Estimate of the Enemy Situation” for the Combined Chiefs of Staff detailed the desperation of the Japanese situation and stated unambiguously, “An entry of the Soviet Union into the war would finally convince the Japanese of the inevitability of complete defeat.” Japan's cable traffic

back and forth between officials in Tokyo and Moscow fortified this conviction. American policymakers stated so repeatedly throughout July. Truman himself characterized the intercepted July 18 cable as the “telegram from the Jap emperor asking for peace.” Truman was also well aware that the Soviet invasion would deliver the fatal blow to Japan’s war effort.

At Potsdam, prior to receiving the official report on how powerful the atomic bomb tested at Alamogordo on July 16 really was, Truman seemed to exult over Stalin’s reassurance that the Soviets, as promised at Yalta, were coming into the war in early August: “He’ll be in the Jap War on August 15,” Truman wrote. “Fini Japs when that comes about.” He conveyed the good news to his wife the following day: “We’ll end the war a year sooner now, and think of the kids who won’t be killed!”

Truman knew that the atomic bombs were not necessary to end the war. He chose to use them for other reasons—primarily to make clear to the Soviets the fate that lay ahead for them if they interfered with U.S. plans in Europe or Asia.

The Soviet invasion proved to be the game changer that Americans, Japanese, and Soviets all knew it would be as the Red Army cut Japan’s once-powerful Kwantung Army to shreds. When asked on August 11 why Japan must surrender so quickly, Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki responded that if Japan delayed, “the Soviet Union will take not only Manchuria, Korea, Karafuto, but also Hokkaido. This would destroy the foundation of Japan. We must end the war when we can deal with the United States.” Japanese leaders shared Prince Konoe’s fear that the Soviet invasion would trigger a popular communist uprising. They preferred to take their chances with the capitalist United States.

One could provide lots of evidence that the Soviet invasion—the atomic bombings—induced Japanese surrender. But perhaps the most startling is the display at the official National Museum of the U.

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S. Navy in Washington, DC, which minces no words in stating that the atomic bombings “made little impact on the Japanese military. However, the Soviet invasion of Manchuria on 9 August—fulfilling a promise at the Yalta Conference in February—changed their minds.” Perhaps the Navy’s historians were aware that six of America’s seven five-star admirals and generals who earned their fifth star during the war—MacArthur, Eisenhower, Leahy, Nimitz, King, and Arnold—are on record stating the atomic bombings were militarily unnecessary, morally reprehensible, or both.

That these facts remain so little known by the general U.S. public is a sad reflection of the state of historical ignorance plaguing the country. But perhaps even more troubling is the fact that well-informed and presumably well-meaning people are unaware of this reality and continue to mislead the American people.

In November 2015, the National Parks Service officially confirmed that the U.S. government would be establishing the Manhattan Project National Historical Park with units at Los Alamos, Hanford, and Oak Ridge. Two respected cabinet members—Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell and Secretary of Energy Ernie Moniz made the announcement. Secretary Moniz promised that the park “will provide the platform for our citizenry to understand the roots of [the national scientific laboratories that emerged from the Manhattan Project] and what it means for our future responsibilities.” According to Secretary Jewell, who appeared to be deeply moved by the plight of the bombs’ victims, the bomb “did mark the end of the war, but it left devastation in its wake.”

Despite Jewell’s protestations to the contrary, the bombs not only did NOT “mark the end of the war,” they marked the beginning of something even more horrifying—the threatened extinction of all life on our planet. These profoundly disturbing truths get lost in almost all the 70th anniversary commemorative events. But they are absolutely crucial to assessing the consequences of the use of atomic

bombs seven decades ago. That existential threat has in no sense abated. And what is most significant in judging the actions of Truman and advisors like Brigadier General Leslie Groves and Secretary of State James Byrnes who encouraged the bombs' use against Japan is that they were aware of the apocalyptic implications before they unleashed these weapons upon the world. Truman mentioned on at least three occasions that the weapons he was about to utilize were not just more powerful bombs but monstrosities that augured complete destruction. As he said at Potsdam after receiving the full briefing on the immense, almost indescribable, destruction wrought by the Trinity test, this was no normal bomb. It was "the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark." In late May, Los Alamos laboratory director Robert Oppenheimer had warned military and political leaders that within three years, the U.S. would likely have weapons up to 7,000 times as powerful as the bomb dropped on Hiroshima. He was a little premature, but, in 1954, scientists actually testified about the possibility of building weapons 700,000 times the potency of the Hiroshima bomb.

Soviet leaders responded exactly as U.S. scientists predicted they would—by starting their own crash program. They knew through their own contacts with Japanese diplomats that there was no military need for dropping atomic bombs on a country that was about to surrender and concluded that their own country, even more than Japan, was the intended target. The warning from the United States was clear—obstruct U.S. postwar plans in Europe or Asia and you will suffer the same fate as the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki but on a far larger scale. As the atomic bombings indicated, the U.S. would be unrestrained in the kind of violence it was willing to unleash to achieve its goals. The dreaded nuclear arms race was soon on. In a couple decades, nuclear arsenals would reach the 70,000 mark worldwide. Humanity has hung on by a thread and still clings by its fin-

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gertips to the future. As physicist I. I. Rabi observed prophetically, “Suddenly the day of judgment was the next day and has been ever since.”

But these two messages—that the atomic bomb didn’t end the Pacific War and that in using them the U.S. knowingly opened the door to ending all life on the planet—were not conveyed by the official commemorative events or, with few exceptions, the mainstream media coverage. Some of us, however, did everything we could to challenge the dominant narrative.

At American University, we held a major exhibit to commemorate the 70th anniversary. It was, to the best of my knowledge, the biggest exhibit on the atomic bombings ever held in the United States. At its core were six powerful Hiroshima Panels painted by acclaimed Japanese artists Toshi and Iri Maruki and permanently on display at the Maruki Gallery in Saitama, Japan. The Marukis entered Hiroshima a few days after the bombings and, unable to erase the horrifying images seared so indelibly into their minds, later painted a series of 15 panels. In his review of the exhibit, the *Washington Post’s* Mark Jenkins described the Marukis’ “grim” paintings as “suggesting Hieronymus Bosch, Goya’s black paintings and Picasso’s ‘Guernica,’ as well as lurid renderings of hell from the less gentle-minded branches of Buddhism.” The early paintings, which focused on the atomic bomb victims, depict the nightmarish conditions the victims faced. They graphically portray the torment of anguished, naked people as they walked through the fires of hell on earth, surrounded by corpses on all sides. For our exhibit, we selected two of these early paintings—“Fire” and “Ghosts.” The exhibit also included “Floating Lanterns,” a beautiful rendering of the lantern ceremony held every August 6 in Hiroshima. Over the years, the Marukis’ vision of victimhood in the nuclear age grew to include more than just the Japanese living in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This broadening vision was captured in the other paintings that we exhibited. In 1955, they painted “Petition,”

which captures the remarkable petition drive begun by Tokyo-area housewives to ban atmospheric nuclear testing in the aftermath of the Lucky Dragon 5 incident in 1954; “Crows,” a stark portrayal of the discrimination against Korean victims, whose bodies were left unattended to rot in the streets as crows swooped down to pluck out their eyeballs; and “Death of American Prisoners of War,” which showed U.S. prisoners who survived the bombing only to be beaten to death by angry Japanese.

In addition to the Maruki panels, the American University exhibit included drawings that students from Hiroshima’s Honkawa Elementary School sent to Washington, DC’s All Souls Unitarian Church in appreciation of art supplies provided by church members in 1947 and artifacts, photos, and other information from the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum and the Nagasaki Atomic Bomb Museum. American University had co-sponsored an exhibit with the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki 20 years earlier in 1995, displaying several of the artifacts that had been intended for the Smithsonian’s Enola Gay exhibit before it was infamously canceled under pressure from the American Legion, the Air Force Association, and Congressional xenophobes. Cancellation of the exhibit struck fear in the hearts of curators around the country. Museums have tread lightly since then, rarely, if ever, risking controversial exhibits. No public museum dared attempt an honest atomic bomb exhibit in 2015, leaving it to three private institutions—American University, Boston University, and Pioneer Works in Red Hook, Brooklyn—to fill the gap.

The American University exhibit was tremendously successful in some ways and disappointing in others. Choosing to have it coincide with the August anniversaries of the atomic bombings meant that most students would be away for their summer breaks. Though thousands of DC-area citizens and international visitors attended, it did not generate the kind of discussion on campus that it might have if classes were in session.

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The exhibit did, however, attract a considerable amount of media attention. As is usually the case with Hiroshima- and Nagasaki-related events in the United States, the Japanese media turned out in force and covered the exhibit thoughtfully and comprehensively throughout its duration. Other international media were also well represented as the exhibit got excellent coverage not only in Japan, Russia, and China but in much of Europe and Latin America. During the course of the summer, I conducted scores of interviews—sometimes as many as six a day—but mainstream U.S. media did its best to ignore the anniversary in general and the exhibit in particular. The Associated Press, to its credit, wrote an excellent article that was picked up by many newspapers. C-SPAN did a special program. The *Washington Post* provided a thoughtful review and the *Los Angeles Times* a shorter, though positive, one. But so far as mainstream media coverage, that was pretty much it. National Public Radio, which has become increasingly corporate and conservative in recent years, steered clear. The Pacifica Radio Network and other alternative media, on the other hand, eagerly provided coverage.

The paucity of U.S. corporate media coverage highlighted the broader challenge of reaching a mainstream audience with counter-triumphalist interpretations of U.S. history. Oliver Stone and I have had a similar experience surrounding *Untold History*. Despite the book being on the *New York Times* bestseller list for weeks and the book and documentaries attracting effusive endorsements that began with Mikhail Gorbachev and soon included many of America’s leading scholars and also receiving rave reviews from almost all the progressive media, getting treated seriously by the corporate media was an uphill struggle and often an exercise in futility. Exposing the history of the American empire and national security state was apparently too radical for their tastes and interests.

Japanese scholars should understand how this works. My experience with Japanese media over the years is quite similar. This was

most apparent when Oliver Stone and I did a Japanese speaking tour together in August 2013 after Oliver joined my students and me on my annual study-abroad class in Kyoto, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. In addition to class-related activities, Oliver and I did daily public events and interviews. The Japanese media was happy to cover our blistering critique of the atomic bombings—close to 150 reporters and cameramen showed up for our tour of the Hiroshima A-Bomb Museum—but fell strangely silent when it came to covering our remarks about Japan’s failure to deal honestly and comprehensively with controversial aspects of its own history. Nor did we get much traction in mainstream Japanese media for our visit to and comments on the ongoing U.S. military occupation of Okinawa or for our support for anti-base forces in their heroic struggle to block building a new U.S. marine base in environmentally pristine Henoko, despite the repeatedly voiced opposition of the Okinawan people.

Oliver’s participation in the 2013 Peace Tour certainly garnered an extraordinary amount of media attention, but, over the years, my students and I have become accustomed to being followed around by TV and documentary film crews and newspaper reporters because of the uniqueness of our program and the special message it conveys. This past summer we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the tour, which is quite special and worth reflecting on. It is the only one of its kind in which students from the United States, Japan, China, Korea, Vietnam, Canada, the Philippines, and other nations live and study nuclear history together and participate in commemorative events in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I began taking students in 1995 in order to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the atomic bombings and the launching of American University’s Nuclear Studies Institute to great fanfare because of our sponsorship of that first atomic bomb exhibit. Ritsumeikan University Economics Professor Atsushi Fujioka, a leading scholar and renowned peace activist, helped guide that first Peace Tour and then began bringing his own Ritsumeikan University stu-

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dents the following year. The tour has undergone dramatic changes over the years. We added Nagasaki to the itinerary and then branched out to include students from Asia Pacific University.

2015 was a special year. Professor Fujioka, who is in semi-retirement (though he will be back with the Peace Tour again next summer), was replaced by another leading Japanese scholar/activist—Ritsumeikan University Law Professor Akihiko Kimijima—who rejoined us for the first time since 1995 and 1996. Professor Kimijima has since been named chair of the faculty of International Relations and president of the Peace Studies Association in Japan. We were also joined on the faculty by Ritsumeikan Professor of International Relations Kazuyo Yamane, Montgomery College (Maryland) History Professor Vincent Intondi, esteemed Hibakusha Koko Tanimoto Kondo (daughter of Rev. Kiyoshi Tanimoto, who was instrumental in revitalizing Hiroshima in the days and years after the bombing), and Satoko Norimatsu (director of the Vancouver Peace Philosophy Centre).

In addition to the faculty, we had approximately 50 participants—the largest group we’ve ever had—equally divided among American and Asian students. The turnout was particularly gratifying for the American side because, despite considerable interest in the program, the cost of airfare, tuition, and travel expenses has often kept enrollment down in recent years. The small scholarship fund we’ve put together provides some assistance to interested students.

We’ve learned many lessons over the years about the challenges of nuclear education. Clearly, no places rival Hiroshima and Nagasaki for teaching about the history and future dangers of nuclear warfare. Both cities have excellent, though quite different, museums, peace parks, commemorative events, and special sites to help teach the lessons. Students routinely describe the experience as “life-changing” and several have participated multiple times. Many have gone on to careers that put the lessons they’ve learned to good use as educators,

policymakers, and activists.

Participants—students and non-students alike—usually report that meeting the Hibakusha and hearing their personal testimonies has the most profound impact on them. Most of the survivors who address our group were teenagers in August 1945. Their memories, like those of the Marukis, are vividly imprinted in their memories. Their accounts are painful, graphic, personal, tragic, and highly emotional. They touch the students in a very human way.

Interestingly, though, the most powerful testimony comes from Koko Tanimoto Kondo, who was only eight months old at the time of the bombing. Koko's story is of a different sort. She tells of growing up the daughter of the Rev. Kiyoshi Tanimoto, who was often absent during her childhood as he was engaged in global peacekeeping efforts as well as in efforts in Hiroshima, where several badly disfigured young girls attended his Methodist Church. Koko befriended these “big sisters” and came to internalize a deep anger toward the Americans responsible for their suffering. Throughout her early years, she fantasized about exacting revenge when she was ready. For Koko, that event came sooner than she anticipated when 10 year old Koko and her mother, brothers, and sister were summoned to the United States to surprise her father, who was a guest on an old television show “This is Your Life.” Among the other participants who honored Rev. Tanimoto was Enola Gay Co-captain Robert Lewis. Koko's bitterness melted away as she heard Lewis describe his anguish over what he had done and recount the comment he wrote in the flight log—“Oh God! What have we done?” She could never forget the tears she saw in Lewis's eyes that day. Later, when Koko was a student at American University, she wanted to visit Captain Lewis, but never did. She later learned that he had died in an institution. His psychiatrist reported that he left behind a sculpture of a mushroom cloud and a tear. Koko also tells about coming to understand her father and realize that his absence was more an expression of his love

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for her than any kind of rejection. Aside from building the Hiroshima Peace Center and playing a central role in the city’s revitalization, he also spearheaded with Saturday Review editor Norman Cousins, the Hiroshima Maidens’ Project, which brought some of the most disfigured female Hibakusha to the United States for multiple plastic surgeries in 1955. Koko also shares a deeply disturbing story about her humiliating experience at the Atom Bomb Casualty Commission, which led her to swear that she would never again tell anyone that she came from Hiroshima. She kept that vow until her days as an undergraduate at American University when several students’ callous defense of the U.S. invasion of Vietnam so outraged her that she declared that she was from Hiroshima and admonished them to consider the victims, shaming them into silence.

But Koko’s story is ultimately about love, forgiveness, and reconciliation. It is the emotional high point of the Peace Tour. Other Hibakusha share different experiences based on their own experiences. Many are equally moving in their own way. No one ever forgets hearing of the excruciating suffering or extraordinary courage and resilience of 16-year old Sumiteru Taniguchi, especially after he removes his shirt to show them the scars 70 years later or the original photos of his horrific burns. Taniguchi-san, who is chairman of the Nagasaki Council of A-Bomb Sufferers, spent four years in the hospital, much of the time begging someone to put him out of his misery. The famous January 1946 photo of him lying on his stomach exposing his bright red back is on his business card with the caption, “I want you to understand, if only a little, the horror of nuclear weapons.” No one ever forgets the anguish of 10-year old Sakue Shimohira, who finally found her mother’s body only to have it crumble into ashes in her hands or to hear of her struggle to go on living after her younger sister threw herself in front of a train. Shimohira-san too intended to throw herself in front of an oncoming train, but, at the last minute, changed her mind. It took courage to die, she reflected.

But it also took courage to live.

Survival was incredibly difficult for Hibakusha, young and old, in the years after the bombing. There are reasons why so few Hibakusha discuss the 1945-50 period and what they had to do to stay alive.

There's lots one could say about the Peace Tours. I personally find them reenergizing in ways unlike anything else in life. But the challenge comes in trying to move students beyond the immediate human reaction to the gruesome accounts they're hearing to think about the deeper implications of the United States' willingness to prolong the war in August 1945 in order to use the atomic bombs and what that says about how far U.S. officials were willing to go to get their way throughout the Cold War and in its aftermath. Truman began the process. The Soviets, fearing, for good reason, a U.S. atomic attack accelerated their own research and tested their own atomic bomb in August 1949. In response, the U.S. upped the stakes exponentially and began developing a hydrogen bomb, which it tested in 1952. Destructive capabilities reached new heights. Oppenheimer's nightmare scenario was becoming reality. The Soviets responded in kind and the madness was on. President Eisenhower, who is mostly remembered for his warning about the deadly dangers of the military-industrial complex, was the chief architect of the insanity. When Eisenhower took office in January 1953, the U.S. had a little more than 1,000 nuclear bombs. When he left office eight years later, that number had reached more than 22,000. When his budgeting cycle was completed in 1962, the number had climbed to 30,000. After backing down during the Cuban Missile Crisis rather than destroy half the world or more, Soviet leaders determined never to again be in such a position of weakness. Before long, between them, the U.S. and the Soviets had the equivalent of more than 1.5 million Hiroshima bombs. When nuclear winter was later taken into account, experts realized that we had the capability several times over to end all life on our planet.

That tale of human folly can be taught and learned in Hiroshima

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and Nagasaki, but it is not intrinsic to the experience in those two cities. As one of my students astutely pointed out several years ago, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are about World War II. The horrors of that war, unparalleled in the annals of history, would pale by comparison with the horrors of World War III, which would likely draw the final current down on all human and animal life. In fact, if even a small fraction of today’s arsenal of 16,000 nuclear weapons is used, we’ve had it. Recent estimates place the number of deaths from the long-term effects of a limited war between India and Pakistan in which only 100 nuclear weapons were used at close to 2 billion people. That is the discussion that was largely missing from the 70th anniversary commemorative events. That is the lesson that Oliver Stone and I tried to convey in our *Untold History*. In nuclear history, there are no do-overs—no second chances to get things right. As Nikita Khrushchev, whose recklessness helped get us into the Cuban Missile Crisis and whose statesmanship and humanity helped get us out, astutely remarked to Norman Cousins, “Peace is the most important goal in the world. If we don’t have peace and the nuclear bombs start to fall, what difference will it make whether we are Communists or Catholics or capitalists or Chinese or Russians or Americans? Who could tell us apart? Who will be left to tell us apart?” Few asked that question in 2015. But with each succeeding day, it becomes increasingly poignant and increasingly urgent.

Notes

- 1) Peter Kuznick is Professor of History and Director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University. In 2012, he and filmmaker Oliver Stone co-authored the book and documentary film series titled *The Untold History of the United States*, which aired on Showtime in the United States and NHK in Japan. He has been bringing students on a study-abroad class to Kyoto, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki every summer since 1995.