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## Morality, Reduced To Arithmetic

By Jim Holt;

Can the deliberate massacre of innocent people ever be condoned? The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki on Aug. 6 and 9, 1945, resulted in the deaths of 120,000 to 250,000 Japanese by incineration and radiation poisoning. Although a small fraction of the victims were soldiers, the great majority were noncombatants -- women, children, the aged.

Among the justifications that have been put forward for President Harry Truman's decision to use the bomb, only one is worth taking seriously -- that it saved lives. The alternative, the reasoning goes, was to launch an invasion. Truman claimed in his memoirs that this would have cost another half a million American lives. Winston Churchill put the figure at a million.

Revisionist historians have cast doubt on such numbers. Wartime documents suggest that military planners expected around 50,000 American combat deaths in an invasion. Still, when Japanese casualties, military and civilian, are taken into account, the overall invasion death toll on both sides would surely have ended up surpassing that from Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Scholars will continue to argue over whether there were other, less catastrophic ways to force Tokyo to surrender. But given the fierce obstinacy of the Japanese militarists, Truman and his advisers had some grounds for believing that nothing short of a full-scale invasion or the annihilation of a big city with an apocalyptic new weapon would have succeeded.

Suppose they were right. Would this prospect have justified the intentional mass killing of the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

In the debate over the question, participants on both sides have been playing the numbers game. Estimate the hypothetical number of lives saved by the bombings, then add up the actual lives lost. If the first number exceeds the second, then Truman did the right thing; if the reverse, it was wrong to have dropped the bombs.

That is one approach to the matter -- the utilitarian approach. According to utilitarianism, a form of moral reasoning that arose in the 19th century, the goodness or evil of an action is determined solely by its consequences. If somehow you can save 10 lives by boiling a baby, go ahead and boil that baby.

There is, however, an older ethical tradition, one rooted in Judeo-Christian theology, that takes a quite different view. The gist of it is expressed by St. Paul's condemnation of those who say, "Let us do evil, that good may come." Some actions, this tradition holds, can never be justified by their consequences; they are absolutely forbidden. It is always wrong to boil a baby even if lives are saved thereby.

Applying this absolutist morality to war can be tricky. When enemy soldiers are trying to enslave or kill us, the principle of self-defense permits us to kill them (though not to slaughter them once they are taken prisoner).

But what of those who back them? During World War II, propagandists made much of the "indivisibility" of modern warfare: the idea was that since the enemy nation's entire economic and social strength was deployed behind its military forces, the whole population was a legitimate target for obliteration.

"There are no civilians in Japan," declared an intelligence officer of the Fifth Air Force shortly before the Hiroshima bombing, a time when the Japanese were popularly depicted as vermin worthy of extermination.

The boundary between combatant and noncombatant can be fuzzy, but the distinction is not meaningless, as the case of small children makes clear. Yet is wartime killing of those who are not trying to harm us always tantamount to murder?

When naval dockyards, munitions factories and supply lines are bombed, civilian carnage is inevitable. The absolutist moral tradition acknowledges this by a principle known as double effect: although it is always wrong to kill innocents deliberately, it is sometimes permissible to attack a military target knowing some noncombatants will die as a side

effect. The doctrine of double effect might even justify bombing a hospital where Hitler is lying ill.

It does not, however, apply to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Transformed into hostages by the technology of aerial bombardment, the people of those cities were intentionally executed en masse to send a message of terror to the rulers of Japan.

The practice of ordering the massacre of civilians to bring the enemy to heel scarcely began with Truman. Nor did the bomb result in casualties of a new order of magnitude. The earlier bombing of Tokyo by incendiary weapons killed some 100,000 people.

What Hiroshima and Nagasaki did mark, by the unprecedented need for rationalization they presented, was the triumph of utilitarian thinking in the conduct of war. The conventional code of noncombatant immunity -- a product of several centuries of ethical progress among nations, which had been formalized by an international commission in the 1920's in the Hague -- was swept away. A simpler axiom took its place: since war is hell, any means necessary may be used to end, in Churchill's words, "the vast indefinite butchery."

It is a moral calculus that, for all its logical consistency, offends our deep-seated intuitions about the sanctity of life -- our conviction that a person is always to be treated as an end, never as a means.

Left up to the warmakers, moreover, utilitarian calculations are susceptible to bad-faith reasoning: tinker with the numbers enough and virtually any atrocity can be excused in the national interest.

In January, the world commemorated the 50th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, where mass slaughter was committed as an end in itself -- the ultimate evil. The moral nature of Hiroshima is ambiguous by contrast. Yet in the postwar era, when governments do not hesitate to treat the massacre of civilians as just another strategic option, the bomb's sinister legacy is plain: it has inured us to the idea of reducing innocents to instruments and morality to arithmetic.