

# The Work Continues: Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the Struggle against Nuclear Weapons

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(The following is an article that appears in the August 2015 issue of [The Friends Journal](#). My co-author and friend David Watt is himself a member of the Society of Friends, as well as a professor of history at Temple University. The article is drawn from a talk he gave for the Hiroshima-Nagasaki Day Memorial of [Pax Christi Metro New York](#) in 2012).

Over seven decades, members of the Religious Society of Friends have worked to protest, commemorate, and educate about the U.S. nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some would say that this work began with Albert S. Bigelow, who, though he did not actually become a Quaker until 1955, resigned his captain's appointment in the U.S. Navy soon after hearing of the bombings and a month before qualifying for his pension. Then, in 1958, Bigelow and three other Quakers set sail from San Pedro, California, in a 30-foot ketch named the Golden Rule for the Marshall Islands in an attempt to halt nuclear tests scheduled there.

Before the U.S. Coast Guard prevented them from completing their action, Bigelow and his shipmates encountered Earle L. Reynolds, an expert on the radiation effects of the Hiroshima bombing, and his wife, Barbara. The Reynoldses were so inspired by Bigelow *et al* that they became members of the Society of Friends. Soon after, they sailed their yacht, the Phoenix (now known as the Phoenix of Hiroshima) into the off-limits Marshall Islands testing ground, where Earle was arrested. Throughout the rest of his life, he and others sailed the Phoenix into various national waters to protest the testing of nuclear weapons.

In addition to those direct actions, in the late 1940s and early 1950s Seattle Quaker Floyd Schmoie started and led Houses for Hiroshima, a project that rebuilt houses for 100 Japanese families made homeless by the bombing. Funds for the project were raised by Pacific Yearly Meeting in California and Japan Yearly Meeting. And in the mid-1950s, some Friends housed a number of the Hiroshima Maidens, a group of 25 young Japanese women severely disfigured by the effects of the atomic bomb who were brought to the United States to undergo plastic surgery. Then, in 1975, Quaker-affiliated Wilmington College in Ohio established the Hiroshima Nagasaki Memorial Collection to house the 3,000 books and documents in both Japanese and English that Barbara Reynolds had gathered in the years following those in which she and her husband, Earle, were in Hiroshima for his radiation research. This is still the largest collection of materials outside of Japan related to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And in the decades since then, Friends groups in the United States and around the world have commemorated and mourned the horrific nuclear attacks of 1945; for example, young Quakers at the 2005 annual session for Britain Yearly Meeting launched hundreds of floating candles to mark the sixtieth anniversary of the nuclear attacks.

Yet despite the many protests, commemorations, and educational efforts about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Quakers and other peace advocates still have their work cut out for them. A majority of

Americans still favor the bombings. A 2009 poll conducted by the Quinnipiac University Polling Institute of registered voters across the country suggests that about 61 percent of the American people think that the United States did the right thing in August of 1945; 22 percent think the United States did the wrong thing; and about 16 percent are unsure or undecided.

We believe it crucial that these percentages be shifted massively and soon. For the United States to be a moral nation, its citizens must acknowledge the harm and injustice of what our government did. The history of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki informs (or fails to inform) contemporary life-and-death conversations about nuclear weapons. We believe that the first step toward helping Americans confront the reality of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is to communicate to them the real story of the first and only (so far) nuclear attacks in human history.

### **August 1945**

On August 6, 1945, with no clear prior warning to Japanese civilians, the U.S. government dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. When the bombing was announced, the United States warned that unless the government of Japan surrendered and unless that surrender was completely unconditional, the United States would continue dropping atomic bombs on the cities of Japan. On August 9 another atomic bomb was dropped, this one on Nagasaki. Although it is impossible to determine precisely how many people were killed by the atomic bombs that were dropped in August of 1945, it does seem clear that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed about 60 times more people than were killed by the attacks of September 11, 2001. Most of the Japanese killed were, of course, children, women, and old men.

### **The Comforting Story**

As we have mentioned, the vast majority of Americans approved of the bombings in 1945, and many continue to do so today. But why? A major reason is that they have heard again and again what we are going to call the “comforting story” about the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The comforting story goes like this. In July and August of 1945, President Harry S. Truman was faced with a stark choice. He could either use the atomic bomb or he could order an invasion of Japan that would cost at least 500,000 American casualties. Truman and his advisers did not want to use the atomic bomb for they realized that using it was a terrible thing to do. But in the end they realized that they had no choice. Doing so enabled them to save the lives of hundreds of thousands—and perhaps millions— of American lives. Doing so also enabled them to treat the Japanese people with compassion. In order to save Japanese lives, Japanese people had to be killed. This story, which was invented in the fall of 1945 by people like Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, has been repeated over and over again for nearly seven decades. It is a good story. Americans have grown very attached to it. People who question it are often accused of being un-American. People who question it sometimes lose their jobs. Alas, the comforting story is simply not true.

### **Problems with the Comforting Story**

There are many reasons why the comforting story cannot be true. To begin with, evidence suggests that there was actually very little debate over whether or not to use the atomic bomb. It seems clear that General Leslie Groves, who played a leading role in the discussions, never even considered the possibility of not using the weapon he had helped create. Furthermore, in August of 1945, no invasion was imminent. No invasion could have been mounted until the fall. In any case, in August of 1945 American leaders did not believe that an invasion would produce half a million American casualties. All of the estimates Truman had at his disposal were far lower than that. And by August of 1945, everyone knew that.

We believe that the first step toward helping Americans confront the reality of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is to communicate to them the real story of the first and only (so far) nuclear attacks in human history. The United States certainly did not have to drop a bomb on Nagasaki. Bombing Nagasaki seems to have served no real purpose whatsoever. Japan was already defeated. If the United States had pulled back from its demand that surrender be unconditional, then it is quite possible that Japan would have surrendered immediately.

Alternatively, the United States could have simply waited until the Soviets entered the war against Japan. (The Soviets had promised to do so on the ninth of August.) Soviet entry into the war would very likely have led to Japanese capitulation. Then, too, the United States did not have to drop a bomb on a city such as Hiroshima. It could have demonstrated the power of the new weapon by dropping the bomb on a true military target or even on a place in which very few people lived. And of course the United States certainly did not have to drop a bomb on Nagasaki. Bombing Nagasaki seems to have served no real purpose whatsoever.

In summary, there are many different reasons to believe that the comforting story is untrue. Nearly all historians who have written about Hiroshima and Nagasaki agree on this.

### **So what were the real reasons the bombs were dropped?**

This is not a question that historians can answer definitively. When they try to answer that question, they almost always rely on a combination of observations: the men who decided to use the bombs had run out of patience; they were determined to end the war as quickly as possible. Also, the decision makers had come to believe that killing large numbers of civilians was often completely justifiable. They wanted to be sure that not one more drop of American blood would be spilled than was absolutely necessary.

Historians also believe that some of the men who decided to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki suspected that God had given atomic weapons to the United States so that America could carry out His wishes. They longed to see a demonstration of the amazing things that atomic bombs can do. In addition, they wanted to intimidate the leaders of the Soviet Union and to create a sense of terror and hopelessness among the people of Japan. Some U.S. leaders felt that the Japanese people were not human beings in the fullest sense of that term. And finally, they longed to exact vengeance for Pearl Harbor.

Nearly all historians would say that there was no single reason that atomic bombs were used against the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. There were many different reasons the bombs were exploded.

## **Lessons learned**

In summarizing this material, we do not suggest that making more widely known what most historians say happened at Hiroshima and why these things happened will solve the problem of nuclear weapons. As with civil rights, climate change, and other life-threatening issues, action is required, action which Quakers and other peace activists must lead or participate in.

Nevertheless, we believe that certain lessons can be drawn from historians' accounts of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One lesson is that stories that are comforting, widely accepted, and supported by the prestige of important governmental officials are sometimes completely untrue. Indeed, citizens have an obligation to view stories that are comforting, widely accepted, and supported by the prestige of important governmental officials with particular skepticism.

The second lesson we want to offer is this: Americans often say that the leaders of countries such as North Korea and Iran are not wise enough or virtuous enough to be trusted with nuclear weapons. We think that people are right to say that. We also believe, however, that the leaders of the U.S. government are not wise enough or virtuous enough to be trusted with nuclear weapons. When it comes to nuclear weapons, there are no grounds for U.S. self-righteousness. As we communicate this message widely and emphatically, we trust that many more Americans will be moved to action.