

## Hiroshima Saved My Life

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By Stanley A. Weiss

**WASHINGTON**—As President Barack Obama prepares tomorrow to become the first American President to visit Hiroshima since that fateful day 71 years ago, I've spent a lot of time thinking of friends long since gone. The atomic bombs that America dropped on Japan in August of 1945 took more than 200,000 lives. But they probably saved mine.

At the time, I was a young sergeant in the United States army being readied to participate in the full-scale invasion of Japan. The previous year, I had enlisted in the service just three weeks after my 17th birthday, a skinny Jewish kid from South Philadelphia eager to follow my big brother, Buddy, into war.

In the summer of '45, none of us knew how long the war in the Pacific would last. But the reports about the nearly three-month battle for the island of Okinawa were gruesome, with more than a hundred thousand Japanese killed, some by suicide. We didn't know at the time that America had suffered almost fifty thousand casualties, although we'd heard the number was massive. But we knew that the invasion of Japan would likely begin from this hard-fought island, and we all assumed that the Japanese homeland would be defended with equal ferocity. It was predicted that the mission would take the lives of more than a hundred thousand American G.I.'s — including, most likely, me.

Then everything changed. One day in early August, I sat with a couple of guys in the barracks and puzzled over the local newspaper's story that an American plane had "dropped one bomb" on some Japanese city I couldn't pronounce and "destroyed" it. We understood how our B-29 long-range bombers had firebombed Tokyo with devastating results, taking 100,000 lives. But we were mystified to read that this so-called "atomic bomb" harnessed "the basic power of the universe" and loosed the "force from which the sun draws its power" upon a city called Hiroshima. What the hell did that mean? We scratched our heads about what the paper called this "greatest achievement of organized science in history."

I tried to make sense of the following stories about Einstein and  $E=mc^2$ , but had no more success than I had in my physics classes in school. What most mattered to us was whether this would shorten the war and whether we

would still need to risk our lives invading Japan. When we learned about the second bomb three days later, we could see that the war was ending. Imagine our relief a week later, on August 15, when Japan surrendered.

Years later, revisionist historians argued that the Japanese would have surrendered without our using the bomb or invading their homeland. They believe we used the A-bomb not so much to save American troops lives but as a first step into the Cold War with the Soviets. Some of those same arguments have been advanced again in the run-up to President Obama's visit.

I became a close friend and associate in the 1970s with the pioneer and leading exponent of this revisionist view, Gar Alperovitz, a brilliant political economist and historian who earned his PhD at Cambridge, was a founding Fellow of the Harvard Institute of Politics and a long-time professor at the University of Maryland at College Park.

Gar and I are only nine years apart in age, but we're of different generations, so we have understandably looked at this issue through different lenses. While I trained for the invasion, Gar was nine. He has studied the key documents of the time with all of his considerable scholarly skills. I never have.

Nonetheless, while Gar often cites some generals who believed that Japan's fall was imminent, I side with many of the other officers I knew then who believed the Samurai mindset among the military who then controlled Japan would have never surrendered — because to surrender, in that culture, was the ultimate act of cowardice. I believe an invasion of Japan would have been a bloodbath for everyone. I believe Japanese Emperor Hirohito ordered the military to surrender only because of the A-bombs that President Harry S. Truman decided to drop. I realize my beliefs are not based on academic findings. They are existential, a product of my direct experience and the feelings I had as my buddies and I waited in our barracks for our invasion orders.

But that doesn't mean that I don't look back on what happened in Japan seven decades ago with horror, because I do.

In fact, the threat of another Hiroshima disturbed me so much that years later, I got deeply involved in the anti-nuclear movement. I founded an organization in the mid-1970s called the Nuclear Information Resource Service, or NIRS, so citizens could learn about the dangers of nuclear reactors and take direct action locally. I co-founded a political party in the late 70s, called the Citizens Party, that ran an anti-nuke candidate against Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter in the 1980 presidential election.

In 1982, I founded a very different kind of organization called Business Executives for National Security, or BENS, which has focused on a wide range of defense and security issues ever since, including preventing the use of even one nuclear weapon while working to reduce the world's nuclear stockpiles.

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I'm proud of that legacy, but it hasn't been enough. As America today overhauls its nuclear arsenal, Russian officials speak of their warheads as offensive weapons, and Pakistan quietly grows the world's third largest nuclear arsenal with China's help, the Doomsday Clock stands at three minutes to midnight. That, in part, is why President Obama's visit is so important: to remember what happened yesterday so we can prevent what might happen tomorrow.

It does us no good to whitewash history, to change the narrative around Hiroshima, or to take decisions from 1945 out of the context in which they were made. For all the talk about whether Obama should apologize to Japan — with some even going so far to suggest that Harry Truman should be considered a war criminal — I can guarantee one thing: nobody who lived through the Second World War, who fought in it, who lost family and friends to it, will look back on the end of the war with anything but gratitude and relief.

To this day, schoolchildren in Japan aren't taught the full story of what happened in the 1930s and '40s. They don't learn about the utter brutality of the Japanese war machine and the atrocities it committed across Asia that took more than 20 million lives and precipitated the fall of the atomic bombs. It's not hard to understand why. As human beings, it is only natural to want to push away the painful and unimaginable past, to avoid reliving the darkest moments of a proud nation's history.

But we shouldn't play along. We shouldn't let the story of that time be rewritten by those who seek today to position

Japan in 1945 as a victim and not the aggressor it was. We shouldn't humor those who so easily want to forget, because many of us still remember. I remember.

I remember the stories from the so-called Rape of Nanking, when the Japanese Imperial Army invaded the Chinese capital in 1937 and murdered up to 600,000 men, women and children in the space of six weeks while sexually assaulting as many as 80,000 women first.

I remember the Palawan Island Massacre in the Philippines in 1944, when Japanese soldiers, wrongly believing an Allied invasion was imminent, herded 150 American POW's into an air-raid shelter and then burned almost all of them alive.

I remember the massacre of Manila in the winter of 1945 when Imperial troops, surrounded by Americans who stopped their artillery fire so the Japanese could surrender, chose instead to go on a civilian rampage, slaughtering more than 100,000 innocent civilians through beheadings, machine-gun sprays, and fire set to buildings with people inside.

It is hundreds of atrocities like these that America used to remember when we thought of Hiroshima, the tragically leveled city in the country that attacked us first — drawing far, far too many of our friends and neighbors into war in the South Pacific, who were never the same when they came home, or never came home at all.

Tomorrow, I hope the president celebrates the friendship that grew between America and Japan after the war, an example that all adversaries today can learn from. I hope he celebrates the living standards raised and the economies that grew through our partnership. I hope he uses the memory of 1945 to seek a new beginning in our efforts to rid the world of nuclear weapons once and for all.

But I hope he doesn't seek to rewrite the past or erase parts of our common history. In the end, telling the truth about the war is the highest tribute we can pay to the dead — and the living.

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*This column includes excerpts from Stanley Weiss's upcoming memoir, *Being Dead is Bad for Business: Tales from an Improbable American Life*, to be published by Disruption Books in the fall.*