

March 26, 2013, WTE Column. Editor's Headline: "The price of forgetting history"

Imagine yourself in a flash of unbearably bright light. Instinctively your hands fly up to shield your eyes. Next, a stupendous explosion levels the heart of your city. Your clothes fall off in scorched rags. The skin of your hands hangs in shreds. Death and devastation is all around. You die a slow, painful death from radioactive poisoning; alternatively, you live a few miserable years, stricken with leukemia or cancer.

In view of my impending visit to Japan I desired to learn about the country's recent history. John Dower's 2012 "Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering: Japan in the Modern World" seemed the place to start. A very readable account of Japan's recent past, the book also taught me more about my adopted country's tortuous history than I ever wanted to know.

In the heroic American narrative of WWII, Americans at home heard of mushroom clouds followed by Japanese surrender. What they didn't learn was the human suffering in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The tolls in the two cities were minimized, though today it's estimated that civilian deaths from the atomic bombings alone were three times those of total American military casualties in Japan, the latter hovering around 100,000. The dead in Hiroshima and Nagasaki included untold numbers of Korean abductees pressed into slave labor within the two cities, a handful of American prisoners, and many visiting Japanese Americans who had fled impending U.S. internment.

No U.S. humanitarian aid was afforded the stricken cities, partly because none such was forthcoming to Japanese cities bombed by conventional means—some 66 cities in all. The survivors of the atomic blasts, sick and weakened, subsisted in the filth that surrounded them. Every single body of water—river, lake, pool, and stream—was clogged with the corpses of those who threw themselves, immolated, into the deep. Birds hopped around, wings burned off. Horses afire galloped madly among staggering survivors. The dying, tormented by thirst, begged for water. Everywhere people suffered bereavement, unprecedented physical harm from radiation, and psychological trauma. No one lent a hand.

Fast-forward through half a dozen later wars—Korea, Vietnam, Grenada., Afghanistan, "Operation Desert Storm" (where huge earthmoving equipment pursued fleeing populations and maimed and buried them alive) to the eve of the invasion of Iraq, when America imagined it would bring Japan-style democratization to the Middle East. John Dower's book includes his critical essay, published in late 2002 in The New York Times while the White House promoted "the virtues of preemptive strikes" with rhetoric marked by "spin and propaganda" and reflecting "the astounding level of wishful thinking that saturated the highest levels of policymaking in the Bush administration."

The author notes that arguments similar to his arose throughout the U.S. civilian and military bureaucracies. That the warnings had "no impact on top leaders in the White House," he takes as a sobering indictment of the workings of American so-called democracy and our "imperial presidency."

Dower's own essay seeks to correct the faulty parallels that were drawn between Japan and Iraq. For one thing, in WWII, Japan was the aggressor. Its war-weary population actually welcomed the American occupation, however draconian its measures. Moreover, that occupation had been carefully planned

months in advance of Japanese capitulation and was carried out by an informed and charismatic leader, General Douglas MacArthur. No such planning and no such leader was in evidence for Iraq. Further, though by no means a homogenous society, Japan was not riven by the tribal and religious feuds that fragment Iraq. Finally, Japan had “the blessings of being poor in resources and of virtually no economic interest to outsiders.” Oil-rich Iraq’s occupation, on the other hand, would be manipulated to serve private interests. U. S. corporations couldn’t wait to “get in on the gravy train of today’s ‘war on terror’,” working with the military in “crony capitalism.”

It stands to reason that a nation’s defense contractors who endlessly manufacture fighter planes, submarines, missiles, bombs, and assault rifles, would find ways of putting them to use. Our “imperial presidency” has fallen victim to its own military-industrial machine. The U.S. actually studied Japanese scorched-earth pre-WWII occupations to better effect “pacification” of Vietnam. Today, the U.S. spends more on defense than all other countries combined.

Concurrent with refusal of humanitarian aid, atom-bomb survivors’ diaries and poems were banned in Japan while the occupation lasted. American forces confiscated all photographs of the wreckage and its aftermath.

In a 1995 commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of WWII, the Smithsonian Institution prepared an exhibit to include photographs, writings, and remnants from the atomic bombings. Washington politicians, outraged that their “good war” might be shown from another angle, threatened the Smithsonian with cutting off its funding. “The U.S. Senate unanimously approved a resolution condemning the project.” The country’s premier historian was forced to drop its documentation. The move ensured that Americans learned nothing from the past and are doomed to repeat whatever blunders happened then.

A Dr. Michihiko Hashiya, himself severely wounded in the Hiroshima blast, composed a diary from August 6 to the last day of September. He knew he was dying, noting in passing that his body showed some 150 scars as he gazed on his ruined hospital and terrified patients. His beloved wife had perished in the holocaust; he himself would leave behind two small children. The physician’s diary constitutes a remarkable account of the end of a ferocious war, writes Dower, one that “is intimately Japanese and simultaneously transcends national, cultural, and racial boundaries.” In 1955, Dr. Hashiya’s observations were published in English; “there is nothing comparable” to the booklet. “It retains its capacity to move us today.”