

Letter to the Editor - God, Bush, and the Bomb

by Paul Cantor

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“Thank God for the atom bomb,” wrote William Manchester in a memoir recounting his service as a marine during World War II. Sixty years ago last month, atom bombs killed over 100,000 people and destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

According to the widely held view echoed by Manchester, the bombs forced Japan to surrender on August 14 and thereby obviated the need for an invasion that would have cost even more lives. But the post-war Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that “even without the atomic bombing attacks, air supremacy over Japan could have exerted sufficient pressure to bring about unconditional surrender and obviate the need for invasion.”

Even given the Survey’s conclusion, however, many think we should still “thank God for the atom bomb.” The bomb, they reason, made it clear that there would be no victors in a nuclear confrontation. Consequently there has never been a World War III.

This is an argument favored by the neocons in the Bush administration. It implies that by maintaining its preeminent nuclear arsenal the US prevents other nuclear nations from attacking it or its allies. But if that is the case there is no need to worry about nuclear proliferation and there was no need to attack Iraq. Indeed, the fact that Bush invaded Iraq under his “preemptive war” doctrine indicates either he doesn’t really believe that simply maintaining the world’s preeminent nuclear arsenal is enough to keep the peace or that he lied about the real reason for the invasion.

The truth is the bomb does not keep the peace. In the sixty years since Hiroshima and Nagasaki we have been steadily upgrading our nuclear arsenal, and we have still been involved in major wars in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf and Iraq. During the 1962 Cuban missile crisis we almost went to war with the Soviet Union. Nor can it be said that our preeminent nuclear arsenal has made us safer. Rather, it has led other nations to intensify efforts to obtain or upgrade their own nuclear arsenals, while doing nothing to discourage terrorist attacks against us.

What then should we do? There are four steps we should take immediately to begin to eliminate the threat of a nuclear confrontation. First, we should apologize for dropping the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As a nation we need to recognize that together these two acts were among the greatest atrocities of the 20th century. We tend to think we occupy the moral high ground, while as never before in our history the rest of the world doesn’t see it that way. Today we have Abu Ghraib to add to the slaughter of Indians, slavery, the firebombing of Dresden and Tokyo, and the overthrow of democratic regimes in Chile, Guatemala, and Iran - all stains on our past. Second, we should pull out of Iraq and renounce our unilateral preemptive war policy. Third, we should pledge not to devote more resources to upgrading our nuclear arsenal with bunker-busting bombs and other more devastating weapons. Fourth, we should announce our intention to work through the United Nations to bring all nuclear weapons under international control and then begin to eliminate them.

Only by taking steps such as these can we gain credibility as a nation interested in pursuing peace and justice in the world, rather than only our own interests and hegemony. But none of these steps will be taken under the current administration. It is not too soon to begin thinking about a change in leadership.

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