



Don't Apologize For Hiroshima

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"I think the president would like to do it," John Roos, President Barack Obama's former ambassador to Tokyo, said the other day about a possible Obama visit to Hiroshima when he attends the Group of Seven Summit next month in Japan. "He is a person who bends over backwards to show respect to history, and it does advance his agenda."

That a visit to Hiroshima, on which President Harry Truman dropped the world's first deployed atomic bomb, would advance Obama's agenda is clear. He has long envisioned a world without nuclear weapons, announced steps to pursue it in a high-profile speech in Prague in April of 2009, and continues to push for U.S.-Russian cuts in nuclear arsenals and global efforts to secure loose nuclear materials.

That Obama "bends over backwards to show respect for history" is less clear. Just a day before speaking in Prague in 2009, he dismissed American "exceptionalism" - America's unique historical role in promoting freedom and democracy and, since World War II, ensuring global stability - as no more special than the "exceptionalism" that Brits, Greeks, and others feel about their own nations.

The debate over an Obama visit to Hiroshima - which would make him the first president to visit while in office - has focused almost exclusively on whether he would or should apologize for the bombing. That Obama would be tempted seems obvious, for he hasn't shied away from publicly scolding America for its faults, from its toppling of Iran's government in 1953 to its ongoing struggle with race at home.

If Obama visits Hiroshima, however, he should not apologize. Indeed, if he expresses regret for the horror that U.S. atomic weaponry wrought, as he surely would, he also should note the factors that led to it: a brutal imperial power refusing to surrender, and a president weighing atomic bombs against an invasion that would have killed many more on both sides.

Let's be clear: Truman derived no pleasure from dropping the bomb on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 or Nagasaki three days later. In July, he used a delay in the opening of the Potsdam Conference to travel by car "to the center of Berlin," as he wrote in his memoirs, where he saw the remains of the Reich Chancellery and the ruins of the Reichstag, German Foreign Office, Sports Palace, and many other sites.

"Now they were nothing more than piles of stone and rubble," he wrote. "A more depressing site than that of the ruined buildings was the long, never-ending procession of old men, women, and children wandering aimlessly along the autobahn and the country roads carrying, pushing, or pulling what was left of their belongings. In that two-hour drive, I saw evidence of a great world tragedy."

That summer, Truman was presiding over a war-weary United States, with Americans urging him to "bring the boys home" as soon as possible. He also was wrestling with estimates from top military aides that a land invasion to defeat Japan would require about a million U.S. troops and potentially cost the lives of a quarter-million of them - and the lives of many more Japanese soldiers and citizens.

Truman was facing something else: a seemingly implacable enemy. As U.S. forces in the Pacific advanced toward Japan, its people were committing suicide in hordes rather than face capture. Anticipating a land invasion, Japan's leaders were preparing their people for a fight to the finish, conscripting boys as young as 15 and teaching them how to kill incoming U.S. troops and conduct kamikaze operations. None of that is considered polite to note these days, and neither Obama nor his top aides tend to note it when they ponder Hiroshima.

"It is a stunning display. It is a gut-wrenching display," Secretary of State John Kerry said the other day as he toured the Hiroshima Peace Memorial and Museum, in what could be a prelude to an Obama visit. "Going through this museum was a reminder of the depth of obligation that every single one of us in public life carries... to create and pursue a world free from nuclear weapons."

Similarly, the president wrote in a Washington Post op-ed in late March, "As the only nation ever to use nuclear weapons, the United States has a moral obligation to continue to lead the way in eliminating them."

"Moral obligation"? The phrase sets the stage for an apology, for why would America assume a "moral obligation" if not because the nation was guilty of some ill-advised, even immoral, action?

Maybe he shouldn't go.

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