Facing History and Ourselves: Full Spectrum Dominance, White Supremacy, Hiroshima & Nagasaki

Joseph Gerson\*

*“If justice is indivisible, it follows that our struggles against injustice must be united” – Angela Davis.*

*“the image of these police officers squeezing the life out of Floyd might serve as a metaphor for the way U.S. Administrations have for generations, dealt with the countries many of us come from o- through invasions, occupations, wars, the buttressing of dictators, and the removal of democratically elected governments, among other tactics.” Edwidge Danticat*

Anniversaries commemorating two of the world’s most brutal acts of full spectrum dominance and white supremacist violence are approaching: the 75th anniversaries of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki A-bombings on August 6 and 9. Thousands – many of them Hiroshima school children clearing fire lanes against a possible future fire bombings and Catholics in the Urakami district of Nagasaki - were vaporized by the fire ball. Tens of thousands of others, were burned beyond recognition, drowned in rivers and cisterns as they sought relief or were crushed under ruins of homes and buildings. By year’s end more than 200,000 – nearly all civilians – had died, many of them suffered agonizing deaths. The bombs’ victims continue to die of cancers and other bomb-related diseases to this day. As former U.S. Department of Energy official once reported that the U.S. Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission’s medical studies of the bombs’ survivors, Hibakusha in Japanese, “have been used for everything, including the design of new nuclear weapons.”

The A-bombings, and the nuclear arms races that have repeatedly brought humanity to the brink of annihilation are expressions of the logical/illogical continuity of the U.S. elite’s campaigns to ensure their domination at home and abroad. The country is now consumed in a fundamental debate and struggle over *if* and how to eliminate the symbols and institutional foundations of white dominance, including but certainly not limited to police impunity. From slave patrols, beatings and whippings to Jim Crow, from lynchings to police brutality, red lining, red lining and the prison industrial complex, white supremacy has relied on coercive and often deadly full spectrum dominance.

Not incidentally, full spectrum dominance is also the Pentagon’s mandate. As Douglas Blight wrote in his recent magisterial biography of the abolitionist Fredrick Douglass, “Douglas argued that as long as white supremacy lay at the root of American foreign affairs, the country could never achieve its noble aims abroad”

STATUES TELL A STORY

Across the New England landscape, in town commons and public parks, the fusion of racist domestic, foreign, and military policies is honored in the Spanish-American War memorials. One graces the margins of Harvard University. Atop the plinth is an Anglo-Saxon Cincinnatus, the everyman yeoman with his rifle held astride body, resolutely prepared for battle.

More interesting is the plinth’s square plaque. It pictures desperate women on their knees, arms outstretched appealing for salvation. Behind them appears the image of U.S. warships disgorging white warriors sent to save them. Bordered on the plaque’s four sides are the words: Cuba, Puerto Rico, Philippines, Guam. A repetition of the racist trope of saving the damsel in distress from dangerous and unseen People of Color. G.I. Joe of the 1890s was saving the day, not creating new imperial colonies in contradiction with their country’s anti-colonial War of Independence. He was saving women and children, or so subsequent generations have been led to believe.

In most instances, a nation’s foreign policies are designed to serve the country’s “national interests”, however they may be forged midst popular and elite tensions. In the case of the United States, the expansion of U.S. influence and power, modeled in large measure after European colonialism and neo-colonialism can be traced to the 1870s. Even as few liberated slaves received their promised 40 acres and a mule, midst the continuing genocide of the continent’s First Peoples, westward expansion was inexorable, bringing more land under cultivation. This led to over production, massive crop surpluses, the collapse of market prices and financial distress and ruin for thousands of farmers and their families. The solution? Pressure on the government to look south to Latin America for markets.

These forces built over the next generation. As Professor Jules Davids, of Georgetown University and the lead ghost writer of John F. Kennedy’s *Profiles in Courage who* taught future diplomats and national leaders, the 1890s were a turning point for the United States. By then the North American continental empire had been consolidated. A great economic depression and labor unrest had corporate leaders desperate and lusting after what they understood to be the “holy grail of capitalism” – the China market. If the U.S. could carve out markets there, they believed U.S. factories could operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week resulting in “social peace” and enormous profits.

But there was a major obstacle: European colonial powers controlled the “steppingstones to Asia”, the islands that served as coaling stations for the steam powered commercial and warships of the era. These islands couldn’t be seized until the U.S. had warships capable of competing with the world’ strongest navy, Britain’s. Inspired by the naval war theories of Admiral Mahan and pressed by Secretary of the Navy Theodore Roosevelt and Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, in the 1890s the U.S. built that navy. The 1898 sinking of the U.S.S. Maine in Havana harbor under still mysterious circumstances served as a *causus belli*. Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, Guam, and Samoa were conquered from Spain. And, under cover of war, Hawaii was annexed.

Contrary to the mythology communicated by those statues across New England, the people of these conquered nations experienced a change of their colonial oppressors, not liberation. In Cuba and the Philippines, they continued fighting for independence. They were defeated in brutal wars, fueled by the racism of U.S. forces, reinforced by torture, by the cutting edge information technologies of the day - telegraph and the Dewey decimal system, and by the creation of ruthless U.S. controlled constabularies (the template that remained in use through the Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq Wars.) The foundations of the U.S. overseas empire were thus put in place.

The Monroe Doctrine, declaring that the Western Hemisphere was an impregnable element of the U.S. “sphere of interest” was enforced with repeated deadly wars, military interventions and *coups d’états*. (Nicaragua, Dominican Republic, Grenada, Guatemala, Chile and Honduras just begin the list.) In the 1930s and 40s, significant portions of the British empire became collateral for FDR’s Lend Lease aid to Britain. And, with the post-war collapse of the British and French empires, followed by political subversions, coups, and military interventions including nuclear threats, North Africa and the Middle East, the Cold War’s oil-rich “geopolitical center of the struggle for world power” fell to the U.S. sphere.

Asia was different. In time, the Pacific theater of World War II will be understood less as an anti-fascist war and more as the war between competing imperial powers. In 1905, five decades after Captain Perry’s Black Ships “opened” Japan, the two imperial powers, Tokyo and Washington, did a deal on the sidelines of the Portsmouth Treaty negotiations in the wake of the Russo-Japanese war. Washington would recognize Tokyo’s colonial control of newly conquered Korea in exchange for Japan respecting U.S. colonial control of the Philippines. Over the next several decades the two emerging powers and Britain managed their tensions – most notably via the Washington Naval Conference of 1920-21 which set proportional limits on the size of each of the powers’ naval forces in the Pacific.

The Asia-Pacific armed peace was shattered by a schism that emerged in the Japanese elite. The “militarist” faction resented being forced to playing second fiddle to the Anglo-Saxon empires, especially in China. Others, painfully aware that Japan’s economy was only 1/10th the size of the United States’, argued that Japan should expand its empire under the umbrella of Washington’s and London’s imperial spheres. The “militarists”, who seized power opted to go for “the whole melon.” Japanese military provocations opened the way for a full-scale invasion, and before long Japan controlled Manchuria and many of China’s major cities.

By 1941, even as their forces were increasingly bogged down in China, Japanese troops were threatening Western colonial and economic interests in Asia and their market shares in China. FDR responded by seizing Japanese assets in the United States and more threateningly imposing an oil embargo on Japan. Without adequate oil supplies to pursue its extended war in China, Japan’s leaders opted to simultaneously invade Indonesia and attack Pearl Harbor. Indonesia could supply oil. And by sinking much of the U.S. Pacific fleet, Japan’s leaders believed they could buy time for their war in China while the U.S. was preoccupied with its more important war against Hitler’s Nazis in Europe.

The Pacific War was fueled by racism and imperial ambitions on each side. As the historian John Dower wrote in *War Without Mercy,* “To scores of millions of participants, the war was also a race war. …Japan’s belated emergence as a dominant power in Asia…challenged not just the Western presence but the entire mystique of white supremacism on which centuries of European and American expansion had rested.” Racist propaganda campaigns on both sides of the Pacific were launched to fuel their troops’ fighting spirits and to reinforce public support for the sacrifices needed to pursue the war.

For Americans, Japanese sanity was not to be “measured by our own standards of logic.” Japanese were portrayed as “irrational, nonwhite foreigners.” LIFE Magazine taught that Japanese, like Prime Minister Tojo, “show humorless intensity of ruthless mystics.” Hearst newspapers proclaimed that the wars in Asia and Europe were different because Japan was a “racial as well as cultural and religious menace.” A Japanese victory would result in “perpetual war between Oriental ideals and Occidental. War Department propaganda designed to depict Japanese as “vermin to be destroyed”. This dehumanization of the enemy, with its roots in Euro-American racism, made it possible for General LeMay’s firebombing attacks to burn 100,000 Tokyo residents to death in a single night, to burn 66 Japanese cities to the ground, and ultimately to unleash nuclear weapons on the “vermin” of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In the ultimate expression of full spectrum dominance’s infliction of state power and terrorism, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were attacked by nuclear weapons. The bombs’ fireballs were three million degrees centigrade. In the first second, everyone within a two-mile radius was irradiated. This was followed by the blast wave that destroyed nearly structure within a two-mile radius (one mile in the case of Nagasaki due to its hilly terrain.) This was followed by the heat wave that burned people and rubble indiscriminately.

Dower summarized A-bomb survivors’ testimonies, writing that the people of Hiroshima experienced what they understood as Hell, a “fiery inferno peopled with monsters and naked tormented bodies…..a raging inferno, streets full of monstrously deformed creatures; excruciating pain, without medicine and without surcease… Outlines of bodies were permanently etched as white shadows in black nimbus on streets or walls, but the bodies themselves had disappeared….there were innumerable corpses without apparent injury. Parts of bodies held their ground, like two legs severed below the knees, still standing. Many of the dead were turned into statues, some solid and others waiting to crumble at a touch.”

Too understand the existential threat posed ignited by these first full spectrum dominance nuclear attacks, bear in mind that today’s average strategic nuclear weapons are twenty time more powerful than the Hiroshima and Nagasaki A-bombs. As Physicians for Social Responsibility has reported, even a small exchange of 50-100 of the world’s estimated 3,720 deployed strategic weapons could result in the deaths of as many as two billion people from the blasts, radiation, fire storms and the smoke that would cause global cooling and massive famines.

To escape the moral judgement of the U.S. people and history President Truman lied about the reason he ordered the nuclear attacks, saying that they were necessary to prevent the million U.S. troops being prepared for the invasion of Japan from suffering casualties.

In fact, for months, Japanese diplomats had been suing for peace on the terms Truman accepted AFTER the A-bombings: that Emperor Hirohito be allowed to remain on his throne. Secretary of War Stimson had advised Truman that Japan’s surrender could be arranged “on terms acceptable” to the United States and that he “did not want to have the United States get the reputation of outdoing Hitler in atrocities.”. General (later President) Eisenhower opposed the A-bombings saying, “The Japanese were ready to surrender, it wasn’t necessary to hit them with that awful thing.” Admiral Leahy, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff agreed, saying “The use of this barbarous weapons at Hiroshima and Nagsaki was of no material assistance to the war.” And General LeMay, who led the firebombing campaign, was convinced that without a group invasion Japan would surrender by November when there would be no targets left to attack.

Racism contributed to the decision to attack cities with “densely packed workers homes” with atom bombs. Other contributing factors included bureaucratic momentum and Truman’s fear that if U.S. voters learned that $2 billion ($28.5 billion in 2020 dollars) had been spent to create the A-bomb but that it had not been used, it could lead to his defeat in the 1948 presidential election. But the decisive factor was articulated by Secretary of State Byrnes when he said “We wanted to get through the Japanese phase of the war before the Russians came in.” As this historian Barton Bernstein wrote in the pages of Foreign Affairs on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the A-bombings, the consensus among historians is that the determinative force behind the A-bombings was the commitment to bring the war to an immediate end. The goal was to avoid having to share influence with the Soviet Union in northern China, Mongolia and Korea. And, as Truman noted in his diary, with the atom bomb, he had “a hammer over those boys”, meaning Stalin and his coterie in Moscow.

The Hiroshima and Nagasaki A-bombings were not the last time U.S. nuclear weapons were used. As Daniel Ellsberg, who authored the Kennedy and Johnson nuclear war fighting doctrines teaches, during international crises and wars, they have been repeatedly used in the same way that an armed robber points a gun at his victim’s head. Whether or not the trigger is pulled, the gun has been used. On more than 30 occasions, U.S. leaders have prepared and threatened to initiate nuclear war: four times in relation to Vietnam, three times in relation to China, twelve for Korea and a dozen to maintain U.S. hegemony over the oil-rich Middle East.

Not to be forgotten is Washington’s racist exercise of full spectrum dominance were the three million Indochinese killed during what we call the Vietnam War, many of them dehumanized as “gooks”, the 500,000 Iraqi children the Clinton’s Secretary of State Madeline Albright said were worth sacrificing, and the uncounted “sand niggers” and “sand monkeys” killed the course of this century’s endless wars in the greater Middle East.

It is past time to think systemically. Years ago, the Israeli peace movement had a slogan to the effect that the crimes and corruptions inflicted outside the fortress walls would inevitably flow back and corrupt Israel. The same certainly applies to the U.S. empire, most visibly as returning warriors become the foundation of our police forces with surplus war materials from body armor to tanks.

Since the beginning of the genocide of Native Americans, the building of the American economy on the backs and blood of enslaved people, the conquering of colonies, creation of neo-colonies, and the Hiroshima and Nagasaki holocausts, racism and full spectrum dominance have served as mutually reinforcing foundations of empire.

As protesters in our streets and the aging Hibakusha cry out, another world, another America, is possible. The path away from institutionalize racism and murderous full spectrum dominance, leads through profound social, economic, political, spiritual, intellectual, and military change. First, we must face our history and ourselves. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki anniversaries, in the shadows of the deaths of George Floyd and so many others, are among the most important places to start.

\*Dr. Joseph Gerson is President of the Campaign for Peace, Disarmament and Common Security and Vice-President of the International Peace Bureau. His books include With Hiroshima Eyes: Atomic War, Nuclear Extortion and Moral Imagination and Empire and the Bomb: How the U.S. Uses Nuclear Weapons to Dominate the World.