

# Blood and Thunder

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Rm. 35, Student Union Building, UNB Campus  
DEADLINE: 5 p.m. Tuesday

# Ban the bombast

Dear Sir:

For a month the press wallowed in the 40th anniversary of Hiroshima. The leaders of the pack were the newsmagazines: 23 pages in *Newsweek*, 25 in *Time*. The second was a Herculean labor of reporting and writing by *Time's* senior writer Roger Rosenblatt. But in general, I think the press made too much of a bad thing.

As I read the endless descriptions of the dropping of the bomb, the reflections, the laments, the breast-beating, the mea culpas, I began to feel paralyzed. Or, rather, I began to feel that any confident assertion of American power must be paralyzed if the bomb is seen in this way: that such an assertion in "the atomic age" must be futile or too dangerous or immoral, and probably all three. There was almost no discussion of the most important consequence of the bomb: the development of the theory and strategy of deterrence. The implicit message was that, given the burden of American guilt in dropping the bomb, and given the frightfulness of the weapon, we should all join the nuclear freeze movement and wind ribbons round the Pentagon. This may not have been the intention of the journalistic overkill, megawords for megadeaths. It was the effect.

Some commentators did point out that the only available alternative on August 6, 1945, was a conventional invasion of Japan, and the continued heavy (conventional) bombing of its cities. A conservative estimate is that such an invasion would have cost the lives of at least 5000,000 GIs and God alone knows how many Japanese soldiers and civilians. But no one noted that this would not have been the only cost. As the American armies were slaughtered by suicidal opposition, Truman would have had no choice but to take American (and British) forces out of Europe, when the Russian divisions were massed from the Baltic to the Black seas. The Soviet Union would have overrun Western Europe. It would not have been deterred by a threat to use the bomb, since Truman already would have refused to use it against Japan. That would have been a catastrophe. Then there would have been cause for guilt.

So how did the press cover the anniversary? There was a lot about the victims and survivors in Hiroshima. It is right

that we should be reminded of the horror, yet something in the coverage made me restless. In his poem "A refusal to mourn the death, by fire, of a child in London," written during the Blitz, Dylan Thomas began with the rightly famous line: "After the first death, there is no other." The man who wrote that was not only feeling accurately (and deeply), he was thinking and so making us feel more accurately. The interviews with the survivors did not make me think or feel anything very deep. What is more, it is wrong to allow the awfulness of the suffering in Hiroshima to erase or diminish the no less great suffering inflicted on others by conventional weapons. Apart from the implication for the future, the bombing of Hiroshima was no more terrible than the bombing of Dresden or Coventry—or, for that matter, shooting someone with a bow and arrow at Agincourt. No new human savagery was revealed when the bomb was dropped; the first day of the Battle of the Somme was just as frightful (perhaps worse).

Whether or not Russia was deterred by America's possession of the bomb after 1945, some writers in the past few weeks have said that Truman thought that dropping it on Japan might be a warning to Russia. If Truman did in fact think that (and the evidence is slight), it is certainly an uncomfortable reason, but it would have been no more than a consideration of statecraft. Power has its reasons. If one is not prepared to face that fact, unpleasant as it is, one should not comment on power.

But very little of the coverage of the Hiroshima anniversary was framed in terms of statecraft. America dropped the bomb—and what happened then? This question was not asked. Just as a consideration of the alternative to the bomb lifts some of the load of guilt from America, so does a consideration of how America behaved once it had dropped the bomb. For several years America alone (in partnership with Britain) possessed the bomb. During that time America acted with unparalleled maturity, assurance, magnanimity, and (more often than not) even wisdom.

So with Hiroshima we "entered the atomic age." Yes, we did, bang! What does it mean to say, wringing our hands, "We entered the atomic age"? It means that we have "a

new weapon of death and destruction." But that has happened often enough in history. In his *The History of the West* W.H. McNeill emphasises that the new weapons have often explained the rise and fall of empires. One of those empires that kept succeeding each other in Mesopotamia (I cannot remember which) succeeded by the discovery of the stirrup. Once both hands were free, because the stirrups kept you on the horse, you could do all kinds of mean things to your enemy, even fire an arrow from your bow. The stirrup and the atom bomb are of a different order—but there is a connection.

True enough, the nuclear bomb gives us the power "to wipe out human life and civilization." It is an awesome fact. But it cannot be allowed to paralyze us and exempt us from all other moral responsibilities and concerns. The bomb is no excuse for

fecklessness in our private lives—although it is used openly as such an excuse for all kinds of instant gratification, since "we may not be here tomorrow," and for refusing responsibility, as in a decision not to have children—and it is no excuse for it either in our public lives. The belief that the world will soon come to an end has occurred again and again in our history. As the Black Death swept over Europe, no one could explain it; and as it arrived in villages, in towns, almost wiping out whole populations, it seemed to come from nowhere. It radically altered the social and economic life of Europe, and entered powerfully and permanently into the European consciousness. To the medieval mind, it was the nuclear bomb. If the bomb makes people feel nerve-racked, dislocated, aimless, lonely, threatened by unidentified dangers, and all the rest, then one can only

answer that they are the kind of people who would find something else to make them feel nerve-racked, dislocated, aimless...

Today's obsession with the bomb is of quite recent growth—since the middle 1970's. There may be many reasons for this obsession. There is no Vietnam War to provide a "good cause." The environment, which quickly succeeded Vietnam when the draft was eliminated, has proved to be an unsatisfactory, murky issue. Always to be marching up and down against toxic wastes, however legitimate, is in the end a rather parochial concern. But there is always the bomb. I objected to the coverage of the Hiroshima anniversary most of all because it (unintentionally) fed an underlying anti-Americanism that can only paralyze the exercise of American power.

Henry Fairlie

## OPINION...

continued

promotion of hate. A very strange idea. Promoting hate is a way of striking at a group when you aren't courageous enough to stand on your own.

Pick a problem, any problem. Then pick a villain. You're likely to find at least a few people who are as scared as you. It seems crazy; but people are often foolish and they can be manipulated into following those whose goals are so illegitimate that they can only be carried out by mobs. And if anything should be illegal, I guess that's a good candidate.

Something else we should perhaps look at is the religious side of things - the Christian / Jewish struggle as seen by Jim Keegstra. Granted, Keegstra expresses the views of a minority; but he is hardly alone. And this is an one of many unfortunate aspects of this situation.

Keegstra and his supporters are obviously obsessed - and I put no negative connotation on this word - with promoting their version of Christianity. Looked at one way, preaching something other than Christianity (Judaism, for example) is equivalent to being anti-Christian. This sort of built-in conflict comes to a head when dealing with fanatics - again, no negative connotation intended - of any kind. How does a society deal with this? Now, as my fingers

wander across this keyboard, I haven't the slightest idea.

Personally, I know Christians. Some of my best friends are Christians. Very serious folk who believe that the Bible is the truth and the light and the one way and so on. I am not a Christian (nor a Moslem, Jew, Buddhist, atheist, etc.) And so we disagree. Usually in fairly civil tones. Still, there is no real understanding; which, between friends, is rather distressing. Between groups - and an axiom of communication is that groups communicate less effectively than individuals - the consequences are often tragic.

The terrible thing is that if Keegstra believes in this conspiracy theory (and God only knows if he does), then there's not a lot anyone can do to change his mind. No amount of evidence is going to convince him that the Holocaust really happened. Beliefs are

self-sustaining entities, whether they mesh with "objective reality" or not. The Zionist conspiracy trip is very real for Jim Keegstra; and any evidence that is brought before him can be dismissed as part of that same conspiracy. It's really rather sad.

Well, it looks like Keegstra will appeal his case. There will be more and more coverage to endure...more people writing columns like this one. Besides that, there is the matter of all those people that Keegstra taught. How many of them believe what he told them? We have a long-term problem here, one that won't be resolved by a judge's decision.

A final note: As I write this the Jewish Defence League is planning to "confront" Keegstra down in Eckville. Violence has not been ruled out. Hatred HAS been promoted. God help us all.

## Quotations

"We have met the enemy, and he is us."

-Walt Kelly

"Invest in inflation. It's the only thing going up."

-Will Rogers

"Power is the ultimate aphrodisiac."

-Henry Kissinger

"The mind of a bigot is like the pupil of the eye; the more light you pour upon it, the more it will contract."

-Oliver Wendell Holmes