

## Acknowledging Hiroshima: Should We Apologize?

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Boston, MA: On August 6th 1945, a nuclear bomb destroyed the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Three days later, a second weapon obliterated the city of Nagasaki. By August 15th, Japan surrendered and the war in the Pacific was over. The attacks and their aftermath killed more than 200,000 people. Nuclear weapons were never used before or after. Sixty-five years after President Truman ordered the bombings, the United States has decided to break its official silence about them. For the first time, a senior American representative will participate in the memorial services held in Hiroshima.

What our Ambassador to Tokyo, John Roos, will or will not say in Hiroshima has been the subject of some controversy. Commentators in Japan and elsewhere have faulted the United States for refusing to apologize for the bombings. True reconciliation, they insist, requires publicly taking responsibility for the past. But if America is to apologize for Hiroshima, should it not be paired with Japanese apologies for the Rape of Nanjing, the sex slaves, the various death marches? Some would argue that to stop Japanese “fight to death” brutality the atomic bombings were a necessary response.

The emphasis on apology is attractive, but ultimately oversimplified. Political reconciliation is a process rather than an event ushered in by saying we are sorry. It takes a long time. That process of humanizing the enemy started, arguably, many years ago when General McArthur's G.I.'s, occupying Japanese cities, insisted, to the great surprise of the locals, on paying for the merchandise they picked up in stores. The process continued with the American rebuilding of the Japanese economy and with the inculcation of cultural and educational ties between the two nations.

Indeed, the work of reconciliation can be facilitated by apologies. But it is not always so and particularly for people who are not perpetrators and their contemporaries. Political apologies are occasionally powerful but often deeply problematic. We tend to think that an apology is worthwhile only if it is sincere, only if it "comes from the heart." But what does it mean for a political apology to be genuine? How to disentangle "the heart" from real politick? Apologies also run the risk of cheapening and diminishing the magnitude of the event that one is apologizing for. Is it really dignified and adequate to apologize for wiping two cities off the face of this earth? Is there any moral edification in forcing almost abstract horrors into the banal, rigid formulations made regularly by unfaithful spouses, disgraced politicians and racist talk show hosts?

Acknowledgement expresses recognition of the past and aspiration for the future. It can also be initiated by one side, serving as an inducement to the other. At its best an act of acknowledgement is a reaffirmation of another's sense of reality. It communicates to her that she is not suffering invisibly in some solipsistic, closed-off psychic prison. What she thinks happened actually did happen, and we know it even if we differ on the interpretation of context and particularly motives. Acknowledgement, in refusing to “let bygones be bygones” carries with it a vision and passionate pledge for a better future.

Apologies are a form of such acknowledgment, but they are not synonymous with it. Ultimately, what is necessary for reconciliation is some kind of mutual acknowledgement: we have caused harm; those we have hurt are human beings - scarred by the history of violence between us but also capable of change and regeneration. And insofar as we, too, are human beings, we remember and take responsibility. Showing up, bowing one's head and saying nothing can convey our heartbreak at what we have wrought just as powerfully, indeed more powerfully, than a well-dressed official reading words that someone else had written for him, expressing stiff regrets for an event that happened before either was born.

And, while Ambassador Roos is standing there, head bowed, he might reflect on the remarkable invitation for and standard of reconciliation set by the people of Hiroshima. Declared "a city of peace" in 1949, its surviving residents, almost inexplicably, chose to dedicate themselves to the promotion of non-violence and the obliteration of nuclear weapons. In a cynical, pessimistic world that still takes its cues from Thucydides' resigned mantra about "human nature being what it is," they remind us that we are not algorithmic war machines programmed to perpetuate endless cycles of injury and revenge. That, while victimhood so often prompts us to make victims of others, it does not have to. That, to pit Auden against grumpy old Thucydides, human beings composed of "eros and dust" can understand, even if rarely, that "we must love one another or die." If Mr. Roos must say anything at all, perhaps that's not such a bad line.

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