

U.S. President Obama's Visit to Hiroshima: a Critical Commentary through the Eyes of Hannah Arendt

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Obama and Hirohito: the impact of their visits to Hiroshima

In 1964, Hannah Arendt analyzed in detail the relationship between crime and responsibility in her lecture 'Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship.' Arendt's aim was to provide a response to stormy criticism of her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published a year before. In her talk she said:

There exists in our society a widespread fear of judging that has nothing to do with the biblical "Judge not, that ye be not judged," and if this fear speaks in terms of "casting the first stone," it takes this word in vain.

What I wish to point out is how deep-seated the fear of passing judgment, of naming names, and of fixing blame – especially, alas, upon people in power and high position, dead or alive – must be.

This lecture provided a brilliant discussion of the issues of state crime and responsibility. More than half a century on, on May 27, 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama visited Hiroshima. There he addressed neither the *crime* of indiscriminate mass killing in the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; nor the *responsibility* of the U.S. state for that crime against humanity that men from the U.S. government and military forces committed 71 years ago. It was not because of fear of passing judgment that the majority of citizens of Hiroshima and of Japan eagerly welcomed Obama's 50-minute visit to ground zero and greeted with acclaim his 17-minute speech – a speech that contained no apology whatsoever for America's actions. Simply put, the Japanese exhibited amnesia - a complete loss of memory about the real significance and gravity of the genocidal nuclear attack on tens of thousands of defenseless civilians. It was also amazing to observe the way that, with only a few exceptions, Japan's entire media including the main local newspaper *Chugoku Shimbun* praised Obama's courage in visiting Hiroshima to articulate his "dream" for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

For this inappropriately festive event 5,600 police officers were mobilized to maintain tight security in and around Peace Park. The visit reminds us of Emperor Hirohito's first post-war visit to Hiroshima on December 7, 1947. Then, about 50,000 civilians - including many A-Bomb survivors - enthusiastically welcomed Hirohito at ground zero, singing the national anthem in unison. In response, Hirohito made a short and simple statement:

Thank you for your warm welcome. Today I feel satisfied, having seen the progress in the reconstruction of Hiroshima City. I sympathize with the misfortune that the citizens of Hiroshima suffered. You must contribute to world peace by building a peaceful Japan so that we Japanese do not waste the lives that victims have sacrificed.

Hirohito, apparently unapologetic, never mentioned his own responsibility for the "misfortune" and "sacrifice" that he as the Grand Marshall of the Japanese Imperial Forces caused Japanese citizens as a consequence of the 15 year long war, conducted in his name.

As soon as Japan surrendered to the Allied nations on August 15, 1945, the Japanese government adopted a national doctrine, "National Acknowledgement of Japanese War Guilt", claiming that, as far as Japan's actions during the war were concerned, the entire nation was guilty. The real purpose of this doctrine was to obscure the facts about where the guilt actually lay, allowing wartime leaders, including Hirohito, to evade personal responsibility. In addition, Hirohito was falsely presented as a peace-loving victim of war who had been politically used and manipulated by a small group of militarists. In order to enhance this myth, between February 1946 and December 1947, Hirohito visited hundreds of cities and towns - with the notable exception of Okinawa - throughout Japan, meeting millions of ordinary citizens who had been his "subjects" until Japan's new constitution was promulgated on November 3, 1946. As a consequence of this grand tour, the Japanese people perceived Hirohito as an archetypal war victim, a national symbol of war victimhood. Hiroshima was the last destination of this nation-wide tour. For the citizens of this city, including A-Bomb survivors, Hirohito was identified as a revered symbol of the suffering of war. Consequently, a feeling that might be called the "National Sentiment of Japanese War Victimhood" soon infiltrated the country, completely replacing the concept "National Acknowledgement of Japanese War Guilt." As a result, all other Asian victims of Japanese war atrocities were excluded from the Japanese sense

of war victimhood. For a long time, even Korean A-bomb victims were unacknowledged as casualties of the bombing.

Obama's recent stopover in Hiroshima was as effective as Hirohito's visit to that city had been in that it badly emasculated Japan's anti-nuclear and peace movements. It also caused serious damage to Japan's democracy. The aim of this short essay is to provide an analysis of the adverse impact on Japan of Obama's visit, in particular his visit to Hiroshima. I will apply Hannah Arendt's analysis of crime and responsibility as expounded in her two lectures, 'Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship' and 'Collective Responsibility.'*

Guilt as an attribute of an individual

Arendt described the victims of the holocaust as "innocent people who were not even potentially dangerous" to the Nazis, and claimed that they were killed "not for any reason of necessity but, on the contrary, even against all military and other utility considerations." The same arguments can be applied to the victims of the atomic bombing. Citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were "not even potentially dangerous" to the U.S. at that time, even though, as citizens of the nation conducting the war of aggression, they were not entirely "innocent".

As has been well substantiated by a number of historians, the real aim of the U.S. in employing nuclear bombs against Japan was to demonstrate to the Soviet Union the mass-destructive power of the new weapon, and thus to discourage the Russians from embarking on war against Japan. As many military leaders in the U.S. forces thought at the time, strategically, to end the Asia-Pacific War, the use of a nuclear weapon was not remotely necessary. Rather than military or other reasons, the real motivation was political. Deployment of these bombs was undoubtedly a grave criminal act that violated international laws including the Hague Convention II of 1899; Hague Convention (IX) Concerning Bombardment by Naval Forces in Time of War of 1907; the Hague Rules of Aerial Warfare of 1923; and the 1925 Geneva Protocol. Of course, this indiscriminate mass killing of civilians was a crime against humanity.

The people who committed these appalling crimes were unquestionably "criminals." Among them were U.S. President Harry Truman, War Secretary Henry Stimson, Secretary of State James Byrnes, General Leslie Groves, and Dr. Robert

Oppenheimer as well as many other bureaucrats, military leaders and scientists. They participated in the decision to use the bombs and the selection of targets, knowing that tens of thousands of people would be killed as a result. According to the judgment of the International Peoples' Tribunal on the Atomic Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki held in Hiroshima between 2006 and 2007, these people were guilty of conspiracy to the committal of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Although they committed these crimes as a group, they were individually guilty of criminal acts. This is because, as Arendt explained, "there is no such thing as collective guilt or collective innocence; guilt and innocence make sense only if applied to individuals." The criminal court is therefore the place "where not systems or trends or original sin are judged, but men of flesh and blood like you and me, whose deeds are of course still human deeds but who appear before a tribunal because they have broken some law whose maintenance we regard as essential for the integrity of our common humanity."

Arendt elaborated further on this point:

Legal and moral standards have one very important thing in common – they always relate to the person and what the person has done; if the person happened to be involved in a common undertaking as in the case of organized crime, what is to be judged is still this very person, the degree of his participation, his specific role, and so on, and not the group.

The judges (of the Eichmann trial) took great pains to point out explicitly, in a courtroom there is no system on trial, no History or historical trend, no ism, anti-Semitism for instance, but a person, and if the defendant happens to be a functionary, he stands accused precisely because even a functionary is still a human being, and it is in this capacity that he stands trial.

Equally, the crime of indiscriminate mass killing committed by Truman, Stimson, Byrnes and others should be judged as the deeds of people in their capacity as individual human beings, not in their roles as functionaries - U.S. President, War Secretary, Secretary of State and the like. Those who, on August 6 and 9, 1945, indiscriminately killed by bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki over 210,000 people, mostly civilians, including 40,000 Koreans, were *human beings* and not a national government or a military force. And, like the terrible deeds committed by the Nazis, the crime that was the deployment

of atomic bombs was “not committed by outlaws, monsters, or raving sadists, but by the most respected members of respectable society.”

Clearly, the issue of responsibility cannot be addressed without an acknowledgement that crimes have been committed. Oblivion about crime directly leads to oblivion about responsibility. Conversely, oblivion about responsibility connects directly with concealment of crime.

Justification of crimes by means of the theory of reason-of-state

The problem is, however, that serious war crimes such as the holocaust and the atomic bombing committed during the war, in particular those committed by a victor nation, are hardly ever punished by law. Regarding this phenomenon, Arendt argued:

The theory behind the formula of acts of state claims that sovereign governments may under extraordinary circumstances be forced to use criminal means because their very existence or the maintenance of their power depends on it; the reason-of-state, thus the argument runs, cannot be bound by legal limitations or moral considerations, which are valid for private citizens who live within its boundaries, because the state as a whole, and hence the existence of everything that goes on inside it, is at stake. In this theory, the act of state is tacitly likened to the “crime” an individual may be forced to commit in self-defense, that is, to an act which also is permitted to go unpunished because of extraordinary circumstances, where survival as such is threatened.

Yet Arendt found this argument inapplicable to the crimes committed by the Nazis because such “crimes were in no way promoted by necessity of one form or another; on the contrary, one could argue with considerable force that, for instance, the Nazi government would have been able to survive, even perhaps to win the war, if it had not committed its well-known crimes.” Likewise, as discussed earlier, the crime of the deployment of atomic bombs was “not prompted by necessity.” By August 1945, it was clear to anyone’s eyes that there was no threat to the existence of the U.S. as a nation, and that the U.S. would be able to win the war against Japan, even without resorting to atomic bombs.

President Truman justified the criminal act of instant and indiscriminate killing of 70-80,000 citizens of Hiroshima with the ironic excuse that it was “to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians.” It is well known in the United States that this justification for the atomic bomb attacks was subsequently further inflated with the 1947 claim that using the bomb had saved the lives of one million people, and the claim that the war would not otherwise have ended. Even today, this assumption is deeply rooted in the beliefs of most Americans. This American justification of the indiscriminate mass killing cannot be supported even by the theory of the reason-of-state. Thus it is nothing but a *myth* unsupported by any convincing evidence or logical argument whatsoever.

Debates on the question of whether the atomic bombing was right or wrong tend to be focused on the issue of the historical “necessity” of using the bomb to end the Asia Pacific War. Such debates about circumstantial conditions evade the most important issue – the *criminality* of indiscriminate mass killing with nuclear weapons.

Collective responsibility vs. personal guilt

As Arendt rightly argued, guilt “always singles out; it is strictly personal,” and “it refers to an act, not to intentions or potentialities.” On the other hand, there are two kinds of responsibility – personal and collective. When an individual acts, personal responsibility is ascribed to the person concerned. Yet Arendt emphasized the importance of collective responsibility, contrasting it with moral and /or legal (personal) guilt. She defined collective responsibility as follows:

Two conditions have to be present for collective responsibility: I must be held responsible for something I have not done, and the reason for my responsibility must be my membership in a group (collective) which no voluntary act of mine can be dissolve, that is, a membership which is utterly unlike a business partnership which I can dissolve at will. This kind of responsibility in my opinion is always political, whether it appears in the older form, when a whole community takes it upon itself to be responsible for whatever one of its members has done, or whether a community is being held responsible for what has been done in its name. The latter case is of course of greater interest for us because it applies, for better and worse, to all political communities and not only to representative government. Every government assumes responsibility for the deeds and misdeeds of its predecessors and every nation for the deeds and misdeeds of the past. This is even

true for revolutionary governments which may deny liability for contractual agreements their predecessors have entered into.

“Personal Responsibility.” This term must be understood in contrast to political responsibility which every government assumes for the deeds and misdeeds of its predecessor and every nation for the deeds and misdeeds of the past. And as for the nation, it is obvious that every generation, by virtue of being born into a historical continuum, is burdened by the sins of the fathers as it is blessed with the deeds of the ancestors.

Here, Arendt was undoubtedly imagining German *national* responsibility for various atrocities that the Nazis committed during the war.

But these ideas can be applied to any nation including Japan and the U.S. We, who were too young to be involved in World War II or were born after the war ended, are of course not guilty for our ancestors’ misdeeds, either morally or legally; yet, because we reap the rewards of those acts, we are held responsible for them. The question is: why must we be held responsible for acts in which we have had no part, simply because we are citizens of the same nation as our forebears?

This is Arendt’s answer to this question:

This vicarious responsibility for things we have not done, this taking upon ourselves the consequences for things we are entirely innocent of, is the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow men, and that the faculty of action, which, after all, is the political faculty par excellence, can be actualized only in one of the many and manifold forms of human community.

For different communities to co-exist, each must be held responsible for misdeeds or criminal acts committed in their name by members of their own community against members of other communities, whether those acts were perpetrated recently or in the more distant past. Without subjecting such misdeeds to judicial process, there can be no peaceful co-existence. Therefore, in order to establish and maintain peaceful international relations, we must closely and constantly examine our own conduct. This is why we need to address in particular our own war responsibility. Many civilians of other nations were victimized as a result of gross misconduct committed by our fathers and our past governments.

Unfortunately both Japan and the U.S. have so far failed to fulfill their respective “collective responsibility” in this sense. Moreover, Japan’s failure in this matter has created a vicious cycle of irresponsibility. As a nation Japan does not openly recognize either the criminality of the many brutal acts it has committed against other Asian peoples, or its own national responsibility for those acts. Because of this, it denies the illegality of similar crimes that the U.S. perpetrated against the Japanese people. Many in Japan are caught in this vicious cycle. Precisely because they do not thoroughly interrogate the criminality of the brutal acts the U.S. committed against them or pursue U.S. responsibility for those acts, they are incapable of considering the pain suffered by the victims of their own crimes (Asian peoples and Allied POWs) or the gravity of their responsibility for these crimes. This mentality on the part of the Japanese can be called a “sense of war victimhood” with the victimizers unidentified. This is the reason why Japan has willingly subordinated itself to U.S. military control, although at the same time it has never been trusted by neighboring Asian nations, and cannot establish peaceful relationships with them.

Obama and Abe’s complicity in the denial of war responsibility

In Hiroshima, Obama spent less than ten minutes visiting the A-bomb Museum: it was as though he was just passing through. For this brief occasion the Hiroshima City Council temporarily halted excavation work that it had been conducting since November 2015 in front of the Museum building. The Council had been excavating to collect personal items such as fountain pens, watches and children’s toys from the time of the bombing as well as paving stones and stone walls destroyed by the bomb. Nine days before Obama’s visit, the excavation pit was filled in and the area was paved with asphalt. This was not because Obama was expected to walk on it but, according to the City Council, simply for cosmetic reasons. On March 18, 1945, when Hirohito inspected damage caused by the intense fire-bombing of Tokyo by the U.S. forces eight days earlier, all the burnt corpses were removed from the area he was to visit and dumped in ditches. Hirohito never actually saw any dead bodies, despite the fact that about 100,000 people had been incinerated in six hours of horrendous fire storms caused by 237,000 napalm bombs dropped on downtown Tokyo.

After “visiting” the A-bomb Museum, Obama spoke for 17 minutes to a small audience of A-bomb survivors selected by the Japanese government. All of these survivors had

long been requesting a visit by a U.S. President to Hiroshima but had never demanded an official apology. No Korean survivors were included in this group of officially chosen representatives.

Obama began his speech with the following remarks:

Seventy-one years ago, on a bright cloudless morning, death fell from the sky and the world was changed. A flash of light and a wall of fire destroyed a city and demonstrated that mankind possessed the means to destroy itself.

He described the atomic bombing as if it were a natural calamity that had no identified human agency. In other words, at the very beginning of his speech, in front of a group of victims of the Hiroshima war crime, he refused to acknowledge the most vital issue of the atomic bombing - the issue of the crime itself. He declined to identify those who were actually personally responsible for the horrific deed and the reason they committed it. By declaring in the second sentence that “mankind possessed the means to destroy itself,” Obama implied that all mankind was guilty. With this sentence, he refused to acknowledge the national responsibility of the United States for the terrible war crime that, together with other prominent Americans, one of his predecessors committed. In other words, he refused to admit his own responsibility as well as that of the U.S. President at the time.

On this historic occasion, in the first paragraph of his speech, given as the first U.S. President to visit Hiroshima, Obama completely failed to admit the two most vital issues – “crime” and “responsibility.” Given this, the inanity of the rest of his speech was no surprise. The speech was utterly pointless not only from the ethical viewpoint but also in that it failed to identify concrete strategies for the abolition of nuclear weapons. Obama confined himself to general comments to the effect that any war is terrible, and that the goal of abolishing nuclear weapons may not be achieved in his lifetime. He noted also that “persistent effort can roll back the possibility of catastrophe.” Shortly before coming to Japan, in May 2016, Obama visited Vietnam. There too he failed to say a word concerning U.S. responsibility for the heavy and persistent indiscriminate bombings that U.S. forces conducted in Vietnam utilizing napalm bombs, cluster bombs and other types of bombs, as well as Agent Orange.

On the “collective guilt of mankind,” as quoted earlier, Arendt pointed out that “there is no such thing as collective guilt or collective innocence; guilt and innocence make sense only if applied to individuals.” She condemned such spontaneous admission of collective guilt, because the result of this action is always a “whitewash of those who *had* done something.” She asserted that *where all are guilty no one actually is*.

As we have already discussed, Japanese political and military leaders also utilized the deceptive concept of collective guilt immediately after Hirohito officially surrendered to the Allied nations on August 15, 1945. The national doctrine of “National Acknowledgement of Japanese War Guilt” whitewashed the guilt and personal responsibility of many of Japan’s wartime leaders, including Hirohito, the Grand Marshall of the Japanese Imperial Forces – guilt and responsibility for killing and injuring millions of Asians as well as more than three million Japanese. Yet the current prime minister of Japan, Abe Shinzo, does not even use this misleading doctrine of collective guilt in order to evade Japan’s national war responsibility. He shamelessly denies the historical facts of numerous war crimes and atrocities that the Japanese committed against Asians, for example, the Nanjing Massacre and the phenomenon of military sex slaves. Because the U.S. president evaded his national responsibility in Hiroshima for the atomic bombing by laying guilt and responsibility at the feet of all mankind, the U.S. is tacitly resonant with Abe’s denial of Japan’s war responsibility. Obama and Abe stood together in Hiroshima Peace Park. But in reality this scene was a celebration of their mutual acceptance of denial of their respective war responsibilities. Of course this ceremony had also served as another hidden mutual verification - confirmation of the rightness of the U.S. nuclear deterrent strategy and the U.S.-Japan military alliance. This is clearly substantiated by the fact that, shortly before coming to Hiroshima, Obama spent a few hours at the U.S. military base in Iwakuni, where he addressed 3,000 people, mostly U.S. marines and their families as well as members of the Japanese Self Defense Forces stationed there. In this speech Obama emphasized the importance of U.S.-Japan military cooperation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to identify a further problem: the Hiroshima City Council itself shares the illusion of collective guilt with the U.S. and Japanese governments. This fact is visibly reflected in the epitaph carved on the memorial cenotaph located near the center of the Peace Park. The inscription reads, *Yasurakani nemutte kudasai[,]ayamachi*

wa kurikaeshimasenu kara,” which means “Please rest in peace, for [we] shall not repeat the error.” In Japanese, the subject of a sentence is often intentionally omitted as a form of politeness, making the subject ambiguous, as is the case with the epitaph sentence. Nevertheless, the sentence can be interpreted as “We, the Japanese, shall not repeat the error,” or “We, as human beings, shall not repeat the error.” On the face of it, the epitaph presents a message for the international community, promoting universal humanitarian principles. But it does not indicate *who* made the error, or *how* to avoid repeating it. By implying that we all share responsibility for this “error,” the epitaph also deflects any responsibility for the crimes committed by the United States. In fact, on its official website, the city council provides its own interpretation of this inscription in the following way: “The error in this case does not indicate any specific individual or nation, but acts of war in general and the use of nuclear weapons by mankind in general.”

The city that was the victim of an atomic bomb for the first time in the history of mankind refuses unambiguously to draw attention to the crime of indiscriminate mass killing with nuclear weapons and to identify who bore responsibility for it. How could that city lead the popular movement against nuclear weapons? Indeed, if justification for indiscriminate mass killing, denial of its criminality and failure to allocate responsibility for it are not acts that damage democracy, how should we describe them?

* ‘Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship’ and ‘Collective Responsibility’ in *Responsibility and Judgment* by Hannah Arendt, edited and with introduction by Jerome Kohn (Schoken Books, New York 2005)

(September 2016)

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Author’s Note: This article will be included in my forthcoming book *Entwined Atrocities: New Insights into the U.S.-Japan Alliance* (Peter Lang), to be published in early 2023.