

The ultimate terror attack

August marks another anniversary of the atomic bombing of Japan, the ultimate act of terrorism in which 231,920 people have now died, the latest, the children of 1945, from a plague of cancers.

I first visited Hiroshima 22 years after the atomic bombing. Although the city had been completely rebuilt with glass boxes and ring roads, its suffering was not difficult to find. Beside the river, less than a mile from where the bomb burst, stilts of shacks rose from the silt, and languid human silhouettes searched pyramids of rubbish, providing a glimpse of a Japan few can now imagine.

They were the survivors. Most of them were sick, impoverished, unemployed and socially excluded. Such was the fear of the “atomic plague” that people changed their names; most moved away. The sick received treatment in a crowded state-run hospital. The modern Atomic Bomb Hospital, surrounded by pines and overlooking the city, which the Americans built and ran, took only a few patients for “study”.

On 6 August, the anniversary of the bombing, the Mainichi Shimbun reported that the number of people killed directly and after exposure to radiation had now reached 231,920. Today, in the same hospital wards I visited, there are the children of 1945, dying from a predictable plague of cancers.

The first Allied journalist to reach Hiroshima following the bombing was Wilfred Burchett, the Australian war correspondent of the London Daily Express. Burchett found thousands of survivors suffering mysterious symptoms of internal haemorrhage, spotted skin and hair loss. In a historic despatch to the Express that began, “I write this as a warning to the world”, he described the effects of radiation.

The Allied occupation authorities vehemently denied Burchett’s reports. People had died only as a result of the blast, they lied, and the “embedded” Allied press amplified this. “No radioactivity in Hiroshima ruin” was the headline in the

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New York Times of 13 September 1945. Burchett had his press accreditation withdrawn and was issued with an expulsion order from Japan, which was later rescinded. Japanese film shot in the hospitals was confiscated and sent to Washington, where it was classified as top secret and not released for 23 years.

The true motive for using this ultimate weapon of mass destruction was suppressed even longer. The official truth was that the bomb was dropped to speed the surrender of Japan and save Allied lives. Today, as the public becomes more attuned to the scale of government deception, this was probably the biggest lie of all. As the historian Gar Alperovitz, among others, has documented, US political and military leaders, knowing that Japan's surrender was already under way, believed the atomic bombing was militarily unnecessary. In 1946 the US Strategic Bombing Survey confirmed this. None of this was shared with the public, nor the belief in Washington that the atomic bomb "experiment" in Japan, as President Truman put it, would demonstrate US primacy to the Russians.

Since then declassified files have shown that the United States has almost used nuclear weapons on at least three occasions: twice in the 1950s, during the Korean war and in Indo-China (against Ho Chi Minh's forces, which were then routing the French), and during the 1973 Arab/Israeli war. During the 1980s, President Reagan threatened the use of "limited" nuclear weapons, until huge demonstrations in Europe curtailed the American short-range missile programme. Under George W Bush's essentially Reaganite administration, the US (and British) military's love affair with nuclear weapons is on the rise again. In 2001, the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, the landmark agreement with the Russians signed in 1972. This was the first time in the nuclear era that Washington had renounced a major arms control accord.

The most important official behind this is John Bolton, the under-secretary of state for arms control and international security: an ironic title, surely, given the extraordinary stand Bolton has taken and the threats he has made. A former Reagan man who is probably the most extreme of George W Bush's "neo-cons", Bolton had his appointment endorsed by Senator Jesse Helms, one of America's greatest warmongers, with these words: "John Bolton is the kind of man with whom I would want to stand at Armageddon... for the final battle between good and evil."

Bolton is Defence Secretary Rumsfeld's man at the "liberal" State Department. He is a strong advocate of the blurring of the distinction between nuclear and conventional weapons. This is described vividly in last year's leaked Nuclear Posture Review, in which the Pentagon expresses its "need" for low-yield nuclear

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weapons for possible attacks on a shopping list of “enemies of the United States”: Libya, Syria, Iran, Iraq and North Korea. The inclusion of Iraq is significant. During the long charade about Saddam Hussein’s elusive weapons of mass destruction, no mention was made in Washington of US willingness to use nuclear weapons against Iraq. It was left to Britain’s Defence Secretary, the caustic Geoff Hoon, to disclose this. On 26 March 2002, Hoon told parliament that “some states” – he mentioned Saddam Hussein by name – “can be absolutely confident that in the right conditions we would be willing to use our nuclear weapons”. No British minister has ever made such an outright threat. As Hoon himself later admitted, British policy is merely an extension of US policy.

As for John Bolton, there is little doubt that he has been assigned to lead the charge against North Korea, which has nuclear weapons. Bolton has been travelling the world trying to assemble a “coalition” that will send warships to “interdict” North Korean vessels. Two weeks ago he was in Seoul, where he unleashed a remarkable stream of abuse against the North Korean dictator Kim Jong-il who, he said, ran “a hellish nightmare”. (In reply, Pyongyang described Bolton as “human scum”.)

Last month I interviewed Bolton in Washington and asked him: “If you stop ships, isn’t there an echo of what happened in 1962, with the threat of nuclear war? Won’t the North Korean regime be moved to defend themselves with the nuclear weapons they have?” He replied that a North Korean ship had already been stopped and “the regime did nothing in response”.

“But if you take action, the nuclear risk is there, isn’t it?” I asked. He replied, “The risk is there if we don’t take action... of them blackmailing other countries.” He quoted Condoleezza Rice, Bush’s closest adviser: “We don’t want to wait for the mushroom cloud.”

Two weeks ago, on the 58th anniversary of Hiroshima’s incineration, a secret conference was held at the Strategic Air Command in Omaha, Nebraska, the base where, 24 hours a day, the United States keeps its “nuclear vigil”. (It was the setting for Stanley Kubrick’s *Dr Strangelove*.) In attendance were cabinet members, generals and leading scientists from America’s three main nuclear weapons laboratories. Members of Congress were banned, even as observers. The agenda was the development of “mini-nukes” for possible use against “rogue states”.

The mantle of the greatest rogue state of all cannot be in doubt. Since the end of the cold war, the United States has repudiated, rejected or subverted all the major treaties designed to prevent war with weapons of mass destruction,

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especially nuclear weapons. This is the rampant power to which, says Hoon, we are inexorably tied.

That, not an establishment brawl between the government and the BBC, ought to be our most urgent concern. **JP**