

Western “Civilization” or Lessons on History and a Blind Eye

By Wayne Northey

We Westerners live in a civilization of vaunted global human rights and universal equality. *The reality could not be further from the truth.* “Western civilization doth protest too much, methinks” to paraphrase Shakespeare. Or to quote Mahatma Gandhi’s response to, “What do you think of Western civilization?”: “I think it would be a good idea”. Western civilization is erected not on a foundation of noble achievements of truth, justice and freedom, but upon insatiable rapacity and Darwinian survival laws of the jungle. *Westerners were largely responsible for 160 million deaths in 20th century wars:* a century bloodier than all others in recorded history, one that simultaneously saw the West rise to worldwide ascendancy and the planet plunge to new depths and volume of brute bestiality.

In Errol Morris’ 2004 film, *The Fog of War*, former U.S. Defense Secretary and octogenarian Robert McNamara, architect of the 1960’s Vietnam War, reminisces on eleven lessons learned from his long life. At one point, some detail has been gone into about the military campaign against Japan headed by Gen. Curtis LeMay, directly under whom McNamara served. That was after LeMay had initiated incendiary bombing in Germany, where in Dresden alone on February 14 & 15, 1945, 100,000 civilians lost their lives; and in over 40 other German cities, there were about 1,000,000 civilian casualties. This unconscionable barbarity was repeated in Tokyo, March 9 and 10, 1945 with a similar casualty toll to Dresden. LeMay chortled (though mistakenly about the death toll) that “we scorched and boiled and baked to death more people in Tokyo on that night of March 9-10 than went up in vapor at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.” (Can one hear the clarion anticipatory abjectly heartless echo of Timothy McVeigh?) Such atrocities were subsequently perpetrated against 66 Japanese cities with about 800,000 civilian casualties (more than all Japanese military combined), and culminated in Hiroshima and Nagasaki with a death toll alone of over 200,000 civilians. (After Hiroshima, President Truman, a “born-again” Sunday School teacher, declared not the Resurrection but the nuclear bomb “the greatest thing in history.” Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King expressed relief that the bomb had been dropped on an Asiatic people, not on white races in Europe.)

McNamara at one point in the movie is brutally candid. Had the Allies lost the war, he muses, *he and LeMay would have been tried as war criminals.* When Timothy McVeigh bombed 168 victims to death in Oklahoma City, he was declared a mass murderer and executed by the U.S. government for his crime. General LeMay likewise commented: “I suppose if I had lost the war, I would have been tried as a war criminal. Fortunately we were on the winning side.” Unfortunately for McVeigh, he was not. This juxtaposition underscores a fundamental Western cultural maxim and ethos as old as Babylonian creation mythology and as current as dominant Wild-West rugged individualism folklore: *might is right.* Curtis LeMay served as a general for seventeen years - longer than any other person in the history of the United States military. He eventually received every award his country could bestow, other than the Medal of Honor. And Defense Secretary

McNamara went on to direct another war theatre, Vietnam, which occasioned 2 to 3 million Vietnamese civilian deaths and massive, continued, environmental devastation. He too was highly decorated for his service.

In 1938, the U.S. Department of State announced that aerial bombardment of civilians was “in violation of the most elementary principles of those standards of humane conduct which have been developed as an essential part of modern civilization.” When the Nazis first bombed civilians, President Roosevelt in a communication to all the major powers dated September 1, 1939, declared it, and other similar bombings, acts of “inhuman barbarism” that have “profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity”.

That was then. This is now. *Well, it was “now” soon after and always, in fact...* The Allies, the “good guys”, the “forces for democracy and freedom” have long imagined and mobilized “English-speaking peoples raining incendiary bombs over the enemy *to impose the customs of civilization*”, as historian Tami Biddle put it about 19th century “white-man-burden” (Kipling) fantasies. Novelist Antoine Audouard writes: “But to go to war is to go to the bottom of the pit”. *War is abject ethical “bombing/bottoming out”*. War correspondent Edgar L. Jones wrote for *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1946: “We Americans[/Westerners] have the dangerous tendency in our international thinking to take a holier-than-thou attitude toward other nations[!].... As victors we are privileged to try our defeated opponents for their crimes against humanity; but we should be realistic enough to appreciate that if we were on trial for breaking international laws, we should be found guilty on a dozen counts. We fought a dishonorable war, because morality had a low priority in battle[!]. The tougher the fighting, the less room for decency; and in Pacific contests we saw mankind reach the blackest depths of bestiality.” Has anything changed in 60 years? To choose war is to choose “bestiality” and everything contrary to civilization, no matter what side, where differences of brutality are only in degree. *If means and ends are not one, means inevitably dictate ends*, is ironclad cultural law. “You have defeated us Nazis”, declared a Nuremberg war criminal, “but the spirit of Nazism rises like a Phoenix amongst you.” That is the legacy of World War II, of all war, of the current War against Terror.

In response to the revelations of torture in Iraqi prisons and elsewhere, President Bush assured us the perpetrators’ actions “do not represent American values”. He was right, of course. American/Allied/NATO/Western responses to the enemy show not significantly in the (purported) spontaneous brutality of a few lowlife military guards. *To represent American/Allied/NATO/Western values is to organize massive, premeditated, and recurring air strikes and other atrocities against civilians and combatants in an orgy of self-righteous “civilizing”, “pacifying” and “liberating” of the enemy*. True, World War II Allied tally of victims was still less than Hitler’s and Stalin’s (though not for lack of trying! Paul V. McNutt, the head of the War Manpower Commission, expressed a significant percentage of American polled public sentiment, when he said he favoured a final solution of “extermination of the Japanese *in toto*”. One shutter at the potential continued use of nuclear bombs, had the War then extended by even a few months; should the current U.S. doctrine of pre-emptive nuclear strikes be enacted...) And the

vaunted end of course was/is different: *peace* – if only peace of the graveyard, and perpetual “peace”/war.

In dominant American/Allied/NATO/Western ethical doctrine, frozen it seems forever in Orwellian doublespeak, *war is peace, American imperialists are liberators, war criminals are heroes, and Western society is (alone) civilized.*