

## Who Are the War Criminals?

By Wayne Northey

In Errol Morris' 2003 film, *The Fog of War*, former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, architect of the Vietnam War strategy, reminisces on lessons learned from his life, organized by Morris around issues of war. 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 he 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." 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 Baptist Sunday School teacher, declared the nuclear bomb "the greatest thing in history." Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King expressed relief that the bomb had been dropped on 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*. Now, 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. Curtis LeMay served as a general for seventeen years - longer than any other man 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 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 out”*. War correspondent Edgar L. Jones wrote 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 one is on. *If means and ends are not one, means inevitably define ends*. That is the legacy of World War II, of all war.

In response to the revelations of prison abuses in Iraq, President Bush assured us the perpetrators did not represent American values. He was right, of course. American/Allied/Western responses to the enemy show not significantly in the disorganized brutality of a few lowlife military guards. *To represent American/Allied/Western values is to organize massive, premeditated, and recurring air strikes against civilians in an orgy of self-righteous “civilizing” and “pacifying” of the enemy*. True, the 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 public sentiment when he said he favoured “extermination of the Japanese *in toto*”). And the vaunted end was different: *peace* – if only peace of the graveyard, and of course perpetual “peace”/war. In dominant American/Allied/Western ethical doctrine, frozen it seems forever in Orwellian doublespeak, *war is peace, American imperialists are liberators, and war criminals are heroes*.