

After the first Persian Gulf War the U.S. put an iron umbrella over the Middle East to guard its oil lines, striking with aircraft and missiles at targets in countries that disputed its virtual monopoly over their most lucrative regional product.

The most startling use of terror from the air in the 21st century so far has been the attack on the USA by suicidal commandos who made guided missiles out of hijacked American airliners in a brilliant scheme of calculated destruction aimed at the empirical cathedrals of American civilization, the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001. The attack was the worst death toll on a single day in American history, killing more than 2,000 persons.

Retaliation from the air was quick and devastating: the contradictory attitude toward the so-called war on terrorism might be illustrated by rephrasing a famous remark by Winston Churchill during World War 2: "Curse those bastards who crash airplanes into our cities and bless our heroes who bomb their cities."

Robert E. Lee said it was probably fortunate that war was so terrible, otherwise we might grow to love it. He had not foreseen its possibilities as video entertainment such as the two Persian Gulf Wars provided with wire-guided missiles breaking down doors or falling through factory chimneys. A few cynics predict that future wars will be instigated against poor southern hemisphere countries to keep audience ratings high — a video Orwellian scenario of perpetual war using high-tech airwar stuff against everything above ground.

The use of missiles and bombs to kill Iraqi soldiers during the first Gulf War in 1991 — in particular the turkey shoot at Iraqis fleeing from Kuwait in a massive fleet of cars, trucks, tanks — evolved directly from the British use of fighters and bombers to wipe out two trapped Turkish divisions in 1918. The Israelis did the same thing when they caught a large column of Egyptian armor and soldiers in a narrow pass during the 1967 Seven Days War. The World War II equivalents might be the destruction of Nazi tanks and troops in the "killing grounds" of the so-called Falaise pocket in 1944 and aerial attacks by U.S. naval aircraft on convoys of Japanese troopships.

Of the 50 or more million human beings who died in the Second World War, a considerable proportion died in bombing attacks.

Life underneath the bombs has never been pleasant. Warning of imminent bombing attacks during World War II were signaled by horrendous sirens that many who experienced their sound say chills their blood even now. Anything constructed underground was used for shelter by urban populations. Bomb shelters, prototypes of later backyard protections against nuclear attack (fortunately never tested), cluttered rural landscapes. The sirens were followed by the deafening drone of aircraft engines and firing of clustered anti-aircraft batteries; then the impact and explosions of thousands of bombs. Anyone above ground during the raids would see towering columns of smoke during the days, the glare of firestorms and searchlights at night. Hundreds of thousands were cremated or suffocated in their shelters; untold numbers of families disappeared from history.

"On March 9, 1945, more than 300 B-29 Superfortresses attacked Tokyo," Max Boot wrote in his book, *The Savage Wars of Peace: Small Wars and the Rise of American Power*. (N.Y. Times, 2003) "Their napalm and magnesium incendiaries turned



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16 densely packed square miles into an inferno. An estimated 84,000 people, mostly civilians, were killed, making this one of the deadliest days of warfare ever."

Air Force General Ira Eaker complained in a forward to a book about the bombing of Dresden written by David Irving (yes, the same Irving who denies the Holocaust) that the men who died in shot-down bombers are seldom considered in postwar books about the air war over Europe and Asia (though television documentaries are redundant in their portrayals of pilots and bomber crews). Most books concentrate on the massive death and destruction bombing raids caused, which is in contrast to books written during the war that justified bombing of civilian populations. Total warfare, after all, insists that all members of society either soldier or arm him. Tactical bombing seeks to destroy the soldier. Strategic bombing is more complex; obliteration of production and supply is less a goal than erosion

of morale, although several surveys indicate that bombing of civilians only increases their stoicism and antipathy toward their attackers, the anonymous fliers who indiscriminately murder friends, lovers and children from the stratosphere.

A U.S. bombing appraisal committee, which included John Kenneth Galbraith, concluded after World War II that bombing alone would never have sufficiently eroded determined resistance against attack by average German civilians. Galbraith personally thought, as survivors in Germany of allied air raids attested, that bombing actually developed a camaraderie among those bombed on either side of the war.

The immense air war of World War 2 can be scaled down to the minuscule: a family cowering in a shelter under a city ravaged by bombs dropped from fleets of airplanes piloted by determined frightened crews fighting off winged defenders whose rage and terror matched their enemy, everywhere in the sky and on the ground death and burning desolation.

Only the Nazi deathcamps exceeded the horror of living underneath the bombs. The Germans initiated the slaughter with terror bombings of Guernica and Rotterdam and by their aerial war against England. A firestorm caused by incendiary bombs dropped by British aircraft on Hamburg in 1943 killed an estimated 100,000. The beautiful German city of Dresden was unnecessarily destroyed by bombers in two days and nights. Firebombing of Japan in 1945 incinerated several hundred thousand each raid on its cities by American B-29s. Atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki altered humanity's history and psyche.

Michael S. Sherry wrote in his book, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (Yale Press), that the "tension between large hopes and dark fears about the warplane" said less about technology or erroneous predictions of air warfare than it did "the cultures which would build and use bombers." Although these "apocalyptic apprehensions and dreams of deliverance" did not always explain why nations bombed one another, "they at least suggest how they would justify bombing or why they sometimes needed little justification at all."

The development of the bomber has resulted in the slaughter of millions who might not have died in warfare without its use. Sherry wrote: "To treat bombing simply as an abstraction — as a strategy or horrible fantasy or set of statistics — would be to repeat a persistent error in a half-century's preoccupation with the bomber: the tendency to regard it (and finally the atomic bomb) as more potent in imagination than in its capacity to kill and destroy."

Perhaps the most inaccurate prediction about the age of the airplane was, as Sven Lindquist wrote in *A History of Bombing*, the belief that "flight would do away with the very cause of national conflicts by bringing people closer to one another. Those who had been divisive and hostile on the ground would live peacefully together in the boundless heavens during the age of flight."

CREMATION OF EQUALS

Life betrays us. We must die. Nothing can save us. Not love, not good works, not ageless monuments, not wealth, power or prayer. Our curse is to perceive our end, and to numb the terror we empty our lives as readily as our bowels. It is the most enduring question: *Why must I die?*

Each death is an end to the world. Elaborate constructions of life afterward persist in every culture, yet for all of the rigorous hells and nirvanas a more solid faith gives our scanty lives meaning: that the bloodlines will continue, that humanity will survive the smaller mortalities of its members. Our children, their children. A future time.

The faith has lately been shattered. The human race has brilliantly invented its own suicide. For the entirety of its future humanity, its civilizations and quite possibly all other life on its home planet are threatened with a holocaust conceived by itself.

We have seen our world from space, so small and frail, a mote in God's eye; the same technical mastery that propels rockets to the stars is capable also of sending them on a shorter, final journey of obliteration.

Even now, in the post Cold War era, the end of the nuclear arms race between the superpowers and dismantling of their huge arsenals (though not the smaller ones), it is an act of faith that at any instant deadly missiles have not been launched from somewhere. On a normal day we might look up and see spiky umbrella-like contrails of nuclear missiles reentering the planet's atmosphere, and all that was normal a few moments before will vanish forever.

History has a fissure more pertinent than the birth of Christ or the sowing of grain. The Sign of the Cross is transposed with a more powerful eternal icon. The Mushroom Cloud.

Humanity will either obliterate or save itself. An indication the species might be worth preserving will be its courage to try. A species' extinction could begin when increasing numbers of its members lose hope for themselves and their future; when they stop their inner clocks because they perceive life as useless or unbearable. Some lasting effect must be a result of this hopelessness — a decline, a loss of energy and will, and the cleverness indispensable for survival.

The human race is not unlike any other life form that has lived temporarily on earth. Like its individual members

whose lives run on a personal timeline without reprieve despite collectively skirting oblivion for awhile with the end of the Cold War, the species must eventually die, and like a person it can die at any age or stage of its development. The richness of its past, its dreams or schemes, its success or failures, none of these is a case against death.

The very quality that forced human rule over the Earth, our ruthless and intelligent violence, is the obstacle to our continued existence. We differ from our extinct predecessors in that our threatened oblivion is from our own industry, and in the possibility that we might overcome our history and survive awhile longer.

We cannot undue nuclear weapons. The knowledge is with us for as long as *homo sapiens sapiens* defies its own handicaps and dwells in the galaxy. If we are not smart enough to contain our atomic goblin, our ruined cities will leave no trace that we once briefly and foolishly ruled Earth.

There is nothing more political than the wish of the human race to survive upon its home planet. Thomas Jefferson wrote that the care of human life and happiness and not their destruction is the first and only legitimate object of good government. The power of the vote was a recognition by his founder peers that the usual relationship between citizen and ruler is hostility. The question of whether the USA is any longer (or has ever been) an open government must not overshadow the real fact that it still has to generally and eventually respond to essential demands of its citizenry.

A majority begins with one. It is the great mass of ordinary people who will and must prevent world suicide. It must be done by everyone, beginning with each one. Each of us will die, either privately or as part of the extinction of the species if we do not arrest the dangers of nuclear violence. There are good reasons we must each die, primary among them to make room and leave a few resources for our descendants. What is different now is that we must step outside our small fears and immediate prejudices and insure a world for our inheritors. There has never been a more personal or more universal struggle in our history.

~MICHAEL McCUSKER

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