

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Horrendous, yet necessary events

It was Spanish-born philosopher George Santayana who first said, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

He might have added that those who only remember part of the past are even worse.

Which brings us, if you haven't guessed, to U.S. President Barack Obama's unfortunate visit last week to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park in Japan, where he offered tribute to the "silent cry" of the 140,000 people who were killed by the world's first atomic bomb attack Aug. 6, 1945.

He did not apologize directly ? but just being there, combined with his history of apologizing for past U.S. actions, i.e. the Middle East, Iran and Cuba ? plus his call for a world without nukes, certainly left his audience feeling he'd apologized.

Indeed, after the ceremony, 79-year-old bomb survivor Shigeaki Mori hugged the president and said afterward that even without an interpreter, he knew from his body language what Obama was saying.

You will likely know that three days after the Hiroshima bomb was dropped ? and after Japan still refused to surrender despite the warning ? another 70,000 people died in the second bomb in Nagasaki.

After that, Japan surrendered.

There is a large, and unfortunately growing, body of public opinion which openly condemns the U.S. ? and then president Harry Truman ? for dropping the bomb on civilian targets and causing so much death and destruction.

They seem to think ? as critics of major events often do ? that the bomb dropping came in a vacuum, as if the Americans decided to test it out and see if it actually worked or not.

They forget ? or, more likely, conveniently chose to ignore ? the history that led up to this terrible moment.

To be sure, nuking both Hiroshima and Nagasaki were horrendous events, hopefully, as Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe said, never to be repeated.

But before you start tsk-tsking and pointing fingers at the dreaded Americans, let us go back four years to Dec. 7, 1941, "a date that will live in infamy," as then president Franklin D. Roosevelt proclaimed shortly before the U.S. formally declared war on Imperial Japan.

On that day, even as U.S. and Japanese officials were still holding meetings about Japan's aggressive expansionist activities in the Far East, Japan launched a massive attack on U.S. naval installations in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, killing 2,403 Americans, wounding another 1,178, and causing extraordinary property damage to ships, planes and buildings.

This, even though the U.S. and Japan were not at war, and Japan had not announced its intention to launch a war with the Americans.

Japan's emperor at the time was seen to be a God-like figure, and the Japanese fought with a zeal ? and a cruelty ? which has seldom been matched in the world. Indeed, as horrible as the death toll is from the two nuclear strikes, it is still less than the 300,000 innocent Chinese people slaughtered by the Japanese in Nanking, not to mention Japan's shocking cruelty to captured POWs throughout the region and during the long, sorry course of that horrid war.

It is true ? as some anti-Americans posit ? that by 1945 it was obvious that Japan was losing the war.

But it is also true that they were not about to surrender.

So the Americans at the time were faced with the Hobson's choice of a)- launching an all-out military attack on mainland Japan to subdue the enemy or b)- drop the bomb and hope that would convince them of the futility of continuing the fight.

It's not as if there was an option available where nobody would be hurt and we could all live in peace and harmony for ever more.

The Americans estimated that launching an attack on mainland Japan would cost at least 500,000 American lives ? plus losses for Russia and other allies ? and even more Japanese lives, both military and civilian, given what U.S. commanders characterized as the "fanatical hostility" of the Japanese population toward non-Japanese.

In short, the nuclear bombs not only saved lives but ended the war.

It wasn't pretty, but it was necessary. If anybody should apologize for the death toll, it should be Japan, not the West.

And Obama, by doing what he did, risks sullyng the service of all those men and women who died while fighting off Japanese aggression and unbridled imperialism.

