

*Cultures of War:
Pearl Harbor/Hiroshima /9-11/Iraq*

John W. Dower

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John Dower is a retired Professor of History at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an expert on US-Japanese relations. His book compares Al Qaeda's surprise attack on the US in 2001 with the Japanese surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941; the conduct of WW2 in the Pacific with the conduct of the 2003 Iraq War; the 1945-1952 occupation of Japan with the ongoing occupation of Iraq; and the post-conflict reconstruction of Japan with the continuing reconstruction efforts in Iraq. This is a significant and well written academic work that draws from a very wide variety of sources but suffers slightly from being US centric and somewhat high-minded.

One conclusion the author reaches early on is that just as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the six months of runaway victories that followed stemmed from a delusion that Japan would force an isolationist US to request peace, so the US political and military hierarchy were similarly deluded in 2003, thinking that an intervention in Iraq needed no post-invasion planning and would produce peace in the Middle East. For Dower the actions of the US after 2003, a vulgar, coarser, and significantly less competent version of its actions in Japan after 1945, were a result of their adherence to an extreme version of free market capitalism (favoured almost to the point of being a religious belief system). He rightly questions the legality of many of the decisions made by the US in Iraq in recent years.

The author discusses a number of interesting points.

Firstly: the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was not a complete surprise to the US. The Japanese preference for attacking without a declaration of war, as they had done against China in 1894, 1931 and 1937, and against Russia in 1904, was well known; but for political reasons (possibly due to the need to overcome the objections of the America First isolationists, to whom Japan gave so much credence), the US wanted Japan to strike first. The extent to which US opinion has agonised subsequently over whether or not Pearl Harbor – an event in which 2403 people were killed – could or should have been avoided is fascinating to a non-American reader.

Compared to the atrocities inflicted by Japan on China (200,000 killed in

Nanking in 1937), and by Germany across Europe (5.7 million dead in Poland alone after an attack without a declaration of war), the length and verbosity of the various US enquiries set up to determine culpability for being 'unprepared' at Pearl Harbour, suggest a widespread frame of mind that takes as its starting point that America is entitled to regard itself as invulnerable. ¹

This conclusion is strengthened by the author neglecting to discuss the 1940-1941 Japanese consideration and rejection of the option to attack the USSR instead. Had this happened the history of the world might have been very different: Germany at the gates of Moscow, while simultaneously a Japanese strike deep into Siberia from their existing occupied territories in Manchuria. In such circumstances the prospect of a Soviet collapse would have been very real, followed by a quick and nasty settling of scores between Germany and the UK. The reason Japan did not do this – not spelt out by Dower – is that its army had already attacked the USSR in May 1939, only to be routed at Nomonhan by Marshal Zhukhov on 25 August 1939, an event little known in the US, but regarded elsewhere as one of the strategic battles of the twentieth century. Nor does he point out that the Japanese attack on the British positions at Kota Bharu in Malaya started two hours before Pearl Harbor and this event is, in fact, often referred to in Japan as 'the first battle of the war'.²

Secondly, the book contains an extensive analysis of the US decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan in August 1945, and is very critical of this. At the risk of sounding slightly flippant, the usual concerns are raised:

- (1) Japan was almost defeated by that point so why use atomic bombs?
- (2) The use of such weapons against targets that were significantly civilian (as well as military) should not have been considered by a civilised nation.
- (3) A demonstration of the bomb should have been carried out to which the Japanese would have been invited with a view to persuading them that resistance was now futile.
- (4) The Japanese should have been 'warned' about the impending use of the weapons etc.

None of these arguments really convince. Although it is true that Japan was considerably weakened by the late summer of 1945, its loyalty to its imperial system and capacity for determined resistance meant that most

¹ An irony here: both the US Army and Navy commanders at Pearl Harbour were dismissed and severely criticised for being 'surprised' by the Japanese attack. General MacArthur, though, who allowed his air force to be destroyed on the ground in the Philippines, became a US war hero.

² See *The Japan Times*, 12 December 2009.

commentators thought that a finish to the war in the Pacific might not come until 1947. At the risk of venturing into what looks like moral equivalence, is it correct to regard atomic weapons as uniquely uncivilised? In terms of deaths, 166,000 were killed at Hiroshima (fewer than at Nanking – see above) and 80,000 at Nagasaki (compared to 200,000 dead in the 1944 Warsaw uprising). The extensive fire raids on Tokyo, which dropped conventional incendiary devices, are an interesting comparison, with 100,000 people killed in a single day by the US Air Force in March 1945. Unless one is of the view that all force is wrong and that pure pacifism is the bench mark against which all human behaviour should be judged, considering solely the numbers of casualties, it does rather look as if dropping the atomic bombs, in such a bloody war, might almost be regarded as a proportionate use of force.

Could a 'demonstration' of the bomb have been laid on? Where? Would the Japanese have turned up? Even if they had, would their very different attitude toward what constituted an acceptable level of casualties have led them to seek an armistice? What about the practical difficulties in arranging a test explosion? In August 1945 the uranium bomb (later dropped on Hiroshima) had not been tested anywhere, while the plutonium bomb (dropped on Nagasaki) had only been tested once, in New Mexico on 17 July 1945. Suppose the device selected for the demonstration before Japanese and other international witnesses had failed to explode?

Apologists for the use of the bomb also point out that both Japan and Germany had programmes of their own to develop atomic weapons and that in this context the US 'getting in first' by using its own was a justified tactic. Germany in fact had produced two one-ton composite bombs (consisting of alternate layers of paraffin and uranium) by April 1945 and planned – had the war continued – to drop these on Manhattan at some point in 1945/1946.

Dower is clearly right to point out that the US was significantly more advanced in this field and that the Japanese were really nowhere near producing either a Hiroshima or a Nagasaki style weapon. He does not comment, however, on their much more interesting efforts to produce a 'dirty bomb'.³ This is peculiar because it is now widely known that in May 1945 a German submarine (U-234) surrendered in the US while on passage to Japan with a cargo of uranium oxide. How should the US have reacted to this? Taken no action? Although they might not have known how much uranium had been

³ For a full discussion of these subjects see Philip Henshall, *The Nuclear Axis – Germany, Japan and the Atom Bomb Race 1939-1945* (2000) and David Myrha, *The Horten Brothers and Their All Wing Aircraft* (1998), chapter 17, 'The German Atomic Bomb and the Horten 18', pp, 217-227. The French troops who captured the two prototype uranium/paraffin bombs destroyed them

transported from Germany to Japan at that point in time, the US was aware, from its ability to read Japanese signals intelligence, that the Japanese Navy had a flotilla of aircraft-carrying submarines and were considering using these to carry out a long distance raid against a major target on the US west coast. Would this attack have resulted in the Japanese dropping a 'dirty bomb' on San Francisco? One has to consider that even if the likelihood of such an action were judged to be very low in mid-1945, no conscientious US commander or politician would have ignored such a threat.

When debating these points, the author answers some of his own questions about why the bomb was dropped: there was a determination to show the Soviets that the US was now the leading power in the world. This view was articulated as early as March 1944 by the head of the Manhattan Project, General Groves ('you realize, of course, that the main purpose of this project is to subdue the Russians'), was repeated in May 1945 by Secretary of State Byrnes (dropping the bomb on Japan would 'make the Russians more manageable'), and retrospectively confirmed by Vannevar Bush (its use had 'prevented Russia from sweeping over Europe after we demobilized').⁴

The rationale behind this approach was down to the Americans being fearful of the Soviet Union intruding into China (a traditional area of US influence), particularly as Stalin – in international diplomacy a stickler for punctilious adherence to the letter of any agreement – had promised at the Yalta Conference to attack Japan precisely three months after defeating Germany. This meant that the Soviet land assault on the Japanese in Manchuria would begin on either 9 or 10 August 1945. This, in turn, determined that the US 'had' to have used its bombs by these dates if it were to 'impress' the Russians. Accordingly Hiroshima was attacked on 6 August and Nagasaki on the 8th.

Another book would be needed to comment on how mistaken the US were in this respect. While it is true that using the bomb was justifiable in a narrow military context, the assumptions made by the US about containing the Soviets were offensive – given a comparison of the casualties incurred in the

⁴ Dower notes that some of the European scientists, who had assumed that they were working on a scheme that would thwart Hitler building the first atomic weapons, were dismayed by the steady drift of the Manhattan Project toward an anti-Soviet outcome. It is interesting to consider at what point the US decided this. If Groves (who never commanded troops in action) was saying this in early 1944, it may have been the case that the US took the view in late 1943 that they should obtain the bomb as a future bargaining chip against the USSR.

field by both sides.⁵ Stalin and the USSR did not become 'more manageable' as a result of the US dropping two atomic bombs. There was no Soviet plan to 'sweep across Europe' after the defeat of Germany.⁶ Stalin already knew – in detail – about the Manhattan Project and, presumably, was familiar also with the motivations for using the bomb to 'subdue the Russians' expressed above. For their part there are many on the Japanese side who regard the Soviet attack on Manchuria and Korea, and not the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as the final determining factor in their decision to surrender. As the Soviets also consider this likely, the argument that the use of atomic weapons ended the Second World War – and saved lives – is clearly debatable.

Thirdly: the author decries the use between 1945 and 1949 of surrendered Japanese forces to 'restore order' by the British, French, Dutch and Chinese in Vietnam, the East Indies and China. He is probably right when he says this is against international law, which determines that once an army has surrendered it should not be used for any military purpose by its captors. However, the circumstances prevailing in the area in late 1945 might have looked different to those dealing with practicalities. While part of the motive of the British, French and Dutch in this matter may have been to quickly and cheaply extinguish nationalist movements in their colonial possessions, it was also true that extensive lawlessness existed at this time across much of the Far East and China; and that a need to keep some of the surrendered Japanese forces under arms to accelerate a return to normalcy appeared justified. In comparison with this, Dower does not comment on the existence of extensive US interests in the Philippines for decades after 1945. The reader could be forgiven for thinking that there is a subtext at work here of European colonialism bad, enlightened US arrangements good.

Fourthly: nowhere in the very extensive discussions in this book about Iraq is any mention made of the significant role played by Israel in persistently lobbying the US (and others) that a pre-emptive war against Saddam Hussein was justified, and in providing 'intelligence' of a dubious value. Given the range of material now in the public domain, this is simply not good enough.⁷

The author is on stronger ground when he points out the degree of US

⁵ There may also have been humanitarian considerations in dropping the bomb. It was suspected that the Japanese were planning a final massacre of the remaining 120,000 Allied prisoners of war. Forcing a Japanese surrender by the use of a fantastic weapon was considered by some to be a way of saving these lives.

⁶ Those who doubt the intentions of the Soviets can now read the Politburo minutes. These are quoted in some detail in Jurgen Rohwer and Mikhail Monakov *Stalin's Ocean Going Fleet 1935-1953* (2001).

⁷ See in particular John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, *The Israel Lobby* (2007) pp. 250-253.

contempt for its enemies – whether Japan in 1941 ('slitty eyed Nips') or any of the perceived adversaries in the contemporary 'War on Terror' ('ragheads'). In the latter case the contempt took the form of insisting that 9/11 was 'too sophisticated' for al-Qaeda (according to Paul Wolfowitz) and that someone else must be responsible ('see if Saddam did this' being asked by President Bush on 12 September 2001). The propensity of senior US figures to hold such views has been remarked on by Michael Scheuer, a former CIA official, who is quoted on page 58 about the intellectual proclivities of Wolfowitz, Bush and others:

'They....cannot imagine the rest of the world does not want to be like us; and believe that an American Empire in the twenty first century not only is our destiny, but our duty to mankind.'

Dower also makes the interesting point that it was the conduct of the US occupation of Iraq, rather than solely the war, that clearly breached international law. One example of this was the forced privatisation of the country's assets; or, as Paul Bremer, head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, would have it, altering the 'cockeyed socialist economic theory' that had foolishly existed before the US take-over. Whatever one might think about Iraqi law, it decreed that national assets – such as oil – could only be owned by the state and that the constitution of Iraq could only be changed by the Iraqi government. After 2003 this ceased to be the case. In these circumstances the only basis for Mr Bremer's actions appears to be military force – a concept with no legal validity anywhere in the world.

Even a partisan anti-American reader would concede that the involvement of the US in World War II produced a conclusion to the conflict that was preferable to allowing a German and Japanese victory. But at the conclusion of this depressing book we may wonder if the time has come for a broader critique of US foreign policy and the baleful influence it has exerted in the past century. Such an account would start with the pursuit of economic liberalism by Woodrow Wilson; his decision (while campaigning amongst various ethnic blocs resident in the US during the mid-term elections in 1918) to support the dismantling of Austria-Hungary, Imperial Germany and the Ottoman Empire; the insistence by US banks on the payment of reparations in full; the misreading of Soviet intentions in 1947-1948 and the instigation (and continuation) of the Cold War; the decision to undermine the 1954 Geneva Peace Agreement on Vietnam; the absurd blockade of Cuba; and the unprecedented support for and identification with Israel. Why does the US behave like this? Is there a common thread here? Is its detached geographical position, occupying part of a continental block that is thousands of miles from

Europe-Asia-Africa a determining factor? If so, how should the rest of the world relate to the Americans?