

The Splendor of a Thousand Suns: Hiroshima and Imperial Forgetfulness

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Joe Biden's visit to Hiroshima in the framework of the G7 once again brings to the surface the cynical memory of an empire that 78 years ago unleashed the power of "a thousand suns" on a defenseless population.

"Vishnu is trying to convince the prince to do his duty and to impress him, he takes on his multi-armed form, and says, "Now I have become death, the destroyer of worlds... I imagine we all think that, in one way or another." [i]

With that famous quote from the Bhagavad Gita, Julius Robert Oppenheimer was referring to the moment he saw his atomic creature detonate in the desert of New Mexico. It was July 16, 1945 and the Trinity test was the ultimate expression of imperialist rationality. The atomic bomb added to the geopolitical scenario. "We knew the world would no longer be the same...some people laughed, some people cried...most people remained silent," Oppenheimer recalled aloud as he looked at the ground, perhaps with self-conscious shame, as if asking for forgiveness from future generations. His legacy was instant and massive death. The U.S. thus became the first nuclear power in history.

A few weeks later, on August 9, that same plutonium prototype, the Fat Man, was dropped by the US Bockscar bomber on the city of Nagasaki in Japan. If the Hiroshima bomb, which had stunned humanity two days earlier, is the apotheosis of civilizational decadence, that of Nagasaki cannot find words to justify such a degree of atrocity, a horrifying horror [ii]. None of the crimes of the Japanese imperial army in China and Indochina was executed with these bombings, which twice detonated the glow of "a thousand suns" on the civilian population. The historical barbarism of Western Europe was inconceivable, but it was surpassed -by far- by the barbarism of the United States, Aimé Césaire would say with just reason [iii].

The argument that these Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) were used to avoid deaths

and put an end to the war is one of the falsehoods to which US imperialism has accustomed the peoples of the South of the world. What was really at stake was geopolitical supremacy after the near end of World War II, that is, the hegemonic transition initiated by the crisis of capitalism itself. For the US, collaboration with the USSR against Japan was becoming a central problem, against which it needed to give a message of “preponderant power” [iv]. In a capitalist and colonial world, whoever wanted to crown himself king had to ride on a mountain of ruins and shadows, exercising that power.

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The gunner and photographer of the Enola Gay aircraft described the Hiroshima detonation in the following words: “I began to count the fires. One, two, three, four, five, six... fourteen, fifteen... it’s impossible. There are too many to count. Here comes the mushroom shape Captain Parsons told us about. It’s coming this way. It is like a mass of bubbling molasses. The fungus spreads (...) The city must be underneath all that. 70,000 people died in a flash, their shadows left on the asphalt. The film and photographic record is impressively large and mute”.

The whole archive on the bombs obeys to that frivolity of reason that engenders monsters, but also to a logic of international power. For the objective to be achieved, power must be shown, it must be made a spectacle.

On August 15, 1945, the defeated Japanese emperor would give the first radio address of his life: “The enemy has begun to employ a new and more cruel bomb, whose power to do harm is, in fact, incalculable, and is claiming the lives of many innocent lives. If we continue to fight, it would not only result in a final collapse and destruction of the Japanese nation, but would also lead to the total extinction of human civilization.” Thus Hirohito expressed Japan’s total surrender. It was also the first time his voice was heard in public. His desire for imperial expansion over the continent was drowning in a sea of silence and destruction that he had never imagined could befall his own nation. More than 250,000 people had died in the two bombings, while hundreds of thousands would suffer blindness, burns and cancer. “Hundreds of thousands of children, mute, telepathic,” Vinicius de Moraes would recite [v], because silence would inundate Japan for years to come.



Aerial view of the city of Hiroshima after the impact of the bomb.

When the B-29 bomber dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, the brand new San Francisco Charter – which gave birth to the UN – had been signed less than two months earlier to “defend peace and human rights in the world”. After seeing such barbarism, they decided to create the UN. With the concentration camps in the retinas of the world – unthinkable in Europe before Nazism, but known and suffered in the South for centuries – the Western powers established an international system to prevent new human catastrophes. But Japan was not the West, nor was China or Indochina, nor Africa or Asia. Neither was Our America.

Now the bombs are pointing south

Once the US was overtaken in its nuclear technology by the USSR in 1949 and by China in 1964, no direct war would be possible between the two great international power blocs. As Vijay Prashad states in his book “Washington Bullets” [vi]: “The main contradiction in the years after 1945 was not between East and West – the Cold War – but between North and South: imperialist war against decolonization”.

Once the war was over, the United States emerged as the “guarantor of freedom”, as the sole guardian of world peace, and quickly allied itself with its old enemies -Germany and Japan- to confront its old-new enemy: international communism. It is said that in the Korean War, after the defeat in the battle of Chosin, where the support of the Chinese People’s Army was central for the Korean communists, General Douglas MacArthur asked for 26 atomic weapons to be sent to attack the Chinese. This country not only had the nerve to make a new revolution, but also to support a sister nation against imperial attack. U.S. President Harry Truman flatly refused. The same president who had dropped two bombs, who had initiated the famous doctrine that bears his surname, refused on this occasion, not because of humanitarian considerations, but because he knew that other countries could now pay him back in the same coin.

Meanwhile, the peoples who had fought against the Axis now had to fight for the rights that had been agreed upon at the UN to be recognized, so that the genocides would not be

repeated invisibly outside the first world. According to UNHCR [vii], in the 20 years of the Vietnam War, between 2 and 6 million Vietnamese and nearly one million American soldiers -most of them of African descent- died. Imperialist colonialism did not see the people of Vietnam as a worthy rival, as they did not even consider them as people. The Yankees left an apocalypse in their wake, but they could not ride victorious on their mountain of bones.

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Their impotence in Vietnam was deployed as revenge in Africa. In that continent, the CIA and its puppet governments made the assassination of popular leaders a real sport. From the assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo, to the CIA’s support and financing of UNITA [viii] and the FNLA in Angola -which delayed independence and denied a future of justice and equality to a broken country- with a war that left 800 thousand dead, 4 million refugees and some 100 thousand mutilated. Years later, they would have a new chapter on the other side of this continent, in Somalia, when, shielded by “freedom” and “humanitarian aid”, they intervened to guarantee the alleged oil reserves of this country. Hundreds of Somalis were killed and helicopters shot down [ix].

In the times following the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, capitalism led by the United States had its moment of greatest technological deployment, economic growth and territorial expansion. Elements that would demonstrate all its power in the global south and in the internal colonies of the West itself. Because, it must be made clear, the Afro, indigenous and Latino communities would suffer within the empire similar levels of exploitation, racism and oppression as the rest of the global south. With a large part of their organizations and leaderships under persecution; with selective assassinations, such as that of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, or with hundreds of imprisonments. A situation that continues to this day. There are currently 200 people from indigenous communities in U.S. prisons; most of those imprisoned have been incarcerated for more than three decades. [x]

The terrorist wars against the East

The first intervention in the Persian Gulf against Iraq was in 1991. Oil was involved, US imperialism was beginning its solitary world reign, leaving in a few months more than 200,000 dead. But the most atrocious massacre was caused not by conventional weapons, but by the economic blockade. The conservative figures of the UN - which is not very useful in preventing wars, but which does generate valuable information about them - show that around 1.7 million Iraqi civilians died as a result of that brutal sanctions regime imposed by the U.S. Half of those victims were children.

The Iraq war - the war of the chemical weapons that never existed - began in 2003 and left at least half a million to a million dead. According to journalist Nafeez Mosaddeq Ahmed [xi], in the case of Iraq alone, the economic war killed 1.9 million Iraqis from 1991 to 2003. And from 2003 onwards, one million more deaths must be counted. In total, that’s about 3 million Iraqi lives. If you add the fatalities in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq the numbers are chilling. Bazz party [xii] assessments aside, what has become clear is that the US brought neither democracy, freedom nor human rights to those countries.

In Syria they did not manage to change the political regime, but in almost 10 years of war

they generated 384,000 deaths, most of them civilians, as well as 5.7 million refugees and more than six million internally displaced persons due to the fighting. In Syria, which once had one of the highest standards of living in the region, the economy and infrastructure collapsed, with reconstruction costs estimated at more than 400 billion dollars. In addition to the bombings, imperialism had another secret weapon, ISIS [xiii], which applied its laboratory patriarchal fundamentalism, imported to destroy the region and especially the Kurdish community organizations.

Breaking the wave from the horizon

If we were to comb this diverse and rich space that is Our America, we would find several elements in common. However, there is one that stands out: the terror and plundering generated by the “destroyer of worlds”, by that imperialist barbarism that champions across the Rio Bravo, also located a few miles away from Cuba, that people that resists the irresistible in an island that has been blockaded for more than 60 years. According to the last report presented to the UN, in October 2019, [xiv] the accumulated damages during almost six decades of application of the blockade reach the figure of 140 billion dollars. Terrorist attacks against Cuba constitute another chapter. It is estimated that between all of them they caused at least 3,000 deaths. The terrorists always came from the north, or took refuge there, with all the privileges.

Juan Bosch had become president of the Dominican Republic after the fall of the empire’s putative son, the dictator Rafael Leonidas Trujillo. Since Professor Bosch’s sovereign and dignified policies did not please the US-addicted oligarchy, they staged a coup d’état in 1963, when the Dominican Revolutionary Party had not even been in government for a year. But the defenders of the popular vote and the constitution put up a fight and were about to regain power when U.S. President Lyndon Johnson, convinced of the defeat of the loyalist forces and fearing the emergence of “a second Cuba” in the Caribbean, ordered the U.S. armed forces to “restore order”.

On April 28, 1965, “Operation Power Pack” was launched, which implied the return of the Trujillo policy, which had ruled with an iron fist for 31 years. This policy was responsible for the death of more than 50,000 people. Among its “outstanding” events was the so-called “Parsley Massacre”, in which thousands of Haitians were murdered. The name was due to the fact that the perpetrators identified the people from the other side of the island by their weak pronunciation of the letter “r”. Thus, their linguistic racism made it possible to distinguish between those who would be imprisoned and those who would never breathe again.

MINUSTAH [xv] was not the first imperialist intervention in Haiti, but it serves as an example of oppression applied with a colonial-humanitarian discourse. If we overlook the butchers Papa Doc and Baby Doc [xvi] -who under the direct orders of the CIA and the approval of Ronald Reagan crushed the Haitian people- and the coup d’état of Jean Bertrand Aristide in 2004, we have more than 10,000 deaths caused by cholera, brought in by the troops of Nepal, a minor partner of the plethora of nations that intervened under the guidance of the Americans. There are no exact figures on the rapes of Haitian women, but with the imperialist, patriarchal and colonial arrogance the facts did not cease to multiply. The proof is in the girls and boys abandoned by the soldiers. A few years earlier, on an island that had also made its revolution, the Americans landed in Grenada with 7,000 troops, in the 1983 invasion that would bear the code name “Operation Urgent Fury”.

Pop and the dirty war in Central America

The 80's were years of pop music exportation and high levels of interference in Central America. These were the years of the "contras" in Nicaragua and the massacres in El Salvador, where the local army, under orders from Washington, generated some 27 documented civilian massacres between 1979 and 1985. In total, the war in El Salvador claimed approximately 80,000 lives.

In Guatemala there is still no agreed number. The Commission for Historical Clarification estimated that the toll at the end of the war was 200,000 dead, 45,000 disappeared and close to 100,000 displaced; the majority of the Mayan Quiché people, victims of a racism that serves as a pillar of imperial policies. The atrocities committed against women do not have precise figures either. But we do know that many escaped to the mountains, or died fighting, while many continue to fight for justice and memory policies.

The second half of Guatemala's 20th century began with hope, but United Fruit and the CIA cut it short. The coup d'état against Jacobo Árbenz in 1954 was the beginning of a long and dark saga of coups and interventions. The inhabitants of the El Chorrillo neighborhood in Panama know a lot about that. It was that popular suburban neighborhood that bore the brunt of the 1989 Marine invasion. No Panamanian government filed any complaints in international forums, and no Panamanian president even attempted to do justice for the dead. There are not even official figures. Only one president ever set foot in El Chorrillo and he was not even Panamanian. On his trip to the VII Summit of the Americas in 2015, Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro stopped by to say hello and listen to the repressed voices of that historic crime that the local elite still sweeps under the rug.

From dictatorships to the "war on drugs"

In the South, the transition from civil-military dictatorships to market and "low intensity" democracies took place, with the exception of Chile, whose elite will be the example to be exhibited for the global hegemonic power. Augusto Pinochet would remain in power a decade longer than most dictators, as would Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay. The Condor Plan that articulated the military leadership had an economic and geopolitical project behind it, which reoriented the economies of the region according to the directives of neoliberalism. If they killed, tortured and disappeared in Chile, Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, Uruguay, Brazil or Peru, it was to promote a new phase of capital, destroying on the way almost all revolutionary processes.

Colombia did not need a coup d'état because the civilians who governed did not need to imprint an anti-constitutional aspect to their regime. Colombia is a case that knew how to go against the grain, because while at the beginning of the 21st century the region was beginning to enter a new cycle of integration and popular processes, the South American country was filling up with military bases and applying Plan Colombia to wage "war on drug trafficking", which was nothing more than the fight against the insurgencies and any possibility of social justice.

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Drug trafficking was not only not eradicated, but it was strengthened and even reached the

presidency with the government of Alvaro Uribe. But this war left 8 million victims, 7 million displaced and 10 thousand “false positives” between 2000 and 2015. This, without counting the assassinations and massacres by paramilitaries in rural areas of the country. The Colombian ruling classes are still proud of their “patriotic work”. The American soldiers not only took charge here to protect “their” exportable strategic resources, but also abused the children. At least 53 Colombian girls were raped by U.S. soldiers and contractors, who also recorded the abuses and sold the videos. The Marines were not prosecuted by the Colombian justice system for having committed these rapes within the territory of US military bases [xvii].

This tragedy can be compared to that of Mexico in the first decades of the 21st century. The first conclusion of the “war against drug trafficking” is that it has always been in reality a war against the people. In Mexico, the toll is 250,000 dead, 71,000 disappeared and millions of displaced people. This war came on top of a historical plundering, starting with the U.S. appropriation of half of the country, up to the new colonialism of the free trade agreements initiated in 1994.

Bainbridge was right

And the list continues to this day, it grows longer, it becomes more grim. Coups d'état and destabilization attempts are accumulating and overlapping: Honduras, Paraguay, Brazil, Bolivia. The massacres of Senkata, Sacaba, the burning of whipalas. The assassination of Berta Cáceres, of Marielle Franco. The repression in Chile, the eyes that do not see, the raped young women. It continues in the war against Venezuela and the unilateral coercive measures. In fact, the most recent action of modern piracy has been carried out by the British, who know the subject, and have kept billions in Venezuelan gold reserves.

In the middle, the American diplomat Elliott Abrams returned from the alley of the damned to continue attacking the peoples. The massacres he was responsible for in Central America were the letter of introduction that allowed him to obtain the honor of “destroyer of Venezuela”. This people was massacred many times in the past, the last one during the Caracazo. From those embers Hugo Chavez would emerge, against whom they would apply all possible methods to overthrow him.

This long process reveals the decadence of an entire civilization, which pushes millions of human beings into the abyss so that the richest 1% can live in obscene luxury. On this planet, two thousand billionaires – generally white men from the global north – possess twice as much wealth as 4.6 billion people (60% of the population). At the same time, 700 million people live in extreme or moderate poverty despite being employed [xix]. These are the naked figures of a unipolar hegemony paved with two atomic bombs, thousands of napalm bombs and hundreds of coups d'état. Bombs and propaganda, death and spectacle. Because power has to show off, like the bombs in Japan, or like the rich in Forbes magazine. It also has to be silenced, like the sun that shines and leaves a trail of shadows. It is those same shadows that have sustained the American empire; behind all those figures of devastation are millions of lives that will one day be vindicated.

On that July day in the New Mexico desert, a new era began with the Trinity test. Oppenheimer interpreted it from his dark mysticism with phrases from the Bhagavad Gita, but it was Kenneth Bainbridge, one of the designers of the first nuclear bombs, who years later was head of the Harvard Physics Department, who grasped the nature of the new imperialist stage that was approaching. After the explosion, Bainbridge turned to

Oppenheimer and said, “Oppy, we’re all sons of bitches now.”

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Notes

[i] The Bhagavad Gita is a 2nd century BC Hindu scripture that expresses a conversation between a human being, Arjuna, and an incarnation of God Vishnu, Lord Krishna. In the book, Arjuna is troubled and depressed about having to fight against his cousins in war. The quote by Robert Oppenheimer is from 1965 and appears in the documentary The Decision to Drop the Bomb, which was broadcast on the American network NBC.

[ii] You have to write a poem/about the atomic bomb/it’s a horror/he told us/an awful horror/it’s the end is nothingness/it’s death. Taken from “Poema frustrado” by Uruguayan poet Mario Benedetti.

[iii] Cesaire, Aimé. Discourse on colonialism.

[iv] Concept attributed to the Director of Policy Planning of the United States Department of State, Paul Nitze, in 1952. “The preponderant power must be the objective of U.S. policy.”

[v] “Rosa de Hiroshima”, poem by Vinicius de Moraes. Its musical version has several interpretations.

[vi] Prashad, Vijay. Washington Bullets. Battle of ideas: Buenos Aires.

[vii] UNHCR, UN Refugee Agency.

[viii] The National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA).

[ix] On this episode there is a film that shows the imperialist perspective, entitled “Black Hawk Down” from 1993.

[x] If we also consider those imprisoned in the Guantanamo concentration camp, the figure is 500 political prisoners.

[xi] The ignored victims of the wars of the West. Available at: <https://www.voltairenet.org/article187311.html>.

[xii] The party ruled Iraq between 1968 and 2003, first under Ahmed Hasan al-Bakr and from 1979 under Saddam Hussein. This party positioned itself as an advocate of pan-Arab nationalism, secular and militant socialism.

[xiii] Known in Spanish as the Islamic State.

[xiv] Report of Cuba on Resolution 73/8 of the United Nations General Assembly: “Necessity of ending the economic, commercial and financial blockade imposed by the United States of America against Cuba”. Disponible en: <http://www.granma.cu/cuba/2019-11-08/informe-sobre-las-afectaciones-del-bloqueo-a-cuba-del-ano-2019-20-09-2019-13-09-08>

[xv] The United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti, also known as MINUSTAH.

[xvi] Jean-Claude Duvalier, dictator in Haiti from 1971 until he was overthrown by a popular uprising in 1986. He succeeded his father François “Papa Doc” Duvalier as the ruler of Haiti after his death.

[xvii] As reported in the Report of the Historical Commission of the Conflict and its Victims.

[xix] See:

<https://www.oxfam.org/es/cinco-datos-escandalosos-sobre-la-desigualdad-extrema-global-y-como-combatirla>

Featured image: The US conducted 105 nuclear tests in the Pacific, mainly in the Marshall islands, between 1946 and 1962. Image: Wikipedia

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