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Max Hastings, *Retribution: The Battle for Japan, 1944-45*. New York: Knopf, 2008. Pp. xxv, 615. ISBN 978-0-307-26351-3.

Review by William J. Astore, Pennsylvania College of Technology (wastore@pct.edu)

In November 1945, my uncle, a U.S. Marine sergeant, was stationed on the island of Peleliu in the Pacific. A year earlier, in September and October 1944, U.S. Marines and soldiers had fought bitterly for this island in a campaign whose brutality is memorably captured by E.B. Sledge.¹ My uncle, a self-described “rock happy gyrene,” had some free time, so he and a couple friends went out to take pictures. In a letter to my father, my uncle wrote they took pictures “Mostly of the scenery and Jap pill-boxes. Also a picture of some of the prisoners (Japs) on a truck. Compared to the boys who were prisoners of those little yellow ‘bastards,’ these boys are living the life of ‘Reilly.’ They are well-fed and husky but pretty short.”²

My uncle’s description of the Japanese as “little yellow bastards” was for those times a mild one. By the time he wrote this letter, Japanese mistreatment of Allied prisoners-of-war was well known. Japanese POWs on Peleliu may not have been living the “Life of Reilly,” but compared to malnourished and emaciated Allied POWs, often used as slave laborers and savagely tortured by their Japanese captors, my uncle’s depiction certainly would have resonated with nearly all those who fought against the Japanese in World War II.

Max Hastings understands such resonances in *Retribution*, his masterly survey of the closing stages of the war against Japan. It was first published in Britain as *Nemesis* (2007). Knopf may have felt most Americans would not recognize the reference to the Greek goddess of retributive justice. But the title was apt, since Nemesis was the “indignant avenger,” the merciless punisher of humanity’s hubris and excess.³ And certainly Japanese militarism and imperialism in the Pacific was marked by deep-seated martial pride as well as titanic violence and inhumanity, which the Allies avenged mercilessly.⁴

A particular strength of Hastings’s account is that he addresses not just the usual topics of the Pacific War, but its enormous cost to Asian peoples. China, for example, lost at least 15 million people in its war against Japan; at least a million Vietnamese died in the Japanese-caused famine of 1944-5; the Philippines in 1942 replaced one colonial overlord with another, only to discover the Japanese were far more ruthless, racist, and murderous than the Americans.

Hastings is often provocative. The Philippines in 1944-5, he suggests, witnessed countless horrors in a campaign fought in part to satisfy the vanity of a single man, General

¹ *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (1981; rpt. NY: Presidio, 2007).

² Letter from Pal Astore to Julius Astore 28 November 1945 (author’s collection).

³ “Nemesis,” *The Oxford Dictionary of Classical Myth and Religion*, ed. S. Price & E. Kearns (Oxford: OUP, 2003) 369-70.

⁴ John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (NY: Pantheon, 1986).

Douglas MacArthur, who got his “I shall return” moment at the price of 750,000 dead, mostly Filipino civilians. Hastings’s critique of “America’s Caesar” is scathing; he notes, for example, how MacArthur allowed the “geographical convenience” of Leyte Island “to blind him to its unsuitability for every important strategic purpose”(188) and consistently underestimated enemy opposition even as he clamored for more men and matériel.

If the autocratic and vainglorious MacArthur is Hastings’s goat, General William (Bill) Slim, commander of the Fourteenth Army in Burma, is his hero: “In contrast to almost every other outstanding commander of the war, Slim was a disarmingly normal human being, possessed of notable self-knowledge His calm, robust style of leadership and concern for the interests of his men won the admiration of all who served under him” (68-9). Hastings’s summary of the Burma Campaign is especially colorful and strong. He suggests the campaign had much more to do with restoring British imperial prestige than with any military necessity. Slim’s army was a polyglot force that included Indian, Nepalese, and African troops, which often used elephants for portage and bridging (he notes in passing that some four thousand elephants died in Burma in the war). Hastings is a master of the telling, often dryly humorous, anecdote: “tins of mutton were delivered to the 4/Ist Gurkhas, bearing labels which showed images of female sheep. The men declined to eat them. The battalion CO instructed his quartermaster to find a crayon and draw testicles on the beasts. The amended mutton was found acceptable” (76).

Hastings covers familiar topics with insight. With respect to the great naval battle at Leyte Gulf, he rightly criticizes Admiral Bull Halsey for impetuosity and over-aggressiveness and Vice-Admiral Takeo Kurita for timidity and fatalism. But he also recognizes the systemic breakdown in the Imperial Japanese Navy’s seamanship and morale: “their ship recognition was inept, their tactics primitive, their gunnery woeful, their spirit feeble” (153). Failure of conventional attacks soon led the Japanese to experiment with, and then to embrace, suicide attacks—the kamikazes—which only intensified mutual hatreds. Nemesis was thus unleashed.

Western societies cherish a distinction between spontaneous individual adoption of a course of action which makes death probable, and institutionalisation of a tactic which makes it inevitable. Thus, the Allies regarded the kamikazes with unfeigned repugnance as well as fear This new terror prompted among Americans an escalation of hatred, a diminution of mercy (172).

Land warfare was especially alien and brutal in the Pacific. Japanese island garrisons often had nowhere to retreat and fought almost to the last man. They ingeniously exploited thick cover and held their fire until the last possible moment. In “Report from the South Pacific,” an anonymous U.S. sergeant who fought on Guadalcanal warned that “a man’s keenness of eye or dullness of eye may determine whether or not he will live. Ten men in my platoon were killed because they walked up on a Jap 37mm gun. The Japanese gun was so well camouflaged that I got within four feet of the gun before I saw it.”⁵ Hastings notes the most common American combat experience in the Pacific was being “pinned down” by an enemy he could not see. The typical response was to resort to firepower and flameth-

⁵ *Scouting and Patrolling: The Soldier, The Enemy, The Ground* (Washington: Infantry Journal, 1943) 24. This pamphlet was issued to American troops during the war.

rowers to blast and burn out the (mostly) hidden defenders. Under such conditions, there was little chance to give quarter, and even when offered, few Japanese accepted.

But the Japanese were not simply fanatics; most were no more willing to die for their country than their foes. “They had simply been conditioned to accept a different norm of sacrifice” (54). “See you at the Yasukuni Shrine” (dedicated to those who died in service of the emperor) was their equivalent to “Death before dishonor.” But the brutality of army training and discipline, together with Japanese racism, bred utter contempt for other peoples, leading to massacres of innocents like the one in Manila in 1945. The “systematic inhumanity” of the Japanese “[was] as gross as that of the Nazis” (236). But Hastings also notes that, in the case of street fighting in Manila, the United States resorted to massive firepower that also killed innocent Filipinos indiscriminately, though not intentionally. As he surveyed the ruins of his old quarters (the penthouse of the Manila Hotel), MacArthur spoke of how he “was tasting to the acid dregs the bitterness of a devastated and beloved home,” to which Hastings has his own acid rejoinder: “It seems bizarre that he paraded his own loss of mere possessions in the midst of a devastating human catastrophe” (238).

Two more human catastrophes occurred at Iwo Jima and Okinawa, and Hastings’s chapters on these battles are concise and compelling. The ferocity of Japanese resistance convinced Americans that their enemy was determined to die rather than accept defeat. “The prospect of invading Kyushu and Honshu in the face of Japanese forces many times greater than those on Okinawa, and presumably imbued with the same fighting spirit, filled those responsible with dismay” (403), Hastings correctly notes. The only alternatives to invasion seemed to be blockade, incendiary air attacks, and Soviet entry into the war against Japan.

With respect to blockade, Hastings celebrates the achievement of American submariners, citing the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey’s conclusion in 1946 that their contribution to the war against Japanese shipping was singularly effective. Hastings agrees: “No other combatant force as small as the U.S. Navy’s submarine flotillas and their 16,000 men achieved a comparable impact upon the war anywhere in the world” (280). Turning to strategic bombing by B-29 Superfortresses, Hastings sagely remarks that

The Japanese people found themselves at last within range of American bombers at a time when Allied moral sensibility was numbed by kamikaze attacks, revelations of savagery towards POWs and subject peoples, together with general war weariness. Joined to these considerations was the messianic determination of senior American airmen to be seen to make a decisive contribution to victory, to secure their future as a service independent of the army (282).

As horrifyingly indiscriminate as General Curtis LeMay’s firebombing raids were, especially against Tokyo in March 1945, Hastings concludes they had a morally defensible purpose—to weaken the will of Japan to resist.

Here, Hastings absolves LeMay (as well as Britain’s Arthur “Bomber” Harris in Europe) for his role in “area bombing”: “It seems quite mistaken to nominate either officer as a sinner for the mass slaughter of civilians, a policy for which responsibility rightly belongs to their superiors” (315). This is both insightful and inadequate. In the documentary *The Fog of War*,⁶ Robert S. McNamara, then an Army Air Force officer, recalled that LeMay told

⁶ Dir. Errol Morris, 2003.

him they had better win the war against Japan, or they would be tried as war criminals. Even the hard-bitten LeMay was uneasy (though publicly unrepentant) about the hundreds of thousands of civilians incinerated in his campaign.

The morality of LeMay's campaign requires careful thought. Never in our history had Americans killed so many enemy non-combatants in so short a time. At Tokyo in March, one hundred thousand were killed; in subsequent firebombing raids, perhaps an additional two hundred thousand; then at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, another two hundred thousand. Was killing half a million Japanese civilians from March to August 1945 necessary to ending the war quickly? If so, does that make it morally defensible?

To paraphrase Harry Truman, American "beastliness" was a regrettable but resolute and necessary response. The horrors inflicted upon Japan were calculated to convince the Japanese "beast" that the war was lost. A more rapid surrender would save both Allied and ultimately Japanese lives. Hastings provides the context necessary to come to grips with these hard truths.

What remains telling to me is the extent to which U.S. strategic bombing of Japan is neglected compared to the Combined Bombing Offensive (CBO) in Europe. In my six years of teaching at the U.S. Air Force Academy as well as reviewing course material at Air Command and Staff College, I saw much more attention paid to the triumphal lessons of the CBO. For example, all cadets at the Air Force Academy are given a special history lesson on the CBO, praising its contribution to Allied victory over Nazi Germany. However, in my time at the Academy, no equivalent lesson was taught concerning LeMay's B-29 incendiary raids on Japan.

This disparity reflects the U.S. Air Force's moral unease about LeMay's campaign. To mount effective raids against Japan, LeMay (with the full support of Generals Norstad and Arnold and their civilian superiors) had to abandon the vision (or "rhetoric," to use Tami Biddle's phrase⁷) of precision strategic bombing for the reality of a massive and indiscriminate "dehousing" campaign that targeted young and old. This directly contradicted America's image of itself as morally and technically superior to its enemy, which may be why LeMay's campaign remains largely forgotten by most Americans today—indeed, even most American airmen.

Hastings reminds us that the decision to use atomic bombs was not a discrete choice but the culmination of a series of events—the concept, the organization, the construction, the testing, followed by actual deployment. To have decided *not* to drop the bombs, the president would have had consciously to act to *stop* a process that had acquired immense forward momentum. As Freeman Dyson noted in the documentary *The Day after Trinity*,⁸ only a man of iron will could have done this, and President Truman, great as he became, was, in the summer of 1945, an uncertain and over-tasked leader.

We tend to look back at public support for the war as unified and total. It was not. Allied political and military leaders well knew that they did not have an open-ended commitment to get the job done at any and all costs. In the necessary debate over the morality of dropping the bombs and their impact in shortening the war, we must remember that

⁷ Tami Davis Biddle, *Rhetoric and Reality in Air Warfare: The Evolution of British and American Ideas about Strategic Bombing, 1914-1945* (Princeton: Princeton U Pr, 2002).

⁸ Dir. Jon Else, 1981; DVD 2002.

public support for the war was declining fast—a fact that further drove Allied leaders to seek the quickest possible ending.⁹

Hiroshima and Nagasaki seemed to produce a quick ending. But they were not even the last shots of the air war against Japan. Another way to understand these attacks is in the context of prior and subsequent incendiary raids against Japanese cities. The awesome might of the atomic bombs was more of a post-war construction; it was also the logical fulfillment of the previous incendiary raids. No one has ever described Hiroshima and Nagasaki as precision attacks against purely military targets. They were part of an unrepentant campaign of “shock and awe” against a seemingly implacable enemy that needed to be threatened with total annihilation to convince him to surrender. Armageddon met Nemesis, and Japan finally ended its dithering and prevarication to surrender that August, spurred on as well by the Soviet offensive in Manchuria. Admiral Mitsumasa Yonai, the navy minister, confessed, “The atomic bombs and the Soviet entry into the war are, in a sense, God’s gifts” (509), because they finally allowed the Japanese to bear what otherwise could not be borne—the dishonor of admitting their cause was lost. Hastings tartly concludes that “Those who seek to argue that Japan was ready to surrender before Hiroshima are peddlers of fantasies” (513).

Hastings ends his stunning account on a sober note—the failure of modern-day Japan to “come to terms with the horrors which it inflicted upon Asia almost two-thirds of a century ago” (550). This failure is not just cultural but one of narrative dissonance. Today, the American narrative of the Pacific War is clear. A perfidious sneak attack was avenged by a righteous victory. Initially surprised and outclassed, Americans mobilized and surged to victory, then ruled Japan benevolently after the war. The Japanese narrative is far more tortured, with glorious early victories forgotten in the catastrophic defeats that came later. Allied memories involve triumph over great difficulties, most notably a tenacious, often terrible, enemy. Japanese memories are nightmarish landscapes within which “the individual wanders through endless dreamlike scenes of degradation, horror, and death, a shapeless nightmare of plotless slaughter.”¹⁰ This dissonance may explain, if not excuse, Japanese reluctance to confront their past deeds.

In *Retribution*, Hastings has quite simply produced a tour de force truly worthy of the staggering events that marked the climax of World War II in the Pacific.

⁹ I am indebted to Bill Hawkes for helping me refine these points.

¹⁰ Haruko Taya Cook & Theodore F. Cook, *Japan at War: An Oral History* (New York: New Press, 1992) 8–14.