

Apocalypse Now: Be Careful What You Wish For

On August 6, 1945, an American B-29 dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima in Japan. Three days later, another American aircraft dropped a bomb on Nagasaki. Six days later, the Japanese government surrendered unconditionally to the United States and her allies.

Historians have long debated whether this use of nuclear weapons was necessary. Some contend that the Americans had already firebombed over sixty Japanese cities with no overtures of surrender, that an invasion of Japan would have resulted in millions of casualties, both Japanese and American, and that dropping the bombs was therefore justified. Those in opposition argue that some other means might have brought a Japanese surrender – a bomb dropped in a less populated area, a quarantine of the Japanese islands rather than an invasion – and that the Japanese were in fact seeking surrender.

Despite this divide, both sides agree on one point: ever since those back-to-back explosions, the world has never been the same.

Today nine governments – the United States, Russia, China, France, the UK, Pakistan, India, Israel, and North Korea – are known to possess nuclear weapons. These remain a threat to world peace, but the chief danger in our time derives from terror groups or radical countries seeking to manufacture or purchase nuclear weapons. They might also use “dirty bombs” – weapons made from nuclear waste and conventional explosives, and delivered by a car or truck – to kill many people and make a city uninhabitable for years.

Mankind is long accustomed to natural catastrophes, hurricanes

and earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and plagues. We have as well a long, bloody history of eliminating those we regard as enemies. In the twentieth century, human beings devised ever more efficient ways of killing one another: machine guns, poison gas, aerial fire bombings, and concentration camps.

But never before had anyone conceived of weapons that could destroy the entire human race.

This use of the atom has changed forever the way we regard our future. That this is so can be seen in the explosion of apocalyptic literature in the last seventy years.

Prior to Hiroshima, few writers outside of religious tomes contemplated the possible destruction of mankind. Novels like Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and H.G. Wells's *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* were rarities in the nineteenth century.

Since 1945, however, apocalyptic books and movies have become a genre all its own. From Pat Frank's 1959 novel *Alas, Babylon*, which fascinated and terrified me in ninth grade, to Walter Miller's *A Canticle For Leibowitz*, which roused discussion in my college literature class, from television shows like *Jericho* to movies like *The Book of Eli*, our culture is inundated with fictions predicting not only the demise of the human race by nuclear warfare, but by other manmade machinations as well: lab-manufactured infectious diseases, genetically altered foodstuffs, cyber attacks, germ warfare, and climate disasters.

Some of these books and films have exerted influence in the highest reaches of government. William Forstchen's *One Second After*, for example, describes what happens to a town in western North Carolina when an atmospheric nuclear explosion causes an electromagnetic pulse (EMP). The EMP shuts down all of the country's electrical systems, sending millions of people in the blink of an eye back to an age lit only by fire

and the tormented by starvation, disease, and human savagery. In 2009, Congressman Roscoe Bartlett cited *One Second After* in the House of Representatives, urging that every American read it and wake up to the dangers of such an attack.

Like William Forstchen, the writers and filmmakers of these cataclysmic stories intend their work as warnings, signposts of paths to be avoided. They understand the dangers inherent in the dark side of our science. They see that human folly, mistakes in diplomacy, errors in technology, some lunatic radical fringe, or other variables might result in a holocaust.

Weirdly, some among us wish for just such a nightmare, a time when disaster shakes the foundations of civilization and the world falls into a New Dark Age. Do a Google search for “those who want the apocalypse,” and you’ll find people who hope for an end to automobiles, showers, coffee, credit cards, and computers.

Why would some who watch the same movies and read the same books as the rest of us come away with such a radically different take on the message? Why would they harbor a clandestine wish for disaster?

Here are two theories.

First, some people genuinely despise humanity. Some believe the erasure of mankind would improve the planet. Like the Roman Emperor Caligula, who supposedly wished that the Roman people “had but one neck” so that he could slice it through, these misanthropes would celebrate the death of the human race.

Second, all these stories feature a handful of survivors battling to stay alive, and I suspect some people desire themselves to be members of this heroic band. Never do they imagine themselves blown into dust at Ground Zero. Once in a grocery store the frail cashier said to the woman in the

checkout line ahead of me that she would be glad if everything collapsed. Looking at her, I thought to myself, “Young lady, you’d last less than a week.”

As my mom used to say, “Be careful what you wish for.”

Meanwhile, the rest of us – those of us who enjoy our morning coffee and showers, who treasure the medicines and doctors who keep us alive, who prefer eating hamburgers and salads to slugs and frogs, who may find civilization complicated but who want our family and friends to keep breathing – must be vigilant, encourage our leaders to seek peace rather than war, and defend civilization.

We must look back at Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and say, “Never again.”

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