

# If Obama Visits Hiroshima

**Richard Falk**

There are mounting hopes that Barack Obama will use the occasion of the Group of 7 meeting in Japan in May to visit Hiroshima, and become the first American president to do so. It is remarkable that it required a wait of over 60 years until John Kerry became the first high American official to make such a visit, which he termed 'gut-wrenching,' while at the same time purposely refraining from offering any kind of apology to the Japanese people for one of the worse acts of state terror against a defenseless population in all of human history. Let's hope that Obama goes, and displays more remorse than Kerry who at least deserves some credit for paving the way. The contrast between the many pilgrimages of homage by Western leaders, including those of Germany, to Auschwitz and other notorious death camps, and the absence of comparable pilgrimages to Hiroshima and Nagasaki underscores the difference between winning and losing a major war. This contrast cannot be properly accounted for by insisting on a hierarchy of evils that the Holocaust dominates.



John Kerry and Kishida Fumio at Peace Memorial Park in Hiroshima, 11 April

The United States, in particular, has a more generalized aversion to revisiting its darker hours, although recent events have illuminated some of the shadows cast by the racist legacies of slavery. The decimation of native Americans has yet to be properly addressed at official levels, and recent reports of soaring suicide rates suggests that the native American narrative continues to unfold tragically.

The New York Times in an unsigned editorial on April 12 urged President Obama to make this symbolic visit to Hiroshima, and in their words "to make it count "by doing more than making a ritual appearance. Recalling accurately that Obama "won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2009 largely because of his nuclear agenda "the editorial persuasively criticized Obama for failing to follow through on his Prague vision of working toward a world free of nuclear weapons. A visit to Hiroshima is, in effect, a second chance, perhaps a last chance, to satisfy the expectation created early in his presidency.

When it came to specifics as to what Obama might do, the Times offered a typical arms control set of recommendations of what it called "small but doable advances": canceling the new air-launched, nuclear-armed cruise missile and ensuring greater compliance with the prohibition on nuclear testing by its endorsement coupled with a recommendation that future compliance be monitored by the UN Security Council. The Times leaves readers with the widely shared false impression that such measures can be considered incremental steps that will lead the world over time to a nuclear-free world. Such a view is unconvincing, and diversionary. I believe rather

that these moves serve to stabilize the nuclear status quo and have a negative effect on disarmament prospects. By making existing realities somewhat less prone to accidents and irresponsibly provocative weapons innovations, the posture of living with nuclear weapons gains credibility and the arguments for nuclear disarmament are weakened even to the extent of becoming irrelevant. I believe that it is a dangerous fallacy to suppose that arms control measures, even if beneficial in themselves, can be thought of as moving the world closer to nuclear disarmament.

Instead, what such measures do, and have been doing for decades, is to reinforce nuclear complacency by making nuclear disarmament either seem unnecessary or utopian, and to some extent even undesirably destabilizing. In other words, contrary to conventional wisdom, moving down the arms control path is a sure way to make certain that disarmament will never occur!

As mentioned, many arms control moves are inherently worthwhile. It is only natural to favor initiatives that cancel the development of provocative weapons systems, disallow weapons testing, and cut costs. Without such measures there would occur a dangerous erosion of the de facto taboo that has prevented (so far) any use of nuclear weaponry since 1945. At the same time it is vital to understand that the taboo and the arms control regime of managing the nuclear weapons environment does not lead to the realization of disarmament and the vision of a world without nuclear weapons.

Let me put it this way. If arms control is affirmed for its own sake or as the best way to put the world on a path of incremental steps that will lead over time to disarmament, then such an approach is nurturing the false consciousness that has unfortunately prevailed in public discourse ever since the Nonproliferation Treaty came into force in

1970. The point can be expressed in more folksy language: we have been acting for decades as if the horse of disarmament is being pulled by the cart of arms control. In fact, it is the horse of disarmament that should be pulling the cart of arms control, which would make arms control measures welcome as place holders while the primary quest for nuclear disarmament was being pursued by stages as the nuclear weapons states emptied their arsenals as verified by international monitoring procedures. There is no reason to delay putting the horse in front of the cart, and Obama's failure to do so at Prague was a central flaw of his otherwise justly applauded speech.

Where Obama went off the tracks in my view was when he consigned nuclear disarmament to the remote future, and proposed in the interim reliance on the deterrent capability of the nuclear weapons arsenal and this alleged forward momentum of incremental arms control steps. What is worse, Obama's actual record is, at best, neutral when it comes to addressing the nuclear challenge. During his presidency, Obama supported a \$1 trillion modernization program for nuclear weapons to be completed in 2030, and includes appropriations for a variety of technical innovations that make it militarily more tempting to use nuclear weapons in certain conflict situations. As well, Obama continued with the militarization of space and has been an enthusiastic advocate of nuclear power.

Further undermining the Prague initiative, Obama uncritically endorsed the nonproliferation treaty regime, lamenting only that it is being weakened by breakout countries, especially North Korea, and this partly explains why he felt it necessary back in 2009 to consider nuclear disarmament as a practical alternative to a continued reliance on nonproliferation, although disarmament was posited more as a goal beyond reach and not as a serious present political option. He expressed this futuristic outlook in these words: "I am not

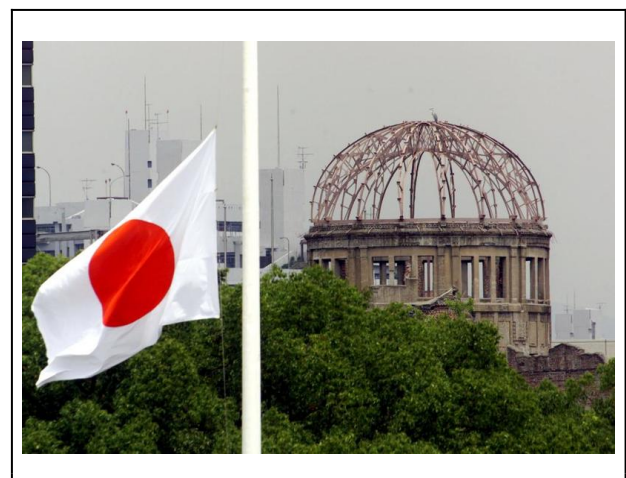
naïve. This goal will not be reached quickly—perhaps not in my lifetime. "He has never clarified why such a goal is not attainable within the term of his presidency, in particular, why it should not be explicitly pursued.

In this regard, and with respect to Obama's legacy, the visit to Hiroshima provides an overdue opportunity to disentangle nuclear disarmament from arms control. In Prague, Obama significantly noted that, "...as the only nuclear power to have used a nuclear weapon, the United States has amoral responsibility to act. "[emphasis added] In the 1996 Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the legality of the threat or use of nuclear weapons, the judges unanimously concluded that there was a legal responsibility to seek nuclear disarmament with due diligence. The language of the 14-0 ICJ finding is authoritative: "There exists an obligation to pursue in good faith and bring to a conclusion negotiations leading to nuclear disarmament in all aspects under strict and effective international control."

In other words, there is a legal as well as a moral responsibility to eliminate nuclear weapons, and this could have made the Prague call for a world without nuclear weapons more relevant to present governmental behavior. The Prague speech, while lauding the NPT, never affirmed the existence of a legal responsibility to pursue nuclear disarmament, which was a key element in striking a bargain between the nuclear weapons states and those states without nuclear weapons. The other key element was the commitment to share peaceful nuclear technology with the non-weapons states, thus encouraging and legitimating the development of nuclear capabilities that could be at any point configured to produce nuclear weapons, as well as creating dangerous risks of reactor disasters of the sort that occurred in Fukushima. In effect, the NPT while inducing states to forego the weapons option creates conditions that facilitate the development of a

nuclear weapons capability should the political will of a government shift in that direction. Additionally, there are the distinct problems arising from the presence of nuclear reactors vulnerable to earthquakes, terrorism, wartime targeting, and a variety of accidents.

In this respect an official visit to Hiroshima offers Obama a final opportunity to reinvigorate his vision of a world without nuclear weapons by bringing it down to earth, and in the process leave an anti-nuclear legacy that overcomes the ambivalence of his record while president, that is, seeming to favor nuclear disarmament while maintaining the nuclearist agenda that has guided American policy ever since the bombs were dropped in 1945. In this regard, it would be more effective if Obama were to visit Hiroshima on August 6th, and include Nagasaki in his itinerary, rather than take advantage of the G-7 meeting to make a convenient side trip. Choosing to visit Hiroshima on the anniversary of the attacks, especially if during the visit Obama spoke words of apology and acknowledged that the Prague speech fell short by not mentioning the coupling of an authoritative legal responsibility reinforcing the moral responsibility that was admitted. Such assertions would capture the world imagination, and give the quest for nuclear disarmament a political plausibility that it has lacked for decades.



Why is this? By acknowledging the legal obligation, as embedded in Article VI of the Nonproliferation Treaty, as reinforcing the moral responsibility, there arises a clear imperative to move toward implementation. There is no excuse for delay or need for preconditions. The United States Government could at this time convene a multinational commission to plan a global conference on nuclear disarmament somewhat resembling the Paris conference that recently produced the much heralded climate change agreement. The goal of the nuclear disarmament conference could be the vetting of proposals for a nuclear disarmament process with the view toward establishing a three year deadline for the development of an agreed treaty text whose preparation was entrusted to a high level working group operating under the auspices of the United Nations, with a mandate to report to the Secretary General. After that the states of the world could gather to negotiate an agreed treaty text that would set forth a disarming process and its monitoring and compliance procedures.

The United States, along with other nuclear weapons states, opposed in the 1990s recourse to the ICJ by the General Assembly to seek a legal interpretation on issues of legality, and then disregarded the results of its legal findings. It would be a great contribution to a more sustainable and humane world order if President Obama were to take the occasion of his historic visit to Hiroshima to call respectful attention to this ICJ Advisory Opinion and go on to accept the attendant legal responsibility on behalf of the United States. This could be declared to be a partial fulfillment of the moral responsibility that was accepted at Prague. It could even be presented as the completion of the vision of Prague, and would be consistent with Obama's frequent appeals to the governments of the world to show respect for international law, and his insistence that during his presidency U.S. foreign policy was so configured.

Above all, there is every reason for all governments to seek nuclear disarmament without further delay. There now exists no geopolitical climate of intense rivalry, and the common endeavor of freeing the world from the dangers posed by nuclear weapons would work against the current hawkish drift in the U.S. and parts of Europe toward a second cold war and overcome the despair that has for so long paralyzed efforts to protect the human interest. As the present state of nuclear weapons possession, climate change, and neoliberal globalization should make clear, we are not likely to survive as a species very much longer if we continue to base world order on a blend of state-centric national interests and dominant actor geopolitics and political economy. Obama has this rare opportunity to choose the road not often traveled upon, and there is no better place to start such a voyage than at Hiroshima. We in civil society could then with conviction promote his nuclear legacy as 'From Prague to Hiroshima,' and feel comfortable that this president has finally earned the honor of the Nobel Peace Prize prematurely bestowed.

There is one final consideration. Some have noted, most influentially, Mikhail Gorbachev, that nuclear disarmament cannot be properly undertaken in isolation from the overall military setting. Especially when far along in a nuclear disarming process, political anxieties would likely shift to the dangers of making the world safe for conventional weaponry, and especially give rise to concerns around the world about the effects of American military dominance in a post-nuclear global setting. Such concerns seem only natural given the American global pattern of force projection consisting of hundreds of overseas military bases, navies in every ocean, and the militarization of space. In this regard, as confidence grows that nuclear disarmament will be achieved, attention would likely turn to demilitarization and war prevention. Given the militarization of the planet, and the destructiveness of non-nuclear warfare, it



would be beneficial to think of nuclear disarmament as a crucial and urgent step on the road to general and complete disarmament, which is without doubt a necessary dimension of sustainable peace for the peoples of the world. In effect, the ethically imperative vision that transcends Obama's Prague vision is that of a world without war, which itself is no more utopian than leaders of the world want it to

remain. What may be more utopian is to suppose that the human species can long coexist with the war system.

This article is a modified version of a post that appeared on [Richard Falk's blog](#) and will be reprinted in a forthcoming issue of the journal Peace Review.

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