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**COMMENTARY**

**Palaima: In war, we choose to see our own truths**

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In thinking about his experiences as a soldier in Vietnam, writer Tim O'Brien says this: "To generalize about war is like generalizing about peace. Almost everything is true. Almost nothing is true."

This is why it is easy for us to be so certain about the truths we choose to believe. It is why programs such as the McLaughlin Group, "TV's original political talkfest," are so successful. They are Wal-Mart shelves displaying assorted opinion products for people to select from. When we see our particular truth, we say: "There. That's it. We're right."

Such programs do not explore the complexities of important issues. They do not help us understand why other citizens view things differently than we do. They do not help us do what citizens of a viable democracy should do: move toward informed compromise and consensus. They reinforce our beliefs in our own separate truths.

Truth, or rather our notion of it, is the real crux here. Take, for example, the two recent opinion columns by security specialist Austin Bay and University of Texas journalism professor Robert Jensen about the use of nuclear weapons, past and present. ("Sixty years after Hiroshima; Aug. 6)

Jensen argues that the United States (and other nuclear powers) has not acted in good faith regarding the aims of the 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty: nuclear disarmament and ultimately "general and complete disarmament under strict and effective international control."

Without entering here into the problems of getting opposing sides to agree upon what the wording of such international agreements actually means, let's admit that what Jensen says is true. No one would deny that he is speaking the truth when he says that the atomic bomb made Hiroshima into a nuclear hell. And many readers will also accept as true his categorical claim, "Nuclear weapons are evil." But where do such truths get us?

Arguing in support of our use of atomic bombs in Japan, Bay cites Paul Fussell, who fought as an infantry man in the non-nuclear hell of Europe at the end of World War II. He ranks right up there with John Keegan, E.B. Sledge, Thucydides, Remarque and Homer in writing about war. Fussell is glad the atomic bombs were dropped before he and other boys like him were sent from the slaughter in Europe off to Japan to kill or be killed.

In his books, Fussell conveys a deep and enduring anger about how the U.S. military high command misused rank-and-file soldiers, sending them into the field ill-trained and ill-equipped, often getting them killed for no good reason.

Marines such as E.B. Sledge fought against fanatical Japanese soldiers who simply would not surrender. Marines in the Pacific theater saw atrocities that call into question the very nature of our humanity. Like Fussell, Sledge was glad the atomic bombs were dropped before more American G.I.s were killed.

So Bay also is speaking the truth. Only an extraordinary front-line soldier would have been capable of seeing any moral ambiguity in the dropping of the atomic bombs. Let us even accept as true Bay's further claim that the atomic bombs saved the lives of many American and Japanese soldiers.

Where do these truths get us?

Watch Errol Morris's documentary "The Fog of War," or read James Blight's book edition. In them, Robert McNamara, the statistician for our fire-bombing of Japan in World War II and later the manager of bombing and body counts in Vietnam, lays out 10 lessons of war. One is proportionality.

Leaders, military or civilian, must make awful choices. It is not enough to say atomic bombs saved the lives of Japanese and American soldiers. The atom bombs and the earlier fire-bombings of Japan (and of non-strategic German cities and villages) killed so many innocent civilians that McNamara has no doubt that both he and Air Force Gen. Curtis LeMay would have been tried as war criminals had we lost the war.

The moral truth, whatever it is, also must factor those dead women, children and old men into the calculus of war. And part of the truth also must be the precedent these actions set for our later overkill bombing in Vietnam, which for a time was directed by LeMay and McNamara.

But those who would say the atomic bomb is evil must answer the questions raised by an old man in Cormac McCarthy's latest novel who says, "You can be patriotic and still believe that some things cost more than what they're worth. Ask them Gold Star mothers what they paid and what they got for it."

Talk over abstract morality with a Gold Star mother who has lost a son or daughter in the war in Iraq, and you just might begin to get a glimpse of the truth.

Tim O'Brien also claims that a real war story never ends. This is true, because the truth about our choices in war is always just beyond our reach.

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