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Atomic Energy

August 30, 1945

JUN 27 1950

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Dear Ray,

Here are my ideas concerning the tactics and the morality of the atomic bombing of Japan.

Possession of this new force should have been advertised to the Japanese in an announcement like earlier ones warning all civilians in certain named cities that a stated number of them were to be bombed on a set date. The tactics of a surprise attack were bad when we knew they had asked Russia to explore peace measures and when we knew they could not resist air attack of any kind. Tactically we were in a weak position compared to Britain when she took the retaliatory steps of bombing civilians in Germany, for she acted defensively against first offense. And she had the excuse of fear for survival, as we did not. We too were prepared to retaliate with gas attacks, though this too would violate the rules of war. We did not know actually that the Japanese lacked this new power, but its use after a warning would have shown the same kind of self-restraint in its use as we use when warning a criminal of the punishment we are ready to administer if necessary. We made new power a source of fear instead of a source of respect for our forbearance.

Morally, and by that I mean the way we must feel concerning our own conduct and what we fairly expect in justice from all others, we lost influence with Russia and Britain. And here I am thinking not of the bomb power in warfare as wrong morally, but of its signal to these powers that we can go the limit to ease our national burden economically as well as in a military sense. The saving of lives is no more desirable morally than the removal of veto power from any single nation in the Big Five or the retreat of a major power from controls over minorities. If Britain hangs on to Hong Kong, at least if we do not protest it, we shall have signed on for the old rules again. I should have wanted to turn Russia and Britain back in on themselves in these matters before Congress approves any peace treaties. Lives, vetoes, trade rights are all on the same level of expediency now. We lost something, no question of that, in moral suasion when we turned atomic power loose with Britain to surprise Russia as well as the rest of the outsiders.

Our course now is to say we would act differently in both regards if we had it to do again and, for me, to say that the single-veto power described at San Francisco is repugnant to our people as clearly as is taking land or life that would give us an immediate advantage.

Waver

(DHS)