



Iwo Jima's Lesson in Empathy

(Published in *The Washington Post*, February 25, 2007)

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Colaboraciones n° 1564

March 19, 2007

"Don't cheer, boys. The poor devils are dying."

Capt. John Philip of the USS Texas, to his crew as they watched the Spanish ship Vizcaya burn off Santiago Bay, Cuba, in 1898

On March 9, 1945, 346 B-29s left the Marianas, bound for Tokyo, where they dropped 1,858 tons of incendiaries that destroyed one-sixth of Japan's capital, killing 83,000. Gen. Curtis LeMay, then commander of the air assault on Japan, later wrote, "We scorched and boiled and baked to death more people in Tokyo . . . than went up in vapor at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined."

That was inaccurate -- 80,000 died at Hiroshima alone. And in his [new biography](#) of LeMay, Barrett Tillman writes that the general was mo-

re empathetic than his rhetoric suggested: "He could envision a three-year-old girl screaming for her mother in a burning house." But LeMay was a warrior "whose government gave him a task that required killing large numbers of enemy civilians so the war could be won."

It has been hotly debated how much indiscriminate killing of civilians in the Asian and European theaters of World War II really was "required" and therefore was morally permissible. Even during the war there was empathy for civilian victims, at least European victims. And less than 15 years after the war, movies (e.g., "The Young Lions," 1958) offered sympathetic portrayals of common German soldiers swept into combat by the cyclone of a war launched by a tyrant.

But attitudes about the Japanese soldier were especially harsh during the war and have been less softened by time than have attitudes about the German soldier. During the war, it was acceptable for a billboard -- signed by Adm. William F. "Bull" Halsey -- at a U.S. Navy base in the South Pacific to exhort "Kill Japs, Kill Japs, Kill More Japs." Killing America's enemies was Halsey's trade. His rhetoric was symptomatic of the special ferocity, rooted in race, of the war against Japan: "We are drowning and burning them all over the Pacific, and it is just as much pleasure to burn them as to drown them." Halsey endorsed the Chinese proverb that the "Jap race" was the result of "a mating between female apes and the worst Chinese criminals."

Wartime signs in West Coast restaurants announced: "This Restaurant Poisons Both Rats and Japs." In 1943, the Navy's representative on the committee considering what should be done with a defeated Japan recommended genocide -- "the almost total elimination of the Japanese as a race."

[Stephen Hunter](#), movie critic for The Post, says that of the more than 600 English-language movies made about World War II since 1940, only four -- most notably "The Bridge on the River Kwai" (1957) -- "[have even acknowledged the humanity](#)" of Japanese soldiers.

Perhaps empathy for the plight of the common enemy conscript is a postwar luxury; it certainly is a civilized achievement, an achievement

of moral imagination that often needs the assistance of art. That is why it is notable that Clint Eastwood's "[Letters From Iwo Jima](#)" was one of five films nominated for the best picture Academy Award.

It is stressful viewing, an unsparing attempt to come as close as cinema can to conveying the reality of combat, specifically the fighting that killed 6,821 Americans and all but 1,083 of the 22,000 Japanese soldiers on the small (eight square miles) black lava island. Remember the searing first 15 minutes of "Saving Private Ryan" -- the carnage at Omaha Beach? In "Letters From Iwo Jima" it is exceeded, with harrowing permutations.

The Japanese commander on the island, Tadamichi Kuribayashi, was -- like the admiral who attacked Pearl Harbor, Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto -- a cosmopolitan warrior who had lived in, and never stopped admiring, America. In 2005, a team of Japanese archaeologists scouring the island's man-made caves for artifacts of the battle found a sack of undelivered mail from Kuribayashi and other officers and soldiers. All the writers knew they faced overwhelming force -- Japan had no assistance to send -- and were doomed to die in accordance with the Japanese military code that forbade surrender and encouraged suicide.

Japanese forces frequently committed barbarities worse even than those of the German regular army, and it is difficult to gauge the culpability of conscripts commanded by barbarians. Be that as it may, the pathos

of the letters humanizes the Japanese soldiers, whose fatalism was a reasonable response to the irrational. Viewers of this movie, while

moved to pride and gratitude by the valor of the Marines, will not feel inclined to cheer. We are catching up to Capt. Philip's sensibility.

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