

# INTRODUCTION

## From Vengeance to Virtue

In the end, there was chaos in Kabul. Thousands thronged the airport, desperate to escape the return of Taliban control. Convinced he could have no future in his homeland, seventeen-year-old Zaki Anwari frantically clung to the wheel of an American C-17 aircraft as it took off. He and a dozen others either fell to their deaths or were crushed by the airplane's unforgiving landing gear.<sup>19</sup> They were not the only victims of the botched withdrawal. Amidst the panicked crowds, a suicide bomber murdered 170 Afghans, thirteen US troops, and wounded an estimated 150 others.<sup>20</sup> As the mayhem continued, day after excruciating day, Americans looked aghast at their country's quandary. To remain in Afghanistan meant spending billions more on what seemed like a forever war, but exiting meant abandoning millions of Afghan allies to the nightmare of extreme Islamist rule. Most Americans wanted the war to end, but they never wanted it to end this way. They were left appalled at what their government had done. A rare murmur of consensus echoed across the land as Americans lamented: this is not who we are.

It was far from the first time Americans felt this way. Their sentiment resembled how they reacted during an entirely different episode in the summer of 2018, when news media broadcast scenes of migrant children at the southern border locked in cages. The public listened to the wails of toddlers calling for their mothers and were sickened by the sound.<sup>21</sup> Again, Americans insisted that this is not who we are. Most Americans wanted secure borders, but few wanted

children to pay the price. As in Afghanistan, the government was grappling with a dilemma, and the public recoiled at the result.

There have been many moments when Americans objected to their government's behavior, but few episodes are as compelling as those suffused with moral ambiguity. As a historian, I decided to look back at an earlier time when Americans also declared, "This is not who we are." I wanted to see how the country grappled with its government's humanity at a pivotal moment in the nation's past. What I found surprised me.

America emerged from World War II as the undisputed superpower. Its defeat of Nazism's radical racial ideology and Japanese militarism was total. Its enemies were vanquished, its allies were hobbled, and its one true rival, the Soviet Union, was reeling from the loss of some twenty million citizens.<sup>22</sup> But during the war, the United States committed numerous inhumane acts against the innocent. It imprisoned thousands of American citizens in concentration camps because of their race. It used nuclear weapons on entire cities, indiscriminately killing some 200,000 civilians. And it imposed a punishing peace on Germany, which for two painful years caused countless children and adults to starve. As I explored the process that produced these decisions, I fully expected that racial animus and wartime hatreds alone would explain them. But it couldn't. To my surprise, the majority of key decision makers, along with much of the American public, opposed these harsh measures. The most remarkable aspect of these policies was precisely how little support and how much ambivalence they actually produced.

In the internment affair, the shock of Pearl Harbor sparked a fear of saboteurs, but many questioned whether security required removing thousands of citizens from their homes. The government's own surveys of public opinion found that, initially, a paltry fourteen percent of west coast residents approved of forced evacuation of Japanese Americans. The percentage was higher among those in southern California, but even there the surveys found only limited support for internment. If you had been alive at the time, you could easily have had the impression from newspapers and politicians that most Americans were demanding the removal of Japanese Americans from the coast and insisting on their confinement to concentration camps, but the polling data suggests the opposite, that in the first few months after Pearl Harbor, there was no groundswell of support for this drastic action. While racism undeniably fueled hatred toward Japanese

Americans, that anger had its limits. The public had to be convinced that forced relocation was a sensible idea. As the internment unfolded, discomfort with the policy and degrees of opposition to it slowly began to mount.<sup>23</sup>

Something similar happened with the atomic bombs. The use of this remarkable new weapon might end the war and ultimately save lives, but it would require the killing of hundreds of thousands of innocent people. An oft-cited Gallup poll taken just days after Hiroshima showed that eighty-five percent of Americans supported the nuclear attack. But most Americans had no idea what an atomic bomb was. The vast majority, including the president, had no college education (fewer than one in twenty did), and most could not begin to grasp the effects of a nuclear strike. An earlier Gallup poll, in 1944, revealed that most Americans opposed the use of poison gas against the Japanese. It is almost inconceivable that Americans would have opposed poison gas yet approved of a nuclear attack, since the latter is many times more horrific and long-lasting. Had Americans understood that the atomic bombs were more than just a very powerful conventional bomb, they likely would have opposed its use as well. In fact, as time passed and Americans learned what the bombs had actually done to innocent civilians, with all their gruesome effects, support for the decision plummeted. It has fallen to roughly fifty-six percent today.<sup>24</sup>

The same was also true regarding the Roosevelt administration's scheme to cripple Germany. If that nation were reduced to an agrarian state, it could hardly make war on the world again. But what if such extreme treatment only inflamed Germans' thirst for revenge, ultimately igniting the very war that the punishing peace was intended to prevent? The government initially considered the harshest measures. When word of the punitive Morgenthau Plan leaked to the press, Americans recoiled. Even FDR himself tried to distance himself from it, and his Republican opponent in the presidential election used it against him in the campaign. Yet it was a modified version of Treasury Secretary Morgenthau's plan that became official US policy for the first two years of occupation. While hatred toward the German people undeniably rippled across America, soon after the war average Americans were confronted with images of starving German children, and their anger quickly ebbed. Remarkably, Americans voluntarily ate less in order to have more food available for Germans and others in desperate straits. Polling data showed a substantial majority, over

sixty percent, in favor of feeding the needy, including America's former enemies. With respect to each of these three brutal acts against civilians, average Americans appear to have embraced kindness and mercy over cruelty and revenge.

My primary interest, however, was not with the American public's views. As I dug deeper into these decisions, I found an even greater surprise. The brutal actions that the American government inflicted on the innocent were not only actively opposed or uneasily accepted by the public but were also opposed, or at least not endorsed, by most of the nation's top leaders. In each of the three vengeful decisions, a majority (and sometimes an overwhelming majority) of key officials argued against vengeance and favored mercy. But if most of the government's top leaders supported mercy, how and why were these vengeful policies adopted? That is the crucial question that drives Part I.

Part II tackles the flip side of the puzzle. It asks how American leaders sought, in essence, to atone for some of its own wartime cruelties. After the war, the United States undertook a dramatic series of measures. By leading a massive food campaign that fed millions of people during a global food shortage, by rebuilding western Europe and Japan, and by heroically airlifting supplies to a blockaded Berlin, America did more than just rescue countless civilians from hunger and oppression; it transformed its image in the eyes of the world.

I had expected to find that after years of sacrifices by the American public, from rationing to war bonds, Americans would be tired of giving. The opposite turned out to be true. While a sizeable minority still wanted to punish its wartime enemies, the majority was inclined toward forgiveness. Still, the nation's better angels had to be directed. President Truman cleverly recruited an audacious advertising whiz kid, Charles Luckman, who, with Truman's strong backing, encouraged Americans to eat less in order to save millions overseas. The Friendship Train was only one of many successful drives that Luckman engineered. The astonishing aspect of America's postwar sacrifices was how much of it was directed toward its recent former foes. Anti-communism and the desire to check the spread of Soviet influence can only partly explain these decisions. When we probe deeper into individual motives, we find a complex collection of causes, with the humanitarian impulse being an important factor in the mix.

This is the story of how destructive decisions overlapped and intertwined and how the country then tried to reverse course. It traces

the connections between heroes, villains, and victims in each virtuous and vengeful act, weaving a new kind of through line across America's past. But unlike the Hollywood version of history, the real heroes and villains proved far more complex, often assuming both roles. Many of the same people were intimately involved in each of these pivotal decisions, and they sometimes switched sides. For reasons both pragmatic and personal, idiosyncratic and ethical, the proponents of harshness in one case became the defenders of mercy in another, and vice versa. These were ethical dilemmas, complex and confusing. Even the person most known for her support of human rights, Eleanor Roosevelt, sometimes found herself defending decisions that many felt were cruel. Again, I wanted to learn why.

Some leaders, such as War Secretary Henry Stimson, remained remarkably consistent – consistently ineffective. Stimson's Christian values convinced him of the wrongness of many governmental actions during the war, but he could not overcome the forces around him, from his Cabinet rivals to the generals he supposedly oversaw. He harbored deep ambivalence about the internment, objected to the fire bombings of Japan, and agonized over the use of atomic weapons. He worked hardest to prevent the punitive plans for Germany, yet there, too, he faltered.

Herbert Hoover, the nation's first Quaker president, consistently stood for mercy, but his fortunes fell in tragic fashion. Hoover had been an international icon, having organized relief efforts during World War I. A gifted mining engineer with a knack for logistics, Hoover's actions as a private citizen to deliver food and medicine to occupied Belgium earned him the moniker "the Great Humanitarian."<sup>25</sup> For a time, he was arguably the most admired man in America, but as president he failed disastrously to lift his country out of the Great Depression. Shunned by both parties and scorned by the public, Hoover toiled in political purgatory. Even Franklin Roosevelt, when encouraged to invite the former president to the White House for consultations, quipped, "I'm not Jesus Christ. I can't resurrect him." And then, to everyone's amazement, the postwar food crisis brought Hoover back into the limelight. The Great Humanitarian dusted off his rescue playbook, speechified his Christian values, and embarked upon a worldwide mission to once more feed despairing nations. How he came to be in the position of global savior is as compelling as the mission itself, for his resurrection had everything to do with the vicious Washington intrigues being waged behind the scenes.

Hoover and Stimson did not stand alone. Several key officials strove to prevent or undo the vengeful actions of their nation. Some labored from within, such as the millionaire magnate Will Clayton, a Texas cotton king who served his country through the State Department, at first helping shape the bitter peace for Germany, then recoiling after witnessing the cruelty of its effects. Some consider Clayton the true father of the Marshall Plan: the billion-dollar transfer of American wealth that remade Western Europe. Another voice for mercy came from Joseph Grew, the Bostonian aristocrat and longtime ambassador to Tokyo. After six months as a prisoner of the Japanese Empire, he returned to America on a speaking tour aimed at softening hatred toward the people of Japan. Had he succeeded, the atomic bombs might never have been used.

And there were others, lower down, who pressed for mercy, calling on the American sense of fairness. A lieutenant commander of naval intelligence risked his career to combat the Japanese-American relocation. Two young attorneys in the Justice Department heroically attempted to expose a cover-up about internment. And there were those outside of government, from Quaker Friends to Protestant clergy, driven by a Christian conviction that fairness and decency should form the basis of any action. They all believed that harming innocent civilians, especially children, was “not who we are” as a nation, and they said so in strikingly similar words. Each, in his or her own way, sought to ameliorate the worst effects of wartime anger and racial animus. Yet their opponents cannot be seen as sinister, for they, too, believed that their actions were morally justified.

The advocates of mercy wanted to build a better world, and that same desire drove the ones who demanded retribution. The man behind the harsh peace for Germans genuinely believed that his plan to cripple Germany would form the foundation of a lasting peace. The men who devised and enforced the concentration camps for Japanese Americans did so in part because they believed it was essential to secure the nation. And the few who advocated the use of atomic bombs against civilians believed it necessary for the future stability of world order. Or at least that was what they told themselves and others, but the truth was more complex. None of these decisions was straightforward or clear-cut. Each involved degrees of moral ambiguity. And all of the key players grappled with shades of gray. We will meet each of these leaders within these pages. We will learn their

stories and the reasons why they thought the way they did. And we will look beneath the surface of their convictions to find sometimes a hopeful faith in humanity, and at other times a misplaced longing for revenge.

These are truly human dramas, full of noble aspirations mixed with baser needs. Efforts at world peace were fueled by individual ambitions. Calls for punishing an enemy in the name of the public good were often driven by hunger for private gain. The quest for global security flowed not in a direct line from A-bombs to occupation zones but in stutter steps from vengeance to virtue. America's emergence as number one came at the needless cost of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives but was then cemented by the saving of millions more.

*This Is Not Who We Are* spotlights America's struggle to be good at the moment it was becoming great. It asks why the United States treated its enemies cruelly when most American leaders and the public supported mercy. It shows how a handful of officials managed to impose their will upon a flawed policy process, thwarting the kinder intentions of the majority. But the book also shows how the country tried to atone for its inhumane actions by leading the world in humanitarian acts. To suggest that America reclaimed some of its humanity in the years just after the war is not to claim that the country suddenly became morally pristine. The list of injustices committed against others, domestically and abroad, is a catalogue of moral failings.<sup>26</sup> But if we are to be objective, we must also examine the many humane acts that Americans pursued – for those actions alleviated suffering and saved lives. I show how the cruel and the compassionate deeds were intertwined and cannot be understood in isolation.

My previous books have dealt with the problem of enemies: how we assess them, how we try to predict their behavior, why we often fail to read them correctly, and just as important, why we sometimes succeed. In this book, rather than examining enemy assessments, I instead focus on the way that enemies were treated. My larger aim is to offer a historian's take on judgment. I believe that the decisions about how to treat enemies (both actual and perceived) can offer us a unique window on wisdom. But to access those insights, we must explore how people grappled with hard ethical choices when the stakes were the highest they could be.

## Background and Approach

It has been more than thirty-five years since John W. Dower published his acclaimed study of racism in the US-Japan conflict, *War Without Mercy*,<sup>27</sup> and since that time, most scholars assume that racism explains the ferocity of that war. Racism was so deep and widespread across the United States in the 1940s that it was not surprising that Dower found ample evidence of racist attitudes on the part of American leaders and the public. But while racism clearly intensified the battlespace, racism alone cannot explain some of the harshest wartime policies. Many high-level American leaders tried hard to prevent not only some of the most vengeful measures against Japanese and Japanese Americans but also those directed against the German populace. This book spotlights the intense struggles within the highest echelons of American government to create what many leaders saw as humane policies. And though they ultimately failed, their efforts demonstrate that at least in the innermost circles of government, rather than being a war without mercy, WWII was in many ways a war over mercy. It was an ongoing series of struggles between those who pushed for vengeance and those who favored moderation.

This book also challenges the recent depiction of the United States offered by Stephen Wertheim in *Tomorrow the World*.<sup>28</sup> Like many works in the vein of William Appleman Williams's *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, Wertheim and scores of like-minded scholars have argued that American leaders often single-mindedly sought economic and military imperialism around the globe. This book offers a more complex view. It affirms that certain officials did pursue American expansion, but it emphasizes the considerable efforts to spread American power for what those individuals saw as humane reasons.

The Williams lineage of scholarship has advanced our understanding of America's rise, but it has tended to focus on singular motives for expansion, whether economic, military, ideological, cultural, or other. The problem with that approach is that motives are typically mixed. Individuals and governments act out of multiple motivations. Isolating a single factor can be illuminating, but it tends to skew our perception of the intricate process of decision making. This book does indeed focus on a particular motivation – mercy toward one's enemies (or perceived enemies) – but it tries to present this subject within the



context of numerous competing drives: the thirst for vengeance, the craving for power, the demand for security, the hunger for personal gain, the desire to outflank individual rivals, the yearning to repay acts of friendship, and the noble hope to act with honor. Just as Thucydides observed more than two and a half millennia ago, wars bring out the vast range of human motivations, and no single cause can explain it all.

Although most of the historic decisions I cover in this book have been studied in depth, they have typically been studied in isolation. Scholars have given us countless weighty monographs on subjects such as the Marshall Plan, the atom bombs, the internment, and related matters. But the decisions that produced these actions must be seen as an organic process. Only when we view their interconnections can we grasp how and why they came to pass. Because many of the same people took part in each decision, they learned from their interactions. The dynamics of one decision shaped the outcome of the next. Historians have too often overlooked this crucial element in the story of America's rise, and that is unfortunate, because decisions are never made in a vacuum. I hope that this book can heighten the importance of studying decision webs.

Every book is by nature limited in scope. In order to do justice to certain subjects, I had to omit others. There is still more to be said about the fire bombings of Japan, the aerial bombings of Germany, the rebuilding of postwar Japan, the nature of humanitarian aid, and so many other morally complex issues. One reason I chose to focus on the three cases in Part I was because they involved interactions among many of the same individuals, though the cases themselves were each distinct. This made them excellent examples of group decision making over time. But another reason for studying the Japanese-American internment, the initial occupation policy for Germany, and the atomic bombings is that they hold special relevance for a study of moral judgments: each eventually came to be seen by many as immoral. Within two years of Germany's surrender, the punitive occupation policy had to be reversed by the Marshall Plan. Decades later, the internment was declared an injustice, and the government paid restitution to the survivors. And although the wisdom of the atomic bombings of Japan remains debated, shortly after the war a movement arose among some American Christians to atone for these attacks. The penultimate chapter details that drive, and how it transformed into an effort to Christianize the Japanese.

Because I focused on the ethical struggles that American leaders confronted both during and after the war, I necessarily had to examine some of their religious views. It is important that readers distinguish between my own views and the views of the people I present. Readers will find that most of the main characters in this story were Protestants, who spoke unselfconsciously of their Christian values. When I write about their Christian virtues, I am neither endorsing nor deriding those beliefs; I am simply reflecting how those individuals viewed themselves and the world. Their speeches, and also their private writings, frequently employed references to the Christian duty to one's fellow man. Today, much of their language can seem sexist, pious, and out of step with America's secular mainstream. But if we want to comprehend these decision makers' moral judgments, we cannot ignore their religious beliefs, even when their words might make some of us uncomfortable. As a historian, it would be professionally negligent, and an act of cultural erasure, to omit this important aspect of their world view.

The phrase "This is not who we are" is likewise not a reflection of my own view of America. To me, it seems unreasonable to claim that any nation is good or bad. Rather, I see countries as collections of individuals, groups, and institutions that engage in varying degrees of good and ill at various points in time. But the sentiment "This is not who we are" did reflect how many of the people in this book viewed America in the 1940s. They frequently spoke of the goodness of the American people. They commonly referred to its Christian character. And they often did this precisely as their government's actions flagrantly belied those vaunted values. But at other times they conjured notions of American virtue in order to encourage sacrifice and compassion for strangers overseas. When they employed phrases like "This is not who we are," we should interpret those words not as their declarative affirmations of the country's character but rather as their aspirational ideals. The phrase "This is not who we are" should therefore not be taken literally. It is merely, yet profoundly, an expression of a wish. They were really saying, "This is not who we want to be."

It is easy to look back and say what should have been done. That is the luxury of being a historian, spared from the pressures of the moment, freed from the crushing weight of consequence. And that is one more reason why I felt drawn to the three cases of vengeance in Part I. Each involved people struggling with life-altering, world-changing choices. They found themselves tied up in morally ambiguous knots

that no one could easily sever. Some of them tried to use their virtues as their guide. I wanted to explore that process in the hope that we might profit from what they learned.

For the past fifteen years I have had the honor of teaching military officers about great power competition. My students come not only from the United States' armed services but also from allied nations around the world. One lesson I hope to convey to them is that power is never just about tanks, planes, and guns. It is more crucially about ideals. If power is the ability to get what you want, then that ability is enhanced when a country acts in accordance with attractive principles. When a country treats others with decency, dignity, and a deep sense of fairness, it not only enhances its own power, it also builds a better world. Sometimes the human emotions of anger, hatred, and thirst for revenge can cause leaders and their publics to forget that simple truth. The struggle between those who understood the roots of lasting power and those who didn't formed an underlying tension throughout the 1940s. It is a struggle that still plagues great power conflicts to this day. As America embarks on a new era of great power competition and cooperation, it should remember that its ideals are among its greatest source of strength. But to fully appreciate this fact, we must first learn the story of America's internal conflicts over vengeance. We must know why Americans were insisting that "This is not who we are," at the very moment they began to lead the world.

