

OUR VIEW

Unworthy Anniversary

Sixty years ago, this month, the U.S. military dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, effectively ending World War II and effectively beginning a nuclear arms race that, at times over the past six decades, has periodically threatened to plunge the globe into chaos. Amid anniversary commemorations of those fateful August days and the struggles of a six-nation coalition, led by the United States, to rein in North Korea's nuclear capabilities—and send a message to other nations with nuclear aspirations—Americans would do well to revisit the devastation wrought by the bombs.

By most accounts, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed nearly 250,000 people; half died on Aug. 6 and Aug. 9, the respective days of the attacks; the rest succumbed over the years to things like cancer. The suffering of the bomb survivors, known as hibakusha—Japanese “for bomb affected people”—became a powerful reminder of drastic impact of war on a nuclear level. Sadly, it's a message that seems to get lost every year around this time, swallowed up by round-the-clock, round-the-channels and round-the-radio-dial commemorations of how America swatted Japan away like some pesky fly at a backyard barbecue.

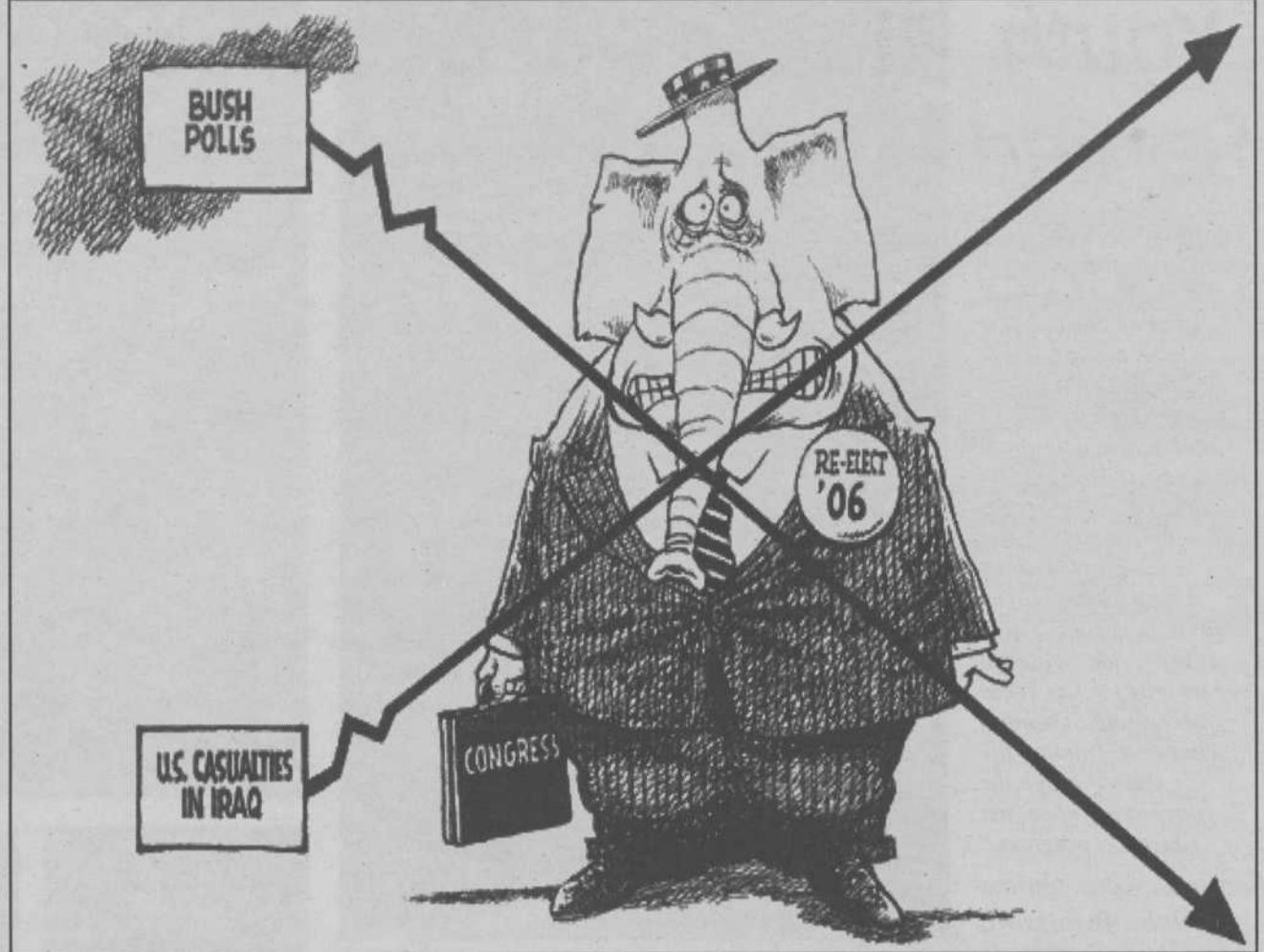
If the current debacle of a war in Iraq is good for anything—other than lining the pockets of Halliburton brass and proving that neo-conservatism isn't foolproof ideology, rather an ideology hijacked by fools—it's in reminding us that war is the worst kind of human theater and that World War II was the worst of that. The day America dropped the bombs is the day the great atomic debate began. Over the last 60 years, intellectuals of every ideological and political stripe have either defended or ridiculed America's use of atomic weaponry.

A 1997 excerpt from “Perspectives,” published at Ohio University, encapsulates the debate: “Some respected historians say the bombing was avoidable at best, and analogous to Nazi war crimes at worst. They argue that there were alternatives to using the bomb: naval blockade, modification of unconditional surrender terms, conventional bombing, and waiting just a little longer to see if the Soviet Union's August 9 entry into the war would prompt the Japanese to surrender.

“But according to a consensus of historians with the Ohio University Contemporary History Institute, such conclusions ignore context, including the war's own momentum and the broader historical record. For example, Okinawa—the deadliest Pacific War battle—had ended in mid-June, with nearly 50,000 American casualties. At that time, Truman told his Joint Chiefs of Staff that he ‘hoped there was a possibility of preventing an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other.’”

Perhaps more important than the debate over whether dropping atomic bombs was the correct thing to do is squaring talk of how America's actions ended World War II with the damage wrought by that decision—tens of thousands of innocent people died. When is it OK to kill innocents in the name of war? Is it? Certainly, U.S. military strategists could've used other approaches that would've curtailed civilian casualties. Such casualties, sadly, are a part of war, some people rightfully argue. But how much civilian death is too much? The human toll from the Japan bombings are enough to populate a small metropolis. To some outsiders, America became less of a democratic power and more of a despotic one, ready to swing its nuclear stick at any challengers.

Now back to the war in Iraq. We hear about the U.S. soldiers killed in the line of duty—led to their deaths, we later discovered, because of falsified information about weapons of mass destruction and tangential connections between Iraqi leaders and terrorists—and we're deeply troubled/saddened by the losses. However, we rarely hear about Iraqi civilian casualties, as though their lives are less precious. There's even a term for them: collateral damage. But another one is more fitting: Murder victims.



Convicted by juries, exonerated by DNA

By Dora LaGrande
Sentinel-Voice

The overall perception in this country is that our system of criminal justice is best described as a search for the truth. Increasingly, the forensic use of DNA technology is an important ally in that search. DNA aids the search for truth by exonerating the innocent. The criminal justice system is not infallible; it is not fair, and it is more discriminatory than most other U.S. systems. We simply cannot say we live in a country that offers equal justice to all Americans when racial disparities plague the system by which our society imposes the ultimate punishment.

Last week, two men who were convicted in jury trials, both minorities (one Black, one Hispanic), were exonerated by DNA evidence that cleared them of rape convictions. Thomas Doswell, who was released last Monday, spent 19 years in prison for a rape he didn't commit, and he was denied parole four times because he refused to accept responsibility for the crime. Doswell was misidentified by a victim and another witness who picked his photo from a group of eight they were shown by the police, who had marked his picture with an “R,” the letter police placed on mug shots of people charged with rape.

Luis Diaz, who spent 26 years behind bars, was known as the “Bird Road Rapist.”



ON THE RECORD

By Dora LaGrande

He was released last Wednesday after DNA evidence cleared him in two attacks and cast doubt on whether he was responsible for any of the crimes. Diaz was convicted in 1980 and sentenced to life in prison for seven of 25 sexual assaults that occurred between 1977 and 1979 in the Bird Road area of Coral Gables, Fla. Diaz was convicted by eight victims who identified him, even though most of them described a much heavier Hispanic who spoke English. Diaz, a Cuban-American, spoke very little English and because of his work as a fry cook, smelled of onions, which not one victim mentioned. What ever happened to reasonable doubt?

Since 1992, over 160 people have been exonerated because of DNA evidence. Post-conviction DNA exonerations provide a wonderful opportunity to re-examine, with greater insight than ever before, the strengths and weaknesses of our criminal justice system. We can examine how they bear on the all-important question of factual innocence. FBI officials report that out of 10,000 sexual assault cases since 1992, about 2,000 tests (20 percent) have been inconclusive,

2,000 (20 percent) have excluded the primary suspect, and 6,000 (60 percent) have matched or included the primary suspect. These percentages have remained constant for last 13 years and overwhelmingly 75 percent to 85 percent of the suspects were minorities.

With evidence this astounding, we have to ask ourselves why would the nation's prosecutors, who are supposed to be champions of justice, oppose defense applications for testing. Don't prosecutors have a professional and moral duty to seek the truth? Just as pretrial DNA testing has illuminated the unexpected frequency with which police and prosecutors have targeted the wrong person, post-convic-

tion testing in cases that were tried 15 or more years ago can exonerate those wrongly convicted, and testing can possibly identify the true perpetrator.

Prosecutors virtually have nothing to lose, except — in my opinion — the chance to lock up another innocent Black or Hispanic. The nation's prosecutors are overwhelmingly White. Of all the prosecutors in death penalty states, less than half of a percent is Black or minority, and they are fighting post-conviction DNA testing with everything that they have. For now, it's a small victory for the convicted: 23 states have been funded to the tune of \$342 million for post-conviction DNA testing.

While progress is being made, the wheels of justice are turning too slowly. More than 350 African-Americans have been executed since 1977, and racial disparities in sentencing rates continue. Death by discrimination is (See LaGrande, Page 11)

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