

71 years after the first atomic strike, Obama calls for the end of nuclear weapons at Hiroshima

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President Obama called for an end to nuclear weapons in a solemn visit to Hiroshima to offer respects to the victims of the world's first deployed atomic bomb. (Reuters)

By [David Nakamura](#) May 27 at 6:45 AM

HIROSHIMA — Nearly 71 years after an American bomber passed high above this Japanese city on a clear August morning for a mission that would alter history, President Obama on Friday called for an end to nuclear weapons in a solemn visit to Hiroshima to offer respects to the victims of the world's first deployed atomic bomb.

Writing in the Hiroshima Peace Park guest book, Obama called for the courage to “spread peace and pursue a world without nuclear weapons.” In later remarks, he said that scientific strides must be matched by moral progress or mankind was doomed.

Obama's visit had brought great anticipation in Hiroshima, and across Japan, among those who longed for an American president to acknowledge the suffering of the estimated 140,000 killed during the bombing on Aug. 6, 1945 and its aftermath. That figure includes 20,000 Koreans who had been forced by the Japanese military to work in the city for the imperial war machine.

[\[More and more Americans question the Hiroshima bombing. But would they do it again? Maybe.\]](#)

Three days later in 1945, a second U.S. atomic bomb in Nagasaki killed a total of 80,000, including another 30,000 Koreans. Most of those killed in both cities were civilians. The Japanese emperor announced his nation's surrender a week later.

On Friday, people lined streets as Obama's motorcade entered the city. The presidential limousine pulled up behind the Peace Memorial Museum.

In the park, guests were seated just in front of the curved, concrete cenotaph that pays tribute to the dead with an eternal flame burning just beyond it. The Genbaku Dome, or A-bomb dome, the

preserved, skeletal remnants of a municipal building destroyed in the blast, was visible in the distance.

National Security Adviser Susan E. Rice and Ambassador Caroline Kennedy walked out from near the museum, along with their Japanese counterparts, followed by Obama and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe.

Then Obama was handed a wreath and laid it on a stand in front of the cenotaph. He bowed his head and stood silently for a minute. Abe then did the same.

“We come to remember the terrible force unleashed in the not-so-distant past,” Obama said, adding that the souls of the people who died in this city “speak to us and they ask us to look inward and take stock of how we are and what we might become.”

The president called for nations to reconsider the development of nuclear weapons and to roll back and “ultimately eliminate” them.

What the aftermath of Hiroshima looked like



The United States atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan, on Aug. 6, 1945, killed 140,000 people and nearly destroyed the city.

“The world was forever changed here. But today, the children of this city will go through their day in peace. What a precious thing that is. It is worth protecting, and then extending to every child. That is the future we can choose,” he said. “A future in which Hiroshima and Nagasaki are known not for the bomb of atomic warfare but as the start of our own moral awakening.”

After the remarks, Obama and Abe walked to the front row to greet Sunao Tsuboi, a survivor of the atomic blast, who stood up clutching a walking cane. Then Obama greeted Shigeaki Mori, another survivor, giving him a hug.

The president and prime minister then walked north toward the dome. Reporters rushing to get photographs of the two got involved into an aggressive shoving match with Secret Service agents and Japanese security officials.

[For Japan's envoy in Washington, a homecoming in Hiroshima]

Obama and Abe stood together gazed at the dome for several minutes. Abe appeared to be explaining the significance to Obama. To their left was a statue of Sadako, a child who died of radiation and became known for her colorful paper cranes, that have become a symbol of Hiroshima's effort to promote peace.

Obama's motorcade snaked back through the city to the helicopters waiting to ferry the president on the start of his journey home after a weeklong Asian trip.

As the first sitting president to visit Hiroshima, Obama's visit was infused with symbolism for the two nations that have transformed from bitter World War II enemies into the closest of allies.

Prior to the ceremony, Obama visited the Marine Corps Air Station in Iwakuni, about 25 miles south of Hiroshima, and spoke to a group of U.S. and Japanese troops. He told them that his trip to Hiroshima is an "opportunity to honor the memory of all who were lost during World War II, a chance to reaffirm the commitment to pursuing the peace and security of a world where nuclear weapons are no longer be necessary. It's a testament to how even the most painful divides could be bridged — that our two nations who were former adversaries could not just become partners but best of friends and the strongest of allies.

"This base is a powerful example of that," he added.

[Remembering Hiroshima: "Stop working. We lost the war."]

Previous U.S. presidents had avoided Hiroshima over fears that a visit would be regarded as an apology for President Harry Truman's decision to authorize the bombings, which historians say was done in an attempt to avoid a planned invasion of Japan.

But Obama and his advisers believed the time was right, in his final year in office, to make the pilgrimage — not as an apology but rather to highlight the alliance between the two nations and to warn of the dangers of modern nuclear weapons, exponentially more powerful than the bombs dropped in Japan.

Obama has had mixed success in reducing and safeguarding the global nuclear weapons cache and fissile materials stockpile. Aides said he hoped his visit would reaffirm U.S. commitment to disarmament and nonproliferation, with seven months left in office.

A day before his visit while attending an economic summit in Ise City, Obama called the use of atomic bombs an “inflection point in modern history” and said the fate of such weapons “is something that all of us have had to deal with in one way or another.”

For Obama, another challenge is to use the visit to advance the process of reconciliation in the Asia Pacific, where old wartime grievances have been slower to heal than they have among some of the European combatants of World War II.

Obama sought to make clear that while all sides suffered, all sides also bear responsibility for the horrors of war, even as Japan and its neighbors continue a bitter debate over long-ago wartime atrocities.

The White House has said it would welcome Abe to Pearl Harbor, where plans are underway to mark the 75th anniversary of the Japanese attack on Dec. 7. One senior U.S. official said he would be surprised if Abe did not come, though the prime minister said at a news conference this week that he had no plans at this time.

Abe reminded reporters that he gave a speech to the U.S. Congress during a state visit to Washington last spring that reflected on the war and the sacrifices of Americans. The prime minister also accompanied Obama on a tour of the World War II Memorial, where Abe laid a wreath and prayed for the souls of the dead.

It's not just Hiroshima: The many other things America hasn't apologized for

By [Adam Taylor](#) May 26

What the aftermath of Hiroshima looked like



The United States atomic bombing of Hiroshima, Japan, on Aug. 6, 1945, killed 140,000 people and nearly destroyed the city.

This week, President Obama will become the first sitting [U.S. president to visit Hiroshima](#), the Japanese city that the United States nearly destroyed with a nuclear bomb in 1945. While the bombing is estimated to have killed as many as 150,000 people, Obama is not expected to apologize during his visit.

It's reasonable to ask, after more than 70 years, why not apologize for Hiroshima? One well-worn argument is that the bombing of the city (and the atomic bombing of Nagasaki that followed) was morally justifiable as it was the quickest way to end World War II — a conflict that had already taken millions of lives.

[\[How the Hiroshima bombing is taught around the world\]](#)

But another argument is broader and perhaps even more persuasive: Apologizing simply isn't something the United States does, nor do many other countries. "We don't apologize, ever," said Jennifer Lind, a professor at Dartmouth College and the author of "[Sorry States: Apologies in International Politics](#)." This isn't a unique facet of American diplomacy, either. "Countries in general do not apologize for violence against other countries," Lind added, noting that Germany and, to a lesser degree, Japan are outliers, as they have actually apologized.

In interviews produced by the Japanese government, survivors talk about the experience of living through the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan)

But what else has America not apologized for? Here are a few ideas.

Agent Orange in Vietnam



A warning sign stands in a field contaminated with dioxin near Danang airport, during a ceremony marking the start of a project to clean up dioxin left over from the Vietnam War, at a former U.S. military base in Danang, Vietnam, Thursday, Aug. 9, 2012. The sign reads; "Dioxin contamination zone - livestock, poultry and fishery operations not permitted". (AP Photo/Maika Elan)

During the Vietnam War, the United States sprayed about 12 million gallons of Agent Orange, a herbicide, over areas of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos in a bid to both remove cover for Vietcong and North Vietnamese fighters and kill food crops. Since then, the Red Cross of Vietnam [has estimated that about 1 million](#) people were disabled or suffered health problems because of contact with the herbicide.

[Legacies of war: Forty years after the fall of Saigon, soldiers' children are still left behind]

While the United States has sometimes disputed the link between Agent Orange and health problems, it has contributed more than \$100 million to help clean up the herbicide aftermath. Congress has also allocated (far smaller) sums to health and disability programs that often target those who may have been harmed by Agent Orange. However, there [has been no apology for this](#) or for other controversies of the war, such as widespread U.S. [use of landmines](#).

The 1953 coup in Iran



President Jimmy Carter toasts the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran during New Year's Eve dinner at Niavaran Palace in Tehran on Saturday, Dec. 31, 1977. (AP Photo)

In 1953, democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mossadegh was overthrown in a coup. In Mossadegh's place, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi was reinstated as the shah of Iran, overseeing policies that were widely seen as restrictive and corrupt. The shah was in turn ousted from office by the 1979 Iranian revolution, which installed Iran's current Islamic theocracy.

In declassified documents, the CIA has acknowledged that the overthrow of Mossadegh was "carried out under CIA direction as an act of U.S. foreign policy, conceived and approved at the highest levels of government," with the [aid of the](#) British Secret Intelligence Service.

[The key moments in the long history of U.S.-Iran tensions]

However, the United States and Britain have never apologized for their role in the coup, with the Obama administration recently stating that it [had no plans to](#). The negative effects of the coup have been acknowledged by some U.S. figures, notably former secretary of state Madeleine Albright. "The coup was clearly a setback for Iran's political development," Albright [said in 2000](#). "And it is easy to see now why many Iranians continue to resent this intervention by America in their internal affairs."

The 1973 coup in Chile



Socialist Senator Salvador Allende, (eyeglasses), one of three presidential candidates, leaves Government House on Aug. 27, 1970 in Santiago, Chile. (AP Photo)

The United States is also widely suspected of involvement in a bloody 1973 coup that ousted socialist Chilean President Salvador Allende in 1973 and put dictator Augusto Pinochet in control of the country. Pinochet would go on to lead the country for 17 years, during which his regime was accused of the rampant use of abduction, torture and murder. The [CIA has denied](#) any direct involvement in the coup, though it acknowledged it had been opposed to Allende's presidency.

In 1977, Brady Tyson, deputy leader of the U.S. delegation to the U.N. Human Rights Commission in Geneva, did attempt to offer an apology for the U.S. involvement in the coup, but he was quickly [disavowed by the State Department](#). When Obama traveled to Chile in 2011, he brushed aside a [request for an apology](#) from a Chilean reporter. "The history of relations between the United

States and Latin America have at times been extremely rocky and have at times been difficult," Obama [said](#). "But we're not trapped by our history."

The West African slave trade



President Bill Clinton watches African leaders sign an agreement on the prevention of genocide, at the Entebbe Summit for Peace and Prosperity held in Entebbe, Uganda Wednesday, March 25, 1998. (AP Photo/Greg Gibson)

The U.S. Congress offered an apology for slavery to African Americans in 2009 (though it was specifically [worded in a way](#) that meant it could not be used as a legal rationale for reparations). But what apologies have been made to the African countries whose modern history the slave trade helped shape?

Not a lot, it turns out. Bill Clinton came close to making an apology during a presidential trip to Uganda in 1998. "Going back to the time before we were even a nation, European Americans received the fruits of the slave trade," Clinton had told a crowd [in a village outside](#) Kampala, the Ugandan capital, in what were said to be impromptu remarks. "And we were wrong in that."

At the time, critics quickly argued that the wording of the comments implied regret rather than a formal apology. And the location was odd: Most slaves came from West Africa, not Uganda. Clinton had been in [Senegal just a week before](#), where the comments may have carried far more weight.

Support for Congo's dictator



President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire (now Congo) and his wife Bobi Lawda wave to supporters from their limousine as they pass by in Kinshasa, Tuesday, Dec. 17, 1996. (AP PHOTO/Michel Euler)

Patrice Lumumba was the first democratically elected prime minister of Congo. However, he was ousted just 12 weeks into his term and then killed four months after that on July 2, 1961. The assassination, which took place just seven months after his country's independence from Belgium and in the heat of the Cold War, has come to be viewed as a disaster for the troubled country.

Belgium would acknowledge its role in the [assassination in 2002](#) and offer its official apologies for the move. It's unclear whether the CIA had any direct link to that plot, but it is known that it carried [out huge covert operations](#) in Congo during this period. The United States would soon go on to support dictator Joseph-Desiré Mobutu (who later changed his name to Mobutu Sese Seko) and his immensely corrupt regime for decades. No apologies have been made.

The 2003 invasion of Iraq



A statue of Saddam Hussein is pulled down by U.S. troops and Iraqi civilians in Firdaus Square, in downtown Baghdad in this April 9, 2003, photo. (AP Photo/Jerome Delay)

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 is clearly one of the most controversial moments in recent history. Even if the war took out dictator Saddam Hussein, many would argue that it brought chaos to the wider region that persists to this day. At the least, the death toll among Iraqis was huge, though estimates are depressingly vague: Most [suggest that a few hundred thousand](#) people lost their lives, at the least.

George W. Bush, the U.S. president who ordered that invasion, has expressed some remorse for the faulty intelligence touted in the run-up to the conflict, but he has refused requests to apologize for the invasion itself. "I'm convinced that if [Hussein] were in power today, the world would be much worse off," he told [CNN in 2010](#), denying that the war had been a "lost cause."

Iran Air Flight 655



Iranian children throw flowers into the sea as part of a 24th anniversary commemoration of the downing of Iran Air flight 655. (ATTA KENARE/AFP/GettyImages)

On July 3, 1988, the USS Vincennes fired two surface-to-air missiles at an aircraft it mistakenly believed was an Iranian F-14 fighter flying over the Persian Gulf. Instead, the plane was actually Iran Air Flight 655 — a civilian airliner flying from the nearby Bandar Abbas International Airport, bound for Dubai. All 290 passengers and crew on board were killed.

The shoot-down happened at a time of tension between Iran and the United States, which was at that point backing Iraq in its war with Tehran. Despite the tragic nature of the incident, Washington offered [little contrition](#). George H.W. Bush, the U.S. vice president at the time who was then on the campaign trail for the upcoming election, was even quoted as saying, "I will never apologize for the United States — I don't care what the facts are" (though this was not in direct reference to Iran Air Flight 655).

In 1996, President Bill Clinton expressed regret over the incident, and the United States paid the Iranian government \$131.8 million in compensation, with around \$61.8 million going to the families of those killed. But no formal apology or acknowledgment of wrongdoing was ever made.

What apologies have been made?

Looking over this short list (and thinking of the numerous other events out there that we missed), it might be reasonable to wonder when America has actually apologized for foreign events. There are a few pretty clear examples: The United States apologized in 2010 for American [experiments on Guatemalans in the 1940s](#), for example, and in 1993, it said sorry for its role in the [1893 overthrow](#) of the Hawaiian monarchy. Also, Washington does tend to apologize more readily for smaller-scale incidents: In 2012, Obama [apologized profusely](#) for U.S. military involvement in the burning of copies of the Koran in Afghanistan in 2012.

But overall, apologies tend to be the exception and nonapologies the rule. The logic here is not moral but rather political. Apologies are often controversial from the apologizers' side, Lind explained, which means that the apology may be tempered or halfhearted. In turn, people in the country receiving the apology are often not satisfied, creating more political headaches. There are further discussions about what actually constitutes an official apology and how it could affect calls for legal reparations.