

This is Patricia's and my ninth summer living in Arizona, and since I spent most of my life in the midwest, the summer solstice and the autumnal equinox notwithstanding, Memorial Day weekend was the traditional and is my personal beginning of summer, and Labor Day its end. And for reasons that will become apparent, I want to draw upon two experiences of a summer exactly twenty-one years ago, though that summer's beginning and ending dates play no role in my comments.

My younger son, Steve — whose older daughter's graduation I attended two weeks back (she is actually his "step-daughter," has been now for eleven years, but though her own father is still alive and a part of her life, she really regards Steve as "Daddy" and Patricia and me as true grandparents) — Steve had graduated from Valparaiso University in December of 1994, having spent the summer of that year living in Moscow under the auspices of a program permitting college students to live abroad for a few months. While in Moscow, he had been able to spend a few days in St. Petersburg, one of several cities that can claim to be "the Venice of the North."

In the summer of '95, Steve was single, and living and working in a far west suburb of Chicago, and when the opportunity for his first week of vacation in July arose, my late wife, Carol, felt sorry that he would have to vacation alone, and suggested that I should go somewhere with him. He had often expressed interest in visiting Brazil where I had made a number of business trips, and so I suggested to him we go there, but he responded, "You've always wanted to go to Russia" — some of you may recall when I will quote Tolstoy or speak of Dostoyevski or of Russian music — and so we did. We flew to St. Petersburg, where we spent almost five days before taking an overnight train to Moscow — but let me return to St. Petersburg in a few moments.

As you most certainly know, this past week, President Obama visited Hiroshima. Hiroshima was bombed on August 6, 1945 — fifty years and a few weeks before Steve's and my trip.

Now, it was in the fall of that same 1995 that I was to begin — did begin — seminary, and if I am not mistaken, the Sunday in August just before the fiftieth anniversary of Hiroshima and shortly after Steve's and my return from Russia was the last time I preached at the church in Ogden Dunes, Indiana, in which I became a Presbyterian and later was ordained as a minister. So, somewhat as today, Hiroshima, I felt, was an appropriate point on which to touch during my sermon.

Now if you are wondering where I am going with these separate threads, let me not keep you waiting. When Steve had visited St. Petersburg the previous summer, he had gone to a spot he wanted me to see. St. Petersburg, for those who might not recall, had been renamed after the Communist Revolution, renamed "Leningrad," and in World War II, the Nazis had besieged Leningrad for about 900 days. The population fell by more than a million people, and the spot to which Steve had wanted to and did take me the evening we left was a cemetery where roughly 500,000 who died in that siege were buried, mostly in massive long mounds. 500,000. Estimates of the number of Russians killed in "The Great War" are often given as 20 million.

For reference, US war deaths in World War II were about 405,000, less than the number of Russians — civilians, mainly, — buried in those St. Petersburg mounds.

Hiroshima was horrible; 80,000 people are estimated to have been killed immediately and about 60,000 are estimated to have died later of radiation poisoning, yet three days later, the Japanese had not surrendered, and an additional 40,000 were killed, and 20,000 died later of radiation poisoning, after the bombing of Nagasaki. While wrought and caused by a different enemy, Leningrad vividly — if that is not a paradoxical choice of words — displays how many deaths can result from one conventional weapons battle. I can understand how President Truman, *or anyone* who might value human life, though essentially pacifist, yet familiar with the magnitude of the horrors of that war could have made the decision he did.

And so I told my fellow Ogden Dunes congregants in that last sermon there.

Even today there are some voices arguing that President Truman did not need to drop that first bomb, and there are those who dispute that the existence of the bomb has not been a primary reason that despite more-or-less constant wars among peoples of the world, World War III has not — at least not *yet*, Vladimir Putin's words are alarming and that the Chinese plan atomic missiles on submarines in the Pacific equally so — World War III has not yet occurred; may it never. MAD ("mutually-assured-destruction," for those unfamiliar with the term) is not a comforting basis for peace, yet it has been effective.

And protecting the peace, protecting its people, is the number one reason, if not for all governments that history has known, for government among the American people, which makes it tragically ironic that the costliest war in our still brief history, the Great Civil War, cost half-again as many lives as did World War II.

Yet we need remember always that government is a *human* institution, and as such, it is prone to error, to sin.

In my bulletin comments to the excerpt we read from Paul's letter to the Romans, I purposely avoided asking the question I ask now: *Would Paul say that Hitler was God's chosen?* No; it is important to remember that Paul practiced *real politik*; he was protecting those who might possess his letters from arrest and persecution from the Roman authorities, the same authorities who presumably put Paul to death, though we do not know for sure.

And when we read the excerpt from Exodus about elders being appointed to help Moses, which I suggest anticipates a bit Plato's "philosopher kings," we do not quite get the fear that . . . well, wait, the writers of the Hebrew Bible may not have foreseen in the same words as Plato and Aristotle the dangers of *tyrants*, but the reason I had us read from Judges was that those same writers of the Hebrew Bible judged the kings of Israel and Judah by whether or not they worshipped the God of Israel and God alone, or whether

they worshipped and allowed the people to worship idols to other gods, for then the whole nation(s) suffered. They might not have used the word, “tyrants,” yet those writers recognized that bad leadership from government was bad for the Hebrew people; their bad kings were, effectively, *tyrants*.

Why does all this matter to us Christians and us Americans (our Canadian friends have, I believe, all gone back north) on this Memorial Day weekend?

It is because we need government leaders to worship, shall we say, the *right* gods, and whether or not they in fact *worship* the one true God, that they will allow God to work through them by pursuing the values you and I draw from our faith.

But worshipping God, even being sincere in one’s Christian faith is, I am sorry to say, not enough to assure the ideals of government are achieved. President Jimmy Carter was — is — as sincere a man of faith as any President has been, and achieved a great deal through the Sinai Accord between Egypt and Israel, and he did generally act on principle, as with the boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, but few would argue his was a particularly good presidency for overall world peace; George W. Bush is a man of similarly strong faith, but whether the right move or not, the Iraq War is a stain on his reputation.

But my comments on these men is simply prelude to this: I do not know about Harry Truman’s faith; I have not read what is supposed to be the excellent biography on him by David McCullough. Yet I must assume that Truman valued human life greatly as he made the decision he did over using those first atomic bombs. I believe even a Christian Pacifist could make that decision.

Presidents must do that sort of thing.

Consider the President during whose tenure those first honored on Memorial Day gave their lives: Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln had a view of history that was much like the deuteronomic history of the Hebrew Bible. In his second inaugural address, which, dead white man though he might be, should be, but is not, a required read for every school child. Lincoln looked at the Civil War as having been God’s punishment on this nation for the evil of slavery.

And of course, whatever the arguable unconstitutionality of the Emancipation Proclamation, which should, but does not, temper my lawyerly distaste for some of President Obama’s excesses, Lincoln made a decision as significant as Truman’s when he, Lincoln, waged war against secession, waged war against those whom he considered his own citizens in the deadliest of wars in which Americans have participated, waged war to save the Union but that gave to the world what became its greatest power.

And on this Memorial Day, I want to link these two decisions, Lincoln’s and, eighty short — yikes — eighty short years later, Truman’s, for both decisions I think made the world safer. Made the world safer, because had the United States split in 1861, who knows what would have happened in the two World

Wars of the first half of the last century. But with a strong America and the decision of President Truman, we — meaning not “we Americans” but “we” as most of the world — have enjoyed at least seventy years of history that suggest that neither those whom Lincoln honored at Gettysburg nor those buried in St. Petersburg nor those killed by the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki died in vain.

But oh for a world, a world that can only come when humans worship not the worldly, but the godly, and there is indeed but one true God, the God we know in the person of Jesus Christ.

“My peace I give unto you,” he says; oh that we might find a way to keep it and truly to have “peace and justice embrace,” as a psalmist wished.

Peace and justice *at the same time*, a world which Bush and Carter sought, a world where neither appeared impossible in which Lincoln and Truman acted, a world for which hundreds of thousands of American men and women who deserve to be memorialized have given their lives.

We pray to God for that world, though we know it will come only in God’s time, when we shall know that all those deaths were not in vain, and in the words of the poet, Dylan Thomas, “Death *shall have* no dominion.” Amen