

## ICON OF THE MONTH

‘They can be absolutely confident’, said Geoff Hoon in 2002 of Britain’s putative enemies, ‘that in the right conditions we would be willing to use our nuclear weapons.’

This is a world where common sense is set aside and morality is turned inside out. What conditions would be ‘right’ to unleash such destruction – on any population, let alone one ground under the heel of Saddam or Kim Jong-il? In what sense is this a ‘credible’ deterrent?

We talk glibly of ‘apocalypse’, as if these elemental devices had the power to rip open the curtain of illusion to show us reality. It is indeed hard to think of any more brutal confrontation with reality than the blow that fell on Hiroshima, from a clear blue sky, at 8.16am on August 6, 1945. Tens of thousands of men, women and children were slain without warning. The eyewitness accounts are literally obscene.

Within five years, the death toll had risen to 200,000. By 1980 – 35 years after Japan had surrendered – cancers caused by the radiation had dispatched another 97,000.

This is the reality – but our attention is distracted by the unearthly beauty of a mushroom cloud nine miles high. The fascination of that image means we always see the fate of Hiroshima safely in long shot. And so the grotesque is made acceptable.

Three days after the dropping of the first atomic bomb, the USAF delivered a second one, of a different design. Was it just a hurry-up to Emperor Hirohito, or were the saviours of the free world curious to see whether plutonium made a bigger bang than uranium? Either way, in the end 200,000 citizens of

Nagasaki paid the cost.

Here is an icon full of paradox. We defend our values of individual liberty and human rights with weapons that kill indiscriminately. To protect our civilisation, our leaders must convince the world that if it comes to the crunch they will prove themselves to be the greatest barbarians in history.

In 1962, it very nearly did come to that. During the Cuban missile crisis,



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### No 80: Nuclear weapons

John Kennedy contemplated giving the order to lay waste to the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and China. Once again we trivialise the unimaginable: the odds of a holocaust were shortened to 2-1 and historians say: ‘The world held its breath’...

So much for the security of ‘mutually assured destruction’. It was machismo that took us to the brink then, and if most modern weapons are phallic, nuclear weapons are positively priapic.

‘We have got to have this thing over here, whatever it costs,’ said Ernest Bevin in 1946. ‘We have got to have [a] bloody Union Jack on top of it.’

‘Whatever it costs’ turns out to be, today, about £1 billion a year. Some think it is worth it. Membership of the nuclear ‘club’ confers status and privilege, if not (as North Korea has found) a degree of immunity. Britain may have given the world *Habeas corpus* but it owes its permanent seat on the Security Council to the fact that it can – if the conditions are ‘right’ – incinerate whole cities on the other side of the globe.

To be exact, our quartet of Trident submarines carry up to 48 warheads apiece, each of which packs the punch of 100,000 tonnes of TNT in a ballistic missile with a range of 4,600 miles. But once again there is an air of unreality: the ships are named *Valiant*, *Vanguard*, *Vengeance* and *Victorious* – four V-signs to humanity that pass themselves off as Nelsonian men o’ war.

Officially, this country is committed to nuclear disarmament, but it has to be multilateral. Unofficially, the story is that as long as the French have them we have to have them too. They are, after all, a necessary evil – they’re just not necessary for everyone. Canada and Italy, to name but two, have done very well without them. South Africa and Ukraine are applauded for saying no. Iran is harassed for saying maybe.

Still, we should look on the bright side. Twenty years ago, the world was awash with 65,000 nuclear warheads. Today, there may be fewer than 20,000 – and only half of them under the thumb of George W Bush. **Huw Spanner**