

**8:15 AM**

**by Michael Ventura**

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Perched in the main lobby of the Albuquerque airport is a 1914 Ingram/Foster biplane, a craft of elegant simplicity and, to me, astounding audacity. It's just some wood, wire, and canvas, an angular frame that flies, powered by a 6-cylinder, 100 horsepower engine, with a ceiling of about 1000 feet. A year or so ago my friend and I paused a while to admire it. In 1914 a man sat in the midst of that frame and flew with nothing to shield him from the wind, on a day when that put-put plane was at the forefront of technology. Just 31 years later a B-29 with a ceiling of 30,000 feet, its engines delivering 9000-worth of horsepower, dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima. And just 24 years after that, people walked on the moon. Such amazing leaps in the space of one lifespan. And you think of all the other leaps till now, you step back, you stop taking it for granted, and no wonder the whole world is dizzy. We are, every one of us, travelers in a new dimension that keeps expanding itself beyond the power of any person or institution even to catalogue it, much less to exert restraint or control.

That thought sent me driving west on Route 60, along the southern edge of the Gallinas Mountains, in the vicinity of Magdalena, New Mexico. You top a rise at 7000 feet, and spread all across a valley is the Very Large Array. That's its official name. Twenty-seven radio telescopes, each nearly 100 feet high (a ten story building), each with a dish "about as big as a baseball diamond," to quote the explanatory film at the visitor's center. "There are many sorts of light," the film explains, "most of which we cannot see." Something disquieting about that. There's lots to be seen all around us, most of which we cannot see. To know this intellectually is one thing; to feel it for a moment emotionally is quite another. Then I stood under that wide blue sky beside one of these towering white "dishes" through which a kind of dialogue is taking place that, literally, spans the universe. This human artifact reaches out to the edge of what we know of existence, a distance so far beyond human scale that, trying to imagine it, my mind goes blank. I've driven my '69 Chevy some 670,000 miles, so I have some concrete idea of what a round trip to the moon means; but at the Very Large Array I'm so far out of my depth that I might as well be what, I suppose, I really am -- a somewhat conscious speck. Yet representatives of our species of specks carry on, in my name and yours, this dialogue with the infinite.

And there's this: Those lights I can't see, beaming into that dish -- well, they're not *only* beaming into that dish, some of them are no doubt splashing on me, on all of us, and none (except, maybe, astrologers) have measured or guessed the effect of *that*. If I'm sounding like a little kid, hey, little kids have the sense to know that, as Dr. Who would say, existence is fan-tas-tic -- which is what anyone must feel at the Very Large Array. But even in my reverie I'm aware that we're a species of trouble-makers, marvelous and otherwise, and I can't help but wonder what trouble we'll make (may it be marvelous!) of the knowledge gleaned at the Array.

That thought, in turn, led me to those steep roads up the Jemez Mountains, north of Santa Fe, to Los Alamos -- a place of incredible vistas, especially thrilling when horizons of great storm clouds take to showing off.

Los Alamos sits atop a mountain that not so long ago geologically (25,000 years) was a volcano; something's still cooking down in the depths, which is why there are hot springs in the neighborhood. My destination was the Manhattan Project exhibit at the Bradbury Science Museum -- but a smaller exhibit there, of the fan-*tas*-tic variety, blew me away first. You know those thousands of terra cotta soldiers buried with the first Chinese emperor in 210 BC? Some were painted with "a rare pigment called Han Purple." Apparently Han Purple contains properties which enable Los Alamos scientists "to study an unusual phase of matter known as superfluid, whose characteristics exhibit capabilities to communicate faster than the speed of light." That's right: faster than the speed of light -- which, until recently, was believed the fastest possible speed in the universe. Not anymore. Just thought you'd like to know.

The Manhattan Project exhibit gives lots of chewable information to ruminate about -- like, "the average age [of the scientists] was 25," and the majority of them were liberals, who, as one said, "truly believed that by building that bomb there'd never be another war." And you can stand beside replicas of "Little Boy" and "Fat Boy," the cutesy names given to two bombs that obliterated more than 200,000 Japanese civilians in two explosions lasting about nine seconds each. Hiroshima, August 6, 1945; Nagasaki, August 9.

It isn't generally known that Manhattan Projects scientists, even the notorious Edward Teller, wanted first to drop a kind of demonstration bomb where it would do the least harm, to induce a surrender by convincing our enemy of our new-found might. President Truman rejected that proposal. What most Americans "know" is that our atomic bombs forced the Japanese to surrender and spared us an invasion that would have cost (the usual figure is) 100,000 American lives. But the museum exhibits testimony to the contrary, from experts whose knowledge and patriotism are beyond question.

General (later Republican president) Dwight D. Eisenhower, supreme commander of Allied Forces, when consulted by then-Secretary of War Stimson, expressed "my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated, that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a weapon to save American lives. Japan was at that very moment seeking some way to surrender with a minimum loss of face. It wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing."

Admiral William Leahy, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Truman's personal friend: "The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender, the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan at all." (Leahy had the guts to say this in public in 1945.)

Major General Curtis LeMay, U.S. Army Air Forces: "The war would have been over in two weeks without the Russians entering [they were to invade Japan August 8] and without the atomic bomb. The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war."

Why, then, Hiroshima? And why Nagasaki? Probably to prove to Stalin and the Soviet Union that we were smart enough to make atom bombs and evil enough to use them.

It could be argued that -- in the short term, at least -- Present Truman's employment of horror as an instrument of foreign policy was not stupid. I'd never agree, but there's an argument to be made. That discussion isn't on the public table because many Americans, then and now, crave the belief that their country is what no country has ever been:

innately good. So they swallow the propaganda version of Hiroshima's and Nagasaki's necessity. For example:

The exhibit directly facing the testimony by Eisenhower, etc., is in a way the most interesting of all and is presented by an outfit calling itself The Los Alamos Education Group. Their exhibit discounts and denies the generals' testimony and repeats at length the same old lies that Truman told -- plus justifying the bombings, by implication, with testimonies of Japanese atrocities, while failing to mention that the soldiers who committed those atrocities were not the civilians of Hiroshima, any more than the civilians of San Antonio were responsible for using the atom bomb. The ferocity of denial is such that, in the face of it, the Bradbury Science Museum compromises its honesty and permits an exhibit that its own researchers know to be false.

In Nicolas Roeg's 1985 film *Insignificance*, Einstein's watch stops at 8:15, the hour Hiroshima was bombed. Roeg said in an interview: "When something has happened -- with lovers, or with the world -- it's very easy to think, 'Oh, that was 40 years ago.' We think that 40 years diminishes it somehow. [In 1985] Hiroshima was 40 years ago, so it's all right. But 8:15 comes around every morning. It comes every day, and that moment is *in our lives*. It's in my little 2-year-old boy's life. It's here. The act is with us. Everyone in the world now has a little bit of it on him. It's important to know that something that's been done, committed, is *lived with*."

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