

There is nothing divine about a bomb test



BARB GUY

The first I heard of Divine Strake was last month. I was standing a few feet from the Nevada Nuclear Test Site where the experiment will happen. Corbin Harney, a Western Shoshone elder, winkingly gave me permission to enter the U.S. government-run, restricted-access site as his guest, since, if you believe the treaty the government signed, his people still own the land. I declined his invitation - I didn't have time to go to jail. Still, he and I stood together, holding hands, our heads bowed in prayer, or in respect for the prayers of others, as a religious service was held in the nuclear dust. This Catholic mass welcomed the Shoshone spiritual leader, a Jewish man wearing a tallit and reading from the Torah, a Mennonite, an Episcopal priest, a Jesuit priest, a Zen priest, a Methodist minister, an elderly nun in microfleece pants and sneakers, a former

Marine officer, a hibakusha (Japanese survivor of the Hiroshima atomic bomb), my husband Chris, and me. It was a fine American exercise in people of many faiths coming together, talking through difference, wishing for peace, and petitioning our government.

Divine Strake is the code name for a massive non-nuclear test planned for June 2. An explosion of 700 tons of ammonium nitrate and fuel oil - ANFO - will send a mushroom cloud perhaps 10,000 feet into the Nevada sky. This gigantic experimental blast will use 280 times the amount of ANFO that demolished Oklahoma City's Murrah Federal Building in 1995, killing 168 people and damaging or destroying more than 300 buildings.

Some experts worry the test is a precursor to developing a nuclear bunker-buster bomb. I suppose reasonable people can disagree about whether to test, but Utahns, downwind from so many nuclear tests that were supposed to be safe, yet turned out to be deadly, can be forgiven if they're wary.

After Sept. 11 nearly five years ago, some Americans began to wonder why people in other countries hate us. They don't all hate us, of course, but suddenly many Americans were shocked at the image of ourselves we saw

reflected in infuriated eyes. Historically, America has enjoyed international goodwill, never more so than on Sept. 12, 2001. But that has slipped through our fingers.

A strake, by the way, is a metal strap that holds boats or planes together. Odd. But what makes me go nuclear is the use of "Divine" in the name. I've really had it with the Bush administration positioning things like they were ordered up by God. And this isn't the first time. There are at least nine other divine tests on the books, including Divine Warhawk and, to really prove the point, Divine Hates.

Up close, each day, Americans are doing lovely, honorable things, but I wonder how we look as a group from far away. We ignore poor people and people stricken with unrelenting illness and pain, we turn our backs on genocide, and we spend our vast wealth and waste our sharp minds on war. Then we name the effort after deity. As if this experiment is ordained by God. The appalling arrogance, the blind blasphemy, the colossal chutzpah, in essentially naming this test after God!

Could this be why people hate us? We make bad choices. We choose to enrich the already wealthy, making everyone else poorer; we ignore the sick and

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starving; we invent wars but give them very real death tolls; we ruin the only land the world will ever get; we spend sinful amounts of money to create a better way to wage war; and, more and more, we literally do it in God's name.

The Bush administration acts like God prefers us to other countries. Like God isn't also God to Iceland and Bhutan and France and Rwanda. With President Bush in charge, we surely look like we think we're special. A little too special for some people.

We see people across the globe possessed by such a religious vehemence that their humanity is ruined. Crazy with bloodlust, they must destroy human life, American life, to prove God is on their side. Americans find this indefensible - that's not how reasonable people behave.

Then why is President Bush's team putting the language of the holy to our war efforts? To imply that God approves of our actions? I can only wonder what God might really think of America's "Divine" projects.

Who would Jesus bomb? First and foremost, no one. If we fail to grasp that lesson, if we keep confusing the unholy with the sacred, our jihad looks a lot like theirs.

Barb Guy writes a regular column for these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.