

## **“Whose History is it Anyway?: Memory, Politics, and Historical Scholarship” (1996)<sup>1</sup>**

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“As soon as you bring historians in, you run into problems. You get distortions.” This comment might well have been made by one of the Washington politicians or veterans’ organizations that in 1994 attacked the Smithsonian Institution’s plans for an exhibit observing the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In fact, a Shinto priest at Japan’s Yasukuni shrine to the nation’s war dead made it while criticizing proposals to add an educational component to the shrine’s commemorative functions. The priest’s comment reminds us of the universality of the suspicions and hostility that historians (who like to think of themselves as fairly inoffensive and harmless folks) can arouse when they become involved in matters about which great numbers of citizens feel passionate emotion.

With the fiftieth anniversary of World War II’s final events behind us, we can perhaps begin to gain some perspective on the remarkable rancor the commemorative effort unleashed. The storm center of the controversy was, of course, the proposed *Enola Gay* exhibit at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum, which was to feature extensive treatment of the current state of historical scholarship on the decision to drop the atomic bomb and the ending of the world war, as well as the bombs’ immediate effects on the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the long-term implications of the development and use of nuclear weapons.

As early drafts of the exhibit text became known, the Air Force Association, the American Legion, and conservative members of Congress, sensing the issue’s demagogic potential, denounced the exhibit as “anti-American,” insensitive to veterans, and too sympathetic to the bomb victims. Numerous meetings and extensive modifications in the text did no good. When the smoke cleared, the original exhibit had been scrapped; the museum director had been forced out; and Republicans in Congress (joined by a few Democrats) were gearing up for hearings that, for a time, threatened to turn into a McCarthyite witch-hunt for the sinister and disloyal persons responsible for the shameful exhibit. When the Senate hearings began in May 1995, Chairman Ted Stevens, a Republican from Alaska, asked ominously, “What went wrong with [the Smithsonian’s] management practices, and what steps have been taken to correct the revisionist and ‘politically correct’ bias that was contained in the original script?” (Though marked by senatorial rancor and ill temper, the hearings actually proved fairly tepid and inconclusive.)

Reeling and shell-shocked, the Smithsonian mounted a cautious, scaled-back exhibit that simply portrayed the fuselage of the *Enola Gay* and videos of the crew, with minimal historical context on President Harry Truman’s decision, the bomb’s human toll, or the long-term consequences of its use. Air force historian Richard Hallion dismissed the new exhibit as “a beer

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can with a label.” Historian Kai Bird, modifying the chilling term ethnic cleansing coined by the genocidal Bosnian Serbs, spoke of a “historical cleansing” of the museum. A cartoon in the *Boston Globe* pictured an empty museum with an official announcing, “We’re returning to our original mission as the air and space museum.” An ironic outcome of the episode was that far more Americans undoubtedly became aware of the scholarly debate over the atomic bomb decision than would otherwise have been the case.

While the Smithsonian flap attracted the most public attention, the fiftieth-anniversary cultural struggle over the meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki erupted on other fronts as well, even in the arcane realm of postage stamp design. Because of their ubiquity, lowly postage stamps represent a significant visual means by which a nation’s historical perception can be shaped, hence the controversy over a proposed stamp commemorating the atomic bomb. The original Postal Service plan was to issue an atomic bomb stamp as part of an ongoing series recalling the major landmarks of World War II. Those planned for 1995 release were to note the principal events of 1945, including the atomic bombings—certainly the most notable war events of that year apart from the actual capitulation of Germany and Japan.

Planning went forward in the recesses of the postal bureaucracy. At one point I received a telephone call from a historian friend who had been asked to evaluate an early draft of the proposed stamp. (I had not realized until then how carefully the proposed textual and visual content of stamps is reviewed and evaluated. The Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee oversees the process, consulting specialists in various fields.) In this version, the mushroom cloud appeared to float in space, with no hint that a city lay below; the historical tag line read (as I recall), “Atomic Bombs Level Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” I immediately agreed with my friend that some geographic features should be included to link the bomb to its target, and that the word *Level*—with its bland and even positive connotations (“This is absolutely on the level”)—be dropped in favor of a more accurate phrase: perhaps “Atomic Bombs Destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” In fact, the message was softened, rather than made more precise, eventually evolving into “Atomic Bombs Hasten War’s End.”

But the entire issue soon became moot. In December 1994, under protest from the Japanese government, with whom the Clinton administration was already embroiled in trade conflicts, President Bill Clinton canceled the much-revised stamp, relegating it to the limbo reserved for postage stamps that never actually reach the nation’s post offices.

In one way or another, across the United States, journalists, pundits, and ordinary citizens found themselves unexpectedly wrestling with the historical meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the angry months leading up to the fiftieth anniversary of the bombings. A Gallup Poll jointly commissioned by *USA Today* and CNN found that 59 percent of Americans expressed approval of Truman’s decision and 35 percent disapproved. Fifty years after the event, Americans remained uncertain and deeply divided about its meaning.

### ***The Bomb and the “Good War”***

Why do Hiroshima and Nagasaki stir so restlessly in our national psyche after the passage of half a century? Why do we have such trouble not only reaching consensus about how we

should view these events, but even discussing them calmly and rationally? Whereas the fiftieth anniversaries of Pearl Harbor, D day, Germany's surrender, and other World War II landmarks were observed by public ceremonies and general agreement about their significance, Hiroshima and Nagasaki generated only recrimination and angry debate.

One reason Americans have had so much trouble coming to terms with Hiroshima and Nagasaki surely lies in the fact that what our atomic bombs did to those cities has never been easily assimilable to the prevailing public view of World War II as the "Good War"—a noble struggle against forces that threatened not only Western values but the survival of civilization itself. Particularly in the aftermath of the bitterly divisive Vietnam conflict, Americans looked back nostalgically to the, 1941-45 period as a time when the nation's aims were clear and just, a time when nearly all citizens had rallied behind the government. This show of unanimity was sharply at variance with the turmoil of the 1960s. No campus protesters in 1944 had accused Franklin Roosevelt of being a baby killer; no one had dubbed the conflict "Stimson's War." On the contrary, World War II symbolized a moment of shared national purpose and unity in a righteous cause. Studs Terkel's decision to call his 1984 oral history of World War II *The "Good War"* helped fix this image in the public, mind. (Though Terkel's ironic quotation marks suggested certain reservations about the appropriateness of the popular label.)

Of course, even without the atomic bomb, this version of the war elided some awkward realities. The Roosevelt administration's grudging response to the plight of European Jewry, the arrest and internment of Japanese-American citizens, the flourishing of black-market chiselers and wartime profiteers, the persistence of racism in the military and on the home front, the incineration of Dresden and other German cities, and the firebombing of Tokyo on the night of March 10-11, 1945 (in which more people may have died than initially perished at Hiroshima) all complicate the Norman Rockwell image of the War. While historians have explored these darker facets of the conflict, and while some history textbooks deal with them, they have not loomed large in either the public memory or the media's treatment of the war.

But if the popular image of the "Good War" involved selective memory and the downplaying of certain awkward facts, it also contained much truth. By and large—and certainly in contrast to the Vietnam era—1941-45 did mark a time of national unity and moral clarity. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, have long complicated this picture of a crusade pursued by a unified nation employing wholly justifiable means. They are the misshapen pieces that prevent us from completing the picture puzzle in an entirely satisfactory fashion. While some of the awkward realities noted above were partially redressed as the years passed—survivors of the internment camps were belatedly compensated; a Holocaust Memorial was erected on the Mall in Washington, D.C.; the civil rights movement erased the more blatant forms of racial segregation—the issues posed by the atomic annihilation of two cities remained contested terrain. As the semicentennial approached in 1995, the subject seemed farther from closure than ever. Now that the anniversary has passed, the controversy has receded from the front pages, but the wounds and animosities remain.

***Opinion Manipulation, Ethical Discourse, Antinuclear Activism: The Symbolic Functions of "Hiroshima" and "Nagasaki"***

The inability to fit the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki comfortably into the “Good War” paradigm did not prevent those events from figuring prominently in the polemics of the Cold War years. Indeed, the very uncertainty that surrounded the meaning of those acts made them available for a variety of polemical uses. President Truman initially presented the Manhattan Project as the greatest scientific achievement in all history and defended his decision to drop the bomb as a fully justifiable action that had ended the war, saved untold thousands of American lives, and repaid Japan for Pearl Harbor, the Bataan Death March, and other atrocities. The wartime enemy became the postwar ally, the argument that the bomb “saved American lives” was sometimes expanded to encompass the contention that it had also ensured the survival of multiple thousands of Japanese who would otherwise have been killed in the invasion that supposedly would have been inevitable had the bombs not been dropped. At a 1984 conference at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, on the centennial of Harry Truman’s birth, Truman adviser Clark Clifford expatiated on this humanitarian theme with a considerable show of emotion. On the evidence of public opinion polls, a vast majority of Americans initially accepted the official justification for the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and a majority—though a steadily dwindling one—has continued to do so ever since.

This public endorsement of the government’s rationale for the dropping of two atomic bombs in 1945 may in part reflect the public’s insulation from the actual human consequences of that action. From the first, Washington officialdom, often with the complaisant support of much of the media, offered for public consumption a selective and sanitized version of these events. In Japan, U.S. occupation authorities strictly censored photographs and films showing bomb victims. Medical data on both the bomb’s short-term blast-and-fire effects and the long-term consequences of radiation exposure (not only at Hiroshima and Nagasaki but also at later nuclear test sites in the Marshall Islands and the American Southwest) were kept from the public or discussed in bland and general terms.

In “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” a highly influential—and artfully misleading—article published in the February 1947 issue of *Harper’s* magazine, former secretary of war Henry L. Stimson justified and rationalized the U.S. action. In the behind-the-scenes discussions that led to this seminal important essay, Stimson, his wartime aide Harvey Bundy, Harvard president James B. Conant, and Bundy’s son McGeorge Bundy made their purpose crystal clear: to influence the larger public by reaching teachers and other opinion molders and, in Conant’s words, by combating the “sentimentalism “ that, if not resisted, could “have a great deal of influence on the next generation.” Continued Conant in a September 1946 letter to Harvey Bundy, “A small minority, if it represents the type of person who is both sentimental and verbally minded and in contact with youth, may result in a distortion of history.” From such concerns the Stimson essay took shape, and in the years to follow it would play a significant role in sustaining the official version of events and warding off the inroads of “sentimentality” that Conant so feared.

Hollywood films such as *The Beginning or the End* (1947), a ludicrously fictionalized version of the Manhattan Project and the decision to drop the bomb, and *Above and Beyond* (1952), a formulaic tale of marital discord and reconciliation supposedly based on the life of Paul W. Tibbets, Jr., the pilot for the Hiroshima mission, further served to shore up the official

government version. Since most Americans very much wanted to believe the fundamental message of all this propaganda—that dropping the bomb was essential, wholly justified, and fully in keeping with the nation’s high war aims—the opinion-molding effort proved highly effective. The subtle process of creating a dominant hegemonic discourse unfolded in almost textbook fashion in the shaping of postwar American attitudes about the atomic bombing of Japan.

The campaign to forestall criticism of Truman’s decision was part of a larger government and media effort throughout the early postwar period to soothe atomic fears and play down the true effects of nuclear weapons. In its August 11, 1951 issue, to cite only one of hundreds of examples, *Collier’s* magazine published “Patty, the Atomic Pig.” The article was based on an actual incident in which a piglet that was part of the Noah’s Ark of goats, pigs, rats, and other animals assembled for the July 1946 Operations Crossroads nuclear test at Bikini Atoll was later found swimming in the radioactive waters of Bikini lagoon. The *Collier’s* story, presented as a whimsical fairy tale, began, “Once upon a time, there was a great group of generals, admirals, scientists, newsmen and curious people who wanted to know more about atomic explosions.” Illustrated with cute drawings, the story imagined Patty’s thoughts before the blast (“‘My, oh, my,’ thought the little piglet, ‘What will become of us all?’”) and her adventures afterward (“Patricia swam as fast as she could thrash her little legs, holding her nose high out of the water”). Patty not only survives (no long-term radiation-exposure hazards here!) but grows to be a six-hundred-pound porker under the benevolent care of kindly scientists at the Naval Medical Research Institute at Bethesda, Maryland, and ends her days as a coddled exhibit in a zoo. Sugarcoated propaganda like this, part of a mountain of material in the media that reinforced the government’s version of both the 1945 bombings and of Washington’s subsequent nuclear program, served to deflect and neutralize serious scrutiny of the meaning and implications of atomic weaponry, past or future.

For all its power and pervasiveness, however, the official justification for the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki never achieved absolute dominance; a “counterhegemonic discourse” was present from the beginning. The announcement that a new atomic weapon had been dropped on Hiroshima immediately seized the attention of theologians, ethicists, pacifists, religious leaders, and other Americans concerned about the moral implications of war. Many pointed to the instantaneous annihilation of that city, and then of Nagasaki, as the logical and chilling culmination of a long process by which the rhetoric of “total war” undermined the centuries-old “just war” doctrine (most fully articulated by Roman Catholic theologians) that sought to shield civilian populations from the worst horrors of wartime.

The distinction between civilians and combatants had broken down badly in the course of World War II. The leaders of all the belligerent nations, including President Roosevelt, spoke the language of “total war,” insisting that every citizen, not just the military forces, must share in the struggle. Wartime vegetable plots became “victory gardens”; the sale of government bonds became “victory drives.” Even children were militarized. I vividly recall the pressures in my third- and fourth-grade classes at Fairview Elementary School in Dayton, Ohio, to buy war stamps, collect scrap metal, and turn in pencil stubs for the graphite they contained. (Worried about what my pacifist parents might think of these efforts, I once asked my teacher to return a pencil stub I had contributed, leading her to ridicule me before the class as an “Indian giver.”) If

an entire society is mobilized for war, the entire society also becomes a legitimate target of war. President Truman, justifying the atomic bombing, accurately pointed out that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were centers of military production—just as were Seattle, Los Angeles, and countless other U.S. cities.

The atomic bombing was only the culminating act in the breaking down of a never wholly effective ethical barrier—already breached in World War I by Germany’s U-boat attacks on passenger ships; at Guernica and Nanking in the 1930s; in the Nazi V-2 raids on London, Antwerp, and other Allied cities; and in the Allied firebombings of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, and other crowded urban centers. But the technological gift that the physicists presented to President Truman in 1945 rendered the mass extermination of civilians vastly more efficient, radically raising the stakes of the larger postwar debate over the viability of the “just war” doctrine and the ethical implications of the “total war” language so enthusiastically embraced by wartime leaders.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki also naturally came to loom large in the discourse of antinuclear campaigners. As the Cold War deepened, and as waves of nuclear fear periodically swept the nation, activists regularly invoked the two cities as symbols of what must never happen again. “No More Hiroshimas” became a rallying cry of the antinuclear cause.

Indeed, the degree of attention accorded to Hiroshima and Nagasaki as symbols of a future to be avoided can be correlated closely over time with the pervasiveness and intensity of anxiety about nuclear war. In 1946, with fear of the new weapon still raw in America and a campaign for the international control of atomic energy at full throttle, John Hersey’s journalistic account of six A-bomb survivors, entitled simply *Hiroshima*, became a bestseller. In the mid- and late 1950s and early 1960s, as public fears of radioactive fallout from nuclear tests fueled a test-ban movement that won broad support, iconic images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki abounded. Survivors of the 1945 bombings addressed rallies; test-ban activists marked the anniversaries each August. In 1955, Ralph Edwards’s popular TV show *This Is Your Life* featured a Hiroshima survivor in a staged “reconciliation” with a crew member of the *Enola Gay*. The survivor solicited contributions for the “Hiroshima Maidens,” a group of bomb-disfigured young women brought to the United States for plastic surgery by the magazine editor and antinuclear campaigner Norman Cousins.

In the early 1980s, as the Reagan administration’s military buildup and belligerent rhetoric inspired a nuclear-weapons freeze campaign, allusions to Hiroshima and Nagasaki were again commonplace. In 1985, on the fortieth anniversary of the bombings, *Time* magazine, both reflecting and contributing to the fears of nuclear war so pervasive at that moment, featured on its cover the nuclear age’s instantly recognizable logo: the mushroom cloud ascending over Hiroshima. In short, in every period of heightened nuclear anxiety and antinuclear activism from 1945 on, Hiroshima and Nagasaki did polemical duty as emblems of a global fate to be avoided at all costs.

### ***Historians Confront the Bomb***

Despite the use of “Hiroshima” and “Nagasaki” as points of reference in various public discourses, the actual events of August 6-9, 1945, and their devastating consequences, obscured from the very beginning by official censorship and deception, grew steadily dimmer in public memory with the passing years. In the early 1960s, however, historians and other scholars turned a fresh eye on those events, and especially on President Truman’s decision to authorize the military use of two atomic bombs at a moment when Japan’s war-making capability was near collapse. Their findings made it increasingly hard for informed observers to continue to view this decision from the uncritical perspective of 1945.

In fact, from the earliest moments of the atomic age, a few critics had challenged the official rationale for dropping the bomb, but not until the 1960s did this dissident viewpoint gain a significant scholarly hearing. In his 1961 book *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II*, historian Herbert Feis, while generally supportive of Truman’s action, became the first major American historian to suggest that the calculations underlying it might have been more complex than official dogma conceded.

Only in 1965, though, with the publication of historian and political scientist Gar Alperovitz’s *Atomic Diplomacy* did an American academic offer a radical frontal challenge to the received interpretation. Why the rush to deploy the new weapon when leaders of Tokyo’s wartime government were urgently signaling a desire to end the fighting? asked Alperovitz. Why did Washington so vehemently insist on “unconditional surrender” prior to August 6, only to do an abrupt about-face and accept a whopping condition—Emperor Hirohito could remain on his throne—as soon as the bombs were dropped?

Any meaningful response to these questions, Alperovitz concluded, required attention to broader strategic and economic considerations. A dramatic demonstration of the atomic bomb’s destructive power, he suggested, promised to introduce a potent new factor into U.S. dealings with the Soviet Union, a wartime ally already shaping up as a postwar adversary. Doubtless the passions of war, the impulse to avenge Pearl Harbor, Japanese atrocities, and the appeal of ending the war with a fantastic display of American firepower rather than by painstaking negotiations (which would later have to be explained to a restive public) all played their role—especially after the desperate and bloody Okinawa campaign of March-June 1945. But other considerations entered the picture too, considerations that scholars began to probe with increasing insistence.

Despite Truman’s later claims, suggested Alperovitz (and soon other scholars as well), the grim prospect of a land invasion of the Japanese main islands, tentatively scheduled to begin November 1, was not necessarily paramount in the president’s mind in late July and early August 1945. He was, they argued, more concerned with the precise way the war might be ended in the coming few weeks or even days. At the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Stalin had pledged to declare war on Japan “two or three months” after Germany’s surrender; in other words, as it turned out, by early August at the latest. If a spectacular American blow demonstrating an awesome new secret weapon, not Russia’s impending declaration of war, were seen as having forced Japan’s capitulation, America’s role in postwar Japan and the Far East, as well as Washington’s bargaining posture vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in shaping the politics and economy of postwar Europe, might be vastly enhanced.

Combing the primary sources, Alperovitz—and an impressive group of historians that eventually included Martin Sherwin of Tufts University (later of Dartmouth); Barton Bernstein of Stanford University; Robert Messer of the University of Illinois-Chicago; Michael Sherry of Northwestern University; J. Samuel Walker, historian of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission; James S. Hershberg, director of the Cold War History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center; independent scholars such as Stanley Goldberg and Kai Bird; and a number of others—documented a variety of considerations that clearly seemed relevant to a full understanding of Truman’s decision. Stanley Goldberg, for example, emphasized that Truman and his inner circle of atomic advisers, including General Leslie R. Groves, majordomo of the Manhattan Project, feared an angry public and congressional reaction if they failed to use the new weapon that they had secretly spent billions to develop. Hershberg, in a massively researched biography of James B. Conant, a member of the Interim Committee that advised Truman on atomic matters, revealed that the high-minded university president favored demonstrating the bomb’s power in the most awesome possible way—by destroying a city—as the best hope of rallying world support for the postwar international control of atomic energy.

Meanwhile, historian John W. Dower’s book *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, published in 1986, documented the racism that pervaded America’s anti-Japanese wartime propaganda (as well as Japan’s anti-American wartime propaganda). *Eagle Against the Sun: The American War with Japan* (1985) by historian Ronald Spector (a Vietnam veteran and member of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves) similarly emphasized the centrality of racism on both sides. This, too, it seemed, must be factored into the equation when evaluating Truman’s readiness to drop two atomic bombs on a defeated Japan.

Yale psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton had earlier contributed to this surge of scholarly attention to the bomb with his important 1967 study *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*. His book moved under the mushroom cloud to explore the psychological responses of bomb survivors as well as the deep psychic effects of living with the fear of future thermonuclear war. Transcending the limits of diplomatic history (sometimes, it seemed, almost transcending history altogether), Lifton added a new perspective to the debate, along with a powerful new set of analytic terms, notably *psychic numbing*, that would prove enormously influential.

Washington’s original justification for the A-bomb decision had arisen in the specific context of the immediate postwar years, when wartime passions still ran high, and the Cold War and the nuclear arms race were just taking shape. The post-1965 wave of critical scholarship about the bomb was shaped by a very different historical moment. Alperovitz, born in 1936, represented a younger generation of historians who came of age in Cold War America, when the bomb (now called a “thermonuclear weapon”) evoked not so much victory over Japan as nuclear tests, radioactive fallout, a grim struggle with the Soviet Union, and the threat of a world-destroying thermonuclear holocaust. As an undergraduate in history at the University of Wisconsin in 1958, Alperovitz encountered William Appleman Williams, who was radically revising conventional diplomatic history by insisting on the primacy of economic factors—especially the influence of corporate capitalism—in shaping U.S. foreign policy.

After a stint as legislative assistant to Robert Kastenmeier, a Wisconsin congressman known for his strongly antimilitarist views, Alperovitz entered a doctoral program in political

economy at Cambridge University, where he read with economist Joan Robinson. She, like Williams, stressed the interplay of politics, economics, and diplomacy. Alperovitz's 1963 Ph.D. dissertation (published two years later by Simon and Schuster) was a product of these experiences. Reflecting Joan Robinson's influence, his initial thesis topic had not been "the atomic bomb decision" but the economic and political planning for postwar Eastern Europe that went on in wartime Washington. This, in turn, led him to the larger topic of how Washington policymakers viewed the Soviet Union, and ultimately to how these postwar calculations influenced the Truman administration's strategy for ending the Pacific war. The specific issue of the atomic bomb was initially quite peripheral to his research focus.

When *Atomic Diplomacy* appeared in 1965 (timed by the publisher to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings), reviewers and scholars at once recognized it as a thoroughgoing challenge to a version of the atomic bomb story that for two decades had enjoyed broad public assent and minimal critical scrutiny. The book and the times were made for each other. Early in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson massively escalated the Vietnam Way—and he did so with a decision to launch an intensive bombing campaign against North Vietnam (after running as a peace candidate against Barry Goldwater a few months earlier). That year saw the first major stirrings of an anti-war movement that would soon come to question the official version of the war and the bombing campaign against the North Vietnamese. It was a propitious moment, indeed, to probe the motives that led an earlier American president to call tremendous destructive power down upon an Asian people.

Not surprisingly, the critical reassessment of the A-bomb decision launched by Alperovitz steadily gained ground after 1965 within academia, especially among younger scholars, as a succession of events eroded the credibility of public officials and their pronouncements: the optimistic bulletins that flowed from Vietnam as the body bags and the shocking TV images multiplied; the New Left's ideological assault on "the Establishment"; Henry Kissinger's secret bombing of Cambodia and wiretapping of his own staff; and, of course, the tangle of official crimes collectively known as Watergate that ended with a discredited Richard Nixon driven from office.

Like *Atomic Diplomacy*, Martin Sherwin's *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (1975), a major contribution to the scholarly reassessment of the A-bomb decision, was based on his Ph.D. thesis—completed in 1971 as the controversy over the Vietnam War raged, and revised for publication as newspaper headlines screamed of secret Cambodia bombings, the Pentagon Papers, the Watergate hearings, and a president's forced resignation. These were not times that fostered the uncritical acceptance of official versions of public events. Indeed, the political-cultural climate of 1965-75 almost demanded the skeptical reassessment of accepted historical interpretations and even of the fundamental assumption—a legacy of World War II, really—that the government's version of the truth was ipso facto trustworthy, disinterested, and reliable.

All this unfolded just as new methodological approaches and new areas of research transformed the history profession. The rethinking of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombings was, in fact, only part of a much broader process whereby an older historiography that had focused mainly on elites—whether political, military, social, intellectual, or cultural—gave way to a "new social history" more attuned to the experiences of ordinary people, particularly the

underclass, and more critical of the actions of policymakers, statesmen, corporate leaders, generals, and other power wielders. In diplomatic history, focus shifted from treaties and conferences to the larger economic, cultural, and ideological framework within which foreign-policy processes unfolded.

These new historiographical emphases, coupled with the broader political and cultural currents that flowed across America in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, encouraged the skeptical reassessment of received wisdom on many topics. Inevitably, this reassessment included attention to the events of August 6-9, 1945, that had taken the lives of well over two hundred thousand human beings (including long-term deaths related to radiation exposure) and laid the groundwork for an ever more dangerous nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union.

### *Atomic Bomb Scholarship in the Arena of Public Opinion*

By around 1980, the reassessment of the A-bomb decision launched by Alperovitz and others, while still a subject of lively debate among historians, had generally been welcomed as stimulating and provocative. Within the guild, it was widely viewed as another manifestation of the familiar process by which historians continually reassess the past and question received interpretations. Debated at scholarly conferences and dissected in journal articles, the new analytic hypotheses were beginning to make their appearance in college textbooks as well as classroom lectures.

For most Americans, however, the debates of historians on this topic remained arcane and remote, a matter of no concern. When nonhistorians did encounter the new scholarship, many rejected it contemptuously; the received wisdom about the justice of the atomic bomb decision generally retained its sway over grassroots America. For those who had embraced the “Good War” paradigm, any questioning of Truman’s oft-repeated justification of his action challenged an image of World War II that had become a cornerstone of national identity. If the motives for dropping the atomic bomb could be probed and problematized by historians, what part of the American past was safe from skeptical critical scrutiny? As historian Michael Kammen would write in the aftermath of the Smithsonian debacle and other cultural battles involving conflicting interpretations of the American past: “Historians become notably controversial when they do not perpetuate myths, when they do not transmit the received and conventional wisdom, when they challenge the comforting presence of a stabilized past” —and, it may be added, when news of what they are up to finally gets out. Perhaps no issue of the postwar era confirmed this generalization more dramatically than the angry struggle over who would finally determine the meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: historians or “the people.”

Exacerbating the populist (or pseudopopulist) reaction against the scholarship of the atomic bomb historians was the widespread practice (adopted by many historians as well as nonhistorians) of attaching to them the blanket label “revisionists.” They were engaged in a process of historical revision, of course, but when the term was applied exclusively to this one group, it suggested that they were deviants who had departed from the accepted norms of professional practice. In fact, these scholars were “revisionists” only in the sense that all good

scholars are “revisionists,” continually questioning and revising standard interpretations on the basis of new evidence, deeper analysis, or the fresh perspectives offered by the passage of time.

The allusions to “*the revisionist school*” of atomic bomb historians also conveyed a certain conspiratorial implication, as though these scholars had colluded, presumably with sinister or subversive motives, to concoct and foist upon an unsuspecting public a single, agreed-upon new version of history. In fact “the revisionists” were a diverse and contentious crew, representing a wide range of often conflicting viewpoints, based on different research findings and different weighings of the facts. Barton Bernstein, for example, sharply criticized Gar Alperovitz for talking of Truman’s “decision” to drop the bomb when, in Bernstein’s view, Truman inherited from the Roosevelt administration both the *assumption* that the bomb would be used and a tolerance for destroying entire cities. As a new president in office for only a few months, Bernstein argued, Truman had simply fallen back on these inherited assumptions and practices when news of the successful Alamogordo test reached him at the Potsdam Conference in mid-July 1945. Bernstein also took both Alperovitz and Sherwin to task for treating as a virtual certainty the possibility that the war could have been ended long before the planned invasion date of November 1, 1945, without the atomic bomb. While agreeing that other alternatives were available and should have been tried, he remained agnostic as to whether they would have succeeded in forcing Tokyo’s surrender.

Certainly, most historians who addressed the question agreed that the factors shaping Truman’s actions in the war’s climactic days were too complex to be summed up in a single, easily recited formula (“The atomic bomb saved American lives, ended the war, and repaid Japan for Pearl Harbor”)——a formula that, if not demonstrably false, was demonstrably inadequate. But beyond this, one would be hard put, despite accusations to the contrary, to identify a monolithic “revisionist” position on the A-bomb decision. The process of historical reassessment, on this subject is continually evolving, as it is on every topic of sufficient complexity to warrant historians’ interest, with a variety of arguments and hypotheses in play at any given moment.

That the fury over historians’ examination of the Hiroshima/Nagasaki bombings exploded so spectacularly in 1994-95 was linked, I think, not only to the fiftieth-anniversary observances but also to the fact that American society was racked by new kinds of cultural conflicts and political turmoil. Conditioned by four decades of black-and-white Cold War thinking, many Americans in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s collapse seemed to transfer the same “*us-versus-them*” outlook willy-nilly to the domestic sphere. From this perspective, the angry denunciations of “the revisionists” as unpatriotic and contemptible, and the refusal to grant their findings any shred of legitimacy, became simply another manifestation of a political climate marked by inflammatory, polarizing rhetoric.

In this climate, the low-level irritation felt by many ordinary citizens, especially older Americans and World War II veterans, at historians who questioned an article of national faith was exacerbated and amplified by a braying army of jingoistic politicians, editorial writers, and radio talk-show hosts who saw this as another emotion-laden “wedge” issue——like attacking the National Endowment for the Arts for “promoting obscenity” or advocating constitutional amendments permitting school prayer, requiring a balanced budget, and banning flag desecration. By such issues, the New Right defined itself, rallied the faithful, and demonized its enemies.

Conservative presidential aspirants made sure the issue would remain divisive. Senator Bob Dole, in a red-meat speech to the American Legion in September 1995, denounced the Smithsonian's original *Enola Gay* exhibit as another example of the insidious work of "intellectual elites" and other "arbiters of political correctness" who were contemptuous of patriotism, scornful of veterans and their sacrifices, and intent on waging "war on traditional American values."

But even in this volatile climate, popular attitudes toward the atomic bomb decision resisted easy generalization. Over the decades, different groups had diverged markedly in their judgments about Truman's action, and this remained true in the 1990s. In a 1995 Gallup Poll, for example, the aggregate results concealed important variations in opinion on the basis of gender, race, and age. The rate of approval of Truman's action, for instance, was notably higher for men than for women. (A similar gap emerges in almost every poll dealing with military issues, including defense spending, the use of force to achieve U.S. aims, armed interventions such as the Persian Gulf war, and so forth.) As to race and ethnicity—no surprise here—a significantly higher percentage of whites approved the atomic bomb decision than did African Americans, Hispanics, or Asian Americans. From the first, nonwhite groups had raised the issue of racism in the A-bomb context and posed awkward questions about whether President Truman would have been ready to drop the bomb on Germans, had the European war continued into the summer of 1945. Given the firebombing attacks that turned German cities into raging crematoria, it is by no means clear that Truman would have refrained from using the atomic bomb on white Europeans, but the nagging "what if" question can never be answered with certainty.

Another key division that showed up in public opinion data as early as the 1960s—and again quite sharply in the 1995 poll—is a generational one. Broadly speaking, the older generation that remembers World War II and that initially associated the atomic bomb with Japan's surrender and frenzied celebrations of V-J day tends to be strongest in the conviction that dropping the bomb was justified. By the same token, succeeding generations, having very different associations with nuclear weapons and no direct memories of the war, tend to be more critical of Truman's action.

As a result, it was misleading to frame the *Enola Gay* controversy as a simple, straightforward conflict between historians (or academics) on the one hand, and the general public on the other. Some historians continue to accept the Truman administration's justification for dropping the bomb as sufficient; a few have attacked "the revisionists" as scornfully as any conservative politician or professional veteran. Nevertheless, broadly speaking, the controversy of 1994-95 did expose a considerable chasm between the methodology of historians and the way many Americans think about the past, especially the portion of the past encompassed by their own experiences and memories. Historians are constantly challenging the received wisdom and established interpretations of events. This is what they do. Usually this process unfolds in scholarly journals or at professional gatherings out of the public eye. As new interpretations filter into textbooks and classrooms, they may eventually modify the general public's historical understanding, but the shift is typically gradual, almost imperceptible.

Occasionally, however, the disjunction between the scholarly approach to history and the public's personal, even semimythic view of the past is exposed with stark clarity, usually when the ongoing process of historical revision and reassessment focuses on an issue about which

many citizens feel passionately, or that has great patriotic resonance. Such a moment occurred in 1913, for example, when Charles A. Beard argued in his *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* that the Founding Fathers had in fact pursued public policies that served their pecuniary Interests. Beard was roundly vilified; he had questioned the motives of patriots revered by every schoolchild! This controversy over an issue of historical interpretation also unfolded at a moment of highly charged ideological conflict, as conservatives and reformers battled over the government's role in regulating industrial capitalism.

A similar phenomenon, I suspect, underlay the reaction, ranging from annoyance to rage, roused by the historical profession's ongoing examination of the atomic bomb decision—a long-term scholarly project that the *Enola Gay* controversy suddenly thrust into public view. As the Air Force Association demanded in one of its many press releases aimed at discrediting the Smithsonian exhibit, “All revisionist speculation should be eliminated.” The Shinto priest at Japan's Yasukuni war shrine could not have put it better.

This reaction was undoubtedly intensified by the fact that August 1945 remained a part of many Americans' living memory. As Edward T. Linenthal has pointed out, the tension between the commemorative impulse and critical historical scholarship can be profound, and fiftieth anniversaries, the “last hurrah” for most survivors, highlight this tension in a particularly volatile way.

### ***The First Thing We Do, Let's Kill All the Historians***

In the early 1980s, as the nuclear-weapons-freeze campaign unfolded and I pursued research of my own on the atomic bomb's cultural fallout, I often lectured to community groups. When asked about Truman's A-bomb decision (as I almost invariably was), I would discuss the work of Alperovitz, Sherwin, and others as an interpretive approach that merited consideration. But often the questioner would have none of it, especially if he (usually it was a male) remembered World War II, and most especially if he was a veteran convinced beyond all argument that the atomic bomb had saved his life.

I recalled these exchanges in 1988 when Paul Fussell, in *Thank God for the Atomic Bomb*, argued that his personal status as an infantryman in Europe fearing transfer to the Pacific in the spring of 1945 granted him special insight into the decision to use the bomb that far transcended what he lampooned as historians' “tidy hindsight.” Professor Fussell ridiculed scholars like Michael Walzer and Michael S. Sherry, too young to have fought in the war, who presumed to offer interpretations of Truman's actions. Whatever the solipsism and anti-intellectualism of Fussell's position, his views are far from unique and are easy enough to understand. They have, however, more recently been adopted by many who were not themselves participants in World War II, as the battle over the *Enola Gay* exhibit made only too clear.

In August 1995, when I published an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reviewing the controversy over the A-bomb decision and (as I thought) offering a fairly balanced, uncontroversial assessment of the cultural issues and fault lines it had exposed, the response was revealing. While fellow historians and other scholars reacted positively, the scattered responses from outside academia proved uniformly hostile. An early-morning telephone call, for example,

came from a gentleman in North Carolina who, though born after the war, was the son of a veteran who had fought in the Pacific. My caller therefore insisted that he also owed *his* life to the atomic bomb, since if his future father had died in an invasion of Japan, he, the son, would never have been conceived.

The larger implications of my caller's argument were fairly breathtaking: the bomb saved not only the lives of untold thousands of American soldiers who might have perished in the invasion, had it occurred, but also the lives of all the children they subsequently fathered, and by now presumably their grandchildren and even great-grandchildren. If we project into the infinite future the potential descendants of all the men who did not die in the invasion of Japan that was never launched, the atomic bombs that destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki must surely be ranked among the most beneficent and life-giving forces in all human history!

Shortly after this call, a Louisiana investment counselor wrote a sarcasm-filled letter that attacked me as a typical "off-the-wall," anti-American academic eager to besmirch the United States while glossing over all of Japan's misdeeds. He concluded with this final thrust: "I await your political comments on the justification of the war between Athens and Sparta. I am sure that you have an opinion on this and I welcome your comments."

Those who articulate such responses are not interested in debate; for them, unquestioning support for Truman's atomic bomb decision becomes a litmus test of patriotism. Indeed, they reject the legitimacy of the historical enterprise itself. What right have you, a mere academic, such critics are really asking, to publish dissenting views on matters about which true patriots cannot possibly hold differing opinions? As my Louisiana correspondent put it, "*No one can doubt* that this horrible weapon saved American lives." That precisely this assertion is, in fact, a matter of considerable doubt, and certainly open to historical inquiry and discussion, was a position whose legitimacy he simply could not acknowledge. He was left, therefore, with no alternative but to impugn the character and integrity of those who do hold it. The confrontation between popular memory and patriotic affirmation on the one hand, and the norms of historical research and argument on the other, could hardly be more starkly revealed.

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Like "Waterloo" and "Verdun," Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the half century since 1945 have often functioned as a kind of rhetorical shorthand in a variety of public discourses. For some, these two cities, set apart forever by history, served as emblems of America's scientific and technical prowess; for others, as places on a map whose obliteration allowed the nation's just purposes to be attained and countless American (and even Japanese) lives to be saved. They were invoked by moralists as symbols of modern warfare's transgression of all ethical bounds; and seized upon by antinuclear activists as cautionary reminders of what the world must never again permit to happen.

In the fiftieth-anniversary years, however, with the public mood both retrospective and ideologically charged, attention focused once again on the original events in all their jagged immediacy. In the process, many citizens grasped—perhaps for the first time—that for several decades, scholars had been questioning the official justifications originally advanced for the atomic bombing of Japan. The result was not thoughtful discussion and the search for a new,

more historically defensible consensus, but high-decibel contention, inconclusive recrimination, and accusations of bad faith and disloyalty. The Smithsonian exhibit did not cause the controversy; it merely provided the occasion for it and guaranteed that it would be played out amid shameless political opportunism and in a glare of media publicity.

The emotional debate will probably continue so long as politicians see political capital in it, and so long as vast numbers of Americans remain convinced that the atomic bomb was an essential and wholly justifiable means to end a righteous war. It will most certainly continue so long as significant numbers of World War II veterans remain among us, many forever convinced that without the bomb they would have died on Japanese soil.

Even Smithsonian secretary I. Michael Heyman, in a postmortem on the canceled exhibit, gave the back of his hand to the historians who had helped plan it and ignored his institution's mandate to promote "the increase and diffusion of knowledge," as he abjectly capitulated to the exhibit's detractors: "In this important anniversary year, veterans and their families were expecting, and rightly so, that the nation would honor and commemorate their valor and sacrifice. They were not looking for analysis, and, frankly, we did not give enough thought to the intense feelings such an analysis would evoke." Whether the "intense feelings" aroused by thoughtful analysis might in the long run have been more helpful than not to Americans who continue to struggle with the meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Heyman did not consider.

In the face of assumptions like this—that "analysis" and "feelings" are mutually exclusive, that when passions run high, analysis must give way to feelings—it is understandable that historians, with their insistence on research and their readiness to question established interpretations and mythic versions of the past, should be viewed as a threat.

But historians, too, have their convictions and commitments, and we should not underestimate the long-term power of critical historical inquiry, even on emotion-laden topics. For better or worse, it is the historians, at the end of the day, to whom society delegates custodianship of the past.

Whatever the long-term resolution of this divisive and unhappy controversy, Hiroshima and Nagasaki are likely for the foreseeable future to remain the Banquo's ghost of World War II, perennially challenging comfortable generalizations about the conflict and underscoring the disparity between the mythic past inscribed in popular memory and the past that is the raw material of historical scholarship.