

Paul Boyer, *Fallout: A Historian Reflects on America's Half-Century with Nuclear Weapons* (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1998)

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## HOW AMERICANS IMAGINED THE BOMB THEY DROPPED

This essay, adapted from an article published in the August 12 and 19, 1985, issue of the *New Republic*, further underscores the upsurge of journalistic attention to America's nuclear history elicited by the fortieth anniversary of the first use of the atomic bomb. In this piece, I offered an overview of the nation's earliest, confused responses to the atomic bomb in the immediate postwar period and reflected on Americans' forty-year effort to come to terms with the fact that their nation had used the bomb to destroy two cities in 1945.

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"HIROSHIMA." "NAGASAKI." The very words, familiar to the point of banality but restlessly alive, remind us that we have yet to assimilate fully what they represent to our political, cultural, or moral history. "After the passage of nearly four decades and a concomitant growth in our understanding of the ever growing horror of nuclear war," declared the American Catholic bishops in 1983, "we must shape the climate of opinion which will make it possible for our country to express profound sorrow over the atomic bombing of 1945. Without that sorrow, there is no possibility of finding a way to repudiate future use of nuclear weapons."

Catholic bishops choose words with precision. Not remorse, not shame—only sorrow. Yet even that minimal standard seems beyond us. Peace activists will observe the anniversary of the bombing on August 6, but most Americans will ignore it, lapse into banalities about the distant beginnings of the "atomic age," or debate once again the well-worn political questions surrounding the decision to drop the bomb—important

questions, to be sure, but so familiar that they have taken on a ritualized quality, in which every response to every point is known in advance.

The bishops are far from alone in concluding that we have failed as a people to come to terms with Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As early as 1946, Mary McCarthy described Hiroshima as "a kind of hole in human history." A few years ago I interviewed Ralph Lapp, the Manhattan Project physicist who later became a vigorous critic of the nuclear arms race. One of his comments was particularly striking: "If the memory of things is to deter, where is that memory? Hiroshima . . . has been taken out of the American conscience, eviscerated, extirpated."

To understand why, we must go back to the beginning. How did Americans first respond to the knowledge that official actions taken by their leaders had resulted in the instantaneous obliteration of two cities and the death of well over 100,000 human beings? In the public-opinion polls, the approval ratings stood at about 85 percent, with what *Fortune* magazine called "a considerable minority of disappointed savagery" wishing that even more Japanese cities had been wiped out. A Wisconsin woman expressed her genocidal impulses in a letter to the *Milwaukee Journal*: "When one sets out to destroy vermin, does one try to leave a few alive in the nest? Certainly not."

At all levels of American culture, there was an almost compulsive post-Hiroshima effort to trivialize the event and avoid its deeper implications. The *New Republic*, ridiculing reports from Japanese sources of contamination by radiation in the destroyed cities, commented on September 24, 1945: "If radioactivity is present in the soil, such plants will be marked by an unusual number of sports and mutations. Here is the ideal job for Emperor Hirohito, an amateur geneticist. . . . Let him go to Hiroshima, sit among the ruins, and watch the mutations grow." By 1947 the Manhattan telephone directory listed forty-five companies that had incorporated the magic word "atomic" in their names, among them the Atomic Undergarment Company. General Mills that year offered kiddies a genuine "Atomic 'Bomb' Ring" for fifteen cents and a Kix cereal box top.

There were exceptions, of course, to this denial of the enormity of the event. From the first, some Americans reacted to Hiroshima and Nagasaki with dismay and anguish. "King Herod's slaughter of the inno-

cents—an atrocity committed in the name of defense—destroyed no more than a few hundred children," a professor at Chicago Theological Seminary wrote in *Christian Century* magazine. "Today, a single atomic bomb slaughters tens of thousands of children and their mothers and fathers. Newspapers and radio acclaim it a great victory. Victory for what?" A somewhat unexpected voice of moral protest was that of David Lawrence, editor of the conservative magazine *United States News*. And in the African American press, such intellectuals and organizational leaders as W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, Walter White, and others raised charges of racism in the decision to use the atomic bomb against a darker-skinned people.

Generally speaking, however, the media and the public as a whole approved of the bombing of Japan. This was, after all, wartime. For nearly four years Americans had been subjected to anti-Japanese propaganda, some of an incredibly crude racist character, and this racism spilled over into initial reactions to the bomb. The *Philadelphia Inquirer's* political cartoonist pictured an apelike creature staring up in gaping incomprehension as the bomb bursts overhead.

President Truman's initial announcement linked Japan's surprise attack at Pearl Harbor to the retribution meted out at Hiroshima, and this moral symmetry appealed to many early postwar commentators on the bomb. In his influential 1946 book *Dawn over Zero*, William L. Laurence of the *New York Times*, the Manhattan Project's official chronicler, described his feelings aboard the plane headed for Nagasaki: "Does one feel any pity or compassion for the poor devils about to die? Not when one thinks of Pearl Harbor and of the Death March on Bataan." Given the intensity of this war spirit, it is hardly surprising that with rare exceptions Hiroshima and Nagasaki figure hardly at all in early postwar American fiction or poetry.

Awareness of the magnitude of the civilian toll at Hiroshima was initially blunted by President Truman's announcement, which declared: "The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians." Of course, Americans quickly realized that Hiroshima was not a Japanese Fort Benning, but a major city. Even then, however, they did not respond with the shock that

a totally unprecedented innovation in strategic bombing policy might have elicited. By August 1945, Americans were conditioned to accept the slaughter of civilian populations as a legitimate military practice. At Dresden, Hamburg, and other German cities, and then in the Japanese war, the obliteration of cities had become the de facto Allied bombing strategy. More civilians died in the Tokyo firebombing raid of March 10, 1945, than perished at Hiroshima.

The most compelling factor of all in shaping the initial American response to Hiroshima was surely the universal insistence of policymakers and opinion leaders that the only alternative to the atomic bomb would have been a land invasion of Japan costing hundreds of thousands of American lives. A few challenged this assertion. The Manhattan Project scientists who had urgently advocated a demonstration shot prior to all-out military use continued to raise questions after the war's end. Reports of Japanese peace feelers in early August quickly surfaced after V-J Day. In *Fear, War, and the Bomb* (1948), the Nobel Prize-winning British physicist (and political leftist) P. M. S. Blackett suggested that power calculations involving the Soviet Union had figured importantly in Washington's decision.

For the vast majority of Americans, however, the theme that the atomic bomb "saved American lives" took deep root, obviating the need for any further discussion. Blackett's realpolitik argument was angrily denounced by most American reviewers. (Not until the 1960s, in a very different political climate, would this "revisionist" interpretation gain a serious hearing.) Dwight Macdonald was one of the very few to challenge the moral legitimacy of this argument; it could, he said, be used to rationalize "any atrocious action, absolutely any one." But his was a lonely voice in 1945. Some took the argument even further, claiming that the bomb had saved *Japanese* lives as well by bringing a hopeless struggle to a decisive conclusion. As the *Chicago Tribune* put it in commenting on the American leaders' atomic bomb decision: "Being merciless, they were merciful." A *Tribune* editorial made the point visually, picturing a dove of peace flying over Japan with an atomic bomb in its beak.

Any consideration of the early cultural response to Hiroshima must take into account John Hersey's remarkable work of 1946. Published first in a single issue of the *New Yorker* and then as a book, and now reissued

with a new chapter for the fortieth anniversary, Hersey's *Hiroshima*, with its straightforward factual account of the experiences of six ordinary men and women during and after the atomic bombing, helped transform the caricatured "Japs" of wartime propaganda back into Japanese—into fellow human beings. This was unquestionably a significant achievement, and one for which Hersey has been deservedly praised. But it has proven extraordinarily difficult for critics and cultural historians to assess his work's broader impact. For many readers the effect seems to have been at once intensely moving and curiously passive. Hersey's restrained, uninflected *New Yorker* prose offered a kind of expiation and catharsis, a closing of accounts on a troubling episode, rather than a challenge to push on to a deeper, more threatening engagement with it.

That the response of most Americans to Hiroshima and Nagasaki froze immediately at the surface level, never moving to a deeper plane of moral complexity, is surely attributable in large part to the fact that the nation's media and molders of opinion quickly turned to other aspects of the atomic energy story. Within hours of Truman's announcement, newspapers and magazines were offering detailed explanations of nuclear physics, long self-congratulatory histories of the Manhattan Project, and euphoric discussions of an atomic-energy utopia of limitless power, atomic cars and planes, medical wonders, boundless leisure, and revolutions in agriculture. That this latest scientific wonder had burst on the world's consciousness through the obliteration of a city seemed merely a regrettable piece of bad luck—rather as though electricity, with all its benefits, had first become known through the mass electrocution of several hundred thousand people.

Some went further, suggesting that the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been an essential step in making atomic energy available for peaceful purposes. Similarly, those who believed that the atomic bomb would assure world peace by making war too horrible to contemplate stressed the symbolic importance of the event. "Never in all the long history of human slaughter have lives been lost to greater purpose," *Reader's Digest* declared reassuringly in November 1945; all mankind was now united by bonds "fused unbreakably in the diabolical heat of those explosions."

Hiroshima and Nagasaki penetrated the postwar American

consciousness in another important symbolic respect as well: as examples of what might lie ahead for American cities. At the moment of victory, the nation suddenly felt itself naked and vulnerable, and Hiroshima became the emblem of that vulnerability. "In that terrible flash 10,000 miles away," wrote Washington correspondent James Reston in the *New York Times*, men and women in the capital had "glimpsed the future of America."

The immense symbolic and polemical value of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was heavily exploited by activist scientists and others who in 1946 sought to arouse public support for the Acheson-Lilienthal international control plan. "Only one tactic is dependable—the preaching of doom," one scientist told the *New Yorker*; anything else was "met with yawns." Without international control of the atom, Americans were endlessly warned, the fate of these two cities would be theirs as well.

Highly effective as propaganda, this shorthand use of "Hiroshima" and "Nagasaki" as abstract cautionary devices further diminished the capacity of Americans to respond directly to the actual fate of two real cities. The emotional thrust of the 1946 fear campaign was directed forward to possible future atomic holocausts, not backward to what had already occurred. Indeed, one international control activist urged the pacifist A. J. Muste to mute his criticism of the atomic bombing of Japan, since it was diverting attention from the important political task at hand. Muste, however, like the Catholic bishops in 1983, was convinced that the nuclear future and the nuclear past were inextricably linked. Without confronting Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he later wrote, "no political or moral appraisal of our age is adequate, no attempt to find an answer to its dilemmas and destiny offers hope."

This brings us to the final, perhaps the underlying, reason why the American people proved so reluctant to grapple with the full implications of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the war, and why after forty years we still approach with such uncertainty the events of that distant August. The nuclear obliteration of two cities on orders from Washington forced Americans of 1945—and forces us today—to face up to the extent to which the fighting of World War II had descended into wholesale, indiscriminate slaughter. And this recognition, in turn, seems seriously to compromise the moral clarity of what has come to be called "The Good

War." In contrast to the ambiguities of some of America's military involvements since 1945, World War II united the American people in what was seen almost universally as a wholly justifiable struggle against forces that represented the very embodiment of evil. But the nuclear devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, coupled with the destruction of other cities by "conventional" means, adds an unsettlingly discordant note. To contemplate Hiroshima and Nagasaki unblinkingly is to confront our recent moral history in the most radical way imaginable. Few were ready to do that in 1945. Few have been prepared to do it since.

Thus the American cultural and intellectual engagement with Hiroshima has remained episodic and inconclusive. The reasons are clear enough. Hiroshima challenges not only our view of World War II, but also some of our most deep-seated beliefs about the meaning of our national experience. For years, cultural historians have noted the power and the tenacity of the myth of American innocence: the belief that we are somehow set apart from the other nations of the world, our motives higher, our methods purer. This myth has never lacked critics, of course, and as early as the 1920s it came under massive challenge. But it remained potent well after World War II, and is far from dead today. It is very difficult, to say the least, to fit Hiroshima into a moral schema rooted in a national mythology of innocence and exceptionalism.

Hiroshima raises in the starkest imaginable fashion that most troublesome of ethical dilemmas: At what point are good motives corrupted and perverted by the means employed to achieve them? If that point was not reached at Hiroshima—and certainly at Nagasaki—at what conceivable point in the actions of a nation-state would it be reached? These are not questions for which our image of America has prepared us. Consider, for example, Freeman Dyson's reflections, in *Disturbing the Universe*, on the anger of many American atomic scientists when J. Robert Oppenheimer, in a famous comment of 1948, described them having "known sin":

They lacked the tragic sense of life which was deeply ingrained in every European of my generation [the generation of the First World War]. They had never lived with tragedy and had no feeling for it. Having no sense of tragedy, they also had no sense of guilt. They seemed

very young and innocent although most of them were older than I was. They had come through the war without scars. Los Alamos had been for them a great lark. It left their innocence untouched. That was why they were unable to accept Oppy's statement as expressing a truth about themselves.

Hiroshima challenges another foundation stone of American culture as well: our proud pragmatism, the tradition of William James and John Dewey. Absolutist thinking must be abandoned, James insisted; the best test of truth is its practical usefulness in helping us achieve our purposes. Give up abstract moralizing, Dewey agreed; accept reality as it actually presents itself and concentrate on shaping it toward intelligently formulated social ends. The same experimental method that gave rise to modern science, he said, must now be applied in the social realm. In practice, this philosophy led Dewey to lend enthusiastic support to American intervention in World War I. That conflict, he believed, could be utilized by engaged intellectuals for progressive purposes at home and abroad.

The pragmatic tradition is not conducive to the taking of principled moral stands. (Those like Jane Addams and Randolph Bourne who did take such a stand in 1917–18 found themselves exiled to the margin, if not ostracized.) But if Hiroshima does not demand that one at least most seriously consider such a stand, what situation possibly could? The experimental ethic is serviceable when the results of a failed "experiment" can be corrected with relative ease. It is less satisfactory in helping us formulate a position toward decisions like the one President Truman faced in August 1945—and others may face in the future.

Finally, our national discourse over Hiroshima remains so deeply troubling because it is not merely about a past event, however divisive or traumatic, but also about contemporary public policy issues of the gravest import. Culture and politics are never wholly separable, of course, but in this instance they are interwoven in a particularly complex and volatile way. Our sporadic but continuing effort to come to terms with Hiroshima is part of our larger struggle to clarify, collectively and individually, our view of World War II, our vision of America, our characteristic approach to issues of ethics and value, and is, finally, a way to comprehend the nuclear reality itself.