

PAUL BOYER, FALLOUT: A HISTORICIAN REFLECTS  
ON AMERICA'S HALF-CENTURY  
ENCOUNTER WITH NUCLEAR  
WEAPONS

## THE DAY AMERICA FIRST HEARD THE NEWS

August 6, 1985, the fortieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, came at a moment of transition in Americans' perception of nuclear issues. The nuclear-freeze campaign, rhetorically checked by President Reagan's "Star Wars" address of March 1983, was clearly on the wane. But the dramatic changes in the Soviet Union launched by Premier Mikhail Gorbachev, who came to power in March 1985, had barely begun. U.S.-Soviet talks on bilateral nuclear-missile reductions in Europe, sidetracked during Reagan's first term, had at last resumed, but Reagan's November 1985 meeting with Gorbachev in Geneva still lay several months in the future.

Amid much uncertainty, nuclear jitters persisted. The fears roused by the rhetoric and the actions of Reagan's first term, and the resulting surge of antinuclear activism, remained potent cultural forces. In this context, the Hiroshima anniversary attracted much media attention, including a *Time* magazine cover featuring a mushroom cloud. In this setting, I wrote the following, which appeared as an op-ed piece in the *New York Times* on August 4, 1985.

WHERE WERE YOU when you first heard about the atomic bomb? My guess is that most Americans over the age of fifty can answer that question instantly. August 6, 1945, was one of those days that stick in the brain. The most trivial details of such days can often be recalled decades later, simply because *they* are associated with the moment one first hears a piece of shocking or frightening news.

I must confess that the radio newscasts of that distant August afternoon have blurred a bit in my mind. But the newspaper memory remains starkly vivid. I can visualize just where the afternoon edition of the *Dayton Daily News* was lying

in our kitchen when my eye caught the riveting headline. I can recall reading it aloud to my parents, mispronouncing the strange new word “A-tome” because I had never heard anyone say-it before.

Other people, older than I, were also deeply shocked by Truman’s announcement. It was a moment that, even then, struck many as a radical turning point in human history, and a surprising number felt impelled to put pen to paper and record their feelings and reactions.

In New York City, Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, spent the night of August 6 composing an impassioned essay, “Modern Man Is Obsolete.” The atomic bomb had made nationalism outmoded and dangerous, he argued, and only a world government could save mankind. In Charlotte, North Carolina, a country-music singer, Fred Kirby, also spent a sleepless night after hearing the news. The next day, he wrote “Atomic Power,” a song evoking grim images of divine judgment and apocalyptic destruction. It caught on immediately and, for several weeks early in 1946, was on *Billboard’s* list of top country favorites.

At his summer cottage in Kennebunk, Maine, the Rev. John Haynes Holmes of New York City’s Community Church was enjoying the ocean view when he heard the report. “Everything else seemed suddenly to become insignificant,” he wrote a few days later. “I seemed to grow cold, as though I had been transported to the waste spaces of the moon. The summer beauty seemed to vanish, and the waves of the sea to be pounding upon the shores of an empty world....For I knew that the final crisis in human history had come. What that atomic bomb had done to Japan, it could do to us.”

In Pelham Manor, New York, Patricia E. Munk had just returned from the hospital, having given birth to her second son, when the word arrived. “Since then,” she wrote in a letter six days later, “I have hardly been able to smile, the future seems so utterly grim for our two little boys. Most of the time I have been in tears or near tears, and fleeting but torturing regrets that I have brought children into the world to face such a dreadful thing as this have shivered through me. It seems that it will be for them all their lives like living on a keg of dynamite which may go off at any moment.”

The atomic bomb announcement elicited very little celebration. A few newspapers published gloating editorials and cartoons; a radio comedian joked about Japan's "atomic ache." Another said the bomb "made Hiroshima look like Ebbetts Field after a game between the Giants and the Dodgers." For most Americans, however, the news brought not joy but profound apprehension.

The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* warned on August 7 that science may have "signed the mammalian world's death warrant, and deeded an earth in ruins to the ants." The next day, the *Milwaukee Journal* published a map of Milwaukee overlaid with concentric circles showing the pattern of destruction in Hiroshima.

The more highly placed the observer, it seemed, the deeper the uneasiness. Washington, a reporter wrote, was "pervaded by a sense of oppression." "For all we know," intoned the radio announcer H. V. Kaltenborn in his broadcast on the evening of August 6, "we have created a Frankenstein! We must assume that with the passage of only a little time .in improved form of the new weapon we used today can be turned against us."

This primal fear of extinction cut across all political and ideological lines, from the staunchly conservative *Chicago Tribune*, which wrote of an atomic war that would leave the earth "a barren waste, in which the survivors of the race will hide in caves or live among ruins," to the liberal *New Republic*, which on August 20 offered an almost identical vision of a conflict that would "obliterate all the great cities of the belligerents, bring industry and technology to a grinding halt," and leave only "scattered remnants of humanity living on the periphery of civilization."

From our contemporary perspective such cataclysmic imagery may seem so familiar as to be almost trite—if visions of universal destruction can ever become trite. But it is sobering to realize how quickly these dark visions surfaced. Within hours of Truman's announcement, and years before the world's nuclear arsenals made such a holocaust likely or even possible, the prospect of global annihilation already filled the nation's consciousness. In the earliest moments of the nuclear era, the fear that would come to haunt millions of people not yet born in 1945 had already found urgent expression.

In most cases, our memories of even the highest moments of public drama are eventually filed away. They become a reassuring part of our general stock of

recollections, to be brought out and nostalgically relived from time to time. But August 6, 1945, is different. After forty years, it still has not receded into that safe and static realm we call “the past.”

Kaltenborn’s Frankenstein still roams; the *Post-Dispatch*’s kingdom of the ants still waits in the wings. The stab of fear we felt when we read that first newspaper headline or heard that first radio bulletin may not occupy the center of our awareness, but it remains with us still.