

AMERICA'S CULTURE WARS AND THE CLASSROOM HIROSHIMA

By Leo Maley III and Uday Mohan

The dominant American view of Hiroshima and Nagasaki owes much to what people felt when they first heard about the bombings fifty years ago. In 1945, many Americans believed the Japanese got what they deserved when we bombed those two cities. An August 1945 Gallup poll showed 85 percent of the public approving of the use of the atomic bombs on Japanese cities.¹ A second poll, published in the December 1945 issue of *Fortune*, a leading business magazine, is even more revealing. It showed 53.5 percent of the American public believing we “should have used the two bombs on cities, just as we did.” An *additional* 22.7 percent believed that we “should have quickly used many more of them [atomic bombs] before Japan had a chance to surrender.”²

For Americans of the World War II generation, the passage of fifty years has not significantly altered attitudes concerning America's use of the atomic bomb. When asked to “remember Hiroshima,” many still angrily respond by evoking Pearl Harbor or the Bataan Death March.³ A substantial number of Americans have passed down family memories of death and survival in the Pacific war. Many of these veterans and their families continue to believe that the atomic bomb saved their own lives or the lives of loved ones. Half a century after the end of the war, many still “thank God” for the atomic bomb, and they are contemptuous of historians who question the necessity of the bombings.⁴

In contrast, for some time it has been possible for American academics to challenge the dominant justifications for the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and



V. J. Day, Aug. 15, 1945, Paris
Photo: National Archives

Nagasaki. Scholarship critical of the widely-held belief that it was necessary to use atomic bombs on Japanese cities has steadily accumulated since the 1960s.⁵ But because most textbooks fail to incorporate or emphasize the latest atomic bomb scholarship, and few college courses focus on Hiroshima in any depth, the accumulating scholarship has had limited effect. For their part, the media ignore, with limited though sometimes striking exceptions, the impressive body of evidence and argument that runs counter to the official justifications for the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁶

The National Air and Space Museum's plans for a 1995 exhibit on the end of World War II and its nuclear aftermath was in many ways a watershed for American thinking about Hiroshima. This was the first nationally prominent effort to make use of, however cautiously, some

of the newer critical scholarship on the bomb decision. Museum curators had intended to acknowledge the continuing intense debate about the decision among historians, as well as the diversity of opinions among American military, scientific, and political leaders concerning the bombings.

Unfortunately, the proposed exhibit and the meaning of Hiroshima became deeply embroiled in America's accelerating "culture wars." Scholars who raised critical questions about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were pejoratively labeled "revisionists," or even "cultists"; and Smithsonian curators were called "politically correct pinheads" among other names.⁷ Conservative veterans and their allies wished to banish any interpretation that might draw into question the legitimacy of momentous decisions made fifty years ago. As Peter Blute, at the time a Congressman from Massachusetts, stated, "I would hate to think that young people in this country would go into our national museum and view an exhibit and come out of that exhibit and say to themselves, 'Weren't we wrong?'"⁸

The somewhat greater openness of the media to questions about the bomb decision during the summer of 1995 suggests that the forced cancellation of the Smithsonian exhibit and the marginalization of historians in the media during 1994 do not reflect the final word on American understanding of Hiroshima. Some poll numbers bear this out. A Gallup poll conducted in July 1990 showed that Americans split about evenly when asked if they approve or disapprove of the use of the atomic bombs against Japan.⁹ According to a 1995 America's Talking/Gallup poll, 49 percent of the American public say they would have tried means other than the bomb to force Japan to surrender in World War II.¹⁰ It is worth noting that the latter poll was taken soon after the months-long barrage of propaganda against the planned Smithsonian exhibit.¹¹



THE 1990 POLL also indicated that:

- **one in four Americans did not recall that an atomic bomb had been used against an enemy in wartime.**

THE 1995 POLL also showed that:

- **60 percent did not know that Truman was the president who authorized the atomic bombings.**
- **35 percent did not know that Hiroshima was the target of the first atomic bomb.**

It was in this context—of tenaciously held myths about Hiroshima, but also of signs that the myths are unstable—that we had the opportunity in the fall of 1995 to teach a 15-week undergraduate seminar titled "Hiroshima: History, Ethics, and Memory" under the auspices of the University Honors Program at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Our primary goal was to have our class of 18, only one of whom was a history major, converse and write thoughtfully about what remains a highly contested historical event. While we had our students read some *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors) testimonies, including poetry by Kurihara Sadako, we maintained an almost exclusively American focus in our course. We wanted to explore with our students the multifaceted ways that American media, historians, scientists, ethicists, and others have responded to the moral and political challenge of Hiroshima. Like the title of Robert J. Lifton and Greg Mitchell's recent book, we wanted our students to grapple with *Hiroshima in America*.¹²

Our course considered what is now known about the decision to use the atomic bomb, as well as the historical, ethical, and commemorative voices that have vied to determine the meaning of Hiroshima over the past fifty years. We wanted our students to examine the relationship between government, war, and the writing of history: How did President Truman (and other top government officials) explain the use of the bomb? What does current scholarship tell us about the decision-making that led to the bomb's use? We also wanted them to reflect on public consent: What factors contributed to public "consent" to the bomb's use? What role did the media play in shaping public opinion? What responsibility do citizens have for decisions made "in their name"? We planned to discuss the topic of commemoration: How have Americans commemorated the use of the bomb? How has the tension between commemoration and history played out in the media and in the conflict over the recently canceled

Smithsonian exhibit? How should we—as Americans—remember Hiroshima?

We also considered issues of ethics and law: Are there ethical limits to the conduct of war? What rights does an enemy have in wartime? What did American military leaders think of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? How did the atomic scientists view their role in the making and use of the bomb? Is scientific research morally neutral, or do scientists have a particular social responsibility? Was the use of the atomic bomb a violation of international law? These were the kind of tough, open-ended questions we wanted our students to grapple with for a semester.¹³

The principal text for our course was Gar Alperovitz's 1995 book, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth*.¹⁴ In addition, our students read John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, nearly sixty essays and book excerpts, several newspaper editorials, and some poems. We also showed a brief documentary film and excerpts from television news programs.

The first half of Alperovitz's book is the most detailed and heavily documented analysis to date of the decision to use the atomic bomb.¹⁵ Alperovitz argues from the documents that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not militarily necessary. Truman and his advisers understood that a combination of Russian entry into the Pacific war and an American clarification of surrender terms could in all likelihood have ended the war well before any planned American invasion of Japan. These options were put aside, however, in favor of using the bomb, which was seen as a (postwar) trump card against the Russians.

If the first half of Alperovitz's book considers what we now know (and do not know) about the decision to use the atomic bomb, the second half of the book examines what the public was told (and not told) about the decision. Alperovitz contrasts public statements by President Harry Truman, two key members of his

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U. S. Navy press photo, November 27, 1945.
Caption: "Officers of USS Appalachian view the damage at Hiroshima."
Photographer unknown.

cabinet (Henry Stimson and James Byrnes), and General Leslie Groves (who directed the project that developed the atomic bombs) with what scholars now know about the decision. The picture that emerges is one of self-deception among American leaders and the willful misleading of the American public through suppression of information and the construction of an official and misleading history of the decision to use the bomb. This official history includes the infamous and endlessly repeated myth that the bomb saved half a million or even a million American lives.

Our students also read a number of essays that take issue with Alperovitz's interpretations. In one essay, for example, Barton Bernstein, a leading historian of the bomb decision, argues that most American leaders did not question or challenge the bomb's use. For Truman, the weapon, conceived under Franklin D. Roosevelt, appeared legitimate, and its use seemed necessary and desirable.¹⁶ Another essay, emphasizing Japanese wartime fanaticism and questioning the seriousness of Japanese peace feelers, defended President Truman's decision to use atomic weapons.¹⁷ We also had as a guest speaker J. Samuel Walker, a historian who has surveyed recent scholarship on the atomic bomb decision.¹⁸ We thought it important that our students consider the interpretive nature of all history, including Alperovitz's book, and struggle with the ambiguity of historical evidence concerning the decision to use the atomic bomb.

Most of our students were quite open to questioning the dominant rationale for the atomic bombings. Their responses were less rigid than those generally found in the public at large, at least the public sentiment generally reported in the media. Perhaps our students' willingness to question American orthodoxies about Hiroshima reflects poll data showing young Americans to be less supportive than older Americans of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings.¹⁹ The greater

openness of students to questioning the bombings might also be a function of the academic setting, which is somewhat shielded from the heated rhetoric and media simplifications of the American public sphere.

Initially, faced with Alperovitz's monumental scholarly work, students appeared to put aside whatever conventional preconceptions they might have had about the bomb. Students at first willingly refracted their understanding of Hiroshima through Alperovitz's framework, but because Alperovitz stresses the ambiguity of some of the historical evidence, and because we encouraged students to seek as open and complex a picture of Hiroshima as possible, a number of our students eventually voiced frustration at the unresolvable nature of some questions: What exactly was going through the minds of Harry Truman and his advisers regarding the use of the bomb? How clearly and firmly were American officials laying out alternatives to the bomb's use? What responsibility did the Japanese leaders share in continuing the war and bringing greater destruction on Japan? These disturbing questions remain unanswered.

As these ambiguities surfaced and remained unresolved, some students became less critical of the conventional justifications for using the atomic bomb. As the semester progressed and we got further away from Alperovitz's book, questioning the bomb decision began to give way to uncertainty about what position to hold on the use of the bomb.

During the final meeting of our class, we asked students to list the significant issues Hiroshima raised for them. Most comments congealed around four broad issues that had come up repeatedly throughout the course. The first theme concerned Cold War rationales. A few students less critical of the bomb based their arguments on general Cold War grounds. They felt that the bomb helped to contain Soviet ambitions in the Far East and elsewhere and that this justified its use.

The second theme concerned the state's relation to civil society. Students saw the decision to use the atomic bomb and the various ways top government officials rationalized the decision as a lesson in how political elites attempt to stifle public debate about questionable government actions. One student commented that we should shed our apathy and demand more accountability from government officials. A second student added that the media could play an important role in both pressuring the government and in providing honest information about Hiroshima. A third student expressed concern about undemocratic and overzealous government classification policies.

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A third overarching theme concerned the ambiguity and uncertainty of historical interpretation. For some students a semester of studying the atomic bomb decision raised more questions than it answered. One student stressed a major difficulty involved in evaluating historical interpretations about the decision. Without personal familiarity with the original historical documents, he wondered, how can a reader evaluate the conflicting interpretations put forth by historians? In the face of uncertainty, he said that he would give "orthodox" interpretations of the atomic bomb decision the benefit of the doubt. Another student took a contrary position, arguing that "revisionists," such as Alperovitz, were responsible for disclosing a fuller and more accurate history that made possible serious debate about the decision. For a third student, the course resulted in a shift from accepting Hiroshima myths to accepting uncertainty about the bomb's necessity.

Finally, a fourth theme concerned the morality of the bombings. Interestingly, most of our students were reluctant to make strong ethical claims. Statements were often qualified with some version of "It's only my opinion, but . . ." Some students suggested that Hiroshima may be justifiable, but nevertheless it should never be repeated. Only one student, a self-declared pacifist, made consistent ethical arguments throughout the semester. In this last meeting, for example, he offered the clearest ethical statement about Hiroshima: intentional targeting of civilians is immoral. Strikingly, little was said directly about the victims of the A-bomb in our wrap-up discussion. This may have been due to the largely American focus of our course, and possibly to the discomfort which many Americans feel when presented with the testimony of *hibakusha* and other victims of our government's actions. Perhaps, to varying degrees, we all want to avoid confronting the human consequences of the atomic bombings.

Ours is not the only recent course to examine the decision to use the atomic bomb in detail. Classes that consider at length the use of the atomic bomb in 1945 have recently been offered at a number of U.S. universities, including American University (Peter Kuznick), Stanford University (Barton J. Bernstein), the University of Massachusetts, Amherst (Richard Minear), Tufts University (Martin Sherwin), and Birmingham-Southern College (Matthew Levey).

As important as we think it is, our course, and others like it, are not adequate vehicles to expose students to the complexity and ambiguity surrounding the decision to use the atomic bomb. Clearly, only a very small minority of university students will ever take a class that considers Hiroshima in any depth. Unfortunately, American high school and college history textbooks generally do a poor job when it comes to their treatment of the decision to use the atomic bomb.²⁰ It is important, therefore, that those who use textbooks in their survey courses on American, Japanese, and world history incorporate into their course lectures the research findings and arguments found in the recent historiographical debate on the bomb decision.²¹ In addition, two excellent essay collections (not yet available when we taught our course) are likely to facilitate teaching about Hiroshima as a politically and culturally contested event.²² Beyond these few suggestions, we believe that teaching possibilities on this topic are nearly endless, and we look forward to hearing about others' experiences in bringing Hiroshima into American classrooms. ■

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NOTES

1. Only ten percent of the American public disapproved of the bombing. See George H. Gallup, *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971*, Vol. I: 1935-1948. New York: Random House, 1972, 521-22; and also, *Public Opinion Quarterly* 9 (Fall 1945): 385.
2. "The Fortune Survey," *Fortune*, 32:6 (December 1945): 305.
3. See, for instance, Charles Glover, "Americans Froze Day in Memory: Dec. 7 Became Point of Reference for the Comings and Goings of Life," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, December 7, 1991, A14; and James E. Romero, Jr., "No Hiroshima, if Pearl Harbor Hadn't Happened," *Santa Barbara News-Press*, September 11, 1994, G4.
4. See, for instance, Paul Fussell, "Hiroshima: A Soldier's View," *New Republic*, August 22/29, 1981, 26-30.
5. See, for example, J. Samuel Walker, "The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update," *Diplomatic History* 14 (Winter 1990): 97-114.
6. See Tony Capaccio and Uday Mohan, "Missing the Target," *American Journalism Review*, July/August 1995, 18-26; Uday Mohan and Sanho Tree, "Hiroshima, the American Media, and the Construction of Conventional Wisdom," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4 (Summer 1995): 141-60, especially pp. 159-60; and Uday Mohan and Leo Maley III, "Orthodoxy and Dissent: The American News Media and the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb Against Japan, 1945-1995," in *Cultural Difference, Media Memories: Anglo-American Images of Japan*, ed. Phil Hammond. London and Washington: Cassell, 1997.
7. Andre Ryerson, "The Cult of Hiroshima," *Commentary* 80 (October 1985): 36-40; Robert P. Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995; R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., "Hiroshima and the Hectoring Herd," *Washington Times*, September 2, 1994, A18. Also, rather than being judged on its merits, history critical of the atomic bombings is often accused of being a product of 1960s divisions over the Vietnam War. See, for instance, Edwin M. Yoder, Jr., ". . . Or Hiroshima Cult," *Washington Post*, February 4, 1995, A17.
8. Peter Blute, quoted in Saito Michio, "Skimming over the Mushroom Clouds: The Saga of the Atomic-Bomb Exhibit," *Japan Echo* (Summer 1995): 68. Congressman Blute also declared that "the decision to drop the atomic bomb was . . . a morally unambiguous decision . . ." Peter Blute, "Revisionist History Has Few Defenders," *Technology Review*, August/September 1995, 52.
9. Only 53 percent approved. *Gallup Poll Monthly*, August 1990, 33.
10. Kristin E. Hussey, "Hiroshima, Nagasaki a Mystery to Americans," *Washington Times*, March 3, 1995.
11. Both polls also showed American loss of memory about World War II. The 1990 poll, for example, indicated that one in four Americans did not recall that an atomic bomb had been used against an enemy in wartime. The 1995 poll showed that 60 percent did not know that Truman was the president who authorized the atomic bombings, and 35 percent did not know that Hiroshima was the target of the first atomic bomb.
12. Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial*. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995.
13. For a useful, brief examination of the several facets involved in understanding and teaching the atomic bombings, see Richard Minear, "Hiroshima, HIROSHIMA, 'Hiroshima,'" *Education About Asia* 1 (February 1996): 31-8. Minear includes a very helpful bibliography of the recent literature.
14. One of us (Maley), it should be noted, was a researcher for this book.
15. For a judicious review of Alperovitz's book, see Marilyn Young, review of Gar Alperovitz, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth," in *American Historical Review* 100 (December 1995): 1515-16.
16. Barton J. Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," *Foreign Affairs* 74 (January/February 1995): 135-52.
17. See, for instance, Robert James Maddox, "The Biggest Decision: Why We Had to Drop the Atomic Bomb," *American Heritage*, May/June 1995, 71-7.
18. J. Samuel Walker, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb: A Historiographical Update," *Diplomatic History* 14 (Winter 1990): 97-114. A slightly different and updated version of this essay appears in Michael J. Hogan, ed., *Hiroshima in History and Memory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
19. See, for instance, Fred Bruning and Jee-Young Shin, "Truman's Decision: Do LIers [Long Islanders] Agree? Poll Results Vary Widely By Age," *Sunday Newsday* (Long Island, New York), July 16, 1995, A4, A45; Kristin E. Hussey, "Hiroshima, Nagasaki a Mystery to Americans," *Washington Times*, March 3, 1995; and Barton J. Bernstein, "The Struggle Over History: Defining the Hiroshima Narrative," in *Judgment at the Smithsonian*, ed. Philip Nobile. New York: Marlowe and Company, 1995, 202.
20. J. Samuel Walker, "History, Collective Memory, and the Decision to Use the Bomb," in Michael Hogan, ed., *Hiroshima in History and Memory*.
21. In addition to the Alperovitz volume, we recommend reading the essays collected in Michael J. Hogan, ed., *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, especially those by J. Samuel Walker, Barton J. Bernstein, and Herbert Bix. For a defense of the atomic bomb decision see Robert J. Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later*. Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1995.
22. See Edward Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*. New York: Metropolitan/Henry Holt, 1996; and Laura Hein and Mark Selden, eds., *Living with the Bomb: American and Japanese Cultural Conflicts in the Nuclear Age*. Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997.