

# Historical Inquiry and the Public Memory

While the controversy created by the *Enola Gay* exhibit at the Smithsonian illustrated the deep division between the public memory and prevailing patterns of historical scholarship, new levels of inquiry suggest ways in which those of us who teach about the bomb might try to bridge the gap.

PUBLIC MEMORY was initially framed by two early publications.<sup>1</sup> In August 1946, John Hersey's *New Yorker* article (and subsequent book) forced Americans to think about the role that nuclear weapons should play in postwar U.S. foreign policy. Even a hostile commentator, William Buckley, Jr., later conceded that Hersey's writings offered "both a spiritual acknowledgment of the transcendent magnitude of the event, and an invitation to analytical mediation on its implications."<sup>2</sup> If Hersey's writing set the precedent for the image of Hiroshima as an anti-nuclear symbol, then the work of Truman's secretary of war Henry Stimson, first in a 1947 *Atlantic* article and then in his lengthier memoirs, served as the first illustration of the other role to be played by Hiroshima in the American public memory. Prodded by James Conant, who feared the effects of a widespread public questioning of Truman's decision, Stimson justi-

## *The Hiroshima Decision as a Case Study*

By Robert David Johnson

fied the use of the bomb as the only alternative to an invasion which would have yielded as many as half a million American casualties, a vastly inflated figure which nonetheless quickly became part of the public consciousness on the issue.<sup>3</sup>

Although not quite so polarized, the earliest academic work on the decision to drop the bomb paralleled these alternative visions. In 1961, Herbert Feis' *Japan Subdued* cast Truman's central aim as a military one: ending the war in the Pacific as soon as possible with the minimum loss of American lives.<sup>4</sup> From the other side, Gar Alperovitz's *Atomic Diplomacy*, first published in 1965, stressed the diplomatic, not military, reasons behind the dropping of the bomb. In his view, President Truman deliberately prolonged the war so that he could intimidate the Soviet Union by dropping the bomb.<sup>5</sup>

While Alperovitz's book (recently updated and republished) has naturally been contentious, most historians now accept Barton Bernstein's contention that a hope that the bomb might intimidate the Soviets served as a "bonus," not the primary reason,

for Truman's decision to use the bomb. Bernstein also has asked historians to view Truman's decision in light of accepted standards of morality and warfare at the time, noting that no reason existed for policymakers in the Truman administration to look for such alternatives to the dropping of the bomb as a non-combat demonstration, modifying the U.S. demand that Japan surrender unconditionally so as to permit the retention of the Emperor system, pursuing Japan's peace feelers more diligently,

delaying the use of the bomb until after the Soviet entry into the Pacific war, or relying on heavy non-atomic bombing and a naval blockade of Japan. Finally, Bernstein also made the important historical finding that, contrary to claims offered by Truman and his secretary of war, Henry Stimson, in their memoirs that U.S. deaths from an invasion of Japan might have totaled as many as half a million men, policymakers at the time had access to figures which listed a far lower likely figure, somewhere around 25,000 men. Bernstein's work, and that of similarly minded historians, served to modify the extreme claims associated with the two earlier interpretations of Hiroshima.<sup>6</sup>

That the orthodox school once associated with Feis had all but ceased to exist was implicitly confirmed when Stimson's former aide, McGeorge Bundy, conceded that American policymakers "were full of hope that the bomb would put new strength into the American power position" when conducting diplomacy after the war. Building on the earlier work of Michael Sherry, he also explicitly addressed the critics—in both the scholarly community and among the public at large—who characterized Hiroshima and Nagasaki as immoral acts, stressing the role played by strategic bombing campaigns directed against civilian targets in changing the accepted view of morality in warfare. Indeed, Bundy claimed, "of all the changes in warmaking brought by experience and felt necessary in World War II, none is more remarkable than that which reversed both official and public attitudes toward the area bombing of cities." He correctly noted that most of the moral arguments directed against atomic weapons worked as well against the use of incendiary devices against civilian targets, which had become accepted Air Force practice by late 1944 and received strong support among the American public.<sup>7</sup>

In short, most diplomatic historians now realize that alternatives to using the bomb were recognized at the time, and that political as well as military factors thus influenced President Truman's decision. Recent scholarship on the overall foreign policies of Roosevelt and Truman has tended to reinforce this general view of two administrations for which geopolitical concerns played a key role in shaping the approach of top

policymakers; in retrospect, it would be startling if policymakers in the United States, clearly the most powerful nation in the world in 1945, had not considered the political and diplomatic ramifications of such an important decision as dropping atomic weapons on Japan.<sup>8</sup>

In sharp contrast to the trend within the scholarly community, however, public opinion on Truman's decision to drop the bomb has become much more polarized in the last fifteen years. Paul Boyer recently has commented on how the Hersey and Stimson works helped "position Hiroshima at the core of the debate over nuclear weapons—past, present, and future." They also established a pattern, which has become especially pronounced in the last fifteen years, in which contemporary intellectual and diplomatic developments shaped the public memory of Hiroshima to a far greater degree than historical scholarship on the event. For most of the Reagan administration, the anti-nuclear interpretation of Hiroshima associated with Hersey's work dominated. Memories of Hiroshima attracted prominent attention from nuclear freeze activists looking to heighten public attention of the possibly perilous effects of Reagan's military buildup. Although the anti-nuclear interpretation of Hiroshima generally did not entail an attack on the scholarly community, it nonetheless focused on a very different sort of questions than those posed by most scholars, since it concentrated more on ethical judgments about the use of the atomic bomb than attempting to explain the reasons for Truman acting as he did.<sup>9</sup>

As the threat of nuclear war has faded and public confidence in an assertive American policy has increased, public attention has focused less on the morality of Truman's decision and more on

Stimson's positioning of Hiroshima as the alternative to a large-scale invasion of Japan and thus the savior of American lives. The starkest example of this point of view came in Paul Fussell's 1981 article, which praised Truman's decision from the perspective of an American soldier and also condemned what Fussell termed the "revisionist" scholars who did not live during the era for making judgments on Truman's policy. This perspective appeared in a slightly more restrained fashion in David

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McCullough's popular biography of Truman, which likewise defended the President's action as the only alternative to a large-scale invasion which might have produced up to 500,000 American casualties. Changes in both U.S. domestic politics and the American role in international affairs have intensified the public strength of this nationalist position. The emergence of economic issues as a key element of diplomacy and the burgeoning trade deficit with Japan made Tokyo seem more like a rival than a friend, while the security aspect of the relationship, so important in minimizing friction throughout the Cold War, seemed less important in the aftermath of the collapse of the USSR.<sup>10</sup> One can imagine a very different American response had the fiftieth anniversary of Hiroshima occurred in the international climate of a decade before, when criticism of Japan in the United States tended to be muted under the broader concern of maintaining a united front in the Pacific. Meanwhile, the anti-Washington attitude recently evident in Congress and, Tony Capaccio and Uday Mohan argue, the mishandling of the issue by the media have only increased the public's sense that the United States was right to drop the bomb.<sup>11</sup>

What, then, are we teachers to do? As Akira Iriye reminds us, "scholarly history is not the same thing as public memory, certainly not in a society where freedom of inquiry exists." Historians, Iriye recommends, need to maintain their integrity by producing works which "reinvestigate the past constantly in light of new evidence and frameworks of analysis." Ways do exist for historians to influence the shaping of the public memory while maintaining high levels of scholarly inquiry. New methods currently prominent in the field of U.S. foreign relations, for example, can address the concerns that form the core of the public discourse on the decision to use the bomb while still focusing on a scholarly approach. Two of the most fruitful recent lines of inquiry in diplomatic history have centered on examining the interaction between domestic politics and foreign policy, and approaching American foreign policy as part of international history. Recent scholarship has utilized these general approaches while again moving away from the extremes associated with the public memory of the issue.<sup>12</sup>

For example, since any discussion of the question of whether

the dropping of the bomb brought the war to a close needs to incorporate both the American and the Japanese perspectives, the international approach offers an obvious avenue for addressing the impact of Truman's decision. Too much of the historiography, however, especially that of the revisionist variety (along with virtually all aspects of public commentary on the issue), has dealt with only the American side of the equation. As Ian Buruma points out, Alperovitz, for one, has implicitly assumed that "it was clear the Japanese would have surrendered *with* such a guarantee" of retaining the Emperor system, even though "there is no evidence that Japan would have surrendered, even with a guarantee of the Emperor's status, and there are good reasons to believe that it would not."

Indeed, Japanese leaders seemed as little concerned with saving Japanese lives as did Truman.<sup>13</sup> Herbert Bix has also attempted to redress some of the imbalances in Alperovitz's account (and those of most other American scholars).

Akira Iriye delved into this issue over a decade ago in *Power and Culture*, where he offered a good deal of evidence on the weakness of the peace forces within the Japanese government. Bix applied Iriye's general framework to the atomic bomb decision. Contending that the Emperor played a critical role in the formation of Japanese wartime policy, that he had little interest in an early peace, and that the so-called "moderates" within the Japanese cabinet were of a similar mindset, Bix concluded that a U.S. guarantee to retain the Emperor system would not have induced a Japanese surrender. Like Buruma, he also minimized the influence of those promoting the peace overtures within the Japanese government. Looking to assess the American unwillingness to compromise on the policy of unconditional surrender "in light of the tremendous sacrifices that the Emperor kept imposing on his people," Bix sees "many other reasons for the delayed surrender beyond American policymakers' desire to practice atomic diplomacy, or realize ulterior objectives vis-a-vis the Soviet Union."<sup>14</sup>

Lawrence Wittner utilized an international lens in a different fashion in his ambitious new book on the international implications of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *One World or None* examines

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how the use of the bomb provoked a rethinking of the nature of international relations by contributing to the rise of world federalist movements in not only Japan but in the United States as well. While world federalism never assumed the predominant position in U.S. policy, Wittner shows that it had more impact than generally has been perceived. In particular, what he terms an "unprecedented receptivity to new approaches to world order" manifested itself in the Acheson-Lilienthal Plan to place all atomic weapons under international control. Wittner's book maintains high levels of scholarly inquiry while nonetheless offering insights on how Hiroshima affected perspectives on international affairs that transcended national boundaries. By continuing to examine the use of the bomb through an international lens, historians ask the types of questions that promise to move the atomic bomb debate beyond the narrow confines of the 1994-1995 controversy. To what extent the public will be willing to engage in this type of examination, of course, remains to be seen. But it does offer a potential path toward a new type of public memory on the issue.<sup>15</sup>

Examining in greater detail the intersection between domestic forces—such as contemporary press opinion or the role played by scientists—and Truman's action also offers a promising way for historians to ask historically oriented questions that nonetheless address the issues which most concern the public memory on the issue. The role played by Congress represents one aspect of the domestic equation which deserves more attention, particularly in light of the prominent role played by Congress (especially through the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy) in postwar nuclear policy.<sup>16</sup>

Meanwhile, Alan Brinkley's recent work has indicated how growing congressional conservatism during World War II constrained the domestic agenda of Franklin Roosevelt, and it is only reasonable to assume that a desire to

ward off legislative attacks affected the decision making processes of Truman, himself a creature of Congress. Indeed, as Stanley Goldberg has recently commented, fear of a possible congressional invasion caused General Leslie Groves, the director of the Manhattan Project, to take "all steps possible to make sure that the atomic bomb played a role in bringing the war to an end." Throughout the war, Groves placed the appropriations for the Manhattan Project in the budget for the Army Corps of Engineers, helping to hide from Congress the fact that an item originally estimated at \$133 million wound up costing over \$2 billion to produce. Yet he knew that the secrecy would not last forever; Stimson and Undersecretary of War

Robert Patterson joked near the end of the war that if the project did not succeed, they would spend the rest of their lives testifying before Congress. Secretary of State James Byrnes, meanwhile, worried about how such an inquiry would affect the political well-being of the Democratic party. What part the fear of the congressional repercussions of not using the bomb played in the bureaucratic events leading up to Truman's decision remains a matter of debate, but, as several historians have pointed out, the President's advisors framed the choice to maximize the chances of Truman's deciding to go ahead with Hiroshima. As Groves remarked later, the bomb's success ensured that "we will never have the greatest congressional investigation of all times."<sup>17</sup>

While a gap always will exist between historical inquiry and the public memory, ways exist for historians to narrow the divide. Looking more at domestic events both in Japan and the United States offers a way for historians to ask far more complicated questions, and, hopefully, yield findings which have the

potential for affecting public discourse on the issue. ■

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## Historical Inquiry and the Public Memory: *The Hiroshima Decision as a Case Study* — Notes

### NOTES

- For the development of the historiography, see Barton Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy, 1941-1945: An Historiographical Controversy," *Peace and Change* 3 (1974): 1-14; J. Samuel Walker, "The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update," *Diplomatic History* 14 (1990): 97-114.
- Paul Boyer, "Hiroshima in American Memory," *Diplomatic History* 19 (1995): 303.
- J. Samuel Walker, "History, Collective Memory, and the Decision to Use the Bomb," *Diplomatic History* 19 (1995): 319; Bernstein, "Seizing the Contested Terrain of Early Nuclear History," *Diplomatic History* 17 (1993): 58-59; Henry Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New York: Harper, 1948); John Hersey, "Hiroshima," *New Yorker* (August 1946); for the background to public images about the bomb, see Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (New York: Pantheon, 1985); and idem, "Exotic Resonances: Hiroshima in American Memory," *Diplomatic History* 19 (1995): 275-296.
- Herbert Feis, *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of the War in the Pacific* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961); for Feis' earlier work on the origins of the Cold War, see *Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin: The War They Waged and the Peace They Sought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).
- Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965); for pathbreaking works of the Wisconsin School in their challenge to Feis' orthodox interpretation of the Cold War, see William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: Globe Publishing, 1959), and Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-1966* (New York: Wiley, 1967).
- Robert James Maddox, "Atomic Diplomacy: A Study in Creative Writing," *Journal of American History* 59 (1973): 925-934; Barton Bernstein, "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little-Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory," *Diplomatic History* 19 (1995): 227-273; idem, "Roosevelt, Truman, and the Atomic Bomb: A Reinterpretation," *Political Science Quarterly* 90 (1975): 23-69; "Truman at Potsdam: His Secret Diary," *Foreign Service Journal* 57 (1980): 29-36; "A Postwar Myth: 500,000 Lives Saved," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 42 (1986): 38-40; and "Seizing the Contested Terrain of Early Nuclear History: Stimson, Conant, and their Allies Explain the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," *Diplomatic History* 17 (1993); Rufus Miles, Jr., "Hiroshima: The Strange Myth of Half a Million American Lives Saved," *International Security* 10 (1985): 121-140; for the other key work representing this point of view, see Martin Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975); for more on Alperovitz's central role in shaping the historiographical debate, see Walker, "The Decision to Use the Bomb," *Diplomatic History* 19 (1995): 98-101.
- McGeorge Bundy, *Danger and Survival: Choices About the Bomb* (New York, 1988): 48, 55; Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987); see also Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); for revisionist challenges, see Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Construction of An American Myth* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); idem, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam*, rev. ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985); idem, and Robert Messer, "Marshall, Truman, and the Decision to Drop the Bomb," *International Security* 16 (1991/1992): 204-214.
- Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy, 1943-1945* (New York: Random House, 1968); Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt and American Foreign Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979); Melvyn Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992).
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- Boyer, "Exotic Resonances," *Diplomatic History* 19 (1995): 314; Paul Fussell, "Hiroshima: A Soldier's View," *New Republic* 22 (August 29, 1981): 26-30. Reprint, *Thank God for the Atomic Bomb and Other Essays* (New York: Random House, 1988); David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992); Walker, "History, Collective Memory, and the Decision to Use the Bomb," *Diplomatic History* 19 (1995): 320.
- On the difficulties confronted by historians with the *Enola Gay* exhibit, see Tony Capaccio and Uday Mohan, "Missing the Target: How the Media Mishandled the Smithsonian Enola Gay Controversy," *American Journalism Review* 15 (July/Aug. 1995): 20.
- Akira Iriye, "Historical Scholarship and Public Memory," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4 (1995): 92; For the background to the debate within the diplomatic history community, see Michael Hunt, "The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History: Coming to Closure," *Diplomatic History* 16 (1992): 115-140; Hogan and Thomas Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
- Ian Buruma, "The War Over the Bomb," *New York Review of Books* 33 (September 1995): 21.
- Akira Iriye, *Power and Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981); Herbert Bix, "Japan's Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation," *Diplomatic History* 19 (1995): 197-226; see also Leon Sigal, *Fighting to a Finish: The Politics of War Termination in the United States and Japan, 1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
- Lawrence Wittner, *One World or None: A History of the Nuclear Disarmament Movement through 1953* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993); the quotation is from p. 318.
- Uday Mohan and Sanho Tree, "Hiroshima, the American Media, and the Construction of Conventional Wisdom," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4 (1995): 141-160.
- Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); James Hersheberg, *James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Atomic Age* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993); Stanley Goldberg, "Racing to the Finish: The Decision to Bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki," *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4 (1995): 117-128.

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