

Teaching Mr. Stimson

By Peter K. Frost

For some time now, I have taught a mixed lecture and discussion class on the atom bomb, primarily by using Secretary of War Henry Stimson's February 1947 *Harper's Magazine* article "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb."¹ As many *EAA* readers no doubt know, Secretary Stimson wrote this article in response to a request by Harvard University President James Conant, a distinguished scientist who had himself worked on the bomb and hence was worried about a number of Americans who criticized the use of this awful weapon on essentially civilian targets.² Stimson's article attempted to explain in non-technical language why he felt it necessary to drop both the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs. His aim, some have suggested, was not only to refute the bomb's American critics and maintain American support for a Cold War nuclear arsenal, but also, perhaps, to deal with personal doubts that both he and President Conant could not help but have.³

To make the discussion on the atom bomb work, students must of course be familiar with the basic background. Through text reading (any standard one will do),⁴ students learn such things as the military situation in 1945, Japanese peace feelers to the USSR, Prince Konoe Fumimaro's grave fears that the end of the war would lead to social unrest, and the surrender terms as spelled out in the Potsdam Declaration of July 1945.⁵ I also make sure that my students are familiar with such basic chronology as the dates of the dropping of the Hiroshima bomb (August 6, 1945), the USSR's entry into the war (August 8), the Nagasaki bomb (August 9), the first "conditional" Japanese offer to surrender (August 10), and the Emperor's final surrender broadcast (August 15).

While I would also love to have my students explore the complex Japanese reactions to the bomb on their own (a wealth of good English language material exists),⁶ the course that I am asked to give has to cover so much ground that I must explain some of these feelings in class. Among common reactions, I say, are not only horror at the deaths, the suffering, and the long term medical effects suffered by bomb victims (*hibakusha*), but also anger at the Japanese militarists for trying to fight such a powerful enemy, disillusionment that the Allies would try Japan's leaders for war crimes while avoiding discussion of their own, a realization that the Japanese people must encourage modern science for Japan to compete in the modern world, a deeply religious and rather mystical sense that Japan's sufferings somehow cleansed it of its own sins, and a hope that this awful tragedy would end future wars.

To underscore these complex reactions, I ask the students to think about two events. Why, I ask my students, do you suppose that the Showa Emperor [Hirohito to Americans] made one of his first public tours to Hiroshima on December 8, 1945, the anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack?⁷ Why did one of the students I long ago sent to rural Japan to teach English suddenly get three separate invitations on August 6 to go out for drinks with the boys? The point of all of this is that whether or not "the boys" are rightists trying to

defend Japan's honor or leftists trying to ban nuclear weapons, Japanese argue that their experience is unique. Indeed, I argue many Japanese are convinced that the United States would not have dropped the bomb on a nation of white people. That the bombs were not ready by the time of the German surrender does not appease this group; some American historians are inclined to agree.⁸

Stimson's article, I go on to say, forms an ideal way to discuss these radically different points of view. My aim is not to say that the bomb is right or wrong, racist or not, but rather to see how those opposed to the bomb might react to what Stimson wrote. Put another way, Stimson's article reflects a dominant (but not unchallenged) American view of the bomb-dropping that is at odds with what many Japanese believe. We can best understand the differences, I continue, when we try to imagine how those opposed to the bomb might look at four of Stimson's basic points.

(1)

The first is that "The possible atomic weapon was considered to be a new and tremendously powerful explosive, as legitimate as any other of the deadly explosive weapons of war." "The face of war," Stimson writes, "is the face of death."⁹ How, we may ask, are dropping two atom bombs worse than the horrendous Allied fire bombings of other Japanese and German cities, or the war-induced famines and the almost unimaginable cruelties inflicted on helpless citizens throughout Asia? All wars are awful. Haven't American commanders the right to use every weapon they have, or, in historian (and World War Two veteran) Paul Fussell's words, to "thank God for the atomic bomb"?¹⁰

Three possibilities suggest themselves. One is to get students to note from Stimson's own words how worried top officials were that this enormously expensive project might not work.¹¹ Would there not be tremendous pressure to drop the two bombs to prove that the enormous expense was justified? Another possibility is to use an important memorandum that Stimson quotes to bring up the old dispute about whether or not the Americans dropped the bombs to scare the Communist world. Stimson's memo states that "an appreciation by the leaders of our country of the power of this new weapon" might lead to "a pattern in which the peace of the world and our civilization can be saved." Did this statement suggest that the United States should drop the bombs to get the USSR to back off?¹² Here I stress that while most US historians now think that Cold War considerations were at best an additional, but certainly not an essential, reason for dropping the bomb, many Japanese might well think otherwise.¹³

Finally—and it is startling how long it sometimes takes students to notice this—Stimson fails to mention that the two atomic bombs were radioactive. Even had the students not been exposed to the rich literature, art, and film portrayals of the "black rain," most are Godzilla fans who can easily recognize—when prompted—how much of postwar Japanese culture is affected by the belief that radia-

MR. STIMSON DEFENDS THE BOMBS

Editor's Note: Henry Stimson's 1947 *Harper's Magazine* article "The Decision to Drop the Bomb" has been reprinted on both the *EAA* (www.aasianst.org/eaatoc.htm) and Columbia University (<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu>) Web sites. The following are some excerpts and page numbers from that article, reprinted with permission.

The possible atomic weapon was considered to be a new and tremendously powerful explosive, as legitimate as any of the deadly explosive weapons of modern war. The entire purpose was the production of a military weapon; on no other ground could the wartime expenditure of so much time and money have been justified." [98]

[Here Mr. Stimson quotes a memorandum he discussed with President Harry S. Truman on April 25, 1945.] To approach any world peace organization of a pattern now likely to be considered, without an appreciation by the leaders of our country of the power of this new weapon, would seem to be unrealistic. [99]

[Stimson's article continues by quoting a July 2, 1945 memorandum to the President.] I think that [Japan] has within her population enough liberal leaders (although now submerged by the terrorists) to be depended upon for her reconstruction as a responsible member of the family of nations . . . On the other hand, I think that the attempt to exterminate her armies and her population by gunfire or other means will tend to produce a fusion of race solidarity and antipathy which has no analogy in the case of Germany . . . It is therefore my conclusion that a carefully timed warning be given to Japan . . . [103]

On July 28, the Premier of Japan, Suzuki, rejected the Potsdam ultimatum by announcing that it was "unworthy of public notice." In the face of this rejection, we could only proceed to demonstrate that the ultimatum meant exactly what it said . . . [104]

Had the war continued until the projected invasion on November 1, additional fire raids of B-29's would have been more destructive of life and property than the very limited number of atomic raids which we could have executed in the same period. But the atomic bomb was more than a weapon of terrible destruction; it was a psychological weapon. [105]

The bomb thus served exactly the purpose we intended. The peace party was able to take the path of surrender, and the whole weight of the Emperor's prestige was exerted in favor of peace. When the Emperor ordered surrender, and the small but dangerous group of fanatics who opposed him were brought under control, the Japanese became so subdued that the great undertaking of occupation and disarmament was completed with unprecedented ease. [106]

tion has permanently scarred their race. It hardly matters that most biologists will dispute notions of permanent genetic damage, or that some Americans at the test site were also exposed to unhealthy doses of radiation. The point is that many Japanese believe they were victims of a bomb whose radiation effects had not been adequately tested.

(2)

What of Stimson's second assertion that, as reported by an official committee, the bomb "should be used on a dual target—that is, a military installation or war plant, surrounded by or adjacent to houses and other buildings most susceptible to damage."¹⁴ Discussion here can support Stimson by noting that the Enola Gay dropped the first bomb over a military parade ground, or perhaps question whether a Japanese military draft and orders to mobilize the whole nation blurs the line between citizen and soldier. Against this, students should be able to realize why few Japanese now consider Hiroshima and Nagasaki as military targets. Most of all, students should note that when Stimson defines a "dual target" as a "military installation," a "war plant," or "houses and other buildings," he totally leaves out human beings.

(3)

How might Japanese respond, then, to Secretary Stimson's third point, that because Prime Minister Suzuki had "rejected the Potsdam ultimatum by announcing that it was 'unworthy of public notice [.]' . . . we could only demonstrate that the ultimatum had meant exactly what it said. . . ." Japan had substantial military forces left, Stimson asserts; the fighting was bound to be fierce, with heavy American casualties predicted.¹⁵ Noting the fanaticism of the Kamikaze suicide planes, Stimson argued that "there was a very strong possibility" that "the Allies would be faced with the enormous task of destroying an armed force of five million men and five thousand aircraft, belonging to a race which had already amply demonstrated its ability to fight literally to the death."¹⁶ Would not these fanatics be encouraged if the United States and its allies had backed away from their threat?

I first help out students a bit here by noting that Prime Minister Suzuki had responded to the Potsdam Declaration by using the word "*mokusatsu*," a term that my rather ancient Kenkyusha dictionary suggests means not only "to take no notice of; treat with silent contempt" but also "to remain in a wise and masterly inactivity."¹⁷ Could it be that the Prime Minister was playing for time needed to build a consensus?¹⁸ The Americans knew the Japanese were beginning to discuss very limited peace terms with the Russians. Did this matter?

I then ask students to note that Stimson's article shows how the Truman Administration made it much harder for the Japanese to surrender by rejecting—at least until the final note hinting at the possibility—Stimson's suggestion that the Potsdam Declaration include a statement that the Emperor would not be harmed.¹⁹ Could the Americans have made such a guarantee without angering the American public or fracturing America's allies? Most Americans who know something about wartime public opinion think not; many opponents of the bomb disagree.

Again, would not a far fairer warning have stated that the Soviet Union might soon join the war? Here again, there were very solid reasons why the Allies did not do this—for openers, the USSR was not yet ready to declare war. My point is rather that the Potsdam Declaration lacked both a "carrot" (reassurance about the Emperor) and

a "stick" (a Russian invasion leading to a Communist zone of occupation and the sort of social revolution that Prince Konoe so feared). Those supporting the bombing would explain why it was impossible to provide such things; those opposed might argue that the Potsdam Declaration was neither as "fair" a warning as one might hope, nor one that was totally rejected.

(4)

Stimson's last point is that Americans needed to "shock" Japan into ending this savage war. A shock might work, he states, because Japan, unlike Germany, had liberals who "could be depended upon

for her reconstruction as a responsible member of the family of nations.” Conversely, “the attempt to exterminate her armies and her population by gunfire will tend to produce a fusion of race solidarity and antipathy that has no analogy in the case of Germany.”²⁰ To avoid an awful bloodbath, Stimson implies, the US must dramatically show the Japanese that the Americans have the ability to annihilate the entire nation.

When asking students to construct a counter argument, I begin by pointing out that there is no historical evidence to support Secretary Stimson’s assertion that the invasion of Japan was “expected to cost over a million casualties to American forces alone.” We simply do not know why Stimson chose to put this exaggeration into his 1947 article.²¹ What we can do is discuss whether the actual number of predicted casualties matters. Isn’t an American President’s first priority to save his own troops?

I then ask students to comment on Stimson’s assertion that the Japanese were different from the Germans. While it is easy enough to imagine American officials thinking this in the era of the Kamikaze, students might debate whether Germany also had a “fusion of race solidarity and antipathy” that made them fight to the end. Conversely, students might discuss whether Stimson’s distinctions between Japan and Germany do indeed suggest that Germany might not have had one of their “dual target” cities atom-bombed for its shock value.

Yet when all is said and done, the class ought to see that the notion of a “shock” is essential to both Stimson and his critics. Stimson quotes Dr. Karl Compton, another atomic scientist, approvingly when Compton stated that “it was not one atom bomb or two, which brought surrender; it was the experience of what an atom bomb would do to a community, *plus the dread of many more*, that was effective.”²² Compare this with the Japanese Cabinet Secretary Sakomizu Hiratsune’s comment that “The A-bomb provided an excellent help because the A-bomb sacrificed many people other than Japanese military men. This provided us with an excuse that America would not refrain from doing such evils, that therefore there would be no other choice but to cease the war to save many innocent Japanese citizens. If the A-bomb had not been dropped [,] we would have had great difficulty to find a good reason to end the war.”²³ Oddly, both men accept the need for a shock; the difference is that one man sees it as noble, the other as evil.

Where, then, is the class left? Not, I would argue, with an absolute judgment of right or wrong—students themselves will have to decide that. Also not, then, a “politically correct” class, whether of the conservative or liberal persuasion, that stresses the judgment of the instructor. Indeed, my class does not limit itself to historical facts, not least because we are trying to understand myths, unscientific beliefs, and the sort of might-have-beens that historians delight in calling “counterfactuals.” My purpose is rather to get students to see how different nations or cultures can construct radically different “master narratives”²⁴ or dominant historical explanations from the same bits of evidence, and how, in this case, these different formulations were used to comfort the Americans who destroyed and the Japanese who surrendered. I do this because, like many Americans, I was upset when popular protests and the US Congress aborted the Smithsonian Museum’s attempt to balance these two points of view in a planned fifty-year retrospective on the bombs.²⁵ I can only hope that my attempts to discuss the Stimson article in this way not only encourages my class to use an important primary source to make up

their own minds about whether the bomb was “right” or “wrong”, but also helps the next generation to try to imagine the views of those with whom they disagree. ■

NOTES

1. Henry L. Stimson, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” *Harper’s Magazine*, February 1947, 97–107. This article is reprinted in several anthologies. Hereafter “Stimson.”
2. John Hersey’s “Hiroshima,” first printed in *The New Yorker* in August 1946, while it did not discuss the policy behind the bomb, was highly influential because it gave a vivid picture of the bomb’s horrors. *Hiroshima* (New York: Random House, 1985), was reprinted with an update by the author forty years later.
3. J. Samuel Walker, “The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historical Update” in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, Michael Hogan, ed., (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 23. As his title suggests, Walker provides several additional useful references, among them James G. Hersberg, *James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age* (New York: Knopf, 1993).
4. My favorite is James L. McClain, *Japan: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2002).
5. For a translation of Prince Konoe’s memorial and commentary, see John W. Dower, *Empire and Aftermath: Yoshida Shigeru and the Japanese Experience, 1874–1954*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 260ff.
6. Start with Columbia University’s excellent Web site, <http://eacp.easia.columbia.edu>. *Education About Asia*, vol. 1, number 1, has two interesting articles. See also John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1999). See also John Dower’s article in Michael Hogan, *op. cit.* footnote 2, and Asada Sadao, “The Mushroom Cloud and National Psyches: Japanese and American Perceptions of the Atom Bomb Decision, 1945–1955,” in Laura Hein and Mark Selden, *Living With the Bomb* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1997). These articles suggest good primary sources.
7. Dower, 330.
8. See, for example, John Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).
9. Stimson, 98, 107.
10. Paul Fussell, “Hiroshima: A Soldier’s View: Thank God for the Atomic Bomb,” *The New Republic*, 22–29 August, 1981, 26–30.
11. Stimson, 98.
12. Stimson, 99.
13. Barton J. Bernstein, “Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little-Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory,” Hogan, *op. cit.*, 40–41.
14. Stimson, 100.
15. Stimson, 101ff.
16. Stimson, 102.
17. *Kenkyusha’s New Japanese-English Dictionary*, Katsumata Senkichiro, ed., (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1954), 1129.
18. Robert J. C. Butow, *Japan’s Decision to Surrender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), 142–149.
19. Stimson, 104.
20. Stimson, 103.
21. J. Samuel Walker, “History, Collective Memory and the Bomb,” in Hogan, *op. cit.* 189.
22. Stimson, 106. Italics in the original quote.
23. John Hunter Boyle, *Modern Japan: The American Nexus* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1993), 299. Boyle does not give a source for this quote.
24. Richard Minear introduced me to this most helpful term—probably without realizing it since he was busy teaching at the time!
25. See *Judgment at the Smithsonian*, Philip Nobile ed., (New York: Marlowe and Company, 1995).

PETER K. FROST is Professor Emeritus at Williams College and a Visiting Professor of International Studies at the Croft Institute at the University of Mississippi.