

FILM REVIEWS

Ultimate Power The Race

NARRATED BY PETER JENNINGS

1999, 42 MINS. VHS IN BLACK AND WHITE AND COLOR

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“Ultimate Power: The Race” (1999) is part of a 12-part ABC series, *The Century*. It includes both documentary footage of Manhattan Project days and new interviews.

Much of the documentary footage is available elsewhere. The interviewees include the usual suspects—Hans Bethe, Freeman Dyson, Edward Teller—and some not-so-usual: atomic scientists Martin Deutsch, Boyce McDaniel, Joseph Rotblat. Two interviewees are scholars: William Lanouette and Richard Rhodes.¹ The film has clear photography, pointed interviews, and little dead air.

For those of us who live by the adage, “Study the historian,” videos such as this present a major hurdle: the invisibility of their authors. Here the credits flutter past only at the end, and there is no “writer.” The card catalog lists (in addition to Peter Jennings) Carrie Cook and Richard E. Robbins, filmmakers with no expertise about things atomic. Yet they—not the interviewees—determine the message.

This message has little triumphalism. The film includes photographs of Japanese victims; coverage of Leo Szilard’s political activism; an interview with Victor Rotblat, the only scientist to quit after V-E Day; scientists reflecting on their own blinkered vision or misgivings immediately after August 6; and repeated references beyond Hiroshima to the postwar nuclear arms race. Any one of these features would have triggered the film’s cancellation had ABC asked the views of Newt Gingrich, the Air Force Association, or the others who killed the Smithsonian Institution’s intended *Enola Gay* exhibit (1995).²

The narrator is ABC anchorman Peter Jennings, until the final moments merely a voice, but an entirely recognizable voice. Howard Zinn has written (of Tom Brokaw): “He is an anchorman for a big television network, meaning that he is anchored to orthodoxy. . . .”³ Granted, Jennings is less knee-jerk than Brokaw (witness ABC’s 1995 film about the bomb⁴). Still, what we get here is orthodoxy, or at least one wing of it. This orthodoxy makes itself felt in the very concept that frames the video: “the race.” That there was a race is absolutely fundamental to the orthodox view of Hiroshima: heroic American scientists working feverishly to produce the bomb to stop Hitler.

Was the Manhattan Project in a race? With whom? From when to when? There was certainly a race—in the minds of the Manhattan Project and its scientists. It was a race against Hitler. (In this ABC series, “Ultimate Power: The Race” is one of two parts; “Ultimate Power: Evil Rising,” about Hitler, precedes it.) The race began with Szilard’s activism in 1939, but it ended long before August 6. Instructive here is Stewart Udall’s *The Myths of August*.⁵ Udall titles one section of his book “The Myth of the Race with Hitler” and reviews the evidence, including the *absence* of evidence of a concerted American effort to determine German progress in building a bomb. Remember what it took to build the American bomb: 59,000 acres (over 90 square miles) at Oak Ridge, Tennessee and 500,000 acres at Hanford, Washington, not to mention Los Alamos and Alamogordo. Beginning in Fall 1943 American bombers “photograph[ed] all important industrial enterprises in Germany.”⁶ Examination of that data would have made clear the impossibility of an all-out German effort to build a bomb, but perhaps it was the mystique of German science that drove the American scientists (if not Groves, who headed the Manhattan Project).

Udall quotes Richard Rhodes: “One of the mysteries of the Second World War was the lack of an early and dedicated American intelligence effort to discover the extent of German progress toward atomic bomb development.”⁷ But for Udall there is “no mystery.” He writes: “The race with the Nazis was the *raison d’être* of the Manhattan Project,” so General Leslie Groves “was wary of any hard facts that might reveal that the ‘desperate race’ with Hitler’s scientists was a fantasy.”⁸ Rhodes called the race over as of early 1944: “The race to the bomb, such as it was, ended for Germany on a mountain lake in Norway on a cold Sunday morning in February 1944.”⁹ Even Groves himself concluded (in a memo to Secretary of War Stimson dated April 23, 1945) that “The capture [of the German stockpile of uranium ore] . . . would seem to remove definitely any possibility of the Germans making use of an atomic bomb in this war.”¹⁰ V-E Day, May 8, ended all conceivable concern about a German bomb.

Was the U.S. in a race with Japan? In a very minor way if at all: Japan hardly ever figures in contemporary comments. When did that race end? We might suggest dates:

March 9, 1945: the beginning of the low-level firebombing raids—bombing that was possible in part because Japan had lost virtually all anti-aircraft capabilities. Aerial surveillance of the sort Udall mentions was now possible.¹¹

July 13, 1945. The Japanese government first talked seriously of ending the war, and U.S. intelligence, having broken the Japanese codes, listened in.¹²

If there was a race after V-E Day, it was a different race entirely: not to invent the atomic bomb, a race against Japan, but *to drop the bomb before Japan surrendered*, a race against the clock. Rhodes alludes to that fact briefly here: “So somewhere around there [V-E Day] it became not a weapon to end a war or a weapon to beat someone else to the weapon, but a new weapon.”

Should we use this film in our classrooms? Authorial invisibility complicates analysis, as does the power of the film footage. If analysis is difficult even for us scholars and teachers, how much more

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so for students—at whatever level! In the absence of a concerted effort to teach visual literacy, I favor not using this video—or any other.

In the presence of a concerted effort to teach visual literacy, the question becomes: is this film more useful than existing treatments? At 42 minutes, suitable for showing (in two class sessions, with discussion each day before and after the film), this film is one of the best. In my seminar on Hiroshima, I regularly use the BBC *World at War* segment entitled “The Bomb,” which is just about the same length (52 minutes; 1973). It covers the political decisions and military context from Yalta to August 9 but scants the Manhattan Project; its impeccable narration by Sir Lawrence Olivier, a plus for viewers, does impede criticism. My favorite video of the Manhattan Project is KTEH-TV’s “The Day After Trinity: J. Robert Oppenheimer and the Atom Bomb” (88 minutes; 1981); here the context is the life of Oppenheimer.¹³

In my survey course I pair two short films. The first, “Air War Against Japan—October 1944-August 1945” (14 minutes), is chapter 24 in “The Air Force Story” (1947); that series was part of the postwar campaign for recognition and funding of the newly independent Air Force. Only the final minutes deal with the atomic bomb—we see the mushroom cloud (to the accompaniment of trumpet fanfare) but no victims; the narration avers that Japan was utterly defeated *before* the bomb and *before* the Soviet declaration of war. The second, “Hiroshima-Nagasaki-August, 1945” (16 minutes), is footage taken soon after the fact in both Hiroshima and Nagasaki; kept under wraps by U.S. authorities until 1969, it was edited by a Columbia University team.¹⁴ Its close-ups of victims are devastating—even college students need a warning about what they are about to see; the message of its narration is opposition to nuclear weapons. Using these two films enables me to raise the crucial issues of Hiroshima *and* to further visual literacy. To show *any* film of Hiroshima—“Ultimate Power: The Race” or any other—without teaching visual literacy is to squander a major opportunity. ■

NOTES

1. William Lanouette is the author, with Bela Silard, of *Genius in the Shadows: A Biography of Leo Szilard* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1992); Richard Rhodes wrote *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986).
2. The best treatment is Mike Wallace, “The Battle of the *Enola Gay*,” in Wallace, *Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American Memory* (Philadelphia: Temple, 1996).
3. Howard Zinn, “The Greatest Generation?” in *The Progressive*, Oct. 2001, p. 12.

4. ABC, “Hiroshima: Why the Bomb Was Dropped,” Peter Jennings and Sherry Jones, 1995 (69 minutes).
5. A former bomber in the European theater, Congressman from Arizona, and John F. Kennedy’s Secretary of the Interior, Udall educated himself on things atomic when he “decided to become involved, as a private investigator and lawyer,” in radiation issues in Arizona (p. 3).
6. Udall, *Myths*, pp. 36ff; the quotation is from p. 38.
7. Rhodes, *Making*, p. 605.
8. Udall, *Myths*, p. 40.
9. Rhodes, *Making*, p. 517.
10. Quoted in Rhodes, *Making*, p. 613.
11. Michael S. Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven: Yale, 1987), pp. 269ff.
12. For the July 13 intercept, see Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschulz, eds., *Hiroshima’s Shadow: Writings on the Denial of History and the Smithsonian Controversy* (Stony Creek: Pamphleteer’s Press, 1998), pp. 524–5.
13. The title comes from Oppenheimer’s response to an interviewer in the mid-1960s: should the U.S. work with the Soviet Union on nuclear issues? Said Oppenheimer: “1965 was twenty years late; it should have happened the day after Trinity.” The Trinity test took place on July 16, 1945.
14. For background, see Erik Barnouw, *Media Marathon: A Twentieth-Century Memoir* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 193–217.

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