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Hiroshima as Politics and History

Martin J. Sherwin

History has often been enlisted in the service of politics, but the history of United States diplomacy, so frequently influenced by the memoirs of government officials, has been particularly vulnerable. How Americans came to understand their government's decision to use atomic bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki is a classic case of a historical narrative shaped by government insiders to serve their view of the national interest. The controversy over the planned exhibition, centering on the *Enola Gay* (the plane that bombed Hiroshima), at the National Air and Space Museum (NASM) on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II is a reminder that, even in the post–Cold War United States, history remains a hostage to politics, past and present.

Henry L. Stimson, secretary of war from 1940 to 1945, was the most important formulator of the history of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; in modern political parlance, its chief "spin doctor." Writing in 1947 to President Harry S. Truman, Stimson explained that his seminal article, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," was in part "intended to satisfy the doubts of that rather difficult class of the community which will have charge of the education of the next generation, namely educators and historians."[1]

To satisfy those potential doubters, Stimson explained that the Truman administration faced the choice of either using atomic bombs or invading Japan. The sole motivation for the atomic attacks, he wrote, was to save American lives by ending the war as quickly as possible. Missing was the idea, frequently discussed in his diary, that a dramatic wartime demonstration of the bomb would help control Joseph Stalin's postwar ambitions. Nor did he discuss Japanese messages intercepted by United States military intelligence indicating that the Japanese had been trying to surrender "conditionally" since June 1945. Assisted by the chilling effect that the Cold War had on debate and the long delay before the relevant documents became available to historians, Stimson achieved his goal. Many Americans—and for a long time perhaps most educators and historians—accepted his explanation.[2]

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[1] Henry L. Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," *Harper's Magazine,* 194 (Feb. 1947), 97–107; Henry L. Stimson to Harry S. Truman, Jan. 7, 1947, Henry L. Stimson Papers (Sterling Library, Yale University, New Haven, Conn.).

[2] Stimson, "Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," 106. See also Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York, 1995), esp. part 1. Henry L. Stimson's diaries, the first major source for revising Stimson's own explanation for the atomic bombings, first became available to researchers in 1959. Many important "Magic" intercepts of Japanese message traffic were declassified only in 1995.

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Ending the war quickly was certainly *one* motive for using the atomic bombs. But other motives *promoted, reinforced,* and perhaps even *overtook* the one put forward by Stimson. These included: (1) the hope that the bomb(s) would curb Stalin's ambitions in Eastern Europe and the Far East; (2) the pressure that senior Manhattan Project administrators felt to justify the money, materials, and talent spent to build atomic bombs; (3) the momentum to use these new weapons created by the strategy of urban bombing; and (4) the desire to avenge Pearl Harbor and the ghastly treatment of American prisoners of war.[3]

Another evidence of the political motives for Stimson's article is a letter by the man who first urged Stimson to write that article. James B. Conant, president of Harvard University and former chief science administrator of the Manhattan Project, had written to Stimson in the autumn of 1946—after the publication and radio broadcast of John Hersey's *Hiroshima*—that the growing criticism of the atomic bombings was undermining the credibility of the United States' nuclear monopoly. Such criticism had to be countered, Conant warned, and Stimson was the only person who could do it effectively.[4] So politics figured from the first in the discussion of why atomic bombs were used at the end of World War II, and politics have continued to undermine and circumscribe the effort to bring to public attention the research done on this subject over the past thirty-five years.

I was a member of the advisory committee of historians to the ill-fated historical exhibit planned to accompany the display of the *Enola Gay* at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum. When first recruited, I told the museum staff member who phoned me that I opposed calling celebratory attention to the *Enola Gay* on the fiftieth anniversary of its mission. Even if one believed that it had played a critical role in ending a terrible war, I opposed an exhibit that might be interpreted as celebrating the deaths of 150,000 to 200,000 Japanese civilians, mostly old men, women, and children.

My view was not a comment on the courage, dedication, or morality of the brave men who piloted the *Enola Gay* or other bombers during World War II. It reflected a belief that our professed national values should lead us not to celebrate killing even in war. Furthermore, this fiftieth anniversary presented a unique opportunity for Americans and Japanese to heal the wounds of war by jointly celebrating its most positive result, the birth of Japanese democracy. Mourning together for all who died on both sides of a war is a necessary step toward healing

[3] Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and the Origins of the Arms Race* (New York, 1987), 198. For hope for an impact on the Soviets, see Henry L. Stimson Diary, May 13, 16, June 6, 1945, Stimson Papers; for pressure on administrators, see Sherwin, *World Destroyed,* 199; for the influence of strategic bombing, see Michael S. Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven, 1987). For the impulse to revenge, see Truman's response (in mid-August 1945) to John Foster Dulles's protest against the atomic bombings: "When you have to deal with a beast, you have to treat him [Japanese] like a beast," in Sherwin, *World Destroyed,* xvii–xviii.

[4] On James B. Conant's letter to Stimson, see Sherwin, *World Destroyed,* xix. On Conant's role in initiating and shaping Stimson's article, see James Hershberg, *James B. Conant: From Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age* (New York, 1993), 291–304.

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The *Enola Gay* returns from its mission of August 6, 1945, having dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. From "The *Enola Gay*" exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum. *Courtesy United States Air Force.*

the wounds of war. Just such a healing event was held in Dresden, Germany, on February 13, 1995, when "General John M. Shalikashvili, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff," the *New York Times* reported, "joined his German and British military counterparts and the Duke of Kent, representing Queen Elizabeth II, to lay wreaths at a vast cemetery called Heidefriedhof, where many of the dead from 50 years ago are buried."[5]

The counterargument was that the historical exhibits accompanying the *Enola Gay* would not celebrate nuclear destruction but examine the origins of the nuclear age. The Hiroshima and Nagasaki peace museums had agreed to lend NASM several artifacts. Although skeptical that an exhibit that adequately reflected critical historical research could be mounted at NASM, I joined the committee with the understanding that I came to it with deep reservations.

On February 7, 1994, the advisers, having received a draft of the exhibit script several weeks earlier, met at NASM for their first and only meeting. I was critical

[5] *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1995, p. A6.

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of the script for two reasons. First, the historical section was not attractively designed. The history of the decision would be told through documents hanging passively on the museum's walls. I urged the curators to create an interactive exhibit that challenged visitors to assume the roles of Truman, Stimson, James Byrnes, or other decision makers and to discover what influenced their views in spring 1945.

Second, and more serious, many important documents that revealed what the decision makers thought were missing from the exhibit. No one who read the selected documents would understand why so many historians have come to believe that the president and secretary of war had not been candid in explaining why they used atomic bombs. The exhibition omitted, for example, passages in Stimson's diary that repeatedly referred to the advantages the United States would gain in dealing with the Soviet Union by successful use of atomic bombs against Japan.[6]

I also wanted the curators to include Undersecretary of the Navy Ralph Bard's memorandum to Stimson of June 27, 1945, which recommended that atomic bombs not be used without giving the Japanese at least two or three days' warning, and the Joint Planning Staff estimates of the number of Americans likely to be killed in an invasion. The estimates, based on an analysis of other operations in the Pacific theater, such as those on Iwo Jima and Okinawa, were considerably lower than the figure of five hundred thousand killed that Stimson and Truman published.[7] Finally, while the artifacts from Hiroshima and Nagasaki were powerful reminders that atomic bombs do horrible things to people, they would not help visitors understand *why* the bombs were dropped on cities. I judged the commemorative character of the exhibit dominant and ubiquitous, and the historical portion marginalized and unappealing.

My view was contradicted by the reactions of the other advisers, most especially the historians from the United States Air Force, Dr. Richard Hallion and Dr. Herman Wolk, who staunchly defended the script. "Overall this is a most impressive piece of work," Hallion wrote to the curators after the meeting, "comprehensive and dramatic, obviously based upon a great deal of sound research, primary and secondary." The script *was* based on sound research. The curators had studied the literature thoroughly. They had a sophisticated understanding of the evidence and the arguments. But their approach to the exhibit had been extremely cautious, for political reasons. It was this caution that Hallion and Wolk supported and that led another adviser, Edwin Bearss, chief historian of the National Park Service, to endorse the air force view with a letter of his own. "As a World War II combat veteran," Bearss wrote to a curator, "I commend you and your colleagues who have dared to go that extra mile to address an emotionally charged and internationally significant event in an exhibit that, besides enlightening, will challenge its viewers."[8]

[6] Stimson Diary, May 13, 16, June 6, 1945.

[7] For both documents, reprinted in full, see Sherwin, *World Destroyed,* 307–8, 335–63.

[8] Richard Hallion and Herman Wolk, Feb. 7, 1994, in National Air and Space Museum press kit, "Favorable Comments about the Exhibition 'The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II': Advisory

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John T. Correll, the editor of *Air Force Magazine,* had a decidedly different opinion of the exhibit. In his view, it not only suffered from too much of the PC, or political correctness, he disliked, but it was insufficiently endowed with the PC he exploited for his living, patriotic correctness. Correll considered the exhibit biased against the air force, pro-Japanese, and anti-American. His article condemning the exhibit script, "War Stories at Air and Space," which served as a clarion call to veterans' groups, took quotations out of context and seemed to use innuendo to impugn the patriotism of Martin Harwit, the director of NASM. Correll wrote that Harwit "was born in Prague, grew up in Istanbul, and came to the United States (at age fifteen) in 1946. He asks those who suspect his attitude toward U.S. forces in World War II to consider his personal background." Correll quoted the script as stating, "for most Americans, this war was fundamentally different than the one waged against Germany and Italy — it was a war of vengeance. For most Japanese, it was a war to defend their unique culture against Western imperialism." What Correll failed to note, and what journalists who repeated this inflammatory quotation without reading the original script failed to discover, was that this sentence came near the end of a section that frankly and clearly summarized the brutality of Japanese militarism:

> Japanese expansionism was marked by naked aggression and extreme brutality. The slaughter of tens of thousands of Chinese in Nanking in 1937 shocked the world. Atrocities by Japanese troops included brutal mistreatment of civilians, forced laborers and prisoners of war, and biological experiments on human victims.[9]

Correll's article reflected his long-standing disaffection with NASM which, under Harwit's administration, had been mounting exhibits that aired criticisms of the consequences of air and space technology. The air and space museum, he insisted, was ignoring its "basic job . . . the restoration and preservation of aircraft." Yet in the past decade, other Smithsonian museums had successfully sponsored challenging exhibits, and previous critical exhibits at NASM had received some excellent reviews.[10]

But the *Enola Gay* exhibit was different for several reasons. First, the public criticism of the exhibit began in the planning stages and just six months before a congressional election in which conservative forces were in the ascendancy. Second, the event being commemorated was the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, the "Good War," and the museum's administration failed to respond publicly (until too late) to charges that it was denigrating the men who had fought in that crusade. And, finally, the exhibit probed how the Japanese thought about

Board Comments on the January and April Scripts," n.d., p. 1 (in Martin J. Sherwin's possession); Edwin Bearss to Tom Crouch, Feb. 24, 1994, *ibid.*

[9] John T. Correll, "War Stories at Air and Space," *Air Force Magazine,* 77 (April 1994), 24–29; National Air and Space Museum, "The Crossroads: The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War," [script no. 1, Jan. 12, 1994], p. 5 (in Sherwin's possession).

[10] Correll, "War Stories at Air and Space," 26–27, 29.

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the war, a virtue that critics distorted, misinterpreting recognition of the humanity of Japan's soldiers as anti-American bias.

Within a month of the publication of "War Stories" and a companion article, "The Decision that Launched the Enola Gay" (which ignored thirty years of critical historical research on the decision), a broad spectrum of veterans' groups, led by the 3.1 million–member American Legion, had enlisted congressional allies.[11] Senators and congressmen rushed to condemn the exhibit.[12] Sen. Nancy Kassebaum offered a resolution in the Senate, and dozens of congressmen signed letters that threatened retribution against the staff and the museum if the script was not modified to the satisfaction of its critics. Behind these letters and resolutions (in addition to politics as usual) was an astonishingly self-righteous view of the atomic bombings. "There is no excuse," Congressman Sam Johnson and six of his colleagues wrote to I. Michael Heyman, secretary of the Smithsonian, "for an exhibit which addresses *one of the most morally unambiguous events of the 20th century* to need five revisions."[13]

What had begun as a debate over interpreting and balancing the public presentation of a historical event of transcendent importance was quickly turned by congressional intervention into a "political cleansing" operation against the exhibit and the NASM staff.[14] The political agendas of those who joined in this assault varied: the veterans sought to control the public presentation of the Hiroshima narrative; the Air Force Association wanted NASM's administration returned to more accommodating hands; and conservative politicians saw another issue they could use in their culture wars crusade.

The exhibit's critics called for two very different sorts of fundamental changes to the script. First, they demanded that the exhibit include a history of the Japanese aggression and atrocities that began with Japan's invasion of China in the 1930s, an arguably reasonable alternative framework for the exhibit, which would deemphasize the beginning of the nuclear age (the original focus revealed by the subtitle: "The End of World War II, the Atomic Bomb, and the Origins of the Cold War"). Second, they insisted on an objectionable and unconscionable censorship: the removal of all documents critical of the use of the atomic bombs, including passages from the memoirs of Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adm. William D. Leahy. The American Legion also insisted on the removal of the statement (generally recognized as a fact) that "to this day, controversy has raged about whether dropping this weapon on Japan was necessary to end the war quickly."[15]

[11] John T. Correll, "The Decision that Launched the Enola Gay," *Air Force Magazine,* 77 (April 1994), 30–34.

[12] The Air Force Association has compiled a bound volume, "The Enola Gay Debate, August 1993–May 1995," which contains, among much other information, numerous letters from congressmen to senior Smithsonian Institution administrators. Copies may be obtained from the Air Force Association, 1501 Lee Highway, Arlington, VA 22209.

[13] *Congressional Record,* S.R. 257, 103 Cong., 2 sess., Sept. 22, 1994, pp. S13315–16. Sam Johnson et al. to I. Michael Heyman, Dec. 13, 1994, Air Force Association, "Congressional Correspondence and Press Releases," pt. 8 of "The Enola Gay Debate" (emphasis added).

[14] On November 16, 1994, approximately 50 historians (the number expanded to over 100 in the following week) signed a letter to I. Michael Heyman urging him to resist censorship ("historical cleansing") of the exhibit. The secretary's failure to respond led to the formation of the Historians' Committee for Open Debate on Hiroshima.

[15] Ralph Bard's memorandum of June 27, 1945, urging advance notice to the Japanese and noting that the Japanese were looking for a way to surrender, had been inserted into the April 1994 script at my suggestion,

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Heyman, who had inherited this unenviable situation in the fall of 1994, chose the path of least resistance, unconditional surrender. Without ever saying a word against censorship, on January 30, 1995, he canceled the exhibits that were to accompany the *Enola Gay.* "I have concluded," he stated, "that we made a basic error in attempting to couple a historical treatment of the use of atomic weapons with the 50th anniversary commemoration of the end of the war."[16] His actions and explanation suggest a revision of George Santayana's aphorism "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." I am now more inclined to worry that "Those who insist on only their memories of the past, condemn others to remain ignorant of it."

The *Enola Gay* debate is not only about the politics of history and the political uses of history. It also is a disturbing example of a clash between memory and history. Though it is fifty years in the past, we continue to live in the shadow of World War II—personal memories of the war remain part of the current debate over the history of the war. In this environment, memory and history inevitably conflict, for memory, the living voice of the past, is personal and particular, while history, the scholarly reconstruction of the past, is universal and critical. Memories may contribute to the construction of history, but history does not necessarily validate memory.

In the United States, the "collective memory" of World War II sees the war as "our finest hour." It was not simply the "Good War." It was the most just of wars, the model war, the most righteous of wars, and a war—as the leaflets American planes dropped on Japanese cities in July 1945 stated—in which the United States "[stood] for humanity."[17] America without that image is unimaginable to the generation that fought the war, and to those in subsequent generations who have defined their lives by the image. If we did some terrible things, they had to be done; the Germans and Japanese brought the punishment they received—their well-deserved punishment, many members of the war generation would say—on themselves.

Reinforcing the power of the warriors' individual and collective memories to resist the construction of critical histories of the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki and all strategic bombing were the demands and politics of the emerging Cold War. The image of American moral superiority was promoted with special intensity during the Cold War, and our increasing reliance on nuclear deterrence created powerful resistance to criticism of the wartime use of nuclear weapons. Early questions about the need to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki were replaced with answers, such as Stimson's article, and the answers given left no room for ambiguity.

American society has an especially strong intolerance for ambiguity. Perhaps it results from our system of government, which, in contrast to a parliamentary

but it was eliminated in negotiations with the American Legion. The "to this day" quotation was in the first script, National Air and Space Museum, "Crossroads," p. 2.

[16] *Washington Post,* Jan. 31, 1995, p. A1.

[17] Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 2; Mark Selden, "Before the Bomb: The 'Good War,' Air Power, and the Logic of Mass Destruction," *Contention,* 5 (Fall 1995), 113–32.

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system, severely limits the spectrum of views we debate. Our public dialogues are driven toward oversimplification and clarity. More than in other democratic societies, our problems are discussed in either/or terms: good or bad, right or wrong. Ambiguity and complexity are unwelcome, even viewed with suspicion, in our political culture.

Unlike any other American war, World War II was an unambiguous war, a war with clarity of purpose and an unprecedented sense of national unity. But victory left an ambiguous legacy—our relationship to our erstwhile Soviet ally. In 1947 George F. Kennan's containment policy suggested one way of dealing with our Soviet problem, but it too was ambiguous: As a political strategy it was too complex, and as an analysis it was too subtle.

The Berlin blockade of 1948 transformed the American foreign policy environment. It not only recast the former German enemy into a heroic victim of Soviet communism but also resolved the ambiguities of containment. As an American airlift kept West Berlin supplied, B-29 bombers capable of delivering nuclear weapons were ostentatiously moved to England. United States air power and monopoly of nuclear weapons offered a direct way to deal with the Soviet threat—strategic nuclear bombing.[18]

With nuclear weapons and strategic bombing at the center of the emerging Cold War defense strategy of the United States, the ambiguities of containment disappeared. The Cold War may have been a poor substitute for World War II, but World War II was an ideal model for the Cold War. The demand for clarity drove our politics. Stalin substituted for Adolf Hitler, communism replaced National Socialism, and Soviet cities were targeted as so many potential Hiroshimas and Nagasakis. Memories of World War II coexisted comfortably with the perceived requirements of the Cold War, stifling the serious critical discussion of urban bombing that had begun in the spring of 1945 in such journals as the *Christian Century, Christianity and Crisis,* and the *Saturday Evening Post,* and that had continued after the war with criticisms of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[19]

The *Enola Gay* debacle at the National Air and Space Museum is a reminder of how completely the politics of the Cold War—in reinforcing Americans' collective memory of the "Good War"—circumscribed discussions of the war's ambiguities. This special protection accorded the history of the Hiroshima bombing for decades unites the task of "unspinning" Stimson's history of the decision with the more

[18] See two papers presented at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Washington, D.C., March 31, 1995: Carolyn Eisenberg, "The Berlin Blockade and the Militarizing of American Foreign Policy, 1948–49" (in Sherwin's possession); and Gar Alperovitz and Kai Bird, "A Theory of the Cold War: U.S. Policy, Germany, and the Bomb," *ibid.* The most important new study of United States German policy is Carolyn Eisenberg, *Drawing the Line: The American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944–1949* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996).

[19] Uday Mohan and Sanho Tree, "The Ending of World War II: Media Perspectives in the 1940s–1960s and Early 1990s," paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, Chicago, Jan. 6, 1995 (in Sherwin's possession). The United States Strategic Bombing Survey's analysis of the Pacific war concluded that "certainly prior to December 31, 1945, and in all probability prior to November 1, 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated." See United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Summary Report (Pacific War)* (Washington, 1946), 26.

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considerable challenge of disentangling our current politics from our Cold War culture. If the past is prologue, then debates like that about the *Enola Gay* exhibit are the future, and historians must recognize that as citizens of a democratic society they assure that open debate, rather than congressional fiat, determines what histories of our national experience are available to the public.

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