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# War and Memory: The Creation of the American Memory of the Atomic Bombings and the End of the War in the Pacific

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## Abstract

Much has been written about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, an element often overlooked in the history of these events is the way in which an official narrative of them was created in the minds of the American public. This paper examines how this official narrative and consequently memory of the bombings was formed. To do this newspaper articles were analyzed from the first published reports of the bombings in the American press up to recent stories regarding the bombings. Through the analysis of these reports it becomes clear that American memory of the bombings have three elements attached to it. The first being that Japan would not surrender, secondly the bombs saved lives, and finally Japan had started the war with the attack on Pearl Harbor. What makes these elements interesting is that each in some form or another was reported in the newspapers analyzed in this essay. The ultimate conclusion of the essay is that through various press releases and speeches Henry Stimson and Harry Truman were able to effectively shape the way in which Americans remember the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This then adds to the historical understanding not only of the events themselves, but also to how and why people remember.



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Paper presented at the 3rd Annual James A. Rawley Conference in the Humanities — *Imagining Communities: People, Places, Meanings*. Lincoln, Nebraska, April 12, 2008. Sponsored by the University of Nebraska–Lincoln History Graduate Students' Association. Copyright © 2008 Michael Mishler.

History is often thought of as the study of things that have happened in the past. To do this most historians primarily rely on documents and aspects of material culture in order to come to some conclusion about the past. Inferences are drawn from the careful study and analysis of these items that remain from the past. For more recent history though, an interesting problem presents itself for the historian, the issue of memory. When a historian studies something from the more recent past they are confronted with not only the written sources but also with the people who created the sources or who lived through a given time period. This forces the historian to confront and question whether or not a person's memories are valid in terms of studying a historical event. While this debate over the value of memory continues, it is not the focus of this essay. Instead this essay follows a tributary that has come out of this debate: that is how memory of a particular event is created and more specifically how group memory or popular memory is created. This essay will attempt to explain how a group memory or official memory of the atomic bombings of Japan has been created in the United States. It will seek to trace the evolution of this memory from the time Americans became aware of the bombings up until the late 1990s. Through this process the essay will offer ideas not only on how a particular memory was formed, but also offer insights as to why this memory was formed and held up in the public sphere. To do this what follows will base itself largely on newspaper articles from the time of the bombings up until the present.

To begin though we must first look at the world in which the atomic bombs were created and used. The time period is summer of 1945, the United States and its allies have been at war with Germany and just concluded a peace. The United States has also been at war with Imperial Japan since the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Having concluded this peace the focus turned to defeating Japan and ending the war. The United States wondered whether its Soviet ally would enter the war with Japan and if they did when would they. There had been fire bombing raids on Tokyo and other Japanese cities since the beginning of the summer. The new President Truman attempted to fill the spot Roosevelt had for the past

twelve years. He had been thrust into a role he was not necessarily prepared for and into an administration that had been operating largely without his direct input. This provides some background and context into which the bombs would be used.

Now that some historical context has been given it is time to turn to the creation of the memory of the bombings. The bombs were dropped on Hiroshima on August sixth, 1945 and on Nagasaki on August ninth. The American public was informed of the first bombing at the latest by August eighth 1945. Most of the public probably heard of the bombing on August sixth with the President's radio address to the nation or read about it the next day in the newspapers. An article printed on August seventh, 1945 appearing in the New York Times reproduces President Harry Truman's and Secretary of War Henry Stimson's announcement of the bombing of Hiroshima to the American public. The article begins with the President announcing that, "sixteen hours ago an American airplane dropped one bomb on Hiroshima, an important Japanese Army base. That bomb had more power than 20,000 tons of TNT... The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid manifold. And the end is not yet..."<sup>1</sup> Here the American public is first informed in writing of the use of a new bomb on Japan. This new bomb is powerful, and later they are told it harnesses the power of the atom and that had secretly been in development for some time. In addition it provides an initial reason as to why the bomb was used. The reason being Japan started the war with its surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Later the text states, "it was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum was issued at Potsdam on July 26... their leader promptly rejected the ultimatum... if they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth."<sup>2</sup> It is here that the American public is not only given the first information on the use of the bomb and why it was used at all, but is also told that the Japanese were given a chance to surrender but their leaders chose not to surrender so the war will continue. These are the beginnings of the creation of the first official narrative of the atomic bombs and their use. The American public was simultaneously told of the bombing of

Hiroshima and that a new atomic weapon had been used. They are told it was because Japan started the war with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and because of their leader's refusal to surrender after the announcement at Potsdam.

Later articles also appearing in the *New York Times* build on the general themes outlined here and add to the narrative by planting the seeds of creating heroes out of those who carried out the bombing mission on Hiroshima. In an article written by W. H. Lawrence, he describes the initial announcement of the use of the bomb by General Carl A. Spaatz. The article initially describes the vast amount of destruction this first bomb caused to the city of Hiroshima. It then describes the sequence of the bombing itself. It states, "the bomb was dropped at 9:15 A.M. from the Superfortress *Enola Gay*, piloted by Col. Paul W. Tibbets Jr. . ."<sup>3</sup> From here the article goes on to describe the effects of the bombing witnessed by the crew of the *Enola Gay* and another air crew about 170 miles away. Following the description and testimony given by the aircrew on the effect of the blast and their experience dropping the bomb, there is an interesting fact given about the mission by Tibbets. He is quoted as saying the city of Hiroshima was picked as the target once he and his crew were over Japan.<sup>4</sup> Most of the article covers the experience of the aircrew that dropped the bomb and gives a description of what they saw the bomb do. Further this aircrew is described as a humble group of men who knew what they had to do and carried out their mission. This is the initial picture of the bombing that the American public is presented. This being that the bomb was dropped on the sixth at 9:15 A.M. and that it destroyed about sixty percent of the city of Hiroshima.

The American public was made aware that a second atomic bomb had been dropped on Japan on August ninth. This news was reported by General Spaatz to the American public. W. H. Lawrence wrote another article for *The New York Times* describing the use of a second bomb against Japan. This article is much like the one from the day before except it describes the bombing of Nagasaki. This particular article describes how the Japanese media reported that the populace of Nagasaki was dead and that Nagasaki was chosen be-

cause of its strategic importance as a shipping point for the Japanese armed forces and as an industrial center. Then the article goes on to detail what it calls propaganda that is put out by Japanese sources regarding both of the bombings. Lawrence writes, "voice broadcasts and wireless broadcasts aimed at North America and Europe apparently were trying to establish a propaganda point that the bombings should be stopped."<sup>5</sup> He goes on to give a few examples of this but dismisses them. As of August ninth the American public is aware that two atomic bombs have been dropped on Japan and that both have done great damage to the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Any ideas about the bombings being something other than good and necessary is assuaged by the articles disregarding of what it terms propaganda which called the bombings unnecessary and also crimes against humanity. Here I do not wish to pass judgment on the morality of bombings, but rather am attempting to show how an official narrative was being created about the bombings in the American mind spearheaded by the U.S. government and reported by the media. They are by now also aware that the Soviet Union declared war on Japan the same day that the bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. Adding to this understanding of the bombings is another article appearing in *The New York Times* for date of August tenth. It describes a warning given by President Truman to Japan that atomic bombings will continue until they unconditionally surrender. The article describes Truman's announcement with, "Truman threatened the Japanese tonight with obliteration by atomic bombing unless they surrender unconditionally... [it quotes Truman as adding] 'If Japan does not surrender bombs will have to be dropped on war industries and, unfortunately thousands of civilian lives will be lost.'"<sup>6</sup> More than just relaying the news of the President's warning to Japan the article also quotes the President as saying the use of the bombs was to shorten the war and protect thousands of lives. It quotes Truman as remarking:

Having found the bomb we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed

American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare. We have used it in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans.<sup>7</sup>

By now the American public has a clear conception forming about the bombs, their use, and the destruction they have caused Japan. People have heard of the destruction on the radio and read about it in the newspapers like *The New York Times*. Now they are offered information as to why the bombs were used on Japan. These new and extremely powerful bombs were used according to the President because of the attacks on Pearl Harbor which started the war with the United States and because of all the Japanese acts of aggression during the war. Finally the public is told that these bombs were used to save countless thousands of lives and that they will continue to be used until Japan and its leaders unconditionally surrender. This statement is important because American's have a direct justification given for the use of the bombs. They have heard the same message twice within a four day to five day period. The new type of bombs were used on a militaristic Japan that had started the War in the Pacific, one who refused to surrender, who committed atrocities during the war, and now the public receives added information this being that the bombs were used to save lives. In this statement it means American lives the lives of American soldiers. There are no longer any assumptions as to why the bombs were used, it was not just because it was war time, and it was not solely because of Pearl Harbor, it was a combination of factors that have forced America's hand into using this type of weapon. Here is the first instance of the creation of an official narrative of the use of the atomic bombs. This will combine and coalesce with the earlier news reports describing the bombing of Hiroshima and later of Nagasaki. However, this cannot yet be pursued because these developments will not happen yet, but this will be important for the future American understandings regarding the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

On August 14, 1945, Japan formally surrendered to the United States and its allies. The headline in the *Chicago Tribune* the next day

read *Great War Ends! Japs Will Surrender to Gen. M'Arthur*. The article accompanying the title explains how the Japanese decided to surrender and what the terms of this surrender were to be. Five major outcomes of the surrender are listed in the document. Four of these that are of interest to this study are as follows:

Emperor Hirohito accepting unconditionally the surrender terms proclaimed by the United States, Great Britain, and China at Potsdam July 26 and agreed to carry out all order of the supreme allied commander of forces that will occupy Japan. Secondly allied forces were ordered to cease firing and the Japanese government was instructed to issue similar order to all Japanese forces. Thirdly, General MacArthur was appointed supreme allied commander and the Japanese government was instructed to surrender formally to him at the place and time he designates. Fourth, President Truman announced he would proclaim V - J Day formally as soon as the surrender terms are signed by the representatives of the Japanese government and the allied power...<sup>8</sup>

Also the article goes on to state that all items regarding surrender were met but the U.S. included a clause that would allow Emperor Hirohito to remain in power as a puppet figure subject to the supreme allied commander. These points of the surrender are important for later issues that would arise in the American memory and understanding of the bombings. What is important here is to establish the terms of surrender and that they were clearly made public. These terms will become important in later discussions regarding the question of unconditional surrender and Japan's refusal as being a motivating factor for the use of the atomic bombs.

Following the conclusion of the War in the Pacific, attention regarding the atomic bombings of Japan was largely pushed to the side of the American consciousness. It was time to celebrate and to start rebuilding society. Other more pressing concerns presented themselves, things like the growing discontent between the Soviet Union and the United States and issues regarding the rebuilding of Europe and Japan. Issues and stories related to the bombings fall out



of the limelight of the newspapers that is until their anniversary in 1946. For now there is a semiofficial memory that has been created and which the American public is used to in regard to the bombings. This being that Japan brought these bombings on themselves through their provocation in starting the war with the attack on Pearl Harbor and through their refusal to meet the surrender terms offered at Potsdam as well as to save lives. Since the Japanese surrendered so soon after the second bomb was dropped, many in the public assumed Japan surrendered as a result of these two bombings. This means that there was a general thought amongst the public that without the bombs the war with Japan would have continued. However, in June of 1946 something interesting happens. A newspaper article circulates and appears to contradict the official and group memory that has been created of the bombings. The article reports that a definitive report was released by the United States Strategic Bombing Commission which stated that the atomic bombs did not cause Japan to surrender. The article quotes this commission as finding, "that the Japanese government had been trying to terminate the war for three months when the A-bombs devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945... [and] the report states that the Japanese surrender was hastened but cannot be attributed to the atomic bomb."<sup>9</sup> This article is important to understand the creation of the memory of the bombings because in certain respects it contradicts the official narrative and group memory that have been created in the mind of the U.S. public. This being that the bombs were used to bring an end to war in which Japan would not surrender. The article is interesting in that one government agency not only challenges the popular understanding of why the bombs were used but also the official reasons given by the President and then Secretary of War Henry Stimson. This article was the earliest and the first in a long line of those that would challenge the popular understanding and official narrative about the bombings.

In order to add credence to the official narrative, Truman and Stimson went public yet again on the use of the bombs and why they decided to make use of them. This was in part due to the increasing number of articles that began criticizing the bombing in late

1946 and into 1947. The official narrative given during the war by the government was being to have holes poked in it by government commissions like the Strategic Bombing Survey but also by scientists and other high ranking officials who worked on or were in some way related to the creation of the atomic bombs. It is now that the strong official narrative emerges, this is the one that has pervaded the minds of U.S. population and it continues up through the present. This is the so called "saving lives narrative". It emerged in the winter of 1947 when both Henry Stimson and Harry Truman released joint statements on the decision to use the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Stimson revealed in *Harper's Magazine* in January of 1947 that, "military leaders were convinced that unless atomic bombs were used, major fighting would not end before late in 1946 'at the earliest' with an expected cost of more than one million casualties to American forces alone."<sup>10</sup> Further he is quoted in another article reporting on the same story that, "the military use of atomic energy was connected with larger questions of national policy"... and also that the decision to use it had the whole-hearted support of seven of the country's top scientists, who had served as members of the advisory committees to determine policy."<sup>11</sup> Here Stimson and Truman are attempting to resurrect their earlier attempts at creating an official memory regarding the decision to use the atomic bombs.

Stimson expands on the earlier theme of saving lives as introduced by Truman and states that the bombs were used to save at least one million lives. Stimson also defends and expands the official narrative through his assertion that despite what was written regarding scientists being displeased and arguing against the use of the bombs they were in fact wholly for their use. He also adds to the idea that the bombs brought a quick end to the war despite official findings to the contrary in asserting that without the bombs the war would have dragged on well into 1946 and perhaps beyond. Stimson is also quick to dismiss the idea that certain scientists wanted to show the Japanese the power the bombs by testing a bomb on a deserted island in their presence. Stimson says a number of scientists were against this idea from the beginning despite its proposal. Truman is quoted as writing, "the final decision [to use the atomic bomb] had to be made

by the President, and it was made after a complete survey of the situation, had been made... The Japanese were given fair warning... well in advance of the dropping of the bomb. I imagine the bomb caused them to accept the terms."<sup>12</sup> Truman for his part builds on the narrative as established by Stimson and also is sure to state that, of course, the bombs brought an end to the war and also that Japan had its chance to surrender but chose not to and so brought the bombings upon themselves. This is the basic official narrative that had been created out of the original narrative that had come under scrutiny in 1946 and 1947. This narrative being that Japan brought the bombings upon themselves in that they started the war, the use of the bombs was never questioned and were used to save at least a million American lives, and that they brought the end to a war in which Japan refused to surrender which otherwise would have continued well on into the future.

This narrative is defended by the President again later the same year in August of 1947. This took place during a speech to commemorate the two-year anniversary of V. J. Day. Largely this was due to continued thoughts after the war concerning whether or not the bombs actually needed to be used. Truman for his part sticks to the narrative that had been established in full earlier in the year. The article describes him as stating,

He never entertained any doubts as to the wisdom of that decision [to use the bombs]... he had given the matter long and prayerful study before reaching a decision. He believes now as then that the action was necessary to save the lives of 250,000 young American's that otherwise would have been lost on the invasion beaches.<sup>13</sup>

There is a slight alteration to the official narrative in that Truman claims the number of lives saved by the bombs was 250,000 as opposed to a million but here the difference is negligible because in either case it is such a large amount of lives as to render the exact details meaningless.

This is the narrative that would enter the popular mind and be reinforced not only by the President and Stimson but also by Ameri-

can history textbooks well into the future and even up to the present. It is the narrative that has shaped and become the popular American memory of the bombings.

Now that the official narrative and memory has been established we can begin to trace how a group memory emerged from it, the forms it has taken since its establishment, and why it remains so prevalent in American minds. Here the focus will be on how this official memory became the popular memory of the bombings in the American mind and will seek to show this in practical as well as in theoretical terms. The main way in which this official narrative has become the group memory of these events in the United States is through their official proclamation and repetition within the historical tradition of the United States. From popular reading to primary and secondary education textbooks a certain understanding of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is expressed. This meaning or understanding is expressed again and again no matter where a person turns. This understanding of the bombings is the one that was given by Stimson and Truman in January of 1947. It is constantly repeated in textbooks, on T.V., in movies, newspapers and magazines, and, of course on the Internet. Largely this has created a sort of self-informing cycle in which the official narrative in some form or another is repeated to a populace that expects to hear just this narrative. In this way not only does this narrative become solidified in the minds of Americans, it also becomes something that is almost glorified because added to this understanding is the idea that we (the United States) were fighting the good war for ideals like democracy and peace. Here I do not wish to question the intent of the leaders during the war nor do I want to enter into a debate regarding the morality of war or anything of this nature. Instead what I am attempting to establish is that the American public brings a general conception and viewpoint to their understanding of the War in the Pacific. This is that America was forced into a war with Japan because of their surprise attack on Pearl Harbor. Further they chose to fight to the bitter end despite the United States offering them a way to surrender. Because of this and other issues as outlined in the official narrative the U.S. had to use the atomic bombs. In a sense there

is a sort of implicit teleology that is brought to the general public's understanding of the bombings.

These ideas are evidenced clearly when in people's letters to the editor. Most often these come on the anniversary of the bombings in August and are often in response to Japanese festivities promoting peace or suggesting that the bombings were immoral in nature. It is in these writings that one can witness the pervasive nature the official narrative has had on the popular memory of these events in the American mind. One article that illustrates these ideas well comes from the December 13, 1982 edition of the *Chicago Tribune*. In a letter printed in the section titled "Voice of the People", Mario Caruso, Jr. is quick to repeat the official narrative with some added commentary. He writes,

Every year on August 14 we are made to feel guilty for dropping the atom bomb on Japan... however, on Dec 7, 1941 we suffered the unprovoked attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor... we also have been hearing that the Japanese recently have been rewriting their history books, apparently to cover up their atrocities and the fact that they were the aggressors. Are we to feel guilty for dropping the atom bomb on Japan to end the war they got us into in the first place? It seems to me that the Japanese should bear the guilt of the war and the bomb itself.<sup>14</sup>

Here the reader is presented with some key elements of the official narrative; these elements have managed to become part of the popular memory of the event. These elements are: the reference to Pearl Harbor, Japan started the war; the bomb(s) ended the war. Here are three key pieces of the official narrative put forth by Stimson and Truman in 1947 that have through repetition in textbooks, on T.V., in movies, newspapers and magazines made their way into the popular memory of the bombings in the United States.

An equally informing view similar to this one comes again from the *Chicago Tribune*, this time from a Ruth Martens writing in 1977. She writes, "I cannot help thinking of the victims who have suffered in silence as a result of the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor... the atomic

bombing of Hiroshima would never had taken place if the bombing of Pearl Harbor had not occurred.”<sup>15</sup> Here again one can see the influence of the official narrative in her assertion that without Pearl Harbor the bombing of Hiroshima would never have happened nor needed to happen. One final example of the influence of the official narrative coming to shape the popular narrative can be seen in a longer piece published in the *Chicago Tribune*. This comes from Bob Wiedrich and was printed in August of 1982. He writes, “Harry Truman was right on target when he ordered the atomic bombs dropped on Japan... his action was dictated by the estimated 1million casualties the allies were expected to suffer in an invasion of the Japanese homeland...”<sup>16</sup> Further he adds a new twist to the memory and narrative in claiming that the Japanese had planned and attempted to infect the United States with bubonic plague by sending infected rats over in balloons. Here again the official narrative is clearly evident. He makes reference to the saving of a million lives because with the use of the bombs an invasion was not necessary. Further he implicitly promotes the idea that the atomic bombs brought an end to the War in the Pacific. Finally, there is the twist he adds, which is to paint the Japanese as perpetrators of atrocities though this time in the form of using biological weapons. This understanding is not merely limited to the average citizen or just to veterans of the war. It has a much wider base and appeal within the populace. The popularity even remains in the academic community and is not strictly limited to the military schools of the United States.

In the introduction of his book, *Weapons for Victory*, Robert Maddox criticizes scholars who have written revisionist histories regarding the atomic bombings and the decision to make use of the atomic bombs. In his introduction he writes, “The present volume offers interpretation of the events leading up to Hiroshima and Nagasaki... along the way I have pointed out some of the more blatant revisionist distortions such as those already mention...”<sup>17</sup> These revisionist theories are based off of evidence like the conflicting reports cited earlier and the tracing of the emergence of the official narrative put forth by Stimson and Truman in 1947. Throughout the rest of the book let alone the introduction, Maddox presents the official narra-

tive as retold in 1995 in an attempt to defend against scholars who have come to a different understanding of the atomic bombings. This work and the years of 1994 and 1995 lead into an important time in the process of creation of the popular memory of the atomic bombings. This refers to the now infamous Enola Gay Exhibit and controversy at the Air and National Space Museum.

To understand the significance of this major controversy a little background needs to be given in regard to the planned exhibit. In 1994 an idea was brought up for an exhibit to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the War in the Pacific. This was to be an exhibit held at the Air and National Space Museum in Washington, D.C. The exhibit itself would specifically focus on the Enola Gay and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. From the beginning though the project more than anything else engendered controversy. The historians selected to make up the crew for the project could not agree from the beginning on key areas of what the exhibit was to do and be like. One member of the design team, Martin Sherwin has written a few articles regarding his participation in the project and the problems that were encountered along the way. The way the original exhibit was planned left him feeling quite uneasy about what was being proposed. He makes the following comment, "I judged the commemorative character of the exhibit dominant and ubiquitous, and the historical portion marginalized and unappealing..."<sup>18</sup> He felt this way because in his mind the proposed exhibit would tell the history of the decision to use the bomb through a limited number of documents hung on the wall near the fuselage of the *Enola Gay*. Further, other objects included like artifacts from Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the original plan did little to challenge people to think and understand why Truman, Stimson, Byrnes and others came to the decision they did.<sup>19</sup>

To Sherwin the exhibit was more about presenting a certain idea and show and glitz and not about history. However, he was overruled by other advisors like the historians from the United States Air Force, Dr. Richard Hallion and Dr. Herman Wolk, who in the words of Sherwin staunchly defended the proposed script. These two men understood the history and had done their research but took a very

cautious approach to the exhibit. They were commended by some like Edwin Bearss, a historian for the National Park Service and veteran of the Second World War. However, others like John T. Correll the editor of *Air Force Magazine* felt the exhibit was, "it not only suffered from too much of the PC... Correll considered the exhibit biased against the air force, pro-Japanese, and anti -American", and he wrote an article condemning the exhibit.<sup>20</sup> This sparked off even more public criticism of the exhibit which was only in the planning stages. A series of articles came out questioning or condemning the exhibit in its current form usually making claims that the exhibit was unpatriotic or untrue to history. Things got so bad after the printing of Correll's article and others like it that the American Legion, "enlisted congressional allies... Senators and congressmen rushed to condemn the exhibit... Sen. Nancy Kassebaum offered a resolution in the Senate, and dozens of congressmen signed letters that threatened retribution against the staff of the museum if the script was not modified to the satisfaction of its critics."<sup>21</sup> These changes demanded by the senate and congress were to add more to the exhibit explaining Japanese wartime atrocities like its invasion of China and the Nanking massacre and the removal of all documents that were critical of the use of nuclear weapons. The American Legion wanted a statement removed that questioned whether or not the bombs really were necessary to bring the war to a quick conclusion.<sup>22</sup> There were also a flurry of newspaper articles that covered this unfolding drama and debacle. Most of the articles track the changes to the exhibit brought on by all the controversy surrounding the original and then amended plans for the exhibit. One article on the topic states,

at one pole speculative estimates of how many Americans would have died invading Japan, and were presumably spared because of the bombing, and at the other whether the attack in August 1945 was necessary to end the war... some historians now contend the bombing was not aimed at wartime enemy Japan as at the wartime ally the Soviet Union... in the latest clash the Smithsonian Institution, attacked by veterans and groups and members of Congress for a World War II ex-



hibit that they said was overly solicitous of Japan, has decided to drastically scale back the display: The narrative already revised five times, will be dropped, and visitors will see only part of the Enola Gay's fuselage, along with a small commemorative plaque.<sup>23</sup>

This sums up much of the coverage and debate about the exhibit at the Smithsonian. What this quote and the information pulled from the Sherwin article illustrates is the extent to which the official narrative had by the years of 1994 and 1995 become the popular memory of the atomic bombings. This is not to say that there were not detractors or those who did not question the way the bombings were remembered. There were a number of scholars and historians who by the 1990s did question the popular memory—these being people like Sherwin, Michael J. Hogan, Barton J. Bernstein, John W. Dower, Gar Alperovitz, as well as others. Nevertheless the controversy and heated reactions towards the exhibit illustrate just how deeply ingrained the popular memory of the bombings was in the mind of the American public. The initial display may not have been historically challenging enough for someone like Sherwin but it was also not unpatriotic. However, the public and members of the Senate and Congress could not begin to handle the idea that there would be any other way to remember the bombings than what had been provided to them in the official narrative. They chose to believe this even if certain historians like Alperovitz and Bernstein and other scholars wrote histories offering different conclusions and understandings of the bombings.

The controversy caused by the exhibit brings us to the question of why the official narrative which has become the popular memory of bombings has remained so strong despite more and more historical works being written that either challenge this memory or claim that it is a created product that leaves out vital information. One reason can be that these works while being discussed in the scholarly community and in academia in general fail in large part to reach the public. First and foremost many of the studies that question the motivations for using the bombs and subsequently the

memory of the bombings and the official narrative are aimed first at an academic audience. Typically these works have been written by specialist historians and this work has been discussed and debated amongst their colleagues. A factor playing into this is that these studies did not come out until well after the official narrative had time to sink into the public consciousness and psyche. The first of the works challenging the popular memory and official narrative was not published until 1961. This was Herbert Feise's work, which largely endorsed the findings of the Strategic Bombing Commission. The next scholarly work that came out was Gar Alperovitz's *Atomic Diplomacy* published in 1965. These studies came out fourteen and eighteen years after Truman and Stimson had created the official narrative in their announcements in *Harper's* in 1947. The public was offered no alternative for almost twenty years. For twenty years children were taught more or less the official narrative and this became the memory of the bombings for Americans. There was no further discussion of the findings of the Strategic Bombing Commission because Truman and Stimson had released their joint statement which effectively made the earlier findings of that commission null and void.

Another aspect playing into all this was the climate of the Cold War. Up until the debate over the *Enola Gay* exhibit the United States and its citizens were living under the Cold War, a world in which nuclear annihilation or the threat of it loomed heavy around every corner. The United States was painted as a bastion of democracy and freedom during this time which was in contrast to the Soviet Union. People needed stories and understandings of events that would confirm and even play up this understanding and conception of themselves. How could a nation possess such a vast amount of nuclear weapons as the United States did during the Cold War and question itself on its use of them in the past? It makes sense people would cling to an official version of events in a world where the only certain thing people could believe in was that their country was doing the right thing. Overall there was not a widespread atmosphere conducive to questioning U.S. policy or actions especially in something that had been remembered as the "good war".

Other explanations for this phenomenon come from J. Samuel Walker. In his article, "History, Collective Memory, and the Bomb" explains why there is this disjuncture between history and memory regarding the use of the atomic bombs. He quotes David Lowenthal who states, "[there are] three basic sources of public perceptions of the past- history, memory, and relics..."<sup>24</sup> Currently there are fewer and fewer people around who remember Hiroshima, and even those who are around do not necessarily have a detailed or full picture of the event. In this respect their memory can become distorted and they can mix and match memory and history coming to conclusions that are informed by each and then represented later as memory. In doing this these people do not so much contribute to an increased level of understanding of these events, but rather recreate official stories and intermix memory and history. Since there are few relics easily accessible to the public and because the memories of the few people who were actually around for the bombing have been distorted and altered with time, history is the only thing that is left. This history that most people know and go by though is what they are taught in grade school but especially in high school. Lowenthal quotes Frances FitzGerald as saying, "the history that those students learn is often the version of events that will stay with them for the rest of their lives... long after the facts have been forgotten, general impressions remain... what stick to memory from those texts is not any particular series of facts, but an atmosphere, an impression, a tone."<sup>25</sup> This tone or memory comes from the textbooks the students use. It informs and sets their understanding of the past even if they forget some of the details. It is because of this particular function and aspect that the official narrative has been able to impress itself so deeply on the American mind. School textbooks have taught the official theory for some many years and until recently have continued to do so.

This has created a tone or impression on the memory of the American public which views the bombings and the decision to go forward with them in light of what they learned in high school. This tone or impression then informs their understanding of the past for the rest of their lives. It becomes a sort of filter through which peo-

ple take in information about the past, judge this information and either make it conform to their tone or disregard it. This is likely what has happened in order to create the popular understanding or group memory of the bombings that is commonly held today within the United States. The process and cycle described thus far continues to go on. The official narrative is put forth in various books, magazines, films, and other forms of media. Few question what they believe or their memory because they have no reason to do so. Unless this impression is directly challenged by competing information it is the memory people will stick with because it is comfortable, it is what they know, it in some respects makes them feel safe and gives order to their world. What we are left with is an issue that is still hotly debated today both in and out of academic circles. The United States and its people are still dealing with the legacy of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki some sixty two years after the fact. The preceding has not been an attempt to pass some sort of moral judgment on the bombings or those who decided to use them. Instead the goal has been to show how the popular, group, or collective memory of this event has been created and the reasons for its remaining so strong in the public mind. To do this I have relied in large part on newspaper articles describing the events which have been used to create the chronology of the formation of the memory. This has been supplemented and expanded by secondary sources offering a mix of practical and theoretical reasons as to how and why this memory was created and remains so strong.

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## Notes

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