HIROSHIMA IN AMERICAN MEMORY

The year 1995—the fiftieth anniversary of both the end of World War II and the beginning of the atomic age—had powerful emotional overtones for America. When Michael J. Hogan, editor of the journal *Diplomatic History*, invited me to contribute to a special commemorative issue on the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, I readily accepted. The invitation not only provided an opportunity for me to revisit my own memories of August 1945 and of a 1958 visit to Hiroshima but also to explore further the continuing role of Hiroshima in America’s cultural and political discourse. Ten years earlier, in 1985, I had written an essay for the *New Republic* on Americans’ immediate reaction to President Truman’s atomic-bomb announcement (see chapter 2). In the 1995 essay below, I broadened the focus to reflect on the continued polemical and metaphorical resonance of Hiroshima in U.S. life from 1945 to the present. Drawing on my earlier work as well as on considerable fresh research, I once again rethought America’s effort to come to terms with these protean events that refused to recede quietly into history, instead remaining vividly alive in the nation’s collective memory.

The essay from which chapter 15 is adapted appeared in the Spring 1995 issue of *Diplomatic History*. This special issue, also including essays by Barton J. Bernstein, Herbert P. Bix, John W. Dower, Michael J. Hogan, Seitsu Tachibana, and J. Samuel Walker, was subsequently reprinted in Michael J. Hogan, ed., *Hiroshima in History and Memory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Both versions included full scholarly citations, omitted here.
The fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima invites reflection on the role of this event in American memory. For half a century now, the word “Hiroshima” has resonated in U.S. culture and public discourse, as its meaning has been debated, contested, and exploited. For me, a 1958 visit to that city drove home the ambiguous quality of the memory. As my train entered the station, several Japanese passengers around me, smiling and apparently full of civic pride, repeated “Hiroshima: atomic bomb. Hiroshima: atomic bomb” for the benefit of the visiting American. How to respond? I felt acute embarrassment, yet my seatmates seemed clearly pleased to remind me of the event that had made their city famous. This memory now mingles with earlier recollections of my first confused encounter with Hiroshima, in a newspaper on August 6, 1945, four days after my tenth birthday. With the Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombings now half a century in the past, perhaps the moment is opportune to explore our long effort to come to terms with Hiroshima—the city, the event, and the symbol.

At least since the Romans leveled Carthage in 146 B.C., thereby imposing the first “Carthaginian peace,” the names of certain sites have taken on powerful symbolic meaning. “Waterloo” evokes irrevocable defeat; “Gettysburg,” the Civil War’s turning point. “Verdun” has become shorthand for the futility of trench warfare, while “Guernica” and “Dresden” stir thoughts of the slaughter of civilians from the air. Allusions to “Pearl Harbor” rallied Americans during World War II, while the chambers of commerce of Buchenwald and Dachau face an uphill task in extricating their towns from associations that are only too familiar—and gruesome. In more recent times, “Dien Bien Phu” and “Bay of Pigs” took on their own symbolic resonances.

Clearly certain place names serve as a shorthand in cultural discourse, based on a shared understanding of their symbolic meaning. When the event alluded to is sufficiently remote, the name is drained of emotion and serves a purely rhetorical function. We speak of a “Carthaginian peace” or say that someone “met his Waterloo” with little conscious awareness of the specific events or the specific towns in North Africa or Belgium that gave rise to these expressions. Hiroshima is another
place name set apart by history, but unlike Carthage or Waterloo, its symbolic meaning continues to evoke passionate emotional responses.

For many Americans, that meaning is clear and unambiguous. Since 1945, Hiroshima, sometimes paired with Nagasaki, has been shorthand for the destructive capability of nuclear weapons. In medieval cartography, Jerusalem was the navel of the world. In nuclear geography, it is Hiroshima. In *We Can Do It!* (1985), a “Kids’ Peace Book” with definitions for each letter of the alphabet, the entry for “H” reads:

**H is for Hiroshima.** *Hiroshima* is a city in Japan, where an atomic bomb was dropped many years ago in 1945. Thousands of people lost their lives and the city was destroyed. That’s why we say “NO MORE HIROS­HI­MAS!” H is also for hope, happiness, and harmony. That’s what the world needs instead. Another H is for hug.

The page is illustrated with a drawing of a boy hugging his grandmother as she writes a protest letter, while grandpa sits nearby knitting a scarf with the slogan: “No more Hiroshimas!” In this rhetorical usage, to which we shall return, Hiroshima was removed from history and treated as a semimythic symbol of atomic menace. In the passive voice of the above passage, for example, the bomb was dropped, a city was destroyed, with no hint of who dropped the bomb or destroyed the city, or why. Such dehistoricizing characterizes not just juvenile peace literature but much of the rhetorical invocation of “Hiroshima” by antinuclear activists over the years.

But the peace activists’ use of “Hiroshima” is only part of a multivo­cal discourse. At the other end of the spectrum, millions of Americans have over the years shared the view enunciated by President Harry S. Truman when he announced that a new weapon had destroyed the “mili­tary base” of Hiroshima: that the atomic bomb was a wholly justified means of defeating a treacherous foe. In Truman’s geographic calculus, “Hiroshima” avenged “Pearl Harbor.” More important, the argument runs, the bomb saved thousands of American lives that would have been lost in an invasion of Japan. In the immediate postwar period, most Americans embraced this view. As Eugene Rabinowitch, editor of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, recalled in 1956: “With few exceptions,
public opinion rejoiced over Hiroshima and Nagasaki as demonstrations of American technical ingenuity and military ascendency."

The lack of detailed visual evidence of the bomb's effects reinforced this initial positive response. Occupation authorities censored reports from the city and suppressed the more horrifying films and photographs of corpses and maimed survivors. Americans initially saw only images of the awesome mushroom cloud, which, as historian James Farrell has observed, presented the bomb as "a new but natural event, free of human agency." Indeed, Farrell notes, both elements of the quickly adopted compound term "mushroom cloud" suggested an unmediated natural phenomenon.

As we saw in chapter 3, Henry Stimson's 1947 Harper's Magazine article "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb" was part of a high-level effort to justify the use of the bomb and to define the meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki for Americans. The president of Harvard, James Conant, a key figure in nuclear policymaking, both prodded Stimson, the former secretary of war, to publish his apologia, and edited the first draft (ghostwritten by McGeorge Bundy, the son of Stimson's wartime aide Harvey Bundy) to make sure it struck the appropriate justificatory note. Despite much revisionist scholarship on Truman's decision, the mantra "the atomic bomb prevented an invasion and saved American lives" is still repeated, particularly by veterans convinced that it saved their lives.

This argument, more often expressed orally than in print, found its boldest—not to say its most reckless—articulation in Paul Fussell's 1981 New Republic essay "Hiroshima: A Soldier's View," later revised and published in Fussell's Thank God for the Atomic Bomb (1988). Having spent the spring and summer of 1945 as an infantryman in France expecting imminent reassignment to the Pacific, Fussell implied that only persons in his precarious situation had the moral authority to evaluate the A-bomb decision. He pointed out that one critic of that decision, political scientist Michael Walzer, was only ten years old in 1945. Revisionist historian Michael Sherry, he jeered, "was eight months old, in danger only of falling out of his pram." "The farther from the scene of horror," he said, "the easier the talk." "The invasion was definitely on," Fussell asserted, "as I know because I was to be in it." With equal assurance he dismissed the claim that postwar power calculations influenced Truman's
decision: “Of course no one was focusing on anything as portentous as that, which reflects a historian’s tidy hindsight. The U.S. government was engaged not in that sort of momentous thing but in ending the war conclusively, as well as irrationally Remembering Pearl Harbor with a vengeance.”

Certainly the testimony of historical actors is useful, but Fussell moved beyond merely presenting combat soldiers’ perspective to an anti-intellectualism that ignored a large body of scholarship directly relevant to his topic. Fussell notwithstanding, most historians now view Japan as teetering on the brink of collapse by early August 1945 and agree that postwar considerations did indeed influence Truman’s decision. By ignoring or ridiculing the relevant scholarship, Fussell vastly oversimplifies highly complex issues. Nevertheless, his outburst merits notice as an articulation of a widely held and culturally influential view of the bomb decision—and of the meaning of Hiroshima.

But the more familiar cultural role of the word “Hiroshima” has been as a symbol of what must never happen again. It is the definitive object lesson of nuclear horror. If the bomb’s full meaning in terms of human suffering did not at first grip the American consciousness, the fact of the destruction of a city certainly did. In this sense, Conant’s view of the salutary effects of actually dropping the bomb on a crowded metropolis proved prescient. While the obliteration of two cities did not lead to international control, as Conant had hoped it would, it did help to inspire successive antinuclear campaigns. The cautionary theme emerged quickly. Within hours of Truman’s announcement, radio commentators and editorial writers somberly noted that the fate of Hiroshima could await any American city. For many atomic scientists, euphoria over the Alamogordo test and the Hiroshima blast quickly changed to dismay as the human toll became apparent in classified reports. Many Manhattan Project veterans plunged into the campaign for international control with speeches and articles in which future Hiroshimas figured as the fearful alternative to the Acheson-Lilienthal plan. The image of Hiroshima as a preview of the atomic future gripped the American consciousness in August 1945, not to be dislodged thereafter.

John Hersey’s *Hiroshima* (1946) deepened popular perceptions of the word’s meaning: not just the destruction of “a city,” but the death
and suffering of scores of thousands of individual men, women, and children, each with his or her own story. A skilled journalist, Hersey translated the mind-numbing statistics into a gripping interwoven narrative of six individuals. Of the first 339 readers to write Hersey, 301 offered glowing praise. Such articles were essential, observed one, "to counteract the 4th of July attitude most people hold in regards to the atom bomb." Another described "a fitful, dream-laden night" after finishing the article. The San Francisco poet William Dickey later recalled his initial encounter with Hersey's work:

I sat in the car one summer during lunch breaks at the frozen food plant, reading *Hiroshima* when it first came out. The picture that is in my mind is of people, vaporized by an unexpected sun and only their shadows left burned into the wall behind them. In their eyes it was shock of noon forever.

While Hersey's work deepened emotional sensibilities, it had a broader cultural impact as well. As William F. Buckley Jr. later observed, its appearance in a leading periodical "was both a spiritual acknowledgment of the transcendent magnitude of the event, and an invitation to analytical meditation on its implications." With his cool, understated prose, Hersey helped position Hiroshima at the core of the debate over nuclear weapons—past, present, and future. In successive campaigns against the nuclear arms race, "Hiroshima" offered a stark, one-word encapsulation of the alternative. In the lexicon of symbolic geography, it was often linked to Alamogordo and Bikini as representations of the three faces of atomic danger: modern science, the bomb itself, and more terrible instruments of thermonuclear destruction around the corner.

But the politico-cultural role of Hiroshima memories, brought to a keen edge by John Hersey in 1946, fluctuated over the years with the cycles of activism and quiescence in America's long encounter with the nuclear threat. As Michael Mandelbaum observed in 1984, "Americans have normally ignored the nuclear peril. Each episode of public anxiety about the bomb has given way to longer periods in which nuclear weapons issues were the preoccupation of the nuclear specialists alone." With
the onset of the Cold War, the Soviet A-bomb test in 1949, and Truman's green light to the hydrogen-bomb project, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, like nuclear awareness in general, faded from public consciousness. Takashi Nagai’s *We of Nagasaki* (1951) offered gripping testimony similar to that of Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, but in an altered cultural and political climate, the work attracted much less attention.

As activism revived in the mid-1950s, now aimed at halting nuclear testing and its deadly by-product of radioactive fallout, campaigners again invoked “Hiroshima,” this time as an example of the lethal effects of radiation and as a benchmark to demonstrate the escalating nuclear threat. The H-bomb, they repeatedly emphasized, was “a thousand times more powerful” than the Hiroshima bomb.

The resurgence of Hiroshima memories that accompanied the test ban campaign had many sources. Michihiko Hachiya’s classic *Hiroshima Diary* (1955), published on the tenth anniversary of the bombing, brought the event sharply back into focus. So, too, did the “Hiroshima Maidens,” twenty-five disfigured survivors of the blast who in 1955 arrived in the United States for reconstructive surgery. The project had originated with Kiyoshi Tanimoto, a Methodist minister featured in Hersey’s *Hiroshima*. Promoted by the antinuclear activist Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review*, the project gained national attention on May 11, 1955, when Ralph Edwards’s popular television show, *This Is Your Life*, showcased Tanimoto. The program evoked the terror of the bombing and featured a handshake between Tanimoto and Captain Robert Lewis, copilot of the *Enola Gay*, who gave the minister a check for the Hiroshima Maidens. Edwards invited viewers to contribute, and twenty thousand letters poured in. The 138 operations performed on the young women had mixed results, and the death of one from cardiac arrest under anesthesia clouded the project. But despite criticism in Japan about the “publicity stunt” and the U.S. State Department’s reservations, the project helped restore Hiroshima to the forefront of memory while furthering the test ban cause.

As the test ban campaign intensified, so, too, did the cultural resonance of Hiroshima. “Nuclear War in St. Louis” (1959), the documentary-style narrative written by St. Louis antinuclear activists and published in the *Saturday Review*, was based on data from Hiroshima and
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In a different medium, Alain Resnais's 1959 film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, widely shown in the United States, portrayed a brief affair between a Hiroshima architect (played by Eiji Okada) and a French actress (Emmanuelle Riva) who has come to the city to make an antiwar film. With a screenplay by Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima Mon Amour* juxtaposed grainy images of the devastated city of 1945 with the actress's recollections of a doomed wartime romance with a German soldier. As the images of destruction give way to scenes of bustling postwar Hiroshima, so the actress's wartime memories fade. But though the theme is one of forgetfulness, the atomic-bomb scenes early in the movie conveyed their own message to audiences of 1959.

In 1962, as the test ban campaign crested, Robert Jay Lifton, an associate professor of psychiatry at Yale, completing a year of research on Japanese youth, turned to a different project. Traveling to Hiroshima, Lifton interviewed some seventy *hibakusha* ("explosion-affected persons"). Reporting his findings and speculations in a 1964 article in *Psychiatry*, then more fully in *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima* (1967) and subsequent writings, Lifton advanced the concept of "psychic numbing" to explain how survivors dealt with their bomb memories and their guilt over escaping death when so many had not. Broadening his focus, Lifton speculated that psychic numbing could also illuminate patterns of nuclear denial in entire societies that faced not the reality but the possibility of nuclear annihilation. "The encounter of people in Hiroshima with the atomic bomb has specific bearing upon all nuclear age existence," he wrote; "a better understanding of what lies behind this word, this name of a city, might enable us to take a small step forward in coming to terms with that existence."

Cultural historians tended to be critical of Lifton's bolder hypotheses for their lack of historical specificity. Lifton's model, they suggested, did not explain the alternating cycles of engagement, apparent apathy, and renewed engagement that characterized Americans' response to the
bomb. It tended to reduce the complex texture of actual lived experience to a single procrustean psychological formula.

Nevertheless, Lifton’s explanatory framework, and perhaps even more his clear moral engagement with nuclear issues, proved highly influential, as evidenced by the fact that *Death in Life* won the prestigious National Book Award for 1967. And in using Hiroshima as the template for the phenomenon of “psychic numbing,” he kept the city in the forefront of awareness.

British science writer Jacob Bronowski, reviewing *Death in Life* in the June 1968 *Scientific American*, made the point explicitly. The psychic numbing exhibited by the *hibakusha* of Hiroshima, he suggested, could help explain the decline of nuclear awareness in the later 1960s:

> Twenty years is too long for sorrow, which time does not so much heal as blunt. . . . In that ebb tide of conscience . . . the moral impulse of 1945 has been eroded. We might have supposed that the sense of guilt had been washed away without a trace, had not Professor Lifton discovered it still haunting (of all people) the survivors of Hiroshima. The discovery gives his quiet and penetrating book a kind of cosmic irony that, more than any burst of righteousness, ought to shake us all out of our somnambulism.

Lifton and Bronowski thus contributed to what by 1967 had become a well-established practice of using Hiroshima heuristically. The fate of this city and its inhabitants in 1945, they suggested, could illuminate the larger psychic dynamics of the nuclear age.

The next surge of U.S. nuclear activism, arising in the late 1970s and cresting in the nuclear-freeze campaign of the early 1980s, once more brought Hiroshima to the cultural forefront. As in the late 1950s and early 1960s, activists again contrasted the puny Hiroshima bomb with modern nuclear firepower. The poet Sharon Doubiago, for example, noting that the missiles carried by one Trident submarine packed the explosive might of 2,040 Hiroshima-sized bombs, wrote in 1982:

> *Say the word Hiroshima*
> *Reflect on its meaning for one second*
Say and understand Hiroshima again.
Say and understand Hiroshima two thousand and forty times.

Testament, a 1983 television movie set in a northern California town as radiation from an attack on San Francisco creeps nearer, included an impaired Japanese-American boy called Hiroshi—a common Japanese name, but one obviously chosen for its historical resonance. The courses on nuclear war introduced on many college and university campuses in the early 1980s typically began with Hiroshima and assigned John Hersey's now classic work. For several years, Wisconsin antinuclear activists launched paper lanterns on the Mississippi River on August 6, emulating an annual commemorative ceremony held in Hiroshima on that date. Robert Penn Warren's 1983 poem “New Dawn” imagined the moment just after the Hiroshima blast, as the Enola Gay streaks away:

Now, far behind, from the center of
The immense, purple-streaked, dark mushroom that,
there, towers
To obscure whatever lies below,
A plume, positive but delicate as a dream,
Of pure whiteness, unmoved by breath
    of any wind,
Mounts
Above the dark mushroom,
It grows high—high, higher—
In its own triumphant beauty

Hiroshima also provided freeze advocates with a wealth of medical evidence. In 1947 the National Academy of Sciences, with funding from the Atomic Energy Commission, had launched a research project in Hiroshima on the bomb's radiological effects. By the 1980s, links had emerged between A-bomb exposure and heightened incidence of cataracts, leukemia, multiple myeloma, and other cancers. Persons exposed in utero or in infancy exhibited abnormally high rates of small head and body size and mental retardation. Such antinuclear organizations as Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) used this evidence to build opposition to nuclear weapons. References to Hiroshima dotted The
Final Epidemic, a 1981 collection of essays by scientists and physicians on the effects of nuclear war. At a 1982 Washington conference of educators concerned with the nuclear threat, Dr. Stuart Finch of Rutgers Medical School presented medical data from Hiroshima and expressed the hope that it would help deter “any future use of nuclear energy as an instrument of war.”

Meanwhile, Robert Jay Lifton continued to explore the larger applicability of the Hiroshima experience. At the 1982 conference mentioned above, Lifton returned to his now familiar theme: “Hiroshima is important to us, it is a text for us, and we must embrace it and learn from it.” He also stressed, however, that Hiroshima could be a misleading text. Just as the “small” 1945 bomb served to dramatize the vastly larger destructive power of the H-bomb, so Lifton contrasted the hibakusha experience with the incomparably greater psychological impact of global thermonuclear war. At Hiroshima, outsiders had quickly arrived to aid the survivors; in a full-scale thermonuclear war, little outside aid would be available—the whole world would become “Hiroshima.” Beyond the statistics of death, destruction, and long-term medical consequences, Lifton contended, Hiroshima had introduced a new image into human self-awareness: a “radical sense of futurelessness” that undercut people’s hopes of living on through their work or their offspring. After August 1945, such forms of symbolic immortality could no longer be presumed. All this, he suggested, lay embedded in the historical meaning of Hiroshima and set it forever apart from other cities that had become symbols of war’s horror.

crashes en route to Hiroshima, killing all aboard. The bombardier of the backup crew has qualms of conscience and releases the bomb far outside the city, with few casualties. This “demonstration shot” ends the war, but the bombardier is executed for disobeying orders. The activist climate of the early 1980s also assured a larger audience for Naouji Ibuse’s brilliant *Black Rain*, a novel exploring the long-term effects of the Hiroshima bombing on a young woman and her relatives. Originally serialized in a Japanese magazine, Ibuse’s work appeared in English in 1967–68 in the small-circulation *Japan Quarterly*, but a 1985 Bantam paperback edition introduced it to a wider public.

PSR lecturers, instructors in college nuclear-age history courses, and organizers of nuclear-freeze rallies made effective use of films of Hiroshima’s devastation and photographs of survivors, including the horrifying (and once suppressed) documentary film *Hiroshima-Nagasaki 1945*. But the visual evocations of Hiroshima came in many forms. The artist Robert Morris’s ambitious 1981 installation “Jornada del Muerto,” a highly theatrical and politically engaged work exhibited by Washington’s Hirshhorn Museum in 1981–82, included large photographs of Hiroshima in ruins and close-ups of burn victims, together with replicas of missiles and photographs of Manhattan Project scientists. *Unforgettable Fire* (1977), originally shown on Japanese television, offered gripping watercolors by Hiroshima survivors. In the preface, Japanese television executive Soji Matsumoto stressed its contemporary relevance: “Thirty years have passed since the A-bomb was dropped. The memory of how things were in Hiroshima at that time is being forgotten. It is therefore necessary to appeal to the people of Japan and of the world that there be ‘No More Hiroshimas.’ . . . To publish a collection of these pictures as a book is very significant, since we are living in a world in which the diffusion of nuclear weapons is threatening the existence of all humanity.”

In 1982, a San Francisco publisher issued “I Saw It,” cartoonist Keiji Nakazawa’s comic book–format account of the bombing, which he had lived through as a boy. In 1985 came a U.S. edition of the powerful *Hiroshima Murals* by the Japanese artists Iri and Toshi Maruki. A 1986 documentary film about the Marukis and their work, by historian John Dower and filmmaker John Junkerman, received an Academy Award nomination. Toshi Maruki also wrote and illustrated *Hiroshima no Pika*
(1982), a children’s book about a Hiroshima family caught in the bombing. Like Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, these fresh visual images—from naive watercolors, comic books, and children’s stories to works by well-known artists—restored human and historical immediacy to an image constantly at risk of being dulled by familiarity or drained of specificity by repeated use for symbolic or rhetorical purposes.

Aging Hiroshima survivors added emotional intensity to the nuclear-freeze campaign. Several *hibakusha* spoke at the June 1982 Central Park rally and participated in a television special on PBS. At a Washington forum arranged by Senate sponsors of the freeze resolution, four survivors recounted their memories. One, Dr. Mitsuo Tomosawa, fifteen years old in 1945, recalled lying awake all night on August 6 listening to the moans from a nearby hospital.

The attention generated in August 1985 by the fortieth anniversary of the atomic bombings of Japan also served to focus renewed attention on Hiroshima. *Time*, in the issue that featured a cover photograph of the mushroom cloud over Hiroshima, published a special section, “The Atomic Age,” that included a lengthy essay about Yoshitaka Kawamoto, director of Hiroshima’s Peace Memorial Museum and himself a bomb survivor. The Yale sociologist Kai Erikson, in a fortieth-anniversary essay in the *Nation*, reflected on Hiroshima’s significance for the present: “We need to attend to such histories as this . . . because they provide the clearest illustrations we have of what human beings can do . . . when they find themselves in moments of crisis and literally have more destructive power at their disposal than they know what to do with. That is as good an argument for disarming as any that can be imagined.”

Hiroshima memories were often explicitly used by freeze activists to awaken people to the nuclear danger. As the editor of *Atomic Aftermath* put it: “The short stories included herein are not merely literary expressions, composed by looking back at the past. . . . They are also highly significant vehicles for thinking about the contemporary world over which hangs the awesome threat of vastly expanded nuclear arsenals.” More luridly, Peter Wyden’s 1984 popular history *Day One: Before Hiroshima and After* contained a stark prefatory legend: “One millisecond after you read this, you and one billion other people could begin to perish.”
From fall 1945 through the 1980s, in short, the role of Hiroshima in American memory was linked to the shifting rhythms of confrontation with the threat of nuclear war and with campaigns to reduce that threat. In an official environment marked by concealment and evasion, Hiroshima remained jaggedly real. The missiles were out of sight, underground or underwater, their horror only potential, but what happened at Hiroshima (and Nagasaki) could be instantly grasped and invoked: the print of a woman's blouse fabric burned into her skin, a battered pocket watch forever frozen at 8:15 A.M., shadowy images of human beings vaporized by the blast. Such evidence offered a permanent reminder that the nuclear threat was not simply potential or theoretical. An actual city had been destroyed, actual human beings had died. As Robert Lifton wrote in 1980, "We require Hiroshima and its images to give substance to our own terrors, however inadequately that city represents what would happen now if thermonuclear weapons were dropped on a human population. As much as we must decry the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it is possible that these cities already have contributed significantly to our tenuous hold on the imagery of extinction. They have kept alive our imagination of holocaust and, perhaps, helped to keep us alive as well."

Hiroshima memories subversively undercut the techno-rational vocabulary of the nuclear theorists. Artifacts from the shattered city, whether survivors' narratives, photographs or watercolors, or the prose of a Hersey or an Ibuse, cut through the strategists' bloodless prose. As Jean Bethke Elshtain has observed, "Human beings think most often in images; a terrible or delightful picture comes into our minds and then we seek to find words to express it, to capture it, to make it somehow manageable. Thus it is with the possibility of nuclear war. Our images are fixed. The scenes of utter destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki; two cities laid waste; people disappeared, remaining as shadows on cement or persisting in a terrible and painful twilight zone of lingering death from radiation."

But precisely how, if at all, did Hiroshima memories actually affect nuclear policy? Evidence of direct influence on policymakers is scant. When I asked former secretary of defense Robert McNamara in 1985 if he could recall any film, novel, painting, or other imaginative work that
had shaped his view of nuclear war, he candidly replied: "No, I don't think so. . . . I was so associated with the Defense Department and writings related to the Defense Department that were . . . scientific, or technical, or political in character that I think it was those rather than artistic expression that influenced my thinking."

But the effect of Hiroshima images on grassroots opinion, and thus in defining the parameters within which policymakers operate, while difficult to quantify, has surely been important. From 1945 through the 1980s, antinuclear activists used films, photographs, paintings, journalistic accounts, firsthand testimony, fiction, and poetry based on the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings to convey the human meaning of nuclear attack, rouse awareness of the continuing threat, and build support for disarmament.

A few scholars, usually antinuclear activists themselves, have attempted to measure this effect. In the late 1960s, disturbed by widespread apathy about the nuclear threat, the sociologists Donald Granberg and Norman Faye showed the harrowing documentary film Hiroshima-Nagasaki 1945 to students at the University of Missouri and then measured the results by questionnaire. After several screenings they reported: "It was our impression that the film was doing what we wanted: making concrete something that is ordinarily seen as an abstraction, and sensitizing people to the victims and potential victims of nuclear war." The questionnaires confirmed this impression: The film increased most students' "anxiety regarding nuclear war, decrease[d] the desire to survive a nuclear war, raise[d] the sufficient provocation threshold, and lower[ed] the maximum tolerable casualty threshold."

A decade later, a doctoral student in history at Illinois State University devised a teaching unit on Hiroshima and then tested its results on undergraduates at Illinois State and on students in an Indiana high school. The unit included films documenting the devastation and suffering caused by the Hiroshima bombing, as well as material on Truman's atomic-bomb decision. Results were mixed. For example, the high school students who completed the study unit showed greater agreement with the statement "War is not a satisfactory way to settle disputes" and heightened awareness of the "danger of nuclear extinction," but they also
showed greater agreement with the statements "The dropping of the atomic bomb was a moral act" and "The bomb was used to save lives and shorten the war." Apparently the visual material from Hiroshima heightened apprehensions about a future nuclear war, while the print material convinced some students that Truman's 1945 decision was justifiable and wise.

Other research suggested that many factors shaped attitudes toward nuclear-related issues, and thus toward the meaning of Hiroshima. In an attitudinal study of 477 Californians conducted in 1969–70, for example, the sociologist Vincent Jeffries found the greatest readiness to accept nuclear war in defense of "our national interests" among the generation born before 1927, and the least readiness among those born between 1943 and 1949. In other words, Americans who had learned of Hiroshima as adults, and who had lived with the knowledge the longest, showed a higher tolerance for nuclear war than did those with no direct memories of the event. Such evidence casts doubt on the assumption, often implicit in the antinuclear camp, that the sharper the Hiroshima memories, the greater the aversion to nuclear war. For the older age group, news of the atomic bomb had come in a specific historical context: at the close of a popular war against a hated enemy. The younger and more vehemently antinuclear group in Jeffries's study, by contrast, knew Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a more culturally mediated, less historically rooted framework.

Political ideology as well as age affected how one read the Hiroshima story. For example, from the 1950s through the 1980s, antinuclear activists cited medical data from Hiroshima to show the long-term radiological hazards of nuclear war. But others used the same evidence for different purposes. In 1955, just as the "Hiroshima Maidens" arrived, the conservative *U.S. News & World Report* published an upbeat interview with Dr. Robert H. Holmes, director of the Hiroshima research project. The boldface summaries accompanying the interview conveyed the magazine's rose-tinted slant on the story: "In 190,000 survivors: 100 cases of leukemia, some mild eye cataracts, the next generation is normal ... No genetic changes thus far in the first generation ... Many within 2,000 meters did not show radiation effects ... Only 15 percent of
deaths due solely to radiation . . . Children of survivors appear happy, well adjusted . . . Usually fertility returns with general health . . . The Atomic Age is here, let's not be afraid of it.”

Three photographs illustrated the story: a devastated Hiroshima in 1945; a healthy-looking young survivor being measured by a kindly researcher; and three generations of a Hiroshima family, including a boy born before August 1945, one in utero when the bomb fell, and one born after the bombing, all apparently in the bloom of health. At the time this cheerful feature appeared, U.S. News was faithfully echoing the government's theme that through civil defense, atomic war would not be so bad. The message was clear: Hiroshima had been destroyed, but recovery had been quick, and all was now well.

Religious beliefs influenced perceptions of Hiroshima's meaning as well. For some biblical literalists (see chapter 9), the annihilation of two cities and the prospect of a vastly more destructive nuclear war represented essential steps in a foreordained sequence of end-time events. In this providential narrative, Hiroshima functioned not as a cautionary example but as a sign pointing to a glorious future as God's divine plan unfolded.

Not only was the meaning of “Hiroshima” contested, but the repeated use of this image by activists always carried the risk of exploiting the actual event and of subordinating it to one's own agenda. Paul Goodman addressed this risk in a sardonic and doubtlessly unfair comment on Death in Life: “The survivors of Hiroshima, Dr. Lifton has shown us, are certainly fucked up, but they are not so fucked up as Dr. Lifton. After all, it is rather much to drop an atom bomb on people and then to come ask them how they feel about it.” Hiroyuki Agawa made a similar point in his 1957 novel Devil's Heritage, which bitterly attacked the U.S. medical research project in Hiroshima for treating the hibakusha like guinea pigs. As Hiroshima memories were transmuted into literature and visual images, and as cautionary lessons were drawn from the ordeal of the city and its inhabitants, the reality of what actually happened on August 6, 1945—and why—sometimes seemed to blur. As the Japanese architect repeatedly tells the French actress in Hiroshima Mon Amour, when she describes the photographs and artifacts displayed in the city's atomic-bomb museum, “You have seen nothing.”
The issues involved in manipulating and imaginatively reworking historical events can become exceedingly complex. In *Death in Life*, Lifton reflected perceptively on the symbolic status of Hiroshima, distinguishing it from other cities devastated by war: "When we hear reports about the Hiroshima bomb, our emotions are not exactly the same as when confronted with equivalent evidence of bomb destruction in London, Amsterdam, Hamburg, Dresden, or Tokyo. These cities, to be sure, convey their own messages of man's capacity and inclination to assault himself. But with Hiroshima (and her neglected historical sister, Nagasaki) something more is involved: a dimension of totality, a sense of ultimate annihilation—of cities, nations, the world."

Yet this unique emotional power rested in part on extracting "Hiroshima" from history and elevating it to the realm of metaphor. Lifton himself, with admirable motives, contributed to this process, as he made the psychically numbed hibakusha symbols of a numbed world. But he was hardly alone. Many who spoke out against nuclear war over the decades used memories of Hiroshima in this instrumental and potentially exploitative fashion. For some activists, invoking "Hiroshima" became a way to avoid hard thinking, an emotional button that could always be pressed, a high-voltage jolt to any discourse.

But the effect of this jolt could not always be anticipated. For some, it simply roused terror. The Australian pediatrician and antinuclear activist Helen Caldicott (see chapter 10) faced criticism in the early 1980s for what some saw as her irresponsible manipulation of fearful images. For others, repeated exposure to the "Hiroshima" image seems to have produced the very numbing that Lifton deplored. Symbols—even the most potent ones—decay over time. As Andy Warhol once observed: "When you see a gruesome picture over and over again, it doesn't really have any effect." Hiroshima was not immune to this process. As early as 1981 a journalist wrote: "Hiroshima has become one more historical cliché, like Lexington or the Battle of New Orleans." Contributing to this deadening process was the ubiquitous practice of using Hiroshima as a convenient date marker in book titles, as in *The American Past: A History of the United States from Concord to Hiroshima*; *Cold War America: From Hiroshima to Watergate*; or *From Harding to Hiroshima: An Anecdotal History of the United States from 1923 to 1945*. New imaginative works in
different genres helped revive the image, but as 1945 receded further into the past, the loss of immediacy and resonance that eventually envelops even the most horrendous or momentous historical events inevitably took its toll.

Hiroshima, then, has clearly played a crucial and a complex role in post-war American thought and culture. The slowly dimming memory of August 6, 1945, has functioned as a palimpsest on which many different fears, expectations, and political agendas have been imprinted. In the realm of cultural imagery, "Hiroshima" has functioned as a kind of empty vessel, replicating the literal void created in August 1945. As one survivor described his experience immediately after the bombing: "I climbed Hijiyama hill and looked down. I saw that Hiroshima had disappeared. . . . Hiroshima just didn't exist." As the actual city was rebuilt and became the bustling metropolis of today, the "Hiroshima" of the imagination floated free, playing its ambiguous role in the first half century of our encounter with nuclear weapons.

And what of the future? Will Hiroshima gradually fade from our cultural and political discourse? The Cold War is over, and while nuclear menaces remain, the threats of the superpower nuclear arms race and of global thermonuclear holocaust have clearly ebbed. Under these circumstances, cultural attention to Hiroshima—always closely linked to broader cycles of nuclear awareness and activism—has diminished sharply. "For most people," the historian Richard Minear observed in 1993, "Hiroshima has become a non-issue."

Such judgments, of course, are relative. Hiroshima is obviously in no danger of vanishing entirely from the arena of either scholarly or cultural discourse. *Atomic Ghost*, a 1995 anthology of nuclear-age poetry contains several poems about the city and its fate. Evidence for its continued power to stir the imagination is provided, too, by a recent three-act play about Hiroshima by Walter A. Davis, a professor of English at Ohio State University. The drama begins realistically, in 1989 at an Ohio shopping mall, with a book-signing by Paul Tibbets, the *Enola Gay* pilot (an actual event in which Davis participated as a protester bearing a sign proclaiming: "Mourn: Hiroshima Was Mass Murder"). But it soon takes a surreal and expressionistic turn. Tibbets, kidnapped by a historian, re-
calls his career, and Truman, Stimson, Oppenheimer, and a group of hibakusha make appearances. In a hallucinatory final scene suggesting the enduring vitality of the Hiroshima memory, the historian shoots Tibbets, but the former pilot “rises from the dead and reclaims his spot and begins again to sign copies of his book for the queue in a never-ending process.”

Meanwhile, however, the ranks of those who actually remember the events of fifty years ago grow thinner. In another twenty-five years, when “Hiroshima” is nearly as remote as “Verdun” is today, what will be its symbolic status? If the danger of nuclear war continues to lessen, it will probably join Carthage and Waterloo in the graveyard of dead symbols, drained of urgency, a shorthand convenience for textbook writers.

But given the human capacity for mischief and the nuclear knowledge that is now an ineradicable part of our mental storehouse, the chances seem at least even for Hiroshima to play its symbolic role again, as the world confronts the nuclear threat in some new form. In Helen Caldicott’s epidemiological language, the virus has entered a latent phase, but it survives. We still live with the new reality encoded in that innocuous-looking metal sphere as it lazily drifted six miles down from the Enola Gay to a point 570 meters above the Aioi Bridge: epicenter of the nuclear age.