As the fiftieth anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings neared, a long-planned exhibit at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum (NASM) became the focus of a bitter dispute. As early as 1989, NASM officials had decided to mount a major exhibit on the atomic bombing of Japan, using as a centerpiece the *Enola Gay*, the plane that dropped the Hiroshima bomb. Developed by the museum curators in consultation with historians and other scholars, the planned exhibit included, along with the technical and military aspects of the story, exhibits conveying the bombs' immediate effects; the role of the atomic bomb in the early Cold War; and a spectrum of opinion about the decision to drop the bomb, pro and con. The critical voices included not only "revisionist" historians, but also respected figures of 1945—including political and military leaders—who at one time sharply questioned Truman's decision.

As word of the exhibit spread, vocal protest erupted from veterans' organizations and Washington politicians, who insisted that the exhibit be patriotic and celebratory. Reacting to the pressure, the Smithsonian scuttled its original plans, radically scaled back the exhibit, and eliminated all textual and visual material that could conceivably rouse controversy.

This heavily publicized dispute—one of several involving government-funded exhibits around the same time—attracted much attention among historians. When my friends
Edward Linenthal of the University of Wisconsin—Oshkosh and Tom Engelhardt of Henry Holt (in an earlier incarnation the editor at Pantheon with whom I had worked on By the Bomb’s Early Light), asked me to contribute to a collection of essays on the controversy, I agreed.

This concluding chapter is adapted from the essay I wrote for that book, History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past (New York: Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt, 1996). Seeking to place the 1995 controversy in the larger context of America’s nuclear history, it sums up my fifteen-year scholarly engagement with the bomb—and an episodic personal involvement that covers nearly my entire life.

"AS SOON AS you bring historians in, you run into problems. You get distortions." This comment might well have been made by one of the Washington politicians or veterans’ organizations that in 1994 attacked the Smithsonian Institution’s plans for an exhibit observing the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In fact, a Shinto priest at Japan’s Yasukuni shrine to the nation’s war dead made it while criticizing proposals to add an educational component to the shrine’s commemorative functions. The priest’s comment reminds us of the universality of the suspicions and hostility that historians can arouse when they become involved in matters about which great numbers of citizens feel passionate emotion.

With the fiftieth anniversary of the Second World War’s final events behind us, we can perhaps begin to gain some perspective on the remarkable commemorative effort unleashed. The storm center of the controversy was, of course, the proposed Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian’s Air and Space Museum, which was to feature extensive treatment of the current state of historical scholarship on the decision to drop the atomic bomb and the ending of the war, as well as the bombs’ immediate effects on the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the long-term implications of the development and use of nuclear weapons.

As early drafts of the exhibit text became known, the 180,000-
member Air Force Association, the 3-million-member American Legion, a small group calling itself the Committee for the Restoration and Proud Display of the *Enola Gay*, and conservative members of Congress, some genuinely offended, some sensing the issue's demagogic potential, denounced the exhibit as "anti-American," insensitive to veterans, and overly sympathetic to the bomb victims.

*Enola Gay* pilot Paul Tibbets blasted the planned exhibit as "a package of insults." President Bill Clinton, attuned as always to the ever-shifting currents of public opinion, aligned himself with the veterans' organizations and unqualifiedly endorsed the actions of his predecessor in the White House half a century before. Editorial opinion overwhelmingly lined up against the Smithsonian. The right-wing politician Pat Buchanan detected a sinister conspiracy in the whole affair: "In all this, friends, there is something less benign than the timidity of academics desperate to be seen as politically correct. What is under way is a sleepless campaign to inculcate in American youth a revulsion toward America's past."

Numerous meetings and extensive modifications in the exhibit text did no good. When the smoke cleared, the exhibit had been scrapped; the museum director had been forced out; and Republicans in Congress (joined by a few Democrats) were gearing up for hearings that for a time threatened to turn into a McCarthyite witch-hunt for the sinister and disloyal persons responsible for the shameful exhibit. When the Senate hearings began in May 1995, Chairman Ted Stevens (R.-Alaska) asked ominously: "What went wrong with [the Smithsonian's] management practices, and what steps have been taken to correct the revisionist and 'politically correct' bias that was contained in the original script?" (Though marked by senatorial rancor and ill-temper, the hearings actually proved fairly tepid and inconclusive.)

Reeling and shell-shocked, the Smithsonian mounted a cautious, scaled-back exhibit that simply portrayed the fuselage of the *Enola Gay* and videos of the crew, with minimal historical context on President Truman's decision, the bomb's human toll, or the long-term consequences of its use. The air force historian Richard P. Hallion dismissed the new exhibit as "a beer can with a label." Another historian, Kai Bird, modifying the chilling term "ethnic cleansing" coined by the genocidal Bos-
nian Serbs, spoke of a “historical cleansing” of the museum. A cartoon in the *Boston Globe* pictured a totally empty museum with an official announcing: “We’re returning to our original mission as the air and space museum.” An ironic outcome of the episode, as we shall see, was that far more Americans undoubtedly became aware of the scholarly debate over the atomic-bomb decision than would otherwise have been the case.

While the Smithsonian flap attracted the most public attention, the fiftieth-anniversary cultural struggle over the meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki erupted on other fronts as well, even in the arcane realm of postage-stamp design. Because of their ubiquity, lowly postage stamps represent a significant visual means by which a nation’s historical perception can be shaped; hence the controversy over a proposed stamp commemorating the atomic bomb. The original U.S. Postal Service plan was to issue an “atomic bomb” stamp as part of an ongoing series recalling the major landmarks of World War II. Those planned for 1995 release would have noted the principal events of 1945, including the atomic bombings—certainly the most notable war events of that year apart from the actual capitulation of Germany and Japan.

Planning went forward in the recesses of the postal bureaucracy. At one point I received a telephone call from a historian friend who had been asked to evaluate an early draft of the proposed stamp. (I had not realized until then how carefully the planned textual and visual content of stamps is reviewed and evaluated. The Citizens Stamp Advisory Committee oversees the process, consulting specialists in various fields.) In this version, the mushroom cloud appeared to float in space, with no hint that a city lay below; the historical tag line read (as I recall) “Atomic Bombs Level Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” I immediately agreed with my friend that some geographic features should be included to link the bomb to its target, and that the word “Level”—with its bland and even positive connotations (as in, “This is absolutely on the level”—be replaced by a more accurate phrase, perhaps “Atomic Bombs Destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” In fact, the message was softened, rather than made more precise, eventually evolving into: “Atomic Bombs Hasten War’s End.”

But the entire issue soon became moot. In December 1994, under protest from the Japanese government, with whom his administration
was already embroiled in trade conflicts, President Bill Clinton canceled the much-revised stamp entirely, relegating it to the limbo reserved for postage stamps that never actually reach the nation's post offices.

In one way or another, across America, journalists, pundits, and ordinary citizens found themselves unexpectedly wrestling with the historical meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the angry months leading up to the fiftieth anniversary of the bombings. In a Gallup poll jointly commissioned by USA Today and the Cable News Network, 59 percent of Americans expressed approval of Truman's decision, with 35 percent disapproving. Fifty years after the event, Americans remained uncertain and deeply divided about its meaning.

**THE BOMB AND THE "GOOD WAR"**

Why do Hiroshima and Nagasaki stir so restlessly in our national psyche after the passage of half a century? Why do we have such trouble not only reaching consensus about how we should view these events, but even discussing them calmly and rationally? The fiftieth anniversaries of Pearl Harbor, D Day, Germany's surrender, and other landmarks of World War II were observed by public ceremonies and general agreement about their significance, but Hiroshima and Nagasaki generated only recrimination and angry debate.

One reason Americans have had so much trouble coming to terms with Hiroshima and Nagasaki lies in the fact that what our atomic bombs did to those cities did not lend itself to the prevailing public view of World War II as the "Good War"—a noble struggle against forces that threatened not only Western values but the survival of civilization itself. Particularly in the aftermath of the bitterly divisive Vietnam conflict, Americans looked back nostalgically to the 1941–45 period as a time when the nation's aims were unambiguously clear and just, a time when nearly all citizens had rallied behind the government. This show of unanimity was sharply at variance with the turmoil of the 1960s. No campus protesters in 1944 had accused Franklin Roosevelt of being a baby killer; no one had dubbed the conflict "Stimson's War." On the contrary, World War II symbolized a moment of shared national purpose and unity in a righteous cause. Studs Terkel's decision to call his 1984 oral history of
World War II The "Good War" helped fix this image in the public mind (though his quotation marks suggest certain reservations about the appropriateness of the popular label).

Of course, even without the atomic bomb, this version of the war elided some awkward realities. The Roosevelt administration's grudging response to the plight of European Jewry, the arrest and internment of Japanese-American citizens, black-market chiselers and wartime profiteers, the persistence of racism in the military and on the home front, the incineration of Dresden and other German cities, and the firebombing of Tokyo on the night of March 10-11, 1945 (in which more people may have died than initially perished at Hiroshima), all complicate the Norman Rockwell image of the war. Historians have explored these darker facets of the conflict, and some history textbooks deal with them, but they have not cast much of a shadow in either the public memory or the media's treatment of the war.

Although the popular image of the "Good War" involved selective memory and the downplaying of certain awkward facts, it also contained much truth. By and large—and certainly in contrast to the Vietnam era—1941-45 did mark a time of national unity and moral clarity. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have long complicated this picture of a crusade pursued by a unified nation employing wholly justifiable means. They are the misshapen pieces that prevent us from completing the puzzle in an entirely satisfactory fashion. While some of the awkward realities noted above were partially redressed as the years passed—survivors of internment camps were belatedly compensated; a Holocaust memorial arose in Washington; the civil-rights movement erased some more blatant forms of racial segregation—the issues posed by the atomic annihilation of two cities remained contested terrain. As the semicentennial approached in 1995, the subject seemed further from closure than ever. Once the anniversary passed, the controversy no longer dominated the front pages, but the wounds and animosities remained.

The inability to fit the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki comfortably into the "Good War" paradigm did not prevent those events from figuring prominently in the politics and culture of the Cold War years. As we saw in chapter 15, the very uncertainty that surrounded the meaning of those acts made them available for a variety of polemical uses.
President Truman initially presented the Manhattan Project as an awe-inspiring scientific achievement and defended his decision to drop the bomb as a fully justifiable action that had ended the war, saved untold thousands of American lives, and repaid Japan for Pearl Harbor, the Bataan Death March, and other atrocities. As the wartime enemy became the postwar ally, the argument that the bomb “saved American lives” was sometimes expanded to encompass the contention that it had also assured the survival of thousands of Japanese who would otherwise have been killed in the invasion that supposedly would have become inevitable had the bombs not been dropped. On the evidence of public opinion polls, a huge majority of Americans initially accepted this justification for the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and a majority—though a steadily dwindling one—has continued to do so ever since.

This popular endorsement of the government’s rationale for the dropping of two atomic bombs in 1945 may in part reflect the public’s insulation from the human consequences of that action. From the first, Washington officialdom, often with the support of the media, offered for public consumption a selective, sanitized version of these events. In Japan, as Wilfred Burchett’s memoir *Shadows of Hiroshima* describes, U.S. Occupation authorities strictly censored photographs and films showing bomb victims. Medical data on both the short-term blast-and-fire effects and the long-term consequences of radiation exposure (not only at Hiroshima and Nagasaki but also at later nuclear test sites in the Marshall Islands and the American Southwest) were kept from the public or discussed in bland and general terms.

Preceding the publication of Henry Stimson’s highly influential—and artfully misleading—1947 essay on the atomic-bomb decision, Stimson and his collaborators made their purpose crystal clear in letters discussing the article: to influence the larger public by reaching teachers and other opinion molders. In James Conant’s words, the aim was to combat the “sentimentalism” that, if not resisted, could “have a great deal of influence on the next generation.” Conant continued in a September 1946 letter to Harvey Bundy, “A small minority, if it represents the type of person who is both sentimental and verbally minded and in contact with youth, may result in a distortion of history.” From such concerns the Stimson essay took shape, and in the years that followed, it played a
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significant role in sustaining the official version of events and warding off the inroads of "sentimentality" that Conant so feared.

Hollywood films like *The Beginning or the End* (1947), a ludicrously fictionalized version of the Manhattan Project and the decision to drop the bomb, and *Above and Beyond* (1953), a formulaic tale of marital discord and reconciliation supposedly based on the life of Paul W. Tibbets Jr., the pilot for the Hiroshima mission, further shored up the official government version. Since most Americans very much wanted to believe the fundamental message of all this propaganda—that dropping the bomb was essential, wholly justified, and fully in keeping with the nation's high war aims—the opinion-molding effort proved highly effective. The subtle process of creating a dominant hegemonic discourse (to use Gramscian analytic terms) unfolded in almost textbook fashion in the shaping of postwar American attitudes about the atomic bombing of Japan.

The campaign to forestall criticism of Truman's decision was part of a larger government and media effort throughout the early postwar period to soothe atomic fears and play down the true effects of nuclear weapons. In its August 11, 1951, issue, to cite only one of hundreds of examples, *Collier's* magazine published "Patty, the Atomic Pig." The article was based on an actual incident in which a piglet that was part of the "Noah's Ark" of goats, pigs, rats, and other experimental animals assembled for the July 1946 Operation Crossroads nuclear test at Bikini atoll was later found swimming in the radioactive waters of Bikini lagoon. The *Collier's* story, presented as a whimsical fairy tale, began: "Once upon a time, there was a great group of generals, admirals, scientists, newsmen and curious people who wanted to know more about atomic explosions." Illustrated with cute drawings, the story imagined Patty's thoughts before the blast ("'My, oh, my,' thought the little piglet, 'What will become of us all?'") and her adventures afterwards ("Patricia swam as fast as she could thrash her little legs, holding her nose high out of the water"). Patty not only survives (no scary radiation-exposure hazards here!) but grows to be a six-hundred-pound porker under the benevolent care of kindly scientists at the Naval Medical Research Institute at Bethesda, Maryland, and ends her days as a coddled exhibit in a zoo. Sugar-coated propaganda like this, part of a mountain of material in the
media that reinforced the government's version both of the 1945 bombings and of Washington's subsequent nuclear program, served to deflect and neutralize serious scrutiny of the meaning and the implications of atomic weaponry, past, present, or future.

For all its power and pervasiveness, however, the official justification for the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki never achieved absolute dominance; a "counterhegemonic discourse" was present from the beginning. The Hiroshima announcement immediately seized the attention of theologians, ethicists, pacifists, religious leaders, and other Americans concerned about the moral implications of war. Many pointed to the instantaneous annihilation of that city, and then of Nagasaki, as the logical (and chilling) culmination of a long twentieth-century process by which the rhetoric of "total war" radically undermined the centuries-old "just war" doctrine (most fully articulated by Roman Catholic theologians) that sought to shield civilian populations from the worst horrors of wartime.

The distinction between civilians and combatants had broken down badly in the course of World War II. The leaders of all the belligerent nations, including President Roosevelt, spoke the language of "total war," insisting that every citizen, not just the military forces, share in the struggle. Wartime vegetable plots became "victory gardens"; the sale of government bonds became "victory drives." Even children were militarized. I vividly recall the pressures in my third- and fourth-grade classes at Fairview Elementary School in Dayton, Ohio, to buy war stamps, collect scrap metal, and turn in pencil stubs for the graphite they contained. (Worried about what my pacifist parents might think of these efforts, I once asked my teacher to return a pencil stub I had contributed, leading her to ridicule me before the class as an "Indian giver.") If an entire society is mobilized for war, the argument goes, the entire society also becomes a legitimate target of war. President Truman, justifying the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, accurately pointed out that they were centers of military production—just as were Seattle, Los Angeles, and countless other U.S. cities.

The atomic bombing was only the culminating act in the breaking down of a never wholly inviolable ethical barrier—already breached in World War I by Germany's U-boat attacks on passenger ships, at Guer-
nica and Nanking in the 1930s, in the Nazi V-2 raids on London, Antwerp, and other Allied cities, and in the Allied firebombings of Hamburg, Dresden, Tokyo, and other teeming urban centers. But the Manhattan Project's technological gift to President Truman rendered the mass extermination of civilians vastly more efficient, radically raising the stakes of the larger postwar debate over the viability of the just-war doctrine and the ethical implications of the total-war language so enthusiastically embraced by wartime leaders.

Hiroshima and Nagasaki also naturally pervaded the discourse of antinuclear campaigners. As the Cold War deepened, and waves of nuclear fear periodically swept the nation, activists regularly invoked the two cities' names as reminders of what must never happen again. As we have seen, in each period of heightened nuclear fear and activism from 1945 onward, Hiroshima and Nagasaki did polemical duty as emblems of a global fate to be avoided at all costs.

HISTORIANS CONFRONT THE BOMB

Despite the use of "Hiroshima" and "Nagasaki" as shorthand points of reference in various public discourses, the origins and consequences of the actual atomic bombings of August 6 and 9, 1945, already obscured by official censorship and deception, grew steadily dimmer in public memory with the passing years. In the early 1960s, however, historians and other scholars turned a fresh eye on those events, and especially on President Truman's decision to authorize the military use of the awesome new superweapon at a moment when Japan's warmaking capability was near collapse. Their cumulative findings made it increasingly hard for informed observers to view this decision from the simplistic and uncritical perspective of 1945.

Even from the earliest moments of the atomic age, some had challenged the official rationale for dropping the bomb. In a radio broadcast on April 26, 1946, the liberal news commentator Raymond Gram Swing said: "I have heard it argued that the bomb dropped on Hiroshima was in effect dropped on the Russians, since it was not needed to bring the Japanese war to a close, but to establish and demonstrate a vast margin of power superiority over the Soviet Union." The British scientist P. M. S.
Blackett, a political radical, developed the same argument in a 1948 work, *Fear, War, and the Bomb*.

Not all the criticism came from the left. General Dwight D. Eisenhower and other military figures expressed reservations about Truman's resort to the atomic bomb, as did such Republican stalwarts as Herbert Hoover and John Foster Dulles. Indeed, in the 1950s it was often right-wing publications, such as William F. Buckley's *National Review*, that voiced retroactive skepticism about this momentous decision taken by a Democratic president.

But not until the 1960s did this dissident viewpoint gain a significant scholarly hearing. In *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II* (1961), Herbert Feis, while generally supportive of Truman's action, became the first major American historian to suggest that the calculations underlying it might have been more complex than official dogma conceded.

Only in 1965, though, with the publication of Gar Alperovitz's *Atomic Diplomacy*, did an American academic radically challenge the received interpretation. Why the rush to deploy the new weapon when some top leaders of Tokyo's wartime government were urgently signaling a desire to end the fighting, asked Alperovitz? Why did Washington so vehemently insist on "unconditional surrender" prior to August 6, only to do an abrupt about-face and accept a whopping condition—Emperor Hirohito could remain on his throne—as soon as the bombs were dropped?

Any meaningful response to these questions, Alperovitz concluded, required attention to broader strategic and economic considerations. A dramatic demonstration of the atomic bomb's destructive power, he suggested, promised to introduce a potent new factor in U.S. dealings with the Soviet Union, a wartime ally already shaping up as a postwar adversary. Doubtless the passions of war, the impulse to avenge Pearl Harbor, Japanese atrocities, and the appeal of ending the war with a fantastic display of American firepower rather than by painstaking negotiations (which would later have to be explained to a restive public) all played their role—especially after the desperate and bloody Okinawa campaign of March–June 1945. But other considerations entered the
picture as well, considerations that scholars began to probe with increasing insistence.

Despite Truman's later claims, suggested Alperovitz (and soon other scholars as well), the grim prospect of a land invasion of the Japanese main islands, tentatively scheduled to begin November 1, was not necessarily paramount in the president's mind in late July and early August 1945. He was in fact, they argued, more concerned with how, precisely, the war might be ended in the coming few weeks or even days. If a spectacular American blow demonstrating an awesome new secret weapon, not Russia's imminent declaration of war (pledged by Stalin at Yalta and again at Potsdam), were seen as having forced Japan's capitulation, America's role in postwar Japan and in Asia, as well as Washington's bargaining posture vis-à-vis the Soviet Union in shaping the politics and the economy of postwar Europe, might be vastly enhanced.

Combining the primary sources, Alperovitz—and an impressive group of historians that eventually included Martin Sherwin of Tufts University; Barton Bernstein of Stanford University; Robert Messer of the University of Illinois—Chicago; Michael Sherry of Northwestern University; J. Samuel Walker, historian of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission; James S. Hershberg, director of the Cold War History Project at the Woodrow Wilson International Center; such independent scholars as Stanley Goldberg and Kai Bird; and a number of others—documented a variety of considerations that clearly seemed relevant to a full understanding of Truman's decision. Stanley Goldberg, for example, emphasized that Truman and his inner circle of atomic advisers, including General Leslie R. Groves, major domo of the Manhattan Project, feared an angry public and congressional reaction if they failed to use a new weapon that they had secretly spent billions to develop. Hershberg, in a massively researched biography of James Conant, a member of the Interim Committee that advised Truman on atomic matters, revealed that the high-minded university president favored demonstrating the bomb's power in the most awesome possible way—by destroying a city—as the best hope of rallying world support for postwar international control of atomic energy.

Meanwhile, John Dower's War without Mercy: Race and Power in the

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Pacific War (1986) documented the racism that pervaded America's anti-Japanese wartime propaganda (as well as Japan's anti-American wartime propaganda). Eagle against the Sun: The American War with Japan (1985) by the historian Ronald Spector (a Vietnam veteran and member of the U.S. Marine Corps Reserves) similarly emphasized the centrality of racism on both sides. This, too, it seemed, must be factored into the equation when evaluating Truman's readiness to drop two atomic bombs on a defeated Asian nation.

Washington's original justification for the A-bomb decision arose in the specific context of the immediate postwar period, when wartime passions still ran high, and the Cold War and the nuclear arms race were just taking shape. The post-1965 wave of critical scholarship about the bomb was shaped by a very different historical moment. Alperovitz, born in 1936, represented a younger generation of historians who came of age politically in Cold War America, when the bomb (now called a "thermonuclear weapon") evoked not so much the memory of victory over Japan as thoughts of nuclear tests, radioactive fallout, a grim struggle with the Soviet Union, and the threat of a world-destroying thermonuclear holocaust. As an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, Alperovitz encountered the historian William Appleman Williams, who was radically revising diplomatic history by insisting on the primacy of economic factors—especially the influence of corporate capitalism—in shaping U.S. foreign policy.

After earning an M.A. in economics at Berkeley and a stint as legislative assistant to Robert Kastenmeier, a Wisconsin congressman known for his antimilitarist views, Alperovitz entered a doctoral program in political economy at Cambridge University, where he read with economist Joan Robinson, who, like Williams, stressed the interplay of politics, economics, and diplomacy. Alperovitz's 1963 dissertation (published two years later by Simon and Schuster) was a product of all these experiences. Reflecting Joan Robinson's influence, his initial thesis topic had not been the atomic-bomb decision but wartime Washington's economic and political planning for postwar eastern Europe. This led him first to the larger topic of how Washington policymakers viewed the Soviet Union, and then to how these postwar calculations influenced the Truman ad-
ministration's strategy for ending the Pacific war. The specific issue of the atomic bomb was originally quite peripheral to his research focus.

When *Atomic Diplomacy* appeared in 1965 (timed by the publisher to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings), reviewers and scholars at once recognized it as a thoroughgoing challenge to a version of the atomic-bomb story that for two decades had enjoyed broad public assent and minimal critical scrutiny. The book and the times were made for each other. Early in 1965, President Lyndon Johnson massively escalated the Vietnam War—and he did so with a decision to launch an intensive bombing campaign against North Vietnam (after running as a peace candidate against Barry Goldwater a few months earlier). That year saw the first major stirrings of an antiwar movement that soon came to question the official version of the war and the bombing campaign against the North Vietnamese. It was a propitious moment, indeed, to probe the motives that might have led an earlier American president to call tremendous destructive power down on an Asian people.

Not surprisingly, the critical reassessment of the A-bomb decision launched by Alperovitz steadily gained ground after 1965 within academia, especially among younger scholars, as a succession of events eroded the credibility of public officials and their pronouncements: the optimistic bulletins that flowed from Vietnam as the body bags and the shocking television images multiplied; the New Left's ideological assault on "the Establishment"; Henry Kissinger's secret bombing of Cambodia and wiretapping of his own staff; and, of course, the tangle of official crimes collectively known as Watergate, which ended with a discredited Richard Nixon driven from office.

The timing of Martin Sherwin's *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance* (1975), another major contribution to the scholarly critique of the atomic-bomb decision, further illustrates the link between the reassessment of Truman's action and the broader political climate. Like *Atomic Diplomacy*, Sherwin's book was based on his Ph.D. thesis, completed at UCLA in 1971 as the controversy over the Vietnam War raged, and revised for publication as newspaper headlines screamed of secret Cambodia bombings, the explosive Pentagon Papers, the
Watergate hearings, and a president's forced resignation. These were not times that fostered the uncritical acceptance of official versions of public events! Indeed, the political-cultural climate of 1965–75 almost demanded the skeptical reassessment of accepted historical interpretations and even of the fundamental assumption—a legacy of World War II, really—that the government's version of the truth was ipso facto trustworthy, disinterested, and reliable.

All this unfolded just as new methodological approaches and new areas of research were transforming the history profession. The rethinking of the Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombings was, in fact, only part of a much broader process whereby an older historiography that had focused mainly on elites—political, military, social, intellectual, or cultural—gave way to a "new social history" more attuned to the experiences of ordinary people, particularly the underclass, and more critical of the actions of policymakers, statesmen, corporate leaders, generals, and others who wield power. In the phrase of the day, the new social historians, some using computer-based quantitative techniques, proposed to study history "from the bottom up." In diplomatic history, the focus shifted from treaties and conferences to the larger economic, cultural, and ideological framework within which foreign-policy processes unfold.

These new historiographical emphases, coupled with the broader political and cultural currents that flowed across America in the wake of Vietnam and Watergate, encouraged a skeptical reassessment of the received wisdom on many topics. Inevitably this reassessment included attention to the events of August 6 and 9, 1945, that had taken the lives of well over one hundred thousand human beings (including long-term deaths related to radiation exposure) and laid the groundwork for an ever more dangerous nuclear arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union.

**ATOMIC BOMB SCHOLARSHIP IN THE ARENA OF PUBLIC OPINION**

By around 1980, the reassessment of the A-bomb decision launched by Alperovitz and others had been generally welcomed as stimulating and provocative. Within the guild, it was widely viewed as another manifesta-
tion of the familiar process by which historians continually reassess the past and question received interpretations. Debated at scholarly conferences and dissected in journal articles, the new analytic hypotheses were beginning to make their appearance in college textbooks and in classroom lectures.

For most Americans, however, historians' debates on this topic remained arcane and remote, a matter of no concern. While the work of Alperovitz, Sherwin, and others certainly had some broader impact through the major newspapers, intellectual reviews, and journals of opinion, the received wisdom about the justice of the atomic-bomb decision generally retained its sway in grassroots America. For those who had embraced the "Good War" paradigm, any questioning of Truman's oft-repeated justification of his action challenged an image of World War II that had become a cornerstone of national self-identity. If the motives for dropping the atomic bomb could be probed and problematized by historians, what part of the American past was safe from skeptical critical scrutiny? As historian Michael Kammen wrote in the aftermath of the Smithsonian debacle and other cultural battles involving conflicting interpretations of the American past, "Historians become notably controversial when they do not perpetuate myths, when they do not transmit the received and conventional wisdom, when they challenge the comforting presence of a stabilized past"—and, it may be added, when news of what they are up to finally gets out. Perhaps no issue of the postwar era confirmed this generalization more dramatically than the angry struggle over who would finally determine the meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki: historians or "the people."

Exacerbating the populist (or pseudopopulist) reaction against the scholarship of the atomic-bomb historians was the widespread practice (adopted by many historians as well as by nonhistorians) of attaching to such scholarship the label "revisionist." Historians were engaged in a process of revision, of course, but when the term was applied exclusively to this one group, it suggested that they were deviants who had departed from accepted norms of professional practice. In fact, these scholars were revisionists only in the sense that all good scholars are revisionists, continually questioning and revising standard interpretations on the basis of new evidence, deeper analysis, or the fresh perspectives offered by the passage of time.
Allusions to “the revisionist school” of atomic-bomb historians also conveyed a certain conspiratorial implication, as though these scholars had colluded, presumably with sinister or subversive motives, to concoct and foist on an unsuspecting public a single, agreed-upon new version of history. In fact (as anyone familiar with American intellectual life would assume), the “revisionists” were a diverse and contentious crew, representing a wide range of often conflicting viewpoints that were based on different research findings and different weighings of the facts. Barton Bernstein, for example, criticized Gar Alperovitz for talking of Truman’s “decision” to drop the bomb when in fact, in Bernstein’s view, Truman inherited from the Roosevelt administration both the assumption that the bomb would be used and a tolerance for destroying entire cities. As a new president in office for only a few months, Bernstein argued, Truman had simply fallen back on inherited assumptions and practices when confronted with the successful Alamogordo test. Bernstein also took both Alperovitz and Sherwin to task for treating as a virtual certainty the possibility that the war could have been ended well before the planned invasion date of November 1, 1945, without the atomic bomb. While agreeing that other alternatives were available and should have been tried, he remained skeptical about whether or not they would have succeeded in forcing Tokyo’s surrender. Other historians criticized Alperovitz, Sherwin, and others who were assessing the A-bomb decision for concentrating too much on U.S. sources and paying insufficient attention to the Japanese archives.

Certainly, most historians who addressed the question agreed that the factors shaping Truman’s actions in the war’s climactic days were too complex to be summed up in a single, easily recited formula ("It saved American lives, ended the war, and repaid Japan for Pearl Harbor")—a formula that, if not demonstrably false, was demonstrably inadequate. But beyond this, one would be hard put, despite accusations to the contrary, to identify a monolithic “revisionist” position. The process of historical reassessment on this subject is continually evolving, as it is on every topic of sufficient complexity to attract historians’ interest, with a variety of arguments and hypotheses in play at any given moment.

That the fury over historians’ treatment of the Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombings exploded so spectacularly in 1994–95 was linked, I think, not
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only to the fiftieth-anniversary observances, but also to the fact that U.S.
society was racked by new kinds of cultural conflict and political turmoil
in the 1990s. Conditioned by four decades of black-and-white Cold War
thinking, many Americans in the aftermath of the Soviet Union’s col­
lapse seemed to transfer the same outlook to the domestic sphere. From
this perspective, the angry denunciations of the “revisionists” as unpatri­
otic and contemptible, and the refusal to grant their findings any shred
of legitimacy, became simply another manifestation of a political climate
marked by inflammatory, polarizing rhetoric.

In this climate, the low-level irritation felt by many ordinary citizens,
especially older Americans and World War II veterans, at historians who
questioned an article of national faith was exacerbated and amplified by
a vocal army of jingoistic politicians, editorial writers, and radio talk-
show hosts who saw this as another emotion-laden wedge issue—like
attacking the National Endowment for the Arts for promoting obscenity;
or advocating Constitutional amendments permitting school prayer, re­
quiring a balanced budget, and banning flag desecration. By such issues
the New Right defined itself, rallied the faithful, and demonized its
enemies.

Conservative presidential aspirants made sure the issue would re­
main divisive and inflammatory. Senator Bob Dole, in a red-meat speech
to the American Legion in September 1995, denounced the Smithso-
nian’s original Enola Gay exhibit as another example of the insidious
work of “intellectual elites” and other “arbiters of political correctness”
who were contemptuous of patriotism, scornful of veterans and their sac­
rifices, and intent on waging “war on traditional American values.”

But even in this volatile climate, popular attitudes toward the
atomic-bomb decision continued to resist easy generalization. Over the
years, different groups had diverged markedly in their judgments about
Truman’s action. So, too, in the 1990s. The aggregate results of a 1995
Gallup poll concealed important variations in opinion on the basis of
gender, race, and age. The rate of approval of Truman’s action, for in­
stance, was notably higher for men than for women. (A similar gender
gap emerges in almost every poll dealing with military issues, including
defense spending, the use of force to achieve U.S. aims, armed interven­
tions like the Persian Gulf War, and so forth.) As to race and ethnicity—
no surprise here—a significantly higher percentage of whites approved the atomic-bomb decision than did African Americans, Hispanics, or Asian Americans. From the first, nonwhite groups had raised the issue of racism in the A-bomb context and posed awkward questions about whether President Truman would have dropped the atomic bomb on Germans if the European war had continued into the summer of 1945. (Given the firebombing attacks that turned German cities into crematoria, it is by no means clear that Truman would have refrained from using the bomb on white Europeans—but the nagging What if? can never be answered with certainty.)

Another key division that shows up in public-opinion data as early as the 1960s, and again quite sharply in the 1995 poll, is a generational one. Broadly speaking, as we have seen, the older generation that remembered World War II and that initially associated the atomic bomb with Japan’s surrender and frenzied V-J Day celebrations tended to be strongest in the conviction that dropping the bomb was justified. Succeeding generations, having very different associations with nuclear weapons and no direct memories of the war, tended to be more critical of Truman’s action.

Of course, none of these correlations of gender, race, or age is absolute. Other factors, including religious beliefs, political views, and variations in individual temperament, enter in as well. Any generalization about how “the American people” have viewed these issues remains open to qualification and skeptical challenge.

It would be misleading to frame the Enola Gay controversy as a simple conflict between historians (or academics) on the one hand and the general public on the other. Some historians continued to accept the Truman administration’s justification for dropping the bomb as sufficient; a few attacked the “revisionists” as scornfully as any conservative politician or outraged veteran. Academia is no tranquil domain cut off from the passions and ideological disputes that agitate the larger society.

Nevertheless, broadly speaking, the controversy of 1994–95 did expose a considerable chasm between the methodology of historians and the way many Americans think about the past, especially that portion of it falling within their own experiences and memories. Historians con-
stantly challenge the received wisdom and established interpretations of events. This is what we do. Usually this process unfolds in scholarly journals or at professional gatherings out of the public eye. As new interpretations filter into textbooks and classrooms, they may eventually modify the general public’s historical understanding, but the shift is typically gradual and almost imperceptible.

Occasionally, however, the disjuncture between the scholarly approach to history and the public’s highly personal, even semimythic view of the past is exposed with stark clarity, usually when the ongoing process of historical revision and reassessment focuses on an issue about which many citizens feel passionately, or that has great patriotic resonance. Such a moment occurred in 1913, for example, when Charles A. Beard argued in his *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* that the Founding Fathers had in fact pursued public policies that served their pecuniary interests. Beard was roundly vilified. He had questioned the motives of patriots revered by every schoolchild! This controversy over an issue of historical interpretation unfolded at a moment of highly charged ideological conflict, as conservatives and reformers battled over the government’s role in regulating capitalism.

A similar phenomenon, I suspect, underlay the reaction, ranging from annoyance to rage, roused by the historical profession’s ongoing examination of the atomic-bomb decision—a long-term scholarly project that the *Enola Gay* controversy suddenly thrust into public view. As the Air Force Association demanded in one of many press releases aimed at discrediting the Smithsonian exhibit, “All revisionist speculation should be eliminated.” The Shinto priest at Japan’s Yasukuni war shrine could not have put it better.

This reaction was undoubtedly intensified by the fact that August 1945 remained a part of older Americans’ living memory. As Edward T. Linenthal pointed out in a perceptive essay in the February 10, 1995, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the fiftieth anniversaries of great public events, the “last hurrah” for most survivors, tend to bring out in a particularly volatile way the continuing tension between the commemorative impulse and critical historical scholarship.

This particular fiftieth anniversary cast in bold relief a gap that had
been developing for years between the American historical profession and a significant portion of the American people. I myself had become acutely aware of this discontinuity in the early 1980s when, as the nuclear-freeze campaign unfolded and I pursued my research on the atomic bomb's cultural fallout, I often lectured to community groups. When asked about Truman's A-bomb decision (as I almost invariably was), I would discuss the work of Alperovitz, Sherwin, and others as interpretive approaches that merited consideration. But often the questioner would have none of it, especially if he (usually it was a male) remembered World War II, and most especially if he was a veteran convinced—beyond all argument—that the atomic bomb had saved his life.

In August 1995, when I published an essay in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reviewing the controversy over the A-bomb decision and (as I thought) offering a fairly balanced, uncontroversial assessment of the cultural issues and faultlines it had exposed, the response was revealing. While fellow historians and other scholars reacted positively, the scattered responses from outside academia proved uniformly hostile. One early-morning telephone call, for example, came from a North Carolinian who, though born after the war, was the son of a veteran who had fought in the Pacific. My caller therefore insisted that he also owed his life to the atomic bomb, since if his future father had died in an invasion of Japan, he, the son, would never have been conceived. To him, any questioning of the assumption that the atomic bomb “saved American lives” represented a kind of existential challenge.

Shortly after this call, a Louisiana investment counselor wrote a sarcastic letter that attacked me as a typical “off-the-wall,” anti-American academic eager to besmirch the United States while glossing over all of Japan’s misdeeds. He concluded with this thrust: “I await your political comments on the justification of the war between Athens and Sparta. I am sure that you have an opinion on this and I welcome your comments.”

Those who articulate such responses are not interested in debate. For them, unquestioning support for Truman’s atomic-bomb decision becomes a test of patriotism. In fact, they reject the legitimacy of the historical enterprise. What right have you, a mere academic, such critics are
really asking, to publish dissenting views on matters about which true patriots cannot possibly hold differing opinions? As my Louisiana correspondent put it: “No one can doubt that this horrible weapon saved American lives” (emphasis added). That precisely this assertion is, in fact, a matter of considerable doubt, and certainly open to historical inquiry and discussion, was a position whose legitimacy he simply could not acknowledge. He was left, therefore, with no alternative but to impugn the character and the integrity of those who do hold it. The confrontation between popular memory and patriotic affirmation, on the one hand, and the norms of historical research and argument on the other, could hardly be more starkly revealed.

When even columnists (and World War II veterans) like Russell Baker of the New York Times and the late Mike Royko of the Chicago Tribune, normally bemused observers of the passing scene, were reduced to sputtering fury that anyone—especially anyone who did not actually fight in the war—could even hint that the atomic-bomb decision involved motives beyond those publicly proclaimed by Truman, one realizes the depths of the ideological and generational chasms exposed by this debate.

Even the Smithsonian’s secretary, I. Michael Heyman, in a postmortem on the canceled Enola Gay exhibit, gave the back of his hand to the historians who had helped plan it, and ignored his institution’s mandate to promote “the increase and diffusion of knowledge,” as he abjectly capitulated to the exhibit’s detractors: “In this important anniversary year, veterans and their families were expecting, and rightly so, that the nation would honor and commemorate their valor and sacrifice. They were not looking for analysis, and, frankly, we did not give enough thought to the intense feelings such an analysis would evoke.” Whether the “intense feelings” aroused by thoughtful analysis and a broader diffusion of the relevant scholarship might in the long run have been therapeutic as Americans continue to struggle with the meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he did not consider. In the face of assumptions like this—that “analysis” and “feelings” are mutually exclusive, and that when passions run high, analysis must give way to feelings—it is understandable that historians, with their boring insistence on research and their readiness to
question established interpretations and mythic versions of the past, should be viewed as a threat.

For all the rancor it generated, the *Enola Gay* controversy was only the latest manifestation of a half-century process by which the events of August 6 and 9, 1945, figured rhetorically in a variety of public discourses. For many, the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought victory in a just cause, spared countless American lives, repaid the treachery of Pearl Harbor, and demonstrated a powerful nation's scientific and technological mastery. For others, it was needless slaughter, symbolizing the utter collapse of all ethical restraints in modern warfare. Still others viewed it as a calculated move on a larger strategic chessboard. For anti-nuclear activists, it was the ultimate warning.

In the fiftieth-anniversary year, with the cultural mood both retrospective and ideologically charged, attention focused once again on the original events in all their jagged immediacy. In the process, many citizens grasped—perhaps for the first time—that for several decades, scholars had been questioning the official justifications originally advanced by President Truman and endlessly reiterated thereafter. The result was not thoughtful discussion and the search for a new, more historically defensible consensus, but recrimination and accusations of bad faith and disloyalty. The Smithsonian exhibition simply provided a context for this unfolding cultural psychodrama. The Smithsonian's location in the fishbowl of Washington guaranteed that the drama would be played out with shameless political posturing and the glare of media publicity. Though muted, the controversy will probably persist so long as politicians see capital in it and vast numbers of Americans—especially World War II veterans—remain convinced that the atomic bomb was an essential, wholly justifiable means to a righteous end. But historians, too, have their convictions and commitments, and one ought not underestimate the long-term power of critical historical inquiry, even on emotion-laden topics. Whatever the ultimate resolution of this divisive and unhappy national quarrel, Hiroshima and Nagasaki seem likely for the foreseeable future to remain the Banquo's ghost of World War II, perennially challenging comforting generalizations about the conflict and underscoring the disparity between the mythic past inscribed in popular memory and the past that is the raw material of historical scholarship.