

Triumphal and Tragic Narratives of the War in Asia

John W. Dower

Fiftieth anniversaries are unlike other commemorative occasions, especially when they are anniversaries of war. Participants in the events of a half century ago are still alive to tell their emotional personal tales. Their oral histories confront the skepticism and detachment of younger generations who have no memories of the war. Historians with access to materials that were previously inaccessible (or simply ignored) develop new perspectives on the dynamics and significance of what took place. Politicians milk the still palpable human connection between past and present for every possible drop of ideological elixir. History, memory, scholarship, and politics become entangled in intricate ways.¹

All this is predictably apparent in this fiftieth anniversary of the conclusion of World War II in Asia. Where the end of the war against Japan is concerned, however, the contemporary commemorations have become unusually contentious, especially in the United States. Why such controversy now, when for all ostensible purposes we are commemorating the Allied victory over an aggressive, atrocious, and fanatical enemy?

The answer, of course, lies in the atomic bombs and the fact that victory over Japan entailed incinerating and irradiating men, women, and children with a weapon more terrible than any previously known or imagined. Triumph and tragedy became inseparable. At the same time, in the fires of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the so-called total victory of the United States became fused with a future of inescapable insecurity. The bombs marked both an end and a beginning—the end of an appalling global conflagration in which more than 50 million people were killed and the beginning of the nuclear arms race and a new world in which security was forever a step away and enormous resources had to be diverted to military pursuits.

It is a measure of the impoverishment of our present-day political climate in the United States that Americans have been denied a rare opportunity to use the fiftieth anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to reflect more deeply about these

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¹ I have developed some of the themes in this present essay in substantially different form in two other articles: briefly in John W. Dower, "Hiroshima, Nagasaki and the Politics of Memory," *Technology Review*, 98 (Aug./Sept. 1995), 48–51; and in considerably greater detail in John W. Dower, "Three Narratives of Our Humanity," in *History Wars: The Enola Gay Controversy and Other Battles for the American Past*, ed. Edward Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt (forthcoming: Metropolitan Books, New York).

developments that changed our world forever. That opportunity was lost early this year when the Smithsonian Institution, bowing to political pressure (including unanimous condemnation by the United States Senate), agreed to scale back drastically a proposed major exhibition on the atomic bombs and the end of the war against Japan in its Air and Space Museum in Washington.

The exhibition initially envisioned by the Smithsonian's curators would have taken viewers through a succession of rooms that introduced, in turn, the ferocity of the last year of the war in Asia, the Manhattan Project and the unfolding imperatives behind the United States decision to use the bombs against Japan, the training and preparation of the *Enola Gay* mission that dropped the first bomb on Hiroshima (with the fuselage of the *Enola Gay* as the centerpiece of the exhibition), the human consequences of the bombs in the two target cities, and the nuclear legacy to the postwar world. The draft script included occasional placards that concisely summarized the "historical controversies" that have emerged in scholarship and public discourse.

This ambitious proposal proved to be politically unacceptable. The Senate denounced the draft script as being "revisionist and offensive to many World War II veterans." Critics accused curators responsible for the draft of being "politically correct" leftists and rarely hesitated to brand as "anti-American" anyone who questioned the use of the bombs.² Confronted by such criticism, and by a conservative Congress threatening to cut off federal funding to "liberal" projects in general, the Smithsonian—like Japan fifty years earlier—surrendered unconditionally. Visitors to the Air and Space Museum eventually were offered only a minimalist exhibition featuring the refurbished fuselage of the *Enola Gay* and a brief tape and text explaining that this was the plane that dropped the first atomic bomb, following which, nine days later, Japan surrendered. The artifact, supporters of this bare presentation declare, speaks for itself.

Artifacts do not in fact speak for themselves. Essentially the United States government has chosen to commemorate the end of World War II in Asia by affirming that only one orthodox view is politically permissible. This orthodoxy amounts to a "heroic" narrative, and its contours are simple: The war in Asia was a brutal struggle against a fanatic, expansionist foe (which is true, albeit cavalier about European and American colonial and neocolonial control in Asia up to 1941). That righteous war against Japanese aggression was ended by the dropping of the atomic bombs, which saved the enormous numbers of American lives that would have been sacrificed in invading Japan. As the Senate's condemnation of the Smithsonian's plans put it, the atomic bombs brought the war to a "merciful" end.

Other euphemisms convey essentially this same simple story line. The heroic or triumphal narrative coincides with the identification of World War II as the last "good war"—a perception reified in American consciousness by the horribly

² *Congressional Record*, S.R. 257, 103 Cong., 2 sess., Sept. 22, 1994, pp. S13315–16. For the text of Senate Resolution 257, see below, "Documents," 1136. Such accusations of "anti-Americanism" came from ostensibly liberal as well as conservative and right-wing sources; see, for example, Jonathan Yardley, "Dropping a Bomb on an Idea," *Washington Post*, Oct. 10, 1994, p. B2; and "The Enola Gay Explosion" [editorial] *ibid.*, Jan. 20, 1995, p. A20.

destructive and inconclusive subsequent conflicts in Korea and Indochina. As captured in the title of a well-known essay by the writer and World War II veteran Paul Fussell, who had been slated to participate in the invasion of Japan as a young soldier, the heroic version of the war's end in Asia also finds common expression as the "thank God for the atom bomb" narrative—a memorable incantation that simultaneously places God on the American side and reminds us *pari passu* that the Japanese are pagans.³ The triumphal American narrative offers an entirely understandable view of World War II—emphasizing the enormity of German and Japanese behavior, eulogizing American "valor and sacrificial service" (in the words of the Senate resolution), and applauding the bombs for forcing Japan's surrender and saving American lives.

But what does this heroic narrative leave out? What are the "historical controversies" the Smithsonian's curators thought worth making known to the public? What might we have learned from a truly serious commemorative engagement with the end of the war in Asia?

There are many answers. To begin, the argument that the bombs were used simply to end the war quickly and thereby save untold lives neglects complicating facts, converging motives and imperatives, and possible alternative policies for ending the war. Such considerations can do more than deepen our retrospective understanding of the decision to use the bombs. They also can help us better appreciate the complexities of crisis policy making in general.

If, moreover, we are willing to look beyond the usual end point in the conventional heroic narrative—beyond (or beneath) the sparkling *Enola Gay* and the almost abstract mushroom cloud—we can encounter the human face of World War II. Humanizing the civilians killed and injured by the bombs, and, indeed, humanizing the Japanese enemy generally, is difficult and distasteful for most Americans. If this is done honestly in the context of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it becomes apparent that we confront something more than the human consequences of nuclear war. We are forced to ask painful questions about the morality of modern war itself—specifically, the transformation of moral consciousness that, well before the atomic bombs were dropped, had led *all* combatants to identify civilian men, women, and children as a legitimate target of "total war."

To engage the war at this level is to enter the realm of tragic, rather than triumphal, narratives. As the Smithsonian controversy revealed, however, even after the passage of a half century there is little tolerance for such reflection in the United States, and now virtually none at all at the level of public institutions. We have engaged in self-censorship and are the poorer for it.

Critics of the Air and Space Museum's early scripts emphasized what was missing in them—most notably, a vivid sense of the fanaticism, ferocity, and atrocious war conduct of the Japanese enemy. This was a fair criticism. Using the same

³ Paul Fussell, *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays* (New York: 1988) 13–37.

criteria, it also is fair to ask what the heroic American narrative of the end of the war neglects.

At the simplest level, the popular triumphal narrative tends to neglect events and developments that are deemed important in the scholarly literature on the bombs.⁴ The entry of the Soviet Union into the war against Japan on August 8, two days after the bombing of Hiroshima, for example, tends to be downplayed or entirely ignored—and with it the fact that the American leadership had solicited the Soviet entry from an early date, knew it was imminent, and knew the Japanese were terrified by the prospect.⁵ Why the haste to drop the bombs before the effect of the Soviet entry could be gauged?

The nuclear devastation of Nagasaki on August 9 is similarly marginalized in the orthodox narrative. What are we to make of this second bomb? Why was it dropped before Japan's high command had a chance to assess Hiroshima and the Soviet entry? How should we respond to the position taken by some Japanese—namely, that the bombing of Hiroshima may have been necessary to crack the no-surrender policy of the militarists, but the bombing of Nagasaki was plainly and simply a war crime?⁶

The heroic narrative also generally obscures the United States military's timetables as the terrible end game was played out. Of course, American leaders desired to end the war as quickly as possible and to avoid the huge casualties invading Japan would entail. Contrary to the impression conveyed by the "thank God for the atom bomb" narrative, however, no invasion was imminent in August 1945, or in September or October. The initial assault on the main Japanese islands, aimed at Kyushu in the south, was scheduled for November 1, and it was anticipated that the major attack on Tokyo and the Kanto area in the main island of Honshu would not take place until March 1946. This does not negate the argument that United States leaders were duty-bound to end the war as quickly as possible, but it does cast the issue of anticipated casualties in clearer perspective.

Shortly after the end of the war, United States intelligence experts themselves publicly concluded that Japan was already at the end of its tether when the bombs were dropped. A famous report by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, issued in 1946, concluded that the material and psychological situation was such that Japan "certainly" would have been forced to capitulate by the end of 1945, and "in all probability" prior to November 1, "even if the atomic bombs had not

⁴ I offer the points that follow, not as original observations, but to illustrate the "historical controversies" that, essentially a priori, are anathema to the heroic narrative. For basic treatments, see Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and the Origins of the Arms Race* (New York: 1987); J. Samuel Walker, "The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update," *Diplomatic History*, 14 (Winter 1990), 94–114; and the symposium "Hiroshima in History and Memory," *ibid.*, 19 (Spring 1995); especially Barton Bernstein, "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little-Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory," *ibid.*, 227–73.

⁵ As Professor Rinjitō Sodei notes, many Japanese accounts weigh the Soviet declaration of war as being as shocking to the Japanese leadership as the Hiroshima bombing; see Rinjitō Sodei, "Hiroshima/Nagasaki as History and Politics," *Journal of American History*, 82 (Dec. 1995) 1119.

⁶ See, for example, Tarō Takemi, "Remembrances of the War and the Bomb," *Journal of the American Medical Association*, Aug. 5, 1983, 618–19. Takemi, later a prominent physician, was a physicist at the time and privy to responses to the bomb at the highest levels.

been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated." This was an ex post facto observation, of course, but it raised (and still raises) pertinent questions about the nature and shortcomings of wartime Allied intelligence evaluations of the enemy.⁷

It also became known after Japan's surrender that alternatives to using the bombs on civilian targets had been broached in American official circles. Navy planners believed that Japan could be brought to its knees by intensified economic strangulation (the country's merchant marine and most of its navy had been sunk by 1945). Within the Manhattan Project, the possibility of dropping the bomb on a noncombat "demonstration" target, with Japanese observers present, had been broached but rejected. Conservative officials such as Acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew, the former ambassador to Japan, argued that the Japanese could be persuaded to surrender if the United States abandoned its policy of "unconditional surrender" and guaranteed the future existence of the emperor system. Through their code-breaking operations, the Americans also were aware that, beginning in mid-June, the Japanese had made extremely vague overtures to the Soviet Union concerning negotiating an end to the war.⁸

These developments complicate the simple story line of the heroic narrative. Greater complication, however, arises from the fact that declassification of the archival record has made historians aware of how many different considerations officials in Washington had in mind when they formulated nuclear policy in the summer of 1945. No one denies that these policy makers desired to hasten the war's end and to save American lives, but no serious historian regards those as the sole considerations driving the use of the bombs on Japanese cities.

Although the initial Anglo-American commitment to build nuclear weapons was motivated by fear that Nazi Germany might be engaged in such a project, it is now known that by 1943—long before it became clear that the Germans were not attempting to make an atomic bomb, before Germany's collapse was

⁷ United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Summary Report (Pacific War)* (Washington, 1946), 26. Cf. United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Japan's Struggle to End the War* (Washington, 1946), 13.

⁸ Among prominent critics of the Smithsonian's critics, Gar Alperovitz and Martin Sherwin emphasize the option of the United States abandoning the demand for unconditional surrender and pursuing a negotiated settlement with Japan. See Gar Alperovitz et al., *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb—And the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York, 1995). In American political discourse, this argument represents an interesting ideological somersault—now identified as "leftist," it was conspicuously conservative when originally advanced by Joseph Grew in 1945 and was vigorously attacked as such by liberals and leftists at the time. To Grew's critics, the emperor system was the keystone to Japanese aggression abroad and repression at home, and any presurrender Allied promise to guarantee its continuation smacked of right-wing appeasement and would severely compromise the ability of the United States to dictate reformist policies in defeated and occupied Japan. The waywardness of ideological labels is compounded when we look at contemporary Japan. There the political and academic Left is critical of the emperor system and Emperor Hirohito's wartime role, and the Alperovitz-Sherwin argument (that the Japanese were trying to surrender and the United States should have cut a deal with the imperial government) is most associated with pro-emperor conservatives and neofascists. For critical appraisals of the feasibility of a negotiated surrender, see Bernstein, "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender," 238–44; and a study based largely on Japanese materials: Herbert Bix, "Japan's Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation," *Diplomatic History*, 19 (Spring 1995), 197–225. I spell out my skepticism of the "conditional surrender" argument in Dower, "Three Narratives of Our Humanity," but I regard the issue as deserving serious consideration. The so-called revisionist historians whom the Smithsonian's critics dismissed with blanket contempt disagree among themselves on various issues pertaining to the bombs and the end of the war.

imminent, before the Manhattan Project was sure of success, and before the lethal Allied military advance on Japan was clearly underway—United States planners had identified Japan as the prime target for such a weapon. Pragmatic considerations may have accounted for this shift of targets, but the change was nonetheless a profound one. The original rationale for moving to an entirely new order of destructive weaponry had evaporated, and the weaponry itself had begun to create its own rationale.⁹

Sheer visceral hatred abetted this early targeting of Japan for nuclear destruction. Although critics of the Smithsonian's original script took umbrage at a passing statement that called attention to the element of vengeance in the American haste to use the bombs, few historians (or honest participants) would discount this. "Remember Pearl Harbor—Keep 'em Dying" was a popular military slogan from the outset of the war, and among commentators and war correspondents at the time, it was a commonplace that the Japanese were vastly more despised than the Germans. As we know all too well from our vantage place fifty years later, race and ethnicity are hardly negligible factors in the killing game.¹⁰

Apart from plain military and sociopsychological dynamics, the development and deployment of the bombs also became driven by almost irresistible technological and scientific imperatives. J. Robert Oppenheimer, the charismatic head of the Manhattan Project, confided that after Germany's surrender on May 8, 1945, he and his scientific colleagues intensified their efforts out of concern that the war might end before they could finish—a striking confession, but not atypical. Almost to a man, scientists who had joined the project because of their alarm that Germany might develop a nuclear weapon stayed with it after Germany was out of the war. In the evocative phrase of the scientific community, the project was "technically sweet."¹¹

Other political imperatives largely extraneous to the war against Japan also helped drive the decision to use the bombs. Documents declassified since the 1960s make unmistakably clear that from the spring of 1945, top-level United States policy makers saw the bomb as a valuable card to play against Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union—one that would, they hoped, dissuade the Soviet Union from pursuing its ambitions in Eastern Europe and elsewhere. At the same time, shrewd readers of the domestic political winds warned that if the Manhattan Project ended with nothing dramatic to show for its efforts, the postwar Congress surely would launch a hostile investigation into the huge expenditure of secret funds for it. Some policy makers also effectively argued that the new weapon was so awesome that its horrendous destructiveness had to be demonstrated against real cities with real people in them, so that the postwar world would understand the

⁹ For a recent treatment of this fact, known for some time, see Arjun Makhijani, "Always the Target?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 51 (May/June 1995), 23–27.

¹⁰ On the racial aspects of the war, see John W. Dower, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York, 1986).

¹¹ For J. Robert Oppenheimer's statement, see Sherwin, *World Destroyed*, 145. For a rueful acknowledgment of how "technically sweet" the project was, see the interview with Victor Weisskopf, *MIT Tech Talk*, Oct. 2, 1991. Only one or two scientists left the Manhattan Project after Germany surrendered.

need to cooperate on arms control.¹² From this perspective, the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki might be seen as the concrete opening demonstration of postwar deterrence theory.

In Japan, as might be expected, popular memory of the atomic bombs tends to begin where the American narrative leaves off. In the heroic narrative, one rides with the crew of the *Enola Gay*, cuts away from the scene the moment the Little Boy bomb is released, gazes back from a great distance (over eleven miles) at a towering, iridescent mushroom cloud.¹³ If by chance one does glance beneath the cloud, it is the bomb's awesome physical destructiveness that usually is emphasized. Rubble everywhere. A silent, shattered cityscape. In this regard, the heroic narrative differs little from a Hollywood script.

By contrast, conventional Japanese accounts begin with the solitary bomber and its two escort planes in the azure sky above Hiroshima, with the blinding flash (*pika*) and tremendous blast (*don*) of the nuclear explosion, with the great pillar of smoke—and then move directly to ground zero. They dwell with excruciating detail on the great and macabre human suffering the new weapon caused, which continues to the present day for some survivors.

This Japanese perception of the significance of Hiroshima and Nagasaki can become maudlin and nationalistic. The nuclear destruction of the two cities is easily turned into a "victimization" narrative, in which the bombs fall from the heavens without historical context—as if the war began on August 6, 1945, and innocent Japan bore the cross of bearing witness to the horrendous birth of the nuclear age. In this subjective narrative, the bombs become the symbolic stigmata of unique Japanese suffering.

It is virtually a mantra in the United States media that what the Japanese really suffer from is historical amnesia. They cannot honestly confront their World War II past, it is said, and there are indeed numerous concrete illustrations of this beyond fixation on the misery caused by the atomic bombs. These range from sanitized textbooks to virtually routinized public denials of Japanese aggression and atrocity by conservative politicians (usually associated with the Liberal Democratic party, the United States government's longtime protégé) to the government's failure, until very recently, to offer an unequivocal apology to Asian and Allied victims of imperial Japan's wartime conduct.¹⁴

¹² This was one of the arguments used in rejecting a June 1945 proposal by Manhattan Project scientists (in the Franck Report) that the atomic bomb be demonstrated on a noncombat target. See Sherwin, *World Destroyed*, 117–18, 210–19; Bernstein, "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender," 270–71; and James G. Hershberg, *James B. Conant: Harvard to Hiroshima and the Making of the Nuclear Age* (New York, 1993), 293, 818.

¹³ It remains for psychologists and symbolic anthropologists to tell us what to make of an American airplane named after the pilot's mother delivering a bomb named Little Boy and giving birth to a wildly celebrated new age of destructive capability.

¹⁴ On June 9, 1995, the lower house of the Japanese Diet expressed deep remorse (*fukai hansei*) for causing great suffering to other peoples, especially Asians, in World War II. Conservative opposition to a stronger resolution not only thwarted a clear-cut "apology" but also led to wording that made clear that Japan was not alone in "modern history" in engaging in colonialism and aggression. On August 15, however, Prime Minister

In actuality, however, popular Japanese discourse concerning both war responsibility and the experience of the atomic bomb is more diversified than usually is appreciated outside Japan. Since the early 1970s, when Japan belatedly established relations with the People's Republic of China, the Japanese media have devoted conspicuous attention not only to exposing Japanese war crimes in Asia but also to wrestling with the complex idea that victims (*bigaisha*) can simultaneously be victimizers (*kagaisha*).¹⁵

This Japanese sense of contradictory identity is not to be confused with the more simplistic notion of righteous retribution that critics of Japan commonly endorse—the notion that the Japanese reaped what they sowed; that having tried to flourish by the sword, they deservedly perished by it. Rather, it is a more complex perception that innocence, guilt, and responsibility may coexist at both individual and collective levels. A well-known series, *Atomic Bomb Panels* (*Genbaku no Zu*), painted collaboratively by the married artists Iri Maruki and Toshi Maruki, provides a concrete illustration. After producing twelve stunning large renderings of Japanese nuclear bomb victims between 1950 and 1969, the Marukis took as their next subject the torture and murder of Caucasian prisoners of war by enraged survivors of the destruction of Hiroshima. They followed this with a stark painting depicting the piled-up corpses of Korean atomic bomb victims, being pecked at by ravens.

For the two painters, as for those who viewed their murals, these shocking depictions were a reminder (really a *discovery*) of the fallacy of the traditional victimization narrative. In the painting titled *Death of the American Prisoners of War*, first exhibited in 1971, the inversion was total: the victims were captured American airmen, the individuals who had been bombing Japanese cities, and the ominous victimizers were *hibakusha*, citizens of Hiroshima who had just been the target of the first atomic bomb. In *Ravens*, completed in 1972, the Marukis undermined the victimization narrative in other ways. The terrible mound of Korean corpses forced viewers to confront the facts not only that there were other

Tomichi Murayama offered a clear apology (*owabi*) for the damage and suffering caused by imperial Japan. On August 23, 1993, the then prime minister Morihiro Hosokawa had made a briefer unequivocal apology, generally ignored by the non-Japanese media. For the Diet resolution, Murayama's statement, documents illustrating the debate about "war responsibility" across the Japanese political spectrum, and a brief commentary see my contribution to a University of Michigan periodical: John W. Dower, "Japan Addresses Its War Responsibility," *ii. The Journal of the International Institute*, 3 (Fall 1995). The non-Japanese media has also generally failed to report that current textbooks approved by the conservative Ministry of Education speak more frankly about Japanese aggression and atrocities than was the case up through the 1980s.

¹⁵ Japanese Marxist and neo-Marxist scholars, many of them associated with the Rekishigaku Kenkyūkai (Historiographical Research Association), have been critically attentive to Japan's war responsibility ever since Japan's defeat. Serious mass media treatments of war crimes in Asia, beginning with the Rape of Nanking, generally are dated from reports by the writer Katsuichi Honda beginning in 1970. In the early 1970s another influential writer, Makoto Oda, popularized the notion of a dual victim-victimizer Japanese identity. The death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989 removed some of the lingering taboos on discussion of Japan's war responsibility. Recent issues that the non-Japanese press has seized on as continuing evidence of Japanese war crimes—such as the murderous medical experiments of Unit 731 and the sexual enslavement of non-Japanese "comfort women" (*ianfu*) who were forced to service the emperor's loyal soldiers and sailors—have been widely exposed in the Japanese media. While conservative Japanese politicians and bureaucrats have undertaken to sanitize this atrocious chapter of Japanese history, the popular struggle to combat such "historical amnesia" has been vigorous.

atomic bomb victims besides Japanese but also that the Japanese people had accepted without question the colonization of Korea and brutal conscription of Koreans as forced wartime laborers. Even after the nuclear devastation, as the mound of corpses suggested (and an accompanying commentary made explicit), Japanese survivors continued to discriminate against Koreans.¹⁶

Other Japanese have introduced other moral considerations in attempting to come to grips with the meaning of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some see the bombs as a plain atrocity—an American war crime, as it were, that cancels out, or at least mitigates, the enormity of Japan's own wartime transgressions. More typically, however—and this was true even in the immediate aftermath of the bombings—anti-American sentiment per se is surprisingly muted. The focus instead has been on using the bomb experience to bring an antinuclear message to the world. As Professor Rinjirō Sodei has reminded us, Kenzaburō Ōe, the 1994 Nobel laureate in literature, emerged as a spokesman for this position in influential essays written in the early 1960s. In Ōe's rendering, the *hibakusha* were "moralists" because they had experienced "the cruelest days in human history" and never lost "the vision of a nation which will do its best to materialize a world without any nuclear weapons."¹⁷

Moral reflections of this sort—by Japanese or by critics of the use of the bombs in general—usually are given short shrift by American upholders of the heroic narrative. In their view, war is hell, the Japanese brought the terrible denouement of the bombs upon themselves, and the only morality worth emphasizing is the moral superiority of the Allied cause in World War II. Indeed, one of the formulaic terms that emerged among critics of the Air and Space Museum's original plans (alongside the "merciful" nature of the use of the bombs) labeled the nuclear destruction of the two Japanese cities "morally unambiguous."¹⁸

It was not, and it may well be that the most enduring legacy of the Smithsonian controversy will be its graphic exposure of the moral ambiguity of the use of the bombs—and of Allied strategic bombing policy more generally. Here is where

¹⁶ The Marukis went on to address such subjects as the Rape of Nanking, Auschwitz, the Battle of Okinawa (in which Japanese bore grave responsibility for the death of other Japanese), and Minamata (the postwar site of extensive deaths from environmental poisoning). Their paintings are reproduced and discussed in John W. Dower and John Junkerman, eds., *The Hiroshima Murals: The Art of Iri Maruki and Toshi Maruki* (Tokyo, 1985). The belated Japanese acknowledgment of non-Japanese victims of the atomic bombs—including Koreans, Japanese Americans, a few Caucasian American prisoners, individuals from other Asian countries, and Europeans—is a critical part of the unraveling of the Japanese victimization narrative. In the heroic American narrative, it is customary to refer vaguely, at best, to atomic bomb "casualties." By such linguistic leveling, combat and civilian deaths are placed on the same plane.

¹⁷ On Japanese responses to the bombs, see John W. Dower, "The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory," *Diplomatic History*, 19 (Fall 1995), 275–95; and the foreword to the reprint of a classic work, first published in English in 1955: John W. Dower, "Foreword," in Michihiko Hachiya, *Hiroshima Diary: The Journal of a Japanese Physician, August 6–September 30, 1945* (Chapel Hill 1995) v–xvii. On Ōe see Sodei, "Hiroshima/Nagasaki as History and Politics," 1121.

¹⁸ See, for example, the use of this phrase by Richard Hallion, chief historian of the air force, *Washington Times*, Aug. 30, 1994; and by Congressman Sam Johnson and six of his colleagues in a letter to I. Michael Heyman, secretary of the Smithsonian, Dec. 13, 1994, in Air Force Association, "Congressional Correspondence and Press Releases," pt. 8 of "The Enola Gay Debate, August 1993–May 1995," unpaginated compilation of documents available from the Air Force Association, 1501 Lee Highway, Arlington, VA 22209.

the triumphal story line gives way to a tragic narrative. The "good war" against Axis aggression and atrocity was brought to an end by a policy that the United States, Great Britain, and the League of Nations all had condemned only a few years previous, when first practiced by Japan and Germany, as "barbarous" and "in violation of those standards of humane conduct which have been developed as an essential part of modern civilization." That policy was the identification of civilian men, women, and children as legitimate targets of aerial bombardment. The United States, President Franklin D. Roosevelt typically declared in 1940, could be proud that it "consistently has taken the lead in urging that this inhuman practice be prohibited." Five years later, well before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this inhuman practice was standard United States operating procedure.¹⁹

The proposed Smithsonian exhibition threatened to expose this moral ambiguity in the most vivid manner imaginable, by literally visualizing ground zero; and here, I submit, many proponents of the heroic narrative confronted an unanticipated and unexpectedly formidable challenge. For the triumphal story they cherished and the great icon that represented it—the huge, gleaming, refurbished *Enola Gay* Superfortress itself—were overwhelmed by humble artifacts from the ashes of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was not so much the numbers of photographs and artifacts that the curators planned to include in the room on "Ground Zero," unit 4 of the planned exhibition, that undermined the heroic narrative, although this was fiercely argued. Rather, it was the intimate nature of these latter items.

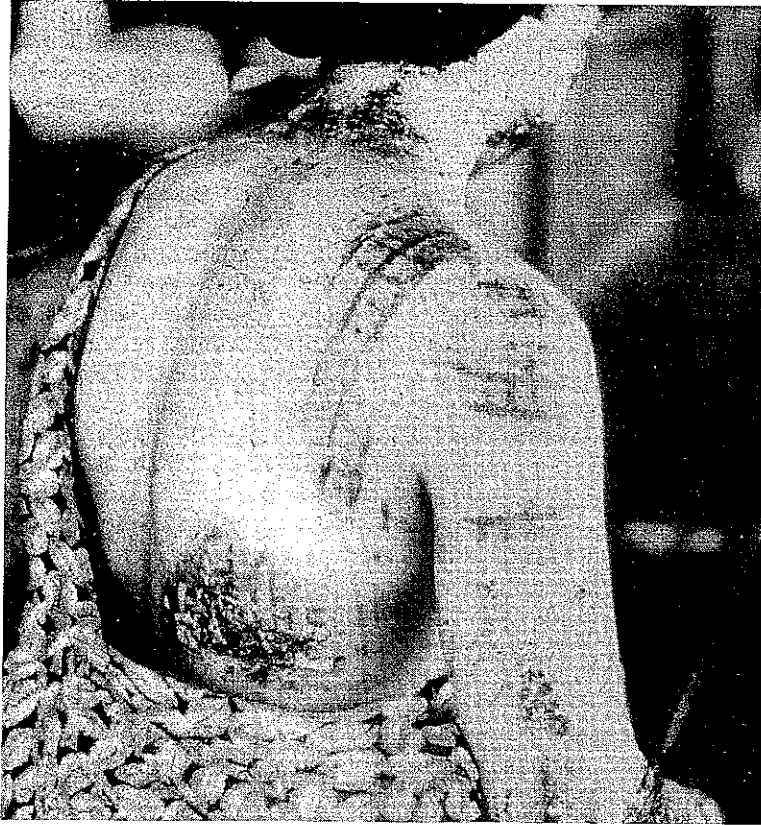
Nothing brought this to life more succinctly than the juxtaposition of the Superfortress and the lunch box.

Among artifacts the Smithsonian's curators proposed bringing to Washington from the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima was a seventh-grade schoolgirl's charred lunch box, containing carbonized rice and peas, that had been recovered from the ashes. The girl herself had disappeared. In the Japanese milieu, this is a typical, intensely human atomic bomb icon; and to American visitors to an exhibition, it would be intensely human too. This pathetic artifact (and other items like it) obsessed and alarmed critics of the proposed exhibition, and for obvious reasons: for the little lunch box far outweighed the glistening Superfortress in the preceding room. It would linger longer in most visitors' memories. Inevitably, it would force them to try imagining an incinerated child. Museum visitors who could gaze on this plain, intimate item and still maintain that the use of the bombs was "morally unambiguous" would be a distinct minority.²⁰

This sense of the tragedy of the war, even of the "good war" against an atrocious Axis enemy, became lost in the polemics that engulfed the Smithsonian. Yet it is not an original perception, certainly not new to the more civilized discourse

¹⁹ Dower, *War without Mercy*, 37–41. See also Ronald Schaffer, "American Military Ethics in World War II: The Bombing of German Civilians," *Journal of American History*, 67 (Sept. 1980), 318–34; Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon* (New Haven, 1987); and Barton Bernstein, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered," *Foreign Affairs*, 74 (Jan./Feb. 1995), 135–52.

²⁰ For the critics' fixation on the lunch box see, for example, John I. Correll, "War Stories at Air and Space," *Air Force Magazine*, 7 (April 1994) 24; and John T. Correll, "'The Last Act' at Air and Space," *ibid.* (Sept. 1994) 61.



The National Air and Space Museum planned to use this image of a Hiroshima survivor's burn patterns in its exhibition "The Last Act." When the museum replaced that exhibition with "The *Enola Gay*" in spring 1995 it dropped that image and the entire section of the exhibition entitled "Ground Zero."

Courtesy National Museum of Health and Medicine/Armed Forces Institute of Pathology, HP 138a

on the bombs that has taken place in previous years. Indeed, in oblique ways even President Harry S. Truman, a hero of the triumphal narrative, showed himself sensitive to the tragic dimensions of his decision to use the bombs. The day after Nagasaki was bombed, he expressed qualms about killing "all those kids." Years later it was discovered, in a copy of a book about the bombs in his personal library, that the former president had underlined this quotation from Horatio's famous speech in *Hamlet*.

let me speak to the yet unknowing world
 How these things came about: So shall you hear
 Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
 Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
 Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
 And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
 Fall'n on the inventors' heads
 But let this same be presently perform'd
 Even while men's minds are wild; lest more mischance,
 On plots and errors, happen ²¹

²¹ Bernstein, *Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender* 257; Merle Miller *Plain Speaking: An Oral Biography of Harry S. Truman* (New York 1973) 248