

# Where Do We Stand on the A-Bomb?

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Michael S. Henry

The recent controversy at the Smithsonian Institute over how to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the use of the Atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki focuses attention on a historical struggle that has smoldered since the Japanese surrendered. The debate has been between traditional and revisionist historians. Since 1945, scholars have supported (traditional) or attacked (revisionist) the value of the bombs in hastening the end of World War II.

For two decades after the war, the traditionalists held sway in the debate. According to writers such as Herbert Feis, the bombs were dropped as a military move to end the war, and to prevent a bloody invasion of Japan. While acknowledging that Japan was reeling in the summer of 1945, the traditionalists do not believe the military was ready to surrender. Thus, the traditionalists conclude that the A-bombings were justified and ought not be censured; they saved both American and Japanese lives.

Spawned by the Vietnam War in the 1960s, revisionist historians such as Gar Alperovitz questioned the traditionalist's interpretations. They contend that the invasion was unnecessary, and the A-bombs

were not needed militarily. They suggest the Russian declaration of war in August 1945 was sufficient to jolt the Japanese into giving up.

To the revisionists, American policy makers had a political rather than a military agenda in using the bombs. Truman and his advisors wanted the weapons to send a message to the Soviets. They hoped the power and terror of the Atomic attacks would make Russia more manageable and willing to accept America's post-war goals in Asia and Europe. In short, the United States tried to use Atomic diplomacy to blackmail the Soviets into post-war cooperation. Thus, the bombs were militarily unnecessary and a horrific waste of life.

For most people, the first comprehensive treatment of the A-bomb controversy comes in their high school years. And certainly our children are likely to learn about this debate in high school United States history. But, what do people learn about the A-bombings in school? Where do our textbooks stand on this issue? Do they support the traditionalists or the revisionists? Do they defend or condemn United States actions?

To answer these questions, I looked at six widely-used high school American his-

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tory textbooks:

Graff's *America: The Glorious Republic* (1985);  
Boorstin and Kelley's *A History of the United States* (1990);  
DiBacco, Mason, and Appy's *History of the United States* (1991);  
Bragdon, McCutchen, and Ritchie's *History of A Free People* (1995);  
Jordan, Greenblatt, and Bowes's *The Americans: A History* (1994); and  
Todd, Curti, and Boyer's *The American Nation* (1995).

I am interested in their treatment of America's motives and objectives in using the bombs, its warning to the Japanese, the Japanese attitude toward surrender, the Soviet role in ending the war, and the human cost of the attacks. In sum, I was curious about the extent to which revisionist historiography had penetrated high school textbooks.

All the books discussed the Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Each devoted 1/2 to 3/4 of a page to the development and use of the weapons. And three books (Bragdon, Jordan, and Todd) supplemented the text information with end-of-the-chapter discussions based on the historiographic debate between the revisionists and traditionalists, or primary sources that presented various points of view on the use of the bombs. After considering these materials, students were asked to decide if the bombings of Japan were justified.

While all the books summarized casualties at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, none of them presented the data in a way to raise sympathy or to make pure victims of the Japanese. Five of the books had a photograph of the destruction at either Hiroshima or Nagasaki. Although Jordan's book included letters from the people at Nagasaki, no book had pictures of the survivors. The texts estimated the casualties for the two attacks in the range of 200,000 people. In addition, Bragdon compared Hiroshima with the "83,000 incinerated by American napalm bombs in Tokyo." Boorstin best summarized the consensus view of the

books that Truman knew "1000s of innocent Japanese would die," but he concluded that "the odds were that it would cost less (than the invasion)."

All the historians recognized the military necessity for dropping the bombs. They noted the United States believed it would need to invade Japan in 1945 and that such action would be bloody. Several authors put potential American casualties in the neighborhood of one million. All agreed the bombs shortened the war and saved lives on both sides.

Two books (Todd and Jordan) added retribution as a motive for the A-bombings. They quoted Truman's announcement on 6 August 1945: "The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold." Overall, the writers agreed with Truman's assessment that the bombs were necessary to save "the lives of thousands and thousands

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of young Americans" by preventing the invasion of the home islands.

The books also concurred that the United States gave a clear warning to the Japanese. All quoted from the Potsdam declaration of July 1945 that Japan faced "prompted and utter destruction" if it did not surrender. One book (DiBacco) acknowledged that some Manhattan Project scientists wanted to give the Japanese a demonstration of the bomb's power as a warning of its destructive force, but American policy makers rejected this option. Nevertheless, all authors seemed satisfied that the Japanese received sufficient warning, but refused to heed it.

While the authors agreed on most aspects of the bombings, they differed widely on whether or not Japan was ready to capitulate in August 1945. Two books (Graff and Todd) did not directly mention the question of Japanese surrender at all. Three

books (Jordan, DiBacco, and Boorstin) indicated there was a struggle between the Japanese civilian authorities, who favored surrender, and the military, who wanted to fight on. One book (Bragdon) said the United States broke the Japanese code and knew their leaders planned to surrender before the bomb was used. Again, Boorstin expressed the only consensus reached by the authors: "no one knew how long Japan would hold out."

None of the historians seemed impressed that the Soviets played a major role in ending the war with Japan. Only four books mentioned that Russia declared war on 8 August 1945 at all, and none speculated that this action was likely to shorten the war. Nor did any author suggest the United States used the bombs to prevent Soviet gains in Asia or to intimidate Stalin in the post-war era.

On balance, the six United States history books gave little credence to the revisionist interpretation of the Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Students reading any of the books would likely conclude the A-bomb was a terrible, but necessary tool needed to end the war. None of the texts asserted that American policy makers had ulterior motives in using the A-bomb. It was a military weapon designed to achieve a military objective.

Some elements of the revisionist's thinking appeared in the end-of-the-chapter supplements in two books (Bragdon and Todd), however. Bragdon mentioned that some people "believed that the real reason the bombs were used was to intimidate Stalin and the Soviet Union." Yet, this statement was presented as an interpretation to be discussed, not as a fact to be accepted.

In summary, if you favor the traditionalist view of the A-bombings, you will be pleased with current high school history textbooks. If, however, you want to understand the revisionist position, you will not find it in our schools today. For those ideas, you will need to head off to your favorite bookstore for the latest edition of Gar Alperovitz's *Atomic Diplomacy*. □