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## **Unpacking the Bomb: Media Coverage of Hiroshima and Nagasaki**

*“[News] media helped put in place a narrative that legitimized the use of nuclear weapons and absorbed the bomb into American life.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“All the major elements of our contemporary engagement with the nuclear reality took shape literally within days of Hiroshima”<sup>2</sup>*

On August 6, 1945 the *Enola Gay*, an American B-29 bomber dropped the world's first ever atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, instantly killing 80,000 people. Three days later Nagasaki was hit and another 40,000 casualties were added to the death toll. The cities were raised to the ground. Over the next couple months tens of thousands more Japanese civilians would die from radiation exposure and poisoning. Current estimates that place the cities' total death tolls at 150,000 and 75,000 respectively, are still considered conservative. The devastation was terrifying and today, people refer to the dropping of the bombs as “the greatest act of terrorism”<sup>3</sup> and generally perceive it as unjustified. In 1995, 50 years after the bombing, a Gallup poll found that only 44% of American respondents “replied that if the atomic bomb decision had been theirs to make, they would have dropped the bomb”.<sup>4</sup>

And yet, immediately after the bombings, in the Gallup poll conducted on August 16, 1945 85% of American respondents expressed support for using the new atomic bomb on Japanese cities as compared with 10% who states their opposition. The following month the same poll found overwhelming approval... [only] 4% would have refused to use the bomb”<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, by the end of August 1945 it appeared as though the atomic bomb had integrated itself into

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<sup>1</sup> Mohan, “Nuclearism and the Legacy of U.S. Media Coverage of Hiroshima – Nuclear Age Peace Foundation.”

<sup>2</sup> Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. Pg xxi

<sup>3</sup> Awan, “Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Single Greatest Acts of Terrorism in Human History?”

<sup>4</sup> Asada, *Culture Shock and Japanese-American Relations : Historical Essays*. 208

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 212

American pop culture. For example, “the bar at the Washington Press Club offered an ‘Atomic Cocktail’... A letter in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* suggested that atomic vitamin pills be given to the slumping Athletics. *Time* said the Alamogordo test had ‘proved the bomb a smash-hit’”<sup>6</sup>

America’s positive reaction to the bomb and apparent acceptance was not mere happenstance, rather it was a coordinated effort on the behalf of the American government and the news media. The news media and official government handles, especially in war, do not always share a perspective, as seen in Vietnam, Korea and, more latterly, Iraq. However, certainly in the critical period between the dropping of the bomb in August 1945 and the creation of the Atomic Energy Commission, which transferred America’s nuclear program to civilian control, in January 1947, news media and government worked as one to ensure a positive reception for the bomb. Looking back, the situation begs the question how? How was the media so successful at shaping public opinion? What made news media’s coverage of Hiroshima and Nagasaki so influential, unanimous and accepted, following an event now considered controversial?

Given the war context, it is easy to argue that censorship was the primary means of shaping public opinion. But, while war-time censorship played a significant role in the success of post-Hiroshima news media, it was ultimately the media’s ability to create a focused and coherent narrative that was then tied into the prevailing culture and public sentiments of the time that made their coverage so convincing.

## **CENSORSHIP**

The US Office of Censorship issued its first voluntary Censorship Code on January 15, 1942 and continued to play a significant role in the American public perception throughout the war. While censorship was voluntary, reporters in the field still had to pass military censors, making it very difficult for media outlets to publish anything contrary to official government statements. For example, General MacArthur went “to pains to restrict journalists’ access to the bombed cities, and his military censors were sanitizing and even killing dispatches that described the horror.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. 10

<sup>7</sup> “Hiroshima Cover-Up.”

Even when journalists managed to make it to the bombed cities getting their dispatches back could be even harder. The classic example remains George Weller of the Chicago Daily News who defied orders and sneaked into Nagasaki to write 25,000 words on the atrocity. Upon finishing his article however, he “made a crucial error: He submitted the piece to military censors. His newspaper never even received his story. As Weller later summarized his experiences with Macarthur’s censors, ‘They won’”<sup>8</sup>

While censorship limited the media, it had an even greater impact on the public given the limited media outlets available. With fewer magazines, newspapers and radio channels to choose from, it was much more difficult for average citizens to gain exposure to alternate perspectives. Hence, citizens were inundated with similar information for almost every form of news given the low number of different outlets in circulation made it much easier for the censors to control.

Thus, it cannot be disputed that censorship played a role in the forming of American public opinion following the bombing. Its biggest contribution was aiding in the marginalization of the bombs victims through the censorship of radiation related material as well as visual evidence.<sup>9</sup> However, while censorship certainly aided the government and media, it was not the sole reason for public acceptance of the bomb. Censorship’s inability to explain the full level of support, is seen through the events that emerged courtesy of Australian journalist Wilfred Burchett. Although he and Weller made it to Japan at roughly the same time, Burchett was the first to report on the impact of the bomb on Hiroshima which he described as looking like “a monster steamroller had passed over it and squashed it out of existence”.<sup>10</sup> Despite US efforts that included confiscating Burchett’s camera, his dispatch made in to the London Daily Express. This article was the first mention of “Disease X” and the “atomic plague” – symptoms we now recognize as radiation sickness. While Burchett’s vivid descriptions of the ruins shocked readers around the world, the US government was able to quickly put an end to “atomic plague” talk by inviting a group of journalists out to the New Mexico test site to see for themselves the lack of radiation. Following the trip, major newspapers across the country denounced “Disease X” as a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Mohan, “Nuclearism and the Legacy of U.S. Media Coverage of Hiroshima – Nuclear Age Peace Foundation.”

<sup>10</sup> Tanter, “Voice and Silence in the First Nuclear War: Wilfred Burchett and Hiroshima.”

Japanese propaganda creation in articles “US ATOM BOMB SITE BELIES TOKYO TALES: TESTS ON NEW MEXICO RANGE CONFIRM THAT BLAST, AND NOT RADIATION, TOOK TOLL” by Laurence that described how “the Japanese are still continuing their propaganda [and] attempting to create sympathy for themselves and milder terms... Thus, the Japanese described ‘symptoms’ that did not ring true”<sup>11</sup>

The ability of the US government and media to regain control of the situation and dismiss contradictory information highlights that American acceptance of the bomb was not only due to a suppression of facts. Rather, censorship was just one element used to mold public opinion. The bigger reason the media was able to have an impact on perception was because the news and government understood the culture within which they were working. Hence, they were able to create narratives that reflected, built on and played into popular sentiments, thereby making their version of events easier to believe and accept.

## **NARRATIVES**

In reaction to the bombs, and building off the poetic press releases written by Laurence, news media crafted focused, synchronized narratives that reflected public mood to create a positive public acceptance of the bomb. Media across the country promoted the bomb through a combination of four arguments and positioning tactics: (1) emphasizing the bomb as vengeance on Japan, (2) diminishing victim’s stories and denying the existence of radiation, (3) highlighting the bomb’s technological achievements and the positive potential for nuclear energy and finally, (4) by stressing the bomb as a necessary evil that saved countless American lives.

### *THE A-BOMBS AS VENGEANCE*

A lot of media coverage of the bomb positioned the dropping of the A-Bombs as an equal, justified form of revenge. By emphasizing Japanese treatment of American POWs and returning to Pearl Harbor rhetoric journalists were able to incite anger in Americans that made them accept

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<sup>11</sup>Laurence, “US Atom Bomb Site Belies Tokyo Tales: Tests on New Mexico Range Confirm That Blast, and Not Radiation, Took Toll.”

the bomb as justified through revenge. As Laurence summed up in a *New York Times* article “Does one feel any pity or compassion for the poor devils about to die [from the bomb]? Not when one thinks about Pearl Harbor and the Death March on Bataan.”<sup>12</sup> And this wasn’t a perspective limited just to news media, it was echoed all the way through government. Even President Truman helped position the bomb as justified revenge on Japan stating in his speech announcing the dropping of *Little Boy* on Hiroshima that “the Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbour. They have been repaid many fold.”<sup>13</sup> He further compounded this sentiment on August 11 when he stated, “nobody is more disturbed over the use of Atomic bombs than I am but I was frankly disturbed over the unwarranted attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor and their murder of our prisoners of war. The only language they seem to understand is the one we have been using to bombard them. When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast. It is most regrettable but nevertheless true.”<sup>14</sup>

Ultimately, in his book *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult* Newman summarizes American lack of guilt when he states that “except for a tiny minority, was there guilt among the Allies. They had fought against tyranny, for democracy, had been outrageously provoked by Japan's sneak attack, and wanted only to achieve a lasting peace, not to deny prosperity to their enemies. The atom bomb? Just another weapon. Given Japan's transgressions, it was not only a legitimate weapon, it provided warranted retribution.”<sup>15</sup>

### *RADIATION + MARGINALIZING VICTIMS*

Another key component to the media’s and government’s post-Hiroshima reporting was their systematic denial of radiation sickness and overall de-emphasis of victim’s stories. A lot of the victim marginalization came through extreme censorship of visual evidence of the bombs. For example, the first photographs of victims only appeared in *Life* magazine two months after the war ended and even when they did, the photo’s potential power was undermined through their captions in which “the photographer reported that [the] injuries looked like those he had seen

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<sup>12</sup> Laurence, “Atomic Bombing of Nagasaki Told By Flight Member.”

<sup>13</sup> “One Man, One Mission.”

<sup>14</sup> Rotter, *Hiroshima : The World’s Bomb*. 128

<sup>15</sup> Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*.155

when he photographed men burned at Pearl Harbor”<sup>16</sup> This news sanitation of radiation complications was a direct following of the government’s official narrative of the atomic bombs “which downplayed civilian casualties and categorically dismissed reports of the deadly lingering effects of radiation”.<sup>17</sup>

Any reporter who deigned include reports of the ‘atomic plague’ was accused of falling for Japanese propaganda and hence, instantly discredited given the patriotic sentiments of the time. And censorship was not just limited to radiation, all the way through the 1940’s anything that “might invite mistrust or resentment” of the US was banned, hence, any reports on the continuing health problems failed to make news reports.<sup>18</sup>

### *THE “BRIGHT ATOMIC FUTURE”*

The censoring of radiation and health concerns paved the way for mainstream news media to cut the victims out of the narrative completely, and instead, focus on the bomb’s impressive technological innovation. According to popular media, there seemed no limit to the new potential of atomic energy; an *Atlantic* article claimed that “through medical advances alone, atomic energy has already saved more lives than were snuffed out in Hiroshima and Nagasaki” and multiple source spoke of miracle cancer treatments stemming from atomic energy.<sup>19</sup>

Journalists also latched on to the grandiose language used in press releases to describe the bomb and compounded their exalting of atomic energy’s potential by drawing parallels between the bomb and mythology. *Life* magazine cited Prometheus and declared that “atomic energy will probably have a similar history [to fire]. It is potentially the greatest enemy of man, but it is also his greatest hope for the future.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Roeder Jr, “Making Things Visible: Learning from the Censors.”

<sup>17</sup> “Hiroshima Cover-Up.”

<sup>18</sup> Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*. 156

<sup>19</sup> Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. 123

<sup>20</sup> Asada, *Culture Shock and Japanese-American Relations : Historical Essays*. 63

Emphasizing the bomb's positive future potential was successful in the mediation of post-bomb sentiments given how well it played into America's belief in innovation, the ability to fix problems and "what Walt Whitman called the 'strong, light work of engineers.'" <sup>21</sup> It also provided a way to lament and accept the massive destruction caused by the bomb within a productive and freeing framework. Focusing on the fact that the bomb was the means to unlimited power, an end to war, disease and even –some claimed- poverty, made the terrible destruction of Japanese more palatable. <sup>22</sup>

### *A NECESSARY EVIL*

The last core narrative seen at the end of WWII was the justification of the A-Bombs by claiming they had saved the US from undertaking a land invasion that would have cost thousands of lives. Due to space constraints, this paper does not delve into the more recent controversy over the casualty estimates, and whether they were artificially inflated or justifiable. Instead, the paper focuses on the information available immediately following the war and its role for news media.

The primary part of this narrative was the American government's assurances that had the bomb not been used, the US would have been forced to mount a land invasion of mainland Japan. This operation was not guaranteed to succeed and would have cost American lives the government did not want to lose. The US had just finished taking Okinawa in two months and three weeks. The operation had killed some 110,000 Japanese combatants, caused 7,400 to surrender (an unprecedented action) and killed 45,000-80,000 civilians. <sup>23</sup> On the American side, there were 50,000 casualties - 12,500 of which were soldiers that were killed. <sup>24</sup> To put this in perspective, Okinawa (1206 km<sup>2</sup>) – an island .5% the area of mainland Japan Honshu (225,800 km<sup>2</sup>). <sup>25</sup>

This resulted in a lot of rhetoric that acknowledged the mass destruction of the bomb but positioned it as a necessary means to achieve an important end – the end of war and Japanese

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 61

<sup>23</sup> Rotter, *Hiroshima : The World's Bomb*.140

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 140

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

surrender. This rhetoric proved powerful for citizens as saving American lives was seen as an ultimate priority so it helped rationalize the destruction of the enemy. For example, Henry L Stimson, US Secretary of War claimed that his “chief purpose was to end the war in victory with the least cost in the lives of the men in the armies which I had helped to raise. In the light of the alternatives which, on a fair estimate, were open to us I believe that no man, in our position and subject to our responsibilities, holding in his hands a weapon of such possibilities for accomplishing this purpose and saving those lives, could have failed to use it and afterwards looked his countrymen in the face.”<sup>26</sup>

## **CULTURE**

While the narratives employed by the media and US government to justify the use of the A-Bombs were logical and persuasive, they would not have carried the same impact had they not been reflective of broad sentiments in America’s collective psyche. In particular, it was the (1) rampant racism and anti-Japanese sentiment as well as (2) widespread individual uncertainty and fear about the ramifications of the bomb that made Americans such a receptive audience and willing to believe the narratives shown to them.

### *ANTI-JAPANESE SENTIMENT*

Throughout the war internal US propaganda had vilified the Japanese. In the words of General John L DeWitt, head of the US Western Defense Command, “there was no means test given for loyalty: ‘a Jap is a Jap’... and all ‘Japs’ are potentially treacherous” the *New Republic* elaborated claiming that ‘the natural enemy of every American man, woman and child is the Japanese man, woman and child.’”<sup>27</sup> Japan’s sneak attack on Pearl Harbor only served as a basis for further hatred and antagonism.

By 1945 America was four years into anti-Japanese racism. It had put Japanese Americans in internment camps and seized their possessions. Americans had heard the horror stories from

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.130

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.166



servicemen who escaped Japanese POW camps in 1944 when President Roosevelt authorised their release.<sup>28</sup> The climate was right for the country to accept the positioning of the A-Bombs as vengeance – a terror Japan had brought upon itself through its transgressions. Four years of reducing Japanese, and Japanese-Americans, to the status of animals or beasts, meant it was easier to support articles and releases that saw the killing of tens of thousands of Japanese as justified to save American lives. This prevalent racism also made it easier for news media to minimize coverage of Japanese victims as Americans were not conditioned to feel sympathy for this adversary as they “considered [Japanese] inferior to themselves.”<sup>29</sup>

### *WITH STRENGTH COMES VULNERABILITY*

The Manhattan Project had been kept a closely guarded secret for the duration of the war. Hence, when the US dropped the first atomic bomb its own citizens were just as in the dark about this new weapon’s capabilities as the unsuspecting Japanese victims. While immediately after Hiroshima America was the world’s only nuclear superpower, the public realized very quickly that they would not be alone for long. As one article recalled, “[the bomb awoke a fear that] is not new; in its classical form, it is the fear of irrational death. But overnight it has become intensified, magnified.”<sup>30</sup> This speaks to many citizen’s mix of anxiety and apprehension that the very same weapon America had used to such great gain could also be used against them. Americans had simultaneously won unconditional surrender from Japan while unleashing the most destructive weapon in the world on two cities. The rampant internal confusion about what to think about the bomb, left Americans open to media’s influence and grasping for a framework on which to base a judgement as well as a way to understand what had just taken place.

This swirling confusion meant that the media’s emphasis on the positive sides of nuclear energy was even more well received by the American public. In Paul Boyer’s terms “the bright atomic future narrative not only served as a cultural ‘anodyne to terror’...it also focus[ed] attention on the beneficent atom (peace) and not the malevolent atom (war)”<sup>31</sup> Thus, the argument for a

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<sup>28</sup> Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*. 30

<sup>29</sup> Rotter, *Hiroshima : The World’s Bomb*. 166

<sup>30</sup> Boyer, *By the Bomb’s Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*. 8

<sup>31</sup> Asada, *Culture Shock and Japanese-American Relations : Historical Essays*. 61

nuclear program being necessary in both war and peace started to take root and become normalized. American's confusion made it easier to distract them from the negative destruction with the positive potential as people were seeking a way to support their country's decision. Furthermore, the fear of the unknown in relation to the atomic bomb made individual citizens less likely to dig for negative news of the devastation thereby further facilitating the positive narratives and marginalization of Japanese victims.

## CONCLUSION

The story of news media post Hiroshima is fascinating because even though media and the government were able to collaborate in the immediate aftermath to create positive public perception, support for the atomic bomb has not lasted. When one compares Gallup polls from 1945 and 1995 one sees a dramatic shift from only 4% of the population opposing the bomb in 1945 to 49% saying they "would have tried some other way" in 1995.<sup>32</sup> This profound shift in public opinion on the bomb actually further reinforces the paper's central argument that censorship, narrative and culture all worked together to successfully mold public opinion following WWII. As these three factors shifted out of war time, so too did public opinion.

Post-war, censorship drastically diminished. Photos of victims started to emerge. Dispatches from Japan that had been censored were rediscovered and shared with the public. New information regarding the actual predicted casualty numbers was brought to light and the full impact of radiation began to be understood. On top of this, as the 'spell of *Remember Pearl Harbor*' started to fade and the younger generation no longer remembered the attack, anti-Japanese sentiment also fell. A 1995 survey conducted by ABC News Polling Unit and NHK (Japan Broadcasting Corporation) found that 60% of Americans over 60 "say they feel anger toward the Japanese on account of the Pearl Harbor attack" however, when one the whole population was asked the number dropped to 39%.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 43

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 216

All these factors combined meant that by the time the early 21<sup>st</sup> century had arrived, American culture and censorship practices were no longer in place to support the narratives that had once been so effective. Instead, culture and nuclear energy was being seen in the shadow of the Cold War – a completely new and different context.

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