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May 2010

Selected Media Depictions of the Dropping of the Atomic Bomb

How many singular events have occurred throughout history that one can point to and say, “That is when everything changed?” One such event is the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. It is impossible truly to understand milestones of this kind without actually living through them. The closest we can come to comprehending what it was like is to understand how people reacted at the time.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7th, 1941 forced the United States into a war that the government had been trying to avoid. This event was enormous in the same way that the dropping of the bomb was, especially for the people living at the time. People were shocked and outraged that the Japanese, unprovoked as they were, would attack the United States. The United States would be in the war for four years and lose over 400,000 troops. In 1945, though, President Harry Truman made a decision that forever changed how the world thought of war and diplomacy. He gave orders, that he hoped would end the war for good, to drop the newly developed atomic bomb on Japan. On August 6th, 1945 the atomic bomb called Little Boy was dropped on Hiroshima and on August 9th, 1945 the atomic bomb named Fat Man was dropped on Nagasaki. Nine days later, the Japanese surrendered [Infoplease, “America’s Wars: U.S. Casualties and Veterans”; available from <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0004615.html>; Internet; accessed 17 April 2010].

These facts are only facts, though. To understand the enormity of this sudden and shocking entrance into the atomic age, it is essential to look at the mainstream media, alternative presses, and interviews of civilians who lived through this time. Two *LIFE* Magazines, one from August 6th and the other from August 27th, suggest how the mainstream media reacted. The *Catholic Worker* newspaper is an example of an alternative press and there is a current website, called *indymedia*, that represents the same opinions. Also enlightening are two oral histories from two civilians who lived through the dropping of the bomb, recorded by and archived at the New York State Military Museum. One interviewee is a man who served in World War II and the other is a woman who worked on the Manhattan Project. Taken together, these various sources help to show what the reaction was to the dropping of the bombs.

In this current age, most people, when they think of the atomic bomb, think of the atrocious destruction and loss of *LIFE* that it caused. People today also understand that it ended a war that was costing many people their lives, both in the United States and abroad. However, this

fact takes a backseat to the images from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the burned women and children, the decimated buildings, and the utter ruin that was Japan after the bomb. The reaction was not the same at the time, though. People all around the world were thrilled that the war was finally over. Their sons, brothers, fathers, husbands, and boyfriends could finally come home and escape the violence. This is what people then focused on. The major newspapers and magazines reported on the triumph of the United States, the celebrations and general giddiness of the civilians, and the wonder of the new atomic weapon that had been used successfully. Reactions were almost unanimously positive. There were a couple of exceptions to that, but they represented a very small minority.

By simply reading the headlines of *LIFE* Magazine, a popular mainstream publication, it is clear that Americans, after the bomb dropped, were just happy that the war was over. There was little sympathy for the destruction and death of the Japanese in these headlines. They were brutally honest and even gloating about the end of the war. In the *LIFE* issue of August 20th, 1945, the headlines throughout the magazine are quite candid. One headline, in huge type font and occupying most of page one, announced: “The War Ends; Burst of Atomic Bomb Bring Swift Surrender of Japanese.” Then, later in this issue, another headline read: “Hiroshima; Atom Bomb No. 1 Obliterated It.” The first headline is just truthful, although nothing is said of the Japanese losses. However, the second headline seems more hard-hearted. The writers are certainly not empathizing with the Japanese losses in any way.

The end of the war is all that matters at this point. Following the story about the first atomic bomb, is an article about the second. This headline states similarly, “Nagasaki; Atom Bomb No. 2 Disemboweled It.” In this headline, the theme is taken a step further. This kind of diction [“obliterate” and “disembowel”] suggests that people at the time reacted positively, perhaps even gloatingly, to the dropping of the bomb.

The reporting itself was not filled with the stories of the Japanese dead and wounded or the overall effects of the bomb, but rather on the many celebrations and rejoicing that were happening all over the United States. The headline for the *LIFE* Magazine issue of August 27th, 1945 simply says, “Victory Celebrations” in bold, large type across the page. This issue presents numerous, huge pictures of the celebrations and parades in the United States for the end of the war. There are pictures of soldiers kissing women, of hundreds of people crowded in the streets of New York City, and of people throwing streamers out of their windows into the streets below. These pictures capture the mood and style of reporting that were so prevalent at the end of the war, as Phillip Knightley has documented in his classic history of war correspondents, *The First Casualty*.

LIFE reports, “During the last week of World War II and the first week of the so-called Atomic Age, lively celebrations, prayerful thanksgivings, hangovers, prognostications and, especially in some sections, ambiguous introspections were in evidence” [Noel F. Busch, “Week the War Ended,” *LIFE*, August 27, 1945, 29]. Most of this issue contains no material of real substance about the dropping of the bomb. It reports on dance contests, bestselling books, and

even animals. The article reads, “Animals, always up to something unpredictable, distinguished themselves in Chicago, where a squirrel bit his 1-year-old master through the leg, and in Canada, where a moose stepped into a bathtub” [*Ibid.*]. This issue also contains many pictures of all the random happenings around the nation. One picture shows a bartender mixing a cocktail next to a sign that reads, “Atomic Cocktail.” The caption underneath says, “The new era was met head on by a bartender in Columbus, Ohio, but Americans sanely continued to prefer bourbon” [*Ibid.*, 32]. This sort of unsubstantial and nonsensical reporting suggests the lack of sympathy, at this time, for the Japanese. People were just glad the war was over, it seems. The reporting covered anything and everything, including the trivial--but not the destruction in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Of course, *some* reporting covered the dropping of the bomb itself, although exact descriptions of the decimation seemed to be left out completely. The tone of the writing about the bomb was solemn and awe-filled but not regretful. One article described the exact moment when the bomb went off: “In the moment of its incomparable blast, air became flame, walls turned to dust. ‘My God,’ breathed the crew of the B-29 at what they saw” [“Hiroshima,” *LIFE*, 20 August 1945, 26.]. Clearly there was a sense of wonder at the new atomic weapon. People speculated about what this atomic energy could mean for the world. One article commented, “Military scientists speculated wildly about what the new weapon does to armies, navies, the art of defense. For if there is no defense, then perhaps man must either abolish international warfare or move his whole urban civilization underground” [“The Atomic Age,” *LIFE*, 20 August 1945, 32.].

Officials who were involved with the dropping seemed to better understand the ramification of what they had done. One article reporting on the bomb said, “The people of the world, although thrilled by the prospect of peace, were shaken by the new weapon, which had brought it about. Even General Carl Spaatz, whose airmen dropped the bombs, said hopefully, ‘Wouldn’t it be an odd thing if these were the only two atomic bombs ever dropped?’ [“The War Ends,” *LIFE*, 20 August 1945, 25].

President Harry Truman made a public statement after the bombing that seems closest to expressing regret for the Japanese losses as any official gets. One article reported, “President Truman, who knew what victory had cost and would still cost, proposed Sunday, Aug. 19, for prayer ‘to the memory of those who have given their lives...’ and to God ‘that He will support and guide us into the paths of peace’ ” [“Victory Celebrations,” *LIFE*, 27 August 1945, 21.]. Although not a direct apology, it is still conciliatory.

On the other hand, General Curtis LeMay of the Air Force was much less sympathetic toward the Japanese. He wrote about how the bombing was not anything out of the ordinary, as far as war goes. He said, “The assumption seems to be that it is much more wicked to kill people with a nuclear bomb, than to kill people by busting their heads with rocks” [Ernest R. May and Philip D. Zelikow, *The Kennedy Tapes* [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002], xxii.]. This was a harsh statement but it showed the differences in opinions, even within the government

officials. A Rotterdam, NY woman named Ruth Bull worked as a secretary for the Manhattan Project, which was the first successful testing of the atomic bomb. She recalled that after the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, everyone who worked on the Manhattan Project was called in for a counseling lecture. This lecture was to help them deal with the guilt they might have over the loss of so many Japanese lives. At first, Ruth said, she did not understand why anyone would need to go to the lectures; she herself was indifferent. However, then she began to think about all the women and children who were killed, it started to affect her. The government obviously had a notion of the effect that the bomb might have on people, or else they would not have held the lectures or made public statements Truman's.

There was also reporting on the international reactions to the dropping of the bomb and subsequent ending of the war. The headline of one article states, "Victory Reports Around The World; U.S. Fighting Men Lead Wild Celebrations At Japs' Surrender Offer." The article contains different sections that were written by correspondents around the world. One from London reports, "Winston Churchill received the news at his Westminster Gardens flat. He lit a fresh cigar and said: 'At last the job is finished.' " And the reporter from Paris wrote,

GIs and WACs, shouted and pounded each other on the backs and ran out into the streets. There they shook hands with every passer-by and soon Frenchmen joined them in impromptu parades down the Champs-Elysees and through the Grands Boulevards. Soldiers and civilians linked their arms together, and as they marched they sang Don't Fence Me In. General de Gaulle's face broke into a smile when he heard the news at the conclusion of a heavy session with his ministers on internal politics. [Harry Zinder, "Victory Reports Around The World," *LIFE*, 20 August 1945, 38.].

The correspondent out of Moscow reported on something of a more serious note. He wrote about the impact that he felt the atomic bomb had on the Russian people:

But what has seemed to grip most imaginations has been news of the atomic bomb. This story was quietly broken to the Russian people by a 74-line story on the back page of most newspapers. The story consisted entirely of excerpts from President Truman's announcement and that was all. No comment. No leaders. No editorial comment of any kind. But nobody missed the story or what it implied. And on everybody it had an odd, sobering effect. [Craig Thompson, "Victory Reports Around The World," *LIFE*, 20 August 1945, 38.].

So, does this reporting reveal something about how people were actually thinking at the time? Were people more concentrated and horrified by the atomic bomb than the major news sources revealed? One perspective on this can be found in an oral history, recorded by and archived at the New York State Military Museum, of Roland Fitzroy, a veteran of World War II. He worked in California for the military and two of his colleagues drove a piece of the atomic bomb that was dropped on Hiroshima to the naval base in San Francisco, where it was put on the boat that would carry it to the Enola Gay. Fitzroy commented about Truman's decision to drop the bomb, "[It was the] only possible decision. We would have lost millions of people. The week before we had bombed Tokyo with incendiary bombs, killed more people and nobody batted an eyelash but just because we did it with one bang..." This seems to be the general theme

portrayed in the mass media.

Journalists seemed to concentrate on the official sources' statements and reasons used to justify the dropping of the bomb. One article reported, "In his [Truman's] broadcast he told Americans and the rest of the listening world that he made no secret pacts at Potsdam, that the U.S., Canada and Great Britain would closely restrict the atomic bomb which had been used to 'shorten' the war" ["The War Ends," 34.]. Articles tended to focus on that fact and the fact that Japan had been warned and yet refused to surrender at the Potsdam conference. A *New York Times* article reported President Truman's solemn warning: "It was to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction that the ultimatum of July 26, was issued at Potsdam. Their leaders promptly rejected that ultimatum. If they do not now accept our terms, they may expect a rain of ruin from the air the like of which has never been seen on earth" [The New York Times On The Web, "On This Day"; available from <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/big/0806.html>; Internet; accessed 17 April 2010.].

Most media concentrated on official sources such as this.

Some alternative presses focused completely on the fate of the Japanese people and the destruction that the bomb had caused. These types of publications did not constitute a large portion of the population but they were still in existence at the time. The *Catholic Worker* is an example of this kind of alternative press. The Catholic Worker Movement promoted peace and social justice through lay Catholic activism and the newspaper reflected those beliefs. In September, a month after the atomic bomb was dropped, Dorothy Day, the leader of the Catholic Worker Movement, wrote an article denouncing the use of the bomb. She reflected,

We have killed 318,000 Japanese. That is, we hope we have killed them, the Associated Press, on page one, column one of the Herald Tribune, says. The effect is hoped for, not known. It is to be hoped they are vaporized, our Japanese brothers, scattered, men, women and babies, to the four winds, over the seven seas. Perhaps we will breathe their dust into our nostrils, feel them in the fog of New York on our faces, feel them in the rain on the hills of Easton [site of a Catholic Worker farm in Pennsylvania]. [The Catholic Worker Movement, "We Go on Record: the CW Response to Hiroshima"; available from <http://www.catholicworker.org/index.cfm>; Internet; accessed 17 April 2010.]

Dorothy Day also wrote to President Truman after the bomb was dropped. She said, "We beg you in the name of Christ crucified, to do all in your power to cause this abomination of desolation, this new discovery to be buried forever. Far better to be destroyed ourselves than to destroy others with such fiendish and inhuman ingenuity" [Quoted in Nancy L. Roberts, *Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 135]. Her horror at the Japanese deaths was unmistakable.

The dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki successfully ended World War II. It brought all American soldiers home and peace was finally attained. At what price did this success come, though? It brought the world into a whole different, more violent and fragile,

existence. Everything changed after those bombs were dropped. However, most of the U.S. media rejoiced at the ending of the war. They seemed to be far less concerned with the destruction of the two Japanese cities and their citizens than they were with the celebrations of the war's end.

The question remains: did people actually not care about the Japanese casualties or did their joy at the war's end simply overshadow their humanitarian instincts? Again, the evidence is mixed. The *Catholic Worker's* perspective and also some comments by mainstream journalists suggest that at least some people did comprehend and decry the bomb's use. Some observers even today claim that the mass media did not do an accurate job of covering the event. One article from the Portland Independent Media Center asserted about the coverage of the atomic bombs, "Mainstream media—including the nation's major newspapers and television broadcasting networks—have rarely wavered in their support of the official narrative, and have produced very little investigative reporting about its details or even verity" [Portland Independent Media Center, "Patriotic Correctness: the Hiroshima cover-up"; available from <http://portland.indymedia.org/en/2004/08/294141.shtml>; Internet; accessed 17 April 2010.].

This research's admittedly limited sample of content would tend to reinforce that conclusion. In any case, the use of the first atomic bombs completely changed the world. One article in *LIFE* Magazine articulated this quite well. It commented on the end of World War II: "When a man enters a year like 1939, he cannot expect ever to find the entrance to that fateful tunnel again. He is lucky enough to find the exit, which sends him out into an entirely different country" ["Hiroshima," 32].

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