Was A-bomb on Hiroshima necessary?;
U.S. historians debate reasons behind WWII decision by Truman

BYLINE: Jacob Margolies; Yomiuri Shimbun New York Bureau

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Why did the United States use the atom bomb against Japan at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the final days of World War II?

Most Americans have always believed that the decision was made in order to end the war as soon as possible and save the many lives that surely would have been lost if an invasion of Japan had been necessary.

In recent years, however, most scholars who have studied the reasons behind the dropping of the two bombs, which killed over 200,000 Japanese, have come to agree that the war could have ended prior to an American invasion without using the atomic bomb, and that at least to some extent anti-Soviet thinking was connected to the decision to use the bomb.

With the 50th anniversary of the bombing coming up in August 1995, and the Cold War over, the next year will see intense and renewed scrutiny in the United States of why the bomb was dropped and its repercussions.

The Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C., is planning a major nine-month exhibition beginning in May 1995 that will feature the Enola Gay, the B-29 plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, as well as artifacts showing the devastation that the bomb inflicted on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The exhibition will explore the different arguments regarding the reasons for the bombing, as well as how the decision to use it was made.

The 50th anniversary of the bomb will also see a new book on the subject by the noted revisionist historian Gar Alperovitz. The Yomiuri Shimbun recently interviewed Alperovitz and five other leading historians who have written extensively about the bomb and continue to debate questions surrounding its use.

In 1965, Alperovitz's controversial book Atomic Diplomacy challenged official explanations for the bomb. The book, which was updated in 1985, argued that diplomatic, rather than military considerations, were behind the decision to use the bomb.

Alperovitz has presented evidence including diaries and letters of President Harry Truman and his top advisers, and Japanese diplomatic cables that were intercepted by the U.S. military to argue that American leaders knew that the atom bomb was not necessary for gaining Japan's surrender, but that it was used nonetheless in hopes of limiting Soviet influence in Asia and Eastern Europe.

Alperovitz, with a team of researchers under his direction, has spent the past five years working on his new book, which he says will strengthen his claim that geopolitical considerations were behind the decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The period beginning with the Yalta Conference in February 1945 and continuing right up until the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945, is particularly important in understanding why the bomb was used.

There are differing interpretations of key events from this time, and the meaning of the discovered original documents and records is still being contested.
At Yalta, the Soviet Union agreed to join the war against Japan, three months after the German surrender. The Germans surrendered in May and when Truman, Stalin and Churchill met at Potsdam in July, the Soviets agreed that they would declare war against Japan on Aug. 15.

During the summer months as Japan's situation continued to deteriorate, Truman began receiving reports about Japanese "peace feelers" and of intercepted cables between Japan and its diplomats in Europe, indicating that Japan might be prepared to surrender under certain conditions, most importantly that it be allowed to maintain the Emperor system.

In late July and August, cables between Japan's Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo and Japan's Ambassador to the Soviet Union Naotake Sato discussed the need to end the war, and revealed that Prince Konoe would go to Moscow as the personal representative of the Emperor in an effort to put an end to the hostilities.

That Truman knew generally about these intercepted cables is indicated in his diary entry on July 18, 1945, where he mentions "...telegram from Jap Emperor asking for peace...."

During this time Truman was already presented with American military analysis that the Soviets' entry into the war would greatly accelerate Japan's surrender. It had become clear that victory was imminent, although it was not known when the war might end.

On July 17 at Potsdam, Truman wrote in his diary, "...He'll (Stalin) be in the war August 15. Fini Japan when that comes about." With the help of the Soviet Union, Truman hoped he would be able to end the war without an invasion of the Japanese mainland and many American lives could be saved.

But when on the following day Truman received details about the successful test on July 16 of a nuclear device at Alamogordo, N.M., Soviet entry into the war was no longer seen as desirable. A diary entry from Potsdam by an aide to then U.S. Secretary of State James Byrnes, Truman's closest adviser, stated that the secretary was "hoping for time, believing that after (the) atomic bomb Japan will surrender and Russia will not get in so much on the kill, thereby being in a position to press claims on China."

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill on July 23 said, "It is quite clear that the United States do not at the present time desire Russian participation in the war against Japan."

Hence the decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan was, Alperovitz argues, motivated by diplomatic considerations:

n To gain Japan's surrender before the Soviets entered the war and made advances in Asia.

n The United States desire to show the force of its powerful new weapon as it was engaged in tough negotiations over the fate of Eastern Europe.

n A general desire to impress and intimidate the Soviets.

Under Alperovitz's revisionist view, the use of the atomic bomb was entirely unnecessary for gaining Japan's surrender prior to the scheduled U.S. invasion of Kyushu on Nov. 1, 1945.

Japan was ready to surrender as long as it was allowed to keep the Emperor, and surely the Soviet entry into the war would have proven a final shock in persuading Japan to surrender.

This interpretation is fiercely contested by other historians. Stanford University's Barton Bernstein, a prominent scholar in the field, argues that the evidence shows that the bomb was used primarily to end the war on American terms, and to avoid if possible an invasion of Japan.

He acknowledges that evidence uncovered over the past 15 years indicates that anti-Soviet purposes were seen as a bonus, but argues that they were not the compelling reason for the decision to use the bomb.

Other leading historians who have investigated why the United States dropped the bomb come down somewhere in the middle. Most currently believe that the primary factor was the desire to end the war rapidly with Japan's unconditional surrender, and that diplomatic considerations in the nascent Cold War environment were a significant secondary reason.

They also point out that there were other important considerations that helped insure that the bomb once developed would be used. These included the huge cost of developing the weapon; domestic politics in the United States; and the entire conduct of World War II, beginning in Europe and continuing in Asia, in which nations had progressively moved to intentionally kill noncombatants on a massive scale.
Bernstein argues that the military advice Truman received foresaw the necessity of an invasion of Japan even if the Russians entered the war. At a June 18 meeting at the White House, Gen. George Marshall, the army chief of staff whom Truman depended on greatly for military advice, told the president that only heavy bombardment, followed by an invasion of the mainland, coupled with Soviet entry into the war would lead to Japan's surrender.

American military planners were anticipating the necessity of invasion, and two Joint Chief of Staff Planning Committee studies done in June 1945 estimated U.S. fatalities in a two-stage invasion of Japan at 46,000.

Truman desperately wanted to end the war with as little additional loss of American life as was possible and believed the bomb could accelerate Japan's unconditional surrender. The claim made by Truman after the war that the use of the atomic bomb prevented the loss of 500,000 American lives that would have accompanied an invasion of Japan was created after the fact to justify the bombing and to bar any scrutiny of the decision. There is no evidence that the president or any of his advisers believed the figure of 500,000, but the estimate of 46,000 lives was a concern that was taken seriously.

Bernstein also argues that the intercepted cables between Foreign Minister Togo and Japanese Ambassador Sato in Moscow are considerably more ambiguous than Alperovitz sees them. These communications suggest considerable uncertainty about what terms Japan would have been willing to accept to end the war.

In fact it was clear that the militarists in the Japanese Cabinet were determined to continue fighting and that the "peace forces" were fearful of a coup if the hard-line army faction learned about even the tentative considerations that were being given to negotiations.

Truman and Byrnes reading these contradictory intercepted messages could not have been confident that Japan was ready for peace.

Distrust of Japan and suspicion that its leaders were treacherous was the accepted view of U.S. leaders. Given this atmosphere, Bernstein believes that nothing in the intercepted cables could have led Truman to believe that Japan was ready to surrender prior to the bomb's use.

Even when Japan did finally surrender on Aug. 10, after two atomic bombs and Soviet entry into the war (on Aug. 8), it took the unprecedented intervention of the Emperor to convince a still divided Japanese Cabinet to make a formal peace offer.

Whatever the primary motivation for the bomb's use, military or diplomatic, there was never serious consideration not to use it. The recommendation to Truman to use the bomb without warning against Japan was made prior to Potsdam by a committee of Truman's top advisers including Byrnes and Secretary of War Henry Stimson on May 31.

The historian McGeorge Bundy, who helped Stimson write his memoirs before serving as a foreign policy adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, argues that once Truman accepted his advisers' recommendation in June to use the bomb the planning by the military to use it was set into motion, and that later events at Potsdam are unimportant to the decision.

Bundy stresses that given the determination to win the war and avoid U.S. casualties, it was taken for granted by U.S. leaders that if you developed the bomb you would use it to try to end the war.

Bundy does think, however, that if diplomatic communication between Japan and the United States had been clearer that it is possible the war could have been ended without using the atomic bomb. If the United States had informed Japan over the summer that (1) the Soviets would be entering the war, 2) that it would be possible to maintain the Emperor, (3) neutral observers at Alamogordo could confirm that the United States had developed this terrible new weapon there was a chance that Japan might have been persuaded to surrender before Aug. 6, 1945.

Several of Truman's close advisers, including Stimson and Joseph Grew, had urged the president in the Spring of 1945 to modify the demand for unconditional surrender to make it clear that the Emperor could be maintained.

Truman and Byrnes, however, feared that such a concession would be politically damaging in the United States and they refused to modify this demand until after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombing.

Truman and his closest advisers saw the bomb as a legitimate weapon and, especially given the great expense of developing it, they saw no reason not to use it. It was believed that it would help push Japan's leaders into unconditional surrender and that it would positively affect diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union.
Certainly, Truman knew that use of the bomb would receive overwhelming support from the war-weary U.S. public. Given the context of the times and the brutal history of the war, the decision on whether or not to use the bomb seemed an obvious one to U.S. policymakers.

With hindsight, however, the use of the bomb seems to have been unnecessary as a weapon for ending the war on military grounds. And as a tool of diplomacy, the atomic bomb hardly had the hoped-for-effect on the Soviet Union.

Two 1946 studies, one by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey and the other by army intelligence, concluded that even without the atomic bomb Japan would have collapsed before an invasion and that the planned Nov. 1 landing in Kyushu was only a "remote" possibility.

Whether Truman should have known this prior to August 1945 is open to debate.

The belief that the atomic bomb might convince the Soviet Union to surrender its geographic and political interests as the war came to an end proved to be incorrect. In fact, unbeknownst to the United States, the Soviets were well on their way to developing their own nuclear arsenal. After the war, Stimson recognized the danger of a spiraling arms race and suggested approaching the Soviets about the possibility of putting the bomb under international control.

His advice was rejected, and over the next 45 years the military standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union would dominate international relations around the world.

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Review of A-bomb controversy sought

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DATELINE: HIROSHIMA

The former director of the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima has sent a letter to the captain of the B-29 bomber that dropped the world's first atomic bomb on the city, seeking a review over a recent proposal by the U.S. veteran to change the historical interpretation of the bomb's use, The Yomiuri Shimbun learned Thursday.

Akihiro Takahashi, 62, addressed the letter to Paul Tibbets Jr., who was captain of the Enola Gay aircraft from which an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in 1945.

In the wake of a plan for a special exhibition at the National Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian Institution in the United States--which is to describe the outbreak and development of World War II and the situation of nuclear weaponry in the Cold War backdrop--Tibbets and other American veterans recently requested a change in the interpretation of the role of the A-bombs in the closing days of World War II.

The veterans complained that in the draft plan for the exhibition revealed last spring, no description about Japan's wartime atrocities were included.

They said the atomic bombs used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were effective in putting an end to the war and consequently reducing the number of victims.

Apparently responding to the claims, the U.S. Senate last month adopted a resolution that determined the "atomic bombs put a merciful end to the war."

The museum also revealed a modified plan that included a description of Japan's invasions of Asian nations.

Takahashi criticized the revision in the letter to Tibbets, saying it is obvious the United States dropped the atomic bombs on Japan so as to check the power of the weapon.

He also said the United States can no more be exempted from its responsibility for using the atomic bombs than Japan can evade its responsibility for its invasions into Asia.

The argument that atomic bombs saved the lives of U.S. and Japanese citizens is merely a use of sophistry, Takahashi said.

"The exhibition must depict the reality of the war so that it will be able to teach visitors that nuclear weapons themselves are absolutely evil," he said in the letter.

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Editorial;
Japan, U.S. must deal with past calmly

The United States observes the 53rd anniversary of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on Thursday (Wednesday U.S. time). Earlier, the U.S. Congress approved a motion to designate Dec. 7 as an official day for commemoration of the Pearl Harbor attack on Dec. 7, 1941. The proclamation urged all government departments and agencies to fly the U.S. flag at half-staff, as well as programs and ceremonies to be held in honor of Americans who died as a result of the attack.

The attack on Pearl Harbor was the trigger that drew the United States into World War II. "Negligence of duty" by Japanese diplomats in Washington, prior to the attack, caused a delay in declaring war against the United States. This sowed the seeds of a strong distrust of Japan in the hearts and minds of many Americans, who came to believe the Japanese were "sneaky."

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor should be deplored.

New perspectives
To mark the 50th anniversary of the end of the war next year, many Americans are seeking to shed new light on developments that led to the U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki as well as the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The Smithsonian Institution in Washington is scheduled to exhibit the Enola Gay, the B-29 that delivered the first atomic bomb, as well as documents and photos depicting victims of the atomic bombings, at one of its museums next May. The exhibition will be the first of its kind to display such records and photos at a public facility in the United States.

However, the project drew strong criticism from U.S. war veterans who insisted that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were justified and that the planned exhibition focused too heavily on the victims. As such objections were being voiced, the U.S. Senate passed a resolution remonstrating against criticism of Americans who fought for freedom.

To quell such criticism, the Smithsonian Institution has revised its plans regarding what to exhibit. This has, in turn, invited criticism from Hiroshima and Nagasaki, both of which will lend items depicting the sufferings of the atomic bomb victims to the Smithsonian.

This was followed in early December by another controversy. The Japanese government expressed displeasure over a U.S. Postal Service plan to issue a stamp featuring a mushroom-shaped cloud rising from an atomic blast and a caption reading: "Atomic bombs hasten war's end, August 1945." The government has asked the United States to reconsider the plan. It had good reason to do so out of concern for the sentiments of the people of Japan, the only nation to have experienced the horror of nuclear weapons.

With the end of the Cold War, Japan-U.S. relations have become more complicated and delicate. There is a widespread indifference among Americans regarding Japan. On the other hand, there appears to be a changing mood among Japanese that could develop into resentment against Americans. Bitterness between Japanese and Americans could result over the issue of the atomic bombs.

Vast emotional gulf
At the root of the problem lies a vast emotional gulf between Japanese and Americans in terms of how they view "Pearl Harbor" and "Hiroshima." "Remember Pearl Harbor" has been a recurring refrain in the United States. Most Americans believe that while the dropping of the atomic bombs was regrettable, it was also justified.

Meanwhile, many Japanese more often stress having been the victim of the atomic bombs but fail to fully examine the historical path that led to the attacks.

Japanese and Americans should not let their feelings develop into bitter resentment over the two wartime experiences. Japan and the United States have the responsibility to work together to maintain global peace and stability. The emotional conflict between the two nations should not cloud the importance of their bilateral relationship.

Some U.S. scholars are questioning whether Hiroshima and Nagasaki really had to be bombed. Japan and the United States should be urged to reexamine their past calmly.

It is an urgent task for both nations to promote grass-roots dialogue to eliminate the emotionalism afflicting the two peoples. Those born after the war now account for more than half of the population in Japan and the United States. They are in a position to objectively face the issues symbolized by "Pearl Harbor" and "Hiroshima."

Japan and the United States can and should take a reasoned approach to their past and work to build better bilateral ties.

(From Dec. 8 Yomiuri Shimbun)
Smithsonian 'sells out' over Enola Gay; Fresh approach to A-bomb nixed by political pressure

BYLINE: Barton J. Bernstein ; Daily Yomiuri

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This is the first half of an article on the Smithsonian Institution's Enola Gay exhibition. The second part will appear Friday.

For over 10 months the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum has been embattled in its effort to provide a script accompanying its planned display of the Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima on Aug. 6, 1945, killing well over 78,000 and injuring many more. The original script, put together by trained curators in consultation with a panel of U.S. scholars of World War II history, sought to put the atomic bombing in the context of World War II and to provide information to understand and assess President Harry S. Truman's decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japanese cities.

That script mentioned Japanese military expansion, beginning in the 1930s, and referred to Japan's "naked aggression and extreme brutality (and) the slaughter of tens of thousands of Chinese in Nanking in 1937 (which) shocked the world." In stark terms, the script also mentioned "atrocities by Japanese troops... brutal mistreatment of civilians, forced laborers and prisoners of war, and biological experiments on human victims."

Further setting the scene so that viewers of the Enola Gay exhibit could understand the passions and hatreds of World War II, the script mentioned Japan's December 1941 attack on the U.S. bases at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and also the incarceration during much of World War II in the western United States of Japanese aliens and U.S. citizens of Japanese ancestry, thereby stressing U.S. racism and its anti-Japanese feelings.

Reflecting the dominant U.S. writing in the past 30 years on the decision to use the bomb, the script included substantial evidence on whether the atomic bombing of Japan was necessary to end the war, whether the use of the bomb was ethical, and whether there were serious doubts in 1945 or soon thereafter in the United States about the atomic bombing of Japan. In addressing such questions, which have been the focus of considerable scholarship in the United States, the script did not always give answers. But it did stress that these unsettling questions demand attention, that comfortable popular assumptions warranted reconsideration, and that these questions were part of coming to terms with the nearly 50-year-old U.S. nuclear history.

Within a few months, however, the museum's script was being savagely attacked by the editor of the official magazine of the Air Force Association. In a harsh article and editorial that seemed generally indifferent to much of the published scholarship of the past 20 years, the editor argued energetically that the atomic bombings had been necessary, implied that doubters were unpatriotic, claimed that the script treated the Japanese as innocent victims and Americans as aggressors, and charged the scriptwriters with being antinuclear. In an orchestrated campaign, apparently replete with slanted press releases, he helped spur some mass media columnists and editorial writers to attack the script along similar lines. It is highly unlikely that most of these critics ever read the script in its entirety; undoubtedly most depended upon the press releases and were outraged by some quotations lifted from the script.

Probably many of these critics, often less than informed on the issues, would have been shocked to learn that, in mid-1946, an official U.S. study, headed by Paul Nitze, a future nuclear "hawk," concluded that the atomic bombings had been unnecessary. That study asserted in often-quoted language: "it is the Survey's opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945 (the date of the planned U.S. invasion at Kyushu), Ja-
pan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated." Such a conclusion, even by an authoritative group, is not necessarily correct, and there is good reason to have some doubts about it and the evidence it was based on. But the very fact that such a conclusion was reached indicated how much broader the dialogue on the use of the A-bomb was than the Air Force Association and its journalistic allies understood.

Under pressure from the Air Force Association, media assaults, and the American Legion, a large veterans' association, the Air and Space Museum began to revise. Accused of treating the Japanese as innocent victims and minimizing World War II Japanese atrocities, the writers reduced the number of pictures portraying the agony of the A-bomb victims, and added many more on the theme of Japanese wartime atrocities. Some of these revisions were warranted because, in graphically capturing the horror of the nuclear bombings, the script's pictures and text tended to minimize the brutality of the Pacific War and evidence of Japanese atrocities, and thus had failed to provide part of the cultural context in which Americans, in 1945, had welcomed and justified the dropping of the atomic bombs. But the scriptwriters were also compelled to cave in on other matters. Among the changes demanded was the removal of mid-1945 evidence that respected American military advisers had estimated that the invasions of Japan would have cost about 25,000-46,000 American dead and possibly another 108,000-180,000 wounded or missing in combat.

The veterans' organizations forced the scriptwriters instead to state that, had the invasions occurred, the total number of American combat casualties (dead, wounded, and missing) might have reached a million. In view of the total size of the U.S. invasion forces--about 776,700 in the Kyushu operation and 1.1 million in the Honshu operation--such a high casualty rate of over 50 percent was a substantial exaggeration.

Apparently high casualty numbers were so important to the veterans' organizations because they feared that low estimates could raise questions about the necessity and moral justification for the atomic bombings. The veterans' organizations were unwilling to take the mid-June 1945 estimate of army chief-of-staff General George C. Marshall seriously, and relied heavily upon dubious postwar statements about a "half million lives saved" by President Harry S. Truman. Those numbers fit the organization's needs.

The million casualty figure, demanded by veterans' organizations, was challenged by me, as well as other scholars, in a mid-November 1994 meeting with Dr. Martin Harwit, the director of the Air and Space Museum, and his scriptwriters. Apparently Dr. Harwit agreed that what General Marshall believed in mid-June 1945 was very important and he informed the American Legion that the script as it dealt with casualties in the event of an invasion of Japan would be revised based upon the archival information that I had brought to his attention.

This decision provoked a fusillade of attacks. The American Legion contended that Harwit had violated his agreement with them, that he had unfairly revised the script, and that he had betrayed their trust. They demanded cancellation of the exhibit, and gained the support of over 80 members of the new Congress who called for Harwit's resignation. Because the Air and Space Museum depends heavily upon federal tax dollars, it cannot afford to risk offending Congress. Its welfare rests on federal funding.

To protect the museum and the Smithsonian, its director, I. Michael Heyman has agreed to what is basically a "sellout." He gained the support of his board of trustees, as well as the approval of congressional leaders, notably House Speaker Newt Gingrich, for a greatly scaled-back exhibit. The Enola Gay will truly dominate and the text will be virtually eliminated. Anything offensive to veterans' groups, and anything suggesting that the use of the A-bomb might be controversial will be omitted.

This "sellout" will give the veterans' groups exactly what they desired, an exhibit that basically celebrates the atomic bombing. It is essentially what General Paul Tibbets, the pilot of the Enola Gay, recently called for. Just display the plane, he insisted. Don't provide a text, any unsettling evidence, raise questions, or invite dialogue.

(Barton J. Bernstein, professor of history at Stanford University, is editor of the book "The Atomic Bomb: The Critical Issue.")

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Smithsonian decision not Americans' views on war

BYLINE: Barton J. Bernstein ; Daily Yomiuri

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This is the second half of an article on the Smithsonian Institution's Enola Gay exhibition. The first part appeared on Thursday's Editorial/Opinion page.

The bitter dispute over the Enola Gay script, and seemingly this final resolution of what has been basically a political dispute, has resulted in the total triumph of the veterans' organizations. They have come to define the A-bomb history, at least for the millions of likely viewers, who will go to the very popular National Air and Space Museum to see the Enola Gay. From the beginning these organizations often seemed comfortably unaware of the historical scholarship on the A-bomb decision, and seemed usually to regard archival sources as irrelevant.

Shrewdly, the veterans groups recognized that evidence, analysis, and scholarship were irrelevant. Their political clout would assure triumph. In contrast, professional historians, while deploring this naked politicization of represented history, proved politically weak.

Whether or not these historians agree with various U.S. World War II military leaders about why and whether the bomb should have been used on Japan, most scholars of the early A-bomb history would agree that it is important for American citizens, as well others, to know that Admiral William Leahy, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Dwight Eisenhower, General Douglas MacArthur, and others after the war questioned whether the A-bomb had been necessary to end the war with Japan. In sharp words condemning the atomic bombing on moral grounds, Leahy wrote publicly, "in being the first to use (the bomb), we had adopted an ethical standard common to barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion (by) destroying women and children." His words, as well as the postwar objections from others have been banished from the Enola Gay exhibit on behalf of what might be described, invidiously, as "feel good history." In a sense "historical cleansing," the removal of troubling evidence, has occurred.

Thus, the result will not be true education, but rather miseducation, as dictated by Congress and the veterans' organizations. They will have besmirched and abridged the very values--openness and reasoned inquiry in a democratic society--for which many U.S. soldiers believed they were fighting.

The triumph of an "official history" in this situation raises deep questions about U.S. culture and politics in the mid-1990s. Within the United States, there has long been a disjunction between popular culture and academic culture, between what most people read and believe and what university professors write, read and think. In recent years, this gap has become more painful amid the political backlash against university affirmative action for designated minorities (African Americans and Hispanics) and hostility toward multiculturalism (which is partly an effort to understand and value non-white cultures) on many campuses.

The seedbed of resentment about affirmative action and multiculturalism has greatly nurtured hostility in the United States. At a time when Americans are fearful about their nation's economic future and when U.S. industrial production has been challenged by powerful economic competitors, most notably, Japan, there has been considerable inclination toward scapegoating Japan and Japanese. This phenomenon, seen most recently in some very popular novels, is sometimes called "Japan-bashing." It often appears alongside reasoned attacks on Japan for its trade practices and complaints that U.S. workers are losing their jobs to Japan. These economic problems and the sometime exaggerate perception of them, exacerbated by deep wellsprings of racism and ethnocentrism, have often soured recent Japanese-U.S. relations.
Because the Enola Gay and the A-bomb obviously involve an important part of U.S.-Japanese history, when the United States was the victor and Japan the defeated nation, the recent controversy over the exhibit and the script has drawn upon deep resentments. In a U.S. culture of dislocation, with many Americans resenting people at home and abroad, the issue of Hiroshima has taken on great historical significance. To many, World War II, with the victory in the Pacific, was one of the high points of U.S. power--and a time of great national triumph. Other kinds of triumph now seem less likely.

The atomic bombing, so greatly welcomed by Americans in 1945, was called into question by the Enola Gay script. Such questioning produced an unanticipated counter attack in 1994-95, a time of resentment, anxiety and economic dislocation. Veterans' organizations successfully exploited the culture and politics of the mid-1990s to achieve victory over the museum. And a Congress, reflecting similar values and now composed heavily of Republicans who want to uncritically affirm parts of the U.S. past and further dramatize patriotism, easily seized upon what was for them an attractive issue.

Unfortunately, they were unintentionally assisted by the fact that Japan has not adequately come to terms with acknowledging its own ugly World War II past; the evidence of Japanese militarist aggression, the rape of Nanking, the atrocities of World War II, the biological experimentation of Unit 731, and the impression of non-Japanese as "comfort women." To many Americans, unfortunately, that past may justify the use of the A-bomb and persuade them that a self-critical and revealing U.S. history, raising questions about U.S. bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, is unwarranted and unpatriotic.

Across the cultural divide in Japan, undoubtedly, many are distressed by the insensitivity to the victims of the atomic bombings and the frequent inability to recognize that the question is not simply the use of the A-bombs in Japan but, substantially, the use of those weapons on noncombatants.

Such use in 1945 represented a repudiation of earlier morality, as defined by President Franklin Roosevelt, among others, when in 1939 he pleaded with the nations at war not to kill noncombatants. By 1945, all the major powers in the war--Germany, Japan, the Soviet Union, Britain, and the United States--had violated that earlier ethic.

Understanding the use of the A-bomb is part of recognizing and explaining that process in World War II. Both Americans and Japanese should ponder the meaning of President Harry Truman's words, when two days after the Nagasaki bombing he defended the atomic bombings: "nobody is more disturbed over the use of atomic bombs than I am but I was greatly 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."

Unfortunately, those who attend the new "sanitized" Enola Gay exhibit will not have to confront those chilling words. They are especially chilling because in 1945, when Truman wrote them, he largely summarized mass popular feeling in the United States. In 1945, few Americans were disturbed by the use of the atomic bombs. Some even wanted to see the use of more such bombs, and regretted the speedy ending of the war.

Those 1945 sentiments also reminded us of how far the United States and Japan have traveled in 50 years toward mutual respect and reconciliation. But the difficulties of each nation coming to terms with its history also suggests how far the lengthy road of self-exploration and international reconciliation stretches.

Looking critically at a nation's recent past can be profoundly unsettling. The process can chip away at, if not demolish, some of the socially binding myths, and maybe even a few bricks of nationalism, which a people and national leaders sometimes view as essential to national identity. It is partly for those reasons that citizens, as well as their governments, prefer to hear the comforting and to avoid the unsettling. The result can be encouraged ignorance, not substantial understanding. That is the unstated purpose of the newly revised Enola Gay exhibit in Washington, D.C.

While both thoughtful Japanese and Americans should feel unhappy about the decision to eviscerate and sanitize the Enola Gay exhibit, they should not conclude that the triumph of "feel good" history necessarily expresses the dominant strains in U.S. society. Many Americans are willing to look critically at their own past, especially the World War II period of a half-century ago when most Americans living in 1995 were not even born. Perhaps various media events planned in the United States for mid-1995 reexamining critically the decision and meaning of the use of the atomic bomb, may help to spur analysis, promote understanding, and nurture lament and regret. For as the American physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, the so-called father of the A-bomb, said in the years after Hiroshima, no one can feel good about having been involved in an event that killed so many.
(Barton J. Bernstein, professor of history at Stanford University, is editor of the book "The Atomic Bomb: The Critical Issue.")

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Hiroshima Mayor Takashi Hiraoka said Wednesday the lessons of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki should be shared by everyone, making the virtual cancellation of the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum's atomic-bomb exhibit all the more regrettable.

"The exhibit would have been a great opportunity for people to ponder the historic significance of the dropping of the bombs and it would have sent a message to the world that a nuclear bomb should not be used a third time," said Hiraoka, who was joined by Nagasaki Mayor Hitoshi Motoshima at a luncheon at the Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan in Tokyo.

Motoshima, stressing that he regrets the suffering Japan caused its Asian neighbors, said he would still urge the United States to question whether all the wars it waged were justifiable and whether the dropping of the atomic bombs was truly necessary.

"After the Aug. 9 dropping of the bomb on Nagasaki, the U.S. Army took pictures of the mushroom cloud to report the successful bombing to Washington," said Motoshima. "But why didn't they take pictures of the hellish scene taking place just below the cloud? That might have prevented the intensive nuclear arms race that occurred in the aftermath of World War II."

Hiraoka said he was disappointed by the Smithsonian's decision in January, which came amid mounting pressure from Congress and World War II U.S. veterans, to drastically scale down the planned exhibit of the Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The exhibit was to include artifacts and pictures of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

"The United States considers the dropping of the atomic bombs as something that marks the end of World War II," said Hiraoka. "But I, as mayor of Hiroshima, consider the dropping of the bombs as an issue that concerns the whole human race. I think the Enola Gay and other atomic-bombing related documents should be shared by all people as an important historic lesson."

Hiraoka said he does not expect or intend to seek an apology from the United States for the dropping of the atomic bombs. "I would rather the United States work for nuclear disarmament. That will be a much better consolation for Hiroshima citizens."