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“THE WHOLE WORLD GASPED”

Just as people recall the circumstances under which they first heard the news of the attack on Pearl Harbor, so they will remember how the atomic bomb first burst upon their consciousness.

—*Scientific Monthly*, September 1945

*August 6, 1945. President Truman was aboard the U.S.S. Augusta, steaming across the Atlantic on his way home from the Potsdam conference, when he received the word: an American atomic bomb had been successfully detonated over Hiroshima, Japan. Excitedly Truman rushed to the officers' wardroom and told them the news. The navy men burst into cheers.*

*At the White House, it was a slow news day and only a few reporters were on duty. In mid-morning, assistant press secretary Eben Ayres strolled into the press room and told the reporters something might be coming later. At 10:45 A.M., Eastern War Time, Ayres released the story. At first the reporters seemed to hesitate, then they rushed for the telephones. The first bulletin went out over the Associated Press wire at 11:03.*

*John Haynes Holmes, minister of the Community Church of New York City, was vacationing at his summer cottage in Kennebunk, Maine, that day. Soon after, he described his feelings on hearing the news: “Everything else seemed suddenly to become insignificant. I seemed to grow cold, as though I had been transported to the waste spaces of the moon. The summer beauty seemed to vanish, and the waves of the sea to be pounding upon the shores of an empty world. . . . For I knew that the final crisis in human history had come. What that atomic bomb had done to Japan, it could do to us.”<sup>1</sup>*

How does a people react when the entire basis of its existence is fundamentally altered? Most such changes occur gradually; they are more discernible to historians than to the individuals living through them. The nuclear era was different. It burst upon the world with terrifying suddenness. From the earliest moments, the American people recognized that things would never be the same again.

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.

Perhaps the best way to convey a sense of the earliest days of what almost immediately began to be called the "Atomic Age" is not to impose too much order or coherence on them retrospectively. Out of the initial confusion of emotions and welter of voices, certain cultural themes would quickly emerge. But first, the Event.

The first to hear the news that distant Monday were those who happened to be near a radio at midday—housewives, children, the elderly, war workers enjoying a vacation day at home:

This is Don Goddard with your news at noon. A little less than an hour ago, newsmen were called to the White House down in Washington, and there they were read a special announcement written by President Truman. . . . This was the story of a new bomb, so powerful that only the imagination of a trained scientist could dream of its existence. Without qualification, the President said that Allied scientists have now harnessed the basic power of the universe. They have harnessed the atom.<sup>2</sup>

As the sultry August afternoon wore on, the news spread by word of mouth. The evening papers reported it in screaming headlines:

ATOMIC BOMB LOOSED ON JAPAN ONE EQUALS 20,000 TONS OF TNT FIRST TARGET IS ARMY BASE OF HIROSHIMA  
DUST AND SMOKE OBSCURE RESULT.

On his six o'clock newscast, Lowell Thomas of CBS radio, already assuming that everyone had heard the story, began in his folksy, avuncular voice:

That news about the atomic bomb overshadows everything else today; and the story of the dropping of the first one on Japan. The way the Japanese describe last night's raid on Hiroshima indicates that this one bomb was so destructive that the Japs thought they had been blasted by squadrons of B-29s.<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile, over at NBC, the dean of radio news commentators, H. V. Kaltenborn, was preparing the script of his 7:45 P.M. broadcast. The first draft began by describing the atomic bomb as "one of the greatest scientific developments in the history of man." Hastily, Kaltenborn penciled in a punchier opening: "Anglo-Saxon science has developed a new

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.

explosive 2,000 times as destructive as any known before.”<sup>4</sup>

Continuing in his stern, professorial voice, Kaltenborn struck a somber note: “For all we know, we have created a Frankenstein! We must assume that with the passage of only a little time, an improved form of the new weapon we use today can be turned against us.”

Kaltenborn was far from alone in perceiving the nightmarish possibilities. Science may have “signed the mammalian world’s death warrant,” warned the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* on August 7, “and deeded an earth in ruins to the ants.” A *Milwaukee Journal* editorial on the same day speculated about “a self-perpetuating chain of atomic destruction” that, like “a forest fire sweeping before high winds,” could obliterate the entire planet.

In a broadcast that evening, Don Goddard added a chilling concreteness to these ominous forebodings:

There is reason to believe tonight that our new atomic bomb destroyed the entire Japanese city of Hiroshima in a single blast. . . . It would be the same as Denver, Colorado, with a population of 350,000 persons being there one moment, and wiped out the next.<sup>5</sup>

Thus in the earliest moments of the nuclear era, the fear that would be the constant companion of Americans for the rest of their lives, and of millions not yet born in 1945, had already found urgent expression.

The carefully orchestrated government press releases, illustrated with a set of officially approved photographs, only partially allayed the gathering fear and uncertainty. Hiroshima itself was enveloped in an eerie silence that the outside world only gradually penetrated. “As for the actual havoc wrought by that first atomic bomb,” said Lowell Thomas on August 7, “one earlier report was that the photographic observation planes on the job shortly after the cataclysmic blast at Hiroshima had been unable to penetrate the cloud of smoke and dust that hung over that devastated area.” An air force spokesman on Okinawa said Hiroshima “seemed to have been ground into dust by a giant foot.”

At a hectic news conference on Guam, Col. Paul Tibbets, Jr., pilot of the *Enola Gay*, the atomic-bomb plane, compared the cloud over the city to “boiling dust.” Navy captain

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.

William S. Parsons, the scientist responsible for the final bomb assembly aboard the plane, extended an open palm to represent Hiroshima and said that only the fingers—the docks jutting into Hiroshima Bay—had been visible after the blast. The news conference was continually interrupted by a cigar-chomping Gen. Curtis LeMay with a terse, “No, you better not say that.”<sup>6</sup>

Speculation and “human interest” stories supplemented the tightly controlled official releases. Newsmen compared the atomic bomb to the 1917 explosion of a munitions ship in the harbor of Halifax, Nova Scotia, that had killed eighteen hundred people. They interviewed the wife of Gen. Leslie R. Groves, military chief of the Manhattan Project (“I didn’t know anything about it until this morning, the same as everyone else”). They sought out Eleanor Roosevelt, who gave FDR’s posthumous benediction to the atomic bomb: “The President would have been much relieved had he known we had it.”

Journalists strove for a local angle: “DEADLIEST WEAPONS IN WORLD’S HISTORY MADE IN SANTA FE VICINITY” was the headline carried by the *Santa Fe New Mexican* over its story about tiny Los Alamos, nerve center of the Manhattan Project. Tennessee papers played up what the *New York Times* dramatically called the “secret empire” at Oak Ridge, where work on the atomic bomb had been conducted in a vast “labyrinthine concrete fortress.” In Hanford, Washington, reporters found the local residents surprised to learn that the vast secret facility nearby had been making plutonium; they had assumed poison gas. The Albany newspapers noted that General Groves was the son of a Presbyterian minister who had once had a church in that city.<sup>7</sup>

The secret atomic-bomb test conducted at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945, was now revealed. Lowell Thomas quoted a railway engineer who had been in the cab of the *Santa Fe* over 100 miles away at the moment of the predawn test: “All at once, it seemed as if the sun suddenly appeared out of the darkness. . . . The glare lasted about three minutes, then all was dark again.” Newspaper stories told of Georgia Green, a blind girl in Albuquerque, 120 miles from Alamogordo, who at the moment of detonation had cried out, “What was that?”<sup>8</sup>

On August 9, with Hiroshima still dominating the nation’s consciousness, came a further

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.

shock: a second atomic bomb had been dropped on the Japanese city of Nagasaki. "It is an awful responsibility which has come to us," intoned President Truman on nationwide radio the next day. "We thank God that it has come to us instead of to our enemies; and we pray that He may guide us to use it in His ways and for His purposes."<sup>9</sup>

Amid the stupefying rush of events, people could only assure each other that something momentous, almost unfathomable, had occurred. "[One] forgets the effect on Japan . . .," said the *New York Herald Tribune*, "as one senses the foundations of one's own universe trembling." The papers were full of such observations. The bomb, commented *Christian Century* magazine, had "cast a spell of dark foreboding over the spirit of humanity." In the *New York Times's* first letter-to-the-editor about the atomic bomb (forerunner of thousands that would appear in the years to follow), A. Garcia Diaz of New York City spoke of the "creeping feeling of apprehension" pervading the nation. (With characteristic understatement, the *Times* captioned this letter: "Atomic Bomb Poses Problem.") In the *New York Sun*, correspondent Phelps Adams described the mood in Washington: "For forty-eight hours now, the new bomb has been virtually the only topic of conversation and discussion. . . . For two days it has been an unusual thing to see a smile among the throngs that crowd the streets. The entire city is pervaded by a kind of sense of oppression." Political cartoonist D. R. Fitzpatrick of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* pictured a tiny human figure desperately clinging to a pair of reins attached to an awesome lightning bolt streaking across the skies. The caption was: "Little Man, Where To?"<sup>10</sup>

On August 10, a day after the Nagasaki bombing, the Japanese offered to surrender if Emperor Hirohito could keep his throne. The Allies agreed, and on August 14, World War II ended. The nation's cities erupted in frenzied celebration, but the underlying mood remained sober and apprehensive. In Washington, the *New Republic* reported, the war's end did nothing to mitigate the post-Hiroshima gloom or the "curious new sense of insecurity, rather incongruous in the face of military victory." Thanks to the atomic bomb, wrote an official of the Rockefeller Foundation a few weeks later, the nation's mood at the moment of victory was bleaker than in December 1941 when much of the Pacific Fleet had lain in ruins at Pearl Harbor.<sup>11</sup> "Seldom, if ever," agreed CBS radio commentator Edward R. Murrow on August 12, "has a war ended leaving the victors with such a sense of uncertainty and fear, with such a realization that the future is obscure and that survival is not assured."<sup>12</sup>

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On August 17, amid stories of the surrender ceremonies in Tokyo Bay, H. V. Kaltenborn reported a sobering assessment by air force general H. H. ("Hap") Arnold of what an atomic war would be like. "As we listen to the newscast tonight, as we read our newspapers tomorrow," said Kaltenborn, "let us think of the mass murder which will come with World War III." A few days later he added, "We are like children playing with a concentrated instrument of death whose destructive potential our little minds cannot grasp."

"The knowledge of victory was as charged with sorrow and doubt as with joy and gratitude," observed *Time* in its first postwar issue.

In what they said and did, men are still, as in the aftershock of a great wound, bemused and only semi-articulate. . . . But in the dark depths of their minds and hearts, huge forms moved and silently arrayed themselves: Titans, arranging out of the chaos an age in which victory was already only the shout of a child in the street.

The war itself had shrunk to "minor significance," *Time* added, and its outcome seemed the "most grimly Pyrrhic of victories."<sup>13</sup>

The best known of these early postwar editorials, Norman Cousins's "Modern Man Is Obsolete," which appeared in the *Saturday Review* four days after the Japanese surrender, exuded this spirit of apprehension. "Whatever elation there is in the world today," wrote Cousins,

is severely tempered by . . . a primitive fear, the fear of the unknown, the fear of forces man can neither channel nor comprehend. This fear is not new; in its classical form it is the fear of irrational death. But overnight it has become intensified, magnified. It has burst out of the subconscious and into the conscious, filling the mind with primordial apprehensions.<sup>14</sup>

Among book publishers, the post-Hiroshima race was won by Pocket Books, which on August 17 published *The Atomic Age Opens*, a 256-page paperback compendium of news stories, editorials, and pronouncements by world leaders intended to help those who were "grasping for solid ideas through the haze of the first excitement." The general tenor of these

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utterances is summed up in one chapter title: "The Whole World Gasp[ed]." <sup>15</sup>

Perhaps the most important print medium through which the American people formed their initial impressions of the atomic bomb was Henry Luce's photo magazine *Life*, with its five million-plus circulation. *Life* devoted much of its August 20, 1945, issue to the bomb; here, in full-page photographs of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many Americans encountered for the first time the towering mushroom-shaped cloud that would become the quintessential visual symbol of the new era. Hiroshima, said *Life*, had literally been "blown . . . off the face of the earth." Nagasaki, it added, choosing its words carefully, had been "disemboweled."

Underscoring a point made frequently in this early postwar period, *Life* noted that the atomic bombings were simply an extension of the massive B-29 "fire-bomb missions" under General LeMay that had already "ripped the guts out of Japan's great cities." These raids, *Life* explained, relied on

the newly developed "jelly" bombs, which were aimed at different spots in a city and calculated to merge into one huge conflagration. Airmen called them "burn jobs" and a good-sized "burn job" did almost as much damage to property as the atomic bomb did and it also killed almost as many people.

In a lengthy background feature, *Life* insisted that the most important story concerning the debut of atomic energy was the scientific one: "Even the appalling fact that some 100,000 Japanese had died seemed incidental to the fact—which touched the destiny of everyone alive—that a way had been found to release the forces which killed these 100,000." Through several pages of simplified text and drawings, *Life* introduced its readers to the mysteries of the atom, uranium, and nuclear fission.

But what did it all mean? In an editorial titled "The Atomic Age" and in an essay, "The Atom Bomb and Future War," by *New York Times* military analyst Hanson W. Baldwin, *Life* tried to place the devastating events in context. Baldwin minced no words. As soon as the long-range rockets developed by the Germans were fitted with atomic warheads capable of "de- stroy[ing] cities at one breath," he wrote, echoing H. V. Kaltenborn, mankind would have "unleashed a Frankenstein monster." If conventional infantrymen had any future role at all, Baldwin continued, it would be as "an army of moles, specially trained in underground fighting."

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In its editorial, by contrast, *Life* strove for a hopeful note: Atomic fission was a major breakthrough in humankind's long struggle to understand and subdue nature, and the world should be grateful that "Prometheus, the subtle artificer and friend of man, is still an American citizen." The future would be different, certainly, but it need not terrify. Even Hanson Baldwin's grim predictions could be viewed in an optimistic light. After all, "consider the ant, whose social problems much resemble man's":

Ants have lived on this planet for 50 times as many millions of years as man. In all that time they have not committed race suicide and they have not abolished warfare either. Their nations rise and fall and never wholly merge. Constructing beautiful urban palaces and galleries, many ants have long lived underground in entire satisfaction.

But whatever the long-range reassurance offered by entomology or Greek mythology, the compelling immediate fact was that atomic fission had just been used to vaporize two cities. To its credit, *Life* confronted this fact squarely. The increasing ferocity of strategic bombing since the late 1930s, it said, "led straight to Hiroshima, and Hiroshima was, and was intended to be, almost pure *Schrecklichkeit* [terror]." All the belligerents, the United States no less than Nazi Germany, had emerged from World War II "with radically different practices and standards of permissible behavior toward others."

Despite these bleak reflections, the editorial concluded on a note of moral elevation. Above all else, the atomic bomb raised "the question of power. The atomic scientists had to learn new ways to control it; so now does political man":

Power in society has never been controlled by anything but morality. . . . Our sole safeguard against the very real danger of a reversion to barbarism is the kind of morality which compels the individual conscience, be the group right or wrong. The individual conscience against the atomic bomb? Yes, there is no other way.

No limits are set to our Promethean ingenuity, provided we remember that we are not Jove.<sup>1 6</sup>



Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.

Many readers responded with lavish praise. The editorial was a reminder, said one, that “the simplest language is the best vehicle for the profoundest thoughts.”<sup>17</sup> But what was *Life* actually saying? Evidently this: the same individuals who had acquiesced in the degradation of warfare into *Schrecklichkeit* were now being exhorted to confront the atomic bomb with consciences finely tuned to moral considerations. The American Prometheus who had assumed Jove's mantle and obliterated two cities with his newly discovered atomic thunderbolts was now being sternly told that he must resist the temptation ever again to play god.

After the initial shock, Americans seemingly rallied and took the atomic bomb in stride. Comedians (not all of them professionals) strained to find humor in the new weapon. A radio newscaster commented that Hiroshima “looked like Ebbetts Field after a game between the Giants and the Dodgers.” Others joked that Japan was suffering from “atomic ache.” Only one radio entertainer—Milton Berle—explicitly refused to make jokes about the atomic bomb.<sup>18</sup>

Within hours of Eben Ayres's announcement, the bar at the Washington Press Club offered an “Atomic Cocktail”—a greenish blend of Pernod and gin. 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.” Updating an old joke, *Life* reported that Oak Ridge workers, when asked what they were building, had replied: “We're making the fronts of horses, and shipping them to Washington for final assembly.” One of the odder of the post-Hiroshima headlines appeared in the *Milwaukee Journal* on August 8: “The New Bomb Is So Staggering to the Mind, One Doesn't Dare Pun ‘Up and Atom!’ ” *Stars and Stripes*, the military newspaper, reported one GI's comment: “Wait a minute, I got a gag for you. Just put in your paper: ‘Now we're cooking—with atomic bombs!’ and don't forget to credit me.” On August 13, the *Chicago Tribune* ran an entire column of “Atomic Anecdotes.” The *New Yorker*, while taking a dim view of all this “humor,” dutifully recorded some of it “for the benefit of future social historians.”<sup>19</sup>

Nor could American business resist the bomb's commercial possibilities. Within days of the Hiroshima bombing, department stores were running “Atomic Sales” and advertisers

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offering "Atomic Results." Somewhat later, a jewelry company on New York's Fifth Avenue advertised:

BURSTING FURY—Atomic Inspired Pin and Earring. New fields to conquer with Atomic jewelry. The pearled bomb bursts into a fury of dazzling colors in mock rhinestones, emeralds, rubies, and sapphires. . . . As daring to wear as it was to drop the first atom bomb. Complete set \$24.75.

Other enterprising entrepreneurs gathered the greenish, glass-like fused sand at the Alamogordo test site and (oblivious to the danger of radioactivity) fashioned it into costume jewelry, which they advertised nationally. The Atomic Age Publishing Company of Denver announced a new magazine, *The Atom*, with a goal of one hundred thousand subscribers. By 1947, the Manhattan telephone directory listed forty-five businesses that had appropriated the magic word, including the Atomic Undergarment Company.

In 1946 the General Mills Corporation offered an "Atomic 'Bomb' Ring" for fifteen cents and a Kix cereal boxtop. Look into the "sealed atom chamber" in "the gleaming aluminum warhead," the advertisement said, and "see genuine atoms SPLIT to smithereens!" "Based on a scientific principle used in laboratories," the ring was "perfectly safe" and "guaranteed not to blow everything sky high." It was loaded with extras, including "bombardier's insignia embossed on cylindrical bomb grip." In fact, this little promotional premium managed to anticipate several cultural themes that would obsess America in the years ahead. Behind the bomb warhead was a space for secret messages: "You can outwit enemies by concealing a message of 100 words in this strategic compartment," the cereal-box copy promised; "It's so deceptive that anyone plotting to spy against you will be thrown off guard." Some 750,000 American children deluged General Mills with orders for their very own "Atomic 'Bomb' Ring."<sup>20</sup>

In Hollywood, writers rushed to incorporate the atomic bomb into their movie scripts. The first film to accomplish this feat, *The House on 92nd Street*, was released in late September 1945. A spy thriller about Nazi agents operating in New York City early in World War II,

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it was revised at the last minute to make the object of the agents' quest be "Process 97, the secret ingredient of the atomic bomb."

The music industry was quick to cash in on the new national preoccupation as well. The Slim Gaillard Quartet recorded "Atomic Cocktail" in December 1945. The following year brought "Atom Buster" and "Atom Polka." In the interesting "Atom and Evil" by the San Francisco-based Golden Gate Quartet, a black gospel group, atomic energy is portrayed as an innocent, well-intentioned man seduced by a jaded "Miss Evil." A California company marketed a line of jazz recordings under the "Atomic" label complete with the picture of a mushroom-shaped cloud.<sup>21</sup>

The complex psychological link between atomic destruction and Eros (a link that at the time of America's first postwar atomic test in 1946 led a French fashion designer to christen his new bathing suit the "Bikini") was established very early. Within days of Hiroshima, burlesque houses in Los Angeles were advertising "Atom Bomb Dancers." In early September, putting aside its pontifical robes for a moment, *Life* fulfilled a Hollywood press agent's dream with a full-page cheesecake photograph of a well-endowed MGM starlet who had been officially dubbed "The Anatomic Bomb." In "Atom Bomb Baby," a pop song of 1947, the bomb became a metaphor for sexual arousal.<sup>22</sup>

Despite the outpouring of post-Hiroshima atomic ephemera, it would be wrong to conclude that Americans took the bomb casually or that its impact quickly faded. Just below the surface, powerful currents of anxiety and apprehension surged through the culture. As one cultural observer noted in January 1946, the attempts to make light of the atomic bomb were simply a by-product of the more profound underlying reaction: "paralyzing fear."<sup>23</sup>

Some observers found this reaction rather contemptible. "Fantasy is running wild," complained Maj. Alexander de Seversky in the February 1946 *Reader's Digest*. "The hysteria with which Hiroshima was greeted . . . does not reflect credit on the United States," agreed a Yale University military strategist later that year.<sup>24</sup> But whatever they thought of it, contemporary social observers agreed that the news of the atomic bomb had had a devastating effect, the impact made all the more traumatic by the unexpectedness of

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Truman's announcement. A flurry of journalistic stories in 1939 had publicized breakthroughs in the esoteric field of nuclear fission (arousing sufficient uneasiness that physicist Enrico Fermi went on CBS radio to assure the country there was "no cause for alarm"), but then a blanket of secrecy had descended and the atom largely disappeared from the public consciousness.<sup>25</sup>

The spring and summer of 1945 had brought vague talk of new and terrible secret weapons, and the Postdam Declaration of July 26 had threatened the Japanese with "complete and utter destruction." Such isolated and generalized allusions, however, had prepared Americans no better than the Japanese for August 6. Except to a tiny circle of scientists and government officials, Truman's announcement came as a bolt from the blue.

To be sure, the immediate reaction was also influenced by the fact that for nearly four years Japan had been the hated, treacherous enemy. Vengeance was on many minds. "The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor," said President Truman grimly; "They have been repaid manyfold." The moral symmetry of this equation appealed to many commentators and editorial writers. "No tears of sympathy will be shed in America for the Japanese people," said the *Omaha Morning World Herald* on August 8. "Had they possessed a comparable weapon at Pearl Harbor, would they have hesitated to use it?" The *New York Times's* first editorial comment on the bomb, "Our Answer to Japan," was no less vindictive. The devastation of Hiroshima, it said, was "but a sample" of what lay ahead. More atomic bombs were being built and could be "dropped on Japan at any time our military leaders choose."

"We are lucky to have found The Thing and are able to speed the war against the Japanese before the enemy can devise countermeasures," observed the Communist Party's *New York Daily Worker*. "Nip propagandists" protesting the atomic bomb should recall who started the war, said the *Los Angeles Times* on August 8. The "whining, whimpering, complaining" Japs, agreed the *Philadelphia Inquirer* three days later, were "good at dishing it out," but with the tables turned, "they now want to quit." "The Jap Must Choose," proclaimed *Newsweek* on August 13, "between surrender and annihilation." Outweighing the bomb's "wholesale slaughter," agreed the *Nation* on August 18, was its "spectacular success" in forcing the Japanese surrender. Two billion dollars, it added, "was never better spent."

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"When the Atomic Bomb Fell," a country-music song of December 1945, praised the bomb for giving the enemy just what he deserved:

Smoke and fire it did flow,  
Through the land of Tokyo.  
There was brimstone and dust everywhere.  
When it all cleared away,  
There the cruel Jap did lay,  
The answer to our fighting boy's prayer.<sup>26</sup>

Many political cartoonists quickly assimilated this new motif into propagandistic anti-Japanese cartoons. A *Philadelphia Inquirer* cartoon of August 7 portrayed a grotesque, apelike brute staring up in dumb wonder as an atomic bomb exploded overhead. The cartoon in *PM*, the liberal New York City daily, was totally blank except for the words "So sorry" in a balloon at the top. The *Chicago Tribune* pictured the dove of peace flying over Japan, an atomic bomb in its beak. An *Atlanta Constitution* cartoon showing bodies flying into the air over Hiroshima was captioned: "Land of the Rising Sons." <sup>27</sup>

But given the heavily racist wartime climate, post-Hiroshima vindictiveness proved surprisingly short-lived and was quickly overshadowed by a growing fear of what might lie ahead. The bomb might indeed force Japan to her knees, wrote Hanson W. Baldwin in the *New York Times* on August 7, but it would also bring incalculable new dangers. "We have," he concluded bleakly, "sowed the whirlwind."<sup>28</sup>

Nor did the promise of a peacetime atomic Utopia initially do much to diminish post-Hiroshima fear. Typically, the editor of a religious periodical noted in September 1945 that such speculations were being advanced, but confessed that "at the moment we can visualize only the unutterably shattering effect upon civilization and the wholesale destruction of millions of human beings."<sup>29</sup>

The darkening national mood was intensified by the reaction from abroad. While the news of Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not have as sharp and immediate an impact in Europe (itself devastated and prostrate) as it did in the United States, awareness of the bomb's ominous implications came quickly. In a statement that somehow gained force from its stilted, Latinate English, the Vatican newspaper *Osservatore Romano* declared on August 7: "The last

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twilight of the war is colored by mortal flames never before seen on the horizons of the universe, from its heavenly dawn to this infernal era. This war gives us a catastrophic conclusion that seems not to put an end to its apocalyptic surprises." In contrast to President Truman's gloating, Winston Churchill struck a somber note: "This revelation of the secrets of nature, long mercifully withheld from man," he declared, "should arouse the most solemn reflections in the mind and conscience of every human being capable of comprehension."<sup>30</sup>

Reinforced by such pronouncements from abroad, the "Great Fear" was open, palpable, and starkly literal in its expression. Newsman Don Goddard, as we have seen, quickly transmuted the devastation of Hiroshima into visions of American cities in smoldering ruins, and millions of Americans soon made the same imaginative leap. Physically untouched by the war, the United States at the moment of victory perceived itself as naked and vulnerable. Sole possessors and users of a devastating new instrument of mass destruction, Americans envisioned themselves not as a potential threat to other peoples, but as potential victims. "In that terrible flash 10,000 miles away, men here have seen not only the fate of Japan, but have glimpsed the future of America," wrote James Reston in the *New York Times*.

The *Milwaukee Journal* on August 8 published a large map of the city overlaid by concentric circles of destruction. And worse lay ahead. The primitive atomic bombs of 1945, observed the *New York Times* on August 12, were analogous to "the steam engine of James Watt, the telegraph of Morse, the flying machines of the Wrights." As soon as the atomic bomb was paired up with the guided missile, speculated the *Detroit News* on August 17, the threat to civilization would rise to "a new pitch of terror." In an interview with the *New Yorker*, John W. Campbell, Jr., the editor of *Astounding Science Fiction*, offered a similar vision of World War III: "Every major city will be wiped out in thirty minutes. . . . New York will be a slag heap. . . . Radioactive energy . . . will leave the land uninhabitable for periods ranging from ten months to five hundred years, depending on the size of the bomb." Speaking on a New York radio station days after Hiroshima, the sociologist Harvey W. Zorbaugh (a member of the wartime Committee for National Morale) predicted "an armament race such as the world has never seen."<sup>31</sup> The life expectancy of the human species, said the *Washington Post* on August 26, had "dwindled immeasurably in the course of two brief weeks."

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From our contemporary perspective, such fears seem so familiar as to be almost trite, but it is important to recognize how *quickly* Americans began to articulate them. Years before the world's nuclear arsenals made such a holocaust likely or even possible, the prospect of global annihilation already filled the national consciousness. This awareness and the bone-deep fear it engendered are the fundamental psychological realities underlying the broader intellectual and cultural responses of this period.

This primal fear of extinction cut across all political and ideological lines, from the staunchly conservative *Chicago Tribune*, which wrote bleakly of an atomic war that would leave Earth "a barren waste, in which the survivors of the race will hide in caves or live among ruins," to such liberal voices as the *New Republic*, which offered an almost identical vision of a conflict that would "obliterate all the great cities of the belligerents, [and] bring industry and technology to a grinding halt, . . . [leaving only] scattered remnants of humanity living on the periphery of civilization."<sup>32</sup>

This fear pervaded all society, from nuclear physicists and government leaders to persons who barely grasped what had happened, but who sensed that it was deeply threatening. Indeed, the more knowledgeable and highly placed the individual, it seemed, the greater the unease. The "strange disquiet" and "very great apprehension" the atomic bomb had left in its wake, wrote theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, was particularly intense among "the more sober and thoughtful sections of our nation." Eugene Rabinowitch, a Manhattan Project chemist at the University of Chicago, later recalled walking the streets of Chicago in the summer of 1945 haunted by visions of "the sky suddenly lit by a giant fireball, the steel skeletons of skyscrapers bending into grotesque shapes and their masonry raining down into the streets below, until a great cloud of dust rose and settled over the crumbling city." As the members of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey probed the ruins of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in September 1945, an "insistent question" formed itself in their minds: "What if the target for the bomb had been an American city?"<sup>33</sup>

So palpable was the depression in Washington, D.C., wrote newsman Phelps Adams, that many were admitting "they would be happier if this \$2,000,000,000 gamble had failed," or

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.

if the new knowledge could be “bundled up in a sack and lost in the river like an unwanted kitten.” The malaise gripping the capital, agreed the *New Republic*, was not rooted in dismay over what the atomic bomb had already done, but in “thoughts of its future use elsewhere and specifically against ourselves or our children.” Even if the secret remained secure for fifteen years, said radio commentator Elmer Davis on December 30, 1945, that was a short time “for people who <sup>34</sup> are raising children.”

Children were on many minds in these unsettled weeks. *Life* flippantly suggested that a generation weaned on Flash Gordon would be unfazed by the atomic bomb; but within days of Hiroshima, the *New Yorker* reported this moment observed among children at play in Manhattan:

For years the playground in Washington Square has resounded to the high-strung anh-anh-anh of machine guns and the long-drawn-out whine of high-velocity shells. Last Saturday morning a great advance was made. We watched a military man of seven or eight climb onto a seesaw, gather a number of his staff officers around him, and explain the changed situation. “Look,” he said, “I’m an atomic bomb. I just go ‘boom.’ Once. Like this.” He raised his arms, puffed out his cheeks, jumped down from the seesaw, and went “Boom!” Then he led his army away, leaving Manhattan in ruins behind him.

Some time later, another observer of juvenile life in New York City noted a change in the Broadway penny arcades: “Where during the war for a nickel you could try your luck shooting at a helpless parachutist as he drifted toward the ground, you can now try your luck at wiping out a whole city, with an atomic bomb—all for five cents.”<sup>35</sup>

As the historian shifts focus to the level of individual experience, the evidence becomes tantalizingly fragmentary: the child who, in a prayer shortly after Hiroshima, asked God to let his family all die together; the little girl who, when asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, replied “alive”; the young mother in Pelham Manor, New York, who had just given birth to her second son when the Hiroshima news came and who three days later recorded her feelings in a letter to H. V. Kaltenborn:

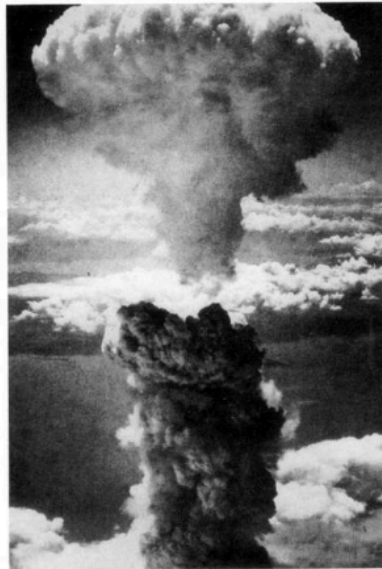
Since then I have hardly been able to smile, the future seems so utterly grim for our two little boys. Most of the time I have been in tears or near-tears, and fleeting but torturing



Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.

regrets that I have brought children into the world to face such a dreadful thing as this have shivered through me. It seems that it will be for them all their lives like living on a keg of dynamite which may go off at any moment, and which undoubtedly will go off before their lives have progressed very far.<sup>36</sup>

Such scattered evidence gives us a glimpse into the consciousness and culture of childhood, as well as the concerns of adults trying to fathom the bomb's impact on the generation that would grow up in its shadow. It is perhaps noteworthy that John Hersey chose to conclude his influential 1946 work *Hiroshima* with the recollections of a ten-year-old survivor. The lad's account is terse and noncommittal, but Hersey does not assume that the emotional effects of the experience were therefore negligible. "It would be impossible to say," he observes, "what horrors were embedded in the minds of the children who lived through the day of the bombing in Hiroshima."<sup>37</sup> Comparable fears about American children contributed to the larger uneasiness that seeped through the culture in the weeks after August 6, 1945.

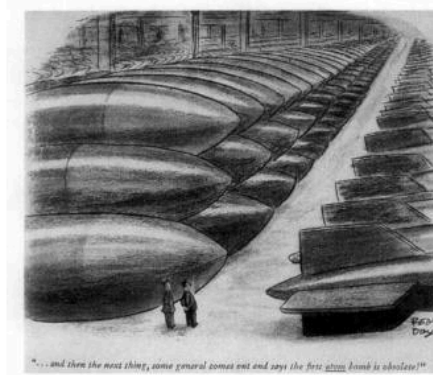


Enter the mushroom cloud. Photographs like this one taken over Nagasaki and described in *Life* as "a big mushroom of smoke and dust" were widely reprinted in newspapers and magazines in August 1945, quickly becoming the universally recognized visual symbol of atomic-age menace.

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.



Des Moines could be next. Newspapers brought the word in stark headlines: a single bomb could now destroy a city. In the editorial cartoon, a newly unleashed atom menaces a terrified world.

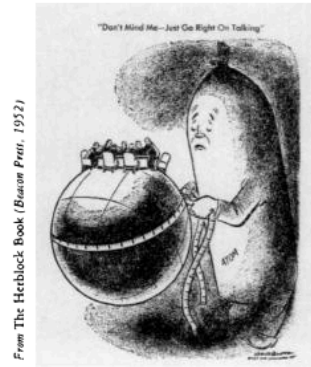


Within two weeks of Hiroshima, a *New Yorker* cartoon envisioned a nuclear arms race with weapons that would make the 1945-model atomic bomb seem antiquated.



The many faces of nuclear fear. This illustration from John W. Campbell's 1947 popularization *The Atomic Story* was captioned: "In a cave or forgotten cellar, an atomic bomb can soon be set up."

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.



For a brief, intense moment, world government or the international control of atomic energy seemed to offer an escape from terror. But as this 1947 Herblock cartoon illustrates, such hopes proved short-lived.



Dreamscapes of the nuclear future. At the end of *Life's* "56-Hour War" (November 19, 1945), technicians measure radioactivity in the rubble of Manhattan as the marble lions of the New York Public Library direct their unblinking gaze over the devastated city.

Rather than diminishing, this mood deepened as weeks stretched into months. America was in the grip of a "fear psychosis," said anthropologist Robert Redfield in November

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.

1945; atomic anxiety had become “a nightmare in the minds of men.” *The First One Hundred Days of the Atomic Age*, a paperback published in late November, offered yet another potpourri of statements still “pouring forth from all sides” and reflecting “ever widening concern and alarm.” Despite the passage of several months, wrote Hertha Pauli in the December *Commentary*, the bomb seemed to “weigh more and more heavily on the minds of more and more men.” When *Time* named Harry Truman “Man of the Year” on December 21, 1945, the president’s picture on the cover was dwarfed by a mushroom-shaped cloud and a hand gripping a lightning bolt. All the year’s great events, said *Time*, including the deaths of FDR and Hitler and the surrender of Germany and Japan, paled before the awesome reality of the bomb:

What the world would best remember of 1945 was the deadly mushroom clouds over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Here were the force, the threat, the promise of the future. In their giant shadows . . . all men were pygmies. . . . Even Presidents, even Men of the Year, [were] mere foam flecks on the tide. . . . In such a world, who dared be optimistic?<sup>38</sup>

Nor did the new year bring relief. In January, a State Department official commented on the undiminished “hysteria” and “poisonous fog” of suspicion and fear still pervading the country. Talk of the bomb was continuing to “boom on unceasingly from radio, press, and platforms,” wrote another observer. A mental-health writer who made a national lecture tour that spring found “general fear and confusion.” Bob Hope joked about this fear. “Have you noticed the modern trend in verses this year?” he said on his radio show on Valentine’s Day 1946. “No more of this ‘Roses are red, violets are blue.’ I picked up one and it showed an atom bomb exploding, and under it a verse that read: ‘Will you be my little geranium, until we are both blown up by uranium?’” The strain in such humor was apparent.

As late as 1948, a speaker before a New York City business and professional club began:

The atomic age is here, and we’re all scared to death; you, I, and everyone else. And no wonder. We woke up one morning, and either heard over the radio or read in big, black headlines, that an atomic bomb had been delivered, when we didn’t even suspect the possibility of such a thing. Our very first contact was a shock, particularly since it told of the death of a great city.<sup>39</sup>

But how accurate were all these comments? Were these cultural observers perhaps simply

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.

quoting each other, parroting what had quickly become conventional wisdom? Was the culture indeed in shock, or was this simply an instant media cliché? Some at the time wondered the same thing. “We know what the atomic bombs did to Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” commented *Fortune* in December 1945. “What did they do to the U.S. mind?”<sup>40</sup>

Conclusions must be tentative, but the evidence does suggest quite strongly that the atomic-bomb announcement was, indeed, a psychic event of almost unprecedented proportions. In the first place, the news spread with amazing rapidity. “Never before,” said the American Institute of Public Opinion (the Gallup poll) in November 1945, had it found “such *continuous* public interest in one particular subject or issue.” Not since opinion polling began, commented *Time* in December, 1945, had one topic evoked such “prolonged [and] intense public concern.” The report of an exhaustive 1946 opinion study conducted under the auspices of the Social Science Research Council similarly emphasized the bomb’s “phenomenal” impact: 98 percent of the adult population knew of it, including “even the most isolated.”<sup>41</sup>

But did this intense preoccupation with the atomic bomb also reflect, as many cultural observers claimed, incipient dread and barely controlled terror? Here the public-opinion data become confusing and to some extent contradictory. Attitudes on the subject seem to have been remarkably volatile. Different pollsters reported different findings; the same poll sometimes produced seemingly conflicting results.

The earliest post-Hiroshima polls reveal a considerable will to think positively about the bomb. In a September 1945 Gallup poll, 69 percent of the respondents considered it “a good thing” the atomic bomb had been developed, while only 17 percent took the contrary view and 14 percent expressed no opinion. A *Fortune* survey of the same period confirmed the positive view—though less decisively—with 47 percent saying the atomic bomb had decreased the chances of world war, 16 percent asserting it had increased the chances, and 24 percent seeing no change.<sup>42</sup>

But in the most comprehensive early survey of public attitudes toward the bomb, the study conducted in the summer of 1946 by Leonard S. Cottrell, Jr., and Sylvia Eberhart for

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.

the Social Science Research Council, the results were far less clear-cut. A two-stage study yielding very similar results in polls taken before and after the Bikini Atoll atomic tests, it employed in each segment a general opinion survey of a representative sample of some three thousand adult Americans, and an hour-long interview with about six hundred subjects selected from the larger sample.

Some of the findings tend to confirm the hopeful spirit revealed by the early Gallup poll data. For example, when subjects in the intensive interviews were asked "How worried are you about the atomic bomb?" only about 25 percent would admit to being "greatly worried," while 65 percent claimed they were either not worried at all or not much worried. Asked to list unsettling world issues, only one in six spontaneously mentioned the atomic bomb.<sup>43</sup>

But other results of the 1946 study add a degree of ambiguity to the picture. For example, a strong majority agreed that America's nuclear monopoly would be short-lived. In the in-depth interviews, when asked how soon other countries would be able to make an atomic bomb, nearly 80 percent of those willing to venture an opinion thought that other nations either already *had* bomb-building capability, or would achieve it within five years or so. In the general survey, 60 percent said they believed the bomb secret was already known to other countries. More tellingly, nearly half the subjects expressed the fear that another world war was either certain or possible within twenty-five years. (Other polls of 1946 and 1947 reveal even deeper apprehensions on this score.) Nor was there much doubt that this would be a nuclear war. Sixty-four percent of those polled perceived a "real danger" that atomic bombs would someday be used against the United States.<sup>44</sup>

Puzzled by findings that paradoxically revealed both a widespread assumption of eventual atomic war and a low level of openly acknowledged worry about the bomb, Cottrell and Eberhart offered several explanations. They noted, for example, that a majority (56 percent) of those polled believed an effective atomic-bomb defense would soon be developed. (This confidence, Cottrell and Eberhart suggested, was rooted less in specific knowledge than in a generalized faith in "the inexhaustibility of scientific invention.") Further, they reported, many of the in-depth interviewees seemed fatalistically convinced that it was pointless to brood about such a cosmic threat. The very magnitude of the danger, in other words, led them (at least when talking with a pollster) to deny it a place among the issues they spent

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.

time consciously worrying about. "If you were living in a country where there were earthquakes," said one, "what good would it do you to go to bed every night worrying whether there would be an earthquake?"<sup>45</sup>

Others linked their reported lack of anxiety to a generalized confidence in the nation's leaders. "I know the bomb can wipe out cities," said one interviewee, "but I let the government worry about it." Agreed another: "I let the people who are qualified in these things do the worrying. I . . . accept circumstances as they are." This reliance on "the authorities" emerges strongly in three representative in-depth interviews Cottrell and Eberhart reprinted verbatim. "Some people are worried, hysterically so," a young university-trained chemical engineer acknowledged, but of himself he said: "As long as our government is continuing atomic research so we won't be caught by new and more drastic developments, I'm not particularly worried. . . . Let's call it 'apprehension' rather than 'worry.'" "I feel that the government will work out some method of defense," said a fifty-six-year-old skilled worker from Pennsylvania. "I am placing my trust in these great masterminds that are working on it now."<sup>46</sup>

What conclusions does this public opinion data suggest? First, that generalizations about the nation's post-Hiroshima mood must be sensitive to the passage of time. A statement by a contemporary observer that accurately caught the mood of, say, October 1945 might be contradicted by a poll taken a few months later—and both could be accurate. This point is illustrated by the changing responses to the Gallup poll's query about whether development of the atomic bomb was a "good thing" or a "bad thing." By October 1947, the percentage considering it a "good thing" had dropped to 55 percent, while the "bad thing" contingent had more than doubled, to 38 percent. Confirming a significant shift in attitudes, another 1947 Gallup poll showed an almost equal division on the question whether people everywhere would in the long run be "better off because somebody learned to split the atom."<sup>47</sup> In the immediate post-Hiroshima period, one might speculate, relief over the war's end and the emotional high brought on by Japan's surrender inclined Americans to downplay their atomic-bomb fears and to endorse "for the record" President Truman's insistently positive view of the bomb. But as the wartime climate faded and people turned increasingly to thoughts of the future, they may have become more willing to express openly the deep

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light* (UNC Press, 1994 [1985]), excerpt.

anxiety that many cultural observers insisted was present from the beginning.

Even taking the passage of time into account, how much do the polls really tell us? In dealing with the cultural ramifications of so profound an event as this, are we perhaps confronting a reality to which this useful instrument of social investigation is ill-suited? Significantly, Cottrell and Eberhart themselves speculated that American culture in 1946 may have been suffused with “much more anxiety than people admit, but that it is repressed.” “Listening to the people talk,” concluded *Time*, in its December 1945 summary of various opinion surveys, “the pollsters found awe, fear, cynicism, confusion, hope—but mostly confused fear and hopeful confusion.”<sup>48</sup>

Perhaps one should not try to put a finer point on such limited and ambiguous evidence. Shaken and disoriented by an awesome technological development of almost unfathomable implications, Americans grasped at straws, searched for hopeful signs, and tried to arrange scary new facts into familiar patterns.

Somber pronouncements and opinion polls are not our only window on the nation's mood at the dawn of the atomic era. Popular culture offers a sometimes overwhelming wealth of additional evidence far removed from the world of the *American Scholar* and the American Institute of Public Opinion. In the country-music field, for example, a brief vogue of “atomic bomb” songs produced what musicologist Charles Wolfe has called “some of the most bizarre country songs ever written.” Some of these simply cashed in on the “atomic” theme in their titles or carried on the vindictive wartime mood. Others, however, expressed deep fear and uncertainty about the future. Certainly this is true of the most successful song of this genre, “Atomic Power,” by country-music star Fred Kirby. A frequent guest on CBS radio's “Carolina Calling,” Kirby during the war had toured radio stations as the government's “Victory Cowboy,” singing patriotic songs. He wrote “Atomic Power” on August 7, 1945, after a sleepless night brought on by the Hiroshima news. An immediate hit, the song was recorded by at least seven country-music groups, including the Buchanan Brothers, Chester and Lester, whose 1946 version on the Victor label enjoyed several weeks near the top of *Billboard's* listing of “Most-Played Juke Box Folk Records.” Kirby himself performed the song thousands of times in churches, on the radio, and at country-music



festivals.<sup>49</sup>

“Atomic Power” is squarely in the tradition of country-music songs that for decades had both celebrated and deplored the inroads of technology; memorialized train wrecks, ship disasters, and hotel fires; and evoked the fundamentalist religious beliefs of Southern Protestantism. While the human toll at Hiroshima and Nagasaki elicits no particular regret (“they paid a big price for their sins”), the fact of two great cities literally “scorched from the face of the earth” arouses horror-struck awe. Atomic power is seen as coming from “the mighty hand of God” (“They’re sending up to Heaven to get the brimstone fire,”)—but as a fearsome destroyer and apocalyptic omen rather than a benevolent gift. In the concluding verse, atomic destruction is again linked to a divinely ordained ending to human history that will come as a bolt from the blue; “We will not know the minute, and will not know the hour.”<sup>50</sup> Fear, trembling, brimstone, images of cosmic destruction: the themes of “Atomic Power” are wholly in keeping with the national mood so frequently described by cultural observers in the months after the atomic bomb burst upon the American consciousness.

Clearly, then, the weeks and months following August 6, 1945, were a time of cultural crisis when the American people confronted a new and threatening reality of almost unfathomable proportions. Equally clearly, the dominant immediate response was confusion and disorientation. But interwoven with all the talk of uncertainty and fear was another, more bracing theme: Americans must not surrender to fear or allow themselves to be paralyzed by anxiety; they must rally their political and cultural energies and rise to the challenge of the atomic bomb.