

Hiroshima and Nagasaki at Sixty

This summer marks the sixtieth anniversary of the Allied victory in the Second World War. That victory followed the deployment of a terrible weapon of unprecedented power, a product of American science used against Japan at Hiroshima and again at Nagasaki. The use of the atomic bomb ended the world war and set the stage for the Cold War. It publicly began the nuclear age, an age which confounded every prediction as the world survived a massive arms race, the madness of Mutual Assured Destruction, and the global proliferation of nuclear technology. Today, nations can destroy one another from afar and terrorists can devastate cities; these are the post-atomic realities we must live with forevermore.

The decision to use the bomb has always been controversial: Would Japan have surrendered without it? What justification was there for dropping the bomb so soon on Nagasaki? Should President Truman have ordered a public demonstration before using the bomb on populated areas? To what extent was Truman motivated by a desire to keep the Soviet Union from invading Japan? Yet despite the controversy and the second-guessing, there has been very little reconsideration by the general American public of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Yes, there have been some serious moral reevaluations as well as some works of rank historical revisionism. But the overall sentiment of the American people, sixty years on, remains one of simple relief that the bomb ended the war.

And what of the scientists who built the bomb? Most of them joined the atomic effort for noble reasons. And after the war, many of them became serious advocates or activists for or against atomic weapons. But *during* the war, in the midst of the research, they were overcome by the thrill of scientific discovery—compelled by the sheer novelty of their work but unable to think clearly about its implications. “Don’t bother me with your conscientious scruples,” Enrico Fermi told some of his colleagues, “after all, the thing’s superb physics.” Richard Feynman described the trancelike quality of research and development: “You see, what happened to me—what happened to the rest of us—is we started for a good reason, then you’re working very hard to accomplish something and it’s a pleasure, it’s excitement. And you stop thinking, you know, you just *stop*.” Gerard DeGroot’s new book *The Bomb: A Life* offers these and numerous other examples of the amoral lust for atomic discovery. The scientists and engineers who made the bomb were brilliant and they helped win the war, but they were the original “nuclear giants and ethical infants.”

As the behavior and beliefs of the physicists working on the Manhattan Project make clear, scientific insights do not imply moral wisdom. The lesson is simple: A scientist in the thick of things, in thrall to discovery—whether researching weapons, cloning, or anything else—cannot be relied upon for sound policy judgment or “conscientious scruples.” This grave task always resides, in the end, with statesmen and citizens.