THE EMBRACE OF ATOMIC BOMB ORTHODOXY AND REVISIONISM

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Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C. *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. xii + 190 pp. Illustrations, map, suggested readings, footnotes, and index. $85.00 (cloth); $24.99 (paper); $20.00 (e-book).

Wilson Miscamble, an award-winning diplomatic historian at the University of Notre Dame, would like everyone to stop talking about atomic-bomb revisionism: the idea that the atomic bomb was not primarily used to end the war with Japan but to intimidate the Soviets and make Joseph Stalin more pliant in the emerging postwar order; thus the weapon's use formed an important seed of the Cold War that blighted the world for the next four decades. This historiographical tradition stems from Gar Alperovitz' *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (1965), timed to coincide with the twentieth anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Alperovitz used the newly released diaries of Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson of the Truman administration to argue that the Americans engaged in a "strategy of delayed showdown" with the Soviet Union in the endgame of World War II. Miscamble will have none of this, and he structures this slim textbook as an all-out attack on every major thesis launched by Alperovitz. Miscamble's central argument echoes what is known in atomic-bomb historiography as the "orthodox" position: the atomic bomb(s) ended the war, as intended, and had no connection to postwar (or wartime) efforts at "atomic diplomacy" with respect to the Soviet Union. Recent scholarship has confirmed most of this picture, especially the last point about the failure of the Americans to make any substantial geopolitical hay out of their atomic monopoly. Yet, by patterning his argument on Alperovitz', Miscamble recapitulates a mirror-image of revisionism. Simply put, the best way to stop the error of linking the atomic bombs' use in the war with postwar diplomatic history is to stop doing so.

The historiography of nuclear weapons in the 1940s divides into three general subfields of history, each stressing progressively later years of that decade. The first concerns the actual building of the atomic bomb, and it has traditionally been a story of physicists (recent scholarship also includes chem-

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ists and engineers), their involvement with the military, and the three-and-a-half–year effort to build a functioning nuclear device. Aside from detailed monographs by historians of science, one can locate this school in the official history by Richard G. Hewlett and Oscar E. Anderson, Jr., *The New World: A History of the United States Atomic Energy Commission, Volume I: 1939/1946* (1962); in Richard Rhodes' Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (1986); and, more recently, in Andrew J. Rotter's *Hiroshima: The World's Bomb* (2008), an international history comparing several nuclear programs in the 1940s. The second cluster, a branch of military history, focuses on the use of the atomic bombs in the final days of the war with Japan; included here are Richard B. Frank's *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (1999) and my own *Five Days in August: How World War II Became a Nuclear War* (2007). The final set hails from the storied corridors of diplomatic history and follows the thinking of politicians and diplomats about the role nuclear weapons might play in both foreign and domestic policy. Such works comprise the bulk of the historiography, represented by, for example, Martin J. Sherwin's *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and the Origins of the Arms Race* (1973, 1987); Wilson Miscamble's own *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima, and the Cold War* (2007) for the early years; and, for the later years, both Gregg Herken's *The Winning Weapon: The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War, 1945–1950* (1980) and Campbell Craig and Sergey Radchenko's *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War* (2008).

Linking these disparate approaches has long proved a challenge, and the orthodoxy/revisionism dispute centers around the causal priority of the military and diplomatic histories. (The technological story is decidedly subordinated in both.)[1] Revisionists have argued that the diplomatic (pressuring the Soviet Union) drove the military (using the bomb); for the orthodox it is no less obvious that the military (ending the war quickly) drove the diplomatic (not pressuring the Soviet Union until the war was over). Both, however, insist on making the causal connection—or lack thereof—the central dynamic of their narratives.

It is significant that no major work pursuing the revisionist point full throttle has appeared for over fifteen years. The last such book was Gar Alperovitz' mammoth *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (1995), which retains the argument of his 1965 volume but includes some interesting emendations. (Most importantly, Stimson is replaced as arch-villain by James F. Byrnes, Truman's first appointed secretary of state). Since then, essentially every study has presented a negative case against revisionism, supplemented by reams of declassified archival evidence and well-reasoned interpretations, including Miscamble's 2007 book arguing for strong continuities between the foreign policies of Franklin Roosevelt and his successor.[2] The difficulty with this line of orthodox writing is not the evidence but the framing, which is purely nega-

tive, developing arguments on territory staked out by the revisionists. There is no affirmative *diplomatic* explanation for the bomb's use; that account is taken from military history. Thus, in this, his newest book, Miscamble effectively recapitulates the case against "atomic diplomacy" and lauds the recent military history (especially Frank), yet continues to talk about the two narratives as if they had something to do with each other. They do not.

This claim might be surprising to those who have not immersed themselves in the arcana of casualty estimates, Interim Committee reports, and desk diaries of the military officers involved in the decision. Yet this *disconnect* between the military and diplomatic lines is well established, and marks where the orthodox position goes astray. Why do we continually return to the atomic bombings as a subject for historical inquiry? Almost every historical account of the bombings seeks to answer one or more of the following three questions: Why did Truman make the decision? What ended the war with Japan? Was the use of the atomic bomb morally defensible? Sadly, none of these can be answered by the historical evidence available; the recent developments in the military history of the atomic bomb tell us why.

First, to Truman's decision: a reader poring over a volume entitled *The Most Controversial Decision* will likely be surprised to find no page where Truman makes a decision to bomb Hiroshima.[3] The omission is telling. For Alperovitz, it was vital to claim that Truman made a concrete decision, because he wanted to decry the motives behind it. For the orthodox, it is just as important to discern Truman's intentions to establish that they were benign, even laudable (end the war, minimize deaths). The argumentative structure, again, has been set by revisionism. Certainly, Truman had strong views on the subject of the atomic bomb, both before and after their use (often several views, sometimes contradictory), and Miscamble carefully documents their twists and turns; but having views does not imply that Truman sat down and came to an intentional moment of decision, the kind necessary for evaluating his motivation. In fact, Miscamble repeatedly cites evidence indicating that Truman did not. Frank and others—especially Barton J. Bernstein in numerous lengthy articles (most notably "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little-Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory" [1995][4])—have shown clearly, and Miscamble endorses, that there was no political decision to drop the bomb. Instead, all levels of government and the military operated on a long-standing assumption that if the bomb were developed in time, it would be used. The weapon was integrated by the military and through a series of committees (especially the Target Committee)[5] into the bombing campaign on Japan. The president did not meddle. As Miscamble notes, "Truman accepted the reports of his military advisers without question. He made no pretense to being a military strategist. He neither probed his advisers about broad strategy nor the tactics being applied

in specific military theaters" (p. 29). With few exceptions (such as Stimson's removal of Kyoto from the target list), the politicians did not intervene into issues of delivery. Even the bombing order quoted by Miscamble, over the signature of General Thomas Handy and directed to General Carl Spaatz in the Pacific, barely mentions the Commander-in-Chief, and only in the context of *publicizing* the attack on Hiroshima.[6] Even that publicity, the famous August 6th speech issued by Truman while steaming westward back from Potsdam on the U.S.S. *Augusta*, was not Truman's. Miscamble establishes that the statement was "prepared before he left for Potsdam, to be issued under the president's name" after the first bombing (p. 87), but then he elides the authorship-by-committee and slips into characterizing the speaker of the words as "Truman." The work of many is collapsed into the action of a single individual. If the bombs' use was greased on the skids of military procedure, as Miscamble correctly documents—"It must be appreciated that the American military largely controlled the specific timing of the bomb's use and Truman proved quite content to delegate that responsibility" (p. 79)—then where was Truman's decision? As it happens, Truman made only one clear decision related to the dropping of the atomic bomb, and that was a decision to *stop* dropping these bombs without express presidential order (thus reversing the Handy order), a command issued on August 10 and discussed by Miscamble on page 117 in the context of morality, not decision making.

Yet Miscamble, in the tradition of diplomatic history, insists at several points that there was an active decision to initiate atomic bombing.[7] The sections of this book that directly concern diplomacy are excellent; Miscamble admirably details the intricacies of international negotiation, and the account of British involvement in atomic matters is the best I have seen in such a generally accessible study. The author has demonstrated over his career a gift for understanding foreign-policy actors and a talent at unearthing their thinking; and to that end he has scoured the papers of Truman, Jimmy Byrnes, and others to find their inner thoughts on the bomb. Those papers reveal matters of great importance to diplomacy; they do not contain any operational discussion of the atomic bomb or any clear decision to drop it. Even without such a moment, Miscamble's exploration of the diplomacy yields trenchant insights. His quite positive treatment of the much-maligned Byrnes is subtle, for example, and neatly addresses the major contentions in Alperovitz' 1995 book.[8]

The second major question—about the end of the war—is also vexing. The issue boils down to another entrenched debate between the revisionists (the war ended because of Soviet entry on August 8, 1945) and the orthodox (the bomb ended the war, full stop). Of course, given that the Allies refused to modify the terms of unconditional surrender, only the Japanese government could end the war in the Pacific because only it could surrender; the Americans and the Soviets could make moves toward this end, not effect it

themselves. So why did the Japanese government surrender? We simply do not know the answer, because we do not have records of the deliberations of those August days; they were destroyed between surrender on August 15th and the American occupation on September 2nd. Studies by scholars such as Tsuyoshi Hasegawa (*Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* [2005]), based on archival work in English, Russian, and Japanese, and Sadao Asada ("The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender—A Reconsideration" [1998])[9] are forced to rely on testimonies from a subset of those involved (key military officials had committed suicide), all of which exonerate Emperor Hirohito from blame. (These retrospective accounts may very well be accurate; we just have no way of corroborating them.) In Miscamble's account, analogous to the compression of the atomic-bombing assumption to a unitary decision by Truman, the crucial moment collapses to the emperor without elaboration: "In his own crucial deliberations the atomic attacks appeared to weigh most heavily" (p. 99). The evidence is too thin to make so precise a judgment, and Miscamble offers no hint that there are grounds for reasonable debate. (The same body of evidence can be used, for example, to argue that Hirohito *delayed* surrender: Herbert Bix, "Japan's Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation" [1995]).[10]

The third domain, the morality of the bombing, is more properly a subject of ethics, and resolving it depends on a well-defended moral framework from outside the historical discipline. Miscamble notes the difficulty, and then implicitly offers a utilitarian argument that the bombing was justified because it forestalled an invasion and a prolonged war, which would have resulted in many more deaths. This is quite possibly correct, but reasonable people could disagree about whether body-counts are the appropriate way to resolve this question.

Miscamble's *The Most Controversial Decision* provides the most succinct and up-to-date version of the orthodox account of the atomic bombing of Japan, and those looking to direct students to such a book would be well advised to use it.[11] The orthodox have, after all, effectively countered Alperovitz' main contentions. The historiography now needs to go beyond the twinned argumentative structures of orthodoxy and revisionism. Instead of trying to connect the military and political lines, historians might focus on the points of rupture (which could perhaps explain the puzzling contrast between wartime competence and postwar confusion concerning the bomb), trace the careers of mid-level individuals who straddle both periods, or follow the military history of the bomb more comprehensively into the postwar period. In any event, it is certainly time to stop talking about revisionism.

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1. A crucial node for all three historiographies is General Leslie R. Groves, the director of the Manhattan Project, who was a vital link between policymakers, the scientists, and the military. Mystifyingly, Miscamble nowhere references Robert S. Norris' comprehensive *Racing for the Bomb: General Leslie R. Groves, the Manhattan Project's Indispensible Man* (2002), which precisely articulates how the military coordination of the atomic bombs took place.

2. This negative case is made, with a touch of vitriol, in Michael Kort, "The Historiography of Hiroshima: The Rise and Fall of Revisionism," *The New England Journal of History* 64 (Fall 2007): 31–48. For a general review of post-revisionism writings on the atomic decision, see J. Samuel Walker, "Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground," *Diplomatic History* 29 (April 2005): 311–34.

3. Miscamble almost wholly ignores the Nagasaki bombing. As discussed in Michael D. Gordin, *Five Days in August: How World War II Became a Nuclear War* (2007), 92–96, the bombing was completely military; Truman and other politicians were unaware of the mission until after it was over. Thus, a diplomatic perspective is bound to give it short shrift.

4. Barton J. Bernstein, "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little-Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory," *Diplomatic History* 19 (1995): 227–73.

5. On this important committee, see the excellent account in Sean L. Malloy, "'The Rules of Civilized Warfare': Scientists, Soldiers, Civilians, and the American Debate over Nuclear Targeting, 1940–1945," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30 (June 2007): 475–512.

6. Gordin, *Five Days in August*, 49–50.

7. "This decision caused him none of the anxiety that afflicted him during later difficult decisions" (p. 80); "the continuing swirl of controversy that surrounds Harry Truman's decision to authorize the atomic bombings of two Japanese cities" (p. 151); "the serious political and moral objections of many later critics of Truman's decision" (p. 151).

8. Yet even here there are puzzling claims. Miscamble overstates Byrnes's importance on nuclear matters, derides Stimson as a doddering geriatric to enhance Byrnes, and never informs the reader that this heroic figure was summarily canned by Truman in 1947.

9. Sadao Asada, "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender—A Reconsideration," *Pacific Historical Review* 67 (1998): 477–512.

10. Herbert Bix, "Japan's Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation," *Diplomatic History* 19 (1995): 197–225.

11. An alternative text, more balanced between various interpretations, is J. Samuel Walker's *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs against Japan*, rev. ed. (2007).