



The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

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24 Hours After Hiroshima: National Geographic Channel Takes Up the Bomb

Robert Jacobs

[Editor's note: See the Japanese film footage of the devastation of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 and its aftermath, the Bikini tests of July 1946 and the rapturous account of the American announcer shown in an American newsreel below. This film includes the first images of hibakusha seen in the United States.]

On August 17, 2010, the National Geographic Channel premiered a new documentary titled *24 Hours After Hiroshima* on its *National Geographic Explorers* series.¹ While the title suggests, and the film itself claims that it will provide an in depth look at the immediate aftermath of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima in 1945, what it presents for the most part—with certain fascinating exceptions—is the orthodox American narrative of the bombings, supplemented with a brief examination of the strategic bombing survey and of the impact of the weapon on the civilian population of Hiroshima.



24 Hours After Hiroshima on National Geographic Explorer

The film suffers from the shortcomings of many cable historical documentaries (over dramatization, lack of depth, and flawed reenacting), but it does go beyond the historical narration typical of what might be labeled “orthodox American Hiroshima documentaries” by including the stories and presence of living *hibakusha*, survivors of the bomb. The historical presentation nevertheless hews closely to triumphal American ideas about the bomb, the war and American power: the bombings singularly ended the war and saved lives—both American and Japanese—and its focus on Hiroshima reduces the bombing of Nagasaki to a historical footnote.

What separates this film above all from its predecessors, is the presence of *hibakusha*, living witnesses to the horrors of the bombing. Three *hibakusha* relate their personal experiences in the bombings, bringing a focus to this film that is sorely lacking in most previous made-for-American-television Hiroshima documentaries. The *hibakusha* humanize a story usually told in the US with emphasis on the American participants and conveying exclusively their perspectives. To be sure, Enola Gay weapon specialist Morris Jeppson, who died

in April 2010, is included in the film, but this time the Enola Gay crewmember is not the only person present in Hiroshima on that day to tell his story.

Another important feature in the film is provided by the commentary of scholars. Rather than limiting their contribution to historical footnoting, the filmmakers include a series of powerful statements that address the morality of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the impact of the bombs on the bodies and psyches of the victims at the time and down to the present, framing for the audience exactly why these events have affected the modern world so deeply. National Geographic is to be applauded for letting these voices join with those of Japanese *hibakusha* to be heard in American homes.

The film is at its weakest when explaining why the bombs were used and what effects they had. Here we find a rote repetition of traditional American narratives of the bombing that can be traced back to August of 1945. At several points the film flatly declares, or presents Morris Jeppson the weapon specialist on the Enola Gay, stating that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki directly ended the war. The orthodox narrative relies heavily on the notion that these weapons are “super” and exceptional. When Harry Truman introduced the new American weapon to the world and announced the successful nuclear attack on Hiroshima, he used magical language to describe the bomb. Truman claimed that it “harnessed the basic power of the universe,” and that it was given to the United States “by God.”² These and other narrative strategies deliberately cloaked nuclear weapons in an aura of magical invincibility, which deflected attention from the fact that the United States had developed a weapon of mass destruction and deployed it against a primarily civilian population. This magical discourse served to focus the listener on the supposed supernatural character of the technology rather than on the weapon’s genocidal effect. The legacy of this rhetorical strategy is evident when one visits any of the American museums devoted to exhibiting the history of nuclear weapons. These exhibitions invariably focus on the work of Manhattan Project scientists and engineers—emphasizing American techno-culture—rather than on the military use of the bombs and their legacy. This point is made succinctly in the film by anthropologist Hugh Gusterson who points out that the American narrative of the bombing stops in August of 1945, while the Japanese narrative of the bombing begins in August of 1945 and continues forward. The timelines of the American and Japanese narratives cross for only one month, and while the American narrative hails the triumphal technological achievement and then moves directly to victory, the Japanese narrative focuses on the destruction of the two cities, the death of hundreds of thousands, and the legacy of the bombing for survivors.

The magical discourse invoked by Truman was reinforced by the Japanese surrender a week after the bombing of Nagasaki. The idea that the nuclear attacks were the cause of the Japanese surrender is still hotly debated by historians: no mention of this controversy is provided to viewers who are provided with a flat cause and effect logic that, “Japan formally surrenders three weeks later.” The fact that the Soviet Union declared war on Japan two days after Hiroshima, and that its troops marched into Manchuria and occupied Japanese territory in the Kuril Islands goes unmentioned.³ Likewise, there is no mention of the fact that the US softened the Potsdam surrender terms to suggest that the Japanese emperor would be spared.

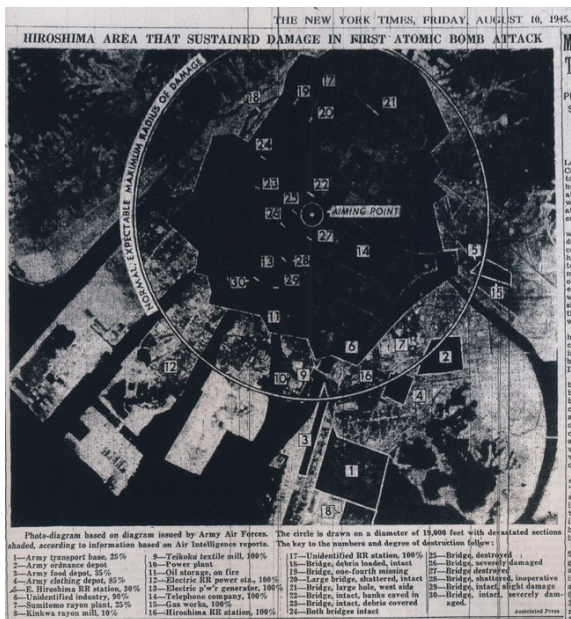
Consider the retelling of another American truism about the bombings: they saved both American and Japanese lives. This classic logic of militarism, that killing is done to save lives, is presented as fact. In *24 Hours After Hiroshima* we are told that, “some” fear that if the war goes on, millions more will be lost on both sides. In truth this is the claim of an actual person speaking years after the war’s end, and not the omniscient “some.”⁴ This claim, though widely repeated, has also been widely questioned by historians who note that the allies planned invasion was scheduled for November, more than two months later.⁵

The film reiterates the misleading claim that wartime Hiroshima was “a city of considerable military importance: it houses a communications center and an assembly area for troops.” Paradoxically the narrator then states that Hiroshima was “far from *just* a military target,” and that its population is 80% civilian. A communications center and assembly area hardly vest a city with “considerable military importance,” a claim that echoes the introduction of Hiroshima to the American public by Harry Truman on August 6, 1945, who referred to it as “an important military base.”⁶ Three days later Truman reinforced this, stating, “The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in the first attack to avoid, in so far as possible, the killing of civilians.”⁷

There are many points to consider here. First of all, as the film itself mentions, virtually every major city in Japan had been burned to the ground in the spring of 1945 by the firebombing squadrons of Curtis LeMay. Can it be that the US Army attacked and burned 67 cities, but preserved several targets of “considerable military importance” as showcases for future weapons? The fire-bombings crippled Japan’s war making ability and only stopped because of the

lack of critical targets. The cities that were taken off the firebombing list (to preserve virgin targets so that assessments of the effects of atomic bombs could be made) were clearly of *secondary* importance to Japan's ability to continue to prosecute the war.

Consider the map below, printed in the *New York Times* on Friday August 10, 1945 (the day after Nagasaki was bombed). This map purports to show up to 30 important targets in Hiroshima and their scale of damage after the nuclear attack. The map shows conclusively that the two or three most important military targets (the Army transport base, Army ordnance depot, food depot and clothing depot) are all located in the Ujina port area, and are outside of the area of destruction. Almost all of the "targets" that are inside the area of destruction are bridges, hardly targets that were primarily of military importance. The map vividly reveals that the bomb did not target the military assets clustered at Ujina, but rather the city center: it targeted specifically *civilian* Hiroshima.⁸

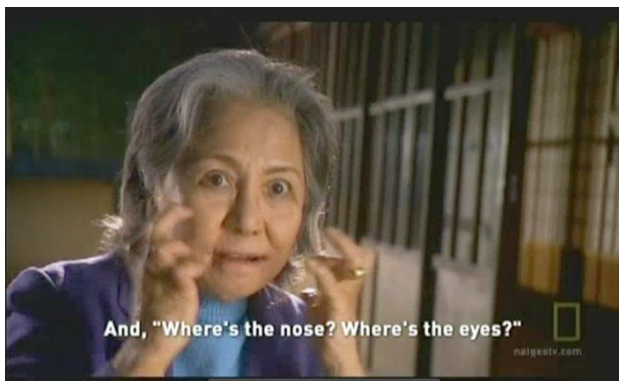


Map of targets of value in Hiroshima, *New York Times* (August 10, 1945)

The film shows several clips that demonstrate the work of the US Strategic Bombing Survey (SSB) in assessing the impact of the weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The SBS worked for several months in both cities documenting the impact of each of the bomb's effects so that the US could enter the postwar world with a detailed grasp both of the devastating firebombings and of the weapon it now alone possessed.⁹ Two salient statements from the Survey, widely quoted by historians that would provide useful perspective for viewers are left out of the film. The first quote directly contradicts Truman's statement about seeking to avoid the killing of civilians. In its report on *The Effects of Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki* the SBS's authors state explicitly that, "Hiroshima and Nagasaki were chosen as targets because of their concentration of activities and population."¹⁰ Regarding the narrative that the bombs saved lives, the authors of the SBS again disagree claiming in their *Summary Report (Pacific)* that, "Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved, 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 American invasion], Japan 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."¹¹

Clearly these battles go back to 1946, and even to 1945, within US discourse on the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They are, however, generally missing from mass culture presentations of this history in the United States. It is typical rather than unusual for this film to avoid such discussions. What sets this film apart however, is its inclusion of interviews and artwork done by hibakusha from Hiroshima. Considering the inclusion of hibakusha from the 1995 exhibition of the *Enola Gay* at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington DC (where it is currently on display), this inclusion is noteworthy.

Throughout the film, three hibakusha talk about their experiences at the time of the bombing, immediately after the bombing, and about subsequent incidents in their lives.¹² The presence of living witnesses to the horrors of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima gives this film a power and intimacy frequently missing from such documentaries. Of course such testimony is a critical part of independently produced documentaries on the bombings, such as Steven Okazaki's *White Light/Black Rain* or Robert Richter and Kathleen Sullivan's *The Last Atomic Bomb*, but it is generally missing from the documentaries presented on such basic cable channels as the Discovery Channel, the History Channel and the National Geographic Channel, where many Americans without a prior interest in the subject often encounter such films.



Sasamori Shigeko

Sasamori Shigeko, who was 13 at the time of the bombing, tells of how she was burned on 2/3rds of her body. When her mother found her five days later, she recognized Shigeko's voice, but not her burned body. Ms. Sasamori's still disfigured hands demonstrate the lifelong impact of such burns to the television audience.¹³

Tanemori Takashi was an 8 year-old boy playing hide and seek inside his school building with his friends when the bomb detonated. The school building collapsed on top of him and a soldier had to pull him out of the rubble.



Tanemori Takashi

Tanemori would go on to make many paintings of his experiences, publish a book, and found the Silkworm Peace Institute in California.¹⁴

The testimony of Koko Tanimoto Kondo opens a window onto the later life of the hibakusha. Ms. Tanimoto Kondo was only 8 months old when the bomb was dropped, and so she has no direct memory of the event, but amazingly she holds up the dress she was wearing on the morning that the bomb was detonated. Ms. Kondo, a prominent Hiroshima hibakusha and the daughter of Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto, the Hiroshima Methodist minister who spearheaded the project that resulted in the medical trip to the US of the so-called Hiroshima Maidens, recounts her experiences as a subject of study by the Atomic Bomb Casualty Commission (now known as the Radiation Effects Research Foundation). The medical researchers at the Commission examined but did not treat the

hibakusha.¹⁵ The hibakusha offered the US military an unprecedented opportunity to conduct long-term studies of the impact of radiation exposure on the human body. The US was beginning to systematically manufacture nuclear weaponry and to plan for future nuclear wars. Detailed information on the effects of radiation on the human body was scarce and would become increasingly valuable as the Cold War began. The ABCC, originally staffed by American doctors, would later become a joint US-Japanese research institute and its studies (still ongoing today) would contribute to both military and humanitarian efforts.

Ms. Kondo recounts her experiences as a subject of study at the ABCC, and her horror and anger at being made to remove her clothes in front of a room full of doctors just as she was entering puberty. The power of her embarrassment and still tangible rage at this dehumanizing treatment and having her adolescent feelings disregarded in a setting of power inequity illustrates the revictimization of the hibakusha at the hands of the ABCC. Susan Lindee has written about how the ABCC treated hibakusha as sources of data rather than as human beings and Ms. Kondo's angst ridden telling of this story is one of the most vivid illustrations of this history.¹⁶



Koko Tanimoto Kondo

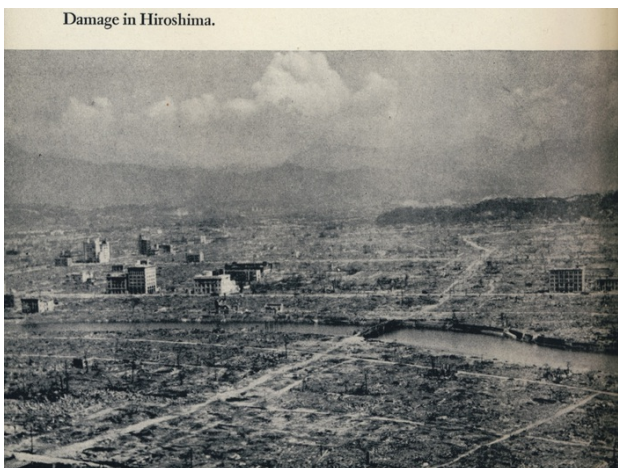
An important contribution of the film is its introduction of paintings by the hibakusha. The paintings vividly depict such horrors as people “walking like ghosts,” the intensity of the firestorm, and rivers choked with the corpses of the dead. It is worth recalling, however, that these paintings, done decades after the bombings beginning in the 1960s, have been tempered by time. Sociologist Akiko Naono has pointed out that many of the hibakusha she interviewed testify that they softened the depictions in the paintings from the hellish scenes they experienced in part to offer comfort to those who died.¹⁷ The paintings nevertheless convey some of the most powerful images of the human toll exacted by the atomic bombs that Americans have ever seen.



The film

A painting of bodies in the Ota River as Hiroshima burned

claims that images of the victims of Hiroshima were withheld from the American public because it was feared that exposure to these images would turn American public opinion against the bombings. This is largely, but not wholly true. It is certainly the case that the primary image of the atomic bomb that most Americans encountered, and still do encounter, is the mushroom cloud high in the sky. Those who have seen images of the cities below have, for the most part seen images of an erased city, void of human beings, and photographed from the air. These images removed the people from the landscape and suggested that what was bombed was *Hiroshima* and not the *people* of Hiroshima.



Typical early photograph of Hiroshima published in the United States, seen from the air and without any visible human beings. Notice that the title, “Damage in Hiroshima,” seems to describe the damage to buildings and not to people.¹⁸

These landscape images of the vanished city, and the ubiquitous image of the mushroom cloud, became the visual icons of the bombings commonly seen in the west. Photographs showing the dead and injured in Japan were banned in the US and Japan until 1949. Nevertheless, some images of hibakusha were seen in America before that ban was lifted. The first images that I have tracked were included in newsreel footage that discussed the Bikini nuclear tests in 1946, and the first anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This *Universal Newsreel* clip, titled “Jap Films of Atom Blast at Hiroshima,” and released on August 5, 1946, provided the first images of burned and injured hibakusha from Hiroshima shown in America.¹⁹

The film also contains powerful statements by some of its historical advisors. Anthropologist Hugh Gusterson tries to help viewers understand how the exposure to radiation resulted in psychological trauma that lasts throughout the life of hibakusha, separate from the traumas of the historical experience of the bombings. “Many of the survivors carry around with them the fear that the radiation is a sort of time bomb in their bodies,” describes Gusterson, “and they have lived with the constant fear that they would come down with leukemia or cancer, that they would give birth to children with birth defects.” These worries rob the hibakusha of the simple human experience of simply having a cold or flu. Each health problem, however minor, could trigger the deep anxiety that the symptoms were the first sign that the time bomb lurking inside of them had finally gone off. Every fever could be the first sign of impending death.

Powerful statements about the immorality of the weapons themselves come from two more commentators. Pulitzer Prize winner Richard Rhodes declares unambiguously, “This was not an ideological bomb. This was a weapon of mass destruction: a weapon of terror.” Rhodes wisely describes the bomb in terms very familiar to 21st century Americans, employing the fears and rhetoric of the present in order to properly frame this first nuclear attack over 65 years prior. Similarly, physicist and missile defense critic Theodore Postol states powerfully that, “These weapons, they are so indiscriminate, they are so murderous: you have to ultimately conclude that these weapons are weapons of mass genocide.” These are unambiguous statements of moral condemnation of the use of nuclear weapons, even during wartime, in Japan.

Rhodes also frames the existential terror that accompanied the bombings, describing how the destruction of the city was more far reaching than the statistics that list the

“Jap Films of Atom Blast at Hiroshima,” *Universal Newsreel* (August 5, 1946). [See the film](#) of the aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima and the 1946 test at Bikini.

number of dead or of destroyed buildings. When a city is destroyed he reminds viewers, the complex connections of individuals and communities are severed leaving survivors “trying to decide where the world was.”

24 Hours After Hiroshima is not a radically new take on the history of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Many independent films and countless publications have examined this history with far more nuanced and critical approaches. But *24 Hours* is interesting as a made-for-television and classroom film, one of countless historical documentaries shown repeatedly on basic cable and reflecting the budget and production deadlines inherent in these films. I consider it interesting for just this reason. Much as b-movies from the fifties can open a window on the baseline of cultural attitudes towards issues like gender roles and attitudes towards science and militarism (among other things), these documentaries take the current pulse of what is permissible when talking to a general audience about the history of the use of nuclear weapons by the United States during World War Two. In 1995, on the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bomb, it was impossible to incorporate the voice and existence of the hibakusha in the Smithsonian Institution's exhibit. What this film reveals is that, under certain circumstances, it is now possible to incorporate hibakusha in popular representations of the bombings. That it has become possible to reveal the murderous character of the atomic bomb on American cable tv has to be defined as progress.

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Notes

¹ Producer, director and writer: Pamela Caragol Wells.

² “Text of Statements by Truman, Stimson on Development of Atomic Bomb,” *New York Times* (August 7, 1945): 4.

³ Historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa is the most prominent voice to advance the argument that the Japanese Imperial Government was primarily motivated to surrender by the Russian declaration of war and subsequent invasion. See, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

⁴ This claim was first publicly made by Secretary of War Henry Stimson: see, Henry Stimson, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” *Harper's* (February 1947): 97-107.

⁵ For a discussion of the historiography of this debate see, J. Samuel Walker, “The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographic Update,” in, Michael J. Hogan, ed., *Hiroshima in History and Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 11-37; [Sean L. Malloy](#), “Four Days in May: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 14-2-09 (April 4, 2009).

⁶ “Text of Statements.”

⁷ “President Truman's Report to the People on War Developments, Past and Future,” *New York Times* (August 10, 1945): 12.

⁸ “Hiroshima Area that Sustained Damage in First Atomic Bomb Attack,” *New York Times* (August 10, 1945): 5.

⁹ The SBS also conducted studies of the effects of conventional and fire bombing raids throughout Japan.

¹⁰ *United States Strategic Bombing Survey: The Effects of Atomic Bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1946): 41.

¹¹ *United States Strategic Bombing Survey: Summary Report (Pacific)* (Washington DC: Government Printing Office, 1946): 26.

¹² It is worth noting that all three hibakusha featured in the film are Christians and fluent English speakers.

¹³ Sasamori would later be among the 25 women known in the US as the Hiroshima Maidens. See, [Robert Jacobs](#), “Reconstructing the Perpetrator's Soul by Reconstructing the Victim's Body: The Portrayal of the ‘Hiroshima Maidens’ in the Mainstream Media in the United States,” *Intersections: Gender and*

Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific 24 (June 2010).

¹⁴ See, Takashi Tanemori, *Hiroshima: Bridge to Forgiveness* (North Vancouver, BC: Multicultural Books, 2007).

¹⁵ Ms. Kondo is also mentioned in John Hersey's seminal 1946 book *Hiroshima*. See, John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946): 4.

¹⁶ M. Susan Lindee, *Suffering Made Real: American Science and the Survivors at Hiroshima* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

¹⁷ [Naono Akiko](#), "Transmission of Trauma, Identification and Haunting: A Ghost Story of Hiroshima," *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* 24 (June 2010).

¹⁸ Photograph taken from William L. Laurence, *Dawn Over Zero: The Story of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946): 280. Laurence was the *New York Times* reporter who was the official Manhattan Project publicist. He received a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting on the development and use of nuclear weapons by the United States, a prize that is now considered controversial. See, "Hiroshima Cover-up: Stripping the War Department's Timesman of his Pulitzer": [Link](#).

¹⁹ "Jap Films of Atom Blast at Hiroshima," Universal Newsreel (August 5, 1946). Available online [here](#).