

Hiroshima Bombing Gets Hollywood Makeover

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[Who What Why](#)

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President Barack Obama will finish up his current Asia trip by becoming the first sitting US president to visit Hiroshima, Japan, site of the fateful atomic bombing attack on Aug. 6, 1945, that killed tens of thousands of Japanese citizens.

The people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki suffered unspeakable horrors that day, and in the months and years that followed. Some in the US government didn't want Americans to see what really happened. For perspective — and revelations — on that paradigm-changing event, in concurrence with Obama's visit, WhoWhatWhy revisits past coverage of a painful final chapter to World War II.

*What follows is author **Greg Mitchell's** piece (which originally ran in 2014), examining Hollywood's role in sanitizing the devastation and suffering at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.*

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You might wonder why most Americans, after Hiroshima, accepted the new nuclear dangers so readily, even as atomic bombs led to hydrogen bombs and the world's stockpile of warheads mounted on intercontinental ballistic missiles expanded from mere dozens to thousands.

An important factor was the active suppression, by the Pentagon and other US agencies, of vital information about radiation effects and other nuclear dangers. I have documented this in two books, [Hiroshima in America](#) (with Robert Jay Lifton) and [Atomic Cover-up: Two U.S. Soldiers, Hiroshima & Nagasaki, and The Greatest Movie Never Made](#). The cover-up extended even to Hollywood.

This is a cautionary tale, one that has only recently seen the light after being buried for decades. It exposes the official censorship—by the Truman White House—of a major Hollywood film on the bombing of Hiroshima. And the tale goes beyond censorship: it involves the outright falsification of major historical facts.¹



A Propaganda Film is Born

The MGM drama, *The Beginning or the End* emerged in 1947, after many revisions, as a Hollywood version of America's official nuclear narrative: The bomb was clearly necessary to end the war with Japan and save American lives—and we needed to build new and bigger weapons to protect us from the Soviets.

Just weeks after the Hiroshima attack in August 1945, Sam Marx, a producer at MGM, received a call from agent Tony Owen, who said his wife, actress Donna Reed, had received some fascinating letters from her high school chemistry teacher. That teacher, Dr. Edward Tompkins, who was then at the Oak Ridge nuclear site, wrote to ask if Hollywood had a feature on the atomic bomb in the works, one that would warn the world about the dangers of a nuclear arms race. He was surprised to learn they did not. But this would soon change.

Tompkins' letter set in motion what MGM boss Louis B. Mayer, a conservative Republican, called "the most important story" he would ever film. MGM hired Norman Taurog to direct the film, and Hume Cronyn to star as physicist Robert Oppenheimer, who headed the scientific effort to create the bomb.

President Truman himself provided the title, *The Beginning or the End*. Within weeks, as I learned through archival research, MGM writers were meeting with the atomic scientists at Oak Ridge and elsewhere.

My fascination with the making, and unmaking, of this seminal film about the dawn of the Atomic Age took me to the Truman Library, where I was the first to consult key documents, White House letters and scripts. The story of the derailing of the movie, and why it was important, is told in my book, "Hollywood Bomb."



The Bombing Gets a Hollywood Makeover

The early scripts, which I discovered at the library, raised doubts about President Truman's decision to drop the bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima—and portrayed the effects of the bombing with a stark realism that would have shocked many viewers.

The script called for shots of a bombed-out Hiroshima as ghostlike ruins, with close-ups of a baby with a burned face. The underlying message reflected the regrets of many of the scientists who had worked to create the bomb: It would have been better to continue the war—even if it meant a full-scale invasion of Japan—“than release atomic energy in the world.”

But then something happened, and the “message” of *The Beginning or the End* shifted radically.

The reason for the shift was clear: General Leslie Groves, the director of the Manhattan Project who was back at the Pentagon, had secured the all-important right of script approval—along with a then-hefty \$10,000 fee—and was playing an active role in reshaping the film.

Unlike Groves and Truman, nearly all of the scientists impersonated in the film—even Albert Einstein—were not given script approval (although they signed releases). The Hollywoodization of the bomb had begun.

Facts were suppressed, and events were completely fabricated:

Suppression of fact:

In revised scripts, the decision to use the bomb was presented as justifiable, even admirable. The doubts raised earlier just disappeared. And now, after scenes depicting the bombing of Hiroshima, no victims were shown, just a charred landscape filmed from the air.

Suppression of fact:

Under General Groves' guidance, the revised script made light of nuclear fallout.

Fabrication:

The B-29s flying over Hiroshima were pelted with heavy flak, a detail that made the attack seem more courageous. In fact, there was no anti-aircraft fire over Hiroshima.

Fabrication:

One scene depicted fictional German scientists visiting a fabricated Japanese nuclear facility in—Hiroshima!

Fabrication:

In another entirely false episode, Matt Cochran, a young scientist arming the bomb, prevents a chain reaction from blowing up 40,000 people on a Pacific island—and thereby exposes himself to a fatal dose of radiation. But before he dies, Matt concludes,

“God has not shown us a new way to destroy ourselves. Atomic energy is the hand he has extended to lift us from the ruins of war and lighten the burdens of peace.”

Harry Truman’s Behavior Gets a Hollywood Makeover

After screening the film, Walter Lippmann, the famed columnist, said he still found one scene “shocking.” It pictured Truman deciding, rather cavalierly, after only a brief reflection, that the United States would use the weapon against Japan. President Truman felt uncomfortable with the scene, as well.

Following protests from the White House, the rightwing MGM screenwriter James K. McGuinness deleted the offending scene and wrote a new one:

Fabrication:

In the revised scene, Truman “reveals” that the United States would drop leaflets over Hiroshima warning of the coming attack with a new weapon as a means to “save lives.” There were no such leaflets.

Fabrication:

The fictional Truman also says there was a “consensus” that dropping the bomb would shorten the war by a year. No such consensus existed.

Fabrication:

And in the film the President predicts this “will mean life for...from 300,000 to half a million of America’s finest youth.” This was a highly inflated figure.

Fabrication:

President Truman says that both Hiroshima and Nagasaki had been picked as targets for their military value. In fact, they were selected because they had not been bombed previously and so would demonstrate the power of this new weapon. In any case, the aiming points for release of the bombs was the center of the cities, not military bases.

Fabrication:

The new scene also had Truman claiming he had spent “sleepless nights” making the decision. But in real life he proudly insisted he had never lost any sleep over it.

Suppression of fact:

The Truman White House demanded further changes. Among them, deleting a reference to morally concerned scientists who favored setting off a demonstration bomb for Japanese leaders in a remote area, to give them a chance to surrender before we dropped an atomic bomb on a city.

Fabrication:

The claim that the bombing would shorten the war by “approximately” a year was ordered changed to “at least” a year.

Truman even wrote a letter to the actor who had portrayed him in the original scene, complaining that he made it seem as if the president had come to a “snap judgment” in deciding to use the bomb. As indicated above, the offending scene was rewritten. This prompted the actor, Roman Bohnen, to write a sarcastic letter to the President, informing him that people would be debating the decision to drop the bomb for 100 years “and posterity is quite apt to be a little rough.” He went on to suggest that Truman should play himself in the movie. Truman, who normally ignored critical letters, took the trouble to reply and defend the atomic bomb decision, revealing, “I have no qualms about it whatever.”

Soon—likely on orders from the White House—Bohnen was replaced by another actor.

A Manufactured “Aura of Authenticity”

The drama that emerged in 1947, after many revisions, was a Hollywood version of what became America’s official nuclear narrative: The bomb was clearly necessary to end the war with Japan and save American lives—and we needed to build new and bigger weapons to protect us from the Soviets. The movie was seen by hundreds of thousands of Americans. Because of its quasi-documentary form, most viewers probably accepted its depiction of events as accurate.

The Beginning or the End, which billed itself as “basically a true story,” opened across the country in March 1947 to mixed reviews. *Time* laughed at the film’s “cheery imbecility,” but *Variety* praised its “aura of authenticity and special historical significance.” Bosley Crowther, the *New York Times* critic, applauded its handling of the moral issues in portraying the “necessary evil” of the atomic attacks.

On the other hand, Harrison Brown, who had worked on the bomb, exposed some of the film’s factual errors in *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*. He called the claim that warning leaflets had been showered on Hiroshima the “most horrible falsification of history.”

Physicist Leo Szilard knew what violence had been done to the truth. He summed it up this way: “If our sin as scientists was to make and use the bomb, then our punishment was to watch *The Beginning or the End*.”

Mutual Assured Destruction

Mankind’s punishment would be the era of MAD, or Mutual Assured Destruction—the Cold

War doctrine that pitted the locked-and-loaded nuclear arsenals of the United States and the Soviet Union against each other in a 50-year standoff. Those nuclear weapons, still on hair-trigger fuses—as well as those possessed by China, Pakistan, North Korea, Israel and other nations—continue to threaten the existence of life on earth whenever political leaders play “chicken” with one another for “strategic” advantage. And the nuclear arms race fed the vast nuclear power industry, marked by its own unprecedented dangers and accidents from Three Mile Island to Chernobyl and Fukushima.

Greg Mitchell is the author of more than a dozen books, including “[Hiroshima in America](#)” (with Robert Jay Lifton) and “[Atomic Cover-up](#)” and “[Hollywood Bomb](#).” He is the former editor of *Nuclear Times* and Editor & Publisher and writes a daily column at *The Nation*.

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