

When New York Times Reporter Was Chief Propagandist for Atomic Bomb

By [Greg Mitchell](#)

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William L. Laurence earned the nickname “Atomic Bill” several times over. He was a Pulitzer-winning New York Times science reporter who became embedded with the Manhattan Project and followed its creation of the first atomic bombs at several sites around the United States. As the first use of the new weapon against Japan neared, seventy-five summers ago, he wrote several lengthy articles glorifying the Bomb and the men who made it, which were published, with overwhelming impact, by his newspaper (and others across the country) starting on August 7, 1945.

Then, on August 9, he observed the atomic bombing of Nagasaki from one of the support planes, another unique experience. Later he wrote about that for the *Times* – again, an account that required government clearance. It expressed wonderment and pride in the death-dealing device, without concern for the tens of thousands of civilians who died below. As always, Laurence provided colorful depictions of the bomb’s blast and visual effects with little focus on its startling radiation dangers.

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THREE CENTS

FIRST ATOMIC BOMB DROPPED ON JAPAN; MISSILE IS EQUAL TO 20,000 TONS OF TNT; TRUMAN WARNS FOE OF A 'RAIN OF RUIN'

HIRAM W. JOHNSON, REPUBLICAN DEAN IN THE SENATE, DIES

Belmont Helped Present U. S. Entry Into League—Opposed World Charter

CALIFORNIA EX-GOVERNOR

Ran for Vice President With Theodore Roosevelt in '12—In Washington Since '17

Washington, Aug. 6.—Hiram W. Johnson, Republican senator from California, died today in the city of Washington. He was 77 years old. He had been in Washington since 1917. He had served as vice president of the United States in 1912 with Theodore Roosevelt. He had also served as governor of California from 1911 to 1917. He was a prominent figure in the Senate, known for his opposition to the League of Nations and his support for the United States' entry into World War I.

Jet Plane Explosion Kills Major Bong, Top U. S. Ace

Pilot Who Downed 40 Japanese Craft, Sent Home to Be 'Safe,' Was Flying New 'Shooting Star' as a Test Pilot

BIRMINGHAM, Calif., Aug. 6.—The plane started to wobble in the air, then it fell. It was a new plane, a "Shooting Star," and it was being flown by a test pilot. The pilot was Major Gregory B. Bessinger, one of the top U.S. aces. He had downed 40 Japanese aircraft during the war. He was sent home to be "safe," but he was killed in this accident. The plane was flying at a high altitude when it began to wobble. Bessinger tried to regain control, but he was unable to do so. The plane crashed into the ground, and Bessinger was killed.

KYUSHU CITY RAZED

Kenney's Planes Blast Taramizu in Record Blow From Okinawa

ROCKET SITE IS SEEN
125 B-29's Hit Japan's Raiders Wrecked Norse Toyokawa Naval Arsenal in Demolition Strike

By FRANK L. WASHINGTON
The first of 125 B-29 Superfortresses to be sent to Japan was the one that was used in the attack on Kyushu. The attack was a record blow from Okinawa. The planes were flown by Major Gregory B. Bessinger and his crew. They destroyed the city of Taramizu and the Toyokawa Naval Arsenal. The attack was a major victory for the United States.

REPORT BY BRITAIN

'By God's Mercy' We Beat Nazis to Bomb, Churchill Says

ROOSEVELT AID CITED
The report of the British government states that they were able to beat the Nazis to the atomic bomb. Churchill said that it was "by God's mercy" that they were able to do so. He also mentioned that the United States had provided them with the necessary technology.

Steel Tower 'Vaporized' In Trial of Mighty Bomb

Scientists Awe-Struck as Blinding Flash Lighted New Mexico Desert and Great Cloud Bore 40,000 Feet Into Sky

By LEONARD WOOD
WASHINGTON, Aug. 6.—A trial of the atomic bomb was held today in the New Mexico desert. A blinding flash of light was seen, and a great cloud of white vapor rose into the sky. Scientists were awe-struck by the power of the bomb. The tower that was used in the trial was "vaporized" by the explosion.

NEW AGE USHERED

Day of Atomic Energy Hailed by President, Revealing Weapon

HIROSHIMA IS TARGET
The President has hailed the day of atomic energy as a new era in human history. He said that the atomic bomb was a revealing weapon that would change the world. He also mentioned that Hiroshima was the target of the first atomic bombing.

MORRIS IS ACCUSED OF 'TAKING A WALK'
Faction Official 'Set to Part Company'—McDuffie Says Only Temporary Aided

The Mr. Morris, leader of the faction, was accused of "taking a walk" from the party. McDuffie said that Morris was only temporarily aided by the party. The faction was a group of people who were opposed to the party's policies.

CHINESE WIN MORE OF 'INVASION COAST'
Smash Into Part 121 Miles Southwest of Canton—Big Area Open for Landing

The Chinese have won more territory on the coast of China. They have smashed into a part of the coast that is 121 miles southwest of Canton. A big area is now open for landing.

WAR NEWS SUMMARIZED
TUESDAY, AUGUST 7, 1945
The British have captured the town of Kyushu. The Japanese have been defeated in the Pacific. The United States has won the war.

ATOM BOMBS MADE IN 3 HIDDEN CITIES
Secrets on Weapon So Great That Not Even Workers Knew of Their Product

By RAY WALKER
WASHINGTON, Aug. 6.—The secrets of the atomic bomb were so great that not even the workers who made them knew of their product. The bombs were made in three hidden cities.

TRAINS CANCELED IN STRICKEN AREA
Traffic Around Nagasaki Is Disrupted—Japanese Still Hit by Spill Atoms

The trains in the stricken area have been canceled. Traffic around Nagasaki is disrupted. The Japanese are still hit by the spill of atoms.

CHIEF BOMB CHEERLEADER
Less well-known: Laurence continued his role as chief bomb cheerleader weeks after the Nagasaki bomb exploded.

TARKS TALK WAR IF RUSSIA PRESSURE; PREFER VAIN BATTLE TO SURRENDER
By RAY BURN BARKER
The Tarks are talking war if Russia pressures them. They prefer a vain battle to surrender.

REICH EXILE EMERGES AS HEROINE IN DENIAL TO NAZIS OF ATOM'S SECRET
By LEONARD WOOD
The Reich exile has emerged as a heroine in the denial to the Nazis of the atom's secret.

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Image on the right: William L. Laurence and General Leslie Groves



On September 9, 1945, Laurence toured the Trinity test site, in New Mexico, where the United States tested its first atomic weapon on July 16, with General Leslie Groves and physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer. The top-secret area finally had been opened to journalists.

Two weeks earlier, President Truman's secretary, Charles G. Ross, had sent a memo to the War Department urging the military to recruit a group of reporters to explore the test site.

"This might be a good thing to do in view of continuing propoganda from Japan," Ross wrote.

Now General Groves, who believed the reports of radiation disease from Japan were a "hoax," was personally escorting some of the newsmen near ground zero. His driver, a young soldier named Patrick Stout, spent several minutes in the crater of the blast and was photographed, smiling.

Laurence's account of this visit (delayed three days until September 12 due to a censorship review) disclosed quite frankly why he and thirty other journalists had been invited: to "give lie to" Japanese "propaganda" that "radiations were responsible for deaths even after" the Hiroshima attack, as he wrote. He quoted General Groves calling any deaths by radiation in Japan as "very small." (In truth, the total was probably 20,000 or more in the two bombed cities.)

General Groves had expressly asked the reporters to assist him in this effort, and they did not disappoint him. (He was also in the process of securing script approval on that MGM movie about the bomb.) Geiger counters showed that surface radiation, after nearly two months, had "dwindled to a minute quantity, safe for continuous human habitation," Laurence asserted. He did introduce one bit of contrary information: the reporters had been advised to wear canvas overshoes to protect against radiation burns.

But Laurence was keeping a lot to himself. Embedded with the Manhattan Project for months, he was the only reporter who knew about the fallout scare surrounding the Trinity test: scientists in jeeps chasing a radioactive cloud, Geiger counters clicking off the scale, a mule that became paralyzed. Here was the nation's leading science reporter, severely compromised, not only unable but disinclined to reveal all he knew about the potential hazards of the most important scientific discovery of his time. In his report he repeatedly used the word "propaganda" to describe Japan's claims, the debunking of reported

symptoms of radiation disease, the explicit claim that the bomb had to be dropped to end the war.

The press tour, in fact, had “an oddly reassuring effect,” the *New York Times* observed in an editorial. Still, a scientist informed the young soldier, Patrick Stout, who stood in the crater during the press tour, that he had been exposed to dangerous levels of radioactivity. Twenty-two years later Stout became ill and was diagnosed with leukemia. The military, apparently acknowledging radiation as the cause, granted him “service-connected” disability compensation. Stout died in 1969.

W.L. Laurence would win another Pulitzer for his Bomb-related reporting in 1945.

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Greg Mitchell is the author of [a dozen books](#), including most recently [The Tunnels: Escapes Under the Berlin Wall](#) (Crown) and [The Beginning or the End: How Hollywood – and America – Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb](#).

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