

The Truth about Hiroshima and Nagasaki

What Chris Wallace didn't tell you on the Fox News special adapted from his new bestseller.

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Chris Wallace of Fox News has published his first book, Countdown 1945. It's about the final days of the run-up to dropping the atomic bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. You might have hoped that it would be a bit contrarian — like some of his interviews and commentary on that network.

Would he question what Robert Jay Lifton and I have [called](#) “The Hiroshima Narrative” that has held sway in the media and popular culture since President Truman announced the attack on August 6, 1945? That narrative has insisted that the bomb, and only the bomb, could have ended the Pacific war against Japan and thereby saved hundreds of thousands or even a million American lives.

Sadly, based on the evidence of an hour-long *Fox News* special, which he hosted this past Sunday night, and on his book—now a national bestseller—the answer is no. The only thing remarkable about Wallace's arguments are that they offer nothing new, as if no challenging evidence or counter-narratives have been raised over the past 75 years.

Why does this matter today? Among the many issues Wallace failed to mention on *Fox*: America's official “first-use” policy, initiated in 1945, which enables any president to respond to a non-nuclear attack or threat by launching our nuclear missiles, remains fully in effect today. The enduring defense of the use of the bomb against two cities in 1945 to “save American lives” can only encourage, or at least enable, possible future use—by the U.S. or any other country. In fact, polls show that large numbers of Americans say they would support a nuclear first-strike in response to a grave danger posed by North Korea or Iran.

There were some true howlers in the *Fox* special, such as showing an overhead view of the mushroom cloud rising at Hiroshima using footage actually shot over Nagasaki; then, a few minutes later, using the same footage for the Nagasaki bomb but changing it from color to black and white, hoping we wouldn't notice. Earlier, the producers briefly flashed footage of the atomic test in the ocean off Bikini in 1946 to represent the first test of the bomb in the New Mexico desert in 1945.

But the program can be criticized more for omissions than errors of commission.

There was not a single second of footage from the aftermath of the bombings that revealed any injured, sick, dying or dead Japanese victims. All we saw was rubble and damaged buildings.

What else was left out?

There was no discussion of Japan's near collapse weeks before the attacks. In the summer of 1945, the country was suffering under a full blockade. Increasingly desperate surrender feelers were being communicated by Japanese diplomats, of which Truman was well aware, but you would never know that from the program.

We also do not learn that the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that Japan would have likely surrendered, even without the atomic bombings, before the U.S. invasion planned for late that autumn.

Instead we're told that the "enemy showed no willingness to surrender," and "few doubted that defeating the Japanese could drag on for another 12 to 18 months." In fact, by July 1945, many American military analysts, including leading generals, doubted this.

Nor did we hear in the documentary that several top Truman advisers believed that Japan would quit the war if the United States modified its "unconditional surrender" demand by signaling that the emperor could remain on the throne. There was no admission in the program that after dropping the bombs we allowed the emperor to stay on anyway. What if we had done that earlier?

Beyond the use of the two atomic bombs, several other factors speeded the end of the war, most notably Russia's entry on August 8, which the U.S. had demanded and Stalin had agreed to at Potsdam two weeks earlier. Securing that from Stalin, Truman wrote in his diary, "Fini Japs" and "we'll end the war a year sooner now"—referring to the Soviets' declaration of war, not the expected dropping of the bomb. The only reference on the *Fox* show to this critical factor was a brief mention in Wallace's closing remarks.

Wallace accurately cited the immediate death toll for both cities as 100,000, but failed to present the ultimate toll due to burns, injuries and radiation poisoning, which doubled the number of deaths if not more. Hiroshima was repeatedly referred to as a "military target" or even a "military city"—a key U.S. claim going back to August 1945 when Truman labeled it a "military base"—even though Japanese soldiers only represented about one in ten deaths there (and there is no mention of the dozen U.S. prisoners who died in the attack). A total of about 150 Japanese military personnel died in Nagasaki.

As is customary in such programs, Nagasaki was barely a footnote. Kurt Graham, director of the Truman Library and Museum, offered a bizarre and false defense of dropping the second bomb: The U.S. did not yet have the kind of "satellite reconnaissance" that would have allowed an aerial assessment of damage in Hiroshima, so we had to plunge ahead with the Nagasaki bombing.

This is nonsense, as photos from a U.S. flyover of Hiroshima were quickly sent to Washington. (*The New York Times* in a front-page headline cited 60% of the city destroyed.) You'd never know from Wallace that many of the historians and others who support the use of the first bomb feel that the bombing of Nagasaki, just three days after Hiroshima, is indefensible, perhaps even a war crime.

The range of "expert" opinions on the show was extremely narrow, with the main commentators—except for one Hiroshima survivor—a conservative Republican senator (Roy Blunt), that director of the Truman library, a historian for the military bomber group that

carried out the attacks, and a department chairman from the Smithsonian National Air & Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Twenty-five years ago that institution brought shame on itself when it caved to pressure from veterans and politicians which led to the cancellation of a balanced exhibit surrounding its triumphant display of the newly restored B-29 bomber Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the Hiroshima bomb. The Wallace book appears to support that suppression.

Wallace claims further that Truman deeply pondered for weeks whether to deploy the new weapon, even spent many “sleepless nights.” Truman himself, however, would repeatedly assert that he never lost any sleep over it. Asked once how long it took to make the decision, he snapped his fingers in reply.

One Japanese survivor, Hideko Tamura Snider (married to an American) is allowed in the TV special and book to tell the moving story of experiencing the bombing and losing her mother. But this is undercut by the overall message that the loss of civilian lives was a) Japan’s fault; b) unavoidable in war; and c) a paltry number compared to the lives that would have been lost in a U.S. invasion.

In any event, her story ends on a disturbing note as she is filmed visiting the restoration of the Enola Gay at an Air & Space Museum annex. There she assures Wallace that she feels no anger about losing her mother, though she still grieves. Then she turns to the plane and says “Sayonara,” as Wallace hugs her around the shoulders.

That is the one thing “new” in the *Fox* special. Otherwise it follows a tired formula. And while Wallace’s *Countdown 1945* book is more detailed and at times more nuanced, its arguments are fully reflected in the TV special, and reduces all questions about the necessity of dropping the bombs to “hindsight.”

From my particular perspective, what I also found astounding was how much the program echoed moves by the Truman White House and military to sabotage the first movie about the bomb, produced by MGM in 1947, which lends its name to the title of [my new book, *The Beginning or the End: How Hollywood—and America—Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*](#).

As long ago as that, Truman and the military forced changes in the movie script to, among other things, bolster the “military target” and “million lives saved” arguments, remove any scenes of victims on the ground, cut any references to Nagasaki or to Truman’s alleged “sleepless nights.” Truman even ordered a re-take of a key scene and got MGM to fire the actor playing him for lacking the proper “military bearing.”

Chris Wallace’s unqualified summation in the *Fox* special perfectly matches the message of both that MGM film and what’s been the main plotline of *The Hiroshima Narrative* for seven and a half decades: “The bomb ended the war more than a year earlier than any invasion of Japan would have, and likely saved more than a million casualties on both sides.” Yet there is little credible evidence that Japan, in its desperate state and after a Soviet declaration of war, would hold out for a year after a massive U.S. invasion—or even without one—nor did few military experts expect a million U.S. casualties in such an invasion.

That ultimate Wallace argument also rests on a tragically faulty premise. Having successfully tested the bomb, and with more ready to be quickly assembled, there is only a slim chance that the invasion, though well-planned, would ever have happened. There is no

way Truman would have ordered tens of thousands of American soldiers to their deaths once he had atomic bombs at the ready. As we've seen, he also believed that, even without the atomic weapon, the Russians' attack on Japan meant the war would end "a year sooner."

The historical debate thus has always rested on the issue of whether Truman should have waited another few days, or weeks, for Japan to capitulate before ordering the bomb dropped over the center of two cities, killing more than 200,000, an estimated 95% of them civilians.

Yet Wallace diminishes what he calls "questions of morality" by concluding, "It's unrealistic to think that Harry Truman would have made any other choice." That may be true, but all of us have the responsibility to consider whether that choice was the correct one, with possible "first-use" of nuclear bombs still a terrifying option today.

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