

The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan. By WILSON D. MISCAMBLE. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 174 pp. CAD \$33.95 (paper).

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Was it necessary and moral to use atomic bombs against Japan? These questions have been discussed since the day the bombs were dropped. So much research exists on this subject today that it is extremely difficult to add anything new. Attempting it, one probably needs to unearth new sources or offer a completely novel interpretation. In my view, this book by Professor Miscamble does neither.

First, in regard to originality, the author's position fully falls into the traditionalist camp, which holds that the use of atomic bombs was necessary. Most of the books published in the last twenty years—in varying degrees and with some notable exceptions—lean towards this outlook. Thanks to the challenge of the so-called revisionists, however, the accumulated literature has also become increasingly detailed and nuanced on many of the contested issues. This book, nonetheless, is not too keen on taking this into account. It rather reads as a model representative of the traditionalists' orthodoxy: Truman wanted to end the war, chose the best available option and saved untold lives on both sides in the process. The ultimate responsibility for Hiroshima and Nagasaki lies with the Japanese. And the Soviets are responsible for the initiation of the Cold War that the Truman administration tried so hard to avoid.

What's more, the author contends that the use of the A-bombs was not only necessary, it was also moral. Referring to the "much maligned and misunderstood political genius Niccolo Machiavelli," Miscamble argues that Truman "had blood on his hands" but "prevented much greater bloodshed." Given that the Notre Dame historian is also a catholic priest, his use of "means justifies ends" consequentialism is surprising.

Leaving the ethical debate aside, the most illuminating and exciting parts of the work are the detailed portrayals of the US policy makers in their approach to the atomic weapon. A life-long student of Truman, Miscamble expertly demonstrates how the president and his aides saw the 1945 realities, why the use of A-bombs appeared as the best alternative, and, in fact, why other alternatives were not considered. Here the author also advances one of the main messages of his book: do not judge Truman's actions from a neat post-Hiroshiman perceptive when he and his men had to operate in a messy pre-Hiroshiman reality.

I agree with this and many other points the author makes. For example, he is correct in pointing out that Truman did not start, but inherited a legacy of, civilian terror bombing from Roosevelt and Churchill. He is also correct to posit that use of atomic weapons was critical in eliciting a speedier surrender. And yet, I find the overall tone of the book's narrative too partial. Miscamble goes to great length to depict the Americans as men who tried to do the best for their country in a complex situation. He does not, however, extend the same courtesy to the Russians or the Japanese. They are at times described as "obtuse," "stupid," "fanatic" and "brutal." Hence, the heroes of his story—Truman and Byrnes in the first place—might make mistakes (such as naively seeking amiable relations with the Soviets in 1945/6 in Miscamble's view). Their opponents make mistakes, however, out of irrationality and immorality. The relevant literature shows that the situation was far more complex than this.

The same applies to the controversies surrounding the use of the bombs. For example, in writing about August 6th, Miscamble does not fail to mention that "Hiroshima contained military targets." Naturally, all cities of Hiroshima's size had some military targets. The author could have as easily emphasized that it was precisely for the fact that Hiroshima had not been a military priority, thus still untouched, why it was selected and why the bomb was dropped over its city center.

Miscamble's discussion of the effects of the two bombs is also at times confusing. In one chapter, the author stresses that Nagasaki, too, was critical in swaying the Japanese government's

decision in favor of surrender. But when, in the next chapter, the author wants to refute the argument made by others that Japan was on the verge of surrender, he says that “the second bomb did not alter the firmly held positions of the Japanese” (p. 97). Eventually we learn that Hirohito’s interventions proved decisive. And Miscamble emphasizes that the emperor decided to end the war in response to Hiroshima, not the Soviet entry. Again, a few pages later, Hirohito’s decision was apparently induced by all three events though the bombs weighed “most heavily” on his mind. The bottom line is that, no matter what the context, professor Miscamble tries to demonstrate that the American action (the two bombs) was justified and that it mattered far more than the Soviet one. Such interpretation, of course, ignores, for example, the massive literature on the Soviet impact as well as the doubts raised in regards to the necessity of Nagasaki (held even by scholars who otherwise recognize that Hiroshima was unavoidable). Miscamble’s straightforward interpretations are not even upheld by the literature of the Japan experts he quotes. A fairer reading of these sources would have produced a more balanced narrative. It would have also resulted in a more honest acknowledgement that many of the A-bomb controversies cannot be adjudicated in the simple manner in which the book often proceeds.

The general reader might not notice the many ambiguities and contentions which are overlooked. Indeed, the book will probably impress as a well-written work based on an extensive reading of primary and secondary sources. The lack of nuance and the liberty in selectively using the research of others to support the one’s own views, however, will not persuade the expert.

This book—merely 150 pages long—was published as part of the Cambridge Essential History series. The series seeks short, thesis-driven texts. This surely accounts for certain short-cuts professor Miscamble had to take in his exposition. We nevertheless find the same arguments and problems in his twice-as-long publication: *From Roosevelt to Truman* (2007). As a matter of fact, the book here under review “draws heavily” on the longer one, as Miscamble fleetingly mentions in the introduction. But what really should have been said is that large chunks of Chapters 2–9 are identical to the content published in 2007 (including the main text, footnotes, and pictures). I am afraid that those who have already obtained the earlier title will find little need to read this one.

Lastly, this work was written as a direct attack on the literature of the revisionists, especially Gar Alperovitz.¹ In my view, Miscamble’s approach shares many of the flaws that have been attributed to Alperovitz’s research including tendentiousness in interpreting evidence. Unlike Alperovitz’s work, however, the present publication will probably not inspire a whole generation of new research, nor will it be the last word in this ongoing controversy.

NOTES

¹See Gar Alperovitz. 1965. *Atomic diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam: The Use of the Atomic Bomb and the American Confrontation with Soviet Power* (New York: Simon and Schuster) and Gar Alperovitz and Sanho Tree. 1995. *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Knopf).

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This edited volume helps the reader to better understand the cultural and rhetorical context of public diplomacy in East Asia and how the values and campaigns of public diplomacy in this region contrast with dominant Western-centric UK, US, and European models. It reinforces the regional focus