

Book Review of *Hiroshima and the Historians: Debating America's Most Controversial Decision*

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Kenneth B. Pyle. *Hiroshima and the Historians: Debating America's Most Controversial Decision*. Cambridge University Press, 2024.

Hiroshima and the Historians: Debating America's Most Controversial Decision is a book by Kenneth B. Pyle, a historian of modern Japan and an expert in US-Japan relations. It originated from the honors seminars Pyle taught for about twenty-five years at the University of Washington. Reflecting on his specialized knowledge and accumulated experience, in 2013, Pyle gave a public lecture as part of the 2013 Griffith and Patricia Way Endowed Lecture.¹ The lecture's topic was the so-called Hiroshima decision, by which the Truman administration executed the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to end World War II. The value of Pyle's lecture was recognized by the managing editor of *Pacific Northwest Quarterly*, the well-established peer-reviewed journal with over a hundred years of publication history. In the summer of the same

¹ "Kenneth Pyle's lectures on 'Hiroshima and the Historians,'" accessed December 1, 2024, <https://jsis.washington.edu/news/kenneth-b-pyle-lectures-on-hiroshima-and-the-historians/>

year, the journal published Pyle's lecture under the title "Hiroshima and the Historian: History as Relative Truth."² It is this article's structure and contents that later developed into the current book under this review.³

In a nutshell, *Hiroshima and the Historians* presents the historical controversy of the Hiroshima decision from a bifurcated perspective. The two central questions this book raises are the American government's reasons for the use of A-bombs against the Japanese cities and the different approaches that historians have taken to explain the wartime decision. The book adopts an expository strategy that can address these two inquiries simultaneously: composing a comprehensive review of the existing Hiroshima decision literature. Specifically, it identifies six strands of the existing research on the decision to use atomic bombs:

1. First is the orthodox view elaborated in the immediate post-war times to defend the American use of A-bombs. Pyle's discussions about this official view center around Henry L. Stimson's 1947 article in *Harper's Magazine*. The article justifies the use of A-bombs by contending that it saved more lives, "a million [possible] casualties," including both countries' soldiers as well as civilians. Pyle details how this Secretary of War's account builds the argument that there was no alternative but the demonstration of an overwhelming capacity of destruction like A-bombs to frustrate the Japanese war leaders' determined resistance. The author also finds that this official version resonated with the general sentiment of the American public, helped assuage their moral conflict, and consolidated their worldview where America takes the good side (pp. 84-87).

2. Next is the revisionist view born from the 1960s and 1970s

² Kenneth Pyle, "Hiroshima and the Historian: History as Relative Truth," *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 103, no. 3 (2013).

³ John M. Findlay, "Introduction to Kenneth B. Pyle's 'Hiroshima and the Historians: History as Relative Truth,'" *The Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 103, no. 3 (2013): 122-23.

anti-war and civil movements in the US. The representative work Pyle reviews in this category is Gar Alperowitz's 1965 *Atomic Diplomacy*, which was expanded and republished in 1995 without a significant change in the main arguments. According to Pyle, this revisionist history argues that if the Truman Administration openly announced the Soviet Union's impending entry into the war against Japan, it would facilitate an early Japanese surrender. He also points out that Alperowitz's discovery was possible because of previously unavailable sources, such as newly declassified Stimson papers, intercepted wartime Japanese diplomatic messages, and Dwight Eisenhower's remarks on the unnecessary of A-Bombing (pp. 103-106). Another critical work Pyle cites is Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's *Racing the Enemy*,⁴ which also singles out the Soviet entry, not the A-bomb, as the primary cause of Japan's early surrender. According to the author, Hasegawa's use of diplomatic sources from all three countries—the UK, Japan, and Russia—enabled and reinforced his claim, while its credibility remains debatable.

3. An established historian of modern Japan, Pyle does not fail to discuss the Japanese responsibility for the destruction of its cities by atomic bombs. His first reference is Robert Butow's *Japan's Decision to Surrender* (1954).⁵ According to Pyle, this book calls attention to the still-debated question of how much the Japanese emperor Hirohito was responsible for Japan's failure to surrender earlier. He also contrasts Butow's description of Hirohito as a constitutional monarch—who reigns but does not rule—to that of Herbert Bix. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (2000), Bix depicts the Japanese emperor as a “fighting generalissimo” contrary to the previous passive image and attributes a decisive role to him for the defeat (pp. 195, 199).

⁴ Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Belknap Press, 2006).

⁵ Robert J. C. Burrow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender* (Stanford University Press, 1954).

4. Pyle also looks beyond the Truman Administration, during which the Hiroshima decision was made. Taking a long-term perspective, he reviews the studies that focus on the legacy of Franklin D. Roosevelt (henceforth FDR) and its influence on his successor. The author pays particular attention to “Roosevelt scholars’ discussions of ‘unconditional surrender policy’.” This school of scholars draws a conclusion that Truman did not have to make the decision—in fact, there is no record of a meeting for the Hiroshima decision. Truman simply did not interfere with the progress of his predecessor’s policy. Pyle, in agreement, tells how FDR’s policy was important in shaping the course of the war, from the weakening of diplomatic exchange between the US and Japan, the justification of Japanese hardliners who refused surrender, to the massive destruction of Japan through air raids even before the Hiroshima decision, thus leaving Truman with few alternatives. The fact that 90% of the American public supported FDR’s policy by the summer of 1945 testifies to the irreversibility (pp. 212-14, 224-26, 228).

5. Additionally, Pyle introduces two strands of scholarly discussions regarding the Hiroshima decision that did not appear in his 2015 article. One is military historians’ accounts. Knowing the conventions that locate military histories outside mainstream academia, he nevertheless assigns one full chapter (Chapter 6) to this genre of historiography. He defends his choice by thoroughly reviewing two particular works, Edward Drea’s *In the Service of the Emperor* (1998) and Richard Frank’s *Downfall* (1999). Pyle concisely and persuasively summarizes both works’ common argument that the Japanese military was strengthening its will to resist by fortifying its territories and thus, Japan was far from being on the verge of surrender in the summer of 1945, unlike the revisionist historians’ claims. In effect, this chapter on military historians echoes the orthodox view while discrediting the revisionists’ findings (pp. 162-63, 165-66).

6. Another new theme that the current book introduces is racial relevance. Pyle examines whether racism is relevant to the US decision to bomb Japanese cities. He raises this issue in the book’s opening chapter by recalling a question that his Waseda University professor asked in the

1960s. “Would America have dropped an atomic bomb on Germany?” (p. 1) He provides some circumstantial evidence: FDR’s racist remarks on Japanese immigration and the US’s internment of Japanese (but not Germans) during World War II. But, Pyle concludes that historians have failed to find direct proof of racism’s relevance to the Hiroshima decision (pp. 148-149, p. 152).

Having provided basic historiographical discussions on the Hiroshima decision, this book might not be the answer for readers seeking original findings and arguments. As mentioned earlier, Pyle composed the monograph based on his teachings of honors seminars. Indeed, the characteristics of the book can be best described as informative and instructive rather than experimental and disputatious. Perhaps for the same reason, the author is attentive in giving a refined reading list for the historiography of the Hiroshima decision. This practice already appeared in the article version of his writing on this topic, with attached “bibliographical notes.” In the present monograph, he devotes a 10-page appendix titled “Suggestions for Further Reading,” which is evidence of why this book serves well for college-level readers who have just gained an interest in this historical topic (See Table 1). Still, one should note that for the author, a historian, the “unconditional surrender policy” school of thought, which takes a longer-term perspective, makes the best appeal. Thus, his writing tone appears more supportive in that section of the book, Chapter 8.

Table 1. Kenneth Pyle’s Recommended Reading List for the Hiroshima Decision (refined by the reviewer)

School of Thought	Recommended Readings
Orthodox Interpretation	Henry Lewis Stimson, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” <i>Harper’s Magazine</i> (1947).
Revisionist Account	Gar Alperovitz, <i>Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam</i> (Vintage Books, 1965); Gar Alperovitz, <i>The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth</i> (Knopf, 1995); Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, <i>Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan</i> (Harvard University Press, 2005).

Japanese Responsibility	Robert J. C. Butow, <i>Japan's Decision to Surrender</i> (Stanford University Press, 1954); Yoshimi Yoshiaki, <i>Grassroots Fascism: The War Experience of the Japanese People</i> (Columbia University Press, 2015); Herbert P. Bix, <i>Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan</i> (Harper Collins, 2000).
Unconditional Surrender Policy	Leon Sigal, <i>Fighting to a Finish: The Politics of War Termination in the United States and Japan, 1945</i> (Cornell University Press, 1988); Kenneth B. Pyle, <i>Japan in the American Century</i> (Harvard University Press, 2018) (*Chapters 2 and 3).
Military Historians	Edward Drea, <i>In the Service of the Emperor: Essays on the Imperial Japanese Army</i> (Nebraska University Press, 1998); Richard B. Frank, <i>Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire</i> (Random House, 1999).
Racism's Relevance	John W. Dower, <i>War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War</i> (Pantheon, 1986); Ronald Takaki, <i>Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb</i> (Little, Brown, 1995).
Primary Sources & Testimonials	Michael Kort, <i>The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb</i> (Columbia University Press, 2007); John Hersey, <i>Hiroshima</i> (Vintage, 1989).

What is brought up but does not receive an in-depth analysis is the question of whether the Hiroshima decision led to the liberation of Asian people from Japanese war crimes and whether it should be justified in this light. In a couple of places in the book, Pyle shows his acknowledgment of this controversial issue: He cites one Chinese student's term paper that for Asians, the question is not the reasons for the decision of the bomb's use but its effect as punishment of the Japanese atrocities against Asian people (p. 7); He quotes Hasegawa's interview that when Japan is rendered as a victim, we must not forget the nation is also responsible for war crimes (p. 121). However, this inquiry is generally out of the scope of this book, which primarily aims to provide historical accounts of why the American political leaders reached the Hiroshima decision and of how historians—American or Japanese who write in English—have taken diverse views.

While Pyle believes historians' duty is to provide as truthful as possible historical accounts to instigate a free dialogue among a community of scholars, he admits historians cannot be completely free of subjective biases. In this reviewer's opinion, the blind spot that this book fails to

cover is the historical meaning of the Hiroshima decision to Japan's Asian neighbors. For the author, the Hiroshima decision is an issue for primarily American and Japanese audiences. As a corollary, throughout his book, Japan plays the role of victim, for whose cultural reproduction in the long postwar period the image of destroyed Hiroshima has played the central part. This perspectival orientation resulted in the non-inclusion of a large volume of recent studies that reveal the politics of memory involved in the history of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings.⁶ This omission may be inevitable because one book cannot cover all relevant topics. However, a historical study that subjects the Hiroshima decision only to the US-Japan relations would not help explain the similar tragic events in World War II such as forced labor and "comfort women," as these had complex international contexts that transcend any bilateral relations.

Still, the publication of Pyle's book is timely. As the author stresses, the Hiroshima decision is one of the most controversial historical disputes between the US and Japan. In the immediate aftermath of the decision, the American public largely supported the use of the A-bomb against the Japanese cities for an earlier ending of the war. While the US public opinion has been after several decades altered to become more critical of the bomb's mass killing of non-combatant civilians, they are still reluctant to accept the demand for a formal US apology. In 1996, when Japan moved to inscribe the Hiroshima Peace Memorial as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which it eventually succeeded, the US made clear its opposition.⁷ On the other hand, most of the Japanese have consistently refused to accept the explanation that the A-bombing of Hiroshima was absolutely necessary to force a Japanese surrender and to

⁶ The memory politics of the Hiroshima bombing, see "Chapter 5 The Bombed: Hiroshimas and Nagasakis in Japanese Memory" in John W. Dower, *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering: Japan in the Modern World* (The New Press, 2012). This book is also included in Kenneth Pyle's recommended reading list on the Hiroshima Decision but without a description of its main arguments and findings (p. 250).

⁷ "US opposed Hiroshima memorial's inscription on UNESCO list: records," *Yonhap News Agency*, May 12, 2016, <https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20160512009200315>.

avoid unnecessary deaths in both countries. Nonetheless, when it comes to formal conversations between governments or public organizations, the Japanese stop short of pursuing US responsibility any further.

The controversy continues today. In response to President Barack Obama's visit to Hiroshima in 2016, then-president candidate Donald Trump said, "Fine. Just as long as he doesn't apologize," as emphasized by Pyle in this book (p. 10). Shortly after the publication of Pyle's book, in October 2024, *Nihon Hidankyo*—short for The Japan Confederation of A- and H-Bomb Sufferers Organizations—was awarded the 2024 Nobel Peace Prize "for its efforts to achieve a world free of nuclear weapons and for demonstrating through witness testimony that nuclear weapons must never be used again."⁸ Just two days later, the White House officially announced President Biden's congratulatory remarks, yet without hinting that the US caused the everlasting suffering.⁹ This silent avoidance means that the Hiroshima decision is likely to be a continuous historical issue for dispute between the US and Japan and among all the neighboring nations involved in this entangled history—*Nihon Hidankyo* officially acknowledges that the organization includes Korean atomic bomb victims as well.¹⁰ For those who want to know how the Hiroshima decision and its historiographical discussions have unfolded, *Hiroshima and the Historians* is the book to start with.

⁸ The Nobel Prize website, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/peace/2024/press-release/>.

⁹ The White House website, accessed December 15, 2024, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2024/10/13/statement-from-president-biden-congratulating-nobel-peace-prize-winners/>.

¹⁰ "Peace Prize Representative Nihon Hidankyo, 'Korean victims fight together against anti-nuclear,'" *YTN*, December 10, 2024, https://m.ytn.co.kr/en/news_view.php?key=202412102310275948#return.