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Hiroshima Film Cover-up Exposed: Censored 1945 Footage to Air

Greg Mitchell

[The movie "Original Child Bomb" aired on Saturday night August 6 at 5:30 p.m. on Sundance Cable, and several times the following week. Those interested in ordering it can write Mary Becker of the Thomas Merton Center at marybecker@cox.net]

NEW YORK In the weeks following the atomic attacks on Japan almost 60 years ago, and then for decades afterward, the United States engaged in airtight suppression of all film shot in Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the bombings. This included footage shot by U.S. military crews and Japanese newsreel teams. In addition, for many years all but a handful of newspaper photographs were seized or prohibited.

The public did not see any of the newsreel footage for 25 years, and the U.S. military film remained hidden for nearly four decades.

The full story of this atomic cover-up is told fully for the first time, as the 60th anniversary of the atomic bombings approaches. Some of the long-suppressed footage will be aired on television this Saturday.



Six weeks ago, Editor and Publisher broke the story that articles written by famed Chicago Daily News war correspondent George Weller about the effects of the atomic bomb dropped on Nagasaki were finally published, in Japan, almost six decades after they had been spiked by U.S. officials. This drew national attention, but suppressing film footage shot in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was even more significant, as this country rushed into the nuclear age with its citizens having neither a true understanding of the effects of the bomb on human beings, nor why the atomic attacks drew condemnation around the world.

As editor of Nuclear Times magazine in the 1980s, I met Herbert Sussan, one of the members of the U.S. military film crew, and Erik Barnouw,

the famed documentarian who first showed some of the Japanese footage on American TV in 1970. In fact, that newsreel footage might have disappeared forever if the Japanese filmmakers had not hidden one print from the Americans in a ceiling.

The color U.S. military footage would remain hidden until the early 1980s, and has never been fully aired. It rests today at the National Archives in College Park, Md., in the form of 90,000 feet of raw footage labeled #342 USAF.



When that footage finally emerged, I corresponded and spoke with the man at the center of this drama: Lt. Col. (Ret.) Daniel A. McGovern, who directed the U.S. military filmmakers in 1945-1946, managed the Japanese footage, and then kept watch on all of the top-secret material for decades.

"I always had the sense," McGovern told me, "that people in the Atomic Energy Commission were sorry we had dropped the bomb. The Air Force -- it was also sorry. I was told by people in the Pentagon that they didn't want those [film] images out because they showed effects on man, woman and child. ... They didn't want the general public to know what their weapons had done -- at a time they were planning on more bomb tests. We didn't want the material out because ... we were sorry for our sins."

Sussan, meanwhile, struggled for years to get some of the American footage aired on national TV, taking his request as high as President Truman, Robert F. Kennedy and Edward R. Murrow, to no avail.

More recently, McGovern declared that Americans should have seen the damage wrought by the bomb. "The main reason it was classified was ... because of the horror, the devastation," he said. Because the footage shot in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was hidden for so long, the atomic bombings quickly sank, unfronted and unresolved, into the deeper recesses of American awareness, as a costly nuclear arms race, and nuclear proliferation, accelerated.

The atomic cover-up also reveals what can happen in any country that carries out deadly attacks on civilians in any war and then keeps images of what occurred from its own people.

Ten years ago, I co-authored (with Robert Jay Lifton) the book "Hiroshima in America," and new material has emerged since. On Aug. 6, and on following days, the Sundance cable channel will air "Original Child Bomb," a prize-winning documentary on which I worked. The film includes some of the once-censored footage -- along with home movies filmed by McGovern in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

THE JAPANESE NEWSREEL FOOTAGE

On Aug. 6, 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb over Hiroshima, killing at least 70,000 instantly and perhaps 50,000 more in the days and months to follow. Three days later, it exploded another atomic bomb over Nagasaki, slightly off target, killing 40,000 immediately and dooming tens of thousands of others. Within days, Japan had surrendered, and the U.S. readied plans for occupying the defeated country -- and documenting the first atomic

catastrophe.

But the Japanese also wanted to study it. Within days of the second atomic attack, officials at the Tokyo-based newsreel company Nippon Eigasha discussed shooting film in the two stricken cities. In early September, just after the Japanese surrender, and as the American occupation began, director Sueo Ito set off for Nagasaki. There his crew filmed the utter destruction near ground zero and scenes in hospitals of the badly burned and those suffering from the lingering effects of radiation.



On Sept. 15, another crew headed for Hiroshima. When the first rushes came back to Tokyo, Akira Iwasaki, the chief producer, felt "every frame burned into my brain," he later said.

At this point, the American public knew little about conditions in the atomic cities beyond Japanese assertions that a mysterious affliction was attacking many of those who survived the initial blasts (claims that were largely taken to be propaganda).

Newspaper photographs of victims were non-existent, or censored. Life magazine would later observe that for years "the world ... knew only the physical facts of atomic destruction."

Tens of thousands of American GIs occupied the two cities. Because of the alleged absence of residual radiation, no one was urged to take precautions.

Then, on Oct. 24, 1945, a Japanese cameraman in Nagasaki was ordered to stop shooting by an American military policeman. His film, and then the rest of the 26,000 feet of Nippon Eisasha footage, was confiscated by the U.S. General Headquarters (GHQ). An order soon arrived banning all further filming. It was at this point that Lt. Daniel McGovern took charge.

SHOOTING THE U.S. MILITARY FOOTAGE

In early September, 1945, less than a month after the two bombs fell, Lt. McGovern -- who as a member of Hollywood's famed First Motion Picture Unit shot some of the footage for William Wyler's "Memphis Belle" -- had become one of the first Americans to arrive in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He was a director with the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey, organized by the Army the previous November to study the effects of the air campaign against Germany, and now Japan.

As he made plans to shoot the official American record, McGovern learned about the seizure of the Japanese footage. He felt it would be a waste to not take advantage of the newsreel footage, noting in a letter to his superiors that "the conditions under which it was taken will not be duplicated, until another atomic bomb is released under combat conditions."

McGovern proposed hiring some of the Japanese crew to edit and "caption" the material, so it would have "scientific value." He took charge of this effort in early January 1946, even as the Japanese feared that, when they were done, they would never see even a scrap of their film again.

At the same time, McGovern was ordered by General Douglas MacArthur on January 1, 1946 to document the results of the U.S. air campaign in more than 20 Japanese cities. His crew would shoot exclusively on color film, Kodachrome and Technicolor, rarely used at the time even in Hollywood. McGovern assembled a crew of eleven, including two civilians. Third in command was a young lieutenant from New York named Herbert Sussan.

The unit left Tokyo in a specially outfitted train, and made it to Nagasaki. "Nothing and no one had prepared me for the devastation I met there," Sussan later told me. "We were the only people with adequate ability and equipment to make a record of this holocaust. ... I felt that if we did not capture this horror on film, no one would ever really understand the dimensions of what had happened. At that time people back home had not seen anything but black and white pictures of blasted buildings or a mushroom cloud."

Along with the rest of McGovern's crew, Sussan documented the physical effects of the bomb, including the ghostly shadows of vaporized civilians burned into walls; and, most chillingly, dozens of people in hospitals who had survived (at least momentarily) and were asked to display their burns, scars, and other lingering effects for the camera as a warning to the world.

At the Red Cross Hospital in Hiroshima, a Japanese physician traced the hideous, bright red scars that covered several of the patients -- and then took off his white doctor's shirt and displayed his own burns and cuts.

After sticking a camera on a rail car and building their own tracks through the ruins, the Americans filmed hair-raising tracking shots that could have been lifted right from a Hollywood movie. Their chief cameraman was a Japanese man, Harry Mimura, who in 1943 had shot "Sanshiro Sugata," the first feature film by a then-unknown Japanese director named Akira Kurosawa.

THE SUPPRESSION BEGINS

While all this was going on, the Japanese newsreel team was completing its work of editing and labeling all their black & white footage into a rough cut of just under three hours. At this point, several members of Japanese team took the courageous step of ordering from the lab a duplicate of the footage they had shot before the Americans took over the project.

Director Ito later said: "The four of us agreed to be ready for 10 years of hard labor in the case of being discovered." One incomplete, silent print would reside in a ceiling until the Occupation ended.

The negative of the finished Japanese film, nearly 15,000 feet of footage on 19 reels, was sent off to the U.S. in early May 1946. The Japanese were also ordered to include in this shipment all photographs and related material. The footage would be labeled SECRET and not emerge from the shadows for more than 20 years.

The following month, McGovern was abruptly ordered to return to the U.S. He hauled the 90,000 feet of color footage, on dozens of reels in huge footlockers, to the Pentagon and turned it over to General Orvil Anderson. Locked up and declared top secret, it did not see the light of day for more than 30 years.

McGovern would be charged with watching over it. Sussan would become obsessed with finding it and getting it aired.

Fearful that his film might get "buried," McGovern stayed on at the Pentagon as an aide to Gen. Anderson, who was fascinated by the footage and had no qualms about showing it to the American people. "He was that kind of man, he didn't give a damn what people thought," McGovern told me. "He just wanted the story told."

In an article in his hometown Buffalo Evening News, McGovern said that he hoped that "this epic will be made available to the American public." He planned to call the edited movie "Japan in Defeat."

Once they eyeballed the footage, however, most of the top brass didn't want it widely shown and the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) was also opposed, according to McGovern. It nixed a Warner Brothers feature film project based on the footage that Anderson had negotiated, while paying another studio about \$80,000 to help make four training films.

In a March 3, 1947 memo, Francis E. Rundell, a major in the Air Corps, explained that the film would be classified "secret." This was determined "after study of subject material, especially concerning footage taken at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is believed that the information contained in the films should be safeguarded until cleared by the Atomic Energy Commission." After the training films were completed, the status would be raised to "Top Secret" pending final classification by the AEC.

The color footage was shipped to the Wright-Patterson base in Ohio. McGovern went along after being told to put an I.D. number on the film "and not let anyone touch it -- and that's the way it stayed," as he put it. After cataloging it, he placed it in a vault in the top-secret area.

"Dan McGovern stayed with the film all the time," Sussan later said. "He told me they could not release the film [because] what it showed was too horrible."



Sussan wrote a letter to President Truman, suggesting that a film based on the footage "would vividly and clearly reveal the implications and effects of the weapons that confront us at this serious moment in our history." A reply from a Truman aide threw cold water on that idea, saying such a film would lack "wide public appeal."

McGovern, meanwhile, continued to "babysit" the film, now at Norton Air Force base in California. "It was never out of my control," he said later, but he couldn't make a film out of it any more than Sussan could (but unlike Herb, he at least knew where it was).

THE JAPANESE FOOTAGE EMERGES

At the same time, McGovern was looking after the Japanese footage. Fearful that it might get lost forever in the military/government bureaucracy, he secretly made a 16 mm print and deposited it in the U.S. Air Force Central Film Depository at Wright-Patterson. There it remained out of sight, and generally out of mind. (The original negative and production materials remain missing, according to Abe Mark Nornes, who teaches at the University of Michigan and has researched the Japanese footage more than anyone.)

The Japanese government repeatedly asked the U.S. for the full footage of what was known in that country as "the film of illusion," to no avail. A rare article about what it called this "sensitive" dispute appeared in The New York Times on May 18, 1967, declaring in its headline that the film had been "Suppressed by U.S. for 22 Years." Surprisingly, it revealed that while some of the footage was already in Japan (likely a reference to the film hidden in the ceiling), the U.S. had put a "hold" on the Japanese using it -- even though the American control of that country had ceased many years earlier.

Despite rising nuclear fears in the 1960s, before and after the Cuban Missile Crisis, few in the U.S. challenged the consensus view that dropping the bomb on two Japanese cities was necessary. The United States maintained its "first-use" nuclear policy: Under certain circumstances it would strike first with the bomb and ask questions later. In other words, there was no real taboo against using the bomb. This notion of acceptability had started with Hiroshima. A firm line against using nuclear weapons had been drawn--in the sand. The U.S., in fact, had threatened to use nuclear weapons during the Cuban Missile Crisis and on other occasions.

On Sept. 12, 1967, the Air Force transferred the Japanese footage to the National Archives Audio Visual Branch in Washington, with the film "not to be released without approval of DOD (Department of Defense)."

Then, one morning in the summer of 1968, Erik Barnouw, author of landmark histories of film and broadcasting, opened his mail to discover a clipping from a Tokyo newspaper sent by a friend. It indicated that the United States had finally shipped to Japan a copy of black and white newsreel footage shot in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese had negotiated with the State Department for its return.

From the Pentagon, Barnouw learned in 1968 that the original nitrate film had been quietly turned over to the National Archives, so he went to take a look. Soon Barnouw realized that, despite its marginal film quality, "enough of the footage was unforgettable in its implications, and historic in its importance, to warrant duplicating all of it," he later wrote.

Attempting to create a subtle, quiet, even poetic, black and white film, he and his associates cut it from 160 to 16 minutes, with a montage of human effects clustered near the end for impact. Barnouw arranged a screening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and invited the press. A throng turned out and sat in respectful silence at its finish. (One can only imagine what impact the color footage with many more human effects would have had.) "Hiroshima-Nagasaki 1945" proved to be a sketchy but quite moving document of the aftermath of the bombing, captured in grainy but often startling black and white images: shadows of objects or people burned into walls, ruins of schools, miles of razed landscape viewed from the roof of a building.

In the weeks ahead, however, none of the (then) three TV networks expressed interest in airing it. "Only NBC thought it might use the film," Barnouw later wrote, "if it could find a 'news hook.' We dared not speculate what kind of event this might call for." But then an article appeared in Parade magazine, and an editorial in the Boston Globe blasted the networks, saying that everyone in the country should see this film: "Television has brought the sight of war into America's sitting rooms from Vietnam. Surely it can find 16 minutes of prime time to show Americans what the first A-bombs, puny by today's weapons, did to people and property 25 years ago."

This at last pushed public television into the void. What was then called National Educational Television (NET) agreed to show the documentary on August 3, 1970, to coincide with the 25th anniversary of dropping the bomb.

"I feel that classifying all of this filmed material was a misuse of the secrecy system since none of it had any military or national security aspect at all," Barnouw told me. "The reason must have been--that if the public had seen it and Congressmen had seen it--it would have been much harder to appropriate money for more bombs."

THE AMERICAN FOOTAGE COMES OUT

About a decade later, by pure chance, Herb Sussan would spark the emergence of the American footage, ending its decades in the dark.

In the mid-1970s, Japanese antinuclear activists, led by a Tokyo teacher named Tsutomu Iwakura, discovered that few pictures of the aftermath of the atomic bombings existed in their country. Many had been seized by the U.S. military after the war, they learned, and taken out of Japan. The Japanese had as little visual exposure to the true effects of the bomb as most Americans. Activists managed to track down hundreds of pictures in archives and private collections and published them in a popular book. In 1979 they mounted an exhibit at the United Nations in New York.

There, by chance, Iwakura met Sussan, who told him about the U.S. military footage.

Iwakura made a few calls and found that the color footage, recently declassified, might be at the National Archives. A trip to Washington, D.C. verified this. He found eighty reels of film, labeled #342 USAF, with the reels numbered 11000 to 11079. About one-fifth of the footage covered the atomic cities. According to a shot list, reel #11010 included, for example: "School, deaf and dumb, blast effect, damaged ... Commercial school demolished ... School, engineering, demolished. ... School, Shirayama elementary, demolished, blast effect ... Tenements, demolished."

The film had been quietly declassified a few years earlier, but no one in the outside world knew it. An archivist there told me at the time, "If no one knows

about the film to ask for it, it's as closed as when it was classified."

Eventually 200,000 Japanese citizens contributed half a million dollars and Iwakura was able to buy the film. He then traveled around Japan filming survivors who had posed for Sussan and McGovern in 1946. Iwakura quickly completed a documentary called "Prophecy" and in late spring 1982 arranged for a New York premiere.

That fall a small part of the McGovern/Sussan footage turned up for the first time in an American film, one of the sensations of the New York Film Festival, called "Dark Circle." It's co-director, Chris Beaver, told me, "No wonder the government didn't want us to see it. I think they didn't want Americans to see themselves in that picture. It's one thing to know about that and another thing to see it."

Despite this exposure, not a single story had yet appeared in an American newspaper about the shooting of the footage, its suppression or release. And Sussan was now ill with a form of lymphoma doctors had found in soldiers exposed to radiation in atomic tests during the 1950s -- and in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In late 1982, editing Nuclear Times, I met Sussan and Erik Barnouw -- and talked on several occasions with Daniel McGovern, out in Northridge, California. "It would make a fine documentary even today," McGovern said of the color footage. "Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a movie of the burning of Atlanta?"

After he hauled the footage back to the Pentagon, McGovern said, he was told that under no circumstances would the footage be released for outside use. "They were fearful of it being circulated," McGovern said. He confirmed that the color footage, like the black and white, had been declassified over time, taking it from top secret to "for public release" (but only if the public knew about it and asked for it).

Still, the question of precisely why the footage remained secret for so long lingered. Here McGovern added his considerable voice. "The main reason it was classified was...because of the horror, the devastation," he said. "The medical effects were pretty gory. ... The attitude was: do not show any medical effects. Don't make people sick."

But who was behind this? "I always had the sense," McGovern answered, "that people in the AEC were sorry they had dropped the bomb. The Air Force--it was also sorry. I was told by people in the Pentagon that they didn't want those images out because they showed effects on man, woman and child. But the AEC, they were the ones that stopped it from coming out. They had power of God over everybody," he declared. "If it had anything to do with nukes, they had to see it. They were the ones who destroyed a lot of film and pictures of the first U.S. nuclear tests after the war."

Even so, McGovern believed, his footage might have surfaced "if someone had grabbed the ball and run with it, but the AEC did not want it released."

As "Dark Circle" director Chris Beaver had said, "With the government trying to sell the public on a new civil defense program and Reagan arguing that a nuclear war is survivable, this footage could be awfully bad publicity."

TODAY

In the summer of 1984, I made my own pilgrimage to the atomic cities, to walk in the footsteps of Dan McGovern and Herb Sussan, and meet some of the people they filmed in 1946. By then, the McGovern/ Sussan footage had turned up in several new documentaries. On Sept. 2, 1985, however, Herb Sussan passed away. His final request to his children: Would they scatter his ashes at ground zero in Hiroshima?

In the mid-1990s, researching "Hiroshima in America," a book I would write with Robert Jay Lifton, I discovered the deeper context for suppression of the U.S. Army film: it was part of a broad effort to suppress a wide range of material related to the atomic bombings, including photographs, newspaper reports on radiation effects, information about the decision to drop the bomb, even a Hollywood movie.

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The 50th anniversary of the bombing drew extensive print and television coverage -- and wide use of excerpts from the McGovern/Sussan footage--but no strong shift in American attitudes on the use of the bomb.

Then, in 2003, as adviser to a documentary film, "Original Child Bomb," I urged director Carey Schonegevel to draw on the atomic footage as much as possible. She not only did so but also obtained from McGovern's son copies of home movies he had shot in Japan while shooting the official film.

"Original Child Bomb" went on to debut at the 2004 Tribeca Film Festival, win a major documentary award, and this week, on Aug. 6 and 7, it will debut on the Sundance cable channel. After 60 years at least a small portion of that footage will finally reach part of the American public in the unflinching and powerful form its creators intended. Only then will the Americans who see it be able to fully judge for themselves what McGovern and Sussan were trying to accomplish in shooting the film, why the authorities felt they had to suppress it, and what impact their footage, if widely aired, might have had on the nuclear arms race -- and the nuclear proliferation that plagues, and endangers, us today.

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