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Remembering 'The Good War': The Atomic Bombing and the Internment of Japanese-Americans in U.S. History Textbooks

by Mark Selden

Japan, the Japanese people, and Japanese-Americans enter the pages of American history textbooks only in treatments of World War II, which, together with the American Revolution, constitutes the high water mark of American triumphalism. At a time when Japanese textbooks are subject to intense public scrutiny for their treatment of the war and colonialism, it is appropriate to examine their American counterparts. Like the treatments of wartime foes in the textbooks of other nations, these reveal as much about dominant American nationalism and chauvinism as they do about Japan and the Japanese. Here I consider two of the primary -- and most contested -- issues discussed in 19 textbooks spanning the years 1958 to 2000 and including many of the most influential among both high school and college textbooks.

Textbooks are important vehicles through which contemporary societies transmit ideas of citizenship and both the idealized past and the promised future of the national community. They provide authoritative narratives of the nation, delimit proper behavior of citizens, and outline the parameters of the national imagination. Textbook controversies erupt when prevailing assumptions about national unity and purpose are challenged and when international relations change rapidly as in the post-Cold War era and post-9–11, sometimes rupturing the smooth flow of earlier dominant narratives.

The textbooks of nearly all nations bristle with nationalism. There are, nevertheless, differences and gradations that differentiate nations over time. Many American textbooks, far more than their Japanese or German counterparts, [1} for example, invoke national pride in the nation's history, reaching an apogee in the treatment of wars, notably the American revolution and World War II. This pride is manifest in such titles as: The American Pageant, Our American Heritage, The Great Republic, The Enduring Vision, and, perhaps the most lyrical, America: The Glorious Republic. While many of the texts manifest great pride in American achievements, particularly democracy, prosperity, technological prowess, and the rise to world leadership, the best of them, a minority to be sure, raise important questions about the darkest episodes and encourage independent thought about the nation, the world, and historical change. A few of these texts do not hesitate to offer critical judgments on the great blemishes in American history, including racism, the plight of the poor in the midst of great wealth, and the human costs inflicted by American wars.

The decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, in many ways the defining event of the twentieth century, was from the outset, and has remained ever since, controversial. So, too, was the decision to deprive 112,000 Japanese and Japanese-Americans of constitutional rights and intern them for the duration of the war. Two-thirds of their number were American-born and therefore U.S. citizens, thereby calling into question the fundamental rights of citizenship. The remaining third were Japanese citizens who were prevented by discriminatory legislation on the books from 1924 that specifically barred Japanese from obtaining U.S. citizenship. That is, as historian Gary Okihiro observes, they were, in effect, permanent migrant laborers since, unlike other migrants, the law barred them from citizenship. The analysis of 19 U.S. textbooks, both those designed for high school and college use, reveal significant fault lines in the approach to these problems.

The Atomic Decision and the End of World War II

Consider, first, the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. All 19 textbooks discuss the atomic decision in the context of the end of World War II. Some, following an approach that is also favored in Japanese textbooks, confine themselves to "stating the facts." For James Davidson and Mark Lytle, A History of the Republic (303) it is sufficient to note that "over 150,000 Japanese died in the two explosions," and that the two bombs and the Soviet entry into the war on August 8 led to Japan's surrender. Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti are even more curt in their Triumph of the American Nation (817). They confine their discussion to the following observations: "First the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Two days later, the United States dropped a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki. On August 10 the Japanese government asked for peace."

There is no hint of controversy, no allusion to the fierce debates that erupted at the time and continue to this day, and certainly no invitation to students to consider the implications of the decision to drop atomic bombs on the citizens of two large Japanese cities, to reflect on the strategic implications of the bomb with respect to Soviet-American relations, or to examine the options available to U.S. planners, the manifold international context of the surrender, or the costs of alternative policies. Interestingly, Todd and Curti's earlier text, Rise of the American Nation (739) stated that "Nearly 100,000 of the 245,000 men, women and children in Hiroshima were killed instantly or died soon thereafter," a cost in lives that they weigh against President Harry Truman's decision to drop the bombs explained as "a last resort to force Japan to surrender, and thus to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of American fighting men." The earlier textbook also noted, as the later one did not, the Soviet declaration of war against Japan on August 8 prior to the Nagasaki bomb and prior to Japan's surrender. Those bare facts, even in the absence of analysis, could provide the basis for fruitful discussion of watershed issues in the hands of skillful teachers.

The best of these texts examine key dimensions of the atomic controversy, discuss critically Truman's decision to drop the bombs, or note alternatives to it, and consider the human and political costs of alternatives, thereby setting the stage for class discussion of crucial issues of war, peace, and America's global role.

John Garraty's The American Nation (702) sharply poses the killing of thousands of civilians against the possible contribution to ending the war and carefully records the Hiroshima casualties (killing 78,000, with 100,000 more injured), though making no mention of those who subsequently died of their wounds or of radiation (140,000 by the end of 1945m many more in years to come), or those whose atomic experience condemned them to suffer throughout their lives. Garraty does add a sobering detail found in no other text that I have consulted, which is the fact that the dead included 20 American POWs in Hiroshima. He proceeds to offer the opinion, one widely shared by many specialists, that the bombing of Nagasaki three days later "was far less defensible, but had the desired result," that is, forcing Japan's surrender, eliding mention both of the Soviet attack on Japanese forces in Manchuria on August 8, and the U.S. softening of surrender terms following the bombing of Nagasaki on August 9.

Among the fullest and most balanced treatments is Alan Brinkley's The Unfinished Nation. After noting Truman's claim that the alternative "was an American invasion of mainland Japan that might have cost as many as a million lives," a view effectively challenged by revisionist historians, he gives equal space to the views of Gar Alperovitz and others who dismiss the argument that "the bomb was used to shorten the war and save lives" and insist that, with Japan on the verge of surrender, the United States used the bomb principally "to make Russia more manageable in Europe" by utilizing the U.S. super weapon. Brinkley spells out for students the arguments of proponents and critics, providing rich information concerning the human costs of the atomic bombings, the strategic impact and alternatives, and the cost in lives of the entire war. Making no attempt to resolve the debate, he encourages students to engage themselves in one of the great ethical-political issues of American, Japanese, and world history that shows no sign of closure six decades after the events.

Many texts dramatize the atomic bombing photographically, showing the mushroom cloud or Hiroshima or Nagasaki in ruins. But with two exceptions, none reveal the human face of the bombing by showing mangled corpses, orphaned children, or stunned people wandering amidst the devastation after the blast. Joy Hakim's A History of US, in this as in many other contexts, presents the human story of critical events and poses controversial issues for student reflection. Hakim alone among the texts consulted presents students with the overwhelming visual spectacle of destruction of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki from the vista of the bombed out city of Hiroshima to survivors in Nagasaki the day after the explosion, to a woman whose skin was burned in the pattern of cloth she was wearing when the bomb struck. [2] Gary Nash and Julie Jeffrey's The American People shows no actual human victims, but it presents an Osaka department store exhibit displaying a pictorial version of the victims in agonizing flight. In examining the texts, one is reminded of U.S. World War II regulations and subsequent wartime censorship most notable in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, which barred media publication of dead and mutilated bodies, whether of soldiers or civilians, U.S. or enemy. [3]

Atomic Bomb survivors at Miyuki Bridge, Hiroshima, two kilometers from Ground Zero. August 6, 1945. Photograph by Matsushige Oshito.

Four of the texts, in discussing the atomic bomb and the end of World War II, make no mention of the Soviet declaration of war on August 8 (Dexter Perkins and Glyndon Van Deusen, The United States of America; John Garraty, The American Nation; Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti, Triumph of the American Nation; Alan Brinkley, The Unfinished Nation), thereby conveying the impression that the only significant factor prompting surrender was U.S. power, particularly the atomic bomb. And most of those that do take note of the Soviet declaration of war make no effort to assess its relative significance vis-à-vis the U.S. atomic bombs. Again Hakim, A History of Us, provides an important exception. "On August 8," she writes (9:182), "Russia enters the war against Japan. Russian forces attack Japanese armies in Manchuria and Korea. For some Japanese leaders this is more threatening than the bomb."

Few texts make any mention of the air war in the months prior to the bomb in which the United States joined Britain, Germany, and Japan in eliminating the remaining constraints on civilian bombing (but see Paul Boyer et al., The Enduring Vision (966) and Hakim, A History of US (9:177)). The culminating event here was the devastation of 62 Japanese cities, beginning with the firebombing of Tokyo that took more than 100,000 lives. This initiating rite of Japan's trial by fire and napalm was one of the hallmark events of World War II that would leave a legacy of bombing civilians that became presuppositional for powers with air power capability, most notably the US, in all subsequent wars. In my view, this is among the gravest weaknesses of many of the texts, one that is shared, however, by the monographic literature on the war that likewise focuses on the atomic bombs and pays scant attention to firebombing of cities. [4]

Despite the critical tone of certain textbooks on the atomic decision, particularly more recent college textbooks that reflect the increasingly critical consensus among historians, and despite the conscientious chronicling of the numbers of soldiers and civilians who died in several of the best works (Garraty, The American Nation, 702), most texts celebrate U.S. victory in the war and its global consequences with scant reference to the human costs, particularly costs to civilians as a result of U.S. actions. The high school

texts in particular rarely interrogate the atomic decision or intrude on the heroic narrative of the war. A few texts, however, notably recent college texts, effectively question the human costs of a war whose toll in human lives has yet to be surpassed. Robert Kelley, in The Shaping of the American Past (661), observes that, counting civilian casualties, some 50 million died in the war (the figures remain controversial; statistics on military and combat deaths everywhere far superior to those for civilian deaths and, particularly, those resulting from such ravages of war as famine, flood, and social disintegration) and by war's end many nations lay in ruins. Brinkley, too, in The Unfinished Nation (842) records the dead, some 14 million combatants including 322,000 American dead and 800,000 injured, limiting the numbers to combatants and thereby eliding the major issue: the massive toll of civilians far exceeding military casualties. Hakim in A History of US (9: 175) notes that in less than one month, between April 16 and May 8, 1945, the Russians lost 304,887 men, including killed, missing, and wounded, in the siege of Berlin; by contrast the total number of US deaths in the entire war in both the European and Pacific theaters was 325,000. This is important information for student readers to process, yet few of the texts provide it. Surely one of the most important messages that textbooks can convey from the perspective of reconciliation and a peaceful future is to make plain the horrific human costs of war and, thereby, resist the temptation to present one-sidedly heroic interpretations of war, particularly those wars fought by one's nation.

The lunchbox of Watanabe Reiko, a fifteen-year old high school student who was doing construction work with her schoolmates 500 meters from the epicenter of the Hiroshima explosion.The lunch box, with its peas and rice contents carbonized, was found several day's later. Reiko's body was never found. The lunchbox was donated to the Hiroshima Peace Museum by Reiko's father Shigeru in 1970. In 1995 it became the storm center of controversy over the Enola Gay exhibit at the Smithsonian Museum and was eventually censored from the exhibit.

The Internment of Japanese and Japanese-Americans

Four of the earliest texts, including one high school text (Leon Canfield and Howard Wilder, The Making of Modern America) and three college texts (Thomas Bailey, The American Pageant, Dexter Perkins and Glyndon Van Deusen, The United States of America, and Todd and Curti, Rise of the American Nation), all published in the 1950s and 1960s, make no mention of the internment of Japanese and Japanese-Americans. But all subsequent texts discuss it, and by the early 1980s there is a striking consensus in the textbook concerning the internment of Japanese and Japanese-Americans following Pearl Harbor. Indeed, all of the texts in which the internment is mentioned, including one text written as early as 1961, sharply condemn it as an injustice. It would be difficult to think of another issue in these texts on which critical consensus of American policy is so powerful. Herbert Bass et al., Our American Heritage (441-42), and Paul Boyer et al., The Enduring Vision (957), both quote General John L. DeWitt, West Coast Commander, who urged removal and describe internment of 112,000 people of Japanese ancestry, most of them born in the United States and therefore citizens. [5] "A Jap is a Jap. It makes no difference whether he is an American citizen or not." Bass et al. describe it as "a shameful episode." They also provide detailed discussion of anti-Japanese racism in California, the desire to strip Japanese of their property, losses of $400 million as a result of forced removal, and the thousands of Japanese who fought in the U.S. army. Two more recent textbooks use the emotionally laden but apt term concentration camp to describe the internment "relocation camps" (Robert Kelley, The Shaping of the American Past (650); Arthur Link et al., The American People (731)), presenting students with a powerful moral issue because of the association of the term with Holocaust Germany. "Someone tied a number to my collar and the duffel bag," one seven-year-old wrote of her experience en route to a camp in the California desert, Hakim records in A History of US (9:142), highlighting the human face of the event.

Eight of the 19 texts display sympathetic photos of Japanese and Japanese-Americans, especially women and children, in their best clothes waiting patiently in long queues before being herded into buses and trains en route to the camps, or a Japanese-owned store with a sign that would appear in many immigrant-owned businesses again in 2001: "I am an American," although 60 years later it would appear with a slight twist, "Proud to be an American." This was both a silent act of solidarity with the victims of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, and, perhaps, a precaution affirming one's American identity at a time of hostility and lashing out at those deemed threatening to Americans. Is it possible that in this instance school textbooks, rather than transmitting the official canon may have played a role in preparing public opinion to right one of the great injustices of American history? If so, this is a heartening, indeed, potentially crucial role of textbooks that has rarely been noted.

Surprisingly, only two of the four textbooks written after the historic 1988 Act of Congress sharply criticizing the wartime internment policy and ordering official apology and reparations ($20,000 per person) to the victims, mentions the decision (Brinkley, The Unfinished Nation (826) and Hakim, A History of US (9:146)). Only five of the nineteen texts locate the internment in the long-term context of discrimination against Japanese-Americans that denied them citizen rights and subjected them to racist attacks on the U.S. West Coast. Only three quote the victims of dispossession and internment, Bass et al., Our American Heritage (442), Nash and Jeffrey, The American People (833), and Hakim, A History of US (9:142-46; the only text to devote an entire chapter to the issue).

Several texts point to the important wartime contributions of Japanese-Americans in the U.S. military. Thirty three thousand Nisei served, most in segregated all-Japanese units, including the much-decorated 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Some worked as translators. Many enlisted to escape internment, leaving their parents, grandparents and siblings interned for the duration of the war. But not a single text mentions the fierce Japanese and Japanese-American resistance against the violation of their constitutional rights. In particular, there is no reference to the members of the "Fair Play Committee" who refused U.S. demands to register for the draft so long as Japanese and Japanese-Americans were deprived of their constitutional rights. Some of their leaders spent the war years in Leavenworth, only being pardoned after the U.S. victory). [6] And not a single text hints at the existence of the fierce struggle waged by internees who demanded repatriation to Japan, refusing to declare allegiance to a nation that imprisoned them solely for having committed the crime of being born Japanese. In 1942 and 1943 more than 300 Japanese were repatriated to Japan in exchange for American detainees, and by January 1, 1945, 20,067 Japanese and Japanese-Americans had filed applications for repatriation. [7] And none discusses the U.S. government apology and reparations to Japanese-Americans four decades after the war in terms of the movement for justice by Japanese-Americans and others. Nor, for that matter, is there any reference to the changing political and social demographics that gave greater voice to Japanese-Americans as their strength grew as a result of education and professionalization, and as the numbers of Asian-American migrants swelled. That is, in this as in so many other instances, social and political processes, notably those involving resistance, go unmentioned, leaving only outcomes, usually outcomes of state policies, presented as facts stripped of important social context. In eliminating the terrain of resistance and social conflict we are left with the image of a U.S. government that moved in mysterious ways to right a gross violation of the rights of one of its hyphenated minorities and to reify the image of Japanese-Americans as a model minority, one that rallied unanimously to the national cause and fought heroically for the United States against Japan in World War II, even as their parents, grandparents, brothers, and sisters passed the war in the camps. It is an analysis that distorts fundamental elements of the Japanese-American experience and deprives substantial elements of the community of agency and history.

The texts reveal a variety of approaches to the two sensitive issues of the atomic decision and internment of Japanese and Japanese-Americans, the best of them problematizing the issues, some even strongly criticizing elements of U.S. government policy in ways that invite student reflection on and engagement in ethical and political issues that speak to the very nature of the American

experience and the U.S. global role. In so doing, they display a respect for the ability of students to address not only the heroic moments but also the blemishes and atrocities committed by society and the state at various moments in our history.

The central problem of history textbooks -- by no means limited to American history textbooks -- that address issues of war and nationality is nationalist myopia, often tinged with racism. This is particularly true where textbook treatments are lashed to the chariot of triumphalist state power. Under special circumstances, such as the emerging consensus among Europeans concerned with laying the groundwork for an emerging European Community in shaping the region's future, or in instances such as the internment of Japanese-Americans in U.S. textbooks, a breath of fresh air may intrude on the history conveyed in textbooks. Such moments open for students the possibility of engaging in difficult, even painful, issues of history and ethics. In this way it becomes possible for students to reflect on our past and envisage a common and just future.

Notes:

[1] See Laura Hein and Mark Selden, eds., Censoring History. Citizenship and Memory in Japan, Germany and the United States (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2000) for a comparative analysis of war memories enshrined in the textbooks and textbook controversies involving the three nations.

[2] Hakim enjoys a luxury not available to other textbook writers. She is able to present her 'anti-text', a work that does not hesitate to provide a people's history, often going against the grain of officially sanctioned versions of history, because, of all the texts intended for high school students considered here, hers is not published by a U.S. publisher (the publisher is Oxford University Press) and, most important, it is not properly a "textbook" in the sense that it need not pass the censorship of the Texas and California state boards, or face screening by neoconservative watchdog groups that monitor text adoptions. That is, rather than being published with an eye to adoptions by large American school systems, A History of Us is mainly available in libraries and bookstores for purchase or consultation. Freed from the necessity to satisfy the criteria of textbook guardians, its author did not hesitate to write with verve and spirit, to convey a range of voices beyond the mainstream, and generally to bring history to life.

[3] George H. Roeder, The Censored War: American Visual Experience During World War II (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); cf. his "Making Things Visible: Learning from the Censors," in Laura Hein and Mark Selden, eds., Living With the Bomb: American and Japanese Cultural Conflicts in the Nuclear Age (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 1997). Not until 1943 did the War Department reverse its policy and permit Life magazine for the first time to display a picture of three Americans killed in the war in a bid to strengthen the will to fight. The War Department continued to keep a tight grip on photos that were approved for publication, generally photos showing intact bodies that concealed the agonies of death and, in the contemporary era of embedded journalism and photography, extending its reach to censor even the coffins of returned service personal.

[4] Perhaps surprisingly, the same lacunae exists in Japanese textbooks. All emphasize the atomic bomb, as well as the Soviet declaration of war. Few mention the systematic destruction of 62 Japanese cities by conventional weapons and napalm. See, for example, the three texts included in Japan in Modern History: Junior High School (Tokyo: International Society for Educational Information, 1994). See also Ishii Susumu, Sasayama Haruo , and Takamura Naosuke, Nihonshi A (Japanese History A) (Tokyo: Yamakawa Shuppansha, 1998), pp. 238-39.

[5] The racist 1924 immigration law barring Japanese from obtaining American citizenship was never extended to American-born children of Japanese. By 1940, two-thirds of the Japanese and Japanese-Americans in the United States were American born. But as Ronald Takaki notes, first-generation parents, denied the opportunity to become U.S., citizens, assured that their children would have Japanese as well as U.S. citizenship, and by 1940 over 50 percent of the second-generation Japanese-Americans had secured Japanese citizenship, too. Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 216.

[6] Roger Daniels, Concentration Camps: North America, Japanese in the United States and Canada, during World War II (Malabar, Fl.: Robert E. Krieger Publishing, 1981), pp. 43-44, 124-25; Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore, pp. 397-400; Gary Okihiro, Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), pp. 170-72.

[7] Jacobus ten Broek, Edward N. Barnhart, and Floyd W. Matson, Prejudice, War and the Constitution, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), pp. 175-81; Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, Personal Justice Denied (Washington , D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), pp. 251-52. In fall 1945 and spring 1946, more than 1,000 sailed to a Japan devastated by bombing; many others eventually decided to remain in the United States.

Texts Consulted

* indicates high school texts. Other texts appear to be college or general texts. U.S. texts rarely state explicitly that they were written for high school or college use, and some texts may well be used both in college and in advanced high schools.

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2. Richard Current, T. Harry Williams, and Frank Freidel, American History: A Survey. New York. Alfred A. Knopf, 1961.

3. Thomas A. Bailey, The American Pageant: A History of the Republic, 2nd edition. Boston: Little, Brown, 1961.

4. Lewis Paul Todd and Merle Curti, Rise of the American Nation, 2nd edition. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966.

5. Dexter Perkins and Glyndon G. Van Deusen, The United States of America: A History. New York: Macmillan, 1968.

6. John Garraty, The American Nation: A History of the United States, 5th edition. New York: Harper & Row, 1983.

7. *Herbert J. Bass, George A. Billias, and Emma Jones Lapsansky, Our American Heritage. Morristown, N.J.: Silver Burdett, 1983.

8. Stephan Thernstrom, A History of the American People. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.

9. Mary Beth Norton, David M. Katzman, Paul D. Escott, Howard P. Chudacoff, Thomas G. Paterson, William M. Tuttle, and William J. Brophy, A People and a Nation: A History of the United States, brief edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984.

10. *Henry Graff, America: The Glorious Republic. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985.

11. Bernard Bailyn, Robert Dallek, David Brion Davis, David Herbert Donald, John L. Thomas, and Gordon S. Wood, The Great Republic: A History of the American People, 3rd edition. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1985.

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13. Gary B. Nash and Julie Roy Jeffrey, The American People: Creating a Nation and a Society. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.

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16. Paul Boyer, Clifford E. Clark, Jr., Joseph F. Kett, Thomas Purvis, Harvard Sitkoff, and Nancy Woloch, The Enduring Vision: A History of the American People. Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath, 1990.

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18. *Joy Hakim, War, Peace, and All That Jazz. Book Nine, A History of US. New York: Oxford University Press.

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