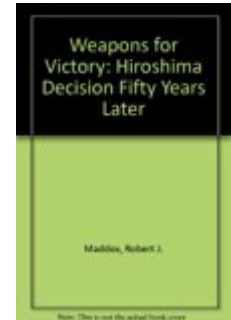


**Robert James Maddox.** *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995. vii + 215 pp. \$19.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8262-1037-1.



**Reviewed by** Guillaume P. De Syon

**Published on** H-War (March, 1996)

The controversies of summer 1995 surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombings of Japan left all sides agreed on only one point: little, if anything, was historically resolved. From the congressional rancor over the canceled *Enola Gay* exhibit to Japanese disgust with the U.S. postage stamp showing an atomic cloud, opinions ran deep. This also becomes clear in historiographical terms in Robert James Maddox's review of the events leading to the decision to drop the bomb.

Over nine chapters, Maddox takes the reader along the complex and sometimes confusing path of political and military decision-making in an attempt to dispel what he terms "the fondness of many academics for tales of conspiracy in high places." The "many" academics seem to have a single leader: Gar Alperovitz, the author of *Atomic Diplomacy* (1965; rev. ed., 1994). Maddox argues, with reason, that Alperovitz epitomizes the extreme revisionism that characterized 1960s U.S. political scholarship influenced by the Vietnam war, which heavily criticized U.S. motives for bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Maddox be-

gins his investigation by reviewing the dilemmas president Harry Truman faced as he took over from Franklin D. Roosevelt. In analyzing the decision to bomb, Maddox considers several major points, including the Soviet and Japanese dimensions and the casualty question.

The Soviet issue (whether dropping the bomb was done solely to impress Moscow for political and military gains) and the Japanese one (whether Tokyo would have surrendered solely because of a threat to drop the bomb) have become major points of contention between conservative and revisionist historians. Maddox tends to side with conservative historians on both counts (who argue, briefly, that Moscow was not a variable in the decision and that Japan could not have been impressed). He is fairly convincing when arguing these issues, yet by choosing sides he weakens his claim to dispassionate historiography. The same is true of his handling of the casualty question.

In both the Introduction and Chapter 4, Maddox weighs the evidence concerning the rationale and feasibility of a Japanese invasion. Attacking

the casualty figures used to support a conspiracy thesis, Maddox suggests that this amounts to "writing history backwards" (p. 3). Although this may be an acceptable challenge (evidence used to support falsifiable claims is what keeps many political commentators going), Maddox commits himself to responding to Alperovitz et al. by striking out at anyone who may have considered the question of inflated invasion casualty figures. In the process, he argues that the "new evidence" Alperovitz described has in fact been available for years. Maddox notes that scholars who use the revised figure of 200,000 casualties (as opposed to the 500,000 given in Truman's memoirs) to assert their criticism of the atomic decision fail to take into account that this is still a "staggeringly high" number.

Maddox's point is well taken and has been central to opinions on both sides of the issue: that beyond memoranda, statistics, and political meetings, the setting and the "mood" of the times are essential to understanding the behavior of the American and Japanese leaderships. In some ways, Maddox's quasi-systematic criticism of Alperovitz echoes the ways in which reviewers lashed out when the first edition of Alperovitz's book appeared. This does not mean that Maddox is beating a dead horse—quite the contrary. As Alperovitz has worked over the years to refine and support his claims, arguments between him and his detractors have increased in virulence. Yet the lack of a uniformly satisfactory explanation on both sides of the debate leaves the spectators confused. Maddox supports Alperovitz's opponents in a fairly convincing manner, yet other aspects of Maddox's approach leave the reader with a sense of unease.

Though I remain impressed with the clear-headed assessments Maddox provides throughout his study, I am nevertheless troubled by one aspect in particular. The way Maddox takes to task the original manuscript of the canceled Smithsonian *Enola Gay* exhibit cheapens his work unnec-

essarily. The proposed show was canceled despite revisions proposed to appease the Smithsonian's adversaries. Maddox joins the fray on the side of exhibit opponents by attacking the original manuscript in his Introduction. He notes, for example, that although Admiral Leahy wrote of the bomb as a horrific device in 1950, there is no evidence that he felt this way in 1945, contrary to what revisionist—including, according to Maddox, the Smithsonian—have argued.

A check on the relevant passage in the original script (long obtainable from opponents of the exhibit and now published in a separate book) shows that script writers mentioned Leahy's 1945 and 1950 stances separately without making the latter the dominant one. Granted, the label header "military opposition to the bombing" could have been confusing to the general public, but certainly not to the discerning historian. Had Maddox wished to take on the original script's shortcomings, he should have done so in a separate chapter or book. By simply lashing out without qualifiers at what he views as a mistake, he does all sides a disservice, further clouding the important debate over public memory vs. historical writing.

Maddox's unfortunate handling of the *Enola Gay* exhibit should not detract from the quality of his book. He has done a fine job of recasting historical evidence within the context of World War II and of challenging some of Gar Alperovitz's many assertions. On the other hand, he does not convince the reader that all "revisionist" claims have no foundation (Martin Sherwin's work, for example, should remain one of the standard references for decades to come). Any historiographical analysis of the events leading to the atomic bombings, no matter how balanced, is likely to be troubling as it seeks to dispel assumptions. Although it is highly informative, Maddox's book has this characteristic as well. A dispassionate historiography of the bomb is unlikely to appear any time soon.

Copyright (c) 1996 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@H-Net.MSU.EDU.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-war>

**Citation:** Guillaume P. De Syon. Review of Maddox, Robert James. *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later*. H-War, H-Net Reviews. March, 1996.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=306>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.