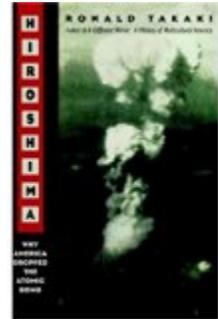


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ronald Takaki. *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Bomb*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995. 193 pp. \$14.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-316-83124-6; \$28.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-316-83122-2.

Reviewed by Christopher Hill (University of Colorado, Colorado Springs)  
Published on H-Asia (September, 1997)



Ronald Takaki is one of those enviable historians whose works are often published by popular presses rather than simply academic ones. The reason for this is obvious: a keen writer, Takaki covers large issues with a sense of confidence and knowledge that appeals to the general reader as well as the specialist.

Hiroshima is no exception. Using a judicious blend of newly released primary sources, along with some of the better known secondary ones, Takaki weaves a story that covers the spectrum of the events leading up to and following the dropping of the atomic bomb. In the process he delivers a strong indictment of the Government's entire decision-making process.

While using new evidence, Takaki's thesis does not add a great deal that is original to the debate; perhaps that is simply not possible with an issue such as this, one which has been controversial since the day the bomb was dropped. In any event, I don't believe that is his purpose. As he notes in his first chapter,

...[A]s we revisit Hiroshima historically, we need to have a serious and substantive debate, not casual and uninformed opinions or angry attacks on the Smithsonian that suppress many facts and stifle discussion. Imposing only one version of history based on a narrow and biased selection of evidence—what can be termed “political correctness”—is wrong, whether it comes from the left or the right. What we need is historical accuracy.(10-11)

In attempting to make this point, the author covers virtually every argument that has surfaced in the debate over Hiroshima. The Soviet Union, Truman's insecurity, racism, machismo—all are scrutinized in this brief book. In the process, Takaki rounds up the usual suspects; Tru-

man, Byrnes, Groves, Oppenheimer, Stalin, the ghost of FDR and others are prominent characters throughout this history. Indeed, in a sense this is a morality play, and the central figure whose ethics are in question is Harry S. Truman.

Takaki makes it clear that “Truman is the key to understanding why America dropped the bomb on Hiroshima” (10). To prove this point, the author digs deep into Truman's psyche: “Behind Truman's exterior of confidence and conviction, however, was an intricate personality, driven by an inferiority complex, notions of race, a need to be resolute and masculine, and feelings of ambivalence, as well as remorse” (10). Truman is psychoanalyzed throughout the book.

This is not one of Ronald Takaki's strongest works. While well-written (as is all his work), he is unable to avoid the pitfalls that psychohistory entails. For example, the author puts a great deal of emphasis on the use of sporting terms as metaphors for the war; he argues that “the language and notions of masculinity seemed to frame the way Truman and his policymakers viewed...the atomic bomb” (114-5). Well of course they did! War has been viewed as the ultimate test of “manliness” since time immemorial; as such, this attitude tells us little about the decision to drop the bomb. Similarly, Takaki is guilty of ex post facto judgement. He notes that Truman's grandparents had been slaveholders, and that as a youth the president had used racial slurs against African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans. I am no apologist for Harry Truman's racism, but it must be put in the context of the place (Missouri) and the time (1911). If Takaki wants to use racism as a factor in the decision to drop the bomb, he needs to use fresher evidence.

In the final analysis, Ronald Takaki, does precisely what he set out not to do: he imposes a version of history that is largely one-sided. While I happen to agree with nearly every argument he makes, I doubt very much that the anti-Smithsonian crowd will find this to be a balanced assessment.

*Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb* is a good read. If, as it seems, Takaki wanted to write a

book that would appeal to a non-professional audience, he has succeeded greatly. I fear, however, that *Hiroshima* is not going to change many minds, nor put an end to the argument as to why the bomb was dropped.

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**Citation:** Christopher Hill. Review of Takaki, Ronald, *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Bomb*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. September, 1997.

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