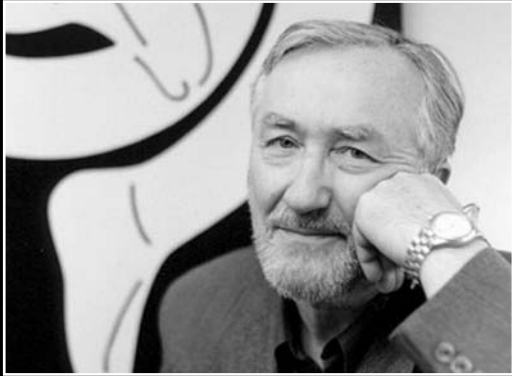


EAA Interview with **John Dower** Interviewed by Lynn Parisi



*Most EAA readers are familiar with MIT Professor John Dower, who works in modern Japanese history and US-Japan relations. He is the author of numerous publications including the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (1999). Dower is both an internationally-prominent scholar and a master teacher. One of his most recent pedagogical projects, with colleague Shigeru Miyagawa, is *Visualizing Cultures (VC)* a Web-based, multimedia, interactive, curricula project on Asia that is suitable for teachers at a variety of levels. VC is supported by several organizations including the Andrew Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Center for Global Partnership. In the following interview with EAA editorial board member Lynn Parisi, Dower discusses VC, as well as the impact of the atomic bombings upon Japan, the United States, and the world. The address for the Visualizing Cultures Web site is <http://visualizingcultures.mit.edu>.*

Lynn Parisi: *John, thank you for doing a second interview for Education About Asia. Yours has been a major voice in the discourse on Hiroshima for many years, and we appreciate your contributions to this EAA special section marking the sixtieth anniversary of the atomic bombings.*

Since the early postwar period, much of American discourse regarding Hiroshima has been framed by the question of whether the bomb was necessary, a discussion revisited in this issue of EAA. Because lessons on the “decision to drop the bomb” are a staple of many American history classrooms, this enduring controversy seems a good place to begin our conversation. Briefly, can you discuss how the dialogue over this question has evolved over time? Why has this question persisted in academic and public debate?

John Dower: Immediately after WWII, it was understandably argued that the bombs were necessary to end the war quickly—that is, without dropping the bombs in August 1945, the United States would have had to invade Japan, at an enormous cost in American lives. Thus the famous phrase: “Thank God for the atomic bomb.” Then, people added to this that the bombs didn’t just save American lives, they saved Japanese lives as well because invasion would have meant enormous losses in Japan.

Soon after the war ended, however, it became clear that these explanations were too simple. It became known, for example, that no invasion had been planned until November 1945, and that was to be a relatively small-scale invasion of Kyushu. The major planned invasion of the Kanto area around Tokyo was slated for March 1946. So the question arose, “Why the big rush to drop the bombs? Were they really necessary?” Around the same time, the US Strategic Bombing Survey released a famous summary report that concluded that Japan was so desperate and low on supplies that it would have had to surrender by November 1945 even without the atomic bombs or an invasion. In other words, Japan was already on the ropes and on the verge of surrender. That was just an opinion, but once again it made people ask questions.

This report also raised the issue of the Soviet Union’s entry into the war, which took place between the bombing of Hiroshima on

August 6 and Nagasaki on August 9. Most Americans argue that the A-bombs ended the war. Many Japanese scholars and others knowledgeable about decision-making at the time, however, have long maintained that it was the double shock of the atomic bomb and the Soviet declaration of war that persuaded Japan’s leaders to surrender. The United States knew Japan was terrified of communism and the possibility that the Soviet Union would enter the war and possibly occupy at least part of Japan. It was revealed soon after Japan’s surrender that the United States had long been urging the Soviet Union to participate in the war against Japan, and that Stalin had promised to do so within three months after the end of the war with Germany. In July 1945, Stalin told President Truman he would be ready by August 15, a week later than the original promise. In fact, spurred by the Hiroshima bomb, the Soviet Union declared war on August 8, exactly three months after Germany’s capitulation.

For many people, these various facts made it more difficult to simply say “thank God for the atomic bomb—it saved a half million or a million or whatever huge number of American lives.” There was no invasion in the immediate offing. The Japanese were already on the ropes. The Soviet Union was about to declare war, which everyone knew would profoundly shock Japan’s leaders. Why, then, was there such a *rush* to drop those incredibly destructive weapons on two densely populated cities?

By the 1960s, as more formerly top-secret US records became declassified, one answer to this question began to emerge. This internal record revealed that many top-level American policymakers deemed it desirable to use the bomb quickly to show Stalin we had it, persuade him to back off in Eastern Europe, and prevent the Soviet Union from extending control over a slice of Asia and possibly even part of Japan. Obviously, this new information complicated the picture, for it indicated that the bomb was not simply dropped on Japan to end WWII in Asia. It also was seen as a deterrent in the emerging Cold War—what Gar Alperovitz, a pioneer researcher in these archives, called “atomic diplomacy.”

As scholars dug into these secret documents, they found other arguments being advanced for using the bombs as well. For example, it was clear that bipartisanship would end and the US would

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return to politics as usual once the war ended. President Truman was reminded by Secretary of State James Byrnes, a shrewd and seasoned politician (as was Truman), that the top-secret project to develop an atomic bomb had been extremely expensive. If the war ended with nothing to show for this outlay, Truman and the Democrats could expect to be pilloried by Republicans. So here was an additional argument—in this case, a domestic political reason—for incinerating Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

There was more. For example, the once-secret record also includes arguments by high-level scientists that I always find myself thinking of as “idealistic genocide,” a ghastly phrase. The new weapon was so awesome, so much more destructive than almost anyone could imagine, this argument went, that we had to show the world how terrible it was in order to prevent postwar nuclear proliferation. Just think about this. At that moment, policymakers were not even talking about Japan. They were talking about the future—saying we have developed a qualitatively different capability for mass destruction, and to keep this under control in the postwar world, it is necessary to graphically demonstrate just how terrible these weapons are. How? By dropping them on a real target—Japanese cities packed with real people. These were moral men, but the things we do in the name of morality are oftentimes horrendous.

Once the door was opened to questioning the decision to use the bombs, many other disturbing questions arose, about which there is also a wealth of internal documentation. Could the United States have persuaded the Japanese to capitulate by abandoning its demand for “unconditional surrender” and guaranteeing the continued existence of the imperial institution, which it was known Japan’s leaders were adamant about? Why couldn’t the new weapon’s awesome destructiveness have been demonstrated on a military target in Japan? Why was it necessary to drop a second atomic bomb on Nagasaki, before the Japanese even had time to respond to the double blow of Hiroshima plus the Soviet declaration of war? After the war, there were scientists knowledgeable about the events of 1945 in both Japan (like Tarō Takemi) and the United States (such as Victor Weiskopf) who argued that the first bomb may have been necessary, but the second amounted to a war crime. These are all profound questions and issues, but not the sort that the “thank God for the atomic bomb” argument usually has room for.

Lynn Parisi: *You’ve provided EAA readers, and our students, with a very useful case study in how historians reconsider a problem over time and in light of new documentation. As we mark the sixtieth anniversary of Hiroshima in a very different world, do you think that the question of whether the bomb was necessary remains an important and useful focus of discussion? Are there other questions that we should be asking to frame the discussion of Hiroshima today?*

John Dower: These questions do not go away. One reason is that we live in a world of runaway weapons of mass destruction, and have ever since 1945. Another is that we live in a world in which civilian non-combatants are routinely identified as legitimate targets of war. You can’t talk about such matters without addressing Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Let’s say you, I, or any educator is asked to generalize about “the twentieth century.” We can certainly document progress, but part of that progress was technological and military, with one result being the ability to kill on an unprecedented scale. We can say that the twentieth century was a wonderfully creative century, and certainly there is much to admire. But it was also a century of unspeakable slaughter. And if we ask for “symbolic” or representative examples, the catalog of horrors is fairly predictable: Verdun and the Somme, the Holocaust, the Rape of Nanjing, the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Stalin’s mass murders, China’s atrocious Cultural Revolution, and many more recent crimes against humanity. Many Americans would add Pearl Harbor, of course, and many would be aghast at finding Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the same list as the Holocaust and the Rape of Nanjing. But we instinctively know that these were horrendous acts of destruction. They killed, after all, close to a quarter-million individuals, the vast majority of them civilians.

If you subscribe to the “thank God for the atomic bomb” argument, it follows that you must applaud everything about “Ground Zero 1945.” This was the issue that led to the uproar over the Smithsonian Institution’s proposed *Enola Gay* exhibition on the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in 1995. But then why is the “Ground Zero” all Americans think of when they hear the phrase today—the World Trade Center bombed in the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001—so profoundly shocking? Is there really no connection at all between this tragedy and crime against humanity and the two Ground Zeroes of sixty years ago?

Most Americans would say there isn’t. That was war and this was peace; that was retaliation and perhaps even deserved retribution, while 9/11 was unprovoked; those bombings “saved” lives, while the terror-bombing atrocities of our present day take life wantonly. But the moral, philosophical, and even practical questions involved here cannot be dismissed so easily. How do we deal with the deliberate targeting of civilians?

It is fair to say that, since WWII, the bombing of civilians has been widely accepted as natural, legitimate, appropriate, and necessary. It is integral to “total war,” essentially a kind of psychological warfare. Germans did this in bombing Europe and Britain; Japan targeted cities in China beginning in 1937. Initially, the United States and the League of Nations condemned this as beyond the pale of civilized conduct. But by the time we got deep into the war, Britain and the United States concluded that it was desirable to target urban centers. In the past five or six years, there has been a growing international literature questioning how we should think about the air war against Germany. How do we face the fact, as historians and moral individuals, that the Allies killed around 600,000 German civilians in attacks that sometimes didn’t even have much military rationale beyond psychological impact?

The same question arises concerning US strategy in the war against Japan, well before Hiroshima and Nagasaki were incinerated. “Tactical” bombing of military installations in Japan began in late 1944, but it was not very effective. Thus, in March 1945, the United States made an absolutely basic decision to fire-bomb Tokyo with

napalm incendiaries. The first such air raid killed close to 100,000 civilians and destroyed over fifteen square miles of the capital. From that point on, prior to Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the United States systematically fire-bombed over sixty Japanese cities. US pilots called their runs “burn jobs,” and long before 9/11, historians referred to the practice as “terror bombing.” Including Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the total number of Japanese civilians killed in the air raids was probably similar to the estimates for Germany—that is, around half a million or so, though the figures are imprecise.

Did this help win the war? That is unclear. Is it worth raising the issue of targeting civilians in the broadest and deepest moral, legal, religious, and historical terms—in the context, say, of “just war”? In my view, it is imperative that we do so. It might roil the classroom, but that is healthy. That’s what serious education is, after all: teaching people to ask questions, and think for themselves.

Lynn Parisi: *You are currently at work on a project that will potentially further conversation on Hiroshima in the context of modern warfare. The project is Web-based and titled Visualizing Cultures (VC). Hiroshima is one of the featured units in VC. Visual materials have been a focus for much of your research throughout your career. What do visual texts offer the historian that written sources do not?*

John Dower: Ever since I started teaching, I’ve used visuals in the classroom, and I imagine most teachers who do this have discovered what I did: that the graphics don’t just illustrate what you’ve been talking about, but tell their own stories. If they are historical visuals, moreover, they convey the way people of the past were seeing their own times. So they have an intimacy and a vividness that, put in proper context, can enrich our understanding of the past.

My colleague Shigeru Miyagawa and I began the VC project several years ago, and it quickly became more challenging than we anticipated, both conceptually and technologically. The basic vision is to wed visuals to serious commentary, to do this elegantly, and to integrate the presentation with a clear instructional component. We now have six units on an MIT platform that reaches the entire world (<http://visualizingcultures.mit.edu>). The current focus is on Japan, but will eventually cover Asia more broadly.

Lynn Parisi: *How does the visual collection on the VC Web site encourage different ways of thinking and talking about Hiroshima? For educators specifically, how can the resources on this Web site enrich or refocus classroom consideration of Hiroshima?*

John Dower: Five of the six units deal with the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The sixth, titled “Ground Zero 1945,” addresses the question: “What did it really mean to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?” If you ask students what they picture when they hear “Hiroshima,” my guess is that the most common answer will be “the mushroom cloud.” That’s hardly surprising. It’s our usual style of sanitized documentary history: the *Enola Gay* drones in, drops the bomb, turns away; there is that great pillar of smoke, and the narrator intones that Japan surrendered eight days later. There might be a fleeting image of a charred, unpopulated landscape.

Teachers can take students beneath the mushroom cloud in various ways. We have written accounts by survivors, but those are words—we can close the page. There are photographs, but we have learned to block these out. There is also a little bit of powerful film footage from immediately after the bomb that depicts the injured. But to me, the most effective way to approach what the bombs actu-

ally did lies in a body of drawings that were done by *hibakusha*, or atomic-bomb survivors.

We remember great, even cataclysmic events through intimate, concrete images. That’s the way memory works. Back around 1970, a Hiroshima survivor brought a picture he had drawn to NHK, Japanese public television. It was an image from August 6 that had haunted him. His drawing, if I remember correctly, showed a small bridge with a sheet of metal on the stony ground beneath it, and under the metal you could see the faces of two little girls. He saw this while fleeing the firestorm that followed the bomb, the artist explained: the girls looked like they had drawn the metal sheet up like a blanket, but they were dead. NHK showed this on television and invited other survivors to put their atomic-bomb memories similarly to paper, and eventually several thousand such amateur drawings and paintings were submitted. They were shown on television and featured in exhibitions around the country—a quarter century after the events they depicted. I was in Japan at the time and saw some on television by chance late one night, and sought out an exhibition. I had never seen anything as powerful and intimate. When you look at a photo, it doesn’t have the name of a person, we don’t quite know the circumstances, we can’t quite put a story with it. But the *hibakusha*’s own pictures usually came with written messages on them, or on their backs, or in an accompanying note, describing what these people could never forget.

It was my experience that these graphics broke through the psychological blocking and numbing—the barriers we erect against horrendous words, films, and photos. Why? I’m not sure. Perhaps because they are intimate stories that reflect what was burned into the minds, hearts, and souls of those who experienced the atomic bombings. Perhaps it helps to know that the artists themselves survived.

In any case, more than another quarter century later we put up a Web site. There are more than 2000 of these *hibakusha* drawings at the Peace Memorial Museum in Hiroshima, and we arranged to incorporate over 400 into the unit, mostly as a database. From these, I selected about thirty-five images I felt were representative of the themes and experiences that emerge in *hibakusha* recollections as a whole, and wove a text around these images that explains them and incorporates factual information on the nature and effects of the nuclear explosions.

The site is not about the decision to drop the bombs, but rather about what the bombs did. I think young people can handle this and need to address it. After all, they are growing up in a culture of acute fear of weapons of mass destruction, and at a time when important decisions are being made about the future use of nuclear weapons. If teachers wish to assign projects, the database makes this possible. If they want to pursue the broader aspects of the war, as well as the debates about the decision to use the bomb, there are links to other sites. The metadata is still being finalized for the database, but it will include Japanese as well as English, making this of possible use to Japanese language teachers too.

I think the unit is also a way for teachers to introduce a subject that fascinates academics today, namely “memory.” How do people remember this war? Americans tend to focus on the infamy of Pearl Harbor, the terrible sacrifices of the Pacific War, and the great triumph and celebration of the war’s end. But obviously, this is not the case in Japan. When Japanese look back each August, the anniversary of the war’s end and also of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they remember by saying, “Look how terrible this was. We don’t want to

go there again.” It’s the difference between triumphal and tragic narratives, or “Self” and “Other,” to use some fashionable jargon. Young people should be introduced to this.

Lynn Parisi: *Let’s pick up on something you mentioned earlier, the concept of ‘Ground Zero.’ The VC Hiroshima unit is entitled Ground Zero, 1945—placing it as a specific “ground zero” at a particular time. This term was once associated almost exclusively with the nuclear epicenters in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but as you mentioned, it now is associated primarily with the World Trade Center in this country. What significance do you place on the fact that we now have multiple meanings and associations with the term ‘ground zero’?*

John Dower: I doubt if many young Americans today could say from where the term “Ground Zero” came. It became popular in the US media beginning in 1946, and was always associated with the nuclear age introduced at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The term appears on a small monument at the Trinity site in New Mexico, where the first nuclear device was tested in July 1945. After 9/11, however, it was as if Americans didn’t just borrow the term, but *appropriated* it and erased its prehistory. “Ground Zero” now signifies the World Trade Center site and American victimization. We rarely even talk or think about the many non-American victims at the WTC.

This erasure of history and memory is really quite stunning. If you go back to the immediate aftermath of 9/11, for example, the media, everyone, was ranting about who these people were who could kill innocent civilians. Pundits were churning out pieces about how they came out of barbaric cultures that don’t respect individual life and had no compunctions about killing women and children. It was all the fashion to beat the “clash of civilizations” drums—and not acceptable at all to point out that targeting civilians has been standard operating procedure on all sides since WWII.

Lynn Parisi: *How can we effectively link these two experiences of ‘Ground Zero’ in the classroom to better understand each and the issues of modern warfare?*

John Dower: Discussing “9/11” can help focus “Hiroshima,” and visa versa. That is, we can try to move students from the horror of September 11 to the question, “Why was it a horror?” Much of the answer clearly lies in deliberately targeting non-combatants. Then we can ask: but isn’t this what people do in wars? Before World War II, the answer was “no.” During the war, it became “yes, and for good reasons,” and the United States was very much part of that crucial reformulation. Obviously, this sort of comparison can lead in various other directions concerning declared and undeclared wars, “asymmetrical” warfare, state terror versus the solitary bomber or Al-Qaeda-type terrorist, killing from a distance versus killing face-to-face like most contemporary suicide bombers do—and, of course, the many ways in which Hiroshima/Nagasaki and 9/11 *differ*.

Lynn Parisi: *John, thank you for sharing your insights and current work with EAA readers.*

John Dower: Thank you for this opportunity to share some thoughts with teachers. I truly admire the important work they are doing. ■

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