Many of today's journalists covering the atomic bombings of World War II write their stories as if President Harry S Truman's endgame with Japan in the months before August 1945 entailed only two choices: bomb or invasion. In this scenario Truman's use of the bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki was necessary to secure Japanese capitulation and prevent a bloody invasion. While this framework lends itself to a tidy, uncluttered narrative, it omits the crucial months prior to the bombings when a confluence of events might well have brought about a very different termination of the war.

In the spring and summer of 1945, before the world knew of the existence of the atomic bomb, the American media engaged in extensive speculation and debate about the best means for bringing an end to the war with Japan. The media reported on, and also helped put into play, possible alternatives to the bomb for successfully concluding the Pacific War.

The media discussed four key issues before the bomb was dropped: the impact on Japan of possible Russian entry into the Pacific War; the importance of clarifying terms of surrender for Japan; the significance of Japanese peace feelers; and the rapid deterioration of the warmaking capacity of Japan. Many in the media appeared to believe that this constellation of factors would bring about an early end to the war. But once Truman announced that the United States had used an atomic bomb against Japan, the media by and large discarded the rich historical process they had commented on in favor of Truman's narrow public interpretation. The media helped to put aside, as a result, the historical understanding in which civil society could fully ground its response to the use of an unprecedented weapon of war, a weapon that held the potential for global destruction, as commentators at the
time understood. Remaining, instead, was the official account, which further legitimized use of the bomb by articulating a narrow understanding of the historical process leading to the bomb's use. Rather than being remembered as the ultimate weapon of mass destruction, the bomb became for many of that generation an icon of salvation: "Thank God for the Atom Bomb," as Paul Fussell later would write.

Although the official explanation that the bombs were needed to obviate a bloody invasion was challenged by a few mainstream dissenters and religious commentators in the 1940s, the right wing in the 1950s, and then the left in the 1960s, the overall legacy of post-Hiroshima reporting and official explanation has led to a virtually immutable popular history of the end of World War II, resistant to the findings of modern scholarship. The media coverage of the recent controversy over the Smithsonian's Enola Gay exhibit illustrated all too well this wide and difficult-to-bridge gap between scholarly and public understanding of Truman's decision.

Most historians who have analyzed the news media's response to Hiroshima have generally treated the media as reflectors of public opinion. These scholars have suggested that wartime culture, official censorship, and a belief in American exceptionalism were largely responsible for the lack of dissenting commentary in the media. While these are important issues to keep in mind, viewed only in this way, the media become reflectors rather than shapers, as well, of popular opinion. According to this view, the media had not the means or reason to challenge the official line. This approach also suggests why studies of the media and Hiroshima do not continue beyond the 1940s. Once Hiroshima becomes a settled matter of public opinion, there appears to be little reason for media behavior to change, thus making further analysis of media coverage unwarranted.

There are four problems with this approach. First, it contributes to the notion, regardless of scholarly intention, that the Hiroshima question is settled as far as Truman's decision is concerned. Secondly, it

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1. The advent of the atomic bomb was generally seen as an unprecedented historic event. As Bruce Bliven wrote in the New Republic, "There is no doubt that [the coming of the atomic bomb] is, in its potentialities, the most significant event in the history of mankind for many generations. At last it seems literally true that humanity as a whole must either learn to live at peace or face destruction on a grotesquely vast scale." Later in his essay he called the bomb an "appalling weapon." See "The Bomb and the Future," New Republic, 20 Aug. 1945, 210–12. See Paul Boyer, By the Bomb's Early Light (New York, 1985), for a record of similar reactions.
