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Bombs, Bikinis, and Godzilla: America's Fear and Fascination of the Atomic Bomb as Evidenced Through Popular Media, 1946-1962.

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Chapter I

Introduction

“After the thing went off, after it was a sure thing that America could wipe out a city with just one bomb, a scientist turned to Father and said, ‘Science has now known sin.’ And do you know what Father said? He said, ‘What is sin?’” – Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*.¹

The 1950s can be defined by many things, be it the rebellious rock ‘n roll stylings of Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash, or the wholesome family values depicted in television shows such as *Leave it to Beaver*. There are the prosperous and patriotic attitudes of Americans during the “I Like Ike” administration, and even the terrifying possibility of all out destruction due to nuclear war. The atom bomb became one of many symbolic figures to come about during the fifties. The bomb was a hero, a savior, that delivered the U.S. from a costly and devastating war. The promise of the atom meant new technologies and infinite discoveries in the realms of medicine, energy, and even economics. The fifties also saw a rapidly growing pop culture movement in the United States, spurred by mass media and consumption, and this movement latched on to the atom bomb and rode it high. But beneath all these hopes and dreams that the atom may elevate humanity unlike anything ever before, there was a deep undercurrent of fear that the very

¹ Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat’s Cradle*, (New York: Random House, 1963), 17.

technology that had liberated mankind in 1945 might also be the means to mankind's extinction.

This project examines the popular culture of the 1950s in the United States to uncover the emotional state of American citizens concerning the atom bomb. For this study, the term "Americans" will be used primarily to describe white, middle class men and women unless otherwise stated. These people were the primary consumers in American culture during the fifties, as lower class, poor families (which included many minorities as well as white families) did not often have the additional income to expend on the leisure items that most of this study is compounded of. Upper class, rich families also purchased items that many others could not afford, thus their lifestyle makes for a difficult area to focus on a comprehensive American consumer culture.

After the use of the atom bomb on Japan in 1945, Americans experienced a mixture of fear and fascination with the incredible power of the bomb, and this is evidenced in the culture Americans consumed and produced during the time period. For roughly the next decade, fear remained in the background of Americans' minds while feelings of triumph, hope, praise, and even amusement at times prevailed. By the 1960s, when the reality of atomic energy had been established, fear became the dominant emotion felt by the majority of Americans. What was once a promising new technology that could lead America into the future became instead seen as a weapon capable of reverting civilization back to primitive times, and Americans placed their hopes towards new advancements, primarily technology concerning space exploration.

The atom bomb was an extraordinary piece of technology, and its mere existence was enough to both fascinate and terrify Americans as well as citizens around the world. The atom bomb (sometimes referred to as “atomic bombs” or simply abbreviated to “A-bombs”) is a nuclear weapon that uses nuclear fission to generate an incredible explosive blast. This process requires a mass of enriched uranium or plutonium that must then be assembled into a supercritical mass, the speed of which creates an explosion of extreme proportions. The power of the A-bomb can produce the energy of approximately 20,000 tons of TNT (Figure 1). While called atom bombs, most the energy is produced from the nucleus of the atom, and not the atom itself.² Nuclear weapons were first developed in the 1940s, and have only been used twice in actual combat, both times by the United States of American against the nation of Japan during World War II.

A major reason Americans and the scientific community worldwide were enamored with the atomic bomb was due to its unprecedented destructive power. The motivation for the employment of the bombs (code named Little Boy and Fat Man respectively) has been debated, but two reasons are undeniable: President Harry S. Truman desired to test the power of the newfound nuclear technology, and, if successful, cause immediate and devastating damage that the Japanese would swiftly surrender. The first bombing took place in the industrial city of Hiroshima on August 6th. In the

² Chuck Hansen, *U.S. Nuclear Weapons: The Secret History*, (San Antonio: TX, Aerofax, 1988)



Figure 1: Seizo Yamada's ground zero photo taken approximately 4.3 miles northeast of Hiroshima. Source: Seizo Yamada, "Ground Level View of Hiroshima Mushroom Cloud," 1945, accessed on March 22, 2017, <http://nuclearweaponarchive.org/Japan/Hirosh.html>

explosion, around 80,000 people were instantly killed, and more than 70,000 were injured.³ Even though many of the buildings were strongly constructed to withstand intense earthquakes in the region, approximately 70 percent of all manmade structures in Hiroshima were destroyed due to the atomic bomb. The bomb's blast covered an estimated 4.7 square miles. After the Japanese hesitated about surrendering, a second bomb was quickly prepared, and on August 9th it was deployed on the seaport city of Nagasaki.

(Originally, the Americans had planned to bomb

the city of Kokura on the 11th, but weather and other factors changed the bombing's time and location.) The casualty rate varies by large degrees, but at least 35,000-45,000 people died instantly when the bomb exploded, with more than 60,000 injured. The Japanese surrendered three days later, on August 12th.⁴ After these events, every major power on the global stage desired the new technology of nuclear weapons after witnessing how swiftly and deftly the Americans obliterated the Japanese cities.

Rapidly emerging popular culture and technology in America during the post-war era allowed the atom bomb to quickly become an American icon. Television sets became

³ These numbers are debated. While most U.S. sources claim approximately 80,000, many Japanese sources point to a total closer to 200,000. Jonathan Soble, "At Hiroshima's 70th Anniversary, Japan Again Mourns Dawn of Atomic Age," *The New York Times*, August 6, 2015.

⁴ Michelle Hall, "By the Numbers: World War II's Atomic Bombs," *CNN Library*, August 6, 2013.

much more affordable, and came to be used in most American's homes in the post-war era. Prior to 1941, there were an estimated 7,000 televisions in American homes. By 1960 however, nearly 70 million televisions had been purchased.⁵ Radios were as popular as ever, especially with new styles of music and musicians debuting at a swift pace. The United States by 1960 had approximately 4,281 radio broadcasting transmitters, more than 3,000 more than any other country in the world.⁶ Newspapers with their columns and cartoons are read by most every American. Census data has determined that approximately 123 percent of households subscribed to a newspaper in 1950, or 1.23 newspapers sold per household.⁷ Comic books and superheroes were seeing monumental sales. Comics featuring superheroes sold millions to Americans, with the best-selling comic franchise of the era, Captain Marvel, selling approximately 1.4 million copies on a biweekly publication.⁸ The pop art movement was also emerging through the fifties and sixties, an art form that challenged fine art by including everyday items and images, from Coca-Cola bottles, Campbell's Soup cans, and even the atomic bomb.

The emergence of this new media allowed for a vast number of new products for a society to consume, and studying both the consumer and the products they purchased can yield understanding of their values, ideas, and emotions. Lizbeth Cohen states that analyzing consumerism leads to insight on American class, gender, and race relations, as

⁵ "Annual Television Set Sales in USA," TV History, 2013, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://www.tvhistory.tv/facts-stats.htm>

⁶ *Statistics on Radio and Television, 1950-1960*, (Paris, France: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1963): 10

⁷ "U.S. Daily Newspaper Circulation, 1940-2000," U.S. Census, accessed March 22, 2017, <http://www.staeofthedia.org/2004/newspapers-intro/audience>.

⁸ Ben Morse, "Thunderstruck," *Wizard*, July, 2006, 179.

well as the changing of government as it evolves to accommodate the changing markets.⁹ This is especially apparent in the postwar era. The 1950s, according to Cohen, saw the emergence of a new type of American citizen, who recognized that it was through the consumption of goods that they could benefit society. Cohen explains that during the thirties and forties, American citizens purchased items largely to create a better society. Activists chose where to shop and what to buy as statements for equal opportunity and to combat fascism, among other things. Cohen writes that this “citizen consumer” sought “the enhancement of American democracy and equality.”¹⁰ During the war, Americans developed a sense of using their purchasing power to promote the country and the marketplace, becoming the “purchaser consumer.” Americans were encouraged to buy American goods from American stores in order to support the troops and be a good citizen. Where the citizen consumer favored self-interest, the purchaser consumer believed in supporting the marketplace as to better all Americans. After the war however saw a blending of these two ideas, and the “purchaser as citizen” was born. This new citizen believed that by combining personal gratification in the marketplace, they were also patriotic because consumption allows for social mobility, a strengthening of the economy, and demonstrated the freedom and superiority America had over other nations.¹¹ Never had before citizens recognized that they had such power through their interaction with the marketplace. Americans purchased not just what was available but what they wanted for themselves and what they wanted for society.

⁹ Lizbeth Cohen, *A Consumer's Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption on Postwar America* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 2008), 9.

¹⁰ Cohen, 55.

¹¹ Cohen, 8-9.

This project has two main goals. First, I aim to determine, via analyzing popular culture, the ways in which the attitudes towards the atom bomb changed during the era. Through the 1950s, there is a conflict in the ways in which the atom bomb was portrayed. In some aspects, the bomb was heralded as being a pinnacle of technology, an “American hero” that saved the nation from the Japanese, and the atom itself as a savior. Americans also acknowledged the dangers the bomb posited, such as the destruction in Japan, the possibilities that it could be used in future warfare, as well as the effects of harmful radiation. Secondly, this project is important to present-day research as many of the same themes of the 1950s are still in effect today. Contemporary popular culture consistently harkens back to the 1950s and the atom bomb. In 2015 alone, the incredibly popular video games *Fallout 4* and *Wasteland 2* were produced, taking place in a world where the Soviet Union dropped an atomic bomb on the United States, with *Fallout 4* taking home numerous Game of the Year Awards. In the same year, the film *Mad Max: Fury Road* debuted, the fourth in a series set in a post-apocalyptic Australian wasteland, and the film received an Academy Award for Best Picture. The atom bomb is still a popular piece of culture even in the new millennium, and to more fully understand why it remains important the root of its presentation in culture must be explored.

My examination of the atom bomb in popular culture will be split into multiple chapters, each focusing on a theme in which Americans viewed the bomb. The first chapter, titled “The Atom Bomb is Beautiful,” focuses on the positive and appealing representations of the atomic bomb in American media. During the fifties, numerous beauty pageants themed around the bomb took place, all showcasing the contestants by comparing them to the explosive weapon. Dozens of songs were also produced in which

a male singer compares a woman whom they are infatuated with to the atomic bomb. The early pop art movement also saw artists depicting the atom bomb in stunning ways in their works.

The second chapter, “The Atom Bomb is a Savior,” focuses on the almost mythical powers many ascribed to the atom bomb and atomic energy during the era. Many experts during the era claimed that the atom could solve many of the Earth’s problems, including curing disease, making money obsolete, providing near limitless vehicular power, and generating an endless supply of electricity. Science fiction also played a major role in championing this concept, from comic book superheroes to monsters on the big screen. These details show that Americans gave the atom a power that could do more good than harm, and that it was through the atom that mankind would be able to further prosper.

The third chapter, “The Atom Bomb is Profitable,” focuses on merchandising of the atomic bomb, as well as the Geiger counter industry. Through the uranium rush, the bomb and its components became a marketable item that interested the entire family. Geiger counters are devices used to detect uranium radiation. During the early 1950s, Geiger counter manufacturers advertised their merchandise as tools that could lead users to uranium, which they could then sell for millions. Numerous American men purchased Geiger counters and prospecting gear to aid them in their search for uranium and fortune. Towns and businesses near nuclear testing sites or recent uranium finds attempted to use these in advertising to appeal to aspiring prospectors. Children were also a major focus for marketing prospecting. Popular boy’s magazines frequently featured articles on Geiger counter and prospecting, and toys that allowed children to envision themselves as

prospectors were also prominent. The focus on children shows that American businesses saw a future with uranium prospecting, and that to ensure profits the future must be educated and encouraged to participate in that lifestyle.

The final chapter, “The Atom Bomb is Scary,” explores how in the late fifties America’s fascination towards the atom turned into fear. With the Soviet Union locked in an arms race with the United States, Americans began to fear that a nuclear war could be inevitable. The year 1957 was a turning point in the Cold War, as President Dwight D. Eisenhower issued a two-year ban on nuclear testing, the Soviets launched Sputnik 1 and 2, and the Gaither Report, a private examination of the U.S. defenses, was leaked to the American public. All of these things spread fear across America and generated a negative perception of the atom bomb. U.S. popular culture reflected this. After 1957, fewer and fewer songs were written about the bomb, and those that were focused on destruction, not of love. Monster movies featuring creatures empowered by atomic radiation also became popular. Superheroes became intensely more vulnerable as Americans no longer felt invincible due to the atom. As the world entered the sixties, parodies of the fifties culture and its love for the bomb became popular, such as seen in *Dr. Strangelove*.

The atomic bomb has been depicted in numerous ways across media, from beautiful to terrifying, and each of these portrayals must be examined independently to accurately determine the emotions of Americans during the fifties. While one in 2017 may easily assume that those in the atomic era were also fearful of this new technology, the popular culture they produced indicates a much more positive message. Each form of media, be it song or movie, comic or artwork, provides a primary source document with its own voice and perspective. By lumping these perspectives into common themes, such

as the view of the bomb as a thing of beauty, I aim to trace the evolution of the view of the bomb from savior to destroyer.