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Review of The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan and Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb

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Miscamble, Wilson D. *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. ISBN-13: 978-0521735360

Takaki, Ronald. *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995. ISBN 13: 9780316831222

To commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb, the Smithsonian Museum prepared an exhibit featuring *Enola Gay*, the aircraft that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. This exhibit unleashed a maelstrom of controversy, since it defied the national consensus promoting the necessity of the atomic bomb. In the wake of the Smithsonian exhibit, two historians, Ronald Takaki and Wilson Miscamble, entered the debate surrounding the necessity of the atomic bomb. In his book entitled *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb*, Takaki claims to bring “historical accuracy” to the debate rather than simple political correctness.¹ Miscamble, however, wishes to “directly challenge” previous scholarship on the matter.² To determine the necessity of the atomic bomb, Miscamble discusses the state of the Pacific Theater toward the end of the war, the Japanese attitude toward surrender, atomic diplomacy with the Soviet Union, Truman’s personal motivations behind his decision, and the morality of the usage of the atomic bomb in his book, *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan*. Takaki explores similar themes in his own study for the same purpose, with the addition of racial prejudice against the Japanese. While Takaki and Miscamble explore similar figures and events in their studies, their analyses and resulting arguments differ.

¹ Ronald Takaki, *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995), 11.

² Wilson D. Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 4.

Takaki presents a passionate argument against the necessity of the atomic bomb. He posits that the use of the atomic bomb to end the war with Japan was unneeded from a military point of view, unlike what is commonly believed by the public. Rather, Takaki argues, Truman's decision to use the bomb against Japan stemmed from a desire to threaten the Soviet Union, racial prejudice against the Japanese, and Truman's innate need to prove himself decisive and capable, not a "sissy."³ Miscamble disagrees by rejecting any explanation that attributes the use of the bomb to "postwar international politics" (i.e. Takaki), Miscamble maintains that Truman's motivation for using the bomb was primarily militaristic and was essential in forcing Japan's surrender and sparing American soldiers from a costly land invasion.⁴ In addition, he finds the use of the atomic bomb morally justifiable, since it prevented a prolonged war that would have resulted in more deaths.

Takaki endeavors to place the decision to drop the bomb in a global context. He makes extensive use of primary sources throughout his study, including declassified military documents and personal diaries. Through these records, Takaki examines the events surrounding Hiroshima and Nagasaki from various points of view. He successfully exploits the differences between these accounts to determine the necessity of the bomb's deployment. *Hiroshima* casts a wide net; Takaki's cast of characters ranges from Harry Truman to the citizens of Hiroshima to the editors of *Time* magazine. While Miscamble also utilizes various memoirs and personal papers, he places a heavier emphasis on previous scholarship particularly the studies that claim the bomb's use unnecessary to make his argument. He often re-visits the theses of these works in order to dispute them. Yet, Miscamble's review of the revisionist literature would be more appropriately placed in

³ Takaki, *Hiroshima*, 109.

⁴ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 151.

a review article. His lack of primary sources makes *The Most Controversial Decision* seem under-researched in comparison to Takaki. Miscamble and Takaki discuss similar figures in their studies. Miscamble focuses more heavily on Truman and Byrnes. His approach is chronological and textbook-like, displaying his emphasis on the decision-making process that led to the bomb's use. Takaki's approach, on the other hand, lies in historical anthropology, providing a dense description of the players surrounding the decision to deploy the bomb. This reflects Takaki's desire to challenge the necessity of the bomb by analyzing its effect on various players.

Hiroshima and *The Most Controversial Decision* are both classic examples of the revisionist-orthodox interpretations that followed the deployment of the atomic bomb during World War II. By its nature, revisionist discourse on the bomb's deployment is more controversial than the orthodox, as it goes against the national consensus surrounding the atomic bomb's necessity. The public, as seen in the *Enola Gay* controversy, strongly prefers the orthodox interpretation. Yet, while very well-argued, Takaki and Miscamble do not contribute original interpretations to the revisionist-orthodox debate. In its emphasis on atomic diplomacy, Takaki's revisionist argument mostly follows the school of thought first presented in Gar Alperovitz's 1965 book *The History of the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*. Takaki's thorough description of Anglo-American prejudice against Japanese immigrants, however, is more original while Miscamble heavily echoes the pre-existing orthodox argument. His contribution to the orthodox interpretation does not stem from his argument but rather in the timing of his study. In recent years, scholars have favored a revisionist interpretation. Miscamble instead spearheads the neo-orthodox interpretation.

Takaki and Miscamble are both wonderfully concise and clear in their arguments and positively contribute to the historiography surrounding the use of the atomic bomb against Japan.

Yet, the reader may find the images Takaki and Miscamble provide of Truman as somewhat off-putting. Their opinions of Truman lie on opposite ends of the spectrum. Takaki portrays Truman as struggling to overcome an “inferiority complex” and prove his decisiveness, which in turn prompted Truman’s desire to deploy the atomic bomb.⁵ Miscamble similarly acknowledges that Truman was similar to a “struggling student” in the initial days of his presidency.⁶ Unlike Takaki, Miscamble does not attribute Truman’s struggles to insecurities. He instead puts blame on Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “disgraceful failure” to inform Truman on FDR’s foreign policy views.⁷ While one would expect differing views on Truman from two authors with opposing arguments, the images of Harry Truman presented by Takaki and Miscamble possess a two-dimensional, caricature-like flavor. Takaki is too critical in his approach, assigning too much blame to Truman while Miscamble is too defensive of Truman and does not assign enough blame. What studies of this type need is a rounded and unbiased portrayal of Truman that more aptly describes Truman’s strengths and weaknesses.

While Takaki and Miscamble present opposing arguments, their studies do not stand in opposition to each other. Together, these works provide insight that one cannot solely find in either study. A reader may appreciate reading these studies conjointly, as doing so better creates a platform to “examine critically” the true necessity of the atomic bomb.⁸

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⁵ Takaki, *Hiroshima*, 102.

⁶ Miscamble, *The Most Controversial Decision*, 31.

⁷ Ibid 26.

⁸ Takaki, *Hiroshima*, 11.

About the author

Alicia Espinosa is a junior at Boston University. She will be graduating in May 2018 with a Bachelor of Arts in History and minors in Anthropology and Public Health.