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## ■ SECRECY, COVER-UP & THE BOMB

# The Atomic Curtain

ROBERT JAY LIFTON AND GREG MITCHELL

In the beginning were the secrets. The facilities where the atomic bomb was built—the entire enterprise and its finished product—existed in a mysterious realm outside the known, visible world. The word *secret* means "kept from knowledge or observation" and is derived from words meaning "to separate" or "divide off." To be privy to the secret of the atomic bomb was to share in a privileged mystery.

After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, it became more a matter of *concealment*. Secrecy and concealment are used almost interchangeably, but the latter suggests more active steps to suppress information. It is derived from the idea of covering, hiding and "the underworld." We can say that the nuclear sequence evolved from the *secret* to that which was *actively concealed* and, finally, to *falsification*.

This sequence was apparent in the thousands of radiation experiments on Americans that have recently come to light. But the source of that suppression and falsification can be traced back to Hiroshima, and even before. It actually started with the decision to create a weapon of mass destruction and hide the nature of the device from most of the 125,000 people who built it. "Only a handful, of course, knew what they were creating," Dwight Macdonald observed shortly after Hiroshima. "It hardly needs to be stressed that there is something askew with a society in which vast numbers of citizens can be organized to create a horror like The Bomb without even knowing they are doing it."

Unfortunately, the concealment not only widened but settled into American institutions. Concealment also succeeded in distancing Americans from what happened at the other end of our weapons—in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For years American officials suppressed information about the bomb's effects (particularly its radiation effects), censored or manipulated newspaper reports, seized all photographs and film footage of Japanese A-bomb victims and declared top secret most documents relating to the decision to use the weapon. The American cover-up has been apocalyptic in at least two ways: in the grotesque human dimension of what has been suppressed, and in the relationship of that cover-up to our continuous embrace of still more destructive nuclear devices.

This process, and the so-called national security state itself, began with Hiroshima—with a small group of relatively isolated leaders making drastic decisions, and then concealing from the public the nature and consequences of those decisions. Suppression has haunted America ever since.

Hiroshima initiated an overarching American pattern of cover-up: from Vietnam and Watergate to Iran/*contra* and

*Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell are co-authors of Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial, to be published by Putnam's in July.*

Iraqgate. The American people have shown signs of resentful awareness of these patterns of concealment, as in the widespread anger at Robert McNamara for his quarter-century delay in acknowledging suppressed truths about Vietnam. Surely Hiroshima was the mother of all cover-ups, creating distortions, manipulative procedures and patterns of concealment that have affected all of American life. Secrecy has been linked with national security—and vice versa—ever since.

There is an even more direct link between Hiroshima and subsequent cover-ups, which has to do with nuclear weapons "credibility." A willingness to use the weapons has always been emphasized as necessary to sustain America's nuclear policies. But as Jonathan Schell has pointed out, all Presidents (after Nagasaki) have known in their hearts that nuclear weapons were so horrific they were all but unusable, and therefore frequently found themselves paralyzed and, more than that, frustrated and confused by what could be called *a false reliance on unworkable power*.

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### *'Nuclear alienation' contributed to people's alienation from the entire political process.*

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The Vietnam War, from this standpoint, was an effort to maintain American credibility by means other than nuclear weapons. The same was true of the systematic deceptions, self-deceptions and concealments associated with that war. For both Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon and their advisers, the bomb always loomed in the background as a possible weapon—which, at the same time, was fundamentally unusable. This dilemma was never acknowledged, because to admit it would be to diminish the credibility of nuclear threat in the eyes of potential enemies, and to confuse the American public and undermine its confidence in U.S. leaders.

Bomb-centered contradictions also could have played a significant part in the Watergate scandal. Of course, Nixon's personal tendencies toward revenge and paranoia gave rise to his Administration's web of lawbreaking. But his struggle with executive impotence, expressed mournfully in his image of America as a "pitiful, helpless giant," surely accentuated such tendencies. Executive impotence also had a lot to do with the elaborate efforts at cover-up. As Schell sees it, that interplay of Vietnam and nuclear contradictions "drove two Presidents into states of something like madness and led to the near-ruin of our political system."

That near-madness, we would add, had to do with a combination of impotence and nuclearistic omnipotence—the capacity (and periodic inclination) to unleash the weaponry that would kill everyone, and the pain of holding back even in the face of American defeat and decline. The more excruciating the conflict, the more the President would feel the need to cover over—at all costs keep from the American people—the nuclear contradictions. Significantly, the President most associated with "cover-up," Nixon, is also the one who spoke more favorably of making nuclear threats.

Nor did ordinary Americans escape from these confusions. That was made clear in a study by Michael Carey of members of his own generation concerning "duck and cover" drills in U.S. schools during the 1950s. They remembered feeling fearful, often terrified; but they also recalled a powerful demand from authorities that they suppress or numb themselves to such fears—to conceal these emotions from themselves.

Many did. For some, frightening dreams or periodic anxieties began at the time of the air-raid drills and continued for years. The effects were lasting. There was a sense that life itself was unmanageable, or at least likely to be suddenly and absolutely interrupted. Perhaps more important, there was a feeling of the absurdity of the notion of finding safety from the bomb beneath a tiny desk. Americans sensed that these measures were pathetically inadequate for coping with the bomb's power to annihilate—which Hiroshima had already revealed.

It is not too much to say that the entire generation—indeed the entire country—was left with a feeling that the world had gone mad in creating and using these weapons, and certainly the authorities had gone mad in their arrangements for dealing with them.

All of this contributed to what we call nuclear alienation. Starting with Hiroshima, officials advised Americans to leave all problems surrounding the bomb to political, scientific and military leaders—the nuclear priesthood. Americans were not supposed to think critically or engage in the debate over the gravest issue of our age. Over time, we became accustomed to bowing out of that discussion, and then of debates involving other major issues. We got used to putting the greatest problems, military and social, completely in the hands of experts and political leaders who claimed to have them under control—only to recognize in painful moments that they didn't have them in hand at all. Surrendering our right to know more about Hiroshima, and later nuclear policies, contributed to our gradual alienation from the entire political process.

The message of the official Hiroshima narrative was *control*: controlling the story of Hiroshima, controlling nuclear weapons, controlling history. But the official narrative also increased ordinary Americans' sense of being out of control of their own destiny, of being out of control of the forces that determine their future.

No wonder, then, that the American people have come to feel deceived by the bomb and its caretakers. We know that ominous truths have been concealed from us—starting with Hiroshima. One reason we remain confused is that part of each of us psychologically colludes in the concealment. But our resentment at what has been concealed and falsified does not necessarily limit itself to nuclear matters but can spread, vaguely and bitterly, into just about any aspect of social and national experience.

We have to ask ourselves, then, how much of our mistrust of politicians and public officials, of the media, of our government and just about all who govern us—how much of this angry cynicism so evident in our public life in recent years—is an outcome of the Hiroshima and post-Hiroshima nuclear deceptions and concealments. To what extent do we feel ourselves a people who have been unforgivably deceived in that most fundamental of human areas—having to do with how, when and by whose hand, or lethal technology, we are to die? □

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