# Impairing Public Understanding: Flawed History, Uncritical Reviews and Interviews, and Misrepresenting A-Bomb-Related History


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# IMPAIRING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING: FLAWED HISTORY, UNCRITICAL REVIEWS AND INTERVIEWS, AND MISREPRESENTING A-BOMB-RELATED HISTORY

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**Chris Wallace** with **Mitch Weiss,** *Countdown 1945: The Extraordinary Story of the Atomic Bomb and the 116 Days That Changed the World*. New York: Avid Reader Press, 2020. 295 pp. Figures, bibliography, and index. $30.00.

"Fox Sunday News" anchor Chris Wallace, with apparently very limited help from his co-author, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Mitch Weiss, has produced a well-heralded, bestselling volume. *Countdown 1945* has normally been treated by Wallace himself, on the dedication page and in interviews, and generally by published reviewers, as basically or entirely Wallace's book.

While including some post-Hiroshima segments dealing briefly with the Nagasaki bombing and Japan's surrender as well as some later A-bomb-related writings and events, the book focuses most heavily on the 116 days from FDR's April 12 death to the U.S.'s bombing of Hiroshima on August 5 (U.S. time). Using the device of an almost day-to-day countdown, in many short chapters and also in more than a dozen subchapters, the volume is conceived in near-novelistic form to be a chilling and enlightening thriller. It offers readers a "you are here" view of often dramatic events.

*Countdown* has been substantially praised by various reviewers in mainline general publications. Even though it is a work in what is sometimes dismissively termed "popular history," the accolades it has widely received, the bestseller status it achieved, and the prominence of its primary author collectively mark the volume as likely to be of continuing influence on the public, and perhaps even in AP history classes. Thus it merits close, critical-minded examination.

*Countdown* deals—mostly in narrative fashion and only sometimes interpretively—with many of the obvious U.S. officials: President Harry S Truman, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, General George C. Marshall (army chief of staff), and General Leslie Groves (director of the A-bomb project). The volume also treats, though more briefly, Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy, Admiral William D. Leahy (de facto

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chairman of the JCS), General Douglas MacArthur, and General Dwight D. Eisenhower, among others.

Perhaps aiming for a broader canvas than dealing only with U.S. officialdom and with physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer and very briefly with some other scientists (including Albert Einstein, Edward Teller, James Franck, and Leo Szilard), the book dwells at length on some members of the A-bomb-dropping "Enola Gay" crew. That includes, among others, radar specialist Jacob Beser, navigator Theodore ("Dutch") Van Kirk, bombardier Thomas Ferebee, tail gunner George (Bob) Caron, co-pilot Robert Lewis, and pilot Paul Tibbets, commander of the mission.

Apparently seeking to include some women, the book introduces, and dwells for a chapter or more, on two previously unknown figures: Ruth Sisson (later using her married name Ruth Huddleston), who like most other employees at wartime Oak Ridge did not know she was working on uranium and in an A-bomb project; and Hideko Tamura Snider, who as the 10-year-old, Japanese-born and -raised Hideko Tamura was unfortunately in Hiroshima when the U.S. A-bombed it.

So far, most of the mainline published reviews—those appearing in the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Time* magazine—and the near-handful of easily accessible broadcast interviews with Wallace, have greatly praised the book. One *Washington Post* reviewer, Bethanne Patrick, who normally deals with both fiction and non-fiction,_particularly lauded *Countdown* for being "carefully researched."[1] The *Wall Street Journal* reviewer, James Hornfischer, a specialist on the WWII navy, praised the volume for being "well researched in primary sources," and termed it, "the non-fiction blockbuster of the season."[2] *Time* magazine writer Karl Vick admired both Wallace and his book for their "rigor and fealty to fact."[3] In the *New York Times*, in a twice-published review in that newspaper, historian Jay Winik of the Council on Foreign Relations uncritically summarized the book's analysis and enthusiastically assessed the volume in the *New York Times* as both "masterly" and "superb."[4]

None of the previously cited mainline reviews and known interviews faulted the book for its greatly limited research, nor recognized its troubling errors in the use of evidence, nor even commented on the volume's lamentable strategy of uncritically and naively employing quoted dialogue. Most significantly, no known review or interview challenged the volume's portrayal of Truman's A-bomb decision-making as agonized, meticulous, thorough, and broad. According to Wallace, implicitly disagreeing with much of the scholarly literature, President Truman carefully consulted a wide array of U.S. officials on whether or not to use the bomb, and on the moral meanings of such use.

Nor did any reviewer or interviewer question the book's unsubstantiated—and largely incorrect—contentions about the very high casualty-fatality

estimates for U.S. forces provided by major U.S. officials or their staff if the U.S. had chosen to invade Japan. Nor, aside from the thoughtful historian Gregg Herken, a retired University of California Merced professor, did any of the reviewers or interviewers deal with the questionable formulation, indicated in the book, that Truman's only reasonable choices in seeking to end the Asian war were between using the A-bomb or invading Japan.

Implicitly seeming to accept these techniques and strategies in writing popular history, no reviewer or interviewer questioned or even noted that the book never deals explicitly with rival interpretations of the major Truman/A-bomb events or seeks openly to wrestle with the interpretation of sometimes contested and even ambiguous evidence. *Countdown's* strategy is, in effect, to tell a good story, and apparently to use any available evidence—even if suspect—to narrate that tale in vigorous fashion.

Dismayingly, no reviewer or interviewer apparently noticed, and certainly none reported, that a handful of chapters, as well as briefer segments, lacked all sourcing. Those evidentiary gaps occur in at least 15 percent of the book's basic 278-page text.

Unwisely, the book's author(s), judging from its bibliography and endnotes, never used any of ten major archival collections that are valuable and in most cases necessary in examining Truman's A-bomb decision-making; whom he consulted, or did not; and on what A-bomb-related issues, if any, he received advice. Those significant omissions include: Secretary of Navy James Forrestal (Princeton), Byrnes (Clemson), Marshall (Marshall Library), Assistant Secretary McCloy (Amherst), Eisenhower (Eisenhower Library), MacArthur (MacArthur, Norfolk) Air Force chief of staff General Henry Arnold (Library of Congress), Leahy (Library of Congress), Under Secretary of State Joseph Grew (Harvard), and presidential adviser Joseph Davies (Library of Congress). Wallace also apparently ignored all but one of the published biographies of these men and all of their published memoir volumes.

Unintentionally underscoring Countdown's remarkably inadequate research, the author(s) ignored the major books on Truman, *Man of the People* (1995) by Alonzo Hamby and Robert Ferrell's *Harry S Truman: A Life* (1996). *Countdown* also entirely disregarded the useful A-bombrelated books by Martin J. Sherwin, Richard Frank, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, Robert J. Maddox, Robert Newman, Sean Malloy, Michael Gordin, Gregg Herken, and editor Michael Hogan, among others, and amazingly also ignored every relevant article from a scholarly journal, except one.[5]

Most historians who worry and care about evidence should also greatly mistrust Wallace's strategy of uncritically using post-Hiroshima evidence to define and to interpret pre-Hiroshima decision-making on crucial A-bomb-related issues. That problem, in reaching well beyond dealing with Truman himself, operates somewhat similarly in Wallace's uncritically using distantly

post-Hiroshima dialogue as verbatim 1945 words. Does anyone really believe that someone who was a 10-year-old in 1945 could accurately remember in her 1996 published memoir, or in a 2019 interview, the exact words she and a school-girl friend uttered in 1945? Or believe that most '"Enola Gay" crew members, and the plane's top pilot, unless they had 1945 diaries or similar 1945 materials, could do so in reliably providing verbatim 1945 words, in 1960 and even much later? Such uncritical use by Wallace of claimed 1945 words precisely recalled so long after 1945 must strain credulity. Unfortunately, chunky segments of the book provide such dubious "you are here" verbatim testimony.

To many readers of this essay-review, it may seem peculiar, or even a violation of custom or a general policy to admit—let alone to stress—having read other reviews and to have listened to, or read, broadcast interviews that served in piecemeal as something like friendly book reviews.

But the strategy of such reading and listening, and of discussing even briefly those reviews and interviews, is carefully conceived. My principled aim is not only to examine the greatly flawed book closely and sometimes to stress its many weaknesses and errors, but also to bring forcefully into question the nature of reviewing in the popular media. That leads to my interpretation: that such often-defective reviewing and interviewing contribute, though presumably unintentionally, to the devaluation of reasonable standards on evidence and accuracy and may also help to open the way toward the success of "fake news."

To make a strong argument along these interpretive lines here would be intellectually unacceptable, because a single set of cases—studying the deeply flawed book under examination, and the five generally uncritical reviews and three easily available interviews—cannot prove the larger case in U.S. culture. At best, the present review essay can only suggest possible merits of such a case and urge others to examine similar reviewing and interviewing in the mainline U.S. media.

*Countdown* displays numerous problems in its use of evidence, in sourcing, and in putting together a responsible narrative of the crucial 116 days and somewhat beyond. Such problems include annoying, minor errors: thinking that the A bomb project at the time of FDR's death had already cost "billions" (p. 16) rather than under $680 million, that the Nagasaki-bombing plane was named "Bocks Car" (p. 240) and not "Bockscar," that the 1954 Oppenheimer hearings (p. 265) occurred in public and not in private, that historian Robert Ferrell was named Robert Farrell (p. 292), and that scientist James Franck was actually named James Frank (p. 294). All five of these instances, as well as at least a handful more that could be easily added, are truly minor—what, in basketball jargon, could be termed, dismissively, as "ticky-tacky fouls."

More troubling are some other rather typical, but still relatively small, errors.

Consider first Wallace's flawed treatment (pp. 1-3) of April 12 events. That was the day of FDR's death, Vice-President Truman being summoned to the White House in a phone call, and his being sworn in as president. The general substance of those events was generally familiar by the book's 2020 publication date and has been treated in Truman's own memoir *Year of Decisions* (1955) and in a batch of books, but many issues involving details—including sometimes the actual words spoken that day—remain uncertain.

Unfortunately, there are unsettling problems involving Wallace's first few pages on April 12. Distressingly, the bulk of Wallace's description of Truman (including how he dressed), some chunks of the specific narrative, and even parts of the alleged April 12 dialogue are without any acknowledged source. They seem to be drawn heavily from the never-acknowledged Truman book written by Robert Donovan, *Conflict and Crisis* (1996), and with Wallace's only one acknowledgment and then only for one sentence from A. J. Baime's recent Truman volume, *The Accidental President* (2017).

Adding to Wallace's problems, much of the April 12 dialogue—as apparently first used verbatim in print by Donovan in 1977 and now employed verbatim by Wallace—is from Donovan's questionable 1972 interview with House of Representatives Parliamentarian Lew Deschler. In 1972, Deschler claimed—contrary to Truman's then-closed Aprll 16, 1945, letter—to have been present in Speaker Sam Rayburn's special hideaway meeting room near 5:00 p.m. on April 12, when Truman went there and unexpectedly received the summons to the White House. Why, especially in view of Truman's now-available letter (written four days after April 12), should anyone trust such exact Truman-Rayburn words from Deschler, recalled by him in 1972 about what was said in 1945?

Seemingly dazzled by the legendary Oppenheimer—whom Wallace naively believes was regarded by his fellow scientists as "the genius of the age" (p. 110)—Wallace mistakenly has him "juggling a thousand different papers" (p. 7) at Los Alamos on a typical day. Even a quick reading of some reliable secondary sources would have avoided such errors, and the use of Oppenheimer's now-archived files (in the Library of Congress and at the Los Alamos laboratory) would have easily avoided Wallace's "hype" on Oppenheimer's work.

Very troubling also is Wallace's handling of FDR-Oppenheimer matters. Taking what is now a reasonably well-known letter to Oppenheimer dated June 1943 and signed by FDR, Wallace naively believes (p. 13) that FDR himself wrote it—and not someone in the A-bomb system. To conclude, as Wallace does, that FDR actually wrote that letter, or even knew Oppenheimer, is remarkable and basically wrongheaded.

As troubling, Wallace actually believes, incorrectly, that Oppenheimer and FDR knew each other, but "never talked much" (p. 12). In fact, there is

no evidence that they actually knew each other personally, or that they ever actually talked at all.

But Wallace's difficulties in using sources and his eagerness to tell what might be termed "a good story," also occur elsewhere in the book. Too often, his quest for the "good story," his related failures in conducting necessary research, and his eschewal of using critical-minded judgment conspire, in collective ways, to impair aspects of his book.

Take, for example, the highly implausible story told by the former radar specialist Jacob Beser, as uncritically related by Wallace (p. 72) in a chapter entitled "70 Days," and specified as occurring on May 28. Wallace trustingly narrates Beser's arresting tale of how he had attended a high-level Pentagon meeting, challenged an important military officer on radar matters, and declared, "It's bull shit." Wallace fails to question whether a 24-year-old lieutenant would risk doing so in a meeting with notable scientists (including Caltech theorist Richard Tolman and mathematician/physicist John von Neumann) and high-ranking military officers. Nor did Wallace notice that the version of Beser's tale as used in *Countdown* departed on a number of substantial details from the version Beser himself had provided in his 1988 memoir, *Hiroshima and Nagasaki Revisited*.

Adding to Wallace's difficulties, there is a set of rather detailed, official minutes for that May 28 meeting of the Target Committee. Beser does not even appear in the official minutes' lengthy list of those present at the meeting, and the radar issue that Beser allegedly discussed is also totally absent from those five-page, mostly single-spaced minutes.

Erring on other matters, Wallace mistakenly describes the Interim Committee before June 1, 1945, as having already "brushed aside the objections [about use of the bomb] from Szilard and Franck" (p. 85). But, in fact, the Franck report (partly written by Szilard) did not even get finished until June 11. Wallace, in his error, thus significantly misunderstands the activities of the Interim Committee.

In an entirely unsourced claim and contrary to what physicist Philip Morrison himself said in at least one public lecture and in private interviews, Wallace contends that Morrison, at a Target Committee meeting, had urged first warning Japan of the A-bomb before the U.S. used it (p. 102). Adding further to Wallace's difficulties, the official minutes on the only three meetings of the Target Committee never listed Morrison as even attending any committee meeting.

It would be easy to add at least a few more similar sets of problems to this litany. Here are three: Wallace's erroneous claim that physicist Donald Hornig signed Szilard's petition (p. 267); Wallace's incorrect contention that many people at Los Alamos signed that pre-Hiroshima petition (p. 102); and Wallace's errant use of questionable dialogue on arming "Little Boy" (pp. 203–04, 288).

Though Wallace's volume is mostly a narrative, he does advance what he undoubtedly regards as an important interpretation: that Truman was a meticulous decision-maker, consulted widely on whether or not to use the A-bomb, received varying advice, agonized over the decision, and was influenced by the high casualty /fatality estimates involving American troops in a U.S invasion (p. 256). While not explicitly endorsing Truman's A-bomb decision, Wallace seems to lean strongly in that direction—mostly by presenting the choice as between using the A-bomb or invading Japan—and by Wallace's citing (p. 256) such high U.S. casualty/fatality numbers.

While historians and other analysts may reasonably differ on whether or not Truman made the right decision, no responsible study should trust Wallace's greatly flawed presentation on these subjects—of how Truman made his decision, or on what information and advice he received, and thus on what occurred in important high-level meetings and discussions.

Wallace significantly misinterprets matters, cites advice that was never given to Truman, and often misunderstands key documents—including especially the June 1 Interim Committee minutes, the June 18 White House minutes, and Truman's own Potsdam diary. By never consulting most of the crucial manuscript collections, Wallace apparently could not recognize his serious errors.

He largely set up his errant analysis by first presenting his incorrect conclusions about the June 1 Interim Committee meeting (p. 81). Strangely, he entirely omits citing any source for that meeting, though he did cite and use some earlier Interim Committee minutes. Somehow managing to misunderstand the Stimson-formulated mandate to the committee and the minutes of various sessions, Wallace contends, errantly, that the committee had explicitly confronted the question of whether to use the bomb or to continue to fight the war by conventional means. Put bluntly, he was incorrect—and remarkably so.

Wallace systematically fails to understand some fundamental facts: The Interim committee was not created by Secretary Stimson to discuss that issue of whether or not to use the A-bomb and the committee never directly discussed that issue in either/or terms. Before Stimson's appointment of the committee members, there was already—for Stimson, for his assistants, and for many others in the A-bomb officialdom—the dominant, and dominating, assumption: the bomb would be used. But the question of how had not been defined.

Propelled probably by the concerns of one or more scientists, the committee did, however, briefly deal on May 31 with the possibility of a non-combat demonstration, and mostly on May 31-June 1 with the questions of targeting of the A-bomb. It was to be used, as Stimson and Byrnes made clear, on a basically military/industrial target surrounded by workers' houses.

Having stunningly misunderstood the basic sources and the nature of the issues and thus some decision-making, and having ignored most of the

major relevant secondary literature on those subjects, Wallace soon moves on to discuss the White House meeting of June 18. It was on whether to invade Japan, and thus also on the likely cost to the U.S. in fatalities and casualties.

But in providing the interpretive context for understanding that June 18 meeting, Wallace—again without citing any evidence—makes major errors. He asserts, contrary to all the available evidence, that Truman had earlier considered the possibility of a non-combat demonstration as a warning before employing the bomb directly on Japan (p. 94).

Adding to Wallace's remarkable batch of nonexistent events and nonexistent advice, he also asserts that both Eisenhower and MacArthur, by June 18, had already recommended against using the bomb (p. 94). How Wallace could make such an outlandish claim is puzzling. Apparently, Wallace did not realize when writing that page or later in making a somewhat similar claim involving Ike at Potsdam that neither top-level general even knew by June 18 of the U.S.'s A-bomb project. (pp. 150–51). Indeed, neither Eisenhower nor MacArthur ever claimed, in memoirs or in now-archived documents, to have given Truman any pre-Hiroshima advice on the A-bomb's use, and thus Wallace's inadequately sourced claim of such an Ike-Truman conversation at Potsdam is also incorrect.

Wallace also asserts—once more without any source, and contrary to available documentary evidence—that General Marshall's staff, stated prior to the June 18 meeting that the invasion of Japan would cost the U.S. 500,000 to 1 million U.S. lives (p. 95). Actually, an important staff estimate prepared for Marshall suggested far less—no more than about 25,000 U.S. lives involving only Kyushu, and about 46,000 U.S. lives if there were two invasions—first of Kyushu, and then of Honshu. The key document (JWPC 369/1 of June 14) has been available in U.S. archives, for more than 35 years and for more than 20 years in various publications, which Wallace entirely ignores.

Wallace, in dealing with June 1945 evidence, has other problems. He uncritically believes Assistant Secretary McCloy's highly dubious claims—first probably offered by McCloy in 1953, and then repeated in the mid-1960s—that McCloy at the June 18 meeting had opened a discussion of the A-bomb (pp. 96-98). But Wallace, though not questioning the only sources (McCloy's own statements) for such a dubious claim, never notes that even McCloy did not claim that the A-bomb discussion was broad, deep, or wide-ranging.

Despite some other history-minded analysts accepting McCloy's 1953-1960s claims of having briefly initiated such an A-bomb discussion at that White House meeting, there is substantial evidence to mistrust McCloy's undoubtedly honest but nevertheless faulty claims.

The powerful though indirect evidence rebutting McCloy is overwhelming: most significantly, not one of the four men (including McCloy himself) at the

meeting who kept diaries put any such report in his own diary at the time. It strains credulity to believe that Stimson, McCloy, Leahy, and Forrestal would have each forgotten to mention such a significant event if it had actually occurred. Further adding to overwhelming doubts, of the men at that White House meeting, none of the four who later published memoirs—Truman, Leahy, Stimson, and Admiral Ernest J. King, chief of naval operations—mentions any such A-bomb discussion having occurred at that White House meeting. In addition, neither the official minutes for the June 18 meeting nor the earlier draft (available at the Marshall Library)—both sets were crafted by a brigadier general—makes any mention of such an A-bomb discussion.

Wallace also claims without solid evidence that Truman agonized over the A-bomb decision (pp. 162 and 256). But Wallace's strongest evidence, when closely examined, is greatly inadequate: Truman's July 25 diary entry, in which the president does describe the bomb as horrible and also states that it will be used on a military target in Japan. Careful interpretation of that Truman diary entry cannot support Wallace's strained claim that Truman was agonizing over whether or not to use the bomb. He was sincerely overwhelmed and distressed by the reports of the Abomb's great power. Thus, he worried about the future, but not about whether to use the weapon against Japan. For him, that was a relatively easy decision, basically the implementation of an inherited assumption.

Indeed, there is no substantial evidence in any of the pre-Hiroshima archival materials involving Truman and his associates that he ever agonized over the decision to use the bomb, or even discussed any moral issues on the basic decision of his commitment to use. Nor is there any pre-Hiroshima evidence that any of Truman's close advisers had any ethical doubts about whether to use the A-bomb on Japan.

Before Hiroshima, Truman may, however, have agonized over how to use it against Japan—on mostly a military target or heavily against non-combatants. He may have honestly but incorrectly believed that the actual A bomb target would be a military one. On August 10, in meeting with his cabinet, and informed by the very recent reports of the deadly atomic bombing of Japan, Truman obliquely acknowledged that the targeting had basically killed many innocent non-combatants. His painful statement on that subject appears in the diary of then-Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace. But Chris Wallace (no relation to Henry) may well not have known of that Truman statement, or even of Henry Wallace's diary,

In multiple and unfortunate ways, Chris Wallace's severely self-limited research—in archival materials and in secondary literature—barred him from understanding important matters and thus from probing significant issues thoughtfully, carefully, and deeply.

Understanding in depth what President Harry S Truman thought, what he said, and how he felt—both pre-Hiroshima and then post-Hiroshima—about

using the atomic bombs on Japan involves careful and perhaps even empathetic analysis. Unfortunately, *Countdown* is of no assistance on these issues, and it greatly misunderstands and thus substantially distorts that complicated history.

Lamentably, *Countdown*'s many problems in craftsmanship, in research, and in interpretation apparently escaped the notice of the reviewers and interviewers who uncritically tended to endorse the book, and in some cases even to bestow accolades on it. Their generally uncritical responses do help to raise, albeit in a small way, larger issues about book-reviewing and related interviewing in the mainline media, and also about the appropriate standards for assessing evidence and for offering careful judgment in interpreting events, and thus about the possible, though presumably unintended, injury to U.S. culture and to historical understanding.

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