

The United States in the Atomic Age

Paul Boyer

The United States in the Atomic Age
College of William and Mary

Fall Semester 2002
Hist. 492-01 (559-01)

In this course we will explore the impact of the atomic bomb, the nuclear arms race, and nuclear power on American thought and culture. Our sources will include novels, science fiction, popular music, movies, television programs, journalistic accounts, and interpretive essays by historians. While I will give some lectures, an important part of the course will be class discussion and the exchange of ideas. I hope to schedule three evening films. In addition, each student will choose and carry out an independent research project. (Collaborative projects are a possibility as well, provided each member of the collaboration participates fully, and does as much research and writing as would be involved in an individual project.) The course will close with brief reports on these projects.

Assigned Books:

Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*
Michael J. Hogan, ed., *Hiroshima in History and Memory*
John Hersey, *Hiroshima*
Daniel T. O'Neill, *The Firecracker Boys*
Ray Bradbury, *The Martian Chronicles*
Walter M. Miller, Jr., *A Canticle for Leibowitz*
Tim O'Brien, *The Nuclear Age*
A. G. Mojtabai, *Blessed Assurance: At Home with the Bomb in Amarillo, Texas*
Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past*

COURSE OUTLINE

W 8/28 Introduction; get acquainted

I. Dropping the Bomb; Early Reactions

Reading: Hogan, Hiroshima in History and Memory, pp. 11-115 (Walker, Bernstein, and Bix essays); Hersey, Hiroshima; Boyer, By the Bomb's Early Light, 3-26
F 8/30 Lecture: The Decision to Drop the Bomb: the Continuing Debate
M 9/2 Discussion/debate: The A-bomb decision
W 9/4 Lecture: Inner Doubts; Public Certitude: Harry Truman and the Bomb
F 9/6 Lecture: Early Cultural Responses to the Bomb, 1945-1949
M 9/9 Discussion: Hersey, Hiroshima

II. Cold War, Fallout Fears, Civil Defense

Reading: O'Neill, The Firecracker Boys
Bradbury, Martian Chronicles
Miller, A Canticle for Leibowitz
W 9/11 Recalling 9/11/01
Lecture: The Era of Fallout Fears: Political and Cultural Responses
Evening film #1: "The Day the Earth Stood Still," "Them!" or "Invasion USA"
F 9/13 Discussion: Film #1
M 9/16 Discussion: The Firecracker Boys
W 9/18 Lecture: The Paradoxes of Civil Defense and the "Peaceful Atom"
F 9/20 In-class film: CDI "Dark Cloud" (30"), followed by discussion.
M 9/23 Discussion: The Martian Chronicles
W 9/25 Lecture: Poets, Novelists, Science-Fiction Writers Confront the Bomb
Evening film #2: Dr. Strangelove or On the Beach
F 9/27 Discussion: Film #2
M 9/30 Discussion: A Canticle for Leibowitz

Thematic Perspectives

Reading: Boyer, By the Bomb's Early Light, pp. 47-240
Mojtabai, Blessed Assurance
W 10/2 Lecture: Attitudes Toward Science and Technology in the Atomic Age
F 10/4 Lecture: The Religious Response – I: Ethics and the Bomb
M 10/7 Lecture: The Religious Response – II: Bible Prophecy Belief and the Bomb
(in-class film: "The God of the Atom")
W 10/9 Discussion: Blessed Assurance; the ethics debate; Bible prophecy belief.
F 10/11 The Bomb in the Arts (in-class film: "Hellfire: A Journey From Hiroshima")
[M 10/14: Fall break, no class]
W 10/16 Discussion: The bomb and the arts
F 10/18 Midterm Exam
"The Big Sleep" (1963-1979)
M 10/21 Lecture: Post-1963 Decline in Political Activism and Cultural Attention to the Bomb
W 10/23 Recycling the Fifties: in-class video: 1974 "Happy Days" episode on fallout shelters.
F 10/25 Lecture/discussion: The mass media and nuclear themesThe "Reagan Round" of Nuclear Activism (1979-1984)

Reading: Tim O'Brien, Nuclear Age

M 10/28 Lecture: Deju vu all over again: Three Mile Island and the early Reagan years

W 10/30 Discussion: O'Brien, Nuclear Age

Evening film #3: The Day After, War Game, or Superman IV

F 11/1 Discussion of film #3

M 11/4 Lecture: The Cultural Meaning of Star Wars Beyond the Cold War: The Nuclear Theme Since 1990

Reading: History Wars. (Specific essays to be announced.)

W 11/6 Lecture: The post-Cold War Persistence of Nuclear Themes in Popular Culture

F 11/8 Lecture/discussion: The Enola Gay Controversy

Thinking About Our Own Findings

M 11/11

W 11/13

F 11/15

M 11/18

W 11/20 Reports on research projects

F 11/22

M 11/25

[Thanksgiving break]

M 12/2

W 12/4

Summing Up

F 12/6 Final reflections. How has the Bomb Changed America?