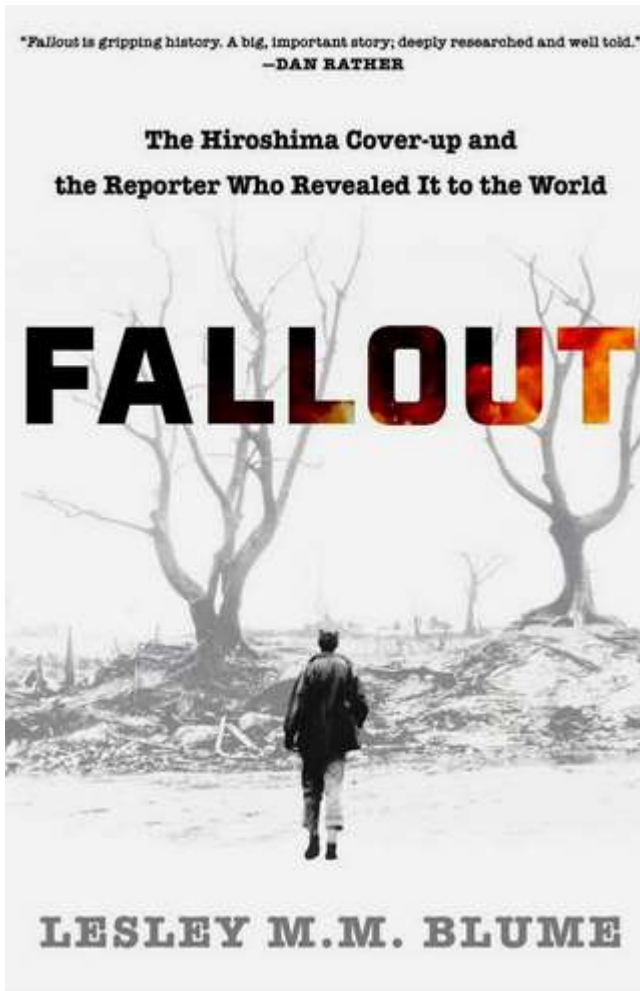


Blume casts light on dawn of nuclear era

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"Fallout: The Hiroshima Cover-Up and the Reporter Who Revealed It to the World" by Lesley M.M. Blume. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020, 288 pages, \$27 (hardcover).



“At first, the government appeared to be forthright about its new weapon,” Lesley M.M. Blume writes near the beginning of “Fallout: The Hiroshima Cover-Up and the Reporter Who Revealed It to the World,” her new investigation into how the government initially tried to cover up the true extent of the devastation that was wrought when the United States became the first country to use nuclear weapons during wartime. “When U.S. President Harry S. Truman announced to the world that an atomic bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima, he pledged that if the Japanese did not surrender, they could ‘expect a rain of ruin from the air, the like of which has never been seen on this earth.’”

“It would take many months – and the bravery of one young American reporter and his editors – before the world learned what had actually transpired beneath those roiling mushroom clouds,” she explained a little later. “‘Fallout’ is the story of how John Hersey got the full story about atomic aftermath when no other journalist could, and how ‘Hiroshima’ became – and remains – one of the most important works of journalism ever created.”

As those close to me can attest, the creation and use of the first atomic bombs has long been a fascination of mine. Ever since I saw the miniseries “Oppenheimer” when it first aired in the United States on PBS in 1982, I have read virtually everything published on the subject, including “The Making of the Atomic Bomb” by Richard Rhodes in 1986 and more recently, “American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer” by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin in 2005. And while I am convinced there is still much to tell about this prodigious and horrendous monument to human ingenuity, most authors concentrate on the lives of those responsible for giving the world the means to bring about its own demise and/or the technical merging of physics and engineering that nuclear weapons represent.

By contrast, few inquiries have focused on the consequences using these weapons had on the unfortunate and unsuspecting human beings who unwittingly became casualties of war. It is important, Blume feels, that we never lose sight of the very human and personal consequences that inevitably accompanied the decision to drop atomic bombs on noncombatants, complete with the racial overtones, cultural insensitivity and massive inhumanity that is forever linked to that decision.

“Fallout” is extensively researched, with 64 pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction, seven chapters and epilogue that form the main narrative. Blume’s literary style is a seamless combination of exceptional journalism, meticulous historical investigation and superb storytelling. Her prose is accessible to both professionals as well as the general public – a feat not often achieved by authors with similar credentials. The way she personalizes the various characters populating her manuscript leaves you with the sense that you know them intimately; i.e., their personalities, motives and the immense impact this horrific event had on all aspects of their lives.

Admittedly, I was familiar with John Hersey’s infamous account of the impact the atomic bomb had on the citizens of Hiroshima, but I was completely oblivious to the struggle he went through to bring the story to light – and the extent to which the government was willing to go to suppress the true story from coming out, especially in the months and years immediately after the war. Some things, it seems, never change – and one of those things is the attempt by those in power to shape the narrative they prefer as opposed to what actually happened. Consider the following from “Detonation,” the sixth chapter and one of the most instructive:

“Harvard president and Manhattan Project adviser James B. Conant had just returned from a nearly monthlong holiday in New Hampshire’s White Mountains when he read Hersey’s story. ‘Hiroshima’ alarmed him greatly. The article was turning public opinion against the bomb and its creators – not to mention how it was undermining Americans’ belief in their leadership. It had not only exposed how much the government had withheld from the U.S. public and eroded the country’s moral standing, it could – contrary to General Groves’ hopes – jeopardize public support for future nuclear arsenal building and preparedness. For certain U.S. officials and unrepentant Manhattan Project principals, these waves of criticism were as damaging as those initial press reports out of Japan in the earliest days of the occupation. Immediate action needed to be taken to contain and spin the story – again.”

An award-winning journalist and historian, Blume’s work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *National Geographic*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Vanity Fair*, *Slate* and *Departures*, among other publications. Her previous books include “Everybody Behaves Badly: The True Story Behind Hemingway’s Masterpiece,” “The Sun Also Rises,” “Let’s Bring Back: An Encyclopedia of Forgotten-Yet-Delightful, Chic, Useful, Curious, and Otherwise Commendable Things from Times Gone By” and “It Happened Here.”

So if you thought you knew everything there is to know about the dawn of the nuclear era, think again. Unless you read “Fallout,” your education on the subject will remain woefully inadequate. Moreover, if you want to know how government works – then and now – you need to rush to your local bookstore (or favorite online bookseller) and pick up a copy of this one. Highly, highly recommended.

– Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University.