



Memorial to the victims of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. (Photo: Samueles, Pixabay.com, CC-o)

ATOMIC BOMBINGS AT 75: Hiroshima Cover-up

How Timesman Won a Pulitzer While on War Dept. Payroll

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The NYT reversed itself to the official narrative of categorically dismissing reports of deadly effects of radiation in articles by a Times correspondent who was being paid by the government, report Amy and David Goodman.


At the dawn of the nuclear age, an independent Australian journalist named Wilfred Burchett traveled to Japan to cover the aftermath of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. The only problem was that General Douglas MacArthur had declared southern Japan off-limits, barring the press. Over 200,000 people died in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but no Western journalist witnessed the aftermath and told the story. The world’s media obediently crowded onto the USS Missouri off the coast of Japan to cover the surrender of the Japanese.

Wilfred Burchett decided to strike out on his own. He was determined to see

for himself what this nuclear bomb had done, to understand what this vaunted new weapon was all about. So he boarded a train and traveled for thirty hours to the city of Hiroshima in defiance of Gen. MacArthur’s orders.

Burchett emerged from the train into a nightmare world. The devastation that confronted him was unlike any he had ever seen during the war. The city of Hiroshima, with a population of 350,000, had been razed. Multistory buildings were reduced to charred posts. He saw people’s shadows seared into walls and sidewalks. He met people with their skin melting off. In the hospital, he saw patients with purple skin hemorrhages, gangrene, fever, and rapid hair loss. Burchett was among the first to witness and describe radiation sickness.

Burchett sat down on a chunk of rubble with his Baby Hermes typewriter. His dispatch began:

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The article „The Atomic Plague“ by Wilfred Burchett in Daily Express from 5.9.1945.
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“In Hiroshima, thirty days after the first atomic bomb destroyed the city and shook the world, people are still dying, mysteriously and horribly—people who were uninjured in the cataclysm from an unknown something which I can only describe as the atomic plague.”

He continued, tapping out the words that still haunt to this day:

“Hiroshima does not look like a bombed city. It looks as if a monster steamroller has passed over it and squashed it out of existence. I write these facts as dispassionately as I can in the hope that they will act as a warning to the world.”

Burchett’s article, headlined THE ATOMIC PLAGUE, was published on Sept. 5, 1945, in the London Daily Express. The story caused a worldwide sensation. Burchett’s candid reaction to the horror shocked readers.

“In this first testing ground of the atomic bomb I have seen the most terrible and frightening desolation in four years of war. It makes a blitzed Pacific island seem like an Eden. The damage is far greater than photographs can show.

When you arrive in Hiroshima you can look around for twenty-five and perhaps thirty square miles. You can see hardly a building. It gives you an empty feeling in the stomach to see such man-made destruction.”

Burchett’s searing independent reportage was a public relations fiasco for the U.S. military. General Douglas MacArthur had gone to pains to restrict journalists’ access to the bombed cities, and his military censors were sanitizing and even killing dispatches that described the horror. The official narrative of the atomic bombings downplayed civilian casualties and categorically dismissed reports of the deadly lingering effects of radiation.



Wilfred Burchett (YouTube). Source: consortiumnews.com, License: CC BY-SA 4.0

Reporters whose dispatches conflicted with this version of events found themselves silenced: George Weller of the Chicago Daily News slipped into Nagasaki and wrote a 25,000-word story on the nightmare that he found there. Then he made a crucial error: He submitted the

piece to military censors. His newspaper never even received his story. As Weller later summarized his experience with MacArthur’s censors, “They won.”

Kill the Messenger

U.S. authorities responded in time-honored fashion to Burchett’s revelations: They attacked the messenger. Gen. MacArthur ordered him expelled from Japan (the order was later rescinded), and his camera with photos of Hiroshima mysteriously vanished while he was in the hospital. U.S. officials accused Burchett of being influenced by Japanese propaganda. They scoffed at the notion of an atomic sickness. The U.S. military issued a press release right after the Hiroshima bombing that downplayed human casualties, instead emphasizing that the bombed area was the site of valuable industrial and military targets.

Four days after Burchett’s story splashed across front pages around the world, U.S. Major General Leslie R. Groves, director of the atomic bomb project, invited a select group of thirty reporters to New Mexico. Foremost among this group was William L. Laurence, the Pulitzer Prize-winning science reporter for The New York Times. Groves took the reporters to the site of the first atomic test. His intent was to demonstrate that no atomic radiation lingered at the site. Groves trusted Laurence to convey the military’s line; the general was not disappointed.

Laurence’s front-page story, “U.S. ATOM BOMB SITE BELIES TOKYO TALES: TESTS ON NEW MEXICO RANGE CONFIRM THAT BLAST, AND NOT RADIATION, TOOK TOLL,” ran on Sept. 12, 1945, following a three-day delay to clear military censors.

“This historic ground in New Mexico, scene of the first atomic explosion on earth and cradle of a new era in civilization, gave the most effective answer today to Japanese propaganda that radiations [sic] were responsible for deaths even after the day of the explosion, Aug. 6, and that persons entering Hiroshima

U. S. ATOM BOMB SITE BELIES TOKYO TALES

Tests on New Mexico Range
Confirm That Blast, and
Not Radiation, Took Toll

By WILLIAM L. LAURENCE

Special to THE NEW YORK TIMES.

ATOMIC BOMB RANGE, New Mexico, Sept. 9 (Delayed)—This historic ground in New Mexico, scene of the first atomic explosion on earth and cradle of a new era in civilization, gave the most effective answer today to Japanese propaganda that radiations were responsible for deaths even after the day of the explosion, Aug. 6, and that persons entering Hiroshima had contracted mysterious maladies due to persistent radioactivity.

To give the lie to these claims, the Army opened the closely guarded gates of this area for the first time to a group of newspaper men and photographers to witness for themselves the readings on radiation meters carried by a group of radiologists, and to listen to the expert testimony of several of the leading scientists who had been intimately connected with the atomic bomb project.

The ground, visited for the first time even by Maj. Gen. Leslie R. Groves, over-all director of the atomic project, since that historic morning of Monday, July 16, gave awesome testimony on a number of subjects.

It revealed, even at a glance, the tremendous power of the atomic explosion that had blasted the

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The New York Times

Published: September 12, 1945
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U. S. ATOM BOMB SITE BELIES TOKYO TALES

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earth over a radius of 800 yards from the center.

It gave mute testimony of the enormous temperatures developed at the split instant of the explosion, fusing the earth for a radius of 1,200 feet into a green, glass-like coating resembling fine jade. It told of the enormous pressure that had compressed the earth below it over an area of 400 yards into a giant bowl that reached a depth of twenty-five feet.

It showed that by far the majority of deaths within the radius of the explosion's effectiveness had been caused by the tremendous power of the blast and by the heat and fires resulting from the temperatures, estimated at millions of degrees.

The visitors saw a scene of desolation and devastation that made the surrounding semi-desert appear as a fertile oasis. Both from the ground and from the air, the sight is an unforgettable one.

Before entering the area white canvas sandals to pull over our shoes were furnished to us. This, General Groves explained, was to make certain that some of the radioactive material still present in the ground might not stick to our soles.

As we walked over the ground we were preceded by radiologists carrying Geiger counters, sensitive instruments that respond instantly to any radiation in their vicinity, revealing on a graduated dial the exact quantity present.

Instruments Belle Japanese

The Geiger counters supplemented the testimony given by the ground's appearance. They showed that less than two months after the explosion the radiations on the surface had dwindled to a minute quantity, safe for continuous human habitation.

Only in the center of the saucer, over a radius of about fifty yards, were the radiations higher than the standard tolerance dose for continuous exposure. In this area it would take 600 hours of continuous habitation to produce fatal results, according to the scientists present.

Furthermore, it was pointed out that the radioactive material on the fused surface constituted only about one-eighth of an inch. It would therefore be relatively easy to remove this surface material and make the ground safe for immediate habitation.

At the rate the radiations have diminished during the past two months, it was pointed out, the entire area will be free of them within a relatively short time.

The atomic explosion in New Mexico was from a steel tower only 100 feet from the ground, whereas the bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki were dropped from a bomber and exploded in the air from a much greater height, a scientist pointed out. Detonation at that height over the Japanese cities, he said, greatly reduced the absorption of the gamma rays in the ground, so that there were fewer of these radiations in Japan than in New Mexico.

This finding is borne out by a

report just received by General Groves from Brig. Gen. Thomas F. Farrell, his next in command, who is now in Japan with a group of American scientists to study the effects of the bombs on the scene.

The studies of the American scientists are still in the preliminary stage, General Groves stated. But he added that, according to General Farrell, Japanese sources now admitted that eleven days after the bomb had pulverized Hiroshima the radiation there was much less than the tolerance dose, which means, he added, that "you could live there forever."

Most of the casualties in Hiroshima, these Japanese sources now admit, according to General Farrell, were owing to the blast and its consequent collapse of buildings and flying debris and to burns from radiant heat and subsequent fires. By far the majority of the deaths came from the blast, they believe.

Persons in the center of the explosion, General Groves stated, "could be killed by fifteen different ways," but all the evidence indicates that it was the blast. The same Japanese sources now believe that there is no present danger in Hiroshima from surface radiations. Vegetation growing on the Hiroshima parade grounds supports this belief.

Foe's Propaganda at Work

"The Japanese claim," General Groves added, "that people died from radiations. If this is true, the number was very small.

"However, any deaths from gamma rays were due to those emitted during the explosion, not to the radiations present afterward. In the area where people could be killed by radiation they were killed by other causes, particularly blast.

"While many people were killed, many lives were saved, particularly American lives. It ended the war sooner. It was the final punch that knocked them out. Otherwise they might have kept on fighting for a longer period."

The Japanese are still continuing their propaganda aimed at creating the impression that we won the war unfairly, and thus attempting to create sympathy for themselves and milder terms, an examination of their present statements reveals.

Thus, at the beginning, the Japanese described "symptoms" that did not ring true. More recently they have sent in a radiologist, and since then the symptoms they describe appear to be more authentic on the surface, according to the radiologists present here today.

"Relief" Workers Misnamed

The Japanese, for example, had sent out a report that relief workers sent into Hiroshima after the blast had received radiation burns.

"We now know from Japanese sources," General Groves went on, "that these were actually workers who were sent into Hiroshima before the bombing to evacuate the city on prior order. They simply were hurt in the original blast and were not examined and treated as they should have been."

In addition to General Groves who represented the United States Army, the group of experts conducting the tour included Prof. J. R. Oppenheimer, who directed the scientific research and develop-

Laurence's Sept. 12, 1945 front page article (Source: consortiumnews.com, License: CC BY-SA 4.0)

The New York Times

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had contracted mysterious maladies due to persistent radioactivity,” the article began. Laurence said unapologetically that the Army tour was intended “to give the lie to these claims.”

Laurence quoted Gen. Groves: “The Japanese claim that people died from radiation. If this is true, the number was very small.”

Laurence then went on to offer his own remarkable editorial on what happened:

“The Japanese are still continuing their propaganda aimed at creating the impression that we won the war unfairly, and thus attempting to create sympathy for themselves and milder terms . . . Thus, at the beginning, the Japanese described ‘symptoms’ that did not ring true.”

But Laurence knew better. He had observed the first atomic bomb test on July 16, 1945, and he withheld what he knew about radioactive fallout across the southwestern desert that poisoned local residents and livestock. He kept mum about the spiking Geiger counters all around the test site.

William L. Laurence went on to write a series of ten articles for the Times that served as a glowing tribute to the ingenuity and technical achievements of the nuclear program. Throughout these and other reports, he downplayed and denied the human impact of the bombing. Laurence won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting.

On Government Payroll

It turns out that William L. Laurence was not only receiving a salary from The New York Times. He was also on the payroll of the War Department. In March 1945, Gen. Leslie Groves had held a secret meeting at The New York Times with Laurence to offer him a job writing press releases for the Manhattan Project, the U.S. program to develop atomic weapons. The intent, according to the Times, was “to explain the intricacies of the atomic bomb’s operating principles in laymen’s language.” Lau-



General Leslie Groves (left), military head of the Manhattan Project, with Professor Robert Oppenheimer (right). (U.S. Army). Source: consortiumnews.com, License: CC BY-SA 4.0

rence also helped write statements on the bomb for President Truman and Secretary of War Henry Stimson.

Laurence eagerly accepted the offer, “his scientific curiosity and patriotic zeal perhaps blinding him to the notion that he was at the same time compromising his journalistic independence,” as essayist Harold Evans wrote in a history of war reporting. Evans recounted:

“After the bombing, the brilliant but bullying Groves continually suppressed or distorted the effects of radiation. He dismissed reports of Japanese deaths as ‘hoax or propaganda.’ The Times’ Laurence weighed in, too, after Burchett’s reports, and parroted the government line.”

Indeed, numerous press releases issued by the military after the Hiroshima bombing—which in the absence of eyewitness accounts were often reproduced verbatim by U.S. newspapers—were written by none other than Laurence.

“Mine has been the honor, unique in the history of journalism, of preparing the War Department’s official press release for worldwide distribution,” boasted Laurence in his memoirs, *Dawn Over Zero*. “No greater honor could have

come to any newspaperman, or anyone else for that matter.”

“Atomic Bill” Laurence revered atomic weapons. He had been crusading for an American nuclear program in articles as far back as 1929. His dual status as government agent and reporter earned him an unprecedented level of access to American military officials—he even flew in the squadron of planes that dropped the atomic bomb on Nagasaki. His reports on the atomic bomb and its use had a hagiographic tone, laced with descriptions that conveyed almost religious awe.

In Laurence’s article about the bombing of Nagasaki (it was withheld by military censors until a month after the bombing), he described the detonation over Nagasaki that incinerated 100,000 people. Laurence waxed:

“Awe-struck, we watched it shoot upward like a meteor coming from the earth instead of from outer space, becoming ever more alive as it climbed skyward through the white clouds. . . . It was a living thing, a new species of being, born right before our incredulous eyes.”

Laurence later recounted his impressions of the atomic bomb:

“Being close to it and watching it as it was being fashioned into a living thing,

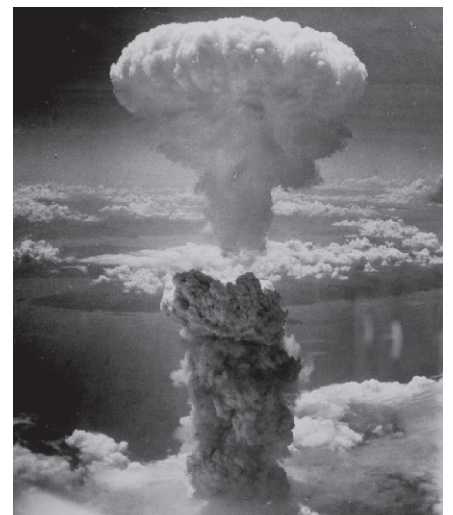
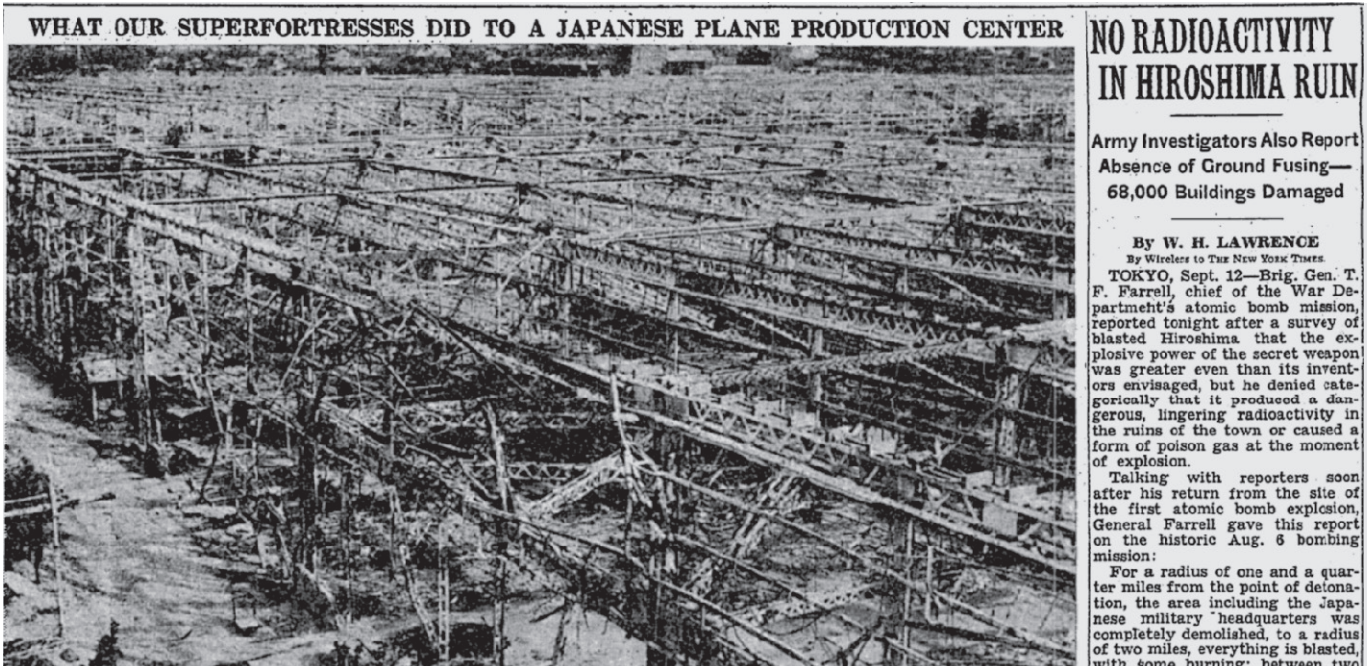


Photo of Nagasaki bombing taken by Charles Levy from one of the B-29 Superfortresses used in the attack. (Office of War Information.). Source: consortiumnews.com, License: CC BY-SA 4.0



Lawrence' second piece, contradicting his first on radiation. Source: consortiumnews.com, License: CC BY-SA 4.0

gering radioactivity." Lawrence's dispatch quotes only Farrell; the reporter never mentions his eyewitness account of people dying from radiation sickness that he wrote the previous week.

The conflicting accounts of Wilfred Burchett and William L. Laurence might be ancient history were it not for a modern twist. On Oct. 23, 2003, The New York Times published an article about a controversy over a Pulitzer Prize awarded in 1932 to Times reporter Walter Duranty. A former correspondent in the Soviet Union, Duranty had denied the existence of a famine that had killed millions of Ukrainians in 1932 and 1933.

The Pulitzer Board had launched two inquiries to consider stripping Duranty of his prize. The Times "regretted the lapses" of its reporter and had published a signed editorial saying that Duranty's work was "some of the worst reporting to appear in this newspaper." Current Times executive editor Bill Keller decried Duranty's "credulous, uncritical parroting of propaganda."

On Nov. 21, 2003, the Pulitzer Board decided against rescinding Duranty's award, concluding that there was "no clear and convincing evidence of deliberate deception" in the articles that won the prize.

As an apologist for Joseph Stalin, Duranty is easy pickings. What about the "deliberate deception" of William L. Laurence in denying the lethal effects of radioactivity? And what of the fact that the Pulitzer Board knowingly awarded the top journalism prize to the Pentagon's paid publicist, who denied the suffering of millions of Japanese? Do the Pulitzer Board and the Times approve of "uncritical parroting of propaganda"—as long as it is from the United States?

It is long overdue that the prize for Hiroshima's apologist be stripped.