

SCIENTISTS, SOLDIERS AND STATESMEN: THE STRUGGLE TO CONTROL THE ATOMIC BOMB FROM 1939-1962.

This past fall marked the 60th Anniversary of the Cuban Missile Crisis and today we are again confronted with the dark shadow of a nuclear exchange -- one of several euphemisms that characterized the early atomic age from the August 1945 bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the build-up of atomic and hydrogen bombs, the Berlin Crisis, the Korean War, the birth of MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction), and the missile crisis aptly described by one historian as gambling with history.

President Harry S. Truman publicly described the bomb after Hiroshima as the greatest thing in history. He believed that it would make all the old notions about the importance of allies and security treaties obsolete. He believed these things in part because several advisers, chief among them General Leslie R. Groves, the military head of the Manhattan Project that built the first bombs, assured him the Russians could not achieve such a weapon for a decade -- if ever. But many of the scientists who worked on the bomb never believed the American monopoly would last. It lasted for only four years, ending in the deep irony that all the claims for the bomb as the ultimate weapon now became an overriding sense of fear. Truman asserted it could only have been accomplished so soon because American secrets were given to the Soviet Union by spies and treasonous American Communists, who betrayed their country.

The immediate answer was to build a still more destructive weapon, the hydrogen bomb, and to launch a campaign against those who had aided and abetted the Soviet Union's quest to build a weapon to match and surpass the American achievement.

This course will cover the origins of the American nuclear program from the 1939 letter Albert Einstein sent President Franklin D. Roosevelt warning him about the possible threat that Nazi Germany was engaged in an effort to build such a weapon, and the Manhattan Project was initiated to insure the United States was the first to develop a usable bomb, and the inevitable origins of atomic diplomacy as the war neared an end and statesmen began to think about postwar issues.

From that point we will discuss the nuclear build up, especially the numerous tests of atomic weapons that also launched the grotesque Freudian-like "Bikini" swimsuit. Then the 1948 Berlin Crisis and the Korean War, both of which seemed to demonstrate the uselessness of the bomb in warfare. But the bomb had influenced every aspect of American culture, both its fears and desires. The 1953 Rosenberg spy trial brought together all these threads in a searing national and international event: the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. Eisenhower's "Massive Retaliation" threats may have played a role in the end of the Korean War but did not change the outcome in other Cold War contests. The Kennedy campaign asserted that the "Missile Gap," which did not exist, was the cause of failure and the portent of danger for the nation. And so the United States set out on another quest to make sure that MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction) would provide security. The Cuban Missile Crisis ended the immediate threat of nuclear holocaust and led to the first treaties to limit provocative testing of nuclear weapons. The rest is for another course.

Thursdays from 10:00 a.m.–noon starting March 2 through April 20 for 8 sessions

Hybrid — Lecture/Discussion — Unlimited