On Display: the Unthinkable

A museum tries to make sense of the bomb.

By Mark Williams Pontin

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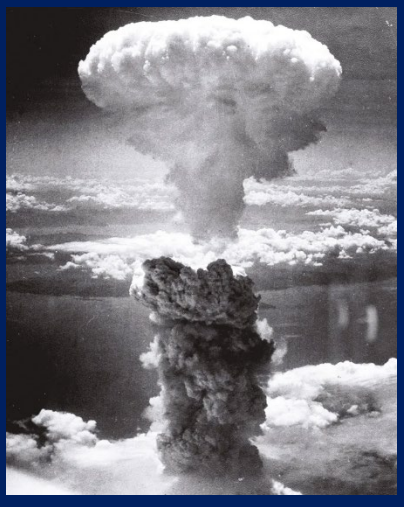
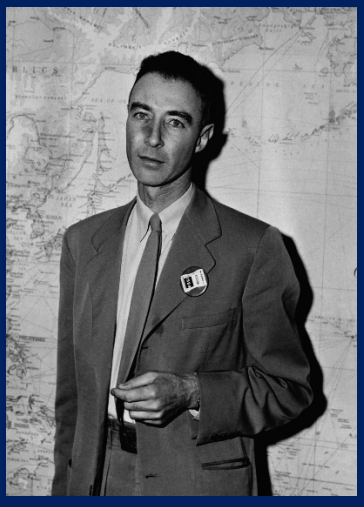
Grave Site

The National Atomic Museum
1905 Mountain Road NW
Albuquerque, NM
www.nuclearmuseum.org

How is a nuclear bomb like an ancient African battle elephant? On a recent visit to the National Atomic Museum in Albuquerque, NM, I found hidden among the predictable exhibits – metal casings identical to those used in the Little Boy and Fat Man devices dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, films of mushroom clouds expanding over atomic- and hydrogen-bomb test sites, photos of Robert Oppenheimer and the gang at Los Alamos, CA – a reproduction of a 16th-century Flemish tapestry with a placard beside it that tried to answer this riddle.





The tapestry depicts elephants striding among Roman legionnaires and their foes. The placard explains, “One of the best-known ancient arms control agreements was negotiated between Rome and Carthage following Scipio Africanus’s victory over Hannibal in the Battle of Zama in 202 B.C. This treaty required the Carthaginians to surrender all their war elephants.”

Museum visitors, then, are told that thermonuclear bombs and the battle elephants from the classical world are analogous examples of weapons systems regulated by the mutual agreement of warring groups. “Society has always placed limits on the ability of one side to wage war on another,” the sign claims.

This is a dubious reading of history: war was almost always waged without constraint. Elephants saw centuries of use in warfare before and after the battle of Zama. But the Atomic Museum’s comparison of pachyderms and nuclear bombs is less risible than what I found when I first visited the museum in 2001.

Back then, the museum resided on the dry New Mexico plain outside Albuquerque, across the road from Sandia National Laboratories. (The museum’s current location is temporary; a move is planned for 2006.) Sandia is responsible for providing a measure of the country’s surety; it started in 1945 as the Manhattan Project’s “Z Division,” charged with engineering the U.S. nuclear arsenal to be fail-safe. When I entered the museum, one of the first things I saw was pictures of battle elephants. Straight-faced, the director of the museum explained that, in their time, these creatures had been considered absolute weapons, too dreadful to be used. Ever since that visit, I’ve wondered: were the people responsible for this display *serious*?

Of course, *no one* has found it easy to think about the bomb. In 1946, in the first book published on nuclear strategy, *The Absolute Weapon*, Yale University’s Bernard Brodie wrote, “Everything about the atomic bomb is overshadowed by the twin facts that it exists and that its destructive power is fantastically great.” Deterrence, Brodie argued, was the only rational military policy; yet that required a plausible nuclear war&ndashfighting capability.

Brodie moved to the Santa Monica, CA, nonprofit think tank Rand in the early 1950s. Over the next decades, Rand’s defense avant-garde constructed doctrines of nuclear deterrence. As in any avant-garde, stars emerged who espoused novel variations of doctrine. Arnold Wohlstetter, for instance, elaborated on U.S. vulnerability to a Soviet first strike and the concept of escalation. Herman Kahn stressed civil defense, underground shelters, and thought experiments like the Doomsday Machine, parodied in the film *Dr. Stangelove*. Brodie himself took varying positions, but before his death in 1978, he returned to where he began: the bomb was so dreadful that it could not be subjected to intellectual manipulation. (In “Nuclear Accountability,” a current nuclear professional struggles to think about the unthinkable.)

And yet, as things turned out, the strategic nuclear elite carried through the most brilliant and sustained – though also the most perilous – gamble in human history. After winning a Cold War that never came to direct military conflict, the United States became the only superpower, in 1991. Indeed, comparisons can be made with Rome’s situation in 202 B.C.E., after the battle of Zama gave it supremacy in the classical world.

Such a comparison would have seemed obvious to those who shaped U.S. nuclear strategy in the Cold War. Over the past 35 years, they and their proteges have shaped *all* aspects of U.S. policy. Some of them – like Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, and Paul Wolfowitz – the world knows only too well. Others are known only by Washington insiders. Having played successfully for high stakes during the Cold War, none in this elite will be timid about formulating America’s strategic aims during the 21st century.

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