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# Hiroshima Cover-up: How the War Department's *Timesman* Won a Pulitzer

*Governments lie.*

—I. F. STONE, JOURNALIST

**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

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boarded a train and traveled for thirty hours to the city of Hiroshima in defiance of General 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: "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."<sup>1</sup>

Burchett's article, headlined *THE ATOMIC PLAGUE*, was published on September 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 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. 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.”<sup>2</sup>

U.S. authorities responded in time-honored fashion to Burchett’s revelations: They attacked the messenger. General 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, 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. Lawrence, the Pulitzer Prize-winning science reporter for *The New*

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*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 September 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 had contracted mysterious maladies due to persistent radioactivity," the article began.<sup>3</sup> Laurence said unapologetically that the Army tour was intended "to give the lie to these claims."<sup>\*</sup>

Laurence quoted General 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."<sup>4</sup>

But Laurence knew better. He had observed the first atomic

<sup>\*</sup>In the course of the press tour, General Groves' driver, a 29-year-old soldier named Patrick Stout, posed in the center of the bomb crater for photographs. A scientist later informed Stout that he had been exposed to high levels of radiation. He died of leukemia in 1969, and was given service-connected disability payments by the Army in apparent recognition that radiation was the cause. [Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York: Putnam, 1995), pp. 51–52.]

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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.

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, General 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.<sup>5</sup> The intent, according to the *Times*, was “to explain the intricacies of the atomic bomb’s operating principles in laymen’s language.”<sup>6</sup> Laurence 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.

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“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.”<sup>8</sup>

“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, so exquisitely shaped that any sculptor would be proud to have created it, one . . . felt oneself in the presence of the supranatural.”<sup>9</sup>

Laurence was good at keeping his master’s secrets—from suppressing the reports of deadly radioactivity in New Mexico to denying them in Japan. The *Times* was also good at keeping secrets, only revealing Laurence’s dual status as government spokesman and reporter on August 7, the day after the Hiroshima

bombing—and four months after Laurence began working for the Pentagon.\* As Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell wrote in their excellent book *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial*, “Here was the nation’s leading science reporter, severely compromised, not only unable but disinclined to reveal all he knew about the potential hazards of the most important scientific discovery of his time.”<sup>10</sup>

### Radiation: Now You See It, Now You Don’t

**A CURIOUS TWIST** to this story concerns another *New York Times* journalist who reported on Hiroshima; his name, believe it or not, was William Lawrence (his byline was W. H. Lawrence). He has long been confused with William L. Laurence. (Even Wilfred Burchett confuses the two men in his memoirs and his 1983 book, *Shadows of Hiroshima*.) Unlike the War Department’s Pulitzer Prize winner, W. H. Lawrence visited and reported on Hiroshima on the same day as Burchett. (William L. Laurence, after flying in the squadron of planes that bombed Nagasaki, was subsequently called back to the United States by the *Times* and did not visit the bombed cities.)

W. H. Lawrence’s original dispatch from Hiroshima was published on September 5, 1945. He reported matter-of-factly about the deadly effects of radiation, and wrote that Japanese doctors worried that “all who had been in Hiroshima that day would die as a result of the bomb’s lingering effects.” He described how “persons who had been only slightly injured on the day of the blast lost

\*The *Times* sometimes identified William L. Laurence as a special consultant to the War Department, beginning with his article about the bombing of Nagasaki on September 9, 1945.

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86 percent of their white blood corpuscles, developed temperatures of 104 degrees Fahrenheit, their hair began to drop out, they lost their appetites, vomited blood and finally died.”<sup>11</sup>

Oddly enough, W.H. Lawrence contradicted himself one week later in an article headlined NO RADIOACTIVITY IN HIROSHIMA RUIN. For this article, the Pentagon’s spin machine had swung into high gear in response to Burchett’s horrifying account of “atomic plague.” W.H. Lawrence reported that Brigadier General T.F. Farrell, chief of the War Department’s atomic bomb mission to Hiroshima, “denied categorically that [the bomb] produced a dangerous, lingering radioactivity.”<sup>12</sup> 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 October 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.”<sup>13</sup>

On November 21, 2003, the Pulitzer Board decided against rescinding Duranty’s award, concluding that there was “no clear

\*Wilfred Burchett died in 1983. William L. Laurence died in 1997.



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and convincing evidence of deliberate deception” in the articles that won the prize.<sup>14</sup>

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.