

ROLE PLAYING
THE ATOMIC BOMB AND THE END OF WORLD WAR II

Noel C. Eggleston
Radford College

While educators have been employing the teaching technique of role playing for many years, historians have generally been reluctant to adopt this methodology. Wedded to traditional methods, many historians apparently find the technique of re-enacting or simulating past historical events or incidents too novel and smacking of "gimmickery." The situation may well be significantly changing. Perhaps in a time of troublesome enrollment the profession has expanded its commitment to experimentation in classroom strategy; in any case, based on the number of recent publications on this topic, an increasing interest in role playing exercises seems evident.¹

Role playing is not a fad. Nor is it a substitute for the traditional lecture as a means of classroom communication. Role playing can, however, serve as a useful supplementary approach for many history courses. Few in the profession have the ability to enthrall a class over a quarter or semester by use of the lecture method alone. Moreover, with economic pressures surrounding the historical profession, it has become increasingly difficult to justify the retention of small classes when they are not used advantageously. If the instructor plans simply to talk at the audience, there may as well be two hundred or four hundred students seated in a room as thirty.

Numerous prepared role playing and simulation games are available on the market today.² But one equally viable alternative is for a history professor personally to construct a role playing exercise to fit the individual needs of a class. This article examines the development and use of such an exercise for an American history survey class.

The story of America's role in developing and employing the first atomic bomb remains an intriguing subject for discussion. Thirty years after the atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, historians continue to publish many articles and books on this provocative topic.³ And the subject is one which an instructor of an American history survey class cannot afford to omit. For the whole question of this momentous decision is not only historically interesting but also crucially significant for an understanding of the events surrounding the abrupt ending of World War II and the developing post-war confrontation with the Soviet Union.

There are numerous ways to present this episode of United States history to a freshman college survey class, but the use of the role playing method has proven particularly stimulating and satisfying. Two major factors led me to search for an alternative means of covering this material. First, I found it disturbing that students considered the individuals associated with recent American history, men like Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry S. Truman, and Henry L. Stimson, as foreign as such figures as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Perhaps this should have come as no surprise. Students generally seem to have only a vague awareness concerning events of the early 1960s. Role playing appeared to offer a solution to this problem by giving a class the opportunity to examine a selected period of recent history in depth. Textbook names could perhaps become real people with varying responsibilities, feelings, and motivations. Students could gain a greater understanding of the problems and complexities of this crucial period by assuming the positions of the characters involved in the terminating phase of the war.

A second major goal was to inject some excitement and discussion into the class. The development of class interaction and debate is a constant problem for most instructors, especially for those who teach introductory freshman survey courses. Role playing can serve as a vehicle to alleviate this problem by overcoming three obstacles which can significantly inhibit the amount of

discussion and debate. Students often feel unprepared, lack confidence in what they are saying, and find themselves in an atmosphere un conducive to a free exchange of ideas. Role playing can and should fit the needs of students in each of these three categories. Thorough preparation for a character role is vital for any role playing exercise. Confidence almost automatically follows in the wake of thorough preparation. A conducive atmosphere is up to the instructor. I have found that a controlled, well-organized but informal exchange of views by students sitting in a circle is easy to achieve if preparation and desire are present.

Role playing can, I believe, result in the maximum amount of discussion possible from an individual class. Students who would normally remain silent in a different setting will quite often speak out frequently and forcefully when role playing. This discussion can become habit forming, and it may even bring individuals out of their self-imposed shells. Many students will not have previously encountered this type of exchange with their peers; thus a certain hesitancy may be expected. But the prospect of watching a passive class become intellectually active is certainly worth the efforts involved in this experiment.

The basic format for this particular exercise revolves around a one or two-day role playing discussion of the critical question, "Should the United States drop an atomic bomb on Japan?" While an instructor could be historically accurate and limit the discussion participants for this meeting to those officials actually involved in the final decision-making process itself, I have chosen to broaden the list of people included in the debate in order to encompass a wider range of issues. Thus, the students represent not only the men who were directly active in atomic policy-making, such as President Harry S. Truman, Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, and General Leslie R. Groves, but also figures who stood on the periphery of the question, such as scientists Leo Szilard and Niels Bohr, Admiral Ernest J. King, and General Henry H. Arnold. A professor could modify the exercise to include as few as ten participants or as many as thirty-five. In my larger survey sections, I have students serve as aides, advisors, or assistants to the major characters; in essence, both students play the same role.

I often add as participants people who played no decision-making role at all at the time, but whom I nevertheless include in order to raise specific points for discussion and comment, points often neglected or given only cursory treatment in 1945. Examples of this type of participant include Hanson Baldwin of the New York Times, who came to regard the use of the bomb as one of the "Great Mistakes" of the war; a medical doctor who can offer estimates of the physical damage which will result from the employment of the bomb; and a religious leader who can raise moral questions concerning the vast destruction of human life.⁴ My overall goal, as can be deduced from the above, is not to reflect precisely what did occur, but rather to examine the issues which government officials faced in 1945 and, indeed, some which they did not. Given the nature of this secret wartime project, there never was such an all-encompassing meeting as the one staged in this class. That fact, however, does not reduce the usefulness of this broader approach to the ideas of the period.

The meeting requires, as do all role playing exercises, a high degree of organization and preparation. Two to three weeks before the scheduled debate, I begin the project by outlining for the class the general views of the various participants and by having the students choose the personalities whom they wish to represent. My current list includes over twenty participants--the President, State Department representatives, military officers, scientists, and the additional people mentioned above. While supporters of the atomic bomb's use outnumber opponents, both sides are fairly represented in each of

and frequently exuberant, concerning this technique. This is, I believe, particularly noteworthy since history has a definite image problem. Students often enter a history survey class expecting to dislike it; the number of actual history majors in the class is likely to be quite small (out of 140 students this past quarter I had one history major). Yet on formal student evaluations and in informal meetings after the quarter was over, I have had many students mention that the role playing exercises in particular had made the class enjoyable and stimulating. They had discovered a fact that most of the rest of us already knew--history can be interesting. Success can also breed success. New students, based on positive comments which they had heard from their peers regarding the role playing technique, have on a number of occasions asked for class sections where role playing would be conducted.

The drawbacks of this project have been very limited. A lack of familiarity with the period and simplicity in argumentation have proven to be perhaps the most significant problems. One expected problem has never really materialized--discussion dominance by a few individuals. The varying stress of the questions asked--military, political, and scientific in nature--may account for this occurrence. Each group has an especially appropriate moment to join the discussion, although any student is free to comment on issues at any time. Having attempted the use of role playing with a number of other topics in my survey classes, I have found the issue of the atomic bomb one of the easiest to adapt to the role playing technique.⁸ And if it works, why not use it? At a time when the profession is seeking to draw students into the discipline, innovative teaching methods can provide one means of achieving this goal.

APPENDIX

A basic list of participants;

Harry S. Truman	President
James F. Byrnes	Secretary of State
Henry L. Stimson	Secretary of War
Joseph Grew	Undersecretary of State
General Henry H. Arnold	Army Air Force
General Leslie R. Groves	Director, Manhattan Project
Admiral Ernest J. King	Joint Chiefs of Staff (Navy)
Admiral William D. Leahy	Chief of Staff
General George R. Marshall	Chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff (Army)
Scientists	Evenly divided for and against use of the bomb; fictional or real names can be used
Religious leader(s)	
Doctor(s)	
Academic Consultant(s)	Evenly divided; professionals invited to offer general advice on the issue
Hanson Baldwin	<u>New York Times</u>

An instructor can vary the number of participants by employing multiple positions for scientists, doctors, religious leaders, and academic consultants or through the use of aides and assistants for the major characters. Other possible participants include Winston Churchill and General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

NOTES

¹Numerous articles on role playing and simulation have appeared in the past few years. See, for example, Walter M. Bacon, Jr., and M. Glenn Newkirk, "Uses of Simulation in Teaching History," Contemporary Education, XLVI (Fall, 1974), 38-41; Lawrence R. Cole, "'Role Playing'--A Simulation of Living History," Social Science Record, X (Winter, 1973), 13; Wayne Dumas, "Role Playing: Effective Technique in the Teaching of History," Clearing House, XLIV (April, 1970), 468-470; Robert S. Feldman, "Historical Role Playing: An Alternative Teaching Strategy," American Historical Association Newsletter, XV (November, 1977), 4-6; Harold Gorvine, "Teaching History through Role Playing," History Teacher, III (May, 1970), 7-20; Cathy S. Greenblat, "Gaming and Simulation in the Social Sciences: A Guide to the Literature," Simulation and Games, III (December, 1972), 477-491; R.W. Hostrop, "Simulation as Stimulus to Learning and Retention," Improving College and University Teaching, XX (Autumn, 1972), 283-284; Clair W. Keller, "Role Playing and Simulation in History Classes," History Teacher, VIII (August, 1975), 573-581; Eugene S. Lubot, "A Simulation of the Opium War Negotiations," History Teacher, IX (February, 1976), 210-216; Lubot, "Self-Designed Simulations in the Teaching of Asian History," Teaching History, III (Spring, 1978), 27-31; Noel R. Miner, "Simulation and Role-Playing in the Teaching of East Asian History," History Teacher, X (February, 1977), 221-228; and Stephen M. Sachs, "The Uses and Limits of Simulation Models in Teaching Social Science and History," Social Studies, LXI (April, 1970), 163-167. Examples of role playing techniques are also included in a publication by Harvard University, Experiments in History Teaching. This 120-page book contains descriptions of approximately 75 various class projects. Douglas Alder's "List of Innovative Practices in the Teaching of History," available from the American Historical Association, includes a section on simulation. At its most recent annual meeting, the American Historical Association also held a workshop on historical role playing.

²While experimenting with role playing on a variety of topics, I have found two prepared exercises particularly satisfying: "1787: A Simulation Game," by Eric Rothschild and Werner Feig; and "The Union Divided: A Simulation Game," by Eric Rothschild, Joan Platt, and Daniel C. Smith. Both of these exercises are produced by Olcott Forward Publishers of Hartsdale, New York.

³See, for example, these works published within the last few years: Barton J. Bernstein, "The Alliance: Roosevelt, Churchill, and the Atomic Bomb, 1940-1945," Western Political Quarterly, XXIX (June, 1976), 202-230; Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy, 1941-1945: An Historiographical Controversy," Peace and Change, II (Spring, 1974), 1-16; Bernstein, ed., The Atomic Bomb: The Critical Issues (Boston, 1976); Bernstein, "The Quest for Security: American Foreign Policy and International Control of Atomic Energy, 1942-1946," Journal of American History, LX (March, 1974), 1003-1044; Thomas T. Hammond, "Atomic Diplomacy: Revisited," Orbis, XIX (Winter, 1976), 1403-1428; Robert J. Maddox, "Atomic Diplomacy: A Study in Creative Writing," Journal of American History, LIX (December, 1973), 925-934; Thomas G. Paterson, "Potsdam, the Atomic Bomb, and the Cold War: A Discussion with James F. Byrnes," Pacific Historical Review, XLI (May, 1972), 225-230; Martin J. Sherwin, "The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War: U.S. Atomic Energy Policy and Diplomacy, 1941-45," American Historical Review,

LXXVIII (October, 1973), 945-968; and Sherwin, A World Destroyed (New York, 1975).

⁴For these participants, see Hanson Baldwin, Great Mistakes of the War (New York, 1950); Averill A. Liebow, Encounter with Disaster: A Medical Diary of Hiroshima, 1945 (New York, 1970); and Robert C. Batchelder, The Irreversible Decision, 1939-1950 (Boston, 1962).

⁵The following works, for example, contain extensive references to the participant's views concerning the question of the atomic bomb: James F. Byrnes, Speaking Frankly (New York, 1947); Karl T. Compton, "If the Atomic Bomb Had Not Been Used," Atlantic Monthly, CLXXVIII (December, 1946), 54-56; Joseph Grew, The Turbulent Era, Vol. II (Boston, 1952); Leslie R. Groves, Now It Can Be Told (New York, 1962); Ernest J. King and Walter M. Whitehill, Fleet Admiral King (New York, 1952); Alice K. Smith, A Peril and a Hope, The Scientists Movement in America, 1945-1947 (Chicago, 1965); John P. Sutherland, "The Story General Marshall Told Me," U.S. News & World Report, XLVII (November 2, 1959), 50-56; and Harry S. Truman, Memoirs, Vol. I (New York, 1955).

⁶Henry L. Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," Harper's, CXCIV (February, 1947), 97-107.

⁷The debate over the dropping of the atomic bomb was renewed in 1965 with the publication of Gar Alperovitz's Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam (New York, 1965), a highly critical look at the motivations behind the final decision to use the weapon. Herbert Feis in The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II (Princeton, 1966) offered a more balanced view of the question, although his conclusions ultimately supported the Truman Administration's decision. Excellent articles on the subject include: Samuel E. Morison, "Why Japan Surrendered," Atlantic Monthly, CCVI (October, 1960), 41-47; Louis J. Morton, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," Foreign Affairs, XXXV (January, 1957), 334-353; and the aforementioned works of Barton J. Bernstein and Martin J. Sherwin.

⁸I have also developed a detailed role playing exercise on Reconstruction for use in my American survey classes. See Noel C. Eggleston, "Reconstructing Reconstruction," The Society for History Education Network News Exchange, I (Winter, 1976), 8-9.