

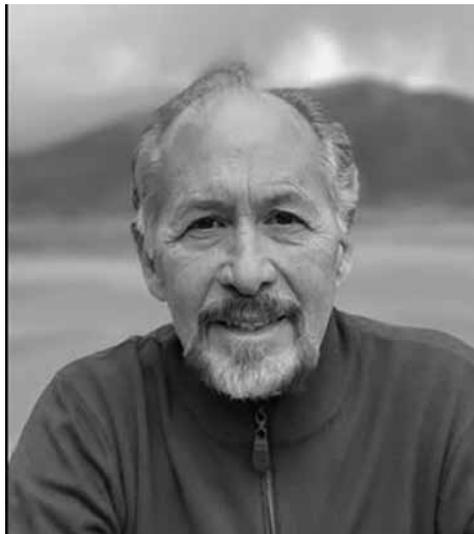
In Memoriam:

Martin Sherwin (1937-2021)

Nuclear history lost a giant—a founding pioneer, influential scholar, commentator, and activist, and warm and wry friend, colleague, teacher, and mentor—with the passing, on October 6, 2021, at age 84, of Martin J. Sherwin. An energetic, exuberant, painstaking researcher, Sherwin, whom we all knew as Marty, co-authored *American Prometheus*, the Pulitzer Prize-winning biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer, between two totemic books on the early nuclear age, and taught at universities including Princeton, Tufts, and, most recently, George Mason.

Born in New York City (to a Jewish family of modest means in Brooklyn), Sherwin attended James Madison High School and graduated in history from Dartmouth College in 1959. As he remembered in his last book, *Gambling With Armageddon: Nuclear Roulette from Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis*, three years later, in the Navy, he had an ominous brush with the apocalypse. Part of an antisubmarine warfare (ASW) unit based near San Diego, he was part of urgent preparations as the missile crisis peaked. At one point, he retrieved for his commander from an office safe top secret war plans to disperse planes to an airfield in Baja California, Mexico “beyond the reach of Soviet missiles” with nuclear warheads. Some sailors joked that the Baja beaches “would be a delightful place to die,” he recalled, but the situation was grim, even on the West Coast far from the Kennedy Administration’s blockade (“quarantine”) of Cuba.¹

Sherwin (and the world) survived, but the experience piqued his interest in the nuclear arms race and nuclear danger. Over the next decade, in addition to marrying Susan Smukler in 1963 (they had met in high school but only dated in college) and starting a family (Andrea was born in 1965, Alex four years later), he enrolled in a Ph.D. program in history at the University of California-Los Angeles to investigate why and how the weapons that could destroy civilization had originated. His UCLA doctoral dissertation evolved into his first book: *A World Destroyed: The Atomic Bomb and the Grand Alliance*, published in 1975 by Alfred A. Knopf. Sherwin’s playfulness was evident from the cover—hilariously, wickedly, it featured the *dramatis personae* drawn by *New York Review of Books* caricaturist David Levine, and the title was a backhanded allusion to Henry A. Kissinger’s *A World Restored*. Inside, the narrative was nuanced, serious, and eloquent. Exploring the intersection of scientific, military, political, and diplomatic realms that produced the atomic age, *A World Destroyed* carefully covered the story’s milestones—from the discovery of fission to the construction of the bomb in the Manhattan Project (and at Oppenheimer’s lab at Los Alamos); to the wartime Anglo-



American “interchange” dispute that signaled the future weapon’s capacity to stir tensions, even between allies; to Danish physicist Niels Bohr’s 1944 quest to alert Roosevelt and Churchill to the peril of a postwar nuclear arms race that could destroy civilization, and convince them to seek Stalin’s cooperation before using the bomb; to the thinking and decision-making at the top of the Truman Administration that, despite cautions from the atomic scientists, culminated in both the atomic attacks on Japan and the onset of a U.S.-Soviet nuclear arms race.

Prior books on the atomic age’s origins had suffered from a dearth of declassified documentation. The first volume of the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission’s official history, *A New World, 1939-1946*, published in 1962, was able to tap such records,

but mere uncleared scholars couldn’t. However, Marty was able to exploit the first tranche of “AEC historical documents” on the World War II period, as well as just-opened British records, to dig far more deeply than prior efforts. Memorably, he concluded by asserting that, “instead of promoting American postwar aims, wartime atomic energy policies had made them more difficult to achieve,” and, “As American-Soviet relations deteriorated, Hiroshima and Nagasaki rose as symbols of a new American barbarism, and as explanations for the origins of the cold war. A century before, Henry Adams had tersely phrased the truth that had now received a final, unequivocal confirmation: ‘Man has mounted science, and is now run away with.’”² The book won SHAFR’s Stuart L. Bernath Prize and was a finalist for a Pulitzer. (Nearly a half-century later, despite the proliferation of subsequent books and evidence, I still assign *A World Destroyed* in my classes as the best-written, most incisive introduction to the myriad questions, dilemmas, and controversies—and the fascinating personalities—involved in the advent of the atomic era.)

Together with journal articles by Stanford University historian Barton J. Bernstein, Sherwin’s *A World Destroyed* began the “post-revisionist” phase of a-bomb historiography, which to a considerable extent continues today. In contrast to the traditional/orthodox claims by officials such as Harry S. Truman, Henry L. Stimson, and Winston S. Churchill (echoed by historians like Herbert Feis) that the bomb was used solely for military reasons—to defeat Japan, save U.S. lives by avoiding a costly invasion, and end the war quickly—and, at the opposite extreme, Gar Alperovitz’s revisionist case in *Atomic Diplomacy* (1965), benefitting from Stimson’s just-opened diaries, that the postwar motive of intimidating Moscow drove the decision, Sherwin and Bernstein contended that a complex

mix of considerations, both wartime and postwar, evolving and differing for various figures, produced the decision. They also showed conclusively that, contrary to orthodox/traditional claims or insinuations, Truman's decision was not binary—use the atomic bomb *or else* invade Japan with massive U.S. casualties—but that Washington in fact had other alternatives available between the time the bomb was ready in early August and the start of the planned invasion nearly three months later (on November 1). These alternatives included modifying the demand for Japan's unconditional surrender by communicating that the emperor could stay in place (as in fact happened); awaiting the impact of the Soviet entry into the war against Japan (on August 8, between Hiroshima and Nagasaki); and continuing other effective, non-atomic, military actions that were ravaging Japan.

The “post-revisionist” arguments, and the evidence behind them, significantly influenced scholarly views of Truman's decision to use the bomb—though less so the general public, which largely stuck to the traditional/orthodox view, presuming that anyone who questioned or criticized the Hiroshima decision preferred a U.S. invasion that might have cost “over a million” American lives (as Stimson had suggested in a 1947 magazine article). That public, as opposed to many historians', perception of the decision became evident in the controversy over the National Air & Space Museum exhibition, planned to coincide with the event's 50th anniversary in 1995, of the Enola Gay B-29 airplane that was used to drop the uranium gun-type weapon (“Little Boy”) on Hiroshima. After it was leaked that the planned display included evidence suggesting that postwar Soviet-related motives, rather than purely wartime military goals, influenced the decision-making, public outrage forced it to be sharply curtailed (limited to the Enola Gay by itself). Sherwin and Bernstein, along with Kai Bird (his co-author on the Oppenheimer biography, then in progress), were among the many historians who sharply protested the prevailing view that questioning the atomic bombing, or its motives, constituted an unpatriotic attack on the military, and the smothering of what had become, in fact, a fairly mainstream scholarly view.

When Sherwin began teaching at Princeton University in the mid-1970s, most courses dealing with nuclear weapons examined the subject through the lens of technology or political science/international relations theory—aimed at training potential practitioners of nuclear arms control. This was the era when the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks, or “SALT,” dominated the U.S.-Soviet superpower rivalry, and such instruction frequently focused on the convoluted details of these negotiations (or nuclear strategies, equipment, and procurement). Sherwin, by contrast, was perhaps the first historian to teach the nuclear arms race (at least its origins and early years) *as history*, and to present the bomb's arrival as a tale with vibrant characters (led by Oppenheimer) and vital, ongoing legacies for U.S. foreign policy and world affairs—rather than the “bean counting” that he felt too often dominated the discourse.

In 1980 Sherwin moved from Princeton to a tenured position at Tufts University near Boston. The following year, as a Harvard College undergraduate, I was lucky enough to meet him. (I didn't know it, but I had already indirectly encountered his thinking when Prof. Everett Mendelsohn, in a history of science class, showed the just-released documentary, “The Day After Trinity,” about Oppenheimer and the bomb, for which Sherwin and Bernstein were consultants.³) In the fall of 1981, fishing for a topic for my senior history thesis, I discovered *A World Destroyed*—and that a key figure in the decisions to build and use the atomic bomb in World War II had been Harvard University president James B. Conant. (I also appreciated that he included the most important documents as appendices,

arousing a lust for primary source research.) I decided to call Prof. Sherwin to ask his opinion of writing a thesis on Conant and the atomic bomb—and then discovered, after multiple phone calls, that he was neither at Princeton nor Tufts, but spending a sabbatical year working on his “Oppie” bio as a fellow at Harvard's Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History. Crossing Massachusetts Avenue, I found Marty—he threatened to call me “Mr. Hershberg” until I stopped calling him “Prof. Sherwin”—and we hit it off. Bearded, casual, funny, unpretentious, he agreed to supervise my Conant thesis, and we cut a deal: he invited me to rummage through his research files for *A World Destroyed* in search of material on Conant (which I did in his basement, between games of ping pong), and I agreed to pass along any cool documents I found in my Conant research about Oppenheimer. I soon came to understand how fortunate I was: Marty treated students like colleagues rather than twerps, introducing us to colleagues, inviting us to meals at his house (where I met his wife, Susan, and kids Andrea and Alex) to partake in conversations that often included notable nuclear figures, encouraging us to lecture in his classes and participate in conferences.

At Tufts, Sherwin continued to expand the teaching of nuclear history. His undergraduate class, History 192A, “America in the Nuclear Age,” attracted more students as public interest in nuclear issues grew during the Ronald Reagan years, and creatively integrated emerging scholarship and popular culture. Students contemplated the apocalypse not only through *A World Destroyed* and other sober monographs but films like “On the Beach,” “Dr. Strangelove,” and “Mad Max,” and novels by E.L. Doctorow and Kurt Vonnegut. To build the community and enhance interest in nuclear studies, in 1986 he created the Nuclear Age History and Humanities Center (NAHHC), which organized seminars, granted fellowships to graduate students, and more. That fall, I was again fortunate to work with Marty when I came to Tufts to write a Ph.D. dissertation (an expansion of my earlier thesis on Conant) under his supervision. The timing proved fortuitous because it allowed me to witness, and participate in, his active engagement in U.S.-Soviet academic exchanges in response to the rise of *glasnost* under Mikhail Gorbachev, who had become the Soviet leader the previous year.

Although a serious, rigorous scholar, Marty also had passionate political views and used his historical knowledge to promote them, e.g., in articles in *The Nation*, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, and elsewhere—above all to expand awareness of nuclear dangers, which spiked in the early 1980s. I remember visiting Marty and his wife Susan at their home in Belmont, and finding a mug in the bathroom that said, approximately: “Things to do: 1. Stop nuclear arms race. 2. Floss.” (Or was it the other way around?) When Gorbachev came to power in 1985, Marty eagerly promoted the suddenly advancing efforts to limit or reverse the nuclear arms race, and exploited *glasnost* to promote U.S.-Soviet student and historical exchanges. He invited Russian scholars like Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov (who would co-author the first significant post-Soviet cold war history, *Inside the Kremlin's Cold War*, 1996), finally able to discuss Soviet history candidly, to Tufts to meet students and colleagues and give talks to classes and NAHHC seminars.

Convinced that discussions between Soviet and American students and scholars on subjects formerly taboo in the USSR were now possible, Marty launched the Global Classroom Project (GCP) to hold video “space-bridges” (or “tele-mosts” as they were known in Russian) on nuclear issues between Soviet and American experts for joint classes for students from Tufts University and Lomonosov Moscow State University (MGU).⁴ In early 1987 Sherwin recruited Tufts University president Jean Mayer, to propose his scheme directly to Gorbachev. A positive response

soon arrived from nuclear physicist Evgeny P. Velikhov, a senior figure at the Soviet Academy of Sciences and a reformist advisor to Gorbachev on nuclear and strategic issues. Velikhov would become Sherwin's main Soviet counterpart throughout the project, aided by his deputy, another physicist, strategic commentator, and informal Gorby advisor, Andrei A. Kokoshin (later post-Soviet Russian Deputy Defense Minister).

After Marty overcame an eleventh-hour logistical-bureaucratic crisis, the first Tufts-MGU *telemost* was held in early March 1988, dealing with the nuclear arms race's origins and featuring both U.S. and Soviet atomic scientists. While, on the American side, Los Alamos veterans Philip Morison and Victor Weisskopf had volubly commented on nuclear issues for more than three decades, the USSR side epitomized the expanding Soviet discourse with an unprecedented presentation by Yuli Khariton, a leader of Stalin's project which shattered the U.S. atomic monopoly in 1949.

Later that March, Marty brought about 70 undergraduates taking "America in the Nuclear Age" (chaperoned by TAs, including me) to Moscow for an in-person joint class at MGU. After remarks by Sherwin and Velikhov, the class was shown—probably for the first time ever in public in Moscow or the USSR—"Dr. Strangelove," capably and simultaneously translated by TA Hans Fenstermacher. During that trip and another a year later, in March 1989—which coincided with the elections for the new "Congress of People's Deputies" (to replace the rubber-stamping Supreme Soviet)—Marty organized, to gauge the fast-moving scene, meetings for the students with Soviet officials, scholars, and journalists as well as U.S. observers such as the resident *New York Times* correspondent. Later 1988 "space-bridge" classes looked at strategic issues and the Cuban Missile Crisis, although—as the Soviet Union collapsed and the superpower nuclear arms race ebbed—the GCP shifted its focus to environmental issues, reflecting Sherwin's broad approach (and variable funding sources!).

In 1989, as the communist world convulsed, Marty organized a Cold War history conference in Moscow, hosted in early June by the Soviet Academy of Sciences' Institute for the Study of the USA and Canada, and attended by prominent Cold War historians (a bit more left-leaning than the more mainstream group that had attended a comparable conference hosted by John Lewis Gaddis at Ohio University the previous fall).⁵ Amid tumultuous events ranging from the Congress of People's Deputies' inaugural meeting (and nightly protests in Moscow) to the massacre of pro-democracy protesters in Beijing to the semi-free elections in Poland to Ayatollah Khomeini's funeral in Tehran, the conference featured frank, *glasnost*-enabled provocative discussions of various Cold War events and topics previously smothered in censorship and communist orthodoxy (Pleshakov led the Soviet side, standing in for many missing "Iskan" colleagues).

Though the GCP ended in 1992, Sherwin followed up the exchanges with Russian nuclear historians by co-executive producing a documentary on Igor Kurchatov, one of the leading scientists behind the creation of the Soviet atomic bomb. *Citizen Kurchatov: Stalin's Bomb Maker*, which appeared in 1999, a half-century after "Joe One" (as the Americans code-named it) shattered the U.S. atomic monopoly, posed questions comparable to those involved in his Oppie inquiry about the moral dilemmas which arise when scientists offer their talents to political and military leaderships.

Meanwhile, he kept chasing Oppenheimer materials—hitting archives, requesting documents through the Freedom of Information Act, interviewing associates. Drowning in these sources, he wisely recruited as a collaborator his friend Kai Bird, author of acclaimed biographies of John McCloy and the Bundy brothers

(McGeorge and William) and remarkably talented at distilling information to a manageable manuscript. Marty and Kai shared critical views of the Hiroshima decision and the removal of Oppenheimer's security clearance in 1954 at the height of McCarthyism, motivated in large part by his opposition to a crash program to build the hydrogen bomb. Consolidating a quarter-century of Marty's research (about 50,000 pages, Bird estimated⁶), the collaboration worked smoothly, and produced *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer* (New York: Knopf, 2005), which won the Pulitzer Prize for biography, National Book Critics Circle Award for Biography, and more.

Retiring from Tufts, Marty then left for the Washington, DC area, where he taught, for the rest of his career at George Mason University. The Sherwins lived in apartments in Georgetown and then, the Watergate, and often summered in Colorado thanks to Susan's work with the Aspen Institute; Marty also visited Italy to participate in annual nuclear history summer "boot camps" organized by the Wilson Center's Nuclear Proliferation International History Project. Enduring the saddest event of his family life—the premature loss, from cancer, of his daughter Andrea in 2010—he worked on his last major book project, a study on the early atomic age. He originally hoped to complete it by the 50th anniversary of the missile crisis in 2012, but inevitably the project lengthened as he delved deeper and deeper into the sources and battled health troubles, including lung cancer. In 2020 Knopf published *Gambling With Armageddon: Nuclear Roulette from Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis* (dedicated to Andrea) which permitted Marty to incorporate fresh sources and scholarship on the nuclear events that most preoccupied him. Recalling his Navy experience, he wrote: "I did not know until I researched this book how close to death we had come."⁷ In *Gambling*, he also gave his valedictory analysis of nuclear weapons, arguing that the acute risks they (still) posed overwhelmed any conceivable transitory advantages. Though Marty would've raised his eyebrow at such effusive praise, *The New York Times* reviewer called *Gambling With Armageddon* "the definitive account" of the nuclear story from 1945 to 1962.⁸

We will miss Marty, a unique presence, but will read, savor, and learn from his works for as long as nuclear weapons threaten catastrophe.

—James G. Hershberg

Notes:

1. Martin J. Sherwin, *Gambling With Armageddon: Nuclear Roulette from Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2020), xiii-xiv.
2. Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and Its Legacies* (3rd edition, Stanford University Press, 2003), p. 238.
3. In the mid-1980s, Sherwin advised PBS on the documentary series, "War and Peace in the Nuclear Age."
4. On the GCP, see Aidan J. Demsky, "'Hello Moscow!': Planetary Collapse, Television, and the Tufts Global Classroom (1988-1992)," History thesis, Tufts University, 2021.
5. On both conferences, which I was fortunate to attend thanks to Marty, see James G. Hershberg, "The End of the Cold War and the Transformation of Cold War History: A Tale of Two Conferences, 1988-89," in Mark Kramer and Vit Smetana, eds., *Imposing, Maintaining, and Tearing Open the Iron Curtain: The Cold War and East-Central Europe, 1945-1989*, Harvard Cold War Studies Book Series (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), pp. 533-50.
6. Harrison Smith, "Martin J. Sherwin, whose Oppenheimer biography won a Pulitzer, dies at 84," *Washington Post*, 8 October 2021.
7. *Gambling With Armageddon*, p. xiv.
8. Talmage Boston, "Nuclear Nightmare," *New York Times Book Review*, December 27, 2020, p.19.