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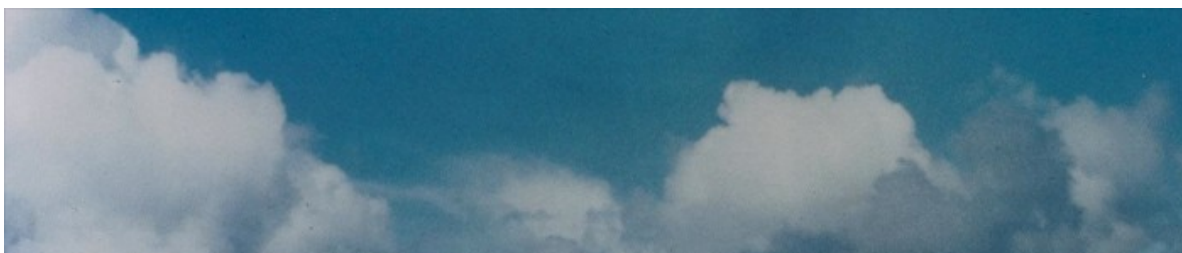
Necessary Evil

3-4 minutes

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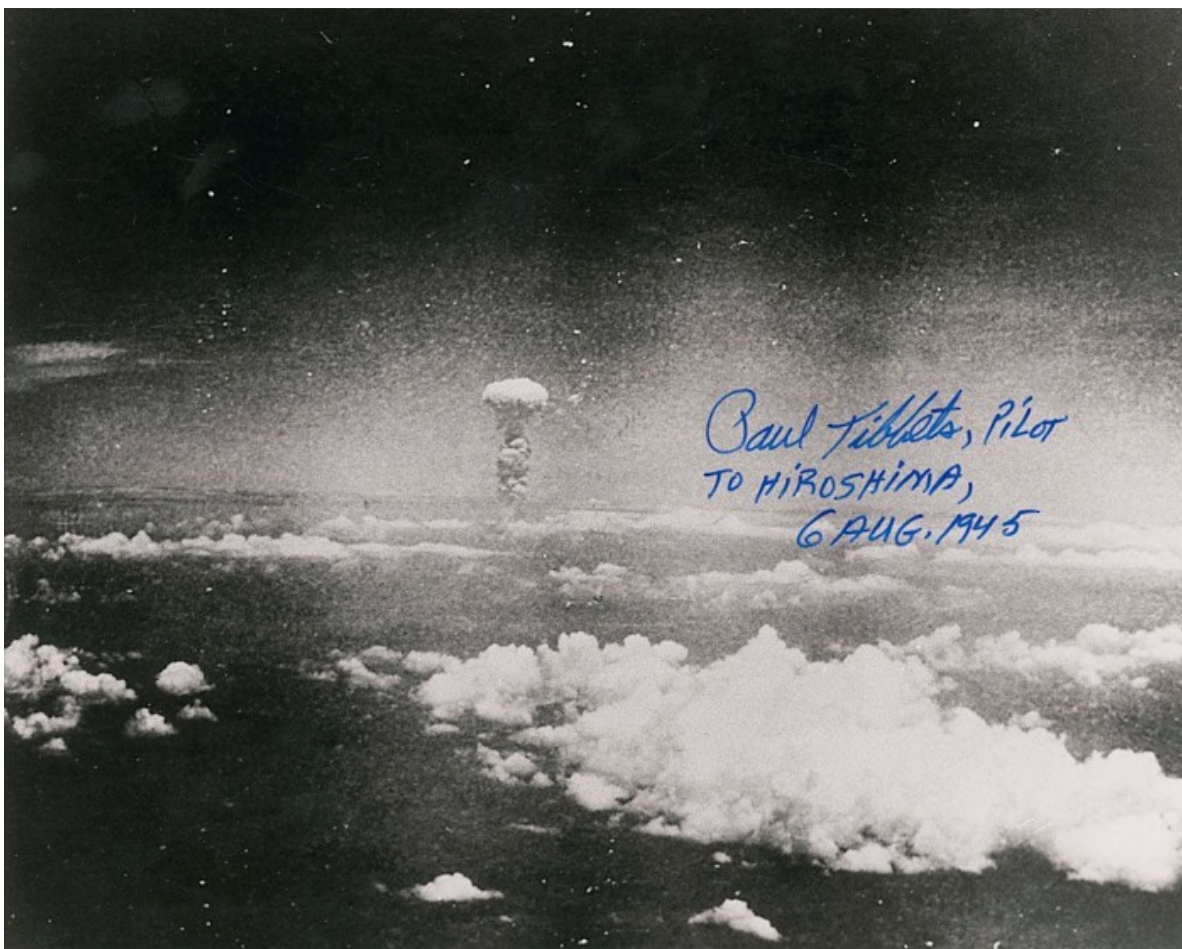


Everyone knows the name of the plane that dropped the first atomic bomb in wartime. It is an old-fashioned, matronly, innocent-sounding name: *Enola Gay*. By contrast, the plane itself is charged with controversial meanings. Public historians and museum practitioners still reference the 1995 “Enola Gay affair” at the Smithsonian’s National Air and Space Museum as an ugly skirmish in America’s “culture wars.”





It remains unpopular in the United States—a nation that hasn't since 1945 definitively won any of its many, many wars, foreign or domestic (including “wars” on poverty, crime, drugs, and terror)—to talk about the apocalyptic evil ushered in by the Enola Gay, the 100,000+ civilian casualties at Hiroshima, and the argument for classifying the bombing as a war crime. World War II stands as America's last “good war,” and relatively few people want to sully that memory, especially while members of the “Greatest Generation” survive.



It is one of the strange accidents of history that the plane's name plays into the popular American myth of innocence. “Enola Gay” is not just a quaint moniker; it is the maiden name of the mother of the pilot, Paul Tibbets. The honorific suggests family, domesticity, respect, honor,

love. And the typography on the aircraft's nose is simple, almost dignified. This was absolutely out of the norm for nose art on aircraft of the U.S. Army Air Forces. WWII airmen typically painted pinups and/or fantasy art and bestowed irreverent names on their killing machines. Case in point: There were two Boeing B-52 Superfortress bombers over Hiroshima on August 6, 1945—one for bomb delivery, the other for photographic observation. The latter had been christened “Necessary Evil.” Its nose art featured a blond beauty in a two-piece bathing suit standing (in heels) by a bullseye, a tattered Rising Sun Flag, and the smoldering ruins of a Japanese city.



Imagine this plausible counterfactual scenario: What if the two planes had switched roles? What if every American student in every U.S. history class had to utter the phrase “Necessary Evil” when discussing the first military use of nuclear arms? What if this mockingly militarist and sexist artwork (seen above) were burned into collective memory and indelibly linked to the endgame of the Second World War? Would such an infinitesimal change in world history have changed anything in the long run? Would Americans today commemorate the destruction of Hiroshima any differently? Would they feel the same about their nation’s enormous stockpile of weapons of mass destruction?

Tags: [graphic art](#), [propaganda](#), [war](#), [WWII](#)