An Oral History of the Nuclear Age

The Manhattan Project and the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan on August 6th and August 9th, 1945 respectively brought about a new era of destructive possibilities which for many were previously unimagined. Today, students study the effects of the atomic bomb and other nuclear weapons, examine the political implications of possessing these weapons, and watch action thriller movies with the very familiar mushroom cloud explosions. The bomb has become a part of day to day life in America. Not as a fear, but something that is accepted as existing. The American people are rarely surprised to hear the word “nuclear” as the daily news is littered with speculation of foreign nuclear missile programs and nuclear energy plants. But there is a generation which grew up before the dropping of the first atomic bomb, lived through the nuclear arms race of the Cold War, and watched as nuclear energy has grown to be promoted as a viable power source. As this generation grows older, it is important to learn this first hand history from them and not let the experiences get lost among lines in a textbook.

One such member of this generation is Cora Einterz. Born in 1931, she was a teen when the first bombs were dropped and was raising a family during the events of the Cold War.

I asked Cora the generically her thoughts on the atomic bomb or how it had affected her life. Cora responded that the bomb really did not have too much effect
on her or her family that she could remember. She remembered reading about the
attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. She was aware of the threat of nuclear strike
during the Cold War, but never really experienced any panic associated with
nuclear warfare. As far as economics and finances were concerned, Cora posited
that her family was probably affected by decreased trade and increased prices or
taxes, but she was not entirely sure. She contributed that her late husband
managed the finances for the household.

I probed a little further about the dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan. I
inquired as to what the emotional climate of the country was, or at least as she
experienced it. Cora was young at the time of the attacks, but explained as best as
she remembered it. She explained that she was sad for the people of Japan. There
was sadness because of the horror invoked by the awful destruction of their cities.
Movies and documentary type films added to the horrors of the atomic bomb by
depicting the destruction and desolation left in the wake of the bomb. There was
sadness also because there was a feeling of helplessness and inability to help the
people who had succumbed to tragedy. However, at the same time as these feelings
of grief, there was also a great happiness. Cora expressed she was very happy that
the war was over, but sincerely wished that it could have ended differently,
although she was unaware as to whether or not there were other viable strategies to
ending the war. I asked her which the more overwhelming emotion was: the
sadness for the Japanese, or the happiness that the war was finally over. Cora
concluded that the happiness for the end of the war was definitely the more
overwhelming emotion for both her and the people around her at the time. She followed up by saying that from a humanitarian perspective the way in which the war concluded was irreconcilable. However, for five long years the Japanese had been the enemy and the enemy had finally been defeated. This view is consistent with what many Americans were experiencing during World War II. Editorial cartoons and publications had made the Japanese out to be sub-human creatures who did not value human life and had only the goal of taking as many American lives as possible. While Cora did not take this extreme of a view of the Japanese, she understood that the United States was at war with the Japanese, which meant the Japanese were doing all they could to kill and defeat the Americans. Cora chuckled at the irony when she mentioned that now she teaches Japanese students in English as a Second Language. She remarked on just how far American relations with Japan have come since 1945.

Moving forward in time to post WWII and Cold War era, I asked about the creation of bomb shelters or fallout shelters in preparation for possible nuclear attacks coming from the Soviet Union. Cora told me that she personally never had a bomb shelter and none of her friends during the Cold War did either. She said that people who had had bomb shelters during WWII sometimes converted their shelters for Cold War purposes, but other than that shelters were not really seen by her. She does not even remember seeing any public fallout shelters as were highlighted in civil defense public service announcements. Cora was born and raised in New York City. She moved with her family to the western part of the
state in 1960. In the mid-1960s, she moved again, taking her family to Michigan. In 1969, she moved one last time and settled her family in Indiana. She attributes the moves to western New York and the Midwest as partially why she was not too concerned about nuclear strike. She and her family did not live near target areas during most of the Cold War. It was not as rational for her and her family to want a fallout shelter because odds were they would never use it. However, one of her daughters, Ellen Einterz, contributed that she participated in “Duck and Cover” drills while in elementary school in western New York. She, however, did not remember ever having watched “Bert the Turtle.” Ellen stated that more than anything these drills served to scare the children into taking the Cold War threat seriously.

Cora also expressed that she was calmed by thoughts that the United States government was in control of the situation with the Soviet Union. She hoped that the United States government would not use nuclear weapons after the destruction at Hiroshima and Nagasaki and she did not think the United States would intentionally start a nuclear war. She just had too much faith in the government being responsible with the technology and believed the government when they told the American people that nuclear weapons would not be used again. I asked whether or not she remembered anyone strongly advocating for nuclear warfare during the Korean War and the Vietnam War. She does not remember any of her friends being in favor of using nuclear weapons; they all thought the technology brought about too much devastation. Cora did acknowledge that even though the
United State was not using the destructive power of nuclear weapons, the
government was employing the deadly Agent Orange in the jungles of Vietnam.
The government conceded some destructive power, but from a humanitarian
perspective were not conceding too much.

Following the theme of trust in the government, I asked Cora what she
thought of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), or “Star Wars” as it was dubbed
by many. She informed me that she was in favor of SDI because the government
said it was necessary to remain on equal footing with the Soviet Union. Or rather,
instead of the government being on equal footing, Cora trusted the government
when they said SDI would provide the United States with an advantage over the
Soviet Union. The United States would be one step ahead in the nuclear buildup.
The idea of the United States being able to intercept any missiles before the
missiles posed a serious threat to United States citizens was very appealing. Not
only was this idea appealing to her, but to many Americans. For many, the desire
for SDI to be a viable military plan was enough to convince them of the possibility of
functionality. Most of the American people knew nothing of this type of science or
military strategy. When the president and his aides said SDI was the best option
for the country, many American people were willing to try it. From the creation of
the atomic bomb to landing a man on the moon and throughout the Cold War,
science was making so many advances that nothing seemed too far out of the realm
of possibility. So many inventions had come about which had previously been
science fiction that the concept of shoot laser from space seemed viable if someone
were just dedicated enough to discovering how. Cora said she was sure the American people were contributing financially to SDI through taxes, but she was willing. She wanted to be prepared just in case. For Cora, at least in regard to this specific issue, cooperating with the government was, the best chance for America to be prepared.

I asked Cora if she could think of any moments of the Cold War in which she really felt the threat of impending nuclear war. As one might expect, she referenced the Cuban Missile Crisis. She had heard about the crisis on the news, but she said the situation was taken care of really before anyone knew what was going on in the Caribbean. The Cuban Missile Crisis was certainly much scarier for her than the rest of the Cold War because the crisis brought the potential for war closer to home. No longer were the nuclear weapons half a world away in the Soviet Union. The nuclear warheads were now not too far away from the coast of the United States. The risk of going to war was elevated during that time. People started believing the spark of war could actually ignite. And the war could take place within the United States. It would be the first attack on United States soil since Pearl Harbor. But even Pearl Harbor, terrible as it was, was miles out to sea. Now the mainland could be attacked. And the weapons used would be much more devastating. However, Cora again held confidence in the United States government. She believed the government truly did not want to go to war and would do whatever necessary to avoid escalating the Cuban Missile Crisis into war. As was discovered after the Cuban Missile Crisis, this is the mentality which President John F. Kennedy took
with him when addressing the crisis. He truly wanted to avoid a war and took the necessary actions to ensure the United States did not have to engage the Soviet Union or Cuba in military conflict.

During Cora’s lifetime, she not only experienced the growing presence of nuclear weapons but also the growth in nuclear energy technologies. Nuclear power plants started to emerge. Cora told me that there was actually a nuclear power plant built not too far away from her home in New York. She remembers there were multiple protests concerning the presence of this power plant. The fears surrounding the stability of the plant was of major concern. People were worried about radioactive pollution or that the rivers and other water sources may become contaminated. Cora said that nuclear energy was mostly billed as a benefit for the future. There was large energy possibilities and theoretically nuclear energy was a more sustainable, and self-sufficient, source of energy than oil. Cora said that she, and probably others, would have felt much more comfortable with nuclear power plants if there were some guarantee that nothing bad would happen, that there would be no Chernobyl or Fukushima. However, she admitted that even if she had this guarantee she would not necessarily want a nuclear power plant in her backyard.

To conclude the subject of nuclear weapons and nuclear energy, I asked Cora whether any of the symbols of nuclear weapons or nuclear energy held any significance for her. She said she had never really considered this question before. The only symbol that came to mind was the mushroom cloud seen after nuclear
explosions. She said this image was one thing that had been ingrained in the minds of her generation and really all Americans since August of 1945. The mushroom cloud was associated with the atomic bomb. This connection is one made very quickly by most Americans. She said the mushroom cloud means destruction. The mushroom cloud means the deaths of many and the leveling of cities. The mushroom cloud represents all of the devastation which many worked so hard to avoid during the Cold War. She had never considered why the cloud is labeled as a “mushroom” cloud as opposed to an “umbrella” cloud or something else. However, the name just seems appropriate in light of all that is suggested by a mushroom cloud.

Cora’s perspective on nuclear weapons and fears about the Cold War was not quite what was expected. Typically, the Cold War is thought of as a time of overwhelming tension and fears of nuclear holocaust. However, Cora did not experience too much concern for her safety during this time period. She knew of the destructive powers of nuclear weapons and certainly did not want these weapons to ever be used again, but she did not worry that the destructive powers of nuclear weapons would reach her. She lived away from target areas. She had faith that the government would prevent escalation of war. She had faith that the government would incapacitate any attempts of the Soviet Union to harm Americans. Lastly, she was mostly concerned about raising her family. As a mother, she worried more about the welfare of her children and making sure they were being raised correctly than she was about the Cold War. She left that worry up to the experts. This
perspective is not one that is emphasized in the study of the Cold War. The tensions of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the near accidents involving nuclear technology, the overarching fears that spread throughout the nation. These are the subjects that are learned about. For many, this was not the story of the Cold War. While the possibility of nuclear war with the Soviet Union lingered in the air, many were able to live fulfilling lives in spite of this. As important as understanding the fears of the era is, it is important to understand this perspective as well.