The saga of how America invented the atomic bomb and used it to defeat Japan and end a world war is an epic for the ages. It came at a crucial moment in world history: in 1945 three world-historical trends came together: (1) WWII ended, (2) the nuclear age dawned, and (3) the Cold War began. The A-bomb played a pivotal role in each. How was it made? Why was the U.S. alone in having it? Was the bomb really necessary to win the war? Were there alternatives to using it on two Japanese cities?

We'll address these questions as we look at the convergence of science with politics and war during the final days of WWII. We will also examine the misbegotten effort of the Smithsonian Institution's National Air & Space Museum (NASM) to mount a 50th-anniversary exhibit in 1995 in order to review the causes and consequences of WWII in the Pacific. In the end the NASM exhibit focused on the Enola Gay, the B-29 bomber that delivered the first A-bomb to Hiroshima. NASM's ambitious but flawed exhibit gave voice to major differences of opinion that continue to divide historians who work on WWII and the A-bomb.

We can only speculate about the future of nuclear weapons. But we can all learn by studying the process that led to the making of the atomic bomb as well as Japan's part in prompting its use.

Readings in this course will come from half a dozen readily available paperback books. There are also 3 novels to read for pleasure: they help illustrate the climate of opinion in Japan and the U.S. during the WWII era.

TESTS: 2 midterm exams, 1 bluebook, 1 takehome. In April students will give oral reports on their paper projects. The finished seminar paper is the final assignment in this course. NO final exam.