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 in 1945 at a crucial moment in world history, when 3 world-historical trends occurred at the same time: (1) the end of WWII, (2) the dawn of the nuclear age, and (3) the beginning of the Cold War. The A-bomb played a pivotal role in each.

How was the atomic bomb made? Why was the U.S. alone in having it? Was it really necessary to win the war? Were there alternatives to dropping the bomb on two Japanese cities?

We'll address these questions as we look at the convergence of war with politics and science 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 to review the causes and consequences of WWII in the Pacific. 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 differences of opinion that continue to divide historians who work on WWII and the A-bomb.

READINGS: Required reading will come from half a dozen paperback books.

TESTS: 2 midterms—1 bluebook exam, 1 take home exam. 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.

George Wilson is Professor Emeritus of History and East Asian Languages & Cultures. Wilson taught at IU for 35 years before retiring in 2002 as Director of the East Asian Studies Center. His interests center on Japan and the history of the Meiji Restoration. He is the author of Patriots and Redeemers in Japan (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992) and 4 of his 5 books deal with Japanese history.