off Japan's coast, launching sorties against mainland airfields. A single, lucky Japanese bomb hit. It exploded on the hangar deck, among fueled and armed aircraft, immediately starting a conflagration that burned through the topside flight deck. Bombs, torpedoes, ammunition, and fuel started to explode, killing 800 crew and burning away large sections of the wooden flight deck. Fire control efforts were desperate, crippled by a lack of firefighters and continual internal explosions. Despite this, dozens of individual acts of heroism sustained the struggle to save the ship. Springer's interviewees perfectly recreate the destruction, terror, and immediate chaos.

Great tales abound in Inferno. We see men fighting fires, blown off the ship into the sea, and trying to escape burning decks and work areas, while crewmates contain damage. Springer found accounts from the crew of the Santa Fe, a cruiser that pulled alongside the stricken Franklin to take on the injured and pass hoses over to fight the fires. Amid the chaos and heroism, the captain, Leslie Gehres, momentarily despaired of saving the ship, but the effort went on, often independent of him.

Gehres brought an imperious style aboard when he took over the Franklin after its operations in Luzon. In fact, much of Inferno's most interesting reading explores this, along with his lapses of character. After the attack in March, he treated as deserters all who had left the ship. On reaching the States, he even initiated court-martial proceedings against some. He insisted on bringing the ship into the dock on arrival in Hawaii, then misjudged and crashed the Franklin into the moon, for which he blamed the mooring detail. His mean-spiritedness, amid so much self-sacrifice and professionalism, was disheartening.

Springer lets the men speak for themselves, and they do. It is no surprise that at one of the principal Franklin crew websites, no mention is made of Gehres, and no picture of him appears. During his life Gehres did his best to dishonor many of his surviving crew. The men have had the last word.

Inferno cries out for cinematic adaptation. The attacks, the firefighting, the crew's struggle to survive, and the ignominy of Gehres's treatment make an outstanding story. Until then, we are lucky to have a book as well done as this.

—Thomas Mullen
Flemington, New Jersey


The nuclear attacks on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are difficult subjects for historians, and for all Americans. Those events and the historical narratives about them are fraught with the tension between America's willingness to inflict great suffering in the service of its perceived national interests and America's desire to think well of itself. The title of Sean L. Malloy's work Atomic Tragedy reflects this tension.

Henry L. Stimson, as Malloy paints him, was a contradictory figure, pulled between the demands of duty as Franklin Roosevelt's secretary of war and his own morality. He was a man of Victorian values, with all that implies: a devotion to duty, honor, and the protection of the weak, paradoxically intertwined with sexism, racism, and Anglo-Saxon elitism. After World War I, Stimson, though never a pacifist, energetically advocated against industrialized warfare and in favor of arms control and international conflict resolution such as the world court. When Stimson accepted the position of war secretary, Malloy writes, the man who "had spent much of the previous twenty years working for international peace" would become "one of the most prominent public advocates of American military intervention in Europe."

Stimson saw no contradiction between the two positions. Soon he became the civilian commander of the Manhattan Project.

Malloy's text explores with sensitivity, insight, and rigorous attention to detail the complexity and contradictions of wartime research into atomic weapons. "While he welcomed the scientists' aid in winning the war," Malloy writes, "Stimson's Victorian values and his horror at the excesses of industrialized warfare left him acutely sensitive to the perils of unleashing nuclear fire upon the world."

In focusing on Stimson, far from succumbing to temptations of the "great man" approach to history, Malloy reveals the extent to which momentous historical events may be wrought by a large number of men—great, middling, or base—acting with incomplete or inaccurate information, according to differing value systems, in the service of contradictory ends. Copious references are provided in endnotes, where they offer support for Malloy's argument without interrupting his lucid narrative prose.

Malloy deftly manages the biographer's trick of portraying his subject with sympathy while stopping short of hagiography. He assesses Stimson's actions and motivations with clear eyes, acknowledging and distinguishing between the moral standards of his time and those of our own. As secretary of war, Stimson was one of the few men with the power and inclination to prevent or limit the destruction of civilian life by nuclear weapons. Why didn't he do
so? His failure “to closely engage with the
details of both conventional bombing and
nuclear targeting” led to a nuclear weapon
that was designed for use against inhabited
cities. His “belief that the atomic secret
could be used as a bargaining chip in post-
war negotiations [with the Soviet Union]—
and his inability to figure out exactly how
to use it for this purpose” led to a diplo-
matic situation where a demonstration of
the bomb’s power in Japan had strategic
benefits on the global stage. Also, of
course, his control over the project was far
from complete, and his decisions involved
a noticeable degree of wishful thinking.

The consequences of the Manhattan
Project stretched far beyond the deaths and
destruction in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, of
course, and Malloy does not neglect this
broader context. The massive postwar pro-
liferation of nuclear weapons cast its shad-
ower over the balance of the 20th century,
and we continue to face the “still-potent
threat of nuclear annihilation.” Stimson has
received at least his fair share of the blame
for that legacy because, like many of his
compatriots, he often “succumbed to the
temptation to gain short term [diplomatic]
advantage” from the “atomic secret,”
rather than sacrificing such advantages for
the sake of “crafting a long-term solution
to the danger posed by nuclear weapons.”
The simplistic article “The Decision to
Use the Atom Bomb,” published under
Stimson’s name in the February 1947
Harper’s magazine, deflected or at least
delayed much of that blame, and it continues
to inform understanding of these
events. Malloy is not interested in either
placing blame on Stimson or shifting it
away, however. As he points out, “None of
the American leaders entrusted with the
bomb were ignorant about the danger it
posed to human civilization.” He argues
that “virtually every American policymak-
er with any knowledge of the bomb shared
to some degree Stimson’s conflicted and
inconsistent attitude toward the future of
nuclear fission.” He urges us not to cele-
brate or chastise Stimson, but to study him
and learn from his experiences. His book
offers a powerful opportunity to do just
that.

—Dyon Stefanou
Rockville, Maryland

Young Blue Eyes

FRANK SINATRA HATED the new music
they called rock and roll. “It is sung,
played, and written for the most part
by cretinous goons and by means of its
almost imbecile reiteration, and sly, lewd,
in plain fact, dirty lyrics...it manages to
be the martial music of every sideburned
delinquent on the face of the earth,” he
complained in 1957. What he didn’t
explain was that he was angry over these
upstarts stealing his act. Making teenage
girls scream and swoon was his gig.

Sinatra became this object of post-pubescent adoration dur-
ing World War II. It happened almost literally overnight. A few
months after leaving the popular Tommy Dorsey big band to
strike out on his own, Sinatra was the opening act for the
Benny Goodman orchestra at New York City’s Paramount
Theater on New Year’s Eve 1942. The girls went wild like no
audience ever before.

Still only in his mid-20s, Sinatra was already a big star, but
now he was suddenly a big solo star and a teen idol. Through
the 1942–1944 musicians union strike, which kept him and
everyone else from recording, he continued to thrive, scoring a
string of top-10 hits with previously unreleased recordings
he had made with Tommy Dorsey and with Harry James before
that. His voice found its way into most American homes on the
radio programs Your Hit Parade and his own The Sinatra Show.

He made it big on the silver screen, too, co-
starring with dancer Gene Kelly in Anchors
Aweigh, Hollywood’s biggest moneymaker
of 1944. Once he was able to start record-
ing again, he put eight top-10 hits on the
charts in 1945, including his now-classic
“Saturday Night Is the Loneliest Night of
the Week.”

Like success, controversy followed Sin-
atra through his career. In October 1943 a
near replay of the scene at the Paramount
that had kicked off his stint as teen heart-
throb turned ugly. Police spent hours quelling the disturbance
dubbed the Columbus Day Riot. Worse for Sinatra’s reputation
was the start of a string of FBI investigations, including a look
into charges that he had paid a doctor $40,000 to declare him
physically unfit for military service.

Like a few of the rockers he may not have cared for, Sinatra
endured as a superstar through the decades because he was the
best at what he did. Nobody could take a song written by some-
one else and make it his own like Sinatra could. He gave a know-
ing inflection to lyrical nuances that lesser singers crooned with-
out a clue. He was a master at phrasing what could be a cloying
rhyme so that you hardly notice any rhyme at all. Rock, and all
the rest of pop music since, owes a great debt to Sinatra.

—Carl Zebrowski
Managing editor of America in WWII

62 AMERICA IN WWII JUNE 2008