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ABSTRACT

In conducting research about U.S. homefront children during the Second World War, a professor of history wrote to the 100 largest-circulation newspapers in the United States as well as 75 African-American, Hispanic American, and Jewish-American newspapers and magazines seeking letters from people who experienced the War as children. More than 1,500 letters were received dealing with an amazing variety of topics. One of the topics is the focus of this paper: the children's fears and nightmares following the attack on Pearl Harbor. The study quotes extensively from the letters concerning, for example, how children heard of the Pearl Harbor attack and their experiences during blackouts and air raid drills. It is noted that the traumas experienced by U.S. children during the War and the long-lasting impact of these experiences on many of the youngsters need to be acknowledged more widely. (DB)

"Pearl Harbor and America's Homefront Children: First Fears, Blackouts, Air Raid Drills, and Nightmares"*

by

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A year and a half ago, I had finished writing a draft of my study of America's homefront children during the Second World War. But what I had written was one-dimensional and boring. What was missing was authenticity. What was missing was the voice of the homefront children themselves. To rectify this, I devised an approach which, I hoped, would give me the first-person, participant testimony which was lacking.

In February 1990, I wrote the 100 largest newspapers in the United States (by circulation), as well as 75 African-American, Hispanic-American, and Jewish-American newspapers and magazines. "Dear Editor," I wrote:

"I am a professor of history ... and the book which I am now writing may be of interest to some of your readers.... This book deals with American children's experiences on the homefront during the Second World War.

"The child's perspective seldom appears in history. Yet for many Americans now in their fifties, their childhood experiences during the war were not only of crucial importance then, but have remained influential throughout their lives. Issues such as the soldier father's absence and even death come to my mind.... I

want to know about children of all colors, and my book will explore racial, ethnic, and gender differences and relations among children. My book will also deal with children's contributions to the war effort in scrap-collection and bond drives, and with the impact of ... movies, radio, and comic books.... The book thus will examine not only children's lives during the Second World War, but also their hopes and fears, some of which the Americans from this generation have carried with them into the 1990s.

"These are some the topics I will be addressing. But to do the job right, I would like to hear from people ... who have stories to tell about their lives on the homefront...."

With this appeal, the letters began arriving at the rate of 30-40 per day. In all, I have received more than 1,500 letters. They deal with an amazing variety of topics ranging from adultery, air raids, and alcoholism to V-J Day, War Bonds, and war-boom communities, and from anti-Semitism, the atomic bomb, and the Boy Scouts to scrap collection drives, sexuality, and spies. I devised a coding system for the 175 different topics with which these letters deal, and through this system I have been able to access the material which I need.

These letters have proved invaluable in writing <u>America's Homefront Children during the Second World War</u>, which will be

published next year. Moreover, I believe that this method, which I have used to capture the experiences of people who have no historical record of their childhood other than their memories, can be used in pursuing other topics which can be fully researched in no other way.

Among the homefront topics which had proved to be illusive were children's fears and nightmares. For example, how had they heard of the Pearl Harbor attack and what had been their experiences during blackouts and air raid drills? Here is a sampling:

That Sunday morning for Jackie Smith, an eleven-year-old, began as it usually did, with church. Standing in front of her family's quarters at the Pearl Harbor naval base, she was waiting to walk with her family to the base chapel to attend services. Although Jackie noticed airplanes flying overhead, this was not unusual. She thought she was witnessing a simulated dogfight between American aircraft, but then "all of a sudden flames were shooting up," and it "looked like the whole island was on fire." Her father ran inside to telephone the base, but the operator told him to get off the line because Pearl Harbor was under attack. By then, the airplanes were flying at tree-top level; the rising sun insignia on the wings was clearly visible. Immediately the rest of the family dashed inside and hid under tables. Jackie ran upstairs with her father to grab mattresses

off the beds to provide other hiding places from the bombs and machine-gun bullets. Through the second-story window, she saw not only the airplanes, but even the faces of the pilots. "I could almost touch them, it seemed."1

Virginia Connolly's father was killed at Pearl Harbor. Virginia was eight years old. Her mother placed a gold star flag in the front window signifying that a family member had died in the war, and she told her children that the family would never celebrate another Christmas because now "we were war orphans."2

Stephanie Carlson, who was ten years old, was living in Honolulu on December 7, 1941. She remembered Pearl Harbor in a poem she wrote in the days after the attack:

> Dec. 7 started like any other quiet Sunday in Hawaii....
> Then things began to happen.
> We heard the rumble of guns firing.
> There were black airplanes in the sky.
> We thought it was a drill....
> The telephone rang.
> My father answered it.
> He was called to his destroyer because the Japanese were attacking Pearl Harbor.

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1 Letter #423.

2 Letter #158.

We could stand on the porch and see some of the fighting.
It looked like a Fourth of July celebration....
We saw three Japanese airplanes fly right over our house.
They dropped two bombs which just whistled down.
It looked just like it was going to fall on you....3

Most children remained in Hawaii, but Jackie Smith, Stephanie Carlson, and other military dependents soon boarded ships and left for safety on the mainland.4

Most American children lived thousands of miles from Pearl Harbor, but on December 7 they too knew that an event of great importance had occurred. As they witnessed the fearful reactions of their parents, they knew that the Japanese attack portended grave danger. Barbara Wells's older brother Dub, who was eighteen, was in the Navy stationed at Pearl Harbor. Her mother was in "a state of shock," sitting in her rocking chair, "a cold cloth on her head, listening to the radio." It was several days before the family learned that Dub was safe. "While we were still awaiting word from him," Barbara recalled, "his birthday presents arrived for Mama's December 18th birthday.... I remember how she cried when she opened the package, not knowing

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[3] Letter #58; poem published in Boston Herald, April 12, 1942.

[4] Letter #423; Kansas City Star, January 14, 1989; New York Times, June 4, 1987.

if that would be the last present from her adored oldest son."5

Ruth Hickman's brother John was also stationed at Pearl Harbor. Ruth, an eleven-year-old, was in her country schoolhouse the next day when her schoolmates, who had gone home for lunch, returned with the news that John had been killed on December 7. There were five Hickman children in the school, "and we went home and my Mother cried and prayed. Was a sad time. But the good thing," Ruth remembered, "was that it wasn't true." Several weeks later, the Hickmans were notified that John was alive and "OK."6

Barbara and Ruth's mothers were not the only parents to cry in the aftermath of Pearl Harbor. Fathers cried too, and daughters and sons alike were stunned to witness such emotion. A ten-year-old boy entered his family's living room to see his father sitting in front of the floor model RCA radio, "its single green tuning eye beaming out in the darkened room. Dad was bent over, his head in his hands ... his shoulders were faintly shaking as the announcer rattled on.... I stood there for awhile, feeling shaken; it was the first time I had seen my father cry."7

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[5] Letter #16.

[6] Letter #351.

[7] Letters #410, #42.

Indeed, on December 7, girls and boys in the United States witnessed adult behavior they had not seen before, and it frightened them. Mothers and fathers experienced rage. They shouted and screamed. They struck their children. All day long on December 7, they talked about "war" and its ugly and tragic possibilities. One ten-year-old girl could take it no more. "War, war, war! That's all I hear. I'm tired of hearing about war." At that point, her mother slapped her across the mouth.8

Men swore and raged at the Japanese. Stereotypes abounded of the Japanese as duplicitous plotters, hiding behind steel-rimmed glasses and toothy grins. Racism fed the stereotypes, and Americans everywhere vowed to avenge the sneak attack. "Why those dirty sons-a bitches," screamed one man. Another man, deep in drink, repeated over and over, "I'm gonna get me a machine gun and kill every one of those slant eyed sons-of bitches I can find."9

Whatever untoward behavior the children observed on that memorable day, the results were generally the same: fear and apprehension. Marian Hickman, for example, was six years old. December 7 was her uncle's birthday, and there was a family dinner at her St. Louis home that afternoon. Afterwards, the men were playing Rook in the living room; the women were in the

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[8] Letters #45, #131, #179.

[9] Letters #16, #208.

kitchen chatting and washing the dishes; the radio was on. "Everything stopped! No more happy talk in the kitchen. The card game was never finished." And what Marian remembered most vividly was the "fear that went through that room. How frightened I was without knowing what was really happening. The adults whom I adored and trusted were afraid! If they were afraid, how could I be safe and protected? It was overwhelming...."10

The next day in grade schools across the country, girls and boys gathered to talk about the war and to comment on their parents' unusual behavior the day before. "Fear of what was to come permeated the air," recalled one of the homefront children. Some were afraid that they would be strafed by airplanes or killed by bombs on the way to school. Many gathered at all-school assemblies to hear President Franklin D. Roosevelt speak by radio about the "day of infamy" perpetrated by the Japanese Empire at Pearl Harbor. And the children talked and asked many questions: "Would the Japs come over here and bomb us next? Where would they bomb if they came? Would they come even before Christmas?" "What are we going to do?" asked a ten-year-old girl in rural Indiana. "I am afraid."11

Following the aerial attack at Pearl Harbor, children all

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[10] Letter # 256.

[11] Letters #136, #191, #270, #342.

over the country expressed fear that enemy bombs would rain down on them from the skies. Their anxieties deepened as they participated in air raid drills and blackouts in the days after the bombing. Some, being afraid to walk to school for fear that they would be killed by falling bombs, ran to school and ran home from school. After running home from school at 3:30 each day, the excited first words of one second-grader to her mother were always the same: "We didn't get bombed today." Other children ran involuntarily. An eight-year-old girl at P.S. 18 in Yonkers was "let out of school" by her teachers and told, along with all the others, "to run home." Her heart pounded and she ran "scared to death ... sure a bomb would get us."[12]

Reportedly, the coastal children felt more vulnerable to bombing raids than did the children inland. But it was immediately clear to parents and teachers in the Midwest that their children also felt deeply endangered. In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, a grade-school boy in Janesville, Wisconsin, dreaded the nights with their blackouts, for they were "punctuated with fear. All the lights had to be turned out when the siren went off." The boy's terror was so real that he imagined that he could hear the airplanes "in the darkness overhead.... We thought about being bombed. We thought about dying. We thought about losing each other. We crowded close together and waited...." Once the siren sounded the all-clear

[12] Letters #246, #0.3.

and the lights came back on, the family celebrated. "Then my father would play the piano and my mother would sing," and the neigbors would come over "to join in the music."13

Air raid sirens screamed both during the school day and, at night, during the blackouts. At night, pitch darkness was required. Heavy black or dark green drapes, or sometimes black tarpaper, were hung over all windows; no illumination at all, including flashlights or matches, was permitted. Air Raid Wardens in Civil Defense helmets knocked on doors to chastize any violators.14

Children usually did not need to be remonstrated, however. For one thing, some boys and girls did not understand that these were drills and not actual attacks. When the sirens sounded, said one girl, "I always thought that Hitler was coming to bomb us." For another, children interpreted all warnings literally and took their responsibilties with the utmost seriousness. After an Air Raid Warden had come to the door to announce that he could see the glow of a flashlight, a four-year-old girl inside was "frightened to death" that because of this infraction, "the enemy would drop bombs on us." Another little girl living in Eureka, California, was afraid that "light would seep out" and

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13 Dr. Leslie B. Hohman, "How Should Children Be Trained for a War Situation," Ladies Home Journal, 59 (April 1942), 110; Letters #12, #28, #342.

14 Letters #11, #442B.

the entire town would be shelled by Japanese submarines. "I lived in fear," she said, "that I might inadvertently touch a drape and cause it to shift." Still another girl in Pittsburgh expressed shock that her father, rather than turning out his desk lamp, would put it under the table where it would not be seen. She worried that he would go to jail. Other children feared that they might be arrested for aiding the enemy should any dreaded light shine from their house or apartment.15

Adding to their anxieties, some children had to assume special responsibilities during the blackouts, such as the ten-year-old girl in upstate New York who cared for her Italian-born grandparents. Her grandfather was paralyzed on one side, her grandmother had a weakened heart, and neither spoke English. "When those sirens screeched, I would pray silently that it was just a drill again." If not, it would be her responsibility to take her ailing grandparents from their second-floor flat to the shelter in the basement. "Quietly, ... I tried to comfort these two gentle people in Italian, reassuring them everything was alright while deep inside I was terrified myself."16

Parents, of course, had their duties during the air raids. Many fathers and quite a few mothers served as Air Raid Wardens.

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15 Letters #21, #32, #62, #66, #67, #83A, #122, #206C, #240C, #246, #316, #320, #440.

16 Letter #88.

Although children took pride in their parents' participation, in the absence of a father or mother during the blackouts, children's fears mounted. A girl from Wausau, Wisconsin, who was five at the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, remembered:

> My whole world was black ... and every light was off. My sister and I were instructed to find a spot in the house to hide, usually under a bed, behind a chair, in a closet or down the basements so the Japs wouldn't get us. When Dad, wearing his warden arm band, exited the house to make his patrol, the last lit lamp was turned off. Eerie darkness reigned everywhere. Even the street lamps were dark. Howling sirens screamed a cruel warning. The whole scene filled my imagination of a real attack. I was very frightened and cried.17

Children also experienced panic during air raid drills in the schools. One girl, hearing the sirens wail, joined her classmates in marching to the basement and lining the walls. "Right at that time, I heard an airplane and started to scream: I knew for sure we were going to be bombed." Indeed, even though these drills occurred during daylight and not darkness, sometimes the terror was greater at school than at home. Importantly, at school children were separated from their mothers and fathers. "I was always afraid," said one homefront girl, "that we would

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17 Letter #270; also Letters #206J, #219, #222, #267.

get bombed when I was at school and not at home with my family. That terror stuck with me for many, many years."[18]

During the drills in the schools, children either went out into the hallway, or down to the basement, and sat against the wall, or they stayed in the classroom and crouched under their desks. This was the wartime version of "duck and cover."

As the war progressed, other fears displaced those of air raids and bombings. As with adults, fear arose among children when they knew enough to recognize the potential danger that confronted them, but not enough fully to comprehend the situation or how it might evolve. And some anxieties, trivial though they might appear in isolation, have never left, such as the fear generated by airplane sounds. Marion Hickman, the six-year-old from St. Louis, remembered once loving to watch the airplanes. Later, though, "airplanes became a great source of anxiety to me as I began to realize they were a big part of the war. Each time I would hear a plane, I'd wonder if something terrible was going to happen."[19]

Finally, many of these fears did not evaporate with the end

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[18] Letters #21, #28, #25, #63, #186, #240C, #244, #355.

[19] Lois Meek Stolz, Our Changing Understanding of Young Children's Fears, 1920-1960 (New York: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1964), 8; Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, editor, The Family in a World at War (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1942), 256; Letters #256, #228.

of the war. What gave the wartime anxieties a permanence in the emotions of the homefront children was that the war did not entirely end with the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The United States soon had another mortal foe, the Soviet Union, which in 1949 detonated its own atomic bomb, and American children learned once again to "duck an cover."[20]

In conclusion, while it is clear that no one will ever know how deep, widespread, or longlasting children's fear of aerial bombardment has been from 1941 to the present, the letters of the homefront children do offer insights. And as we commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack, we should acknowledge not only the trauma that many of America's children have experienced, but also the lifespan consequences resulting from these childhood fears.

Thank you.

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[20] P.M.S. Blackett,, Fear, War, and the Bomb (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1949); Paul Boyer, By The Dawn's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age (New York: Pantheon, 1985); Spencer R. Weart, Nuclear Fear: A History of Images (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).