

Unwarranted Claims and False News in *The New York Times*

By Barton J. Bernstein

After we had been advised that the nation first [having the A-bomb] would be able to terminate the war at once . . . , I was convinced that we should proceed with all possible speed to develop and use the all powerful weapon. . . I was confident that the [secret] securing of the funds . . . would not present a difficult problem.

Senator Elmer Thomas (D-Oklahoma)[\[1\]](#)

In January 2024, a Washington-based *New York Times* reporter, [Catie Edmondson](#), landed a journalistic plum: a “Reporter’s Notebook” [article](#) on the front-page of the newspaper, complete with a two-page spread inside the paper, with illustrations. She presented the story as a pioneering article that allegedly uncovered a hitherto unknown, or little known, secret: precisely how the US government funded the atomic bomb during World War 2. The *Times* underscored the seeming importance of the article by featuring, above the fold, a picture of physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, the wartime director of Los Alamos and “father of the A-bomb,” along with Army General Leslie R. Groves, director of the Manhattan Project. Other photos inside further emphasized what the editors apparently deemed as her article’s significance.[\[2\]](#)

A 2018 Barnard graduate, and former editor-in-chief of the Columbia University *Daily Spectator*, Edmondson has been with the *Times* for almost six years. She has covered congressional matters since 2018, although in 2023 she also wrote some articles about Germany. Edmondson, who started at the *Times* on a James Reston Reporting Fellowship, could fairly be described as a rising star at the newspaper.

Her “Reporter’s Notebook” article was ostensibly about history, but also concerned an issue of great continuing import. That secret wartime funding may reasonably be considered the precedent for postwar “black budget” financing in various parts of the US military and intelligence budgets. It is a subject that, despite many publications over the years, still invites more research, and more analysis.[\[3\]](#)

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Edmondson, by her own admission, was initially ignorant about secret wartime A-bomb funding, and it may well be commendable that she sought to learn about it. Given that hers was not just another article, but prominently displayed on the newspaper of record's front page, it is important to understand how she went about researching the matter, what she learned, and what, if anything, she contributed to general knowledge.

Lamentably, Edmondson's self-celebrated research did not advance understanding of the subject in any significant way. She discovered and reported what has mostly been long known, though she did not present it as such. At the same time, she made a number of errors, and ignored or omitted much important information and context. Notably, she failed to consult many monographs, memoirs, and biographies published in the last several decades covering the events she claimed to examine afresh, and thus displayed an ignorance of the extensive scholarship by historians deeply familiar with the archival records. Ultimately, the prominence of her article, juxtaposed with its significant faults, constitutes a troubling failure in meeting the standards of journalistic responsibility. The *Times* ill-served its readers.

Had Edmondson's subject been obscure history, her article, with all its faults, might not warrant sustained attention. But since it concerns a subject of continuing importance, and because the article seems to have served as a springboard to an increasingly frequent and prominent role for Edmondson at the newspaper of record, it would seem the article deserves critical discussion and analysis. This is particularly true, moreover, since the *Times* has not deigned to issue even modest corrections or disclaimers. The *Times*'s response to public and private criticisms that have been leveled so far has basically been a non-response. The *Times*, put simply, has stonewalled.^[4]

Boosterism and the Article

Edmondson's enthusiastic, and apparently self-pleased, 19 January article was soon followed by a [Times podcast](#), conducted by Sabrina Tavernise. The podcast consisted of a friendly interview with Edmondson about her research and findings, which were admiringly and uncritically treated as important and revealing, almost a celebration of her resourcefulness, prowess, and seeming discoveries. Reference to the [podcast](#) appeared on page 2 of the print edition ("Inside the *Times*: The Story Behind the Story"), and was entitled, "Once the Credits Roll, Reporting Begins." In sum, Edmondson's article received about as much play and attention as the *Times* can lavish on an article nowadays, short of nominating it for a Pulitzer Prize.

Instead of being handled with such self-regard, Edmondson's article should have been fact-checked, and then modestly presented, and explicitly treated, as a useful but severely limited, and rather selective, summary of what had been largely known for more than a half century about the secret A-bomb financing, with some candid acknowledgment of what, though very limited, was added and thus new. Admittedly, to place in the *Times* a restatement, at some length, of essentially known matters might be useful to many readers, but that should have been stated up front in the article and the

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podcast. The implication in both was very different: Edmondson's report, and findings, were portrayed as startling, revealing, and remarkably new.

Edmondson began her article in personal terms. She had been in Berlin viewing Christopher Nolan's "Oppenheimer" film, when she wondered how so much money—\$2 billion, she said—for the A-bomb project could have been secretly appropriated. "I was incredulous," she wrote. "How could they have possibly hidden so much money?" She then described what she called "an obsessive search to find out the history of how Congress secretly funded the atomic bomb."

Edmondson presented the secret-financing subject as if it was a problem on which there was no informative scholarship, and little published literature, so that she had to do vigorous and pathbreaking research herself, a task that occurred over period of six months. She stressed, among her other significant efforts, reaching out to Yale's [Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library](#), in New Haven, Connecticut, for access to key diaries. Somehow, knowledge that those diaries (of Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson) have been available on easily accessible microfilm at many libraries for more than 30 years eluded her. Asking Yale librarians for help in accessing Stimson's diaries is tantamount to a student in Washington, DC, asking *The New York Times* in Manhattan to see copies of issues from the 1940s, not knowing that they have been available for decades on microfilm, or digitally for some years.^[5]

Ironically, despite Edmondson's emphasis on her seeking Yale's help, there is no evidence in her article that she actually exploited Stimson's diary with sufficient diligence and discipline to find some very relevant daily entries. Indeed, because she never mentioned in her article the most significant—and even startling—entries, one has to wonder, and ask: What did she look at? How did she miss the most revealing (but probably unexpected) items in Stimson's diaries?

A Reasonably Well-Known Subject

Apparently, before embarking on her quest, and possibly even after finishing it, Edmondson did not know, and never learned, nor apparently did her *Times* editors, that the secret A-bomb funding, revealed soon after the 1945 atomic bombing of Japan, has been well-known for many years to nuclear-history scholars, and to many other historians and political scientists, and to a number of attentive others. Collectively, thousands of undergraduate and graduate students have been weaned on the subject of the secret wartime funding of the A-bomb.^[6]

More importantly, over the decades the subject has also been treated in a half-dozen published memoirs, in three major official histories, and in nine independent scholarly studies—meaning in at least 18 not obscure works.

As early as 1948, the retired wartime secretary of war, Henry L. Stimson, in his memoir [On Active Service in Peace and War](#), usefully discussed the secret funding that had occurred beginning in 1941-1944, before any congressmen were informed, and then

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in 1944, when three House members and four senators were informed secretly. That group included, among others, House Speaker Sam Rayburn (D-Texas); House Minority Leader Joe Martin (R-Massachusetts); Senate Majority Leader Alben Barkley (D-Kentucky); Senator Elmer Thomas, chairman of the appropriations subcommittee; and Senator Styles Bridges (R-New Hampshire), appropriations subcommittee member.^[7]

Contrary to Edmondson, there is no evidence that any of the seven legislators wrote in 1944 a “contemporaneous” account of the 1944 arrangements, or even an oblique statement in 1944 on the meeting with Secretary Stimson dealing with the secret funding. The only available accounts by any of those legislators came some years later, and thus were not actually, in the strict meaning of the word, contemporaneous.

The first significant published recollection by any of the involved legislators occurred in 1954, when *That Reminds Me* by Alben Barkley came out. Six years later, Joe Martin, in his memoir, *My First Fifty Years in Politics*, written mostly by journalist Robert Donovan, discussed the wartime secret funding in which Martin had been involved. And in 1961, Styles Bridges, in a CBS television program, talked about his wartime role in the secret A-bomb funding.^[8]

In addition to these memoirs, with varying degrees of depth, three official histories—all of which are available online—deal in useful detail with that subject. Historians and others have used and referred to these writings for decades.

The bulky *Manhattan District History* (1947, [online](#)), commissioned by General Leslie Groves, devotes about 30 pages—from among 14,000 total pages—to wartime funding. The financing material was probably declassified and available as far back as the mid-1970s.^[9]

About a decade before that first and massive official history was declassified, a special atomic-bomb official history, *The New World 1939/1946* (1962, and [online](#)), by Richard Hewlett and Oscar Anderson, Jr., also provided information on the secret financing along with useful leads to archival sources. So, in a more limited way, did the army’s official history, *Manhattan* (1985, and [online](#)), by Vincent Jones.^[10]

Biographies of Henry L. Stimson, Office of Scientific Research and Development (OSRD) director Vannevar Bush, and General Groves that are available (in some instances, for decades) also discuss the secret wartime funding, as do other biographies of leading figures from that period. Some of these books include information on President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s role, the involvement of budget director Harold Smith, and of General George C. Marshall, the army chief of staff. Groves’s own 1962 memoir, *Now It Can Be Told*, briefly discusses the funding, as does Vannevar Bush’s memoir, *Pieces of the Action* (1970).^[11]

In sum, while Edmondson cannot be faulted for not having been exposed to the subject in college (she majored in English at Barnard), and her curiosity after watching the “Oppenheimer” film is admirable, it is startling that even a cursory review of the

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published literature, much of it published more than 25 years ago, did not reveal to her that the story was already reasonably well-known. A quick trip to the [Library of Congress](#), and reading about 70 pages of text in the relevant published books, should have quickly filled her in. That would have required no more than some hours to gather such books, and maybe about half-day more to carefully read the relevant material.

Had Edmondson, with her editors, planned a useful, but modest, summary of what was already known, such an article—with careful attention to details—might have taken about day or so to prepare. It would not have required looking at the various texts' source notes, though that might have deepened the presentation, and certainly would not have necessitated archival research.

But had Edmondson wanted to be intellectually enterprising, she could have supplemented such reading of published works by doing substantial primary research, which might have led to new wrinkles. That would have entailed, however, formidable work involving the following: the Roosevelt Library for non-digitized records; the Truman Library for records not online; the Library of Congress for non-digitized files; and about 35,000 [National Archives](#) pages (many on microfilm), which are now mostly digitized and online. Only that kind of research—requiring time, effort, knowledge, and judgment—might have allowed her to break new ground.[\[12\]](#)

A Curious Research Strategy

Edmondson began her quest by initially checking *Wikipedia*, and it had nothing on the subject. Careful scholars and savvy students generally understand the site has serious limitations. One of them is that the absence of a relevant *Wikipedia* entry is not meaningful. Silence on a subject can be misleading, for it's not unusual for a subject to be ignored by *Wikipedia* despite the existence of significant scholarship on that subject.

In fact, notwithstanding *Wikipedia*'s reported silence, which has since been remedied, several more contemporaneous publications on the secret A-bomb funding have appeared since the sources listed above.[\[13\]](#)

One of the most notable books was published as recently as 2021, when science historian Alex Wellerstein, a specialist in nuclear history who teaches at the Stevens Institute of Technology, issued his [Restricted Data](#) volume. It contains about a half-dozen pages on the secret funding and also some helpful leads to relevant archival materials, most of them available in or near Washington, DC. But Wellerstein's book was not the only facet of his work Edmondson egregiously ignored. Aspects of his book appeared on his "[Restricted Data: The Nuclear Secrecy Blog](#)" as early as 2011, including one post with the head-turning title, "[Origins of the Nuclear Black Budget](#)." Wellerstein, who is well known in his chosen field, is periodically mentioned in the *Times* as a source on nuclear-history matters, and he has been occasionally cited by the *Times*'s skillful science and nuclear-policy specialist, William Broad. One wonders if Edmondson consulted Broad, in addition to *Wikipedia*.[\[14\]](#)

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How Edmondson could spend about six months, even in short segments, doing the meager amount of research that she apparently did is something of a puzzle. Any nuclear-history scholar, or probably a nuclear-policy journalist, could have saved her months and quickly directed her to relevant books, the few major archival collections, and the digitized online materials. Such guidance would have provided her, in a shorter amount of time, with far more knowledge than she apparently gained. Unfortunately, Edmondson seemed badly overmatched in seeking to do history. She lacked the requisite background in historical research, and failed to make up for that by seeking the assistance of a knowledgeable scholar or journalist.

Some readers and podcast viewers, including A-bomb historian Wellerstein, so generally stated online. But there is no evidence that Edmondson, or any editors at the *Times*, recognized this assessment was correct, or sought to rebut it. Her response, and the *Times*'s, has been a discouraging, stonewalling silence. And, probably until this essay, that strategy has generally worked.^[15]

Using and Misusing Elmer Thomas's Memoir

Edmondson makes much of finding [Elmer Thomas's memoir](#), the former Oklahoma senator having been one of seven congressmen who worked to pass the secret 1944 A-bomb appropriation. That book enjoyed very modest sales, though it is available in many libraries and not completely unknown.

Singling out Thomas's memoir stemmed from her stated desire to understand the legislators knowingly involved in the secret funding. As Edmondson states, she was "particularly obsessed with trying to get the account of one of the lawmakers who was physically in the room when [the] discussions [about the secret funding] occurred." Why she settled for only one recollection, however, and not materials for all who might have left memoirs or interviews, remains unclear. In and of itself this decision was problematic, in that it practically dictated that her findings would be circumscribed. It's as if she had decided to attend a stage play, but declared she would not listen to all the main characters who spoke on stage. Instead, she asserted, listening to the words of only one character would be adequate.

Not using, and probably not knowing of, the public recollections by Alben Barkley, Styles Bridges, and Joe Martin, Edmondson chose to focus on, and to draw from, only Thomas's [Forty Years a Legislator](#). The problem posed by this decision was then greatly compounded by Edmondson's failure to recognize the 2007 memoir's features and peculiarities.

Perhaps the first of Edmondson's conceptual errors is to believe that Thomas's memoir presented a "*contemporaneous*" [my emphasis] account, written in 1944 by "someone in the room," about the June 1944 meeting with Secretary Stimson and the arrangements for the secret funding. She failed to recognize that Thomas wrote his account a few years afterward, probably starting in 1947 or 1948, but perhaps even

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slightly later—in 1949-1950. It was not truly contemporaneous, but at least three years, and perhaps five or six, removed from the 1944 events.[\[16\]](#)

More surprisingly, Edmondson completely failed to appreciate the roundabout manner in which the volume came to be published in the first place. She mistakenly concluded that Elmer Thomas himself had published the memoir. In fact, Thomas died in 1965, 42 years before the book's publication. She should have realized that Thomas would have been 131 years old by 2007.

In point of fact, Thomas's original 443-page book manuscript, apparently completed in the early 1950s, had languished in the Oklahoma-based archives for many years before its publication. In the early 21st century, it was edited by Richard Lowitt and Carolyn G. Hanneman, and sharply cut down to about 160 printed pages of text. Apparently, Edmondson did not appreciate or understand that the editors compressed and deleted significant material on A-bomb financing from the much longer manuscript that Thomas had written. That longer, original material, has been available in the Library of Congress manuscript reading room since about 1954. But Edmondson, though based in Washington and after having found the published Thomas memoir at the Library of Congress, apparently never thought of checking it against the original manuscript, despite the editors' description of how much the manuscript had been redacted. The original segment was about 20 percent longer than what appeared in the published version, and somewhat richer. Comparing the two alone would have enriched her article.[\[17\]](#)

Alternately, if Edmondson had looked at Thomas's archived papers at the Library of Congress, she might have discovered that by about 1950, Thomas had also compiled a separate, 112-page A-bomb-related manuscript, which contained much correspondence, various economic data, parts of relevant legislation, and other useful materials.[\[18\]](#)

Moreover, by relying only on the edited memoir, Edmondson sometimes did not use Thomas's own writing, nor his actual recollections, but segments he had borrowed from an official A-bomb history. Because of her limited understanding, Edmondson also did not realize that Thomas, probably owing to a faulty memory, actually omitted an important part of the secret-funding story. And overly impressed by Thomas's tables of economic data, Edmondson failed to recognize that Thomas had significantly erred, by about \$270 million (in 1944 dollars), in providing A-bomb/financing numbers. To spot that mistake, she most likely would have had to carefully examine documents in files that she probably ignored altogether.[\[19\]](#)

An Invidious Interpretation

In her article, Edmondson demeaningly suggests, in a cynical interpretation, that Roosevelt administration officials told one story to the seven legislators about the secret A-bomb funding, but another one when they were talking amongst themselves. Edmondson, unfortunately, does not realize that her use of a brief statement by General Groves as the crucial evidence on this matter was highly questionable. Groves had not been at the key February and June 1944 meetings with the legislators, nor did he

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participate in most of the planning sessions in advance of the meetings with the legislators.[\[20\]](#)

That statement by Groves that Edmondson uses in support of her interpretation is the following: that officials in 1944 had come to recognize that the project's "expenditures were too vast and the project too big to remain concealed indefinitely." But that statement by Groves, written about two decades later and tucked away in a larger paragraph, does not warrant the interpretation that Edmondson gives it.[\[21\]](#)

Edmondson fails to establish that the skimpy evidence from 1944 supports her invidious allegation. Establishing the necessary evidence would have required what she did not do—research deeply in the 1944 files of administration members on this subject. It's unclear whether she used any 1944 archival-type materials, apart from some pages in Stimson's diary.

She does not understand that Secretary Stimson, as a longtime attorney, was probably sensitive to legal standards in dealing with the seven legislators, and thus inclined to include such concerns in formulating his generous A-bomb briefings to those congressmen. What was required from Edmondson on this aspect was systematic attention to context, to evidence, and to the sense of responsibility that not only Stimson, but also two of his most important advisers, shared about the issue of secret A-bomb funding. Harvey Bundy, a top aide on leave from a major Boston law firm, and Under Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson, who had been on a highly prestigious federal appeals court, were generally committed to legal arrangements, properly arrived at.[\[22\]](#)

Edmondson's invidious argument reveals no effort on her part to understand the nuance and the complexity of arrangements in Stimson's meetings with the legislators. Instead, she engaged in what might be characterized, not unfairly, as blunt-minded oversimplification in describing the relations between the executive and legislative branches.

Other Significant Problems from Limited Research

Given Edmondson's superficial research into the secondary literature, and scant primary research, her article is replete with other troubling errors, serious problems of interpretation, and glaring omissions.

Edmondson erroneously writes that top US officials by 1944 "had grown more anxious about Nazi Germany's strides toward building an atomic weapon." In fact, many key officials had become *less* anxious. In a document Edmondson may have seen, Stimson himself, in expressing his reduced worries, told the four senators in June 1944 that Germany, which had once seemed to be ahead, was no longer in that position. No less significantly, OSRD Director Vannevar Bush, in a document that Edmondson probably never found, indicated in that June meeting that the United States was ahead of Germany.[\[23\]](#)

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Another major error is Edmondson's conclusion that the high-level decision in early 1945 to let a handful of congressmen visit Oak Ridge was "essentially to shut up a single congressman." This was markedly incorrect, and a highly important story, one that Edmondson missed entirely.

That Oak Ridge visit was conceived by Secretary Stimson, General Groves, and others to halt a brewing congressional rebellion, which involved a number of legislators who had become wary about the secret project. She also failed to do the research to uncover that at least one of the dissident congressmen raised fundamental constitutional issues about the procedures of funding the Manhattan Project. Given the goal set at the outset of the article, this aspect was a highly important part of the story, yet Edmondson missed it entirely. Indeed, the constitutional issues first raised by the secret A-bomb funding, but never resolved, is why the issue remains of great import to this day.[\[24\]](#)

There was also, inevitably, some presentism in Edmondson's article, i.e., a tendency to inject present-day knowledge or perspectives into an account of the past. One of the most common errors when writing history is the failure to present the context in which people acted, and hence the framework their thoughts and intentions.

Edmondson, for example, states that the seven US legislators in 1944 had the "idea that they were approving \$800 million . . . to create a weapon of mass destruction that would soon kill and maim more than 200,000 people." They had no such idea about such a devastating impact from the weapon. Nor did anyone else of importance on the project as of 1944, or even as late as mid-1945. Los Alamos director J. Robert Oppenheimer in May 1945, in a top-level meeting with Stimson, Bush, Marshall, and other notables, forecast about 20,000 dead from an A-bomb attack. Edmondson's article greatly misled *Times* readers on one of the most important aspects of early A-bomb history.[\[25\]](#)

Somewhat less significantly, although discomfiting to anyone familiar with the history, Edmondson seems, incorrectly, to believe, as did Senator Thomas, that none of the other six legislators had ever effectively leaked, during World War 2, the secret information about the A-bomb project while the war was ongoing. But that was not the case. In fact, one of them had done so, much to the distress of both General Groves and Secretary Stimson. If Edmondson had carefully used Stimson's long-available diary, or the long-available archival materials of some of Stimson's wartime associates, she would have learned of that significant leak to the press by Senator Styles Bridges.[\[26\]](#)

Edmondson adds to her problems by making elementary mistakes that should have been caught by a copy editor. She wrote, mistakenly, that the Los Alamos laboratory "was built up out of the desert." That was definitely not the case. Los Alamos is not in the desert. Probably Edmondson mistakenly conflated the terrain at Alamogordo (the site of the A-bomb test) with Los Alamos, which is 210 miles north and situated on a plateau about 7,300 feet above sea level.

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And even though A-bomb funding was central to Edmondson's article, she did not learn enough to correct a widespread misunderstanding on the cost of the wartime project. She apparently believes that the Manhattan Project, up to the August 1945 dropping of the bombs, cost \$2 billion. In fact, that estimate is off by a significant amount, about \$300 million. The accurate total was approximately \$1.7 billion.[\[27\]](#)

Edmondson also seems to assume, mistakenly, that the cost of the Los Alamos laboratory loomed very large in the total budget. Actually, Los Alamos, in construction and operations, only cost about \$74 million (nearly 5 percent of the budget). Most of the funds went to the processing facilities at Hanford, Washington (producing plutonium) and Oak Ridge, Tennessee (producing fission-grade uranium).[\[28\]](#)

Troubling Omissions: Marshall and Truman Ignored

What Edmondson's lengthy article leaves out is no less problematic to the story she purports to tell.

Edmondson never acknowledges the existence of, much less the indispensable role played by, General George C. Marshall, the esteemed army chief of staff who joined Secretary Stimson in making a powerful case for the secret A-bomb funding.

It was Marshall, as Stimson underscored in his June 1944 meeting with the four senators, who stated that the A-bomb might, under some circumstances, "determine the outcome of the war." That important estimate, coming from the highly respected head of the army, was undoubtedly compelling to the legislators.[\[29\]](#)

Edmondson claims to want to know what went on in the legislators' minds when they met with high-level officials about the secret funding. But she omits entirely a pivotal matter: Stimson's and Marshall's express conclusion that the A-bomb might well win, or help win, the war. How could the seven legislators, amid their deeply felt patriotism in war, not have been persuaded by those two prestigious figures?

Not recognizing the authority that Henry Stimson, a lifelong Republican, and General Marshall, a non-partisan and greatly admired military leader, brought to bear on the issue meant that Edmondson fails to understand the process by which the secret funding of the A-bomb was achieved, and consequently, how the national-security state, in something of a bipartisan government, operated in the crucible of World War 2.

The entire War Department budget under consideration by Congress in June 1944 was about \$49.1 billion. The House appropriations subcommittee had received ten volumes of budget details, and presumably those bulky materials were also available to the Senate subcommittee members. Given the more than six-dozen categories in the War Department budget; the presence of a number of multi-billion-dollar categories; and the comparatively small size of the secret A-bomb funding—under two percent of the total budget—the concealment, in 1944, of the A-bomb monies was apparently not that difficult.[\[30\]](#)

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Notably, Edmondson never mentions that Senator Harry S. Truman (D-Missouri)—who did not know of the secret funding—was a member of the appropriations subcommittee, and that he was present on both days the budget was under consideration. The subcommittee’s hearings, on 16-17 June 1944, ran for only about four and a half hours—10:30 AM-12:20 PM on the first day, and then 10:00 AM-12:30 PM. The hearings were friendly, not generally probing, and no senators focused on the categories (“Expediting Production” and “Engineer Service, Army”) that hid all or most of the A-bomb money.[\[31\]](#)

Truman, while present both days, was entirely silent the first day, and then said almost nothing the second day. But because he became president in April 1945, of course, his actions, especially his silence, merit the closest scrutiny. Edmondson neglects to mention Truman’s unsuccessful efforts, in 1943-1944, shortly before the appropriations hearings, to send an investigator from a separate committee that he chaired, to look into the secret Manhattan Project facility at Hanford. *Times* readers would have benefited from knowing that Secretary Stimson was so angered by Truman’s nosiness that he rebuked him once, and wrote in his diary, “Truman is a nuisance and a pretty untrustworthy man. He talks smoothly but he acts meanly.”[\[32\]](#)

That also deprived *Times* readers of a significant irony: Less than a year later, Stimson, despite his strong anti-Truman sentiments in 1944, would begin assisting the new president in helping to craft the policies that would lead to the first use of atomic bombs, over Japan in August 1945. Adding perhaps to the irony, Truman, whom Stimson had barred from knowing about the A-bomb in 1944, never knew that at one time the secretary of war considered him “a nuisance and a pretty untrustworthy man.” As a new president though, Truman did learn in April 1945 from Stimson the names of the seven legislators who, unlike Truman, had officially known of the A-bomb project. One can only speculate how the new president felt after reading these names in a top-secret document handed to him during the meeting at which he was briefed on the bomb. It was a document that Edmondson never found, and thus she could not inform readers of this added irony.[\[33\]](#)

An Overall Assessment

Edmondson’s article was, by intellectual and research standards, akin to a draft of an intelligent but severely limited, and heavily flawed, research paper by an able undergraduate student. With the possible exception of her having found a little-known 1957 interview with Speaker Sam Rayburn, with one relevant but questionable paragraph, and a little-known, one-line memo from 1942 by FDR, Edmondson’s article, the podcast, and the uncritical *Times* article on that podcast, added nothing that was firm, or almost firm, to what has long been known about the secret A-bomb funding. Indeed, she had done far less than what was generally known, and published. Any knowledgeable professor would ask the student to make significant revisions—more research, more intellectual depth, acknowledgment of the extant literature, correction of errors, and very importantly the elimination of the inappropriate suggestion of her presenting pioneering work.[\[34\]](#)

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That judgment is the assessment by at least three scholars—each knowledgeable about nuclear history—who read her article. All were dismayed by its factual mistakes, its serious omissions, its ignorance of the published scholarship, and its overstatements in unwarrantedly implying newness.

In addition, nuclear historian Alex Wellerstein, on BlueSky Social, acting independently, has posted a somewhat similar, though quite brief, critique. He concluded that Edmondson had basically “reinvent[ed] the wheel.” He found it “straight up bizarre that [the *Times*] didn’t contact” anyone knowledgeable on the secret funding subject before the *Times* published her article. Wellerstein stated, in sharply critical words, “It’s brazenly anti-expertise. Who needs historians, for context, appraisal of memoir accounts, facts, etc.?”[\[35\]](#)

That’s a devastating, but not unfair, assessment by a deeply knowledgeable scholar. Wellerstein rightly emphasizes the need for Edmondson to understand history, and how to do history, when engaging in historical study. He basically condemns Edmondson and the *Times* for their significant shortcomings, and indicates that the *Times* and Edmondson did not meet necessary intellectual standards.

How, and why, *Times* editors published Edmondson’s troublingly flawed article, did not have it adequately fact-checked, gave it front-page prominence, and allocated so much space to it, is something of a puzzle. Such treatment was unduly generous and did not well serve the newspaper’s readership. The podcast interviewer’s uncritical approach, essentially doubling-down on the article, further raises questions about *Times* journalism, that newspaper’s uncritical self-promotion, and the quiet trimming of intellectual and professional standards.

Edmondson’s article, moreover, is in sharp contrast with the kind of high-level, mature journalism normally practiced by such *Times* stalwarts as William Broad and Carl Zimmer when dealing with complex science-technology issues and government policy. It is dismaying that *The New York Times*, prior to publication, did not appreciate that Edmondson had mostly rediscovered and then written what was long known, and that she had failed to understand much. What she added to the already known information, unfortunately, was little and too often errant, or badly strained and under-researched. And, very troublingly, she had also missed much—far too much.[\[36\]](#)

Compounding the problem, the *Times* then completely ignored for-publication letters pointing out, with specific citations to published books and even their relevant page numbers, that Edmondson had basically added almost nothing new. No such letter was published in the *Times*, and the paper never issued a statement that quietly made the needed corrections. One not-for publication letter, urging concern about Edmondson’s errors, also went unacknowledged. Hence, Edmondson’s errors remain part of the public record produced by the acknowledged newspaper of record, one that has long prided itself on accuracy and responsibility.[\[37\]](#)

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In the now-distant days of an in-house critic (like public editor Daniel Okrent) at the *Times*, matters might well have turned out differently. But those days have passed, and recent events suggest a quiet, and unacknowledged, “circling of the wagons” in that newspaper’s dealing with various problems. Many institutions, when criticized, circle the wagons. Such behavior should, nevertheless, be considered dismaying or worse. To expect better from a major newspaper, and perhaps especially from the widely-read *Times*, does not seem outlandish.

The *Times*’s Responsibility

Even now, about five months after the 19 January article appeared, it would behoove the *Times* to publish a candid article that could be titled, “Inside the *Times*: The Story Behind the Story—How We Misrepresented Matters and Went So Badly Awry.” A podcast, hosted by a *Times* editor and, in addition, with an expert such as Alex Wellerstein, might discuss in depth what remain problems unexplored, or under-explored, on the important subject of the secret wartime funding. That discussion might even usefully spill over into a related subject of great importance: postwar secret funding, and what are known, in the jargon, as “black budgets.” Such actions by the *Times*, however belated, would meet some of the requirements of journalistic accountability and responsibility.

Neither Edmondson nor the *Times* editors recognized that the story of the secret wartime A-bomb funding has important implications relating to democratic accountability, public knowledge, civic responsibility, and secret government. Those are profoundly important, intertwined subjects brought together, in World War 2, by the secret A-bomb financing.

The recent \$1.2 trillion funding bill, passed in late March 2024, included about \$825 billion for defense, or about 69 percent of the total bill. Such large numbers on national defense easily, and dramatically, convey much of its importance. Such a large-sized national-defense appropriation—ideally including some discussion of its major components—clearly merits close attention, regardless of whether one is a critic, a supporter, or generally agnostic about the \$825 billion appropriation and its purposes.[\[38\]](#)

Admittedly, at a time of rampant disinformation in the media, of deep concerns about AI distortions, and of warranted worries about the troubling decline and even disappearance of US newspapers, the problems of Edmondson’s article on the now-distant past and the *Times*’s basic stonewalling, if treated in isolation and not deemed suggestive of a larger pattern, are comparatively small matters. Nevertheless, such matters, even if not very frequent, should not, for multiple reasons, be allowed to quietly slip away—especially in a major national newspaper, with a large print and digital readership.

To focus, as in this essay, on a defective and exaggerated article in the *Times* can be illuminating in various ways. For one, it might encourage some necessary reforms and improvements in the newspaper’s practices—or a revival of past practices. There should

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be, at all levels in journalism, a felt intellectual obligation for candor, for accuracy, for making needed corrections, and for acknowledging and dealing with informed criticism.

Adherence to high standards might even help the print media, and their digitized siblings, at a time when legacy media seem often to feel bewildered and beleaguered by the rise of uncurated news via social media.

The author is indebted to William Burr and M. L. King for recent counsel and for providing the cited hyperlinks; and years ago to Richard Hewlett, Roger Anders, McGeorge Bundy, Herbert York, and Martin J. Sherwin on wartime sources and on US officials' A-bomb/budget thinking. Some librarians/archivists have provided valuable aid: Larry Bland (Marshall Papers); Loretta Deaver (Library of Congress); Dean Dexter (Office of the Secretary of State, New Hampshire); Kathleen Feeney (University of Chicago); Jami Hunter (Carl Albert Center); James Jacobs (Stanford University); Sonya Rooney (Washington University, St. Louis); and Randy Sowell (Truman Library). Assistance for the study of the secret funding was provided by, among others, the Stanford University History Department's Dean Fund, and by the National Science Foundation. The present article draws in some part, and intermittently, on lectures and seminars over the years, at various universities: Stanford, UC-Berkeley, UC-San Diego, Tufts, and Santa Clara, among others.

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[1] Elmer Thomas (Richard Lowitt and Carolyn G. Hanneman, eds.), [*Forty Years a Legislator*](#) (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 131-132.

[2] Catie Edmondson, "[Secret Wrapped in a Secret: A-Bomb's Funding](#)," *NYT*, 19 January 2024, A1, A14-15. The headline on A14 ("An Investigation into the Funding of the A-bomb") with the subhead, ("How Did Congress Keep Huge Outlays, and an Even Bigger Secret, Quiet?"), and on A15 only about six paragraphs of text, plus a one-line FDR memo to Vannevar Bush (and notes), and a few pictures.

[3] Among the many published works on this issue, see David M. Barrett, [*The CIA and Congress: The Untold Story from Truman to Kennedy*](#) (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005); David Wise and Thomas B. Ross, [*The Invisible Government*](#) (New York: Random House, 1964).

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[4] Over a period of 36 days in early spring, Edmondson published 15 articles in the print edition, thus averaging more than one article every three days; several of them appeared on the front page. *NYT*, 20 March, A22; 22 March, A19; 23 March, A1; 26 March, A1; 30 March, A14; a co-authored article 26 March, A13; 8 April, A13; 15 April, A10; a co-authored article 16 April, A1; 17 April, A18; 18 April, A16; 19 April, A17; 21 April, A1; 22 April, A1; and 24 April, A8. In May, in print or only the online edition, she published some more, participated in a podcast on 9 May, and was dispatched to Taiwan to report on visiting US lawmakers.

[5] The paper diaries were opened by the early 1960s or somewhat earlier. The microfilmed diaries became available in about the 1980s, or possibly a few years later. No part of the microfilmed diaries was still classified, so there was no need to examine the originals, though I had initially used them (at Yale, in the Sterling Library) in the 1960s and early 1970s.

[6] For decades, nuclear history has been a staple of college courses at a wide variety of institutions, and engaged dozens of scholars. The list includes Frank Freidel, Donald Fleming, H. Stuart Hughes, William Langer, and Ernest May (Harvard); John Morton Blum (Yale); Walter LaFeber and Richard Polenberg (Cornell); Hilary Conroy (Pennsylvania); Louis Morton (Dartmouth); Richard Challener and Arno Mayer (Princeton); Robert Jervis (Columbia); Thomas A. Bailey, Gordon Craig, Gordon Wright, and myself (Stanford); Conrad Crane, Gary Tocchet, Gian Gentile, and Ben Greene (West Point); Charles Weiner and John Dower (MIT); Thomas Paterson (Connecticut); Howard Zinn (Boston); Lloyd Gardner (Rutgers); Marvin Gettleman (Brooklyn Polytechnic); Thomas Brockway (Bennington); Richard Minear and Larry Owens (Massachusetts); Marilyn Young and McGeorge Bundy (NYU); William Appleman Williams (Wisconsin); Ralph Morrow (Washington University); Walter Johnson and Arthur Mann (Chicago); Russell Weighley (Temple); Allen J. Matusow (Rice); Allen Greb, H. Stuart Hughes, and Herbert York (UC San Diego); Gregg Herken and Sean Malloy (UC Merced); Alvin Coox (San Diego State); Athan Theoharis (Marquette); Andrew Rotter (Colgate); Lawrence Wittner and Arthur Ekirch (SUNY, Albany); Elizabeth Downey (Gonzaga); Lawrence Badash and T. Hasegawa (UC Santa Barbara); Karl Hufbauer (UC Irvine); Martin J. Sherwin (Tufts and George Mason); Wayne Cole (Maryland); Norman Graebner and David Shannon (Virginia); Leo Ribuffo and James Hershberg (George Washington); Otis A. Pease and Robert J. C. Butow (Washington); James Heath (Portland State); Ben Greene (Bowling Green); Robert Messer (Illinois-Chicago Circle); Gerhard Weinberg (North Carolina); Robert Ferrell (Indiana); Peter Kuznick (American); Lawrence Gelfand (Iowa); and Jon Peterson (Queens College). This information is based mostly on conversations, and sometimes also from seminars or lectures.

[7] Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948), 614. Bundy basically did the writing.

[8] Alben Barkley, *That Reminds Me* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1954), 266-267. In that memoir, Barkley somewhat erred on various details, and on related matters involving the

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secret funding. Joe Martin, as told to Robert J. Donovan, [*My First Fifty Years in Politics*](#) (New York: McGraw Hill, 1960), 100-101. In 1970s conversations, Donovan briefly discussed his working with Martin on the memoir. Bridges in “Washington Conversation,” 30 April 1961, and briefly summarized in UPI dispatch, in *Manchester Union Leader*, 1 May 1961, all in Bridges Papers, Office of the Secretary of State, New Hampshire, courtesy of Dean Dexter.

[9] [*Manhattan District History*](#) in MED Records. Probably about a quarter of that total study was still classified in the 1970s during the microfilming, but many more pages have been declassified in the near half-century since then. In the 1990s, I last received access to some of the paper-copy text. In describing the [*Manhattan District History*](#), Edmondson fails to note that, in addition to its eight books and 36 volumes that she indicates as constituting the full history, that multi-volume history also had a final section (about 303 pages) beyond those eight books. She may not have looked at that section, and thus carelessly omitted mentioning it. The unnoted section is “History of the Activities of the Manhattan District Research Division.”

[10] Richard Hewlett and Oscar Anderson, Jr., [*The New World 1939/1946*](#) (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1962), 48-49, 289-290, 339; Vincent Jones, [*Manhattan: The Army and the Atomic Bomb*](#) (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1985), 49-50, 56-57, 115-116, 272-274.

[11] Elting E. Morison, [*Turmoil and Tradition: A Study of the Life and Times of Henry L. Stimson*](#) (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 615-616; Godfrey Hodgson, [*The Colonel: The Life and Wars of Henry Stimson, 1867-1950*](#) (New York: Knopf, 1990), 295-297; G. Pascal Zachary, [*Endless Frontier: Vannevar Bush and the American Century*](#) (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1997), 197; David F. Schmitz, [*Henry L. Stimson: The First Wise Man*](#) (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2001), 173-174; Robert S. Norris, [*Racing for the Bomb: General Leslie R. Groves, the Manhattan Project's Indispensable Man*](#) (Steerforth, VT: South Royalton Press, 2002), 278-279; Leslie R. Groves, [*Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project*](#) (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1962), 360-368; Vannevar Bush, [*Pieces of the Action*](#) (New York: William Morrow, 1976), 133-135. See also Frank A. Settle, Jr., [*General George C. Marshall and the Atomic Bomb*](#) (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2016), 39-44; Stephane Groueff, [*Manhattan Project: The Untold Story of the Making of the Atomic Bomb*](#) (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 333; and David McCullough's Pulitzer Prize-winning [*Truman*](#) (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 290-291, which obliquely provides background on the secret funding. Elliot E. Maxwell (uncredited), “The CIA's Secret Funding and the Constitution,” [*Yale Law Journal*](#), Vol. 84, January 1975, 626, briefly mentions Groves's book, and the article generally puts the secret wartime funding in a broad legal-historical context.

[12] The relevant material at the Library of Congress is Elmer Thomas's “Legislative History of the Atomic Bomb” (1950). The National Archives materials are very rich: H-B files; Special Interest to Groves files, MED Records; Bush-Conant (B-C) files, OSRD Records, RG 227; and [*Manhattan District History*](#).

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[13] Trusting Edmondson's 19 January report, I never sought to check *Wikipedia*'s entry on the "[Manhattan Project](#)" as it stood before 2024 revisions to determine whether in fact it possibly suggested, or even mentioned, the secret funding. It appears likely that she was correct that it did not. The material now in that *Wikipedia* entry involving the secret funding was apparently added sometime in January 2024, or soon thereafter. Some scholar might be interested in trying to track down precisely what was added, when, and in all cases by whom on this subject. It is important to note that the *Wikipedia* entry as it stood in 2023 did provide citations to two major A-bomb histories—the *New World* and *Manhattan*—but Edmondson apparently ignored such guidance. William Burr called my attention to these matters.

[14] Alex Wellerstein, [Restricted Data: The History of Nuclear Secrecy in the United States](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 44, 77-82. Also see Wellerstein's blog post "[Origins of the Nuclear Black Budget](#)," 5 December 2011. After Edmondson's 19 January article, apparently Wellerstein added to the *Wikipedia*'s "Manhattan Project" entry brief information on the secret funding and a reference to his own 2011 article.

[15] Wellerstein's comments, and a few somewhat similar remarks by others, that Edmondson's self-reported findings had been known and appeared in some books, are online from the [podcast](#). He mentioned his own book. Copy of podcast comments provided by M. L. King.

[16] See for somewhat inferential evidence, Elmer Thomas to Stimson, 17 February 1947; and Elmer Thomas to Elbridge Thomas, 5 March 1947, in Elmer Thomas Papers, [Carl Albert Center](#), University of Oklahoma; Thomas, "Legislative History of the Atomic Bomb"; and Thomas, *Forty Years a Legislator*, 121-124. He did not know of the very contemporaneous June 1944 summaries—Stimson diary, 10 June 1944, and Bush, Memorandum, 10 June 1944, H-B #2.

[17] Lowitt and Hanneman, introduction, *Forty Years a Legislator*, xv. Thomas, "Legislative History of the Atomic Bomb" (1950), 35 pages, numbered in roman numerals. Copies of the original 35-page manuscript are in the Thomas papers, in both the [Carl Albert Center](#) and the [Library of Congress Manuscript Division](#).

[18] Somewhat confusingly, Thomas had given the identical title ("Legislative History of the Atomic Bomb") to both his 35-page segment and to the entire 112-page manuscript, which included that 35-page segment.

[19] Thomas, *Forty Years a Legislator*, 133. He had added about \$134,977,000, when he should have subtracted that amount. Thomas drew his table from MED, [Manhattan District History](#), Book I-General, Vol. 4, Chapter 1, 2.2, but erred in the copying of it.

[20] Groves, *Now It Can Be Told*, 362; Stimson diary, 14, 15, and 18 February 1944, and 9 and 10 June 1944.

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[21] Groves, *Now It Can Be Told*, 362; cf. Forrest Pogue interview with General Marshall, 11 February 1957, courtesy of Larry Bland.

[22] In 1980s private discussions-interviews, McGeorge Bundy occasionally emphasized such legal-minded concerns for Stimson, Patterson, and Harvey Bundy (McGeorge's father). This interesting theme remains unexplored in the published literature, and may warrant elaboration and critical analysis.

[23] Stimson diary, 10 June 1944; Vannevar Bush, Memorandum, 10 June 1944, H-B File #2. Bush presented his conclusion as a personal opinion.

[24] Groves to Secretary of War, 6 March 1945; Under Secretary of War Robert P. Patterson to Secretary of War, "Manhattan district," 25 February 1945, both in H-B File #2; and see Stimson diary, 3 and 4 May 1945; Representative Albert Engel to Stimson, 23 February 1945, H-B File #2.

[25] Interim Committee Minutes, 31 May 1945, H-B file #100; and Compton, *Atomic Quest*, 236-237, recalled the 20,000 number for the dead. There is, to my knowledge, no US spring or summer document before Hiroshima with an estimated number of likely A-bomb dead or casualties. Years afterward, a number of scientists in interviews (with me) stated that they had been surprised, after the atomic bombings, by the number of immediate, and longer-run, A-bomb casualties resulting from the two A-bombings. The interviewees include, among others, physicists Hans Bethe, Edward Teller, Robert Bacher, V. F. Weisskopf, and Frank Oppenheimer. A useful study on total A-bomb dead, but not on total casualties, is Alex Wellerstein, "[Counting the Dead at Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#)," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 4 August 2020.

[26] Groves to Secretary of War, "Loose Talk concerning the S-1 Project," 2 October 1944, H-B File #62; and Stimson diary, 17 October 1944.

[27] Calculated from the table in Hewlett and Anderson, *New World*, 724. The total from early 1942 and through all of calendar 1946 was \$2.191 billion. All numbers for 1942-1946 are in then-contemporary dollars, and thus not acknowledging annual inflation. Information on budgets, and allotments, but not usually on the actual expenditures, are in [Manhattan District History](#), Book I, Vol. 5, 2.2-2.6 and 4.3.

[28] Numbers drawn, and calculated, from tables in Hewlett and Anderson, *New World*, 723-724.

[29] Vannevar Bush, Memorandum, 10 June 1944, H-B #2, summarizing testimony to the senators.

[30] Military Establishment Appropriation Bill for 1945 Hearings, especially 3, 5-8, 27, 32-34, 41-43, 49-51, 59, 64, 72-79. Significantly, of the 14-member subcommittee of nine Democrats and five Republicans, only six members were there the first day and a slightly different six the second day. Senator Thomas, who knew of the secret funding,

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chaired the sessions. Senator Styles Bridges, who also knew of the secret funding, was present the first day but absent the second.

[31] Military Establishment Appropriation Bill for 1945 Hearings, 1, 49. On the two categories for secret A-bomb funding, see [Manhattan District History](#), Book I, Vol. 4 (Auxiliary Activities), Chapter 1, 2.4.

[32] Truman chaired the Senate Special Committee to Investigate the National Defense Program, and achieved a national reputation by effectively using that platform to investigate waste, fraud, and corruption during the war. Indeed, the so-called “Truman Committee” was the reason why the Missouri senator, previously considered merely a product of Kansas City machine politics, came under serious consideration as the vice-presidential nominee in 1944. For Stimson on Truman, Stimson diary, 17 June 1943; Stimson to Truman, 13 March 1944, and Stimson diary, 13 March 1944. McCullough, *Truman*, 291, quoted Stimson and probably, in the 1990s, made this statement reasonably well-known.

[33] Groves, “Atomic Fission Bomb,” 23 April 1945, Secretary of War Records, RG 107, National Archives; and Stimson diary, 25 April 1945.

[34] Marshall biographer Forrest Pogue, “Interview with Speaker Sam Rayburn,” 6 November 1957, [George C. Marshall Library](#), Lexington, VA, courtesy of Larry Bland. Rayburn’s claim about one of his knowledgeable colleagues—presumably a House member—seems suspect. In 1944, there were only two House members besides Rayburn with such knowledge, Majority Leader John McCormack and Minority Leader Joe Martin. FDR’s 23 June 1942, memo asked Vannevar Bush, “Do you have the money?” It’s online from the [FDR Library](#), and is from the Bush file, President’s Secretary Files (PSF), FDR Library, Hyde Park, NY. For a deeper archival-based understanding, see, e.g., Bush to Frank Jewett, 9 July 1941, Bush-Conant (B-C) file #91; and Jewett to Bush, 3 November 1941, Bush to Conant, 4 November 1941, and Bush to Roosevelt, 16 December 1942, all in B-C #1.

[35] Alex Wellerstein, on BlueSky Social, posted in winter 2024, and called to my attention by William Burr in late March, after the bulk of my essay had been written. Wellerstein, obviously annoyed by Edmondson’s and the *Times*’s handling, had posted, probably on separate occasions, a few brief, thoughtful indictments.

[36] One can, over time, be occasionally critical of some of their reporting. See e.g., William J. Broad, “Transcripts Kept Secret for 60 Years Bolster Defense of Oppenheimer’s Loyalty,” *NYT*, 12 October 2014, where he erred by not realizing that the massive declassification of the 1954 Oppenheimer hearing-transcript pages had quietly occurred in 1998, under FOIA, and not in 2014. But apparently all the scholars Broad reported as commenting in 2014 on the released documents were also unaware of the much larger segment of 1998-released material.

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[37] I sent two letters to the *Times* by email—on 19 and 31 January—pointing out that Edmondson’s 19 January article had added little that was new, and I cited some important neglected official histories. I also sent a not-for-publication letter by email, on 8 February, suggesting that the *Times* pay attention to problems in the article and issue a public correction of Edmondson’s errors. On 2, 14, and 24 March, I also sent follow-up letters, by US mail, to Edmondson, and even invited a phone conversation. She never responded.

[38] Surprisingly, Edmondson’s recent coverage, in 20-23 March 2024, of that bill did not discuss in print editions of the *Times* any statement of the total national-defense appropriation, or of its major defense components. See *NYT*, 20 March, A22; 22 March, A19; and 23 March, A1; cf. Bryant Harris, “[Congress Passes Defense Spending Bill After Months of Delays](#),” *Defense News*, 23 March 2024, online. Such recent omissions by the *Times* and Edmondson seem dismaying, and somewhat puzzling. In contrast, the *Times*’s Opinion section ran a series (entitled “At the Brink,” 10 March 2024) which focused on nuclear matters and discussed the US plan to spend perhaps up to \$2 trillion to “modernize” its nuclear arsenal.