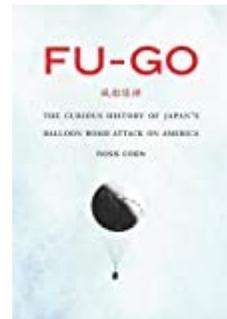




Ross Allen Coen. *Fu-go: The Curious History of Japan's Balloon Bomb Attack on America.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014. 296 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4966-0.



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On May 5, 1945, Reverend Archie Mitchell, his pregnant wife, Elsie Mitchell, and five children from their Sunday school class were out for a picnic and day of fishing in Bly, Oregon. After parking the vehicle, the children ran towards the local creek. Prior to reaching the water, Elsie noticed a dull-gray object and yelled, "look what we found. It looks like some kind of balloon" (p. 2). Before Archie could shout a warning, however, it was too late—the balloon exploded, instantly killing Elsie and the five children.

The balloon, Ross Coen writes, was the world's first intercontinental ballistic missile and part of the Japanese fu-go campaign (p. 6). Between November 1944 and April 1945, over nine thousand balloons were released, three hundred of which were discovered in North America. The balloons were filled with hydrogen and measured thirty feet in diameter. Each balloon also carried a lethal payload: four incendiary bombs and a thirty-pound high-explosive bomb.

Ross Coen, the author of *Fu-Go: The Curious History of Japan's Balloon Bomb Attack on America*, is a PhD student at the University of Washington, where he studies the history of the North American West, the history of technology, and environmental history. Though

Coen is a graduate student, he has published eleven peer-reviewed articles and two previous books, *Breaking Ice for Arctic Oil: The Epic Voyage of the SS Manhattan through the Northwest Passage* (2012) and *The Long View: Dispatches on Alaskan History* (2011).

In this book, Coen traces the history of the Japanese fu-go campaign from its genesis. The initiative, he argues, was a response to US lieutenant colonel James "Jimmy" Doolittle's raid against Japan in April 1942. Eager to retaliate, Tokyo began searching for ways to strike the continental United States. By the summer of 1942, the Ninth Military Technical Institute inherited the program and, eventually, developed a solution—balloon warfare. The term fu-go, Coen explains, was derived from the Japanese character for balloon, *fusen*.

Japanese officials, Coen explains, sold the fu-go campaign as a means to spark massive wildfires in the United States, which would terrorize US citizens and distract from the war effort in the Pacific. In the final chapter of the book, however, Coen reveals the true purpose behind the fu-go initiative. Relying on the Compton Report, in which US officials interviewed Japanese scientists in the wake of Tokyo's capitulation, Coen clarifies that the imperial Army did not expect the balloons to be particularly

effective as offensive weaponsâ (p. 192). Instead, Tokyo pursued the project for the uplift in morale it would createâ and made-up news reports of raging wildfires that were sure to weaken the already fragile American resolveâ (p. 192).

Coen also provides a thorough history of how the balloons were constructed in Japan. Most compelling is the story of the Yamaguchi Girls High School students. By 1944, Coen explains, the lines between civilians and combatants had become blurred in Japan. Tokyo, therefore, conscripted 150 members of the Yamaguchi senior class to build balloon bombs at Kokura Arsenal, where they joined hundreds of additional high school girls. The labor, Coen writes, was grueling: the students were forced to work exhausting twelve-hour shifts in rooms approximately 162 degrees Fahrenheit.

After examining the origins and purpose of the fu-go initiative, Coen analyzes its impact in the United States. Coen begins most chapters with a vignette describing how ordinary Americans encountered a Japanese balloon of war, and he explains how the US government responded to the balloon attacks. Though US officials feared the balloons harbored biological weapons, that notion was eventually dispelled. Coen also lauds the efforts of the US War Department, specifically Byron Price of the Office of Censorship, who censored the press coverage of the balloon attacks. Priceâs objective, Coen explains, was to prevent Tokyo from discovering that the balloons survived the transpacific voyage, as it might encourage subsequent balloon attacks. In the wake of the tragedy at Bly, Oregon, however, Price reluctantly rescinded censorship restrictions. Price, Coen writes, hoped to prevent future deaths by warning US citizens of the danger posed by the Japanese balloons.

The strength of Coenâs book is obvious: relying upon archival research, memoirs, and newspapers, Coen employs colorful anecdotes to trace the history of the fu-go balloons from construction in Japan to discovery and det-

onation in the United States. Coenâs overarching conclusion regarding the fu-go programâs effectiveness, however, is a weakness. âFu-go,â he insists, âwas a failed campaign to be sureâ (p. 202). To validate his assertion, Coen relies upon the 1945 study conducted by the US Office of Scientific Research and Development, which grappled with the threat posed by the fu-go offensive. Using quantitative analysis, the committee concluded that the fu-go initiative would have a negligible strategic impact: at worst, the balloons would cause a fraction of the damage produced by natural causes. Coen reveals in the final chapter, however, that Japanese officials never expected the fu-go program to have a significant strategic impact. It was initiated, rather, âalmost exclusively for home propaganda purposesâ (p. 192). Without analyzing if the fu-go campaign bolstered Japanese morale, it is unfair to label it a âfailed campaignâ (p. 202).

May 1995, Coen writes, marked the fiftieth anniversary of the tragedy in Bly, Oregon. Though Elsie Mitchell and the five children lost their lives, the US Congress eventually provided financial compensation to the affected families and dedicated the area to the victims. During the dedication ceremony, Oregon governor Douglas McKay made clear that it had been an act of war: the six deaths, he lamented, were casualties of war âjust as surely as if they had been in uniformâ (p. 205). Upon learning of the incident in Bly, the Japanese school children involved in the balloonâs construction experienced deep remorse and sent paper cranesâthe Japanese symbol for peace, healing, and forgivenessâto the bereaved families. Despite losing her brother and sister in the accident, Betty Patzke expressed the prevailing sentiment in the Bly community: âI want to thank the Japanese,â she said. âThey have showed that they are really sorry and had a desire to be forgivenâ (p. 211). Ultimately, *Fu-go* is an engaging, thorough narrative that adds to the historiography surrounding World War II.

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