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# Skull Questions: The Public Discussion of American Human Trophy Collection During World War II

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THE PUBLIC DISCUSSION OF AMERICAN HUMAN TROPHY  
COLLECTION DURING WORLD WAR II

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“Last week Natalie received a human skull, autographed by her lieutenant and 13 friends, and inscribed: ‘This is a good Jap—a dead one picked up on the New Guinea beach.’”

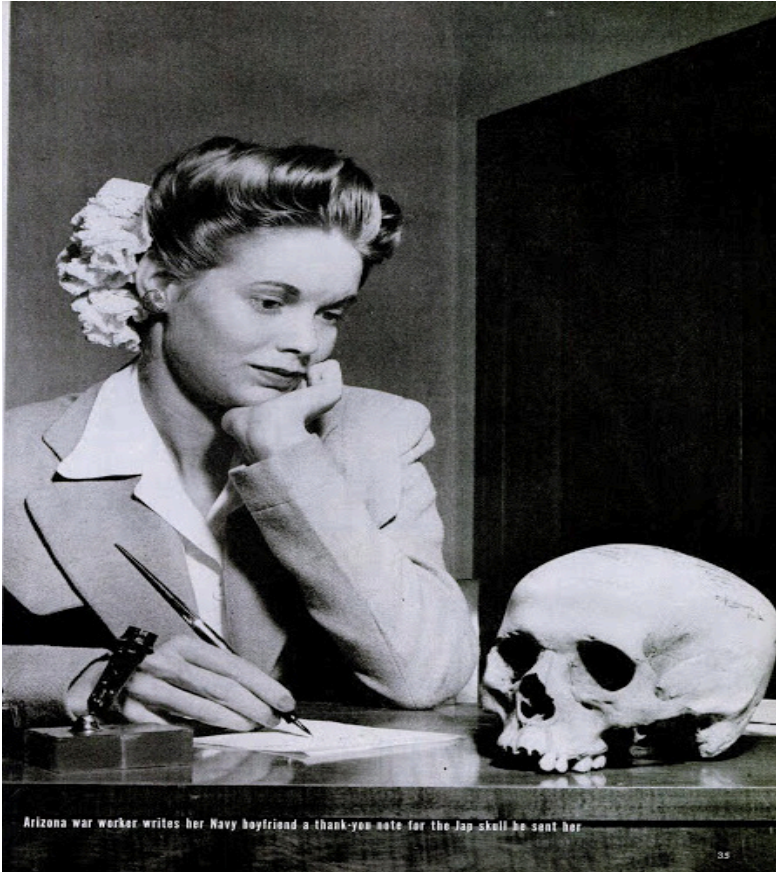
*Life* magazine, May 22, 1944<sup>1</sup>

The May 22, 1944, issue of *Life* magazine featured a full-page photograph of a young woman gazing at a shiny human skull on her desk. The caption read, “Arizona war worker writes her Navy boyfriend a thank-you note for the Jap skull he sent her.”<sup>2</sup> According to the text on the opposite page, the woman’s Navy boyfriend had promised her a “Jap” before he left for the Pacific theater, but the armed forces strongly disapproved of “this sort of thing.”<sup>3</sup> The *Life* image sparked a debate in the public discourse of the United States that became known as the “skull question.”<sup>4</sup> The controversy revolved around the practice of human trophy collection, an ancient martial tradition that became semi-popular with American soldiers during World War II. In the Pacific theater, many U.S. Marines collected the skulls, bones, ears, and hands of the Japanese war dead as souvenirs. As these grisly mementos trickled into the United States, they captivated and appalled the public, revealing that wartime American society was not as unified in its belief in American exceptionalism as it might have otherwise appeared.

A common belief during World War II and for much of the postwar era was that the American people almost

## Skull Questions

unanimously supported the United States and its “noble” war effort.<sup>5</sup> This widespread perception is commonly referred to as the “Good War” framework, and it is through this lens that many Americans understood (and still understand) American involvement in World War II.<sup>6</sup> Edgar Jones, an ambulance driver and war correspondent in the Pacific theater, sneeringly labeled the American wartime disposition a “holier-than-thou attitude”



The infamous *Life Magazine* "Picture of the Week" that sparked the great "skull question" and was featured in much of the American public discussion about human trophy collection.

in 1946.<sup>7</sup> In July 1944, Charles Lindbergh, the famed nationalist aviator, wrote that Americans “are constantly telling ourselves, and everyone else who will listen to us, that we are the upholders of all that is ‘good’ and ‘right’ and civilized.”<sup>8</sup> In the minds of many Americans, the power of the United States government and military stemmed from a superior morality. The American soldier was therefore viewed as the manifestation of the United States and its virtues, and the public had a strong, “morally charged connection” to American GIs.<sup>9</sup> Wartime propaganda bolstered this perception by portraying the GI as an American cultural ideal and a “first-class citizen” that all Americans should strive to emulate.<sup>10</sup>

Many historians have succumbed to believing that the Good War framework was a cultural monolith for the wartime United States. This perception, forged well before the guns went silent in the Pacific, was strengthened by a surge in patriotism and nationalism during the Cold War, when the first histories of World War II were being written.<sup>11</sup> Michael C.C. Adams has accused most historians of portraying World War II as “America’s golden age” and as “a great war... the best war ever.”<sup>12</sup> To exemplify Adams’ point, Thomas Bruscino has recently argued that World War II was an occasion for Americans of all racial and religious backgrounds to discover “many of the shared principles, assumptions, and biases that united them as Americans.”<sup>13</sup>

Not all scholars, however, agree that the Good War framework perfectly captures wartime American society. James T. Sparrow has argued that World War II was not the “uniformly noble crusade” it has typically been portrayed to be, and John W. Jefferies has claimed that the idea of the American home front as defined by “evident unity and common cause” is largely a misconception.<sup>14</sup> Careful examination of the public discussion of American human trophy collection provides vivid support for Sparrow’s and Jefferies’ argument. American society during World War II experienced a greater diversity of thought than both wartime efforts and postwar histories have acknowledged.

The so-called skull question was anything but one-sided. This debate involved a spectrum of reactions that ranged from awe to total condemnation. The majority of articles written during the war, however, expressed at least one of four prevailing sentiments: apathy, acceptance, caution, and horror. These sentiments were not always mutually exclusive. Many authors presented a nuanced view and expressed multiple, overlapping reactions.

It is important to define these four main terms and identify how they usually manifested themselves in the discussion. Many articles addressed human trophies with a prevailing sense of apathy. These publications treated human trophies as unremarkable objects and grouped them with other souvenir products of the Pacific War, such as Japanese swords or flags. Other articles advanced an argument of begrudging acceptance—that while American human trophy collection was wrong and detestable, the American mutilation of war dead paled in comparison to Japanese atrocities. Journalists also preached caution. Some writers openly wondered if the attention given to American human trophy collection would undermine the United States' efforts to appear as a force for good. They feared human trophy collection could be used as a propaganda tool to stoke the flames of Japanese anti-American fervor; the fault thus lay in the ramifications of human trophy collection, not in the act itself. Finally, at the most extreme, many articles expressed horror at the idea of human trophy collection and resolutely condemned the practice on the basis of human decency and Christian morality. The articles in newspapers and magazines that considered the skull question were not just participating in a debate about the Japanese war dead. They were also a part of a very public struggle to understand American wartime identity.

American Dehumanization of the Japanese

“In retrospect it is clear that these attitudes in part reflected an undertone of racism and a conviction that the Japanese were somehow a lesser form of human being.”

Richard J. Aldrich, *The Faraway War: Personal Diaries of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific*<sup>15</sup>

Throughout World War II, the majority of Americans—whether soldiers, civilians, or government officials—actively dehumanized the Japanese. John Dower, a prominent historian of U.S.-Japanese race relations, has described the characteristic emotion of the Pacific War as “sheer race hate.”<sup>16</sup> Not only were the Japanese perceived as sneaky, treacherous, and savage, but they were also largely treated as a separate species.<sup>17</sup> The American press and government conceptualized the Japanese as animals—the Japanese were varyingly depicted or described as termites, rats, apes, monkeys, reptiles, and bats.<sup>18</sup> The subhuman treatment of the Japanese in the American public discussion is best understood using Benjamin Tsubokura Uchiyama’s “Carnival War” framework. Although Uchiyama used this framework to examine Japanese wartime culture, it can also be applied to the United States. These “Carnival War” societies brought the average civilian into close contact with the violence and hatred of the Pacific War through articles and publications that focused on the grotesque and prioritized shock value.<sup>19</sup> The American press, with articles like “Marines Knock Off Japs at Rate Of 1000 a Night on Guadalcanal” and “Igorots, Riding to Battle Atop Tanks, Wipe out 1500 Japanese,” trumped up the idea that the Japanese were animals to be exterminated in an attempt to appeal to the American consumer and captivate his or her interest.<sup>20</sup>

This focus on dehumanizing the Japanese and spectacularizing the fight against them cast the Pacific War as more of a hunt than a traditional war. In the minds of many Americans, the object of fighting Japanese soldiers “was the killing of cunning,



U.S. government propaganda posters

but distinctly inhuman creatures.”<sup>21</sup> In 1942, the U.S. Marine Corps passed out certificates to potential recruits that read “Japanese Hunting License,” and declared “Open Season!” and “No Limit!” in the corners.<sup>22</sup> This probably resonated with many Americans because the concept of the hunt was popular among twentieth-century American men. The anthropologist Simon Harrison has argued that “hunting came to symbolize masculine qualities of self-reliance and hardihood associated with pioneer times [...] the figure of the hunter had an almost mystical significance as the quintessential expression of American male character.”<sup>23</sup> The “hunt” in the Pacific theater, therefore, was seen as a mechanism through which young American men could prove their masculinity and value to American society.

The Japanese did not hold many favorable opinions of Americans, either. Fueled by their own perceptions of racial superiority, Dower asserts, the Japanese believed Americans to be “monsters, devils, and demons.”<sup>24</sup> Takashi Fujitani has argued convincingly that Dower and other historians of Japanese-American relations tend to oversimplify and overunify aspects of the Japanese (and American) wartime psyche. While Fujitani may partially refute Dower, it is important to note that his



argument does not discredit Dower's larger point: fierce racial hatred marked both sides during the Pacific War.

These national conceptions of racial superiority created a mutual Japanese-American hatred that resulted in particularly ferocious fighting. E.B. Sledge, an American veteran of the Pacific War, retrospectively observed that this extreme race hate was "as characteristic of the war in the Pacific as the palm trees and the islands."<sup>25</sup> American war correspondents noted that the fervor of U.S. soldiers fighting the Japanese was unique to the Pacific: contemporary observers routinely described the nature of the war in the Pacific as more "savage" than the conflict in Europe.<sup>26</sup> The word "savage" carries especially heavy connotations about the expectations of U.S. conduct. As Paul Kramer has explained in his examination of American atrocities during the Philippine-American War, there was a widespread belief in American society that fighting a "savage" war against a "savage" enemy absolved U.S. soldiers of any moral or legal restraints.<sup>27</sup> They were free to imitate the alleged savagery of their opponents. Exacerbated by the "Carnival War" press, this cultural perception encouraged U.S. civilians and GIs to believe that such atrocities as human trophy collection constituted acceptable conduct in a war of exceptional savagery.

The islands of the Pacific witnessed both Japanese and Americans soldiers committing atrocities. The Japanese tortured and abused Allied prisoners, while the Allies relentlessly bombed Japanese civilian targets. Neither side showed much mercy to surrendering soldiers on the battlefield.<sup>28</sup> Race hate and atrocities in the Pacific War were mutually constitutive, justifying one another in a deadly positive feedback loop.<sup>29</sup> The atrocities did not necessarily end when the soldier's life did, however. Since many American soldiers thought of their Japanese adversaries as subhuman and objects to dominate, they treated the Japanese dead as hunters would a slain animal.<sup>30</sup> Just as a hunter will skin his prey, American soldiers removed a piece of their enemy as proof of their conquest and superiority. As the war dragged on



and feelings of racial hatred on both sides only heightened, the grisly practice of human trophy collection gained popularity among American soldiers in the Pacific.

Human Trophy Collection in the Pacific Theater

“This was a gruesome business, but Marines executed it in a most methodical manner.”

E.B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa*<sup>31</sup>

It did not take long for the practice of human trophy collection to gain popularity among American soldiers. In 1943, for example, journalist Richard Tregaskis described a conversation he had overheard between two Marines who were about to depart for the Pacific in late July of the previous year. The first Marine proclaimed that he was going to make himself a necklace out of the gold teeth of Japanese soldiers. The second replied that he was going to bring back “some Jap ears ... Pickled.”<sup>32</sup> This conversation reveals two aspects of human trophy collection in the Pacific. First, it was widespread and popular enough that soldiers stationed in the United States had heard of it. Second, human trophy collection did not necessarily result from a hatred and bitterness developed through months or years of fighting against the Japanese; it was a well-established practice only six months after Pearl Harbor was bombed.

As the remarks of Tregaskis’ first Marine suggest, the practice of collecting the gold teeth of dead soldiers was notably popular during the Pacific War, but its placement within the scope of human trophy collection is unclear. It appears that American soldiers viewed the extraction of gold teeth from corpses differently from the extraction of other body parts. The taking of teeth, according to Simon Harrison, “seems to have been largely accepted or tolerated, by both officers and enlisted men, but not other parts of the body.”<sup>33</sup> This contrast is best

illustrated by Sledge's reaction to his friend's proud exhibition of a Japanese hand. Reflecting on the incident decades later, Sledge wrote, "Although I didn't collect gold teeth, I had gotten used to the idea, but somehow a hand seemed to be going too far."<sup>34</sup> This is supported by a vignette earlier in his memoir, wherein Sledge nonchalantly reacted to a fellow Marine slashing a still-alive Japanese soldier's face open to extract gold teeth.<sup>35</sup> The emotional difference between gold teeth and other human trophies is likely connected to the tangible value of gold teeth. A 1943 article in the *Los Angeles Times* explained that gold teeth had "a definite value in trade and barter" among the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Islands. Therefore, it is plausible that U.S. soldiers who collected gold teeth did so because they were used as a form of currency.<sup>36</sup> There are no articles commenting on U.S. soldiers trading other human trophies with indigenous peoples. This suggests that gold teeth served a very different purpose than other human trophies, which held no tangible value and were collected with the sole intention of making them into souvenirs. The skulls, bones, ears, and hands of Japanese soldiers were thus introduced to the U.S. home front, while the gold teeth remained in the Pacific theater and largely outside of the contemporary public discussion concerning trophy collection.

Sledge commented that the collection of human trophies differed from souvenir hunting or looting because "it was more like Indian warriors taking scalps."<sup>37</sup> However, the scalping popularized in American mythology as a Native American practice (British colonists and American settlers participated in it as well) was undertaken immediately after the fighting, if not mid-battle. The collection of human trophies during the Pacific War, on the other hand, occurred "a considerable time after the end of fighting, in an activity perhaps better described as trophy-scavenging than trophy hunting."<sup>38</sup> Usually, American military personnel (both combat and noncombat) would return to the battlefield several hours after the fighting had ceased to search for souvenirs. Japanese helmets, swords, flags, and other pieces

of valuable equipment were the most popular items among GIs. Those who desired human trophies would cut off the head, ears, or hands of Japanese war dead, then wrap the remains in wax paper or boil the flesh off to display the bones. Some carved the bones into small tools, such as letter openers.<sup>39</sup> The practice of souvenir-hunting, whether for swords or skulls, was so popular that it became a characteristic aspect of war in the Pacific. As an astute Associated Press staff writer reported as early as November 1942, "They said on Guadalcanal, 'the Japs fight for their lives - the marines fight for souvenirs.'"<sup>40</sup>

The question remains: Why did American soldiers engage in such a gruesome activity? James Weingartner has argued that since Americans viewed the Japanese as subhuman, "abuse of [their] remains carried with it no moral stigma."<sup>41</sup> As stated earlier, Americans believed their human trophies symbolized their dominance over the Japanese enemy. Moreover, Harrison has added that human trophies were collected for the same reasons tourists purchase souvenirs, "as proof of 'having been there.'"<sup>42</sup> As more Americans partook in the practice, these grisly souvenirs began to decorate American military outposts or were mailed back to the United States as tokens of affection for their loved ones or gifts for figures of authority.<sup>43</sup>

Human trophy collection was not an uncommon experience for U.S. soldiers in the Pacific. Though there are no statistics recording the percentage or number of servicemen who engaged in human trophy collection, it was "something which officers knew to be common on the battlefield."<sup>44</sup> Weingartner has called the practice "as popular as [it was] gruesome."<sup>45</sup> The collection and subsequent mailing home of human trophies had become so prevalent by September 1944 that U.S. customs officers began asking all military personnel if they had any bones in their baggage.<sup>46</sup>

The popularity of human trophy collection among U.S. soldiers in the Pacific theater contrasts sharply with its absence in the European theater. The historian George Roeder reviewed



American lieutenant posing with Japanese skull aboard a Navy torpedo ship in 1944

thousands of censored military photographs from World War II and did not find any evidence of American troops collecting human trophies from European soldiers.<sup>47</sup> Military historian Samuel Hynes has written that he has never encountered an instance of American soldiers mutilating German or Italian dead for souvenirs.<sup>48</sup> Both Weingartner and Dower agree that no American mutilation or abuse of European war dead resulted in any form of a human trophy.<sup>49</sup> It is therefore virtually impossible to deny that human trophy collection in the Pacific theater was largely a racially driven enterprise.<sup>50</sup>

### American Public Discussion

“Possibly it is a heritage of the pioneer days when men took what they wanted. Perhaps it’s the false spirit of ‘every American a king’ – and the king can do no wrong. Maybe it is just bad

manners and poor upbringing...”  
*Christian Science Monitor*, November 28, 1945<sup>51</sup>

The public discussion of American human trophy collection in the Pacific theater peaked in the summer of 1944. In late May, *Life* magazine published its infamous photograph of the Arizona war worker with the skull of a Japanese soldier that her boyfriend had sent her. In August, the *New York Times* revealed that President Roosevelt had refused a gruesome gift: a letter opener carved from the bone of a Japanese soldier.<sup>52</sup> Since *Life* magazine and the *New York Times* acted as major sources of information concerning the war for U.S. civilians, their high-profile inclusions of American human trophy collection brought the issue into the national spotlight, sparking a lively debate in the public discussion.<sup>53</sup>

The idea of human trophy collection, however, was not entirely foreign to public discourse in the United States. The press featured the exploits of the Igorot people, indigenous Filipinos who traditionally dwelt in the highlands of Luzon, on several occasions during the early stages of the war. Articles on this subject almost uniformly praised the Igorots' bravery and ruthlessness in fighting the Japanese alongside U.S. General Douglas MacArthur. They occasionally mentioned the admiration American soldiers had for the Igorots, as well as the high level of organization that existed between the Igorots and U.S. troops. Interestingly, these same articles often highlighted that the Igorot people were head-hunters. As products of the "Carnival War," these publications demanded attention with sensational titles and subtitles such as, "Weapons of Headhunters, Now Aiding MacArthur, Exhibited," "MacArthur Praises Heroic Natives, Who Were Head-Hunters," and "Head-hunters Go Scot Free for First Time in 40 Years."<sup>54</sup>

As the titles suggest, the articles did not condemn the Igorot practice of head-hunting, but rather glorified it as a product of primal bravery and a crucial aspect of the Igorots' all-out resistance against the Japanese. One writer for the *Los*

*Angeles Times* described these indigenous allies as “the head-hunting Igorots of Luzon... [who] are pledged to fight ‘to the death’ against the Japs.”<sup>55</sup> Another explained how the Army was so grateful for the ferociousness of the Igorot people that they actually *de facto* legalized head-hunting in the Philippines. The article explained that “the Igorots came marching single file out of the wilderness, a spear over each shoulder and a Japanese head on each spear. The entire Japanese party had been beheaded.”<sup>56</sup> That was, the article continued, the first time the practice of head-hunting had not been punished in the Philippines since the United States had gained control of the islands, presumably as a thank-you for the Igorots’ bravery. As a result, not only did the U.S. military condone the practice in the Pacific theater, but the mainstream press also covered head-hunting without any tone of disapproval or horror. The implicit support for Igorot head-hunting practices is even more evident in a third article from the *Los Angeles Times*. The piece was printed under a large photograph of a smiling American woman holding an Igorot weapon, described as a “strange, saw-toothed weapon” that could behead a man with one strike and included “a hook on the reverse side upon which the triumphant warrior tied the victim’s head before proudly marching home with his trophy.”<sup>57</sup> This image Americanized the concept of human trophy collection in the public discussion. Seeing a normal American woman smile and casually pose holding a weapon used for head-hunting began to normalize, if not glorify, the concept of human trophy collection for the American reader.

This encounter with human trophy collection early in the Pacific War and its glorification doubtlessly impacted public discourse in the United States. The attention and praise lavished on the Igorots and their head-hunting probably explains why a reader declared the macabre 1944 *Life* magazine photograph “A rare and memorable spectacle....”<sup>58</sup> This reaction of awe remains an outlier in the American public discussion of human trophy collecting, but it is not difficult to account for its origins. The

author, along with many of his fellow Americans, presumably compared the American soldiers' trophy collection to Igorot head-hunting. The nearly universal praise for the "Proud Savage Warriors" of the Philippines presents a new twist on Kramer's theory of "savage" war.<sup>59</sup> Beyond simply imitating the savagery of their enemies, Americans consumed news that condoned the savagery of their allies. As a consequence, GIs were even more absolved of moral or legal condemnation because their allies had already received national praise for committing such atrocities. If American society accepted head-hunting as a result of the "sheer breath-taking and heart stoppin' acts of heroism" of the Igorots, then human trophy collection was logically understood as the result of Americans undertaking similar feats of bravery in the same theater against the same enemy.<sup>60</sup>

### *Apathy*

The "Carnival War" framework and the enthusiasm shown for Igorot head-hunting help explain why much of the public discussion reflected desensitization to the grotesque practice of human trophy collection. Often, the skulls, ears, bones, and other body parts collected by American soldiers were discussed or mentioned as ordinary souvenirs. In a 1944 *Washington Post* column describing the assortment of souvenirs that American civilians received from their loved ones fighting overseas, the mention of a Japanese skull is entirely brushed over. The article reads, "Atlanta reported the recent receipt of a Japanese skull and two live love birds; Tampa, painted emu eggs and bronze Tunisian daggers, and San Francisco miniature outrigger canoes from New Guinea."<sup>61</sup> Aside from being the first object mentioned, the Japanese skull is paid no more attention than are the painted emu eggs or bronze Tunisian daggers. This casual comparison of human trophies to other war souvenirs again appears in an article about Marine souvenir culture in the Pacific:



Cigarettes, matches, soft drinks and the other luxuries have their values, too. The Marines will trade any sort of battle souvenir available for whatever a traveler has in his bag. And if the leathernecks are short of souvenirs one of them will go out into the jungle, waylay a Jap and bring back his ears, if that is what you want.<sup>62</sup>

In this article, not only are human trophies apathetically mentioned, but the act of attaining them is, too. The military publication *Leatherneck* published an anonymous letter describing human trophy collection. The letter described a young man's friend, Stanley, who had collected eleven Japanese ears. As if acknowledging his own apathetic tone, the author attempted to normalize Stanley's grotesque collection by explaining, "It was not disgusting, as it would be from the civilian point of view. None of us became emotional over it."<sup>63</sup>

Still, it appears that civilians, even when considering human trophies outside of the realm of souvenirs, did not find the practice as appalling as the author might have believed. Another article published a month earlier presented a humorous anecdote of an Australian skull trophy. "Claudius, the talking skull," the article began, "has lost his voice."<sup>64</sup> The piece goes on to discuss how an officer with a talent for ventriloquism used to regale the indigenous islanders until he was moved to another station. The article focuses on the humorous story, not the existence of the skull trophy in an Allied military outpost. This sense of apathy characterized much of the public discussion regarding human trophies, which often treated them as unremarkable objects.

### *Acceptance*

In his travels around the Pacific theater, Charles Lindbergh noticed that American atrocities were excused because they were considered acceptable in comparison to Japanese atrocities.

Lindbergh described a perfect example of Kramer's "savage" war theory. In his journal he wrote, "A Japanese soldier who cuts off an American soldier's head is an Oriental barbarian... An American soldier who slits a Japanese throat 'did it only because he knew the Japs had done it to his buddies.'"<sup>65</sup> Despite this criticism, Lindbergh himself conceded, "But barbaric as our men are at times, the Orientals appear to be worse."<sup>66</sup>

This acceptance of American barbarism was also prevalent in the American public discussion at large. Even though many publications criticized human trophy collection, they tolerated the practice because it was viewed as less "barbaric" than the atrocities the Japanese had committed. One column confidently declared, "But, when all is said and done, our barbarisms are pretty pallid by comparison with theirs [the Japanese], and the stories from the Pacific... put a gap between the standards of the two countries."<sup>67</sup> Even the president of the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America, the Right Reverend Henry St. George Tucker, acknowledged that American human trophy collection had been provoked by Japanese atrocities.<sup>68</sup> Another article used an example from Japanese history—"when centuries ago a Japanese invader of Korea brought back thousands of pickled human ears as trophies"—to justify American atrocities (including human trophy collection) in the Pacific War.<sup>69</sup> This sense of acceptance did not go unnoticed. Writing in the *Atlantic Monthly* only six months after the Japanese surrender, Edgar Jones accused the American media of publicizing Japanese atrocities to justify moments of American "moral frailty."<sup>70</sup> These aspects of the contemporary American public discussion also fit within Kramer's "savage" war theory. Articles tolerated human trophy collection because they perceived it to be a justified response to the Japanese atrocities, which were always portrayed as more brutal and cruel than anything ordinary Americans could imagine.

*Caution*

Many other writers were quick to condemn American human trophy collection because evidence of the practice, such as the *Life* magazine photograph, was a Japanese propagandist's dream. One letter to the editor of *Life* condemned the publication of the image because the author believed the Japanese would use the photograph "potently... for anti-allied propaganda."<sup>71</sup> Another submission thoughtfully considered the hypothetical American response if "one of the most prominent magazines in Tokyo published the picture of a young Japanese girl in such a pose."<sup>72</sup> The writer claimed that a "storm of protest at such savagery" would consume American society in hatred for all Japanese.<sup>73</sup> Since much of American psychological warfare was geared towards convincing Japanese civilians and soldiers to surrender to the United States, journalists warned that the public discussion of human trophy collection would prove counterproductive to American strategy.<sup>74</sup> One article even directly accused *Life* magazine of undoing the efforts of American psychological warfare.<sup>75</sup> Additionally, many feared publicizing these human trophies would provoke violence against the American prisoners of war held by the Japanese.<sup>76</sup> In an article in the *New York Times*, Reverend Tucker bemoaned the fact that "reports of such conduct have the effect of stiffening morale in enemy countries and of engendering feelings of hatred."<sup>77</sup> It is therefore important to understand that the fear of a potential Japanese reaction to American human trophy collection influenced many of the negative reactions towards American human trophy collecting.

### *Horror*

The final widespread sentiment that characterized the great skull debate was horror. The *Life* magazine photograph and the letter opener intended for President Roosevelt both received strong condemnations. One of the letters to the editor called the *Life* photograph "revolting and horrible," while another declared, "The head of the Navy lieutenant mentioned is without a doubt

as empty as the skull pictured on the desk.”<sup>78</sup> In a *Washington Post* article entitled “Atrocity Tale,” the author disavowed the letter opener sent to Roosevelt. The article described the object as “a rather nasty variety of barbarism” and congratulated Roosevelt’s refusal of it, stating that the president “did exactly what any man of civilized instincts would have done in his place.”<sup>79</sup> Edgar Jones claimed human trophies were produced from “the blackest depths of bestiality.”<sup>80</sup> A reporter, Enoc Waters Jr., expressed similar horror in his coverage of postwar racial tensions for the *Chicago Defender*, a newspaper dedicated to a primarily African-American readership. In one article about the lynching of a young African-American man, Waters wrote that the “primal savagery” of the lynching reminded him of his experience with human trophy collection as a war correspondent in the Pacific theater. With a disgusted tone, Waters described the American soldiers as “ignorant Southern backwoodsmen” who believed “the Japanese were subhumans who had the audacity to match themselves against white men.”<sup>81</sup>

Many of the horrified responses to American human trophy collection were particularly impacted by a sense of Christian morality. In his article, Weingartner described how American religious organizations quickly and vigorously condemned the practice of human trophy collection. Reverend Tucker declared that human trophies “cannot but be condemned not only from the standpoint of Christian ethics but also out of respect for the canons of human decency.”<sup>82</sup> Indeed, it also appears that President Roosevelt’s refusal of the letter opener was at least partially influenced by religion. Information regarding his refusal of the letter opener “was made available here after the Vatican News Service in Rome said the recent publication of a story about the letter opener had resulted in a request from the Catholic Archbishop of Tokyo for ‘respect for the laws of humanity even in total war.’”<sup>83</sup> While there were many non-religious reactions of horror to human trophy collection in American public discussion, a significant portion of responses

that condemned human trophy collection evoked some degree of Christian morality in order to justify their disapproval. Implicit in these reactions was a comparison between Christianity and Shintoism. Since Shintoism, the state religion of Japan, supposedly tolerated Japanese atrocities, these articles insinuated that the strong Christian condemnation of American atrocities proved Christianity to be the more moral religion. Thus, even in the most critical responses to human trophy collection, Americans still attempted to assert their superiority over the Japanese.

### The Military's Response

“The army has gotten the holy jitters about the skull question...”

John Gaitha Browning's Diary, October 3, 1944<sup>84</sup>

The U.S. military leadership's response to the skull question and its public discussion was characterized by both caution and horror but largely failed to stop the practice. According to Weingartner, the initial military response reflected more horror than caution. U.S. Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall allegedly became aware of American human trophy collecting in late 1943 and radioed General MacArthur about the “concern over current reports of atrocities committed by American soldiers.”<sup>85</sup> The Joint Chiefs of Staff soon afterwards sent a directive to all theater commanders in January 1944 forbidding human trophy collection in the Pacific and any shipment of the souvenirs back to the United States.<sup>86</sup> The publication of the *Life* magazine photograph sparked a flurry of responses from military leaders. Major General Myron C. Cramer, the Army's judge advocate general, quickly dispatched a memorandum to the War Department leadership. He condemned the practice because it violated the 1929 Geneva Convention's clause regarding maltreatment of enemy war dead, as well as the “sensibilities of all civilized peoples.”<sup>87</sup> Rear Admiral Thomas L. Gatch, the Navy's

judge advocate general, recommended to Admiral Ernest J. King, the U.S. Chief of Naval Operations, actions to quash the practice of human trophy collection out of fear that the attention given to the grisly souvenirs would result in retaliation by the Japanese.<sup>88</sup> The War Department shared the Navy's concern regarding possible retaliation. The director of the Army's Bureau of Public Relations was instructed by a War Department bureaucrat to inform U.S. publishers that printing stories about American human trophy collection "would likely encourage the enemy to take reprisals against American dead and prisoners of war."<sup>89</sup> These different responses by the U.S. military shared similar features to some of the aspects that dominated the contemporary public discussion. While the Army's memorandums almost exclusively reflected a horrified reaction to human trophy collection, the Navy's and the War Department's documents are marked by caution and reveal a preoccupation with the fear of Japanese retribution.

Despite their efforts, these military directives soon proved to be ineffective. While the leadership was "vigorously enforcing a 'no skulls' policy and making efforts to discourage the defiling of enemy dead," the soldiers in the Pacific theater were largely unaffected by the policy changes.<sup>90</sup> Harrison cites a veteran who claimed that "his officers never encouraged the collection of skulls and teeth, but never tried to prevent it either, even when orders came forbidding the ownership of skulls."<sup>91</sup> Sledge recounted that when an officer encountered a severed Japanese hand, his only reaction was, "throw that thing away before it begins to stink."<sup>92</sup> There was no condemnation of the action, only of the smell. Lindbergh noted a similar failure to enforce the "no skulls" policy. In August 1944, he wrote about seeing a Japanese skull decorating a blackboard in an officer's tent and hearing about a certain patrol that had carved the thigh bones of Japanese soldiers into pen holders and paper knives.<sup>93</sup> The "number of absurd threats for possession of Japanese bones, teeth, etc." had very little impact on the soldiers of the Pacific theater, and the practice of human trophy collection was largely

unhindered by them.<sup>94</sup>

### Conclusion

“Let us hope, however, that the person who sent this gruesome trophy to the White House was not an American soldier”  
*Washington Post*, August 12, 1944<sup>95</sup>

The skull question is largely forgotten today.<sup>96</sup> For all of the blatant and widespread dehumanizing of the Japanese, postwar Americans suddenly became ashamed of their human trophy collection. The human trophies sent home from the Pacific theater did not become objects of display like the other souvenirs of World War II.<sup>97</sup> The hands, ears, and skull that were so proudly mailed home by U.S. GIs were quietly stored in trunks or unceremoniously returned to Japan.<sup>98</sup> However, the practice of human trophy collection was not totally eradicated from American military culture; there were several notable cases of American soldiers collecting human trophies during the Vietnam War.<sup>99</sup> The skull question resists didactic categorization; it was neither an American moral awakening nor a robust endorsement of human trophy collection.

Instead, the skull question is best understood as a site to puncture the Good War mythology that was pervasive in wartime society and has persisted in historical scholarship. The journalists who participated in the skull debate were grappling with both the issue of human trophy collection and their own national identity. In World War II, Americans were divided on the question of whether American exceptionalism was always a legitimate justification for U.S. actions. The skull question serves as a valuable reminder that the civilian body was not wholly unified in its belief in a superior American morality. As a result, many Americans refused to accept the actions and behavior of U.S. soldiers in the Pacific theater blindly. Even during the so-called “best war ever,” Americans and their press actively



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questioned and challenged what it meant to be an American at war.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>“Picture of the Week,” *Life*, May 22, 1944, 34-35.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>4</sup> Richard J. Aldrich, *The Faraway War: Personal Diaries of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific* (London: Doubleday Publishers, 2005), 14.

<sup>5</sup> Takashi Fujitani, *Race for Empire: Koreans as Japanese and Japanese as Americans during World War II* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 8.

<sup>6</sup> John W. Jefferies, *Wartime America: The World War II Home Front* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Edgar L. Jones, “One War is Enough,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1946.

<sup>8</sup> Charles A. Lindbergh, *The Wartime Journals of Charles A. Lindbergh* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1970), 880.

<sup>9</sup> James T. Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 12.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>11</sup> For more discussion of wartime America as a unified actor, see Paulina Calcaterra, “America, the Liberator and the Propagandist: Tensions with Psychological Warfare in the Pacific Theater” (seminar paper, Dartmouth College, 2018); Amanda Durfee, “Battle for the Smithsonian: An Analysis of the Congressional Hearing over the *Enola Gay* Controversy” (seminar paper, Dartmouth College, 2018); and Karina Korsh, “Cultural Narratives of the Zoot Suit Riots and Twentieth Century American Masculinity” (seminar paper, Dartmouth College, 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Michael C.C. Adams, *The Best War Ever: America and World War II* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Bruscino, *A Nation Forged in War: How World War II Taught Americans to Get Along* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2010), 14.

<sup>14</sup> Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 10-11; Jefferies, *Wartime America*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Aldrich, *The Faraway War*, 476.

<sup>16</sup> John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), 11.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 33, 8.

<sup>18</sup> James T. Weingartner, “Trophies of War: U.S. Troops and the Mutilation of Japanese War Dead, 1941-1945,” *Pacific Historical Review* 61, no.1 (1992): 54.

<sup>19</sup> Benjamin Tsubokura Uchiyama, “Carnival War: A History of Wartime Japan, 1937-1945” (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 2013), i.

<sup>20</sup> Walter B. Clausen, “Marines Knock Off Japs at a Rate of 1000 a Night

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on Guadalcanal,” *Washington Post*, November 21, 1942; “Igorots, Riding to Battle Atop Tanks, Wipe out 1500 Japanese,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 1942.

<sup>21</sup> Weingartner, “Trophies of War,” 55.

<sup>22</sup> “‘Hunting License’ Issued by U.S. Marines,” *New York Times*, April 1, 1942.

<sup>23</sup> Simon Harrison, “Skull Trophies of the Pacific War: Transgressive Objects of Remembrance,” *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 12, no.4 (2006): 821.

<sup>24</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 9.

<sup>25</sup> E.B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed: At Peleliu and Okinawa* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1981), 34.

<sup>26</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Paul A. Kramer, “Race-Making and Colonial Violence in the U.S. Empire: The Philippine-American War as a Race War,” *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 2 (2006): 172, 205.

<sup>28</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 9-12.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> Weingartner, “Trophies of War,” 66-67.

<sup>31</sup> Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 118.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Tregaskis, *Guadalcanal Diary* (New York: Random House, 1943), 15-16.

<sup>33</sup> Harrison, “Skull Trophies of the Pacific War,” 827.

<sup>34</sup> Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 153.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>36</sup> Kyle Palmer, “Traffic Cops and Radios Found on Guadalcanal,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 18, 1943.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Harrison, “Skull Trophies of the Pacific War,” 823.

<sup>39</sup> Jones, “One War is Enough.”

<sup>40</sup> Clausen, “Marines Knock Off Japs at a Rate of 1000 a Night on Guadalcanal.”

<sup>41</sup> Weingartner, “Trophies of War,” 67.

<sup>42</sup> Harrison, “Skull Trophies of the Pacific War,” 823.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Schrijvers, *Bloody Pacific: American Soldiers at War with Japan* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 224; Harrison, “Skull Trophies of the Pacific War,” 825.

<sup>44</sup> Aldrich, *The Faraway War*, 15.

<sup>45</sup> Weingartner, “Trophies of War,” 66.

<sup>46</sup> Lindbergh, *The Wartime Journals of Charles A. Lindbergh*, 923.

<sup>47</sup> Schrijvers, *Bloody Pacific*, 216.

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- <sup>48</sup> Harrison, "Skull Trophies of the Pacific War," 826.
- <sup>49</sup> Dower, *War Without Mercy*, 66; Weingartner, "Trophies of War," 67.
- <sup>50</sup> It is interesting to note that, according to Harrison, "Skull Trophies of the Pacific War," 826, all of the World War II trophy skulls in the "forensic record" have been identified as Japanese. This of course helps show that human trophy collection was unique to the Pacific theater, but it also hints that it was a distinctively American practice. For all of the atrocities committed by Japanese troops in World War II, the collection of skull trophies seems to be noticeably absent. There is no discussion of Japanese human trophy collection from American soldiers during World War II in the historical literature.
- <sup>51</sup> "Souvenir Hunters?," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 28, 1945, 18.
- <sup>52</sup> "Roosevelt Rejects Gift Made of Japanese Bone," *New York Times*, August 10, 1944, 30.
- <sup>53</sup> Weingartner, "Trophies of War," 57.
- <sup>54</sup> "Weapons of Headhunters, Now Aiding MacArthur, Exhibited," *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 1942; "Igorots, Riding to Battle Atop Tanks, Wipe out 1500 Japanese"; "Head-hunters Go Scot Free for First Time in 40 Years," *Los Angeles Times*, April 9, 1942.
- <sup>55</sup> "Filipinos Pledge Guerillas Will Continue Fight on Japs," *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1942.
- <sup>56</sup> "Head-hunters Go Scot Free for First Time in 40 Years."
- <sup>57</sup> "Weapons of Headhunters, Now Aiding MacArthur, Exhibited."
- <sup>58</sup> James B. Giern, "Letter to the Editors," *Life*, June 12, 1944, 6.
- <sup>59</sup> Ernie Santos, "Fighting Igorots," *Washington Post*, March 2, 1942.
- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>61</sup> "Curio Gifts Form Bulk of Mail from Oversea Boys," *Washington Post*, January 2, 1944.
- <sup>62</sup> Olen W. Clements, "Marines Will Swap Jap General's Pants For a Consoling Bottle," *Washington Post*, November 7, 1942.
- <sup>63</sup> "Old Young Men," *Leatherneck* (Washington, D.C.), June 1943, 29.
- <sup>64</sup> "Muted Skull Can't Sing for his Sponsor's Supper," *New York Times*, April 3, 1944.
- <sup>65</sup> Lindbergh, *The Wartime Journals of Charles A. Lindbergh*, 880.
- <sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 903.
- <sup>67</sup> "Another's Poison," *Washington Post*, December 5, 1944.
- <sup>68</sup> "Tucker Deplores Desecration of Foe," *New York Times*, October 14, 1944.
- <sup>69</sup> Morris Harris, "Jap Atrocities Not New, But Now We're Victims," *Washington Post*, January 30, 1944.
- <sup>70</sup> Jones, "One War is Enough."
- <sup>71</sup> Ruth Case Phenix, "Letter to the Editors," *Life*, June 12, 1944, 6.
- <sup>72</sup> Philip Randolph, "Letter to the Editors," *Life*, June 12, 1944, 6.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Calcaterra, "America, the Liberator and the Propagandist."

<sup>75</sup> "Another's Poison."

<sup>76</sup> Harrison, "Skull Trophies of the Pacific War," 827.

<sup>77</sup> "Tucker Deplores Desecration of Foe."

<sup>78</sup> Mrs. J. D. Hubbard and N.E. Bishop, "Letter to the Editors," *Life*, June 12, 1944, 6.

<sup>79</sup> "Atrocity Tale," *New York Times*, August 12, 1944.

<sup>80</sup> Jones, "One War is Enough."

<sup>81</sup> Enoc P. Waters Jr., "New High in Savagery: Ignorance Rivals Brutality in Lynchers," *Chicago Defender*, August 24, 1946.

<sup>82</sup> "Tucker Deplores Desecration of Foe."

<sup>83</sup> "Roosevelt Rejects Gift Made of Japanese Bone."

<sup>84</sup> Quoted in Aldrich, *The Faraway War*, 475.

<sup>85</sup> Quoted in Weingartner, "Trophies of War," 57.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Quoted in Weingartner, "Trophies of War," 59.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.; "Leadership," *The Official Web Site of The United States Navy Judge Advocate General's Corps*, U.S. Navy, [www.jag.navy.mil/](http://www.jag.navy.mil/).

<sup>89</sup> Weingartner, "Trophies of War," 60.

<sup>90</sup> Aldrich, *The Faraway War*, 15.

<sup>91</sup> Harrison, "Skull Trophies of the Pacific War," 827.

<sup>92</sup> Sledge, *With the Old Breed*, 153.

<sup>93</sup> Lindbergh, *The Wartime Journals of Charles A. Lindbergh*, 897, 906.

<sup>94</sup> Aldrich, *The Faraway War*, 475.

<sup>95</sup> "Atrocity Tale."

<sup>96</sup> Harrison, "Skull Trophies of the Pacific War," 818.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 828.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Sharmila Rudrappa, "Fingers in the Attic: Coming to Terms with Our Long History of Collecting Human Remains as Trophies and Souvenirs – From Public Lynchings and Grounds of War both Past and Present," *Pacific Standard*, January 28, 2015, <https://psmag.com/social-justice/fingers-in-the-attic-collecting-human-remains>.

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### Images

Page 126: "Picture of the Week," originally in *Life Magazine* (May 22, 1944), accessed January 25, 2019 via Google Books, <https://books.google.com/books/about/LIFE.html?id=RE8EAAAAMBAJ>.

Page 130: U.S. government propaganda posters, originally released in 1943, accessed January 25, 2019, via <http://www.princeton.edu/~kkruse/his383/History383combined.html>.

Page 135: "Lieutenant (Junior Grade) E.V. McPherson, of Columbus, Ohio with a Japanese Skull which serves as a mascot aboard the United States Navy Motor Torpedo Boat," from the Australian War Memorial (April 30, 1944), accessed January 25, 2019, via Wikimedia Commons, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AWM\\_072837.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:AWM_072837.jpg).