

Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Decision to Drop the Bomb

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Introduction

Of all the political and military decisions in history, few have been subject to more analysis and comment than the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Miles, 1985,121). Scholars in the field have grappled with the vexing question of why the United States decided to use the atomic bomb near the conclusion of the Second World War. A careful study of the critical events leading up to 6 August 1945 offers many distinct explanations. Contemporary discussions on the subject matter introduce a host of theories but taken individually they are far from satisfying. To suggest that a single overriding factor dominated the decision calculus of American policymakers would be to miss the point entirely. Rather, President Harry Truman's decision to drop the bomb on Japan was a culmination of military, political and social motivations used to promote the self-interests of the United States, whether it be in the number of American lives saved in a potential invasion of the island or in shaping the geopolitical structure of the postwar era.

Given the magnitude of what transpired during the summer months of 1945, it is interesting to note that much of America was uninformed about the new developments. Even cabinet members and much of Congress were kept in the dark about the atomic bomb, excluded from discussions on its use¹. In the aftermath of Hiroshima, the atomic bomb did not raise ethical issues for policymakers or the American people². In this context, it is easy to see why the prevailing view in the postwar era was one in which the bomb was used to end the war promptly and save American lives. Until the late 1960's, with much of the archival collections from the period still closed, historians had little documentation to challenge this conventional viewpoint. However, recently declassified documents have provided alternative viewing solutions to the ongoing debate. Military documents such as the 15 June 1945 report to the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the diaries of key advisors like Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Admiral William Leahy, memoirs of important policymakers like Secretary of State James Byrnes and Manhattan Project director Major General Leslie Groves, recollections and papers of military leaders like Dwight D. Eisenhower and Douglas MacArthur, files of atomic scientists such as J. Robert Oppenheimer and Leo Szilard, and the autobiography of Harry Truman have opened the way to a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the reasons for the atomic attack (Takaki, 1995, 5).

The aim of this paper is to present the wide ranging, sometimes competing views in order to gain a better understanding of the motives that contributed to making the fateful decision. In doing so, I examine the three most often cited reasons for dropping the bomb: the orthodox position (military), the revisionist view (diplomatic/political), and racial considerations. To be sure, a paper of this scope and scale is not without its limitations. The

fact that the entire operation was carried out covertly adds to the difficulty in studying the topic. The reliability of the texts used to study the issue always needs to be questioned. We discover that sometime the same individuals gave different accounts of the same events, depending on when he told his story and to whom. The trouble with using social memory as historical evidence is particularly salient here. Moreover, in an effort to be as comprehensive as possible, the depth of analysis is sure to be lacking in some areas. However, in discussing the political climate of 1945, I have found it difficult to present one theory at the exclusion of others. I present a holistic picture of the context in which the decision was made to further emphasize the point that the decision was multi-causal. By adding to the volume of literature on the topic, this paper attempts to take a closer look at the thesis that the decision to use the bombs reflected a complex interplay of domestic and international political forces affecting the U.S. political elite. It was based on political rather than moral grounds set in motion by the path toward total war in which the interests of the U.S. reigned supreme.

Military Considerations

The conventional justification for the atomic bombings is that it was the most expedient measure to securing Japan's surrender. Prominent men like Truman and Stimson cast the framework for what became known as the orthodox interpretation by asserting that the bomb was used to shorten the agony of war and to save American lives. Late in the war, Stimson recognized that Japan was near defeat but not near surrender and looked upon the bomb to make the crucial difference (Bernstein, 1976, xiv). In this way, while alternatives plans were under consideration, they were risky compared to simply dropping a bomb, and thus unwarranted.

One such alternative was a planned invasion of Japan scheduled for 1 November 1945. Truman, in his 1955 autobiography *Memoirs*, estimated that the atomic bomb probably saved half a million U.S. lives, not to mention the number of Japanese casualties. Truman and his advisors had ample reasons to be cautious in pursuing the invasion plan. The battles waged in the Pacific campaigns from 1944-45 served as empirical proof that the Japanese would go down fighting until the very end. Consider, for example, that in the battle for Okinawa from April to June 1945, 13,000 U.S. troops were killed with nearly 36,000³ wounded (Selden, 1989, xxxi). Add to this the tragic memories of Pearl Harbor, Bataan, Luzon and Iwo Jima and U.S. planners knew that an all out invasion of Japan would result in heavy bloodshed. No one doubted the ferocity of Japanese resistance, increasing as the fighting got closer to the homeland (Newman, 1995, 6).

Despite Truman's calculations, new studies quickly dismiss Truman's account of saving half a million or more Allied lives as being grossly inflated. By the time historians were given access to the secret files necessary to review the situation, it was clear that estimates ranged from 20,000 to 46,000 American lives⁴ (Selden, 1989, xxxi). The official report prepared by the Joint War Plans Committee on 15 June 1945 presented the following calculations to the Chiefs of Staff: Killed – 40,000; Wounded – 150,000; Missing – 3,500; Total – 193,500. With Okinawa weighing heavily on the mind of Truman, top military officials assured the President that losses suffered in an invasion of Japan would be lighter.

According to the Joint War Plans Committee, the Tokyo Plain had many more beaches suitable for amphibious assault, with its geography precluding the concentration of defense. The favorable terrain would allow American forces to outmaneuver the Japanese in combat. With this in mind, the military planners concluded, “in terms of percentage of casualties the invasion of the Tokyo Plains should be relatively inexpensive” (1945, 342).

The report was not alone in questioning the military necessity of the atomic bomb. Many of America’s most important military leaders urged the Truman to avoid using the bomb. At a time when Japan’s main army was in China, cut off from supplies and reinforcements as Chinese and Russian forces closed in, U.S. military planners knew that a Japanese surrender was forthcoming. Both General Eisenhower and MacArthur, supreme commander of the Allied forces in Western Europe and the Pacific respectively, voiced “grave” misgivings about the use of the atom bomb and deemed it “completely unnecessary” in achieving the military objective (Takaki, 1995, 30). Their views were supported in a 1946 report by the U.S. Bombing Survey that concluded, “certainly prior to 31 December 1945 and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945 [the date of the planned Kyushu invasion in Japan], Japan would have surrendered even if the bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated” (13).

Given the seemingly inevitable collapse of the Japanese, it is surprising that the war did not come to a close any sooner than it had. As early as spring of 1945, evidence mounted that the capacity of the Japanese air force to defend its homeland against heavy bombardment was rapidly deteriorating. This information led Acting Secretary of State Joseph Grew that the Japanese would be open to a negotiated peace. Grew firmly believed that the Japanese were so nearly beaten by the end of May 1945 that they would in all likelihood would capitulate if the unconditional surrender doctrine that Truman had inherited from Roosevelt were modified to allow the retention of the Japanese Emperor, a revered symbol of the Japanese dynasty (Miles, 1985, p.124). However, Truman’s reluctance to revise the popular expectation that Japan would have to surrender unconditionally remained the sticking point in ending the war through normal diplomatic channels.

While there was much debate in the White House about the efficacy of the bomb in securing military objectives, perhaps the single most significant change in military strategy developed in the air war over Europe and Japan as the nature of warfare was being radically redefined. Combatants were engaged on a path toward total war in which technological advances, coupled with the increasing effectiveness of an air strategy, began to undermine the ethical view that civilians should not be targeted (Takaki, 1995, 26). The aerial assaults on Dresden and Tokyo served as reminders of how overwhelmingly destructive these tactics could be. This pattern of wholesale destruction blurred the distinction between military and civilian casualties. In the Pacific, war-wearied soldiers began to adopt the ‘better us than them’ mentality, causing one colonel to proclaim, “We intend to seek out and destroy the enemy wherever he or she is, in the greatest possible numbers, in the shortest possible time. For us, THERE ARE NO CIVILIANS IN JAPAN” (Quoted in Takaki, 1995, 29). To the extent that there were codes of conduct in warfare, prior to World War II, much of the West

adhered to a model of war which spared civilian lives whenever possible. However, the expansion of the air war led military planners into a new tactic of mass bombing. This revolutionary change in air war strategy generated a certain military logic that the use of the bomb was justified to win the war, even if innocent civilians were made the intended targets. Given the new moral climate, Bernstein concludes, “any nation that had the A-bomb would probably have used it against enemy peoples” (1995, 151). What made the situation unique for the U.S. was that it was the only country that possessed the technological capabilities to manufacture the bomb.

To the extent that the bomb was a military necessity at the war front, domestic political pressure weighed in heavily into making the fateful decision. The Manhattan Project was a bureaucratic industrial colossus with over 120,000 employees and facilities all over the country (Takaki, 1995, 38). By early 1945, federal expenditure for this project was approaching two billion dollars. Truman’s advisor knew that Congress would not continue to blindly commit so much money to a project mired with uncertainty. High-ranking military officials were increasingly concerned about the war ending before the U.S. could successfully use the bomb in combat situation. According to Byrnes, such an event would dispose Congress to cancel future appropriations, followed by ‘relentless investigation and criticism’ (Quoted in Takaki, 1995, 39). The Manhattan Project could have seemed a huge waste if its value had not been demonstrated by the use of the atomic bomb. While there is evidence to suggest that Truman was aware of the domestic political concerns in avoiding the bomb’s use, it is difficult to conclusively determine how, and to what extent, it factored into Truman’s decision⁵.

“Impressing” the Soviets

Given the preponderance of evidence to deconstruct the myth that the bomb was dropped to save a half million American lives, revisionist historians have argued that the U.S. dropped the atomic bombs not to defeat Japan but to project U.S. primacy in the imminent Soviet-American conflict. Without a doubt then, American leaders wanted to take advantage of the real and psychological power that the bomb would bring to the U.S. in the postwar world.

To be sure, U.S. leaders had alternative measures to pursue in ending the war. They had the option of intensifying conventional warfare, modifying the surrender terms to allow for the continuation of the Japanese imperial institution, providing an explicit warning or non-combat demonstration of the new weapon, or awaiting Soviet entry into the war. The emphasis here is clearly placed on the choice that was given to the leaders in making a decision. The main argument advanced by the revisionists is that policymakers, while knowing that Japan was on the verge of surrender in the summer of 1945, rushed to use the bomb because they thought that the Soviet Union’s entry into the Pacific might produce a speedy surrender and therefore not allow the U.S. to use the bomb in combat to “impress” the soviets⁶ (Bernstein, 1976, xvi). General Groves described the bomb’s larger purpose more explicitly in his testimony to the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission: “There was never from about two weeks from the time I took charge of this Project any illusion on my part but that Russia was our enemy, and the Project was conducted on that basis” (Takaki, 1995,

7).

Until the late 1960's, few took seriously the revisionist analyses on the bomb, largely because it had little supporting documentation. In the years following the war, the memoirs of policymakers like Truman and Stimson reaffirmed the notion that the bomb was used to end the war promptly and to save American lives. Critics found it easy to challenge the conclusions drawn by the revisionists, especially since revisionists were actually assaulting the honesty and integrity of policymakers⁷. However, further studies showed a clear pattern that began to develop in memoirs, books and interviews by administration associates in which they indicated that the Soviets were clearly on the minds of the top officials in reaching a verdict. A recollection in 1949 by a top nuclear physicist Leo Szilard seemed to prove that the revisionists were not far off in their claims. In writing about an encounter with Byrnes in May 1945, Szilard writes "Mr. Byrnes did not argue that it was necessary to use the bomb against...Japan in order to win the war...[his]...view was that our possessing and demonstrating the bomb would make Russia more manageable in Europe" (Quoted in Bernstein, 1976, xvii).

With his influential text *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (1965), Gar Alperovitz gave credence to the revisionist interpretation by pointing out the bomb's great influence on American diplomacy in the months leading up to Hiroshima, particularly the Potsdam Conference, and Truman's carefully orchestrated "strategy of delayed showdown," which required a "delay of all disputes with Russia until the bomb had been demonstrated" (Alperovitz, 1976, 58). The bomb had profoundly influenced the attitude American policymakers took in their approach in dealing with the Soviets, as they were convinced that U.S. nuclear capabilities would permit them to take a firm stance in subsequent negotiations.

The documents prior to the Potsdam Conference reveal that Truman coordinated the meeting with the Alamogordo atomic test to see if he would have the nuclear bomb in his arsenal in addressing international concerns. As late as June 18, records indicate that the United States looked upon the Soviets as an ally, needing their military support to win the Pacific war. The War Department advised Truman that, "Russian entry will have a profound military effect in that almost certainly it will materially shorten the war and thus save American lives" (Takaki, 1995, 56). Agreeing with this view, Truman went the meeting with Stalin at Potsdam with the full intention of getting all the assistance in the war that was possible from the Soviets. The official White House explanation for postponing the original July 1 date to mid-July was to give the President ample time to prepare. Statements like, "we were under incredible pressure to get it [the atomic explosion] done before the Potsdam meeting" by Los Alamos director Oppenheimer make it clear what kind of preparations Truman was alluding to (Takaki, 1995, 57). Secretary of War Stimson proved to be vital in delaying the conference. He had calculated that the atomic bomb would be a dominant factor in the discussions with Stalin and thought it would be best to wait until the experimental bomb had been successfully tested. In his personal diary, Stimson referred to the new weapon as a "master card," which he wanted to have "in hand" at the Potsdam Conference (Takaki, 1995, 58).

While long-term postwar concerns continued to occupy policymakers, the atomic

strategy against Japan was closely linked to the fear of Soviet expansion in Asia. U.S. leaders were well aware of the Russian promise at Yalta to enter the war against Japan three months after Germany's surrender on May 7 (Takaki, 1995, 65). With the U.S. invasion of Japan scheduled for November 1, U.S. officials were hesitant about the joint mission with Russia in which Russia would have leverage at the peace table. However, the successful detonation at Alamogordo had changed everything. Secretary of State Byrnes was quoted as saying, "neither the President nor I, were anxious to have them [the Russians] enter the war after we had learned of this successful test" (Takaki, 1995, 65). The bomb meant that the U.S. no longer needed Russian military assistance to win the Pacific war. If anything, Russian intervention would only serve to threaten American postwar interests. Whatever its short-term military effect, the bomb, if successful, had clear long-term political and diplomatic implications. Virtually all of the president's principal advisors were in agreement over the issue. The overall consensus was that the bomb would be a revolutionary new force in shaping American policy and serve as a means for dealing with many of the problems of the postwar world, if not a total solution and the basis for a Pax Americana (Messer, 1982, 88).

"Racializing" the War

Intersecting the volatile political situation at this time was the reality of race in American culture. Anti-Asian prejudices, with its roots in the nineteenth century, contributed to the way Americans quickly racialized World War II in Asia (Takaki, 1995, 7). With racist views towards the Japanese reaching its peak in the aftermath of the devastating surprise attack at Pearl Harbor, Americans began to categorize World War II as two wars – the European war and the Pacific war. In Europe, identifying Hitler and the Nazis as the enemy was delineated from the German people as a whole. Conversely, in the Pacific, American anger was generally aimed at an entire people – the "Japs" (Takaki, 1995, 8). During the war, the Japanese were often characterized as demons, savages, beasts and subhuman (Dower, 1996, 173).

E.B. Sledge details the mindset of a typical American soldier in a battle against the Japs. He writes, "you developed an attitude of no mercy because they [the Japanese] had no mercy on us. It was a no-quarter kind of thing... I've seen guys shoot Japanese wounded when it really was not necessary and knock gold teeth out of their mouths... the way you extracted gold teeth was by putting the tip of the blade on the tooth of the dead Japanese – I've seen guys do it to wounded ones – and hit the hilt of the knife to knock the tooth loose" (1995, p.). The fact that these heinous acts were not carried out on the European front indicates that American hatred towards the Japanese was not solely based on their enemy status. Historian John Dower summed it up best when he wrote, "it is virtually inconceivable, however, that teeth, ears, and skulls could have been collected from German or Italian war dead and publicized in the Anglo-American countries without provoking and uproar; and in this we have yet another inkling of the racial dimensions of the war" (1986, p.66).

In citing that racial motivations might have made the decision to use the bomb easier, it is easy to overlook the fact that the bomb would have been used against the Germans if it

had been available prior to their surrender on May 7. The Manhattan Project was initiated as a direct response to German advances in nuclear capabilities and it is quite evident that Roosevelt and his chief aides assumed the bomb was a legitimate weapon that would be used first against Nazi Germany (Bernstein, 1995, p.136). Interestingly enough, all of Roosevelt's advisors who knew about the bomb always spoke of "after it is used" or "when it is used," and never "if it is used" (Bernstein, 1995, p.138). One cannot challenge the timetable that made the first bomb available only after Germany had surrendered, leaving Japan as the only potential Axis target. In addition, the directive issued to Colonel Paul Tibbets in September 1944 instructed him to train two bomber groups to make simultaneous drops on Germany and Japan (Newman, 1995, 29). These two facts do not eliminate American racism as a contributing factor in using the bomb. However, the racism argument alone is wholly insufficient in explaining the dropping of the bomb on Japan.

Conclusion

Given the complexity of the decision, it is no wonder that perhaps no other events during World War II have generated as much scholarly controversy in recent memory than the atomic bombing of Japan. In analyzing the various motivations contributing to Truman's decision, many factors merit consideration. They are, but not limited to, military reasons, desire for atomic diplomacy ("impressing" the Soviets), racism, the need for a number of scientists to validate their work, fear of Congressional investigation for a two billion dollar expenditure, and the immeasurable momentum of the Manhattan Project itself in propelling the administration to use the bomb.

No serious historian today fully believes that the bomb was used primarily as a means of saving American lives. In considering the counterfactual in which the bomb would not have been used, historians conclude that the bomb's impact in achieving military objectives was quite nebulous. If the bomb was used with the intent of gaining leverage in future negotiations with the Soviets, it had quite the opposite effect. Immediately after Hiroshima, Stalin ordered Soviet nuclear scientists to catch up technologically with their rival, setting off the race for world dominance. With the Soviets successfully testing its first atomic bomb on 23 September 1949, the transition to the atomic age had been made.

Scholars today are blessed with a wide range of sources in studying the topic. With much of the evidence already uncovered, it is hard to say if new developments will be made from current archival research. Experts continue to disagree on some issues, but the critical questions have been answered. Recent scholarship has dealt with the same motivations for Truman's decision, varying only on the emphasis put on one factor in favor of another. One thing is clear. The bomb was not an absolute necessity in winning the Pacific war. However, the dominant assumption in both the Roosevelt and Truman administration was that the bomb would be used against the enemy. Given the bomb's assumed legitimacy as a war weapon, all other considerations for its usage became secondary. In this way, the bomb served a dual role in promptly ending the war and establishing U.S. hegemony worldwide.

Bibliography

- . Consequently, the public at large never knew about the bomb until its use. In a democratic nation, it is something to be said about a decision of this magnitude being made at the hands of a few politicians much to the exclusion of the people. For a brief treatment, see Bernstein, 1995, p. 135.
- . There were some exceptions, most notably the nuclear scientists from the Manhattan Project's Chicago laboratory. In what has become known as the Franck Report, James Franck, Leo Szilard, and other physicists raised moral and political questions about using the atomic bomb. They recommended alternatives to a surprise attack by advocating a noncombat demonstration of the bomb. The noncombat demonstration was rejected on further review for being too risky. Potential risks of the bomb: might fail to detonate, inadequately impress the Japanese (and for that matter, the rest of the world), or kill Allied POWs whom the Japanese might place in the targeted areas (Bernstein, 1995, p. 144).
- . As for the Japanese, an estimated 70,000 troops and 150,000 Okinawan civilians lost their lives in that month period.
- . This is not to suggest that those casualty estimations were trivial. An argument can be made that saving 500 American lives would have warranted the dropping of the bomb, even if it fell short of the 500,000 lives Truman discussed.
- . To say that Truman rushed the decision to use the bomb in order to avoid a political scandal at home would be irresponsible. However, judging by the memoranda that were exchanged between the ranking officials, we cannot totally dismiss its impact.
- . The implication of this claim is that the combat use of the bomb further damaged an already weak U.S.-Soviet American relationship by intimidating the Soviets, holding the U.S. partially accountable for triggering the Cold War. Moreover, some have argued that the failure to include the Soviets in the nuclear program made international control of atomic energy impossible. However, these arguments, which are crucial to the geopolitical developments in the late 20th Century, are beyond the scope of this paper.
- . Of particular salience is the level of trust and confidence with which the American public at this time viewed their Government (Marwil, Lecture). Given this favorable view of the leaders in Washington, it is not surprising that they were reluctant to accept the revisionist interpretation that officials had manipulated public opinion to gain support for the dropping of the bomb.