Truman’s Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb

“Rain of Ruin” or “Gift from Heaven”

Bill Mitchell

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On May 7, 1945, the German High Command surrendered to the Allied Command at Reims, Germany. The five year long, murderous conflict in Europe was over. On July 15, 1945, Harry S. Truman, President of the United States, arrived in Berlin in preparation for the Potsdam Conference to meet with Communist Party General Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union, and Prime Ministers, Winston Churchill and Clement Atlee of Great Britain. As they gazed out upon the war torn ruins of Berlin, both President Truman and Admiral William Leahy, who was Truman’s Chief of Staff, were struck by the devastation; Leahy noted, “It brought home to those of us the horrors of modern war as we fought the war from Washington.”¹ A depressed Truman reflected on the fates of previous civilizations and he, “thought of Carthage, Baalbeck, Jerusalem, Rome . . .”² Truman must have recollected his grim experience as an artilleryman during World War I as he gazed out on the German wasteland, and observed, “that he had never seen such destruction.”³

As Truman prepared for momentous discussions about the post-war arrangements in Europe, he received a note from Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, and George C. Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, that the Trinity test of the atomic bomb had been successful.⁴ A coded message sent by General Leslie Groves, head of the

¹ William D. Leahy, I Was There: The Personal Story of the Chief of Staff of Presidents Roosevelt and Truman Based On His Notes and Diaries Made at the Time (New York: Whittlesey House, 1950), 396.
successful. 4 A coded message sent by General Leslie Groves, head of the Manhattan project confirmed on July 16, 1945, that the Manhattan project was successful. “Operated on this morning. Diagnosis not yet complete but results seem satisfactory and already exceed expectations.”5 This event would lead Truman to make one of the more controversial decisions of 20th century American history, a decision that would soon envelop the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in a nuclear nightmare; the destruction of Berlin that Truman had just witnessed would pale in comparison. The American strategy had been perfected—the atomic bomb was ready.

Historians have debated whether Truman made the right decision when he employed the use of the atomic bomb. Truman’s justification for using the bomb was that it ended the war, or at least ended it sooner and thereby saved countless American and Japanese lives. But had it? Had not Japan been defeated and was she not already on the threshold of surrender? Considering the alternatives that Truman could have considered, did Truman make the right decision when he employed the use of the atomic bomb? Did this decision bring about the immediate surrender of the Japanese, and prevent further costly struggle and bloodshed of combatants and civilians on both sides?

An examination of the facts indicates that, considering the alternatives available to him, Truman made the correct decision to use the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and that his decision was decisive in bringing an immediate end to the abominable war in the Pacific.

Orthodox and revisionist historians are at odds as to whether or not it was

necessary to unleash atomic warfare on Japan to end World War II. Beginning in the 1960's, the popular view of Truman's decision was challenged. New historical documents were available. They included the personal writings of Truman and secret Japanese military and diplomatic messages that had been deciphered under Project Ultra.

A new wave of historians led by Barton Bernstein, Gar Alperovitz, Kai Bird, and Martin Sherwin, to name a few, argued that it was not necessary for President Truman to decide to drop the atomic bomb. Japan was ready to capitulate, and a large number of Japanese cities already lay in ruin as they had been devastated by conventional bombing. The Japanese home islands were effectively blockaded by the American Navy, and the Soviet Union had entered the war.

A number of influential Americans criticized Truman. General Dwight D. Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe felt depressed that Truman had made the decision as he believed that “Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary.” Eisenhower made the moral argument that world opinion was shocked by this act because Japan had attempted to surrender with a minimum loss of face.\(^6\) In a later article, Eisenhower noted that Stimson was highly agitated by Eisenhower's response. Eisenhower concluded that “it wasn’t necessary to hit them with that awful thing.”\(^7\)

Ironically, Eisenhower should have understood what it means to make critical decisions. Cornelius Ryan, an author of popular WWII histories, in *The Last Battle* (1966) lambasts Eisenhower for not taking Berlin. Ryan's criticism was that Ike was duped by Stalin and stopped his forces at the Elbe River seventy miles short of


Berlin, and thus was responsible for the Cold War problems that beset Germany after the War.

It is interesting to note Admiral Leahy’s revision of his opinion especially in light of the fact that he participated as an advisor at Potsdam. Leahy contended later that the bomb had been of “no material assistance,” that the Japanese were on the verge of surrender, and that since the United States had been the first to use the atomic bomb in warfare, the U. S. had violated international ethical standards. Leahy asserted that he had not “been taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children.”

The authors of the Strategic Bombing Survey’s official report on the Pacific War in 1946 concluded that the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs did not defeat Japan. It was the Survey's opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated. The Survey also accepted the testimony of Japanese enemy leaders that these bombs did not persuade Japan to accept unconditional surrender. The effect of the atomic bombs, conventional air power, naval blockade and the Soviet entry into the war, “jointly and cumulatively” were a “lubrication” of a peace making machinery set in motion months before the atomic attacks.

This same survey also acknowledged that despite their catastrophic losses, the Japanese still possessed an asset, which was the willingness of their pilots to meet certain death. The reports noted that if sufficient Japanese planes attacked simultaneously, they

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might be sufficient to cause damage beyond that which the American government and public would be willing to endure.

Revisionist historian, Gar Alperovitz, in *Atomic Diplomacy* (1963), constructed a thesis which contended that the American refusal to modify its “unconditional surrender” demand needlessly prolonged Japan’s resistance. Alperovitz emphasized statements made by John McCloy.

John McCloy, Assistant Secretary of War, was convinced that if the U.S. had in mid-1945 tendered an offer to the Japanese that they could retain the Emperor, that this proposal, coupled with the threat of the atomic bomb, would have compelled the Japanese to surrender. Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, acknowledged that McCloy was influential in the Administration and very involved in the preliminary discussions about the bomb.\(^{10}\)

McCloy was present at some of the most important government meetings in 1945, including discussions by the Committee of 3 (Sec. of War Stimson, Sec. of the Navy James Forrestal, and Acting Sec. of State Joseph Grew) of how to get Japan to surrender. McCloy startled people at the important June 18, 1945, meeting that President Truman held with the U.S. military heads. It was at this meeting that Truman approved an invasion of mainland Japan, scheduled for Nov. 1, 1945. When Truman asked McCloy if he had any alternative to an invasion, McCloy did not hold back:

We ought to have our heads examined if we don’t explore some other method by which we can terminate this war than just by another conventional attack and landing.\(^{11}\)


\(^{11}\) Minutes of Meeting held at the White House, June 18, 1945, Miscellaneous Historical Documents Collection, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, “The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb,” http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/documents/pdfs/21.pdf#zoom=100
Truman asked what Mc Cloy had in mind; Mc Cloy offered his ideas for obtaining surrender by diplomatic methods.

Some communication to the Japanese government which would spell out the terms that we would settle for — there would be a surrender: I wouldn’t use again the term “unconditional surrender,” but it would be a surrender that would mean that we would get all the important things that we were fighting for . . . if we could accomplish our objectives without further bloodshed, there was no reason why we shouldn’t attempt to do it.\textsuperscript{12}

For a moment it seemed that the meeting was over and the conferees started to stand up. The President stopped them, and told them no one would leave the meeting without committing themselves to a course of action. Once again, Truman asked Mc Cloy for his view.

Mc Cloy stated that America had command of the sea and air and, in addition, possessed the atomic bomb. Japan should be allowed to keep the Emperor on a constitutional basis and also have access to but not control over vital raw materials. The President, Mc Cloy went on, should send the Emperor, or the Suzuki government, a personal message outlining this offer, with the threat that if it was not accepted the United States would have no alternative but to employ a new weapon, the atom bomb on Japan.

The last two words had an electrifying effect.

Mc Cloy “sensed the chills that ran up and down the spines” of his listeners. Everyone in the room knew about the bomb, but it was such a secret that except in private conversations, it was rarely mentioned. Mc Cloy later wrote that “everyone was so intent on winning the war by military means that the introduction of political considerations was almost accidental.”\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} John Mc Cloy, \textit{The Challenge to American Foreign Policy} (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1953), 42.
They discussed the possible use of the atomic bomb and, without any formal statement, the decision to use it, in essence, was confirmed. Truman told Mc Cloy to “give further thought to this message but don’t mention the bomb at this stage.”

Sadao Asada, Professor Emeritus of History at Doshisha University in Kyoto made a compelling argument when he stated that those parties who argue that by August 1945, Japan was virtually a defeated nation are correct, and that the bombings were not necessary, are confusing the terms defeat and surrender. “Defeat is a military fait accompli,” he argues, “whereas surrender is the formal acceptance of defeat by the nation’s leaders, an act of decision making.” The Japanese ruling hierarchy was still in gridlock.

Historian Robert J. C. Butow has written about the impact of the bomb on the Japanese leadership. Butow has analyzed the Japanese decision to surrender using Japanese sources. He stresses that the Japanese hawks would never surrender, but that the Japanese doves would surrender conditionally; however, it still took the dropping of the atomic bombs to precipitate this movement. The doves were able to surmount their fear of military reprisal when a greater danger appeared: the imminent loss of the Emperor in the peace faction. Even before the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the declaration of war against Japan by the Soviets, Japan's doves realized that Japan's defeat was certain.

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14 Minutes of Meeting held at the White House, June 18, 1945.
Butow's considered judgment was that the Japanese leaders themselves didn't know when they would have surrendered if Hiroshima and Nagasaki had not been bombed. If the U. S. employed the atomic bomb, which could bring mass destruction easily and instantly, and along with the loss of the Soviet Union as a possible mediator of a negotiated surrender, then defeat - and the destruction of the emperor system - became an imminent threat. Of course, it should be noted that the Japanese sources are somewhat problematical. In the weeks before General Douglas MacArthur arrived in conquered Japan, the Japanese government destroyed much of their archives in fear that the Allies might use information contained in them as evidence in war crime trials. Rather than being able to obtain documents that were current to the time studied, the sources are tainted in that they were created post-surrender; Japanese officials contradicted themselves with obsequious documents prepared for the American victors.

Len Giovannitti and Fred Freed, writers for the New York Times, point to statements by Lewis Strauss, the Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Navy, James Forrestal, that a demonstration explosion would have convinced Japan's leaders to quit. Strauss recommended that an atomic bomb be dropped on a large forest of cryptomeria trees not far from Tokyo. On May 29, 1945, apparently dissenting from the Targeting Committee's recommendations, General Marshall addressed the subject of ending the war with limited casualties by proposing that the bomb be used against a strictly military target like a naval base, and if that attack was not effectual then the U. S. would prepare a list of industrial targets and a warning for people to leave that area. A number of cities

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17 Ibid., 193.
19 Len Giovannitti and Fred Freed, The Decision to Drop the Bomb (New York: Coward-McCann, 1965), 145.
would be selected and one would be picked at random for attack with warnings sent to each proposed target for the population to evacuate. Marshall noted, "We must offset by such warning methods the opprobrium which might follow from an ill considered employment of such force."\textsuperscript{20} Barton J. Bernstein relies heavily on this document and concludes that a few figures such as Marshall and Stimson were "caught between an older morality that opposed the intentional killing of noncombatants and a newer one that stressed virtually total war."\textsuperscript{21}

There are those critics who hedge their bets by accepting the destruction of Hiroshima, but insist the U. S. did not give the Japanese enough time to respond to this event, and hence, the bombing of Nagasaki was unnecessary and amounted to "overkill."

General Carl Spaatz, commander of U. S. strategic bombing operations in the Pacific, was so shaken by the destruction at Hiroshima that he telephoned his superiors in Washington proposing that the next bomb be dropped on a less populated area so that it "would not be as devastating to the city and the people."\textsuperscript{22} The record does show that Truman realized the kind of victims the bombs consumed when, in a statement to his cabinet on August 10, 1945, Truman explained his reluctance to drop a third bomb: "The thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible . . . and he didn't like the idea of killing all those kids."\textsuperscript{23} Certainly, the bombing of Nagasaki was regrettable, but


how many days of stubborn enemy silence should the U. S. have been expected passively to endure? The Japanese government failed to adopt the course which could almost certainly have saved Nagasaki from destruction: a swift communication to the Americans (not the Soviets) declaring a readiness to quit. Even as the reports of Nagasaki were announced on August 9th, the Japanese War Minister, General Anami, made one last clarion call for national honor, and he beseeched the Japanese Supreme Council, “Would it not be wondrous for this whole nation to be destroyed like a beautiful flower?” Even after Hiroshima, the Japanese militants were devoted to that “Last Decisive Battle”, a Japanese Armageddon, which would somehow atone for the defeats and suffering Japan had suffered at the hands of the Americans. Truman’s radio address on August 9th on Potsdam was directed to fanatical militants like Anami, “We shall continue to use it until we completely destroy Japan’s power to make war. Only a Japanese surrender will stop us.”

Further proof of the maniacal military mindset was revealed in a communiqué from Japanese Imperial Headquarters when the military accused the United States of preventing Japan from establishing their “hegemony over the world”. The atomic bomb was just another weapon in the American arsenal. The war would go on and Japan would fight to the death until the Japanese nation ceased to exist. If two atomic bombs dropped in quick succession would not compel the Japanese to surrender, what would?

The most prevalent argument that criticized Truman was the cynical assertion that Japanese lives were sacrificed as a result of “atomic diplomacy”, and the use of the

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25 Ibid.
atomic bombs gave the United States the upper hand in the game of power politics between the United States and the Soviet Union at the end of the war.

On May 14 and 15, Stimson had several conversations involving S-1 (the atomic bomb); during a talk with Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy, he estimated that possession of the bomb gave Washington a tremendous advantage as it "held all the cards," and held a "royal straight flush" in dealing with Moscow on post-war problems: Stimson continued, "They can't get along without our help and industries and we have coming into action a weapon which will be unique." The next day a discussion of divergences with Moscow over the Far East made Stimson wonder whether the atomic bomb would be ready when Truman met with Stalin in July. If it was, Stimson believed that the bomb would be the "master card" in U.S. diplomacy.27

This and other entries from the Stimson diary are important to arguments developed by Gar Alperovitz, that in light of controversies with the Soviet Union over Eastern Europe and other areas, top officials in the Truman administration believed that possessing the atomic bomb was more important as a diplomatic weapon because of the role it would play in diplomacy not because of its role in war. In the midst of an explosive confrontation with Stalin over the Polish issue, Secretary of War Stimson urged discussion of the bomb because (as he told Truman) it had "such a bearing on our present foreign relations with the Soviet Union."28

27 Secretary of War Henry Stimson's Diary Stimson Diary Entries on the Connection between S-1 (atomic bomb) and Foreign Relations - Russia in Particular( May 14-15, 1945), Nuclear Files.org Project of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation http://www.nuclearfiles.org/menu/library/correspondence/stimson-henry/corr_diary_stimson.htm
It was also argued that the two cities were of little military value. Many more civilians were killed than military personnel. The Japanese should have been warned so that civilians could evacuate. Interested in producing the "greatest psychological effect," the Interim Committee members agreed that they could not give the Japanese any warning and that they should target vital war plants that employed a large number of workers. The factories should be closely surrounded by workers' houses. There was also the fear that the bomb might be a dud, and more importantly, that the Japanese might put American prisoners of war in the area.²⁹

At this meeting, Dr. Robert Oppenheimer stated that although the damage from one atomic bomb would not differ much from the effect caused by any major Air Corps strike of present dimensions then ongoing in Japan, "the visual effect of an atomic bombing would be tremendous."³⁰ Bernstein argues that this target choice represented an uneasy endorsement of "terror bombing" because the target was not exclusively military or civilian; nevertheless, workers' housing would include noncombatant men, women, and children.³¹

Proponents for the continuation of conventional firebombing aver that the bombing campaign would have caused as much significant damage to Japan without making the U. S. the first nation to use nuclear weapons. On June 18, 1945, Truman consulted his advisors about the ability of air power alone to defeat Japan. Truman called for opinions from each, beginning with Marshall. The Army Chief of Staff, George C. Marshall, insisted that there was no choice but to invade the main islands. Air power

³⁰ Ibid.
³¹ Bernstein, 1995, 144.
alone, he said, said, was simply not enough to conquer Japan. Lieutenant General Ira Eaker, standing in for Hap Arnold, confirmed this judgment; the air arm had not been able to subdue the Germans. Admiral King also supported Marshall as did Stimson.\textsuperscript{32}

If one recoils from the carnage and suffering depicted in John Hersey’s *Hiroshima*, an examination of the bomber offensive is just as repulsive. It is easy for critics to venture the opinion that we could have used conventional bombing to precipitate a surrender. How long would have conventional bombing continued? Would it have ceased on August 6 or continued into 1946? Considering that the Japanese still maintained thousands of aircraft, how many B-29 crews would have perished? The totality of the Japanese population was engaged in war production.

General Curtis Le May pointed out that, “All you had to do was visit one of those targets after we’d roasted it, and see the ruins of multitude of tiny houses, with a drill press sticking up through the wreckage...” Le May then spoke of the doctrine of total war which the Japanese followed: “The entire population got into the act and worked to make those airplanes or munitions of war... men, women, and children. He acknowledges the moral implications: “We knew we were going to kill a lot of women and kids when we burned that town. Had to be done.”\textsuperscript{33}

Truman’s original argument, and the most persuasive line of reasoning for using the atomic bomb, still remains that Truman’s decision saved countless lives. The proposed mainland invasion of Japan would have created staggering casualties on both sides. This invasion would have caused the deaths of more American and British

\textsuperscript{32} Minutes of Meeting held at the White House, June 18, 1945.
servicemen than Japanese killed in the atomic bombings.

Gar Alperovitz, a critic of Truman's decision, addresses the claims that the atomic bombing saved lives. He argues that very few conventional targets remained to be bombed, and setting aside questions concerning the demand for unconditional surrender and the Russian entry into the war, the bomb was not necessary.\textsuperscript{34} Once again, an argument is based on "What If?" assumptions. His assertion is somewhat specious in that he is more concerned about the loss of Japanese lives than American lives.

Critics must take into account the bloody stepping stones that were leading up to the Japanese mainland. In the Philippines, rather than bypass Manila, Mac Arthur stormed it. The U. S. lost 8,140 men on Luzon while two-hundred thousand Japanese (a significant number starved to death) died there.\textsuperscript{35} Continuing on to the "bloody miniature" of Iwo Jima, a tragically expensive battle that was a combat statistical nightmare, the U. S. suffered 28,000 casualties. Eighteen thousand Japanese were killed. Only two hundred and sixteen Japanese soldiers survived. The kill ratio had foreboding implications for the future as it was a 1.0-0.7 casualty ratio.\textsuperscript{36}

The battle for the seizure of Okinawa resulted in one of the highest number of American casualties for any World War II engagement. Japan lost over 100,000 troops, and the Allies suffered more than 50,000 casualties. Simultaneously, more than 100,000 civilians (12,000 in action) were killed, wounded, or committed suicide. Approximately

\textsuperscript{34} Alperovitz, 342.  
one-quarter of the civilian population died due to the invasion.\textsuperscript{37} Planners for Operation Olympic, the assault on Kyushu, now had a ghastly clue what might befall the invaders of the Japanese homeland.

Barton Bernstein argues that the rationale for the bombings rested on a single, colossal fabrication, which he states has gained surprising currency: that the bombs were necessary in order to save a half-million or more American lives. These, supposedly are the lives that would have been lost in the planned invasion of Kyushu in December, then in the all-out invasion of Honshu in 1946, if that was needed; however, the worst case scenario for a full-scale invasion was forty-six thousand American lives lost.\textsuperscript{38}

On June 17, 1945, Truman’s diary reflected the first of many monumental decisions he had to make:

I have to decide Japanese strategy. Shall we invade Japan proper or shall we bomb and blockade? That is my hardest decision to date. But I’ll make it when I have all the facts.\textsuperscript{39}

On June 18, 1945, Truman met with his military representatives to discuss what steps he should take against Japan. Truman decided at that meeting to have the Joint Chiefs of Staff go ahead with plans to invade Kyushu. The date set for the invasion date was November 1, 1945.\textsuperscript{40}

There was another logistical imperative that required consideration: the Japanese troop strength on Kyushu. In the invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa the U.S. forces always had had a preponderance of combatants, respectively four times to one and two


\textsuperscript{39} Harry S. Truman, Diaries and Papers, Truman Library

\textsuperscript{40} Minutes of Meeting held at the White House, June 18, 1945.
and one-half times to one. In mid-June General Marshall had estimated Japanese strength on Kyushu at 350,000. By July 24 he was saying 500,000 and by August 6 his figure rose to 560,000. He was drawing these figures from the analysis conducted by U. S. intelligence services which were routinely intercepting and deciphering Japanese radio traffic in a secret operation known as Ultra. What Marshall did not know was that Ultra's estimates were unduly low and that by August 6 the Japanese force on Kyushu had reached 900,000. The invasion of Kyushu was scheduled for November 1, 1945 and by that date Japanese troop strength on Kyushu could well have been over 1 million, which meant that U.S. invasion forces would be heavily outnumbered when they landed.\(^{41}\)

Truman possessed an important, informational tool called Magic. This code name was given to the efforts that cracked Japanese diplomatic codes, and this program enabled the U. S. intelligence network to intercept Japan’s most secret diplomatic and military messages. A number of intercepts were revelatory. The Japanese Army Chief of Staff Umezu speculated as to the type of strategy Germany was utilizing in their “battle of resistance” to defend the German homeland as the Americans and Soviets pressed in from all sides. Japan would employ German practices to “defend their capital to the bitter end.”\(^ {42}\) These intercepts indicated that not only was Japan stepping up industrial production in Japan but particularly in northern China, Korea, and Manchuria in preparation for a fight to the bitter end. Japan was enhancing their military set-up in these countries to bring about “continental sufficiency.” In other words, if they lost the battle in the home islands, they would continue the fight in Manchuria.\(^ {43}\) If the war had

\(^{42}\) Allen and Polmar,194.
\(^{43}\) Ibid.,195.
continued into 1946 as projected, the military struggles throughout Asia would have continued, resulting in continuing, needless casualties in China, Korea, Southeast Asia, and other areas occupied by the Japanese.

Due to the Japanese militaristic stranglehold on the Japanese government and society, only the use of a catastrophic weapon would have compelled the Japanese to surrender. On April 20, 1945, the headquarters of the Imperial Japanese issued The Decree of the Homeland Decisive Battle which was a culmination of the belief system that the deluded Japanese military leaders and the credulous Japanese people had constructed. Civilians lived by two guides: The Cardinal Principles of Japanese Life, an ideological pronouncement extolling the virtues of the Japanese Army, and The Way of the Subject which proclaimed the national slogan, “A Hundred Million Hearts Beating as One.”

Tomes have been written about the Japanese Code of Bushido, the spirit of Kamikaze, and fanatical suicides, but a Japanese military guide should be mentioned, entitled, Read This Alone—And the War Can Be Won. It motivated the Japanese soldier. “The war is a struggle between races . . .”

John Dower, Pulitzer Prize winning historian of Embracing Defeat, illustrates the attitude of the Japanese soldier fighting fiercely and dying willingly with a poem that illustrates the Japanese martial fascination with death:

Across the sea, corpses soaking in the water;
Across the mountains, corpses heaped upon the grass.
We shall die by the side of our Lord.
We shall never look back.

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44 Allen and Polmar, 154-60.
45 Ibid., 164.
We shall die by the side of our Lord. We shall never look back.

Rather than mourn the tragic loss of the innocents at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, critics would be well served to probe the psyche of a people who were committed to fight to the death and prognosticate on those scenarios where U. S. Servicemen may have had to fight across the wasteland of Japan. Perhaps, a parallel can be drawn with the Vietnam War. An American army entered the homeland of the Vietnamese, had significant military advantages but could not extirpate the enemy from the countryside. History demonstrated that this type of fighting exacted a huge human cost in terms of fatalities for both sides.

The Japanese plan, if the Americans did invade, was to butcher as many Americans as possible in order to precipitate a decline in American fighting morale, influence American public opinion and engender a loss of confidence in American military and political leaders.\(^{47}\) Heavy U. S. losses would result in war weariness and pressure the U. S. for a negotiated end to the war with the Japanese military retaining power. A Report to the Throne on the progress of the war and how this strategy would play out was submitted by Admiral Oikawa, Chief of the Naval General Staff.

It is characteristic of Americans to hold human lives so dear, it is necessary that we take advantage of this weakness, and inflict tremendous losses on the enemy, using all possible methods.\(^{48}\)

It was apparent that the fire bombings of Tokyo and other Japanese cities, which resulted in hundreds of thousands of Japanese casualties, had caused no discernible reaction by the Japanese. Only devastating, atomic technology would bring the war to a close.

\(^{47}\)Dower, 231.  
\(^{48}\) Allen and Polmar, 169.
The Japanese were taciturn and vowed to fight on. On July 28, 1945, Premier Suzuki, when interviewed at a press conference in Tokyo continued to express a strong conviction for a Japanese victory. When asked what were his views regarding the Potsdam declaration, he answered that he did not find anything of value in the Declaration, and no other recourse than “to ignore it entirely and resolutely fight for the successful conclusion of this war.”

The atomic conclave was a small, secretive group. Truman received a note from Stimson on April 24, 1945, that there was an urgent matter they needed to discuss. It was the first time Truman had heard of the atomic bomb. Truman had no reason to ponder whether or not to use the weapon on Japan. Fundamentally, his decision was merely the implementation of long term assumptions and bureaucratic momentum that the bomb would be used.

It was inevitable from the start of the Manhattan project that the bomb would be used. “At no time from 1941 to 1945,” declared Secretary Stimson, “did I ever hear it suggested by the President or by another responsible member of the government, that atomic energy should not be used in the war.” Dr. J. Robert Oppenheimer confirmed this in 1954, when he recalled that, “we always assumed that if the atomic bombs were needed, they would be used.” After, all America was “engaged in a neck-and-neck race

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49 FRUS: Conference of Berlin (Potsdam), volume 2, 1293.
with the Germans,” and whoever developed the bomb first would be the victor in World War II.53

When the military realized that a weapon of this magnitude was being produced and would be ready to be tested in the summer of 1945, they made concrete plans. On May 11, the Targeting Committee had confirmed the selection of the Japanese targets and a B-29 squadron was trained for the specific job of delivering the bomb.54

After President Roosevelt's death, it fell to Stimson to brief the new President about the atomic weapon. At a White House meeting on April 25, he outlined the history and status of the program and predicted that "within four months we shall in all probability have completed the most terrible weapon ever known in human history."55

This meeting, like Stimson's last meeting with Roosevelt, dealt largely with the political and diplomatic consequences of the use of such a weapon rather than with the timing and manner of employment, the circumstances under which it would be used, or whether it would be used at all. The answers to these questions depended on factors not yet known. Stimson recommended, and the President approved, the appointment of a special committee to consider them.56 This special committee, known as the Interim Committee, played a vital role in the decision to use the bomb. The work of the Interim Committee, in Stimson's words, "ranged over the whole field of atomic energy, in its political, military, and scientific aspects."57

53Oppenheimer, Testimony of Dr. John A. Simpson, 303.
55Stimson, 1947, 99-100.
57Stimson, 1947, 100.
From 1941 to 1945, the United States won a war by enlisting the whole-hearted support of all its people and resources. Sacrifices were made overseas and at home as well. Truman’s failure to employ a weapon developed by the nation would have been a dereliction of his duty. In retrospect, it is simple to look back and say that Japan was already a conquered nation and to ask what could possibly justify the use of the atomic bomb that inhumanly killed so many thousands of helpless Japanese. This argument has been advanced often by critics, but it seems utterly fallacious.

The big “IF” is what would have happened if Truman had not used the atomic bomb when he did? Truman’s critics belabor the point that Japan was about to surrender. What would have happened if they had not surrendered and Truman was compelled to invade Japan rather than use the bomb?

There are any number of scenarios and alternative histories one can dwell upon. The poet, Robert Burns once wrote: “The best laid schemes o' Mice an' Men, Gang aft agley, . . .” Consider that the Allies would be facing an army of two million soldiers, millions of trained civilians, and thousands of Japanese suicide aircraft. It was one thing for the Japanese to fight on far flung islands, but what would happen when “white men” stepped on native soil? As the war ground to an end in the Pacific, the campaigns had become bloodier and blood would continue to spill copiously if an invasion had commenced at Kyushu.

The Japanese had introduced into their military campaigns in the Pacific during 1945 (Iwo Jima, Okinawa, Saipan, the Philippines and Japanese Homeland defense) a concept of fanatical resistance (kamikaze and suicide) which demonstrated their willingness for their military and civilians to “fight to the last man, woman, and child.”
General MacArthur's staff anticipated about 50,000 American casualties and several times that number of Japanese casualties in the November 1 operation to establish the initial beachheads on Kyushu. After that they expected a far more costly struggle before the Japanese homeland was subdued. There was every reason to think that the Japanese would defend their homeland with even greater fanaticism than when they fought to the death on Iwo Jima and Okinawa. No American soldier who survived the bloody struggles on these islands could have had much sympathy with the view that battle with the Japanese was over as soon as it was clear that their ultimate situation was hopeless. No, there was every reason to expect a terrible struggle long after the point at which some people can now look back and say, "Japan was already beaten."

A month after the peaceful occupation of Japan, General MacArthur said that even then, if the Japanese government had lost control over its people and the millions of former Japanese soldiers took to guerrilla warfare in the mountains, it could take a million American troops ten years to master the situation.59

Only the President could make the decision to drop the bomb. Truman was stalwart and made the best decision he could under the circumstances. Historians, critics, and other personages at the time may judge him harshly but it is doubtful if any decision but his could have been made.

The point man for Truman's public counter offensive was Henry L. Stimson. Stimson accepted that analyses of wartime decisions during peacetime were not

58 Hastings, 439-43.
evenhanded. Stimson noted that decisions made during wartime when rehashed in times of normalcy sound “harsh and unfeeling” but the reality of war dictates that every order given presages the promise of death for someone. Stimson stressed that he wanted to “satisfy the doubts of that rather difficult class of the community . . . namely educators and historians.” In a relative sense, the actions of a Marine sniper on Guadalcanal or a P-51 Pilot strafing a village road in Kyushu are as much a part of that process as any decisions made by Yamashita, MacArthur or Truman. There is no morality in war. There are only the dead.

Truman, who shared Stimson’s concern about how future historians might judge his bomb decision, repeated in private interviews, public statements and in his two-volume memoirs that he had always regarded the bomb strictly as a weapon and had no doubt or regret, either at the time or in retrospect, about the necessity or wisdom of its use against Japan. Any speculation about how things might have been done differently was based upon hindsight. Truman frequently cut off debate with the observation that “any schoolboy’s afterthought is worth more than all of the generals’ forethought.”

Gar Alperovitz admits that Truman, from the outset, insisted that the decision to use the bombs, and the responsibility it entailed, was his, but over the years, Alperovitz claims that Truman gave different and contradictory grounds for his decisions. Alperovitz suggested that Truman was motivated by revenge when the President testily responded to a clergyman who had criticized him. Truman admitted he was disturbed over the use of the atomic bombs but then was just as disturbed by the attack on Pearl Harbor and the murder of American prisoners of war. Truman added: When you deal

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with a beast, you have to treat him as a beast.”

Alonzo L. Hamby, a Truman biographer, writes that Truman did not shirk from taking up the mantle of responsibility, because Truman understood that the President had to make difficult decisions. Hamby references a May, 1945 conversation Truman had with Anthony Eden, the British Foreign Secretary during World War II. Truman affirmed that he “was here to make decisions, and whether they prove right or wrong I am going to make them.”

In an address to the House of Commons on August 20, 1945, Churchill defended Truman by stating that he was surprised that “worthy people, but people who in most cases had no intention of proceeding to the Japanese front themselves, should adopt a position that rather than throw this bomb we should have sacrificed a million American and a quarter of a million British lives.”

CONCLUSION

Amos Elon, in The Pity of It All: A History of the Jews in Germany, when writing about the Jewish holocaust, remarked that hindsight is not necessarily the best guide to understanding what really happened. The Past is often as distorted by hindsight as it is clarified by it. Margaret Thatcher, former British Prime Minister, once remarked that the

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64 Winston Churchill in a speech to the House of Commons, Time Magazine. August 27, 1945.
http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,792342,00.html#ixzz14j97yfot
wisdom of hindsight, so useful to historians and authors of memoirs, is sadly denied to practicing politicians.

Truman’s combat experience in World War I as an artillery battery commander must have had an impact on his making the decision to drop the bomb. As an artillery officer in the bloody Meuse-Argonne offensive, he experienced the trauma suffered by his 35th Division. This twenty-six thousand man division lost nearly seven thousand three hundred men during six days of fighting, and suffered the highest loss rate for any U. S. division during the war. Most of the casualties occurred within two or three miles of the artillery battery commanded by Captain Truman. Truman understood the devastation of war as only one who had lived and fought for six days in a “cemetery of unburied dead” could.65

It is risky business to engage in questionable psychoanalysis of how this experience must have impacted Truman’s later military decisions in World War II. Suffice it to say that President Truman who authorized the imminent invasion of Japan in the face of massive casualty estimates knew exactly what he was asking of American sailors, soldiers, marines and airmen. He understood it a level that most Americans today would find unfathomable.

Postwar historians challenged President Truman’s decision to use the atomic bombs to shorten the war and preserve American lives. They suggest that greater emphasis on negotiation could have prevented the atomic holocaust, that the atom bombs represented a cynical demonstration of American power, and that the twin suns of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not just the last targets of World War II but the first targets

of the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Truman realized that on July 16, 1945, the bomb would work and he viewed it as just another weapon to use. By using it, he avoided the Japanese Decisive Battle.

How many lives were saved? The grim calculus of World War II casualties in the Pacific has many aspects. Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa were an example of the tenor of the war in the Pacific. Ask no quarter and none will be given. The images of Japanese naval officers chopping off the hands of sailors who attempted to clamber into lifeboats seeking safety, and American soldiers standing astride the mouth of an Okinawan cave dousing Japanese women and children with the deadly gel of a flamethrower will always loom in the historic mist of the Japanese war. The insanity had to be stopped. It should not have been allowed to continue a single day. Geopolitics may have consumed the passions of his peers and critics but Truman’s main concern was to end the war quickly and save not only American but Japanese lives. The question of whose son will die today was answered by Truman. President Truman’s decision to use the bomb ended the war and saved those lives.
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