

Now I Am Become Death:

The decision to use the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

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American Diplomatic History

On the morning of July 16, 1945, only 25 days before the end of World War Two, an unfathomable explosion would scorch the New Mexico desert. Robert Oppenheimer, the creator of this explosion, this incarnation of death, would begin to recognize the power that he had unleashed. He saw this power; this experimental fire tucked safely between the mountains, and realized in shock how blindly America would take this fire out of the hearth and into the forest. He referenced the Hindu Scripture: “We knew the world would never be the same...Most people were silent...‘Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.’ I suppose we all thought that, one way or another” (Ziff 19). He would see the head of the explosion as death, rising above the desert. The military would immediately see the power as well. But they saw it as signaling the end of the war, not the incarnation of death. (Ziff 19). How does America make its decisions? What is the heart of the American machine, the justifications for war, punishment, or murder? What lies beneath all of these American decisions? Where do political bureaucracy, debate, and planning end, and the consideration of human life begin? To understand the last 60 years in world history, one must grasp the events that took place leading up to and after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the summer of 1945. The decision for the United States to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki as a means to end World War Two and the Japanese resistance was ultimately the worst possible decision. It is impossible to know for certain what would have occurred if America had avoided dropping the bomb. There is some interesting evidence of the causality possibilities of a land invasion, the planned *Operation Downfall*, being extremely high. However, the decision that was made can be seen as being extremely poor. Japan was on its way towards defeat, and America would tragically ignore this to her own benefit. This tragic mistake can be seen

in the rapid deterioration of Japan, the opinions and perspective of those high up in the armed forces, the deliberation over the decision, the bombing itself, its immediate toll on human life and civilization in Japan, and its effects on the arms race in the Cold War.

The bomb would be used solely to end the war. Germany had surrendered after Hitler's suicide, the nation's forces diminished and its efforts ended. The entire focus of American military power would be Japan. A comparison, however, can be drawn between Japan and Germany before the surrender of both of these nations. Germany had been surrounded on its Eastern and Western fronts, and an invasion was imminent. The same was true for Japan. Similarly, both nations were home to some of the most fervent nationalism seen in history (Faragher et al 751). Why, then, would the bomb have to be dropped, with Japanese morale deteriorating?

Many argue that civilians in Japan were still fueled, willing to fight and die until the bitter end. Some, like historian Victor David Hanson, claim that the Japanese would continue purposely fighting this losing battle. Hanson would cite the battle of Okinawa, which, he discusses accurately, "cost 50,000 American casualties and 200,000 Japanese and Okinawa dead. Okinawa saw the worst losses in the history of the U.S. Navy. Over 300 ships were damaged, more than 30 sunk, as about 5,000 sailors perished under a barrage of some 2,000 Kamikaze attacks" (Hanson 1). These figures are very possible, although they were kept from the soldiers. My grandfather, Jerome Weiner, a navy veteran stationed at Okinawa just following the invasion, remembers this lack of knowledge: "How [Okinawa had been secured people didn't talk about it. I don't know whether this was by design, but it wasn't spoken of. They just didn't talk about it, and it wasn't known about for a while" (Weiner). Also, the Japanese Imperial Army responded

to Operation August Storm (The Soviet invasion) by urging its already weakened forces to fight “to the last man” (Fussell). Both of these arguments are fairly valid. However, when they are paired together, a fallacy is revealed. Japan’s strategy of “all-out war” could not have an effective longevity, logically, as Japan had only so many soldiers! Also, a difficult battle, such as Okinawa, does not justify an atomic bombing of a nation. If America had followed this logic they might have utilized the atomic bomb on Germany after the Battle of the Bulge. Therefore, the argument is not valid.

The Japanese had been fighting, but were using an ineffective strategy in the long term. In fact, Gar Alperovitz, former Fellow of King’s College, Cambridge and of the Institute of Politics at Harvard and famed historian, illustrates the “trajectory” of Japan was simply one of failure. An intelligence report issued by the Combined U.S. British Intelligence Committee on July 8, 1945 would convey that “A considerable portion of the Japanese population now consider absolute military defeat to be probable. The increasing effects of sea blockade and the cumulative devastation wrought by strategic bombing...should make this realization increasingly general,” (Alperovitz 17).

Even the U.S. Secretary of War, Henry L. Stimson, would issue a secret memo to Truman stating that America has “enormously favorable factors” on her side. Among these factors, he lists Japan’s lack of allies, naval forces, food and industrial resources or a source of these resources (Stimson 197). He calls to attention Japan’s vulnerability to attack upon their existing materials. Stimson would later attempt to justify this statement, which he appeared to disagree with, in his essay, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb”. Almost ironically, he would cite a similar memo that appears to state the exact

opposite, in a similar list, to the other, earlier memo. This will be discussed in full, in terms of the estimation of the costs of the war. (Stimson 201).

Meanwhile, Japan was cutting their staple rations, and focusing on desperately manufacturing food. They were creating a “wooden aircraft production department” (Alperovitz 22). Japan was at the hands of the United States, and was slowly losing power. It is possible that an invasion could have been delayed, *if not avoided*. Japan was starving, and its civilians were slowly turning against their faltering government. In fact, some argue that Japan close to defeat, and that dropping of the Atomic Bomb only prolonged this. The Chief of Staff to President Truman, William D. Leahy, said, “The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender,” (Alperovitz 319). In 1945, Dwight D. Eisenhower advised Stimson to the same effect. According to a Colorado University paper, “In June 1945, top American military commanders advised President Truman not to use the atomic bomb. General Dwight Eisenhower...told Secretary of War Stimson that ‘Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary’” (Eisenhower 380).

In addition to Japan’s failure at the hands of the United States, Soviet forces were invading from the North, and gaining speed. Alperovitz, in an email interview, stated, “Some felt that waiting out was an option, though...Russian attack was the most obvious alternative”. (Alperovitz). He elaborates on this in his book on the subject, stating that the war could have been delayed on the American front, while Russia invaded Manchuria, an invasion that was over 4 months in planning when the bomb was dropped (Alperovitz ch. 1). In fact, by August 8, the Soviet Army had massed along the Manchurian border, and was beginning to sweep into Northern China and Northern Korea, completely

overpowering the Japanese defenses. Truman knew, in fact, that Russia had the ability to invade Japan. The United States, however, did not want this to occur. Their political battle with the Soviet Union would prompt them to avoid any situation in which the USSR would gain power.

A soviet takeover of Japan might have resulted in vastly increased power for the Soviets, as well as a political and military advantage over the United States, and this was simply not an option for America. Truman himself saw, however, that Soviet entry meant the end of the war, which he casually explains in his diary dated July 17, 1945: “Most of the big points are settled. He’ll be in the Jap War on August 15th. Fini Japs when that comes about.” (Truman 539). At this point, Americans in government were clearly stating that there would be a simple solution to the war. Soon, however, estimations would begin to be thrown around about casualties involved in a potential land invasion.

One of the most interesting areas of debate is the contrast between the *predictions* of what the casualty figures would be with the actual casualty figures in Japan as a result of the bomb. The plan, called *Operation Downfall*, was organized into two parts. One would be Operation Olympic, the invasion of the region of Kyushu, set to begin in November of 1945, and next Operation Coronet, the invasion of Honshu, near Tokyo, set for spring of 1946 (Faragher et al 751-800). (It is of note that the late dates of these invasions indicates that the war may have been over at this point anyway). The pivotal and major question about this planned invasion remains how many lives would have been lost, civilian or otherwise, in the invasion. Scholars do not even come close to agreeing on this issue. Barton J. Bernstein highlights many of these different predictions and

“post-dictions”. Harry S Truman believed the estimate of 500,000, which he would cite as his reason for “never losing sleep over his decision [to drop the bomb]”. (Bernstein 130-135). However, it can be seen that before the bomb was dropped, estimates were much lower. Seven weeks before the bomb, Military planners would place the number between 20,000 and 46,000 lives (Bernstein 130). However, Truman, in a post-war White House, would begin releasing estimates of 250,000. Even after this, he would raise the number to 300,000, after leaving the White House. In his memoir, the estimate had reached 500,000. Anti-bomb historians have been able to dig up estimates such as the ones by the Joint War Plans Committee, JWPC, which put the number closer to 46,000. All of these numbers are, in truth, guesses, and no one can ever know for certain.

However, many believed that this invasion would not have to *happen at all*, saying that the war was almost over. More telling is that these individuals were often in the military, closest to the action. Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Navy, said, “I didn’t like the atomic bomb or any part of it,”(Alperovitz). According to his biographer, he believed that a blockade strategy would have ended the war without an invasion. This is another striking and intriguing possibility. The blockade of Japan’s already faltering and isolated resources could have expedited her collapse. The U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey had already concluded that Japan would, in all probability, have surrendered by November, and the War Department’s Military Intelligence Division also believed that it was “almost a certainty that the Japanese would have capitulated upon the entry of Russia into the war (S&P Group Entry 421). Leahy, Truman’s Chief of Staff, would describe the views of the Combined Chiefs of Staff and the military saying that the United States did not explain, yet should have, that an unconditional surrender

did not necessarily mean the destruction of the Japanese Government (Leahy 518). Another, Navy Chief of Staff Curtis LeMay, would advocate the bombing of Japan. However, he stated in a press conference in 1945 that the war “would have been over in two weeks without the Russians entering and without the atomic bomb” (Alperovitz). This view that the bomb was not entirely used for military purposes directly conflicts with others like war-critic Paul Fussell, who claims that the bomb’s purpose was ending the war and nothing else (Fussell 219). Fussell, an expert on the subject on WW11, is primarily a cultural historian, often noted for his countering of the beliefs of Alperovitz, demonstrating the extreme complexity of issues surrounding the bomb.

General MacArthur was an egotistical leader who had been successful in many of the earlier “island hopping” strategies against Japan and was one of the more prominent figures in the Japanese theater of war (Faragher et al). According to a 1987 biography of MacArthur, *The Pathology of Power*, he was not even consulted beforehand concerning the decision to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Cousins). In addition, many soldiers in the war would feel that their service included fighting, and would gladly serve their nation. Weiner was overjoyed, at first, to hear that the war had ended. Yet he felt a commitment to his service: “I understood that this was a very critical event for people of my generation, and I felt I had to be a part of it. There were times when the ship was averted, and there were submarines, and torpedoes, and the crew would start to ready their guns, and death charges, you’d hear them. You’d understand this is a period of danger.” He saw the danger that was present, seeing submarines under the water. However, he also understood that he needed to serve his country. He felt that in war, he

should do his part. This would all change after the dropping of the bomb, calling into question many closely held beliefs and presenting new moral quandaries.

The debate over the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki also reveals a kind of ignorance, as many did not even understand the capability of the bomb. President Truman, although he would believe that the bomb would be extremely powerful, he believed that it could be used without causing much civilian casualty:

This weapon is to be used against Japan between now and August 10th. I have told the Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop that terrible bomb on the old capital or the new," (Ferrell 55-56).

Similarly, Leo Szilard would state in an interview that Truman didn't "understand" the atomic bomb. How could the correct decision possibly have been made with adequate deliberation if Truman, the man responsible for the bulk of the decision, did not understand the science or the situation? Ignorance is also displayed by major critics, such as Fussell, who said that the war with Germany could have been ended early by bombing a German target and thereby "saving not just the embarrassment of the Nuremberg trials but the lives of around four million Jews, Poles, Slavs, and gypsies, not to mention the lives...of millions of Allied and German soldiers" (Fussell 211). However, clearly, the Jews, Poles, Slavs, and gypsies would have been pulverized by the bomb along with the Nazis. It was this kind of lack of understanding that could be said to have set apart the anti-bomb scientists from the atomic bomb advocates in the years to come.

This debate would escalate immediately following the end of the war, with many scientists such as Szilard, Albert Einstein, and countless other scientists and politicians arguing from year to year. My grandfather, in his interview, recalls this: “Not ‘till I got out of the navy [I think about the moral quandary]. Those thoughts started quite soon, a few months after I returned home. Then, there was a great deal of discussion. I recall, my own feelings were confused. Because, I certainly was grateful that a means had been found to end the war without requiring American forces to invade Japan, we all understood that that would be an exceptionally bloody thing. But many scientists were speaking out against the bomb, and against stockpiling and the arms race, and I identified with them.” The July 17th Petition of the Manhattan Scientists, interestingly not published completely until very recently, shows this scientists’ support. One hundred and fifty-five members of the Manhattan Project signed this petition, before the end of the war. The petition was written to dissuade Truman from using the weapon against Japan without seriously considering “the moral responsibilities which are involved” (Szilard et al 552). Many of these scientists would continue the fight after the bomb was dropped, showing who truly understood the severity of the weapon used and the destruction wrought.

The countless memoirs, stories, and figures concerning the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are much more concrete. Onlookers, such as Dr. Shuntaro Hida, recall seeing rings of fire, land, homes, and disappearing families in a flash of scalding light and a cloud of dust. Hida recalls the specifics in his essay *The Day Hiroshima Disappeared*; describing survivors plummeting into dark water, seeing places and people he loved vanish instantly and painfully (Hida 419). Grotesque mutilations of men, women, and children, bloody masses of survivors or near survivors, and the ashen remains of the dead

are common in many historical accounts. The confusion of the scene: seeing fields of human corpses, and the cries of children were common. The number of casualties, radiation problems, and future generations of victims cannot capture the true horror experienced. This cannot be argued or denied, and few historians attempt to deny the horror of this nuclear attack. However, many do claim that these lives can be justified in history by the lives saved. This is shaky ground, and it cannot be seen how many lives would have ended in this bizarre number game. However, it can be easily acknowledged that the choice made did not end well for the civilians of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the bordering areas of these cities.

Many experts, however, would argue that the lives saved outweigh these Japanese casualties. In many ways, Weiner agrees: When the bomb was dropped, it was one of the most important moments in all of our lives. We were all sitting around, and the main question was how long are we going to have to do this. In the midst of our discussion, a chief petty officer, a tall thin guy, came in, and I remember his face was all ruddy, and he said that a special bomb has been dropped, at we can expect the war to be over, we could go home. The feeling in the room, no one said, Oh, those poor people, people were thinking ‘Oh my God, we’re going home.’ Weiner believed that his life had been completely saved by the dropping of the bomb, and he was not alone. Many US soldiers shared a similar viewpoint, and this is taken advantage of by proponents of the bomb being dropped. In the interview, Alperovitz responded to Weiner’s statements, and his descriptions of the soldiers in the war: “I honor them. However, they simply did not know that at the top of government there were other options known to be available. Your grandfather was told he was going to invade, and understandably, thinks his life was

saved [by the decision to drop the bomb].” This does show the extremely difficult moral ground covered in the issue, and how the soldiers’ perspectives connect to this ongoing debate.

The bombing would also be harmful in that it would endanger future generations, not just in Japan, but worldwide. The bomb would enter the world into a new age of military warfare. Some, as included in the collection “Hiroshima’s Shadow”, even maintain that it played a large role in the escalation of the Cold War, as it created the possibility of using nuclear weapons on another nation in war, and this caused the arms race between America and the USSR. This strikes me as a significant possibility. Szilard, the prominent scientist against the bomb, stated “I think, if we had not dropped the bomb on Hiroshima and instead demonstrated the bomb after the war, then, if we had really wanted to rid the world of atomic bombs, I think we could probably have done it...” (Szilard qtd. in Alperovitz).

The world was truly shaken by the atomic bombs dropped by the Enola Gay. The war ended, leaving some claiming the bomb was the Deus ex Machina that ended the war, and others citing it as only important in terms of its negative effects on the world. Through all of this data, this information, the possible truth still shines through. This bomb was unrelated to the end of the war, as Japan was already moving quickly towards defeat. An invasion could have been delayed, even prevented, through allowing Japan to starve from lack of resources until surrender becomes the only possible path or course. Some, including myself, feel torn by the many different emotions. My grandfather was unable to establish a complete view, as I expected, and as is understandable. He was able

to state the unquestionable truth: “I don’t think [its possible to make the decision with certainty]. But, it was a tragedy any way you look at it.” The difference of opinions, emotions, and ideas is eminent. Yet somehow, after reading the sources and studying the arguments, what brands itself in my mind is the fear of a young man blinded by light and horror, and a young scientist looking upon his creation and saying “I am become Death”. Perhaps this light blinded humanity. Perhaps all of us, in the hot summer of 1945, became death, the world struck by light and shadows would become engraved into our lives, politics, and our minds.

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