

54. LETS GO BACK TO THE HIROSHIMA AND NAGASAKI BOMBINGS AT THE END OF WORLD WAR II (MENTIONED ABOVE IN QUESTION 5). WAS THERE A DIPLOMATIC ANGLE TO THESE BOMBINGS OR WERE THEY PURELY MILITARY IN NATURE?

The orthodox explanation of these events is that they occurred in order to shorten World War II, thereby saving U.S. and Japanese lives in the process. President Harry S. Truman, who made the final decision to drop the bombs, cited an estimate of 250,000 U.S. and 500,000 to a million Japanese casualties, should a U.S. invasion of Japan--planned for November 1, 1945--have been necessary.⁵⁴ Winston Churchill, British Prime Minister during the war, later expanded the potential loss of life to⁵⁵ "a million American lives and half that number of British..." (Churchill's estimates of expected Japanese casualties are not known.)

The actual toll of nearly 200,000 men, women and children killed and 150,000 injured in the two nuclear attacks would seem to be a price worth paying--the lesser of two evils compared to the figures Churchill was citing. However, less than a year after the Hiroshima-Nagasaki bombings, the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey issued its official report on the Pacific War, which cast doubt on Truman and Churchill's assessments of Japan's ability to fight. According to historian Robert Messer:⁵⁶

The authors of this massive, authoritative study of Japan's warmaking capability concluded that "the Hiroshima and Nagasaki atomic bombs did not defeat Japan, nor, by the testimony of the enemy leaders who ended the war, did they persuade Japan to accept unconditional surrender." Rather, the bombs, along with conventional air power, naval blockade, Soviet intervention, and other internal and external pressures, acted "jointly and cumulatively" as "lubrication" of a peace-making machinery set in motion months before the atomic attacks. The Survey's analysts concluded 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 battle of Okinawa in Spring, 1945, is sometimes used to justify the Truman/Churchill casualty figures. There, the U.S. lost 12,000 troops and the Japanese lost 100,000, which lends credence to Truman and Churchill's estimates. But seen in perspective, the Truman/Churchill estimates must be too high: in battle against an initially vigorous Germany and Japan, the U.S. lost 300,000; could a weakened Japan on the verge of collapse inflict as many or more casualties? It is also important to remember that Okinawa was a heavily fortified island which afforded U.S. troops little room to maneuver. In fact, more recent historical evidence indicates that the number of casualties in the first 30 days of an invasion of the Japanese mainland were estimated by General Douglas MacArthur to be between 31,000 and 51,000 during the first 30 days of an invasion (about 20 to 25% of these dying), and about 20,000 fatalities in the worst case. (MacArthur also admitted that he did "not anticipate such a high rate of loss.⁵⁷) Given the Strategic Bombing Survey conclusion that the Japanese would have surrendered "in all probability" by November 1, Truman and Churchill's estimates of casualties appear to be gross exaggerations.

Historical research has shed further light on President Truman's understanding of Japan's weakened condition in the closing days of World War II.⁵⁸ Truman's notes made at the Potsdam Conference between the U.S., Britain, and the Soviet Union in July, 1945 were discovered in the Truman Library in 1979 after being misfiled among the family records of Truman's press secretary. Other relevant Truman documents, in the form of letters to his wife, were discovered in 1983. What these documents make clear is that Truman strongly believed the Soviet invasion of Japan would end the war. On July 17, Truman wrote of Soviet Leader Joseph Stalin: "He'll be in Jap War on August 15. *Fini* Japs when that comes about." And to his wife, he wrote on July 18: "I've gotten what I came for—Stalin goes to war on August 15 with no strings on it... I'll say that we'll end the war a year sooner now, and think of the kids who won't be killed! That is the important thing." On the same day he wrote to his wife, Truman also wrote: "[I] believe Japs will fold up before Russia comes in. I am sure they will when Manhattan appears over their homeland," Manhattan is, of course, the atomic bomb which resulted from the U.S.'s Manhattan Project. Again, historian Robert Messer:⁵⁹

The implications of these passages from Truman's diary and letters for the orthodox defense of the bomb's use

are devastating: if Soviet entry alone would end the war before an invasion of Japan, the use of atomic bombs cannot be justified as the only alternative to that invasion. Tills does not mean, of course, that having the bomb was not useful. But it does mean that for Truman the end of the war seemed at hand; the issue was no longer when the war would end, but how and on whose terms. If he believed that the war would end with Soviet entry in mid-August, then he must have realized that if the bombs were not used before that date they might well not be used at all ...

Truman apparently believed that by using the bomb the war could be ended even before the Soviet entry. Its use would not save hundreds of thousands of lives—but it could save victory for the Americans. The race with the Germans had been won. It was now a race with the Soviets...

It can be argued that ending the war sooner rather than later, even a few days later, by whatever means at his disposal was Truman's first responsibility. It can also be argued that limiting Soviet expansion in Asia, as a bonus to ending the war as soon as possible, was in the U.S. national interest and therefore also Truman's duty. But the point here is that the president, in publicly Justifying his use of the bomb, never made those arguments.

The date Truman cites for Soviet entry, August 15, is itself important. Stalin had originally assured President Roosevelt at the Yalta Conference in February, 1945 that the Soviets would enter the war against Japan three months after the war in Europe was won. The Germans surrendered on May 8, 1945, which would put the Soviets into the pacific war on August 8. (See, e.g., Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy*, pp. 27, 151.) One of Truman's aims at the Potsdam Conference was to get the Soviets to delay entry until August 15, presumably so the U.S. could use the A-bombs in an effort to end the war without Soviet help. The Soviet commitment to enter would then serve as a backup strategy if the A-bombs didn't do the trick. Truman's motivation is understandable, because the Soviets had intentions to occupy Japan just as they had occupied parts of central Europe. The European occupation was creating friction between the Soviets and its British and U.S. allies, particularly in the case of Poland, where the U.S. and Britain wanted free elections. Once the A-bombs were used, Stalin must have discerned Truman's anti-Soviet intentions and decided to enter the war on the original date of August 8.

If the foregoing arguments are correct, then nuclear weapons were used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki not only to bring the war with Japan to an end, but also to keep the Soviet Union out of Japan. A more troubling interpretation is that the U.S. also wanted to send a "warning shot" to the Soviets that it was prepared to act tough in the world at large after the war ended, and had a new weapon it was willing to use. In other words, the U.S. was now "the biggest boy on the block." This latter interpretation is supported by the attitude of Truman's Secretary of State James Byrnes towards the on-going negotiations with the Soviet Union for a post-war settlement. As Secretary of War Henry Stimson⁶⁰ observed of Byrnes, "His mind is full of his problems with the coming meeting of foreign ministers and he looks to have the presence of the bomb in his hip pocket, so to speak, as a great weapon to get through the thing." In fact, U.S. atomic diplomacy only stimulated the suspicions, paranoia, and totalitarian tendencies of Josef Stalin.

55. WASN'T THE ROLE OF THE EMPEROR IN POST-WAR JAPAN AN ISSUE?

Yes, a most crucial issue. Prior to the nuclear bombings, Japan made it clear that Emperor Hirohito must be allowed to stay in place, if only as a figurehead. The U.S. consistently refused, until after the nuclear bombings.

The Japanese did not surrender until August 15, i.e., six days after the Nagasaki bombing of August 9, so it is quite possible that the atomic bombs by themselves were not enough to bring the war to a close. Indeed, many Japanese officials have testified that the entry of the Soviets into the war on August 8 was a much bigger shock than the effects of the atomic bombs. As a reading of the New York Times of August 12 (before surrender) discloses, the U.S. had evidently agreed after the nuclear bombings to let Hirohito stay on. If compromise on the Emperor issue was necessary after the bombings, isn't it reasonable to suspect that compromise prior to the planned dates of the bombings could have brought the war to an earlier close?

It is possible that U.S. officials were afraid of an outcry of the U.S. public against any concessions to the Japanese; "unconditional surrender" had been widely touted as the official U.S. position for months before the war ended. Of course, the ultimate decision left the Emperor in place, and U.S. officials had to deal with the public outcry (small as it was) anyway.

It has been argued that the U.S. used the A-bombs in order to bring the war to a close as rapidly as possible. If the A-bombs were available but weren't used, so the argument goes, there would have been severe recriminations from relatives and friends of soldiers who might have been killed after the bomb became available. But this argument makes sense only if the U.S. had unsuccessfully exhausted every non-nuclear avenue of approach for ending the war, particularly compromise on the Emperor, prior to use of the A-bombs.

Given all the facts, it seems reasonable to conclude that a U.S. desire to impress the Soviets with U.S. nuclear power was a most important factor in delaying on the Emperor issue. In other words, the bomb may have been used to send a loud diplomatic message to the Soviets to watch their step in the post-war world.

It certainly appears that the U.S. could have done more to bring the war to a halt without use of the bomb, but as the above discussion indicates, there are good arguments for and against the final decision. To help you make your own judgement, Table 3 presents a chronology of events leading up to the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and Appendix IV presents a survey form in which you can rank-order your preferences concerning a number of factors involved in the decision.

Footnotes

54 Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, August, 1985.

55 Carnesale, A., et al., *Living With Nuclear Weapons*, p. 73.

56 See footnote 54.

57 Sigal, L., *Fighting to a Finish*, pp. 67, 119-120. See also the *Kansas City Times*, 4 November, 1985.

58 See footnote 54.

59 *Ibid.*

60 Yergin, D., *Shattered Peace*, pp. 122, 132.