

LEARNING FROM TRUMAN'S DECISION

The Atomic Bomb and Japan's Surrender

By George P. Brown

August 6 through 9 of 2005 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. These bombings stand as a watershed event in modern history because they brought to a decisive conclusion the greatest and most devastating conflict in human history, and because they ushered in a new age, the era of nuclear weapons and the policies of “massive retaliation” and “mutual assured destruction”—which at the height of the cold war brought with them the very real potential for the destruction of modern civilization in a large-scale nuclear war. The decision to use the bomb has generated profound and continuing controversy among historians, military analysts, scientists, educators, and concerned citizens. Some have justified the bombings on the basis of military need or the imperatives of global power politics, while others condemn them as at best unnecessary and therefore tragic, and at worst as a wartime atrocity. The controversy ultimately hinges on whether the decision to use atomic weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was based on military necessity or on political expedience. Like many important historical controversies, the analysis of the decision is complex and multifaceted, and requires a historical review of the situation in the summer of 1945.

Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945 leaving Japan alone in an increasingly hopeless war against the United States and its allies. By the summer of 1945, most of Japan's navy was lying on the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, and its armies were scattered throughout the remnants of the country's short-lived empire. The Japanese army was bogged down in China, had been defeated in numerous costly island battles, and American forces were now aiming directly for the Japanese homeland. Okinawa had been lost to Japan in an enormously bloody battle in April, May, and June, and since March, waves of American bombers had relentlessly pounded and incinerated much of urban Japan.

Deprived of overseas sources of oil, iron, coal, and even food, Japan's wartime economy was grinding to a halt: it could no longer produce ships or airplanes, and there was almost no aviation fuel left for the 6,000 to 8,000 airplanes that were held in reserve for final *kamikaze* attacks in defense of Japan's home islands.¹ By August,

the Japanese people were reduced to near starvation, over 330,000 civilians had been killed in the air raids since March, with over 500,000 additional casualties, and millions more were made homeless by the fire bombings. The United States Strategic Bombing Survey Report revealed that from March through August, 104,000 tons of bombs had been dropped on sixty-six urban areas, destroying approximately forty percent of Japan's urban infrastructure.²

Despite the overwhelming evidence that defeat was inevitable, Japan's Prime Minister Suzuki apparently rejected the Potsdam Declaration, an ultimatum calling for Japan's unconditional surrender issued on July 26, 1945,³ with the phrase *mokusatsu*, which could be interpreted as “no comment,” “kill with silence,” “ignore,” or “treat with silent contempt.”⁴ Without officially responding to the declaration,⁵ Japan's Supreme Council renewed their plans for a final defense of the home islands, planning to mobilize reserve troops and the entire population of Japan in a last, suicidal defense on the beaches that would, in the most illusory propaganda of the day, repulse the American attacks and lead to a final, “certain victory,” or at least inflict such heavy losses that more favorable terms of surrender would be considered.⁶ On the diplomatic front, rather than seeking more favorable terms from the Americans, Japanese leaders had approached the Soviet Union in a naïve hope that the Russians would supply them with oil, or would at least remain neutral through the duration of the war.⁷ Meanwhile, the Soviets, while stalling the Japanese diplomatically, had mobilized 1.5 million Russian soldiers in the Soviet Far East in a prelude to opening a vast campaign against Japanese holdings

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Japanese Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki. Photo source: *Mainichi Daily News* Web site at: <http://mdn.mainichi-msn.co.jp/photospecials/graph/050726postdam/35.html>

in Manchuria, Korea, Sakhalin, and the Kuriles.⁸ American military leaders also mobilized massive naval, army, and marine forces for a planned invasion of Kyushu, to take place in November of 1945, to be followed shortly by an invasion of Honshu. This was to be accompanied by an ongoing naval blockade of Japan and a continuation of the intense saturation bombing of Japanese cities and military targets.⁹

There were two overarching problems with the invasion plans that made the use of the atomic bombs a better alternative in the eyes of President Truman and most of his close advisors in the summer of 1945. First, a large-scale invasion of Japan would inevitably lead to a large number of American casualties. Just how many casualties would follow from an invasion is a matter of historical speculation and controversy. General of the Army George C. Marshall in a White House meeting on June 18 said, "Our experience in the Pacific war is so diverse as to casualties that it is considered wrong to give any estimate in numbers."¹⁰ However, he went on to suggest that "There is reason to believe that the first 30 days in Kyushu should not exceed the price we have paid for Luzon [31,000 killed, wounded and missing]."¹¹ Some historians, extrapolating from the losses in the battle for Okinawa as a percentage of the total of the planned invasion forces, have estimated that ". . . the U.S. could suffer approximately 268,000 casualties in a Kyushu invasion."¹² After the war, Truman claimed that the decision to use atomic bombs and the subsequent surrender of

Japan saved the US military from a minimum of a quarter of a million casualties, and in a letter to Air Force historians in 1953 (apparently drafted by his aides but signed by Truman) claimed that the invasion "might have cost as much as a million" casualties.¹³

Even if we assume a much smaller number of American casualties, the Japanese military and civilian losses that would have followed from an invasion would have been enormous. The horrendous Japanese losses in the battle of Okinawa are instructive here: while Americans suffered over 12,500 casualties in Okinawa, there were over 110,000 Japanese military casualties, and tragically, an estimated 75,000 civilians died over nearly three months of fighting.¹⁴ The assumption of a similar proportion of Japanese military and civilian casualties in the far larger invasions of Kyushu and Honshu, combined with additional military and civilian losses due to the continuation of conventional bombing over several more months, leads some historians to argue that the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki actually saved many Japanese lives by ending the war promptly.¹⁵

A second, geo-strategic reason for objecting to an invasion of Japan followed from the imminent Soviet entry into the war against



Stalin at Potsdam. Photo source: Truman Presidential Library.

In his diary after the first day of meetings with Stalin and Churchill at the Potsdam Conference (July 17), President Truman wrote about Stalin, "Most of the big points are settled. He'll be in the Jap war on August 15. Fini Japs when that comes about."

Soviets would have a chance to enter the war against Japan.¹⁹ Other historians carry this strategic logic a step further to argue that a powerful reason for using the atomic bombs against Japan was to demonstrate the awesome power of this new weapon to the Soviets in order to constrain Stalin's postwar ambitions. Sandy Frank writes ". . . the atomic bomb would serve as the diplomatic hammer to ensure that Anglo-American global political objectives would not be seriously challenged by Joseph Stalin's desire for hegemony over Eastern Europe and the Far East."²⁰ Viewed from this perspective, the logic of using the atomic bombs seems to be both powerful and non-controversial. As Barton J. Bernstein writes ". . . it is difficult to believe that any major World War II nation that had the bomb would have chosen not to use it in 1945 against the enemy. In that sense, the United States was not unusual but typical, as was Harry S. Truman, too."²¹

Where, then, is the controversy about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki? The controversies begin with the understanding that there were more than two alternatives (invasion or bombing) in the struggle to end the war. In their postwar memoirs

several top American military leaders, including three of the four chairmen of the joint chiefs of staff at the time, criticized the atomic bombings as unnecessary. These included Admiral Ernest King (who argued that the naval blockade would have eventually brought Japan to surrender without either the bombing or an invasion), General Henry Arnold (who argued that conventional bombing would force Japan to give in), and both Dwight Eisenhower and Douglass MacArthur.²² Admiral William Leahy, the chairman of the joint chiefs, was particularly appalled at the radiation effects of atomic bombs and argued that they were both unnecessary and immoral and would, like other weapons, be used by future enemies in a reciprocal way. Leahy wrote that “Employment of the atomic bomb in war will take us back in cruelty toward noncombatants to the days of Genghis Khan. . . . in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages.”²³

Others have criticized the selection of targets for the atomic bombings. Some have suggested that a “demonstration shot” that revealed the bomb’s awesome power in an unpopulated area might have given Japan’s leaders enough reason to surrender. A group of seven scientists from the University of Chicago’s Metallurgical Laboratory issued a confidential report on June 11, 1945, urging that the bomb be demonstrated on a deserted island before an international gathering as a warning to Japan, and that if Japan even after this demonstration refused to surrender, that it be used in a pre-specified target area with enough warning time to allow for evacuation of the impact zone.²⁴ Leo Szilard, who had been very influential in organizing the scientific and political effort to create the bomb, organized two petitions of fifty-eight and sixty-nine participating scientists in July, initially urging the president not to use the bomb, and, secondly, asking him if it were used, to first provide a warning to Japan and to give Japan’s leaders sufficient time to consider the implications.²⁵

General George Marshall also argued for a warning demonstration of the bomb in May of 1945, and after accepting the decision not to do so, urged that atomic bombs should be used only on strictly military targets.²⁶ President Truman appeared to agree with Marshall on selecting military targets in both private writings and public statements at this time. He wrote in his diary on July 25 (during the Potsdam Conference) that “This weapon is to be used against Japan between now and August 10. I have told the secretary of war, Mr. Stimson, to use

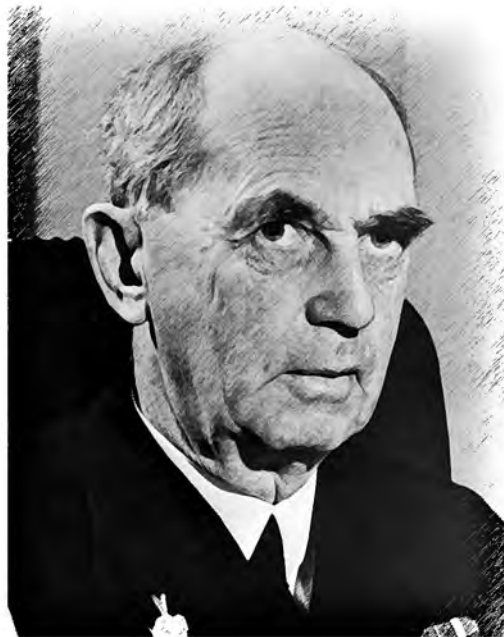
it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. . . . The target will be a purely military one and we will issue a warning statement asking the Japs to surrender and save lives.”²⁷ In a public statement issued on August 9, Truman said, “The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians.”²⁸

The notes of the Interim Committee established by Secretary of War Henry Stimson to advise the president on the use of the atomic bomb tell a quite different story about the selection of targets and the provision of specific warnings about the use of the bomb. The Interim Committee minutes from June 1, 1945 reveal that “. . . the present view of the Committee was that the bomb should be used against Japan as soon as possible; that it be used on a war plant surrounded by workers’ homes; and that it be used without prior warning.”²⁹ The Target Committee established at Los Alamos to make recommendations on the best use of the atomic bomb stated in early May of 1945 that “. . . (1) they be important targets in a large urban area of more than three miles in diameter, (2) they be capable of being damaged effectively by a blast, and (3) they are unlikely to be attacked by next August.”³⁰ The Target Committee minutes go on to note that the Army Air Force was willing to “reserve” five cities (including Hiroshima) from saturation bombing in order to better demonstrate the destructive value of the atomic bombs and to thus provide the greatest possible shock value from the use of the bombs. The Target Committee recommended *against* using the new bombs on strictly military targets, again in order to maximize the shock impact of these new and terrible weapons.³¹

While both Hiroshima and Nagasaki had military installations and military production facilities that would qualify them as military targets, it is clear that their primary value as targets confirms to the logic of both the Target Committee and the Interim Committee: both cities were relatively unscathed by previous conventional bombings, and both provided enormous shock value, primarily because of the incredible destructive power demonstrated in the bombings of these cities. The instantaneous deaths of tens of thousands of civilians also

demonstrated quite clearly and brutally that the United States was both able and willing to, in the final words of the Potsdam Declaration, inflict “. . . prompt and utter destruction” on Japan if its lead-

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Admiral William Leahy. Photo source: Truman Presidential Library.

ers continued to refuse to surrender unconditionally.³² It does not seem credible to assume that Truman, despite his public and private pronouncements, was not aware of the true nature and significance of the targets ultimately selected by his authorized agents.

A third controversy involves the Soviet declaration of war against Japan. Hasegawa argues that the shock of the Soviet attacks on Japan were a greater influence on the Japanese Army leaders than the atomic bombings in inducing them to accept an unconditional surrender. He speculates that even without the atomic bombings, the Soviet attacks, combined with continuing American naval blockades and saturation bombings, would most likely have induced a surrender before the scheduled November American invasion of Kyushu.³³ If this is the case, Hiroshima and Nagasaki might have been spared, but the Soviets might also have claimed more territory in the Far East and more scope in the occupation of postwar Japan, and many more civilians would have died in further conventional bombings of Japanese cities.

A fourth controversy surrounding the decision to use atomic bombs against Japan stems from the argument that Japan's leaders might have been willing to surrender earlier (and without either an invasion or an atomic bombing) if offered terms other than unconditional surrender. At least three of the president's top advisors made exactly this kind of case with Truman. Joseph Grew, who had served as ambassador to Japan from 1931–1941 (and who was acting Secretary of State in early 1945), approached Truman on May 28, 1945, with a proposal to modify the unconditional surrender terms offered to Japan with a statement that offered explicit protection of the Emperor's status in postwar Japan. He argued that such a proposal might well sway the die-hard militarists in the Japanese Supreme Council to accept defeat, and that it would be necessary to retain the emperor in the postwar period anyway to preserve order.³⁴

According to Grew, Truman stated that “. . . his own thinking ran along the same lines as mine.”³⁵ Truman asked Grew to take the proposal to the top military brass in the Pentagon, who on May 29 informed him that in the midst of the current battle for Okinawa, the proposal “. . . would be interpreted by the Japanese as a confession of weakness.”³⁶ On June 18, in a presidential meeting with the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the White House, Admiral William Leahy expressed his view that insisting on unconditional surrender was unnecessary and counterproductive in the sense that it would inspire greater resistance. Truman's response was “. . . that it was with that thought in mind that he had left the door open for Congress to take appropriate action with reference to unconditional surrender. However, he did not feel that he could take any action at this time to change public opinion on the matter.”³⁷ Public opinion in the United States strongly endorsed unconditional surrender: a Gallop poll conducted in June of 1945 showed “. . . by a margin of nine to one, respondents favored doing what was necessary for a complete victory.”³⁸ For political reasons then, Truman was unwilling to risk a popular backlash by modifying the longstanding and publicly supported demand for Japan's unconditional surrender.³⁹ In his memoirs, Stimson wrote that he “. . . wholly agreed with Grew's general argument,” but that “Unfortunately during the war years high American officials had made some fairly blunt and unpleasant remarks about the Emperor, and it did not seem wise to Mr. Truman and Secretary of State Byrnes that the Government should reverse its field too sharply.”⁴⁰

The text of the Potsdam Declaration was to be the final demand for Japan's surrender, and it contained no reassurances on the continuation of the Emperor and no explicit warning on the American intent to use atomic bombs against Japan. Confident that these terms would be rejected, President Truman and the American military planners moved ahead with their plans to use the atomic bombs. In fact, the official order authorizing the use of the atomic bombs was issued on July 25, one day before the Potsdam Declaration was issued.⁴¹ Ironically, the Emperor was protected after the surrender, and did play an important role in establishing and maintaining postwar order.

If the Potsdam Declaration had included a guarantee of immunity for the Emperor and a postwar constitutional monarchy, would Japan's leaders have accepted it? The Japanese Supreme Council was deeply divided between a peace faction that increasingly accepted a tenuous hope that the emperor would be preserved as acceptable grounds for surrender, and a diehard war faction that continued to resist any surrender terms that did not include additional concessions, even after both atomic bombings and the Soviet declaration of war. The war faction insisted on three conditions that went beyond the preservation of the emperor and the imperial institution, including no direct allied occupation of Japan, Japanese government control over disarmament and military demobilization, and Japanese government control over any postwar war crimes trials.⁴² These latter terms would never have been acceptable to the Americans, and, importantly, none of them were raised as points of negotiation directly with American leaders until after the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. It was not until after the Soviets declared war and the Russian army opened up its attacks on a broad front against the Japanese in Manchuria on August 9 that the emperor interceded and, still hoping for the preservation of the throne, pushed the war faction to accept the terms of the Potsdam Declaration and to begin directly negotiating surrender terms with the Americans.⁴³

Assessment and Reflection

President Truman and his Secretary of State James Byrnes missed a historic opportunity by not attempting to end the war through compromise and a clear warning to Japan about the atom bomb in the Potsdam Declaration, followed by a demonstration of the bomb's power in a non-lethal setting. Combined with the Soviet declaration of war, this might have led Hirohito to side decisively with the peace faction in the Supreme Council. Truman and Byrnes were captured by their own domestic and international political and military imperatives, and were desensitized to (or willing to delude themselves about) the human costs of using the bomb by the already enormous loss of enemy civilian lives through the pervasive incendiary saturation bombings of Japan that had taken place since March of 1945.⁴⁴ They chose to end the war expediently and under their own terms, but in so doing they also established a standard for a new level of military and political calculation that led during the Cold War to the widespread acceptance of the idea that nuclear annihilation (mutual assured destruction) was preferable to political compromise with the enemy. The atomic bombings did not succeed in keeping the Soviets out of the war against Japan, and although the war was brought to a rapid conclusion, in the end, Japan was allowed to maintain the imperial throne and even to retain the Showa emperor.

It is a tragedy that the option of a conditional and flexible surrender offer was never presented to Japan's leaders. Joseph Grew and his supporters in the State Department clearly had the best

understanding of Japanese political and cultural dynamics, and had his view prevailed over the political and military logic of Byrnes and Truman, it is possible that tens of thousands of people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki would not have perished in the atomic bombings.

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed and maimed hundreds of thousands of people, and the vast majority of them were civilian non-combatants. Their personal and subjective suffering should never be ignored, discounted, or diminished in our historical assessments of the controversies surrounding the use of the atomic bombs. If we learn anything from revisiting the controversies surrounding the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it should be this: that the logic of military and political power needs to be balanced by empathy, compassion, and a cultural understanding of the other side. ■

NOTES

1. Saburo Hayashi, *Kogun: The Japanese Army in the Pacific War* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1959), 160–161.
2. Cited in Ardath Walter Burks, “Survey of Japan’s Defeat,” *Far Eastern Survey* 15 (August 14, 1946), 248–250.
3. “Chapter 7: The Potsdam Declaration, July 26,” in Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Truman and the Bomb, a Documentary History*, from “The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb, Truman Presidential Museum and Library, retrieved from http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/index.php?action=documentary.
4. John Toland, *The Rising Sun: The Decline and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1936–1945* (New York: Random House, 1970), 774.
5. See Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 168–169. Hasegawa argues that Suzuki may never have actually used the term, but that it was widely used in the Japanese press.
6. Robert J. C. Butow, *Japan’s Decision to Surrender* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1954), 96; also see Hayashi, *Kogun*, 177–179. For a detailed discussion of the final defense plans, see John Ray Skates, *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), especially Chapter 8, “Ketsu-Go: Defense of the Homeland,” 100–117.
7. See Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 106, and more generally chapters 3–6 for an extensive discussion of Japanese overtures to Russia.
8. *Ibid.* 198–199, and Chapter Seven.
9. See Skates, *The Invasion of Japan*, for a detailed review of the invasion plans.
10. “Minutes of Meeting Held at the White House, June 18, 1945,” Truman Presidential Museum and Library, retrieved from http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/documents/fulltext.php?fulltextid=1.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Herman S. Wolk and Richard P. Hallion, “FDR and Truman: Continuity and Context in the A-bomb Decision,” *Air Power Journal* (Fall 1995), 1–5.
13. Barton J. Bernstein, “Truman and the A-Bomb: Targeting Noncombatants, Using the Bomb, and His Defending the ‘Decision,’” *The Journal of Military History* 62 (July 1998), 551.
14. See Skates, *The Invasion of Japan*, 76, and Toland, *The Rising Sun*, 704–726.
15. Wolk and Hallion, “FDR and Truman,” 4.
16. See “Minutes of Meeting held at the White House, June 18, 1945.”
17. “Chapter 5: From the President’s Diary, July 17, 18, and 25,” in Ferrell, ed., *Truman and the Bomb*, http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/ferrell_book/ferrell_book_chap5.htm. For a detailed discussion on this point, see Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), Chapter 19, 238–248.
18. Rufus E. Miles Jr., “Hiroshima: The Strange Myth of Half a Million American Lives Saved,” *International Security* 10 (Autumn 1985), 140.
19. Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, Introduction and Chapter Seven, especially 164.
20. Sandy Frank, “Atomic Bomb: Ultimate Failure of Diplomacy,” Executive Research Project S25, Defense Information Systems Agency, The Industrial College of the Armed Forces, National Defense University (1993), 1–2.
21. Bernstein, “Truman and the A-Bomb,” 569.
22. See Bernstein, 561, for a summary of these views.

23. William Daniel Leahy “Atom Bombs, Germs—and Peace” in Edwin Fogleman, ed., *Hiroshima: The Decision to Use the A-Bomb* (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1964), 30–31.
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26. Samuel J. Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 61; Bernstein, “Truman and the A-Bomb,” 561.
27. See Ferrell, “Chapter 5: From the President’s Diary, July 17, 18, and 25.”
28. “Truman Speech, August 9, 1945 (excerpt),” Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, Containing the Public Messages, Speeches and Statements of the President April 12 to December 31, 1945 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1961), 212. Retrieved from <http://www.dannen.com/decision/hst-ag09.html>.
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31. *Ibid.*
32. See Ferrell, “Chapter 7: The Potsdam Declaration, July 26.”
33. Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 5, 198–199, 295.
34. Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 43–44.
35. Grew, Joseph Clark. “The Emperor of Japan and Japan’s Surrender,” in Fogelman, ed., *Hiroshima: The Decision to Use the Bomb*, 32–35.
36. *Ibid.*, 33.
37. See “Minutes of Meeting held at the White House, June 18, 1945.”
38. Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 46.
39. Henry Lewis Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, “The Atomic Bomb and the Surrender of Japan,” in Fogelman, ed., *Hiroshima: The Decision to Use the Bomb*, 12–24, 19.
40. *Ibid.*, 20. James Byrnes was appointed as Secretary of State in June of 1945.
41. Thomas Handy, “Official Bombing Order, July 25, 1945,” US National Archives, Record Group 77, Records of the Office of the Chief of Engineers, Manhattan Engineer District, TS Manhattan Project File ‘42 to ‘46, Folder 5B “(Directives, Memos, etc. to and from C/S, S/W, etc.)” Retrieved from <http://www.dannen.com/decision/handy.html>. Also see Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 152, 169.
42. Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2000), 512, and Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 122.
43. Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, Chapter Six, especially 209–213.
44. John W. Dower, “Race, Language, and War in Two Cultures,” 257–285, in *Japan in War and Peace: Selected Essays* (New York: New Press, 1993), see especially 264.

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