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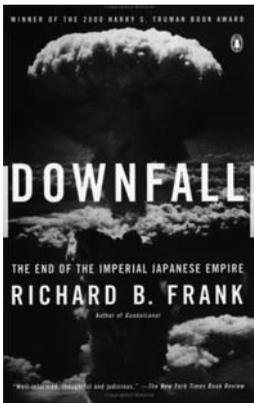
DOWNFALL

The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire

BY RICHARD B. FRANK

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Reviewed by Frederick R. Dickinson



Debating the Bomb

Clausewitz was spot on in describing war as “part of the intercourse of the human race,” but writing before the advent of the nation-state, even he could not fathom the full force of military conflict. One would expect the Pacific War to top the list of major events of the twentieth century, but would Clausewitz have anticipated that a 1999 poll of American journalists identified the atomic bombing of Japan as the most important news story of the twentieth century? Would he have foreseen the energy devoted since 1945 to debating the pros and cons of the decision?

The bombing marks the culmination of the most destructive war in human history, and it presents one of the great moral dilemmas of our age. But the frequency with which it has been debated, and the enor-

mous range of interlocutors found particularly in the United States, suggest that war has an effect far beyond any immediate physical devastation or abstract discussion of right and wrong. War retains its punch because its retelling is a critical pillar of the narrative of nations.

Unlike the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the question of the atom bomb can never be pronounced “closed” by Americans, for it continues to gnaw at the heart of our most cherished national beliefs.¹ The controversy that extinguished the Smithsonian’s Enola Gay exhibit in January 1995 revealed the disquieting burden of the Bomb in the US. The instant obliteration of two cities and their largely civilian populations does not, we intrinsically know, fit well with the belief in a “good war” or a “greatest generation.”²

We may never close the debate on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But as J. Samuel Walker (US Nuclear Regulatory Commission) noted, there has, in recent years, been an attempt to find middle ground between the “traditional” and “revisionist” lines.³ Richard B. Frank’s *Downfall* represents the best of this new scholarship. Nearly a decade old this year, *Downfall* remains available in paperback, and Frank continues to write and speak widely about the critical issues raised in his book. Most importantly, *Downfall* is a model of balance, breadth, and circumspection on a topic that demands careful treatment.

In the context of a debate waged primarily in English by specialists of American diplomacy, *Downfall* is remarkable for its attention to Japan. Like many of his forebears, Frank has no facility with Japanese, and he echoes the “traditionalist” conviction of the importance of the Bomb for securing peace. But Frank shares the deep concern of many revisionists for human suffering. He begins his scholarly analysis not with the usual detached rundown of the numbers or major players, but with grass roots misery in Japan. Nor is that misery the familiar tale of horror in Hiroshima. *Downfall* opens, instead, on a “bitter and cold” evening, March 9, 1945, when 346 B-29s released 1,665 tons of incendiary bombs over Tokyo, inaugurating a five-month period of mass slaughter from the air by conventional means.



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Frank's attention to Japan is not a simple display of compassion. Rather, it derives from an impressively wide range of scholarship. *Downfall* taps sources unavailable to early parties to the Bomb debate, in particular, the un-redacted summaries of American radio intelligence on Japan's diplomats ("Magic" Diplomatic Summary) and military ("Magic" Far East Summary), released in 1995. And, unlike any of his American peers, Frank, with the help of a Japanese translator, pays close attention to important Japanese secondary work, and to such critical primary sources as the official history of the Japanese War History Office (*Senshi sōshō*) and the private postwar recollections of the emperor (*Shōwa Tennō dokuhakuroku*), released after Hirohito's death in 1989.

Debate over the Bomb revolves around two fundamental questions: 1) American intentions, and 2) the Bomb's true efficacy in securing Japan's surrender. On both issues, Frank explicitly rejects revisionist arguments that helped cut general American support for the Bomb from eighty-five percent in 1945 to fifty-five percent in 1994. But his "neo-traditionalism" is far from a crude justification of a "good war." On the contrary, although his training is primarily military (aerorifle platoon leader, Việt Nam) and legal (Georgetown Law), Frank employs the tools of a master historian to construct a compelling case.

On American intentions, Frank rejects the notion that US policymakers viewed atomic bombs and an invasion of Japan as mutually exclusive. Rather, from May 1945, the Joint Chiefs of Staff worked on a twofold strategy of bombardment *and* invasion. American racism and savagery did not dictate incendiary bombing or nuclear annihilation in Japan. Use of these horrifying weapons followed logically from the failure of precision bombing. They were viewed, as well, as indispensable for overwhelming victory and, by extension, lasting peace. As to the most explosive revisionist charge—that President Truman saw the Bomb more

as a deterrent against the Soviets than a weapon against Japan—Frank stresses the absolute focus of American planners from 1942 to 1945 on defeating Japan and securing defeat throughout the Japanese empire.

As a military historian, Frank effectively highlights military concerns as central in the decision to use the Bomb. It is here, too, that his attention to Japanese developments reaps its full reward. Long vital to revisionist claims has been evidence that in August 1945, Japan was on its last leg and that American planners recognized this. Also critical has been the contention that, from June 30, 1945, Japanese leaders actively sought peace through Soviet mediation. Failure to guarantee the future of the imperial house in the surrender terms has strengthened the impression that Washington deliberately pushed Japan into a corner.

But Frank convincingly shows that this tale has relied upon a very selective reading of diplomatic intercepts. When the now robust record of both military and diplomatic radio intelligence is taken into account, it is clear that, although the Japanese wartime economy was on the verge of collapse by the summer of 1945, American planners knew that Japanese leaders were far from throwing in the towel. Rather, from January through August 1945, Tokyo resolutely increased preparations for a "final decisive battle" of the Homeland. This included a massive military build-up from the spring of 1945 on the very spot that the US hoped to launch a preliminary invasion: southern Kyūshū. Japanese overtures to the Soviets were not the product of a peace consensus in Tokyo but, as Washington clearly understood, a desperate effort to prevent Russia from entering the war. As for the utility of a public guarantee for the imperial household, expert summaries of Japanese military and diplomatic radio traffic concluded in July 1945 that only stark military realities—in particular, evidence that a Kyūshū invasion could not be repelled—would spur a genuine Japanese movement for peace.

Frank has not pronounced the last word on the atomic bombs. In 2005, Tsuyoshi Hasegawa rekindled the debate with a widely noted reiteration of a popular claim in Japan—that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were less critical in securing Japanese surrender than the Soviet entry into the war.⁴ But if one must choose just one of a vast array of studies on the profound military, political, and moral issues of the Bomb, *Downfall* could easily be it. For its comprehensive coverage, methodical engagement of alternative perspectives, and absorbing narrative, this volume belongs on the shelf of all serious students of the Pacific War and twentieth century global history. ■

NOTES

1. Gerald Posner, *Case Closed: Lee Harvey Oswald and the Assassination of JFK* (New York: Random House, 1993).
2. Studs Terkel, "The Good War," *An Oral History of World War II* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984) and Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998).
3. J. Samuel Walker, "Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground," *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (April 2005).
4. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005).

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