

THANK GOD FOR THE ATOM BOMB?

By Richard Rice



Images in the above collage: Background image of the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall after the blast (National Archives). Left: 1926 photo of Emperor Hirohito (Library of Congress). Right: Churchill, Truman, and Stalin at the Potsdam Conference (Imperial War Museum, London, England). Photomontage created by Willa Davis.

I once received a call from the concerned editor of an education journal: “Could you find a source other than *Thank God for the Atom Bomb?* We feel it inappropriate for teachers to see it in a journal dedicated to international understanding.” Since the essay on travel versus tourism that I wanted to cite appeared only in this provocatively titled collection of Paul Fussell essays, they finally did allow it to appear in a footnote. The phrase—without the question mark I add above to my own title—comes from a passage in William Manchester’s *Goodbye Darkness: A Memoir of the Pacific War*.

This minor incident is indicative of a much wider reluctance among many in the academic and teaching community to consider all historical aspects of a morally difficult topic. The horror of the bomb, both real and in our conscience, has led to a debate that continues today. As teachers who want to foster critical thinking skills in our students, we must expose them to facts and interpretations that may not be politically correct. It is easy to condemn a weapon of mass destruction, but more difficult to understand why Truman and his inner circle made the decision to use it. Understanding both sides of the debate is critical to developing a more nuanced understanding of the bomb decision.

Within the limits of this brief essay I will cite arguments against the bomb more fully articulated elsewhere in this issue, and place Truman’s decision in the historical context of a bitter war. Because those who argue the bomb should not have been used suggest counter-factual scenarios, I too will ponder the “what ifs” by noting continued Japanese warfare immediately before and *after* the bombs were dropped on August 6 and 9, 1945. This leads to further speculation on the human costs of the invasion of the home islands planned for that November.

The major arguments against the bomb are as follows: 1) using the bomb was immoral; 2) Truman’s demand for an unconditional

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surrender hindered the Japanese peace faction; 3) offshore demonstration of the bomb would have sufficed; 4) Japan wartime leaders were soon to surrender; 5) invasion was a more humane alternative; and 6) there were ulterior motives such as warning off the Soviets or justifying the development expense of the Manhattan Project by demonstration on a human target.¹

Morality and Violence

Critics of the bomb argue the use of nuclear weapons was a new and totally unjustifiable use of violence that opened the age of nuclear holocaust. War has led to more destructive weapons throughout history. But was the bomb morally unjust? Force is necessary to check the ambitions of evil individuals and aggressive states that have no compulsions in their own use of violence. Even if we apply a postwar human rights perspective, in itself a humanistic response to the evils of World War II, and obviously an anachronism for analyzing a decision made in 1945, a strong argument can be made for using force to thwart aggression. William Schulz, head of the American Amnesty International, in a recent book on human rights since 9/11, makes just this point: “. . . violence is not in and of itself a violation of human rights.”² If the use of violence—the extreme case of the atomic bomb in this case—led to an earlier capitulation that saved the lives of American soldiers and others, then we should question if there was, in fact, a moral lapse.³

But surely morality is relative over time: we apply different standards today than in the past; happily one can argue that the spread of the international human rights movement shows that we do not have to adhere to standards of the past. Since 1945, a plethora of “normative” international standards of civilized behavior has emerged in the form of the United Nations and various international courts and forums, but none of these heightened moral concerns preclude the use of violence when used in the name of a greater good. The UN, for example, endorsed both the first invasion of Iraq and intervention in Bosnia, although in the latter case it was shamefully unwilling to use force to prevent Srebrenica, the worst European genocide since Hitler. Arguably, forceful intervention in Rwanda and Darfur could have saved more innocents than did standing aside. Pacifism does not necessarily lead to peace.

Members of the rapidly disappearing “Greatest Generation” view the morality of the bomb quite differently than those who grew up in a postwar world. Their perceptions were shaped by concrete experiences, and millions of former servicemen and women believed their lives had been spared due to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. A public opinion survey of Americans conducted in October 1945 found 85 percent favoring the bombs and 23 percent willing to drop more; Truman was an opinion-shaping leader, but he also reflected the wartime attitude of most Americans.⁴

Paul Fussell, who faced death in combat, articulately and forcefully states this view. His essay, mentioned earlier, is accessible to students, providing an excellent counterpoint for teachers wishing to

fully explore the human dimension of using the bomb. Servicemen during WWII were told repeatedly that their mission was “to close with enemy and destroy him,” not hurt or frighten.⁵

Sooner or later Japan would have surrendered, but at what additional cost in both American and Japanese lives? We must not forget Chinese and other Asians dying on a daily basis under a harsh Japanese occupation policy. Although Truman and his advisors surely knew Japan no longer posed a threat, America was war-weary, and the bitter fighting in the Pacific did not create an atmosphere of reflection or deep thinking about consequences. Truman’s existentialist choice was no doubt influenced by estimates of American losses, and many other factors shaping the world view of Americans in 1945. Japanese wartime behavior had reinforced racist stereotypes, and, as some have argued, Truman did want to check Soviet influence in postwar Japan and elsewhere. This was a legitimate geostrategic goal, and, as I argue later, curtailing Russian advance into Hokkaido saved Japanese lives.⁶

Delaying the bomb—and the surrender—by just a few weeks would mean more American casualties, Japanese casualties, British casualties, and many more civilian deaths in Japan, China, and elsewhere in Asia. If war continued another week or month there would be more innocent victims. Should we weigh the value of those innocent lives against the deaths of innocents in Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Is it immoral to balance one historic tragedy with hypothetical but very likely other tragedies? These are the tough and difficult questions each of us and our students must try to answer.

Total War and Unconditional Surrender

Did the demand for unconditional surrender, a goal of Roosevelt’s also chosen by Truman, encourage Japanese military intransigency and undermine efforts in the summer of 1945 by the Japanese peace party? Possibly, but Roosevelt was determined to not repeat the mistake of World War I. In that war, the Allies, by not demanding total and unconditional German Surrender, in part set the stage for Hitler to claim that the German war effort was undermined by capitalists and Jews. Both Germany and Japan had to be defeated utterly and without conditions. According to many, including historian John Skates, there was a big price for this: “. . . it was unconditional surrender that drove the war to extremes of violence in 1945 and made the atomic bomb seem almost a benign alternative to an invasion.”⁷

Tsuyoshi Hasegawa thinks Japanese reluctance to accept the unconditional surrender of the Potsdam Declaration caused a fatal paralysis: “Japanese policymakers who were in the position to make decisions—not only the militant advocates of war but also those who belonged to the peace party, including Suzuki, Togo, Kido, and Hirohito himself—must bear the responsibility for the war’s destructive end more than the American president and the Soviet dictator [Stalin].” He continues: “It was therefore Japan’s silence and inaction that led to the dropping of the atomic bomb.”⁸ Holding out for a negotiated surrender to retain the emperor and military cost the lives

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of 250,000 in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, 300,000 Japanese who never returned from Soviet captivity, and perhaps 81,000 soldiers who died overseas after surrender.⁹

Although the agonies of the victims of Hiroshima are well known, Japanese, German, and Allied bombing of civilian targets had already breached the moral wall distinguishing legitimate military targets from innocents, a product of “total war.” More than thirty-six million Europeans died in WWII, nineteen million of them civilians.¹⁰

While not well-known to most Americans, in early 1945 American strategic bombing of targets in Japan, only partially successful, was changed to fire bombing, which aimed at the destruction of entire cities. By mid-June, Japan’s six largest cities were heavily damaged and smaller cities became targets. In all, sixty-six cities and 174 square miles of urban Japan were burned out, killing 330,000 Japanese. Total war was being waged long before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and would continue until Japanese surrender.

A “Demonstration” Was Unlikely

In 1945, America was eager to end the war and reluctant to make more sacrifices, especially to defeat an enemy seen as a demonic “other.” Perhaps this is why Truman’s “visceral sense of revenge, widely shared by the American public, also colored his decision to stick to unconditional surrender and drop the bomb.”¹¹ Louis Menand, in a recent essay on nuclear theorist Herman Kahn, cites historian Peter Galison’s comment about the “ontology of the enemy” during the Cold War, which also describes American attitudes towards wartime Japan: a “cold-blooded, machinelike opponent . . . a mechanized Enemy Other,” an enemy not worthy of compromise. As a result of Pearl Harbor and the consequent mobilization of public opinion, the American war aim was unconditional surrender of Japan, not some negotiated peace.¹²

Japan deserved its wartime reputation. Mark Selden, in his introduction to a book of memoirs about the bomb, notes that the conduct of war had changed, destroying the “fragile distinction” between civilians and combatants. All combatants carried out atrocities, but we know more about Japanese horrors in China and Asia: the bombing of Shanghai, the Rape of Nanjing, and the “three-all policy” (burn all, kill all, destroy all) in rural North China, to name a few.¹³

Although from a distant moral and historical perspective one may argue that balancing one evil against another is not ethically legitimate, we cannot easily dismiss the power of wartime passions such acts provoked.¹⁴ John Dower, certainly no fan of the bomb, has documented the passions of war on both sides:

“. . . it is easy to forget the visceral emotions and sheer race hate that gripped virtually all participants in the war, at home and overseas, and influenced many actions and decisions at the time. . . . The dehumanization of the Other contributed immeasurably to the psychological distancing that facilitates killing, not only on the battlefields but also in the plans adopted by strategists far removed from the actual scene of combat. Such dehumanization, for example,

surely facilitated the decisions to make civilian populations the targets of concentrated attack, whether by conventional or nuclear weapons.”¹⁵

Were Japanese Wartime Leaders About to Surrender?

Hasegawa argues that the bombs were not decisive because military leaders were determined to fight on until the USSR declared war. He thinks the Soviet invasion made the peace faction and emperor more determined to end the war: “There is no convincing evidence to show that the Hiroshima bomb had a direct and immediate impact on Japan’s decision to surrender.” Hasegawa asserts that if the USSR had not entered the war, it may have taken more bombs—as they were available, on Kokura after August 19 and Niigata in early September—to convince the Japanese army that the cause was truly lost.¹⁶ Leaders delayed surrender in spite of the fact that out of Hiroshima’s population of 350,000, including 43,000 troops, 140,000 died (within five months), as did 70,000 of Nagasaki’s 270,000 people (the horrible long-term effects of radioactivity were not well-known in 1945).

Historian Richard Frank argues that the ability of American planners to know Japanese strategic thinking through the “Magic” (Ultra) code-breaking program revealed a die-hard mentality within the Japanese cabinet. Military dispatches revealed that the armed forces were determined to fight a hard battle in the homeland. For that reason, the bombs were only part of American strategy: continued bombing and blockade would be followed by the invasion of Kyushu in November 1945, followed by invasion of the Kanto plain in March 1946.¹⁷

While wartime leaders deliberated, the killing went on. On August 14, 1,014 American bombers raided Tokyo as Japanese plans were finalized for a final suicidal defense of the homeland, based on mass mobilization of the population outlined in the April 1945 Field Manual for the Decisive Battle in the Homeland. Civilians were not to be spared: they would serve as human shields in a defense in depth much bigger than Iwo Jima, Guadalcanal, or Okinawa. The military had urged fighting to the bitter end, to maintain morale and make a final demonstration of fighting spirit. In that sense, Japan’s leaders were partly responsible for the atomic denouement by denying the reality of defeat.¹⁸

Selden and others have asserted that an Allied blockade would eventually have led to surrender, but they discount the die-hard faction within the Japanese military. By any objective standard, Japan should have surrendered: it was isolated without an ally since the fall of Germany; forty percent of industry and most urban areas were destroyed; raw materials were depleted; civilian morale and health were low; and the army was short of food and supplies.¹⁹

However, the military-dominated government showed no admission of such weakness when the Domei News Agency, a semi-official organ, announced on July 27 that “Japan will prosecute the war of Greater East Asia to the bitter end.”²⁰ On August 10, Truman

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hoped for surrender, but it was not until 4:05 PM on August 14 that he was informed of Japan’s decision to finally give up. However, the army and navy did not send out surrender orders until August 17, thereby prolonging conflict.²¹

The Invasion Casualties Controversy

If the bombs had not been dropped, Operation Olympic, the invasion of Kyushu planned for November 1, would have cost many American and possibly 250,000 Japanese lives. A lively debate about the numbers has ensued, based on military predictions at the time and pure speculation after the surrender. Critics of the bomb minimize losses, and Truman’s administration later would inflate the estimates, but planners in 1945 thought there would be at least 63,000 casualties. It would be the largest amphibious operation of the war: 693,295 troops, nearly 1,315 amphibious vessels, and 1,914 planes, all backed by logistical support.²²

Critics argue that these human costs were “grossly inflated” in order to justify the bombs, saying that planners actually “. . . worked with estimates in the range of 20,000 to 46,000 American lives as the projected cost of landing in Kyushu.” However, in a war-weary America with a president eager to end the conflict quickly, even these large figures would represent an unjust sacrifice for American servicemen and their families.²³ The American public would have almost certainly condemned Truman for allowing such losses when the bomb posed an alternative. It is unrealistic to expect Truman to have put large numbers of American men in harm’s way to spare lives in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The Japanese invasion defense plan, Ketsu-go, was designed by Army Deputy Chief of Staff Kawabe Torashiro. Military leaders hoped that large invasion losses would demoralize Americans and force termination of war on terms favorable to Japan. On August 11, morning newspapers still stressed resistance and printed a military proclamation urging soldiers and officers to continue fighting, “even if we have to eat grass, chew dirt, and sleep in the field.” The peace faction was planning to surrender, but not the military. They sought a fight to the finish much greater in human cost than Okinawa.²⁴ For example, telegrams from overseas commanders like Yasuji Okamura, army commander in China, expressed continued determination: “I am firmly convinced that it is time to exert all our efforts to fight to the end with the determination for all the army to die an honorable death without being distracted by the enemy’s peace offensive and the domestic passive policy.”²⁵

Air raids continued, killing more than 15,000 Japanese as the third bomb was prepared for August 19. More were in the pipeline for use that fall. After Stalin broke his wartime neutrality with the Japanese on August 9, Russian troops pushed rapidly into Manchuria towards Mukden. Young Japanese officers on August 15 attempted to seize the Imperial palace to thwart surrender. Failing that, the hard-liner General Anami committed suicide at 5:30 that morning.

At 7:21 a radio announcement was sent that Hirohito would speak at noon. He announced acceptance of the unconditional surrender. However, five days earlier, on August 10, Japan had sent a protest letter via the Swiss, citing violation of Articles 22 and 23 of the Hague Convention on war, which prohibited the use of cruel weapons and claiming crimes against humanity. This was the only, and forgotten, protest by the Japanese government.²⁶

In his broadcast on August 15, Hirohito, in one of history’s greatest understatements, admitted that the war had proceeded “not necessarily to Japan’s advantage,” and noted that “Moreover, the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb. . . . Should We continue to fight, it would result not only in an ultimate collapse and obliteration of the Japanese nation, but also in the total extinction of human civilization.”

Although not well known, the last battle of the war was three days later, on August 18–19, as the Soviets took advantage of the delay in the Japanese cease fire order to attack Shimushu Island as a first step in their occupation and seizure of the Kuriles. During this hurried attack, Japanese defenders inflicted 1,567 casualties. Although the Russians were poorly prepared, this last stand of the Japanese army suggests that Operation Olympic, had it been necessary, would indeed have cost many American lives.²⁷

The Soviet Union and Technology Imperatives

Truman and his advisors were suspicious of Stalin’s intentions in East Asia. In light of the occupation and future division of Germany and Korea, this was a legitimate and real geostrategic concern. Through his spy network, Stalin was aware that America had a new doomsday weapon, which Truman revealed at Potsdam, but Soviet scientists were at an early stage of atomic bomb development. Although critics think that Truman used the bomb to warn off the Russians both in Asia and Europe, there is some evidence that Stalin encouraged the use of the new weapon.²⁸

The bomb may indeed have served as a warning. Only on August 24–25, after a strong protest by Truman, did Stalin give up his plans to invade Hokkaido and thereby share an occupation of Japan. Even so, 640,000 Japanese prisoners from Soviet-occupied territory were sent to labor camps in Siberia and the Soviet Far East for development projects, where 300,000 perished. If the war had continued even a few more days, many others would have been captured and worked to death in Russia. Perhaps 100,000 died in the winter of 1945–1946 alone from hunger, exposure, and epidemics, and another 81,000 Japanese soldiers died in Asia from illness or injuries before repatriation.²⁹ Given these real deaths, we have to ask how many deaths would have occurred had the war continued until November 1945 or longer.

A final possible ulterior motive may have been bureaucratic momentum and expense of the huge Manhattan Project, and the desire to justify this by proving the effectiveness of the bomb. Cer-

tainly one can doubt the need for dropping a second bomb with a different design on Nagasaki before the destruction of Hiroshima could be fully assessed and comprehended by Japanese leaders. However, to deplore the bomb based on these reasons requires believing that they were primary, rather than possible contributory factors, in what was obviously a complex decision-making situation. Given the immediate military, strategic, and political issues facing Truman, I find this highly unlikely.

Conclusion

Truman wanted to conclude the war with a minimum of American losses, regardless of Japanese civilian casualties. He sought an American occupation to democratize Japan without Russian interference, and to prevent future Japanese militarism and imperialism. Despite the atomic bombs—or because of them—Japan came to be America’s strongest ally in East Asia and a democratic, peaceful nation. The lesser of two evils is still evil—but Truman made the difficult yet correct choice for his time. We can only hope that this historic first use of atomic weapons will also be the last time a wartime leader has to face such a choice. That would be a fitting memorial for the unfortunate victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. ■

RESOURCES

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NOTES

1. Frank 1999, 332. The author wishes to thank two anonymous readers for their constructive critiques of an early draft. Two recent books are essential reading on the decision to use the bomb: Richard B. Frank’s *Downfall* (1999) and Tsuyoshi

Hasegawa’s *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (2005). Both Frank and Hasegawa see a much more complex military and diplomatic context than those who focus only on victims of the bomb. Fortunately for the busy reader, both have incisive conclusions that could expose students to the debate.

2. Schulz 2003, 180–181.
3. Hasegawa, 299. He thinks “. . . morality by definition is an absolute rather than a relative standard.” I disagree: in history morality is our laudable desire to reach the absolute. In theology, morality is immutable, but not always in human affairs, where existential choices sometimes have to be made.
4. Frank 1999, 331.
5. Fussell, 14.
6. Frank 1999, 356, 359.
7. Skates, 252.
8. Hasegawa, 301, 170.
9. Selden, xxiv–xxv.
10. Selden, xii. Because of the evil legacy of Nazism, Germans until recently have been more reluctant than Japanese to see themselves as victims of warfare, although Kurt Vonnegut and others have made the Dresden bombing on February 13, 1945, a tragic symbol of total war: 1,400 British and 1,350 American bombers created a firestorm seen 200 miles away. Dresden, undefended and with no significant war industry, had an important railroad junction for troops and supplies sent to the Russian front.
11. Hasegawa, 173, 143.
12. Menand, 97.
13. Selden, xi. According to Gerhard Weinberg, 73–74, there was a “moral collapse” in Japan after 1937, based on racism towards the Chinese, Koreans, and other Asians, that was as virulent as American racism towards the Japanese. The Japanese military was fair in its treatment of POWs in the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) and in WWI. But after 1937, from the highest authorities on down, the Japanese military encouraged a racial policy that led to the Bataan Death March, the murder of 50,000 Chinese in Singapore, the use of British POWs for bayonet practice, the execution of captured American flyers, and countless other atrocities, including the Nanjing Massacre. Captive American airmen were routinely executed after March 1945, partly in revenge for the fire-bombing of Tokyo and other cities. After the atomic bombs, more American prisoners were executed: eight were executed in Fukuoka on August 12, and another eight three days later, possibly the last Japanese wartime atrocity.
14. Weinberg, 73–74.
15. Dower, 11.
16. Hasegawa, 186, 198–9, 298.
17. Frank 1999, 103–116, 240–251, 333; 2005, 23.
18. Hasegawa, 96.
19. Selden, xxiii.
20. Hasegawa, 168.
21. Frank 1999, 327–9.
22. Frank, 119; Skates, 256, has somewhat different figures.
23. Selden, xxxi.
24. Hasegawa, 204, 216.
25. Hasegawa, 233.
26. Hasegawa, 234–5, 247–248, 299.
27. Hasegawa, 261–264.
28. Weinberg, 131, footnote 53.
29. Frank 1999, 323–4, 329; Dower, 298–9. Another legacy of the bombs is that they have instilled a sense of victimization among the Japanese, rather than remorse at their own injustices in Asia. Official expressions of regret are still demanded by Koreans, Chinese, and other Asian victims, embittering relations to this day. Although space does not allow discussion here, victim consciousness in postwar Japanese memory has tended to overlook colonialism and racism: Lisa Yoneyama and James Orr discuss this issue in depth (see Resources).

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