

Was the United States justified in dropping the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Smoke rises more than 60,000 feet into the air over the Japanese port city of Nagasaki on August 9, 1945, a result of the dropping of the second atomic bomb three days after the United States dropped the first bomb on Hiroshima. Japan unconditionally surrendered five days later on August 14, 1945. [National Archives]

A distinctive mushroom-shaped cloud in the sky billows over destruction below. Today, this image of the horrors of 20th-century warfare is instantly recognizable. Yet at the beginning of World War II, atomic warfare and the devastation it could cause were inconceivable to most. That changed forever in early August 1945, when the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The nuclear age had begun.

By the summer of 1945, America's participation in World War II had been dragging on for four bloody years. The war in Europe had ended in May with the surrender of Nazi Germany, but the United States and Japan continued to slug it out in a brutal campaign in the Pacific. The losses on both sides of the conflict were mounting with no end in sight. The American public was weary and wanted the war to end. Presented with an opportunity to end the war quickly, President Harry S. Truman authorized the use of atomic bombs. Initial Japanese death tolls were quite high—more than 70,000 people died each at Hiroshima on August 6 and at Nagasaki on August 9. Japan surrendered unconditionally on August 14—a quick end to the war indeed. But was the use of the atomic bomb justified?

Dropping the Bomb Saved Lives

by Spencer C. Tucker

Dropping the atomic bombs on Japan saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers and was the only way to end the war quickly. In the summer of 1945, American planners hoped that a naval blockade and strategic bombing campaign of the Japanese home islands would bring the war to an end. The prospects for an actual invasion appeared dim, as Japanese leaders made major preparations to defend against such an attack. In light of the heavy casualties sustained by U.S. forces in the invasions of Iwo Jima and Okinawa earlier that year, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff were reluctant to carry out Operation DOWNFALL, the planned land invasion of Japan. The Japanese military had a million soldiers, 3,000 Kamikaze aircraft, and 5,000 suicide boats available to defend its home islands. Civilians were also being prepared to fight to the death. With the U.S. invasion scheduled for November 1, 1945, and well aware that the cost of such an enterprise was likely to be high, the Joint Chiefs of Staff pressed President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the February 1945 Yalta Conference to persuade the Soviet Union to enter the war against Japan at any cost.

Following the successful test detonation of an atomic bomb at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945, sharp debate arose among advisers to U.S. President Harry S. Truman (who had succeeded Roosevelt as president on the latter's death in April) regarding whether to employ the new weapon against Japan. The terror threshold had already been passed in the firebombing of Japanese cities. Indeed, the most destructive single air raid in history was not the atomic bombing of Hiroshima or Nagasaki, but the firebombing of Tokyo on the night of March 9–10, 1945. This was total war. It was always assumed that the bomb would be used if it became available. American planners believed that employing the bomb would, in all likelihood, bring the war to a speedy end, saving many American lives. It would also mean that the United States would not have to share occupation of Japan with the Soviet Union, and hopefully it would deter Soviet leader Joseph Stalin from future aggression. The atomic bomb was thus essentially a psychological weapon, rather than a purely military tool, the use of which was designed to influence Japanese political leaders. Dropping it appeared to be the only way to realize the American goal of unconditional surrender.

Revisionist historians have held that the Japanese government was trying desperately to leave the war and that employing the bomb was unnecessary. Intercepts of diplomatic messages indicated, however, that Japan had not yet reached the decision to surrender when the first bomb was dropped. While Emperor Hirohito and his principal advisers had

concluded that Japan could not win the war, they still held out hope for a negotiated settlement and believed that a last decisive battle would force the Allies to grant more favorable peace terms.

Postatomic bomb estimates have claimed the possibility of up to a million casualties in a U.S. invasion of Japan. However, historian Ray Skates concludes in his authoritative study *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb* (1998) that Operation OLYMPIC, the first phase of the invasion of Japan (the conquest of the island of Kyushu planned for November 1945), would alone have taken two months and resulted in 75,000 to 100,000 U.S. casualties. Such losses, while they would not have affected the outcome of the war, might indeed have brought about the political goals sought by the Japanese leaders for more favorable surrender terms.

Prolonging the war would have meant a significantly higher cost in Japanese lives than those actually killed in the atomic bombings. During the war, the Japanese lost 323,495 dead on the home front, the vast majority of them from air attack. With continued strategic bombing this total would have swelled, and many other Japanese would simply have died of starvation. By August 1945, Japan's largest cities had been largely burned out. Waterborne transportation had been interdicted by airborne mining and submarines, and the Japanese nation was close to starvation. The reduced food supply was highly dependent on railroad distribution, and the railroads would have been the next major strategic bombing target. In effect, dropping the bomb resulted in a net saving of both Japanese and American lives.

Dropping the Atomic Bomb was Unjustified

by Gar Alperovitz

The United States was not justified in using atomic bombs against Japanese cities in 1945. United States and British intelligence had already advised that Japan was likely to surrender when the Soviet Union entered the war in early August—and on terms which, in fact, would have been very close to those ultimately accepted by the United States. There are also reasons to believe the decision had as much to do with geopolitics connected with the Soviet Union as it did with the war against Japan.

The conventional wisdom that the atomic bomb saved a million lives is so widespread that most Americans haven't paused to ponder something rather striking to anyone seriously concerned with the issue: Most American military leaders didn't think the bombings were either necessary or justified—and many were morally offended by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Here is how Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower reacted when he was told by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson that the atomic bomb would be used: "During his recitation of the relevant facts, I had been conscious of a feeling of depression and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives."

In another public statement the man who later became president was blunt: "It wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing."

Gen. Curtis LeMay, the tough cigar-smoking air force "hawk," was also dismayed. Shortly after the bombings he stated: "The war would have been over in two weeks. . . . The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all."

And Fleet Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet, went public with this statement: "The Japanese had, in fact, already sued for peace. . . . The atomic bomb played no decisive part, from a purely military standpoint, in the defeat of Japan."

The reasons these and many, many military leaders felt this way are both clear and instructive: Japan was essentially defeated, its navy at the bottom of the ocean; its air force limited by fuel, equipment, and other shortages; its army facing defeat on all fronts; and its cities subjected to bombing that was all but impossible to challenge. With Germany out of the war, the United States and Britain were about to bring their full power to bear on what was left of the Japanese military. Moreover, the Soviet Army was getting ready to attack on the Asian mainland.

American intelligence had broken Japanese codes and had advised as early as April 1945 that although a hard-line faction wished to continue the war, when the Soviet Union attacked—expected roughly in the first week of August—Japan would likely surrender as long as assurances were given concerning the fate of the emperor. Combined U.S. and British intelligence reaffirmed this advice a month before the bombings. One reason this option—using the shock of the Soviet attack and giving assurances to the emperor—appeared highly likely to work was that Japanese leaders feared the political consequences of Soviet power. Moreover, there was also little to lose: An invasion could not in any event begin until November, three months after the Soviet attack. If the war didn't end as expected, the bomb could still be used.

Instead, the United States rushed to use two bombs on August 6 and August 9, at almost exactly the time the Soviet attack was scheduled. Numerous studies suggest this was done in part because they "preferred," as Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Martin Sherwin has put it, to end the war in this way. Although the available evidence is not as yet absolutely conclusive, impressing the Soviets also appears to have been a factor.

Many military leaders were offended not only because the bombs were used in these circumstances but because they were used against Japanese cities—essentially civilian targets. William D. Leahy, President Truman's friend, his chief of staff, and a five star admiral who presided over meetings of both the U.S. Chiefs of Staff and the Combined U.S.-British Chiefs of Staff, wrote this after the war: "[T]he use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender. . . . [I]n being the first to use it, we . . . adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages."