Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman’s Decision to Launch the Atomic Bomb

Matt Redmond

At 8:15 am on August 6th, 1945, the Enola Gay dropped “Little Boy,” an atomic bomb, on Hiroshima, Japan, ushering in the atomic age and initiating heated controversy on the necessity of using such tremendous force in war. On the mixed advice of his opinionated Cabinet, most notably Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Secretary of State James F. Byrnes, President Harry S. Truman launched the world’s first atomic bomb on a city, establishing a new paradigm of American military dominance and doctrine.

Historians disagree as to the primary motivations of Truman’s decision to launch the atomic strike on Hiroshima. Some cite racism as a potential catalyst, claiming that Truman envisioned the Japanese as primitives to be dealt with in a savage manner. Other historians claim that his decision was driven more strongly by an aversion to committing 500,000 American troops to an invasion of Japan. Some claim Truman attempted to defeat the Japanese through so-called Total War, and that the use of the atomic bomb was a logical extension of this doctrine. These historians defend the use of the bomb as a necessary military tool for ending the war. Still others claim Truman made the decision to launch the atomic bomb on Hiroshima for geopolitical reasons. These historians evaluate the threat that Soviet Communism posed to Asia and the powerful propaganda and strategic advantage that an atomic bargaining chip would confer. Although racism and military necessity may have played their roles in Truman’s decision and should not be dismissed outright, it is more reasonable to conclude that Truman decided to drop the bomb on Hiroshima in order to intimidate Russia and contain the spread of Communism through a dramatic show of American strength. Prior to launching the atomic bomb, Truman consulted closely with his advisors. His faith in the ability and experience

This paper was written for Nancy McPhaul’s Advanced Placement U.S. History class in the spring of 2009.
of Stimson and Byrnes led him to make a decision that he rationalized externally as emerging from the dire straits of military necessity, but rationalized internally as another tool in his arsenal of containment. In order to examine why he dropped the bomb, we need to evaluate the three major theories of racism, military necessity, and containment.

Some historians, most notably John W. Dower, posit that racism was a major factor in Truman's decision. They allege that Truman considered the Japanese to be sub-human and unworthy of survival. Truman did make several derogatory comments about the Japanese, for example in his 1945 letter to Samuel McCrea Cavert, head of the American Christian League: “If you’re dealing with a beast, you must treat it like a beast.”¹ To his wife, Bess, Truman remarked that “The Lord made a White man from dust, a nigger from mud, then He threw up what was left and it came down a Chinaman. He does hate Chinese and Japs. So do I. It is race prejudice, I guess.”² The President’s racism reflected the dominant view of the time—mistrust and hatred of the Japanese coupled with fervent displays of jingoism, exemplified by the popular governmental policy of sequestering Japanese-Americans in internment camps. Filmmaker Frank Capra’s propaganda series “Why We Fight,”³ and specifically the “Battle of China” episode on the Rape of Nanking, is an example of the portrayal of Japanese soldiers as vicious, aggressive, impulsive, violent, animal-like, and sub-human. As Dower notes in his War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War, “In this milieu of historical forgetfulness, selective reporting, centralized propaganda, and a truly savage war, atrocities and war crimes played a major role in the propagation of racial and cultural stereotypes.”⁴ Dower believes that the pervading climate of racial acerbity combined with Truman’s own racism were the two most important factors behind the decision to use the atomic bomb. This is a controversial view, however. Historians Gar Alperovitz and Sean L. Malloy argue explicitly against the racist hypothesis as incorrectly inferring causation from correlation. In Alperovitz’s book The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth, the author debunks Dower’s notion that racism was the most important factor behind Truman’s decision by pointing to two things. First, while racism was undeniably present in American culture, Truman did not get caught up in the emotional fervor of the times, but rather waited thirteen weeks, between
April 25 (when he learned of the bomb) and August 6, 1945, to launch. Second, as Alperovitz posits: “It is all but impossible to find specific evidence that racism was an important factor in the decision to attack Hiroshima and Nagasaki. …If racism were a central factor, one would expect to find it strongly expressed...That is not to deny that racism was widespread...however, it is important to distinguish between such attitudes—and causation.”

Alperovitz rebukes Dower for drawing specious conclusions on the motivation behind Truman’s decision by claiming that Dower falsely infers causation from correlation. Another historian, Sean L. Malloy, devotes a section of his book *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb Against Japan* to proving that Truman’s advisors were against using the bomb for racist reasons. Truman valued his advisors’ counsel in nearly all matters relating to the atomic bomb because he had inherited members of Roosevelt’s cabinet who knew more about the bomb than he did. Malloy argues against the racist motivation by analyzing the mindsets of Truman’s cabinet members, notably Stimson: “While many Americans may have easily accepted, even rejoiced, in the mass killing of Japanese civilians in 1945, the Secretary of War was not one of them.”

Malloy evaluates the published opinions of Secretary Stimson, Army Chief of Staff George Marshall, and General Carl Spaatz, concluding that Truman’s advisors made their decisions based predominantly on the military intelligence available to them rather than any racist animus. Alperovitz and Malloy expose the dearth of evidence supporting the racism argument, and demonstrate that Dower draws conclusions about Truman’s motivation that do not follow from the evidence. The lack of specific evidence for Dower’s argument, coupled with the presence of other historical interpretations that better explain the available evidence, strongly suggest that the motivation behind Truman’s decision to launch the atomic bomb was not racist in origin.

Truman’s desire to end the war quickly and avoid a costly invasion of Japan is a more compelling explanation for his decision to drop the atomic bomb, but does not fully explain his motivation. While it is true that military pragmatism was present in the minds of both Truman
and his advisors, this explanation does not thoroughly account for Truman’s underlying diplomatic motivations. Historians who believe that the bomb was dropped primarily out of a sense of military necessity use contextual evidence from speeches and statistics to support their claim. Werner Gruhl, an historical statistician, compiled a list of casualty projections for a full-scale invasion of the Japanese homeland (Appendix A). The data comes from various authorities during the war, including General Douglass MacArthur’s staff and General George Marshall’s staff, as well as the U.S. Army Planners and the 6th Medical Staff. Gruhl’s table contains a summary of the information available to Truman at the time of his decision, which gives a sense of the magnitude of the crisis that Truman thought he was averting by deciding to use the atomic bomb. Gruhl demonstrates that the average estimated number of casualties for an invasion of Japan was 221,661 American soldiers, plus the death of “some or all of the 260,000 POWs held in Japan’s home islands.” These figures lend credence to Truman’s assertion that he may have “saved a quarter million of the flower of our young manhood” by using the bomb when he did. Truman assessed this information and evaluated strategies with Byrnes and Stimson.

Stimson’s memoirs and his recollections of Truman’s decision process (published in Harper’s Magazine shortly after the atomic strike as “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb”) are clear: Stimson believed that the use of the atomic bomb as a legitimate weapon of war was never seriously questioned by anyone in the upper echelons of Truman’s administration. The government had spent a large amount of public money on a weapon that, according to Stimson, they always intended to use. Stimson argued that America should be pushing for the immediate defeat of Japan. Using the bomb would be the most effective way to attain that goal.

In The Atomic Bomb: The Critical Issues, historian Barton J. Bernstein presents evidence supporting Stimson’s statements that dropping the bomb was driven by military necessity:

*In “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” [Stimson] made four key points: policy makers had long regarded the bomb as a ‘legitimate’ weapon; they carefully considered the decision; there were no sure alternatives*
to ending the war (with ‘the complete surrender of Japan’) as quickly and with as small a loss of American lives; and quick victory, not use or avoidance of the bomb, was the controlling purpose for policymakers in 1945.\textsuperscript{11}

Bernstein reiterates Stimson’s public assertion that the government’s goal was to “end the war, not avoid the use of the bomb.”\textsuperscript{12} In the Harper’s article, Stimson publicly affirms that “the principal political, social, and military objective of the United States in the summer of 1945 was the prompt and complete surrender of Japan. Only the complete destruction of her military power could open the way to lasting peace.”\textsuperscript{13}

Although, like Bernstein, one could conclude that Truman’s advisors thought of the bomb in purely pragmatic terms of military necessity, this is not the complete picture. Many of his advisors disagreed that the bomb was a military necessity. Offering an alternative explanation for Truman’s decision, Secretary of State Byrnes stated in a May 1945 conversation with nuclear physicist Leo Szilard: “It wasn’t necessary to use the bomb against the cities of Japan in order to win the war, but our possession and demonstration of the bomb would make the Russians more manageable in Europe.”\textsuperscript{14} Byrnes articulated the theory of Soviet containment as a counter-theory to military necessity. Concurring with Byrnes, General Leslie Groves, director of the Manhattan Project, stated that there were “[no] illusions on my part, but that Russia was our enemy, and that the project was carried out on that basis. I didn’t go along with the attitude of the whole country that Russia was our gallant ally. I always had suspicions and the project was conducted on that basis.”\textsuperscript{15}

Groves was not the only general in Truman’s administration who challenged the validity of the argument from military necessity. General Dwight D. Eisenhower also questioned it, saying: “I voiced to him [Stimson] my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary.”\textsuperscript{16} Stimson himself ultimately refuted his own public position in his private diary dated June 6, 1945. He wrote that the primary purpose of the atomic bomb was “to persuade Russia to play ball.”\textsuperscript{17} Stimson’s private statements and the public statements of Truman’s
other advisors weaken the argument that the use of the bomb on Japan was based purely on military necessity.

Other historians have attempted to support the argument for military necessity, including the popular theory of “Total War.” This theory stipulates that Japanese civilians should be treated the same as Japanese soldiers because of their participation in the Japanese military-industrial complex, including arms manufacturing, shipping, and maintenance. Historians theorize that Truman dropped the bomb because he wanted to destroy the enemy’s power to make war, as well as their morale, no matter the toll. While this theory lends itself well to the Western Front, the concurrent war against Germany, it does not apply to the war against Japan. Allied bombers had already carpet-bombed the majority of Japan’s war factories and civilian towns, and had firebombed Tokyo multiple times. It is common knowledge that most of Truman’s military advisors recognized that Japan’s ability to produce armaments and equipment had effectively been eliminated by early 1945. Furthermore, the targets selected for the atomic attack were both of low strategic value: Hiroshima was a port city which housed a moderately sized military supply depot, and Nagasaki served as a small harbor for the Imperial Navy. If Truman were operating under the premise of Total War, he would have selected a target of higher value. While the Total War theory may have been a part of Truman’s overall strategy in World War II, it does a poor job of explaining his motivation to launch the atomic bomb on Japan and does not support military necessity as a motivation.

Another aspect that undermines the military necessity argument is the option of Japanese surrender. At Potsdam in July 1945, Truman met with Churchill and Stalin to discuss the future conduct of the war. These world leaders issued the Potsdam Declaration (Appendix B), which contained a clause that required Japanese leaders to unconditionally surrender:

Following are our terms. We will not deviate from them. There are no alternatives. We shall brook no delay. …We call upon the government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces, and to provide proper and adequate assurances of their
good faith in such action. The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction.\textsuperscript{18}

Some historians posit that if Truman had given the Japanese military leaders the option for a \textit{conditional} surrender they might have accepted a brokered peace. The Japanese venerated their Emperor and were so invested in the survival of the imperial system that they were unwilling to surrender for anything that would undercut his status as ruler. Stimson proposed that Truman let the Japanese keep their Emperor in order to convince them to surrender more quickly, but Truman refused. Although Truman realized that Japan's true military power lay not with the Emperor but with the Premier, Kantaro Suzuki, he also knew that Japanese pride and cultural identity were centered on their beloved Emperor. Truman intended to crush Japan's military might along with its spirit, demoralizing the populace by removing the Emperor so that they could find neither the military nor psychological strength to challenge America in the future. Suzuki's decision to ignore Truman's ultimatum effectively sealed the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Suzuki publicly claimed to "\textit{mokusatsu}" the Potsdam Declaration, a word that translates roughly to "killing silently by ignoring." Even in the face of Truman's ultimatum, Stimson actively sought a more diplomatic solution. Malloy reflects on Stimson's views: "While it was certainly prudent to plan for a potential invasion, it made no sense to sacrifice any more American lives if surrender could be achieved through a modest clarification or softening of terms... Stimson insisted that no invasion should take place without first exploring diplomatic options for ending the war."\textsuperscript{19} The option for conditional surrender was debated by Truman's advisors and ultimately rejected because Truman believed it would not ensure future peace. The military necessity of dropping the bomb is a compelling but incomplete argument because it fails to take into account the larger geopolitical implications of Truman's decision: Soviet containment.

Alperovitz, Bernstein, and Malloy all agree that Truman's primary motivation for the decision was his desire to use the atomic bomb not as a weapon of war, as historians Robert J. Donovan and Herbert Feis conclude, but rather as a means of deterring Soviet aggression. During the 1930s and 1940s the Soviets had been building up troops along
their Pacific coast and expanding their sphere of influence, notably in Chinese Manchuria. Aware of the growing Communist presence in these regions, Truman sought to counteract Soviet activity by using the atomic bomb to signal a new departure in foreign policy, favoring a philosophy of containment over the prior tendency of American policy to lurch from isolationism to armed intervention and back. As Truman envisioned it, the U.S. would attempt to curtail the spread of Communism by opposing it in all guises and places. The demonstration of atomic power in Japan sent a clear message to the rest of the world: America had both the military and economic power for unilateral negotiation, given its unique ability to wield a weapon that could change the course of warfare. Truman’s own words in his private diary support the containment justification: “…[T]he experience at Potsdam now made me determined that I would not allow the Russians any part in the control of Japan. …[F]orce is the only thing that the Russians understand.”

However, this mindset of shaping global dynamics through American military might was not a new phenomenon, even though the weaponry was new and more intimidating. Roosevelt had believed that “he could join with Churchill in bringing about a U.S.-U.K. post-war agreement…by which [the bomb] would be held closely and presumably to control the peace of the world.” Bernstein describes Truman’s expectations this way: “During his first few weeks in office, Truman learned about the project from Stimson and from James F. Byrnes. Byrnes…told Truman that ‘the bomb might well put us in a position to dictate our own terms at the end of the war.’” Bernstein goes on to evaluate Truman’s advisors’ views on the effects that the bombing would have:

Stimson warned that other nations would be able to make atomic bombs, thereby endangering the peace and threatening the world. The bomb could be a threat to peace or a guarantor of peace. …‘If the problem of the proper use of this weapon can be solved, we would have the opportunity to bring the world into a pattern in which the peace of the world and our civilization can be saved.’

Truman’s advisors, and by extension Truman himself, were sold on the belief that the bomb could be used to intimidate Russia and ultimately help the United States forge a successful post-war foreign policy. The
argument that racism primarily motivated Truman’s decision has been refuted by a majority of prominent historians. The argument that the bomb was an absolute military necessity has similarly been devalued, given the already-weakened state of Japan. Historians accept the argument that Japan would have conditionally surrendered if they could have retained their Emperor; however, this played a negligible role in Truman’s decision because he would only accept an unconditional surrender in order to reinforce America’s supremacy and future world stability. It is clear, after a careful analysis of numerical evidence and the words of both Truman and his advisors, that the underlying motivation behind the decision to drop the atomic bomb was to intimidate Russia, thereby ensuring a peaceful future for the planet maintained by the United States in its newfound role as the free world’s guardian. Truman launched the bomb not as a means of ending World War II, but in the hope of preventing a future war from beginning. ●
Appendix A
Werner Gruhl’s Casualty Intelligence Estimates


Appendix B
Proclamation Defining Terms for Japanese Surrender
Issued, at Potsdam, July 26, 1945

1. We—the President of the United States, the President of the National Government of the Republic of China, and the Prime Minister of Great Britain, representing the hundreds of millions of our countrymen, have conferred and agree that Japan shall be given an opportunity to end this war.
2. The prodigious land, sea and air forces of the United States, the British Empire and of China, many times reinforced by their armies and air fleets from the west, are poised to strike the final blows upon Japan. This military power is sustained and inspired by the determination of all the Allied Nations to prosecute the war against Japan until she ceases to resist.

3. The result of the futile and senseless German resistance to the might of the aroused free peoples of the world stands forth in awful clarity as an example to the people of Japan. The might that now converges on Japan is immeasurably greater than that which, when applied to the resisting Nazis, necessarily laid waste to the lands, the industry and the method of life of the whole German people. The full application of our military power, backed by our resolve, will mean the inevitable and complete destruction of the Japanese armed forces and just as inevitably the utter devastation of the Japanese homeland.

4. The time has come for Japan to decide whether she will continue to be controlled by those self-willed militaristic advisers whose unintelligent calculations have brought the Empire of Japan to the threshold of annihilation, or whether she will follow the path of reason.

5. Following are our terms. We will not deviate from them. There are no alternatives. We shall brook no delay.

6. There must be eliminated for all time the authority and influence of those who have deceived and misled the people of Japan into embarking on world conquest, for we insist that a new order of peace, security and justice will be impossible until irresponsible militarism is driven from the world.

7. Until such a new order is established and until there is convincing proof that Japan’s war-making power is destroyed, points in Japanese territory to be designated by the Allies shall be occupied to secure the achievement of the basic objectives we are here setting forth.
8. The terms of the Cairo Declaration shall be carried out and Japanese sovereignty shall be limited to the islands of Honshu, Hokkaido, Kyushu, Shikoku and such minor islands as we determine.

9. The Japanese military forces, after being completely disarmed, shall be permitted to return to their homes with the opportunity to lead peaceful and productive lives.

10. We do not intend that the Japanese shall be enslaved as a race or destroyed as a nation, but stern justice shall be meted out to all war criminals, including those who have visited cruelties upon our prisoners. The Japanese Government shall remove all obstacles to the revival and strengthening of democratic tendencies among the Japanese people. Freedom of speech, of religion, and of thought, as well as respect for the fundamental human rights shall be established.

11. Japan shall be permitted to maintain such industries as will sustain her economy and permit the exaction of just reparations in kind, but not those which would enable her to re-arm for war. To this end, access to, as distinguished from control of, raw materials shall be permitted. Eventual Japanese participation in world trade relations shall be permitted.

12. The occupying forces of the Allies shall be withdrawn from Japan as soon as these objectives have been accomplished and there has been established in accordance with the freely expressed will of the Japanese people a peacefully inclined and responsible government.

13. We call upon the government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces, and to provide proper and adequate assurances of their good faith in such action. The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction.

*Harry S. Truman,* “*Potsdam Defining Terms for Japanese Surrender.*” *(Declaration presented at Potsdam Conference), Potsdam, Germany, July 1945.*
Notes


10. Ibid., 100.


12. Ibid., 2.


22. Ibid., 103.

23. Ibid.

Bibliography

Primary Sources


Truman, Harry S. “Potsdam Defining Terms for Japanese Surrender.” (Declaration presented at Potsdam Conference), Potsdam, Germany, July 1945.


Secondary Sources


