The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bombs

Analysis of Harry Truman’s Decision to Use the Atomic Bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

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On May 2, 1945, Germany surrendered to the Allied forces after a long, bloody conflict and the death of Hitler. This ended the war in Europe. However, there was still one conflict that was left to be resolved: the war in the Pacific against Japan. Initially, the plan was to issue warnings on the island before bombing and storming it in the spring of 1946. This all changed with the completion and successful test of the most destructive weapon ever created, a weapon that would change the world. On August 6, and August 9, 1945 The United States dropped two atomic bombs, Little Boy and Fat Man, on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, two cities on two of the islands of Japan. These weapons wrought unprecedented death and destruction on the cities and brought about the immediate unconditional surrender of Japan. However, the bombs did much more than that. These weapons served as notice to the world, especially the Soviet Union, of the strength of the United States. These weapons also signaled the coming of a new age and the dawn of the Cold War.

The decision to use these weapons was a very complex affair. There were many different angles that needed to be considered: such as the existing plans to force Japanese surrender, the death toll of a possible invasion, the possibility of Japanese surrender, the consistent backing of “unconditional surrender,” the effect of the bomb on the Soviets, and the costs of the Manhattan project. It is well documented that President Harry Truman wished to end the war quickly in order to end conflict and Americans’ dying and was thus motivated into using two powerful quick strike weapons. However, President Truman made a hasty decision by using the bombs and was not justified in doing so.

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1 A strategy pertaining to the fight against the Axis powers in World War Two. This was initially used by Franklin Roosevelt and means total surrender. It also implies that the surrendering party will not be able to set any conditions on their surrender.
The first area that needs consideration when looking at this issue is the alternate plans to defeat Japan or force a Japanese surrender. By 1945 the United States had a continuing air bombing campaign against Japanese cities as well as a naval blockade of Japan. In 1947 Secretary of War Henry Lewis Stimson released an article addressing the decisions to drop the bombs. In the article Stimson states that by 1945 the Japanese navy and air force were crippled and all that was left was a Japanese army that contained a five million man force.\(^3\) Stimson also provides a long plan to slowly take the Japanese islands.\(^4\) Based on the earlier assertion that Truman wanted to end the war quickly, it is obvious why he would choose the bombs over an invasion.

There was, however, another key proposed strategy. After the atomic bombs were completed Truman appointed a committee whose purpose was to talk with the scientists of the Manhattan project about the future of atomic science and the nuclear bomb. This committee assessed the possibility of dropping an atomic bomb on a deserted area of a Japanese territory or within the Japanese islands.\(^5\) The advantage to this plan would be that it would send a message without harming Japanese civilians. However the committee saw two flaws with this idea. First, if the Japanese were forewarned about the date for this event then the committee was certain Japanese planes would shoot down the test aircraft. Second, if the Japanese were not warned in advance, then they would not be present in a large enough number to be frightened.\(^6\) There was also the worry that the Japanese government would conceal or minimize the power of a bomb.\(^7\)

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\(^4\) Ibid.


\(^6\) Ibid

Other possible strategies to win the war would have been to amend the doctrine of unconditional surrender, support Soviet invasion of Japan, or increasing the bombing and blockading of Japan.\(^8\)

In the years since the bombs were dropped, public opinion has become one that Truman’s decision saved a million lives. This assumption is completely false. In 1947 Henry Lewis Stimson stated that the estimated death toll of invading Japan would be 500,000 men.\(^9\) This also is false. The actual estimated death toll was between 40,000 and 46,000.\(^10\) However General George C. Marshall estimated that 153,500 men would be wounded or missing in action.\(^10\) As we know, fighting the Japanese usually ended up being much more costly than expected; for example the fighting in Okinawa. At the end of this battle 30 percent of the native population of Okinawa was dead.\(^11\) So, after seeing this devastation Truman rightfully believed that the death toll of taking the Japanese islands would be much higher than estimated.\(^12\) It is also believed that the air bombing campaign against Japan would have cost more lives throughout an extended war with Japan than two massive bomb strikes.\(^13\) Because of these last two beliefs Truman was swayed more towards dropping the atomic bombs.

Now things begin to get very complicated when it comes to considering the possible surrender of Japan before the dropping of the atomic bombs. When one looks at the information given by the Japanese it is obvious by their attitude that an unconditional surrender was not on its

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\(^9\) Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb."

\(^10\) I got two different estimates. 1 from Maddox saying 40,000 men and 1 from Walker saying 46,000 men. Maddox, *Weapons for victory: the Hiroshima decision fifty years later*.


\(^13\) Hamby, "Truman and the Bomb," 18-25.
way. Most Japanese were very resistant to surrender, including the civilians. The Japanese were committed to their Emperor and their sense of national pride. Japanese Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki even claimed that Japan would keep fighting for victory until the very end. However, prior to the Soviets entering the war, the Japanese telegraphed them asking for peace. Another curious action by the Japanese was that their ambassador, Soto, made a statement advising that the Japanese ought to surrender. The Foreign Minister, Tojo, made it clear that this surrender would not happen forthwith. The Japanese in 1945 were also having a small amount of communication with the United States about peace and surrender. The big issue that would not allow for Japan’s surrender was that the United States demanded that the position of the Emperor be removed. Yet, after the dropping of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki the United States allowed the Emperor to retain his position and only slightly limited his power. The United States actually prolonged the war by failing to clearly state their position on the Emperor retaining power and therefore contradicted their argument for wanting to swiftly end the war. Also, in retrospect it appears that the bombing campaign and naval blockade would have brought a Japanese surrender within weeks. Additionally, after the war ended President Truman created a Congressional panel to assess the causes of the war in the Pacific. During their research this committee came to the conclusion that without dropping the atomic bombs a Japanese surrender would have been given by November 1, 1945, or at the very latest December 1945. This severely hurt Truman’s justifications for using the bombs to quickly end the war when this panel stated it would have been over in two months anyways.

14 Walker, Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan.
15 Hamby, "Truman and the bomb," 18-25.
16 Ibid.
19 Doug Long, "Hiroshima: Was it Necessary?"
After the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt committed the United States to the idea of unconditional surrender. Unconditional surrender is complete victory and surrender to whatever terms the victor sets. This was achieved in Germany and was expected when dealing with Japan. This focus made concluding a truce with the Japanese very difficult.\textsuperscript{20} In retrospect Truman should have made it clear that the removal of the emperor was not completely necessary for unconditional surrender. This certainly could have brought about the Japanese surrender much sooner.\textsuperscript{21} For these reasons some historians argue that the bombs were dropped out of a blind commitment to the idea of unconditional surrender.\textsuperscript{22}

Another public opinion about the decision to use the atomic weapons was that they were needed to scare off the Soviets and as a deterrent for future war. Many historians see that part of the rationale to drop the bomb was to frighten the Soviets and make them more manageable in Europe.\textsuperscript{21} However this plan ended up backfiring in a way and motivated the Soviets into speeding up their nuclear program.\textsuperscript{23} It was the plan of Henry Lewis Stimson to drop two bombs in quick succession to help encourage belief that the United States had a large stockpile of these weapons, which was not true.\textsuperscript{22}

Before dropping the bomb however, the United States government had to spend a vast amount of resources just to create these awesome weapons of mass destruction. This effort took place in the Manhattan Project. The Manhattan Project brought together many great minds and about two billion dollars to create this technology and the bombs Little Boy and Fat Man.\textsuperscript{24} After spending all that money and using a vast amount of resources it was expected that these weapons

\textsuperscript{20} Martin, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," 334-353.
\textsuperscript{21} Hamby, "Truman and the bomb,:" 18-25.
\textsuperscript{22} Hikins, "The Rhetoric of ‘Unconditional Surrender’ and the Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb," 379-400.
\textsuperscript{23} Long, "Hiroshima: Was It Necessary?"
\textsuperscript{24} Bernstein, "The atomic bombings reconsidered," 135-152.
be used. If they were not it would have been viewed as a gigantic waste of money and time.\textsuperscript{25} This made the decision very easy and was possibly the largest influencing factor on President Truman’s mind.

The last interesting point to look at is Truman’s mind set before making the decision. The Potsdam meeting, scheduled for mid-July 1945, was the first time President Truman was to meet with Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin. President Truman was extremely nervous going into this meeting for he believed he would have to fight tooth and nail to get the Soviets to cooperate and lend their support in fighting the Japanese. Truman wrote to his wife, “Here’s hoping I can do it.”\textsuperscript{26} On July 16 the first atomic test, known as the Trinity test, took place in the desert near Almogordo, New Mexico. This test was not only a success, but exceeded expectations. Secretary Stimson informed President Truman that the light from the bomb could be seen 250 miles away and its roar heard from 50 miles away.\textsuperscript{27} As soon as Truman received these reports he became extremely confident in his dealings with Stalin and Churchill at Potsdam. In his diary Truman writes “Believe the Japs will fold up before Russia comes in, I am sure they will when Manhattan appears over their homeland.”\textsuperscript{28} This entry came on July 18\textsuperscript{th}, a mere day and a half after receiving the results of the Trinity test. This seems a little hasty on Truman’s part. A day and a half is nowhere near enough time to make a decision as complex and influential as this one. This quote backs up my assertions that Truman was driven by a hasty desire to end the war as quickly as possible. In Truman’s mind that atomic bombs were a way to do this with the least amount of risk. This is what drove Truman to make this decision without much consideration of alternative options. Truman for the most part did not ask for papers laying out the advantages

\textsuperscript{25} Lawrence Freedman, "The Most Controversial Decision: Truman, the Atomic Bombs, and the Defeat of Japan," \textit{Foreign Affairs} 90, no. 6 (2011): 182.
\textsuperscript{26} Walker, \textit{Prompt and Utter Destruction}. 54
\textsuperscript{27} Walker, \textit{Prompt and Utter Destruction}. 59
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid. 60
and disadvantages of using these weapons nor did he ask for an analysis of the possible impacts they would have on the future world. This once again backs up the assumption that Truman made a hasty decision and once his mind was made he did not deviate from the chosen path.

There were a great many factors influencing the decision by President Harry Truman to drop the atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is clear that President Truman was motivated by a desire to end the war quickly, as well as a severe pressure to use the bombs so that the Manhattan project would not be viewed as a colossal waste. Also Truman, understandably, believed that a Japanese surrender was not coming after their willingness to resist until the end and after a gruesome conflict in the Pacific that had made many Americans despise the Japanese. However, Truman was most likely wrong. It seems quite apparent that a Japanese surrender was imminent within two months. Furthermore, a Japanese invasion was not likely and would have cost a very small amount of lives compared to American popular opinion. Also Truman’s commitment to unconditional surrender made dealing with the Japanese very difficult. Furthermore Truman made this decision much too quickly following the Trinity test and gave into confidence that he had previously been lacking in his young term of office. In conclusion, while Truman’s decision was understandable, President Truman made the wrong decision and did a poor job viewing this decision from a wider scope of angles and opinions.

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29 Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*
30 Bryan Hubbard, "Reassessing Truman, the bomb, and revisionism: The burlesque frame and entelechy in the decision to use atomic weapons against Japan," *Western Journal of Communication* 62, no. 3 (1998): 348-385.
31 Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction* 59
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