

# The great atomic bomb debate

Text by Bryan McNulty

During 1995, the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, the United States planned to issue a postage stamp showing the Hiroshima atomic mushroom cloud with the words: "Atomic bombs hasten war's end, August 1945." The Japanese government protested, and the stamp was canceled.

That same year, the Smithsonian Institution's Air and Space Museum planned a commemorative exhibition on the Enola Gay, the B-29 that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. The museum director was forced to resign after a massive public outcry, particularly by veterans groups, against leaked early scripts. The scripts emphasized the horrors of the atomic bombing while offering little about the Japanese aggression and atrocities that prompted the bombing.

The atomic bomb issue carries perennial symbolic potency: Hiroshima commemorations each August 6 trigger journalistic deliberation around the world about the morality of the first and only use of atomic weapons.

President Harry S. Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb on two Japanese cities remains one of the most passionately debated historical events of the twentieth century. The controversy boils among historians who have spent a lifetime analyzing the use of the atomic bomb, veterans who lived through the horrors of World War II, and a public influenced largely by media sound bites.

Careers in history are made by examination and re-examination of events such as these. Although the atomic bombings happened fifty-two years ago, contemporary researchers examine every archive, every recollection, and every possible motivation surrounding the decision.

Some respected historians say the bombing was avoidable at best, and analogous to Nazi war crimes at worst. They argue that there were alternatives to using the bomb: naval blockade, modification of unconditional surrender terms, conventional bombing, and waiting just a little longer to see if the Soviet Union's August 9 entry into the war would prompt the Japanese to surrender.

But according to a consensus of historians with the Ohio University Contemporary History Institute, such conclusions ignore context, including the war's own momentum and the broader historical record. For example, Okinawa - the deadliest Pacific War battle - had ended in mid-June, with nearly 50,000 American casualties. At that time, Truman told his Joint Chiefs of Staff that he "hoped there was a possibility of preventing an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other."

"The denouncers of the atomic bombing are joined by many aggrieved Japanese who see themselves as victims of a terrible and indiscriminate weapon," says Alonzo Hamby, Distinguished Professor of History in the College of Arts and Sciences at Ohio University, and author of *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman*. "All humane individuals would prefer that the bomb had not been used. Many scholars, after careful examination of the sources, nonetheless have come to the conclusion that its use was necessary."

On August 6, 1945, a single bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, killing 80,000 people immediately and about 60,000 more within six months. On August 9, a second atomic bomb that ultimately killed about 70,000

people was dropped on Nagasaki.

General of the Army George C. Marshall worried that even with the two atomic bombings, an invasion might be necessary. He had earlier observed that in a raid with conventional bombs five months before, "we had 100,000 people killed in Tokyo in one night and it had seemingly no effect whatsoever." In fact, it took another six days after the second atomic bombing - and the foiling of an attempted coup by military diehards who wanted the nation to fight to the end - before Emperor Hirohito, in an unprecedented personal radio broadcast to his nation, cited the "new and most cruel bomb" in announcing the surrender.

"The U.S. knew that the Japanese had given no indication that they were going to surrender," says Ohio University World War II historian Marvin Fletcher. "The use of the bomb to convince the Japanese of what was obvious - that they had lost the war - was a necessary choice. Truman would have been derelict if he had done otherwise. The number of Americans and Japanese who would have died if the invasions had gone as planned would have been, in my mind, higher than the number of Japanese who died at Hiroshima."

While the Institute's historians agree on the bomb's necessity, some question the necessity of dropping the Nagasaki bomb only three days after Hiroshima.

"A few more days might have given the Japanese government more of a chance to consider the idea of surrender," Fletcher says. "However, I still believe the basic decision was the correct choice to make."

### **Pendulum swings from necessity to Realpolitik**

The revisionist historians' skepticism about the real reason for dropping the atomic bombs has been healthy because initial postwar histories gave short shrift to the foreign policy implications of dropping the bomb, says Contemporary History Institute Director Chester Pach.

"The most credible revisionist argument is that thinking about the bomb and thinking about the Soviet Union were tied up together," says Pach. He notes that several top officials, most prominently Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Secretary of State James Byrnes, were constantly considering the implications of the bomb and its use in international diplomacy - particularly in Soviet-American relations - as the culmination of America's \$2 billion investment in atomic weapon development.

On the other hand, Pach says, "the least credible revisionist arguments are that Japan's overtures in June and July towards negotiations that *might* have dealt with peace was tantamount to surrender or seeking surrender. That simply doesn't hold water. I would not rule out that influencing the Soviet Union was a factor for principal officials who were involved with the bomb, but I don't agree that it was the primary consideration."

Debate raged for weeks this fall on H-DIPLO, an international Internet debate forum co-edited by Pach and Ohio University Distinguished Professor of History John Lewis Gaddis and used by faculty and graduate students interested in diplomatic history. It followed a harshly critical review of *The Decision to Drop The Bomb*, a book by one of the leading revisionists, atomic bomb historian Gar Alperovitz. Pach says this Alperovitz book, as well as an earlier book dating back to 1965, argue "that military considerations and a quick ending to the war had little, if anything, to do with using the bomb - the bomb was used essentially as an anti-Soviet weapon." Pach says the acrimonious Internet debate sparked by the review at times got to the point of microscopic analysis of footnotes in eight hundred-page books, "not unlike controversy between

Biblical scholars over the meaning of a couple of words."

"It is one of those subjects that, even when raised over and over again, bring on a level of passion that I think few historical topics do."

### **The evidence: who is right?**

*Until they were used, until the power of the atomic bomb had been demonstrated, the nuclear option precluded all other options - modifying unconditional surrender - because it promised dividends. The shock of the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki would not only be felt in Tokyo, American leaders calculated, they also would be noted in Moscow. The military use of atomic weapons was expected not only to end the war; it was assumed it would help to organize an American peace. While these expectations and decisions may be understandable in the context of four years of scientific secrecy and brutal war, they were not inevitable. They were avoidable. In the end, that is the most important lesson of Hiroshima for the nuclear age.*

- Martin J. Sherwin, Dartmouth College, *Oxford Companion to World War II*

There is a distinction between questions of interpretation and statements that can be affirmed or refuted by documentary evidence, says Ohio University's Hamby. Claims of "proof" that the Japanese were ready to surrender, he says, fall into the latter category.

Hamby says Sherwin's essay - the only essay on the "politics" of the atomic bomb in this major reference book - is based on the assumption that Japan was serious about surrendering prior to the atomic bombings. "In fact," Hamby says, "there is no empirical evidence that they were. It is quite true that Americans expected unconditional surrender from Japan, having obtained unconditional surrender from Germany. But before two atomic bombs had been dropped, there was no definite Japanese offer to surrender or, before August 10, to engage in anything but the vaguest of talks."

Hamby says the historical record shows this: The Japanese had instructed their envoy in Moscow, Naotake Sato, to seek Soviet mediation for a negotiated settlement, not the unconditional surrender demanded by the United States and Britain at the July 16 Potsdam Conference. Truman knew of this from coded messages broken by the American military and from the Soviets themselves. Sato's intercepted cables from Tokyo left the impression of a Japan unwilling to surrender and preparing to wage a bitter, suicidal resistance that might last for months if the nation was unable to get the terms it wanted.

"A distraught Sato on July 12 vainly urged an apparently gridlocked government in Tokyo to be specific and embrace unconditional surrender," Hamby says. "But the curt Japanese rejection of the Potsdam ultimatum on July 28 reinforced the worst American expectations."

The April 1945 U.S. invasion of Okinawa spelled the collapse of Premier General Hideki Tojo's government. His replacement, Admiral Kantaro Suzuki, told the Japanese Cabinet in June 1945 that thousands of kamikaze pilots would fly against enemy ships even in training planes, that millions of soldiers would fight what was called the "Decisive Battle" by suicide banzai charges, and that civilians would strap on explosives and throw themselves under enemy tanks.

To secure the approval of senior Army officials to his accession to premier, Suzuki affirmed that Japan's

only course was to "fight to the very end" even if it meant the death of 100 million Japanese.

Truman was a front-line combat veteran of World War I who knew what the battlefield was like for the men and women who had to fight the war. Pentagon planners projected 132,000 American casualties (killed, wounded, and missing) for an invasion of Kyushu, the lower home island, and another 90,000 or so for Honshu, where Tokyo is located. Using Okinawa as a model -one American casualty for every four Japanese casualties - the U.S. Sixth Army's medical staff estimated the landing and battle to secure Kyushu alone could result in 98,500 Americans killed and 295,500 wounded.

Other historians, notably Stanford University's Barton Bernstein, have cited a worst-case estimate by the Joint Chiefs of Staff of 46,000 Americans killed in an invasion of both home islands. Hamby says this is a reasonable estimate, but it is irrelevant to the argument that atomic bombs should not have been used.

"Some critics have suggested that Truman should have engaged in a grim calculus, that it would have been the moral thing to accept a 'worst case estimate' of 46,000 American deaths and about 225,000 total casualties without use of the bomb. No one who might conceivably have been president of the United States in the summer of 1945 would have withheld the bomb while facing that prospect.

"My own research for the Truman biography revealed a president concerned primarily with saving American lives, shaken by the immense destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but always convinced that he had done the right thing."

Adds Pach: "A lot of people write history on the assumption that Truman ought to have been looking for reasons not to use the bomb - that that should have driven his thinking. And that seems to me fantastic. Such an expectation misunderstands Truman and distorts how presidents act."

### **Who were the victims**

*On the battlefield men face the ultimate extremes of human existence, life and death. 'Extreme' conduct, although still ethically impermissible, may be psychologically inevitable. However, atrocities carried out far from battlefield dangers and imperatives and according to a rational plan were acts of evil barbarism. The Auschwitz gas chambers of our 'ally' Germany and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by our enemy America are classic examples of rational atrocities.*

- Saburo Ienaga, historian and former Tokyo University professor,  
*The Pacific War, 1931-1945*

While the atomic deaths were horrific, Ohio University Professor of History Donald Jordan says the horror was not unrivaled. The 1937 Rape of Nanjing, in which Japanese troops took the Nationalist Army headquarters city and then spent seven weeks killing up to 300,000 men, women, and children, by hand, is arguably at least as horrific. If rational plans at high levels are the determinant of "evil barbarism," Jordan points out that the deaths from the two atomic bombs are pale shadows to the deaths resulting from the Japanese military's systematic abuse and killings of prisoners of war and slave laborers from Korea, China, and Southeast Asia. And Japan was the first country in any of the theaters of war to create a deliberate firestorm in an undefended city when it bombed Shanghai in 1932, says Jordan, the author of *Chinese Boycotts Versus Japanese Bombs*.

While these and other Japanese military actions may make some of Ienaga's distinctions on the atomic

bombing seem disingenuous, Jordan respects Ienaga for his dedication to trying to get a fuller picture of Japanese aggression in the 1930s and 1940s into the Japanese national curriculum.

"Until quite recently," Jordan says, "there has been very little in the national school system and national textbooks in Japan about the Japanese as aggressors, but a lot of information about what happened in the dropping of the atomic bombs. There is a younger generation that knows very little about the Rape of Nanjing or the 'comfort women' issue, in which thousands of women in occupied countries were forced to become sex slaves for Japanese troops. Now that the Liberal Democratic Party is no longer in total control, there is more information coming out. There are those who are willing to admit there were comfort women, and that maybe there was a massacre in Nanjing, but they have not been able to bring out in the National Diet (parliament) a forthright confession of aggression."

Jordan says the right-wing of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party tends to decry the morality of the atomic bombings, and stresses the Japanese as victims of the war.

"On the other hand if you go across to the Asian mainland, the Chinese and Koreans say, 'The rest of Asia were the victims, and the Japanese better get over that and quit looking at themselves as victims or we won't trust them.' There are museums all over China about the Japanese atrocities. The Chinese and Koreans have a very different view of who were the victims."

By contrast, Hamby says the Germans, particularly West Germans, "have practically wallowed in war guilt for two generations. There is a big contrast with the Japanese."

One of the cultural differences, says Jordan, is a "tremendous respect for the elders and earlier generations. It is very hard for the younger generation to criticize the older generation for having done something really wrong. This would be totally disrespectful of their grandparents' generation."

## **The bomb and POWs**

*In the latter part of June 1945, a note was posted in our camp. It was signed by Hideki Tojo. And it said, 'The moment the first American soldier sets foot on the Japanese mainland, all prisoners of war will be shot.' And they meant it. I hadn't been a prisoner for fifteen minutes before they bayoneted a fifteen-year-old Filipino kid right next to me - a kid so innocent he scraped together this little dirt dam with his last bit of energy so he wouldn't bleed on my uniform while he died. That is why all of us who were prisoners in Japan, or were headed for it to probably die in the invasion, revere the Enola Gay. It saved our lives.*  
- Grayford C. Payne, a survivor of the Bataan Death March,  
quoted in the September 26, 1994, *Washington Post*

According to a report to President Roosevelt from the Joint Chiefs of Staff in September 1943, escaped prisoners had been providing accounts as early as April 1943 of malnutrition, cruel workloads, widespread torture, and murder of U.S. and other Allied prisoners of the Japanese. War planners worried about the fate of POWs in the event of a prolonged war or an invasion of the Japanese home islands. After the war, their fears proved well-founded: Of the 132,134 Americans, British, and Australians taken prisoner by the Japanese, 27 percent - 35,756 -died in captivity.

According to a 1995 book on the planned invasion, *Code-Name Downfall*, by Thomas B. Allen and Norman Polmar, Soviet troops who liberated a POW camp in Mukden, Manchuria, found 3,000 prisoners who, like

prisoners in Japan, had thought they were about to be murdered as the Soviets approached their camp. A Japanese directive described how prisoners were to be killed: "mass bombing, or poisonous smoke, poisons, decapitation... . In any case, it is the aim not to allow the escape of a single one, to annihilate them all, and not to leave any traces." When Red Army troops in Manchuria approached the headquarters of Japan's infamous Unit 731, where POWs were subjected to germ warfare and other experiments, the lieutenant general in charge, Shiro Ishii, ordered all buildings, equipment, and the hundreds of human test subjects destroyed and burned.

Although there were isolated reports of prisoners of war being executed even after the surrender was announced, many believed the abrupt end to the war without invasion was their salvation.

### **Whose history?**

Is the debate over the use of the atomic bomb evidence for an argument that history is a fiction, put forth by both historians and lay public using selective references out of context to advance their own political agendas and careers?

"I think people gravitate toward certain positions that they find congenial for whatever reasons," Hamby says, "and then they devote their careers to trying to justify those positions and work them into a consensus. Sometimes they are successful, and sometimes they are not."

Hamby notes that when the Enola Gay issue made the bomb debate flare outside the circle of historians in 1994, many revisionists argued that "veterans who were trying to intrude into the argument didn't really know very much beyond their own point of view. I'm not sure professional historians should ever discount people who were there. If nothing else, they have a far better sense of the tenor of the times, very immediate feelings about what was at stake, than we do from trying to reconstruct it through documents."

A negative attitude toward historians also surfaced during the Enola Gay debate, and Miner says it is equally obnoxious: "The term 'professor' became a swear word."

Pach agrees, and says he is troubled by participants in historical events "who think that those who study the past as their profession are somehow detached intellectuals who don't quite understand how things were."

"Sometimes a person who was there does have a limited perspective, and sometimes the memory is flawed," Pach says. "Neither the professional historian nor the person who experienced an historical event can claim exclusive custody of history."

For more information on this research project, e-mail [Alonzo Hamby](#), [Chester Pach](#) or [Steven Merritt Miner](#), or visit the [Contemporary History Institute](#).

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<http://news.research.ohiou.edu/perspectives/archives/9701/bomb2.htm>