

This weapon is to be used against Japan between now and August 10th. I have told the Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leaders of the world for the common welfare cannot drop this terrible bomb on the old Capital or the new.

He & I are in accord. The target will be a purely military one and we will issue a warning statement asking the Japs to surrender and save lives. I'm sure they will not do that, but we will give them the chance. It is certainly a good thing for the world that Hitler's crowd or Stalin's did not discover this atomic bomb. It seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made to be the most useful.

Did the United States have to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki?

Okay, Mr. President. Here's the situation. You're about to invade Japan's main islands. Your best generals say hitting these beaches will mean half a million American casualties. Other estimates go as high as a million. General MacArthur tells you that the Japanese will continue guerrilla-style resistance for ten years. Based on horrific battle experience—from Guadalcanal to Okinawa—you believe the Japanese will fight to the death. They have 6 million battle-hardened troops who have shown complete willingness to fight to the death for their homeland—a samurai tradition of complete devotion to the divine emperor that is incomprehensible to Americans. Japanese civilians have jumped off cliffs to prevent capture by Americans, and there are reports that mainland Japanese civilians are being armed with sharpened bamboo spears. But you also remember Pearl Harbor and the Bataan Death March and other wartime atrocities committed by Japanese. Vengeance, in the midst of a cruel war, is not incomprehensible.

Now you have a bomb with the destructive power of 20,000 tons of TNT. It worked in a test, but it may not work when you drop it out of a

plane. Why not give a demonstration to show its power? Your advisers tell you that if the show-detonation is a dud, the Japanese resistance will harden.

Modern history has presented this pair of options—the Big Invasion versus the Bomb—as “Truman’s choice.” It was a choice Truman inherited with the Oval Office. President Roosevelt had responded to Albert Einstein’s 1939 warning—a warning Einstein later regretted—of the potential of an atomic bomb by ordering research that became the Manhattan Project in 1942. Known to only a handful of men, Truman not among them, the project was a \$2 billion (in pre-inflation 1940s dollars) effort to construct an atomic weapon. Working at Los Alamos, New Mexico, under the direction of J. Robert Oppenheimer (1904–67), atomic scientists, many of them refugees from Hitler’s Europe, thought they were racing against Germans developing a “Nazi bomb.” That effort was later proved to be far short of success. The first atomic bomb was exploded at Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945. Truman was alerted to the success of the test at a meeting with Churchill and Stalin at Potsdam, a city in defeated Germany.

Before the test detonation, there were already deep misgivings among both the scientific and military communities about the morality of the bomb’s destructive power. Many of its creators did not want it to be used, and lobbied to share its secrets with the rest of the world to prevent its use. Truman ignored that advice. With Churchill and China’s Chiang Kai-shek, he issued the Potsdam Declaration, warning Japan to accept a complete and unconditional surrender or risk “prompt and utter destruction.” Although specific mention of the bomb’s nature was considered, this vague warning was the only one issued.

When the Japanese first failed to respond to, and then rejected, his ultimatum, Truman ordered the fateful go-ahead. It was a self-perpetuating order that took on a life of its own. After Hiroshima, nobody said, “Don’t drop another one,” so the men proceeded under the orders they had been given.

Almost since the day the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, critics have second-guessed Truman’s decision and motives. A generation of historians has defended or repudiated the need for unleashing the atomic weapon. The historical justification was that a full-scale

invasion of Japan would have cost frightful numbers of American and Japanese lives.

Many critics have dismissed those estimates as implausibly high, and say that the Japanese were already nearing their decision to submit when the bombs were dropped. A study made after the war by a U.S. government survey team reached that very conclusion. But coming as it did a year after the war was over, that judgment didn't help Truman make his decision.

Other historians who support the Hiroshima drop dispute that criticism. Instead, they point to the fact that some of the strongest militarists in Japan were planning a coup to topple a pro-surrender government. Even after the Japanese surrender, Japanese officers were planning kamikaze strikes at the battleship on which the surrender documents would be signed. The view that accepts "atomic necessity" offers as evidence the actual Pacific fighting as it moved closer to Japan. And it is a convincing exhibit. Each successive island that the Americans invaded was defended fanatically, at immense cost on both sides. The Japanese military code, centuries old and steeped in the samurai tradition, showed no tolerance for surrender. Indeed, even in Hiroshima itself, there was anger that the emperor had capitulated.

But were the bomb and an invasion the only options? Or was there another reality? A top-secret study made during the period and revealed in the late 1980s says there was, and destroys much of the accepted justification for the Hiroshima bombing. According to these Army studies, the crucial factor in the Japanese decision to surrender was not the dropping of the bombs but the entry of the Soviet Union into the war against Japan. These documents and other recently revealed evidence suggest that Truman knew at Potsdam that Stalin would declare war against Japan early in August. Nearly two months before Hiroshima, Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall had advised the president that the Soviet declaration of war would force Japan to surrender, making the need for an American invasion unnecessary. It was a fact with which Truman seemed to agree.

So if the estimates of an invasion's costs and ending the war quickly were not the only considerations, why did the United States use these terrible weapons?

What history has confirmed is that the men who made the bomb really didn't understand how horrifying its capabilities were. Of course they understood the destructive power of the bomb, but radiation's dangers were far less understood. As author Peter Wyden tells it in *Day One*, his compelling account of the making and dropping of the bomb, scientists involved in creating what they called "the gadget" believed that anyone who might be killed by radiation would die from falling bricks first.

But apart from this scientific shortfall, was there another strategic element to the decision? Many modern historians unhesitatingly answer yes. By late 1945 it was clear to Truman and other American leaders that victory over Germany and Japan would not mean peace. Stalin's intention to create a buffer of Socialist states surrounding the Soviet Union and under the control of the Red Army was already apparent. Atomic muscle-flexing may have been the overriding consideration in Truman's decision.

The age of nuclear saber rattling did not begin with the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima, but with the Potsdam meeting, where Stalin and Truman began the deadly dance around the issue of atomic weaponry. Truman was unaware that Stalin, through the efforts of scientist-spy Klaus Fuchs, who was working at Los Alamos and passing secrets to the Soviets, knew as much about the atomic bomb as the president himself—if not more.

Some historians have pointed to the second attack on Nagasaki as further proof of this atomic "big stick" theory. Having demonstrated the thirteen-kiloton bomb at Hiroshima, Truman still wanted to show off a large bomb used against Nagasaki to send a clear message to the Soviets: We have it and we're not afraid to use it.

If Truman viewed these bombs as a message to the Soviets, that message, and the frightful nuclear buildup on both sides in the postwar years, dictated American and Soviet policies in the coming decades of Cold War confrontation.

Must Read: *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* by Richard Rhodes; *Truman* by David McCullough.