The American Presidency: An Examination of the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb

by

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for

American Presidency

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*“The atomic bomb was no ‘great decision’. It was merely another powerful weapon in the arsenal of righteousness.” -* Harry S Truman

The invention and consequent use of nuclear weapons is a focal point of world history. Since the first atomic weapons were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, many have often pondered, discussed, and debated the process and ultimate decision by President Truman and his administration to use them. In this paper, I present a review of the history of the process that created and ultimately decided to use the atom bomb and highlight important factors that have become recurring points of debate and themes by scholars of the issue, all as it pertains to the presidency. Simultaneously I discuss a few opinions of those respected scholars mentioned and build off of them to ultimately make and present my own analysis. This subject has forced many questions to be posed: Why was the atomic bomb dropped on Japan? Were other alternatives seriously considered? How did the administration’s policy effect the decision? Some have argued that this great weapon was used for purposes more than ending the war with Japan and that the Truman administration is guilty of a moral crime for the sake of its own diplomatic positioning. I disagree but indeed, the most controversial act of the Truman presidency was the use of nuclear weapons on Japan. No single act of his eight years as president has so concerned historians, political scientists, or the American people in general (Ferrell, 1994, p. 210). It is my belief, however, that this decision was ultimately the best decision and only decision that could’ve been made given the circumstances.

Beginnings of the Bomb

On August 2, 1939, six years earlier to the fateful day that President Harry Truman had authorized for the atomic bomb to be used (Donovan, 1977, p. 96), Albert Einstein wrote to President Franklin Roosevelt regarding the research done by various scientists, including Leo Szilard, in order to bring attention to a new potential technology and the alertness that Nazi Germany may have already begun work on it (Einstein, Letter to President Roosevelt, 1939). Consequently, Roosevelt became aware of that potential and ultimately authorized all possible resources needed for America to beat Germany in the race for this technology (Seaborg, 1998, p. 1, p. 15). However it was not until October 1941, two months before Pearl Harbor and the American entrance to the war did the work on the atomic bomb begin, under the codename the Manhattan Project (Bernstein, A Reinterpretation, 1975, p. 24).

The Manhattan Project is debatably one of the most amazing efforts of human accomplishment. Everything mankind had understood about chemistry at this point in history was used in the undertaking. So, although top secret, it was by no means a small effort. The executive branch employed nearly 129,000 people for the project that included construction workers, scientists, and operating employees whose mission was to determine the best way to create a nuclear reaction through a “shotgunning” process described as the “nuclear steeplechase” (Winkler, 1987, p. 681). Einstein guessed correctly when he wrote in his letter to Roosevelt “that it may be possible to set up a nuclear chain reaction in a large mass of uranium, by which vast amounts of power and large quantities of new radium-like elements would be generated… it appears almost certain that this could be achieved in the immediate future” (Einstein, 1939). What began as a mere theory in the late 1930’s became a reality over the course of roughly 5 years.

Roosevelt and the Bomb

President Roosevelt defined the American policy on the atomic bomb by acting on the idea that it could be used as a legitimate weapon. His policies had the bomb built, prepared and planned for its use, and blocked the Soviet Union from knowledge of the project (Bernstein, A Reinterpretation, 1975, pp. 23-24). This laid the critical groundwork to the path of the decision making process to use the bomb.

The first main concept of Roosevelt’s atomic policy was that he insisted on great secrecy- in order keep America’s options open regarding its usage. He wanted the project a secret kept not only from America’s enemies in the war, but also from our war-time ally the Soviet Union. This was based on his interpretation that their alliance was based on “mutual need, not mutual trust” (Bernstein, A Reinterpretation, 1975, p. 25).

Bernstein writes that Roosevelt unhappily granted the Soviets a freer hand in Eastern Europe as the war drug on but did so believing that the bomb would allow him to modify or reverse arrangements in the future (p. 25). Roosevelt and his Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, were anxious to convert the bomb into a diplomatic advantage, and in December 1944 discussed using the “secret” of the atomic bomb as a means of obtaining a *quid pro quo* from the Soviet Union (Sherwin, 1973, p. 947). Rejecting contradictory pleas from various scientists and his advisors, Roosevelt ultimately agreed with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to maintain an Anglo-American monopoly over the bomb as “a diplomatic counter” to the postwar ambitions of other nations- in particular the Soviet Union (p. 948). Indeed, subject scholars Martin Sherwin and Barton Bernstein agree that if Roosevelt had any other intention other than using the bomb to intimidate the Soviets, he took no action nor made any effort to explore the possibility of doing anything else (Bernstein, A Reinterpretation, 1975, p. 29). Throughout the war his administration maintained the policy of secrecy to reserve any options of using it in the future as “a bargaining lever, threat, military counterweight, or weapon against the Soviets” (p. 31). It is also important to take note, however, that Sherwin and Bernstein also argue that Truman did not use the bomb with this purpose solely in mind (Winkler, 1987, p. 683) but again, Roosevelt may have (A Reinterpretation, p. 29). Gar Alperovitz gained notoriety with a thesis in 1965 that stated the bomb was used solely to make the Soviets more manageable (Graybar, 1986, p. 1) but now Alperovitz’s argument is now widely considered to have been overturned by Sherwin and Bernstein (Winkler, 1987, p. 683).

Secondly, President Roosevelt’s policies put the bomb on course to be used- Roosevelt believed the bomb could and would be used in the ongoing war. Most policy makers under Roosevelt never questioned that the bomb would be used in combat (Bernstein, 1975, p. 32). All members of his administration followed the idea that the development of the atomic bomb was an “essential part of the total war effort” and thus would be used as soon as possible against any enemy (Sherwin, 1973, p. 946). For example, in October 1942, Secretary Stimson directed General Leslie Groves, leader of the Manhattan project, to “produce the bomb at the earliest possible date so as to bring the war to a conclusion” and by 1944 policy makers were comfortably talking about “after (the bomb) is used to end the war” (Bernstein, 1975, p. 32). In addition, both Roosevelt and Churchill signed an *aide-memoire* that stated, among other things, that “When a bomb is finally available, it might perhaps, after mature consideration, be used against the Japanese, who should be warned that this bombardment will be repeated until they surrender” (Sherwin, 1973, p. 959).

These two ideas (using the bomb as a diplomatic weapon as well as a militaristic one) are important to note because Roosevelt’s policy on the subject would have a huge effect on shaping the policy of the next administration, where it would be largely continued.

Truman’s Inheritance

When Harry S. Truman became president on April 12, 1945, he had little knowledge of the Manhattan Project and had no idea it was building an atomic bomb (Bernstein, p. 34). Besides only being in office for three months, he was generally ignored by Roosevelt and thus was largely out of the loop (Ibid.). With this on top of such a vast transition during wartime, he chose to retain most of his predecessor’s advisors and Cabinet (Ibid.). Bernstein deduces that because Truman was “following a prestigious president whom he, like many Americans, loved and admired, the new president was not free psychologically or politically to strike out on a clearly new course” (Ibid.). He tried very hard to adhere to his predecessor’s wishes and strongly believed that Roosevelt had become suspicious of Stalin in his last weeks and had committed to resisting Soviet encroachments (Ibid.). Truman’s almost immediate icy relationship with the Russian foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov didn’t help either (Ferrell, 1994, p. 200). Robert Ferrell (1994) notes in his book, Harry S. Truman: A Life, that even in the European Theatre, Truman did not sway in the slightest from Roosevelt foreign policy: “Upon coming to the presidency Truman might have tried to modify (the arrangement of unconditional surrender), for Germany’s plight was hopeless: the quicker the surrender the better. But such an effort would have required herculean diplomatic discussions with the Soviets… Roosevelt, if in good health, might have done so.” (p. 199).

James Byrnes, whom Truman would later appoint his Secretary of State, was one of the first people to meet with Truman on his first day of the presidency (McCullough, 1992, p. 352). He had been a holdover the Roosevelt administration and was often called “the assistant president” (Truman, 1955, p. 86). He informed Truman that “the bomb might well put us in a position to dictate our own terms at the end of the war” (p. 87).

It should be noted that as this process began moving forward towards the use of the bomb, many of the project’s scientists became weary of their creation’s implications for humanity and what the government planned to do with it. Albert Einstein wrote to Roosevelt again on March 25, 1945, one month before the president’s death, expressing his concern. “The terms of secrecy under which Dr. Szilard is working at present do not permit him to give me information about his work; however, I understand that he now is greatly concerned about the lack of adequate contact between scientists who are doing this work and those members of your Cabinet who are responsible for formulating policy,” he wrote (Einstein, 1945). Szilard, along with main Manhattan Project scientists Glenn Seaborg, and Dr. James Franck, a German refugee and Nobel laureate, were still pushing for international control and with several other leading scientists on the project, created what is now known as the Franck Report. The report argued that “a surprise attack on Japan might create such mistrust in Moscow as to precipitate an arms race and prejudice the case for future international control” (Donovan, 1977, p. 70). When Franck tried to give the report to Stimson on June 12th, he was told the secretary was not available and left a copy with a subordinate (p.70).

Later, on July 17 (the day after the first successful test of the bomb), Szilard sent a petition to new President Truman with the signatures of 70 scientists working on the project (Szilard, 1945). The petition asked that the bombs not be used in the war and suggested that unless some form of international control of atomic energy was put in place, a situation may “develop in the world which permits rival powers to be in uncontrolled possession of these new means of destruction” and the “cities of United States as well as the cities of other nations will be in continuous danger of sudden annhilation” (1945).

This obvious foreshadowing of the Cold War was mostly ignored by the Truman administration and to this day it is still debated whether or not Truman was even aware of the Franck Report or the Szilard petition at the time (Bernstein, 1998, p. 555). However, newly appointed Secretary of State Byrnes met with Szilard and a few other scientists who signed the petition. According to Szilard’s recollection, the conversation was unpleasant and Byrnes “did not argue that it was necessary to use the bomb against the cities of Japan” but “was much concerned about the spreading of Russian influence” (Szilard, 1949, pp. 14-15). Szilard wrote that Byrnes took the view that “our possessing and demonstrating the bomb would make Russia more manageable in Europe” (pp. 14-15). Clearly, policy makers in the new administration were determined to continue the course set by Roosevelt.

Preparing for an Invasion

On June 1, 1945, President Truman delivered a special message to Congress called “Winning the War with Japan”. In that prophetic message Truman told Congress:

“The primary task facing the nation today is to win the war in Japan- to win it completely and to win it as quickly as possible… There can be no peace in the world until the military power of Japan is destroyed… The strategy of the war in Europe was to have all the men that could be effectively deployed on land and sea to crush the German military machine in the shortest possible time. (Unconditional surrender) is exactly what we plan to do in Japan. Our military policy for the defeat of Japan calls for using ships, aircraft, armor, artillery, and all other material in massive concentrations… If the Japanese insist on continue resistance beyond the point of reason, their country will suffer the same destruction as Germany. Our blows will destroy their whole modern industrial plant and organization… We have the men, the material, the skill, the leadership, the fortitude to achieve total victory.” (Donovan, 1977, pp. 65-66)

The massive decision that would be finalized over the course of the following two months in 1945 was foreshadowed in this message. There was no question that Japan would be defeated. The question was how long it would take and through what course of action.

A Normandy style invasion had been in the works for some time- of the Japanese home islands starting with Kyushu. On June 18, 1945, Truman met with his senior advisors for a decision strategy. The bomb was barely mentioned in the meeting, as it took place a month before the first successful atomic bomb test on July 16 (Timeline of the Nuclear Age, 2008). His chief of staff, Admiral William D. Leahy, had informed the Joint Chiefs in advance that the president intended to “make his decisions… with the purpose of economizing to the maximum extent possible in the loss of America lives.” (Donovan, 1977, p. 70). In the meeting with the Joint Chiefs, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and several other top officials, Truman was informed that “if the Japanese are ever willing to capitulate short of complete military defeat in the field they will do it when faced by the completely hopeless (prospect of defeat)” (Joint Chiefs, 1945, p. 3). Truman was told in the meeting that this situation was “best brought by (1) the destruction already wrought by air bombardment and sea blockade, coupled with (2) a landing on Japan indicating our firmness of resolution, and also perhaps coupled with (3) the entry or threat of entry of Russia into the war” (p. 4). Furthermore, the Joint Chiefs told Truman that “it is a grim fact that there is not an easy, bloodless way to victory in war and it is the thankless task of the leaders to maintain their firm outward front which holds the resolution of armed conflict” (p. 4). Truman responded by saying he “understood… after weighing all the possiblities of the situation and considering all possible alternative plans were still of the unamious opinion that the Kyushu operation was the best solution under the circumstances” (p. 5).

The problem was that the military believed that the casualties would be massive- the battle for Okinawa, an island at most 60 miles long and 2 miles wide, killed nearly 45,000 Americans (Donovan, 1977, pp. 67-68). This battle was barely comparably to the entire Normandy invasion from the beaches all the way across France. In the first 30 days of the planned invasion, casualties were estimated to be 31,000 (p.70). This was because in scenarios where the Germans had often surrendered, the Japanese would fight brutally to the last man. Casualty estimates for the remainder of the war to defeat Japan ranged from 250,000 to 1 million men (Bernstein, 1998, p. 552). All this brought the prospect of a battle likely to be longer and bloodier than any the war had seen. However, General Marshall argued invasion was the only course to take and that “air power alone” could not knock Japan out of the war (Joint Chiefs, 1945, p. 7). In the end, the president gave his approval to the invasion of Kyushu and said he hoped they could “avert an Okinawa from one end of Japan to another” (Donovon, 1977, p. 71). The men who would have to give the order to execute such a battle now had before them a stark image of what it would be like for American troops to fight the Japanese on their own soil.

The Bomb as an Alternative

In the Joint Intelligence Committee Weekly Summary for July 26th, 1945 (ten days after the first successful test of the bomb), although never mentioning the atomic bomb, the last page implies its use, stating that “should the continued existence of Japan as a nation be threatened by the possibility of anything approaching the total extinction of its population, many Japanese soldiers and civilians might well come to prefer surrender to death” (Joint Intelligence Committee, 1945, p. 40).

Secretary Stimson wrote in his diary that the possession of the atomic bomb might be the “master card” (Donovan, 1977, p. 68). Stimson believed using the bomb could not only end the war but possibly bring about “the perfection of civilization” (Sherwin, 1973, p. 965). Indeed, both he and Truman contemplated the use of the bomb during a time where carnage was commonplace. They had seen and heard of such horrors in World War I, the Spanish Civil War, the German V-2 rockets and bombings in the Battle of Britain, and the Japanese slaughter of three hundred thousand Chinese civilians in Nanking. It was not as if the United States had not committed similar acts- one night about a month before Truman took office B-29’s had “dropped two thousand tons of napalm bombs on Tokyo… with balls of fire creating an incandescent tidal wave exceeding 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. American crews in the last wave of the attack could smell burning flesh below. Some of the fliers vomited.” (Donovan, 1977, p. 69). Although the number of dead neared 125,000, that was comparable to the Allied bombings of Dresden (p. 69) Indeed, the initial 70,000 deaths were roughly the same as the number died when the second atomic bomb was dropped on Nagasaki (Ferrell, 1994, p. 211).

A report on June 16 by a committee advising President Truman on the bomb, suggested that the Allies (including the Soviets) should be notified of American progress on the bomb and its likelihood of being used (Donavon, 1977, p. 69). However, the report also stated that “We can propose no technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war; we see no acceptable alternative to direct military use.” (p. 69).

The Decision

Truman wrote a letter to a man in 1946 explaining the toil over the decision process. “The use of the atomic bomb was deliberated for long hours and many days and weeks,” he said, “and it was discussed with (the Cabinet), the General Staff of the Allied Armies, as well as Mr. Churchill and Mr. Atlee.” (Truman, 1946).

It was thought that, facing imminent defeat, the Japanese would surrender to negotiated terms. After a lot of discussion and debate within the administration about the terms and the concept of unconditional surrender, it was concluded that indicating to the Japanese Emperor Hirohito could stay in power was not a good idea (Donovan, 1977, p. 91). It was reasoned that if negotiations failed to bring about a clean surrender, “the Japs would be encouraged while terrible repercussions would follow in the U.S” due to the popularity of the domestic war cry “Hirohito must go” (Ibid.). “Unfortunately,” recalled Stimson, “during the war years high American officials had made some fairly blunt and unpleasant remarks about the Emperor, and it did not seem wise to Mr. Truman and Secretary Byrnes that the government should reverse its field too sharply; too many people were likely to cry shame.” (Ibid.). It is important to note that the Japanese had already decided that removing the emperor coupled with unconditional surrender was the “only obstacle” to peace (Butow, 1954, p. 130). Tokyo repeatedly informed its ambassador in Moscow that Japan would not consent to unconditional surrender (Donovan, 1977, p. 92). But the fact of the matter is the policy by the Roosevelt administration and continued by the Truman administration was that the United States was unwilling to accept anything other than unconditional surrender.

The successful test of the bomb occurred on July 16. This test changed everything. Upon learning the bomb worked, General Marshall immediately supported its use on Japan. “We knew that the Japanese were determined and fanatical… we would have to exterminate them, almost man by man... We didn’t realize [the bomb’s] value to give the Japanese such a shock they could surrender without a complete loss of face,” he recalled later. Believing they would have to fight the Japanese to the last man and require the Soviet’s help to do so, the administration had spent a vast amount of its energy planning the invasion and coaxing the Soviets into declaring war on Japan. Now that the bomb worked it was clear that “further diplomatic efforts to get the Russians into the Pacific war were largely pointless,” Stimson would later write (Donovan, 1977, p 94). Empowered, they decided to make one last attempt to convince Japan to surrender. It is important to note that the final proclamation calling for Japan to surrender was drafted concurrently with the order to drop the atomic bomb (p. 94). If Japan would not surrender, the bombs would be dropped.

On July 28 the Japanese government formally rejected the proclamation (Donovan, p. 95). In the eyes of the Truman administration, this rejection determined their fate and opened the door to use the bomb (p. 96). Japan would not surrender unconditionally without a fight and America was unwilling to negotiate. “There was no alternative now,” Truman observed (p. 95). Although there was no formal order to drop the bomb, Truman confirmed the request to use them “no sooner than August 2nd” in a message to Secretary Stimson.

On August 6 the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, initially killing an estimated 70,000 people instantly (Donovan, 1977, p. 97). Japan’s military leaders, believing it was a ruse, dispatched scientists to confirm that it was an atomic bomb (p. 97). Interestingly enough (and important to this paper) is that Truman’s statement after Hiroshima still threatened invasion, as if it were still necessary, further evidencing the idea that American policy makers were unaware of how committed the Japanese were to continuing to fight. “Behind this air attack will follow sea and land forces in such numbers and power as they have not yet seen and with the fight skill they are already well aware,” declared Truman’s statement (Truman, Statement by the President of the United States, 1945). On August 8 the Soviet Union declared war on Japan. Japanese Prime Minister Suzuki held an emergency meeting to discuss the unconditional terms with the military leaders, and as they discussed surrender they were informed that the second bomb had been dropped on Nagasaki, instantly killing 40,000 people (Ibid.).

Although General Groves was given authority to do so already, the committee advising Truman recommended using a second bomb (Ibid.). Indeed, the emergency meeting with the Suzuki and the rest of the government dragged on for three more hours after Nagasaki, with the minister of war proclaiming that they “must fight on to the end no matter how great the odds against us.” (Ibid., p. 99). A third bomb had been made ready and General Arnold, commander of the air forces attacking Japan, said that Japan’s surrender after the second bomb “came more or less as a surprise” (Ibid., p. 98). The Emperor, however, intervened, holding a press conference that evening stating “the time has come when we must bear the unbearable” (Ibid., p.99). Japan had surrendered.

“To avert a vast, indefinite butchery, to bring the war to an end, to give peace to the world, to lay healing hands upon its tortured peoples by a manifestation of overwhelming power at the cost of a few explosions,” Churchill said years later, “seemed, after all our toils and perils, a miracle of deliverance.” (Donovan, 1977, p. 90).

Criticisms and Building on Scholarly Analysis of the Decision

As mentioned before, Gar Alperovitz argued that the bomb was not necessary and used to intimidate the Soviet Union. He argues there were alternatives to the bomb and that Russian entry would have surely forced the Japanese to capitulate before an invasion was required (Alperovitz, Messer, & Bernstein, 1991-1992, p. 205). He notes that both Eisenhower and Marshall believed that Russian entry would force Japanese leaders to give up (p. 205). He and Messer write extensively about the decision to avoid negotiated peace and demand unconditional surrender, which they believe was only to enable the use of the bomb. (p. 212). The believed it was all political and that Truman surely recognized “that the unconditional surrender terms would have to have been bent unless he wished to risk a fight to the finish”. (p. 205). Noting what I have also mentioned, he points out that the Truman administration “saw the bomb as a way to strengthen America’s diplomatic hand” and nothing more, thus using it irresponsibly in an unethical manner.

One of the problems with Alperovitz and Messer’s argument is assuming that eventual surrender was good enough. A July 6 Combined Intelligence Report did state that “An entry of the Soviet Union in to the war would finally convince the Japanese of the inevitability of complete defeat” but did not mention any judgment of when Japan would surrender (Alperovitz, Messer, & Bernstein, 1991-1992, p. 216).

Martin Sherwin argues that many critics of the decision faultily ask whether or not surrender would’ve been achieved without the bomb, when the real question is whether there was another option that would’ve achieved an *earlier* surrender (p. 946). He also writes that most critics have a false basic assumption that “the idea that American policy should have been based primarily on a desire not to employ the bomb” which is as “irresponsible as a policy controlled by a positive desire to use it” (p. 947).

Fred Greenstein takes aim at critics who argue the Soviet intimidation theme, saying that “the record reveals he was going along with policies he inherited from Roosevelt” (Greenstein, 2001, p. 33). “Roosevelts advisers differed about how to use the bomb, but not over whether to use it”, he writes, quoting General Groves who said that any decision of Truman’s that led to the use of nuclear weapons, it was “not to upset the existing plans” (p. 33). Additionally, the largely ignored scientist’s argument for international control was simply not feasible. Donovan reminds us that Truman would have been compelled by Congress to insist on inspection of Soviet atomic production, which would have been near conclude with Stalin. (1977, p. 93).

Sherwin takes a slightly different course, stating that “the atomic bomb was seen and valued as a potential rather than an actual instrument of policy” (Sherwin, 1973, p. 945). He quotes Stimson, “The bomb as a merely probable weapon had seemed a weak reed on which to rely, but the bomb as a colossal reality was very different” (p. 945). However, he then goes back and discusses that the framework to use the bomb was already in place, saying that certain “policies were based on the assumption that the bomb could be used effectively to secure postwar diplomatic aims; and this assumption was carried over from the Roosevelt to the Truman administration.” (p. 947). He refers Stimson again, saying that “the war, not the bomb, had been the primary focus of his attention; as secretary of war his responsibilities permitted no alternative” (p. 947). An important point, however, is that as secretary, his goal was to end the war as quickly as possible and use his “master card” to do so. This was apparent as early as 1942 during the Roosevelt administration when, as mentioned previously, he told General Groves “to produce the bomb at the earliest possible date so as to bring the war to a conclusion”. Bernstein also points out that most studies have exclusively focused on the Truman period and neglected the Roosevelt administration (Bernstein, 1975, p. 1). Observing what I have highlighted previously, we can see that Bernstein is again correct. Roosevelt’s administration paved the road for the Truman administration to follow.

It is evident that the policy was already set in place and the bomb was already on its way to be used. In addition, I would stress that we should consider the politics of reversing this already paved course. Whether it an election or bargaining with Congress, what political price would Truman pay if the public had learned he had reversed the policy of his popular predecessor? I believe it is unlikely that he would have received a warm welcome of support should the public learn that his departure from policy also involved sharing the most powerful weapon in history at that time, which cost the United States $2 billion, with the communists. Bernstein writes that Truman “could not easily reassess the prevailing assumption that the bomb was a legitamate weapon to be used in combat against Japan. Truman lacked the will and the incentive to reexamine this assumption, and his dependence upon Roosevelt’s advisers and the momentum of the project confirmed this tendency” (1975, p. 35).

Combined with the evidence provided in this paper, it is reasonable to conclude that to obtain unconditional surrender, the Truman administration sincerely believed it would have to invade and defeat Japan possibly “man by man”. I think it is critical to observe that Nagasaki was chosen because it was “a major shipping and industrial center of Kyushu” (Etone, 1945). The administration truly believed that Japan would fight on after the bombs were dropped and invasion might still be necessary. It was not that they didn’t expect Japan to surrender, but that they were not counting on it. When the bomb was successfully tested, Truman wrote in his diary that he prayed “the Japs will fold up before Russia comes in. I hope they will when Manhattan appears over their homeland” (Alperovitz, Messer, & Bernstein, 1991-1992, p. 218). He wrote in a letter to Richard Russell on the day of the second bomb saying “I am not going to (drop more bombs) unless it is absolutely necessary. It is my opinion that after the Russians enter into the war the Japanese will very shortly fold up” (Truman, Letter to Richard Russell, 1945). This would be contradictory if the context that the president was saying this out of hope, not expectation. Truman wanted to end the war quickly with the fewest casualties possible. As presented earlier, the military and administration expected Japan to keep fighting. This is a critical point that Bernstein uses to counter Alperovitz and Messer’s argument (Alperovitz, Messer, & Bernstein, 1991-1992, p. 218). The sincerity of Truman’s intention was expressed when he told his wife after the bomb test that “we’ll end the war a year sooner now” (p. 218). The idea that the bomb could do exactly what he wanted (end the war early and minimize American loss of life) was and is huge- and though they may have been aware of the thousands of Japanese citizens to be potentially killed, this was an easy thing to do politically and even morally, as I discussed earlier.

Bernstein argues that many people mistakenly consider the use of atomic bombs from the perspective of modern day values, when “most rank-and-file American citizens… regretted that more A-bombs were not used before Japan surrendered” and that we should not confuse our wishes for different decisions back then with the reasons for the decisions leading to the use of the atomic bomb” (Alperovitz, Messer, & Bernstein, 1991-1992, p. 221). Combining that with the evidence I have presented thus far, it is plain to see that it was not a huge jump “morally”, at the time, to drop the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Dr. Taro Takemi, a Japanese nuclear physicist working for the government in 1945 implies in his article that it was morally *right* for the United States to use the bombs and end the war quickly (Takemi, 1983, p. 619). He writes that “the military had driven Japan to a stage that if it could not win, it would not surrender. It surely would have lost the war and many people would have starved if the atom bomb had not been dropped. When one considers the possibility that the Japanese military would have sacrificed the entire nation if it were not for the atomic bomb attack, then *this bomb might be described as having saved Japan*.” (1983, p. 619)

Conclusion

The bombs, in total, killed almost 200,000 people. Truman would continue to defend his decision the rest of his life. A letter to a journalist in 1963 summarizes his main argument that “it was done to save 125,000 youngsters on the American side and 125,000 on the Japanese side from getting killed” and “probably also saved a half million youngsters on both sides from being maimed for life” further stating that “I knew what I was doing when I stopped the war… I have no regrets… I would do it again” (Truman, Letter to Irv Kupcinet, 1963).

I believe that given the circumstances, waiting for the Russians and gambling on Japanese surrender without aggressively pursuing a quick, decisive victory didn’t make sense. I also believe that had the atomic bombs not been used, the war would have dragged on for many more months or longer. It is impossible to predict what could have happened. Perhaps the bombs were thought to be a bonus in the sense of intimidation towards the Soviets, but as we can see by the evidence I have provided, the bombs were necessary to end the war earlier and minimize the loss of American lives. Indeed, if Truman had reversed course in any of the directions that the scholarly critics would prefer, it is difficult for me to confidently say I would exist to write this paper. In August 1945 Private Billy Jack Myers, my grandfather, was an 18 year old marine in the Pacific, waiting for the orders to invade.

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