

Historiographical Essay Notes

Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A search for Middle Ground

Divisive issue: "Whether the use of the bomb was necessary to achieve victory in the war in the Pacific on terms satisfactory to the United States"

Traditional	Revisionist
The bomb was necessary to avert an invasion of Japan and in that way to avoid the loss of huge numbers of American lives	(mid 1960s) the use of the bomb was not necessary to win the war because Japan was teetering on the verge of defeat and close to surrender 1965: this debate was heightened in Gar Alperovitz's book, <i>Atomic Diplomacy</i> , where he contended that the US used the atomic bomb primarily for diplomatic purposes rather than for military requirements -- to impress/intimidate the Soviet Union in the emerging Cold War.

50th anniversary of Hiroshima (Revisionist strengthening): Ronald Takaki emphasized racist attitudes toward the Japanese on the part of Truman and most Americans and the president's desire to prove

his masculinity as the key elements in the use of the bomb.

- Basically, Truman had a small penis and he wanted to use big bomb to compensate for little peepee
- "American intercepts of Japanese diplomatic messages, to affirm and elaborate his conclusions of three decades earlier. He dismissed military demands, political expediency, and racial antipathy as primary reasons for dropping the bomb. He reiterated his earlier finding that the most plausible explanation for Truman's decision was the goal of impressing the Soviet Union with America's awesome and, for the short term at least, unmatched, atomic power."
- Truman was aware that a Soviet attack could quickly convince Japan to quit the war.
- Diary entry from Truman stated that Stalin said he would invade and many revisionists believed that the notation meant a soviet invasion would likely end the war quickly
- Idea that two step logic: combo of Soviet entry and softening of unconditional surrender probably would have ended the war
- Truman diary: telegram from Japanese emperor asking for peace" revealed that the president knew that Japan was ready to make peace if the emperor was not forced from the throne.
- Blame on Secretary of States James F Byrnes.

Differing perspectives on the meaning of casualty estimates in the summer of 1945 aroused more intense controversy during the 1990s than any other single issue relating to the use of the bomb.

- Barton J Bernstein (1986) showed in June 1945, top military planners estimated that the number of American deaths in an invasion of Japan was not likely to exceed 46k and would most likely be lower.
- John Ray Skates in his book in 1994 supports that the record does not support the postwar claims of huge Allied casualties to be suffered in the invasion of Japan.

Traditionalists disputed the claim that Japan had decided to surrender and was seeking a way to end the war on the sole condition that the emperor remain.

- Maddox suggested that if the Japanese government had decided to surrender on the single condition that the imperial institution be guaranteed, it could have, and should have, approached the United States directly.
- Maddox concluded that the chance that the emperor had personally intervened in support of peace were remote.
- Weckerling's memorandum suggested that the Truman administration was far from convinced that the emperor had decided to surrender or that the peace faction had won control of Tokyo
- Togo and other Japanese officials recognized that the Allied proclamation offered conditions that provided a reasonable basis for peace, including the likelihood that the emperor could remain
- even if the Potsdam Proclamation had made a clear statement to guarantee the position of the emperor, the Japanese government was too divided and too indecisive to accept it and quit the war
- Traditionalists ignore Truman diary entry -- happened after first atomic bomb
- Traditionalists say that Truman might have inflated the potential costs of the invasion but that did not appear out of thin air.

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- *Journal of Military History* in July 1997: War Department and Army of estimates that battle casualties could surpass one million men" in an invasion of Japan. He set out to contest the allegation of "many historians" that Truman's fear of immense losses "was fraudulent."
- He depicted it as conclusive evidence that Truman knew about and accepted huge casualty projections in the event of a landing on the Japanese mainland.

Revisionists overlook: One important concern was that if the United States offered more lenient terms to the Japanese during or after the costly battle for Okinawa, which raged from 1 April to 21 June 1945, it would strengthen the position of the militant faction within the Japanese government

- Worried that easing requirements for unconditional surrender could undermine public support for the war in the US

Traditionalists overlook: traditionalists underestimated the possibility that the alternatives could have forced a Japanese surrender before the invasion began. By failing to consider seriously evidence that suggested that an invasion was not inevitable and that the war could

have ended without either the bomb or an invasion, they oversimplified a complex and crucial issue

- But so is the traditional interpretation's heavy reliance on unprovable assertions about the need for an invasion and the number of casualties it would have caused.
- **Contemporary evidence supports the conclusion that American policy-makers did not regard an invasion as inevitable**
- Also numbers too high -- seems that Truman knew numbers were too high for casualties

During the 1990s, scholars of a middle-ground persuasion contributed fresh perspectives on familiar issues that accepted some key elements of the opposing interpretations while rejecting others.

- **Barton J Bernstein:** took issue with revisionist contentions that Japan was on the verge of surrender before Hiroshima and that the US dropped the bomb primarily to intimidate the Soviets. The war would have ended 31 December 1945 or sooner without the bomb, Soviet entry into the Pacific war, or an invasion.
 - He denied that any primary sources demonstrated that Truman was told by his top advisers in the summer of 1945 that the cost of an invasion of Japan would be several hundreds of thousands of American casualties.
 - He rejected the revisionist contention that the war could have ended as soon or even sooner than it did without dropping the bomb. He argued that none of the alternatives available to U.S. policymakers would have brought the war to a conclusion as rapidly as using the bomb. And he doubted that any of the alternatives, taken alone, would have been sufficient to force a prompt Japanese surrender
- **J. Samuel Walker** arrived at similar conclusions. In addressing the question of whether the bomb was necessary he delivered an answer of "yes . . . and no." Yes, it was necessary to end the war at the earliest possible moment and in that way to save American lives, perhaps numbering in the several thousands. No, the use of the bomb was probably not necessary to end the war within a fairly short time before the invasion took place. And no, it was not necessary to save the lives of hundreds of thousands of American troops.
 - The new weapon "offered the way most likely to achieve an American victory on American terms with the lowest cost in American lives."
- **Richard B. Frank:** Frank showed beyond reasonable doubt that the Japanese government had not decided to surrender before Hiroshima
 - He emphasized that an invasion of Kyushu would have been exceedingly costly, but he concluded that the number of American casualties would have fallen short of several hundred thousand. He estimated that the invasion would have caused casualties in the range of 156,000 to 175,000, of which 33,000 to 39,000 would have been fatalities.
- **Thomas W. Zeiler:** Zeiler agreed with revisionists that American leaders practiced atomic diplomacy, but he denied that the desire to intimidate the Soviets dictated the decision to drop the bomb
- **Herbert P. Bix** found no support in Japanese sources for the revisionist claim that Japan was on the verge of surrender before the bomb was dropped. In a path-breaking article

and in a biography of Hirohito, he demonstrated that the emperor was an active and well-informed policymaker who supported the objectives of the Japanese military.

- The emperor continued to waver about surrendering until after the atomic attacks and Soviet entry into the war. Bix took issue with the revisionist position by concluding that the Japanese government would “probably not” have surrendered even if the Potsdam Proclamation had clearly guaranteed the status of the emperor
- **Tsuyoshi Hasegawa** made a uniquely valuable contribution to atomic bomb scholarship by drawing on Soviet as well as Japanese sources to provide a multinational perspective on the end of the war
 - He explicitly took issue with Frank and Asada (and implicitly did so with Bernstein, Walker, Zeiler, and others) by arguing that the bombing of Hiroshima was less important in convincing the Japanese to surrender than Soviet entry
 - He contended that Truman hastened to use the bomb before the Soviets could enter the war while Stalin rushed to launch an invasion out of fear that the bomb would bring about a prompt Japanese surrender.
- **Forrest E. Morgan** joined the growing chorus of scholars who maintained that both the atomic bomb and the Soviet invasion of Manchuria were required to convince the Japanese to quit the war. He suggested that Japan’s “strategic culture” delayed the decision to surrender because it inhibited competing factions from looking beyond their own narrow interests to consider the welfare of the nation
- In contrast to **Hamby, Offner** sharply criticized Truman’s conduct of foreign policy throughout his presidency. He agreed with revisionists that diplomatic considerations played a major role in the decision to use the atomic bomb.
 - Offner also accepted the revisionist contention that Truman believed that Soviet entry into the war would be enough in itself to force a Japanese surrender. But he rejected the revisionist claim that the Japanese government had decided to quit the war. He blamed the emperor and Japanese military officials for “prolonging the war and thereby inviting use of the atomic bomb.”
- The differences between Hasegawa and other students of the Japanese surrender demonstrated the same pattern. Scholars who occupied the middle ground included academic historians from the United States and Japan, government historians, independent historians, and even nonhistorians whose professional training and personal backgrounds varied widely
- **Although those who occupied the middle ground generally agreed with the traditionalist position that Truman used the bomb primarily to shorten the war and save American lives, they rejected the argument that the president faced a stark choice between the bomb and an invasion**
 - Agreed that war would have ended before invasion was necessary
 - Doubts about American casualties being as large as Truman said