

Argument One: Enola Gay: Was Using the Bomb Necessary?

by Gar Alperovitz

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Tomorrow's opening by the Smithsonian Institution of an exhibit featuring the Enola Gay, the B-29 Superfortress that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima in 1945, has occasioned the protest of hundreds of prominent scholars, writers and religious leaders. The reason is that the plane is being put forward with no mention of the huge number of civilians killed at Hiroshima (and subsequently at Nagasaki), and no acknowledgment of the ongoing domestic and worldwide controversy over the use of the atomic bomb. Instead, Air and Space Museum Director General John "Jack" Dailey has put the emphasis elsewhere -- on the plane -- in all of its glory as a magnificent technological achievement."

News of the century

In 1999, a distinguished group of journalists deemed the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki the most important news event of the 20th century. A recent poll found that more Americans age 30-39 disapprove than approve of the bombings by a margin of 50 percent to 45 percent -- with almost as many (49 percent to 46 percent) also disapproving in the 18-29 age group. One of the main reasons why controversy still persists after almost 60 years is that, contrary to the conventional wisdom, there is very little evidence that top U.S. military leaders at the time believed that the atomic bomb was needed to end the war without a costly invasion. Indeed, quite the opposite appears to be true.

Adm. William D. Leahy, President Truman's chief of staff and the man who presided over meetings of both the U.S. chiefs of staff and the combined U.S.-British chiefs of staff, minced few words. Seven weeks before Hiroshima, his diary shows that he believed that the war could be ended in a manner that achieved all U.S. security aims.

'This barbarous weapon'

In his memoirs, the conservative admiral wrote: "[T]he use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender. . . . [I]n being the first to use it, we . . . adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children."

Among the many other top World War II leaders who are on record as stating that the bomb was unnecessary are the commanding general of the U.S. Army Air Forces, Henry H. "Hap" Arnold; Fleet Adm. Chester W. Nimitz, commander-in-chief of the Pacific Fleet; Adm. William F. Halsey Jr., commander of the U.S. Third Fleet; and the famous "hawk" who commanded the 21st Bomber Command, Maj. Gen. Curtis E. LeMay. Army Chief of Staff Gen. George C. Marshall privately proposed that the bombs be dropped first on a military target such as a large naval base -- then, if that didn't work, that civilians be warned to leave before a city were targeted.

In his memoirs, President -- and former general -- Dwight D. Eisenhower reported the following reaction when Secretary of War Henry Stimson informed him that the atomic bomb would be used: "During his recitation of the relevant facts, I had been conscious of a feeling of depression, and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives." In a 1963 interview, he put it bluntly: "[I]t wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing."

Notwithstanding these and many related facts, writers who defend the atomic bombings claim that a fanatical Japanese military leadership would have fought on, no matter what. It is, of course, impossible ever to fully resolve the historical dispute, because the bombs were, in fact, used. However, the evidence that we have strongly indicates that the Japanese emperor would likely have ended the war without the use of the atomic bomb -- just as so many U.S. military leaders believed.

Top U.S. leaders were advised as early as April 1945 -- four months before the bombing -- that a combination of the forthcoming declaration of war by the Soviet Union (which occurred almost simultaneously with the bombings) plus a clarification of the surrender terms for the emperor would almost certainly have brought an end to the fighting. With three months still to go before the November invasion could begin, the bomb could have been used if the shock of the Red Army attack failed to produce the expected results. When the Japanese Army general staff issued a statement on surrender, it explained that the existence of the nation was threatened "as a result of Russia's entrance into the war." No mention was made of the atomic bomb.

International law

There are also ongoing questions of morality and international law involved in the Truman administration's decision to sacrifice large numbers of civilians. Former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, who during World War II helped plan the bombing of Japanese cities as an aide to LeMay, recently observed that he and LeMay "were behaving like war criminals." A prosecutor, McNamara says, would have argued that directly targeting cities was not proportional to our war aims, thus prohibited under international law. He quotes LeMay as stating explicitly: "If we lose the war, we'll be tried as war criminals."

An additional reason why the bombing is still controversial is that it was done in a way that minimized the possibility of what later came to be called "arms-control" measures. Instead of initiating some kind of "confidence-building" negotiation in advance with the Soviets (as many had advised at the time), a major goal was to demonstrate what Stimson called the "master card" of American diplomacy in as dramatic a way as possible.

The role of force

Obviously, the issues surrounding Hiroshima still bear on the role of force in foreign policy and on the possible future use of nuclear weapons. The Clinton administration explicitly threatened the possible use of nuclear weapons in Korea, and the Bush administration's policies in general -- to say nothing of its new more-aggressive nuclear posture -- open the clear possibility that such weapons will be used in questionable ways.

In light of these many considerations, however one judges the numerous still-debated issues concerning the bombing of Hiroshima, the Smithsonian as one of the nation's premier educational institutions had, and still has, an obligation to present all sides and all important aspects of the continuing controversy.

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Source: Alperovitz, Gar. "Enola Gay: Was Using the Bomb Necessary? Miami Herald, 2003. 19 Feb. 2010

<<http://www.commondreams.org/cgi-bin/print.cgi?file=/views03/1214-06.htm>>.

Argument Two: Blood on Our Hands?

The New York Times
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OP-ED COLUMNIST
By **NICHOLAS D. KRISTOF**

Tomorrow will mark the anniversary of one of the most morally contentious events of the 20th century, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima. And after 58 years, there's an emerging consensus: we Americans have blood on our hands.

There has been a chorus here and abroad that the U.S. has little moral standing on the issue of weapons of mass destruction because we were the first to use the atomic bomb. As Nelson Mandela said of Americans in a speech on Jan. 31, "Because they decided to kill innocent people in Japan, who are still suffering from that, who are they now to pretend that they are the policeman of the world?"

The traditional American position, that our intention in dropping the bombs on Hiroshima and then Nagasaki was to end the war early and save lives, has been poked full of holes. Revisionist historians like Gar Alperovitz argue persuasively that Washington believed the bombing militarily unnecessary (except to establish American primacy in the postwar order) because, as the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey put it in 1946, "in all probability" Japan would have surrendered even without the atomic bombs.

Yet this emerging consensus is, I think, profoundly mistaken.

While American scholarship has undercut the U.S. moral position, Japanese historical research has bolstered it. The Japanese scholarship, by historians like Sadao Asada of Doshisha University in Kyoto, notes that Japanese wartime leaders who favored surrender saw their salvation in the atomic bombing. The Japanese military was steadfastly refusing to give up, so the peace faction seized upon the bombing as a new argument to force surrender.

"We of the peace party were assisted by the atomic bomb in our endeavor to end the war," Koichi Kido, one of Emperor Hirohito's closest aides, said later.

Wartime records and memoirs show that the emperor and some of his aides wanted to end the war by summer 1945. But they were vacillating and couldn't prevail over a military that was determined to keep going even if that meant, as a navy official urged at one meeting, "sacrificing 20 million Japanese lives."

The atomic bombings broke this political stalemate and were thus described by Mitsumasa Yonai, the navy minister at the time, as a "gift from heaven."

Without the atomic bombings, Japan would have continued fighting by inertia. This would have meant more firebombing of Japanese cities and a ground invasion, planned for November 1945, of the main Japanese islands. The fighting over the small, sparsely populated islands of Okinawa

had killed 14,000 Americans and 200,000 Japanese, and in the main islands the toll would have run into the millions.

"The atomic bomb was a golden opportunity given by heaven for Japan to end the war," Hisatsune Sakomizu, the chief cabinet secretary in 1945, said later.

Some argue that the U.S. could have demonstrated the bomb on an uninhabited island, or could have encouraged surrender by promising that Japan could keep its emperor. Yes, perhaps, and we should have tried. We could also have waited longer before dropping the second bomb, on Nagasaki.

But, sadly, the record suggests that restraint would not have worked. The Japanese military ferociously resisted surrender even after two atomic bombings on major cities, even after Soviet entry into the war, even when it expected another atomic bomb — on Tokyo.

One of the great tales of World War II concerns an American fighter pilot named Marcus McDilda who was shot down on Aug. 8 and brutally interrogated about the atomic bombs. He knew nothing, but under torture he "confessed" that the U.S. had 100 more nuclear weapons and planned to destroy Tokyo "in the next few days." The war minister informed the cabinet of this grim news — but still adamantly opposed surrender. In the aftermath of the atomic bombing, the emperor and peace faction finally insisted on surrender and were able to prevail.

It feels unseemly to defend the vaporizing of two cities, events that are regarded in some quarters as among the most monstrous acts of the 20th century. But we owe it to history to appreciate that the greatest tragedy of Hiroshima was not that so many people were incinerated in an instant, but that in a complex and brutal world, the alternatives were worse.

Source: Kristof, Nicholas D. "Blood on Our Hands?" New York Times. Aug. 5, 2003. 19 Feb. 2010
<<http://www.firstpulseprojects.net/bombproject/NKristoff.html>>.

Article Three: Dropping the Atomic Bomb

BY PETER BASTIAN (AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY)

For two decades after the dropping of atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 most historians accepted the US government's justification of its decision to use these weapons: that given the unwillingness of the Japanese government to seriously consider unconditional surrender, the bombings brought the war to a speedy end by allowing the US to avoid a conventional invasion of the Japanese mainland that would have cost hundreds of thousands of American (and Japanese) lives.

In the 1960s, however, some revisionist historians challenged these claims, arguing that the US decision to use these bombs had little to do with ending the Pacific War. Writing in the context of a broader debate on responsibility for the Cold War, these historians argued that Japan was effectively defeated by mid 1945 but that the US wanted to use its destructive new weapon to intimidate the Soviet Union (especially in Europe) and to end the Pacific War before the Russians became too heavily involved in East Asia.

In the mid-1990s the debate over the dropping of the atomic bombs – until this time confined largely to historians – became the focus of public controversy. In 1995 the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum in Washington DC staged an exhibition to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the ending of the Pacific War. The exhibition included the restored forward fuselage of the *Enola Gay*, a photographic exhibition, and commentary on the bombings. It included discussion of the reasons for the bombing of the Japanese cities, photographs of the Japanese victims of the bombs, and a commentary on the nuclear arms race in the subsequent Cold War era. Various veteran organizations, backed by the US Senate, strongly objected to the format. It was condemned for a lack of patriotism, a lack of respect for US war veterans, and an overly sympathetic view of the Japanese position. In the end the Smithsonian backed down and made major modifications to the exhibition, including dropping references to the subsequent arms race and many pictures of the Japanese victims. The issue sparked a debate over political interference in the re-telling of history and also revived the atomic bomb controversy among historians. The scholarly debate now had the advantage of the large amount of US archival evidence declassified after the 1960s

Despite the release of official documents from the 1970s, the broad outlines of the debate between traditionalist and revisionist historians remained unchanged. The revisionists took issue with traditional views in three main areas. They claimed that the US had ignored the fact that by July 1945 Japan was ready to surrender provided some arrangement could be made for the future of the Emperor Hirohito. Traditional historians continued to argue that the Japanese were divided on the surrender issue and that there was every indication that the war would go on. It was also claimed by the revisionists that the Truman administration delayed Russian involvement in the war and then ignored the significance of the entry of the Soviet Union into the war - which in itself would have been enough to bring about a Japanese surrender. The traditionalists countered that the US supported Russian entry as early as possible and that there was no indication that the attacks by the Red Army on the Japanese positions on the Asian mainland would have allowed the US to avoid an invasion of the Japanese islands. Finally, the two sides argued over whether Truman and

others later inflated the estimated number of American casualties in a conventional invasion of Japan, in order to make the use of the atomic bombs seem a palatable alternative.

The last ten years have seen some attempt, in various ways, to deal with what had clearly become a rather polarized debate. . . .

On the issue of Japanese surrender, various studies suggest that in July 1945 the government had not decided to surrender and that Hirohito and the militarists had not been prepared to reach such a decision until the entry of the Russians into the war and the dropping of the atomic bombs finally forced the Emperor's hand. In that sense the traditional view is supported. However, Hasegawa does suggest that the entry of the Russians into the war ended Japanese hopes that the USSR might act as intermediaries with the Americans and may have been even more important than the bombs in the decision to surrender. This at least gives some credence to the revisionist claims that Japan would have surrendered before a US invasion if the bombs had not been dropped. However, there is some danger of hindsight in such a view. Many militants wanted to continue fighting even after Russian entry and after the two bombs had been dropped; they were willing to surrender only because of the Emperor's orders. Moreover, Truman could not be certain of Japanese intentions. Evidence that the Americans hoped or suspected that Soviet entry might be enough to end the war does not demonstrate that Truman knew that the atomic bombs would not be needed.

On the issue of simply using the bombs in order to head off the Russians in Asia and intimidate them in Europe, the findings suggest that the traditionalists are generally closer to the mark. Truman and his generals first and foremost pursued the war against Japan, and the atomic bombs were an important part of their strategy for ending the war. This, however, is not to say that they were not aware of the race with the Russians or the advantages of being able to demonstrate the destructive power of the new super bomb. Yet such a view has not been disputed by most recent traditional historians, who have seen Truman as a practical statesman with one eye on the post-war world and already dealing with problems with Stalin over Eastern Europe. He and his administration clearly saw advantages in possessing and even using the new bombs, but the issue was what primarily motivated them to do so in August 1945.

On the US casualty issue, the traditional view that the US would have suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties in an invasion of the Japanese mainland has not been supported by these studies. However, Truman and his advisers did not know how many American casualties would result from such an invasion. It is understandable that they erred on the side of pessimism. Moreover, even the revised estimates presented in recent studies suggest that the human costs of an invasion would have been large. The atomic bombs would have represented the lesser of two evils and been the more attractive solution for Truman in ending the war. In this sense the traditional interpretation is closer to the truth, even though it exaggerates the likely casualty rate.

On the racial issues, it is true that stereotyping of the Japanese as sub-human was a significant part of US war propaganda. The perceived Japanese treachery at Pearl Harbor also made it easy to justify American revenge bombings on Japanese cities. On the other hand, the massive destruction of German cities throughout the war, including the fire-bombing of Dresden as late as February 1945, showed little in the way of US restraint when dealing with a European enemy. Indeed, the atomic bomb was developed primarily with a view to its use against Nazi Germany; and the weight

of evidence suggests that had it not been for Germany's surrender in May 1945, before development of the atomic bomb had been completed, a German city rather than Hiroshima would have been the first nuclear target. US wartime strategy was to use all means to bring the European and Pacific conflicts to an end as quickly as possible and to minimize American combat casualties.

Whether it was correct or not, US military planners during the war had placed a great deal of faith in the use of massive air power to destroy an enemy's military capacity and will to fight. The US government had always regarded the atomic bomb, from the beginning of its development, as a legitimate weapon of war. It was essentially just a more terrifying type of super bomb to be dropped in the same way as any of the conventional bombs of the war. Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs on Japan in order to quickly finish the war fitted in with these American military strategies that had little to do, ultimately, with racial attitudes irrespective of the personal beliefs of the President or for that matter Americans in general. However, provided we keep in mind US military thinking, perhaps racism did make the decision to use the bombs easier even if it was not an overriding factor and we also acknowledge they certainly would have been used against Germany if they had been ready in time.

Overall, the recent studies, have, in various ways, modified but not displaced the traditional views on why the bombs were dropped. Much of the revisionist case is based on the ahistorical assumption that Truman and US policymakers understood Japanese intentions with the same clarity as historians have been able to achieve decades after the event. In any case, the Japanese showed no serious signs of being willing to surrender in July and early August 1945, and the US government was faced with a possible conventional invasion of Japan which would have involved substantial casualties - if not quite the rates earlier figures had suggested. The bomb had been developed in accordance with US military strategies to win both the European and Pacific war as quickly and cheaply as possible and had the bonus of heading off Soviet influences in Asia. The war propaganda that depicted the Japanese as treacherous and sub-human reflected an American racism that may have made such a decision a little easier for Truman.

Source: Bastian, Peter. "Dropping the Atomic Bomb." *Historiography*. American History for Australian Schools. 19 Feb. 2010 <http://www.anzasa.arts.usyd.edu.au/ahas/bomb_historiography.html>.

Argument Four: Bomb! Unbomb!

Book Review By J. Samuel Walker of Richard B. Frank's book, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire*. Published: Sunday, December 12, 1999

The use of atomic bombs against Japan and the end of World War II in the Pacific have inspired a staggering volume of literature. In 1995 alone, 50 years after the end of the war, seven books and dozens of articles on the decision to drop the bomb appeared. In the past four years, the barrage has slowed but not ceased. In light of the large number of scholarly and popular works, one might reasonably ask why we need another book on the topic.

The answer lies largely in the continuing controversy that the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki have ignited. Despite the enormous body of literature on President Harry S. Truman's decision to use the bomb, scholars still differ on many important questions, sometimes in sharply acrimonious exchanges. As Richard B. Frank, the author of "Guadalcanal," suggests in his introduction to "Downfall," we need further study of the events that led to Hiroshima because the debate is so highly polarized. He seeks to avoid the partisanship that is so prevalent in the literature and to present events "as they were perceived and recorded by American and Japanese participants in 1945 -- not years or decades thereafter." Frank's approach is not as original as he claims, but it enables him to offer a carefully reasoned and admirably balanced account that should be required reading for anyone with an interest in the atomic bomb and the end of the war.

The fundamental question that has triggered so much controversy is whether the atomic bomb was needed to force the Japanese to surrender at the earliest possible moment. The traditional view is that nuclear weapons were essential to win the war. Writers who take this position maintain that the bomb prevented a United States invasion of the Japanese homeland that would have cost hundreds of thousands of American casualties. Traditionalists assert that Truman faced a categorical choice between the bomb and an invasion that was forced on him by the refusal of the Japanese to surrender. In their view, the United States dropped the bomb primarily for military purposes -- to shorten the war and save huge numbers of American lives.

The traditional interpretation is sharply contested by scholars known as revisionists. They contend that the bomb was not necessary for victory. They insist that Japan was seeking a way to end the war on the sole condition that the emperor be retained and, further, that American policy makers were well aware of this. Revisionist scholars argue that the United States used atomic weapons more for political than for military reasons, especially to intimidate the Soviet Union in the emerging cold war.

Frank evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of both positions. Although he does not accept either unconditionally, he is particularly critical of the revisionist view. Drawing on evidence that has opened up within the last few years, especially intercepts of Japanese diplomatic messages, he argues convincingly that the Japanese had not decided to surrender before Hiroshima. Indeed, his analysis of this issue drives a stake into the heart of the most cherished revisionist contention -- that Japan was

seeking peace and the United States prolonged the war by refusing to soften its demand for unconditional surrender.

Frank shows beyond reasonable doubt that neither Emperor Hirohito nor most of his top military advisers had concluded that the war must end. Although they recognized that Japan could not win, they hoped that a last "decisive battle" in the homeland would force the United States to offer milder surrender terms. "It is fantasy, not history," Frank writes, "to believe that the end of the war was at hand before the use of the atomic bomb."

Although Frank aims his heaviest fusillades at the revisionist interpretation, he does not fully embrace the traditional view. He questions the prevalent idea that an invasion of Japan, had it proved necessary, would have cost several hundred thousand, perhaps even a million, American casualties. This issue has been the single greatest source of controversy among scholars over the past few years, and the documentary evidence is frustratingly inconclusive. Frank estimates that the first phase of the invasion, scheduled for Nov. 1, 1945, on the Japanese island of Kyushu, would have caused in the range of 156,000 to 175,000 American casualties, of which 33,000 to 39,000 would have been fatalities. In the book's most original argument, he proposes that such heavy losses might have been enough to persuade American leaders to modify their surrender terms. Japanese resistance to an American landing on Kyushu would have been so formidable that it might have succeeded in accomplishing the political goals that the Japanese militants sought.

Frank also raises doubts about another staple of the traditional interpretation -- that without the bomb an invasion would have been essential. He makes clear how vulnerable the Japanese railroad system was to aerial attacks and how dependent food distribution was on the railroads. Food supplies were already short in August 1945, and the scarcities would have become increasingly acute if the war had continued. Thus, vast numbers of Japanese faced death from starvation within the not-too-distant future. Frank demonstrates as well that the emperor and his closest advisers were growing concerned that domestic unrest and internal upheaval might pose as much of a threat as the American military. Therefore, the emperor was likely to have sought peace even without the atomic bomb, particularly since, Frank suggests, the United States would have shifted its strategy from invading Japan to starving it into submission.

Frank makes the arresting point that despite the horrors visited upon Japan by the atomic bombs, we should not assume that "any termination of the conflict that avoided the use of nuclear weapons would have been preferable." By reminding us that the war might have been even worse than it was for both Americans and Japanese had it continued, he places Truman's decision to use the bomb in its full historical context. His conclusions are likely to incite attacks from those who cling to doctrinaire positions in the endless controversy, but those who seek a well-informed, thoughtful and judicious account have good reason to applaud this book.

Source: <<http://www.nytimes.com/1999/12/12/books/bomb-unbomb.html?n=Top%2FFeatures%2FBooks%2FBook%20Reviews>>.