

The world will note that the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, a military base. That was because we wished in this first attack to avoid, insofar as possible, the killing of civilians. But that attack is only a warning of things to come. If Japan does not surrender, bombs will have to be dropped on her industries and, unfortunately thousands of civilian lives will be lost.

Having found the bomb we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare. We have used it to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans.

We shall continue to use it until we completely destroy Japan's power to make war. Only a Japanese surrender will make us stop.¹

With this statement, Harry S. Truman changed the course of world warfare. The most devastating weapon ever created had just been dropped on Japan. On the same day, the United States dropped a second bomb on the coastal city of Nagasaki. Within a few days, Japan agreed to an unconditional surrender and World War II was concluded.

However, the debate over the use of the bomb had just began. Should the United States have dropped such a bomb on another human civilization? The devastation of the bombs were quickly realized. After the *Enola Gay* dropped the first bomb on Hiroshima, four square miles of a seven square mile city disappeared and 80,000 people died instantly with the remaining population of the city left to suffer from the effects of radiation.² Three days later, a second bomb was dropped on the city of Nagasaki, instantly killing another 40,000 to 75,000 people.³ Scholars have argued the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan for suspect reasons and may not have been needed to bring Japan to surrender. In this paper the author will attempt to prove the United States dropped the bomb on Japan for many reasons. However, the main reason the United

¹ Truman, Harry S, "Public Statement concerning the bombing of Hiroshima, 8/9/45," The Public Papers of the Presidents, Harry S. Truman, 1945, pg. 212.

² Stokesbury, James L., A Short History of World War II, (New York, 1980), pg. 375.

States dropped the bomb on Japan was to save American lives from an assault on the Japanese Islands.

The first issue that must be explored in the debate over the atomic bomb is whether it was necessary to drop the bomb in the first place. American historian James Patterson argued in America in the Twentieth Century that the Japanese leaders knew by July 1945 that they would be unable to win the war against the United States and were moving in the direction of securing peace with the United States. Patterson also argued that the Japanese may have been willing to negotiate a peace on the condition that they could retain their emperor, which at that point the United States was unwilling to do. Patterson further points out that Truman, Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin had agreed at the Potsdam meeting to allow the Japanese to retain their emperor. However, the Big Three did not issue this provision in the Potsdam Ultimatum, and Truman only told Japan to surrender or be completely destroyed. Therefore, according to Patterson, the United States wanted to drop the bomb to show the world the power of the United States.⁴

Along the same lines, World War II historian, Stephen Ambrose questioned the timing of the bombing in his book Rise to Globalism. Ambrose argued that the bomb may have been dropped prematurely. Despite his warning that an invasion of the Japanese Islands was imminent, Truman knew that the United States had no major military operation planned for Japan before the first of November, 1945. In addition, Ambrose argued, many observers felt that the planned declaration of war by Soviet Union on August 8 would convince Japan they could not survive an invasion from the north and from the south and would surrender. According to Ambrose, however, the world did not

³ Patterson, James T., America in the Twentieth Century, (Orlando, 1989), pg. 296.

⁴ Ibid.

get the opportunity to see if Japan would have surrendered with the Soviet declaration, because Truman ordered the bomb to be dropped on August 6.⁵

These facts have led many historians, including Ambrose, to wonder whether or not the dropping of the bomb was politically motivated to show the Soviets the military capabilities of the United States and was the first move by Truman in initiating the Cold War. These historians point out that the United States had deployed a bulk of her troops out of Western Europe during the summer of 1945, leaving the Red Army of the Soviet Union as the most powerful force in Europe. According to this argument, Truman dropped the bomb to deter the Soviets from making a move in Europe.⁶

There were also many reasons within the United States government in 1945 to drop the bomb. Secretary of War Henry Stimson believed the bomb should be used to show the world the destruction of war so that the world could achieve everlasting peace. He wrote in Harper's Magazine, “[The bombs] made it wholly clear that we must never have another war. This is the lesson men and leaders everywhere must learn, and I believe that when they learn it they will find a way to lasting peace. There is no choice.”⁷

Other arguments within the government ranged from a desire to get even with Japan for their actions at Pearl Harbor to the need for Congress to justify the spending of \$2 billion to produce the bombs. Ambrose also proposed the idea that the idea of killing people had become routine in 1945. The coordinated efforts of the British and America in the fire bombings at Dresden had killed tens of thousands of women and children with no real military purpose had hardened the hearts of many policy makers in both countries.

⁵ Ambrose, Stephen E., Rise to Globalism: American Foreign Policy Since 1938, (New York, 1991), pg. 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

Ambrose wrote that the killing of a few more “Japs” seemed the natural thing to do to get them to surrender.⁸ While this racial motivation for the dropping of the bomb does not take into account the slaughter of Europeans at Dresden, it can not be ignored.

In fact, all of the above arguments have valid points. However, they seem to be limited and ignore the perception of the Japanese military from an American standpoint. The answer to why the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Japan is simple; the United States had the bomb, Japan’s military was dedicated, and Japan had not surrendered.

At the end of September 1945, the Japanese seemed willing to fight to the last man. In Okinawa they lost 110,000 men in 83 days, while killing 12,500 men. Many military leaders wondered how much harder the Japanese would fight on their homeland. Some military analysts predicted the losses in the invasion of Japan could be 500,000 dead and another 500,000 injured. These were the numbers presented to Truman during a strategy meeting at the White House in early July. At the meeting, it was decided to give Japan a last chance to surrender, and then end the war with the dropping of the bomb. At Potsdam, the United States, Great Britain and China issued the ultimatum demanding Japan’s surrender. Two days after the ultimatum, the Japanese Premier Suzuki told the world that the ultimatum was not worthy of public notice. Truman was left with the choice to launch a full-scale invasion of Japan or drop the bomb. On August 6, the decision was made when the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. With no response from the Japanese, Truman ordered the second bomb to be dropped on August 9. By August 15, the Japanese had surrendered, and according to Truman, the chief policy maker of the

⁷ Stimson, Henry L., “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” Harper’s Magazine, February 1947, printed in Opposing Viewpoints in American History, (San Diego, 1996), pgs. 239-246.

United States, the country had won the war against Japan without sacrificing so many American soldiers. In a 1955 interview, Truman offered his reasons for using such a deadly weapon,

It was the estimate of General [George] Marshall that this action [dropping the bombs] would probably save the lives of 250,00 of our soldiers and probably twice as many casualties – that was what I was trying to avoid...

...In the long run it takes the psychological condition of the enemy's mind to cause a surrender but my objective was to use the atomic bomb purely as a military blow to create military surrender. That in the long run is what happened. In the First World War if you will remember the Germans were not completely defeated – Germany was never invaded and never touched except by a few air raids which we made along toward the end, but the fact that nine hundred thousand Americans had marched up to and were about to take over caused them to surrender. They never would have surrendered otherwise. I don't believe in speculating on the mental feeling and as far as the bomb is concerned I ordered its use for a military reason – for no other cause – and it saved the lives of a great many of our soldiers. That is all I had in mind.⁹

While the other ideas as to why the United States dropped the atomic bomb have a very strong logical basis and can not be ignored, the President of the United States who ordered the attack seemed committed to the idea of ending the war as soon as possible with as little loss of American life as possible. Truman had the best weapon at his disposal to achieve this noble military objective. Many innocent Japanese women and children died in the atomic attacks, but the two countries were at war with one another. The role of a government in a nation is to protect the lives of its citizens, and when that government can achieve that role while at war with another country, it must follow that policy. Truman brought the war to a conclusion and saved American lives with the dropping of the bombs and in his heart he believed he had done the right thing for the right reasons.

⁸ Ambrose, 51.

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⁹ Hulman, William and Morton Royce, "Interview with Former President Truman c. 1955" internet posting of interview no longer available. Copy of the documents in notes of author at Hazelwood West High School.