

Luke Jett

“Should America have dropped the atomic bombs to end the war?”

On August 6<sup>th</sup> and August 9<sup>th</sup>, the United States dropped nuclear weapons on two cities in Japan killing nearly 200,000 civilians. This decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki to force Imperial Japan to surrender ended World War Two continues to be one of the most controversial events of the war. These weapons ushered in a new era of modern conflict. Their impact still defines the present day political environment. Despite this and the many other painful consequences of the attack, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the most practical and morally responsible method of ending the Second World War.

In order to appreciate the necessity for a swift and unconditional end to the war, one must hold a firm understanding of the clear evil that Imperial Japan represented. At the time of the bombings, the Japanese empire controlled large portions of Asia. It stretched north to Manchuria, west into China, and south into French Indochina, and East across the Pacific island chains. This empire controlled the lives of nearly 100 million people by 1945 and was responsible for the deaths of 17 million combat and civilian casualties. This Japanese sphere of influence maintained the continued suffering of millions. The policies of Imperial Japan exploited the conquered countries in its empire to support its war effort, civilians in the homeland, and ensure its continued control and influence in the area. This imperial power was responsible for the atrocities committed at Nanking and other areas in China. Its leaders and military perpetrated the systematic abuse of thousands of women through the Comfort Women System. In 1945, the Japanese Empire continued to exploit the people of Asia within its sphere of influence, continued to profess a commitment to total war, and by responsible estimates would bring about the death of 200,000 more people every month past it existed July

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1945. With this information, it is clear the Allies were fighting a just and morally war to end a great evil. The question concerning the atomic bombing becomes one of means not cause. These facts necessitate the destruction of Imperial Japan and the requirement for an unconditional surrender. However, it can still be argued that the atomic bombs were the not the most acceptable method of accomplishing this goal.

The clearest and most apparent alternative to the use of atomic weapons was a full-scale military invasion of the main islands of Japan. At the time of the bombings, there were nearly 900,000 Japanese soldiers prepared to defend the main island of Kyushu. Millions more members of the Japanese army were deployed throughout the empire. It is difficult to predict how many forces would have been able to return in event of a full-scale invasion, but it is clear that the defense to such an invasion would have been severe. Taking into account the total war philosophy of the Japanese Empire and the violence and ferocity experienced on Okinawa, it is realistic to believe an invasion of Japan would have been a disaster. Civilian involvement, the nature of the warfare, and the Japanese military mindset regarding surrender likely would have led to a far more costly resolution to the war. As a result, avoiding a full invasion of Japan, the most widely considered alternative to the atomic weapons in 1945, was desirable for both the United States, and the people of Japan.

The Leaders of the Unites Stated did not truly consider many other alternatives to the atomic weapons beyond invasion, but other solutions proposed in the years after the war be addressed as they each had their own limitations. Continuing the conventional bombing campaign currently underway against the Japanese homeland likely would have resulted in a greater number of civilian casualties than both atomic bombing and has limited evidence to

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support its effectiveness in forcing Japanese military leaders to accept a total surrender. The fire bombings of Tokyo alone killed approximately 100,000 civilians and displaced millions more. Similarly, blockading the Japanese home islands would have resulted in the deaths of an unknown number of civilians due to starvation or exposure resulting from widespread famine and lack of medical or material supplies. As discussed previously, delayed resolutions likely would have resulted in the deaths of 200,000 civilians living in Japanese controlled areas of the world each month.

However, the most compelling argument against the use of the atomic weapons is the failure for United States wait in order to see what the impact of the Soviet Army's declaration of war against Japan would be. Some scholars argue that the Soviet campaign in Manchuria and the mainland of Asia combined with the possible United States invasion of the main island may have been enough to force a Japanese surrender without the need for the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Regardless of this possibility, this solution presents several moral dilemmas of equal or greater gravity to the use of nuclear weapons. The Soviet government was responsible for the death of millions of civilians both during and prior to the outbreak of World War Two. On the Eastern front, the atrocities committed against civilians, POWs, and other innocent groups rivaled those committed by the soldiers of German army. These acts of violence and rape continued as the Soviet army began its campaign in Manchuria. The United States' moral obligation to fighting in the pacific was to end the evil of the Japanese Empire. If United States leaders waited for the Soviet army to expand its control into the southern regions of mainland Asia it is probable civilians living in those areas would experience very similar methods of exploitation and control. Although Soviet Russia fought with the allied powers, their

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system of government and treatment of civilians represented another sinister power in the world. Truman and other leaders recognized this, and the use of the atomic bombs possibly limited direct soviet control in Asia.

The use of the Atomic bombs against Japan represented an irreversible shift in the scale of modern conflict. Suddenly, the destruction of entire cities only required a single bomb and a means to deliver it. This shift accelerated but did not start a realignment of world power that was to occur following World War Two. The war exhausted the powers of the British Empire, France, and Germany. Prior to 1945, it became clear to World Leaders that the United States and Soviet Union were to be the new military powers. Due to this realization, an unspoken rivalry developed between the countries and their governmental ideals. The sentiments of the Cold War that was to follow the Japanese surrender existed long before the bombing of Hiroshima. However, with historical hindsight the atomic bombing may have helped ensure this rivalry never resulted in direct military conflict. The atomic bombings established the United States as the military power of the world in the eyes of all world leaders. The country's nuclear power negated much of a Soviet military threat at the conclusion of the war. This resulted in the armament race that defined the post war decades. However, perhaps more importantly, the decision to use the atomic bombs against cities rather than a display of power in an unpopulated region provided a visceral display of the destructive power. August 6<sup>th</sup> and August 9<sup>th</sup> clearly demonstrated that atomic weapons redefined destructive capability. The impact of this sobering realization cannot be underestimated. Now, over 70 years later Hiroshima and Nagasaki thankfully remain the only incidents of atomic military strikes. The decision to use these weapons in 1945 quite possibly helped prevent the use of these weapons later in history.

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If the weapons were used only 20 or 30 years later, atomic capabilities would have been far more widely possessed, cities would have been far larger, and their destructive impact potentially would have been far deadlier. The uses of the atomic weapons against Japan served to not only end the war, but also to force leader to more heavily consider the potential disaster of modern conflict.

From a purely utilitarian perspective, the use of the atomic bombs potentially saved the lives of thousands if not millions of individuals living in 1945. By extension of this impact to the ancestors of those wartime survivors, the legacy of the bombs is innumerable. On a personal level, my paternal grandfather would likely have served as part of a potential main island invasion force in Japan. It is a reality my own existence and that of many others is indebted in part to Truman and other leader’s decision to drop the atomic bombs. However this purely utilitarian rational of trading 200,000 Japanese civilian lives for millions of civilian and military fail to address or satisfy the moral dilemma these bombs carried. Human life is something to be valued and bartering it leaves a sense disheartenment upon the conscious of most moral people. However, despite this utilizing the atomic bombs was the just decision.

The Second World War was a period of great tragedy. The evil that existed in both the Nazi party controlling Germany and the Imperial Japanese government embodied a consistent devaluing of human life and perpetration of suffering. The magnitude to which these powers projected this villainy was unlike that ever seen before in history. Suffering existed across the globe. Suffering came in the form of famines or rape. It was the core element of the Holocaust. The suffering on the eastern front kindled the violence and resentment displayed there. United States Marines and Japanese soldier alike experienced suffering each moment of their pacific

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conflicts. The beaches of Normandy or the image of the flag raising on Iwo Jima are two lasting symbols of suffering and triumph. It is impossible to understand the actions of World War Two without understanding the great evil and suffering that existed. This conflict was a global conflict. Its result affected the entire human population in one manner or the other. The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are part of the suffering and tragedy of the conflict. Despite this, they were part of the solution. These weapons brought about the destruction of the evil responsible for much of this suffering. The attacks paved the way for a new era and the beginnings of a better world. Most importantly, the atomic bombs provided this opportunity to the greatest number of humans. In order to end the suffering a painful solution must have been undertaken. In utilizing the atomic weapons, the United States leaders provided the chance at a new future to the greatest number of people across the planet. This was the goal of the allied powers from the beginning and made the Second World War a just conflict despite the suffering. For this reason, The United States of America dropped the atomic bombs and its leaders were unequivocally morally correct in doing so.