

Hiroshima: A Controversy That Refuses to Die

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Fifty years after the B-29 Superfortress Enola Gay was used to drop an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the decision that ushered in the nuclear age is still the subject of fierce historical debate.

The issue stirs enormous passions: at one pole speculative estimates of how many Americans would have died invading Japan, and were presumably spared because of the bombing, and at the other pole whether the attack in August 1945 was necessary to end the war.

Indeed, some historians now contend that the bombing was aimed not so much at the wartime enemy Japan as at the wartime ally Soviet Union, delivered as a warning against postwar rivalry.

The questions, sometimes raised by a new generation horrified at the death and destruction that rained on Hiroshima and, three days later, on Nagasaki, resonate harshly among World War II veterans, particularly those who survived the bloody fighting in the Pacific that took more than 41,000 American lives.

In the latest clash, the Smithsonian Institution, attacked by veterans groups and members of Congress for a World War II exhibit that they said was overly solicitous of Japan, has decided to drastically scale back the display: The narrative, already revised five times, will be dropped, and visitors will see only part of the Enola Gay's fuselage, along with a small commemorative plaque.

Among historians digging through musty diaries, military records and memorandums from President Truman's Administration, opinions about the bombing of Hiroshima are no less firm than the veterans'.

"I think it can be proven that the bomb was not only unnecessary but known in advance not to be necessary," said Gar Alperovitz, a historian critical of the decision to drop the bomb and who has been studying the issue for some 30 years. Speaking in a telephone interview from Washington, he said, "The President fully understood and was advised that there were other ways to end the war." Mr. Alperovitz said he was planning to publish an extensive study on the subject this summer.

By contrast, Robert Cowley, the editor of the *Military History Quarterly*, whose forthcoming spring issue is devoted to "The End of the War With Japan," said: "If you were in Truman's shoes and had this weapon and had the chance to end the war then and there, there's no question you would use the bomb. The problems of continuing the war were enormous."

Barton J. Bernstein, a Stanford University historian who has figured in the Smithsonian uproar, said in a telephone interview that the bombing should be examined in the context of its time. Professor Bernstein said he was wary both of revisionist historians and the veterans.

Many questions raised now, Professor Bernstein writes in the current issue of *Foreign Affairs*, "often fail to recognize that, before Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the use of the A-bomb did not raise profound moral issues for policymakers."

He explained: "By early 1945, World War II -- especially in the Pacific -- had become virtually total war. The firebombing of Dresden [Germany] had helped set a precedent for the U.S. air force, supported by the American people, to intentionally kill mass numbers of Japanese citizens. The earlier moral insistence on noncombatant immunity crumbled during the savage war."

Professor Bernstein helped ignite the latest furor when he convinced Smithsonian officials that casualty estimates for an invasion of Japan should be about 63,000, not the previous estimates of at least 229,000.

The question of projected casualties, Professor Bernstein said in an interview, "is so important to the vets" because any lessening of these numbers could be interpreted as raising questions about the need for the bombing and, in a sense, diminishing their own role.

Casualty estimates have run as high as the half million cited in Truman's memoirs and the one million referred to by Winston Churchill. These figures were often taken by the public to mean that these many lives had been saved. But Professor Bernstein and other historians note that the term casualties includes wounded as well as dead.

They also note that these postwar estimates appear to be far higher than the figures that military planners were using at the time. Historians caution that all the figures, even those at the time, were speculative.

Professor Bernstein said that he revised his casualty estimates last spring, after rereading the diary of Adm. William Leahy, the equivalent of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the end of World War II.

Admiral Leahy, he said, recounted how an estimate was advanced at a White House meeting of President Truman and his military advisers on June 18, 1945. Participants discussed a casualty figure of 35 percent.

Professor Bernstein said the Army commander, Gen. George C. Marshall, had cited a 35 percent casualty figure for the entire invasion force, about 775,000 troops. But Professor Bernstein said his review of Admiral Leahy's diary indicated that the figure should have been applied only to combat troops, or about 190,000 men. The new calculation yielded 63,000 casualties.

He conceded, however, that the 35 percent figure was made before American intelligence found indications of a large Japanese buildup in the Kyushu region, where an invasion was tentatively planned for the fall of 1945, which presumably would have meant more casualties.

Truman and his advisers, who as veterans of World War I had their own memories of casualties, had seen troops devastated in Europe, and they knew that much of the Pacific battles were even tougher.

"Considering the horrific fighting on Iwo Jima and Okinawa, the prospect of invading Japan itself seemed nightmarish," Peter Maslowski, a professor at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, writes in the forthcoming *Military History Quarterly*.

Professor Maslowski outlines four possible options for President Truman, each with "weaknesses and potential risks." These were the bombing, an invasion, a negotiated settlement (which would presumably hinge on the politically difficult question of allowing the Emperor, revered as a God by the Japanese, to remain in some position of authority), and strangulation through both intensified conventional bombing and a tightened blockade.

"Looking back on the events of 1945 from a secure, peaceful, comfortable perch decades later, it is easy to criticize President Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs," Professor Maslowski writes. "But considering the possible drawbacks associated with the other options, his choice was entirely logical and reasonable -- the least undesirable of four unhappy alternatives."

Mr. Alperovitz disagrees. He contends that the Soviet Union's decision in July 1945 to join the war against Japan was expected by Mr. Truman to spell the end of the war, and that the Americans were already aware of peace overtures.

Instead, he contends, American policy shifted, largely under the influence of Truman's old Congressional mentor James Byrnes, the Secretary of State, who wanted to block the Soviets from moving into northern China and to deliver a warning for the future.

Mr. Cowley, the editor of the *Military History Quarterly*, agreed that the challenge to the Soviet Union was important, saying that if the Soviets had moved into the area "this would have changed the geopolitical ball game; Tokyo would become an oriental Berlin."

Professor Bernstein also said that the Soviet gambit had figured in Truman's decision to use the bomb. So did the momentum of the \$2 billion Manhattan Project, he said. Had the bomb been ready in time, he believes, it would have been used on Nazi Germany.

Mr. Alperovitz and Professor Bernstein note that many of the generals, raised with a nobler notion of war, had worried about the implications of using the bomb. Admiral Leahy called it "barbaric."

But these warriors' qualms were swept away in what Professor Bernstein called a "redefinition of morality that made Hiroshima and Nagasaki possible and ushered in the Atomic Age in such a frightening way."

"That redefinition of morality was a product of World War II," Professor Bernstein writes, "which included such barbarities as Germany's systematic murder of six million Jews and Japan's rape of Nanking. "While the worst atrocities were perpetrated by the Axis, all the major nation-states sliced away at the moral code -- often to the applause of their leaders and citizens alike. By 1945 there were few moral restraints left in what had become virtually a total war."

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