

THE UNITED STATES' RESPONSIBILITY IN THE ATOMIC BOMBINGS

The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 each had an explosive blast yield of roughly fifteen to twenty kilotons. Fires caused by the explosions were so intense that they instantly incinerated everything in the immediate blast zone.¹ Hiroshima's population decreased from 400,000 to 83,000 after the bombing, and damage from radiation exists to the present day. Military personnel and civilian alike were killed with equal power and brutality, and it was estimated that "among the 350,000-400,000 victims of the bombs, 45,000 were Korean residents in Japan, Japanese Americans, Allied prisoners of War, and other non-Japanese citizens."² The atrocities that occurred in Japan that fateful summer afternoon serve as an infamous reminder of the sheer power and terror of nuclear weapons, a reminder all too pertinent at a time when more than 2,000 nuclear tests have been conducted worldwide, and more than 20,000 nuclear weapons are currently in existence. The process behind the United States' decision to drop the atomic bomb, the two alternative decisions that could have potentially ended the war without the direct use of the bomb itself, and the decision to drop a second bomb are crucial points to analyze the extent to which the United States perceived and continues to perceive itself as responsible for the colossal damage done to the populations of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The proposition to employ an atomic bomb originated as the United States was embroiled in dual military battles against both Japan and Germany. Retreating from one of these fronts would speed up the war effort and maximize troop numbers and ordinances in one location instead of splitting resources onto two battlefronts. The question of how to end the war in Japan, however, was not immediately clear. As the United States' forces approached the islands of Japan, military tacticians presented strategies to mixed responses. Some believed that a complete naval blockade of the islands would be sufficient to starve the Japanese of essential resources and communication routes,³ while others believed that the continued strategic firebombings of major Japanese cities would eventually drive the country into submission.⁴ The final decision, however, was made with the knowledge of military generals



Atomic bomb mushroom clouds over Hiroshima

who had fought long and bloody battles with the Japanese. Armed with an understanding of the unwavering mindset of the Japanese soldiers, these generals had come to understand that the only successful tactic would be a massive ground assault.

For the Japanese, surrender was not an option. The Japanese concept of death is incredibly intricate, rooted in well over 3,000 years of folklore with a significant emphasis on family, honor, tradition, and a special regard for the emperor.⁵ A story known as "The Forty-Seven Ronin" illustrates the loyalty of the Japanese soldier. The story tells the tale of a group of warriors and their feudal lord and leader, Asano. Asano believed that the local governor Grand Chamberlain Kira had publically humiliated him, and during a public ceremony produced his sword and slightly injured Kira. While Asano retained some level of embarrassment, it also condemned Asano to an honor bound ceremonial suicide for striking a superior. After his death, his forty-seven samurai became *Ronin* – leaderless samurai. In order to honor the death of their master, the Forty-Seven *Ronin* vowed to avenge their lord's death by tricking, deceiving, and murdering the Grand Chamberlain. Once Kira had been dealt with, all forty-seven *Ronin* committed suicide by disembowelment. In a similar fashion, the Japanese soldiers of the 19th and 20th century were "taught to regard death by their own hand as nothing disgraceful but rather a very natural process."⁶ The 20th century military soldiers of Japan believed they were participating in a centuries-old tradition of honor and integrity by fighting and dying for their country.

The Japanese military had full knowledge that its young soldiers were going into battle with this mentality and took advantage of historical traditions, such as *Bushido*, to achieve their goals. *Bushido*, also known as "the way of the warrior,"⁷ had been the honor code of the samurai class throughout Japan's history. In the 20th century, the Japanese military took this concept and "[romanticized] the 'way,' teaching that all young men must be willing to die for their Emperor."⁸ In this manner, the Japanese military was not only able to attract a significant number of troops but to maximize the individual efforts from each soldier, motivating young men to die by the thousands. Such manipulation of Japanese tradition inspired the kamikaze units – men who would ram their planes or explosive-filled submarines into the enemy line, committing suicide



Operation "Downfall" plan for the invasion of Japan, May 28th, 1945

in the process. Modern Japanese soldiers found themselves reduced to mere "cannon fodder."⁹ Near the end of the war, the Japanese government began encouraging people of all ages, including children and the elderly, to participate in the war effort. It was estimated that twenty-eight million civilians were recruited to assist the military.¹⁰ Though civilians were poorly armed, they were highly motivated to defend their homeland and serve their emperor at all costs, adopting the mantra "One Hundred Million Will Die for the Emperor and Nation."¹¹

In understanding the military spirit and endurance of the Japanese, military strategists like General MacArthur believed that the only successful way to end the war in Japan would be a massive ground assault on the home island. The size of the force that would have been utilized in the invasion of the home island of Japan is astonishing: comprising the entire United States Marine Corps, the entire United States Navy in the Pacific, four United States Air Forces, and 1.5 million combat soldiers, the operation would have involved forty percent of the American military in 1945.¹² Even with this massive force, MacArthur was prepared for the very real possibility that a successful invasion, the capture of Tokyo, and the resignation of the Emperor¹³ would not inevitably lead to the formal surrender

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Atomic bomb mushroom clouds over Nagasaki

of the Japanese military.¹⁴ The planners of the all-out land invasion of Japan believed that operation “Downfall” would result in at least half a million casualties in addition to the deaths of 168,500 Allied prisoners of war, POWs, at the hands of the Japanese in retaliation.¹⁵ It was with this prediction in mind that Truman debated the use of the atomic bomb.

There is much controversy surrounding the possibility of Japan’s surrender prior to the use of the atomic bomb. On June 19th, 1945, weeks before the dropping of the bomb, Japanese Prime Minister Suzuki called a meeting with his ministers over whether Japan should approach the Soviet Union to act as a negotiator with the United States. While all agreed to this plan, many also maintained that no formal attempt be made prior to the land invasion of the United States troops in Japan. The Japanese were confident in their ability to repel the invasion of their homelands and to use the defeat of the United States as leverage for more generous peace terms.¹⁶ The “code of the samurai” remained deeply engrained in Japanese military culture: Japanese Foreign Minister Togo explained that an “unconditional surrender [by the Japanese] and the humiliation it would bring with the surrender of a powerful force of over two million of her soldiers, still heavily armed and scattered over a vast empire, along with the expected foreign occupation of her home islands, was more than the ruling government could accept.”¹⁷

Japan continued to refuse unconditional surrender even with a guarantee to maintain their monarchy in power. Many who criticize the use of

the bomb in ending the war claim that any attempt at Japanese surrender was contingent on a promise from the United States to retain the Japanese Emperor.¹⁸ In fact, United States policymakers had offered these exact terms to Japanese Foreign Minister Togo, who had rejected the offer “out of hand” in an attempt to save face and end the war with dignity.¹⁹ Despite strong feelings from the United States general public, a large majority of which held the Emperor personally responsible for the war, the State Department believed that keeping the Emperor was necessary for ensuring an orderly surrender. They believed that if the Emperor were disposed of, the Japanese people would be “slow to disarm and embittered for generations,”²⁰ resulting in a collapse of the regime and the possibility of sustained American occupation. True to form, the Japanese government continued to refuse surrender, even publishing copies of the surrender agreement in local newspapers with the headline “Laughable Matter”²¹ describing the generous terms believed by Allied powers around the world as “more lenient than those imposed upon Germany.”²² Prime Minister Suzuki disregarded the Potsdam Declaration.

A second core argument brought up against the United States is that the bombs were used without warning and without demonstration. If the Japanese had seen a demonstration of the atomic bombs’ pure destruction, perhaps they would have reconsidered the option for surrender. A simple test would have given the Japanese

government a chance to witness the true extent of damage the United States was prepared to induce. As the first country to complete construction of the atomic bomb, the United States was tasked with the responsibility of setting precedent. If the bomb were used poorly, without proper warning or reasoning, the United States would be setting a dangerous standard for the future of nuclear warfare.

The initial planning behind the Manhattan project was, at its core, a defensive one. Up to this point, the Allies had been in a technological “arms race” with the Axis Powers.²³ Once American scientists discovered that atomic fission was possible, the United States raced to the finish, completing designs and the construction of viable bombs.²⁴ Designs were finalized, however, as the German regime was crumbling, leaving Japan as the viable target for the first bomb. The issue of targeting was not taken lightly. Following the Quebec Conference in September of 1944, President Roosevelt and Winston Churchill discussed how the first bomb should be used: “It might perhaps, after mature consideration, be used against the Japanese, who should be *warned that this bombardment will be repeated until they surrender.*”²⁵ Later, physicist Vannevar Bush debated with Roosevelt over whether the bomb itself should be used or merely held as a threat; a threat coupled with a visual demonstration may have been enough to convince the Japanese to surrender.

While the decision to demonstrate the capabilities of the atomic bomb appeared morally straightforward, there were several mitigating factors to consider. The grand performance would have to be located in a neutral territory in order to ensure that the explosion could not be mistaken as an act of war or aggression on another nation. In addition, to organize and assemble guests from several different nations, as Sachs had suggested, would require a significant amount of time and planning. The world was in the middle of a war, and to call a meeting to watch a poorly scheduled explosion did not seem viable. The longer it took to schedule, the more money and lives would be lost in the war. On the other hand, since this would be a warning to the people of Japan, the risk of having the bomb fail would be catastrophic. None of the scientists knew for certain that the bomb would work. Finally, regardless of the potential success of the demonstrations, the United States had to

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consider the mindset of the Japanese themselves. The Japanese military had almost complete control over the Japanese press, so that even if the atomic demonstration had been successful, the Japanese public would not have been informed of the details.²⁶

In order to mitigate damage to the city itself, the bomb could be set to detonate in the available airspace above Japan where the Japanese public could see the full extent of the explosion. Lewis L. Strauss, then the assistant to the Secretary of the Navy and eventually the Chairman of the Atomic Energy Commission, proposed dropping the bomb in an “uninhabited” area with plenty of trees. The strategists worried, however, that Japanese would place POWs in the designated demonstration zone.²⁷ In addition, there was a growing fear that a demonstration, regardless of how impressive, would “preempt the shock value of the weapon... [and waste a bomb].”²⁸ John J. McCloy, assistant to Secretary of War, Henry Stimson, argued that even with a demonstration, speculation would arise as to the method of deploying the bomb. He argued that given the complexities associated with the development of an atomic bomb, many witnesses would question the United States’ ability to produce another. The United States was also aware of the harm of a successful demonstration, which could hasten the global arms race. The Soviet Union had already begun to speed up research and development efforts the minute Stalin caught wind of the United States’ possession of a bomb, even without confirmation of its effectiveness. With these factors in mind, a consensus was made on May 31st to withhold a demonstration.



Ruins in the wake of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima August 6, 1945

According to military scholar Lawrence Freeman, the primary objective of the second atomic bomb was “to shock a weakened Japan into early surrender. Mere quantitative destruction was not the objective; LeMay’s B-29s were [already] achieving that with conventional bombs.”²¹ In fact, the firebombing raids of Tokyo actually did more damage in terms of pure quantitative destruction than did the atomic bombs. Considering the resilience of the Japanese army, the United States had no reason to believe that the shock from one atomic bomb would provoke Japan’s surrender. In fact, the Japanese military claimed that the destruction of Hiroshima was “not so terrible anyway.”²² Taking this into account, the Truman administration ordered the dropping of the second atomic bomb so close to the dropping of the first.

A critical argument made in light of the dropping of the second atomic bomb rests on the timetable between the first and second droppings. Commentators argue that the Japanese government simply had no time to react to a surrender option in the three days before the second bombing.³ It is reasonable to assume that given the immense destruction of Hiroshima, Japan simply did not have enough time to adequately analyze the damage done to the region while also working to provide relief efforts to the wounded. The Japanese had clearly demonstrated

their tenacity even when the battle seemed lost, as in the situation of Okinawa and Iwo Jima.

The question of surrender prior to the dropping of the first bomb was not unified across Japan. In fact, there is conclusive evidence to support the presence of developing talks within the Japanese government that discussed the emperor’s “then-secret decision” to seek peace shortly before the Nagasaki bombing.²⁹ The issue for the United States, however, was not the will of the emperor but with the decisions of Japan’s military tacticians. General Umezu, Anami, and Toyoda held their ground, claiming that the United States “could not possibly possess enough radioactive material to make a sufficient number of bombs to permit a continuation of such attacks.”³⁰ The more days that passed between the dropping of the first atomic bomb and the second, the more Anami, Umezu, and Toyoda’s assumptions about the nuclear capabilities of the United States solidified. Due to an extensive knowledge of Japanese warfare tactics and increasing doubts from the Japanese military regarding the possibility of a second nuclear bomb, the United States had to make the critical decision of awaiting the possibility of surrender or continuing their atomic barrage to destabilize the region and regime.

It is with this background knowledge that the United States’ perceptions of its responsibility for the bombings in reference to the Hiroshima Commemoration controversy at the Smithsonian’s

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National Air and Space Museum is revealed. The exhibition was commemorated to honor the fiftieth year anniversary of the atomic bomb’s detonation over Hiroshima. The centerpiece of the exhibit featured the restored fuselage of the *Enola Gay* with a replica of the bomb stored in its belly. The exhibition was met with criticism from all sides. Some stated that showcasing the plane itself, and especially placing it at the center of the room, was “celebratory” of such a controversial decision.³¹ Others suggested that the plane belonged more in the Holocaust Museum than the Air and Space Museum.³²

In contrast, members of the Air Force Association, founded by General Jimmy Doolittle in 1946, publicized a campaign run by a group of former B-29 fliers who had collected over 8,000³³ signatures asking the Smithsonian “to either display the *Enola Gay* ‘proudly and patriotically’ or turn it over to a museum that would do so.”³⁴ The Air Force Association charged the museum with using the *Enola Gay* to “defame the strategic bombings [during WWII],”³⁵ making Japan look like the victim and the United States guilty of “war crimes.”³⁶ Veterans of the war effort argue that the “use of the weapon against a brutal and ruthless aggressor to save 30,000 American lives was as morally justifiable as to use it to save half a million.”³⁷ As the controversy continued, news eventually reached the members of Congress, who stated that the historical recollections of the Smithsonian were “narrow” and “biased.” The Senate, in a resolution passed by Nancy Kassebaum, declared that the exhibit was “revisionist, unbalanced, and offensive.”

As the debate continued, it was made clear to the museum and the general public that the logic behind using the bomb was “inescapable.” The retrospective approach to challenging the morality of issues with newfound information that may or may not have been available at the time of the decision making process is futile. The decision to drop the bomb on Hiroshima is often seen as one that would either prevent or cause massive suffering. The paradoxical truth is that the bomb ended potential suffering by *causing* more of it.

The reaction of the public to the Smithsonian’s attempts at rewriting history with newfound information does reveal much about the question of American responsibility. While the United States is inescapably responsible for the aftermath of the atomic bombs, the question of responsibility in itself is all a matter of perspective. By approaching the situation from a utilitarian perspective, the argument stands that the United States had considered several alternative decisions, including the possibility of unconditional surrender, surrender with the promise of retaining the Emperor, and the possibility of offering Japan a demonstration of the bombs. While these alternatives would have eradicated the necessity of the bombs, they involved factors that would have led the United States to engage in a brutal land assault of the home islands.

If read through a moral lens, the negligence of the United States to have a thorough understanding of the bomb they were about to drop on thousands of people, cannot be ignored. The United States had carried out hundreds of test that would have given them a chance to properly understand that a bomb of this magnitude would have resulted in irreparable damages to the drop zone. Regardless of which side one takes, it is evident that the decisions made in regards to the creation, deployment, and utilization of atomic bombs on Japan was not made lightly. At the end of the day, the decisions made by Truman were made with the intention of what was believed to end the war as quickly and effectively as possible in order to mitigate the amount of life lost on both sides.

Richard Balagtas is a Philosophy and Political Science double major, Class of 2016

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By Richard Balagtas

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Dependence on Identity

By Emily Murphy

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