The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II:
The Debate Among Historians

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For many years, professional historians have vigorously debated the decision of President Truman to drop atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This debate has gone through many changes and has shifted with the discovery of new documents and the changes in the historical profession itself. The following essay is a review of the key books and articles that have enriched the debate concerning the atomic bomb and the end of the Second World War. The writings of Henry L. Stimson, Herbert Feis, Gar Alperovitz, Gabriel Kolko, Martin Sherwin, and other important historians and critics are discussed.

1. Introduction

More than fifty-six years have passed since atomic bombs were dropped upon the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August of 1945. At first there was general agreement among most Americans about the primary reason for the bombing: to force a quick surrender from the Japanese government and thus save countless American lives that would be lost in a proposed invasion of Japan. But as the years passed, professional historians began to raise some important questions about the development and use of these atomic weapons. In the nineteen sixties this questioning exploded into an often bitter debate about the Bomb. The key questions raised include the following: Was the bombing of these two Japanese cities truly necessary to achieve the stated goal of forcing a quick and unconditional surrender of the Japanese government? Did President Truman have another possible motive in mind for using the Bomb other than simply forcing a Japanese surrender? What other alternatives were available to the President and his advisors in the summer of 1945? Finally, even if other options were available, was Truman still correct in his decision to use atomic weapons in order to end the Second World War?

I began to read about the controversy surrounding the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1977. At that time, I was amazed to learn so many facts and ideas relating to this debate that none of my friends and fellow students seemed to be aware of. Sadly, the passage of years has seen this "knowledge gap" widen even further. Historians engaged in this debate have learned a great deal more about the facts surrounding Truman's decision due to recently opened archives, newly discovered primary source material, and groundbreaking new books and articles on the subject. Yet few Americans outside of a handful of specialized researchers and historians have ever read any of the key works on this subject and thus most people have only a vague understanding of the complexities involved. In other words, there is a huge gap between what a handful of historians and scholars have known for years and what just about everyone else seems to know.

I have chosen to write the following essay in order to help narrow this knowledge gap. My purpose here is to review some of the main historical literature that has appeared since 1947 when the first major article on this issue was published. This essay is not intended to be a comprehensive review of all the material written about the Bomb as that would take hundreds of pages. But it is my intention to select some of the more important books and articles and to discuss how each contributed to the growing debate over President Truman's decision to use atomic bombs in the Second World War.

2. Setting the Stage: The Origins of the Second World War and The Formation of the Unconditional Surrender Policy

In order to discover the reasons for the outbreak of
World War II, one must look back to the unresolved issues left by the previous World War of 1914–18. Chief among those issues was the failure to create political and economic stability in the vanquished nations, especially in Germany. At first, the peace terms agreed upon at Versailles in 1919 (especially the schedule of reparation payments) seemed exceedingly harsh. Only France and the Soviet Union expressed any willingness to enforce these terms. After a few years even these countries either lost interest or became distracted by their own serious domestic problems. Germany not only failed to make its scheduled payments to the Allies, it also rebuilt its war machine. Under the Nazi regime of Adolph Hitler it created a much more powerful and formidable military than it had built in the First World War. Yet the former Allies offered little resistance to the aggression of the former Central Powers—Germany and Italy— or their newfound ally, Japan.

When hostilities did break out throughout the globe, the old Allies scrambled desperately to deal with a military crisis of disastrous proportions. The USSR signed a Neutrality Pact with the Germans in order to buy time to rebuild its military, decimated by Stalin’s purges of the 1930’s. Caught woefully unprepared by the dazzling military success of the Axis Powers, the remaining Allies belatedly moved to mobilize their nations for war. Soon after the formal declaration of war, the Allies were handed terrible defeats in most major battles with the Axis, France, relying upon the supposed protection of fixed fortifications along the Franco-German border (the so-called Maginot Line) fell quickly to the Germans who simply sidestepped and went around these fortifications and invaded France in May of 1940. When Hitler decided to invade Russia and thus render the non-aggression pact utterly worthless, Soviet armies suffered millions of casualties just in the first few months of fighting. Britain struggled mightily with the daily bombing raids over its cities. The Blitz killed thousands of civilians and severely damaged most major cities in England.

The Americans also had their hands full. First came the surprise attack on the naval installation at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii, then the defeat in the Battle of Wake Island. Next came the abandonment of the Philippines as the US military was forced to evacuate the islands. A brutal Japanese occupation of these islands began.

At this early date, discussions began among the Allies about what to do if and when they managed to re-group and defeat the Axis. The “Big Three” Allied leaders agreed upon one important principle, namely, that the purpose of the war was to force an unconditional surrender from each of the defeated Axis nations. This principle of unconditional surrender was formally agreed to and put in writing by the Allies in Casablanca in 1943. This meant that, whatever the disagreements between the Allies, they were committed to fighting the war to the finish, and they would not permit the Axis powers to dictate the final peace terms in any way.

At first this consensus on surrender terms meant little because it was not at all certain that the Allies would be able to turn back the Axis nations on the battlefield, or on the sea, or in the skies. But the tide of war did indeed change. On the Eastern front, Russian troops turned back German invaders and began a relentless counter-offensive of their own. In the South Pacific American forces won pivotal victories, especially in the battles of Midway Island and Guadalcanal in 1942. In Europe, an important offensive was the invasion of Sicily in 1943. Finally, in 1944, Allied forces invaded France and raced toward Germany in Operation Overlord.

In May of 1945 the German Reich fell to the Allies. In the South Pacific, the strategy of “island hopping” ultimately proved successful. Although the battles for Iwo Jima and Okinawa were among the bloodiest of the war for American as well as Japanese troops, the islands did fall to the Allies. Therefore, by the summer of 1945, the situation facing Japan was extremely bleak. With Okinawa and Iwo Jima now in American hands, Allied planes could bomb Japanese cities almost at will as most airworthy Japanese fighter planes had been destroyed.

Of equal importance was the tightening blockade around the main islands of Japan. For any country a successful blockade of its borders would be a very serious problem. But Japan is especially vulnerable because it relies heavily on imports for goods ranging from oil and the raw materials of war to foodstuffs and the vital necessities of life. Preventing such imports to reach the civilian population created an increasingly desperate situation inside Japan. Daily life for soldiers and civilians became ever more difficult, and the threat of famine loomed almost everywhere. Air raids pounded most major cities, destroying huge sections of
Yokohama, Kobe, and Osaka. In particular, the dropping of incendiary devices over Tokyo in March of 1945 caused fires that destroyed most of that city. This “fire bombing” of Tokyo killed or wounded over 200,000 people.

It was in this situation, in July and August of 1945, that President Truman and his top advisors planned the final actions to end the Second World War in the Pacific. So as we consider the key articles and books on this subject, please do so with two crucial points in mind: first, that the military and economic plight inside Japan was growing more and more desperate with each passing day; and secondly, that the Allies had previously agreed to a policy of unconditional surrender for Japan. This policy meant that the Allies alone would determine any possible terms of surrender and thus there would be no compromise with the enemy until victory was won.


The first major article in the historiographic literature dealing with President Truman’s decision to use atomic weapons was published in 1947. It was written by a key advisor to President Truman. He was Henry L. Stimson, the Secretary of War under Franklin Roosevelt and later, following FDR’s death in 1945, the Secretary of War under Truman.

In “The Decision To Use The Atomic Bomb”, an article published in a popular magazine (Harper’s Weekly) in 1947, Stimson vigorously defended Truman’s decision to use atomic weaponry in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Stimson declared that Truman’s overriding concern was to bring the long, bloody war to a close with a minimal loss of American lives. Just as Truman had claimed in contemporary speeches and in later articles on the subject, Stimson stated that the only possible alternative to the Bomb was an invasion of the Japanese mainland. In such an invasion, Stimson asserted that as many as one million American soldiers might be killed or wounded. Faced with such a grim alternative, Truman decided to authorize the use of the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Stimson’s article has its strengths and weaknesses. On the plus side was the excellent reputation of Stimson himself. At the time of this article’s publication, he was a highly respected former cabinet member and was generally viewed as a man who had played a major role in the victory of the United States and its allies over the Axis powers in the recently concluded war. Though a loyal Democrat, he was not an especially partisan politician and was indeed trusted by Democrats and Republicans alike in the United States Congress. He had managed to restore credibility to the War Department after the disastrous period during and soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. Because of the respect that he engendered, both scholars and the general public took his article very seriously.

On the negative side, historians know that Stimson was very much a key policymaker and advisor when it came to the atomic bomb decision itself (he was perhaps second only to Truman’s Secretary of State James Byrnes in his potential ability to shape or influence Truman’s decision). Therefore, any negative reaction or criticism of that decision would reflect badly upon himself. Thus it appeared to some observers at the time (as well as many critics today) that Stimson’s primary motive in writing this article was to stave off future criticism of Truman and himself rather than to write a rigorously objective analysis of the subject.

A second problem is that the article was published so soon after the actual bombing that few scholars had yet had the time to discover or examine the primary sources necessary to confirm or refute many of Stimson’s assertions. By far the most significant of these claims was his estimate that one million soldiers might be lost in any proposed invasion of the Japanese mainland. As we shall see later in this essay, these estimates of horrific casualties will be questioned and later rejected by most serious historians of the atomic bomb.

Yet there is a great irony here. Although most serious historians of this issue have dismissed his grossly exaggerated estimates of casualty figures in a possible invasion of the Japanese mainland, many Americans still cite the very same kind of estimates as if they are part of the undisputed historical record! Therefore, Stimson’s short article resonates with many Americans even today, especially with veterans and civilians who lived through the war, even if they themselves have never actually read his article.

There is one other point about Stimson’s article that will prove significant in the emerging debate on the Bomb. Stimson argued forcefully that the overriding concern of President Truman was simply to end the war. But he also hints at the possibility that the Presi-
dent may have had an additional motive to use the Bomb, namely, to use it as a "trump card" on Joseph Stalin and the Soviets after the war. In other words, the Bomb would serve the dual purpose of ending the war with Japan as well as gaining an advantage over America's new rival for power in the post war world, the Soviet Union. It should be noted that Stimson downplays this notion as a major factor in Truman's thinking. He sees the "trump card" as merely a kind of bonus in using the Bomb. Yet Stimson left just enough room open for revisionist historians to raise the possibility that "impressing" the Soviets with American nuclear capability and advanced technology might have been a major (if secret) motive behind Truman's decision. In 1947 however, no major scholar raised this kind of question. As we shall see, it will indeed be raised in a dramatic way in the nineteen sixties.

4. The Debate is Joined: Herbert Feis and Japan Subdued

In the years immediately following publication of Stimson's article, countless books were released about World War II in general or some particular aspect of the war. But no authoritative book was published that dealt specifically with Truman's decision to end the war. It was to be another 14 years before such a book appeared. The title of this book was Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and The End of the War in the Pacific.2

The author was Herbert Feis, a respected historian and former State Department official under both FDR and Truman in 1945. Feis's account, although not nearly as controversial as the very next major book to be published about the atomic bomb, is still an extremely important and provocative treatment of most of the key issues surrounding this debate.

Like most atomic bomb historians after him, he emphasized the negotiations that took place at Potsdam, Germany, the very last meeting of the three major leaders of the Allied nations (the United States, the Soviet Union, and Great Britain). But an important change had occurred since the last meeting of Allied leaders: Franklin Roosevelt, perhaps the most popular President in American history, had died in April. His successor was Harry S Truman, vice-president and former senator from Missouri. Whereas FDR was noted for his uncanny ability to build and keep coalitions of diverse groups of people, Truman was at that time an unproven chief executive and a virtual novice in international diplomacy. He had come up through the ranks of "machine politics" in Missouri, where his loyalty to the notorious Pendergast political machine was duly rewarded. In sum, the contrast between the extremely gregarious and politically self-confident FDR and the unproven and untested Truman was a striking one.

It is Feis's view that Truman came to Potsdam with essentially two goals in mind: first and foremost, to keep the fragile coalition of Britain, the USSR, and the United States together; secondly, to secure Soviet entry into the war against Japan (at this point the USSR and Japan were still officially neutral toward each other). According to Feis, Truman assumed that Soviet entry would hasten the end of the war, although how soon the end would come was a matter of conjecture.

But there was something else on Truman's mind that Churchill and most others at Potsdam did not know. The President had learned before leaving for Potsdam that a test of a powerful new bomb was to occur during the conference itself.

The research and development to build an atomic bomb had begun almost at the same time as America's entry into the war in 1941-42. This program, dubbed the Manhattan Project, had operated in a top-secret environment. Its military commander was General Leslie Groves, and the scientist who directed the researchers was Dr. Robert Oppenheimer. After a good deal of frustration and failure, an "implosion" device was finally developed that seemed to offer great promise. Two different types of devices, a plutonium type bomb and a uranium type bomb, were being developed. A major test of one of these weapons was to take place during July.

A controversy swirls around what Truman actually thought about this new and devastating weapon. Feis takes what might be called the traditional view of Truman's motives and actions. He holds that Truman simply wished to end the war quickly with as few American casualties as possible. If using this terrible new bomb could somehow bring the war to an abrupt end, then Truman was for it. After he learned of the successful test in New Mexico, Truman decided to inform Stalin of the existence of this new weapon (albeit in only general terms, i.e., that a new and extremely powerful bomb had been added to the American arsenal). When he told Stalin, the Soviet leader did not seem at all surprised. He simply smiled and told Truman the
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Russian equivalent of “Glad to hear it.” Later it was determined that Stalin was already aware of the work on the atomic bomb through his network of spies, so it is not surprising that he appeared unmoved by this seemingly dramatic news.

But what about Truman’s own behavior upon hearing news of the successful atomic test in New Mexico? This would become a major source of contention among historians. Winston Churchill claimed that Truman seemed a bit passive early on at Potsdam. But one day Truman suddenly seemed, in the words of the British prime minister, a “changed man.” The President appeared much more forceful, telling the Russians “where to get off” and generally acting in a more rejuvenated and combative manner. At first Churchill was puzzled by this radical change in behavior. But when he learned a bit later that Truman had been informed of the successful atomic bomb test on that very same day, Churchill ascribed the sudden change in Truman’s demeanor to his hearing the news of that successful test.

It is important to note that many other staff members who were in a position to observe the President during the Potsdam meetings did not notice any radical change in Truman’s behavior. Thus many scholars doubt whether or not Mr. Churchill correctly gauged Truman’s allegedly “changed” behavior. But to some historians Churchill’s remark is indeed valid. Moreover, they claim that it is a vital clue to Truman’s thinking regarding the Bomb and its affect on American foreign policy.

After discussing the Potsdam conference in some detail, Feis then deals directly with the matter of Truman’s decision to approve the use of atomic weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He asks what should be the crucial question regarding Truman’s decision: was the use of atomic weapons necessary to force a Japanese surrender?

Feis’s answer is truly remarkable. It also serves as a turning point in the atomic bomb debate. Rather than using his own words to express his opinion on the necessity of the Bomb to end the war, Feis simply quotes verbatim the conclusions of a study published in 1946 by the Strategic Bombing Survey. The Survey was an arm of the Office of Strategic Services, or OSS, which was itself the primary intelligence gathering service for the United States military during World War II. This study of the economic and military situation inside Japan reached the following conclusion: “It is the survey’s opinion that certainly prior to 31 December, 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November, 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bomb had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.” [Emphasis added]

After quoting this conclusion, Feis states that he can find no reason to dispute the Survey’s conclusions. In other words, Feis believed that using atomic weapons was not the only reasonable way to force a Japanese surrender. Moreover, an invasion of the Japanese main islands was also not necessary. The policy of blockade and bombardment already in force would have compelled a Japanese surrender on terms favorable to the Allies. By disputing the necessity of an invasion, Feis directly contradicts the assertion by Henry Stimson mentioned earlier, namely, that the only logical alternative to the Bomb was a costly invasion of Japan itself.

Two parenthetical points should be kept in mind. First, it should be noted that the Strategic Bombing Survey issued its report after the end of the war. Therefore, the Survey’s conclusion is conjectural. It is a matter of hindsight, a fact that defenders of the President are quick to point out.

Secondly, because the Survey’s report was issued after the war, the President himself obviously never saw it before he made his fateful decision about the Bomb. Therefore, he can’t be condemned for ignoring a report that he never saw in the first place (although a strong case can indeed be made that Truman was indeed aware of the desperate conditions inside Japan and was certainly aware, in a general way, of the facts described in the Survey).

But there is another point that Truman loyalists fail to mention when attacking the conclusions of the Survey. As members of the OSS, the Strategic Bombing Survey personnel were not by nature or inclination overly critical of American foreign policy in general or of Truman’s decision making in particular. Although many OSS officers returned to civilian life after 1946, those that remained served as the foundation for a new intelligence gathering service: the Central Intelligence Agency! Of course, the CIA has been championed by many conservatives who vigorously defend use of the Bomb. Therefore, supporters of Truman cannot easily shrug off the findings of the Survey as being too leftist, pacifist, or amateurish as they often do with critics of
the Atomic bomb decision.

Thus we see that by agreeing wholeheartedly with the Survey's conclusions, Herbert Feis believed that atomic bombs were not necessary to ensure a Japanese surrender. Nevertheless, Feis then returns to the orthodox view of Stimson. Although in hindsight it would have been preferable if some other alternative had been tried, Feis states that Truman's decision was a valid one, given the information available to him at the time, given the overwhelmingly hawkish advice offered by all of his key advisors regarding the decision, and, most importantly, given the fact that the bombings did indeed seem to succeed at forcing a quick surrender of Japan without further loss of American lives. Therefore, in Feis's words, Truman "should not be censured" for his decision.

Yet whether he realized it or not, Feis had opened up a proverbial Pandora's Box of future criticism concerning the Bomb. As a respected historian of a mostly moderate point of view, as well as being a former member of the Truman administration itself, Feis had raised serious doubts regarding the President's decision. If indeed the Bomb was not necessary, and if Truman somehow knew that it was not necessary, why then did he go ahead and use this terrible weapon of mass destruction?

5. Atomic Diplomacy and its Critics

The next major work on the Bomb attempts to answer this question. Four years after Japan Subdued, a young historian named Gar Alperovitz wrote what has become the most controversial book on this subject. In Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam, Alperovitz agrees completely with Feis that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not necessary. But that is where the two historians part ways. Alperovitz claims that Truman not only knew of plausible alternatives to the Bomb, but that he actively rejected all such options because he wanted to use it primarily as a way to bully Soviet leaders with America's new atomic advantage.4

In this revisionist scenario, Truman went to Potsdam not to seek Soviet entry, but rather to delay Soviet entry until he had heard definitive news about the New Mexico test. Once the President learned of the probable success of this powerful new weapon in his arsenal, he began to act more confidently and stridently in dealing with Stalin and his staff. So the oft-mentioned story told by Churchill, i.e., of a suddenly energized Truman acting far more aggressively toward Stalin after hearing of the Bomb test is taken to heart by Alperovitz. Also, Stimson's reference to the Bomb as a possible "trump card" for Truman after the war is also employed to show Truman's "actual" motives. Alperovitz claims that Truman hoped to use "atomic diplomacy" by bullying the Soviets after the war in many places but especially in Eastern Europe and in Asia.

When it first appeared in 1965, Atomic Diplomacy created a major controversy. His thesis seemed remarkable because it was so detailed. He had also taken full advantage of recently opened archives and could boast of using never-before-seen primary sources. However, it wasn't very long before attacks on Atomic Diplomacy began coming fast and furious. Attacks on Alperovitz came from all over the political spectrum, from the far Left to the extreme Right. Not surprisingly, most conservatives ridiculed any book like this one that condemned Truman's use of atomic weapons. But other critics also attacked Alperovitz and even questioned his truthfulness and accuracy in using primary sources. Perhaps the best example of this is an article by Robert James Maddox in the Journal Of American History. The title says it all: "Atomic Diplomacy: A Study in Creative Writing." Maddox claimed that the work was so suspect that it should never have been considered a serious work of history in the first place.5

Perhaps it was the New Leftist Gabriel Kolko, a famous scholar and critic of American foreign policy, who delivered the most accurate criticism of Alperovitz in the years after Atomic Diplomacy. In his The Politics Of War, Kolko rejected Alperovitz's tendency to ascribe a kind of Machiavellian genius and cunning to the former haberdasher from Independence, Missouri.6 The "politics of war", that is to say, the politics of unlimited warfare in which killing civilians was fair game, had hardened Truman and most major other world leaders to the brutality of war. Once a new weapon became available, leaders used it without stopping to worry about the cost in civilian casualties or in shattered morals. By 1945, all that mattered was ending the war as quickly as possible. Therefore, Kolko was not surprised that no alternatives to the Bomb were ever seriously considered. Indeed, he would have been surprised only if the opposite occurred, namely, if Truman had stopped and considered the long-term im-
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plications of the Bomb: tens of thousands dead, thousands more permanently scarred by radiation, hundreds of thousands left homeless. The intellectual horizons of Truman and his advisors in 1945 simply didn’t reach that high, for all they could contemplate was ending the war in a way that saved American lives and that also required taking few immediate political risks.

In summary, Kolko rejects the notion of an ultra Machiavellian or diabolical Truman. But of course, this does not mean he supported Truman’s decision: on the contrary, he criticized the President for falling victim to the brutality of unlimited war and for not stepping back and considering the catastrophe that the Atomic Age would usher in.

Despite the criticisms of historians like Maddox and Kolko, Alperovitz’s thesis managed to gain a permanent foothold in the historical debate over the bomb. After 1965, almost all serious historians of the bomb have had to grapple with the notion that Truman may have had other motives besides simply wishing to end the war in Japan. The main difference was that most scholars came to view the possibility that Truman wished to “impress” the Soviets as a secondary or minor motive, not as the primary or overarching goal that Alperovitz claimed.

6. Martin Sherwin and A World Destroyed

Up until Kolko’s book most scholars who wrote at length about Truman’s decision spent most of their time scrutinizing the months immediately before Hiroshima with special emphasis on the Potsdam conference. But what about the years before 1945? How did FDR’s handling of the Manhattan Project contribute to the ultimate decision in August of 1945? The next major book about the atomic bomb controversy attempts to answer these questions and shed new light on this debate. This book was A World Destroyed, published in 1975 by Martin Sherwin. Sherwin does a meticulous job of examining the origins of Roosevelt’s interest in developing this powerful new weapon.7

Some historians have implied that if FDR had lived, he may have had the political self-confidence that Truman lacked to question the use of the Bomb at that critical juncture in the summer of 1945. Although FDR was certainly politically self-confident, Sherwin argued strongly and convincingly that FDR’s atomic bomb program was set up only to develop a new weapon and then to bring it into action as soon as it could be successfully tested. Never did anyone in a position of power seriously question use of the bomb beforehand. Moreover, when a few scientists working under Oppenheimer questioned the possible use of the bomb on Japan (most had assumed the bombs were to be used against Nazi Germany) FDR’s reaction was to contact the FBI and have some of these scientists followed by government agents. Moreover, FDR jealously guarded the growing knowledge of atomic energy and refused to share it with his most powerful ally, the Soviet Union. And the outlook of both Leslie Groves and Robert Oppenheimer, directors of the Manhattan Project, was to develop a bomb as soon as possible and to use it as soon as it was ready to be deployed.

For Sherwin, the political atmosphere created long before Potsdam, both in Washington and in the country at large, precluded any serious discussion about whether or not the bombs would be used.

I believe the most important part of this book is Sherwin’s discussion of the bureaucratic momentum that had developed in the highest circles of both the military and civilian leadership of the USA by 1945. As Truman himself noted, the government had spent two billion dollars to research, develop, and test a devastating new weapon. To spend that enormous sum, succeed at creating a bomb, but then not to use the new weapon would have taken a healthy dose of political daring and cleverness, two qualities that Harry Truman did not possess in ample supply (at least not at that early point in his administration). In other words, the Manhattan Project itself had a kind of life of its own, and neither FDR nor Truman saw any compelling reasons to question it or stop it.

It is important to keep in mind that like Kolko before him, Sherwin may have understood why Truman decided the use the Bomb, but he does not necessarily agree with that decision. He simply feels that the decision was not based primarily on a wish to “impress” the Soviets the way Alperovitz had claimed (although Sherwin does feel that using the Bomb as a diplomatic tool was a possible post war “bonus” in the President’s way of thinking). However, as an historian with pacifist leanings, Sherwin bemoans the actual use of the bomb on Hiroshima. He feels that at least one of the possible alternatives to the Bomb, namely, an offer to guarantee the Emperor’s role in Japanese life, should have been tried before going ahead with such a destructive weapon. And, like many other historians,
Sherwin utterly condemns the bombing of Nagasaki. The basic reason is that so little time was allowed the Japanese government to contemplate and then properly respond to the Hiroshima bombing. If enough time had been allowed, Sherwin and others feel, there was a good chance that a Japanese surrender would have precluded any need for a second bombing.

7. The Rejection of Administration Casualty Estimates for a Possible Invasion of Japan and Other Recent Developments

In my opinion, Sherwin’s book is the very best and most authoritative book on the decision to use Atomic weapons in World War II. Since the late 1970s the debate has ranged widely but it still falls somewhere between the extremes of Alperovitz’s book on the one hand, and the more plausible yet critical works of Sherwin, Kolko, and Feis on the other.

In the meantime there have been a number of noteworthy articles that have shed new light on this debate. Perhaps the most interesting has been the new analysis of the nightmarish casualty figures used by Truman, Stimson, and others to help justify the atomic bomb decision. Recall how Stimson claimed that as many as one million American casualties might be incurred in a planned invasion of the Japanese home islands. But in an article published in 1985, historian Rufus E. Miles, Jr., claims that there is no evidence whatsoever that any such estimate was ever used during the war. In fact, Miller can only find a “high end” estimate of twenty thousand casualties. The historian Barton Bernstein, basing his remarks upon newly discovered records, found that the absolute “worst case” scenario estimate was still just forty-six thousand deaths or so, certainly a grim figure, but far short of the astronomical estimate of a half million to a million casualties. Bernstein therefore concludes that the “myth of the 500,000 American lives saved thus seems to have no basis in fact.” [Emphasis added]

This finding by both Bernstein and Miles has been confirmed again and again by other historians acting independently of one another. In fact, the origin of those bloated estimates is unknown to this day. One can only guess that policymakers exaggerated their estimates for a good reason: to try to head off any criticism of the decision to use the Bomb until long after the end of the war. Once that happened, those huge estimates would become not only part of the history of the bomb, but more importantly, of the historical memory of the American people. As such, it would be extremely difficult for revisionist historians to change the minds of most people outside of the historical profession. If that was their plan, unfortunately, it seems to have succeeded, at least up until now. This topic is discussed in an article by Samuel J. Walker entitled “History, Collective Memory, and the Decision to Use the Bomb” published in 1996.

8. Conclusion

I trust that this review of some of the major books and articles concerning the end of the Second World War and the decision to use atomic weapons has been helpful and informative. I also hope that it shall in some small way help to narrow the gap between what a small group of scholars have known for a long time and what most other people do not know at the present time.

Notes
3 United States Strategic Bombing Survey, Japan’s Struggle to End the War (Washington: 1946) 45.

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