Three Fallacies in the Standard Argument Defending President Truman’s Atomic Bomb Decision

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In March of 2002 my first article on the debate regarding President Truman’s decision to use atomic weapons was published in the Memoirs Of Shonan Institute Of Technology. This essay, entitled “The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II: The Debate Among Historians,” outlined the major issues of the debate and showed how the A-bomb controversy has changed over the years since 1945.1

In that previous article I was primarily concerned with laying out the main arguments that historians have grappled with since the end of the war in 1945. On the other hand, I also mentioned that the maturing professional debate among historians has had little effect on the acute lack of knowledge on this issue shown by most Americans outside the historical profession. In this second article, the second part of a planned three part series, I shall critique some of the standard claims raised by Americans when they try to defend the decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

What follows is a critical essay focusing on three major fallacies that undermine what I shall refer to as the “standard defense” of Truman’s decision.

1. Introduction

My first article published in the Shonan Memoirs (March, 2002) was a historiographical essay on the atomic bomb debate. It is an outline of the major points raised by professional historians in the debate over the decision to use atomic weapons in Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945. It was intended to inform readers who are neither professional historians nor history buffs about the main arguments present in the debate and how that debate has evolved over time.

This new essay is intended to be a continuation of my earlier article. I shall discuss three glaring errors in the standard argument that is often used by the general public to defend President Truman and his atomic bomb decision.

By exploring these three errors—I shall refer to them as fallacies—I intend to show how the basic argument in defense of Truman’s decision is much too narrow-minded, contradictory, and ultimately unsatisfactory.

2. The Standard Defense

Despite the light shed upon the atomic decision issue in the last thirty years or so, most Americans still support Truman’s decision to use atomic weapons in Japan in August, 1945.2 But it safe to say that the American people have yet to learn the complete truth regarding that decision. Misinformation, contradictions, falsehoods, and even lies have shaped the information that most Americans receive on this issue from the mass media and the formal educational system. Unfortunately, it continues to be presented in a brutally over-simplified and narrow-minded way. The standard version of the A-bomb decision goes something like this:

By late 1945 Japan lay in ruins, yet it steadfastly refused to surrender to the allies. Thus the United States government and the military believed that the only way to end the war was through a full invasion of the Japanese main islands, namely Kyushu and Honshu. It was estimated that such an invasion would cost at least 500,000 and as many as 1,000,000 lives of American soldiers. Thus to prevent this frightful loss of life, President Truman reluctantly but firmly decided to employ a new weapon in the allied arsenal: an atomic bomb. After two such bombs were dropped over the

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cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August, 1945, Japan quickly surrendered unconditionally.

Public opinion polls taken shortly after the war showed that the vast majority of Americans believed in this simplistic version of events. Moreover, all major polls taken since 1946 have confirmed that this simplified and flawed view of the decision still has overwhelming popular support. I wrote my previous essay to help bridge the knowledge gap that lies between what professional historians have known for some time and what average Americans still do not know.

In this new essay I wish to turn from the somewhat esoteric debates of academics and toward a critique of the typical arguments raised by the American public in defending Truman and his decision to use atomic weapons. I will concentrate on challenging three aspects of this version of events, a version I shall call the “standard defense”.

Before beginning this critique, let me say a word about the format of this essay. Each section of the essay begins with a brief statement of what I believe to be a major fallacy present in the typical argument defending Truman’s decision. This statement is usually one sentence long. It will be followed by about three or four sentences highlighting the major contentions behind the statement. After stating each fallacy in this way, I will concentrate on illuminating key points that undercut and refute the major contentions behind each element of the “standard defense”. In this article I will deal with just three of these fallacies.

3. First Fallacy

Atomic scientists never questioned the possible use of atomic weapons and were united in their support for their use in wartime against any Axis Power.

The scientists who originated and developed atomic bombs viewed them simply as powerful weapons to be used as soon as possible against the Axis Powers, especially Germany or Japan. There was no serious debate on whether atomic energy should be used to build offensive or merely defensive weapons. In the spirit of patriotism, scientists focused only upon helping the United States government research and build powerful weapons as soon as possible. Once the bombs were ready for combat purposes, scientists were united in the hope that atomic weapons would be used quickly against the enemy.

Most of the debate over the use of atomic weapons focuses exclusively on the summer of 1945. By that time, Germany had already surrendered, the atomic bomb had already been developed and tested, and the main question remaining was whether or not President Truman would actually decide to use them. But few people ever take much time to consider how the United States government became so interested in atomic bombs in the first place. Who were the scientists who originally promoted the idea of researching and developing such a radically new and exorbitantly expensive weapon? More importantly, what motivated these scientists to inform the American President of the possible military applications of atomic energy theory?

If average Americans think of this issue at all, it is to assume that American scientists were eager to research and develop any new weapons that might ultimately lead to an Allied victory. The general sense of this argument is that scientists at the time offered their expertise as servants of their governments, ready and willing to do anything to insure total victory for their nation. In the case of the A-bomb, men and women of science are depicted as researching and developing any new weapon to use at the earliest possible date against any member of the hated Axis Powers.

This view of blindly patriotic and unquestioning scientists is at best terribly misleading, and at worst simply false. And it certainly was false in the case of a small but influential group of physicists who were at the forefront of atomic theory and research inside Great Britain and the United States in the late 1930’s.

In order to appreciate the motivations of these scientists, one must briefly return to the period of the late 1930’s. Even at that relatively late period of time, surprisingly few physicists believed that atomic weapons were even conceivable, let alone that they could actually be developed and deployed in a few short years. Moreover, the impetus for research into atomic energy did not come from native-born American physicists. It came rather from a small group of European “émigrés”, i.e., scientists who had emigrated from Nazi-occupied Europe and had moved to either Great Britain or North America.
The informal leader of this elite group of brilliant and politically sophisticated men was a German émigré physicist by the name of Leo Szilard. Szilard, a former colleague of Albert Einstein, had lectured at the University of Berlin for many years until the rise of the Nazi regime in Germany. Sensing the dangers of the new regime, Szilard managed to emigrate from Germany to England, and later to the United States, in the mid 1930’s. In fact, Szilard liked to boast that he managed to escape from Germany just one day before the Nazi government introduced much stricter immigration requirements, especially for Jews like himself.5

Szilard had been on the leading edge of research into what was then a very new and mostly theoretical topic: research concerning the atom and possible ways to harness energy from it, especially through a process known as nuclear fission. Although a number of scientists had performed theoretical investigations during the 1930’s, it wasn’t until 1938 that nuclear fission was indeed officially “discovered” in a laboratory setting by two Germans named Otto Hahn and Fritz Strassmann. This momentous discovery inspired many more investigations into the possibility of harnessing the energy produced by splitting an atom—in this case, using tiny grains of uranium—but even at this relatively late period of time most men of learning simply did not grasp the potentially dangerous implications of the new discovery.

That is where Leo Szilard came on the scene. Szilard had written as early as 1935 about the possibilities of nuclear fission and the potentially powerful release of energy that might result from that process. This was several years before Hahn and Strassmann’s findings were published. But Szilard was so worried about the potential danger of fission that he made a point not to publicize his ultimately very accurate ideas on the subject.6 Along with other key émigré physicists, Szilard tried desperately to keep his potentially explosive discoveries as secret as possible.

Unfortunately, not all physicists agreed with Szilard about the necessity of secrecy. The famous physicist Frederick Joliot-Curie was preparing to publish an article on this subject. Szilard pleaded with Joliet not to publish his findings, but the Frenchman refused. Joliet’s published article proved to be a major breakthrough on the topic of nuclear chain reactions.7

Now Szilard and his colleagues realized that the potential military application of harnessing the power of fission would not be kept secret for long. They were especially worried about what might happen in Germany. The reasons for this concern were two-fold: first, Szilard knew all too well that German scientists in general, and German physicists in particular, were among the best and brightest scientific minds in the world at that time. Their researches tended to be far more advanced than physicists elsewhere, as the pioneering work of Hahn and Strassmann showed all too clearly. Secondly, the émigré scientists were aware of the palpable evil of the Nazi regime, a number of whom had experienced Nazi oppression first-hand. By that time in 1939, the regime was well entrenched in Germany and was already exporting its brand of fascism and extreme racism to many other countries.

Because of this well-founded fear that German scientists might indeed solve the mysteries of splitting the atom and harnessing the potentially destructive power from that process, Szilard decided to inform the United States government of the need for atomic research. In order to do this, he wrote his old colleague Albert Einstein and asked for his help. Einstein also saw the potential dangers involved, and he and Szilard decided to write a letter to President Roosevelt. Although the letter was indeed signed by Einstein, the crux of the letter was apparently written by Szilard himself.8 Szilard also attached a supporting memorandum to the main letter. Einstein convinced a trusted advisor to FDR named Alexander Sachs to pass the letter on to the President. Sachs was more than willing to do so, for he himself apparently shared an interest in atomic energy. Thus Sachs gave FDR the letter. After reading it, Roosevelt informed General Watson, his personal secretary, about the importance of the letter and told him “this requires action”.9 From that point forward, the ball began rolling in terms of the research and development into atomic energy and eventually into the development of an atomic bomb.

We can see from this summary how Leo Szilard, with the help of Einstein, eventually managed to spark an interest by the American government into atomic research. Of course, we know what happened after Szi-

6 Ibid., p. 20.
7 Ibid., pp. 22–25.
8 Ibid., p. 27.
9 Ibid., pp. 27–28.
lard's letter reached FDR. After a few stops and starts, FDR and his military advisors launched an ambitious—and extremely expensive—program to develop a weapon with unprecedented destructive power: the atomic bomb. And once that bomb was ready for use, the American government wasted little time in using this weapon at the first possible opportunity.

But what about the possible motives of Szilard? Did he inform FDR simply out of blind loyalty to his new found home country so that it could have another powerful weapon in its arsenal to be used at the earliest possible moment? The evidence is clear that Szilard did not write his famous letter for such a bellicose purpose. First of all, bear in mind that Szilard was not simply a brilliant scientist, but a man of high moral conviction who cared deeply about living in and nurturing a just and peaceful society. He had fled the oppression and increasing militarism of his native country for what he hoped would be a more politically progressive and peace-oriented society, first in England and later in the United States. In short he was a man of peace, not war.

But Szilard knew early—in fact much earlier than many of his more famous colleagues—that research into nuclear fission had the potential to unleash an enormously destructive power such that the world had never seen. As we know from the summary of his actions previously noted, Szilard at first tried to keep knowledge of his own research and that of his émigré colleagues as secret as possible. Thus he begged Joliet-Curie to keep his latest discoveries on fission under wraps as long as possible. When Joliet refused and decided to publish, Szilard was furious at the Frenchman for what Szilard believed was putting career and self-interest ahead of the cause of peace and security.10 He knew very well that it would only be a matter of time before German physicists followed up on Joliet’s findings and that the Nazi regime would eventually become aware of a possible new and destructive weapon. Therefore, Szilard decided to tell FDR about the possibility of this weapon. But he did this only as a last resort, not as a decision of first choice. He knew all too well that politicians and military leaders often have very different agendas and ambitions than did scientists, especially immigrant scientists like himself who held little or no power to determine what actual use his research might be used. But Szilard ultimately decided to do so for two important reasons: first, he wanted the USA to get a quick start on atomic research. Or more to the point, he did not want Germany to get ahead of the United States. His most fervent hope was that the U.S. would do all the research necessary in order to discover that an atomic bomb could not be built!11 If in fact that had been the case, he might reasonably assume that the Nazis would not be able to build such a bomb either.

Secondly, Szilard and his fellow émigrés like Einstein wanted to be certain that whatever happened, the Germans would not be able to develop an atomic weapon first. If that occurred, Hitler might use the bomb as a kind of atomic blackmail, demanding concessions or even wholesale surrender from the Allies. But the hope here was primarily to have the United States stay ahead of Germany in terms of atomic research, thus avoiding any potential atomic blackmail in the future. There is no indication whatsoever that the émigré physicists ever intended for the Allies to actually use the atomic bomb as an offensive weapon against the German people or any other people in fact. Research into atomic energy was to be purely a defensive measure, never an aggressive or offensive one. Here again the case is strong that Szilard hoped for some kind of diplomatic solution to the conflict well before a bomb could actually be used at all. Therefore, it is safe to say that certainly Szilard, and most probably Einstein and many of his émigré colleagues, hoped that a successful atomic bomb program might render the actual wartime use of that weapon unnecessary.

The actions of both Einstein and Szilard after 1939 certainly confirm this interpretation of their actions as primarily defensive, not offensive in nature. After the war Einstein regretted having told FDR about the possibility of a nuclear bomb. He called it the greatest mistake of his life. Yet he reiterated his claim that he did it primarily to ensure that Nazi Germany did not develop a bomb before anyone else.12 Szilard went further than this. After Germany surrendered in May of 1945 and the new President seemed determined to use atomic weapons in Japan, Szilard did what he could to try and stop it. With the backing of several of his physicist colleagues, he sent a letter to

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11 Ibid., p. 20.
12 Sherwin, p. 27.
Washington by way of a scientist named Dr. Franck. This letter called for an alternative to using the bomb in a combat situation in Japan. He proposed a demonstration of the terrible new weapon in a non-combat, uninhabited environment. At this demonstration, representatives of the Japanese government would be permitted to see the horrible destructive power of the bomb, and thus decide that continued fighting would be futile.13

This letter came to be known as The Franck Report. Unfortunately, the proposal put forth by Szilard and his colleagues was rejected by American policymakers. No true warning, let alone an atomic test demonstration, was ever taken seriously by Truman or his advisors.14

After the war, defenders of Truman’s use of the A-bombs in Japan have tried to dismiss any possible alternatives as unrealistic, impractical, or doomed to failure. But the sad truth is that no alternatives to the bomb were ever seriously considered by President Truman or his advisors.

One thing is certain: the record clearly shows that Szilard and a number of his prestigious colleagues made an effort to urge the President to avoid using atomic bombs unless all other reasonable alternatives had been tried first. Moreover, Szilard spent the remainder of his life after the war in efforts to bring atomic energy under some kind of international control. He also worked tirelessly for the creation of a world government and the setting of strict limits on unbridled nationalism and unilateral military aggression.

In short, the actions of Szilard and many of his colleagues were those of men who cared deeply about achieving peace and preventing the wanton destruction of war. Thus he and his friends did what they did in 1939 with the ultimate goal of preventing one nation—Germany—from developing an atomic bomb before any other country. Never at any time in the late 1930’s (or early 1940’s for that matter) did Szilard express any desire to actually use the bomb on another Axis nation, and certainly not on Japan. It is safe to say that both Szilard and Einstein viewed the bomb as a weapon of last resort to be used only after all other possibilities to end the war had been explored.

In part one of this essay, we have seen how key physicists responsible for giving the United States government important information about atomic energy viewed the possible use of atomic energy and the bomb that resulted from their research.

Now let us turn to the actual decision of President Truman in the summer of 1945. Unlike the scientists who helped develop the bomb, most defenders of President Truman have taken the view that using atomic weapons was the only realistic option to ending the war in the Pacific quickly and with minimal loss of life on the American side. But this point of view relies upon logic which was faulty to begin with and which has also been discredited by subsequent research done by professional historians. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that the majority of Americans still hold to this anachronistic and flawed interpretation of events.

In the remainder of this essay, I shall focus on two elements of this argument that are especially problematic.

4. Second Fallacy

Because of the fanatical commitment of Japanese soldiers and civilians to defend their homeland, atomic weapons were necessary to force the unconditional surrender of Japan to the Allies.

Japanese soldiers and civilians were implacable, inflexible, and even fanatical in fighting and supporting the war. And there were no signs whatsoever of the Japanese surrendering anytime soon in the summer of 1945.

Therefore, the only way to convince Japan to surrender unconditionally was to shock the population into surrendering. Thus the atomic explosions served the purpose of showing the stubborn and inflexible Japanese the futility of further resistance.

Americans since the end of World War II have tended to view that conflict as the last “good war” fought by the United States military. The American journalist and radio personality Studs Terkel even titled his famous book about that conflict “The Good War”, taking note of this enduring perception by the average American.15

13 Ibid., pp. 210–212.
14 Ibid., p. 217.
But Terkel made a point to place italics around “Good War” and for a very important reason. The Second World War was anything but good: it was without question the most brutal, deadly, and inhumane conflict the world had ever seen. Although the First World War was certainly notable for its unprecedented and senseless carnage, that conflict was still mostly confined to battlefields and soldiers. For example, toward the end of the war when the Germans attempted air raids on a target in England that was not strictly military, the British government and newspapers reacted with outrage. The very thought of targeting civilians was still considered a barbaric act.

But such was not the case in World War II. Not long after the commencement of the conflict, both sides no longer tried to avoid killing noncombatants. On the contrary, they began to make focus primarily on breaking down the resilience and morale of civilians by bombing, shelling, and generally wreaking havoc among them. In short, this was unlimited warfare in both its scope and execution. Anyone and anything seemed to be fair game on both sides of the conflict.

In this kind of truly total war, extreme propaganda began to play a much more important role than ever before. In past conflicts, to be sure, the enemy had almost always been presented in a negative light. But in World War II the negative depiction of the enemy went to extreme and unprecedented lengths. One side presented the other in the worst possible manner. Whatever traits and characteristics the enemy appeared to show were blown out of all proportion in order to make him seem loathsome and utterly despicable. Thus the other side was often seen as not only evil but also as sub-human and incapable of using reason, logic, or common sense.

Such was certainly the case in how the Japanese people (both soldiers and civilians) were portrayed by the American media and the government in Washington. As historian Samuel J. Walker has written, before the war “most Americans held Japanese military capabilities in contempt”. The view was that the Japanese military was simply not professional enough to defeat modern armies of the West. That myth was shattered by the successful air raid on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941.

Yet a new myth emerged after Pearl Harbor, and it was buttressed in the American imagination by the many bloody battles that followed. The previous image of the inept, overly deferential, and contemptible Japanese soldier was replaced by almost its exact opposite: now he became the battle-hardened, stubborn, invincible, and even superhuman enemy!

Viewed objectively, these characteristics should have made many Americans admire the Japanese for traits which they themselves seemed most proud of. Such traits would include the ability to show great courage under fire, the refusal to retreat or surrender in the face of mortal danger, and the achievement of a remarkable success rate on the battlefield. But of course in the context of unlimited warfare, such an interpretation was never to be permitted by the newly jingoistic American news media. Now these potentially positive traits were regarded with scorn and indignation. A Japanese soldier showing courage in battle was invariably viewed as insanely stubborn, implacable, and lacking in any notion of self-preservation or common sense. When so many Japanese soldiers showed a willingness to fight to the death especially in the final battles of the war, they were depicted not as brave and patriotic but as insane and suicidal. The advent of the Kamikaze units also lent credence to the myth of soldiers somehow determined to commit a kind of collective suicide.

The same kind of propaganda was also utilized to present the average Japanese civilian in a similar light. For example, in the battle for Saipan much publicity was given to the mass suicides of civilians who chose to jump off of steep cliffs. These included mothers with babies in their arms who chose to die rather than surrender to the American army. Of course, this extremely biased interpretation failed to explain precisely why civilians might take such extreme actions. The evidence is that just as Americans were brainwashed into viewing the Japanese as ruthless, inflexible, and even insane, so too did Japanese propaganda paint an equally negative portrait of the hated gaijin invader. Civilians were led to believe that if captured by Americans, they would surely be tortured or killed. Of course, when such horror stories that were only partially true were spread throughout the country, many people began to believe the propaganda about the evil and bestial American invader, just as Americans also began to believe the negative stereotypes of the Japan-

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16 Walker, p. 22.
17 Ibid., p. 22.
18 Ibid., p. 24.
ese. But this perfectly rational explanation for the seemingly suicidal behavior of the Japanese was ignored by the American media, military, and government. All that mattered was the behavior itself, and so it was presented in the most negative way imaginable.

The reader of this essay may already see why this extreme view of the Japanese people during the war is so central to the traditional arguments employed by those who defend Truman’s decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. According to this pro-Truman interpretation, trying to find a diplomatic alternative to employing atomic weapons is looked upon as fundamentally futile and a waste of time. Adhering to the very same stereotype as that held during the war itself, the notion is that the Japanese people, as stubborn, inflexible, and seemingly suicidal as they seemed to be, could never be persuaded to surrender by appealing to their reason or common sense. As President Truman himself implied with his use of the word “beast” referring to the Japanese foe, a beast can only be “tamed” and not persuaded with logic and reason.

So the Standard Defense has held that in the summer of 1945, with the war still dragging on, the only way to end it quickly was to teach “the beast” a dramatic lesson. The bombs were thus necessary to provide a dramatic shock in order to show everyone in Japan that continued struggle in the war would be a waste of time. Adhering to the very same stereotype as that held during the war itself, the notion is that the Japanese people, as stubborn, inflexible, and seemingly suicidal as they seemed to be, could never be persuaded to surrender by appealing to their reason or common sense. As President Truman himself implied with his use of the word “beast” referring to the Japanese foe, a beast can only be “tamed” and not persuaded with logic and reason.

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There are, of course, serious fallacies with this point of view.

The first is an error of logic along with a failure of empathy, and the second is an error of fact.

It is an error of logic because it equates the behavior of soldiers and civilians in a few major battles with some kind of ubiquitous and permanent flaw in the Japanese character. Here many Americans are guilty of the failure to imagine themselves in the predicament of other people, especially a people caught in a very extreme and desperate situation. At no time in the twentieth century did the American people have to face what so many Japanese were forced to endure in 1944 and 1945: the invasion of their country by a hated and feared enemy right into their very farms, fields, and homes. Remember too that the clear-cut distinctions between soldier and civilian had been all but obliterated in this truly unlimited war. In this light, the fact that most Japanese behaved as if their very existence depended upon fighting the enemy in the most relentless and brutal way should hardly be surprising.

Americans of today should try to imagine what they might do if an enemy force did indeed surround and attack a major American city. How would they want the citizens and soldiers of that city to behave? Should they immediately raise white flags and cower before the feared conqueror? Or would they want the townspeople to fight the hated enemy with every fiber of their being, even if it meant fighting to the death? I think it’s safe to assume that many Americans then and now would be praising the courage and tenacity of their fellow citizens, and not condemning them for being merely implacable, ruthless, insane, or suicidal.

Secondly, there is a key factual error in the traditional point of view.

Although it true that relatively few Japanese soldiers surrendered to invading forces earlier in the war, it is not true that the rate of surrender remained constant. Toward the end of the war, and certainly before the A-bombs were dropped, Allied soldiers noticed a growing number of Japanese soldiers and civilians who were indeed choosing to surrender rather than face almost certain death. The total number was still relatively small, but a sharp rise in the rate of surrender did indeed take place. So the idea that the Japanese people were somehow universally bent upon self-destruction is not borne out by the facts. And remember that this noticeable change in behavior took place despite the relentless propaganda about the dangers of placing any trust whatsoever in the hated gaijin invaders.

Finally, and far more importantly, there is a fatal flaw in the very premise of this area of the Standard Defense. That is because it focuses exclusively on the alleged behavior of the average Japanese soldier or civilian. President Truman knew very well that he would not be accepting a surrender offer from the Japanese public at large. Instead he needed to hear from the ruling elite in Japan, in particular, Emperor Hirohito and the ruling clique around him. Thus no matter how fanatical or suicidal the average soldier

19 Ibid., p. 24.
20 Ibid., pp. 96–97.
21 Ibid., p. 33.
may or may not have been, what really mattered was how flexible or inflexible the ruling elite was going to be when it came time to demand a formal surrender from the Japanese government.

And so one must ask the far more relevant question: Did the leaders of Japan show any willingness at any time to discuss the possibility of surrender on terms that would be favorable to the American government? The answer to this question is an unqualified ‘yes’. In fact, as early as July 1944, over one year before the atomic bombs were dropped, the Japanese government began to send out peace feelers to various neutral European states. They tried to contact members of the Swiss embassy, and also attempted to secure the Soviet Union as a possible mediator between their own government and that of the United States.

In all of the attempts made by Japanese representatives, both in Moscow and in Tokyo, the one condition that was paramount was the preservation of the Imperial role in Japanese society, at least in some shape or form. It appeared that all other issues were at least negotiable, even the possibility of allowing an occupation of the Japanese main islands.

The discussion of a possible surrender grew more intense within the Japanese government beginning in April, 1945, and such discussion and debate continued until the atomic bombings later that summer.

It should be noted that the United States government was indeed aware of the attempts by Japanese representatives to negotiate some kind of peace settlement. That is because both the USA and Great Britain had managed to break the secret codes of communication and both were listening to their main foes—Italy, Germany, and Japan—as well their friends, especially the Soviet Union. But at no time did the American government show any inclination whatsoever to pursue a diplomatic solution to the world’s deadliest conflict.

At this juncture, three related points must be raised. First, even today in 2007 very few Americans are aware that the Japanese attempted in any way, shape or form to discuss possible surrender terms. Generally speaking, Americans just assume that the Japanese government remained completely implacable up until the time the atomic bombs “shocked” the government into an immediate unconditional surrender. Of course, this assumption is false.

Secondly, the few defenders of the Standard view who are indeed aware of the Japanese peace feelers raise this question as a possible counter-argument: If the Japanese were truly serious about surrendering, why didn’t they contact the American government directly? This question is easily dismissed, and it shows a naivete regarding the history of warfare in the recent or distant past. There was nothing unusual about Japan attempting to secure some kind of favorable surrender terms by soliciting the good offices of a major neutral country or third party. In fact, seeking this kind of mediation has been the rule, not the exception, in many major wars of the last few hundred years. For example, when Russia was suffering badly in the Russo-Japanese War, it did not go begging to the Japanese government for favorable peace terms. Instead, it enlisted the mediation of the then politically neutral U.S. government, headed by President Theodore Roosevelt. This is also the same reason why United States representatives agreed to peace talks in Paris during the Vietnam War, as France was a neutral third party in that conflict. Thus the Japanese government was almost certainly hoping for the same kind of third party mediation.

Finally, a possible defense might be offered by Truman’s defenders regarding the failure of the United States government to open any discussion whatsoever with the Japanese. If Roosevelt or Truman had tried to reply to these peace feelers in any direct way, it might undercut the Allied war effort in general, and endanger the support of the voting public home. Thus an American President might lose the support of allies who had agreed to fight the Axis Powers “to the finish” and also endanger himself and his political party by breaking with the stated policy of unconditional surrender.

A flaw in this line of thinking is that only direct or formal replies were possible in such a situation. But this would ignore indirect and more informal measures to begin some kind of negotiations. It was certainly possible for the American President to let Japan know that it was at least open to peace talks and a possible surrender. As with the history of third party mediation, there is also a rich history for many nation-states seeking subtle, informal, or secret methods to try to negotiate extremely serious matters of all kinds. A classic example of this was the Cuban missile Crisis of 1962. The beginning of a solution to that crisis was not solved by Khrushchev going directly to Kennedy, but rather by a trusted assistant meeting with an American businessman informally over a drink in a restau-
rant. And there are many other instances where a subtle, secret, or more round-about approach has been tried to avoid the bad publicity that might occur if more direct negotiations were attempted.

Alas, we shall never know what might have happened. That is because the historical record shows that neither FDR nor Truman were interested in any discussion whatsoever concerning the possible surrender of the Empire of Japan to Allied forces.

In summary, we see that the Japanese government was indeed at least open to the possibility of discussing ways to formally surrender to the Allies. And this historical reality runs counter to the fallacious assumption that the Japanese—both the people at large as well as their leaders—were hell-bent on a course of mass suicide unless some kind of dramatic gesture, i.e., the atomic bombs, could shock them into surrendering. But President Truman was unwilling to address this possibility, and he refused to budge from his position of demanding unconditional and immediate surrender.

5. Third Fallacy

The assertion that 500,000 to 1,000,000 estimated casualties in a proposed US invasion of Honshu and Kyushu were inevitable.

The only alternative to using the A-bombs was an all-out invasion of the Japanese main islands, Honshu and Kyushu. If an invasion of Japan had been ordered, anywhere from 500,000 to 1,000,000 lives of American soldiers would be lost. Thus dropping the bombs saved as many as a million American soldiers from certain death.

Of the fallacious assumptions discussed thus far, this one is the easiest to dismiss because it is based upon completely unverifiable numerical estimates. For those interested in a more detailed discussion of the topic, please see my previous article (SHONAN MEMOIRS, March 2002) which also lists the major sources for the debate that has taken place over the last twenty years regarding these figures.

For a number of years after the war, President Truman and his most famous defenders would often toss out an estimated casualty figure for a possible invasion of the Japanese main islands. The most notorious example of this was Henry Stimson’s extremely influential article published in Harper’s Weekly in February, 1947.

Stimson claimed that Truman decided to use atomic weapons as the only logical alternative to a full scale invasion of Japan. He claimed that if an invasion had been launched, it was “expected to cost over a million casualties to American forces alone.”

Because Stimson was highly respected by both Republicans and Democrats, liberals and conservatives, his word carried great weight with journalists as well as with the American public. But there is one big problem: it has become clear in the ensuing years that there is no evidence whatsoever that such an extremely high casualty estimate was ever discussed by any members of the Truman Administration. Yet Stimson, Truman, and their many defenders continued to offer estimates of 500,000 or 1,000,000 dead or wounded in any proposed invasion of the main Japanese islands. Furthermore, the highest estimate that historians have been able to unearth after years of intense scrutiny is an estimate of 46,000 casualties. Keep in mind even that was considered as a high-end estimate. Most other estimates were much lower than this figure, from a high of 23,000 to about 8,000. And of course, even these figures assume that a full scale invasion of both islands was absolutely necessary, a view that many historians have challenged most vigorously because other alternatives to the invasion were never discussed, let alone attempted.

As historian Barton Bernstein concluded after years of research concerning the casualty figures, the “myth of the 500,000 American lives saved thus seems to have no basis in fact.”

So there seems little doubt that both Truman and Stimson were not being truthful when they reported to the American public such exaggerated casualty estimates.

But this simply begs the question: why attempt to distort the figure at all? After all, even a “low end” casualty figure of 8,000 is still a very significant number especially if such a loss could be made unnecessary by a speedy end to hostilities.

As in so much else about this period, historians will

probably never know the truth with absolute certainty; the true motivations and secrets have long since died along with the principal players in this tragic drama. But it seems reasonable to assume that Stimson felt a need to “stack the deck” in favor of dropping the bomb, and that an absurdly high casualty figure would certainly help in that cause. If he had been completely truthful, there was always the risk that someday questions would arise concerning the complete absence of any debate whatsoever on whether or not the bombs should be used, or that some other alternative might have been tried.

In any case, the high casualty estimates listed by Stimson in 1947 and repeated by others in the standard defense of the atomic bombings are now believed to be completely bogus.

6. Summary of Three Fallacies

In this essay, I have critiqued three of the popular arguments used by those who defend Truman’s atomic bomb decision.

The first fallacious argument is that the scientists who were chiefly responsible for the development of atomic energy had little or no problem handing over their findings to the United States government and that these scientists were eager for atomic research to be converted into a practical weapon for use at the earliest possible moment against the Axis nations, including Japan.

However, the notion of scientists enthusiastically handing over nuclear secrets to the United States government is false. In fact, the man who was chiefly responsible for this handover of nuclear information, Leo Szilard, did so only after years of trying to keep his own advanced research secret from both sides in the growing international conflict. The evidence is very strong that both Szilard and his emigre scientist allies—including Albert Einstein—informed the American government only as a very last resort. After the French physicist Frederick Jolie-Curie refused to keep his advanced research a secret, Szilard feared that the Nazi regime would sooner or later realize the military potential of atomic research and thus set about trying to exploit this new technology. But he and many of his colleagues still hoped that the main purpose of atomic research and development would be primarily defensive in nature, in other words, that even if the United States government was successful in developing an atomic weapon, its main purpose would be to prevent Nazi Germany from performing “atomic blackmail” upon the Allied nations. He and his colleagues did not want the United States to actually use atomic weapons against Germany unless it faced an imminent attack. Moreover, use of this weapon against Japan was certainly never a motive for Szilard and for many of his colleagues. And it must be stressed that he and other scientists fought very hard to prevent the actual use of the bomb against Japan. They called for diplomatic alternatives to end the war and avoid the atomic devastation that eventually took place in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. And after the war, Albert Einstein himself deeply regretted informing the American government about atomic energy, calling it the greatest mistake in his life. So the notion that key physicists responsible for the research and development of atomic weapons were united in their support for actually using such weapons against Japan is simply false.

The second major argument used to defend Truman’s decision holds that both the Japanese military and civilians were so loyal and so inflexible in their support for the war that they would never surrender unless they were “shocked” into doing so. To use President Truman’s own words, the “beast” needed to be “tamed.” There are numerous problems with this point of view, including:

1) The image of the inflexible and fanatical Japanese soldier and civilian was the result of wartime propaganda and outright lies, not objective, verifiable criteria.

2) The Allied propaganda itself was hopelessly slanted in interpreting Japanese behavior during the war. For example, the traits shown by many soldiers and civilians in defending their country—courage, tenacity, and a general willingness to defend their homeland—could have been presented as positive traits that most Americans could feel respect and even admiration for. But in the hands of the Allied mass media and propaganda machine, these qualities were interpreted in a purely negative way.

3) The evidence suggests that the alleged inflexibility and stubbornness of soldiers and civilians certainly began to weaken as the year 1945 wore on. A small but growing number of both soldiers and civilians were beginning to surrender to Allied troops. Daily aerial bombardment, increased hardship, and spreading famine and disease all combined to take
their toll on Japanese soldiers and civilians alike. Despite this reality on the battlefields of Japan, Americans on the front were still fed a steady dose of propaganda concerning the fanaticism and suicidal mania of the Japanese people.

4) The discussion of the alleged “inflexible” behavior of soldiers and civilians is almost completely irrelevant to the decision to drop atomic weapons. This is because President Truman knew all too well that any offer of surrender, unconditional or otherwise, would be coming from the Emperor or the ruling elite, and not from the Japanese people per se. And the evidence is clear that both the Emperor and key civilian leaders of the Japanese government were definitely not behaving in a hopelessly rigid, fanatical, or suicidal way. On the contrary, as early as the summer of 1944 the rules of Japan were sending out peace feelers to try and work out some kind of diplomatic end to the war. And even at the very time the atomic bombs were dropped in the summer of 1945, key Japanese representatives were still looking for some kind of face-saving surrender terms that could be worked out through the representatives of a neutral third-party nation.

Finally, the third fallacious argument is the only one which relies upon “facts”, albeit dubious and unsubstantiated ones. Both Henry Stimson and President Truman claimed that anywhere from 500,000 to 1,000,000 troops would die in a full-fledged invasion of Japan. The problem is that there is absolutely no historical evidence whatsoever for these extremely high casualty estimates. Historians who have scrutinized this particular topic have only been able to find a high estimate figure of 23,000 to 46,000. This figure is an amazing 90% lower than the alleged casualty estimates stated above.

Moreover, the assumption that the only possible alternative to dropping atomic weapons was an all-out invasion of Japan is itself another fallacy, one of many falsehoods regarding this extremely important topic.

In my next article, I wish to address a fourth but most important fallacy. It concerns the actual legal justification for using atomic weapons in World War II, namely, to support the principle of unconditional surrender. As we shall see, even this argument is full of contradictions and falsehoods, just like the three fallacious arguments discussed here.

References

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