Did We Really Need to Use the Atomic Bomb Against Japan?

The Immoral and Unnecessary Nuking of Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Michael T. Griffith
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Since the 1980s, many scholars have recognized that we did not need to use the atomic bomb against Japan to end the Pacific War in World War Two without an invasion. At least one week before we nuked the city of Hiroshima on August 6, 1945, we knew from decrypted Japanese diplomatic cables and other sources that Japan’s civilian leaders were willing to surrender on the sole condition that we would not harm the emperor.

On August 9, 1945, just three days after we nuked Hiroshima, and before Japan’s leaders had sufficient time to process and respond to our nuclear attack on Hiroshima, we dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Nagasaki, which was home to Japan’s largest Christian population. The atomic bombing of Nagasaki was even more inexcusable than the nuking of Hiroshima.

One problem with any article that questions the morality and necessity of the atomic bombing of Japan is the understandable perception that some of Japan’s leaders and many Japanese military personnel of that era do not deserve any sympathy. Japan’s leaders endorsed or ordered the invasion of a large portion of Asia, and needless to say, ordered the bombing of Pearl Harbor. In many cases, Japanese soldiers behaved in a barbaric, disgraceful manner. Therefore, even today, many people either do not want to hear evidence that Japan would have surrendered without being nuked or invaded and/or they feel that “the Japanese deserved to be nuked anyway.”

However, as with most other historical events, the truth about Japan and the Pacific War is not so black and white. Few American books on the war explore the fact that Japan’s leaders, who were strongly anti-communist, tried to avoid war with America and even indicated a willingness to ignore their pact with Nazi Germany. Most American books on the subject also minimize the fact that President Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) imposed harsh sanctions on Japan in the months leading up to Pearl Harbor, ostensibly to punish Japan for its actions in China and French Indochina.
While FDR bent over backwards to befriend the Soviet Union’s brutal, murderous Marxist regime, he showed no such flexibility toward anti-communist Japan. The Japanese offered a wide range of concessions in an effort to get FDR to lift the sanctions, but Roosevelt, perhaps influenced by his pro-Soviet advisers, would not even meet with Japan’s prime minister to discuss the matter.

FDR could have made Japan our ally, and he probably could have persuaded Japan to invade the Soviet Union, which would have almost certainly led to Russia’s defeat and would have spared hundreds of millions of people from Soviet tyranny. The Japanese were seriously considering invading Russia before they concluded that Roosevelt was not interested in a reasonable peace deal and that he was determined to strangle Japan’s economy to the point of collapse. They decided to attack Pearl Harbor only after FDR rejected every peace offer they made to try to get the sanctions lifted, and after FDR refused, on admittedly flimsy grounds, to meet with their prime minister to discuss their differences (Hoover 263-320).

We rightly condemned Japan for bombing cities in China before we entered World War Two. However, during the Pacific War, we fire-bombed dozens of Japanese cities and nuked two Japanese cities, and killed hundreds of thousands of women and children in the process. On August 14, four days after Japan announced its surrender, our Air Force conducted a massive conventional bombing raid on Japan, which included the fire-bombing of the cities of Kumugaya and Isesaka.

There can be no question that in many cases Japanese soldiers engaged in savage, disgraceful conduct, including torturing and murdering civilians and prisoners of war (POWs), raping women, forcing local civilians and POWs to work as slave labor, firing on medical personnel, firing on sailors in the water after their ship had been sunk, and engaging in suicide attacks after pretending to surrender.

But not all Japanese soldiers behaved in this manner. Many Japanese soldiers disapproved of these actions and did what they could to avoid participating in them. Some of the most notorious cases of Japanese war crimes have been exaggerated—they were still brutal and inexcusable, but they were not as bad or as large scale as most history books portray them. There were many cases when Japanese soldiers intervened to protect POWs and civilians from abuse. There were also many cases when Japanese soldiers treated POWs and civilians humanely.

Furthermore, and sad to say, American soldiers in the Pacific War did not always follow the rules of war either. To be sure, American soldiers usually behaved better than did Japanese soldiers, but in some cases our troops tortured POWs, and they often killed Japanese soldiers who had clearly surrendered. In addition, U.S. Navy ships often fired on Japanese sailors in the water after their ship had been sunk. These shameful events were not rare or isolated incidents, as historian John Dower documents in painstaking detail in his highly acclaimed book War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War, and as Richard Aldrich documents in his equally acclaimed book The Far Away War: Personal Diaries of the Second World War in Asia and the Pacific.
Let us now examine some common arguments that are put forward in defense of the use of the atomic bomb against Japan.

Japan would not have surrendered in August 1945 if we had not nuked Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The war would have dragged on for many more months and quite possibly well into 1946 if we had not used the atomic bomb.

Japan’s civilian leaders were ready to surrender weeks before we nuked Hiroshima, and they were ready to do so on the sole condition that we would not depose Emperor Hirohito. By no later than August 1, we were aware of these facts from several sources, including decrypted Japanese diplomatic cables. We knew that keeping the emperor in place was a reasonable condition because we realized that the emperor’s cooperation would be absolutely necessary to get the Japanese army and navy to surrender and to get the Japanese people to accept American occupation.

The Japanese informed us on August 10 that they would surrender according to the terms in the Potsdam Declaration on the condition that the emperor would not be harmed. The next day, via the Byrnes Note, we hinted—but did not overtly state—that the emperor would not be harmed. This ambiguous reply almost undid the efforts of Japan’s moderates to bring about a surrender. In the end, however, the moderates managed to create a situation where the emperor was able to order the hardliners to surrender. This suggests that if we had given clear assurance about the emperor’s status a week or two earlier, Japan might very well have surrendered in response, and there would have been no excuse for nuking Hiroshima and Nagasaki and no excuse for fire-bombing Japanese cities on August 14.

By August 1945, Japan’s military situation was hopeless. Our leaders knew it, and most of Japan’s top leaders knew it. In the weeks leading up to the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, even some of Japan’s senior military officials privately admitted that Japan had no hope of winning the war.

Admiral William Leahy, President Harry Truman’s chief of staff, repeatedly advised Truman that if we would make it clear to the Japanese that the emperor would not be deposed if they surrendered, they would surrender on terms that were acceptable to us, but Truman and his fiercely hardline Secretary of State, James Byrnes, ignored this counsel.
Those who defend our use of the atomic bomb against Japan often minimize the fact that by July 1945, even President Truman believed that the Japanese were in such a weakened, hopeless state that they would surrender if the Soviets declared war on them, and many senior military officials shared Truman's belief, based on their knowledge of Japan's dire situation.

![Victims of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki](image)

Indeed, there is good evidence that Russia's entry into the war on August 8 was the primary reason Japan decided to surrender. Historian Gregg Herken, a professor emeritus of U.S. diplomatic history at the University of California:

> The notion that the atomic bombs caused the Japanese surrender on Aug. 15, 1945, has been, for many Americans and virtually all U.S. history textbooks, the default understanding of how and why the war ended. But minutes of the meetings of the Japanese government reveal a more complex story. The latest and best scholarship on the surrender, based on Japanese records, concludes that the Soviet Union's unexpected entry into the war against Japan on Aug. 8 was probably an even greater shock to Tokyo than the atomic bombing of Hiroshima two days earlier. Until then, the Japanese had been hoping that the Russians — who had previously signed a nonaggression pact with Japan — might be intermediaries in negotiating an end to the war. As historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa writes in his book *Racing the Enemy*, “Indeed, the Soviet attack, not the Hiroshima bomb, convinced political leaders to end the war.” (Herken)

The United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) spent months studying the effects of our conventional and atomic bombing of Japan and concluded that Japan would have surrendered by no later than December 1945, and probably before November, even if we had not used the atomic bomb and even if the Soviet Union had not entered the war against Japan:

> Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts, and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved, 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 bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated. (USSBS 26)
Using the atomic bomb against Japan saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of American soldiers, perhaps even a million. If we had proceeded with our planned invasion of the Japan, we would have suffered hundreds of thousands of casualties.

Leaving aside the fact that we would not have lost “hundreds of thousands” of soldiers in an invasion, by July 1945 it was clear that we did not need to invade Japan to end the war. By that time, our senior military leaders knew that Japan posed no threat to us.

By no later than June 1945, the Japanese were powerless to launch offensive operations anywhere near Japan. We had complete control of the air and were bombing Japan with impunity. Our bombing raids often did not lose a single plane to enemy fire because Japan’s anti-aircraft defenses were so weak. In many cases, our bombing raids were not even challenged by Japanese fighter planes because the Japanese air force was so low on fuel. From November 1944 until the end of the war in August 1945, our bombing raids lost only 3.6 percent of their planes on average (USSBS 16).

We also had control of the sea. Our naval blockade was so effective that few supplies could reach Japan by sea; for that matter, by July 1945 we had destroyed most of Japan’s merchant vessels. Japan’s supply problem was so severe that most of the warships we sunk in Japanese ports “had already been immobilized for lack of fuel” (USSBS 17). The Japanese were rapidly running out of other basic war supplies as well, such as coal, oil, and metal, not to mention food. The Japanese army in China was in somewhat better shape but was cut off because of our naval blockade and our control of the air.

Yes, Japan still had over two million soldiers within its borders, but they were poorly equipped and poorly fed, and many of them had little or no combat experience, in addition to the fact that Japan could no longer defend itself from air and naval attacks.

Furthermore, by August 1, 1945, five days before we nuked Hiroshima, we knew from multiple sources, including decrypted Japanese diplomatic cables, that Japan’s civilian leadership was ready to surrender on the sole condition that we would not harm the emperor.

Nuremberg prosecutor Telford Taylor’s memoir gives us some idea of how commonly it was known among top American officials that Japan was defeated by May 1945, that
Japan's civilian leaders knew it, and that we knew from decrypted Japanese cables that Japan wanted to make peace. Telford was a reserve colonel in Army Intelligence. In May 1945, he returned to the U.S. from Europe and was thinking about trying to get an assignment in the Pacific. He spoke with his superiors in Army Intelligence, especially Colonel Alfred McCormack, who was a good friend of Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy and the director of the Military Intelligence Service. Telford tells us what McCormack told him when he asked about the Pacific War:

I visited Jackson’s staff headquarters and discussed the situation in the Pacific theater with my superiors in the intelligence division, particularly with Colonel Alfred McCormack, in peacetime a law partner of John J. McCloy, the Assistant Secretary of War. I knew that McCormack was as well informed and otherwise equipped as anyone to assess the prospects of the war against Japan. Whether or not he was in on the secret of the atom bomb I do not know, but he told me categorically that the Japanese military situation was hopeless, that the Emperor's advisers knew it, and that intercepted Japanese diplomatic messages revealed their anxiety to make peace. (Taylor xi)

Justice Bernard Roling, the Netherlands’ judge on the Tokyo War Crimes Tribunal, recognized that nuking Japan was not necessary and that Japan had been willing to surrender well before the first bomb was dropped. Roling knew this from having sat through hundreds of hours of testimony at the trial:

The government of Japan was already deeply divided in July 1945, with Japan having already made it clear that it would surrender if the imperial system was maintained. Such willingness to surrender on those terms existed long before the atomic bombs and the declaration of war by the Russians. . . .

Clearly, the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic bombs was wholly unnecessary. And worse, it had no influence on the emperor’s decision. (Roling 40, 43; Smith 467-468)

The nuking of Nagasaki on August 9 was justified because Japan should have surrendered the day after Hiroshima was nuked.

When we dropped an atomic bomb on Nagasaki, Japan’s leaders were still in the process of gathering information about what had happened to Hiroshima three days...
earlier. Japan’s civilian leaders did not even know that something terrible had happened to Hiroshima until the morning after the bombing. Further complicating matters, Japanese military officials initially told the government that Hiroshima had not been nuked but had been fire-bombed or that the bomb was just an extremely large conventional weapon, and they downplayed the effects of the attack.

Japan’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Shigenori Togo, doubted the military’s claims and ordered an on-site investigation. When Japan’s senior military officials were forced to admit that the bomb had been atomic, they argued that the government should take no action until they had all the results of the investigation in Hiroshima.

On August 8, barely 48 hours after the nuking of Hiroshima, the Soviet Union declared war on Japan and early the next morning launched a massive, devastating attack on the depleted and isolated Japanese army that was occupying Manchuria.

On August 9, we nuked Nagasaki, just three days after Hiroshima, and hours after the Soviets began to maul the Japanese army in Manchuria, and while Japan’s civilian leaders were understandably absorbed with trying to process what had happened to Hiroshima and with responding to the Soviet attack in Manchuria. Surely Truman and other high officials knew that three days was not enough time for Japan’s government to formulate a formal response to the unprecedented use of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and to the Soviet invasion in Manchuria. Even McGeorge Bundy, who helped Henry Stimson write his defense of the atomic bombing of Japan, acknowledged that Truman was too quick to nuke Nagasaki:

It is hard to see that much could have been lost if there had been more time between the two bombs. . . . Such a delay would have been relatively easy, and I think right. (Nobile xxi)

The pre-Hiroshima Japanese peace feelers were initiated by low-level Japanese officials who were acting on their own. At no time did the Japanese government approach the American government with a surrender offer before Hiroshima.

In April 1945, none other than Mamoru Shigemitsu, Japan’s Foreign Minister at the time, approached the Swedish minister to Japan and asked if Sweden would be willing to mediate a surrender agreement with the U.S. (Toland 741). Senior Japanese leaders were aware that Japanese officials had arranged for a peace feeler to be presented in Switzerland to Allen Dulles, a senior leader in the American OSS in Europe with high-level connections in the White House. The approach to Dulles was supported by Admiral Mitsumasa Yonai, the Navy Minister; General Shuichi Miyazaki, the Chief of Operations; and Admiral Sokichi Takagi, who even offered to fly to Switzerland to open formal negotiations (Toland 741-746). Furthermore, Emperor Hirohito himself authorized the effort to get the Soviets to mediate a surrender with the U.S., and Truman was aware of this fact from Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo’s July 12 cable (Toland 746-759).

However, the more important point is that this argument ignores the fact that we knew from Togo’s July 12 cable that the emperor wanted to end the war and that the only obstacle was Truman’s demand for unconditional surrender.
I agree with what Lester Brooks said about what Truman should have done when he learned that Emperor Hirohito wanted to end the war as soon as possible, namely, that he should have opened up a diplomatic channel with the Japanese to end the war.

Brooks served on General Douglas MacArthur’s staff during the occupation of Japan and later spent years in the Far East with the U.S. Foreign Service. His book *Behind Japan’s Surrender: The Secret Struggle that Ended an Empire* is one of the best ever written on the factors that led Japan to surrender. Here is what Brooks said on what should have happened after Truman learned of the July 12 cable:

The Soviet move, less than 72 hours after the Hiroshima bombing, was staggering. None knew this better than [Foreign Minister] Togo, who, through the Japanese ambassador in Moscow [Ambassador Naotake Sato], had been trying since Germany’s surrender in May to get the Soviets to act as peace mediator with the Allies.

The Americans knew this also, because the U.S. had cracked the Japanese code and was diligently monitoring and reading Japanese communications. One of the most important messages of the war was Togo’s cable of July 12 to Sato in Moscow: “... it is His Majesty’s heart’s desire to see the swift termination of the war. In the Greater East Asia War, however, as long as America and England insist on unconditional surrender our country has no alternative but to see it through in an all-out effort for the sake of survival and the honor of the homeland.” Though this flat statement should have caused the U.S. to make quick and direct diplomatic efforts to end the war at that point, no action was taken to capitalize on this golden opportunity. (Brooks 15-16)

So Truman knew from Togo’s July 12 cable, at least three weeks before Hiroshima, that the emperor himself wanted to end the war swiftly, and that the only obstacle was the demand for unconditional surrender. From other sources—such as Joseph Grew, John McCloy, James Forrestal, and William Leahy—Truman knew that Japan’s main concern about unconditional surrender was the status of the emperor in such a surrender.
Truman eventually agreed to allow the emperor and the imperial court to remain in place, but he did not give the Japanese any indication he would do so until after he had nuked Hiroshima and Nagasaki and after the Soviets had invaded. If he had given the Japanese assurance about the emperor’s status immediately after learning of Togo’s July 12 cable, as so many of his advisers urged him to do, Japan might well have surrendered in late July or the first week of August, and hundreds of thousands of innocent lives would have been saved. Providing clarification on the emperor’s status would have simultaneously given Japan’s moderates powerful ammunition against the hardliners and would have deprived the hardliners of their main argument against surrender.

Whether Truman failed to do this because of severe incompetence, because of a warped desire to nuke Japan before allowing them to surrender, or because of the influence of the Soviet spies and sympathizers in his administration, the result was the same: a human tragedy of enormous proportions.

Perhaps we should keep in mind that, either because of incompetence or because of the influence of the Soviet spies and sympathizers in his administration, Truman was the one who handed over China to the Chinese Communists led by the despotic Mao Tse-Tung, which resulted in the deaths of millions of Chinese and the subjugation of the Chinese people to totalitarian rule to this day.

As brutal as the Japanese could be sometimes, they were not as brutal as Mao’s Communists. Mao’s forces murdered millions of their fellow Chinese in order to consolidate their power. Millions of other Chinese starved to death because of the Communists’ mismanagement of the economy, especially of the agricultural sector. A very good case can be made that the Chinese people would have been much better off if the Japanese had remained in China.

Questioning the morality of using the atomic bomb against Japan attacks the honor and sacrifice of all the American military personnel who fought in the Pacific War.
The issue of the atomic bombing of Japan has nothing to do with the honor and sacrifice of our military personnel who served in the Pacific War. They had nothing to do with the decision to nuke Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As a matter of fact, many senior military leaders said nuking Japan was unnecessary and wrong, including General Douglas MacArthur, General Dwight Eisenhower, General Carter Clarke, General Bonner Fellers, Admiral William Leahy, Admiral William Halsey, and Admiral Chester Nimitz (Long; Alperovitz 320-365).

SOURCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michael T. Griffith holds a Master’s degree in Theology from The Catholic Distance University, a Graduate Certificate in Ancient and Classical History from American Military University, a Bachelor’s degree in Liberal Arts from Excelsior College, and two Associate in Applied Science degrees from the Community
College of the Air Force. He also holds an Advanced Certificate of Civil War Studies and a Certificate of Civil War Studies from Carroll College. He is a graduate in Arabic and Hebrew of the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California, and of the U.S. Air Force Technical Training School, San Angelo, Texas. In addition, he has completed an Advanced Hebrew program at Haifa University in Israel. He is the author of five books on the Latter-day Saint faith (aka Mormonism) and ancient texts, including *How Firm A Foundation*, *A Ready Reply*, and *One Lord, One Faith*.

**The Pacific War and the Atomic Bomb**

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