

Alternatives to the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

In May 1945, the war in Europe ended with an Allied victory, but fighting continued in the Pacific between Japanese forces and the United States Army. After President Franklin D. Roosevelt's death, Harry S. Truman became President and later authorized the use of atomic weapons on civilian-populated cities in Japan.

On August 6 and 9, 1945, the U.S. dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, codenamed 'Little Boy' and 'Fat Man,' killing a combined total of 105,000 people. Truman's diary reveals his thoughts on the bomb upon learning of its creation.

"We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Era, after Noah and his fabulous Ark."

— Harry Truman, writing about the atomic bomb in his diary on July 25, 1945.

After the dropping of the atomic bomb, Truman believed it was the best solution to end the war quickly, claiming it minimized casualties compared to a potential invasion of Japan, which could have resulted in more casualties on both sides and prolonged the war. Some have argued that Truman's justification for using the atomic bomb at Hiroshima and Nagasaki is not valid when he mentioned it saved lives. Some scholars believe that Truman used the bomb to assert dominance while addressing personal insecurities. The war had already concluded in Europe, and Japan was the last remaining fighting nation, with their defeat seemingly inevitable. If Truman had pursued negotiations for surrender with Japan, the outcome might have been different. However, he waited two months before using the atomic bomb.

This essay seeks to explore the possible alternative actions Truman could have taken instead of using the atomic bomb. It is important to consider the context and decision-making process of Truman and those involved, without judging their actions in hindsight. This essay does not aim to state that past actions were wrong but rather to educate and examine what alternatives might have been available if the option of using the atomic bomb did not exist. In a hypothetical situation where nuclear weapons were not an option, we explore what other strategies might have been considered.

Invasion of Japan

The first and most obvious plan would have been the invasion of Japan. Codenamed 'Operation Downfall', this would see the allied forces perform a full-scale invasion of Japan towards the end of the war in 1945.

Research has shown that discussions were on going whether an invasion on Japan was the best course of action as well as the best way to end the war. former president Herbert Hoover providing Truman some important information regarding if they did invade. He estimated that if an invasion was carried out, a predicted toll of 500,000 to 1,000,000 Americans dead.¹ One problem with staging an invasion on the homeland of Japan, is how long will it take to force them into a state of surrender. President Truman stated that using the atomic bomb ended the war quick because after the bombing of Nagasaki on August 9th, the Japanese signed the papers to surrender. With an invasion, it might have lasted either a month before the fighting stop, or it could have been one year, Nobody knows how long it might have taken for the Japanese to realise they were fighting a losing battle, but by

¹ WALKER, J. SAMUEL. "Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground." Diplomatic History 29, no. 2 (2005): 311–34.

their history, they are a nation that finds the act of surrender a sign of dishonour, therefore meaning they would rather fight to the death in what they believe in. They had a suicide ritual called seppuku, which is a Japanese ritualistic suicide by disembowelment. This was the samurai's code for dying with honour but was also practised by other people outside the samurai guild. Since 1873, this ritual had been abolished, but still the people of Japan used the seppuku when it felt right for them to do so. A lot of the generals of the Japanese empire, during the ending stages of World War II committed to this act to restore honour for themselves or for their families.²³⁴ One factor to take in from knowing about the seppuku ritual, is how do we not know more civilians would have committed this act if the allies were to invade Japan? We know that the Generals committed this act to restore honour to their families, so maybe more civilians would continue in the act if they had seen their country losing a battle on home soil, which likely would have meant that depending on the duration of this battle before the Japanese surrender, there would be a higher amount of civilian suicides/deaths compared to the Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Closing this alternative with what we have mentioned, the United States would not have wanted to put their own troops at risk of further casualties, neither would they have wanted to do so on behalf of the Japanese people because of the uncertainty of how long it might have taken Japan to surrender.

Demonstration of the Bomb

A process before conducting an invasion of Japan could have been a demonstration of the capabilities of what the atomic bomb can create. If negotiations between the United States and Japan happened, the U.S could have given possible scenarios of surrender to Japan. The first one will be if you do not surrender then we will be forced to invade, while the other would have been demonstrating the destruction of the atomic bomb to the Japanese people. As they already had to available bombs at their disposal, the U.S could have laid out a time frame from the demonstration of the bomb, to if the Japanese still did not surrender then the end resort would have been either an invasion or dropping the bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The committee chaired by Nobel laureate and German exile James Franck spoke out about warning the Japanese first about the bomb. They said that a demonstration of the bomb first would prove a much more worthwhile endeavour.⁵ Trumans administration deciding against demonstrating the power of the bomb to Japan and choosing to bomb a city also went against Roosevelt's pre-war plea, that the nations that were at war should avoid bombing the cities that are inhabited by the civilians.⁶ If Roosevelt lived, he could have been a firm believer of this alternative. Japan is surrounded by smaller islands, which Roosevelt might have chosen as a target for demonstration of the bomb, but only if he had lived past the month of April 1945.

Waiting for Soviet reinforcements

The United States decided to use the atomic bomb on mainland Japan relatively quickly, without fully exploring other methods, such as collaborating with the Russians to compel Japan to surrender. The initial plan for a scaled invasion was set for November 1945, coinciding with the Soviet Union's

² Rothman, Lily (June 22, 2015). "The Gory Way Japanese Generals Ended Their Battle on Okinawa". Time. Retrieved 2020-11-28.

³ Frank, Downfall pp 319–320

⁴ Fuller, Hirohito's Samurai

⁵ Alex Wellerstein, "Were there alternatives to the atomic bombings?," Restricted Data: The Nuclear Secrecy Blog, August 3, 2015, accessed November 29, 2023,

⁶ Bernstein, Barton J. "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered." Foreign Affairs 74, no. 1 (1995): 135–52.

declaration of war on Japan in August. This timeline indicated that there was sufficient time from August to November for a collaborative approach to ending the war with minimal casualties.

However, the sudden passing of U.S. President Roosevelt resulted in Truman assuming the presidency. Truman showed little interest in cooperating with the Soviet Union or Stalin, which ultimately influenced his decision-making process. Prior to his passing, Roosevelt had suggested working with the Soviet dictator, despite ideological differences. This cooperative stance is evident when comparing the Yalta Conference to the Potsdam Conference; the change in leadership in both Britain and the U.S. significantly altered the agreements established at Yalta.

During the Yalta Conference, Roosevelt and Churchill worked diligently to secure Soviet support post-World War II in Europe. They anticipated that the conflict with Japan would continue after the fall of Nazi Germany. Several concessions were made, allowing the Soviet Union to retain control over parts of Germany and influence its Eastern European and Asian neighbours. Additionally, Roosevelt agreed to loan funds to Stalin to aid in economic recovery.

By the time of the Potsdam Conference, significant changes had occurred since Yalta, most notably Truman's ascendancy to the U.S. presidency. Unlike Roosevelt, Truman did not favour cooperation with Stalin, which partly explains why he did not delay the second atomic bombing on August 9, 1945. Despite the Soviet Union declaring war on Japan on August 7, signalling Stalin's commitment to aiding in the Pacific, Truman proceeded with the bombing. It's possible that a brief delay might have led to Japanese surrender upon witnessing Soviet involvement in the Pacific.

Considering all the alternatives plans to the atomic bomb, none seem more justifiable. Each option had downsides and consequences like the atomic bomb. For instance, invading Japan in November would result in criticism for not acting sooner and risking U.S. military casualties. Demonstrating the bomb's power could be seen as a waste of resources, given only two bombs existed. Waiting for Soviet support might have angered the American public, as Roosevelt faced backlash for trying to work with Stalin. In conclusion, every choice had its pros and cons, leaving no clear right or wrong answer.

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