

# The Atomic Bombs: Tsuyoshi Hasegawa Reexamines the Japanese Surrender

Reexamining the Japanese Surrender, 63 Years Later

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Since the late 1940s the common justifications for President Truman's decision to drop two atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki have consisted of five basic assertions: 1) that the bombs saved more lives than they took by eliminating the need for a US ground invasion of Japan, 2) that the bombs were dropped on military targets essential to the Japanese war machine, 3) that the bombs were dropped only after a process of careful deliberation by US leaders, 4) that those leaders were forced into dropping the bombs because of the Japanese leadership's refusal to surrender, and 5) that the bombings effectively ended the Pacific war by convincing Japan's leaders to surrender. These five assertions had their origins in the public statements of Truman, Secretary of War Henry Stimson, and others in the years 1945-47, and constitute the core of what might be labeled the "official narrative" concerning the use of the atomic bombs [1].

Historical scholarship in recent decades has completely refuted the first three assertions. Most scholars who have studied the use of the atomic bombs agree that Truman and his advisers knew a mainland invasion of Japan to have been "an unlikely possibility" given Japan's dire military situation in late-July 1945 [2]. Even in the event of a US mainland invasion, the highest projected casualty estimates for US forces were not "over a million" like Stimson and Truman later claimed, but between 30,000 and 50,000 [3]. More importantly, prior to August 1945 Truman and his advisers had considered it possible that the war would end without either the atomic bombs *or* a mainland invasion by US forces [4].

The claims that Truman and advisers used the bombs on military bases, and after careful consideration of alternatives, have both been proven false; Hiroshima and Nagasaki were major population centers, not military targets, and high-level officials later admitted that the bombs had been used hastily [5]. US officials clearly knew beforehand that the bombings would result in massive civilian deaths in both cities, but as J. Samuel Walker notes, that realization made little impact on US leaders given the long-established strategy of targeting civilian populations [6]. In fact, very little deliberation occurred as to whether or not the bombs should be dropped; according to historian Barton Bernstein, "it was not a carefully weighed decision but the implementation of an assumption" [7]. Once the bombs were developed, it was assumed they would be used.

Recent scholars have also pointed to some of the motives for the bombings not mentioned by Truman and

others: the desire to assert US power vis-à-vis the Soviet Union [8]; the political imperative of not appearing soft on Japan [9]; the need to justify the \$2 billion spent on the Manhattan Project to develop the bombs [10]; and the pervasive anti-Japanese racism that increased US officials' (and the public's) enthusiasm for the bombs' use [11].

Yet until recently even revisionist historians have continued to accept the last two major points of the official narrative listed above. First, most scholars have accepted the claim that Japan rejected the Potsdam Proclamation (issued by the Allies on 26 July 1945, calling for the Japanese to surrender unconditionally), and that the rejection of the ultimatum led immediately to the bombs' use. Second, there has been general agreement that the atomic bombs played a central role in forcing Japan to surrender.

Historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, however, has recently challenged both points. Hasegawa argues that Truman and others demanded "unconditional" surrender on July 26 assuming that Japan would not accept the offer, allowing the US to then justify use of the atomic bombs ("unconditional surrender" was understood to include the removal of the emperor from Japanese society, a severe affront to Japanese traditions). Challenging the argument that the bombs forced Japan's surrender, Hasegawa cites a number of Japanese sources suggesting that the Soviet declaration of war against Japan on August 7-8, not Hiroshima and Nagasaki, compelled Japan to surrender.

### ***The Insistence on Unconditional Surrender***

The official narrative holds that Truman and his advisers insisted on unconditional surrender from the Japanese in order to, in Stimson's words, "render them powerless to mount and support another war" [12]. The official version also holds that the Japanese "promptly rejected" the July 26 ultimatum [13]. Stimson claimed afterwards that prior to August 6 there had been "no indication of any weakening in the Japanese determination to fight" [14]. In turn, most recent historians have accepted the claim that Japan rejected the surrender ultimatum. J. Samuel Walker (cited above) notes some ambiguity in the Japanese response, but he nonetheless characterizes that response as a "contemptuous rejection" of the ultimatum and sympathizes with US officials who interpreted it as such [15].

But Hasegawa observes that no one in the Japanese government ever formally rejected the terms of the Potsdam Proclamation. During the days following the ultimatum at least some of the Japanese leaders were known to be contemplating its meaning, though Japan made no formal reply [16]. Instead, Truman and his staff "seized upon" an offhand (and very ambiguous) comment from Prime Minister Suzuki implying his reluctance, accepting that sole comment as representative of the official Japanese reaction [17]. Truman and his advisers intentionally fabricated Japan's "prompt rejection" of the offer and subsequently incorporated it into their narrative justifying the use of the bombs.

While the ultimatum was never rejected, Truman and his Secretary of State James Byrnes knew that the demand for unconditional surrender would not be readily accepted either. According to Hasegawa, they insisted on *unconditional* surrender knowing it was unlikely to yield any result, so that afterwards they could justify the bombs' use by citing Japan's intransigence [18]. Hasegawa's strongest supporting evidence for this claim is a detail of supreme importance, though one which is usually neglected in the standard histories: Stimson, Chief of Staff George Marshall, and General Thomas Handy had, prior to July 26, *already* approved a directive (circulated on July 24-25) that ordered the use of multiple atomic bombs against Japan "as soon as weather will permit" [19]. In addition, Hasegawa notes that US officials had not sent the ultimatum through normal diplomatic channels and cites passages from the diaries of Truman and Department of State adviser Walter Brown that suggest the ultimatum was merely a "prelude" to the use of the bombs [20].

### ***The Soviet Entry, Not the Bombs***

Hasegawa's second major challenge to what has become the official scholarly version of the bombs' use is that the Soviet declaration of war rather than the atomic bombs was the major factor compelling Japan to surrender. The direct role of the bombs in bringing about Japan's surrender has always been part of the official narrative, for obvious reasons [21]. Yet that argument has also gone virtually unchallenged among revisionist historians and those who criticize the bombs' use [22].

Hasegawa continually emphasizes Japanese leaders' need to maintain the Soviet position of neutrality. Both the hawks and the doves agreed on this imperative, though for slightly different reasons [23]. For several months prior to the Soviet invasion, Japanese leaders had been actively seeking to maintain Soviet neutrality. By mid-June members of the peace faction had begun pursuing Soviet mediation (in an unprecedented intervention, the emperor himself even started working directly with the "Big Six" leaders toward this end) [24]. War advocate Colonel Tanemura's April 29 memo emphasized the "life and death importance" that Japanese leaders from both factions attached to the issue of Soviet neutrality [25].

Given the Japanese imperative of keeping the Soviet Union neutral, Stalin's declaration of war on August 7-8 was disastrous. According to Hasegawa, Japanese leaders' diaries and testimonies suggest that the imminent Soviet invasion was more influential in compelling them to accept the Potsdam conditions. Although Emperor Hirohito's desire to end the war became more urgent after Hiroshima, only on August 9 after the Soviet declaration of war did he clearly say that "it is necessary to study and decide on the termination of the war" [26]. The other peace advocates in the Foreign Ministry on the same day began to urge acceptance of the Potsdam ultimatum [27]. The reactions of the more hawkish military officials seem to have been similar. Both Admiral Toyoda and Army Deputy Chief of Staff Kawabe were surprised at the news of Hiroshima but were not ready to temper their views on continuing the war [28]. Many military officials hoped to mount a final defense, but had counted on Soviet neutrality in order to do so [29]. The Soviet declaration of war destroyed those hopes, and severely weakened the war faction's leverage within the government.

The major strength of Hasegawa's work, and one reason for its new arguments, is its in-depth analysis of Japanese primary sources. Few previous historians in the US had consulted the personal writings of figures like Toyoda, Kawabe, and Tanemura. But Hasegawa also makes more extensive use of Allied primary sources, including the memoirs and diaries of Truman, Byrnes, Brown, and others, which play a key role in his argument about the intent of the Potsdam Proclamation. Hasegawa's careful scholarship has significantly enriched our understanding of the intentions behind the demand for "unconditional surrender," as well as the dynamics behind the Japanese decision to surrender.

### ***Sixty-Three Years Later***

More ominously, though, the fact that Hasegawa's book comes six decades after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki suggests the ease with which the official version of historical events often pervades both mainstream commentary and scholarly research. Even many conscientious historians have unthinkingly repeated the basic claims that Hasegawa challenges. Outside of the historical profession, though, all aspects of the official narrative are usually accepted without question, and very few of the preceding facts are known or acknowledged. Many of the long-refuted claims used to justify the use of the atomic bombs are even today frequently accepted as truth. For example, news anchors, journalists, and presidents in recent decades have continued to repeat outlandish casualty estimates for a US invasion which have no basis in the documents preceding August 1945 [30].

Based largely on the assertions and omissions of the official narrative, and that narrative's broad acceptance by mainstream commentators, much of the US public continues to deem the use of the atomic bombs justified. As two recent scholars note, the belief "that the bomb, and the bomb alone, ended the war and saved countless American lives remains an article of faith" [31]. The propaganda has been remarkably successful; many US citizens continue to support not only the use of atomic bombs on Japan in 1945, but have also advocated the use of nuclear weaponry in recent conflicts as well (in 1991 almost half of the US public supported the use of atomic weapons against Iraq) [32].

The acquiescence of the US public to war and violence overseas depends in large part on US leaders' ability to selectively exclude certain factual details from the historical record, but it also depends on the leaders' ability to shield the public from the human evidence—in this case, the images of charred corpses, deformed Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors, and eyewitness accounts describing the immediate aftermath of the bombings. Such images are essential to any honest history of warfare, be it atomic or "conventional." The modern-day observer can never completely understand the horrifying experiences of the victims at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but the photographs, video footage, and post-war fiction inspired by the bombings can at least offer a window into those experiences [33]. For precisely this reason war-

making politicians have always sought to restrict access to this sort of information (a pattern which has reached new extremes in the US since 2001).

Sixty-three years after the Allied bombing of Japan (including not only the two atomic bombs but also the merciless area bombing of Japanese cities in spring and summer 1945) killed over one million people [34], few of the possible "lessons" of Hiroshima and Nagasaki seem to have been learned. The United States is currently engaged in two major wars that have claimed 1-2 million lives, with thousands more to follow should the US invade Iran or—as Obama and McCain both propose—further escalate military actions in Afghanistan. Public consent for these enterprises has depended on official lies and propaganda, alongside the narrative of US history common in high schools and news media across the country that portrays the US as exceptionally benevolent in the world sphere. The memory of World War II has been central to this portrayal, even though the history of US bombing strategy in the war, including the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, suggests a slightly different story. If known and acknowledged, this history might prompt important questions: was World War II really a battle between two moral absolutes, or, as Gandhi suggested, was the difference between the Axis and Allied commanders "only one of degree" [35]? Of even more direct relevance for today, are the domestic ingredients which gave rise to World War II—militarism, national chauvinism, and concentrated control over decision-making and the means of violence—things of the past? Contemporary solutions depend to a large degree on an honest accounting of the past, which offers plenty of lessons for those willing to listen.

#### Notes:

[1] See Henry L. Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," *Harper's Magazine* 194, no. 1161 (1947): 99, 102, 105, 107; see also Truman's August 6, 1945, speech quoted in Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1995), 4-5.

[2] J. Samuel Walker, "History, Collective Memory, and the Decision to Use the Bomb," in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, ed. Michael J. Hogan (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), 190.

[3] Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York: Grosset/Putnam, 1995), 282; J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 106, 39; Barton J. Bernstein, "Truman and the A-Bomb: Targeting Noncombatants, Using the Bomb, and His Defending the 'Decision,'" *The Journal of Military History* 62, no. 3 (1998), 552. For Stimson's claim, see Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," 102.

[4] Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 91-92.

[5] Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, 241, 274; Walker, "Prompt and Utter Destruction," 62; Barton J. Bernstein, "Roosevelt, Truman, and the Atomic Bomb, 1941-1945: A Reinterpretation," *Political Science Quarterly* 90, no. 1 (1975), 59, 62. For the original claims by Truman, Stimson, and others that the bombs had been directed at military bases, and that the bombings came only after long and careful deliberation, see Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," 99, 102, 105, and Truman's August 6 speech, quoted in Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, 4-5.

[6] Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 62. The Allies proved increasingly willing to resort to "area bombing" of civilian populations as the war dragged on. The British, says Walker, had by early 1942 adopted area bombing of cities as a legitimate military tactic (25-26). Three years later, the "bombing of civilians was such an established practice...that American leaders accepted it as a legitimate means of conducting war" (95).

[7] The quote appears in Barton J. Bernstein, "Roosevelt, Truman, and the Atomic Bomb, 1941-1945," 62. See also Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 14-15, 51.

[8] Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 15-16, 18, 62-69 (in which Walker discusses Truman's change

of attitude toward the Soviet entry into the war as a result of the Trinity test), 92; Bernstein, "Roosevelt, Truman, and the Atomic Bomb, 1941-1945," 24, 44-46; Bernstein, "Truman and the A-Bomb," 555-556.

[9] Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 45.

[10] Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 92, 94.

[11] Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 92, 93, 96. Walker points out the differing values that US officials assigned to US versus Japanese lives, saying that Truman "would have elected to use the bomb even if the numbers of US casualties prevented had been relatively small" (double-quoted on page 93); See also Bernstein, "Truman and the A-Bomb," 558, in which Truman describes the Japanese as "savages, ruthless, merciless, and fanatic."

[12] Stimson's July 2 memo quoted in Henry L. Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," 104.

[13] Truman quoted in Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005), 170. For a similar assertion, see Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," 104-105.

[14] Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," 101.

[15] Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 72-73. For another example of revisionist historians who have taken for granted the claim that Japan rejected the ultimatum, see Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, xvi-xvii, 107.

[16] Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 172-173. Here Hasegawa cites the writings of James Byrnes to prove that he had knowledge of the MAGIC intercepts obtained after the issuance of the July 26 ultimatum, which suggested that certain Japanese leaders were at least discussing the ultimatum.

[17] Quote is taken from State Department aid Eugene Dooman, cited in *Ibid.*, 170. See also pp. 169-173 for more information on Suzuki's comment and how Dooman notes that its meaning was constructed and used by Truman.

[18] *Ibid.*, 133-135. See specifically pp. 135 and 159—citing Byrnes' post-war memoirs and Truman's Potsdam diary, respectively. Truman expressed certainty that Japan would not accept the Potsdam terms, but he says that at least "we will have given them the chance."

[19] *Ibid.*, 158-159.

[20] Potsdam diary entries quoted in *Ibid.*, 158-160. Quote is from Brown's July 26 entry (p. 158).

[21] See Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," 107.

[22] Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction*, 88, is a good example: Although he thinks the bombs may have been unnecessary (89), he argues that the atomic bombs were decisive in forcing Japan's surrender. But to do so Walker relies heavily on secondary sources (one Japanese historian in particular, Sadao Asada) rather than primary ones. Walker—unlike Hasegawa—does not consult the Byrnes memoirs, Dooman's testimony, or the Potsdam diaries of Truman or Brown to determine the reasoning of Truman and his advisers immediately before and after the Potsdam ultimatum on July 26.

[23] Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy*, 72-73. The hawks needed Soviet neutrality to prosecute the war; the doves hoped for Soviet mediation. See also Soviet Ambassador Malik's observation of this Japanese need, cited in *Ibid.*, 72.

[24] *Ibid.*, 101-102, 106.

[25] Quoted in *Ibid.*, 58-59.

[26] Quoted in *Ibid.*, 198.

[27] Ibid., 197.

[28] Ibid., 185-86 and 199-200, respectively.

[29] Ibid., 199.

[30] For instances of the deliberate propagation of erroneous casualty estimates in the 1980s and nineties, see Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, 268-270, 282, 286; President George Bush quoted in Walker, "History, Collective Memory, and the Decision to Use the Bomb," 188. The highest of the estimates was six million, given by *USA Today*.

[31] Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, 266.

[32] Ibid., 305n.

[33] For video footage of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, see the 1970 Eric Barnouw film *Hiroshima/Nagasaki, August 1945*; the film *Dark Circle* (1983) by Judy Irving, Chris Beaver, and Ruth Landy; and the Nicholas Meyer ABC special *The Day After* (1983). For well-known examples of atomic bomb fiction, see Hayashi Kyoko, "Ritual of Death," trans. Mark Selden, *The Japan Interpreter* 12.1, 1978; the anthology *The Crazy Iris and Other Stories of the Atomic Aftermath*, ed. Kenzaburō Ōe (New York: Grove Press, 1985); Another must-read is Michihiko Hachiya, M.D., *Hiroshima Diary: Journal of a Japanese Physician, August 6-September 30, 1945*, trans. and ed. Warner Wells, M.D. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955).

[34] See the figure of 780,000 Japanese civilians killed in incendiary raids alone during WWII, cited in Kenneth Hewitt, "Place Annihilation: Area Bombing and the Fate of Urban Places," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (Jun. 1983), 267. This figure does not include the atomic bombings or bombings in which non-incendiary explosives were used.

[35] Mahatma Gandhi, "Atom Bomb and Ahimsa,"

<http://www.mkgandhi.org/nonviolence/gandhi'sstruggle2.htm> (accessed January 27, 2006).

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