

The disputed bombing of japan: a necessary evil

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By August 1945 the United States had successfully detonated an atomic device in New Mexico. Known as the Trinity Test, it would unleash into the world unrestricted power. As World War II dragged on, the Allies prepared for a costly invasion of the Japanese mainland.

They were faced with a dilemma: either invade the mainland with a chance of losing thousands of American lives, or drop newly developed atomic bombs with a risk of hurting thousands of Japanese civilians. The American government infamously chose the latter, resulting in an ever present, heated dispute among historians. The significance of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki cannot be understated. A total of 105,000 people died in addition to 94,000 injured. Furthermore, seventy percent of Hiroshima's city structures were damaged as well as forty percent of Nagasaki's (Fisher).

Some say it was a rational choice while others argue it was one of the greatest atrocities in history. Now, almost 70 years later, this debate continues with the only true assurance being the facts. Considering the circumstances, the bombings were rational decisions. Though the repercussions of those decisions were atrocious, they serve as examples of the true deadly nature of nuclear weapons. This lingering shadow of guilt not only promotes responsible ownership of these weapons, but also ensures a safe and stable future for all mankind.

Firstly, one should consider why American leaders decided to use the atomic bombs. The most blatant reason was to avoid a costly mainland invasion. This can be best understood through Secretary of War Henry Stimson's statement in February of 1947, "As we understood it in July, there was a

very strong possibility that the Japanese government might determine upon resistance to the end, in all the areas of the Far East under its control. In such an event the Allies would be faced with the enormous task of destroying an armed force of five million men and five thousand suicide aircraft, belonging to a race which had already amply demonstrated its ability to fight literally to the death" (Kelly 384). The estimated casualties of Allied soldiers clouded any sound reasoning for implementing such a plan.

Likewise, many argued it was more humane to drop A-bombs than to continue the vicious fire raids the US was implementing all over Japan. Flying from Tinian, 265 B-29s made daily trips, ...carrying their loads of jellied gasoline and incendiary bombs to the wooden cities of Japan. Together with other B-29s from Saipan and Guam, they destroyed Tokyo over a single night on March 9, killing an estimate 100, 000 people. That was just the beginning. Over the next four months, they went on to incinerate another fifty-seven Japanese cities...perfectly fulfilling the objective of their commander, General Curtis " Iron Ass" LeMay, to " scorch and boil and bake to death" the cities of Japan (Kelly 324).

Unlike torturous fire bombs, atomic bombs provided an extremely fast death that left a potent message. Compared to the dozens of fire raids, only two atomic bombs had to be dropped to convince the Japanese to surrender. Furthermore, resentment and deep hatred burned inside fellow allied soldiers' hearts. In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, 70, 000 American infantrymen stationed in the Philippines were forced to surrender to the Japanese due to low supplies. What followed became infamously known as

the Bataan Death March. Epitomizing Japanese cruelty towards POW's, all international laws set by the Geneva Conventions were neglected.

Chris Dorsey describes his father's experience, Soldiers were beaten, bayoneted and decapitated along the way for attempting to drink from streams or pausing to rest. The worst instance of brutality occurred when the Japanese beheaded more than 300 members of the Philippine 91st Army Division by sword. When my father and his fellow POWs finally reached the camp, they remained there until MacArthur's forces finally returned four years later. It proved an eternity of suffering; 30 percent of American POWs held by the Japanese died in captivity (Dorsey). Events such as this built upon racist sentiments in America. A fierce propaganda campaign, led by the American government, developed after the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

Often, the Japanese were depicted as monkeys or other dehumanizing creatures that heightened racist feelings (Miles). With numbed empathy, the atomic bombs were used with less moral guilt. In fact, " In the immediate aftermath of the war, the use of atomic bombs received the overwhelming approval of the American people. A Gallup poll conducted on August 26, 1945, for example, showed that 85 percent of the respondents endorsed the atomic attacks while 10 percent opposed and 5 percent had no opinion" (Kelly 407). However, before the bombings could take place, there was much concern if the bombs would even be effective. In June of 1945, an atomic bomb had not been fully tested.

It was not until the Trinity Test in mid-July, when the first nuclear weapon was detonated, did the nuclear age begin. Three weeks later Enola Gay

dropped “ Little Boy” over Hiroshima, followed by the bombing of Nagasaki (Kramer). If the bombs had failed to explode, it would have made America look weak. A panel of four scientists, Oppenheimer, Lawrence, Fermi, and Compton, reported they saw “ no acceptable alternative” than the use of atomic weapons against Japan (Kelly 290). With the backing of some of the most respected scientists in the world, the American government faced no serious opposition.

As the summer wound down, Americans were eager to end the war. Deadly encounters such as the Battle of Okinawa, which killed up to 50, 000 allied soldiers in 80 days, took their toll. (History Net). Atomic bombs provided a quick and potent message to the Japanese. The Allies released a warning known as the “ Potsdam Declaration” calling for the immediate surrender of Japan or the threat of facing “ prompt and utter destruction”.

When Suzuki, the Premier of Japan, rejected the proposition, Truman acted (Budge). It should also be noted that Hiroshima and Nagasaki were major military hubs for the Japanese Army and Navy. They were not innocent civilian cities but rather vital parts to the Japanese military. Stimson vetoed the proposition to bomb Kyoto, “ With President Truman’s warm support I struck off the list of suggested targets the city of Kyoto. Although it was a target of considerable military importance, it had been the ancient capital of Japan and was a shrine of Japanese art and culture.

We determined that it should be spared” (Keller 386). This challenges the stereotype of a blood-thirsty American military. They sought to find the most effective route to win the war with the least cultural damage. In contrast, one

must consider why the bombings could be deemed unnecessary. The most apparent reason is simply because of moral limitations.

It is hard for most people to not only stomach but to comprehend what drives humans to commit such acts of evil. Murdering civilians is never ideal but taking into account the high animosity felt towards Japan, it probably made the decision a lot easier for the commanders. Several scientists encouraged a demonstrative approach. As an alternative to massive killings, it still showed the power of atomic weapons without the serious humanitarian repercussions. While this may seem like an appropriate alternative, it would only work in a perfect world.

The stubbornness of the Japanese, even if they knew America had atomic weapons, would have prevented any kind of surrender. By executing this plan, America would have shown their hand. Japan would have had much more time to prepare for the onslaught and possibly even retaliation. Likewise, many historians argue the Japanese government was ready to surrender in May of 1945 under the condition the emperor remain in power, exempt from a war crimes trial. Even after the bombings, the emperor was still left in place, calling into question whether the bombs were necessary.

Russia, who joined the Japanese war on the Allied side, would have been excluded from joining if Japan had surrendered early. Many think that if the Allies had stated in their Potsdam Declaration, “Russia will join the war if you do not surrender”, Japan would have been more likely to give in. This is due to Japan’s fear of communism. They would have rather surrendered to a democratic America than let communist Russia dictate terms of surrender

(Denson). While this is a fairly sound argument, it does not take into account the psychological message the bombs sent to Russia and Japan.

The pure and raw power the atomic weapons possessed gave the US an opportunity to flex its muscles. After a project which had, “employed more than 130,000 people and cost nearly US \$2 billion (equivalent to US \$23 billion in 2007 dollars)” (CTBTO), the government had an urge to try the new weapons. The Potsdam Declaration offered an ultimatum, either the Japanese government surrenders to the terms or faces destruction. When they declined the proposition, they faced the consequences. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were arguably the most important events in the twentieth century. The world was launched into an irreversible nuclear age that would haunt future generations for decades.

With thousands of innocent civilians taken by the unparalleled power of atomic weapons, many began to question if it was necessary. Taking into account the circumstances and known facts, the bombings were rationally implemented. With a culture founded on honor and persistence, not much would have swayed the Japanese to surrender. Most importantly, the bombings serve as a cautionary example. With a new nuclear age ushered in, the possibility of a bleak future became ever-present. Now, as we wrestle with this problematic topic today, the fate of posterity will be decided.

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