

The Use of the Atomic Bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

Background:

During the last months of the war, Canada had been supplying the United States with uranium for the top-secret Manhattan Project. Very few people knew about the work on the atom bomb. Even Harry Truman, then the Vice-President of the United States, only found out about it when he became president upon the death of Franklin Roosevelt. On July 16, 1945, three months after the surrender of Germany, the first atomic bomb was secretly, and successfully, tested in the New Mexico desert. Top military strategists in the US had been making plans for two large invasions of Japan with varying estimates of the number of casualties. Now they discussed using the atomic bomb against purely military sites, such as isolated army or naval bases, or against "psychological targets" such as the ancient shrine city of Kyoto. There was also an option to deploy the bomb publicly in an isolated area with international observers, to act as a warning to Japan. The scientific community was divided. Many hoped that the bomb's power would not be used against people while others realized that it had been built as a weapon of war.

By late July, Japanese leaders had been actively seeking a peace treaty. However, they were unwilling to follow Germany's lead and surrender unconditionally since they feared they would have basic freedoms removed, lose all rights to self-government and, significantly, that the emperor of Japan would be have his title taken away. Since the Japanese consider the Emperor to be also a god, military experts felt that they would continue to fight to the death to prevent this from happening; and, if the Emperor was divested of his throne, there would be no-one in Japan with enough authority to get the soldiers to lay down their weapons.¹ On August 6, 1945, an atomic bomb was dropped on the city of Hiroshima, which resulted in the deaths of 71,400 citizens. The Japanese government still refused to surrender unconditionally, but asked for more time to work out a possible agreement. On Aug. 9, the United States followed through on their announced intentions and dropped a second bomb on the city of Nagasaki. This caused the Japanese government to surrender unconditionally on August 14, 1945.

Factors in the Decision

Loss of Life: A full scale invasion of Japan was calculated to cost the lives of up to a million people, including almost half a million American soldiers.² The atomic bomb could result in up to 100,000 lives almost immediately, with untold long-term consequences. A test would cost no lives immediately, but again the long-term health risks were unknown. Meanwhile, assuming the conventional bombing of Japan continued while the repercussions of the A-bomb were being discussed, the delay would allow the current casualty rates to continue. There was also the danger that an announced detonation of the bomb, even in an isolated area, could be intercepted and destroyed, or detonated in an location that affected Americans.

¹ Alperovitz, Gar, "Why the United States Dropped the Bomb." *Technology Review*. Aug-Sept. 1990, pp.23-34.

² Bernstein, B.J, "The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered." *Foreign Affairs*. Jan-Feb.1995. pp. 135-142. (Bernstein's work is controversial in that it challenges this figure and suggests that military leaders realized that 43,000 would be a more accurate number.)

Cost of the Bomb/War: The atomic bomb had cost around 2 billion dollars to develop. It had been designed a weapon of war and few people questioned the ultimate use of it against the enemy. Using the bomb as a demonstration would only justify its cost if Japan surrendered immediately. If the bomb was intercepted and destroyed, the expense of the mission would be fruitless. A prolonged invasion of Japan would cost billions. Using the bomb in a test could eliminate this cost if Japan was sufficiently intimidated enough to surrender.

Length of the War: A full invasion could last another six months. A test could persuade Japan to surrender, although the massive loss of life resulting from the conventional bombing techniques had not succeeded in this regard. Using the A-bomb against Japan could probably end the war immediately. There was also evidence that Japan was close to surrendering soon anyway, whether because of the entry of Russia into the battle or because of the diminishment of its fighting force. Some military leaders, such as General Eisenhower and Admiral Leahy, felt that it was wrong to use such a weapon on such a weak and struggling opponent.³

Moral Issues: Political and social distaste for the deaths of civilians during wartime had eroded significantly during WWII. What had been considered atrocities in previous wars were now almost accepted. The Tokyo air attacks on March 9-11 had killed almost 80,000 Japanese civilians⁴. Between August 10 and August 14, the last day of the war, bombing raids are estimated to have killed more than 15,000 Japanese⁵. Still, there were some military analysts, including General Marshall, who felt that targeting a military installation and warning them ahead of time would be a more responsible use of the technology.⁶

International Politics: Using the bomb against an enemy would be strong evidence that the United States would not be trifled with in the anticipated post-war struggle for control of Europe. The Soviets were already demonstrating their attempt to control Eastern Europe following the fall of Germany, and Truman had delayed his meeting with Stalin until after he had the "master card" in his hand.⁷ The spread of Communism was a real threat to the dominance of American democracy.

President Truman was faced with a momentous decision. Should he drop the atomic bomb on Japan and end the war, or should he continue with conventional attacks and seek a diplomatic resolution? Could he achieve the desired results by detonating the atomic bomb publicly at a demonstration site and intimidating the Japanese into surrender? Although we in the present have the benefit of hindsight, Truman did not. What would you have decided had you been in his position? What was the most reasonable situation under the circumstances, as they were known? You must choose:

³ Alperovitz, pp. 23-64.

⁴ Bernstein, pp. 135-42.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Alperovitz, pp. 23-34.

⁷ *Ibid.*