

Hiroshima and Nagasaki: American High School Textbooks Perpetuate The Big Lie

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This summer the world will pause to commemorate the 73d anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Most Americans are still supportive of Truman's decision despite overwhelming historical evidence the bomb had "nothing to do with the end of the war," in the words of Major General Curtis E. LeMay.

Americans suffer from a misinformation campaign initially perpetrated by the Truman administration and carried on to this day by high school textbooks that continue to tell the story as if Hiroshima and Nagasaki were indispensable in ending the war and saving countless American lives. The historical record is clear, however. As President Dwight D. Eisenhower said, "It wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing."

There is no hint of controversy regarding the decision to drop the bomb in the majority of texts in use in American classrooms and many textbooks contain blatant historical inaccuracies, but the greatest purveyor of historical mistruth is the U.S. Army's *Leadership, Education and Training (LET 3) Custom Edition for Army JROTC*. JROTC is the Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps. More than a half million American high school students are enrolled in JROTC classes nationwide.

JROTC students do more than march in uniform on the football field. They study government (The unit on constitutional law is entitled "You the People"), and they study a "history" of sorts. The JROTC treatment of Truman's decision to drop the bomb is riddled with falsehoods and leaves students convinced that destroying those cities was the right thing to do.

Thanks to policymakers and military leaders of the era who have subsequently told their stories, we know today what transpired. We can also thank Professor Gar Alperovitz of the University of Maryland for a stellar academic career dedicated to analyzing American policy in this regard. Quite simply, President Truman dropped those bombs on a defeated Japan to tell the Russians and the world to back off. We had two bombs and we were going to use them. In a typically cavalier fashion, Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr., Commander, U.S. Third Fleet remarked, "It was a mistake to ever drop [the bomb]. . .they had this toy and they wanted to try it out, so they dropped it. ."

Today we know:

- The bombs weren't needed to win the war. Every top U.S. military leader of the era

has since stated that the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were militarily insignificant.

- The idea that dropping the bombs saved a million American lives is completely fabricated. The war against Japan could have been “won” without additional loss of life.
- The Japanese had been trying to surrender for months. They simply wanted to guarantee their emperor’s safety, a desire the Americans eventually allowed.
- The Japanese would have unconditionally given up without the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki when the Soviet Union entered the war.
- The bombing was not so much the last military chapter of the Second World War as it was the first Chapter of the Cold War.

The authors of the JROTC course book grapple with the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan within the context of an ethical case study where students discuss ethical choices and consequences inherent in a series of historical events. Rather than presenting an unbiased version of events, the discussion is tainted by a strong preference toward bombing Japan, complete with falsehoods and inexcusable omissions.

The JROTC text packages all the most prevalent misperceptions regarding Truman’s decision into one outrageous historical account. The U.S. Army is teaching high school students that using atomic weaponry was necessary to forestall a costly invasion of the Japanese mainland that would have cost a million American lives. The text leaves the impression that the Japanese military in mid-1945 was extraordinarily powerful and that the Japanese were fanatical in their resolve to resist. The text also perpetrates the falsehood that the top brass supported the bombing when in fact all of the top brass subsequently came out to object to its use. Finally, and perhaps most egregiously, the Army’s version of events distorts the complex geostrategic mix involving the Soviets.

The Army text leaves out Japanese attempts to surrender. The book makes no mention of the prior agreements to bring the Soviets into the war against Japan or the Soviet declaration of war on August 8th. The JROTC text fails to recognize that Japanese power quickly disintegrated during the first 6 months of 1945, especially after the US firebombing campaign destroyed 180 square miles of 67 cities, killing more than 300,000 people, figures that exclude the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The book doesn’t describe absolute American control of Japanese skies in the summer of 1945.

Consider the following selections from *Leadership, Education and Training 3*:

“The Soviet Union had not participated in the Pacific campaign, choosing to remain neutral with Japan while fighting for survival against Germany. Truman was in Potsdam meeting with Churchill, trying to enlist the aide of Stalin, when he learned of the atomic test at Trinity.”

At face value this is true, but this statement represents the totality of the Army’s discussion of the Soviet role. The JROTC text minimizes the importance of the Soviets while elevating the significance of the atomic bombings in bringing about Japan’s surrender. The Soviets are portrayed as being weak but it was Stalin’s decision to enter the war and the Red Army’s assault on Manchuria on August 9th and subsequent rapid advance through weak Japanese defenses that caused the Japanese to immediately sue for peace.

Truman and his trusted advisor, Secretary of State James Byrnes, both believed the bomb would keep the Russians in line in Eastern Europe. Dropping the bomb launched the Cold War. It wasn't necessary to end World War II.

During the Tehran Conference in 1943 Stalin agreed that the Soviet Union would enter the war against Japan after Hitler was defeated. In 1945 at the Yalta Conference Stalin agreed to enter the War with Japan within three months of the end of the war in Europe. The Soviet invasion began on August 8, 1945, precisely three months after the German surrender on May 8th. The start of the invasion fell between the atomic bombings of Hiroshima, on August 6, and Nagasaki, on August 9. In the words of Air Force General Claire Chennault: "Russia's entry into the Japanese war was the decisive factor in speeding its end and would have been so even if no atomic bombs had been dropped." An examination of the Japanese historical record confirms this point. It is reprehensible for the Army to omit a more thorough discussion of the pivotal role of the Soviet Union in bringing about an end to the war.

"Truman was troubled by the mounting casualties in the Pacific as Allied forces drew nearer the Japanese home islands. Driven by the Bushido warrior code, the Japanese were prepared to resist to the last, and more willing to die than surrender."

Truman knew a week before Potsdam that Japan's emperor had intervened to attempt to end the war and there were several attempts at peace before this. Japan was prepared to surrender, provided that it could retain its emperor but Truman had two bombs and he was determined to use them to fire a kind of a shot across the bow to the Soviets as post-war Europe was taking shape. General Douglas MacArthur understood it this way. "The war might have ended weeks earlier, he said, if the United States had agreed, as it later did anyway, to the retention of the institution of the emperor."

Colonel Charles Bonesteel, Chief of the War Department Operations Division Policy, poignantly described the situation in the summer of 1945, "The poor damn Japanese were putting feelers out by the ton so to speak — through Russia."

"The Joint Chiefs told Truman to expect over 1,000,000 American casualties and even larger number of Japanese dead in the pending attack on the home islands."

This is false. There's no record of the Joint Chiefs of Staff formally studying the decision and they never made an official recommendation to the President, according to Alperovitz. Additionally, the Joint Chiefs never claimed to be involved. The claim of 1 million casualties as a result of an (unnecessary) American invasion is a complete fabrication. It originated from a 1947 Harper's article by Secretary of War Stimson. Stimson invented the number. It is not based on a shred of historical evidence.

For his part, President Truman randomly selected the number of American lives ostensibly saved as a result of dropping the bomb. He said it would "save thousands of American lives." He later remarked, "It occurred to me that a quarter of a million of the flower of our young manhood was worth a couple of Japanese cities, and I still think they were and are." He also said, "I thought 200,000 of our young men would be saved by making that decision."

The Japanese position was hopeless by the summer of 1945. They were trying to surrender because they were defeated. According to Brigadier Gen. Carter W. Clarke, "We brought them down to an abject surrender through the accelerated sinking of their merchant marine and hunger alone, and when we didn't need to do it, and we knew we didn't need to do it, and they knew that we knew we didn't need to do it, we used them as an experiment for two atomic bombs." Commanding General of the U.S. Army Air Forces, Henry H. "Hap" Arnold looked at the situation from the air, "The Japanese position was hopeless even before the first atomic bomb fell, because the Japanese had lost control of their own air."

"By August 1945, the United States had two nuclear bombs in its arsenal. On August 6, 1945, the Enola Gay dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Over 140,000 Japanese were killed in the blast, and an uncounted number died from the lingering effects of radiation. On August 9, 1945, a second atomic bomb was dropped on the city of Nagasaki. The next day, August 10, 1945, Japan indicated its willingness to surrender."

Japan had been indicating its "willingness to surrender" for some time before the bombs were dropped. The Japanese finally acceded to allied surrender terms because the Soviets had invaded Manchuria the day before.

Every top American military leader was revolted by Truman's decision to drop the bomb. They couldn't see its military necessity. It is incomprehensible that the today's Army feels compelled to contradict its greatest leaders who understood the role of the military in relation to its political superiors. Commander of the U.S. Army Strategic Air Force, General Carl Spaatz understood the separation. He said, "The dropping of the atomic bomb was done by a military man under military orders. We're supposed to carry out orders and not question them. "That was purely a political decision. [It] wasn't a military decision.."

Top Naval officers joined in the chorus. Admiral William D. Leahy, the President's Chief of Staff said, "The use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender."

Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet echoed the sentiments of his colleagues, "The Japanese had, in fact, already sued for peace... The atomic bomb played no decisive part, from a purely military standpoint, in the defeat of Japan."

"Truman appointed a committee to evaluate using the atomic bomb. The committee examined many options, including a demonstration in Tokyo Bay, but Los Alamos was uncertain the device would detonate. Rather than lose a valuable war asset, and to emphasize its destructive power, the committee recommended dropping the atomic bomb on a city."

Secretary of State James Byrnes, Truman's personal representative on the *Interim Committee*, was the most influential member of the committee and steered policy in the direction of using the new weapon without warning on a Japanese city. It was Byrnes who saw the bomb as a promising way to keep the Soviets in line in the post-war era.

Impressionable high school juniors are on the receiving end of this despicable propaganda.

It is astonishing how easily the Army's authors dismiss a quarter-million lives.

The discussion of the decision to drop the bomb in the JROTC text ends with the following:

"When thinking of ethical decisions that affected U.S. and world history, try to imagine how history would have been changed if the Atomic bomb had not been dropped on Japan during World War II. Would the war have continued much longer? Would the U.S. have been attacked again by the Japanese, as they had been at Pearl Harbor the year before? Because the Soviet Union had declared war on Japan on August 8th, do you think that thousands of Soviet and U.S. soldiers would have lost their lives?"

Based on the information contained in the JROTC text, it is "clear" to American high school students that the war would have dragged on indefinitely if we hadn't dropped the bomb. We had to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki to keep the Japanese from attacking America as they did in 1944, and we had to do this to save American and Soviet lives!

JROTC lessons are developed and taught by Senior Army Instructors (SAIs) and Assistant Instructors (IAs). Although SAI's have college degrees, they are typically not state-certified teachers. Als must be retired from the Army and may be hired with a high school diploma provided they earn an associate's degree within five years. Als are the only unsupervised non-professionals allowed to instruct students in classrooms in most states across the country.

Public school officials rarely exercise control over the curricular content of the JROTC program or the professional qualifications of its instructors. It's time they did.

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