

The Hiroshima Myth

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Every year during the first two weeks of August the mass news media and many politicians at the national level trot out the “patriotic” political myth that the dropping of the two atomic bombs on Japan in August of 1945 caused them to surrender, and thereby saved the lives of anywhere from five hundred thousand to one million American soldiers, who did not have to invade the islands. Opinion polls over the last fifty years show that American citizens overwhelmingly (between 80 and 90%) believe this false history which, of course, makes them feel better about killing hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians (mostly women and children) and saving American lives to accomplish the ending of the war.

The best book, in my opinion, to explode this myth is [The Decision to Use the Bomb](#) by Gar Alperovitz, because it not only explains the real reasons the bombs were dropped, but also gives a detailed history of how and why the myth was created that this slaughter of innocent civilians was justified, and therefore morally acceptable. The essential problem starts with President Franklin Roosevelt’s policy of unconditional surrender, which was reluctantly adopted by Churchill and Stalin, and which President Truman decided to adopt when he succeeded Roosevelt in April of 1945. Hanson Baldwin was the principal writer for The New York Times who covered World War II and he wrote an important book immediately after the war entitled [Great Mistakes of the War](#). Baldwin concludes that the unconditional surrender policy “. . . was perhaps the biggest political mistake of the war Unconditional surrender was an open invitation to unconditional resistance; it discouraged opposition to Hitler, probably lengthened the war, costs us lives, and helped to lead to the present aborted peace.”

The stark fact is that the Japanese leaders, both military and civilian, including the Emperor, were willing to surrender in May of 1945 if the Emperor could remain in place and not be subjected to a war crimes trial after the war. This fact became known to President Truman as early as May of 1945. The Japanese monarchy was one of the oldest in all of history

dating back to 660 B.C. The Japanese religion added the belief that all the Emperors were the direct descendants of the sun goddess, Amaterasu. The reigning Emperor Hirohito was the 124th in the direct line of descent. After the bombs were dropped on August 6 and 9 of 1945, and their surrender soon thereafter, the Japanese were allowed to keep their Emperor on the throne and he was not subjected to any war crimes trial. The Emperor, Hirohito, came on the throne in 1926 and continued in his position until his death in 1989. Since President Truman, in effect, accepted the conditional surrender offered by the Japanese as early as May of 1945, the question is posed, "Why then were the bombs dropped?"

The author Alperovitz gives us the answer in great detail which can only be summarized here, but he states, "We have noted a series of Japanese peace feelers in Switzerland which OSS Chief William Donovan reported to Truman in May and June [1945]. These suggested, even at this point, that the U.S. demand for unconditional surrender might well be the only serious obstacle to peace. At the center of the explorations, as we also saw, was Allen Dulles, chief of OSS operations in Switzerland (and subsequently Director of the CIA). In his 1966 book [The Secret Surrender](#), Dulles recalled that u2018On July 20, 1945, under instructions from Washington, I went to the Potsdam Conference and reported there to Secretary [of War] Stimson on what I had learned from Tokyo — they desired to surrender if they could retain the Emperor and their constitution as a basis for maintaining discipline and order in Japan after the devastating news of surrender became known to the Japanese people.'"

It is documented by Alperovitz that Stimson reported this directly to Truman. Alperovitz further points out in detail the documentary proof that every top presidential civilian and military advisor, with the exception of James Byrnes, along with Prime Minister Churchill and his top British military leadership, urged Truman to revise the unconditional surrender policy so as to allow the Japanese to surrender and keep their Emperor. All this advice was given to Truman prior to the Potsdam Proclamation which occurred on July 26, 1945. This proclamation made a final demand upon Japan to surrender unconditionally or suffer drastic consequences.



Another startling fact about the military connection to the dropping of the bomb is the lack of knowledge on the part of General MacArthur about the existence of the bomb and whether it was to be dropped. Alperovitz states "MacArthur knew nothing about advance planning for the atomic bomb's use until almost the last minute. Nor was he personally in the chain of command in this connection; the order came straight from Washington. Indeed, the War Department waited until five days before the bombing of Hiroshima even to notify

MacArthur — the commanding general of the U.S. Army Forces in the Pacific — of the existence of the atomic bomb.”

Alperovitz makes it very clear that the main person Truman was listening to while he ignored all of this civilian and military advice, was James Byrnes, the man who virtually controlled Truman at the beginning of his administration. Byrnes was one of the most experienced political figures in Washington, having served for over thirty years in both the House and the Senate. He had also served as a United States Supreme Court Justice, and at the request of President Roosevelt, he resigned that position and accepted the role in the Roosevelt administration of managing the domestic economy. Byrnes went to the Yalta Conference with Roosevelt and then was given the responsibility to get Congress and the American people to accept the agreements made at Yalta.

When Truman became a senator in 1935, Byrnes immediately became his friend and mentor and remained close to Truman until Truman became president. Truman never forgot this and immediately called on Byrnes to be his number-two man in the new administration. Byrnes had expected to be named the vice presidential candidate to replace Wallace and had been disappointed when Truman had been named, yet he and Truman remained very close. Byrnes had also been very close to Roosevelt, while Truman was kept in the dark by Roosevelt most of the time he served as vice president. Truman asked Byrnes immediately, in April, to become his Secretary of State but they delayed the official appointment until July 3, 1945, so as not to offend the incumbent. Byrnes had also accepted a position on the interim committee which had control over the policy regarding the atom bomb, and therefore, in April, 1945 became Truman’s main foreign policy advisor, and especially the advisor on the use of the atomic bomb. It was Byrnes who encouraged Truman to postpone the Potsdam Conference and his meeting with Stalin until they could know, at the conference, if the atomic bomb was successfully tested. While at the Potsdam Conference the experiments proved successful and Truman advised Stalin that a new massively destructive weapon was now available to America, which Byrnes hoped would make Stalin back off from any excessive demands or activity in the post-war period.

Truman secretly gave the orders on July 25, 1945 that the bombs would be dropped in August while he was to be in route back to America. On July 26, he issued the Potsdam Proclamation, or ultimatum, to Japan to surrender, leaving in place the unconditional surrender policy, thereby causing both Truman and Byrnes to believe that the terms would not be accepted by Japan.

The conclusion drawn unmistakably from the evidence presented, is that Byrnes is the man who convinced Truman to keep the unconditional surrender policy and not accept Japan’s surrender so that the bombs could actually be dropped thereby demonstrating to the Russians that America had a new forceful leader in place, a “new sheriff in Dodge” who, unlike Roosevelt, was going to be tough with the Russians on foreign policy and that the Russians needed to “back off” during what would become known as the “Cold War.” A secondary reason was that Congress would now be told about why they had made the secret appropriation to a Manhattan Project and the huge expenditure would be justified by showing that not only did the bombs work but that they would bring the war to an end, make the Russians back off and enable America to become the most powerful military force in the world.

If the surrender by the Japanese had been accepted between May and the end of July of 1945 and the Emperor had been left in place, as in fact he was after the bombing, this

would have kept Russia out of the war. Russia agreed at Yalta to come into the Japanese war three months after Germany surrendered. In fact, Germany surrendered on May 8, 1945 and Russia announced on August 8, (exactly three months thereafter) that it was abandoning its neutrality policy with Japan and entering the war. Russia's entry into the war for six days allowed them to gain tremendous power and influence in China, Korea, and other key areas of Asia. The Japanese were deathly afraid of Communism and if the Potsdam Proclamation had indicated that America would accept the conditional surrender allowing the Emperor to remain in place and informed the Japanese that Russia would enter the war if they did not surrender, then this would surely have assured a quick Japanese surrender.

The second question that Alperovitz answers in the last half of the book is how and why the Hiroshima myth was created. The story of the myth begins with the person of James B. Conant, the President of Harvard University, who was a prominent scientist, having initially made his mark as a chemist working on poison gas during World War I. During World War II, he was chairman of the National Defense Research Committee from the summer of 1941 until the end of the war and he was one of the central figures overseeing the Manhattan Project. Conant became concerned about his future academic career, as well as his positions in private industry, because various people began to speak out concerning why the bombs were dropped. On September 9, 1945, Admiral William F. Halsey, commander of the Third Fleet, was publically quoted extensively as stating that the atomic bomb was used because the scientists had a "toy and they wanted to try it out" He further stated, "The first atomic bomb was an unnecessary experiment It was a mistake to ever drop it." Albert Einstein, one of the world's foremost scientists, who was also an important person connected with the development of the atomic bomb, responded and his words were headlined in The New York Times "Einstein Deplores Use of Atom Bomb." The story reported that Einstein stated that "A great majority of scientists were opposed to the sudden employment of the atom bomb." In Einstein's judgment, the dropping of the bomb was a political — diplomatic decision rather than a military or scientific decision.

Probably the person closest to Truman, from the military standpoint, was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William Leahy, and there was much talk that he also deplored the use of the bomb and had strongly advised Truman not to use it, but advised rather to revise the unconditional surrender policy so that the Japanese could surrender and keep the Emperor. Leahy's views were later reported by Hanson Baldwin in an interview that Leahy "thought the business of recognizing the continuation of the Emperor was a detail which should have been solved easily." Leahy's secretary, Dorothy Ringquist, reported that Leahy told her on the day the Hiroshima bomb was dropped, "Dorothy, we will regret this day. The United States will suffer, for war is not to be waged on women and children." Another important naval voice, the commander in chief of the U.S. Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations, Ernest J. King, stated that the naval blockade and prior bombing of Japan in March of 1945, had rendered the Japanese helpless and that the use of the atomic bomb was both unnecessary and immoral. Also, the opinion of Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz was reported to have said in a press conference on September 22, 1945, that "The Admiral took the opportunity of adding his voice to those insisting that Japan had been defeated before the atomic bombing and Russia's entry into the war." In a subsequent speech at the Washington Monument on October 5, 1945, Admiral Nimitz stated "The Japanese had, in fact, already sued for peace before the atomic age was announced to the world with the destruction of Hiroshima and before the Russian entry into the war." It was learned also that on or about July 20, 1945, General Eisenhower had urged Truman, in a personal visit, not to use the atomic bomb. Eisenhower's assessment was "It wasn't necessary to hit them with

that awful thing . . . to use the atomic bomb, to kill and terrorize civilians, without even attempting [negotiations], was a double crime.” Eisenhower also stated that it wasn’t necessary for Truman to “succumb” to Byrnes.

James Conant came to the conclusion that some important person in the administration must go public to show that the dropping of the bombs was a military necessity, thereby saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of American soldiers, so he approached Harvey Bundy and his son, McGeorge Bundy. It was agreed by them that the most important person to create this myth was Secretary of War, Henry Stimson. It was decided that Stimson would write a long article to be widely circulated in a prominent national magazine. This article was revised repeatedly by McGeorge Bundy and Conant before it was published in Harper’s magazine in February of 1947. The long article became the subject of a front-page article and editorial in The New York Times and in the editorial it was stated “There can be no doubt that the president and Mr. Stimson are right when they mention that the bomb caused the Japanese to surrender.” Later, in 1959, President Truman specifically endorsed this conclusion, including the idea that it saved the lives of a million American soldiers. This myth has been renewed annually by the news media and various political leaders ever since.

It is very pertinent that, in the memoirs of Henry Stimson entitled [On Active Service in Peace and War](#), he states, “Unfortunately, I have lived long enough to know that history is often not what actually happened but what is recorded as such.”

To bring this matter more into focus from the human tragedy standpoint, I recommend the reading of a book entitled [Hiroshima Diary: The Journal of a Japanese Physician](#), August 6, September 30, 1945, by Michiko Hachiya. He was a survivor of Hiroshima and kept a daily diary about the women, children and old men that he treated on a daily basis in the hospital. The doctor was badly injured himself but recovered enough to help others and his account of the personal tragedies of innocent civilians who were either badly burned or died as a result of the bombing puts the moral issue into a clear perspective for all of us to consider.

Now that we live in the nuclear age and there are enough nuclear weapons spread around the world to destroy civilization, we need to face the fact that America is the only country to have used this awful weapon and that it was unnecessary to have done so. If Americans would come to recognize the truth, rather than the myth, it might cause such a moral revolt that we would take the lead throughout the world in realizing that wars in the future may well become nuclear, and therefore all wars must be avoided at almost any cost. Hopefully, our knowledge of science has not outrun our ability to exercise prudent and humane moral and political judgment to the extent that we are destined for extermination.

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