Chapter 7: Hiroshima in History

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. Another survey taken in the fall of 1945 produced similar findings. Only 4.5 percent of those questioned believed that the United States should not have used atomic weapons, while 53.5 percent expressed unequivocal support for the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Another 22.7 percent wished that the United States had dropped "many more" atomic bombs on Japan before its surrender.[1]

There were, however, a few critics who questioned the need for and the morality of dropping the atomic bombs. Pacifist groups, a number of atomic scientists, some religious leaders and organizations, and a scattering of political commentators, both liberal and conservative, condemned the atomic attacks because of their indiscriminate killing of civilians and/or the failure of the United States to give Japan an explicit warning about the bomb before Hiroshima. As time went on, other voices raised new misgivings about the use of the atomic bombs. Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, and Thomas K. Finletter, a former assistant secretary of state, suggested in June 1946 that Truman's use of the bomb might have been prompted more by a desire for diplomatic gains in the growing rivalry with the Soviet Union than by military necessity. Writer John Hersey, although he did not express an opinion on the bombings, put human faces on six of the survivors and the trials they endured in a widely publicized article in the *New Yorker* in August 1946.[2]

The final report of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, published in July 1946, implicitly questioned the official rationale that the atomic bombings had been necessary to force a Japanese surrender and avoid an invasion. At the request of President Truman, the survey conducted a study of the effects of American aerial attacks on Japan as well as an analysis of Japan's "struggle to end the war."

After examining documents and interviewing Japanese officials, it concluded that Japan would have surrendered without the use of atomic

bombs, Soviet entry into the war, or an American invasion of Kyushu. “Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts, and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved,” the report declared, “it is the Survey’s opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945, and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.”[3]

The survey’s statement was less conclusive than it appeared. It was a “counterfactual” argument, meaning that it was based not on hard evidence but on speculation about what might have happened. The counterfactual judgment was largely the product of Paul Nitze, the vice chairman of the survey team, who believed that the bomb had not been essential for forcing a surrender. The interviews of Japanese officials did not uniformly or even largely support the idea that the war would have ended without the bomb, the Soviet declaration of war on Japan, or an American invasion. Indeed, many suggested that the bomb was the key to bringing about the surrender. As always in dealing with counterfactuals, there is no way of proving or disproving the survey’s conclusion, and it cannot be viewed as definitive.[4]

The criticisms of the atomic attacks and the conclusions of the Strategic Bombing Survey had very little discernible impact on popular support for Truman’s decision. Although the existence of atomic weapons and the possibility that they might at some time be used against American cities was troubling, they did not lead to widespread reappraisal or disapproval of the use of atomic bombs against Japan. Nevertheless, even occasional expressions of dissent offended some Manhattan Project veterans. One leading figure in the building of the bomb, James B. Conant, decided to take action to counter the critics. Conant, a prominent chemist and president of Harvard University, had played a major role in the development of the bomb as the deputy director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development and head of the National Defense Research Committee, both of which had mobilized scientific research in support of the war effort.

Conant, like other atomic scientists, had not been a part of Truman’s inner circle that made decisions regarding the use of the bomb. He had, however, occupied a position in which he offered scientific expertise and policy judgments to Groves, Stimson, and other top officials. As a member of the Interim Committee, he had suggested in a meeting of May 31, 1945, “that the most desirable target [for an atomic bomb] would be a vital war plant …

closely surrounded by workers' houses."[5] Conant fully supported the use of atomic bombs against Japan, in part because he shared with American policymakers the objective of achieving a decisive victory as quickly as possible. In addition, Conant, along with a number of other Manhattan Project scientists, favored the use of the bomb as a means to promote postwar peace. This objective was not an important consideration for Truman and his close advisers, but it was a key element in the thinking of Conant and other scientists.

Conant was convinced that a combat demonstration of the destructive power of atomic bombs was essential to prevent their future use. It was, he believed, "the only way to awaken the world to the necessity of abolishing war altogether."[6] Along with scientific advisers to the Interim Committee and other colleagues, Conant reasoned that the use of the bomb would not only force a prompt Japanese surrender but also shock leaders around the globe into seeking international control of nuclear weapons. "We have had some skeptics express doubts as to whether [the bomb] is indeed a revolutionary weapon," he remarked in 1947, "but what skepticism there would have been had there been no actual use in war!"[7]

Conant had little patience with critics of the use of the bomb against Japan. Although their influence was slight, he worried about the consequences if they undermined public support for Truman's decision. One harmful result might be that the chances for arms control would be diminished. Conant believed that only if the American people clearly demonstrated their willingness to use their atomic arsenal would the Soviet Union be amenable to nuclear arms control agreements. Further, he feared that questions about the use of the bomb would influence teachers and students in the future in ways that distorted history. "You may be inclined to dismiss all this talk [criticizing the use of the bomb] as representing only a small minority of the population, which I think it does," Conant told a friend in September 1946. "However, this type of sentimentalism, for so I regard it, is bound to have a great deal of influence on the next generation. The type of person who goes in to teaching, particularly school teaching, will be influenced a great deal by this type of argument."[8]

In order to head off the potential influence of those who raised doubts about whether the dropping of atomic bombs on Japan had been a sound and proper action, Conant persuaded Henry L. Stimson to write an article to explain why they were used. Stimson, who was writing his memoirs in

retirement, reluctantly took on the assignment, assisted by the collaborator on his memoirs, McGeorge Bundy, the son of former War Department aide Harvey H. Bundy and future national security adviser to presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. The article, which appeared in the February 1947 issue of *Harper's Magazine*, deliberately refrained from directly challenging the critics of the use of the bomb. It provided a judicious, dispassionate, and seemingly authoritative treatment of the Manhattan Project and the decision to drop the bomb, complete with excerpts from Stimson's diary and other documents. It presented the use of the bomb as the "least abhorrent choice" that accomplished its objective of ending the war quickly. Stimson reported that the atomic attacks were authorized in order to avoid an invasion of Japan, which, he said, might have been "expected to cost over a million casualties to American forces alone."[9]

More than any other single publication, Stimson's article influenced popular views about Truman's decision to use the bomb. The information it provided and the respect its author commanded made its arguments seem unassailable. The article received wide circulation and acclaim, and Conant was satisfied that it had fulfilled his objective of effectively countering the complaints of those who criticized the use of the bomb. However, the article, despite the aura of authority it presented, was not a full accounting; it glossed over or omitted important aspects of the events that led to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It offered only hints of alternatives to the use of the bomb or Stimson's own support for modifying the demand for unconditional surrender. It failed to cite the influence of diplomatic considerations and gave the misleading impression that Truman and his advisers carefully considered whether or not the bomb should be dropped. The most vivid of the article's arguments was that the use of the bomb prevented over 1 million American casualties by making an invasion unnecessary. The source of Stimson's figure is not clear; even Bundy could not recall precisely the basis for the casualty estimate.[10] Stimson was not the first to suggest the figure of 1 million, but after his article appeared, that number, or often an embellished variation of it, became indelibly etched into the mythology of the decision to use the bomb.

On at least one occasion, Truman drew on Stimson's casualty estimate in his own explanation for the use of the bomb. In December 1952, James L. Cate, an editor and author of the U.S. Air Force's history of World War II, wrote to Truman for information on some issues relating to the bomb.

Truman drafted a handwritten reply in which he claimed that during a meeting with advisers at Potsdam in which the use of the bomb was considered, Marshall told him that an invasion would cost a minimum of 250,000 casualties. When a member of the White House staff saw Truman's response to Cate, he recommended that the casualty estimate be raised to conform with the projection of 1 million that Stimson had used in his *Harper's* article. Truman accepted the change and cited the larger number in his reply to Cate. The letter's accuracy was doubtful not only because of the revised casualty figure but also because the meeting at Potsdam that the president mentioned almost certainly never took place. There is no evidence that supports Truman's recollection of the conference he described. But the letter to Cate contributed to the unfounded impression that Truman and his advisers had carefully weighed the decision to drop the bomb and that their action had saved American forces from suffering hundreds of thousands of casualties.[11]

Truman used different numbers at different times when he discussed the estimated losses that the bomb had prevented, and he sometimes obscured the distinction between casualties and fatalities. In his memoirs, published in 1955, he stated that Marshall informed him "it might cost half a million American lives to force the enemy's surrender on his home grounds." In other cases he claimed that the use of the bomb saved 250,000 American lives (1946), a quarter of a million American lives and "an equal number of Japanese young men" (1948), one-half million casualties (1949), "millions of lives" (1959), and the lives of 125,000 Americans and 125,000 "Japanese youngsters" (1963). The casualty estimates that Truman cited were obviously not a fixed number, perhaps because he had never been informed of such high figures before he authorized the dropping of the bomb.[12]

Truman's claims were supported by other leading military and political figures, including Churchill, Marshall, Groves, and Byrnes, who also contended in postwar statements or memoirs that the bomb saved hundreds of thousands of American lives.[13] This explanation for the use of the bomb, advanced by respected high-level officials, came to be accepted as a statement of unqualified fact by most Americans. With few documents open for scholarly research, there was little basis for questioning the claims of policymakers on why they opted for the bomb. As a result, the myth took hold—Truman faced a stark choice between using the bomb or sacrificing the lives of huge numbers of American soldiers.

The first scholarly history of the decision to use the bomb raised some questions about the standard view without undermining its basic premises. In *Japan Subdued: The Atomic Bomb and the End of the War in the Pacific*, published in 1961, former State Department official Herbert Feis concluded that "the impelling reason for the decision to use [the bomb] was military—to end the war victoriously as soon as possible." He accepted the argument that if an invasion had been necessary, it might have cost hundreds of thousands of America lives. But Feis discussed alternatives to the bomb at length, expressed regret that the United States did not give Japan an explicit warning about the pending use of atomic weapons at the time of the Potsdam Proclamation, and agreed with the conclusion of the Strategic Bombing Survey that the war would have ended by the end of 1945 without the bomb, Soviet entry into the war, or an American invasion. And although he supported the claims of hundreds of thousands of American casualties or deaths in an invasion, he admitted that he could not find evidence to confirm those estimates.[14]

In 1965, political economist Gar Alperovitz published a book titled *Atomic Diplomacy*, which was based on his doctoral dissertation. He challenged the traditional explanation more directly and much more critically than Feis had done by suggesting that the bomb had not been needed to end the war at the earliest possible time. Drawing on recently opened sources, especially the papers and diary of Henry L. Stimson, he asserted that the United States dropped it more for political than for military reasons. Alperovitz argued that Truman did not seriously consider alternatives to the bomb because he wanted to impress the Soviets with its power. In his analysis, the bomb was used primarily to intimidate the Soviets rather than to defeat the Japanese. Alperovitz pointed out that many sources were still not available to scholars and clearly stated that his findings could not be regarded as conclusive.[15]

Atomic Diplomacy received a great deal of popular and scholarly attention and triggered a spirited historiographical debate. By the mid-1970s, after the publication of several works that drew on extensive research in primary sources, including important studies by Barton J. Bernstein and Martin J. Sherwin, scholars reached a general consensus that combined the traditional interpretation with Alperovitz's "revisionist" position. They concluded that the primary motivation for dropping the bomb was to end the war with Japan but that diplomatic considerations played a significant, if secondary, role in the Truman administration's view of the new weapon's value.[16]

Over the next 15 years, new evidence relating to the use of the bomb stirred further scholarly investigation and debate. It included a handwritten diary that Truman jotted down at Potsdam and personal letters that he sent to Mrs. Truman. Those documents greatly enriched the record on the president's views of the bomb in the summer of 1945, but they did not provide conclusive evidence on his thoughts about the likelihood that the war would end without an invasion, the need for the bomb, the role of diplomatic considerations in deciding to use the bomb, or the extent to which he weighed those issues. In a similar manner, the opening of personal papers and official records of other high-level policymakers and their staffs in the 1970s and 1980s broadened the documentary base for studying the decision to use the bomb but did not offer definitive answers to questions that had intrigued scholars and sometimes provoked sharp debate among them.

Nevertheless, by the late 1980s, specialists who studied the available evidence reached a broad, though hardly unanimous, consensus on some key issues surrounding the use of the bomb. One point of agreement was that Truman and his advisers were well aware of alternatives to the bomb that seemed likely, but not certain, to end the war within a relatively short time. Another was that an invasion of Japan would probably not have been necessary to achieve victory. A third point of general agreement in the scholarly literature on the decision to use the bomb was that the postwar claims that the bomb prevented hundreds of thousands of American combat deaths could not be sustained with the available evidence. Most students of the subject also concurred that political considerations figured in the deliberations about the implications of the bomb and the end of the war with Japan. On all of those points, the scholarly consensus rejected the traditional view that the bomb was the only alternative to an invasion of Japan that would have cost a huge number of American lives. At the same time, most scholars supported the claim of Truman and his advisers that the primary motivation for dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was to end the war at the earliest possible moment—that is, for military reasons.[17]

The debates among scholars and the conclusions that they reached about the decision to use the bomb were not widely known to the general public, which from all indications remained wedded to the traditional view that Truman faced a categorical choice between the bomb and an enormously costly invasion. The chasm between the myth that the public embraced and the findings of scholars who examined the documentary evidence led to a

bitter controversy when the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum made plans in the early 1990s to present a major exhibit on the bomb and the end of World War II. The show would be built around a section of the restored fuselage of the *Enola Gay*, the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima (the entire plane was too large to display). Museum curators designed an exhibit that was intended both to commemorate the valor and sacrifices of American war veterans and to reflect scholarly findings on the decision to use the bomb. But this proved to be an impossible task. By raising questions about the traditional and popularly accepted interpretation of why the United States dropped the bomb, the original script for the exhibit set off a firestorm of protest.

Critics of the script complained that the planned *Enola Gay* exhibit was unduly disparaging of American actions and unduly sympathetic toward the Japanese. Representatives of the Air Force Association, an organization established after World War II to promote air power that included many veterans among its membership, took the lead in denouncing the script. By distorting or quoting out of context some of the statements in the draft script, the association made the proposed show seem outrageously one-sided. It soon won allies from other veterans' groups, many members of Congress, and most newspapers. The *Wall Street Journal* spoke for many critics of the planned exhibit in August 1994 when it condemned "scriptwriters [who] disdain any belief that the decision to drop the bomb could have been inspired by something other than racism or bloodlust."[18]

The original script had hardly been flawless. Robert C. Post, a curator at the Smithsonian at the time and a keen chronicler of the museum's history, later wrote that it was "needlessly, even recklessly, inflammatory." The Smithsonian responded to the protests by modifying the script, especially by correcting parts that demonstrated a lack of balance. Among other changes, it placed greater emphasis on Japanese atrocities during the war and less emphasis on the victims of the atomic attacks. But it became apparent that the most adamant critics would not find acceptable any script that raised questions about the mythological explanation for the use of the bomb. Historians who defended the script pointed out that a vast volume of historical evidence did not confirm the view that Truman faced a stark choice between the bomb and an invasion, but their arguments made no discernible impact on those who objected to the exhibit.

In early 1995, the Smithsonian bowed to enormous and irresistible political

pressure and drastically scaled back the planned exhibit. It decided to display a section of the *Enola Gay* with a minimum of commentary. The head of the Smithsonian, secretary I. Michael Heyman, announced that the exhibit would just "report the facts." The "facts" that the exhibit reported when it opened in June 1995 were largely innocuous descriptions of the plane and its restoration. But some statements were disputable assertions about the use of the bomb, assertions that were highly interpretive. One label, for example, declared that the use of atomic bombs "made unnecessary the planned invasion of the Japanese home islands" and that "such an invasion would have led to very heavy casualties among American, Allied, and Japanese armed forces, and Japanese civilians." Those statements were not necessarily inaccurate; after all, at the time of Hiroshima the United States was making plans for an invasion in case it proved to be necessary, and "very heavy" U.S. casualties could have referred to the estimates of military planners in the summer of 1945. But the effect of this label on most who read it was probably to reinforce their existing impression that Truman faced a choice between dropping the bomb and ordering an invasion. In the *Enola Gay* exhibit, the myths about the decision to use the bomb prevailed over historical evidence that revealed the complexities of the events and considerations that led to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[19]

The *Enola Gay* controversy highlighted the gap between scholarly and popular views on the use of the bomb. Over a period of 20 years after the angry recriminations that erupted over the Smithsonian's plans, scholars continued to mine a rich abundance of documentary sources on the subject. Most of them rejected the two polar interpretations of Truman's decision. The flaws of the traditional view that Truman's only reasonable alternative to an invasion was the bomb had long been evident, at least since Herbert Feis had published his book in 1961. The revisionist view that the bomb was unnecessary because Japan was on the verge of surrender has been conclusively undermined by the opening of valuable Japanese materials after Hirohito's death in 1989. "The myth that the Japanese were ready to surrender," historian Max Hastings wrote in 2007, "has been so comprehensively discredited by modern research that it is astonishing some writers continue to give it credence." Most scholars took a balanced, middle-ground position that combined elements of the competing arguments and did not offer support to purists at either pole of the interpretive spectrum.[20]

Despite the broad agreement among specialists on important aspects of the

topic, many of the key issues that divide scholars on the decision to use the bomb cannot be resolved because they are counterfactual. The lack of conclusive evidence that could settle points of dispute is, of course, a problem that faces historians in the study of any subject. But the debate over the decision to use the atomic bomb hinges more than most topics on "might-have-beens" and "never-weres." Those issues involve questions that can be evaluated only with incomplete factual evidence or debatable analysis. The presence of counterfactual issues in the controversies over Hiroshima is not new; the traditional interpretation relied heavily on unprovable assertions about the need for an invasion and the number of casualties it would have caused.

The most important issues that cannot be fully settled because they require speculation and extrapolation from available evidence include (1) how long the war would have continued if the bomb had not been used; (2) how many casualties American forces would have suffered if the bomb had not been dropped; (3) whether an invasion would have been necessary without the use of the bomb; (4) the number of American lives and casualties an invasion would have exacted had it proven necessary; (5) whether Japan would have responded favorably to an American offer to allow the emperor to remain on the throne before Hiroshima, or whether such an offer would have prolonged the war; and (6) whether any of the other alternatives to the use of the bomb would have ended the war as quickly on a basis satisfactory to the United States.

Those questions go to the heart of historiographical disputes among scholars on Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb. They cannot be answered in a way that will be accepted by all scholars or more casual students interested in the topic. The traditional view of the use of the bomb that Stimson and Truman and many others advanced after World War II was appealing in part because it was unambiguous. If Truman had in fact faced a choice between authorizing the bomb and ordering an invasion that would have cost hundreds of thousands of American lives, the decision to use the bomb would have been obvious and, in the minds of most Americans then and later, incontestable. But the existence of evidence that shows a vastly more complex situation introduces ambiguity and controversy into the issue. The best that scholars can do in addressing the issues is to draw conclusions based on sources that help reconstruct the context of events in the summer of 1945.

The question of the morality of Truman's decision, which is often an unstated part of the debate among historians, will likewise remain unresolved. Scholars who have offered moral judgments on Truman's action range widely in their assessments, from arguments that it was entirely justified by Japanese aggression and refusal to surrender to suggestions that the use of the bomb was the moral equivalent of the Nazi Holocaust. No amount of historical evidence will bridge this gap; it arises to a large degree from the differing values, assumptions, priorities, and experiences that individual scholars bring to their work on the subject. The information that historians provide will not settle the moral issues. As historian Charles S. Maier has suggested in a somewhat different context: "Maybe God draws bottom lines; historians need only record the entries in the ledger."[21]

Recording the entries in the ledger accurately requires recognizing the complexities and uncertainties of the issues surrounding the use of the bomb. Within that context, the answer to the fundamental question that has stirred so much debate among scholars is appropriately ambiguous. The question is, Was the bomb necessary? The answer seems to be yes and no. Yes, it was necessary to end the war as quickly as possible. No, it was not necessary to prevent an invasion of Japan.

A corollary to the first question is, What did the bomb accomplish? The answer seems to be that it shortened the war and saved the lives of a relatively small but far from inconsequential number of Americans. It might also have saved many Japanese lives, though this was not an important consideration for U.S. policymakers. Was that sufficient reason to wipe out two Japanese cities with weapons that delivered unprecedented military power and unpredictable diplomatic consequences? There is no definitive answer to that question or to a multitude of others that follow from it. But it still needs to be addressed in an informed way by scholars, students, and other concerned citizens. The decision to use atomic bombs against Japan was such a momentous event in bringing about the end of World War II and in shaping the postwar world that it should continue to be studied, evaluated, and debated. The issue of whether the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were sound, proper, and justifiable actions must be approached by fully considering the situation facing American and Japanese leaders in the summer of 1945 and by banishing the myths that have taken hold since then.