

Examining the Morality of the U.S. Atomic Bombings: Strategic Necessity or Controversial Decision?

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Abstract: The morality of the two atomic bombings conducted by the United States on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki has long raised contention among both strategists and the general public. This paper discusses the strategic context of World War II's Pacific theater and proposes that despite the unprecedented "cruelty" casted on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by atomic weapons, the bombs were dropped out of the strategic necessity to bring a swift end to the war. By reviewing the diaries of key commanders, the U.S. Army's reports and forecasts of a land invasion of Japan, and account of Japanese resilience and unfathomable refusal to surrender under conventional circumstances, this study demonstrates that by forcing an early Japanese surrender, the atomic attacks obviated a land invasion of Japan, which would have inflicted much heavier casualties and thus provide the moral underpinnings of the atomic weapon attacks.

Keywords: morality, U.S. atomic bombing, strategic necessity, nuclear controversy

1. Introduction

On August 6, 1945, an American B-29 bomber dropped the first ever deployed atomic bomb over the city of Hiroshima, killing 80,000 people instantly [1]. By mid-1945, the Pacific War had reached a critical juncture. The island-hopping campaign waged by the Allies, coupled with intense aerial bombardment, had severely weakened Japan's industrial capacity and military capabilities. Nonetheless, Japan's leadership exhibited fierce resistance and a commitment to continue fighting, leading to protracted battles and staggering casualties on both sides [1]. In this context, the atomic bombings were seen as a means to bypass the anticipated high costs of a full-scale invasion of the Japanese home islands, potentially saving countless lives in the process. However, controversies soon ensued vis-à-vis the necessity of the two nuclear attacks, as critics deemed them immoral "overkills" because of the sheer atrocity brought upon hundreds of thousands of Japanese civilians. These critics argue that Japan's ultimate defeat and surrender was not a matter of probability but merely one of time, and as such the U.S. could have adopted alternative strategies such as conventional bombing, homeland invasion, or a technical demonstration of the atomic bombs to eventually secure Allies' victory.

The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had profound humanitarian consequences, sparking global awareness and prompting moral and ethical debates about the use of nuclear weapons. As a result, anti-nuclear movements gained momentum, advocating for disarmament and pressuring governments to prioritize non-proliferation efforts. This paper aims to address and refute the

arguments put forth by opponents of atomic bombs, maintaining that the nuclear bombings were ultimately justified, despite the devastating aftermath they caused. It is essential to recognize that the decision to use nuclear weapons was complex and multifaceted. Historians point out that President Truman, who had just assumed office after Roosevelt's death, faced significant domestic pressure to employ nuclear weapons. Failing to do so would have invited challenges from other government officials and the American public, who would question his decision to withhold such a potent military tool [2]. Therefore, this paper also seeks to provide a realism-based analysis of America's international security in the context of WWII, explaining the necessity of the bombings in that historical context.

2. Analysis of the Possibility of Japan's Surrender

Critics of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings argue that Japan's surrender was already inevitable and that alternative strategies could have achieved a swift resolution. They emphasize that by mid-1945, Japan was experiencing severe strategic bombings, with estimates suggesting that strategic bombing would be completed by January 1946. The United States Strategic Bombing Survey even suggested that air supremacy alone could have pressured Japan into unconditional surrender, eliminating the need for invasion [3]. Additionally, historical evidence indicates that Japan's leaders had intentions of surrendering before November 1, 1945, and were seeking negotiations with the Allies through the Soviet Union as a mediator [4].

Opponents of the bombings contend that nuclear weapons, resulting in widespread death and radiation injuries, cannot be justified if the Japanese surrender was inevitable. They argue that the bombings were far from a "necessary evil." However, it is crucial to recognize that this criticism relies on hypothetical arguments and does not constitute historical evidence to reject the nuclear bombings as justifiable.

Indeed, there is no conclusive evidence to suggest that alternative strategies would have resulted in a swift surrender by Japan. The historical context of World War II adds complexity to the situation, and the eventual surrender of Japan cannot guarantee that it would have occurred promptly under different circumstances. A pertinent example is Germany's position in 1944. Despite facing a seemingly hopeless strategic situation, Germany continued to resist until the war's end. The motivations behind such irrational persistence remain unclear, but it is believed that the Nazi leadership sought to defend their honor and avoid capture by the Allies, fully aware of the heinous atrocities they had committed.

Compared to Germany, Japan was known for its incomprehensible resolve. The Japanese military and civilians exhibited extreme "no surrender" doctrine measures, influenced by the Bushido Code and the Field Service Code of 1941. This fanaticism manifested in actions such as Kamikaze attacks and suicide tactics rather than surrendering. The Bushido Code demanded unwavering loyalty, and surrender was seen as a shameful act. Considering the relentless determination of the Japanese forces and drawing from the lessons learned from Germany's unwavering resistance, American leaders were faced with the responsibility of safeguarding the lives of 767,000 troops. The adversary they confronted appeared unwilling to surrender easily [5]. Despite Japan expressing intentions of surrendering to the Soviets, there were doubts about the credibility of these intentions, particularly as Japan aimed to retain control over conquered territories. The United States dismissed these proposals, deeming them insincere negotiations that would imply acceptance of Imperial Japan's wartime actions [6].

In summary, the argument against the atomic bombings based on the notion of Japan's inevitable surrender is flawed. Critics cannot definitively prove that Japan would have surrendered before November 1, 1945. There is no definitive proof that Japan would have surrendered before November 1, 1945. Japan's unwavering commitment to the "no surrender" doctrine and the

unrealistic terms proposed in negotiations made it difficult for American leadership to believe in a prompt and complete surrender without the destruction of Japan's military power. Secretary Stimson even acknowledged that a comprehensive dismantling of Japan's military was imperative to ensure a swift surrender [6]. .

3. Rationale for the United States' Use of the Atomic Bomb on Japan

In the face of mounting pressure, President Truman offered Japan one last chance to surrender without facing devastating casualties. While the successful Trinity nuclear test took place on July 16, 1945, Truman refrained from immediate use of the bomb. Instead, he issued the Potsdam Ultimatum, demanding Japan's unconditional surrender with the threat of complete military destruction and homeland devastation [7]. However, misinterpretations of Japan's response, particularly the ambiguous term "Mokusatsu," led to a false perception that Japan was disregarding the Potsdam terms [8]. Consequently, the United States believed that Japan was ignoring the ultimatum. From a realism perspective, in light of Japan's perceived rejection of the ultimatum, the United States had no choice but to follow through with its threats to uphold its credibility in compellence. The effectiveness of ultimatums and compellence lies in the belief that the issuing country will carry out its promises if its conditions are not met. Failing to do so would have unfavorable consequences. Allies such as Great Britain and China, who co-signed the ultimatum, might lose faith in the joint effort, potentially leading to internal division within the Allied Forces. Additionally, the failure to follow through on the ultimatum's terms would weaken America's perceived power, making future compellence efforts difficult or even impossible. Critics argue that a technical demonstration of the nuclear weapon would have sufficed to compel Japan, rendering the bombing of Hiroshima unnecessary. However, the uncertainty surrounding the bomb's functionality when dropped from an aircraft made a demonstration unreliable for compellence. The prospect of the atomic bomb failing to explode as expected during a demonstration would have severely undermined its compellence effect. Consequently, the Interim Committee and the Scientific Panel concluded that there was no viable alternative to direct military use [9].

Considering the necessity of Japan's destruction following its perceived "ignoring" of the Potsdam terms, the remaining question pertains to whether conventional or nuclear attacks should be employed. Apart from concerns over American casualties, using atomic bombs was necessary to uphold America's authority in the face of the Soviet Union. Truman's prior disclosure to Stalin about the acquisition of atomic power placed America in a delicate position. Failing to utilize the atomic bomb would have risked making America appear untrustworthy or incompetent, which could have undermined the objective of establishing trust during the Potsdam Conference, especially considering the escalating tensions with the Soviet Union in Eastern Europe. Therefore, the United States' warning and stance towards Japan before the Hiroshima atomic bomb demonstrated that it had offered Japan opportunities and choices. However, Japan disregarded the ultimatum, leading to the necessity of the bombings to establish credible power. The United States was motivated by its desire to maintain credibility and build trust with the Soviet Union, making the use of the atomic bomb a complex and consequential decision.

4. Moral Analysis of the Atomic Bomb Explosion

The atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have drawn criticism due to the immense loss of life and long-lasting effects on survivors. The bombings violated the principle of distinguishing between civilians and military targets, raising the escalation of all-out war in the Pacific, exemplified by the Tokyo bombing and its immense civilian casualties, has blurred the distinction between civilians and soldiers. The development of the atomic bomb by the US was driven by the need to

win the nuclear race with Nazi Germany, as they feared the potential use of the bomb on their own soil if the Nazis developed it first. In comparison to the civilian deaths that have already occurred during the conflict, the death toll from the atomic bombs does not offer sufficient evidence to condemn the morality of these attacks. Adhering to moral standards in warfare is naive and risky. In a context where civilians and soldiers were indistinguishable, the traditional moral obligations to spare civilian lives no longer applied. Moralizing certain acts of war while condemning others is inherently hypocritical. While casualties are an unfortunate reality in combat situations, people must reject the notion that killing is natural, as evidenced by the atrocities committed by the Nazis and Japan's Unit 731. In other words, using conventional means to invade Japan would have resulted in significantly higher casualties, particularly civilian deaths. Estimates suggest over 10 million deaths, whereas the atomic bombs resulted in fewer casualties [3]. After careful consideration, Secretary Stimson stated that the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the least abhorrent choice. The decision to use atomic bombs was made with the aim of minimizing overall casualties. While reducing human lives to mere numbers may appear callous, it was a rational consideration given the stark contrast in the number of deaths resulting from conventional and nuclear approaches. The devastating potential of conventional warfare and the prolonged nature of the conflict led to the belief that utilizing atomic bombs could swiftly bring an end to the war, ultimately saving more lives in the long run.

5. Discussion

The issue of the United States' use of the atomic bomb fundamentally revolves around national security concerns and the broader implications of nuclear weapons. In the context of modern international security, nuclear weapons have played a significant role in shaping contemporary international relations and have contributed to maintaining peace through a concept known as "nuclear deterrence." This concept rests on the premise that possessing a formidable nuclear arsenal deters potential adversaries from initiating armed conflict. One of the key ways nuclear weapons contribute to peace is by creating a balance of power between states. Possessing nuclear weapons offers a sense of security to states, as the risk of catastrophic retaliation acts as a deterrent against aggression. For instance, during the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union's nuclear capabilities prevented direct armed conflict, as both understood the devastating consequences that would follow. This balance of power established a form of stability known as "Mutually Assured Destruction" (MAD), where neither side had an incentive to initiate a nuclear war. Nuclear weapons also serve as a tool for signaling and coercion in international relations. States often use their nuclear capability as a means to gain diplomatic leverage, enhance their national security, or influence the behavior of adversaries. Nuclear-armed states can employ strategic ambiguity, leaving their opponents uncertain about their intentions, leading to caution and restraint in the face of potential escalation. Moreover, the possession of nuclear weapons can confer prestige and enhance a state's status on the global stage, granting it a seat at the table of major powers. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent risks associated with nuclear weapons. Accidental launches, miscalculations, or acquisition of nuclear weapons by non-state actors pose significant threats to global security. As more states and non-state actors seek nuclear capabilities, the possibility of nuclear proliferation increases. The potential for a destabilizing arms race or conflicts involving nuclear-armed adversaries remains a persistent concern.

Indeed, the reliance on nuclear deterrence as a means to maintain peace is not without critics. Some argue that the possession and potential use of nuclear weapons violates the principles of morality and the foundation of human security. The potential for catastrophic human suffering and long-term environmental damage raises ethical questions about the continued reliance on such weapons.

6. Conclusion

This article critically examines the necessity of the United States' decision to use nuclear weapons and its implications on Japan's potential use of such weapons. Critics of Truman's choice to bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki argue that Japan's surrender was imminent and that alternative strategies could have been employed to achieve a forced surrender, rendering the atomic bombings unnecessary. However, there is no conclusive evidence supporting the notion that Japan would have surrendered without the use of atomic bombs.

The advent of nuclear weapons has undeniably shaped contemporary international relations and contributed to maintaining peace through the concept of deterrence. While nuclear weapons aid in balancing power and deterring direct conflicts among nuclear-armed states, it is crucial to acknowledge the inherent risks and ethical dilemmas associated with these weapons. The international community must persist in its efforts towards disarmament, non-proliferation, and exploring alternative mechanisms to ensure global security.

It is important to note that this article focuses primarily on a specific incident. Future studies should encompass a broader range of perspectives, rather than confining the analysis to a single country, in order to foster a more comprehensive understanding of the subject.

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