

Thinking About the Unthinkable: A Hiroshima Fact Sheet

On August 6th, 1945, a U.S. Army Air Force B-29, the Enola Gay, dropped an 8,900-pound bomb over the Japanese city of Hiroshima. Decorated with crude messages for Emperor Hirohito, Little Boy whistled downward for 44 seconds before bursting 1,900 feet above the center of the city. With a temperature eclipsing a million degrees Celsius, the detonation ignited the air, resulting in a fireball 840 feet in diameter with a brilliance said to be 10 times that of the sun. The blast wave shattered windows over a distance of 10 miles and was felt over 37 miles away. With a destruction radius of one mile, the thermal pulse sent fires raging over four-and-a-half miles.

Hiroshima toppled, buildings were ripped from their foundations, bridges were twisted, and 70 percent of the city's structures were broken to pieces. Radiant heat traveling at the speed of light caused flash burns, charring skin to charcoal. Somewhere between 70,000-80,000 souls were consumed instantly. Tens of thousands more would die slowly, days or weeks or even years later, succumbing to injuries or radiation sickness.

What was the context that could lead to such a horrendous decision to drop the bomb?

DEFEAT WAS NOT SURRENDER

- US cryptological operations (Magic, and with an assist from Bletchley Park) were able to read Japanese military and diplomatic codes relatively early on. There can no doubt that Japan knew it was a defeated nation by the fall of 1944, to say nothing of January 1945. Nevertheless, the intercepts also made clear that although a peace faction within the Japanese government wished to end the war—under certain conditions—hardliners had determined to fight on.
 - The Japanese plan of *Ketsu-Go*, the final defense of the homeland, was to make the conclusion of the war so bloody that the Americans would allow for surrender terms more favorable to the Japanese. Victory was not the Japanese war aim.
 - Most allied casualties occurred after the Japanese knew they could not win the war
 - These concessions included retention of territorial acquisitions, no occupation of the homeland, the maintenance of the imperial system, no demobilization, and no international war crime trials.
 - Distinguished Japanese historian Sadao Asada's "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender – A Reconsideration," an essay based largely on Japanese sources, reveals how difficult it was for the peace faction to prevail even *after* both bombs had been dropped and the Soviet Union had declared war.
 - The Japanese war cabinet – the big six – had to be unanimous in any decision to end the war. They were perpetually gridlocked at three to three. It was only after the Emperor made the unprecedented decision to side with the peace faction that the war ended
 - Even still, a contingent of young Japanese officers staged an attempted coup, even attacking and storming the Imperial residence, in an effort to overturn the decision.
 - The insistence for unconditional surrender was predicated partly on the lessons of WW1. Truman wanted to avoid a repeat of the catastrophe of Versailles. The German army had never been defeated in the field. They had surrendered while still occupying enemy territory. Following General Pershing's advice at the end of the

Great War, the enemy ought to know “they’ve been licked” before a durable peace can be expected to take root.

IT WAS NEVER ONLY ABOUT THE EMPEROR

- Asada also refutes two other common arguments: that retention of the emperor was the sole obstacle to Japanese surrender, and that Soviet entry into the war forced surrender rather than the bombs. Regarding the Emperor, he vacillated throughout the last months of the war, largely following the wishful thinking of the hardliners. During the battle of Leyte Gulf in October 1944 he hoped to “give a telling blow to the enemy so that we may find room for a compromise peace.” As late as mid-February 1945 he confided to his Prime Minister that was “still a chance.” He expected to negotiate peace terms after having given the enemy One final blow.” The bomb, obviating the need for the Americans to invade, ended any hope of landing the “final blow.” Importantly, it is only the atomic bomb—and not Soviet entry—that the emperor mentions in his surrender address to the Japanese people.
- In any case, assurances regarding the safety of the emperor would have been premature prior to an examination of his wartime record. The legend of Hirohito’s pacifism, Max Hastings argued in *Retribution* has been firmly discredited. Hastings found no evidence suggesting that Hirohito, at any point prior to August 1945, desired peace with any real conviction. While it was Hirohito who did finally orchestrate the surrender, we recall he did so only after two atomic bombs. If he wanted peace earlier on, his equivocating proved as deadly as the hardliners’ fanaticism.
- One could argue against prosecuting the emperor, even had he proved guilty of war crimes, but the motivation could not have been justice. To have exonerated the emperor out of hand would have been to forward the suggestion that the lives of murdered Chinese, Malay, Koreans, Indonesians, British, Dutch, Americans, and near countless others counted for nothing. Justice demands the vindication of victims. Prudence or charity might overrule the requirements of justice, but it is not for the victimizers to demand that justice be overruled.

THE BOMB OR INVASION?

- In anticipation of casualties resulting from the land invasion, the US military procured 500,000 Purple Hearts.
- Casualty rates are enormously difficult to project, but these details are salient: no Japanese government had ever surrendered in the history of Japan: by Japanese count, that was two thousand six hundred years. Secondly, no Japanese unit had ever surrendered any skirmish, battle, or campaign of the entire Second World War. So, there was no guarantee that the Allies would get what can be called an “organized capitulation” of Japan’s government and armed forces. There was no guarantee that Japanese forces anywhere in the Pacific would follow the government’s order to stand down. All of that shaped Allied apprehension as to what would be entailed to eventually defeat the up to 5 million Japanese under arms in Japan.
- While it is true that American Marines are combatants, it remains equally true that most of them were conscripts or post-Pearl Harbor volunteers. This is to say that before they were Marines, they were civilians: sons and brothers, husbands and fathers, clerks, schoolteachers, and mailmen. That matters, especially in the face of Japanese intransigence in continuing a war they launched without just cause and which they knew they’d already lost. Moreover, the invasion would have weighed most severely on the Japanese themselves, both the military and civilians, but primarily civilians. Okinawa served as grim forecast of what to expect in fighting across the homeland.

- The land invasion was never the only other military option. Many called for a simple continuation of the Naval blockade. It was not perfect, but it was terribly effective. To maintain it, however, conventional bombing would have to continue in order to crush an attempts to produce aircraft and other weapons with which to fight the blockade. As with any siege, the blockade's primary purpose would be to starve the Japanese out.
- While the atomic was not necessary to either end the world (other means would have done so) nor was it necessary to avoid a land invasion (we could have maintained the blockade) two assertions remain historically credible:
 - If you wanted to save innocent lives, you dropped that bomb
 - If you wanted to end the war *as quickly as possible*, you dropped that bomb

WHY HIROSHIMA?

- Like many Japanese cities, Hiroshima had significant military assets: beyond war-related industry, its docking facilities were important troop-embarkation points. More significantly, it was the headquarters of the 2nd Army Group, recently formed in April of 1945. Among their mandates was the mobilization of guerilla warfare cells in support of *Ketsu-Go*, The Home Defense Plan. This included conscription of every male 17-40 and every female 17-40, who be trained to fight, with no uniforms, little training, and with whatever tool they had available.
- Hiroshima was not the most populated city in the approved list of targets for the atomic bomb, but about in the middle.
- Hiroshima was left largely protected from conventional bombing attacks. US strategists wanted an untouched city in which to prove to the Japanese the destructive power of the bomb.
- Demonstration blasts of the bomb over either unpopulated areas (Mt. Fuji) or purely military assets such as Truk Island. There was concern that alerting the Japanese to the planned demonstration might allow the Japanese an opportunity to thwart it. Additionally, there was fear that if the demonstrated failed, the effort to the end the world quickly would be lost. Lastly, Truk was more than 2,000 miles away from Japan, possibly making the psychological impact of the demonstration small. Also, the military installation at Truk sat alongside a deep lagoon. It was feared that if the bomb failed to detonate and landed in the lagoon, it could be recovered by the Japanese. In any case, one could argue that if the Japanese did not surrender after the "demonstration" of Hiroshima, they would not have done so for any other kind of demonstration.

COUNTING ALL THE DEAD

- The Asia-Pacific War resulted in the deaths of about 19 million noncombatants, of which maybe a million to 1.2 million were Japanese (about 25% from the atomic bombs). So, for every Japanese noncombatant who died, there were 17 or almost 18 other noncombatants. They were overwhelmingly other Asians. About 12 million of them were Chinese. Averaged over the 8 years the Chinese were at war, that works out to 4,000 thousand dead Chinese every single day. Simple demographics would suggest about a quarter of them, or more than a quarter of them, were children under 14. So, that's a thousand dead Chinese kids every day. The other 6 million dead came after December 1941. From at least 1945, a lowball estimate places the innocent dead at 250,000 per month – upwards of 8,000 souls a day.
 - It's important to emphasize that the American leadership at that time didn't know specific numbers but they were aware that enormous numbers of people were dying every single day the war went on.

- In light of the ghastly numbers, the emphasis on a quick end to the war takes on some urgency when one recalls that the first phase of the land invasion, the landing on Kyushu, wouldn't take place until November and the second, the storming of the main island, not until May 1946. How long the other alternatives—whether the blockade to the conventional bombings—would have taken is unknown, but, clearly, they would have taken some time.
- By January 1946, the Japanese rice crop had failed. Had Japan not been under American occupation, Japan would have faced a famine (by the summer of 1946, America was feeding over 10,000,000 Japanese. Had the blockade been continued in lieu of using the atomic bombs, one Japanese historian estimates 12,000,000 Japanese dead.