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The Real Reason America Used Nuclear Weapons Against Japan. It Was Not To End the War Or Save Lives.

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Atomic Weapons Were Not Needed to End the War or Save Lives

Like all Americans, I was taught that the U.S. dropped nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in order to end WWII and save both American and Japanese lives.

But most of the top American military officials at the time said *otherwise*.

The U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey group, assigned by President Truman to study the air attacks on Japan, produced a report in July of 1946 that concluded (52-56):

> Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved, 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.

General (and later president) Dwight Eisenhower – then Supreme Commander of all Allied Forces, and the officer who created most of America's WWII military plans for Europe and Japan – said:

> The Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing.

Newsweek, 11/11/63, *Ike on Ike*

Eisenhower also noted (pg. 380):

> In [July] 1945... Secretary of War Stimson, visiting my headquarters in Germany, informed me that our government was preparing to drop an atomic bomb on Japan. I was one of those who felt that there were a number of cogent

> reasons to question the wisdom of such an act. ...the Secretary, upon giving me the news of the successful bomb test in New Mexico, and of the plan for using it, asked for my reaction, apparently expecting a vigorous assent.
>
> During his recitation of the relevant facts, I had been conscious of a feeling of depression and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives. It was my belief that Japan was, at that very moment, seeking some way to surrender with a minimum loss of 'face'. The Secretary was deeply perturbed by my attitude....

Admiral William Leahy – the highest ranking member of the U.S. military from 1942 until retiring in 1949, who was the first de facto Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and who was at the center of all major American military decisions in World War II – wrote (pg. 441):

> It is my opinion that 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 because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons.
>
> The lethal possibilities of atomic warfare in the future are frightening. My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children.

General Douglas MacArthur agreed (pg. 65, 70-71):

> MacArthur's views about the decision to drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were starkly different from what the general public supposed .... When I asked General MacArthur about the decision to drop the bomb, I was surprised to learn he had not even been consulted. What, I asked, would his advice have been? He replied that he saw no military justification for the dropping of the bomb. 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.

Moreover (pg. 512):

> The Potsdam declaration in July, demand[ed] that Japan surrender unconditionally or face 'prompt and utter destruction.' MacArthur was appalled. He knew that the Japanese would never renounce their emperor, and that without him an orderly transition to peace would be impossible anyhow, because his people would never submit to Allied occupation unless he ordered it. Ironically, when the surrender did come, it was conditional, and the condition was a continuation of the imperial reign. Had the General's advice been followed, the resort to atomic weapons at Hiroshima and Nagasaki might have been unnecessary.

Similarly, Assistant Secretary of War John McLoy noted (pg. 500):

> I have always felt that if, in our ultimatum to the Japanese government issued from Potsdam [in July 1945], we had referred to the retention of the emperor as a constitutional monarch and had made some reference to the reasonable accessibility of raw materials to the future Japanese government, it would have been accepted. Indeed, I believe that even in the form it was delivered, there was some disposition on the part of the Japanese to give it favorable consideration. When the war was over I arrived at this conclusion after talking with a number of Japanese officials who had been closely associated with the decision of the then Japanese government, to reject the ultimatum, as it was presented. I believe we missed the opportunity of effecting a Japanese surrender, completely satisfactory to us, without the necessity of dropping the bombs.

Under Secretary of the Navy Ralph Bird said:

> I think that the Japanese were ready for peace, and they already had approached the Russians and, I think, the Swiss. And that suggestion of [giving] a warning [of the atomic bomb] was a face-saving proposition for them, and one that they could have readily accepted.
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> ***
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> In my opinion, the Japanese war was really won before we ever used the atom bomb. Thus, it wouldn't have been necessary for us to disclose our nuclear position and stimulate the Russians to develop the same thing much more rapidly than they would have if we had not dropped the bomb.

War Was Really Won Before We Used A-Bomb, U.S. News and World Report, 8/15/60, pg. 73-75.

He also noted (pg. 144-145, 324):

> It definitely seemed to me that the Japanese were becoming weaker and weaker. They were surrounded by the Navy. They couldn't get any imports and they couldn't export anything. Naturally, as time went on and the war developed in our favor it was quite logical to hope and expect that with the proper kind of a warning the Japanese would then be in a position to make peace, which would have made it unnecessary for us to drop the bomb and have had to bring Russia in.

General Curtis LeMay, the tough cigar-smoking Army Air Force "hawk," stated publicly shortly before the nuclear bombs were dropped on Japan:

> The war would have been over in two weeks. . . . The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all.

The Vice Chairman of the U.S. Bombing Survey Paul Nitze wrote (pg. 36-37, 44-45):

> [I] concluded that even without the atomic bomb, Japan was likely to surrender in a matter of months. My own view was that Japan would capitulate by November 1945.

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> Even without the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it seemed highly unlikely, given what we found to have been the mood of the Japanese government, that a U.S. invasion of the islands [scheduled for November 1, 1945] would have been necessary.

Deputy Director of the Office of Naval Intelligence Ellis Zacharias wrote:

> Just when the Japanese were ready to capitulate, we went ahead and introduced to the world the most devastating weapon it had ever seen and, in effect, gave the go-ahead to Russia to swarm over Eastern Asia.
>
> Washington decided that Japan had been given its chance and now it was time to use the A-bomb.
>
> I submit that it was the wrong decision. It was wrong on strategic grounds. And it was wrong on humanitarian grounds.

Ellis Zacharias, *How We Bungled the Japanese Surrender*, Look, 6/6/50, pg. 19-21.

Brigadier General Carter Clarke – the military intelligence officer in charge of preparing summaries of intercepted Japanese cables for President Truman and his advisors – said (pg. 359):

> 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.

Many other high-level military officers concurred. For example:

> 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 [the tiny handful of people putting pressure on the president to drop atom bombs on Japan.]

British officers were of the same mind. For example, General Sir Hastings Ismay, Chief of Staff to the British Minister of Defence, said to Prime Minister Churchill that "when Russia came into the war against Japan, the Japanese would probably wish to get out on almost any

terms short of the dethronement of the Emperor."

On hearing that the atomic test was successful, Ismay's private reaction was one of "revulsion."

Why Were Bombs Dropped on Populated *Cities* Without Military Value?

Even military officers who favored use of nuclear weapons mainly favored using them on unpopulated areas or Japanese military targets ... not cities.

For example, Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Navy Lewis Strauss proposed to Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal that a non-lethal demonstration of atomic weapons would be enough to convince the Japanese to surrender ... and the Navy Secretary agreed (pg. 145, 325):

> I proposed to Secretary Forrestal that the weapon should be demonstrated before it was used. Primarily it was because it was clear to a number of people, myself among them, that the war was very nearly over. The Japanese were nearly ready to capitulate... My proposal to the Secretary was that the weapon should be demonstrated over some area accessible to Japanese observers and where its effects would be dramatic. I remember suggesting that a satisfactory place for such a demonstration would be a large forest of cryptomeria trees not far from Tokyo. The cryptomeria tree is the Japanese version of our redwood... I anticipated that a bomb detonated at a suitable height above such a forest... would lay the trees out in windrows from the center of the explosion in all directions as though they were matchsticks, and, of course, set them afire in the center. It seemed to me that a demonstration of this sort would prove to the Japanese that we could destroy any of their cities at will... Secretary Forrestal agreed wholeheartedly with the recommendation...
>
> It seemed to me that such a weapon was not necessary to bring the war to a successful conclusion, that once used it would find its way into the armaments of the world...

General George Marshall agreed:

> Contemporary documents show that Marshall felt "these weapons might first be used against straight military objectives such as a large naval installation and then if no complete result was derived from the effect of that, he thought we ought to designate a number of large manufacturing areas from which the people would be warned to leave–telling the Japanese that we intend to destroy such centers...."
>
> As the document concerning Marshall's views suggests, the question of whether the use of the atomic bomb was justified turns ... on whether the bombs had to be used against a largely civilian target rather than a strictly military target—which, in fact, was the explicit choice since although there were Japanese troops in the cities, neither Hiroshima nor Nagasaki was deemed militarily vital by U.S. planners. (This is one of the reasons neither had been heavily bombed up to this point in the war.) Moreover, targeting [at Hiroshima and Nagasaki] was aimed explicitly on non-military facilities surrounded by workers' homes.

Historians Agree that the Bomb Wasn't Needed

Historians agree that nuclear weapons did not need to be used to stop the war or save lives.

As historian Doug Long notes:

> U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission historian J. Samuel Walker has studied the history of research on the decision to use nuclear weapons on Japan. In his conclusion he writes, "The consensus among scholars is that the bomb was not needed to avoid an invasion of Japan and to end the war within a relatively short time. It is clear that alternatives to the bomb existed and that Truman and his advisors knew it." (J. Samuel Walker, The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update, Diplomatic History, Winter 1990, pg. 110).

Politicians Agreed

Many high-level politicians agreed. For example, Herbert Hoover said (pg. 142):

> The Japanese were prepared to negotiate all the way from February 1945…up to and before the time the atomic bombs were dropped; …if such leads had been followed up, there would have been no occasion to drop the [atomic] bombs.

Under Secretary of State Joseph Grew noted (pg. 29-32):

> In the light of available evidence I myself and others felt that if such a categorical statement about the [retention of the] dynasty had been issued in May, 1945, the surrender-minded elements in the [Japanese] Government might well have been afforded by such a statement a valid reason and the necessary strength to come to an early clearcut decision.
>
> If surrender could have been brought about in May, 1945, or even in June or July, before the entrance of Soviet Russia into the [Pacific] war and the use of the atomic bomb, the world would have been the gainer.

Why Then Were Atom Bombs Dropped on Japan?

If dropping nuclear bombs was unnecessary to end the war or to save lives, why was the decision to drop them made? Especially over the objections of so many top military and political figures?

One theory is that scientists like to play with their toys:

> On September 9, 1945, Admiral William F. Halsey, commander of the Third Fleet, was publicly 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."

However, most of the Manhattan Project scientists who developed the atom bomb were opposed to using it on Japan.

Albert Einstein – an important catalyst for the development of the atom bomb (but not directly connected with the Manhattan Project) – said differently:

> "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.

Indeed, some of the Manhattan Project scientists wrote directly to the secretary of defense in 1945 to try to dissuade him from dropping the bomb:

> We believe that these considerations make the use of nuclear bombs for an early, unannounced attack against Japan inadvisable. If the United States would be the first to release this new means of indiscriminate destruction upon mankind, she would sacrifice public support throughout the world, precipitate the race of armaments, and prejudice the possibility of reaching an international agreement on the future control of such weapons.

Political and Social Problems, Manhattan Engineer District Records, Harrison-Bundy files, folder # 76, National Archives (also contained in: Martin Sherwin, *A World Destroyed*, 1987 edition, pg. 323-333).

The scientists questioned the ability of destroying Japanese cities with atomic bombs to bring surrender when destroying Japanese cities with conventional bombs had not done so, and – like some of the military officers quoted above – recommended a demonstration of the atomic bomb for Japan in an unpopulated area.

The Real Explanation?

History.com notes:

> In the years since the two atomic bombs were dropped on Japan, a number of historians have suggested that the weapons had a two-pronged objective …. It has been suggested that the second objective was to demonstrate the new weapon of mass destruction to the Soviet Union. By August 1945, relations between the Soviet Union and the United States had deteriorated badly. The Potsdam Conference between U.S. President Harry S. Truman, Russian leader Joseph Stalin, and Winston Churchill (before being replaced by Clement Attlee) ended just four days before the bombing of Hiroshima. The meeting was marked by recriminations and suspicion between the Americans and Soviets. Russian armies were occupying most of Eastern Europe. Truman and many of his advisers hoped that the U.S. atomic monopoly might offer diplomatic leverage with the Soviets. In this fashion, the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan can be seen as the first shot of the Cold War.

New Scientist reported in 2005:

> The US decision to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 was meant to kick-start the Cold War rather than end the Second World War, according to two nuclear historians who say they have new evidence backing the controversial theory.
>
> Causing a fission reaction in several kilograms of uranium and plutonium and

> killing over 200,000 people 60 years ago was done more to impress the Soviet Union than to cow Japan, they say. And the US President who took the decision, Harry Truman, was culpable, they add.
>
> "He knew he was beginning the process of annihilation of the species," says Peter Kuznick, director of the Nuclear Studies Institute at American University in Washington DC, US. "It was not just a war crime; it was a crime against humanity."
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> [The conventional explanation of using the bombs to end the war and save lives] is disputed by Kuznick and Mark Selden, a historian from Cornell University in Ithaca, New York, US.
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> ***
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> New studies of the US, Japanese and Soviet diplomatic archives suggest that Truman's main motive was to limit Soviet expansion in Asia, Kuznick claims. Japan surrendered because the Soviet Union began an invasion a few days after the Hiroshima bombing, not because of the atomic bombs themselves, he says.
>
> According to an account by Walter Brown, assistant to then-US secretary of state James Byrnes, Truman agreed at a meeting three days before the bomb was dropped on Hiroshima that Japan was "looking for peace". Truman was told by his army generals, Douglas Macarthur and Dwight Eisenhower, and his naval chief of staff, William Leahy, that there was no military need to use the bomb.
>
> "Impressing Russia was more important than ending the war in Japan," says Selden.

John Pilger points out:

> The US secretary of war, Henry Stimson, told President Truman he was "fearful" that the US air force would have Japan so "bombed out" that the new weapon would not be able "to show its strength". He later admitted that "no effort was made, and none was seriously considered, to achieve surrender merely in order not to have to use the bomb". His foreign policy colleagues were eager "to browbeat the Russians with the bomb held rather ostentatiously on our hip". General Leslie Groves, director of the Manhattan Project that made the bomb, testified: "There was never any illusion on my part that Russia was our enemy, and that the project was conducted on that basis." The day after Hiroshima was obliterated, President Truman voiced his satisfaction with the "overwhelming success" of "the experiment".

We'll give the last word to University of Maryland professor of political economy – and former Legislative Director in the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, and Special Assistant in the Department of State – Gar Alperovitz:

> Though most Americans are unaware of the fact, increasing numbers of historians now recognize the United States did not need to use the atomic bomb to end the war against Japan in 1945. Moreover, this essential judgment was expressed by the vast majority of top American military leaders in all three services in the years after the war ended: Army, Navy and Army Air Force. Nor

was this the judgment of “liberals,” as is sometimes thought today. In fact, leading conservatives were far more outspoken in challenging the decision as unjustified and immoral than American liberals in the years following World War II.

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Instead [of allowing other options to end the war, such as letting the Soviets attack Japan with ground forces], the United States rushed to use two atomic bombs at almost exactly the time that an August 8 Soviet attack had originally been scheduled: Hiroshima on August 6 and Nagasaki on August 9. The timing itself has obviously raised questions among many historians. The available evidence, though not conclusive, strongly suggests that the atomic bombs may well have been used in part because American leaders “preferred”—as Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Martin Sherwin has put it—to end the war with the bombs rather than the Soviet attack. Impressing the Soviets during the early diplomatic sparring that ultimately became the Cold War also appears likely to have been a significant factor.

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The most illuminating perspective, however, comes from top World War II American military leaders. The conventional wisdom that the atomic bomb saved a million lives is so widespread that ... most Americans haven’t paused to ponder something rather striking to anyone seriously concerned with the issue: Not only did most top U.S. military leaders think the bombings were unnecessary and unjustified, many were morally offended by what they regarded as the unnecessary destruction of Japanese cities and what were essentially noncombat populations. Moreover, they spoke about it quite openly and publicly.

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Shortly before his death General George C. Marshall quietly defended the decision, but for the most part he is on record as repeatedly saying that it was not a military decision, but rather a political one.

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