Was the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki justified?

Viewpoint: Yes, the U.S. atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were justified because the Japanese were determined to defend their homeland to the last man in order to raise the human cost for Allied victory and induce a negotiated peace.

Viewpoint: No, although the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was justified and morally defensible, the attack on Nagasaki was, in its haste, a morally indefensible result of bureaucratic ineptitude.

The atomic bombing of Hiroshima (6 August 1945) and Nagasaki (9 August 1945) is most commonly presented in American templates. The Japanese become reactive instead of proactive: "If the United States had done so and so, then Japan would—or would not—have done thus and such." In fact, Japan held the central position. In the summer of 1945 its leaders were convinced that making a final stand in the home islands offered solid possibilities for raising the costs of an invasion beyond American capacities to stomach, and thereby opening a door to negotiations on Japanese terms. That postulate informed Japanese planning for the rest of World War II. No simple dilution of unconditional surrender by the United States would produce a positive reaction. As for the often-cited efforts to use Russia as a mediator, Japan sought, at most, Russian aid in obtaining peace on terms that were never made plain. Nowhere in the diplomatic exchanges were there indications of either an offer to surrender or a discussion of possible surrender terms. Instead, the correspondence bristled with determination to fight to the end, at whatever cost.

U.S. cryptanalysts were able to read these exchanges. They were also aware that the Japanese were concentrating in the very sectors of Kyushu that U.S. planners had chosen for beachheads should an invasion become necessary. The search for an alternative became correspondingly imperative. Electronic intelligence demonstrated beyond dispute that conventional aerial bombing, escalated to area raids inflicting unprecedented devastation and casualties, was doing nothing to change the minds of Japanese leaders prior to Hiroshima. Nor did advocates of some form of longer-term blockade/bombardment make a confident case before the nuclear fact. Not American culture but Japanese decisions, in short, reduced the chances of not using the bomb to zero—a decision that was the best of a set of bad choices.
Viewpoint:
Yes, the U.S. atomic bomb attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were justified because the Japanese were determined to defend their homeland to the last man in order to raise the human cost for Allied victory and induce a negotiated peace.

On 15 August 1945 Japanese soldiers, sailors, and civilians listened to the voice of a man on the radio they had revered as a god but rarely heard. Emperor Hirohito, the sovereign of Imperial Japan, announced the unconditional surrender of the Japanese Empire to the Allied Powers. This unprecedented act ended eight years of bloodshed endured by his people. Despite months of diplomatic maneuvering, the imperial decision to surrender unconditionally had only been made in the last twenty-four hours and was the direct result of the American atomic bombings of Hiroshima (6 August 1945) and Nagasaki (9 August 1945).

The end, however, had been in sight since the U.S. 2nd and 4th Marine Divisions assaulted Saipan (15 June 1944), breaching what Japanese Imperial General Headquarters (Imperial GHQ) considered their Absolute Zone of National Defense. Following this American landing, Tojo Hideki resigned and Koiso Kuniaki replaced him as prime minister of Japan. Koiso, like Tojo before him, was unable to stop the American advance toward his homeland and left office just eight months after accepting the job. Following the resignation of Koiso, the jushin (a council of former government officials) selected Suzuki Kantaro as prime minister with the hope that he could consolidate Army and Navy support for a negotiated peace with the United States.

On 8 April 1945, a day after Suzuki formed his cabinet, the Supreme Council for the Direction of War, with Suzuki at its head, approved an operational plan to defeat the Americans on the shores of Japan. The Ketsu-Go (Decisive) plan took shape throughout the spring and summer of 1945. Many Japanese officials believed that the Allied victory in Europe (8 May 1945) had created a special moral situation in the United States. The American public, having tasted victory, would press their government for an early return of servicemen and rapid victory in the Pacific. The Japanese determined that a decisive blow at the landing point would cause a decrease in morale and lead to an acceptance of a peace favorable to Japan. The Suzuki Cabinet approved the plan in the presence of Hirohito and called for a “fight to the bitter end.” As the hawks planned, Hirohito remained silent.

Morale had also been an important consideration for the American high command. Downfall, the code name for the American invasion of Japan, had been divided into two operations. Operation Olympic would begin on 1 November 1945, and Operation Coronet would follow on 1 March 1946. Olympic alone would dwarf the Allied landing on Normandy (6 June 1944). Olympic called for a simultaneous landing of ten American divisions in southern Kyushu with three more divisions held in reserve in the immediate area. Furthermore, a maritime line of supply reaching all the way to the Marianas Islands and Philippines would have supported these assault forces. In Europe, just five Allied divisions landed on Normandy and had to cross only the one-hundred-mile-wide English Channel. Moreover, the Japanese were far more prepared to receive the American invaders than the Germans had been.

The Japanese suspected the U.S. invasion would come in southern Kyushu. Furthermore, the Japanese Army had correctly determined the exact beaches selected by the American planners as the only possible landing areas on the island. Again, Imperial GHQ planned to destroy the American forces on the beaches. Exactly how many Japanese soldiers would have faced the Americans on Kyushu cannot be ascertained. Most reports have claimed that a minimum of 280,000 combat troops would have faced the 380,000 American invaders. With the Japanese resolved to confront the American forces in an all-or-nothing effort, Imperial GHQ would have also probably committed most of its 900,000-strong army in northern Kyushu to the fray. Such a massive operation, had it been necessary, would have prolonged the war for another nine to twelve months and cost several hundred thousand lives among American and Japanese soldiers and civilians. The atomic bomb, although not ending the Pacific war, forced the Japanese to give up before such a nightmare became a reality.

President Harry S Truman regarded the atomic bomb as a “military weapon and never had any doubt that it should [have been] used.” This statement, questioned by many scholars, was wholly consistent with the military and scientific understanding of the atomic weapon at the time. By spring of 1945 a committee convened to select the target for the soon-to-be-completed weapon. Up until that time several reports measured the predicted effect of the uranium and plutonium bombs in tons of TNT. At the time a single B-29 could drop about eight to nine tons of explosives; thus, these estimates com-
pared the use of one atomic weapon to that of five hundred B-29s in a conventional raid. In the spring J. Robert Oppenheimer, head of the Manhattan Project, which created the atomic device, imparted nothing to alter this view except that radiation would linger in the area. When asked to elaborate on the subject, he said nothing (or at least nothing else has been recorded). The recommendation was made that Kyoto, Hiroshima, and Niigata would be the best targets. Kyoto’s status as a cultural center, however, precluded it from further consideration.

Truman presciently declared that Hiroshima was a military target, as if to save himself from expected criticisms. Nonetheless, as Richard B. Frank has noted in Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire (1999), Truman only demonstrated his lack of knowledge regarding the atomic bomb. Oppenheimer believed that it had great psychological applications. Through correct targeting it could cause such destruction as to politically coerce the Japanese government into accepting an unconditional surrender just to save itself from further destruction.

In Japan, the Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal, Kido Koichi, convinced Hirohito to consider a negotiated peace. Kido proposed that three main conditions would be attached to it. Essentially the Japanese wanted to retain the sovereignty of the Imperial line, execute their own disarmament after the war, and keep foreign soldiers from occupying their homeland. In July, Fumimaro and Sato Naotake traveled to Moscow to urge the Soviets to mediate a peace between the United States and Japan. Although they offered the Soviets everything from trade agreements to military alliances, they did not know that Joseph Stalin had already agreed to enter the war in February 1945. Their pleas fell upon deaf ears.

At 2:45 A.M., 6 August 1945, Colonel Paul W. Tibbets piloted the Enola Gay of the 509th Composite Group at Tinian toward destiny. The uranium bomb, code-named “Little Boy,” detonated at 8:16 A.M. over the courtyard of the Shima Hospital in Hiroshima. Across the world, Truman received notification of the successful bombing after returning from a conference in Potsdam, Germany, where he had approved its use and issued the Potsdam Declaration calling for the unconditional surrender of Japan. A second message read in part, “Visible effects greater than in any test.” On the ground in Hiroshima, the Japanese people were experiencing the incomparable magnitude of the atomic blast. A postwar calculation discerned the bomb’s explosive capacity as equivalent to 12,500 tons of TNT and acknowledged that the epicenter reached 5,400 degrees Fahrenheit.

On 9 August 1945, Suzuki commenced a meeting of his Supreme Council. In the meeting, Suzuki, Foreign Minister Togo Shigenori, and Navy Minister Yonai Mitsumasa wanted to accept the Potsdam Declaration, only with the provision that the Imperial line remain intact. War Minister Anami Korechika, Army Chief Umeza Yoshijiro, and Navy Chief Toyoda Soemu, however, wanted to pursue the decisive battle strategy until the Americans accepted Kido’s previously proposed conditions. Suzuki called for the emperor to break the tie among the Big Six. Robert J. C. Butow argued in Japan’s Decision to Surrender (1954) that the emperor merely stated his opinion when he sided with Togo’s one-condition plan. Nevertheless, he specifically questioned the logic of further planning for the decisive defense of the homeland. Also, he “concluded that continuing the war would only mean destruction for the nation.”

The atomic bombs gave Japanese peace advocates something that they did not have before—a tangible reason for wanting peace. The Japanese military system had been based on their own spiritual strength vis-à-vis that of the enemy. It was on this premise that Imperial GHQ prepared to meet the American invaders on the beaches of Kyushu with the full expectation that they could repel a first wave of attacks. The atomic bomb, however, posed a different problem. It was a technological device. Urging surrender because the Japanese could not compete
technologically with a nation that could have a hundred atomic bombs (as Anami erroneously believed) would allow some saving of face and preservation of the Japanese notion of spiritual superiority.

In December 1945 Suzuki noted that the Supreme Council had continued to prepare for the decisive confrontation with the United States until they dropped the atomic bomb. According to Suzuki, the Cabinet reasoned that the Americans, regardless of incendiary attacks, would still have had to invade Japan to win the war. Thus the Japanese Army and Navy continued preparing for their joint defense of the homeland. Yet, he added that with the advent of the atomic bomb, the Americans no longer needed to invade to win the peace. Suzuki directly related the Japanese decision to surrender with the dropping of the atomic bomb.

During the Imperial conference on 9 August the council was notified of the second bomb attack on Nagasaki and the Soviet invasion of Manchuria. The latter was unfortunate, especially considering Sato and Konoe’s hopeful peace missions to Moscow, but not unexpected. The Japanese Army had been planning for such a contingency since the announcement in May that the Soviet Union would not renew their non-aggression pact with the Japanese in 1946. Even though Tōjō suspected the Soviets might invade, he had no proof. Moreover, some government officials, as revealed in a postwar document translated by the U.S. Army, believed that the United States did want the Soviets to intervene because if that were to happen they would have to give up a sphere of influence during the subsequent occupation.

This situation was clearly not the case; nor did the Truman administration decide to drop the atomic bomb in order to gain political advantages over the Soviets in any future U.S.-Soviet conflict. Both Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall and Air Chief Henry H. “Hap” Arnold wanted the Soviets in the war against Japan for different reasons. Marshall believed that the war was over and only the cost of ending the conflict remained. Intervention by the Soviet Union would help defray some of those closing costs. Arnold still hoped that the U.S. Army Air Force could win the war before the invasion would be necessary. He planned on using Siberian airfields to place a larger part of his air fleet within range of the homeland. Although Michael S. Sherry, in The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon (1987), added that Secretary of State James F. Byrnes had been tempted by the notion of employing nuclear diplomacy against the Soviets, he correctly acknowledged that Truman did not know enough about the situation to have made the decision based on that assumption.

Clearly, the blame lay with the Japanese government for the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some have argued that had the United States been willing to accept a conditional peace based on the proposal by the Lord Keeper in June, much of this unnecessary bloodshed could have been avoided. The United States, however, received few official indications that the Japanese government was serious about ending the war. The Americans had been attacked and brought into a war that they did not begin; therefore, it was not their place to begin peace negotiations either. Furthermore, after such bloodshed, sacrifices, and hardship in the Pacific war, the four conditions Kido proposed were appropriately not considered as serious peace overtures. All the Japanese had to do to end the war in June was really all they did to end it in August—accept the unconditional surrender. Because they did not, the Americans continued the war.

Moreover, the Pacific war had not been diplomatically or militarily limited. Each nation strove to maximize its peculiar national advantages over the other. As the Japanese believed that their soldiers were spiritually superior to the Americans, they wanted to face them man-to-man in a decisive battle to the finish—or at least until they attained a favorable peace. If they perished, their deaths would honor their families past and present. The employment of the atomic bomb was the culmination of a U.S. attempt to end the Pacific war as quickly as possible by all military means available.

The employment of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and the second bomb on Nagasaki has been justified by both American and Japanese accounts. If the emperor had desired peace all along, why did he not speak up during the conference in June that called for a “fight to the bitter end?” Hirohito had to wait for the appropriate moment to intervene and command the Army and Navy to surrender. Any decision to do so earlier, before an exhibition of the futility of resistance, would have resulted in a far greater military uprising than that of 14–15 August. The first bomb had not convinced Hirohito to accept the Potsdam Declaration. “Little Boy” provoked Hirohito to let go of the three-condition plan in favor of the one-condition proposal. The second atomic bomb, and the fear that the Americans would drop more in the coming days, proved crucial in Hirohito’s decision to break the tie in the Suzuki Cabinet, spare his country further destruction, and accept the Potsdam Declaration without condition.

—MICHAEL PERRY MAY, KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
No, although the atomic bombing of Hiroshima was justified and morally defensible, the attack on Nagasaki was, in its haste, a morally indefensible result of bureaucratic ineptitude.

In 1994 the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum became embroiled in intense controversy. The director, Martin Harwit, assembled an ambitious exhibit to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the fateful mission of the Enola Gay against Hiroshima (6 August 1945). The exhibit incorporated U.S. and Japanese perspectives, as well as charred objects from Hiroshima that survived the attack. After a highly charged and politically contentious debate, veterans' organizations and a Republican-controlled Congress combined to quash the exhibit, forcing Harwit to resign. They contended that it sympathized too much with Japanese suffering and not enough with the sacrifices of American servicemen. They also wanted the exhibit to argue that the A-bombs had decisively ended the war. In the much-simplified exhibit presented by the Smithsonian in 1995, an innocuous and seemingly incontrovertible statement explained that "the use of the [atomic] bomb led to the immediate surrender of Japan and made unnecessary the planned invasion of the Japanese home islands." The new exhibit no longer challenged Americans to reexamine received beliefs. Instead, it reassured them that the United States had acted justly and morally in attacking Hiroshima and Nagasaki (9 August 1945).

In contrast to this simplistic storyline, however, historians have raised complex and contentious issues in reviewing events surrounding the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Indeed, by 1950 prominent military officers such as General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Admiral William D. Leahy had already expressed serious reservations about the necessity and morality of these attacks. In examining these complex questions, historians have attempted to evaluate President Harry S Truman's decision based upon what he and his advisers knew or believed to be true in 1945. One must recall that they acted without benefit of retrospect—they knew nothing of the Cold War or the nuclear-arms race and little of the long-term effects of atomic radiation.

Having celebrated Germany's unconditional surrender in May 1945, war-weary American leaders turned their attention to Japan and sought the quickest way to force a fanatical and seemingly implacable enemy to surrender, while minimizing American casualties in the process. With this goal uppermost in his mind, Truman made a just and morally defensible decision to use the atomic bomb against Hiroshima. The attack on Nagasaki, in contrast, was unduly hasty and driven largely by military expediency and bureaucratic momentum.

Well before 1945, Allied strategic-bombing doctrine had come to promote the legitimacy of mass raids against civilians to weaken the enemy's morale and will to resist. Inhibitions against killing Japanese were even weaker than those against Germans, according to John W. Dower in War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War (1986), because of "species distancing," a deliberate propaganda campaign waged in the United States to dehumanize the Japanese. Seemingly confirming to Americans that Japanese soldiers were somehow both less-than-human beasts and superhuman fanatics was their brutal torture and execution of Allied prisoners of war and their often suicidal resistance in defending Saipan, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa, where they fought virtually to the last. Tactics adopted by Japanese kamikaze (divine wind) pilots were equally disturbing, as these pilots willingly sacrificed themselves in attempts to crash their planes into U.S. naval ships (at Okinawa kamikazes succeeded in sinking twenty-eight ships and damaging a further 176). Even more shocking to U.S. soldiers was the behavior of Japanese civilians on Saipan who, rather than surrendering, murdered their children before committing suicide by jumping off cliffs.

With such shockingly powerful evidence of Japanese devotion to bushido (the warrior code of honor) and the emperor, U.S. officials concluded that equally powerful attacks would be needed to convince Japan to surrender. A major element of this effort was massive firebombing raids against major Japanese cities. On 9 March 1945, 334 B-29 bombers armed only with incendiaries attacked Tokyo at low levels. In the ensuing fires at least eighty-three thousand Japanese died, with another forty thousand wounded and one million made homeless. Millions more lost their homes as U.S. firebombing raids continued. By July the fire raids had gutted more than 40 percent of sixty-six urban centers in Japan. Despite this devastation, the Japanese in July still had two million soldiers and 10,500 aircraft ready to defend the home islands, with 5,000 aircraft dedicated to kamikazes. Japanese soldiers' and civilians' wills to resist appeared very much intact.

How, then, to weaken Japan's will to resist quickly and efficiently without exposing U.S. servicemen to unnecessary risks? Atomic weap-
ons seemed to hold the answer. Compared to the bloody invasions of Iwo Jima or Okinawa, bombing raids hit Japan directly and resulted in far fewer American casualties. To Truman and his advisers, atomic bombs simply offered a more efficient and intimidating way to continue work that was already in progress. Given the remarkable resiliency evinced by the Japanese people, it seemed to Truman and Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson that only a tremendous shock would convince the Japanese to surrender. The shock of the atomic bomb, Truman hoped, might prove powerful enough to shatter Japanese resistance, thereby ending the war quickly and saving American lives. With no demurrals from his leading military or political advisers, Truman gave the order to attack.

In using the atomic bomb, Truman had expressed the goal of attacking a purely military target. Since no large military targets remained in August 1945, however, it proved impossible to meet this ethical goal while simultaneously striking a shattering blow to Japan's will to resist. Attacking Hiroshima seemed at least partially to fulfill both criteria. A center for shipbuilding and armaments manufacturing, Hiroshima in August 1945 served as a military headquarters for the Second Army, with barracks for forty-three thousand soldiers. It was also a major center for communications, whose destruction would be recognized almost immediately by Japanese authorities in Tokyo.

Two days after the Enola Gay dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, the Soviet Union entered the war against Japan. The next day the second atomic bomb devastated Nagasaki. Within five days the Japanese surrendered and the wisdom of Truman's decision seemed unassailably vindicated.

Nevertheless, before the nuclear attacks U.S. officials had discussed other alternatives. One option was to demonstrate, in an isolated location, the power of the atomic bomb to the Japanese. Stimson dismissed this strategy, however, because the bomb might possibly fail to detonate when dropped from an aircraft (the successful Trinity test in July had taken place in a tower above ground). Possible physical defects in the bomb itself might also prevent detonation. Any failure could conceivably strengthen the already considerable resolve of Japanese leaders, as well as forfeit the element of surprise. Yet, more importantly, U.S. officials thought a demonstration would not end the war as quickly as actual combat use of the bomb.

Another option discussed was a moderation of the demand for unconditional surrender. Specifically, the United States might release a statement expressing respect for the emperor's position without having to recognize his semidivine status in Japanese culture. Tentative Japanese peace feelers had indicated that the emperor's position was the major sticking point preventing Japan's surrender.

Yet, Truman arguably had little freedom of action in this area. The policy of unconditional surrender was a powerful legacy of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Truman, who had been president only since 12 April 1945, argued that the political or psychological freedom to overturn an important tenet of FDR's legacy, even if he had wanted to. Moreover, Secretary of State James F. Byrnes lobbied hard to keep the terms of surrender unconditional. Apparently fearing that any moderation in terms might be interpreted by hardline elements in Japan as a sign of weakness, rather than as respect or sensitivity to Japanese cultural beliefs, Truman stuck by previous demands for unconditional surrender.

**TOKYO Responds**

On 6 August 1945 the United States dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, resulting in total destruction of the city and massive loss of life. Two days later Radio Tokyo responded to the attack by broadcasting a report on results of the blast.

*With the gradual restoration of order following the disastrous ruin that struck the city of Hiroshima in the wake of the enemy's new-type bomb on Monday morning, the authorities are still unable to obtain a definite checkup on the extent of the casualties sustained by the civilian population.*

*Medical relief agencies that were rushed from neighboring districts were unable to distinguish, much less identify, the dead from the injured.*

*Within neighborhoods, the impact of the bomb was so terrific that practically all living things, human and animal, were literally seared to death by the tremendous heat and pressure engendered by the blast. All the dead and injured were burned beyond recognition.*

*With houses and buildings crushed, including the emergency medical facilities, the authorities are having their hands full in giving every available relief under the circumstances.*

*The effect of the bomb was widespread. Those outdoors burned to death while those indoors were killed by the indescribable pressure and heat.*

*The methods the United States have employed in the war against Japan have exceeded in horrible cruelty the atrocities perpetrated by Genghis Khan in India and Afghanistan.*

Some commentators have suggested that Truman should have explored other options as well. Instead of rushing to use the atomic bomb, the United States could have continued conventional bombing raids while blockading the Japanese home islands. Combined with Soviet entry into the war and some form of guarantee of keeping the emperor, bombing raids and the blockade may have been enough to persuade the Japanese that further resistance posed intolerable risks to Japan’s future existence.

Such a combination of events has been thoroughly examined by Barton J. Bernstein. He concludes, in a 1995 issue of *Diplomatic History*, that these events would likely, although not certainly, have led to Japan’s surrender prior to November 1945 and an Allied invasion. As Bernstein points out, however, in conjectural history there are no certainties. An invasion might still have been required in November, with U.S. casualties of perhaps forty thousand in the first month. Even if an invasion had not been needed, hundreds or perhaps thousands of Americans may have been killed or wounded while blockading and bombing Japan. Many Japanese looked forward to glorious deaths in ramming planes into American bombers or in mounting suicide attacks in midget submarines against American ships. Meanwhile, an unknown number of Allied prisoners of war would also have succumbed to starvation or disease as the war dragged on.

This scenario is problematic for a different reason: it ignores U.S. concerns about Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union. The longer Soviet troops fought against Japanese forces in Manchuria, and the higher the losses they sustained, the more strongly Stalin would have insisted on greater territorial concessions from Japan and a larger say in the future of postwar Japan and East Asia. Ending the war quickly, before Stalin could make stronger claims on Japanese territory or establish a firmer foothold in East Asia, was an important goal for Truman and his advisers.

A few historians have expanded upon this goal to suggest that the United States decided to drop the atomic bomb primarily to impress and intimidate the Soviets, hoping thereby to wring foreign policy concessions from Stalin after the war. Truman and his advisers recognized that the atomic bomb would impress and perhaps intimidate the Soviets, thereby making them more amenable to postwar Allied persuasion. Yet, postwar “atomic diplomacy” was decidedly secondary in importance to the main goal of impressing and intimidating the Japanese to persuade them to surrender.

Historians have also questioned how Truman could have justified a decision against using the atomic bomb, especially since the United States had spent three years and $2 billion developing it. With all his leading advisers agreeing that the atomic bomb offered an excellent chance at ending the war without the need for costly invasions, Truman had little to do except nod his approval. Given the firebombing raids and brutal fighting that had preceded this final order, the Hiroshima attack was essentially a continuation of policy by superior technical means: an attack that might finally persuade a fanatical foe that surrender was more desirable than obliteration.

Did Nagasaki also need to be attacked in order to persuade the Japanese to surrender? In his detailed analysis of events surrounding Japan’s decision to surrender, Bernstein has concluded that the attack on Nagasaki “was almost definitely unnecessary.” The timing of this attack—three days after Hiroshima—was driven not by political or strategic concerns but by weather. Because an extended period of unfavorable weather was predicted, crews rushed to drop the second bomb before conditions forced them to stand down indefinitely. On the day of the attack Nagasaki was actually the secondary target; clouds had obscured the primary objective (Kokura).

The rationale for this attack appears to have been to use two atomic bombs in rapid succession to foil the Japanese into thinking the United States had a large stockpile (in actuality, the Americans had only one more atomic device that could have been ready by September). The three-day gap between Hiroshima and Nagasaki, however, failed to give the Japanese sufficient time to absorb the implications of a radically new weapon of unprecedented destructiveness about which the Japanese knew little.

Nagasaki represents a victory for bureaucratic inertia. To the U.S. military, Nagasaki was “business as usual,” another bombing mission to be flown to devastate yet another Japanese city. Clearly, U.S. officials had underestimated Hiroshima’s impact while failing to reexamine the wisdom of the military’s standing order to use both bombs as soon as they could be made ready. Small wonder that Telford Taylor, the chief prosecutor at Nuremberg, grouped the attack on Nagasaki with Dresden as “war crimes, tolerable in retrospect only because their malignancy pales in comparison to Dachau, Auschwitz and Treblinka,” in *Nuremberg and Vietnam: An American Tragedy* (1970).

Leaving aside the unjustified and morally indefensible attack on Nagasaki, clearly the bombing of Hiroshima, together with Soviet attacks in Manchuria, shocked the Japanese sufficiently into surrendering, which the emperor expressed memorably and meaningfully as “enduring the unendurable and suffering what is insufferable.” Even these twin shocks proved insufficiently persuasive to prevent fanatical Army officers from attempting a coup on 14 August to prevent broadcast of the emperor’s message of surrender. The coup attempt collapsed when senior officers refused to join the patriotic extremists who still fervently desired to fall in battle for their country.

The quickness of Japan’s surrender seemed to confirm the efficacy of the atomic bomb attacks. As
suggested previously, however, Nagasaki followed too closely on the heels of Hiroshima to influence Japan's offer of surrender on 10 August. Moreover, some historians have suggested conclusively to Japan's leaders that their military was entirely and hopelessly outclassed. The bitter pill of surrender thus became endurable for all but the most fervid diehards as the Japanese military came to conclude there was little dishonor in surrendering when further resistance had been rendered inglorious and utterly futile by the quantum leap in destructiveness demonstrated by the atomic bomb.

—WILLIAM J. ASTORE, U.S. AIR FORCE ACADEMY, COLORADO

References


Alperovitz, Sanho Tree, and others, The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth (New York: Knopf, 1995);


Robert J. C. Butow, Japan’s Decision to Surrender (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1954);

John W. Dower, War Without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War (New York: Pantheon, 1986);

Robert H. Ferrell, Harry S. Truman and the Bomb: A Documentary History (Worland, Wyo.: High Plains, 1996);

Richard B. Frank, Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire (New York: Random House, 1999);

Martin Harwit, An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of Enola Gay (New York: Copernicus, 1996);

Robert James Maddox, Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1998);

Philip Nobile, ed., Judgment at the Smithsonian, script by the curators at the National Air and Space Museum (New York: Marlowe, 1995);

David Rees, The Defeat of Japan (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997);