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Peering through Different Bombsights

Military Historians, Diplomatic Historians, and the Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb

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FOR 51 YEARS, questions surrounding the use of the atomic bomb have prompted extensive inquiry.[1] Various authors, working from essentially the same historical record, continue to reach dramatically different conclusions. Those dubbed "revisionists" reject the notion that the bombings were necessary, while others support an "official" endorsement of the attacks to limit Allied casualties and secure Japanese surrender.

In recent years, the revisionists have maintained an upper hand in the debate. They seem possessed of an inherent advantage, in that traditionalists are wedded to one conclusion, while the revisionists can offer various hypotheses as to the underlying reasons behind President Harry Truman's decision. Their ability to claim discovery of the "truth" behind the bombings, be it "atomic diplomacy," racism, scientific curiosity, cost justification, or whatever, constitutes a powerful advantage in both attracting publishers and selling copies. Their opponents are commonly relegated to voicing their opinions in articles or within the context of manuscripts on earlier campaigns, hypothetical invasions, or other Pacific-war themes. The relative success of the revisionists can be measured by surveys which show that many Americans now disagree with Truman's judgement.[2]

Although atomic questions have attracted a wide range of writers, traditionally the most strident defenders of the official position—aside from the decision makers themselves—have been military historians. The leading revisionists (not necessarily the most radical ones),[3] on the other hand, are experts in diplomacy. Consider that the special, "A-bomb-centric," Spring 1995 edition of *Diplomatic History* contained seven articles, all of which were at least sympathetic toward, if not overtly supportive of, revisionist conclusions. By the same token, in its Hiroshima anniversary edition, *Military History Quarterly* did not publish a single article of revisionism.[4]

Admittedly, exceptions to such generalizations exist. In recent years, military historians have examined possible nonatomic options and at times seem to express a preference for them.[5] Not all diplomatists are revisionists, either. Some diplomatic historians count themselves among the most ardent defenders of Truman's decision.[6] Other diplomatists have staked out a quasi-middle ground. They concede Truman's concerns over casualties and commitment to Franklin Roosevelt's unconditional-surrender precedent, yet also see postwar

political considerations at work. Truman's decision, stemming from a sum of concerns, is left in somewhat tilted moral abeyance, as "probably unnecessary."[7]

That the majority of diplomatic historians would prefer diplomatic solutions, while specialists in the military more readily accept military options, should surprise no one. More noteworthy are the inherent historiographical differences between both groups. An analysis of such differences, it would seem, would go a long way toward explaining patterns in the atomic bomb debate.

I hold a PhD in military history and have been a member of the Society of Military History (SMH) for over a decade. Yet, I also joined the Society of History of American Foreign Relations (SHAFR) in 1986, when I opted for a minor in diplomatic history. I have since attended more than a dozen SMH and SHAFR conferences and in the process have noticed several differences in the perspectives, ap-

proaches, and styles of the two organizations and their constituents.[8]

I'll admit some temptation to dismiss the discrepancies as reflective of the politics of the presenters. Fifteen years of observation lead me to conclude that military historians are, on average, more conservative than most historians, most professors, and perhaps even most Americans. By the same token, I am of the opinion that diplomatic historians, their leadership in particular, lean distinctly to the political left.

For those who fought World War II, the bombs served to end a cataclysmic struggle. For their descendants, however, the bomb brought forth fear of a new, more horrifying cataclysm.

Politics admittedly influences one's perspective and in some cases may be all that really matters. No doubt some "historians" enter the fray looking for "evidence" that can be made to fit their preconceived conclusions. Yet, the radical divergences of the atomic bomb issue have deeper origins. Diplomatic historians and their military counterparts not only arrive at different conclusions, they don't even ask the same questions. More often than not, even their introductions scream divergence.

Those who endorse Truman's decision usually begin with vivid descriptions of the fighting in the Pacific theater, climaxing with the wholesale slaughter of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. After they recount the ferocity of these battles, the bombs follow logically as a reprieve from further carnage promised by an amphibious invasion of the Japanese home islands.[9]

Dissenters, convinced that Japan was beaten and ready to surrender, rarely bother with descriptions of island fighting. Instead, they routinely express revulsion at the carnage produced by the bombings themselves, at times presaging their analysis with sympathetic portraits of Japanese "victims." They instinctively express revulsion at the manner in which atomic weapons brought instant incineration to many people and a slow, lingering demise to many more. They further condemn the attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki for being directed predominantly against noncombatants. Overall, they express a fundamental sense of indignation that use of atomic bombs, regardless of specific rationale, was an ethical atrocity.[10]

Moral attacks on the Hiroshima decision, however, seem to have less to do with the Pacific war than with the dawn of the nuclear age. For many people, to oppose the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is to oppose nuclear weapons generally, and the possibility of a third world war especially. A recent work laments the "grave and little recognized costs of Hiroshima: nuclear entrapment, moral inversion, national self-betrayal, enduring patterns of secrecy, deep cultural confusion, and the fear of futurelessness."[11] The chief opposition to Hiroshima, however, is the fear that such weapons might be used again: "As long as we continue to defend and justify the Hiroshima model, we risk making that kind of decision again. . . . Our choice today is between perpetuating a mindset that allows another Hiroshima, or creating one that prevents that outcome and embraces human life."[12] Added to this is a generational divide: for those who fought World War II, the bombs served to end a cataclysmic struggle. For their descendants, however, the bomb brought forth fear of a new, more horrifying cataclysm.

Military and diplomatic historians reflect these generational differences. World War II has had a profound effect in shaping the attitudes of the military history profession and remains a very popular subject at SMH meetings, as well as the subject of several specialized conferences. More importantly, it forms a base and standard to which all ensuing, and several previous, conflicts are commonly compared.

Furthermore, to the people who fought it—and most of those who study it—World

War II remains a "good war," in which the Allied powers defeated two of the most ghastly regimes of the modern era, or indeed all human history. The destruction of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan was without question a considerable achievement, and that achievement gave the combatants—and most of those who write of them—a pervading moral rectitude that persists.

In telling contrast, the most numerous sessions at SHAFR conference, often comprising more than half the program, have dealt with the cold war. Many of the most popular of those sessions have dealt with Vietnam. Instead of a veritable crusade as a base, diplomatic historians start with a war of dubious morality, wherein one encounters politicians who routinely ignore advice and data, to embark on campaigns devoid of strategic logic, all in the name of false theories or saving face. The combatants emerge with little sense of accomplishment from a country that just didn't matter—and a war that never should have been fought. There should be little surprise that diplomatic historians approach their craft with inherent doubt.[13]

Other cold war issues enhance these suspicions. Central Intelligence Agency activity in Cuba, Iran, Indonesia, and elsewhere, as well as ongoing attempts to mask these actions, has spawned an inherent distrust of Washington within the SHAFR ranks. I sincerely believe that many diplomatic historians, rather like journalists in the wake of Watergate, now believe their primary task to be exposing governmental lies. Given a standing assumption that official versions of events are likely fabrications, it follows that diplomatic historians are naturally inclined to seek the "real reason" for dropping the atomic bombs.

Not so long ago, I received a student exam which mistakenly placed the atomic bombs amidst the Vietnamese conflict. Perhaps I should not have been so harsh in my criticism, for the reading of certain revisionist scholars could certainly lead the inexperienced to that conclusion. On a conceptual plane, if not a chronological one, I would argue, the bombs are repeatedly dropped in Vietnam. By applying this framework to 1945, revisionists can conclude that arguments about limiting casualties are mere cover, and the failure to employ alternate methods must stem from ulterior motives.

For some time, the most fashionable revisionist explanation for Truman's decision has been that various officials desired to intimidate Joseph Stalin, perhaps even preventing him from securing territorial gains promised at Yalta. There is no hard evidence to indicate that Truman, arguably the most blunt and outspoken man to occupy the Oval Office, ever regarded such diplomatic issues as paramount. To the revisionists, however, recurrent examples of anti-Soviet policy, coupled with assertions that Truman and others routinely "doctored" invasion casualty estimates in postwar justifications for the bombings,[14] allow for inferential accusations that Truman was either of devious mind himself or putty in the hands of his advisors.

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Military historians do not deny that members of Truman's staff assessed the impact the bomb would have on the USSR. Such analysis would seem, after all, to fit their job descriptions. But while some people perhaps concede that diplomatic concerns may have augmented, sustained, or confirmed Truman's decision, they do not accept the argument that the bombs were dropped primarily to scare the USSR. Their willingness to accept Truman's justifications may reflect a greater trust in national leaders or their sense of overall Allied rectitude in the war. It may also reflect greater acknowledgement of Harry Truman's own military history. Here was a man who had commanded troops in battle, in World War I, and knew the importance of sav-

President Harry Truman. Here was a man who had commanded troops in battle in World War I. He knew the importance of saving the lives of his men.

ing the lives of his men.[15] Now in command of the entire American armed forces, it stands to reason that saving lives while ending the war on American terms would indeed be his highest priority.

Furthermore, while diplomatists see the bombs as a radical departure, military historians more readily place them within the context of strategic precedents. Military historians acknowledge that societies have at times imposed bans on weapons deemed unfair, ungentlemanly, too destructive, or otherwise inappropriate.[16] Yet, they also recognize that the atomic bomb did not have the symbolic weight in 1945 that it has taken on in five decades since. Those who judge Truman's decision as intrinsically evil are employing postwar standards.

Curiously, another weapon did have a similar stigma in 1945: poison gas. Although American commanders at times considered the use of gas, for example, in planning the invasion of Iwo Jima, they jettisoned such projects.[17] Had the American leadership been as morally bankrupt as some revisionists portray it, one wonders why gas was not used on the Japanese at some point.

Military historians often debate the definition of "civilian" as it relates to modern warfare. Some insist that all civilians, regardless of how much they appear to support their government, should be absent from targeting lists. Others dismiss the whole issue of "combatant versus noncombatant" as but a relic of preindustrialized warfare. Regardless, virtually all agree that such distinctions became blurred rather early in World War II. Upon the acceptance that the war-making capabilities of societies, not merely armies, were valid targets, there stemmed considerably less aversion to strategies and tactics that killed primarily civilians. When coupled with the modern state's reliance on reserve forces—to include in desperate times militia, home

guards, and their ilk—the border distinguishing military personnel from noncombatants became even more hazy.

Although most military historians are willing to allow for categorical stands against strategic bombing on grounds of morality—or relative lack of military value, or both[18]—to condemn the atomic bombs alone without also criticizing attacks on Dresden, Hamburg, Coventry, Rotterdam, Nanking, and so on, can be seen as selective, if not inappropriate. From the standpoint of commanders in 1945, the bomb was as much a continuation of existing policy as deviance from it. Those people likely saw no serious difference between atomic incineration and conventional saturation bombing, such as the fantastic destruction delivered upon Tokyo in March. Morally speaking, the key issue was the decision to destroy cities, and that, right or wrong, had been made much earlier.

Revisionists have identified several alternative strategies, suggested to Truman at some point, which they believe could have averted both the bombs and an invasion of Japan. Naval commanders advocated continued blockade, while their Army Air Corps counterparts favored sustained bombing. Neither was mutually exclusive.

Military historians see foibles in the alternative proposals. A blockade, for example, might have taken months—or even years—to achieve the desired results. Furthermore, aside from prohibitive costs, logistical challenges, and home-front impatience, a blockade risked starving to death thousands of Japanese. Adding continued conventional bombing only heightens the potential carnage.

Beyond this, Allied casualties would have continually mounted. At least 16 million people had already died in the Pacific war by the summer of 1945. Given that millions were still under the yoke of Japanese imperialism, thousands would have continued to die due to starvation, disease, and mistreatment. Among them were roughly hundreds of thousands of Allied prisoners in Japanese captivity.

Policy makers in 1945 understood that, compared to an invasion, bombing and

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Although MacArthur's postwar comments questioning the necessity of the bomb's use are often quoted by diplomatic historians, a thoughtful reader must wonder about a general who was the strongest proponent of an invasion of the home islands in 1945, despite the fact that his casualty estimates were among the highest offered to Truman.

blockade promised lower immediate losses but provided no quick guarantee of capitulation and hence no insurance of long-term casualty reduction. The bomb risked few American lives and seemed a boon to surrender. Thus, it seemed the best option to Truman and his advisors.

Diplomatic historians have attempted to fortify their position by uncovering lists of officials who have expressed postwar doubts about the bomb's necessity. Their lists of "notables" include not merely a spate of scientists, theologians, politicians, journalists, and literati, whom military historians rather promptly dismiss as figures unlikely to fully grasp issues of strategy and tactics, but top-level military leaders, such as Gen George Marshall, Gen Douglas MacArthur, and Adm Ernest King.[19]

These three names might seem impressive at first but upon close scrutiny seem unlikely to sway military experts. George Marshall was a man of great administrative ability and a principal architect of the overall victory. Yet, was Marshall a strategist upon whose cost/benefits analysis of a potential invasion of Japan one should weigh the decision to drop the atomic bomb? Is this not the same George Marshall who advocated a cross-channel attack into France in 1942—and again in 1943? Had Roosevelt listened to Marshall in those circumstances, the American Army would likely have suffered catastrophic defeat.

MacArthur's postwar opinions were likely skewed by his virtual assumption of the emperor's authority during Japanese reconstruction. Aside from sentiments derived therefrom, one should not discount political motives from a man whose position on the bombs varied with time, and who made his opposing remarks at a point when he was considering a Republican run for the presidency. Beyond that, MacArthur never acquired a reputation as a "soldier's general." On the contrary, military historians, Australian ones in particular, have often characterized MacArthur as self-absorbed and callous. That he was the strongest proponent of an invasion of the home islands in 1945, despite the fact that his casualty estimates were among the highest offered to Truman,[20] speaks volumes about MacArthur but seems unlikely to sway those who support the president's decision.

In his memoir of 1952, King stated his belief that "had we been willing to wait, the effective naval blockade would, in the course of time, have starved the Japanese into submission."[21] Thus, King's views are predicated on a highly debatable assumption.

Of all the postwar services, the Air Force likely sported the most bomb naysayers. Several Air Force commanders[22] echoed the assertions of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, which, upon publication in 1946, boasted of inevitable Japanese surrender due to conventional bombing alone. Although a few military historians find the survey convincing, others dismiss it, along with King's similar claim, as so much service bravado—often with postwar budgetary concerns attached.

Most military historians remain unimpressed by lists of bomb detractors. Indeed,

one suspects that they could strengthen their own arguments by compiling equally lengthy lists of those who did *not* express postwar doubts, including the entire leadership of the United States Marine Corps, whose men would assuredly have been at the forefront of any invasion of Japan.

More importantly, while postwar skeptics are relatively common, those who expressed reservations before Hiroshima are few and far between. Despite considerable effort, no one has yet discovered any documents that demonstrate a high-ranking military officer's contemporary opposition to the bomb.[23] Very few had the opportunity to voice any concerns.[24] When they did, the role they played was either supportive or ambiguous. Marshall, for example, not only supported the Hiroshima and Nagasaki strikes, he favored the use of as many as nine additional bombs as prelude to invasion of the home islands, should that still be necessary.[25]

Another common revisionist argument claims that if Truman had adopted the recommendations of certain advisors to modify the terms of unconditional surrender and guarantee the emperor's retention, the war could have ended without invasion or atomic attacks. The fact that certain Japanese civilian politicians favored peace in the summer of 1945, however, seems almost inconsequential, given a nation wherein the military had consistently imposed its will on civilians since the invasion of Manchuria in 1931. The militarists opposed capitulation, barring further conditions; these included self-disarmament, self-prosecution of war criminals, and the retention of Korea, Formosa, and other parts of their empire. Most of the militarists held to these views, unacceptable to all the Allied powers, even after Hiroshima and Nagasaki.[26] When one considers that three civilian prime ministers had been assassinated since the 1920s for opposing the military's prerogatives, ascribing to the civilian government an ability to successfully oppose the military seems wishful thinking at best.

Furthermore, by 1945 the United States had little use for diplomacy vis-à-vis Japan. Given memories of the fall of 1941, America was naturally and understandably suspicious of further overtures and likely equated all "peace conditions" with appeasement. Given these dynamics, neither the details of the proposals themselves nor the limited extent of support for them makes any real difference.

Finally, one should note that when Japan did offer to surrender, its government did so conditionally, provided that the emperor be retained. The United States tacitly accepted this offer (with Hirohito subject to MacArthur's directives) as relatively close to "unconditional surrender," overriding the arguments of some Allies, notably the Australians, who wanted to hang Hirohito. Japan could have posed this offer before August. That it did not suggests that the status of the emperor was not the sole stumbling block to peace.

At the heart of this issue is the question of whether Japan really was willing to surrender. With hindsight, the revisionists see an isolated Japan pummeled from all sides, devoid of any real chance of "victory." By all logic, Tokyo was beaten. Aircraft bombed the homeland daily while warships shelled the coast at will. The Japanese faced chronic shortages in equipment, raw materials, and food. Most importantly, they had no allies and were fighting the entire world by themselves.[27]

Yet, military history is full of examples of people who seemingly should have surrendered but did not. Was there not, for example, a critical food shortage at Leningrad? Did the besieged surrender or fight on, with people dying of starvation throughout the next nine hundred days of battle? Eleventh-hour victories have been seized from the jaws of defeat. On some occasions, miracles do occur, as with Frederick the Great in the Seven Years' War. Given Japanese ideology and history, especially their "undefeated" record in warfare and mythology of miracle victories, surrender was never certain, even upon the use of the atomic bombs.

Had the bombs not been used, there is somelikelihood that an invasion of the home islands would have occurred. Both diplo-

matic and military historians have spent considerable time and effort in seeking casualty estimates for the proposed invasion.[28] Both sides are selective in the evidence they employ. The revisionists prefer preliminary Joint Chiefs of Staff studies, the postwar Strategic Bombing Survey, or recommendations of the invasion-optimistic Marshall. Other "smoking guns" better feed the official position, such as the large stockpile of minted Purple Heart Medals or Medical Corps blood-requirement estimates, which anticipated casualties in the hundreds of thousands.[29]

All analysts agree, however, that Japanese casualties would have been extensive and in all likelihood greater than those suffered at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

It is curious that many diplomatists, who in other writings assume that documentation has been destroyed, "doctored," gone missing, or was simply never recorded, are wedded to hard evidence throughout the atomic bomb debate. Does it not stand to reason that Truman would have inquired of his advisors and commanders as to the ramifications of invasion in informal settings? Does it also not stand to reason that he may have received equally informal answers such as a generic "thousands" or "lots" or "too many"?[30]

Military historians have attempted modern assessments of what would have happened in a hypothetical invasion of the Japanese home islands. The extent of Japanese preparations, usually ignored by people who insist that Tokyo was on the verge of surrender, serves as their chief source of "proof." Traditionally, such assessments have leaned toward the high end in casualty estimates, arguing that the bombs prevented what would have been the largest operation of the war. Such catastrophic scenarios remain plausible, given the sheer numbers of Japanese regular forces and militia, kamikaze aircraft and boats, and the possible employment of gas and germ warfare.[31] Other recent assessments are less pessimistic, seeing Japanese military power as nearly exhausted, dependent on untested forces, and vulnerable to American countermeasures.[32]

Proof as to potential casualties is fleeting, as such would have depended primarily on when, after the initial landings, Japan surrendered. All analysts agree, however, that Japanese casualties would have been extensive[33] and in all likelihood greater than those suffered at Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined.

Disagreements surrounding potential casualties underscore what is perhaps the most critical difference of perspective between diplomatists and military historians. Diplomatic historians often ascribe relative value to Truman's decision. Implicit in their invasion-casualty arguments, though rarely stated outright, is an effective equation of Japanese lives with American ones. Following a comparison of actual casualties at Hiroshima and Nagasaki with the lower projections for an invasion comes the notion that killing 180,000 Japanese for the sake of "only 30,000" Americans is not justifiable.

Military historians respond that one of the primary duties of an officer, including the commander in chief, is to limit his or her *own* casualties. For Harry Truman to order the incineration of thousands of Japanese for the sake of hundreds of thousands or "merely" tens of thousands of American or Allied lives—is not out of step with priorities, duty, or ethos. Support for his decision thus remains steadfast, even if one accepts the minimal invasion-casualty estimates now preferred from Stanford to the Smithsonian.

Avoiding unnecessary enemy casualties has long been part of modern "just war theory," but such concerns come into effect only after the enemy actually has surrendered or has clearly been defeated. Until that time, limiting enemy casualties of necessity remains a minor concern. Problems admittedly arise in determining when the enemy has been beaten. Given any indication of Japanese determination to fight, however, any competent commander would rightly take no

chances. Is it not far better to sacrifice more enemy personnel than might actually be required, than in any way to risk the lives of one's own?

A few radical revisionists have argued that race hatred was the prime motivation for the atomic bombs.[34] Such accusations seem to overlook the anti-German background of the Manhattan Project,[35] the exclusion of Kyoto from target lists, and the benign occupation policy that followed the war. Such charges seem all the more fraught when one considers that many Asians—particularly Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, and Vietnamese—were as enthusiastic about Japan's defeat as any "white" conquerors.

Admittedly, though, in 1945 there was near-universal approval, naked joy, and perhaps even malicious delight that the Japanese had gotten what they deserved. It may be impossible for people now to grasp the loathing then held for the Japanese. But as diplomatic historians have increasingly voiced accusations of racism, military historians seem more understanding of these emotions, often tracing their origins to Pearl Harbor, the Bataan Death March, or other examples of aggression and mistreatment of captives.

More importantly, military historians more readily acknowledge that within the context of war, there has usually existed an inherent loathing for the enemy. When, after all, has any nation fought against a people it liked? Although enemies do not have to be "hated" per se, armies and societies commonly have tolerated or openly fostered the use of pejorative terms and other methods of dehumanization as one means of justification for killing. Such feelings often exist even when the enemy is "just like us." Civil wars, after all, are commonly the most vicious and unrestrained of conflicts. Perhaps it is time to question whether racism, which admittedly flowed freely from both sides in the Pacific war, was the source of its brutality or just a readily available conduit for hostility that would have existed anyway.

One hypothetical question may shed light on the entire issue: would there be so much flak about the atomic bombs if Little Boy and Fat Man had been finished earlier and landed somewhere in Germany?

By revisionist standards, was not the Battle of Berlin (which consumed several times more lives than Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined) unnecessary and therefore condemnable? No respectable historian, regardless of subfield, is currently making such an argument.

If we apply the revisionists' standards to the European theater, their basis for critique seems even more powerful than it does in the Pacific. By any calculation, Germany was a beaten nation by the early spring of 1945. The German army faced shortages in all areas, while the Luftwaffe had been so severely drained as to be incapable of mounting effective opposition to the waves of Allied bombers which rained destruction daily and nightly upon a handful of partially intact cities. While Hitler, much like his Japanese counterparts, alternated between fanatical resistance and some form of mass suicide, persons of power in Germany saw the handwriting on the wall and were frantically scrambling for a diplomatic solution—Albert Speer for example. The Allied high command ignored Speer and the others. Few modern historians begrudge their decision.

Instead of pursuing diplomacy, Russian forces entered Berlin, where they slaughtered hundreds of thousands of German troops and civilians, while losing hundreds of thousands of their own. By revisionist standards, was not the Battle of Berlin (which consumed several times more lives than Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined) unnecessary and therefore condemnable?

No respectable historian, regardless of subfield, is currently making such an argument. Nor would such arguments seem likely, even if an atomic bomb had added to the European

carnage. Instead, I would argue, historians would unabashedly exclaim that if the bombs had saved but one victim from the Nazi death camps, their use was justified. Given the failures of appeasement, the knowledge of Nazi atrocities, and a resolve to see the last twisted vestiges of Prussian militarism permanently exorcised, one hears remarkably few complaints on the finale of unconditional-surrender policy in Europe. This is largely because knowledge of the Holocaust has fostered an association of the Nazis with unmitigated evil that is shared by all sane historians and renders would-be apologists impotent.

Imperial Japan, however, is not always held in the same light. One can attribute this to a multitude of factors, ranging from different victims, disparate organizational structures, translation difficulties, destruction of rec-ords, and postwar policy. Whether Japan and Germany should be effectively equated is an important question, however, which affects the probity of unconditional-surrender policy and Truman's decision. Military historians do commonly make such an equation; their diplomatic counterparts do not.

Although they never are Nazi apologists, many diplomatic historians seem to regard war as one big atrocity, from which differentiating among combatants is an exercise in biased judgement. A few revisionists even excuse Japanese behavior (e.g., their treatment of prisoners) as reflective of "cultural differences."[36] Most importantly, diplomatic historians commonly reject citations of Japanese atrocities in support of the atomic bombings as nothing but a "two wrongs make a right" argument.

Military historians see more logic in such a contention. While revisionist works have multiplied, military historians, survivors of the war, journalists, and others have responded to portraits of Japanese "victims" with a plethora of books designed to show otherwise. Works on Japanese chemical and biological warfare,[37] their treatment of prisoners of war,[38] and their system of military prostitution[39] certainly challenge notions of the Japanese as innocent dupes of American racism and imperialism. One might well conclude that logic, negotiation, and moral suasion seemed outmatched opposite those who were known to behead prisoners, eat their livers, and adjourn for a night of raping the local slave-prostitutes. With the moral repugnance felt for Imperial Japan comes an acceptance that in order to defeat a brutal regime, brutality itself is often required. Whether to maintain the ethical high ground or to repay bad behavior with similarly harsh acts is a profound moral dilemma. Unfortunately, it is a fairly common one in warfare. Harry Truman struggled with this personally. The day after Nagasaki, he lamented, "I can't bring myself to believe that, because they are beasts, we should ourselves act in the same manner." Yet, he went on to state, "When you have to deal with a beast, you have to treat him as a beast."[40] Viewed broadly, this seems less racism than a rational acknowledgement of the enemy's determination to resist and a willingness to convince him otherwise.

Military historians do not readily abandon the rules of war. But they do seem more likely to accept a "whatever it takes to get the boys home" stance when the enemy has proven himself anathema. Given that Japan committed atrocities that are readily comparable to the war crimes of the Nazis, most military historians can share with World War II veterans a feeling of vindication. That sense of rectitude is enhanced by a strong desire to prevent any further Allied casualties and a belief that other options were unlikely to be less bloody in the long run. Given extensive precedents and/or moral ambiguity regarding the "civilian" component in the attacks, they maintain support for Truman's decision.

As to which side is "right," I will concede limited room for debate, though I admittedly lean toward the one that places the bombs in the context of the war in which they were dropped and take exception to "generational chauvinism" (i.e., judging past events by contemporary standards). In varied analyses of the failure in Vietnam, military historians have noted that the application of strategic principles derived from World War II, within that inappropriate environment, either exacerbated or led directly to catastrophe.[41] By the same token, should not historians beware those

people who seem to apply historiographic parameters of the 1960s to strategic decisions of 1945?

A brief comparison can perhaps illustrate some dangers. Were not the North Vietnamese totally outclassed on paper? Were their casualties not totally disproportionate to those of the Americans? Did they not endure blockades, shortages, and more "conventional" bomb tonnage than all combatants in World War II combined? Did they surrender, or achieve their objectives? Such analysis, if taken far enough, seems to prompt the question on why nuclear weapons were not used in Vietnam. Such a prompt would represent the exact opposite intent of revisionist arguments.

Both military and diplomatic historians have made important contributions to the atomic bomb debate. If nothing else, their incessant analysis of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as their graphic depictions of the suffering therein, has helped to steer later generations away from the callous use of atomic weapons. Although many people are offended by those who challenge the validity of Truman's decision, I prefer to see something inherently humane in the work of those searching for nonatomic options. That the two groups differ so widely in conclusions, however, no doubt stems from their markedly divergent perspectives of, approach to, and analysis of the issues. □

Notes

1. For example, 1995 witnessed publication of at least the following seven works: Thomas Allen and Norman Polmar, *Code-Name Downfall: The Secret Plan to Invade Japan—and Why Truman Dropped the Bomb* (New York: Simon & Schuster); Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York: Knopf); Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons); Robert James Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press); Robert P. Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press); Philip Nobile, ed., *Judgment at the Smithsonian: The Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (New York: Marlowe); and Stanley Weintraub, *The Last Great Victory* (New York: Truman Talley Books).

2. Barton J. Bernstein, "The Struggle over History," in Nobile, 202–4. For decades after the war, opinion polls demonstrated support for the decision to use the atomic bombs, often by wide margins. In the 1990s, polls show that a slight majority of American women, minorities, and young people (under the age of 30) now disagree.

3. Probably, the most radical is political-economist Gar Alperovitz, whose *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1965) argued that the atomic bombs were meant to intimidate the Soviet Union rather than to end the war quickly. The bottom line in his subsequent works is little changed from his earlier publications. Recently, "scholar of race" Ronald Takaki has promoted another radical line. In *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1995), he makes race the crux of his argument, while further deriding Truman for excessive Anglo-Saxon machismo expressed in a "diplomacy of masculinity."

4. *Military History Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1995), contained 16 articles. Most strongly supported the official position, especially Williamson Murray, "Armageddon Revisited," 6–11; Rod Paschall, "Olympic Miscalculations," 62–63; and Edward J. Drea, "Previews of Hell," 75–81. The only one to mildly question the position was Peter Maslowski, who in "Truman, the Bomb, and the Numbers Game," is critical of postwar invasion-casualty estimates. In its nine years of publication, *Military History Quarterly* has published only one overtly revisionist piece, five years before in vol. 2, no. 3. Charles Strozier's "The Tragedy of Uncondi- tional Surrender" states that "there was no need to invade Japan or drop the bomb" (11). *The Journal of Military History* has not strayed widely from the official thesis either. Since 1991 *JMH* has published about 10 articles on the Pacific war. Most all of them are wholly or largely tangential to the atomic bomb issue; none are revisionist.

5. John Ray Skates, *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994). Skates, for example, seems to imply that an offer of less-than-unconditional surrender prior to August 1945 possibly could have avoided the bombings.

6. Chief among them is Maddox.

7. Chief among them is Bernstein, 195ff.; and idem, *The Atomic Bomb: The Critical Issues* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976). Curiously, Bernstein's impressions of Truman have mellowed with time. An earlier edited volume, *Politics and Policies of the Truman Administration* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), is more critical, effectively placing the burden for starting the cold war on Truman's shoulders.

8. Although I have attempted to substantiate the claims made in this article with written documentation, I willingly acknowledge that many of my opinions have been formed over time through observations made at SHAFR and SMH conferences. This includes information from actual conference sessions and question-and-answer sessions that follow, as well as attitudes displayed at dinners, in book exhibits, at receptions, and so on. Such perceptions have been elucidated in regular contacts with other members of the profession (letters, phone calls, etc.) and routine examinations of newsletters and journals. Furthermore, subscribing to Internet lists such as H-WAR, H-WWII, and H-DIPLO also gives one general impressions and hints as to historiographic patterns. What all this is leading to is that readers may find places in the article wherein generalizations are made without reference to specific written sources. In some cases, it is because I see the statement as blatantly obvious and unlikely to evoke criticism. In other cases, however, the above should explain the origins of my conclusions. Finally, I willingly allow for individual exceptions to the rather broad categorizations into which I place military and diplomatic historians. I stand by the general evaluations.

9. George Feifer, in *Tennozan: The Battle of Okinawa and the Dropping of the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1992), makes this the crux of his argument. After noting that the

battle caused the deaths of 23,000 American soldiers, 91,000 Japanese, and approximately 150,000 civilians—more total casualties than Hiroshima and Nagasaki combined—he argues that the bombs spared the United States from a most costly invasion. Another battle sometimes cited as a portent to an invasion of Japan is Peleliu. See Bill D. Ross, *Special Piece of Hell: The Untold Story of Peleliu* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993); and E. B. Sledge, *With the Old Breed at Peleliu and Okinawa* (Novato, Calif.: Presidio Press, 1981). In its anniversary edition, *Military History Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1995), contained one article on Iwo Jima (Peter Harrington, "Sketches in a Hail of Bullets," 32–36) and one on Okinawa (Bruce Gudmundson, "Okinawa," 64–73).

10. For an example of these trends, see Richard H. Minear, "Atomic Holocaust, Nuclear Holocaust," or Paul Boyer, "Hiroshima in American Memory," both in *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 347–65 and 297–318, respectively.

11. Lifton and Mitchell, xiii.

12. Ibid., xiv.

13. It is worth noting that revisionist theories first became popular during the Vietnam era, when scholars reexamined the cold war and blamed it (and indirectly Vietnam) on unjustified American hostility to the Soviet Union.

14. Barton Bernstein, "A Postwar Myth: 500,000 US Lives Saved," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 42 (June/July 1986): 38–40.

15. Truman often expressed concern over casualties. For example, in discussing the proposed invasion of Japan, he exclaimed that he "did not want an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other." Quoted in Skates, 237.

16. Examples extended from England's banning of the Welsh longbow following the War of the Roses to modern treaties on chemical and biological weapons.

17. John Ellis van Courtland Moon, "United States Chemical Warfare Policy in World War II: A Captive of Coalition Policy?" *Journal of Military History* 60, no. 3 (1 July 1996): 505–7, 510. Gas was also considered in planning Operation Olympic, the proposed invasion of Kyushu.

18. See Stephen Garrett, *Ethics and Airpower in World War II: The British Bombing of German Cities* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993). Garrett suggests that British leaders violated their own standards when they sanctioned the area bombings of German cities. See also Michael Sherry, *The Rise of American Air Power* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1987); Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); and Stanley Falk, "A Nation Reduced to Ashes," *Military History Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 60–61.

19. All are noted in Alperovitz, *Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, 325–57; and Bernstein, "The Struggle over History," 147–51.

20. Peter Mazlowski, "Truman, the Bomb, and the Numbers Game," *Military History Quarterly* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1995): 105–7.

21. Ernest J. King and Walter M. Whitehill, *Fleet Admiral King: A Naval Record* (New York: Norton, 1952), 327.

22. Alperovitz notes five, including Carl Spaatz, Hap Arnold, Ira Eaker, Claire Chennault, and (amazingly) Curtis LeMay. *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, 335–45.

23. "Bernstein, and other historians, can find no contemporaneous evidence of these leaders' opposition to the use of the A-bomb." Bernstein himself concedes this point in "The Struggle over History," 165.

24. Secretary of War Henry Stimson's "Interim Committee," a purely civilian body, debated how and where to use the bombs. They, along with the president, made the crucial decisions. Overall, "military leaders had little role in decisions about the use of the atomic bombs." Skates, 242, 257.

25. Ibid., 243.

26. The United States never could have accepted these conditions, which would have allowed the survival of the militarism that the United Nations was resolved to eradicate.

27. See, for some examples, Jerome B. Cohen, *Japan's Economy in War and Reconstruction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1949). This book provides numerous examples of the effect of Allied policy on the Japanese economy. One which particularly underscores the shortages is the fact that planes were towed from place to place in the factory areas by oxen teams rather than tractors, in order to save fuel.

28. Diplomatic historians have long sought to undermine Henry Stimson's famous 1947 estimate of 1 million casualties. Bernstein in particular has shown that this number has little basis in documentary evidence and is likely a worst-case scenario or postwar justification. Maddox, however, suggests that an oft-cited figure of five hundred thousand may have come from an August 1944 study based on the losses at Saipan. *Weapons for Victory*, 61.

29. Estimates from a meeting of 18 June 1945 speculate 132,000 to 220,000 casualties for the planned invasions. These estimates were based on an estimate of 280,000 Japanese soldiers on Kyushu rather than the 560,000 deployed there by 6 August 1945. The Medical Service was preparing its requirements based on 394,859 casualties. See Drea, 74–81.

30. Stimson, for example, never offered statistics but expressed fears of a campaign that would be "long, costly, and arduous." Skates, 237.

31. This is the thesis of Allen and Polmar. Several authors in the *Military History Quarterly* special edition support such a conclusion as well.

32. Skates claims that with Allied forces possessed of overwhelming combat power and actively pursuing tactics whereby to avert the calamities of Okinawa, the invasion may have been less costly than otherwise assumed. He concludes that "the island of Kyushu would have been occupied . . . at a cost of 75,000 to 100,000 casualties (which falls somewhere in the range of Normandy or Okinawa)" (256).

33. Skates predicts "perhaps 250,000 in the Olympic area alone." Ibid.

34. See Takaki. John Dower, who coined the theory of the Pacific conflict as a race war in *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986), seems to give some credence to Takaki's theories. In "The Bombed: Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japanese Memory," *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1995), Dower describes the bombings as "nuclear genocide" (275).

35. Throughout the development of the bombs, the primary target was almost constantly assumed to be Germany. Even as the war wound down, Col Paul Tibbets received orders to prepare strike plans against both Germany and Japan.

36. This not only seems utter moral abdication to the 10th degree, it also ignores historical precedent. There was relatively little in Japanese culture or history to sanction mistreatment of prisoners. For example, during the Russo-Japanese War, the Japanese treated prisoners with remarkable humanity. Their World War II policies were the result of unrestrained fascism—not cultural differences.

37. Peter Williams and David Wallace, *Unit 731: Japan's Secret Biological Warfare in World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

38. Gavan Daws, *Prisoners of the Japanese: POWs of World War II in the Pacific* (New York: William Morrow, 1994).

39. George Hicks, *The Comfort Women* (New York: Norton, 1995). Up to two hundred thousand women from Korea, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Formosa, the Netherlands, and Japan—most of them from Korea—were recruited or forced into military-run brothels.

40. Quoted in Bernstein, "The Struggle over History," 130–31.

41. See, for example, Mark Clodfelter, *The Limits of Air Power: The American Bombing of North Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 1989).

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