Disinformation and the Dropping of the Atomic Bombs

By Victor Davis Hanson

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Legitimate disagreement about the wisdom of dropping two bombs on Japan to end World War II in 1945 persists even 80 years later, as reflected in discussions this past week.

But recently, there has often been no real effort even to present the facts, much less to consider the lose-lose choices involved in using such destructive weapons. In an age of revisionist history—when Churchill is deemed a "terrorist," Germany did not really mean to starve millions of Jews and Ukrainians in summer and fall 1941, the British forced Hitler to continue the war, and World War II was not worth the cost—so too are Hiroshima and Nagasaki judged as either war crimes or colossal and unnecessary follies.

For today's generation, it seems so easy to declare one's 21st-century moral superiority over our ancestors. So we damn them as war criminals, given that they supposedly dropped the bombs without legitimate cause or reason.

What follows are some of the most common critiques of

President Truman’s decision to use two nuclear weapons against wartime Japan, with an explanation of why his decision to use the bombs proved, at the time and in hindsight, the correct one.

1) Why did the Americans not drop a trial bomb in Tokyo Bay to warn the Japanese to surrender or face the real thing?

That choice was considered at length. The liberal-minded Robert Oppenheimer had headed a commission to determine the most effective way to use the two bombs to end the war as quickly as possible.

A third nuclear weapon may or may not have been available within a few weeks after the bombing, but there were no others beyond those three at hand for at least a few months. So in early August, only two bombs, the uranium-fission bomb “Little Boy” and its plutonium counterpart “Fat Man,” were deliverable. The limited number of bombs affected the decision to use two on real targets.

Note that a third atomic bomb would not be exploded (in a test) for about a year after the war. Moreover, the uranium bomb used on Hiroshima had never been tested; the plutonium one had, but in the New Mexico desert on a tower and not loaded on and dropped from a plane.

As a result, no one knew for certain whether an air-dropped bomb would even work, the optimal detonation height, or the extent of the destruction it would cause. On the eve of the first test of the plutonium bomb on July 16 in the New Mexico desert, even scientists could not agree whether the plutonium blast would set the sky afire or might be not much more powerful than a large conventional bomb.

So given that there was no sure supply of additional bombs and no real knowledge of the effects of the bombs when dropped from the sky, the advisory commission decided that if the bombers crashed or were shot down with the bombs, or if the

bombs prematurely blew up, or if either one failed to explode, or if the test proved underwhelming and did not impress the Japanese military government, then a trial bomb could backfire and only reinforce the Tokyo government's insistence on refusing to surrender.

Others had noted that despite the dropping of millions of leaflets over targeted Japanese cities to warn civilians to flee their cities, given additional scheduled B-29 fire raids, few had heeded the admonishments.

Either the Japanese people believed that their industries dispersed within civilian neighborhoods were so integral to the survival of Japan that they could not be abandoned, or they did not think the Americans would continue with the raids, or they assumed that their own government would use lethal force to prevent massive flights, or their sense of patriotism and confidence in ultimate victory prevented any mass withdrawals from soon-to-be-targeted cities.

As a result, the commission concluded that only a surprise attack without warning on a military/industrial/urban target would be the best way to maximize the bomb's ability to shock the Japanese government into surrendering.

Note that even after the second bomb dropped on Nagasaki, there was an attempted coup by senior Japanese military officers aimed at preventing peace discussions. And there were many in the Japanese hierarchy, even after the second bomb, who believed the atomic bombs were too expensive, or too few, or too untested to be used in any further number. Instead, the dead-enders believed that an Okinawa-like resistance on a nationwide scale could still kill so many Allied soldiers that London and Washington would call off the effort to invade and occupy their nation.

2) But why did the Americans need to drop any bombs?

Since March 1945, the B-29s had destroyed somewhere over 75

percent of the industrial capacity and the urban cores of the majority of the Japanese cities. Yet the military government had shown no sign of surrendering. American submarines and B-29 mining of the harbors had already eliminated almost all maritime traffic in and out of Japanese ports. And still the Japanese resisted.

The months-long firebombing of Japan had cost well over 400 of the massive bombers (each plane with a crew of 11 and costing $1 million). The recent bloodbath at Okinawa was the deadliest American battle of the entire Pacific War. The fighting was not declared over until just seven weeks before Hiroshima, and even then, there still remained pockets of stiff Japanese resistance.

Okinawa had cost over 50,000 American casualties, including 12,000 dead. Over 750 planes were lost and some 380 ships damaged—mostly by attacks by 850 kamikazes. The last twelve months before Hiroshima had killed more Americans than during any other year of the war.

In hindsight, we may think the atomic bombs were superfluous or gratuitous. But the generation that fought the war was despairing that the fighting had become bloodier and more horrific the longer it went on, the closer the allies got to Japan, and the harder it became to impose an unconditional surrender. After Okinawa, they saw no end to the killing in sight, but only more, and far greater, Okinawas on the horizon.

By calculating the number of Japanese troops who fought at Okinawa and the resulting American losses (and also computing the earlier bloody conquest of the Philippines as well), the American military correctly judged that it likely would lose well over one million casualties in the two-pronged invasions of Japan planned for 1945–1946.

Japan could have fielded at least 3.5 million troops and

between 5,000and 6,000 kamikazes—one-way fighter-bomber planes analogous to human-guided cruise missiles, far more accurate and deadly than German V-1 buzz bombs.

In sum, the Allies believed that neither the devastating firebombing nor the catastrophic Japanese defeats in the Philippines, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa had broken the will of the Japanese military government. Thus, Truman was desperately seeking some new solution to avoid invasions that would have likely killed millions on both sides. By earlier agreements, the Americans first had to gain the permission of the British to use the atomic bomb, which was not hard, given the savagery that the British had also experienced from the Japanese at Singapore and in Malaysia and Burma.

In comparison to the ongoing killing zones of the Pacific War, two bombs killed roughly 100,000 to 150,000 people in the first few days after the blast, with thousands more dying later from the aftereffects.

There was never an American eagerness to use its exclusive control of bombs and heavy bombers.

For the next four years, the Americans enjoyed a complete monopoly on atomic bombs from August 1945 to August 1949, when the Russians, through espionage, were finally able to conduct a successful atomic bomb test. Yet, in the period of escalating Soviet-American tensions, which saw ongoing communist revolutions in China, Asia, and Africa, the U.S. did not use its one-sided advantage.

During the Korean War, the U.S. had an arsenal of over 300 atomic bombs with a huge bomber force, versus just a few newly acquired bombs on the Soviet side. Presidents Truman and Eisenhower stifled all talk of using such a nuclear advantage to pressure the Russians and Chinese to stop fueling North Korean aggression.

3) Weren’t the two bombing missions fairly easy?

Hardly.

The two bombs had to be transported 6,000 miles to Tinian by sea from the West Coast. The heavy cruiser Indianapolis sped from San Francisco and later Hawaii, unaccompanied through enemy waters, to deliver the components for Little Boy—only to be sunk along with the majority of its crew by a Japanese submarine, just two days after it departed the island.

There was real fear that air crashes might set off the bombs. Safety devices (especially on the more volatile uranium bomb) to keep the bombs inert until minutes before dropping were last-minute improvisations.

The bombing runs from the B-29 bases on the Marianas to Japan were some 3,200 miles round trip. Crashes, navigational errors, and losses to Japanese flak and fighters were common dangers.

The second atomic bombing mission to Nagasaki nearly ended in disaster. The B-29 (Bock's Car) carrying the plutonium bomb took off despite a fuel tank blockage. On arrival, it could not see the aiming point over the primary target of the city of Kokura. The mission's bombers consequently circled for too long over Kokura, and only belatedly were diverted to the secondary target at Nagasaki.

But it too was likewise obscured with clouds and smoke. Finally, Bock's Car dropped the bomb 1.5 miles off target. As a result of the delays, mishaps, and mechanical trouble, it could not make it back to its Tinian base or even to the halfway emergency base on Iwo Jima. Instead, Bock's Car diverted to the newly acquired Okinawa runways—only to run out of gas as it landed.

4. Why did we target the Japanese and not the Germans?

The atomic bomb was designed to be used against Germany, which the Allies initially feared might beat them to nuclear

acquisition (although the Japanese were also racing to get a bomb).

The mostly experimental and costly B-29 heavy bomber (the only plane found to be capable of efficiently carrying a 10,000-pound atomic bomb) was likewise designed to be used against Germany. The two programs together cost well over $4 billion. But the accelerated pace of the European war in 1945 and the delays in the Manhattan Project resulted in the European war concluding before any bomb was ready.

5. Did the bombs just cause more wars and killing—or save lives?

The bombs, as horrible as they were, saved millions of lives in a variety of macabre but often underappreciated ways.

First, no major power in World War II killed more civilians and soldiers at less human cost to itself than the Japanese military.

For almost a decade, Japan had killed between 16–20 million Chinese, the vast majority of them civilians. It likely killed another 3–4 million British, Americans, British Commonwealth troops, Pacific Islanders, and non-Chinese Asians.

The Japanese military routinely executed prisoners, used captives for grotesque medical experiments, and starved and slaughtered enemy civilians. On average, Japan likely killed over 10,000 of its enemies each day of the war. Any means possible to stop that killing machine was seen as justified by late 1945.

Second, with the conquest of Okinawa (just 800 miles from Tokyo, rather than the 1,600-mile distance from the bases in the Marianas), General Curtis LeMay, in a few months, envisioned a huge second B-29 base. Okinawa would allow far easier and far more firebombing missions, especially given orders for an envisioned 3-4,000 more new B-29s.

More terrifying still, with the end of the European war on May 9, 1945, there were additional plans to transfer some of the 2,000 idle B-17s and B-24s to Okinawa from the European theater.

The British were also considering adding some of their now idle 400-500 heavy Lancaster bombers to the Pacific ("Operation Tiger Force").

In theory, LeMay and his British counterparts eventually might have been able to unleash well over 6,000 four-engine bombers against Japan. They could have easily doubled or tripled the number of the 300,000 Japanese civilians and soldiers already killed by the fire raids.

As a result, after the war, General LeMay insisted that he could have inflicted such destruction on Japan as to have avoided both an invasion and the dropping of the two atomic bombs by either forcing a Japanese surrender or utterly destroying the Japanese ability to resist by burning the entire nation to the ground.

So the two bombs 1) stopped the massive daily Japanese killing of mostly civilians in the Pacific, Asian, and Chinese theaters; 2) ended the fire raids that had proven far more deadly than Hiroshima and Nagasaki; 3) prevented a nightmarish invasion of Japan; and 4) in terrible irony, prompted an emerging doctrine of nuclear deterrence, which, as a result, may help explain why the world has neither seen another global war nor another use of nuclear weapons since 1945

Dropping the atomic bombs may have been a terrible decision, but the alternatives were even worse.

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