

The Intensification of US Efforts to Build an Atomic Bomb

Written by James Chisem

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JAMES CHISEM, MAY 27 2011

The original purpose of the multi-billion dollar, US led Manhattan Project – which had its genesis in the ideas of a select circle of émigré scientists and the British Tube Alloys programme[1] – had been to harness atomic energy for military purposes before the Germans and, if possible, use the resulting weapon to determine the outcome of the war in Europe[2]. By late 1944, as it became obvious that the Third Reich was on the cusp of disintegration and that a testable atomic bomb would be ready by the summer of 1945, the United States heightened the intensity of the project[3]. The race to construct a combat usable bomb in the early months of 1945 was justified as a means to bring about a swift conclusion to the war in the Pacific, which was expected to drag on into 1946, and thereby avoid a potentially costly invasion of the Japanese mainland[4]. However, in recent decades this orthodox view has been challenged by a growing body of scholarly work. Revisionist historians have suggested that clear alternatives to the atomic bomb did exist but were purposefully eschewed by the Roosevelt and Truman administrations[5]. Indeed, Gar Alperovitz famously contended, in his 1965 book *'Atomic Diplomacy'*, that the primary motivation for dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was to intimidate the Soviet Union and establish American preponderance in the post-war world[6].

It is the view of the author that, contrary to the assertions of revisionist literature, the principle rationale behind the intensification of the Manhattan Project in the first half of 1945 was the desire of the US bureaucracy to end the war in the Pacific before the planned invasion of the Japanese mainland in November 1945.

The discourse will be structured in a manner which engages with the elemental revisionist hypotheses. The first section will assess the attitudes of US policy makers towards Japan and the military options available for ending the war in the Pacific. Section two will examine the diplomatic alternatives to the bomb and illustrate why these were eventually eschewed by the Truman administration.

i) The Atom Bomb, the War in the Pacific and US Military Considerations

The crux of the revisionist contention that the Pacific War could have been terminated without the use of atomic weaponry is informed by empirical and normative evidence which suggests that in August of 1945, and indeed in the months prior to August, Japan was on the verge of military and economic collapse[7].

Alperovitz and Walker argue that the Japanese military had been severely weakened not only by the high casualty rates suffered by its forces in the Pacific theatre, but also by the crippling economic impact of the US naval blockade[8]. By the winter months of 1944 the army was beset by substantial shortages of ammunition, fuel and trained personnel[9]. Moreover, the USAAF's relentless strategic bombing campaign against the Japanese mainland throughout 1945, which relied heavily on the deployment of incendiary bombs, had severely impaired Japan's ability to continue the war in both ideational and material terms[10]. Indeed, by July 1945 B29 bombers stationed in Okinawa were averaging 1,200 sorties a week and were being met with little or no resistance[11]. Revisionists assert that such a state of affairs clearly illustrates that the planned invasion of Kyushu in November 1945 was unlikely and that the invasion of Honshu the following March would not have taken place[12]. This is seemingly borne out by the testimony of central US military figures such as Eisenhower and General Arnold[13], along with the findings of the

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1946 Strategic Bombing Survey which concluded that;

“Prior to 31st December 1945, and in all probability prior to November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped...and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated.”[14]

Accordingly revisionists argue that the US bureaucracy – which was supposedly aware of the conditions within Japan – knew that it was not necessary to use the atomic bomb in order to militarily defeat the Japanese or compel them to surrender. It is therefore inferred that the intensification of the Manhattan Project in early 1945 must have been a result of motives extraneous to the Pacific War- namely the intimidation of the Soviet Union[15].

There are, however, several factors and angles which this explanation fails to engage with. Although it has become clear, with the power of hindsight, that the Japanese war economy was teetering on the brink in 1945, this is wholly different to surmising that Japan was close to surrender. Military and civilian officials at the time, operating under the fog of war, had legitimate cause to believe that Japan would continue to put up fierce resistance until its territory had been militarily subdued. In spite of the widespread destruction that it wrought, it was not evident that strategic bombing had weakened the resolve of the Japanese military to continue the war[16]. As Morton points out, Generals Marshall and MacArthur were both convinced that relying “upon bombing alone...was still an unproven formula for success, as was evidenced by the bomber offensive against Germany”[17]. The experience of island hopping had also left an intractable impression on the minds of US policy makers. During the Pacific campaign the Japanese had “demonstrated time and time again that they could fight hard and inflict heavy casualties even when the outlook was hopeless”[18]. The growing frequency of kamikaze attacks on US ships[19] and the increasingly inflammatory rhetoric emerging from Tokyo provided little reason for the US to expect Japanese resistance to dissipate or collapse in the near future. As a consequence Allied intelligence, as well as Truman and the key players in his administration, considered the invasion of the “industrial heartland of Japan” a necessity to end the war[20]. Faced with this situation the atom bomb was seen as possessing a unique strategic utility – shocking the Japanese into capitulation, thus rendering a costly invasion redundant. The intensification of US efforts to produce an atomic bomb was intrinsically informed by this objective. Assistant Secretary of War McCloy, upon hearing of the developments at *Los Alamos*, went as far as to intimate that discussions of a land invasion were ‘fanciful’ whilst the US was close to possessing an atom bomb[21].

In addition to purely military concerns Truman was acutely sensitive to the impact the bomb would have on the domestic political sphere. Whilst Alperovitz dismisses the casualty estimates for the OLYMPIC operation[22], allied planners estimated there would be at least 30,000 American casualties in the first thirty days of the Kyushu phase and 46,000 during the first month of the Honshu phase[23]. In light of the brutal and often fanatic opposition faced by US Marines over the previous four years many in the administration felt that these approximations were in reality woefully optimistic[24]. Truman made it clear on numerous occasions that he feared the planned invasion would be akin to “an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other”[25] – a concern echoed by Secretary of War Stimson[26]. It would have been anathema for Truman to risk the lives of Allied servicemen whilst possessing the means to avoid such a scenario. If the President had delayed the deployment of the atomic bomb and launched the planned invasion, at a cost of tens of thousands of American lives, it was plainly obvious to him that the anger this would have roused amongst the American populace would have ended his political career[27]. The results of a *Fortuna* Magazine poll conducted four months after the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki showed that fewer than 5% of Americans disagreed with the US recourse to atomic weaponry while 22% said they wished more bombs had been dropped prior to the Japanese surrender[28]. This context clearly influenced the hastening of the US endeavour to construct an atomic bomb in 1945.

Furthermore, the impact of the Second World War on liberal democratic conceptions of ethics and Just War had been central in shaping US attitudes towards the production and use of the atom bomb. By early 1945 few moral restraints remained in what had evolved into a total war. If one examines the US policy of strategic firebombing employed in Japan and Germany it becomes evident that mass civilian casualties did not trouble US politicians and military commanders if they served to advance wider Allied war objectives[29]. Roosevelt’s decision to develop the bomb in 1942, and the resolve of the Truman administration to hurry its development in the first half of 1945, was a

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product of this distinct moral environment[30]. Aside from a few dissenting voices in the scientific community, Leo Szilard being the most conspicuous[31], the military utility of the atom bomb was never in question. Truman stressed this on numerous occasions;

“Let there be no mistake about it. I regarded the bomb as a military weapon and never had any doubt that it should be used. The top military advisors to the President recommended its use, and when I talked to Churchill he unhesitatingly told me he favoured the use of the atomic bomb if it might end the war.”[32]

The savagery which characterised the Pacific War no doubt played an important role in convincing key players in the Manhattan Project that the use of the atomic bomb was necessary and justified. The US propaganda machine, aided by the actions of Japanese forces on the battlefield and in POW camps, had worked tirelessly since Pearl Harbour to de-humanise the enemy. Paul Fussell, an infantryman destined for the Kyushu invasion at the time of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, recalls how it was a widely held belief amongst the American public that the Japanese were sub-human[33]. Even those who occupied the highest echelons of power were not free from such racist thinking. Many viewed the atom bomb as serving a retributive role – punishing the Japanese with an even more destructive spectacle than Pearl Harbour[34]. It is worth quoting Truman at length on this issue;

“I was greatly disturbed by the unwarranted attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbour. The only language they seem to understand is the one that we have been using to bombard them. When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him as a beast. It is most regrettable but nevertheless true.”[35]

In spite of the useful empirical research which has been generated by the revisionist discourse, it is apparent that historians such as Alperovitz have relied on post-ex-facto theorising rather than an examination of the conditions which influenced the motives and perspectives of actors during 1945. For policy makers in the Roosevelt and Truman administrations, the atom bomb was viewed as an essential component of the United States' ability to end the war in the Pacific without having to resort to a potentially lengthy and costly invasion of the Japanese mainland.

ii) Ending the Pacific War : Alternatives to the Bomb

A second argument forwarded by revisionist scholars deals with the reluctance of the United States government to pursue alternative avenues which promised to end the war before the scheduled November invasion with a minimum loss of life on both sides and without the need for the use of atomic bombs. In particular they have highlighted the unwillingness of President Truman to modify the terms of 'unconditional surrender' and his repudiation of Japanese peace overtures[36].

By the spring of 1945 it had become evident to various elements in the Japanese bureaucracy that their nation had little chance of reversing its precarious military situation. As such, urged on by a rapidly growing *Peace Faction*, Emperor Hirohito instructed Prince Konoye to contact the Soviet Foreign Commissar Molotov and express his willingness to negotiate peace terms with the United States[37]. However, it was made clear to the Russians that the Japanese were only willing to pursue negotiations if the Allied stipulation of unconditional surrender, a policy inherited from the Roosevelt government, was amended to guarantee the preservation of the thousand year old imperial dynasty[38]. Encouraged by these developments, and recognising the obstacle to peace which unconditional surrender presented, acting Secretary of State Grew proposed that the administration clarify its terms of surrender. Grew, and a significant constituency in the War Department, were convinced that such a move would allay the fears of the Japanese – who were concerned the Emperor would be submitted to some form of Nuremberg style humiliation or even executed – thereby strengthening the *Peace Faction* and bringing a swift end to the war[39].

Revisionists have questioned why Truman consistently failed to engage constructively with the proposals of the *Peace Faction* and why he refused to guarantee the position of the monarchy in the *Potsdam Declaration* if it would have ended the war without the need for a bloody invasion and the use of the atom bomb[40]. Tsoyoshi Hasegawa suggests that the United States purposefully maintained the prerequisite of unconditional surrender in order to

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strengthen Japanese intransigence – making it necessary to drop the atom bomb, thus intimidating Stalin and preventing the expansion of Soviet influence in the Far East[41].

It must be noted, however, that the emphasis placed on the likely success of modifying unconditional surrender by revisionists was not a view which held much sway during 1945. Consequently, Truman was advised against drastically altering the policies of his predecessor. Over the course of the war Emperor Hirohito had, in the same vein as Mussolini and Hitler, become an emblem of “a hated enemy, of depravity, of tyranny and of inhumanity”[42]. It was widely assumed that abandoning unconditional surrender would prompt an angry response from the American public and add credence to growing Republican criticisms of the President as weak in the international sphere[43]. A feeling also existed amongst top diplomats and politicians, most forcefully elucidated by Dean Acheson, that the Emperor had been a willing participant in the expansionist designs of Tojo and the Japanese military clique and as such should not be singled out for special treatment[44]. Moreover, there was a palpable fear that any conciliatory moves by the United States would be interpreted in Japan as a sign of American weakness- emboldening the *War Faction*[45]. In relation to this it must be stressed that there was very little inclination in the administration to attach much importance to the Konoye proposition. In the first place Japanese peace feelers did not utilise the usual diplomatic channels to engage the organs of the US government directly, nor were any formal requests for talks made[46]. Bernstein points out that even after the *Potsdam Declaration* Tokyo remained averse to presenting “concrete proposals for negotiations”[47]. As a result it was perfectly lucid to Truman and others that the *Peace Faction* was not ascendant in the Japanese government[48].

It is clear then that the assertions of Alperovitz and Hasegawa regarding the centrality of the bomb in US-Soviet relations are flawed. If the main concern of the United States in the Far-East was to exclude the Soviets from the occupation of Japan and Manchuria and if key figures were sure of the efficacy of negotiations, then presumably the most effective course of action to achieve this objective would have been to respond to Japanese approaches immediately and alter the *Potsdam Declaration* to align with the demands of peaceable elements in Tokyo[49]. It is true to say that alternatives to dropping the atom bomb on Japan did exist. However, rather than hastening a Japanese surrender, policy makers had ample reason to suppose that changing the terms of unconditional surrender or waiting for further communication would actually entrench Japanese resistance and prolong the conflict. Conversely, Truman and his advisors were confident that the physical and psychological damage caused by the dropping of the atom bomb would, at the very least, impel a rapid conclusion to the war.

Conclusion

The overriding motivation for the intensification of the Manhattan Project in the first months 1945 was to produce a combat usable atomic bomb before the intended invasion of the Japanese homeland in November of the same year. The events of the war, in particular the resistance which had faced allied forces in the Pacific Rim in late 1944 and early 1945, had convinced policy makers that the military regime in Japan would not surrender without a full scale military invasion. A military operation on such a scale was expected to cost the lives of tens, if not hundreds of thousands of American servicemen – a potential political headache in a country exhausted from four years of war and a scenario to be avoided at all costs. The moral dislocation engendered by total war, a racially tinged desire for retribution and the perceived bankruptcy of alternative options combined to create a context in which delaying the production and deployment of the atom bomb was seen as neither conscionable nor strategically desirable. It is therefore evident that the claims of revisionist historians that the dropping of the atom bomb was not necessary, and was done merely as a means of intimidating the Soviets, ignore the central impetus behind the US endeavour to manufacture an atomic bomb – the desire to coerce a Japanese surrender as soon as possible.

The juxtaposition of an unearthly cloud of dust filling the sky – the sum of 5 years of laborious political and scientific effort – with the indescribable scenes of horror which took place beneath it has left an indelible mark on the psyche of successive generations. Indeed, the mushroom cloud has cast its shadow far beyond the two cities it annihilated – retrospectively obscuring the context in which American politicians, scientists and military leaders took the decision to build and use the atomic bomb. Whether Japan was on the verge of collapse, whether peace could have been achieved through other channels or whether the atom bombings actually saved American lives is not the issue. The issue is whether at the time Roosevelt, Truman and other key figures in the US bureaucracy believed that dropping

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atomic bombs on Japan was likely to bring about an end to the war and save American lives. All the evidence suggests that they did. To judge them on the basis of information that they did not possess at the time would be to commit a grave academic error.

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