

The Dropping of the Atomic Bomb

by Melissa G. Thiel

In August 1945, the United States used atomic weapons to destroy Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This bombing was the first ever nuclear weapon used and it is estimated to have killed more than 129,000 Japanese. The decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan is a controversial topic and has been studied and discussed by numerous historians. The reasons why the US used the bomb and the question of if it was justified are not black and white. There are several different factors that go into the decision to drop the bomb. Through my research, I found that historians disagree as to the exact reason President Truman decided to use nuclear weapons and also if he was justified to do so.

Historian Ronald Takaki wrote the book *Hiroshima: Why American dropped the bomb* in 1996 and has a very strong opinion as to why the US used nuclear weapons. According to Takaki the bomb was dropped not to end the war with Japan but to control Russia. Some of the key decision makers that surrounded Truman were deeply concerned with Russia. Takaki states that “the demonstration of the bomb might impress Russia with America’s military might.”¹ Leslie Groves, the director of the Manhattan Project, said “there was never from about two weeks from the time I took charge of this Project any illusion on my part but that Russia was our enemy and the project was conducted on that basis.” Takaki explains that using nuclear weapons on Japan was actually a way to show Russia that the United States was a threat and had the military power to do much damage. Takaki also points out that Japan was not the initial target but Germany was. Once Germany surrendered there was not a need to use the atomic bomb on them so Japan became the new target. Takaki says one reason for this is racism and states that “rooted in the nineteenth century, anti-Asian prejudice contributed to the way Americans quickly racialized the Pacific war.”²

¹ Ronald Takaki, *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb*, (New York: Back Bay Books, 1996).

² *Ibid.*, 7

Americans had a long history of prejudice against the Japanese and the atomic bomb was used for that reason.

Like Takaki, historian J. Samuel Walker thought racism played a role in the use of the atomic bomb. In his 2005 book *Prompt & Utter Destruction* Walker theorizes that the United States government fueled the hatred that the people felt for Japan. The government announced that in April of 1943 the Japanese had executed three American fliers. In 1944 the US government released information about Japanese brutality during the Bataan Death March in 1942. During this march thousands of Americans and Filipino troops were starved, beaten, and executed. Walker believes that these events were strategically used to sway the American public's view about Japan. Walker states "the graphic evidence of Japanese atrocities and inhumanity toward prisoners and civilians fed an image of an enemy that was cruel, barbarous, and deserving of annihilation."³ During this time, the Japanese were viewed as subhuman and depicted as vermin and reptiles. Racial slurs like yellow rats and yellow bastards were used by the public to describe people from Asia. One issue Takaki and Walker did not agree on was the surrender of Japan. Takaki thought the surrender of Japan was inevitable while Walker thought that Japan would fight until the bitter end. Walker uses the battle that took place on the island of Okinawa in April 1945 to prove his point. On April 1, 1945, 180,000 soldiers assaulted the island of Okinawa along with 1,200 ships. Even this did not persuade Japan to surrender. The Japanese did not meet the US soldiers on the beach but instead hid in bunkers, tunnels, and caves. Walker notes that "gradually and painfully, the Americans overcame Japanese defenses and gained control of the island. But the costs were high—about 7,000 members of the Army and Marines were killed or missing in action."⁴ Walker explains that these types of battles justified the use of nuclear weapons to end World War II. He says, "the Japanese government was paralyzed by indecision and dissension. The United States was committed to a total victory at the lowest possible cost in American lives."⁵

Gar Alperovitz, author of the 1996 book titled *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, agrees with Takaki regarding the fact that Japan surrendering was inevitable. He believed that Japan would have surrendered upon Russia's entry into World War II. Alperovitz questions if dropping the bomb was a necessity and expresses his opinion that the military did not play an

³ Samuel Walker J., *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs against Japan*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), revised edition.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34

active role in the decision making process to use atomic weapons. Alperovitz states "there is little contemporaneous evidence that military leaders had any direct formal involvement in the decision making process."⁶

General Douglas MacArthur was the supreme commander of the Allied forces in the Pacific and he was not consulted regarding the use of the atomic bomb. In fact, he was only made aware that the bomb was going to be used 48 hours prior to the event. As Alperovitz notes "no record exist of the kind of careful staff work and policy development which routinely goes into serious military decision-making. There is no sophisticated paper trail."⁷ Alperovitz accuses the United States government of making a haste decision and not consulting with the right people. He believes that high ranking military officials would have been against the use of atomic weapons and would have warned President Truman not to use them.

Like his fellow Historians, Paul Ham believed that there were flaws in the decision to use the atomic bomb and the events that led up to it. In his 2014 book *Hiroshima Nagasaki: The Real Story of the Atomic Bombings and Their Aftermath* he discusses the unconditional surrender of Japan. The term "unconditional surrender" had become a popular slogan during World War II. Japan wanted to keep its Emperor but the United States wanted a total victory. The United States wanted Japan to surrender all her arms and territory. Complete and total surrender was the only thing President Truman would accept. As Ham notes "most Americans agreed with him and felt no compunction to ease the terms of Japan's defeat and humiliation after four years of some of the bloodiest battles the world had seen."⁸ Ham believed that the terms of surrender were unreasonable and that the lack of compromise contributed to using the atomic bomb. He states that a "conditional surrender" would have eased tensions and could have led to a more peaceful solution.

One common theme I kept coming across while doing my research was racism. The 1994 book *By the Bomb's Early Light* by Paul Boyer, the author addresses what was going on in American culture during the time of the bomb and how that effected the decision making. The American public was angry with Japan and seemed not to be too alarmed at the fact nuclear weapons were used. There was actually boasting and pride that the United States was the first to use such extreme measures. Boyer says "even the fact

⁶ Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, (New York: Vintage, 1996), new edition.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 322.

⁸ Paul Ham, *Hiroshima Nagasaki: The Real Story of the Atomic Bombings and Their Aftermath*, (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2014).

that 100,000 Japanese had died seemed incidental.”⁹ Newspapers came out with headings that read “Nagasaki disemboweled” and “Greatest Scientific Developments in the History of Man.” Some stores had “atomic” sales. Boyer sets the stage for the atomic age and shows that racism toward Japan was a major contributor in using the atomic bomb.

Although not all historians agree on the necessity of the atomic bomb and if it should have been used, there are some common themes. All the historians I studied thought racism contributed to the extreme actions of the United States. Also, there was a lot of criticism as to why the bomb was used. The government told the people that by using the atomic bomb, the war would end sooner thus saving American lives. Historians have come to the conclusion that there were many more reasons to why the bomb was used and it is a very complicated issue. One thing that can be agreed upon, the use of nuclear weapons changed the world forever at cost the lives of many innocent civilians.

⁹ Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994).