

Reflections on Hiroshima

Bill Gordon

March 2000

The dropping of an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, which caused untold human suffering and brought about profound implications for the entire human race, represents one of the key events of the twentieth century. By examining the historical background and the motivations of the American leaders at the time, the first three sections of this essay evaluate whether the decision to drop the atomic bomb was justified by the circumstances. The fourth section explains how my personal opinions regarding the bombing of Hiroshima have changed and provides my conclusions on the question of the necessity of the bombing. The final section explores how selected films and readings enhance a historical understanding of the atomic bomb's ramifications on individual human lives and on the global community.

Attitudes of American Leaders and People

John Dower's depiction of the hatred of America's leaders and people toward the Japanese during World War II shocked me. He mentions a December 1945 *Fortune* poll that found 23 percent of the respondents wished the U.S. had the chance to use "many more of them [atomic bombs] before Japan had a chance to surrender" (1986, 54). The poll results vividly reveal the depth of the hatred many Americans must have felt during the war.

When reading selected books on the bombing of Hiroshima, I was troubled by President Truman's and other American leaders' deeply prejudiced opinions and attitudes toward the Japanese people. When I was growing up in Independence, Missouri, President Truman's home town, I never realized that he had written in his diary in July 1945, only a few days before the bombing of Hiroshima, that the Japanese people were "savages, ruthless, merciless, and fanatic" (Dower 1986, 142). The extremely negative racist views of most American leaders and people made it much easier for them to justify in their minds the use of the atomic bombs on the Japanese people.

Diplomatic Stubbornness and Lack of Diplomatic Initiatives

In the waning weeks and days of the Pacific War, America showed no inclination to negotiate an end to the war with the Japanese or to initiate any diplomatic initiatives to seek a prompt, peaceful end of the war to minimize further casualties on both sides. After

Japan's staggering losses and defeat in Okinawa in June 1945, Japanese leaders sought the Soviet Union's help to negotiate a peace with the U.S. However, American leaders continued to refuse to consider Japan's request that the surrender be conditional on the emperor remaining as the nation's head. Although some hard-core militants in the Japanese government vehemently opposed surrender until the very end, for the most part Japan had been willing for some time to accept the other demands of the Allies, such as complete disarmament, relinquishment of territory seized during the war, limitation of Japanese sovereignty to the four main islands and a few minor islands, temporary occupation of Japan by Allied troops, and justice for designated war criminals. How ironic it is that the Americans decided soon after the end of the war to retain the Japanese emperor as a symbol of continuity to maintain political stability.

The Potsdam Proclamation issued on July 26, 1945, made no mention of what would happen to the Japanese emperor. With no promise from the Allies that the emperor would remain in power, Japan rejected the demands of the Proclamation, even though the Allies made clear the consequences if Japan did not accept the ultimatum:

We call upon the government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all Japanese armed forces, and to provide proper and adequate assurances of their good faith in such action. The alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction. (Potsdam Proclamation 1945)

The American people also seemed to dismiss the idea of diplomatic discussions with the Japanese and to overwhelmingly support the American policy of the "unconditional surrender" of Japan, as shown by about 90 percent of the respondents to a June 1945 poll supporting "an uncompromising stance on war aims even if it meant invasion of the Japanese homeland" (Pyle 1996, 212).

Political Considerations

Political factors prevailed over military and humanitarian considerations in the decision to drop the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The concerns of top American leaders about the Soviet Union's future actions had the most significant influence on President Truman's deliberations on whether or not to drop the atomic bomb on Japan. If America did not drop the bomb in order to demonstrate its military superiority, American leaders had concerns that the Soviet Union would occupy Manchuria and would share the occupation of Japan with the U.S., especially if the Japanese surrendered several weeks or months after the Soviet Union's entry into the war against Japan on August 8, 1945. In addition, American

leaders believed that dropping of the bomb would strengthen their position in future dealings with the Soviet Union concerning their sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

President Truman must also have kept in mind the personal political implications of his decision to drop the bomb. With polls showing that Americans overwhelmingly supported the “unconditional surrender” of Japan and with his knowing the strong anti-Japanese sentiments of the American people, President Truman must have felt that he had little political risk in dropping an atomic bomb on Japan. Moreover, President Truman must have also considered his difficulty in explaining to American voters why the government spent two billion dollars to develop a superior weapon if he personally decided not to deploy it, especially if the war had dragged on with additional American casualties.

Changing Personal Opinions

My personal opinions on the dropping of the atomic bomb have changed quite significantly. Before this year (2000), I had visited the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum, seen the film *Black Rain*, and read *Hiroshima* by John Hersey, but I had never thought that seriously about the reasons for dropping the atomic bomb. I had only two strong opinions about the bomb. First, although the atomic bomb has much more strength and deadly effects than conventional bombs and weapons, the atomic bomb has the same basic nature and characteristics as other weapons of war. Therefore, debates over the morality of the dropping the atomic bomb and the waging of war, especially the bombing of civilian targets, seemed equivalent to me. Second, I believed the dropping of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki reduced the number of Japanese and American lives that would have been lost had the bomb not been dropped. This seemed obvious to me because of the short span of time between the first atomic bomb on August 6 and Emperor Hirohito’s surrender radio broadcast on August 15.

After examining the evidence provided in the readings cited at the end of this essay, I now believe no justification exists for the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. America had already destroyed almost all of the Japanese navy and air force, so Japan could not effectively wage war or even defend itself. After steady American air bombings of Japanese cities in the first half of 1945, Japan was already on the verge of collapse when the bomb hit Hiroshima. Top-level World War II military leaders such as MacArthur and Eisenhower believed the bomb to be totally unnecessary from a military point of view (Takaki 1995, 3-4, 30-31). Even if the Hiroshima bombing could be justified, the Nagasaki bombing has absolutely no justification, since America did not even give Japanese leaders

enough time to evaluate the effects of the Hiroshima bombing and to reconsider their decision to not surrender.

Aftermath and Ramifications

The two films *Barefoot Gen* and *Hellfire from Hiroshima* and Dr. Hachiya's *Hiroshima Diary* provide shocking evidence of the human tragedy that resulted from the dropping of the bomb on Hiroshima. Having read Nakazawa Keiji's *manga* book of *Barefoot Gen* before viewing the film, I was somewhat disappointed by the adaptation of the book to film. The book vividly portrays the intense discrimination experienced by *hibakusha* (atomic bomb survivors), anti-war sympathizers, Koreans, and poverty-stricken individuals. On the other hand, the film focuses almost exclusively on the tragic physical effects of the bomb and the love between the members of the Nakaoka family, and it touches only lightly on the considerable discrimination that existed in Japanese society near the end of the war and after the Hiroshima bombing. In sharp contrast to the discrimination and hatred depicted in the *Barefoot Gen* book, Dr. Hachiya's diary of his experiences from August 6 to the end of September 1945 as a doctor at a Hiroshima hospital provides numerous examples of tenderness, compassion, and love, although he also describes the great despair and anguish of many of the bombing victims.

The age of atomic weapons began on July 16, 1945, with the test explosion at Alamogordo in New Mexico. The course of the 20th century atomic arms race would have been little affected by a decision not to drop atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Regardless of the actual deployment of atomic weapons by the U.S., the Soviet Union would have continued to devote resources to the development of an atomic bomb. Nowadays many nations possess and have tested nuclear weapons, so mankind's challenge continues to be how to control these weapons to ensure no nation uses them and no terrorist group obtains and deploys them.

As a final reflection, I would like to consider the most appropriate alternative in the July 1945 poll of 150 atomic scientists regarding whether and how the atomic bomb should be used in the war with Japan (Takaki 1995, 134-5). The poll gave five alternatives: (1) use in manner most effective from a military point of view to bring about prompt Japanese surrender while minimizing the loss of American lives, (2) give military demonstration to Japan with opportunity for surrender before full use of weapon, (3) give experimental demonstration in this country with opportunity for surrender before full use of weapon, (4) do not use militarily but make public the experimental results, or (5) maintain as secret as possible and refrain from

using the bombs in the war. President Truman chose alternative 1, even though only 15 percent of the scientists supported it. After considering the arguments for and against dropping the bomb and reflecting on the alternatives, I now strongly believe the U.S. should have followed either alternative 4 or 5, supported by only 11 percent and two percent respectively of the respondents. American leaders could have readily ended the war without resorting to atomic bombs if they had been willing to actively seek diplomatic solutions rather than being preoccupied with political considerations.

Works Cited

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