

To fully understand the decision to employ the atomic bomb to end the Pacific War, we must immerse ourselves in the domestic and international political climate of August, 1945. Additionally, it is crucial that we become familiar with the next planned battle of the Pacific War – the invasion of Japan. Japan planned a massive defense of their homeland, the intensity of which was clearly demonstrated during the battle of Okinawa, the dress-rehearsal of the invasion of Japanese Home Islands. Our Military was able to keep Okinawa and its staggering casualty rates in relative obscurity by allowing MacArthur's hunger for publicity to keep the eyes of the American people focused on the Philippine fighting. This and other ruses, such as the feigned invasion of Formosa (Taiwan,) kept Okinawa obscure for over 50 years. Thus, the potential casualty rates of the invasion of Japan – so clearly presaged by the vigorous Japanese defense of Okinawa – remained unknown to the general public. Historians who have poured over the declassified invasion plans, have revealed that these plans conservatively expected between one and two million Japanese deaths from the invasion, with Allied casualties dwarfing those of Okinawa. Perhaps if these estimates were more familiar to the Japanese - and Okinawa's carnage more familiar to Americans - the use of the Atomic Bomb to end the war rapidly and without invasion of the home islands, would today be somewhat less controversial, though no less horrific.

Operation Downfall was the overall strategic plan to end the Pacific War by the invasion of Japan and capture of Tokyo. Phase I, Operation Olympic, called for amphibious assaults on Kyushu on 1 November 1945 to capture Kagoshima with its excellent port and airfields. Here a staging base would be constructed for the second phase, the 1 March 1946 Operation Coronet which planned landings east and west of Tokyo to capture the Japanese capitol in a pincer action. An alternative plan, Operation Blacklist, detailed the peaceful occupation of Japan should they surrender without invasion. Details of these plans can be found in the Army's Center for Military History (history.army.mil) and as I have no formal military training, I will only comment on generalities. The terrain surrounding Kagoshima Bay is mountainous and perfect for the type of defensive preparations that made Okinawa such a bloodbath. American forces would land at Shibushi Bay on the east coast of Kyushu and attack northwest to capture the airfield at Kirishima, at the northern end of Kagoshima bay. A second force was to be landed on the west coast to push eastward to complete the encirclement of Kagoshima. Allied casualty estimates varied greatly, ranging from 100,000 to 500,000 dead and wounded. General MacArthur estimated 28,000 Americans would be killed in action, other estimates went far beyond this. It is believed that a half million Purple Heart medals were purchased just for Operation Olympic.

At home, America was tired of war and sacrifice and in no mood to consider paying such a dear price to force Japan to fulfill the "unconditional surrender" provision of the Potsdam Conference. Alternatives to ground invasion existed. As the Navy's fast carrier forces pounded Japan's ports and airfields, American B-29's were so heavily engaged destroying Japan's cities that they were running out of intact targets. The combined strength of Army and Naval air forces clearly provided a means to defeat Japan with far fewer casualties than a ground war, albeit many hundreds of aircraft and tens of thousands of aircrew were placed at risk with each major bombing mission. Then, 46 days after formal resistance ended on Okinawa, the concept of strategic bombing was revolutionized with the demonstration of a weapon that could destroy an entire city - risking only a single aircraft and crew.

Ironically, the main argument against using the Atomic Bomb came from a strategic bombing assessment commissioned by President Truman after the war. The assessment concluded from interrogations and interviews that Japan would have surrendered by the end of 1945 without the need for invasion, simply as the result of conventional bombing campaign and naval blockade. But as spring gave way to summer in 1945, the pressure was on for a quick resolution to the war - not only from the American people, but from a new threat – the powerful Soviet Army, recently victorious over Germany and now free to honor its treaty obligation to enter the Pacific War – as it did on 8 August 1945.

Stalin's land-grab in Europe had caught the attention of both the United States and Japan. Both nations, though engaged in a bitter war with each other, were equally wary of the spread of Communism. From the books I read by Japanese veterans, the threat of Communism weighed heavily on the minds of the Japanese because their two traditional enemies, China and Russia, were both wellsprings of violent Communist revolutions then taking hold in Europe and Asia. America and Japan were thus deeply dismayed to see the now-rested Red Army rapidly retaking Manchuria in early August with the clear intention of invading Japan from the north. Japan and America could not help but observe that whatever Russia conquered, Russia kept. ..And then there was China.

I have not written about the China-Burma-India Theater (CBI) where many Americans served and many lost their lives because when compared with the westward advances of the Southwest and Central Pacific theaters, it was a less notable operation, mostly to open supply routes to aid the Chinese Armies. By late in war, the fighting in China had reverted to an internecine struggle between Nationalist and Communist factions, both attempting to gain control of their country. Until quite late in the war, the Chinese civil war clearly worked in favor of Japan. The opposing Chinese armies were too heavily engaged in a struggle between each other to effectively regain any territory from the Japanese. Should the Japanese surrender however, a great power-vacuum would arise in Formosa, Korea and Indochina and a valid claim would exist for the Chinese to occupy some portion of southern Japan as a spoil of war. Clearly, by summer, 1945, Japan could look beyond the American advance for its greatest existential threats – and America was beginning to realize that two new enemies were revealing themselves to remain our nemesis for two generations yet to be born. In August 1945, two men, a President and an Emperor, as opposite in background as the nations they led, were faced with the most momentous decisions of their lives - decisions that would result in the dawn of the Atomic Age.

Harry Truman, wartime President of the United States for just 4 months because of the recent death of Roosevelt, knew that the invasion of Japan was imminent, that perhaps a million American soldiers would be killed or wounded in this battle and that the military and civilian deaths suffered by Japan would be beyond comprehension. He saw the Gold Stars already in the windows of some 400,000 American homes and knew the American People were not in a mood to see this war continue. Harry Truman also knew that if Japan did not surrender soon, Russia and China were likely to be the next major powers in the Pacific, with Japan itself occupied by America and the Allies, and by Russia and China – likely a Communist China – a looming threat to global security for generations. President Truman, knowing that the United States possessed two operable nuclear weapons, had a terrible decision to make – and possibly fewer options than we'd like to believe. (In Part III, I will ask you as a thought-experiment, to decide Truman's conundrum as an average American of August, 1945.)

Truman's counterpart in Tokyo, though unaware of America's nuclear secret, was also facing a terrible dilemma: You are taught from birth that your Royal Family descended from Gods. You are trained in a semi-religious tradition that you and your subjects are imbued with a divine spirit that would never allow an enemy to occupy any portion of your sacred home territory. You are the Emperor of Japan, divine in your own right but not in direct control of your government. You are fully aware that your people have no food to eat and no fuel to cook with. Your Navy is at the bottom of the sea, your Air Force is destroyed and your last stronghold in the Pacific, just 350 miles south of your sacred home islands, has recently fallen to an unstoppable American military. Your government is still under the influence of fanatical militarists who will never surrender and willing to sacrifice your last subject in a clearly unwinnable war. Though you approved the formation of a peace bloc in the Diet, they are far too weak to challenge the fanatical military. Can you, Emperor of Japan, do the unthinkable and personally demand acceptance of the alien concept of Honorable Surrender to save your nation?