

75 years ago on 6 August 1945, a B-29 bomber departed Tinian to unleash an atomic bomb on Japan. We've discussed the political pressures and traditions that dissuaded the Emperor of Japan from honorable surrender and we've also identified the factors influencing the President of the United States to send the "Enola Gay" on its mission to attempt a quick end to the war. Now what would you do?

Americans reading this today have a world-view shaped by 75 years of cold-war and nuclear standoff. Our America officially proscribes racism - but in 1945 racism, rampant in America and Japan, was a major cause of the Pacific War and actively promoted by both sides. We live today in an America with a vastly different view of Government, Military, Science and Industry - in no small way due to the unfulfilled promises of a better future through nuclear energy. The poisonous effects of radiation, so well known today, were obscure in 1945. The paradox of Mutual Assured Destruction that kept the Superpowers from direct military confrontation these many postwar years has not dissuaded us from lending support to hundreds of small local conflicts. To ask ourselves whether we would have "dropped the bomb" requires us to shed our 2020 hubris and return unbiased to August, 1945.

75 years ago, Americans were still bitterly fighting Japanese in the Philippines and both sides believed that only a bloody invasion of the home islands would end the war. Col Hiromichi Yahara, the highest-ranking Japanese officer on Okinawa (after the suicides of Generals Ushijima and Cho) got through American lines on orders to attempt to escape to Japan to utilize his combat experience in defense of the homeland. Yahara hid in a refugee camp, posing as a Japanese civilian trapped on Okinawa until he was betrayed by a fellow Japanese soldier and taken as a POW. Prior to the war, Yahara lived in America for 2 years as an exchange officer and he knew that Americans would not rape and kill Japanese civilians. Still, he continued to promote this propaganda for the war effort. He understood the western concept of honorable surrender but in Japanese tradition, death had to be chosen over surrender. Yahara and the militarists that ran Japan clung to this view. Japanese civilians were starving - told to exercise to calm their cravings. They endured the American fire raids, they saw the charred corpses of women with children fused to their backs - perhaps they may have despaired of continuing the war (as many secret wartime writings have revealed) but thought, information and media were under absolute military control - doubt was punishable by death. No, Japan was not going to surrender and Americans didn't care, we wanted the war over and our sons home, whatever it took.

In 1945, you were probably living on a farm as most Americans did at the time or perhaps in a crowded apartment in a large city, lured there by the war-plant jobs that brought new affluence to America after the Great Depression. Wherever you lived, you still had basic necessities of life rationed - food, fuel, clothing, tires and nylon hosiery and you were tired of rationing and "doing without." Tired of reading casualty lists, tired of war - would you have opposed using "The Bomb" to end the war quickly?

You likely had a child or spouse or parent in the service under constant danger. You might have been an 18-year-old who just received your draft notice or the parent of a child about to inducted. You might have been an exhausted veteran of the European Theater, waiting to collect enough "points" to come home when you were alerted that you would soon be sent to the Pacific to fight the Japanese. Perhaps you were an Allied POW starving in a forced-labor camp or a veteran of the 10th United States Army who had just survived the most bitter battle of the Pacific War - Okinawa - and now learned your 10th Army was assigned to invade Japan in November. Would you have opposed using "The Bomb?"

In 1945 there was no shame in hating the Japanese. Perhaps yours was a grieving family with one or more Gold Stars in your window. Perhaps you were a Pacific War Veteran having seen your closest friends maimed or just an average American, subject to years of racist wartime propaganda. You may have hated the Japanese for their sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, for their demonstrated brutality in

conducting war, for their atrocities against civilians and prisoners of war - would you have opposed using “The Bomb” to finish them off? The fact is, had we lived in 1945 America, few if any of us would harbor any reservations about using the bomb – had we known about it. When the news broke in America that a new kind of super-weapon was used against the Japanese, most felt only relief that the war and America’s long sacrifice might soon end.

But did “The Bomb” impress the Japanese? Fire-raids, like the one that killed 100,000 people and destroyed half of Tokyo, were now commonplace in Japan. Until the second bomb was dropped on 9 August, Japanese militarists remained unmoved. In a POW camp on Okinawa, Col Yahara still felt obligated to either commit suicide or attempt to escape to Japan to face certain death defending the homeland. He learned of the first atomic bombing the day after it happened. On 10 August, Yahara learned Japan accepted the Potsdam Declaration and on 14 August he was informed the war was over and he would be repatriated. From his book we see he felt no remorse about the manner in which he performed his duties or the treatment of Okinawan civilians, only relief that he would live. All over the world, Allied soldiers shared the same feelings, the war was over, they had survived - August 1945 was not the time for remorse. Col Hiromichi Yahara, architect of the Okinawa defense and in tactical command through most of the Battle of Okinawa, returned to his home town in January of 1946 – three months before my father of blessed memory, then on Biak, returned to his home in Brooklyn.

A tension exists for the historian. Viewed through the eyes of an American in 1945, the use of the atomic bomb is far less of an abomination than we generally regard it today. However, whether the war could have been won without use of the bomb should remain a subject of humanitarian, if not military debate. Author, historian and Pacific War Marine Corps veteran Bob Leckie - who by his own admission never lost his hatred for the Japanese - held the belief that the atomic bomb should not have been used. Post-war analyses have all shown the bomb to be indecisive. From summer 1944, Japanese cities had been destroyed in vast firestorms by conventional bombing – the damage caused by the A-Bomb was nothing new to the Japanese and alone, could not have prompted surrender. Prior to the Hiroshima bombing, by any measure of logic, Japan’s leadership could not escape the reality that the war was lost, survival could only be assured by honorable surrender. That the Potsdam accords were accepted by Japan on 10 August - the day following the atomic bombing of Nagasaki - may have been the result of the nuclear weapons but it also may have been prompted by Russia’s entry the Pacific War that same day. (Russia declared war on Japan just before midnight on 8 August and attacked Manchuria in the first minutes of 9 August.) Four days later, Japan laid down it’s arms and World War II ended – but not war itself. Humans still endeavor to force their will, their way of life or their religion on others and no nation has yet committed itself to changing human nature – except for modern Japan.

On 6 August 2020, in Hiroshima and all over Japan, commemoration ceremonies will be held to mark the 75th anniversary of the first use of a nuclear weapon. The prayers, the floating lanterns and the speeches will reflect Japanese pacifism promoted postwar to replace the militarism that drew them to their destruction. The Japanese were the first (and fortunately only) victims of Atomic War and through this, have brought forth a new national respect for life and the planet we inhabit. Americans will express contrition and the world will be judgmental – but all will remain oblivious of the force within ourselves, far greater than atomic energy, that drives the human race to it’s inevitable destruction: Humans hate much more than we love. We trade arms and pray for peace. We sign agreements to reduce nuclear stockpiles but we do nothing to reduce the stockpiles of hate, racism and xenophobia that breed war. And we snicker at those who have embraced a vision for the future by grasping for a realistic concept of pacifism in a dangerous world and by respecting that world through a national commitment to develop Green Technologies – today’s Japan. Modern Japan has risen from it’s ashes and endeavored to pay it’s debt forward for a better future and we should follow.