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A dubious ADVANTAGE

IF THE DECISION HAD BEEN MINE TO MAKE IN 1945, I hope I would have had the good sense to say *no*, we are not going to use the atomic bomb against a Japanese city.

I certainly would not have been alone in this view. So far as historians can tell from the less-than-perfect records that were kept, top U.S. military leaders felt exactly this way at the time—and well before the August bombings. General (later President) Dwight D. Eisenhower urged that the bomb not be used against an already defeated Japan. The diary of President Harry S. Truman’s Chief of Staff—Adm. William D. Leahy, the conservative who presided over both the U.S. Joint Chiefs and the Combined British-American Chiefs of Staff—reveals Leahy believed the war could be ended on acceptable terms in June 1945. Most top U.S. military leaders (including even the famous hawk Gen. Curtis LeMay) strongly condemned the decision as soon as they felt free to speak publicly after the war.

LeMay, for one, is on record as judging the war would likely have ended in two weeks. Japan was essentially defeated by the summer of 1945—her navy sunk, her industries in ruins, her cities undefended against conventional bombardment. U.S. intelligence argued as early as April 1945 that a modification of the unconditional surrender formula plus the shock of the forthcoming Russian declaration of war (expected in early August), would almost certainly end the conflict long before the first landing of troops could occur in November.

Moreover, even if U.S. intelligence advice proved wrong, three full months remained in which the bombs could be used before any troops hit the beachheads. During this period, Gen. George Marshall, chief of staff of the U.S. Army, urged another option. A document dated May 1945 reads: “[Marshall] thought these weapons might first be used against straight military objectives such as a large naval installation and then if no complete result was derived from the effect of that, he thought we ought to designate [a] number of large manufacturing areas from which the people would be warned to leave. . . .”

Many historians now understand that the decision to use the atomic bomb—and the timing—had a great deal to do with diplomacy toward the Russians rather than military defeat of the Japanese. For one thing, the bomb

was seen as a great “hammer” (to use President Truman’s term) to make the Russians more “manageable” (as Secretary of State James F. Byrnes put it). “Atomic diplomacy” also involved using the weapon to try to stop the fighting *very quickly*—again for political (not simply military) reasons—before the Red Army and Soviet influence got very far into Manchuria.

Neither Hiroshima nor Nagasaki was a significant military target. The bombs were targeted to kill as many workers as possible, with the explicit purpose of creating shock (i.e. *terror*). After the war Admiral Leahy framed the moral issue as well as any civilian—indeed better: “[T]he use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. . . . [I]n being the first to use it, we . . . adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages.”

There is one other issue: Well before atomic weapons were used, Truman was urged by the Interim Committee (via Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson) to inform the Soviet Union of the new weapon before it was used. To explode the new weapon without doing so—as a surprise—would clearly make it much more difficult to achieve post-war control of the new force. Stimson, along with many others, believed the Russians had as much interest in controlling nuclear weapons as did the United States. This eminent, conservative Republican leader was dismayed that Truman subsequently rejected his and other proposals for serious negotiations.

Truman’s shortsightedness was both immoral and dangerous. Since his time, many presidents, including the current one, have neglected arms control and instead pursued short-term, dubious military advantage. At some point—especially given the thrust of current U.S. foreign policy and the determination of modern terrorists—we Americans in our own era may well experience, directly and tragically, the costs of our massive and continuing nuclear failure. *

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