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Dropping the Bomb:

Truman's Simple Answer to a Complex Situation

President Truman had two primary objectives for the United States in World War II: first, to force unconditional surrender by the Japanese with minimal American casualties; second, to prevent Soviet expansion in China, Korea, and Manchukuo. The problem was that these two goals were seemingly irreconcilable. In order to force Japan's military officials to surrender it was necessary to involve Russian troops, but any advance by the Russian army was sure to result in Soviet territorial gains. President Roosevelt accepted these gains as a necessary cost of war. With the successful detonation of the Atom bomb in New Mexico on July 16th, 1945, however, Truman believed he now had the power to quickly force Japanese surrender without accepting Soviet expansion. This was the beauty of the bomb from Truman's perspective: it solved the unsolvable by accomplishing both objectives.

Winning the war was the highest priority for Truman and the atomic bomb was used for that purpose. In addition to simply winning, however, it was also important to win with as few American casualties as possible and without compromising terms for surrender. In Truman's first speech as president he made clear that "[o]ur demand has been and it remains—unconditional surrender."¹ Secretary of State James Byrnes convinced Truman that "the atomic bomb would be the means by which to secure to

unconditional surrender.”ⁱⁱ If Russia was not a threat to expand, the bombs probably still would have been dropped.

Preventing Russian expansion was the second highest priority for Truman. The tenuous friendship that Roosevelt had forged with Stalin did not survive the American president’s death in April of 1945. Personally, Truman was “eager to confront Stalin.”ⁱⁱⁱ Also, Russia’s political exploitation of the U.S during war preparation and their flagrant imperial ambitions concerned Major General John Deane and ambassador to the Soviet Union, W. Averell Harriman. In an early presentiment of the Cold War, Harriman argued that in the face of Communist expansion, “we might well have to face an ideological warfare just as rigorous and dangerous as Fascism or Nazism.”^{iv} As American priorities became established under the Truman administration, the question of how to achieve these aims was fraught with difficulties. In the end, the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan because all other options required sacrifices that Truman felt he no longer had to make because of his new military power.

One military alternative to using the atomic bomb was Operation Olympic. This was an American invasion of the Japanese homeland at the island of Kyushu. Because of the large troop build-up on the island, “the result would have been an unprecedented bloodbath.”^v In addition, the protracted fighting would allow time for the Soviet army to make significant territorial gains. For both of these reasons Operation Olympic was seen as a last resort.

Another military alternative to using the atomic bomb was incorporating the Russian army into the attack. This strategy was seriously considered. Indeed, at the Yalta conference in February of 1945, Roosevelt negotiated a Russian “commitment to enter the war against Japan after Germany’s capitulation.”^{vi} On the eve of the Potsdam conference in August of that same year Truman was still anxious “to get from Russia all the assistance in the war that was possible.”^{vii} Things were changing, however, as Russia’s increasing belligerence in Germany and Eastern Europe was disconcerting to Allied leadership. In his memoirs Byrnes wrote that “I must frankly admit that in view of what we knew of Soviet actions in eastern Germany and the violations of the Yalta agreements in Poland, Rumania, and Bulgaria, I would been satisfied had the Russians determined not to enter the war.”^{viii} Ultimately, the fear of continued Russian imperialism led Truman to sour on the idea of Russo-American partnership in the war.

The political alternative to using the atomic bomb was amending American demands for surrender to accommodate the emperor of Japan. Assistant secretary of war John J. McCloy and Japanese specialists in the State Department argued for treaty negotiations as a means to end the war. Private correspondence that was intercepted by naval cryptanalysis revealed there was a possibility for peace if “America and England were to recognize Japan’s honor and existence.”^{ix} As the war dragged on, the Japanese demand for recognition of the emperor in exchange for surrender became their official position. McCloy felt this was acceptable. He believed “we could readily agree to let the Japanese retain the emperor as a constitutional monarch.”^x Truman, however, was determined to not let Japan dictate the terms of surrender. He believed he owed it to the

memory of Pearl Harbor to enforce unconditional surrender. Because of that firm conviction, the option of amending American demands was unable to gain momentum outside of a minority of politicians.

After considering the other options, it was clear to Truman that dropping the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was the only option that would both prevent Soviet expansion and end the war on terms acceptable to the United States. Because of the unprecedented violence and the fact that there were other available options from which to choose, some have argued that Truman is guilty of choosing politics—stopping the Soviets—over morality. This argument is not supported by this paper’s assessments of the military and political alternatives. If stopping Stalin from advancing was Truman’s primary concern there were other ways to accomplish that, namely lowering American demands for surrender. In order for the bomb to have been avoided in this nascent era of U.S.-Soviet rivalry, either Truman or the Japanese military leadership would have to compromise. Since Japan started the war, and because it was now losing, it was their responsibility—not Truman’s—to make the sacrifices necessary to end the war quickly.

In a complex military and political situation, Truman chose the option that made everything simple. The war was over without conditions, the Russians were unable to make significant territorial gains, and the rapid victory spared American lives.

Unfortunately, the simplicity soon degenerated into the geopolitical complexity of the Cold War. The dropping of the atomic bombs played an important part in the origins of that conflict.

Due to the nature of the Cold War it is difficult to ascertain a definite beginning of the conflict. Perhaps the successful testing of the bomb in New Mexico should be recognized as the origin. From that day forward Truman began maneuvering against Soviet expansion. Stalin's violations of the Yalta agreement in Eastern Europe are another valid possibility. Although not the origin, the dropping of the atomic bombs was an integral part of the Cold War because for the first time Soviet political objectives were actively undermined by their recent ally, the United States. Further, the indirect method of the conflict set the precedent for future engagements. It would be weaker third parties such as Vietnam that would inherit Japan's role as recipient of direct violence. Today, Iran, Russia, and North Korea are positioning themselves to be atomic threats to American interests. Let us hope the wisdom of Kennedy and Khrushchev prevails over the atomic policy of Truman.

ⁱ Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 51

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 105

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 62

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 62

^v *Ibid.*, 264

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 47

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 104

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 164

^{ix} *Ibid.*, 126

^x *Ibid.*, 103