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ALTERNATIVES TO DROPPING THE A-BOMB IN BRINGING THE WAR WITH JAPAN TO AN END

Summary

The following analysis looks at the issue of necessity to drop the atomic bomb on Japan in mid-1945. At that time the war in the Pacific Theatre against Japan was unilateral. Japanese military was crippled and unable not only to pose any threat but also to defend itself. The ports were mined and American Air Force dominated the sky over Japan. Moreover, there is certain evidence that Japanese diplomats were searching for mediator to bring the war to an end with diplomatic tools. Despite those circumstances, President Harry S. Truman decided to employ the new, as it has proven, deadly weapon to force the Emperor to accept the unconditional terms of surrender. The aim of this research paper is to elaborate on the available data alternatives to the A-bomb in ending the war against Japan and also demystify why it was finally used.

Key words: A-bomb, WW2 Pacific Theatre, Harry S. Truman, diplomacy, alternatives to dropping the atomic bomb, unconditional surrender.

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Only once in the history have nuclear weapons been used against both military and civilians targets. Despite world superpowers developing, producing and perfecting nuclear weapons after 1945, never again has any country decided to employ it on the battlefield. Instead, with nuclear weapons proving its deadly power from its very first use, it served as a compelling argument to solve conflicts in diplomatic ways. In the wake of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, it became apparent that using nuclear weapons on a huge scale would result in the complete annihilation of all parties and possibly the human world.

Was it necessary to introduce the A-bomb? It is clear that President Truman wanted to bring the war in the Asian Theatre to an end as quickly as possible with minimal American casualties. It was also highly probable that the A-bomb, if effective, would force the Japanese to surrender. Therefore, President Truman ordered the atomic bomb to be dropped not only on Hiroshima but also on Nagasaki despite other available alternatives. Just minutes after the first new bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, on his way back from Potsdam, Truman

said: "I could not keep back my expectations that the Pacific war might now be brought to a speedy end"¹.

Once the decision to use the A-bomb was made, the orders were quickly carried out culminating with the B-29 bomber, *Enola Gay*, dropping the first bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on 6th August 1945. Three days later, on 9th of August, another B-29 bomber, *Bockscar*, dropped the second atomic bomb on the city of Nagasaki. The bombs ushered in a new nuclear reality, far more destructive than they had been imagined. Civilians within 0.5 kilometre of the ground zero were killed outright by the blast, while people over 4 km out suffered from after effects including radiation-induced cancer². Although the death toll can only be estimated, 130,000 people are believed to have died in Hiroshima and about 70,000 in Nagasaki³. Many died under collapsing and burning buildings. The typical wooden construction proved vulnerable and easily flammable, collapsing as far as 2.3 km from the ground zero. Meanwhile, concrete buildings had windows, doors and ceilings blown off by the power of the blast. In an instant, Hiroshima and Nagasaki were virtually obliterated from the face of the earth. Twenty to thirty minutes after, heavy black rain consisting of the black soot and dust from the burning cities started falling⁴. Highly radioactive, the rain contaminated the area for many years, while direct exposure led to the development of radioactively induced illnesses often leading to death. As a result, the unconditional surrender of Japan was announced just a few days later, on the 15th of August.

Today it is known that this was not necessary as there were other available solutions that would have also brought an end to the war. Some of President Truman's military advisors proposed the invasion of the Japanese mainland. Others focused on the continuation of conventional bombing together with blockading the island depriving the Japanese people and war effort of essential supplies. Besides a military solution, there was always the chance of a diplomatic breakthrough. A minor modification of the strict unconditional surrender might have also won peace in Asia.

Bringing the war with Japan to an end through diplomatic means would have meant promoting meetings, conferences and possibly even proceeding with negotiations to halt military actions including bombing or the possible invasion. However, it was apparent that Japan had been losing the war for some time and bearing in mind the ruthless attack on Pearl Harbor, any negotiations concerning the terms of surrender might have seemed highly unlikely. Subsequently, President Truman wanted to end the war on his own terms.

¹ Truman Harry S., *Memoirs 1945: Year of Decision*, New York, Konecky & Konecky, 1955, p. 422.

² Atomic Bomb Museum, *Counting the Dead*, http://atomicbombmuseum.org/3_health.shtml (02.01.2014)

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Atomic Bomb Museum, *A deadly new threat: Radioactivity*, http://www.atomicbombmuseum.org/3_radioactivity.shtml (02.01.2014).

The terms of President Truman meant that Japan would be deprived of any possibility to negotiate the terms of surrender. President Truman, resolute to bring the war to an end, stated: "The longer the war lasts, the greater will be the suffering and hardship which the people of Japan will undergo – all in vain. Our blow will not cease until the Japanese military and naval forces lay down their arms in unconditional surrender"⁵. The critical issue for the Japanese was what would happen to the Emperor, Hirohito. This was arguably the greatest obstacle to unconditional surrender. They feared that unconditional surrender would mean the permanent removal of the Emperor and perhaps ending the very imperial monarchy itself. The Emperor embodied far more than a mere political leader in the Japanese psyche. "The Japanese regarded the Emperor as a deity, a god – more like Jesus or the incarnation of Buddha than an ordinary human being"⁶. Therefore, when President Truman clarified what he meant by unconditional surrender, by not underlining precisely what would happen to the Emperor and the future political structure of Japan, it proved the most decisive stumbling obstacle for Japanese signing the surrender. The principal terms calling upon unconditional surrender of Japan did outline that there was no intention to enslave or destroy the nation, they also guaranteed freedom of speech, religion and thought, but they did not raise the subject of the Emperor⁷.

The widespread opinion is that the Japanese refusal of the conditions set out at the Potsdam conference triggered President Truman's decision to employ the A-bomb as a military weapon. However, there is certain evidence that Emperor Hirohito with his military advisors and the government were aware that the war was lost and were seeking surrender via diplomatic channels with the assistance of other countries such as Russia, Sweden and Portugal⁸. These moves were known to decision makers since American cryptographers had intercepted a number of cables from Japanese officials.

Under Truman's presidency both peace feelers and manoeuvring began to multiply and became more visible. A message was intercepted on 5th May from the German naval attaché in Tokyo to Berlin. It touched on the hopeless situation of Japanese military forces, which were seeking negotiations. The information came from an influential member of the Admiral Staff: "...large sections of the Japanese armed forces would not regard with disfavour an American request for capitulation even if the terms were hard, provided they were halfway honourable"⁹. Over time, as the Japanese military situation deteriorated, the terms under which they would sign the surrender were

⁵ Truman Harry S., *Memoirs 1945: Year of Decision*, New York, Konecky & Konecky, 1955, p. 207.

⁶ Alperovitz Gar, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, New York, Vintage Books, 1996, p. 35.

⁷ Morison Samuel Eliot, *The Bomb and Concurrent Negotiations with Japan*, [in] Baker R. Paul, *The Atomic Bomb, The Great Decision*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1968, p. 25-26.

⁸ Institute for Historical Review, Mark Weber, *Was Hiroshima Necessary? Why the Atomic Bombing Could Have Been Avoided*, http://www.ihr.org/jhr/v16/v16n3p-4_Weber.html (03.01.2014).

⁹ Alperovitz G., op. cit., p. 26.

becoming increasingly acceptable for the Americans. Just a few days later, on 12th May, it was reported to President Truman that a source talked to Shunichi Kase, the Japanese minister in Switzerland, who wished to arrange a meeting between the Allies and Japan and negotiate peace conditions¹⁰. Kase wanted to engage into the talks without the help from Russia since it could increase Russian influence in Asia.

There is no evidence of any kind of proactive response from President Truman to the above and to the escalating following endeavours. On 2nd June another report was directed to the President but this time originating from Portugal. According to this message, from Masutaro Inoue, Counsellor of the Japanese Legation in Portugal, the Japanese were ready to surrender if the possession of their home island would not be violated¹¹. Then a report from Switzerland on 4th June stated that the Japanese navy, according to Fujimura, a principal naval representative in Europe, was willing to surrender if only some of their dignity would be saved¹². Furthermore, just one day later another peace attempt was made but now it came from Sweden, from Major General Makoto Onodera, the Japanese Military Attaché. Among other things, it stated that Japan and the Emperor were aware that the war was lost and only one condition was essential to the Japanese, "...that Emperor must be maintained in his position after the capitulation. No other conditions of surrender were specified"¹³.

There was one further occasion of great importance on 13th July when U.S. intelligence intercepted a cable showing the desperation of the Emperor. It was a cable from the Foreign Minister Togo giving instructions to the Japanese ambassador in Moscow. It revealed that Emperor Hirohito was planning to send Prince Konoye to Moscow with a letter to Vyacheslav Molotov, asking for participation in the surrender process. Appended to that, the cable stated: 'His Majesty the Emperor, mindful of the fact that the present war daily brings greater evil and sacrifice upon the people of all belligerent powers, desires from his heart that it might be quickly terminated...'¹⁴. Accordingly, it is evident that Japan was aiming to end the war. This was despite being aware that prolonging the war was still possible and that the Japanese people would continue fighting to the last man or until the Emperor ordered the surrender. They were only determined to keep the Emperor and were willing to accept all other terms of the unconditional surrender.

Although President Truman and his advisors were aware of all of such Japan's diplomatic efforts to end the war, they did not pursue them. They claimed that none of the cables were officially ordered by Hirohito himself and

¹⁰ Central Intelligence Agency, *Memoranda for the President: Japanese Feelers*, https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol9no3/html/v09i3a06p_0001.htm (03.01.2014).

¹¹ Alperovitz G., op. cit., p. 26.

¹² Ibidem, p. 35.

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 28.

therefore they could not be treated seriously. Instead, they chose to employ the A-bomb, without pursuing any possible diplomatic solution and skipping more conventional military action that would also have brought the war to an end. That there were such alternative military options can be inherently understood as true given military leaders are tasked with having multiple military strategies to end the war given the typical unpredictability of diplomatic solutions and changing military realities.

The A-bomb was one of the solutions proposed but for a long time and possibly even until the very last moment (the 1945 Potsdam Conference), it was not clear if it would be of any practical use¹⁵. In fact, it was not known whether the scientists would have it prepared and successfully tested in time for it to be used against any enemy in WWII. Therefore, other conventional military strategies had to be continued and planned for the summer of 1945. By 1945, the Americans had an overwhelming domination in the Asian theatre, but the war could still have continued for a long time causing increasing casualties. What made it so difficult for the Americans was the fanaticism of the Japanese soldiers and the civilians engaged in fighting. Dedication to their Emperor and the steadfast will to fight for him and their homeland made them fierce, implacable opponents.

There were a few military options aimed at diminishing the Japanese military potential and will to fight. One of them was the naval blockade of the islands. This tactic was supposed to limit Japanese access to supplies of different strategic goods such as oil, raw materials needed to produce weapons, drugs and also food. This method might have been successful but it was a long term strategy and conflicted with Truman's desire to end the war in the quickest possible manner. Another method was the conventional bombing of the Japanese homeland. Not only military targets were supposed to be destroyed but also the main cities and other strategic installations. This was a method which had been successfully tested in the war against Germany and had been widely used by most countries engaged in World War 2 that had a significant air force. Conventional bombing had proved highly destructive. It was effective at limiting enemy communications and mobility. Meanwhile, it meant destroying key military installations and causing many victims, both military and civilian. The final, albeit the least preferable option, was military invasion. Considering how fanatical Japanese were at protecting their homeland, evidenced by the American invasion of Okinawa, such a tactic was highly risky, costly in terms of human lives and in money and would last an indeterminable amount of time.

Strong evidence that U.S. Navy leaders did not support the use of A-bomb came just a few months after the end of the war in September 1945. Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet on numerous

¹⁵ Walker Samuel J., *Prompt and Utter Destruction, Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs Against Japan*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1997, p. 55.

occasions stated: “The Japanese had, in fact, already sued for peace before the atomic age was announced to the world with the destruction of Hiroshima and before the Russian entry into the war”¹⁶. This must have been clear to the President yet still he decided to use the A-bomb. He asserted that blockading the islands would have been successful but, possibly the only thing that was unacceptable to Truman was the fact that the Navy leaders were unable to ascertain when this would result in the Japanese surrender. In the speech for the National Geographic Society, a few years after the war, Nimitz stated that: “The atomic bomb merely hastened the process already reaching an inevitable conclusion”¹⁷. Therefore, we may assume that what was merely hastening the events in the Asian Theatre for Nimitz was very important and decisive for Truman.

The above attitude presented by the Navy with reference to ending the war in Asia was also shared by Air Force leaders. Just a few days after *Enola Gay* dropped the first bomb on Japan the commander general of the U.S. Army Air Force, Henry H. Arnold publicly expressed his feeling towards the surrender of Japan and the issue of using the A-bomb. He confronted the surrender with the atomic attack and also referred to the American air dominance, from before the employment of the A-bomb, in the following words: “From the Japanese standpoint the atomic bomb was really a way out. The Japanese position was hopeless even before the first atomic bomb fell, because the Japanese had lost control of their air”¹⁸. Therefore, not only were the Japanese beaten at sea but also their air force was non-existent in mid-1945. Just as conventional bombing had proved to be deadly, effective and destructive in Europe, so it was now against Japan. As early as in spring 1945, Arnold stated at a meeting at the Air Force headquarters: “...it was completely evident that we were running out of targets we were hitting along in September and by October there wouldn’t really be much to work on...”¹⁹.

It is obvious that even not accounting for the effects of naval blockade, if most of Japan was heavily destroyed by conventional bombing, Japan would not be able to continue the war. Therefore, the combined effect should be a powerful force in ending the war. By early May the majority of Japanese ports were successfully mined and practically disabled, by mid-June American B-29 Superfortresses had badly damaged Japan’s major and the XXI Bomber Command emphasised America’s complete air domination (also undermining Japanese moral) by dropping warning leaflets on future targets²⁰. Subsequently, it appears that the necessity of dropping the atomic bomb on Japan at this stage of war was widely questioned by both naval and army leaders. Indeed, there

¹⁶ Alperovitz G., p. 329.

¹⁷ Baldwin Hanson, *Great Mistakes of the War*, New York, Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1950, p. 93.

¹⁸ Alperovitz G., p. 334.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 337.

²⁰ Werrell P. Kenneth, *Blankets of Fire, U.S. Bombers over Japan During World War II*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington 1996, p. 189-202.

is no evidence that the President or his advisors consulted the Army for their opinion. General Douglas MacArthur, in charge in the Pacific, was in favour of ending the war by conventional methods. He was not sceptical towards the potential effectiveness of the A-bomb but condemned it as inhumane. MacArthur's pilot, Weldon E. Rhoades, just one day after Hiroshima was bombed recalled: "General MacArthur definitely is appalled and depressed by this Frankenstein monster..."²¹. Therefore, though his first reaction was not critical of Truman he was certainly deeply dismayed that such weapon was employed and a new era of warfare had begun. It can be assumed that if MacArthur's opinion had been requested any time before the Potsdam conference and the ultimatum for Japan, he would have opposed the use of the A-bomb. He was not only aware that the atomic bomb was not necessary to win the war, given Japan's limited military potential, but he also knew that a modification of the unconditional surrender language would have helped persuade the Japanese.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff, as it can be assumed from the above analysis, did not see the necessity of using the A-bomb. According to them the war could have been ended without the employment of this new deadly weapon. Although they were never asked for any official recommendations, it can be assumed that they voiced their opinions away from the public eye. However, as Nimitz stated: "...the decision to employ the atomic bomb on Japanese cities was made on a level higher than that of the Joint Chiefs of Staff"²².

The combined strategy proposed by leading naval and army leaders should have been considered as it was highly possible that the Emperor would have moved to end the war before an American invasion in light of Japan's deteriorating situation. The hardship that Japan was suffering was worsening, there was growing popular criticism of the government, and with the intervention of the Emperor once he clearly opted for peace, it is not unreasonable to conclude that a combination of B-29 raids, a naval blockade, a Soviet invasion, and perhaps clarification of the terms of unconditional surrender would have ended the war without an American invasion and without the use of atomic bombs. Invading Japan was a solution that the decision makers in Washington were trying to avoid. One of the reasons behind this preference was the experience Americans gained while invading Okinawa Island which lasted 82 days. While combined American casualties in the battle of Okinawa was 12,000 killed and missing, the wounded exceeded 60,000, the Joint War Plans Committee (officials from both the Army and the Navy) projected that the invasion of Japan main island a total of about 132,500 casualties (killed, missing and wounded)²³. These estimates of casualties in *Operation Downfall* (invasion

²¹ Alperovitz G., p. 350.

²² Ibidem, p. 331.

²³ Walker J. S., p. 33-38.

of Japan) were too overwhelming for Truman. America and Americans were not ready for such a high price especially when the war was nearly over and other tool for terminating it were at hand.

Instead it should be treated as a means that ended the war immediately, but as many experts believe other solutions would have ended the war possibly within a few weeks or even days later. Some experts also believe that the first use of the A-bomb against human targets could have triggered the Cold War. At that time Russia was becoming a difficult political partner and its diplomatic expansion in Eastern Europe seemed to be a sign that a new, bipolar organisation of the world would begin. Possibly, if the A-bomb had not been used, this scenario could have been avoided. By using the A-bomb, President Truman introduced the world to a new style of diplomacy – atomic diplomacy and brinkmanship. This kind of diplomatic language dominated US–Soviet relations for the next 40 years.

The above discussed evidence that employing the A-bomb in the Pacific war, from the military stance, was not a must, arouses further questions. As proven above there were other available tools that would have brought the war with Japan to the end. The entire presented shares one common feature which was of key importance: they demanded time. On his way from Potsdam, Truman, was becoming cognizant that time was becoming a crucial element for the future of the Pacific region. Therefore, dropping the A-bomb was more dictated by strategic and political motives rather than military one. Initially, Washington's approach was that getting Russians into the Japanese war will help save lives of American soldiers, even up to 100,000²⁴. The Potsdam Conference and the Soviet standpoint concerning Eastern Europe forced Truman to reassess his Asian strategy. Now, American priority was to keep Russia away from the Japanese war. This new approach became even more apparent when Stalin started to demand 'war trophies' in areas occupied by the Red Army in Manchuria. Truman believed: "...our position should be that all Japanese property whether in Manchuria or elsewhere should be available to all countries who have suffered damage by Japanese aggression to be allocated by agreement between the powers"²⁵. To Truman it became evident that unconditional surrender of Japan to American on American terms would exclude any future Soviet claims. Thus, the A-bomb was employed not only to terminate the war but do it promptly, moreover save lives of 'American boys' and put to a test a new, long awaited, weapon.

The decision to use the atomic bomb against Japan meant also that the nuclear discovery and the Manhattan Project entered into everyday discourse and the world of politics, instantly reshaping international relations. The

²⁴ Herken Gregg, *The Winning Weapon, The Atomic Bomb in the Cold War 1945-1950*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1980, p. 15.

²⁵ Truman H., op. cit., p. 424-425.

terrible power of the A-bomb had irreversibly delivered the world into a new epoch. Arguably, this decision haunts Americans to this day as it stimulated an unabated nuclear arms race, from which the technology has proliferated to such an extent that the use of nuclear weapons against them, outside of old Cold War adversaries, has become a very real fear.

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Alternatywy dla zrzucenia bomby atomowej w doprowadzeniu do końca wojny z Japonią

Streszczenie

Poniższa analiza dotyczy kwestii konieczności zrzucenia bomby atomowej na Japonię w połowie roku 1945. W owym czasie teatr wojny z Japonią na Pacyfiku miał jednostronny charakter. W sensie militarnym Japonia była okaleczona i niezdolna nie tylko do stwarzania jakiegokolwiek zagrożenia, ale nawet

do obrony. Porty zostały zaminowane, zaś amerykańskie lotnictwo wojskowe zdominowało przestrzeń powietrzną nad Japonią. Co więcej, istnieje pewien materiał dowodowy, że dyplomaci japońscy szukali mediatora, by doprowadzić wojnę do końca drogą dyplomatyczną. Mimo tych okoliczności prezydent Harry S. Truman postanowił użyć nowej i, jak się okazało, śmiercionośnej broni, by zmusić cesarza do przyjęcia bezwarunkowej kapitulacji. Celem tego artykułu badawczego jest przedstawienie na podstawie dostępnych danych alternatyw dla bomby atomowej w zakończeniu wojny z Japonią oraz zdemistyfikowanie uzasadnienia dla jej ostatecznego użycia.

Słowa kluczowe: bomba atomowa, teatr II wojny światowej na Pacyfiku, Harry S. Truman, dyplomacja, alternatywy dla zrzućenia bomby atomowej, bezwarunkowa kapitulacja.

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