



Truman's Choice

Okay, Mr. President. Here's the situation. You're about to invade Japan's main islands. Your best generals say hitting these beaches will mean half a million American casualties. Other estimates go as high as a million. General MacArthur tells you that the Japanese will continue guerrilla-style resistance for ten years. Based on horrific battle experience – from Guadalcanal to Okinawa – you believe the Japanese will fight to the death. They have six million battle-hardened troops who have shown complete willingness to fight to the death for their homeland – a samurai tradition of complete devotion to the divine Emperor that is incomprehensible to Americans. A ground attack could take a decade or more and could cost up to a million American lives. Dropping the bomb would end the war, saving those Americans, but at a heavy cost. You have a bomb with the destructive power of 20,000 tons of TNT. Experts estimate 200,000 Japanese will die in if you drop the bombs, but you also remember Pearl Harbor and the Bataan Death march and other wartime atrocities committed by Japanese. Vengeance, in the midst of a cruel war, is not incomprehensible.

Modern history has presented this pair of options – the Big Invasion versus the Bomb – as “Truman's Choice”. President Roosevelt had responded to Albert Einstein's warning of the potential of an atomic bomb by establishing the Manhattan Project in 1943. Known to a handful of men, Truman not among them, the project was a \$2-billion (in pre-inflation 1940s dollars) effort to construct an atomic weapon. Roosevelt's health was declining during the war years, he died in April 1945, just 11 weeks into his fourth term. Truman, Vice President at the time, succeeded Roosevelt and thus this was a choice Truman inherited with the Oval Office.

“The Bomb” View

Historians who support the Hiroshima drop, point out the fact that during the war in the Pacific, each island that the Americans invaded was defended fanatically, at immense human cost on both sides. The Japanese military code, centuries old and steeped in the samurai tradition, showed no tolerance for surrender. Indeed, even in Hiroshima itself, there was anger that the Emperor had surrendered after the bomb was dropped. Based on the high numbers of casualties in Okinawa, a massive ground invasion would result in heavy losses on both sides. Even if the Japanese surrendered, there was reason to believe militarists would continue to fight.

Either way, the bomb saved untold numbers of American lives, not only in those that would no longer be needed to fight in a ground attack, but also the lives of those Americans being held in Japan at the time. After the bomb was dropped in the two biggest Japanese cities, Japan surrendered and all American POW's (Prisoners of War) were released from Japan. There is an argument to be made that far more than 200,000 Japanese soldiers would have died in a decade long ground attack. The destruction and loss of life of a ground attack would have been far greater than the two bombs that effectively ended World War II.

“The Big Invasion” View

Before the test detonation, there were already deep misgivings among both the scientific and military communities about the morality of the bomb’s destructive power. Many of its creators did not want it to be used, and lobbied to share its secrets with the rest of the world to prevent its use. Truman ignored that advice. With Churchill and China’s Kai-shek, he issued the “Potsdam Declaration,” warning Japan to accept a complete and unconditional surrender or risk “prompt and utter destruction.” Although specific mention of the bomb’s nature was considered, this vague warning was the only one issued.

When the Japanese first failed to respond to, and then rejected, his ultimatum, Truman ordered the fateful go-ahead. Almost since the day the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, critics have second-guessed Truman’s decision and motives. Would a demonstration explosion over Tokyo Harbor convince Japan’s leaders to surrender without killing hundreds of thousands of people?

Many critics have dismissed the estimates of American losses as implausibly high, and say that the Japanese were already nearing their decision to surrender when the bombs were dropped. A study made after the war by a U.S. government survey team reached that very conclusion. But, coming as it did, a year after the war was over, that judgment didn’t help Truman make his decision.

“The Big Stick Theory”

Was the bomb versus an invasion the only option? Or was there another reality? A top-secret study made during the period and revealed in the late 1980’s says there another motivation for dropping the bomb. According to these army studies, the most important factor in the Japanese decision to surrender was not the dropping of the bombs but the entry of the Soviet Union into the war against Japan. These documents and other recently revealed evidence suggest that Truman knew that Stalin would declare war against Japan early in August. Nearly two months before Hiroshima, Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall had advised the President that the Soviet declaration of war would force Japan to surrender, making the need for American invasion unnecessary. It was a fact with which Truman seemed to agree.

So if estimates of an invasion’s cost and ending the war quickly were not the only considerations, why did the United States use these terrible weapons? By late 1945 it was clear to Truman and other American leaders that victory over Germany and Japan would not mean peace. Stalin’s intention to create a buffer of socialist states surrounding the Soviet Union and under the control of the Red Army was already apparent. Having demonstrated the uranium bomb at Hiroshima, Truman still wanted to show off the plutonium bomb used against Nagasaki to send a clear message to the Soviets: We have it and we’re not afraid to use it.



NAME: _____ PERIOD: _____

TRUMAN'S DECISION

PRO

Why Truman should have used atomic bombs against Japan

CON

Why Truman should not have used atomic bombs against Japan

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On the back of this paper, write a paragraph (3-5 sentences) explaining your opinion on whether or not Truman should have used atomic bombs on Japan.

GRADING: 3points total - Pro/Con chart = 2points (1 for each side) Paragraph = 1 point

