

Arguments Supporting The Bomb
by Michael Barnes

Argument #1: The Bomb Saved American Lives



The main argument in support of the decision to use the atomic bomb is that it saved American lives which would otherwise have been lost in two D-Day-style land invasions of the main islands of the Japanese homeland. The first, against the Southern island of Kyushu, had been scheduled for November 1 (Operation Torch). The second, against the main island of Honshu would take place in the spring of 1946 (Operation Coronet). The two operations combined were codenamed Operation Downfall. There is no doubt that a land invasion would have incurred extremely high casualties, for a variety of reasons. For one, Field Marshall Hisaichi Terauchi had ordered that all 100,000 Allied prisoners of war be executed if the Americans invaded. Second, it was apparent to the Japanese as much as to the Americans that there were few good landing sites, and that Japanese forces would be concentrated there. Third, there was real concern in Washington that the Japanese had made a determination to fight literally to the death. The Japanese saw suicide as an honorable alternative to surrender. The term they used was *gyokusai*, or, "shattering of the



jewel." It was the same rationale for their use of the so-called banzai charges employed early in the war. In his 1944 "emergency declaration," Prime Minister Hideki Tojo had called for "100 million *gyokusai*," and that the entire Japanese population be prepared to die.

For American military commanders, determining the strength of Japanese forces and anticipating the level of civilian resistance were the keys to preparing casualty projections. Numerous studies were conducted, with widely varying results. Some of the studies estimated American casualties for just the first 30 days of Operation Torch. Such a study done by General MacArthur's staff in June estimated 23,000 US casualties.

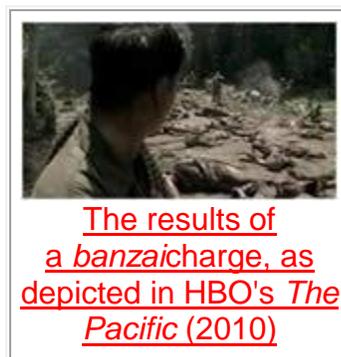
U.S. Army Chief of Staff George Marshall thought the Americans would suffer 31,000 casualties in the first 30 days, while Admiral Ernest King, Chief of Naval Operations, put them between 31,000 and 41,000. Pacific Fleet Commander Admiral Chester Nimitz, whose staff conducted their own study, estimated 49,000 U.S casualties in the first 30 days, including 5,000 at sea from Kamikaze attacks.

Studies estimating total U.S. casualties were equally varied and no less grim. One by the Joint Chiefs of Staff in April 1945 resulted in an estimate of 1,200,000 casualties, with 267,000 fatalities. Admiral Leahy, Chief of Staff to the Commander in Chief, estimated 268,000 casualties (35%). Former President Herbert Hoover sent a memorandum to President Truman and Secretary of War Stimson, with “conservative” estimates of 500,000 to 1,000,000 fatalities. A study done for Secretary of War Henry Stimson’s staff by William Shockley estimated the costs at 1.7 to 4 million American casualties, including 400,000-800,000 fatalities.

General Douglas MacArthur had been chosen to command US invasion forces for Operation Downfall, and his staff conducted their own study. In June their prediction was American casualties of 105,000 after 120 days of combat. Mid-July intelligence estimates placed the number of Japanese soldiers in the main islands at under 2,000,000, but that number increased sharply in the weeks that followed as more units were repatriated from Asia for the final homeland defense. By late July, MacArthur’s Chief

of Intelligence, General Charles Willoughby, revised the estimate and predicted American casualties on Kyushu alone (Operation Torch) would be 500,000, or ten times what they had been on Okinawa.

All of the military planners based their casualty estimates on the ongoing conduct of the war and the evolving tactics employed by the Japanese. In the first major land combat at Guadalcanal, the Japanese had employed night-time *banzai* charges—direct frontal assaults against entrenched machine gun positions. This tactic had worked well against enemy forces in their Asian campaigns, but against the Marines, the Japanese lost about 2,500 troops and killed only 80 Marines.



At Tarawa in May 1943, The Japanese modified their tactics and put up a fierce resistance to the Marine amphibious landings. Once the battered Marines made it ashore, the 4,500 well-supplied and well-prepared Japanese defenders fought almost to the last man. Only 17 Japanese soldiers were alive at the end of the battle.

On Saipan in July 1944, the Japanese again put up fanatical resistance, even though a decisive U.S. Navy victory over the Japanese fleet had ended any hope of their resupply. U.S. forces had to burn

then out of holes, caves, and bunkers with flamethrowers. Japanese forces staged multiple *banzai* attacks. At the end of the battle the Japanese staged a final *banzai* that included wounded men, some of them on crutches. Marines were forced to mow them down. Meanwhile, on the north end of the island a thousand civilians threw committed suicide by jumping from the cliff to the rocks below after being promised an honorable afterlife by Emperor Hirohito, and after being threatened with death by the Japanese army.

In the fall of 1944, Marines landed on the small island of Peleliu, just east of the Philippines, for what was supposed to be a four-day mission. The battle lasted two months. At Peleliu, the Japanese unveiled a new defense strategy. Colonel Kunio Nakagawa, the Japanese commander, constructed a system of heavily fortified bunkers, caves, and underground positions, and waited for the Marines to attack them, and they replaced the fruitless *banzai*

attacks with coordinated counterattacks. Much of the island was solid volcanic rock, making the digging of foxholes with the standard-issue entrenching tool impossible. When the Marines sought cover and concealment, the terrain's jagged, sharp edges cut up their uniforms, bodies, and equipment. The plan was to make Peleliu a bloody war of attrition, and it worked well. The fight for Umurbrogol Mountain is considered by many to be the most difficult fight that the U.S. military encountered in the entire Second World War. At Peleliu, U.S. forces suffered 50% casualties, including 1,794 killed. Japanese losses were 10,695 killed and only 202 captured.

After securing the Philippines and delivering yet another shattering blow to the Japanese navy, the Americans landed next on Iwo Jima in February 1945, where the main mission was to secure three Japanese airfields. U.S. Marines again faced an enemy well entrenched in a vast network of bunkers, hidden artillery, and miles of underground tunnels. American casualties on Iwo Jima were 6,822 killed or missing and 19,217 wounded. Japanese casualties were about 18,000 killed or missing, and only 216 captured. Meanwhile, another method of Japanese resistance was emerging. With the Japanese navy neutralized, the Japanese resorted to suicide missions designed to turn piloted aircraft into guided bombs. A *kamikaze* air attack on ships anchored at sea on February 21 sunk an escort carrier and did severe damage to the fleet carrier *Saratoga*. It was a harbinger of things to come.



[Kamikaze attack on the USS Essex, 1944](#)

After Iwo Jima, only the island of Okinawa stood between U.S. forces and Japan. Once secured, Okinawa would be used as a staging area for Operation Torch. Situated less than 400 miles from Kyushu, the island had been Japanese territory since 1868, and it was home to several hundred thousand Japanese civilians. The Battle of Okinawa was fought from April 1 – June 22, 1945. Five U.S. Army divisions, three Marine divisions, and dozens of Navy vessels participated in the 82-day battle. The Japanese stepped up their use of kamikaze attacks, this time sending them at U.S. ships in waves. Seven major kamikaze attacks took place involving 1,500 planes. They took a devastating

toll—both physically and psychologically. The U.S. Navy's dead, at 4,907, exceeded its wounded, primarily because of the *kamikaze*.

On land, U.S. forces again faced heavily fortified and well-constructed defenses. The Japanese extracted heavy American casualties at one line of defense, and then as the Americans began to gain the upper hand, fell back to another series of fortifications. Japanese defenders and civilians fought to the death (even women with spears) or committed suicide rather than be captured. The civilians had been told the Americans would go on a rampage of killing and raping. About 95,000 Japanese soldiers were killed, and possibly as many as 150,000 civilians died, or 25% of the civilian population. And the fierce resistance took a heavy toll on the Americans; 12,513 were killed on Okinawa, and another 38,916 were wounded.



[A US Marine feeds a Japanese child on Okinawa, 1945](#)

The increased level of Japanese resistance on Okinawa was of particular significance to military planners, especially the resistance of civilians. This was a concern for the American troops as well. In the Ken Burns documentary *The War* (2007), a veteran Marine pilot of the Okinawa campaign relates his thoughts at the time about invading the home islands: By then, our sense of the strangeness of the Japanese opposition had become stronger. And I could imagine every farmer with his pitchfork coming at my guts; every pretty girl with a hand grenade strapped to her bottom, or something; that everyone would be an enemy.

Although the estimates of American casualties in Operation Downfall vary widely, no one doubts that they would have been significant. A sobering indicator of the government's expectations is that 500,000 Purple Heart medals (awarded for combat-related wounds) were manufactured in preparation for Operation Downfall.

Argument #1.1: The Bomb Saved Japanese Lives

A concurrent, though ironic argument supporting the use of the bomb is that because of the expected Japanese resistance to an invasion of the home island, its use actually saved *Japanese* lives. Military planners included Japanese casualties in their estimates. The study done for Secretary of War Stimson predicted five to ten million Japanese fatalities. There is support for the bomb even among some Japanese. In 1983, at the annual observance of Hiroshima's destruction, an aging Japanese professor recalled that at war's end, due to the extreme food rationing, he had weighed less than 90 pounds and could scarcely climb a flight of stairs. "I couldn't have survived another month," he said. "If the military had its way, we would have fought until all 80 million Japanese were dead. Only the atomic bomb saved me. Not me alone, but many Japanese, ironically speaking, were saved by the atomic bomb."

Argument #1.2: It Was Necessary to Shorten the War

Another concurrent argument supporting the use of the bomb is that it achieved its primary objective of shortening the war. The bombs were dropped on August 6 and 9. The next day, the Japanese requested a halting of the war. On August 14 Emperor Hirohito announced to the Japanese people that they would surrender, and the United States celebrated V-J Day (Victory over Japan). Military planners had wanted the Pacific war finished no later than a year after the fall of Nazi Germany. The rationale was the belief that in a democracy, there is only so much that can reasonably be asked of its citizen soldiers (and of the voting public). As Army Chief of Staff George Marshall later put it, "a democracy cannot fight a Seven Years' war." By the summer of 1945 the American military was exhausted, and the sheer number of



troops needed for Operation Downfall meant that not only would the troops in the Pacific have to make one more landing, but even many of those troops whose valor and sacrifice had brought an end to the Nazi Third Reich were to be sent Pacific. In his 2006 memoir, former 101st Airborne battalion commander Richard Winters reflected on the state of his men as they played baseball in the summer of 1945 in occupied Austria (Winters became something of a celebrity after his portrayal in the extremely popular 2001 HBO series *Band of Brothers*):

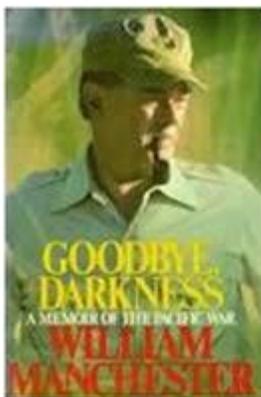
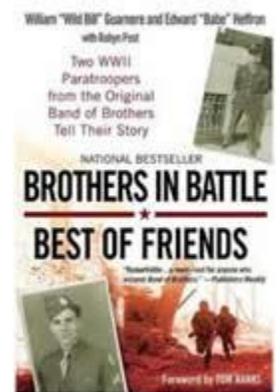
During the baseball games when the men were stripped to their waists, or wearing only shorts, the sight of all those battle scars made me conscious of the fact that other than a handful of men in the battalion

who had survived all four campaigns, only a few were lucky enough to be without at least one scar. Some men had two, three, even four scars on their chests, backs, arms, or legs. Keep in mind that...I was looking only at the men who were not seriously wounded.

Supporters of the bomb wonder if it was reasonable to ask even more sacrifice of these men. Since these veterans are the men whose lives (or wholeness) were, by this argument, saved by the bomb, it is relevant to survey their thoughts on the matter, as written in various war memoirs going back to the 1950s. The record is mixed. For example, despite Winters' observation above, he seemed to have reservations about the bomb: "Three days later, on August 14, Japan surrendered. Apparently the atomic bomb carried as much punch as a regiment of paratroopers. It seemed inhumane for our national leaders to employ either weapon on the human race."

His opinion is not shared by other members of Easy Company, some of whom published their own memoirs after the interest generated by *Band of Brothers*. William "Wild Bill" Guarnere expressed a very blunt opinion about the bomb in 2007:

We were on garrison duty in France for about a month, and in August, we got great news: we weren't going to the Pacific. The U.S. dropped a bomb on Hiroshima, the Japanese surrendered, and the war was over. We were so relieved. It was the greatest thing that could have happened. Somebody once said to me that the bomb was the worst thing that ever happened, that the U.S. could have found other ways. I said, "Yeah, like what? Me and all my buddies jumping in Tokyo, and the Allied forces going in, and all of us getting killed? Millions more Allied soldiers getting killed?" When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor were they concerned about how many lives they took? We should have dropped eighteen bombs as far as I'm concerned. The Japanese should have stayed out of it if they didn't want bombs dropped. The end of the war was good news to us. We knew we were going home soon.



Those soldiers with extensive combat experience in the Pacific theater and with first-hand knowledge of Japanese resistance also express conflicting thoughts about the bomb. All of them write of the relief and joy they felt upon first hearing the news. William Manchester, in *Goodbye, Darkness: a Memoir of the Pacific War*, wrote, "You think of the lives which would have been lost in an invasion of Japan's home islands—a staggering number of American lives but millions more of Japanese—and you thank God for the atomic bomb."

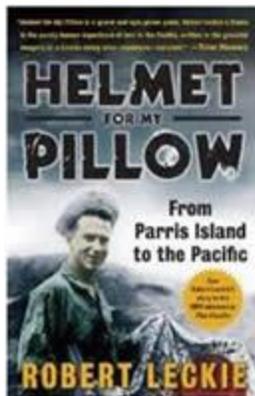
But in preparation for writing his 1980 memoir, when Manchester visited Tinian, the small Pacific island from which the Hiroshima mission was launched, he reflected on the "global angst" that Tinian represents. He writes that while the battle to take Tinian itself was relatively easy, "the aftermath was ominous." It was also from Tinian that napalm was dropped on Japanese cities, which Manchester describes as "one of the

cruellest instruments of war." Manchester continues:

This is where the nuclear shadow first appeared. I feel forlorn, alienated, wholly without empathy for the men who did what they did. This was not my war...Standing there, notebook in hand; you are shrouded in absolute, inexpressible loneliness.

Two other Pacific memoirs, both published decades ago, resurged in popularity in 2010, owing to their authors' portrayal in another HBO mini-series, *The Pacific* (2010). Eugene Sledge published his combat memoir in 1981. He describes the moment when they first heard about the atom bomb, having just survived the Okinawa campaign:

We received the news with quiet disbelief coupled with an indescribable sense of relief. We thought the Japanese would never surrender. Many refused to believe it. Sitting around in stunned silence, we remembered our dead. So many dead. So many maimed. So many bright futures consigned to the ashes of the past. So many dreams lost in the madness that had engulfed us. Except for a few widely scattered shouts of joy, the survivors sat hollow-eyed and silent, trying to comprehend a world without war.



Robert Leckie, like Manchester, seems to have had conflicting feelings about the bomb in his 1957 memoir *Helmet for my Pillow*. When the bomb was dropped, Leckie was recovering from wounds suffered on Peleliu:

Suddenly, secretly, covertly—I rejoiced. For as I lay there in that hospital, I had faced the bleak prospect of returning to the Pacific and the war and the law of averages. But now, I knew the Japanese would have to lay down their arms. The war was over. I had survived. Like a man wielding a submachine gun to defend himself against an unarmed boy, I had survived. So I rejoiced.

But just a paragraph later, Leckie reflects writes:

The suffering of those who lived, the immolation [death by burning] of those who died--that must now be placed in the scales of God's justice that began to tip so awkwardly against us when the mushroom rose over the world...Dear Father, forgive us for that awful cloud.

Argument #1.3: Only the Bomb Convinced the Emperor to Intervene

A third concurrent argument defending the bomb is the observation that even after the first two bombs were dropped, and the Russians had declared war, the Japanese still almost did not surrender. The Japanese cabinet convened in emergency session on August 7. Military authorities refused to concede that the Hiroshima bomb was atomic in nature and refused to consider surrender. The following day, Emperor Hirohito privately expressed to Prime Minister Togo his determination that the war should end and the cabinet was convened again on August 9. At this point Prime Minister Suzuki was in agreement, but a unanimous decision was required and three of the military chiefs still refused to admit defeat. Some in the leadership argued that there was no way the Americans could have refined enough fissionable material to produce more than one bomb. But then the bombing of Nagasaki had demonstrated otherwise, and a lie told by a downed American pilot convinced War Minister Korechika Anami that the Americans had as many as a hundred bombs. (The official scientific report confirming the bomb was atomic arrived at Imperial Headquarters on the 10th). Even so, hours of meetings and debates lasting well into the early morning hours of the 10th still resulted in a 3-3 deadlock. Prime Minister Suzuki then took the unprecedented step of asking Emperor Hirohito, who never spoke at cabinet meetings, to break the deadlock. Hirohito responded:

I have given serious thought to the situation prevailing at home and abroad and have concluded that continuing the war can only mean destruction for the nation and prolongation of bloodshed and cruelty in the world. I cannot bear to see my innocent people suffer any longer.

In his 1947 article published in *Harper's*, former Secretary of War Stimson expressed his opinion that only the atomic bomb convinced the emperor to step in: "All the evidence I have seen indicates that the controlling factor in the final Japanese decision to accept our terms of surrender was the atomic bomb."



Emperor Hirohito agreed that Japan should accept the Potsdam Declaration (the terms of surrender proposed by the Americans, discussed below), and then recorded a message on phonograph to the Japanese people.

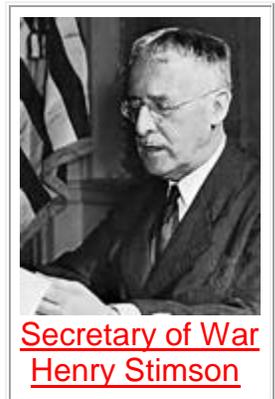


Japanese listen to the Emperor's broadcast

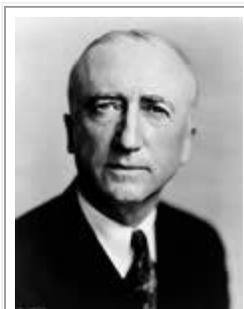
Japanese hard-liners attempted to suppress this recording, and late on the evening of the 14th, attempted a coup against the Emperor, presumably to save him from himself. The coup failed, but the fanaticism required to make such an attempt is further evidence to bomb supporters that, without the bomb, Japan would never have surrendered. In the end, the military leaders accepted surrender partly because of the Emperor's intervention, and partly because the atomic bomb helped them "save face" by rationalizing that they had not been defeated because of a lack of spiritual power or strategic decisions, but by science. In other words, the Japanese military hadn't lost the war, Japanese science did.

Argument 2: The Decision was made by a Committee of Shared Responsibility

Supporters of President Truman's decision to use atomic weapons point out that the President did not act unilaterally, but rather was supported by a committee of shared responsibility. The Interim Committee, created in May 1945, was primarily tasked with providing advice to the President on all matters pertaining to nuclear energy. Most of its work focused on the role of the bomb after the war. But the committee did consider the question of its use against Japan.



Secretary of War Henry Stimson chaired the committee. Truman's personal representative was James F. Byrnes, former U.S. Senator and Truman's pick to be Secretary of State. The committee sought the advice of four physicists from the Manhattan Project, including Enrico Fermi and J. Robert Oppenheimer. The



James Byrnes

The scientific panel wrote, "We see no acceptable alternative to direct military use." The final recommendation to the President was arrived at on June 1 and is described in the committee meeting log: Mr. Byrnes recommended, and the Committee agreed, that the Secretary of War should be advised that, while recognizing that the final selection of the target was essentially a military decision, the present view of the Committee was that the bomb should be used against Japan as soon as possible; that it be used on a war plant surrounded by workers' homes; and that it be used without prior warning.

On June 21, the committee reaffirmed its recommendation with the

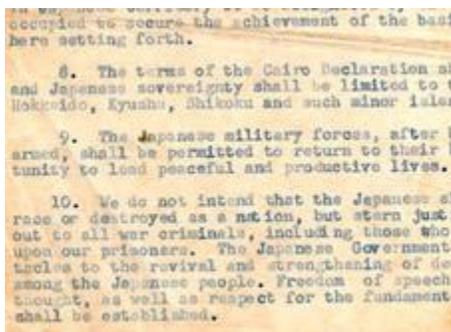
following wording:

...that the weapon be used against Japan at the earliest opportunity, that it be used without warning, and that it be used on a dual target, namely, a military installation or war plant surrounded by or adjacent to homes or other buildings most susceptible to damage.

Supporters of Truman's decision thus argue that the President, in dropping the bomb, was simply following the recommendation of the most experienced military, political, and scientific minds in the nation, and to do otherwise would have been grossly negligent.

Argument #3: The Japanese Were Given Fair Warning (Potsdam Declaration & Leaflets)

Supporters of Truman's decision to use the atomic bomb point out that Japan had been given ample opportunity to surrender. On July 26, with the knowledge that the Los Alamos test had been successful, President Truman and the Allies issued a final ultimatum to Japan, known as the Potsdam Declaration (Truman was in Potsdam, Germany at the time). Although it had been decided by Prime Minister Churchill and President Roosevelt back at the Casablanca Conference that the Allies would accept only unconditional surrender from the Axis, the Potsdam Declaration does lay out some terms of surrender. The government responsible for the war would be dismantled, there would be a military occupation of Japan, and the nation would be reduced in



size to pre-war borders. The military, after being disarmed, would be permitted to return home to lead peaceful lives. Assurance was given that the allies had no desire to enslave or destroy the Japanese people, but there would be war crimes trials. Peaceful industries would be allowed to produce goods, and basic freedoms of speech, religion, and thought would be introduced. The document concluded with an ultimatum: *"We call upon the Government of Japan to proclaim now the unconditional surrender of all the Japanese armed forces...the alternative for Japan is prompt and utter destruction."* To bomb supporters, the Potsdam Declaration was more than fair in its surrender terms and in its warning of what would happen should those terms be rejected. The Japanese did not respond to the declaration.

Additionally, bomb supporters argue that Japanese civilians were warned in advance through millions of leaflets dropped on Japanese cities by U.S. warplanes. In the months preceding the atomic bombings, some 63 million leaflets were dropped on 35 cities target for destruction by U.S. air forces. The Japanese people generally regarded the information on these leaflets as truthful, but anyone caught in possession of one was subject to arrest by the government. Some of the leaflets mentioned the terms of surrender offered in the Potsdam Declaration and urged the civilians to convince Japanese government to accept them—an unrealistic expectation to say the least. Generally the





Warning Leaflet

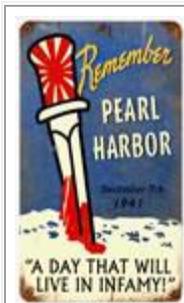
leaflets warned that the city was considered a target and urged the civilian populations to evacuate. However, no leaflets specifically warning about a new destructive weapon were dropped until *after* Hiroshima, and it's also not clear where U.S. officials thought the entire urban population of 35 Japanese cities could viably relocate to even if they did read and heed the warnings.

Argument 4: The atom bomb was in retaliation for Japanese barbarism

Although it is perhaps not the most civilized of arguments, Americans with an “eye for an eye” philosophy of justice argue that the atomic bomb was payback for the undeniably brutal, barbaric, criminal conduct of the Japanese Army. Pumped up with their own version of master race theories, the Japanese military committed atrocities throughout Asia and the Pacific. They raped women, forced others to become sexual slaves, murdered civilians, and tortured and executed prisoners. Most famously, in a six-week period following the Japanese capture of the Chinese city of Nanjing, Japanese soldiers (and some civilians) went on a rampage. They murdered several hundred thousand unarmed civilians, and raped between 20,000-80,000 men, women and children.



Surviving victim of Japanese bombing of Shanghai, 1937



Remember Pearl Harbor Tin Sign



American soldiers on the Bataan Death March in the Philippines, 1942

With regards to Japanese conduct specific to Americans, there is the obvious “back-stabbing” aspect of the “surprise” attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. That the Japanese government was still engaged in good faith diplomatic negotiations with the State Department at the very moment the attack was underway is a singular instance of barbaric behavior that bomb supporters point to as just cause for using the atom bomb. President Truman said as much when he made his August 6 radio broadcast to the nation about Hiroshima: “The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold.”

The infamous “Bataan Death March” provides further rationale for supporters of this argument. Despite having a presence in the Philippines since 1898 and a long-standing

strategic plan for a theoretical war with Japan, the Americans were caught unprepared for the Japanese invasion of the main island of Luzon. After retreating to the rugged Bataan peninsula and holding out for months, it became evident that America had no recourse but to abandon them to their fate. After General MacArthur removed his command to Australia under the cover of darkness, 78,000 American and Filipino troops surrendered to the Japanese, the largest surrender in American history.

Despite promises from Japanese commanders, the American prisoners were treated inhumanely. They were force-marched back up the peninsula toward trains and a POW camp beyond. Along the way they were beaten, deprived of food & water, tortured, buried alive, and executed. The episode became known as The Bataan Death March. Thousands perished along the way. And when the survivors reached their destination, Camp O'Donnell, many thousands more died from disease, starvation, and forced labor. Perhaps fueled by humiliation and a sense of helplessness, few events of WWII aroused such fury in Americans as did the Bataan Death March. To what extent it may have been a factor in President Truman's decision is unknown, but it is frequently cited, along with Pearl Harbor, as justification for the payback given out at Hiroshima and Nagasaki to those who started the war.



Poster

The remaining two arguments in support of the bomb are based on consideration of the unfortunate predicament facing President Truman as the man who inherited both the White House and years of war policy from the late President Roosevelt.

Argument 5: The Manhattan Project Expense Required Use of the Bomb

The Manhattan Project had been initiated by Roosevelt back in 1939, five years before Truman was asked to be on the Democratic ticket. By the time Roosevelt died in April 1945, almost 2 billion dollars of taxpayer money had been spent on the project. The Manhattan Project was the most expensive government project in history at that time. The President's Chief of Staff, Admiral Leahy, said, "I know FDR would have used it in a minute to prove that he had not wasted \$2 billion." Bomb supporters argue that the pressure to honor the legacy of FDR, who had been in office for so long that many Americans could hardly remember anyone else ever being president, was surely enormous. The political consequences of such a waste of expenditures, once the public found out, would have been disastrous for the Democrats for decades to come. (The counter-argument, of course, is that fear of losing an election is no justification for using such a weapon).

Argument 6: Truman Inherited the War Policy of Bombing Cities

Likewise, the decision to intentionally target civilians, however morally questionable and distasteful, had begun under President Roosevelt, and it was not something that President Truman could realistically be expected to roll back. Precedents for bombing civilians began as early as 1932, when Japanese planes bombed Chapei, the Chinese sector of Shanghai. Italian forces bombed civilians as part of their conquest of Ethiopia in 1935-1936. Germany had first bombed civilians as part of an incursion into the Spanish Civil War. At the outbreak of WWII in September 1939, President Roosevelt was troubled by the prospect of what seemed likely to be Axis strategy, and on the day of the German invasion of Poland, he wrote to the governments of France, Germany, Italy, Poland and Great Britain. Roosevelt said that these precedents for attacking civilians from the air, "has sickened the hearts of every civilized man and woman, and has profoundly shocked the conscience of humanity." He went on to describe such actions as "inhuman barbarism," and appealed to the war-makers not to target civilian populations. But Germany bombed cities in Poland in 1939, destroyed the Dutch city of Rotterdam in 1940, and infamously "blitzed" London, Coventry, and other British cities in the summer and fall of the 1940. The British retaliated by bombing German cities. Allied war leaders rationalized that to win the war, it was necessary to cripple the enemy's capacity to make war. Since cities contained factories that produced war materials, and since civilians worked in factories, the population of cities (including the "workers' dwellings" surrounding those factories) were legitimate military targets.



Results of the
firebombing of Tokyo,
1945

Despite Roosevelt's "appeal" in 1939, he and the nation had long crossed that moral line by war's end. This fact perhaps reveals the psychological effects of killing on all of the war's participants, and says something about the moral atmosphere in which President Truman found himself upon the President's death. On February 13, 1945, 1,300 U.S. and British heavy bombers firebombed the German city of Dresden, the center of German art and culture, creating a firestorm that destroyed 15 square miles and killed 25,000 civilians. Meanwhile, still five weeks before Truman took office; American bombers dropped 2,000 tons of napalm on Tokyo, creating a firestorm with hurricane-force winds. Flight crews flying high over the 16 square miles of devastation reported smelling burning flesh

below. Approximately 125,000 Japanese civilians died in that raid. By the time the atomic bomb was ready, similar attacks had been launched on the Japanese cities of Nagoya, Osaka, and Kobe. Quickly running out of targets, the B-29 bombers went back over Tokyo and killed another 80,000 civilians. Bomb supporters argue that, although this destruction is distasteful by post-war sensibilities, it had become the norm long before President Truman took office, and the atomic bomb was just one more weapon in the arsenal to be employed under this policy. To expect the new president, who had to make decisions under enormous pressure, to roll back this policy—to roll back the social norm—was simply not realistic.

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