

CHAPTER 5

Hiroshima, the Japanese, and the Soviets

The final orders to use the atomic bombs had been issued well before Truman began his journey home from Potsdam. On July 25 General Marshall's deputy, Gen. Thomas Handy, serving as the acting chief of staff, wrote at the direction of Stimson and Marshall to Gen. Carl Spaatz, the commanding general of the Army Strategic Air Forces and told him: "The 509 Composite Group, 20th Air Force will deliver its first special bomb as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945 on one of the targets: Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata and Nagasaki." Handy went further and instructed that "additional bombs will be delivered on the above targets as soon as ready by the project staff," and he explained that "further instructions will be issued concerning targets other than those listed above."¹ Notably, there was no suggestion here that only two bombs would be used. The American military prepared to utilize the atomic weapons as they became available.

Stimson had alerted Truman on July 30 of the rapid progress on what he termed "Groves's" project and the expected use of the atomic bomb in early August. The secretary of war also obtained Truman's approval for the White House to release a prepared statement once the bomb had been delivered on its target. It must be appreciated that the American military largely controlled the specific timing of the bomb's use and Truman proved quite content to delegate that responsibility. Indeed, Truman possessed few hesitations about using the weapon, and he simply wanted the military planning to reach fruition. Whatever the subsequent controversies over the

¹ Handy Directive to Spaatz, July 25, 1945, in Kort, ed., *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb*, p. 259.

atomic bomb, this decision caused him none of the anxiety that afflicted him during later difficult decisions, such as when he fired Douglas MacArthur in 1951 in the midst of the Korean War. It constituted an important but hardly a “controversial” decision for him.

Notably, no action of the Japanese government or military in the period after the Potsdam Declaration encouraged either Truman or Byrnes to consider any change in American strategy. Quite the opposite! Having broken the Japanese codes the Americans knew of the tentative, back-channel efforts of certain civilian officials in Tokyo to enlist the Soviet Union in negotiating some kind of peace settlement that would *not* require either a surrender and occupation of the home islands or any fundamental changes in the Japanese imperial system (*kokutai*).² But such terms were completely unacceptable to the Allies. The American-led alliance intended “unrestricted occupation of Japanese territory, total authority in the governing of Japan, dismantlement of Japan’s military and military-industrial complex (‘demobilization’), a restructuring of Japanese society (‘demilitarization’), and Allied-run war crimes trials.”³ Japan must concede fully as had Germany. No indication of such a surrender occurred, of course, because the influential Japanese decision makers could not countenance it.⁴ So the American policy makers waited in vain for the Japanese to respond positively to the Potsdam Declaration’s call for immediate and unconditional surrender. Instead, Japan’s Prime Minister Suzuki Kantaro publicly dismissed the Potsdam terms on July 28 and on July 30. When referring to the terms, he confided to a senior cabinet official that “for the enemy to say something like that means circumstances have arisen that force them also to end the war. That is why they are talking about unconditional surrender. Precisely at a time like this, if we hold firm, then they will yield before we do.” He did not “think there is any need to stop [the war.]”⁵

In the post-Potsdam period the Tokyo government held back from any official contact with the Allies through the formal channels provided by the

² See the collection of Japanese diplomatic cables from July 2 to August 16 to which Byrnes had access in Byrnes Papers, Folder 571. On the limits of Japan’s negotiating terms as revealed in these diplomatic exchanges see Frank, *Downfall*, pp. 229–230.

³ These terms are set forth in Douglas J. MacEachin, *The Final Months of the War With Japan*, p. 36.

⁴ For brilliant expositions of the Japanese determination throughout 1945 to continue fighting see Richard B. Frank’s, *Downfall*, esp. pp. 83–86; and Herbert P. Bix, “Japan’s Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 19 (Spring, 1995), pp. 197–225.

⁵ Suzuki quoted in Bix, “Japan’s Delayed Surrender,” p. 208.

Swiss government. Despite the thunderous bombing campaign of General Curtis LeMay's B-29s from March to August, which had left no sizable city untouched, the Japanese planned to continue their war effort.⁶ Indeed, members of the Japanese military appeared to relish the opportunity to punish American invaders who dared intrude on their home islands.⁷ They held to the main elements of the *Ketsu-Go* ("Decisive Operation") strategy designed to crush the expected American invaders such that the American population would grow weary of the conflict and agree to terms. American officials fully appreciated this as the excellent research of the military historians Edward Drea and D. M. Giangreco has now made indisputably clear.⁸

Late in July American intelligence utilizing the ULTRA code-breaking system determined that the Japanese troop levels in Kyushu dedicated to repelling any invasion had grown by six divisions over June and July and even more soldiers were arriving. General MacArthur's intelligence chief, Maj. Gen. Charles Willoughby, even expressed the fear that Japanese forces could "grow to [the] point where we attack on a ratio of one (1) to one (1)," which, he helpfully added for even the most obtuse of his readers, "is not the recipe for victory."⁹ The prospects for the Olympic invasion now appeared decidedly problematic and the likelihood of significant American casualties commensurately increased. "The odds were against the invaders," as Drea explained, "because the defenders would soon equal or outnumber the attackers on the beaches." On the day of the American attack on Hiroshima, estimates held that the Japanese Army "now had 600,000 troops in Kyushu and expected even more."¹⁰ The commanders of these determined troops expected the support of over four thousand *kamikaze* planes along with conventional fighter aircraft and torpedo planes whose combined attacks might knock out fifteen to twenty percent of the invasion force (three entire divisions) while still at sea.¹¹ In such circumstances none of the American military leaders either in

⁶ For a vivid portrayal of the bombing campaign see Ronald Schaffer, *Wings of Judgment: American Bombing in World War II* (New York, 1985), pp. 128–142.

⁷ Frank, *Downfall*, pp. 83–86.

⁸ Giangreco provides the most detailed and penetrating analysis of Japanese defensive preparations in his brilliantly researched *Hell to Pay*.

⁹ This analysis relies upon, and Willoughby's evaluation is quoted in, Frank, *Downfall*, pp. 211–212.

¹⁰ Edward J. Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor Essays on the Japanese Army* (Lincoln, NE, 1998), pp. 161, 164. The following sentences also rely in part on Drea's valuable research.

¹¹ On the strength of the Japanese Imperial Army and Navy air forces see Giangreco, *Hell to Pay*, p. 78.

the Pacific theater or in Washington cautioned Truman to reconsider his use of the atomic bomb. The reality was quite the opposite. Apprised of the bloody carnage that awaited his invading force General Marshall even asked Leslie Groves in late July about the feasibility of using atomic bombs as tactical weapons to diminish the Japanese resistance on Kyushu!¹²

The on-the-ground reality of a Japanese military “girding for Armageddon” and convinced “that it could achieve success against an invasion,” must be well appreciated by all who genuinely seek to understand why the atomic bombs were used.¹³ In short, Japan hardly stood on the verge of military defeat. The time has come at long last to explode permanently the myth of a Japan ready to surrender – a notion that received much of its currency from the terribly flawed report of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey conducted after the war and publicly issued in July of 1946.¹⁴ This view has done enough damage to proper understanding of the use of the atomic bomb.

While the Japanese readied themselves for the climactic battle for their home islands, feverish preparations continued on Tinian, a tiny island in the Marianas chain. Here the flight and ordnance crews under the respective commands of Col. Paul W. Tibbets, Jr., and Capt. William S. (“Deak”) Parsons made their final preparations to use the new atomic weapon in warfare. Tinian lay 1,500 miles south of Japan and had been captured in July 1944 after characteristically vicious fighting. Once secured, the U.S. construction battalions set about transforming the island into what Stephen Walker rightly described as the “biggest air base in the world.” They hurriedly built six huge runways there and soon LeMay’s B-29s were flying off them to attack targets in Japan. All the various bomber groups based on the island joined to form a “machine of mass destruction” through the early months of 1945 except for the 509th Composite Group commanded by Colonel Tibbets.¹⁵ This

¹² Drea, *In the Service of the Emperor*, pp. 163–164.

¹³ These descriptions of the Japanese military are from Frank, *Downfall*, p. 238.

¹⁴ On the serious flaws of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey see Robert P. Newman, “Ending the War with Japan: Paul Nitze’s ‘Early Surrender’ Counterfactual,” *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 64 (May, 1995), pp. 167–194; and Barton J. Bernstein, “Compelling Japan’s Surrender without the A-bomb, Soviet Entry, or Invasion: Reconsidering the US Bombing Survey’s Early Surrender Conclusions,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 18 (June, 1995), pp. 101–148. Bernstein noted that “analysts can no longer trust the Survey’s statements of counterfactual probabilities about when the Pacific War would have ended without the A-Bomb or Soviet entry. On such matters, the Survey is an unreliable guide” (p. 105).

¹⁵ The details here and the direct quotations are from Stephen Walker, *Shockwave: Countdown to Hiroshima* (New York, 2005), pp. 82–85.



PHOTO 8. Little Boy, the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. (Courtesy Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.)

pecially trained group flying distinctive B-29s modified to carry especially large bombs held back from any bombing assignments over Japan. But, by early August their time to fly to the Japanese home islands had come.

Paul Tibbets's father had pressured him to study medicine, but with his mother's backing he instead decided to fly airplanes. He proved an excellent pilot and distinguished himself flying B-17 bombers over Nazi-occupied Europe in 1942. His superb flying skills earned him the command of the team charged with dropping the atomic bombs. He "assembled a team of experienced flyers," as Michael Gordin records, "and managed to prepare them quickly and with discipline under exceptional circumstances."¹⁶ Tibbets oversaw fifteen special atomic bombers and he commanded fifteen crews trained to fly them. There is little indication that Tibbets and his superiors expected one or even two bombs to suffice to force a Japanese capitulation. Tibbets recalled soon after the war that "I thought it would take five atom bombs to jar the

¹⁶ Gordin, *Five Days in August*, p. 77.



PHOTO 9. The *Enola Gay* sitting on an airfield circa 1945 with signatures of its crew, including Paul Tibbets. (Courtesy Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.)

Japanese into quitting,” but it is clear that as of early August he planned to deliver effectively whatever number came to him.¹⁷

Deak Parsons is not as well known as Tibbets in the accounts of the bombing of Hiroshima, but he played a similarly crucial role. Parsons had a far longer association with the atomic bomb than the experienced pilot. An accomplished ballistics expert, he had been drawn into the Manhattan Project by Groves and Oppenheimer and played an important part in “the development of the bomb as a droppable, deliverable weapon.”¹⁸ He had observed the first atomic explosion at Alamogordo from a B-29 observation plane far above the desert. He then left for Tinian and bore the on site responsibility for assembling the atomic weapons. By August 1 he had completed his crucial work, although he spent subsequent days rehearsing endlessly the difficult and painful steps he would undertake to activate the bomb in flight. (Parsons feared an atomic explosion if the B-29 carrying it

¹⁷ Tibbets quoted in Gordin, *Five Days in August*, p. 83.

¹⁸ On Parsons see Walker, *Shockwave*, p. 61.

were to crash on take-off, so he decided that he must ready the bomb on the mission to deliver it.) The “Little Boy” bomb remained in the bomb assembly building for some further days, however, as the aircrews waited for favorable weather reports. Clear skies were predicted for August 6.

On August 5 Tibbets decided to name the strike plane he had chosen to fly in honor of the mother who had supported his decision to become a pilot. Late in the afternoon he instructed a sign painter to apply eight letters underneath the cockpit. So it was that his plane carried the name *Enola Gay* on the most famous and controversial air mission ever.¹⁹ Tibbets never expressed regret about associating his mother with his deadly undertaking. He always held to the view that he engaged in a military strike to force an end to the war. But such future controversies were far from his mind during the evening of August 5. The final briefings were completed and during that evening the loading crew hoisted “Little Boy” into the bomb bay of the *Enola Gay*.

Early in the morning of August 6 the crews of Tibbets’s plane and those of the accompanying weather and observer planes heard their chaplain pray to God that “armed with Thy strength may they bring this war to a rapid end.” At 2:45 A.M. (Tinian time) Tibbets took off and flew toward Japan. Once the *Enola Gay* reached its steady flying altitude Parsons entered the bomb bay and made the final adjustments to the bomb to allow for its eventual detonation. Guided by the reports of the weather reconnaissance plane, Tibbets concluded that they should attack their primary target. Around 8:15 A.M. (Japanese time, which was 7:15 P.M. August 5 in Washington, D.C.) the *Enola Gay* dropped its solitary weapon on the city of Hiroshima.²⁰

Harry Truman’s seaboard journey back across the Atlantic on the USS *Augusta* had given him time to relax, and it included a similar complement of movies and musical concerts for evening entertainment as had his journey to Potsdam. Enjoying the calm seas, he continued his regular practice of rising early and getting in a good walk on deck before breakfast. He consulted occasionally with Secretary Byrnes, Admiral Leahy, and White House Counsel Samuel Rosenman on the report he would offer the American people on the Potsdam meeting. And, of course, with assistance from his naval and military aides, Captain James Vardaman and Brigadier General Harry Vaughan, he monitored developments from the

¹⁹ This relies on Walker, *Shockwave*, pp. 193–194.

²⁰ This summary account draws primarily from Weintraub, *The Last Great Victory*, pp. 413–418. (For the chaplain’s prayer see p. 415.)

Pacific battlefronts. These developments held both positive and tragic news for the American president eager to bring the bloody war to an end. While the American air force and navy continued their relentless efforts to pound the Japanese into submission, the costs in American lives continued to mount. The sinking of the cruiser USS *Indianapolis* – the very ship that had delivered the key components of the atomic bombs to Tinian Island – by a Japanese submarine on July 29 left just 316 survivors from a ship's crew of 1200, making it "the worst American catastrophe at sea during the entire war."²¹ It served as a painful reminder of the Japanese capability and determination to defend their homeland. Truman's attention occasionally gravitated to the prospects for the atomic bomb, and its likely consequences for the war against Japan. Yet, he had no need to constantly monitor the situation. Obviously aware that the bomb would soon be deployed, the president spoke with the small contingent of White House press corps members on board the *Augusta* on August 3, and he gave them a scoop they were unable to use before the ship reached port. He told them that the United States had developed a new and powerful weapon that might hasten the end of the war.

In the northwest Atlantic on Sunday evening, August 5, at the actual time the bomb exploded over Hiroshima, Truman may well have been watching the comedy/mystery film "Thin Man Goes Home" starring William Powell and Myrna Loy. Not until the next day as he ate his lunch in the sailors' mess did he receive the first reports about the mission Tibbets and his crew completed. Stimson informed him that the "big bomb" had been used on Hiroshima and that "first reports indicate complete success which was even more conspicuous than earlier test." According to his own later account, Truman "was deeply moved." He passed along the news to Byrnes and then with gushing enthusiasm proclaimed to the sailors gathered with him that "this is the greatest thing in history. It is time for us to get home." A further message arrived that confirmed the initial assessment. With palpable excitement Truman informed his mess hall compatriots of the powerful new bomb, which he described "as twenty thousand times as powerful as a ton of TNT." Then he raced to the ship's wardroom to share the news with the *Augusta*'s officers. An observant journalist remembers him almost running as he moved about the ship "spreading the news." As the president later put it,

²¹ For a powerful description of the sinking of the *Indianapolis* and the harrowing ordeal of its survivors see Stanley Weintraub, *The Last Great Victory*, pp. 295–298, 307–310, 326–328, 345–347, 366–371; direct quotation from p. 369.

he could not keep back his “expectation that the Pacific war might now be brought to a speedy end.”²² Here lay his primary and deepest hope regarding the impact of the atomic bomb.

The real audience for Truman’s thoughts on the bomb did not reside on board the USS *Augusta*, however, but in Japan. Provision had been made for a statement, prepared before he left for Potsdam, to be issued under the president’s name as soon as confirmation came through on the success of the first atomic bombing mission. As his ship ploughed its way back to Newport News, this statement was distributed far and wide. It gave basic details of the attack against Hiroshima, and an elemental description both of the power of the new weapon and the scientific effort that allowed the Anglo-Americans to win “the battle of the laboratories” against the Germans to produce it successfully. He described the atomic bomb as harnessing “the basic power of the universe.” In words that might have been expected to penetrate through to the purported descendant of the Sun God then sitting on the Japanese throne, the American leader held that “the force from which the sun draws its power has been loosed against those who brought war to the Far East.” Clearly intent on shocking and intimidating the Japanese, Truman warned that the United States was “now prepared to obliterate more rapidly and completely every productive enterprise” that lay above ground in any city in Japan. There should be no mistake, he threatened, “we shall completely destroy Japan’s power to make war.” Piling on the verbal pressure he explained that the Potsdam ultimatum had been issued “to spare the Japanese people from utter destruction,” but that Japanese leaders had rejected it. This time they should act differently. In words that implied the use of further atomic bombs he uttered a brutal warning to the Japanese leadership: “If they do not now accept our terms they may expect a rain of ruin from the air, the likes of which has never been seen on this earth.” Notably, he further advised that “behind this air attack will follow sea and land forces in such numbers and power as they have not yet seen and with the fighting skill of which they are already well aware.”²³ Naturally, Truman hoped that the awesome display of airpower over Hiroshima would obviate the need to utilize the sea and land forces.

²² For Truman’s account, which includes the two messages he received, see *Year of Decisions*, pp. 464–465. Also see Weintraub, *The Last Great Victory*, pp. 420–421, which includes the observation of the journalist Merriman Smith.

²³ See Statement by the President Announcing the Use of the A-bomb at Hiroshima, August 6, 1945, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman 1945* (Washington, D.C., 1961), pp. 197–200.

On board the *Augusta* Truman and Byrnes drew satisfaction from the successful use of the atomic bomb. Indicative of his domestic political focus Byrnes recalled how as director of war mobilization he had become “worried about the huge expenditure and feared repercussions because he had doubt of its working.” Stimson, however, had reassured him. Truman suppressed any comment on his own wartime dealings with Stimson and generously spoke to the importance of having men like the secretary of war “who have the respect of people” and whom Congress held in such regard to authorize such “huge expenditures in secrecy.”²⁴ Now, the two politicians hoped, the huge amounts expended on the Manhattan Project would pay such notable political dividends in forcing Japan’s defeat so as to disarm even the most severe fiscal critics. The use of the bomb hopefully would validate the enormous scientific and financial endeavor pursued under Roosevelt’s administration.

Neither Truman nor Byrnes raised any concerns regarding whether the atomic bomb was a legitimate weapon of war. Nor did either man raise any questions about the plans to use further bombs against the Japanese. Truman continued to act as a sort of “chairman of the board” who validated and confirmed recommendations that came up to him from subordinates.²⁵ He had stepped into FDR’s shoes and also into his assumptions that the weapon should be used to secure victory in the war. Furthermore, his approval of the use of the atomic bomb reflected the Rooseveltian preference to “achieve complete victory at the lowest cost in American lives.” The atomic bomb proved yet another arrow in the impressive quiver of America’s “industrial might and technological prowess,” which allowed U.S. casualties to be kept so light relative to the losses of other major participants in the war. Samuel Walker correctly noted that “Truman inherited from Roosevelt the strategy of keeping American losses to a minimum, and he was committed to carrying it out for the remainder of the war.”²⁶

Eager to force Japan’s defeat before paying any invasion’s high cost in American blood, Truman allowed the predetermined policy to proceed. While numerous concerned commentators writing from a post-Hiroshima perspective have sought to supply all kinds of alternatives to the atomic bomb for the American president’s use, he operated in a pre-Hiroshima

²⁴ Entry August 6, 1945, Walter Brown’s Diary, Byrnes Papers, Folder 602.

²⁵ Alonzo Hamby refers to Truman as “chairman of the board” in *Man of the People*, p. 324.

²⁶ See J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs against Japan* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), p. 9.



PHOTO 10. Fat Man, the atomic bomb detonated over Nagasaki. (Courtesy Harry S. Truman Presidential Library.)

world. Truman and his associates like Byrnes didn't seek to avoid using the bomb, and those who focus on "alternatives" distort history by overemphasizing them.²⁷ As Barton Bernstein persuasively clarified, the American leaders "easily rejected or never considered most of the so-called alternatives to the bomb."²⁸ They saw no reason to do so because they viewed the atomic bomb as another weapon in the Allied arsenal along with such complements – *not* alternatives – as the naval blockade, continued conventional bombing, the threat of invasion, and Soviet entry into the war. Together, they hoped, these might secure a Japanese surrender before American troops waded ashore on the southern plains of Kyushu.

Forcing a Japanese surrender formed the prism through which Truman also viewed both the use of a second atomic bomb and the Soviet Union's decision to enter the war. By the time the president arrived safely back on

²⁷ The most recent work to focus attention on "alternatives" is Tsuyoshi Hasegawa's *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), see especially pp. 295–299.

²⁸ Bernstein, "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender," p. 235.