

# ENDING THE PACIFIC WAR: HISTORY AND FANTASY

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## **Introduction**

The decision to lash Japan with nuclear weapons stands as the most momentous decision of President Harry S. Truman. It also remains as the greatest and most enduring controversy of the Pacific War. In the famous words of Secretary of War Henry Stimson, it was the “least abhorrent choice” of a dreadful array of options facing American leaders. Virtually all Americans in 1945 and for two decades thereafter believed fervently that atomic bombs not only ended the war, but also saved countless lives. But beginning in the mid-1960s, various scholars and writers mounted multiple challenges to what one of them labeled the “patriotic orthodoxy.”<sup>i</sup> These challenges contain many diverse threads, but they all rest upon a common foundation. That foundation is comprised of three premises:

First, that Japan’s strategic position in the summer of 1945 was catastrophic;

Second, that her leaders recognized that the nation’s situation was hopeless and they were seeking to end the war;

And third that American decision-makers, thanks primarily to decoded Japanese diplomatic communications, understood that the Japanese knew they were defeated and were striving to end the war.

Thus, argue an array of critics, American leaders comprehended that the use of atomic weapons, or perhaps even an invasion of the Japanese home islands, was unnecessary to end the war. Accordingly, the critics charge that the Truman Administration must have used atomic weapons in pursuit of some other goal: to justify the enormous expenditure of funds; to satisfy (perverse) intellectual curiosity; to perpetuate the Manhattan Project as a bureaucratic empire; to exact revenge or most provocatively to intimidate the Soviets.<sup>ii</sup> The controversy also serves as a surrogate for still larger issues touching the true character of this nation, its morals and whether our past should be a source of shame or pride.

Which of these narratives of the end of the Pacific War is history and which is fantasy? The reality as I found it is more complex than the common orthodoxy on either side recognizes. But my ultimate answer to this question is that things were not as bad as President Truman reported—they were, in fact, worse, but worse for reasons that Mr. Truman could not divulge. Let me explain this conclusion, by starting first with the realities of the military strategies adopted by America and Japan to end the Pacific War for the key to understanding this passage is to grasp that both sides steered their course by the military realities as they perceived them.

## **Grand Strategy: American**

President Franklin Roosevelt publicly articulated the national political goal at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943 as the unconditional surrender of the Axis powers. Unconditional surrender was not simply slogan about victory but a policy about peace. It provided the legal authority for the extensive plans to renovate the internal structure of the Axis nations.<sup>iii</sup>

Devising a military strategy to secure that political goal was the task of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). In the spring of 1945, the JCS forged a military strategy that merged two diametrically opposing visions into an unstable compromise. The United States Navy, led by Fleet Admiral Ernest King, had studied war with Japan since 1906. From these decades of analysis, naval officers distilled a number of principles about waging war with Japan. None of these principles was more deeply held than the belief that it would be absolute folly to attempt an invasion of the Japanese home islands. They were convinced that the Japanese would always muster larger ground forces for defense than the U.S. could ever deploy across the Pacific, and Japan's terrain would negate American advantages of firepower and mobility. Naval leaders also naturally favored solutions compatible with the capabilities of their service. Thus, they advocated ending the war in a campaign of blockade and bombardment, including intense aerial bombardment by sea and land based aircraft.<sup>iv</sup> The United States Army, led by General of the Armies, George C. Marshall, never invested the same intellectual capital into examination of a conflict with Japan. When the army turned attention to the problem of ending hostilities with Japan in 1944, it swiftly adopted a strategy of invasion of the home islands. This, of course, was a solution compatible with the capabilities of the army.

The JCS wove these two conflicting views into a strategic plan in May 1945. The Chiefs authorized the continuation and intensification of the strategy of blockade and bombardment until 1 November 1945. At that point, the United States would launch a two-phase invasion of the Japanese Homeland under the overall code name of Operation Downfall. The first step, Operation Olympic, involved the seizure of approximately the southern third of Kyushu, the southern most main Japanese home island, by the Sixth Army starting on 1 November 1945. Olympic would obtain air and naval bases to support a second phase, Operation Coronet, tentatively set for 1 March 1946 involving the Eighth and First Armies to secure the Tokyo-Yokohama region.

As the JCS pointed out in the policy paper they adopted to support this strategy, the overall allied war aim remained unconditional surrender. This would provide the legal authority to execute the far ranging political changes in Japan designed to assure that she never again posed a threat to peace. As the JCS acknowledged, however, there was no historical precedent of surrender to a foreign power of the Japanese government in some two thousand years. Moreover, there had been no instance of a surrender of a Japanese military unit in the entire course of the Pacific War. Thus, there was no guarantee that the surrender of the Japanese government could be obtained, or that even if a Japanese government would capitulate, that the Japanese armed forces would comply with that surrender. Therefore, an invasion was vital because it was most likely to compel a surrender of the Japanese

government. Moreover, an invasion would best position the United States to deal with the situation if there was no surrender or the Japanese armed forces refused to comply with surrender by a Japanese government. <sup>v</sup> With this analysis, the JCS recognized that the ultimate nightmare the United States faced was not Operation Downfall, the two-phase initial invasion, but the absence of an organized capitulation of Japan's armed forces. In the latter case, the United States would face the prospect of defeating in detail four to five million Japanese men under arms in the home islands, on the Asian continent and across the Pacific Ocean. This made even the potential casualties in Downfall only a down payment on the ultimate cost of the complete defeat of Japan. President Harry S. Truman reviewed the invasion strategy in June 1945. He authorized Olympic, the invasion of Kyushu, but he withheld sanction for Coronet.

### **Grand Strategy: Japanese**

In the first weeks of 1945, Japanese military and naval leaders selected a political and military strategy they were convinced would extract their nation from the Pacific War with honor. More importantly, they believed their strategy would at least preserve the old order in Japan, an order in which they were dominant. They called this strategy Ketsu Go, which can be translated as Operation Decisive. The core premise of Ketsu Go was that American morale was brittle. Japanese leaders were sustained by faith in a divinely ordained racial superiority, and fortified by a delusion that American losses in the war had been vastly greater than they were—and thus American morale already had been eroded to a great extent. Japanese strategists believed that by defeating or at least inflicting severe casualties in the initial invasion attempt, they would shatter American will and secure a negotiated peace.

The Japanese did not rely upon espionage or code breaking to reach their prescient assessment exact American intentions. Rather, the Japanese simply deduced their antagonist's intentions from the elementary clues of American character, operational techniques and obvious goals. Although the Japanese much feared the possibility that their adversaries might try to force surrender with a campaign of blockade and bombardment, they believed Americans lacked the patience for a protracted campaign of blockade and bombardment. Therefore they would invade the home islands of Japan. American superiority in combat power during the Pacific War rested upon overwhelming air and sea power, not ground forces. It followed that U.S. plans to invade Japan must encompass the ability to bolster their ground units with masses of planes and ships. While carrier based aviation permitted an almost unlimited scope in picking an invasion site, it represented just a fraction of available American air power. If the U.S. employed ground based air units, the invasion site must fall within aircraft range, particularly of fighter planes, of the nearest bases.

In January 1945 the Japanese perceived shrewdly that the most advanced U.S. air bases in the middle of the year would be on Iwo Jima and Okinawa. Okinawa provided the capacity to support several thousand aircraft. Iwo Jima did not. Thus, an arc representing American fighter plane range from Okinawa foretold the likely American landing areas. Within that arc fell Kyushu and parts of Shikoku. Compared to Shikoku, the southern ranges of Kyushu around Miyazaki, Shibushi Bay and the Satsuma Peninsula formed the most obvious targets with plentiful airfield sites and naval bases from which the Americans could mount an invasion of the Kanto (Tokyo) plain.

Let us pause now for the portion of my presentation that we can call Who Wants to Be An Imperial Army Staff Officer? This is a one-question test and the question is: Where will those clever Yanks place their airfields? On mountain tops? On tidal swamps? Or on level plains? If you can answer that question correctly you qualify for whatever employment opportunities now exist to guide the Imperial Japanese Army. But in 1945, if you could answer that question correctly and then examine a topographic map of Kyushu, you too could pick the exact target areas for Operation Olympic. And that is precisely what the Japanese did.

There were only twelve field divisions in all of Japan on New Year's Day 1945. With so few field units available, Imperial Headquarters embarked on a huge program of homeland reinforcement. At the end of the mobilization, the forces available to defend the homeland would number 60 divisions (36 field and counterattack, 22 coastal combat and two armored divisions) and 34 brigades (27 infantry and seven tank). The aggregate strength of the homeland armies would total 2,903,000 men, 292,000 horses and 27,500 motor vehicles. <sup>vi</sup>

At the same time, the Japanese mobilized the entire adult civilian population. After publicly declaring all males ages 15 to 60 and all females ages 17 to 40 as members of an immense militia, the Japanese moved to actually organize citizens into units and marry them to combat commands for use first as combat support and later as combat units. These efforts threatened to make an American nightmare of a battle amid a “fanatically hostile population” a dreadful reality.

### **Radio Intelligence**

The highly astute calculations of Japanese officers failed to account for one crucial factor. Allied, primarily American, code breakers were pervasively reading Japan's radio traffic. This traffic flowed in two streams. One comprised a relative trickle of diplomatic exchanges, especially between Tokyo and diplomats in Europe. The second encompassed a torrent of daily communications of the Imperial Army and Navy. By the summer of 1945, Allied code breakers were reading quite literally a million messages of the Imperial Army per month, as well as huge quantity of dispatches of the Imperial Navy.

While portions of the diplomatic traffic became known and much discussed as a part of the controversy surrounding the use of atomic bombs as early as at least the 1960's, it was not until 1995 that a complete set of diplomatic intercepts was released. More importantly, the huge flow of military intercepts remained completely unknown for some forty years after the war. In the controversy over the end of the Pacific War, critics sized upon selected diplomatic intercepts, or even selected excerpts of intercepts, to paint a picture of a Japan anxious to end the war. The complete set of intercepts, however, demonstrates a very different picture. First, although they confirm that a number of Japanese diplomats in Europe attempted to open negotiations to end the war, none of them were acting with the actual authority of the Japanese government. Second, they demonstrate that the only diplomatic initiative with actual sanction was an effort to enlist the Soviet Union as a mediator to negotiate an end to the war. But the messages establish that at no time did the Japanese government settle on terms to secure Soviet medication, must less indicate it was

amendable to terms to end the war remotely approximating those the United States and her allies could or should have accepted.

By contrast during July and August, ULTRA unmasked for American leaders the strategic ambush awaiting Olympic. U.S. planning was predicated upon the concept that the 680,000 Americans, including 14 divisions, slated for the invasion of Kyushu would confront no more than 350,000 Japanese, including eight to ten field divisions. But decrypted communications identified 14 Imperial Army divisions as well as a number of tank and infantry brigades—also at least 680,000 strong—most positioned on southern Kyushu. Moreover, rather than only 2,500 to 3,000 aircraft to support their ground troops against over 10,000 American planes manned by far more skilled crews, the ULTRA sources and photographic evidence revealed the Japanese had at least 5,900 to over 10,000 aircraft, half kamikazes, waiting to pummel the invasion convoys.

These revelations provoked American military leaders into an agonizing review of whether Operation Olympic was still viable. A ratio of only one American for every Japanese defender “is not the recipe for victory,” warned General MacArthur’s intelligence officer. The staff of the Joint Chiefs began active contemplation of alternatives to Operation OLYMPIC. On August 7, the day after Hiroshima, General Marshall asked General Douglas MacArthur, the designated Army commander for the invasion of Japan, whether he still regarded Olympic as feasible. MacArthur replied that he did not believe the intelligence and therefore he was prepared to forge ahead. After this exchange, however, Admiral King sent copies of both messages to Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, the designated navy commander for the invasion of Japan, and demanded his views. King knew the answer to the question before he asked it. On May 25, after two months of grueling fighting on Okinawa that generated an American casualty list exceeding any prior campaign of the Pacific War, Admiral Nimitz privately informed King that he could no longer support an invasion of Japan. King’s message of August 9 was clearly intended to bring on a full-scale confrontation over the viability of not only Olympic, but also the whole invasion strategy. What now emerges from this evidence is the harsh reality that the key Japanese leaders in the summer of 1945 did not regard their situation as hopeless. Nor were they simply staggering on with the war oblivious to their actual plight in a fanatical trance. On the contrary, driving them was a coherent and well-conceived military and political strategy called Ketsu Go. Moreover, now we can see that American leaders came to a full and sobering—indeed shocking—realization not only that the Japanese were welded to Ketsu Go, but also that Ketsu Go threatened to obtain for Japan the negotiated peace her leaders sought. A negotiated peace from which a militaristic and expansionist Japan could hope to rise again.

### **Other Realities**

If the military realities are the core of decision-making, there are also several other realities that should shape our judgment about these events. Let me touch briefly upon the most important of these.

While most Americans today knew or have learned about the gigantic cost of Nazi German’s war that killed tens of millions of men, women and children in Europe, fewer and fewer Americans know of the horrendous toll exacted by Japan’s war of aggression. Although no

one can provide a definitive number, historians believe that somewhere between fifteen to seventeen million people died between 1937 and 1945 as a result of Japan's march of conquest in Asia. This total includes at least 10 million in China. There, as elsewhere, the deaths occurred overwhelmingly among noncombatants. More importantly, there was a cost for each day the war continued. In China alone, over 100,000 men, women and children died on average each month, with many thousands of other Asians dying elsewhere, not to mention Allied prisoners of war and civilian internees. Accordingly, one of the profound fallacies of the argument of critics is that while they emphatically stress the terrible costs of atomic bombings, they routinely argue as though the alternatives had no cost. And they particularly refuse to acknowledge that the reality of the daily cost of letting the war continue until the expected November invasion.

If the Japanese inflicted vast deaths among noncombatants, they also sustained huge losses among their own civilian population, and not just from American actions. When the Soviet Union entered the war on August 9, it swiftly overran Manchuria and other areas on the Asian continent. The Soviet captured around 2.7 million Japanese nationals, about two-thirds of whom were civilians. But between 340,000 and 376,000 of this number were killed or disappeared forever in Soviet captivity. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, we learned that the Soviets were also set actually to invade Hokkaido, the northernmost Japanese home island in August 1945. Had the Soviet exacted the same toll there, this would have added another 400,000 dead Japanese civilians.

But the Japanese also stood on the cusp of a still more terrifying fate in August 1945. This story is intricate, but in outline it begins with the fact that a new targeting directive of August 13, 1945, reoriented the U.S. strategic bombing attack upon Japan. That directive switched the main effort from fire bombing urban industrial centers to an attack on the railway system. At first blush, this switch might appear more benign than the attacks on Japan's urban centers, but in reality it posed a far more lethal threat to the Japanese population.

Japan's teeming population of some 72 million was not spread evenly over the home islands. On the contrary, fully three-quarters of Japan's population lived on the main island of Honshu; nearly half the total population of Japan dwelled in the southwestern half of Honshu in an area of massive food deficit. The survival of the population in southwestern Honshu depended upon the harvesting and transfer of food from food surplus areas. By 1945, Japan's rice food production plummeted. The food ration had fallen from 2,000 calories per day per person at the start of the war to around 1,600 in July 1945. Worse was to come. By far the most important foodstuff in Japan was rice. It was harvested in September and October, thus creating the Rice Year that ran from November to November. During the early war years the rice harvest ran about 10 million tons, but the rice harvest in 1945 plummeted to a disastrous 6.6 million tons. Japanese authorities calculated in November 1945 that available food supplies would provide a ration of about 1,300 calories per day per person. Such was the shortage, however, that by May 1945, the daily allotment in Tokyo fell to 1,000 calories per day.

Japan in 1945 was unique among industrialized nations in her reliance upon shipping even for internal communications. The whole transportation system of Japan was based around the concept that goods would be hauled to the nearest port and then shipped to the port nearest the final destination. But American attacks by air, sea and undersea had completely

destroyed or disrupted Japan's maritime system by August 1945. Her only method of moving bulk commodities was by rail. On August 13, 1945, the new targeting directive for the strategic air force took deadly aim at the rail system. Had the war continued for a period measured only in days, not months, Japan's rail system would have been demolished and her population locked into a course of mass famine that would have killed millions. Thus, for the Japanese population, survival depended not merely on ending the war, but ending the war when it did.

### **Conclusion**

Let me finish with this thought.

The decisions made by President Truman and his subordinates to add nuclear weapons to the campaign of blockade and bombardment cost the lives of between 100,000 and 200,000 Japanese at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, on top of the many tens of thousands of others who died in the incendiary raids or due to the ultimate effects of the blockade. Those Japanese noncombatants, however, held no stronger right not to be slaughtered than the vast numbers of Chinese and other Asian noncombatants dying daily, the Japanese noncombatants on the Asian continent dead or forever missing in Soviet captivity, or the Japanese noncombatants (not to mention Allied prisoners-of-war and civilian internees) who would have perished of starvation and disease in the final agony of the blockade. Thus, alternatives to the atomic bombs carried no guarantee as to when they would end the war and a far higher price in human death and suffering.

Finally, the deaths actually incurred in ending the war were not gratuitous. American goals were not simply victory but peace. Had American leaders in 1945 been assured that Japan and America would pass two generations in tranquility and still look forward with no prospect of future conflict, they would have believed their hard choices had been vindicated-and so should we.

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