

The Smithsonian and the Enola Gay: *The Mission*

War in the Pacific

By July 1945, it was clear that Japan had lost. However, Japan had not accepted defeat and was not ready to end a war in which 17 million people had already died at the hands of the Japanese empire since 1931.

The eventual military outcome of the war had been sealed since the US captured the Mariana Islands in 1944. B-29 bombers from Guam, Saipan, and Tinian were systematically destroying the industrial cities of Japan. The US Navy and the Army Air Forces had cut off Japan's supply lines.

Nevertheless, the war dragged on, and casualties were rising. More than 26,000 Americans had been killed or wounded on Iwo Jima in February and March 1945. US casualties from April to June on Okinawa were 48,000.

As Japan's desperation worsened, the ferocity of the fighting continued. Surrender was regarded as dishonorable. Japanese fighting men preferred to take their own lives or die in kamikaze suicide attacks. Americans who surrendered to Japanese forces were treated with contempt, often tortured or summarily executed.

For the past year, Japan had been drawing units back to the home islands in anticipation of a final stand there.

The Decision

In April 1945, Franklin Roosevelt died and Harry Truman became President of the United States. He had not known before that the United States had been working on an atomic bomb. After successful testing of the bomb at the Trinity site in New Mexico in July 1945, Truman and the armed forces had three strategic options for inducing a Japanese surrender. (*Truman takes oath of office in the White House Cabinet Room; standing alongside are Mrs. Truman and daughter Margaret.—Photo via National Archives*)



- Continue the bombing and the blockade. Some military leaders, including Gen. H.H. Arnold, Chief of the Army Air Forces, believed that bombing would soon bring an end to the war.
- Invasion of Japan. Neither Truman nor Gen. George Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, believed that the B-29 bombing campaign would force a prompt surrender. In their view, the only conventional alternative was invasion.
- Use the atomic bomb.

There were differences of opinion about the best strategy among Truman's military and civilian advisors. However, when a warning of "utter devastation of the Japanese homeland" went unheeded, the decision was made to use the atomic bomb.

In his Aug. 9, 1945 radio address to the nation, Truman gave his reasons: "We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans," he said.

Read "The Decision That Launched the *Enola Gay*," Air Force Association, March 1994

Hiroshima and Nagasaki

In the early morning hours of Aug. 6, the *Enola Gay* took off from Tinian. The primary target was Hiroshima, the seventh largest city in Japan, an industrial and military shipping center on the Inland seacoast of Honshu. At precisely 8:16 a.m., the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima. More than half of the city was destroyed in a flash, and about 80,000 Japanese were killed.

Reaction of the Japanese cabinet was polarized, split evenly between the war faction and the peace faction. The Japanese were not quite ready to surrender.

The second atomic bomb was dropped by the B-29 *Bockscar* on Aug. 9. The primary target, Kokura, was obscured by smoke drifting from a nearby city that had been bombed two days before, so *Bockscar* diverted to Nagasaki, a military industrial center on the western coast of Kyushu. The bomb fell on Nagasaki at 11:02 a.m., killing 40,000.

End of the War

The war faction in Japan was still not ready to quit, but Emperor Hirohito asked the Cabinet to prepare an Imperial Rescript of Surrender. A few hours before the Emperor's message was broadcast on Aug. 15, the war minister, Korechika Anami, committed suicide.

In the radio broadcast, the Emperor said that "the enemy has begun to employ a new and most cruel bomb, the power of which to do damage is indeed, incalculable, taking the toll of many innocent lives."

The formal surrender took place aboard the battleship Missouri in Tokyo Bay on Sept. 2.

The Invasion That Didn't Happen

The prevailing opinion in 1945 was that, without the atomic bombs, an invasion of the Japanese home islands would have been necessary to force Japan to surrender. The invasion plan, Operation Downfall, had two parts:

- Operation Olympic, projected for Nov. 1, 1945, sending 766,700 US ground troops and a massive aerial bombardment against the southern Japanese island of Kyushu.
- Operation Coronet, beginning March 1, 1946, directed at the main Japanese island, Honshu. The US invasion force was to consist of 1,026,000 ground troops and an enormous number of aircraft.

The Japanese force waiting in the home islands to throw back an invasion consisted of 2.3 million military troops and four million Army and Navy civilian employees who could be called upon for combat duty. About 7,700 combat aircraft were available, many of them kamikaze suicide planes. Millions of women, old men, and boys had been trained to resist by such means as strapping explosives to their bodies and throwing themselves under advancing tanks.

Casualties: Lives Lost and Saved

Casualty estimates for an invasion of Japan are mostly guesswork. Truman's critics sneer at the idea that the invasion might have cost half a million American lives and say that US dead would not have exceeded "tens of thousands." The debate of the casualty question is open-ended. However, the record of casualties up to the summer of 1945, when Truman made his decision, is instructive.

- In April 1945, an Operation Downfall planning document prepared for the Joint Chiefs of Staff took US casualty rates from seven previous amphibious campaigns in the Pacific War and applied them to the force numbers to be employed in Olympic and Coronet. It pointed to 1,202,005 US casualties, including 314,619 Americans killed.
- The most destructive bombing attack on Japan was not the atomic weapons at Hiroshima or Nagasaki, but incendiary bombs dropped on Tokyo the night of March 9–10, 1945, killing 83,793. Continuation of the conventional bombing would not necessarily have meant fewer casualties.

- On Okinawa US casualties were almost 50,000 (12,520 killed or missing, 36,613 wounded). Japanese casualties were far worse: some 90,000 soldiers and 60,000 civilians dead. An invasion of Japan, with many times the numbers of forces that were engaged on Okinawa, would have led to vastly higher casualties on both sides.

Further Reading

DREA, Edward J., *“Previews of Hell,”* MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History, Spring 1995.

FRANK, Richard B. *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire.* Random House, 1999.

GUDMUNDSSON, Bruce I., *“Okinawa,”* MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History, Spring 1955.

MADDOX, Robert James. *Weapons of Victory: The Hiroshima Decision, Fifty Years Later.* University of Missouri Press, 1995.

NEWMAN, Robert P. *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult.* Michigan State University