HIROSHIMA:
WAS IT NECESSARY?
Part 1 of 2
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given to the author.

In August of 1945 nuclear weapons were exploded upon the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan. Following these atomic bombings, Japan surrendered. But were the atomic bombings necessary to save Allied lives and end Japan's threat to world peace while avoiding a deadly invasion of the Japanese mainland? The following account summarizes the events that led to Japan's surrender in World War II and then considers other means of achieving Japan's surrender. The second half of this article, which also includes the bibliography, can be found in Part 2.

For some who are accustomed to the popular beliefs about this matter, this study may be discomforting, although that is not its intent. But if we learn from past occurrences, it may make our future decision-making abilities more capable of saving the lives of our soldiers and sailors and of people on all sides.

The Tide Turns

As the war with Germany drew closer to the end, the Allies waged an increasingly effective war against Japan. After the fall of the Mariana Islands, including Saipan, to the U.S. in July of 1944, the impending defeat of Japan became increasingly apparent to many Allied and Japanese leaders.

The Marianas had been a key area within Japan's defense perimeter; now Japan would be within range of bombing runs from Pacific Ocean locations that were superior to the China bases that had been used for bombing missions (Akira Iriye, Power and Culture: The Japanese-American War, 1941-1945, pg. 174; Michael Sherry, The Rise of American Air Power, pg. 176).

And so from November 1944 onward, Japan was the subject of numerous large-scale B-29 non-nuclear bombing raids (Robert Butow, Japan's Decision To Surrender, pg. 41). When Air Force chief General Hap Arnold asked in June 1945 when the war was going to end, the commander of the B-29 raids, General Curtis LeMay, told him September or October 1945, because by then they would have run out of industrial targets to bomb (Sherry, pg. 300 & 410(143n)).

While Japan was being bombarded from the sky, a Naval blockade was strangling Japan's ability to import oil and other vital materials and its ability to produce war materials (Barton Bernstein, ed., The Atomic Bomb, pg. 54). Admiral William Leahy, the Chief of Staff to President Roosevelt and then to President Truman, wrote, "By the beginning of September [1944], Japan was almost completely defeated through a practically complete sea and air blockade." (William Leahy, I Was There, pg. 259). Then in May of 1945 the surrender of Germany freed the Allies to focus their troops and resources on defeating the final enemy, Japan. Although fighting fanatically, Japan had lost a string of high-casualty battles (U.S. Dept. of State, Foreign Relations of the U.S., The Conference of Berlin (Potsdam) 1945, vol. 1, pg. 905).
The Potsdam Proclamation

On the evening of July 26, 1945 in San Francisco (which in Tokyo was the morning of July 27) a message from the Allies now commonly known as the Potsdam Proclamation was broadcast in Japanese. The broadcast was relayed to the Japanese government on the morning of the 27th (Pacific War Research Society, The Day Man Lost, pg. 211-212).

The proclamation demanded "the unconditional surrender of all the Japanese armed forces" (U.S. Dept. of State, Foreign Relations of the U.S., The Conference of Berlin (Potsdam), vol. 2, pg. 1474-1476). It made no mention of Japan's central surrender consideration: the retention of the Emperor's position (Butow, pg. 138-139). What made this crucial was that the Japanese believed their Emperor to be a god, the heart of the Japanese people and culture (Pacific War Research Society, Japan's Longest Day, pg. 20). The absence of any assurance regarding the Emperor's fate became Japan's chief objection to the Potsdam Proclamation (Pacific War Research Society, The Day Man Lost, pg. 212-214). In addition, the proclamation made statements that, to the Japanese, could appear threatening to the Emperor: "There must be eliminated for all time the authority and influence of those who have deceived and misled the people of Japan into embarking on world conquest" and "stern justice shall be meted out to all war criminals" (U.S. Dept. of State, Potsdam 2, pg. 1474-1476).

Enter the Bomb and the Soviets

On August 6, 1945, an atomic bomb was dropped on the people of Hiroshima. Early in the morning of August 9th Manchuria was invaded by the Soviet Union. The Soviets had notified Japan's Ambassador to Moscow on the night of the eighth that the Soviet Union would be at war with Japan as of August 9th (Butow, pg. 153-154, 164(n)). This was a blow to the Japanese government's peace-seeking efforts. The Russians had been the only major nation with which Japan still had a neutrality pact, and, as such, had been Japan's main hope of negotiating a peace with something better than unconditional surrender terms (Butow, pg. 87). To that end, the Japanese government had been pursuing Soviet mediation to end the war in response to the Emperor's request of June 22, 1945, a fact often overlooked today (Butow, pg. 118-120, 130).

Late on the morning of August 9th, the U.S. dropped a second atomic bomb without a second thought, this time on the people of Nagasaki. Rather than wait to see if the Hiroshima bomb would bring surrender, the atomic bombing order to the Army Air Force stated, "Additional bombs will be delivered on the above targets as soon as made ready by the project staff." (Leslie Groves, Now It Can Be Told, pg. 308). Word of the second nuclear attack was relayed that day to the Japanese government (Leon Sigal, Fighting To a Finish, pg. 240).

Bringing the nuclear threat closer to home, rumors were reported to the Japanese military that the next atomic bomb would be dropped on Tokyo, where the government leaders were meeting (William Craig, The Fall of Japan, pg. 116). Bombed by the Allies at will, Japan was militarily defeated. It still remained, however, for defeat to be translated into surrender.

After the atomic bombing, the Japanese Army and Navy had sent separate teams of scientists to determine what type of bomb had destroyed the city. By August 11th, both teams had reported to Tokyo that the bomb was, indeed, atomic (Sigal, pg. 236).

No Surrender
Japan had received what would seem to have been overwhelming shocks. Yet, after two atomic bombings, massive conventional bombings, and the Soviet invasion, the Japanese government still refused to surrender.

The Potsdam Proclamation had called for "Japan to decide whether she will continue to be controlled by those self-willed militaristic advisers" (U.S. Dept. of State, Potsdam 2, pg. 1475). On the 13th, the Supreme Council For the Direction of the War (known as the "Big 6") met to address the Potsdam Proclamation's call for surrender. Three members of the Big 6 favored immediate surrender, but the other three - (War Minister Anami, Army Chief of Staff Umezu, and Navy Chief of Staff Toyoda - adamantly refused. The meeting adjourned in a deadlock, with no decision to surrender (Butow, pg. 200-202).

Later that day the Japanese Cabinet met. It was only this body - not the Big 6, not even the Emperor - that could rule as to whether Japan would surrender. And a unanimous decision was required (Butow, pg. 176-177, 208(43n)). But again War Minister Anami led the opponents of surrender, resulting in a vote of 12 in favor of surrender, 3 against, and 1 undecided. The key concern for the Japanese military was loss of honor, not Japan's destruction. Having failed to reach a decision to surrender, the Cabinet adjourned (Sigal, pg. 265-267).

The Emperor's Desire

On the following day, August 14, Anami, Umezu, and Toyoda were still arguing that there was a chance for victory (John Toland, The Rising Sun, pg. 936). But then that same day, the Cabinet unanimously agreed to surrender (Toland, pg. 939). Where none of the previous events had succeeded in bringing the Japanese military leaders to surrender, surrender came at Emperor Hirohito's request: "It is my desire that you, my Ministers of State, accede to my wishes and forthwith accept the Allied reply" (Butow, pg. 207-208).

What made the Emperor's "desire" more powerful than the revulsion the military leaders felt toward surrender? The Emperor was believed to be a god by the Japanese. The dean of historians on Japan's surrender, Robert Butow, notes in regard to the military leaders in Japan's government, "To have acted against the express wishes of an Emperor whom they had unceasingly extolled as sacred and inviolable and around whom they had woven a fabric of individual loyalty and national unity would have been to destroy the very polity in perpetuation of which they had persistently declared they were fighting" (Butow, pg. 224). Or as War Minister Anami said after he agreed to surrender, "As a Japanese soldier, I must obey my Emperor" (Pacific War Research Society, JLD, pg. 87-88).

Surrender was so repugnant to Anami that he committed hara-kiri the day after he signed the surrender document (Butow, pg. 219-220). Where fear and reason had failed, religious devotion to the Emperor enabled the military leaders to overcome their samurai resistance to surrender.

Japanese Hawks versus Japanese Doves

If the hawks in Japan's government surrendered only when the Emperor requested them to do so, what brought the Emperor to express his wish for surrender? For prior to August 1945, it was unprecedented for an Emperor to express a specific policy preference directly to the Cabinet (Butow, pg. 224). The role of the Emperor was to sanction decisions made by the Cabinet, whether he personally approved of them or not (Butow, pg. 167(1n)). As a god, he was considered to be above human politics.

Emperor Hirohito was persuaded to cross this line by the doves in Japan's government, particularly Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal Kido (the Emperor's closest advisor) and Foreign
Minister Togo, a member of Japan's cabinet (Butow, pg. 206; Pacific War Research Society, JLD, pg. 28-30; Sigal, pg. 71 & 268).

If it was the doves, thru the Emperor, who brought surrender, what moved the doves to ask the Emperor to make his direct request to the government? For not only did this circumvent Japanese tradition, it also put the doves in danger of arrest and assassination and the government at risk of a possible coup, by members of the Japanese military.

The military had been arresting people who spoke out in favor of peace. (Pacific War Research Society, DML, pg. 167-168; Butow, pg. 75(56n) & 178-179; Sigal, pg. 228-229). Japan's Prime Minister Suzuki had personal experience with the military's extremism; he had been seriously wounded and nearly killed during an attempted coup in 1936 by a faction of the Army (Craig, pg. 137). A careless pursuit of peace could have resulted in the destruction of the peace movement and, perhaps, the end of any chance to preserve the throne.

What took Japan's Doves so long?

There were three primary considerations behind why the doves made their move when they did:

Some doves, realizing Japan only faced further destruction, had wanted to end the war long before the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima (Pacific War Research Society, JLD, pg. 11; Toland, pg. 843-845; Butow, pg. 17-18, 46-50, 65(33n), 66). As noted above, the fear that the Japanese military would destroy the peace movement restrained the doves from taking action sooner than they did. The doves minimum requirement for surrender was the retention of the Emperor's position (Pacific War Research Society, DML, pg. 200; Butow, pg. 132, 140, 179-180)

But in order for the peace of point 1 to be achieved, points 2 and 3 had to be dealt with first.

The doves were able to surmount their fear of military reprisal when a greater danger appeared: the imminent loss of the Emperor. Even before the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the declaration of war against Japan by the Soviets, Japan's doves realized that Japan's defeat was certain (Butow, pg. 47; Sigal, pg. 48). But with the atomic bomb, which could bring mass destruction easily and instantly, and the loss of the Soviet Union as a possible mediator of a negotiated surrender, defeat - and the destruction of the Emperor system - became an imminent threat (Butow, pg. 193).

The doves had run out of time; their religious devotion to the Emperor forced them to risk their lives to save his or, at the minimum, to save the position of the Emperor (Pacific War Research Society, DML, pg. 200). The only chance to save the Emperor was to surrender.

On August 8 - before the Soviets announced their declaration of war and before the Nagasaki a-bomb was detonated - Foreign Minister Togo met with the Emperor to tell him what he knew of the Hiroshima bombing. They agreed that the time had come to end the war at once (Pacific War Research Society, DML, pg. 300; Pacific War Research Society, JLD, pg. 21-22).

The problem of Unconditional Surrender

But unconditional surrender would still leave the doves' central issue unanswered: would surrender allow Japan to retain the Emperor? Japan's Prime Minister Suzuki spelled out the problem of "unconditional surrender" well for doves and hawks alike when he publicly announced on June 9, 1945, "Should the Emperor system be abolished, they [the Japanese people] would lose all reason for existence. Unconditional surrender, therefore, means death to the hundred million: it leaves us no choice but to go on fighting to the last man." (Pacific War Research Society, DML, pg. 127; Butow, pg. 69(44n)). From this time on, if not earlier, the Allies knew that the throne was the primary issue.
for Japan. While some of Japan's military leaders preferred additional conditions for ending the war, ultimately their control proved to be secondary to the desire of the Emperor - and Japan's doves - for surrender.

Much has been written about the vagueness of the Allies' call for "unconditional surrender". This vagueness, combined with many hostile references to Japan's leaders (Henry Stimson & McGeorge Bundy, On Active Service In Peace and War, pg. 626; Butow, pg. 136), contributed heavily to the conclusion by many in Japan that unconditional surrender could mean the end of their Emperor. Even Foreign Minister Togo, one of the leaders of Japan's doves, noted in a July 12, 1945 message to Sato, Japan's Ambassador to Moscow, "as long as America and England insist on unconditional surrender, our country has no alternative but to see it [the war] through in an all-out effort". The telegram was intercepted by the U.S., decoded, and sent to President Truman (U.S. Dept. of State, Potsdam 1, pg. 873, 875-876).

Robert Butow has aptly portrayed the feelings the Japanese had for the Emperor, in noting, "The one thing they could not do was sign a death warrant for the imperial house", and if it appeared that the Allies would take steps against the Emperor, "then even the most ardent advocates of peace would fall into step behind the [pro-war] fanatics" (Butow, pg. 141).

To demand unconditional surrender, without comment as to the Emperor's fate, meant a choice, Truman thought, between an invasion of the Japanese mainland or the use of atomic bombs on Japan, or possibly both. Army Chief of Staff General George Marshall thought that even after using A-bombs on Japan the invasion would still be necessary, anyway, as opposed to the belief that using atomic bombs on Japan would make the mainland invasion unnecessary (David Lilienthal, The Journals of David B. Lilienthal, Volume Two, pg. 198).

Most high-level discussions that assumed either nuclear weapons or a mainland invasion of Japan would be necessary to end the Pacific war did so with the knowledge that unconditional surrender was the official Allied policy. The "a-bombs or invasion" choice was based in part on the assumption that retention of the Emperor would probably not be offered to Japan. Nor was a warning to Japan of the atomic bomb in the decision-makers' plans, as they considered what would be necessary to end the war. These omissions made the use of the atomic bomb seem all the more necessary for winning the war without an invasion.

U.S. learns of Emperor's importance

The U.S. government was not ignorant of the importance of the Emperor to Japanese surrender. Under Secretary of State Joseph Grew had explained this to President Truman in person on May 28, 1945. Grew had been U.S. Ambassador to Japan for 10 years prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor and was regarded as the most knowledgeable on Japan of any U.S. government official (Leahy, pg. 274). On May 28th Grew informed Truman, "The greatest obstacle to unconditional surrender by the Japanese is their belief that this would entail the destruction or permanent removal of the Emperor and the institution of the throne" (Walter Johnson, ed., Turbulent Era, Joseph Grew, Vol. 2, pg. 1428-1429).

In a June 18, 1945 meeting with Truman and his military advisors, Assistant Secretary of War John McCloy argued that Japan should be permitted to retain the Emperor and should be given a warning of the atomic bomb in order to bring an earlier and less deadly surrender (Walter Millis, ed., The Forrestal Diaries, pg. 70-71; Len Giovannetti and Fred Freed, The Decision To Drop the Bomb, pg. 134-136).
On June 28, 1945, a memo from Under Secretary of the Navy Ralph Bard was given to Secretary of War Stimson. In the memo, Bard recommended the points made by McCloy and suggested Japan be told that Russia would enter the war against them (Manhattan Engineering District Records, Harrison-Bundy files, folder # 77, National Archives; see also Martin Sherwin, A World Destroyed, 1987 edition, pg. 307-308). Bard may have also discussed this memo with Truman in early July (Alice Kimball Smith, A Peril and a Hope, pg. 52-53; altho 15 years later, Bard did not recall the meeting: U.S. News & World Report, 8/15/60, War Was Really Won Before We Used A-bomb, pg. 73).

On July 2, 1945, Sec. of War Henry Stimson and Truman discussed a proposal by Stimson to call for Japan to surrender. Stimson's memo to the President advised, "I personally think that if in saying this we should add that we do not exclude a constitutional monarchy under her present dynasty, it would substantially add to the chances of acceptance". Stimson's proposed surrender demand stated that the reformed Japanese government "may include a constitutional monarchy under the present dynasty" (U.S. Dept. of State, Potsdam 1, pg. 889-894).

However, the constitutional monarchy line was not included in the surrender demand, known as the Potsdam Proclamation, that was broadcast on July 26th, in spite of Stimson's eleventh hour protestations that it be left in (Diary of Henry L. Stimson, 7/24/45, Yale Univ. Library, New Haven, Conn). Pacific war historian Akira Iriye explains, "One reason for this change [the removal of the Emperor retention line] was the growing influence within the State Department of men like [Sec. of State] Byrnes, Acheson, and MacLeish - with no expertise on Japanese affairs but keenly sensitive to public opinion - and the president's tendency to listen to them rather than to Grew and other experts." (Iriye, pg. 255-256). In regard to his disagreement with Under Sec. of State Grew over allowing Japan to retain the Emperor, Dean Acheson later admitted, "I very shortly came to see that I was quite wrong." (Dean Acheson, Present at the Creation, pg. 112-113).

Japan seeks peace through the Soviets

In the meantime, the Japanese government was attempting to persuade the Soviet Union to mediate a peace for Japan that would not be unconditional. This was in response to the Emperor's request at a Big Six meeting on June 22, 1945 to seek peace thru the Soviets, who were the only major member of the Allies that had a neutrality pact with Japan at the time (Butow, pg. 118-120).

Unfortunately for all concerned, Japan's leaders were divided over precisely what terms should be sought to end the war, with the Japanese military leaders still wishing to avoid anything that the Allies would have considered a clear "surrender". Surely Japan's leaders hold the lion's share of the responsibility for the fate that befell Japan.

Having broken the code Japan used for transmitting messages, the U.S. was able to follow Japan's efforts to end the war as it intercepted the messages between Foreign Minister Togo and Japan's Ambassador to Moscow Sato. The messages were sent as the result of the June 22, 1945 Japanese Cabinet meeting. The conditions under which Japan was willing to surrender were not clearly spelled out in the messages, aside from a willingness to give up territory occupied during the war and a repeated rejection of "unconditional surrender".

July 1945 - Japan's peace messages

Still, the messages from Togo to Sato, read by the U.S. at the time, clearly indicated that Japan was seeking to end the war:
July 11: "make clear to Russia... We have no intention of annexing or taking possession of the areas which we have been occupying as a result of the war; we hope to terminate the war".
July 12: "it is His Majesty's heart's desire to see the swift termination of the war".
July 13: "I sent Ando, Director of the Bureau of Political Affairs to communicate to the [Soviet] Ambassador that His Majesty desired to dispatch Prince Konoye as special envoy, carrying with him the personal letter of His Majesty stating the Imperial wish to end the war" (for above items, see: U.S. Dept. of State, Potsdam 1, pg. 873-879).
July 18: "Negotiations... necessary... for soliciting Russia's good offices in concluding the war and also in improving the basis for negotiations with England and America." (Magic-Diplomatic Summary, 7/18/45, Records of the National Security Agency, Magic Files, RG 457, Box 18, National Archives).
July 22: "Special Envoy Konoye's mission will be in obedience to the Imperial Will. He will request assistance in bringing about an end to the war through the good offices of the Soviet Government." The July 21st communication from Togo also noted that a conference between the Emperor's emissary, Prince Konoye, and the Soviet Union, was sought, in preparation for contacting the U.S. and Great Britain (Magic-Diplomatic Summary, 7/22/45, Records of the National Security Agency, Magic Files, RG 457, Box 18, National Archives).
July 25: "it is impossible to accept unconditional surrender under any circumstances, but we should like to communicate to the other party through appropriate channels that we have no objection to a peace based on the Atlantic Charter." (U.S. Dept. of State, Potsdam 2, pg. 1260 - 1261).
July 26: Japan's Ambassador to Moscow, Sato, to the Soviet Acting Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Lozovsky: "The aim of the Japanese Government with regard to Prince Konoye's mission is to enlist the good offices of the Soviet Government in order to end the war." (Magic-Diplomatic Summary, 7/26/45, Records of the National Security Agency, Magic Files, RG 457, Box 18, National Archives).

President Truman knew of the messages' content, noting, for instance, in his diary on July 18, "Stalin had told P.M. [Prime Minister Churchill] of telegram from Jap [sic] Emperor asking for peace" (Robert Ferrell, ed., Off the Record - the Private Papers of Harry S. Truman, pg. 53). In passing up this possible opportunity for an earlier and less deadly peace, Truman was not deliberately trying to prolong the war so the atomic bomb could be used on Japan to intimidate the Soviets. Briefly stated, it is likely that Truman believed the use of atomic bombs on Japan was necessary primarily for the reasons he always gave: "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" (Public Papers of the Presidents, Harry S. Truman, 1945, pg. 212). (For the most thorough exposition of the view that the atomic bombs were dropped on Japan primarily for their effect on the Soviet Union, see Gar Alperovitz, The Decision To Use the Atomic Bomb. Due to its many sources of documentation, this book will be of interest whether one shares Alperovitz' views or not).

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