HIROSHIMA:
WAS IT NECESSARY?

Part 2 of 2
By Doug Long

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Objections to letting Japan keep the Emperor

There were various factors that might have made offering retention of the Emperor a difficult
choice for Truman. It was believed by some that such a concession would embolden Japan to
fight on. This argument, however, rings hollow, for it was all too obvious that the Japanese were
fighting on anyway. In regard to American public opinion, it was well known to Truman that
unconditional surrender was a popular, albeit vague, idea. For many people, this included
punishment of the Emperor. Making an exception in the unconditional surrender to allow Japan
to retain their Emperor would have been politically incorrect for the time (and in view of the
Smithsonian Enola Gay exhibit controversy, for the current time as well). In August of 1945 both
Truman and his primary foreign policy adviser, Sec. of State James Byrnes, expressed concern
over publicly appearing soft on Japan (John Blum, ed., The Price of Vision - The Diary of Henry
A. Wallace, 1942-1946, pg. 474; David Robertson, Sly and Able - A Political Biography of James
F. Byrnes, pg. 435).

But in spite of the U.S. emphasis that the surrender must be unconditional, the Potsdam
Proclamation included in its unconditional surrender terms the condition that the Japanese
would be allowed to establish their own government. Perhaps the Proclamation could have gone a
step further and stated clearly, as Sec. of War Stimson suggested, that the Japanese could retain
the throne. In the end, after atomic bombs were detonated on the people of two cities, the
Emperor was allowed to remain, anyway.

It is sometimes argued that an unconditional surrender was absolutely necessary for the purpose
of keeping allies Great Britain and the Soviet Union committed to participation in the Pacific war.
But Churchill had reservations about requiring Japan's surrender to be unconditional. He stated
them to Truman on July 18, 1945: "I dwelt upon the tremendous cost in American and to a smaller
extent in British life if we enforced 'unconditional surrender' upon the Japanese." Churchill came
away from his conversation with Truman believing "there would be no rigid insistence upon
'unconditional surrender" (Winston Churchill, Triumph and Tragedy, paperback edition, pg. 547-
548). The Soviets favored unconditional surrender because they felt it would
prolong the war, enabling them to advance their troops further into conquered
territory. But any desire the West had for Soviet participation in the Pacific war was lukewarm at best after July 21st, when President Truman received the full report of the successful atomic bomb test of July 16. Moreover, the U.S. did not even consult with the Soviets on the Potsdam Proclamation, which contained the proposed terms of surrender, before sending it out.

Not surprisingly, the Soviets were angered by this (James Byrnes, Speaking Frankly, pg. 207). And on August 10th, Truman told his cabinet he was prepared to accept Japan's surrender without Soviet agreement (Blum, pg. 473-474).

Military rather than Diplomatic approach

A point made by then Assistant Sec. of War John McCloy and seconded by the then Deputy Director of the Office of Naval Intelligence, Captain Ellis Zacharias is of particular importance. Regarding the decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan, McCloy later wrote, "everyone was so intent on winning the war by military means that the introduction of political considerations was almost accidental" (John McCloy, The Challenge to American Foreign Policy, pg. 42, my emphasis). Zacharias lamented, "while Allied leaders were immediately inclined to support all innovations however bold and novel in the strictly military sphere, they frowned upon similar innovations in the sphere of diplomatic and psychological warfare" (Ellis Zacharias, The A-Bomb Was Not Needed, United Nations World, Aug. 1949, pg. 29). Defeating Japan was perceived of by the Allies in the narrow terms of military methods. The Japanese messages intercepted by the U.S. in July showed the Japanese government's view toward the war had changed. However, the U.S. didn't keep up with this change, and the advantage of combining diplomatic methods with military methods was largely missed.

The reason for the emphasis on military solutions, as opposed to diplomatic efforts, may lie in the emotionalism and the desire for revenge that accompanies war. Many found the revenge satisfying, regardless of the loss of additional American lives spent to achieve it.

Truman reflected this feeling in a radio broadcast to the public on the night of Aug. 9, after an atomic bomb had been exploded upon the Nagasaki populace: "Having found the bomb we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of warfare" (Public Papers of the President, 1945, pg. 212). However, the vast majority of the people killed and injured by the atomic blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki did not fall into those categories.

From a purely emotional standpoint, the desire for revenge is understandable in a wartime situation. But from the standpoint of finding the least deadly way to bring the enemy's surrender and save the lives of one's own military personnel, emotionalism may divert leaders from considering diplomatic solutions by making military/punitive measures seem more attractive and necessary. This may have contributed to Truman's belief that Japan would not surrender without a
large-scale invasion of her mainland and/or atomic bombings.

The Emperor stays

Ultimately, Japan was allowed to keep her Emperor. But the Emperor's retention was not established with complete explicitness at the time of Japan's surrender. Two main factors helped Japan's doves resolve the issue:

- The atomic bomb had shown the doves that they had run out of time and that further delay would result in the Emperor's demise.

- While the Allied surrender terms did not explicitly guarantee the Emperor's retention, neither did they refuse the request made by Japan to the Allies on August 10, 1945 to keep the Emperor.

Moreover, the August 11, 1945 Allied response referred to the Emperor's "continuing" role in Japanese government: "the authority of the Emperor and the Japanese Government to rule the state shall be subject to the Supreme Commander of the Allied powers" (Butow, pg. 245). Sec. of War Stimson later explained, "the Allied reply... implicitly recognized the Emperor's position by prescribing that his power must be subject to the orders of the Allied supreme commander" (Stimson & Bundy, pg. 627).

The Japanese government correctly interpreted this and other statements in the Allied surrender terms to mean that the Emperor could be retained. On August 14 the Emperor told Japan's cabinet, "I have studied the Allied reply and concluded that it virtually acknowledges the position of our note [requesting the Emperor's retention] sent a few days ago. I find it quite acceptable." (Toland, pg. 936-937). With this reassurance and at the Emperor's "desire", on August 14 the Japanese Cabinet unanimously signed the surrender document, agreeing to Allied terms (Toland, pg. 939).

Altho the Japanese military still wished to fight on as late as August 14, it was the doves rather than the hawks in Japan's government who had the final say. As mentioned earlier, it was the atomic bomb plus the belief that the Emperor might be retained that finally led the doves to play their trump card: the direct intervention of the Emperor requesting the Cabinet to surrender immediately.

Were Atomic Attacks Necessary?

But was the use of atomic bombs on Japanese cities necessary to bring Japan's doves to play the Emperor card? The Japanese doves had been working to end the war on the condition of retention of the throne (Butow, pg. 141) before the a-bombs that killed over 200,000 people were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (The Committee For the Compilation of Materials on Damage Caused by the Atomic Bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, *Hiroshima and Nagasaki: The Physical, Medical, and Social Effects of the Atomic Bombings*, pg. 113-114).
Might the war have been ended sooner, with fewer deaths on both sides, before the Soviets had gotten into northern Korea (thus possibly avoiding the Korean War), before the atomic bombing of Hiroshima frightened the Soviets into putting their atomic bomb program into high gear (David Holloway, *Stalin and the Bomb*, pg. 127-129, 132), and before an atomic precedent had been set? While there can be no conclusive answer to this question, it is worthwhile to study this topic for whatever insight it may give for future decision-making and the future saving of lives on all sides.

Historian and former Naval officer Martin Sherwin has summarized the situation, stating, "The choice in the summer of 1945 was not between a conventional invasion or a nuclear war. It was a choice between various forms of diplomacy and warfare." (Sherwin, pg. xxiv).

Long-time historian of the atomic bombings Barton Bernstein has taken a cautious view of what might have been: "Taken together, some of these alternatives [to dropping atomic bombs on Japan] - promising to retain the Japanese monarchy, awaiting the Soviets' entry, and even more conventional bombing - very probably could have ended the war before the dreaded invasion [of the Japanese mainland by the Allies]. Still, the evidence - to borrow a phrase from F.D.R. - is somewhat 'iffy', and no one who looks at the intransigence of the Japanese militarists should have full confidence in those other strategies. But we may well regret that these alternatives were not pursued and that there was not an effort to avoid the use of the first A-bomb - and certainly the second." (Barton Bernstein, *The Atomic Bombings Reconsidered*, Foreign Affairs, Jan./Feb. 1995, pg. 150).

Echoing the concern of Assistant Sec. of War John McCloy and Deputy Director of the Office of Naval Intelligence Captain Ellis Zacharias that the Allies became overly dependent on military means, Leon Sigal writes, "At worst, withholding force might have prolonged the war for a while at a time when little combat was taking place; it would not have altered the final result. Yet restraint could have significantly reduced the gratuitous suffering on both sides, especially for noncombatants." Sigal concludes, "it could be argued that the United States behaved as if the objective of inducing Japan to surrender was subordinated to another objective - in Stimson's words, that of exerting 'maximum force with maximum speed.' American policy was guided by an implicit assumption that only the escalation of military pressure could bring the war to a rapid conclusion." (Sigal, pg. 219).

Regarding claims that the atomic bombings saved lives, Gar Alperovitz has noted, "It has been argued in this connection that using the atomic bomb was less costly in human life than the continuation of conventional bombing would have been. Apart from the fact that accounts which urge such a view commonly leave aside questions concerning [modifying the unconditional] surrender formula and the impact of the Russian attack, by early August 1945 very few significant Japanese civilian targets remained to be bombed. Moreover, on July 25 a new targeting directive had been issued which altered bombing priorities." "Attacks on urban centers became only the fourth priority, after railway targets, aircraft production, and ammunition depots." "...the new directive (as the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey noted) 'was about to be implemented when the war ended.'" (Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision To Use the Atomic Bomb*, pg. 342).
It didn't take long after the atomic bombings for questions to arise as to their necessity for ending the war and Japan's threat to peace. One of the earliest dissents came from a panel that had been requested by President Truman to study the Pacific war. Their report, *The United States Strategic Bombing Survey*, was issued in July 1946. It declared, "Based on a detailed investigation of all the facts and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved, it is the Survey's opinion that certainly prior to 31 December 1945 and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated." (Bernstein, ed., *The Atomic Bomb*, pg. 52-56).

In 1948 Sec. of War Henry Stimson published his memoirs, ghost-written by McGeorge Bundy. In them Stimson revealed, "It is possible, in the light of the final surrender, that a clearer and earlier exposition of American willingness to retain the Emperor would have produced an earlier ending to the war". Stimson and Bundy continued, "Only on the question of the Emperor did Stimson take, in 1945, a conciliatory view; only on this question did he later believe that history might find that the United States, by its delay in stating its position, had prolonged the war." (Stimson & Bundy, pg. 628-629).

Robert Butow has affirmed Stimson's position: "Secretary of War Stimson has raised the question of whether an earlier surrender of Japan could have been achieved had the United States followed a different diplomatic and military policy during the closing months of the war. In the light of available evidence, a final answer in the affirmative seems possible, even probable." Butow continues, "Although it cannot be proved, it is possible that the Japanese government would have accepted the Potsdam Proclamation immediately had Secretary Stimson's reference to the imperial structure been retained. Such a declaration, while promising destruction if Japan resisted, would have offered hope if she surrendered. This was precisely Stimson's intention." Butow adds, "The Japanese military... interpreted the omission of any commitment on the Throne as evidence of the Allied intention to destroy forever the foundation stone of the Japanese nation. Here was an invaluable trump card unintentionally given them by the Allies, and the militarists played it with unfailing skill." (Butow, pg. 140-141).

Martin Sherwin has also followed up on Stimson's observation: "That unconditional surrender remained an obstacle to peace in the wake of Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and the Soviet declaration of war - until the government of the United States offered the necessary (albeit veiled) assurance that neither Emperor nor throne would be destroyed - suggests the possibility, which even Stimson later recognized, that neither bomb may have been necessary; and certainly that the second one was not." (Sherwin, pg. 237, emphasis in original). As noted earlier, Stimson explained, "the Allied reply [to Japan's 8/10 surrender offer]... implicitly recognized the Emperor's position" (Stimson & Bundy, pg. 627).

In regard to the U.S. knowledge at the time of Japan's effort to end the war, Butow writes: "the fact is there was at least something of an opportunity here, or perhaps a gamble, which might have yielded startling results had it not been ignored. Although this criticism may be the product of too much hindsight, it is difficult to explain why the Togo-Sato intercepted messages did not at least
produce a logical revision of the then current draft of the Potsdam Proclamation to include some guarantee - even a qualified one - with respect to the preservation of Japan's imperial system." (Butow, pg. 135).

From information contained in the Togo-Sato dispatches, the U.S. knew that Japan wished to send to Russia "Prince Konoye as special envoy, carrying with him the personal letter of His Majesty stating the Imperial wish to end the war" (7/13/45 message from Togo to Sato; U.S. Dept. of State, Potsdam 1, pg. 879). Here may have been another opportunity to bring the war to an earlier end, with lives saved on both sides. Butow notes, "Had Prince Konoye, as the fully 

empowered personal representative of the Emperor of Japan, been permitted to travel to Moscow (or anywhere else, for that matter) and had he there been handed the text of this [Potsdam] proclamation prior to its release to the world at large, he conceivably could have resolved speedily the very issues which government leaders in Tokyo spent the next three weeks in debating without result. Had the Allies given the prince a week of grace in which to obtain his government's support for acceptance, the war might have ended toward the latter part of July or the very beginning of August, without the atomic bomb and without Soviet participation in the conflict. Although Stalin's price for co-operation might have been equal to what he had already been promised at Yalta, the Western Allies might at least have been spared the added burden of subsequently having the Yalta concessions flagrantly augmented many-fold by hostile Soviet action in Manchuria and Korea." (Butow, pg. 135).

Use Both Carrot and Stick

The full weight of both carrot and stick could have been spelled out to Konoye in private: an opportunity to retain the throne in return for a quick surrender versus the alternative of Soviet invasion and atomic destruction. Allowing retention of the throne, the threat of Soviet invasion, and the threat of atomic attack were the three most powerful inducements for Japan to surrender. None of the three were mentioned in the Potsdam Proclamation, nor were they used to try to bring surrender before an atomic bomb was exploded upon the people of Hiroshima. Weren't our troops, not to mention hundreds of thousands of Japanese lives, worth this effort to end the war sooner?

Butow adds, "Had anyone thought of pursuing the Konoye feeler in preference to displaying America's atomic achievement and in preference to seeking a belated Soviet entry into the conflict through Manchuria, Korea, and Sakhalin, an excellent avenue of approach existed in Switzerland where the [Allen] Dulles organization [U.S. Office of Strategic Services] had been in touch with the Fujimura and Okamoto [Japanese peace feeler] groups for several months." (Butow, pg. 134).

Setting up surrender talks sanctioned by both the U.S. and the Japanese governments would likely have been difficult. But there is no easy way of ending a war. The primary question is not what is the easier path, but what path will bring a lasting peace while sparing the most Allied
lives and, secondarily, "enemy" civilian lives.

While it cannot be proven, had officially sanctioned communication been made by the Allies or the U.S. to Japan thru Konoye, the various peace feelers, or other credible diplomatic channel stating that Japan's time had completely run out due to the impending threats of nuclear destruction and Soviet invasion, and that immediate surrender would mean the opportunity to retain their throne, there is a good chance the Japanese doves would have enlisted the Emperor to bring Japan to surrender in late July or early August of 1945.

We could have informed the Japanese, as Sec. of War Stimson informed President Truman on April 25, 1945, that one atomic bomb "could destroy a whole city" (Stimson diary, 4/25/45), perhaps presenting evidence from the Trinity test. The knowledge that the Soviets were about to declare war upon them would have destroyed any hope Japan had of negotiating peace terms thru the Soviets, and the impending two front war would have disabused Japan's military leaders of their plan to mass their remaining forces against the anticipated U.S. invasion.

And ultimately we did allow Japan to retain their Emperor; as Truman biographer Robert Donovan described it, "accept a condition but call it unconditional surrender." (Robert Donovan, "Conflict and Crisis", pg. 99). As Truman wrote in his diary on August 10, 1945 regarding the Japanese request to keep the Emperor, "Our terms are 'unconditional'. They wanted to keep the Emperor. We told 'em we'd tell 'em how to keep him, but we'd make the terms." (Ferrell, pg. 61).

Atomic Bomb - the Last Resort

There is no way we can know for certain whether this approach would have ended the Pacific war sooner and with fewer deaths. But one may regret that such an attempt was not made. Had the attempt failed, the continuing blockade of supplies, Soviet invasion, and the atomic bombs were still available. However, anyone tempted to use the atomic bomb would have done well to share the hesitancy agreed upon by President Roosevelt and Great Britain Prime Minister Winston Churchill on September 19, 1944: the atomic bomb "might, perhaps, after mature consideration, be used against the Japanese" (Robert Williams and Philip Cantelon, ed., The American Atom, pg. 45). (School of Advanced Airpower Studies historian Robert Pape has written an intriguing paper stating that further conventional air bombing would have been unnecessary:


It is likely Dwight Eisenhower was right when he said of the atomic bombings of Japan, "it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing." (Ike on Ike, Newsweek, 11/11/63, pg. 108).

-Doug Long

For further thoughts on the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, click Random Ramblings.
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