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Exploring the 'moral' thesis of Hi

By Max Hastings

THE 60th anniversary of the dropping of the first atomic bomb falls a week today. The occasion will be marked by a torrent of prose from those who regard the destruction of Hiroshima and of Nagasaki three days later as "war crimes", forever attaching shame to those who ordered them. By contrast, there will be a plethora of dismissive comment from pundits who believe the nuclear assault saved a million allied casualties in 1945, by causing Japan to surrender without an invasion of its mainland.

Plentiful evidence is available to both schools. In the spring of 1945, Americans fighting in the Pacific were awed by the suicidal resistance they encountered. Hundreds of Japanese pilots, thousands of soldiers and civilians, immolated themselves, inflicting heavy US losses, rather than accept the logic of surrender.

It was well-known that the Japanese forces were preparing a similar sacrificial defence of their homeland. Allied planning for an invasion in the autumn of 1945 assumed hundreds of thousands of casualties. Allied soldiers — and prisoners — in the far east were profoundly grateful when the atomic bombs, in their eyes, saved their lives.

On the other side of the argument is the fact that in the summer of 1945 Japan's economy was collapsing. The US submarine blockade had strangled oil and raw-materials supply lines. Air attack had destroyed many factories, and 60 per cent of civilian housing. Some authoritative Washington analysts asserted that Japan's morale was cracking.

Intercepts of Japanese diplomatic cables revealed to Washington that Tokyo was soliciting Stalin's good offices to end the war. The Americans were also aware of the Soviets' imminent intention to invade Japanese-occupied China in overwhelming strength.

In short, the 2005 evidence demonstrates that Japan had no chance of sustaining effective resistance. If America's fleets had merely lingered offshore through autumn 1945, they could have watched the Japanese people, already desperately hungry, starve to death or perish beneath conventional bombing. Oddly enough, Soviet entry into the war on August 8 was more influential than the atomic explosions in convincing Japanese leaders that they must quit.

In some eyes, this adds up to a devastating indictment against President Harry Truman, who launched the most murderous weapon in history against a nation already doomed. How is it possible, in the light of such facts, for students like me to retain sympathy — enthusiasm is impossible — for Truman's decision?

The foremost answer is that much we now know was then uncertain. Amid their defeats in 1941-42, the allies had developed an exaggerated respect for their enemy's might. They did not comprehend in 1945 how close was Japan's industrial collapse.

Second, although Tokyo plainly wanted to escape from the war, its terms remained confused. There is little doubt that if Washington had explicitly promised that the emperor might retain his throne, Japan would have bowed. But so faltering and divided was Japan's leadership that the US still possessed grounds for real doubt about Tokyo's intentions. And why should Washington offer guarantees for Hirohito's future when he had been at least the figurehead for Japan's terrible deeds? Many Japanese generals bitterly opposed surrender even after the Soviet invasion, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was not that they deluded themselves that they could win. Rather, they preferred death to humiliation.

All wars brutalize all participants, but both sides in the Pacific had become exceptionally desensitized. The great war correspondent Ernie Pyle wrote shortly before his own death in combat: "In Europe we felt that our enemies, horrible and deadly as they were, were still people. But out here I soon gathered that the Japanese were looked upon as something subhuman and repulsive, the way people feel about cockroaches and mice."

Japan's occupation of China had cost 15 million Chinese lives. Civilians had been raped, tortured, enslaved and massacred, while British and US prisoners were subjected to hideous maltreatment. The Japanese had been waging biological warfare in China. Their notorious Unit 731 subjected hundreds of prisoners to vivisection. Many captured American airmen were beheaded. Some were eaten. A B-29 crew was dissected alive at a Japanese city hospital.

Americans, in their turn,

iroshima bombing

showed themselves reluctant to take prisoners. They subjected Japan's cities to the vast fire-bombing raids which began in March 1945, killing half a million people. Lawrence Freedman and Saki Dockrill, in a powerful analysis, argue that the nuclear assault must be perceived in the context of the deadly incendiary raids that preceded it: "Nobody involved in the decision on the atomic bombs could have seen themselves as setting new precedents for mass destruction in scale — only in efficiency." More people —100,000 — died in the March 9 Tokyo incendiary attack than at Hiroshima.

We may dismiss conspiracy theories that Hiroshima was a first shot in the cold war, designed to impress the Soviets. Rather, the use of a "total" weapon reflected the inexorable logic of total war. Amid a conflict in which 50 million people had already died, those who dispatched the Enola Gay viewed the judgment with gravity, but without the sense of uniqueness that posterity perceives as appropriate. Uncertainty persisted in August 1945 about whether the bombs would work.

This was one reason for Washington's reluctance to stage an offshore demonstration, though more potent was a desire to administer to the enemy a devastating shock, such as only city attacks were thought able to achieve.

The decision-makers were men who had grown accustomed to the necessity for cruel judgments. There was overwhelming technological momentum: a titanic effort had been made to create a weapon for which the allies saw themselves as competing with their foes.

After Hiroshima, General Leslie Groves, chief of the Manhattan Project, was almost the only man to succumb to triumphalism. He said: "We have spent $2bn on the greatest scientific gamble in history — we won." Having devoted such resources to the bomb, an extraordinary initiative would have been needed from Truman to arrest its employment.

Those who today find it easy to condemn the architects of Hiroshima sometimes seem to lack humility in recognizing the frailties of the decision-makers, mortal men grappling with dilemmas of a magnitude our own generation has been spared.

In August 1945, amid a world sick of death in the cause of defeating evil, allied lives seemed very precious, while the enemy appeared to value neither his own nor those of the innocent. Truman's Hiroshima judgment may seem wrong in the eyes of posterity, but it is easy to understand why it seemed right to most of his contemporaries.—*Dawn/The Guardian News Service.*

(The writer, author of Armageddon: The Battle for Germany 1944-45, is currently researching a study of the war against Japan)