

## Chapter 7

# The Decision to Drop the Bomb

On December 6, 1941 President Franklin Roosevelt met with a small group of scientists to convey an earth-shattering decision. He told them to proceed with experiments directed at making an atomic bomb. The next day Japanese planes all but sank the US Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbor. This act of aggression thrust the United States into a war with Japan and Germany. It also gave US scientists one more reason to make a bomb that could destroy an entire city in a single blast. The Manhattan Project, as the effort to make the atomic bomb was called, was placed under the direction of General Leslie Groves. This effort proceeded much as planned. Employing thousands of people the project cost \$2 billion, and was so secret that nobody even told Vice-President Harry Truman about it.

President Roosevelt died on April 12, 1945, shortly before scientists were ready to test the bomb. President Truman was informed of the plans to build the bomb after his first cabinet meeting. A few months later, he would have to make the controversial decision whether to use it.

### War Against Japan

Although President Roosevelt officially committed the United States to a “Germany first” policy, he decided that the first blow should fall upon Japan. Therefore, on April 18, 1942, Colonel James Doolittle led a squadron of sixteen B-25 bombers in a daring air raid on Tokyo. They took off from the aircraft carrier *USS Hornet*, bombed Tokyo in the full light of day, and landed in nationalist-controlled China.

Destroying little of military importance, the Doolittle raid did have two important results. It gave a needed boost to American morale. It also caused Japan to make a fateful change in strategy. Japanese officials had already planned to take New Guinea for use as an air base for attacks on Australia, and they were determined to seize the Solomon Island chain down to Fiji to cut U.S.-Australia sea routes. As a result of the raid, however, Japanese leaders decided to attack east as well. In an effort to prevent future air raids, they attempted to lure the remaining US carriers to destruction at Midway Island. Japan unwisely planned three separate operations at the same time, thereby limiting the forces Japan could commit to any one of them. The 1942 division of Japan’s army strength, as we shall see, had fateful consequences for all three offensives.

### Three American Victories

In the first of the three significant battles, on May 4, 1942 an American fleet intercepted Japanese invaders heading for Port Moresby, New Guinea. Over four days, more than 250 aircraft bombed, strafed, and torpedoed their targets. The Port Moresby battle was the first naval engagement in history during which opposing fleets never caught sight of one another. At the Battle of the Coral Sea, the US and Japanese fleets suffered roughly equal losses. The United States prevented the Japanese invasion of New Guinea, however, and the US was much faster than Japan at repairing damaged ships and building new ones.

In June 1942, Admiral Yamamoto, the architect of Pearl Harbor, set in motion a plan to trap and destroy the remaining US carriers at Midway. Yamamoto’s plan was to send one naval force to pretend to invade the Aleutian Islands, and then to stage an air raid on Midway. Yamamoto hoped to cause the US

carriers to steam to the rescue of the Midway garrison, leaving behind slower support ships. At Midway, the American carriers would then be ambushed by a third Japanese fleet of battleships. Outnumbering the Americans, Yamamoto expected to blast the American fleet out of the water.

Unfortunately for the Japanese, US Admiral Nimitz had access to decoded Japanese messages and was not fooled by Yamamoto. Consequently, he sent all available US carriers, including the *Yorktown*, to await the Japanese at Midway. He planned to destroy the Japanese decoy carriers before Yamamoto's main battle force arrived. On June 4, US torpedo bombers located the Japanese carriers at Midway. Planes and guns protecting the Japanese carriers were trained at the low-flying US torpedo planes, luck intervened. squadron of US bombers caught sight of the Japanese carriers and swooped down unopposed from 19,000 feet. In five fiery minutes they sank three of the four enemy carriers and their planes which were being refueled. (The fourth carrier was found and sunk later the next day.) The Japanese navy had temporarily lost its sword arm.

After a crushing defeat at Midway, the Japanese desperately needed to regain the upper hand. Although the struggle for the Solomon Islands, northeast of Australia, lasted seven months, its result was no less destructive. In August 1942, US marines landed on Guadalcanal in the Solomons to prevent Japanese occupiers from building an airfield. If completed, the airfield could have been used to launch attacks against the US and Australian shipping. The 12,000 marines drove the Japanese into the jungles around the airstrip which the marines called Henderson Field. This maneuver led to a major land, air, and sea struggle. Time after time, the Japanese ferried invasion forces down the narrow waters between the two chains of the Solomons to attack Guadalcanal. Each time, they were beaten back by US ships, planes, and troops. Finally, on February 7, 1943, the Imperial Navy admitted defeat and pulled out the last of the Japanese Guadalcanal defenders. Japanese naval, aircraft as well as troop losses had been larger than those of the United States and far more difficult to replace. The tide in the Pacific had definitely turned in favor of the United States.

## **Offensive in the Pacific**

With Japan on the defensive, US planners decided to adopt a two-pronged strategy for the American offensive. General MacArthur would command the land attack on the Japanese Home Islands from the southwest. He would come by way of New Guinea and the Philippines. This strategy would allow him to keep the "I shall return" promise, given when he was ordered to leave the Philippines early in 1942, and to rescue the Americans left behind who were captured, imprisoned, and grossly mistreated by the Japanese. Meanwhile, Admiral Nimitz would oversee a naval advance on Japan from the east through the open waters of the Central Pacific. Here the United States could exploit its growing fleet of fast carriers to support amphibious (sea-land) troop attacks. Americans evolved a tactic to defeat Japan's system of interlocking navy and air bases. The United States would simply "leapfrog" around strongly held enemy islands. The bypassed base would thereby be cut off from its source of supplies and left to "wither on the vine." In this way American forces were able to advance on two fronts. Meanwhile, a US submarine blockade and aerial bombardment of the Home Islands reduced the Japanese ability to wage war.

# Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

In October 1944, American forces began to drive the Japanese out of the Philippines. There they found that US prisoners left behind in the 1942 defeat had been grossly mistreated by their Japanese jailers. In February 1945, US Marines landed in Iwo Jima. The US needed Iwo Jima, 750 miles from Tokyo, as a refueling airfield for bomber raids on Japan. In the bloody battle that followed, nearly all of the Japanese defenders chose to fight to the death rather than surrender; the only prisoners taken were soldiers too



**Marines raising flag at Iwo Jima  
February 23, 1945**

weak to fight or commit suicide. Twenty-thousand US Marines were killed or wounded in trying to dislodge the stubborn enemy from their underground bunkers. The US victory at Iwo Jima was commemorated by the magnificent photograph of US Marines raising the American flag over the island.

On April 1, US Marines and Army units stormed ashore on Okinawa, the last of a series of stepping-stones to Japan. It took three months for the US to conquer this island. While the Japanese fought for every foot of Okinawa, the United States sank what was left of the Japanese navy. Over 280 US ships were damaged or sunk, however, in air raids. The most effective weapons the Japanese used were 3,500 planes loaded with explosives and captained by suicide (*Kamikaze*) pilots.

High-altitude bombing of Japan began in November 1944. Missions were flown at night in order to assure the safety of the bombers. Because of the distance and the darkness, these raids were not very successful. Then in May 1945, General Curtis LeMay changed the whole nature of air raids against Japan. Without bothering to get permission from his superiors, he ordered his bomber crews to fly their missions by night and close to the ground. Attacking with incendiary (fire-producing) bombs, this first low-level raid burned 16 square miles of Tokyo. It killed 88,000 and left 250,000 homeless. US Army Air Corps generals in Washington were pleased with the results of this raid and made plans for more to come. Eventually, US air raids destroyed forty percent of the built up area of 66 Japanese cities.

## Defense of the Homeland

After Okinawa, the Japanese prepared to defend their homeland. Japanese planners lacked sufficient planes to prevent bombing raids, adequate ships to intercept an invasion fleet, and enough soldiers to defeat the Americans once they landed. Nevertheless, they designed a defense plan with three stages:

1. 4,000 Japanese *Kamikaze* pilots would deliberately fly planes loaded with explosives directly into US invasion ships.
2. A wall of gunfire would mow down the invaders as they landed.
3. Human wave attacks would drive surviving Americans into the sea.

## Conditions in Japan

Japanese leaders who made plans for fighting off US forces knew little about how the average Japanese stayed alive from day to day. Incendiary bomb raids such as the one on Tokyo had destroyed most Japanese cities. Civilians who survived spent night after sleepless night in crowded air raid shelters.

# Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

The Japanese population suffered from shortages of rice and other food. Even the potatoes planted to improve their meager diet were to make aviation gasoline.

To bolster their armed force, the Japanese drafted 15-year-old boys; these teenagers served in local defense units with men old enough to be their grandfathers. Only one in ten soldiers had a gun, and many of these weapons were of an ancient, muzzle-loading design. Civilians were asked to cut bamboo and fashion spears to attack heavily-armed US invaders. Weakened by hunger, these boys and old men could barely knock over straw puppets when they trained with their sharpened bamboo poles.

Japan's economic life was grinding to a halt in the spring of 1945. Japan lacked coal and iron as well as any reliable means of transportation. Production of ships and planes practically ceased altogether. The aircraft that the Home Islands possessed were no match for superior American fighters, and Japanese airfields were often virtually unprotected from American bombers.

Japan depended completely on the outside world for the food, raw materials, and fuel needed to continue the war and feed its population. The US Navy had all but blockaded Japan, sealing it off from sources of supplies. Meanwhile, five million Japanese soldiers in other parts of Asia had no way of returning to defend the Home Islands.

## **The Movement to End the War**

Many Japanese citizens must have suspected that their country had little chance in the face of the coming American invasion. Even the most peace-loving, however, did not dare to speak out against the war. Spies and informers reported defeatist talk to the authorities. In the highest circles of government, no one openly argued that Japan ought to accept the Allied demand for unconditional surrender. Assassinations had long been used by those in power against political opponents and had succeeded in silencing them.

Still, there were many high-ranking opponents of the war. They had a strong sponsor in Emperor Hirohito. Although removed from the day-to-day decision-making process of government, the Emperor was able to work behind the scenes. Through court officials, he was able to investigate the true state of Japan's war effort. After consulting privately with a group of former prime ministers, the Emperor became convinced that he himself had to intervene to end the Japanese people's unnecessary suffering.

The Emperor used his court and political privileges to help develop a peace plan. The peace faction would talk with diplomats from the neutral USSR. Perhaps the USSR could be persuaded to enter the war on Japan's side. If that failed, the Soviets could be asked to arrange an honorable peace with the United States on some other terms than unconditional surrender.

## **Arguments About Using the Bomb**

Not all the scientists who assisted in making the atomic bomb wanted to see it used. The faction opposed to dropping the bomb on a Japanese city was led by two scientists, James Franck and Leo Szilard. At the time they joined the Manhattan Project, Franck and Szilard thought the Germans were working on a similar project and might be the first to devise a workable atomic bomb. The German attempt to produce nuclear weapons failed completely. What was left of this effort fell into Allied hands in May 1945 with Germany's surrender.

As President Harry Truman began the process of deciding whether to use the bomb against Japan, he appointed an Interim Committee to advise him. It was made up of various military officers, scientists, and state department officials connected with the project. Almost from the beginning, committee

members seemed to lean toward using the bomb against a Japanese city. They argued that large civilian casualties were already being produced by conventional air raids. Voter war-weariness, bloodshed from an anticipated Japan invasion (official estimates were for 500,000 US casualties), and potential post-war problems with the Soviets were also mentioned as reasons to drop the bomb on a Japanese city.

Franck and Szilard issued their own report ahead of the Interim Committee. It read in part:

*The military advantages and savings of American lives achieved by the sudden use of atomic bombs against Japan may be outweighed by the ensuing loss of confidence [in the United States] and by a wave of repulsion sweeping over the rest of the world.*

*From this point of view, a demonstration of the new weapon might best be made before the eyes of representatives of all the United Nations, on the desert or on a barren [uninhabited] island. The best possible atmosphere for achieving an international agreement could be achieved if America could say to the world, "You see what sort of weapon we had but did not use. We were ready to renounce its use in the future if other nations join us in this renunciation and agree to put nuclear weapons under efficient international control." <sup>13</sup>*

Other reasons for opposing the use of the bomb were stated by Ralph Beard, Undersecretary of the Navy:

*During recent weeks I have had the feeling that the Japanese government may be searching for an opportunity that they could use as an excuse to surrender. Emissaries from the US could meet with representatives from Japan on the coast of China and tell them of Russia's position [on getting territory in Asia] and information concerning the proposed use of atomic weapons, together with assurance the President might care to make with regard to the Emperor of Japan and the treatment of the Japanese nation following unconditional surrender. It seems quite possible to me that this represents the opportunity [to arrange for the terms of an honorable surrender] which the Japanese are looking for. The only way to find out is to try it out. <sup>14</sup>*

A panel of scientists appointed by the Interim Committee disagreed with Franck and Szilard. They dismissed the effectiveness of a harmless demonstration of an atomic explosion, especially considering the limited supply of bombs. They argued that military use of the bomb was necessary not only to save the lives of American troops: the sheer frightfulness of its results might knock Japan out of this war and prevent future wars as well. They concluded:

*we can propose no technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war; we see no acceptable alternative to direct military use. <sup>15</sup>*

The Interim Committee advised President Truman to use the bomb against Japan as soon as possible on a target that was both military and civilian without issuing a prior warning of the nature of

---

<sup>13</sup> James Frank et al. "A Report to the Secretary of War," quoted in Morton Grodzins and Eugene Rabinowitch, eds., *The Atomic Age* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), p. 24.

<sup>14</sup> Truman Did Not Understand," *US News and World Report* (August 15, 1960), p. 74.

<sup>15</sup> Henry L. Stimson, *The Decision to Use the Bomb*, in Grodzins and Rabinowitch, op. cit., p. 35.

the explosive power of this new weapon. Some of the arguments supporting this decision were later reviewed by the Chairman of the Committee, Henry L. Stimson:

*As we understood it in July, there was a very strong possibility that the Japanese government might determine upon resistance to the end, in all the areas of the Far East under its control. In such an event the Allies would be faced with the enormous task of destroying an armed force of 5 million men and 5 thousand suicide (Kamikaze) aircraft, belonging to a race which had already demonstrated its ability to fight to the death.*

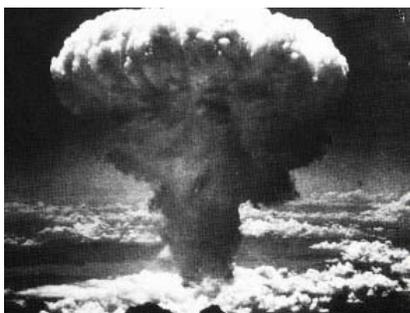
*I felt to extract a genuine surrender from the Emperor and his military advisors, they must be administered a tremendous shock which could carry convincing proof of our power to destroy the Empire. Such an effective shock could save many times the lives, both American and Japanese, that it would cost.*

*Nothing would have been more damaging to our effort to obtain surrender than a warning or a demonstration followed by a dud [bomb that would not go off] - this was a real possibility. Furthermore, we had no bombs to waste. It was vital that a sufficient effect be quickly obtained with the few we had.<sup>16</sup>*

## Japan Seeks a Negotiated End to the War

While American decision-makers were debating, the movement for peace at the highest level of the Japanese government was growing stronger. Japan's Supreme Council was called by the Emperor himself, an event that had never occurred before. The Council decided to seek Soviet help in arranging a negotiated peace. On the day in June that Okinawa fell, the Emperor appointed Prince Konoye, his favorite cousin, to negotiate with the Soviets. However, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov was too busy preparing for the July Potsdam Conference to meet with Konoye. US leaders were aware of Japan's intention to seek a negotiated end of the war, since messages were monitored by US intelligence agents who wrote about these negotiations in their diaries.

## Time for a Decision



In Alamogordo, New Mexico, on July 16, 1945, the US began the Nuclear Age by exploding the first atomic bomb. Not long after its mushroom-shaped cloud rose over the New Mexico desert, President Truman faced an agonizing decision. Should he demand an unconditional surrender, making no specific reference to the nature of the atomic bomb, and use it on a military/civilian target if the Japanese refused to surrender without conditions? Or should he drop a demonstration bomb on some sparsely inhabited area and press for a negotiated surrender?

---

<sup>16</sup> Henry L. Stimson, op. cit., pp. 35-37.

# Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

## Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Identify or define and briefly tell the importance to this chapter of each of the following:

- |                      |                             |                        |        |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------|
| a. Manhattan Project | g. Iwo Jima and Okinawa     | l. Interim Committee's | and m. |
| b. Coral Sea         | h. 3 stage defense plan     | Stimson's arguments    |        |
| c. Midway            | i. potatoes                 | n. Frank's & Beard's   |        |
| d. Henderson Field   | j. blockade                 | arguments              |        |
| e. Leapfrogging      | k. 5 million men under arms | o. demonstration bomb  |        |
| f. General LeMay     |                             | p. Hirohito & Konoye   |        |

2. Prepare a position paper arguing either:

- a. that President Truman should order the use of an atomic bomb against a Japanese city if the Japanese refuse to surrender immediately without conditions, or
- b. that President Truman should order that a demonstration bomb be dropped on some uninhabited area and assure the Japanese that they could keep their emperor if they surrendered immediately, or
- c. that President Truman force Japan's surrender by using conventional warfare.

In your answer consider:

Whether the Japanese were likely to surrender if they knew the US had a weapon as powerful as the Atom bomb we dropped on Hiroshima .

Whether the US was under a moral obligation to prevent the loss of lives of Japanese civilians, particularly women and children.

How use of the bomb by the United States would effect other country's opinions of the US. and her future relations with the Soviet Union.