

CHOICES UNDER FIRE

MORAL DIMENSIONS OF
WORLD WAR II



Michael Bess

Also by Michael Bess

*The Light-Green Society:
Ecology and Technological Modernity in France, 1960-2000*

*Realism, Utopia, and the Mushroom Cloud:
Four Activist Intellectuals and Their Strategies for Peace, 1945-1989*



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Chapter Ten



THE DECISION TO DROP THE ATOMIC BOMB

Twelve Questions

If a man could write a book on Ethics which really was a book on Ethics, this book would, with an explosion, destroy all the other books in the world.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein¹

The American decision to drop the atomic bomb on Japan remains bitterly controversial even after all these years.² Was the United States right to use this powerful new weapon? Did American leaders make the proper choice? Or is it the case, as some have argued, that the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was an unjustifiable act—an atrocity that darkens the history of the United States with a stain that can never be washed away?

Herein lies the core issue underlying the discussion that follows. Since the subject is complicated, let us break it down into twelve basic questions:

1. Was it necessary to drop the bomb in order to get the Japanese to surrender?
2. Was this weapon qualitatively different from all the other weapons used during the war?
3. Did the use of the bomb speed up the Japanese surrender?
4. Were there plausible alternatives for achieving surrender without invading Japan or dropping the bomb?
5. Did the atomic bombing of Japan, by shortening the war, result in a net saving of lives?
6. Was the Nagasaki bomb necessary?

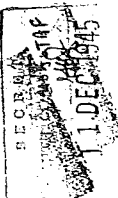


*Mr. Spitzer
delivered
by AFSPC
by AFSPC*

OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF STAFF
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.



25 July 1945



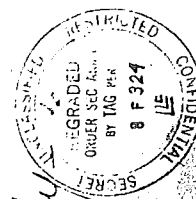
TO: General Carl Spaatz
Commanding General
United States Army Strategic Air Forces

1. The 509 Composite Group, 20th Air Force will deliver its first special bomb as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945 on one of the targets: Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata and Nagasaki. To carry military and civilian scientific personnel from the War Department to observe and record the effects of the explosion of the bomb, additional aircraft will accompany the airplane carrying the bomb. The observing planes will stay several miles distant from the point of impact of the bomb.

2. Additional bombs will be delivered on the above targets as soon as made ready by the project staff. Further instructions will be issued concerning targets other than those listed above.

3. Dissemination of any and all information concerning the use of the weapon against Japan is reserved to the Secretary of War and the President of the United States. No communiques on the subject or releases of information will be issued by commanders in the field without specific prior authority. Any news stories will be sent to the War Department for special clearance.

4. The foregoing directive is issued to you by direction and with the approval of the Secretary of War and of the Chief of Staff, USA. It is desired that you personally deliver one copy of this directive to General MacArthur and one copy to Admiral Nimitz for their information.



Thos Handy
THOS. T. HANDY
General, U.S.C.
Acting Chief of Staff



Letter from General Thomas T. Handy to General Carl Spaatz authorizing the dropping of the first atomic bomb (July 25, 1945).

Emperor Hirohito, clung tenaciously to one final possibility through July and early August 1945. While they acknowledged that they could not win this war, they still held out hope that, through a combination of diplomacy and indomitable resistance, they could compel the Allies to accept a negotiated peace settlement rather than unconditional surrender.

The terms of this settlement, in the eyes of the Japanese hard-liners who dominated national policy, would have to include the following:

- a guarantee that Hirohito could remain on the throne;
- no occupation of the Japanese home islands;
- the Japanese government would control the postwar demobilization process; and
- all trials of military and civilian leaders would be held by Japanese courts.

Since the Allies deemed such conditions completely unacceptable, the stage was set for the war to continue until either one side or the other proved willing to budge. However, it would be a distortion of history to portray the situation in the summer of 1945 as a clear and unambiguous confrontation between the Japanese and Allied governments over the possible terms of surrender. The reality during those months was far messier and more fluid than that: the military situation shifted daily; both governments had numerous factions urging different policies on their own leaders; communication between the Japanese and Americans remained indirect and sporadic; and neither side had any clear sense of precisely how the war could be brought to an acceptable end. The phrase "the fog of war"—the unavoidable confusion and conflicting pressures that often characterize decision-making in the heat of ongoing battle—applies with particular force to the decisions made by the Japanese and American governments during the summer of 1945.

2. *Was this weapon qualitatively different from all the other weapons used during the war?*

The number of persons killed in Hiroshima and Nagasaki will never be exactly known, because the atomic weapons destroyed not only a large number of the cities' inhabitants, but much of the governmental and record-keeping infrastructure that might be used in making such an assessment. Estimates vary widely. The low range of the spectrum is 70,000 dead in Hiroshima and 40,000 in Nagasaki; the high range, which includes deaths from radiation sickness and other bomb-related causes in the years following 1945, is 200,000 in Hiroshima and 140,000 in Nagasaki.

7. *Was there a plausible alternative for achieving surrender with a lower loss of life, by using the bomb differently than the United States actually did?*
8. *Did the United States drop the bomb to intimidate the Soviet Union?*
9. *Did U.S. leaders rush to drop the bomb, in the hope of bringing about Japanese surrender before the Soviets could enter the Pacific War?*
10. *Was the bomb used out of racism?*
11. *Did the use of this weapon violate the basic principles of a just war?*
12. *Was the dropping of the atomic bomb justified? How to judge the morality of this act?*

1. *Was it necessary to drop the bomb in order to get the Japanese to surrender?*

The answer to this question is clear. No, it was not necessary. The Allies were going to defeat Japan, with or without the bomb.

Some Manhattan Project scientists harbored real doubts about whether this complicated experimental machine—the bomb—would actually work as predicted. The United States government was by no means counting on the atomic bomb to win the Pacific War: by the summer of 1945, American leaders had a full-scale plan in place for the invasion of the Japanese home islands, and the assault fleets were already well on their way to a state of readiness.

The first phase of the planned invasion, code-named Operation Olympic, was set for November 1, 1945. It would involve a large amphibious assault, dwarfing even the D-Day operation of 1944 in France; the target would be the southernmost of the Japanese home islands, Kyushu. Once Kyushu had been seized by Allied forces, the plan called for this island to serve as a forward base for a second and definitive attack, code-named Coronet, scheduled for the spring of 1946. Coronet would entail a final push across the remainder of Japanese home territory, culminating in the imposition of terms on a prostrate nation sometime in 1946. The Allies had done this to Germany, and they were determined to do it to Japan as well.

The forces that the Allies could bring to bear in this effort so overwhelmingly outweighed those that the Japanese could muster in their own defense that any impartial observer in the summer of 1945 could clearly see Japan's defeat as inevitable. The problem lay in the fact that the Japanese government remained, perhaps not surprisingly, far from dispassionate on this issue. A majority of the Japanese Imperial Council, including

These unimaginable numbers are not qualitatively different from the atrocious tally of persons killed in other major aerial bombing raids of World War II: Tokyo (100,000 killed), Dresden (60,000 killed), Hamburg (45,000 killed). All totaled, the Allied bombing campaign over Germany killed between 300,000 and 600,000 civilians. The nonnuclear bombing of sixty-six major Japanese cities, in the first seven months of 1945, probably killed between 200,000 and 300,000 civilians (though some estimates range as high as 900,000).³

If we put ourselves in the place of the Allied leaders in 1945, we have to make the leap into a very different mental world from that of today. We have already seen, in chapter 5, how the Allies gradually came to adopt the Orwellian logic of strategic incendiary bombing, in which the killing of masses of noncombatants could be rationalized as morally acceptable and even as "merciful," since it hastened the war's end and the earliest possible cessation of the carnage. The wartime context, moreover, was unequivocally one of brutalization, dehumanization of the enemy, racism, and hatred—on all sides. To lose sight of this fact is to miss one of the key realities of the Second World War: though most of the war's major decisions were certainly built on logical analysis, no judgment was made in a detached rational vacuum. On all sides, the wartime leaders could not help but make their decisions as human beings, subject to such emotions as outrage, fear, bitterness, and the desire for revenge. This is not to suggest that most of what they did was primarily motivated by such emotions: it was not. But it does call attention to the broader human context within which all wartime policies were unavoidably being shaped. This was a time of hard, cold, often grimly brutal resolutions, in which the deaths of large numbers of human beings had become commonplace, and in which the more humane considerations that normally characterize peacetime decision-making necessarily took a back seat.

Seen in this light, how different was the atomic bomb from the conventional ordnance that had already torched so many cities of Germany and Japan? When one focuses on the effects of such bombing, an argument could be made that it was not all that different. Here is a description of the effects of the British incendiary raid on Hamburg of July 27, 1943, one of the major firestorms of the war:

[A fifteen-year-old girl:]

Mother wrapped me in wet sheets, kissed me, and said "Run!" I hesitated at the door. In front of me I could see only fire—everything red, like the

door to a furnace. An intense heat struck me. A burning beam fell in front of my feet. I shied back but, then, when I was ready to jump over it, it was whirled away by a ghostly hand. I ran out into the street. The sheets around me acted as sails and I had the feeling that I was being carried away by the storm.

[A nineteen-year-old man:]

I struggled to run against the wind in the middle of the street but could only reach a house on the corner. . . . We got to the Löschplatz all right but I couldn't go on across the Eiffelstrasse because the asphalt had melted. There were people on the roadway, some already dead, some still lying alive but stuck in the asphalt. They must have rushed onto the roadway without thinking. Their feet had got stuck and then they had put out their hands to try to get out again. They were on their hands and knees screaming.

[The next day:]

Four-story-high blocks of flats were like glowing mounds of stone right down to the basement. Everything seemed to have melted and pressed the bodies away in front of it. Women and children were so charred as to be unrecognizable; those that had died through lack of oxygen were half-charred and recognizable. Their brains had tumbled from their burst temples and their insides from the soft parts under the ribs. How terribly these people must have died. The smallest children lay like fried eels on the pavement.⁴

Forty-five thousand persons died in this manner in Hamburg on that night and the following day.

Sometimes, as we engage in the intellectual exercise of trying to understand the complexities of the war, we can become inured to the underlying realities. This psychological distancing from our subject no doubt reflects, in a small way, the manner in which the wartime leaders themselves gradually became calloused to the dreadful acts that were being perpetrated all around them, and that they themselves were perpetrating. As we analyze the wartime decisions, we catch ourselves, to our shock, tossing around numbers of dead human beings—ten thousand here, a hundred thousand there—almost as unfeelingly as the participants themselves. This tendency toward psychological numbing is understandable and perhaps unavoidable, but we need to resist it as vigorously as we can. We must keep reminding ourselves what it really means, in practice, to speak the words

"firestorm" or "Hiroshima." For hidden beneath the abstraction of the words—words grown customary from heavy use—lie the unimaginable cruelty and madness of what actually happened.

Here then is a glimpse of the reality under the word "Hiroshima." The excerpts are taken from Richard Rhodes's study *The Making of the Atomic Bomb*.

"Just as I looked up at the sky," remembers a girl who was five years old at the time and safely at home in the suburbs, "there was a flash of white light and the green in the plants looked in that light like the color of dry leaves."

[A series of official reports:]

Accompanying the flash of light was an instantaneous flash of heat. . . . Its duration was probably less than one tenth of a second and its intensity was sufficient to cause nearby flammable objects . . . to burst into flame and to char poles as far as 4,000 yards away from the hypocenter [i.e., the point on the ground directly below the fireball]. . . .

Because the heat in [the] flash comes in such a short time . . . there is no time for any cooling to take place, and the temperature of a person's skin can be raised [120 degrees Fahrenheit] . . . in the first millisecond at a distance of [2.3 miles].

Severe thermal burns of over grade 5 occurred within [0.6 to 1 mile] of the hypocenter . . . and those of grades 1 to 4 [occurred as far as 2 to 2.5 miles] from the hypocenter. . . . Extremely intense thermal energy leads not only to carbonization but also to evaporation of the viscerae.

People exposed within half a mile of the Little Boy fireball, that is, were seared to bundles of smoking black char in a fraction of a second as their internal organs boiled away.

At the same instant birds ignited in midair. Mosquitoes and flies, squirrels, family pets cracked and were gone. The fireball flashed an enormous photograph of the city at the instant of its immolation fixed on the mineral, vegetable and animal surfaces of the city itself. A spiral ladder left its shadow in unburned paint on the surface of a steel storage tank. Leaves shielded reverse silhouettes on charred telephone poles.

A human being left the memorial of his outline in unspalled granite on the steps of a bank. Another, pulling a handcart, protected a handcart- and human-shaped surface of asphalt from boiling.

[A junior college girl:]

The vicinity was in pitch darkness; from the depths of the gloom, bright red flames rise crackling, and spread moment by moment. The faces of my friends who just before were working energetically are now burned and blistered, their clothes torn to rags; to what shall I liken their trembling appearance as they stagger about? Our teacher is holding her students close to her like a mother hen protecting her chicks, and like baby chicks paralyzed with terror, the students were thrusting their heads under her arms.

[Yoko Ota, the writer:]

I just could not understand why our surroundings had changed so greatly in one instant. . . . I thought it might have been something which had nothing to do with the war, the collapse of the earth which it was said would take place at the end of the world.

[A medical doctor, Michihiko Hachiya, and his wife:]

The shortest path to the street lay through the house next door so through the house we went—running, stumbling, falling, and then running again until in headlong flight we tripped over something and fell sprawling into the street. Getting to my feet, I discovered that I had tripped over a man's head.

"Excuse me! Excuse me, please!" I cried hysterically.

[A young woman:]

I heard a girl's voice clearly from behind a tree. "Help me, please." Her back was completely burned and the skin peeled off and was hanging down from her hips.

[One of Dr. Hachiya's visitors:]

There were so many burned [at a first-aid station] that the odor was like drying squid. They looked like boiled octopuses. . . . I saw a man whose eye had been torn out by an injury, and there he stood with his eye resting in the palm of his hand. What made my blood run cold was that it looked like the eye was staring at me.

There was a man, stone dead, sitting on his bicycle as it leaned against a bridge railing. . . . You could tell that many had gone down to the river to get a drink of water and had died there where they lay. I saw a few live people still in the water, knocking against the dead as they floated down the river. There must have been hundreds and thousands who fled to the river to escape the fire and then drowned.

[A history professor:]

I climbed Hikiyama Hill and looked down. I saw that Hiroshima had disappeared. . . . I was shocked by the sight. . . . What I felt then and still feel now I just can't explain with words. Of course I saw many dreadful scenes after that—but that experience, looking down and finding nothing left of Hiroshima—was so shocking that I simply can't express what I felt. . . . Hiroshima didn't exist—that was mainly what I saw—Hiroshima just didn't exist.

[Richard Rhodes concludes:]

Destroyed, that is, were not only men, women, and thousands of children but also restaurants and inns, laundries, theater groups, sports clubs, sewing clubs, boys' clubs, girls' clubs, love affairs, trees and gardens, grass, gates, gravestones, temples and shrines, family heirlooms, radios, classmates, books, courts of law, clothes, pets, groceries and markets, telephones, personal letters, automobiles, bicycles, horses—120 war-horses—musical instruments, medicines and medical equipment, life savings, eyeglasses, city records, sidewalks, family scrapbooks, monuments, engagements, marriages, employees, clocks and watches, public transportation, street signs, parents, works of art.

[The history professor who climbed Hikiyama Hill:]

Such a weapon has the power to make everything into nothing.⁵

From the perspective of the dead, perhaps, the difference between a fire-bombing and an atomic bombing is not very significant at all. Death is death. A German child lying "like a fried eel" on the pavement of Hamburg is not qualitatively different from a Japanese child lying "like a boiled octopus" in the first-aid station of Hiroshima. Nor, we should add, are these dead German and Japanese children qualitatively different from the broken body of a London child, killed by German rockets in 1944, or from the shattered form of a Shanghai child, killed by Japanese bombardment in 1937. In all these cases, a city's normal civilian life has been rapidly taken apart, and what remains are the dead, the maimed, the suffering beyond words, the wreckage of lives.

Nevertheless, there are two obvious differences. First, an atomic bomb goes on killing and maiming for years after it has been dropped. Unlike conventional explosives, it emits a powerful radioactive poison that insidiously, invisibly permeates the bodies of those who have survived the blast and heat from the initial detonation. Tens of thousands of Hiroshima's

inhabitants who lived beyond August 1945 developed mysterious illnesses that slowly ate away at them, bringing on a wretched, agonizing death that contemporary medicine proved powerless to prevent. These people, known in Japanese as *hibakusha*, suffered a double ordeal in the years following the war: they not only had to contend with the myriad ailments brought on by radiation exposure, but also faced widespread social ostracism, since it was unclear both to themselves and to others whether their bodies might succumb at any moment to a mysterious disease. To be a young man or woman from Hiroshima or Nagasaki in the 1950s meant a virtual impossibility of finding a spouse, because no one wanted to take on the risk of having children with someone whose genetic constitution might have been damaged by radiation. In this sense, then, the bomb constituted a weapon of a uniquely cruel nature—a device that not only killed and harmed indiscriminately in the short term, but also cut deeply into the future lives of those who had seemingly emerged unscathed.⁶

The second qualitative difference of atomic bombs was one that most wartime leaders clearly recognized at the time. Hamburg was destroyed by 787 Lancaster, Stirling, and Halifax bombers, flying in from Britain to drop 1,000 tons of high-explosive bombs and 1,300 tons of incendiary bombs in a steady procession over the city that lasted for more than an hour. Hiroshima was devastated by a solitary B-29 bomber, carrying a single 5-ton bomb. The attack was over in just a few minutes.

What would happen when, in a single nighttime raid, 787 B-29 bombers dropped 787 of these new weapons on the cities of some future enemy nation? Even if only a quarter of the planes got through to deliver their bombs, what would be left of the society on the ground? What would a nation look like, when its two hundred largest cities and towns had been reduced to so many Hiroshimas and Nagasakis? And all in a single night?

This weapon was not just a new and more powerful piece of ordnance. It was a destroyer of societies. Its power crossed a clear qualitative threshold, and opened up a new era of history. And Allied leaders knew it at the time.

Henry Stimson, the U.S. secretary of war during World War II, was seventy-eight years old in 1945. He had fought in France in the field artillery during the First World War, served as governor of the Philippines and secretary of state under Herbert Hoover. As Roosevelt's secretary of war, he had presided over the Manhattan Project from its inception, and he knew the nature of the weapon the United States was creating. Stimson was not normally a man who used grandiose language. Here is what he

wrote in his notes as he prepared for a secret top-level meeting in Washington to discuss the bomb on May 31, 1945 (a full six weeks before the device had even been tested):

Its size and character

We don't think it mere new weapon

Revolutionary discovery of relation of Man to universe

Great historical landmark, like gravitation, Copernican theory

But: bids fair to be infinitely greater, in respect to its effect on the ordinary affairs of man's life

May destroy or perfect international civilization

May be Frankenstein or means for world peace.⁷

Harry Truman, when interviewed after the war, claimed that he never lost a night's sleep over his decision to use the bomb against Japan. But his actions in the aftermath of Nagasaki are nonetheless revealing. On August 10, 1945, when his aides informed him of Japan's surrender offer, he immediately did two things. He directed that the strategic bombing of Japan continue, as a means of keeping pressure on the enemy until negotiations were finalized. And he ordered an immediate cessation of the atomic bombing. One member of his cabinet, Secretary of Commerce Henry Wallace, later described the president's decision: "The thought of wiping out another 100,000 people was too horrible. He didn't like the idea of killing 'all those kids.'"⁸

The historian Barton Bernstein notes the implicit significance of Truman's actions that day:

Unlike Stimson, who had earlier agonized about the mass bombing of cities, Truman neither before nor after Hiroshima and Nagasaki seemed worried about such mass killings by conventional means. But before the Hiroshima bombing, in what can only be interpreted as self-deception, he had managed not to know that the A-bombs would slay many noncombatants.⁹

Now the president could no longer "manage not to know." The potency of the atomic bomb shattered the wartime rationalization, however tenuous, through which the killing of civilians had been sanitized thus far—the portrayal of noncombatant casualties as unfortunate but unavoidable "collateral damage" inflicted on the enemy while seeking to hit only factories and military installations with precision bombing. Hiroshima erased that

fiction forever: it held up before Truman, in a way that could no longer be fudged or evaded, the true nature of modern warfare.

Today, of course, we know what grew out of that new weapon: the Cold War arms race, the nuclear balance of terror, the numbers of warheads in the tens of thousands. We know that the fear of this weapon may actually have contributed to stabilizing superpower relations during the tense years of standoff between the United States and the USSR. We know that it may actually have helped to avert a major war between great powers.

But we also know this: we came hair-raisingly close to unleashing the full fury of an intercontinental nuclear holocaust in the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. "At the end we lucked out," says Robert McNamara, U.S. secretary of defense during the Cuban crisis, in the 2004 documentary film *The Fog of War*: "It was luck that prevented nuclear war. Rational individuals came that close to total destruction of their societies."¹⁰ One week after the Cuban crisis had passed, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev wrote a letter to the American scientist Leo Szilard, referring in a tone of awe to the "devastating thermonuclear war" that had just been averted. "During those days," Khrushchev wrote, "the world was practically on the brink of such a war."¹¹

And the grandchildren of the World War II generation—German, Japanese, American, British, Russian, and all the others—must now grow up under the shadow of this very large question mark. For we know that if this weapon ever does get used again, on the scale that characterizes modern warfare, it holds the possibility for the kind of destruction that we cannot really imagine. The only word that comes to mind is one that melds together two existing words: ecology and genocide. To get: ecocide; the extermination of most forms of life on earth.

Having said this, however, we must be careful not to project backward onto the atomic bomb of 1945 all the imagery and knowledge that have come to be associated with it during the half-century that followed. The bomb, as it existed in 1945, was only *potentially* an ecocidal weapon, because just two specimens of such a device were available, and at most a dozen or so could be manufactured by the end of the year. The bombs that detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki released an explosive force equivalent to about 12,000 and 20,000 tons of TNT, respectively; the nuclear devices that were being built by the late 1950s positively dwarfed these weapons, releasing forces on the order of a million tons of TNT—a difference of two whole orders of magnitude.

Truman, Stimson, and the other 1945 leaders, both military and civilian,

could undoubtedly intuit where this new weapon was headed in the years to come; they could sense that they were opening a Pandora's box. But they did not at the time invest the bomb with all the fear and opprobrium with which most people tend to view it today. They did not have lingering in their minds, as we do today, the images of the blasted cityscape of Hiroshima, the faces of the disfigured survivors; they were not (with a few exceptions like the Manhattan Project scientist Leo Szilard) placing the bomb in the mental framework of an all-out nuclear war that leaves behind it nothing but a world of radioactive rubble.

The Anglo-American leaders regarded the bomb from a position of cautiously optimistic pragmatism. They did not know for sure whether it would work, nor were they aware of precisely how destructive it would be if it did work (though the Alamogordo test certainly offered an impressive preview). Above all, they believed they had good reason to hope that this new weapon in the American arsenal might add a decisive factor to the array of pressures being brought to bear against Japan—this already defeated enemy that was stubbornly refusing to surrender. The bomb could be made to appear to the Japanese as a weapon that the United States possessed in sufficient quantities to produce one Hamburg, one Dresden, one Tokyo, every few days or even more frequently—until capitulation. The fact that this kind of nuclear destruction was actually not available to the United States in August 1945, because the new bombs could only be produced with a frequency of one every few weeks—remained a closely guarded secret. For the Allied leaders of 1945, therefore, the bomb was definitely not something to be dreaded; it was not an ecocidal weapon or a destroyer of nations. It constituted a possible trump card in an already strong hand, a potentially pivotal factor in the ongoing psychological game of getting the Japanese to admit defeat and lay down their arms.

3. *Did the use of the bomb speed up the Japanese surrender?*

The answer to this question is an almost certain yes. Nuclear weaponry constituted one of two factors that tipped the balance in the Japanese leadership, finally compelling them to open serious negotiations for surrender. The other factor was the Soviet entry into the Pacific War, which took place on August 8, two days after the bombing of Hiroshima and the day before the bombing of Nagasaki.

The Anglo-Americans issued their final ultimatum to Japan from the conference at Potsdam, Germany, on July 26. In this document, known as the Potsdam Declaration, they were careful to fudge some important issues. On the one hand, they did not want to be perceived by their own populations as retreating from the principle of unconditional surrender.

On the other hand, they did want to give the Japanese enough hope for the future so that they would perceive surrender as being clearly more advantageous than fighting on to the bitter end. The Potsdam Declaration was designed to appeal to those factions in the Japanese leadership who might be leaning toward surrender: it offered extensive assurances to the Japanese people and their country in the postwar period; and at the same time, it stated that Japan would have to return to real democracy in its postwar government, and that war criminals would be tried and punished for any atrocities they had committed.

Most important, the Potsdam Declaration deliberately left a somewhat vague spot in its language: it did not say that the emperor would have to give up his position, nor did it say that the postwar government would have to be a republic. The Allies knew that a majority of Japanese regarded Hirohito as semi-divine, and would have endured almost any sacrifice rather than watch him be killed or forcibly removed from power. This aspect of the declaration had been the subject of intense debate within the American government during the preceding months. Some officials, like Undersecretary of State Joseph Grew, had argued that offering an explicit promise of Hirohito's continuation on the throne would greatly increase the chances of Japan's accepting Allied terms. Others, like Assistant Secretary of State Dean Acheson, felt that this kind of imperial guarantee would amount to an unconscionable form of appeasement toward a regime that bore direct culpability for all manner of atrocities and aggression. The final wording of the Potsdam ultimatum, therefore, reflected a compromise between these factions—seeking to communicate a clear impression of continued Anglo-American resolve, while still keeping options open on the imperial question, so that the Japanese could see that surrender would not necessarily mean betraying Hirohito to the mercies of Allied justice. According to the historians Tsuyoshi Hasegawa and Richard Frank, the evidence we now have from Japanese archives shows that key members of the Japanese leadership indeed interpreted the Potsdam surrender terms as leaving open the continuation of the imperial dynasty.¹²

Why were the Japanese so reluctant to face the fact that they had lost the war? The answer lies partly in the highly militarized nature of Japanese society since the 1930s, and in the virtual stranglehold that the military leadership had on the government. Anyone who dared to voice counsels of caution, of reasonable doubt about the ultimate success of the war effort, ran the serious risk of being branded a traitor and either arrested or simply murdered outright.

Surrender was widely regarded by Japanese soldiers as the ultimate dis-

honor, a stain on a man's character to be avoided at any cost: the island campaigns in the Pacific had rendered this widespread mentality horrifyingly evident. Again and again, Japanese garrisons fought to the end, preferring almost any kind of death, including suicide, rather than facing the dishonor of being captured alive. The result was a recurrent fatality rate among the Japanese rarely before seen in the history of warfare: in the Gilbert Islands campaign, 99.7 percent killed; on Makin Island, 99 percent killed; in the Marshall Islands campaign, 98.5 percent killed; at Kwajalein, 98.4 percent killed; on Saipan, 97 percent killed.¹³ Even when defeat became a virtual certainty, Japanese soldiers fought on, sometimes launching a final suicidal *banzai* charge, sometimes committing *hara-kiri* before capture. Even the wounded could not be counted on to give up: in many cases they turned themselves into human booby traps, detonating one last grenade as Allied soldiers prepared to take them prisoner.

Not surprisingly, this mentality applied to the defense of the home islands with an even greater conviction: for here the defense of territory constituted a direct effort in protection of Hirohito himself. Most Japanese leaders, and a majority of citizens, held to this view, and were therefore steeling themselves for a final series of battles that could end only in death or in a negotiated peace that preserved honor and emperor. The army and navy leaders, during the late spring of 1945, developed a detailed plan for this last-ditch defense of the homeland: they code-named it Ketsu-Go (Operation Decisive).

Their logic for Ketsu-Go was straightforward.¹⁴ If we can convince the Allies that we will never give up, they will see no alternative but to launch a direct invasion of Japan, just as they did with Germany. And if we can render that invasion sufficiently bloody for them—costing them thousands and thousands of lives, day after day—then there is a good chance that at some point they will be forced to soften their terms, and will become willing to accept our conditions for a negotiated peace. Public opinion in the democracies will simply not abide the endless loss of young men that would be required for a full-scale conquest of Japan, fought against the implacably unyielding resistance we will lay out for them: We can play on this fact to extract a final set of concessions from the Allied governments. In the end, if Ketsu-Go succeeds, we will still have lost the war, but we will nonetheless emerge with our national polity intact, our emperor safe, and a set of relatively favorable peace terms.

Accordingly, preparations for Ketsu-Go received top priority in the Japanese war effort during the late spring and summer of 1945. Army and navy leaders accurately surmised that the first major Allied thrust would

aim at Kyushu, and they accordingly began building up troop concentrations, war supplies, and multiple lines of fortifications along all the likely landing points. They also started training the civilian population—both on Kyushu and on the other Japanese home islands—to participate directly in the coming military operations, thereby effectively turning millions of former noncombatants into a vast guerrilla force to bleed the invading enemy. Such hastily trained and scantily equipped partisans would clearly pay an extremely high blood price in their confrontation with the heavily armored and mechanized Allied armies, but this price was evidently acceptable to the Japanese government. Finally, there were the kamikazes, who would be brought out in unprecedented numbers, with orders to aim at both the Allied ground troops and the ships assembled offshore.

The numerical dimensions of Ketsu-Go, exhaustively compiled by the historian Richard Frank, are sobering, to say the least. In the first six months of 1945, the Japanese boosted their manpower on Kyushu from 150,000 troops to 545,000; fighter aircraft available for Ketsu-Go by July 1945 numbered about 5,000, while the aircraft available for kamikaze strikes numbered about 5,400. Overall troop strength on all the home islands had more than doubled since January 1945, as military leaders brought them back from outlying theaters for the war's final phase: active troops numbered about 1.9 million by midsummer. Japanese leaders were, in effect, banking on the bloodbath that would engulf Kyushu that fall as their best point of leverage for securing a negotiated peace. As in the game of chess, when one sees defeat looming and sacrifices one's queen to end the game in a draw, the leadership chose to make a climactic sacrifice of their own people so as to have a chance of ending the war on acceptable terms.

Emperor Hirohito, it should be emphasized, unequivocally supported this policy until mid-June 1945, and he acquiesced to it—albeit with increasing reluctance—right through the first week of August 1945.¹⁵ The emperor, along with several key moderates among the leadership, did not share the recklessly defiant attitude of the army and navy brass, and felt certain that the war was irretrievably lost. Nevertheless, both Hirohito and these moderate figures continued to hold out hope, through early August 1945, that the evolving military and diplomatic situation might still present an opportunity for obtaining a negotiated peace.

The Japanese government therefore responded to the Potsdam Declaration with icy reserve. Although the leaders agreed that it would be impolitic to reject outright this major Allied declaration, they nonetheless wanted to make it clear both to the Allies and to their own population that

the Potsdam terms were unacceptable. On the morning of July 28, Japanese newspaper headlines unambiguously proclaimed that Japan was rejecting the ultimatum. The article on the subject in *Asahi Shimbun*, for example, led with the headline LAUGHABLE MATTER, then reported that the government deemed the Potsdam ultimatum "a thing of no great moment."¹⁶ No official of the Japanese government issued any denial or correction of these reports. Then, on the afternoon of July 28, Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki held a press conference. "The government," he stated, "does not regard [the Potsdam Declaration] as a thing of any value; the government will just ignore [*mokusatsu*] it. We will press forward resolutely to carry the war to a successful conclusion."¹⁷

The word *mokusatsu* literally means "kill with silence," but it could be broadly construed as conveying a range of connotations: "ignore," "treat with silent contempt," or the more neutral "refrain from comment." Some observers have argued that the government, in choosing the word *mokusatsu* to characterize its stance, was actually engaging in a subtle form of deliberate ambiguity, and was trying to leave the door open for further negotiations over the possible acceptance of the Potsdam terms.¹⁸ The historian Richard Frank, however, argues persuasively that—regardless of the issue of how to translate *mokusatsu*—the intention of the Japanese government in late July and early August, as revealed by documentary evidence, was to continue prosecuting the war while preparing for Ketsugo and simultaneously seeking to enlist Soviet assistance in negotiating a favorable peace.¹⁹ The Allies, not surprisingly, interpreted Suzuki's *mokusatsu* as a flat-out rejection: this was reasonable, given that the prime minister had sandwiched this ambiguous word between a sentence that dismissed the Potsdam Declaration as valueless, and a sentence that promised to continue "pressing forward" with the war.

The Japanese diplomatic démarche toward the Soviet Union, in these closing months of the Pacific War, rested on a mixture of desperation and highly unrealistic hope. Japanese leaders, from Hirohito on down, evidently believed that a vague promise of postwar territorial concessions in Asia might pry the Russians loose from their British and American allies.²⁰ In this belief they were gravely mistaken. The Soviets had already announced in April 1945 that they would not renew their 1941 nonaggression treaty with Japan. Now, in July and early August, they responded noncommittally to the Japanese diplomatic overtures, and instead began rapidly building up their troop concentrations all along the Chinese border.

The days went by after the proclamation of the Potsdam ultimatum.

The killing continued. On July 26, the American heavy cruiser *Indianapolis* delivered Little Boy, the first of two atomic bombs, to the Pacific island of Tinian, where the United States had built an enormous airbase for B-29 bombers. Three days later, the Japanese submarine *I-58* found the *Indianapolis* in the Philippine Sea, and sank it with a salvo of six torpedoes. Of the 1,199 men on board, some 350 were killed outright or went down with the ship; another 850 jumped overboard and watched their ship sink in a mere twelve minutes. Through a series of negligent mistakes at the ship's destination, Leyte, no one in the U.S. Navy even knew that the ship had been hit. For three days and nights the men of the *Indianapolis* floated, sinking slowly deeper as their life jackets became waterlogged—blinded by sunlight during the day, dying of thirst, hallucinating, raving in the darkness at night, the helpless prey of repeated shark attacks.²¹ When an American PB4Y floatplane discovered them, purely by chance, on August 2, only 318 remained alive to be rescued.

On August 6, at 8:15 a.m., the B-29 bomber *Enola Gay* dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima. At first the news filtering into Tokyo was sketchy or contradictory; then, by the morning of August 7, the situation became clearer. Japanese radio began picking up President Truman's announcement about the atomic bomb early in the morning, and a scientific team was dispatched to Hiroshima to verify the American claims. Prime Minister Suzuki called a cabinet meeting on the afternoon of August 7, but the Japanese government took no immediate action other than to lodge a formal protest through the International Red Cross about the American use of this cruel new weapon. Ongoing discussions among the members of the Imperial War Council—the Big Six, as they were known—revealed a complete deadlock between moderates and hardliners: the three moderates (Suzuki, Shigenori Togo, Mitsumasa Yonai) urged acceptance of the Potsdam terms with the sole condition that the emperor be allowed to stay on the throne; the three diehards (the army and navy chiefs Korechika Anami, Yoshijiro Umezu, Soemu Toyoda) argued that this new weapon was not qualitatively different from the firebombs, that the Americans could not have very many of these weapons, and that Japan must fight on until the Allies accepted all four Japanese surrender terms.

Then, during the night of August 8, the news broke that the Soviet Union had just launched a massive surprise attack against Japanese army units in Manchuria and Outer Mongolia. Soviet forces advanced rapidly, overrunning the unprepared Japanese, taking hundreds of thousands of prisoners. Starting in the early morning of August 9 the Big Six began

holding continuous meetings to deal with the double crisis that now confronted them. At midmorning their discussions were interrupted by the news that the Americans had just dropped a second atomic bomb on the city of Nagasaki. Preliminary reports indicated extensive damage, but considerably lower casualties than at Hiroshima. Yet still the top leadership could not reach agreement on what to do: they remained hopelessly deadlocked, three to three.

Late that night Emperor Hirohito summoned the Big Six for a meeting in his presence. Surely now, the moderates argued, anyone could see that the situation was completely hopeless. The combined armies and navies of the United States, Britain, China, and the Soviet Union were closing in. American ships and submarines had imposed a nearly impenetrable blockade on the home islands, and very little food, oil, or men could be brought in to sustain the war effort. Stockpiles were already dangerously low. Atomic bombs had just leveled two entire cities. The strategic bombardment was continuing.

But the three diehards on the council insisted that unconditional surrender remained out of the question. Only if the Allies accepted the four basic conditions would the fighting men of Japan lay down their arms. And the hard-liners warned the moderates: Even if we generals and admirals in this room were to accept unconditional surrender, we cannot guarantee that this dishonorable solution might not result in an insurrection or even a coup d'état by the armed forces.

At 2:00 a.m. Prime Minister Suzuki turned to the emperor, bowed, and apologized for the council's inability to reach agreement. Emperor Hirohito stood up and began speaking. Tradition held that the emperor's role in these kinds of deliberations would entail nothing more than a ritualistic acceptance of the consensus among the council members: but Hirohito could plainly see that the discussion was going nowhere. For the first time in eighty years, a Japanese emperor intervened directly to break an impasse among the leadership. Hirohito quietly chastised the military leaders for their persistence in offering unrealistic appraisals of Japan's war prospects. Then he told the stunned council that it was time to "bear the unbearable" and accept the Allied terms along the lines suggested by the three moderates.²²

The next day, August 10, the Tokyo government communicated its reply to the Allies: We agree to surrender, as long as the imperial institutions will be allowed to remain. The Allied response came back promptly with an artfully ambiguous reply: "The authority of the Emperor and the

Japanese government shall be subject to the Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers." In other words: Yes, you can keep your emperor, but he will be subject to the authority of our occupation forces. This formula proved acceptable to Hirohito, who once again overruled some of his hard-line subordinates who wanted to reject it.

Hirohito recorded a speech to be broadcast on the radio, addressing his people throughout the Japanese empire. This, too, was a first: most Japanese had never heard his voice. In his recorded speech he said that the enemy's terrible new weapon meant that it was time to give up.²³ He explained to his people that Japan's national honor actually required surrender now, because by surrendering the nation would bring a halt to this devastating war, and hence would be seen by the rest of the world as sacrificing itself in the name of peace.

Hirohito's speech made a big impression on the Japanese armed forces, scattered all over the country and the rest of Asia and the Pacific. The emperor sent out personal envoys to assure the main military commanders in the field that it was truly his wish that they surrender. But in the following days many militarists still refused to give up. Some committed suicide. Another group started preparing a military coup against the emperor—a move that was discovered and quashed by the majority who still accepted his authority.

Even in Hiroshima itself, capitulation remained an unspeakable word. One of the doctors in the main hospital, Michihiko Hachiya, recorded the reaction among the wounded and those tending them; after they had heard the emperor's announcement:

Like others in the room, I had come to attention at the mention of the Emperor's voice, and for a while we all remained silent and at attention. Darkness clouded my eyes, my teeth chattered, and I felt cold sweat running down my back. . . . By degrees people began to whisper and then to talk in low voices until, out of the blue sky, someone shouted: "How can we lose the war!"

Following this outburst, expressions of anger were unleashed.

"Only a coward would go back now!"

"There is a limit to deceiving us!"

"I would rather die than be defeated!"

"What have we been suffering for?"

"Those who died can't go to heaven in peace now!"

The hospital suddenly turned into an uproar, and there was nothing one

could do. Many who had been strong advocates of peace and others who had lost their taste for war following the *pika* [atomic blast] were now shouting for the war to continue. . . .

The one word—surrender—had produced a greater shock than the bombing of our city.²⁴

The bomb had, in effect, shattered the main piece of logic to which the Japanese leadership still clung in the summer of 1945: that of Ketsu-Go. If the Americans could keep wiping out Japanese cities with atomic blasts, one after another, then they would never need to launch an invasion on the ground. They could simply continue as they had done with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, methodically annihilating one piece after another of the Japanese nation until nothing remained but radioactive rubble. As if this were not bad enough, moreover, the Soviet Union's entry into the war had simultaneously destroyed any prospect, however tenuous, of securing a negotiated settlement through Russian mediation. For the Japanese leaders, the possibility suddenly loomed that the imperial government might be overthrown, not by invading Americans, but by their own enraged population, rising up against a regime that was insanely squandering their lives in its blind refusal to admit defeat.

One Japanese scholar, Sadao Asada, has argued that the bomb gave the moderates in the Japanese government a veritable "gift from heaven" because it so clearly and overwhelmingly undermined all the arguments of the diehards for continuing the war.²⁵ Indeed, Asada argues, the bomb paradoxically rendered capitulation considerably more palatable for the Japanese military as well. It was one thing to have to admit being bested by an enemy who had squared off with you on a level playing field, using the same types of weapons as you did: such a humiliation was simply too much to contemplate. But it was quite another thing to yield to an enemy whose weaponry summoned up the very innermost forces of nature. To admit defeat by such a foe was, in effect, akin to admitting defeat by a typhoon or an earthquake. There could still be some honor in surrendering to science itself.

4. *Were there plausible alternatives for achieving surrender without invading Japan or dropping the bomb?*

Four possible courses of action lay open to the Allies.

- *Option 1.* Let go of "unconditional surrender" and offer the Japanese a more flexible set of terms.

Franklin Roosevelt had first announced the Allied demand for unconditional surrender at the Casablanca Conference of January 1943. The doc-

trine had three main purposes: to prevent Nazi or Japanese leaders from seeking to split the Allies by offering separate peace terms to one of the Big Three; to reassure the Soviets that the Anglo-Americans would stay in the war all the way to complete victory; and to avoid the sort of problem that had arisen after the First World War, in which the defeated German army claimed that it had not really been vanquished on the battlefield, but had been "stabbed in the back" by traitorous German civilian leaders who had called for an armistice sooner than necessary. The 1943 doctrine of unconditional surrender meant that, this time around, when Germany finally gave up, all Germans would clearly understand that their Wehrmacht had been incontrovertibly crushed.

The problem with applying this doctrine to the Pacific War lay in the fact that most Japanese interpreted "unconditional surrender" as delivering their emperor into the vengeful hands of the enemy—an act they perceived as an unthinkable disgraceful dereliction of duty. Therefore, some historians have argued that, in the interest of ending the war quickly and bringing a halt to the bloodshed on both sides, the United States should have abandoned the formula of unconditional surrender, and given explicit assurances to the Japanese that they could keep their emperor if they laid down their arms.

This line of argument has three major weaknesses—one political, one moral, and one purely pragmatic. First, it ignores the American political context of the year 1945. Americans, civilians and military alike, had been waging war for several years with the words "unconditional surrender" as the stated goal of their nation's war policy. Japanese atrocities, both against Americans and against other Asians, had been well documented and repeatedly publicized. Under these conditions, any perception that Allied surrender terms were suddenly being softened would have proved completely unacceptable to a majority of the American people. In a June 1945 opinion poll, Americans were asked if they would accept a compromise peace with Japan as a way to shorten the war and avoid a bloody push into the Japanese home islands: they rejected the idea by a margin of nine to one.²⁶ The historian John Dower has exhaustively documented the thirst for revenge that characterized significant portions of the American citizenry: in wartime opinion polls, he notes, 10 to 13 percent of Americans

consistently supported the "annihilation" or "extermination" of the Japanese as a people, while a comparable percentage were in favor of severe retribution after Japan had been defeated. . . . A poll conducted by *Fortune* in December 1945 found that 22.7 percent of respondents wished the United

States had had the opportunity to use "many more [atomic bombs] before Japan had a chance to surrender."²⁷

In this political climate, it is reasonable to assume that, if President Truman had offered concessions to the Japanese in 1945, an enraged American populace would have vehemently turned on him, accusing him of appeasement, of another Munich, of caving in unnecessarily to an enemy who was on the verge of defeat.

But let us suppose for a moment that Truman had decided to brave the wrath of the American electorate, and offer Hirohito an explicit guarantee. From a moral point of view, such an act could be construed in two different ways. From one perspective, it could be viewed as a courageous gesture of magnanimous statesmanship; yet from another, it could equally plausibly be seen as allowing a war criminal—the leader of a truly bestial regime—not only to avoid prosecution for his crimes, but to remain in power indefinitely. Herein lies the second main weakness of the "flexible surrender terms" argument. At a deeper level, the doctrine of unconditional surrender was not just about forcing the enemy to give up, but about the basic Allied aim of *remaking* Germany and Japan into peaceful and democratic societies after the war was over. One way of redeeming the wartime suffering and bloodshed would be to know that these two nations, once defeated, would be placed under completely new leadership, infused with a radically different set of values, and firmly channeled down a path of civic and moral transformation.²⁸ Unconditional surrender, in other words, was not just a brash wartime slogan, but a code word for precisely the kind of unequivocal and decisive military victory that would be needed to pave the way for a deep reordering of the aggressor societies. Hence, from a moral point of view, a softening of "unconditional surrender" to allow the retention of the emperor could be seen as fatally undermining this long-term political goal, by leaving in place the very government that had launched this bloody mess in the first place.²⁹

Finally—and most important of all—we have good reason to believe that, from a purely practical point of view, such a policy might have brought about the opposite effect from the one intended. Knowing as we do now the arguments being made by the diehards in the Imperial Council during the summer of 1945, it is easy to imagine how they would have interpreted a sudden Allied retreat from the principle of unconditional surrender: they would have argued that the Allied populations were succumbing to war-weariness now that the European War was over; that the bloody battle for Okinawa had frightened the Americans into stark aware-

ness of the casualties that lay ahead; and that Japan should therefore fight on harder than ever, holding out adamantly for favorable peace terms. Unfortunately, the mentality of the Japanese militarists was one that could never see an easing of Allied terms for what it would have been—a reasonable and magnanimous offer from a powerful victor. To them, such an act could only spell weakness, and would most likely have emboldened them to hold out even more tenaciously than before. The historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa concludes that, even if the Americans had included an imperial guarantee in the Potsdam terms, "it is doubtful that Japan would have capitulated before the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima and the Soviet Union entered the war."³⁰

• *Option 2. Bombard and blockade Japan into submission.*

Japan was in appallingly bad shape in the summer of 1945. The Allied campaigns of bombardment and naval blockade were taking a terrible toll, and they would have become ever more effective as the months went by into the fall of 1945 and (perhaps) the spring of 1946. It is quite possible, then, that the combined impact of blockade and bombardment would have eventually brought the nation to surrender—without an invasion, and without the dropping of atomic bombs. The key question, from a moral point of view, is whether such a path would have been more or less humane than the one actually taken.

By the beginning of August 1945, sixty-six of Japan's largest cities had been blasted from the air, in a crescendo of attacks that had killed some 300,000 persons and left about 8 million homeless. The United States had more than a thousand B-29 bombers on hand for the pummeling of Japan, and more were on the way. As the bombings went on, the number of fighter planes and antiaircraft guns that the Japanese could bring to bear in their own defense was steadily dwindling—as was the fuel for the planes and the ammunition for the guns themselves. Losses to American flight crews over Japan were accordingly going down.

At the same time, the blockade imposed by Allied navies had just about sealed off Japan's access to foodstuffs, oil, and raw materials from outside the home islands. American submarines were sinking Japanese merchant ships at devastating rates; American mines blocked the major straits and channels of Japan's Inland Sea; and American carrier-borne aircraft patrolled Japan's seashores at will. Food rationing in Japan had begun early in the war, and had set the average intake of a Japanese citizen at 2,000 calories daily; this number had been gradually cut as the war went on, to 1,900 calories in 1944, and 1,680 calories in 1945. The Japanese, in short, were moving down a path that led to death by starvation.

But the situation was about to get much worse. General Curtis LeMay issued an order to his B-29 bombers on August 11, 1945, that would have temporarily focused the rain of airborne destruction primarily on Japan's transportation infrastructure. The nation's mountainous terrain and island geography meant that a large part of its transportation needs in peacetime had been met by ships carrying freight along shoreline routes: this mode of transport had been virtually obliterated by submarine and naval attacks. What remained was the nation's relatively flimsy network of railroads, concentrated in a few main lines that ran down the island valleys, and linked to small trunk lines that were already grossly overburdened. The destruction of these railroads in August 1945 would have forced key aspects of the Japanese economy back to the level of medieval times—but with a modern population of 70 million to feed and supply.

How many Japanese would have had to die—of starvation, of malnutrition-related disease, or through aerial bombardment—before the government finally acknowledged that the survival of Japan itself as a viable society lay at stake? Might the Japanese people have mounted an insurrection against their own government as their suffering reached intolerable levels? No one can be sure, of course. But we do know that as late as May 1946, a full nine months after the war, the effects of wartime destruction on Japanese food production and distribution were still getting worse: the average citizen's daily nutritional intake in Tokyo continued to fall through the winter of 1945–1946, to a remarkable 800 calories, and General Douglas MacArthur had to order 800,000 tons of food brought in during 1946 to avert a general famine. One Japanese scholar reported that estimates of likely deaths in such a famine ran to 10 million persons.³¹

The historian Richard Frank maintains that this option—continued blockade and bombardment instead of invasion—was in fact being considered with growing seriousness by key American military leaders such as Admirals Ernest King and Chester Nimitz in the summer of 1945.³² Throughout June and July, the decryption of high-level Japanese radio communications was revealing to American leaders the massive Japanese defensive buildup on Kyushu, exactly where the main thrust of Operation Olympic was scheduled to go in. As it dawned on American leaders that the amphibious assault would face forces two to three times as large as originally estimated, they began questioning the wisdom of the Olympic plan and started reassessing other options—with the "siege and bombardment" strategy prominent among them. In the end, as we know, the atomic bomb and Soviet entry into the war brought about Japan's surrender more quickly than anticipated, and Allied leaders were spared the

grimly medieval scenario of having to systematically starve millions of Japanese men, women, and children into submission.

• *Option 3.* Demonstrate the atomic bomb on an uninhabited target other than a city.

Here's the idea: Invite a group of Japanese military and political leaders to observe a detonation of one of the American atomic devices on a deserted Pacific island. Construct a scale model of a Japanese city on the island, with various kinds of buildings, including perhaps a realistic replica of the kind of bomb shelter used by Emperor Hirohito. Then retreat to an observation ship offshore, and allow the most senior Japanese official to push the button himself. After watching the explosion, go back ashore (presumably waiting a few hours for things to cool off) and let the Japanese representatives take a walk around. Let them inspect the devastation, then report this back to Tokyo, with the message: Surrender now or we'll do this to your cities.

To counter this idea, defenders of the bomb's use on populated cities offer several arguments.

First, they contend that, if the demonstration device had been a dud, then this would have proved acutely embarrassing to the United States and would have further strengthened Japanese resolve. But this is, quite frankly, a very silly argument. A demonstration of such a devastating weapon is a serious matter, if it holds the real possibility of saving tens of thousands of human lives by bringing about prompt surrender: to refuse such a demonstration because of a fear of embarrassment seems acutely disproportional to the matter at hand. Besides, the device had already been tested once, at Alamogordo, and had worked better than expected: there was no reason to expect a technical failure in a demonstration. Even in the unlikely event of technical failure, nothing would have prevented the Americans from swiftly diagnosing and fixing any technical glitches and scheduling another demonstration.

Second, the defenders of the bomb's use on cities argue that only an actual combat release, with huge numbers of civilian casualties in a real city, would have the shock effect required to push the Japanese leadership toward surrender. This argument has merit, but it assumes that a demonstration on an uninhabited target would inevitably fail to produce such a shock. There was no way to know this for certain, of course, until such a demonstration had been attempted.

Third, the defenders of the bomb's use on cities maintain that the United States only had two operational bombs in August 1945, and that it would have taken several weeks to build more. (The official estimate at the

time was that one new bomb could be manufactured every few weeks, yielding a total of seven more atomic bombs by November 1.) Thus, if an August 1945 demonstration failed to bring about surrender, the United States would have wasted half its existing atomic arsenal. And meanwhile, American soldiers would be continuing to die all over the Pacific, in the ongoing battles that raged every day.

All three of these arguments are heavily outweighed by the moral advantage that the United States would have gained if it had carried out a demonstration on an uninhabited target. At least, afterward, the Americans could say that they were *forced* to nuke a city, because the Japanese simply would not accept a harmless demonstration. This would have strengthened the American moral position considerably.

Within the U.S. government, the responsibility for this decision rested primarily with a body known as the Interim Committee.³³ When Truman became president, he asked Henry Stimson, the secretary of war, to convene a top-level group of military and civilian officials who would provide the president with concrete recommendations about the use of the atomic bomb. The Interim Committee met several times in May and June 1945; its members included such respected figures as James Conant, the president of Harvard; Karl Compton, the president of MIT; Manhattan Project scientists Robert Oppenheimer, Enrico Fermi, and Ernest Lawrence; and the incoming secretary of state, James Byrnes. In its lengthy deliberations, the Interim Committee never seriously contemplated nonuse of the bomb, and only very briefly discussed (and dismissed) the option of a noncombat demonstration. Oppenheimer framed the question as follows, envisioning a demonstration of the bomb by means of an airburst over an uninhabited site in Japan:

You ask yourself would the Japanese government as then constituted and with divisions between the peace party and the war party, would it have been influenced by an enormous nuclear firecracker detonated at a great height doing little damage and your answer is as good as mine. I don't know.³⁴

Byrnes, for his part, found two reasons for rejecting such a demonstration:

We feared that, if the Japanese were told that the bomb would be used on a given locality, they might bring our boys who were prisoners of war to that area. Also, the experts had warned us that the static test which was to take

place in New Mexico, even if successful, would not be conclusive proof that a bomb would explode when dropped from an airplane.³⁵

On June 1, 1945, the committee's report advised Truman that the United States should drop the bomb, without prior warning, on inhabited cities possessing important military and industrial assets—since this manner of use would be most likely to shock the Japanese into surrender.

Today, of course, from the perspective of hindsight, we know that even the atomic bombing of Hiroshima failed, in itself, to secure surrender. The Japanese Imperial Council remained deadlocked over possible surrender terms between August 6 and August 9, which resulted in practice in a policy of continuing the war. Therefore, a fortiori, we can be just about positive that a harmless demonstration of the bomb's effects on an uninhabited site would not have produced the desired surrender.

From the moral perspective, however, the crucial point still remains: the U.S. government did not know, *before* the bombing of Hiroshima, that the Japanese would subsequently refuse to surrender. Therefore, a noncombat demonstration would still have constituted a reasonable and humane alternative. Though American leaders could not know for sure how many people the bomb would kill when dropped on a city, they could safely assume that the number would be at least in the tens of thousands, and would include a great many noncombatants. By deliberately ignoring (or overlooking) this consideration, the United States was in effect choosing to target large numbers of noncombatants for destruction, without giving a serious chance to an alternative course of action that might possibly have rendered the atomic bombing of a city unnecessary.

The objections to a demonstration of the bomb, as laid out by Oppenheimer and Byrnes, seem grossly disproportional to the possible benefit in human lives saved that would have resulted if the demonstration had succeeded. Oppenheimer himself admitted that he did not know for sure—that a *possibility* existed that a demonstration might work. "Your answer is as good as mine. I don't know." This seems a terribly thin thread on which to hang a decision that consigns tens of thousands of noncombatants to incineration.

What would it really have cost the United States to give this option a try? One atomic bomb would have remained, to be dropped on a city like Hiroshima if the demonstration failed. A third bomb (of the more powerful Fat Man design used on Nagasaki) would have been ready on approximately August 21.³⁶ How the war would have ended under this scenario is

a matter for speculation, which we duly take up in a separate section below. But one cannot help being left with a strong impression that American leaders missed a major opportunity here. Their attitude toward the prospect of using the bomb on an inhabited city seems to have been cavalier and callous. This missed opportunity arguably qualifies as one of the more serious moral failings of the Anglo-American war.

• *Option 4.* Adopt a combination of the above-mentioned strategies: modified surrender terms, continued blockade and bombardment, and noncombat demonstration of the bomb.

Barton Bernstein has argued that, while any one of the three strategies we have just discussed did not have a large chance of success if adopted by itself, the three of them together might have stood a very good chance of bringing about Japan's surrender. Why then was such a combination not attempted? Bernstein believes that a widespread fallacy comes into play here, having to do with how we think of the aims and intentions of American leaders in 1945. We tend to project backward onto those men the mentality of today, which (understandably) regards the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with horror: we assume, therefore, that those men would have been anxiously and energetically casting about for alternatives—*any* viable alternative—to using the bomb.

But this is completely mistaken, Bernstein argues.³⁷ American and British leaders regarded the bomb as one important element alongside many others in a broad array of pressures and inducements that they were bringing to bear on Japan so as to end the war as quickly as possible, in a manner consistent with long-standing Allied war aims. These pressures and inducements included:

- Soviet entry into the war against Japan;
- intensive aerial bombardment;
- naval blockade;
- threat of an amphibious invasion of Japan's home islands;
- offering Japan assurances for a generous postwar peace;
- fudging on the retention of the emperor in the Potsdam Declaration; and
- the atomic bomb.

According to Bernstein, American and British leaders in 1945 certainly recognized the revolutionary nature of the weapon they had created, but they did not regard its use against a city as being qualitatively different, from a moral standpoint, than the firebombing that had been visiting destruction on cities like Hamburg, Dresden, and Tokyo since 1943. Thus,

they were not particularly interested in finding ways to avoid using the bomb; rather, they were interested in finding the most efficient way to shock the Japanese into accepting defeat in the most orderly manner possible. Any combination of the above factors that would achieve this goal swiftly, and with a minimum of Allied casualties, struck these leaders as the most humane and moral way to bring the war to an end.

In this sense, to speak of an Allied "decision" to drop the atomic bomb in 1945 can be somewhat misleading. If it implies that the leaders were agonizing over whether or not to use the bomb, and were anxiously seeking alternatives to such use, then we are dramatically out of touch with the realities of wartime decision-making in London and Washington. It is more accurate to say that the leaders hoped that the bomb would work, and were earnestly trying to figure out the most effective way to put it to use, as part of a broad, multipronged strategy for ending the war. Only a small minority of scientists in the Manhattan Project, and an even smaller minority (if anyone at all) in the U.S. and British governments, ever seriously considered relinquishing the bomb as an instrument of warfare.

Leo Szilard was such a man, but the majority of other Manhattan Project scientists, including Robert Oppenheimer, strongly disagreed with him.³⁸ The British government (which had been intimately involved in the Manhattan Project from its inception) gave American leaders its formal assent to the use of the bomb at the Potsdam Conference. Franklin Roosevelt had never shown the slightest qualms about the prospect of using this new weapon once it became available.

Overall, what the historians of the atomic bomb have shown us is a story in which the powerful momentum of the Manhattan Project, coupled with the extraordinary pressures of wartime, overwhelmingly stacked the deck in favor of a combat use of this radical new weapon. President Truman, in theory, could have said no to the dropping of the bomb: he certainly possessed the legal authority to do so. But in order to make such a decision he would have had to step completely out of the context of 1945, casting aside the entire body of assumptions and practices that had been built up by his government since 1941. He would have had to fly in the face of the overwhelming majority of his military and civilian advisors, and unilaterally countermand the policies bequeathed to him by his illustrious predecessor. In the words of General Leslie Groves, the military man in charge of the Manhattan Project, Truman's "decision was one of non-interference—basically, a decision not to upset the existing plans."³⁹

The space for human agency is always a rather dicey matter, even for a sitting president of the United States. Truman possessed real power, and

his choices certainly shaped the war's concluding months and the history that followed. But in the end, his power was also limited, because he made his decisions within a broader context of accumulated policies already established by his predecessors, accumulated moral and political assumptions already entrenched by wartime practice, and accumulated technological and bureaucratic processes already firmly in place when he assumed office. It is only in this rather constrained sense that we can say that Truman "decided" to drop the atomic bomb in 1945. And it is only with this context as our backdrop that we can accurately assess the possible alternatives to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Having said this, we can still ask the question: what might have resulted if the Allies had tried a combination policy that entailed four powerful elements working in synergy?

- Offering modified surrender terms that included a guarantee of the emperor's position;
- continued naval blockade and conventional aerial bombardment;
- demonstrating the atomic bomb on an uninhabited target; and
- the Soviet attack that started on August 8.

No one can say for sure, of course. It seems highly unlikely that, under this scenario, the Japanese government would have capitulated as rapidly as it did in the wake of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, because these four factors (even taken together) did not possess the kind of extreme urgency conveyed by the threat of further atomic attacks on cities. How long the Japanese would have held out before surrendering is a matter open to speculation. One cannot easily imagine the militarist diehards on the Imperial Council suddenly waxing reasonable and conciliatory under the new pressure of Soviet intervention: the actual record of their arguments in the daylong meetings of August 9, after the Soviet attack in Manchuria, reveals that they still adamantly rejected surrender. Among these three fanatics, the logic of extracting favorable peace terms through the threat of a monstrous bloodbath still remained intact. Thus, it is likely that, in the name of saving national honor, the diehards probably would have insisted on a policy of writing off the military losses to the Soviets in China, while reinforcing both Kyushu and the possible Soviet landing sites on the island of Hokkaido.

As for the atomic bomb, the psychological impression made by a non-combat nuclear demonstration might have been significant at first, but it

would have diminished substantially with the passing of time, once the Japanese realized that the United States was not following up with atomic bombardment of cities. (For the purposes of this scenario, we are assuming that the U.S. government has made a decision not to use atomic bombs against enemy population centers unless all other options have failed.) Meanwhile, the ongoing naval siege and conventional aerial bombardment would certainly be taking an awful toll among the Japanese population, but the fact remains that the Japanese had been enduring these pressures for more than eight months, on a colossal scale, without showing signs of a significant collapse of morale. Finally, the explicit guarantee of the emperor's position might have substantially strengthened the hand of the moderates in the Imperial Council—but one can argue with equal plausibility that the council could have read it as a sign of weakening Allied resolve, to be met by stiffened demands for further concessions.

It is useful here—and sobering—to note the actual words spoken by one of the Japanese moderates on the council, in the wake of the Potsdam Declaration. On July 30, Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki held a meeting of his Cabinet Advisory Council, during the course of which one of his aides informed him that the nation's leading businessmen had "urged that Japan accept the Potsdam terms." Suzuki replied as follows:

For the enemy to say something like that means circumstances have arisen that force them also to end the war. That is why they are talking about unconditional surrender. Precisely at a time like this, if we hold firm, they will yield before we do. Just because they have broadcast their Declaration, it is not necessary to stop fighting. You advisers may ask me to reconsider, but I don't think there is any need to stop [the war].⁴⁰

This was a moderate member of the Imperial Council. If even he, at this stage of the war, could interpret the Potsdam Declaration as a sign of weakness—indicating that the Allies might yield if Japan held firm—then it seems far-fetched to argue that the Japanese government stood poised on the verge of surrender at the beginning of August 1945. The leadership, in reality, was divided among those who wanted to hold out to the death, those who wanted to hold out for as long as necessary to get favorable peace terms, and those who stood ready to accept surrender on condition of an imperial guarantee. A great deal more blood would have to flow before that balance of views would shift appreciably.

In the end, it seems reasonable to conclude that this fourfold combina-

tion strategy might well have ultimately resulted in a Japanese surrender (without the need for an invasion or for the atomic bombing of cities)—but that the process might have required anywhere between one and six months to bear fruit.⁴¹ The emperor would play a crucial role in such a course of events, of course, since the final decision to accept surrender undoubtedly lay with him. But Hirohito had carefully avoided, throughout the war, any direct interference in the deliberations of the Imperial Council: his intervention to break the deadlock on the night of August 9 constituted a unique event, precipitated by the dire extremity of the atomic emergency that faced his nation. Over the closing months of the war, Hirohito's views had largely paralleled those of the moderates on the council: accepting the inevitability of defeat, but holding out steadfastly for favorable peace terms—and for the decisive military operation (Ketsu-Go) that might secure those terms. It seems most plausible to conclude that Hirohito's own thinking would have steadily evolved, as the weeks went by after Soviet entry into the war, toward accepting the need for surrender. But it remains unlikely that he would have intervened directly in voting for such a policy, as he did on the night of August 9: he would probably have operated more subtly from behind the scenes, waiting for the balance of opinion among his subordinates to tilt significantly toward an acceptance of capitulation. Either way, this process of assembling a sufficient consensus within the Japanese leadership would have taken time. It is highly unlikely that the fourfold combination strategy would have brought about a Japanese surrender, on terms acceptable to the Allies, before mid-September at the earliest.

And there's the rub: for how many lives would have been lost, in the meanwhile? How many Japanese, American, Chinese, and Soviet soldiers—and how many civilians both in Japan itself and throughout Asia—would have had to die before the Japanese leadership finally made up its mind? It is to this complex issue that we now turn.

5. *Did the atomic bombing of Japan, by shortening the war, result in a net saving of lives?*

This is undoubtedly the most vexing question surrounding the morality of the atomic bomb's use in 1945: it has formed the subject of acrimonious controversy for decades. Part of the problem lies in the fact that answering this question inevitably takes us into the domain of making guesses and estimates and extrapolations. We have to hazard all kinds of assumptions, and this leaves plenty of room for various kinds of bias to distort what we end up thinking we see. But it is a fair conclusion that the

bomb's use probably saved an enormous number of lives—far more Japanese than Allied.

The key to addressing this question lies in how we assume the war would have gone, in the absence of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Three scenarios seem most plausible in this regard:

- *The "Soviet shock" scenario.* Here we assume that, even without the bomb, the sheer shock of Soviet entry into the war forces Japanese capitulation before the start of Operation Olympic on November 1. The deadlock in the Imperial Council is finally broken by the devastating losses experienced by Japanese armies in China, coupled with the threat of simultaneous invasion of the northern home island of Hokkaido by the Soviets and of the southern home island of Kyushu by the Anglo-Americans.

- *The invasion scenario.* Here we assume that Soviet entry into the war proves insufficient to force surrender, and that Operation Olympic consequently proceeds on schedule.

- *The "siege and bombardment" scenario.* Here we assume that the Anglo-Americans, having taken stock of the massive Japanese buildup on Kyushu, cancel or postpone Operation Olympic and instead pursue a strangulation policy, while the Soviets methodically smash the trapped Japanese armies in China.

Of these three scenarios, the first is similar to the "fourfold combination strategy" described above—but without the added pressure brought to bear by the factors of a noncombat nuclear demonstration and the modified surrender terms. We have seen how this scenario, while it certainly could have resulted in an eventual capitulation, would have required the passing of a significant amount of time in order for the Japanese leadership to reach a sufficient consensus on accepting the Allied terms.

The second scenario—the launching of Olympic against southern Kyushu—might well have become a reality. Although some American leaders, like King and Nimitz, were having misgivings about the invasion, others, like Marshall and MacArthur, appeared strongly determined to forge ahead with it if necessary. Certainly the preparations for this assault were already well under way: Marshall even ordered a feasibility assessment, in July 1945, of using atomic bombs as tactical weapons to obliterate the Japanese armies massing on Kyushu three days before the start of Olympic.⁴² Such was the grim resolution in Washington, as the war's finale approached.

The third scenario—long-term strangulation and pulverization from the air—also stood a good chance of taking place. If King and Nimitz had

ultimately prevailed in the behind-the-scenes struggle in Washington over Olympic, then Truman might have canceled the invasion or postponed it until the spring, preferring instead to let the bombers and navies do their deadly work on the islands, while the Soviets chewed up the Japanese armies on the mainland.

In all three of these scenarios, the possibility for loss of life (on all sides) appears extremely high. The first scenario ("Soviet shock") would be the cheapest in blood price for the Anglo-Americans, but one would have to assume that large numbers of Soviet and Japanese soldiers would have perished in the pitched battles on the China front. The number of Chinese civilians caught in the crossfire of this warfare is hard to estimate, but could conceivably prove enormous as well: when the defeated Japanese withdrew from Manila, they indulged in an orgy of vindictive violence against the local inhabitants, leaving some 100,000 dead amid the rubble of the shattered city. The imagination pales at the thought of what the retreating Japanese legions might have wreaked upon the citizens of China. In any case, the sheer scale of these Soviet-Japanese battles cannot but give pause to the historical observer: Japanese forces in China numbered some 1.2 million troops, while the Soviets had around 1.5 million. In the first six days of conflict, between the Soviet attack on August 8 and the cessation of hostilities after August 14, approximately 84,000 Japanese and 12,000 Russian soldiers were killed in combat. During the weeks that followed, the Soviets took prisoner some 2.7 million Japanese nationals residing in occupied China: of these, about 350,000 are known to have perished in Soviet captivity.⁴³

Finally, we need to take into account the ongoing deaths among Allied POWs and among the vast numbers of Asian laborers forcibly conscripted into serving the Japanese throughout the far-flung lands still under Japanese occupation. The death rates among both these groups were appallingly high because of the barbarous treatment they received at the hands of their keepers. We must also consider the ongoing deaths by starvation among Asian civilians in those lands where the Japanese armies were forcibly requisitioning food supplies, in disregard for the famines that resulted.⁴⁴ After a meticulous analysis of the subject, the historian Richard Frank concludes that "the minimum plausible range for deaths of Asian noncombatants each month in 1945 was over 100,000 and more probably reached or even exceeded 250,000."⁴⁵

Thus, even if we assume a relatively early Japanese surrender date of September 15 under this "Soviet shock" scenario, a conservative estimate of the resultant death toll would run something like this: another 30,000

Japanese civilians killed through conventional bombardment of the home islands; 500,000 Japanese soldiers killed in China; 70,000 Soviet soldiers killed in battle; 100,000 Chinese civilians killed in the crossfire or through war-related actions; 100,000 Asian noncombatants outside China (including a smaller number of Allied POWs) dying through maltreatment under Japanese occupation; another 50,000 Japanese dying in Soviet captivity. The total adds up to about 850,000 lives (of which a significant portion would be civilians)—and this is erring considerably on the low side of the plausible.⁴⁶

The second scenario, the Allied invasion of Kyushu, has formed the subject of particularly intense controversy over the years. After the war, Stimson and Truman wrote articles and gave interviews in which they claimed it was reasonable to believe that Operation Olympic would have cost between 500,000 and a million Allied casualties: in their view, therefore, dropping the bomb undoubtedly saved those lives. These estimates subsequently acquired something of a talismanic status in discussions of the Pacific War, particularly among the U.S. servicemen who were boarding troopships in Europe in 1945 for transfer to the Pacific Theater. Then, in the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of American historians issued a challenge to this orthodoxy: their research, they argued, suggested that Allied casualties in Olympic would have been much lower (on the order of from 20,000 to 100,000 men, including both dead and wounded), that the Japanese were on the verge of surrender anyway in 1945, and that dropping the bomb had therefore constituted an unnecessary and atrocious act.⁴⁷ In response, defenders of the orthodox position have claimed that these revisionists were unjustifiably downplaying the number of invasion casualties, and systematically overestimating Japan's readiness to surrender.⁴⁸

Estimating casualties for Operation Olympic, in other words, is a very touchy subject. But after surveying six decades of debates in the literature, it seems reasonable to conclude that the estimate of half a million Allied casualties has been completely discredited by the thorough research of a wide array of historians: the number is far too high, and it is time to put that myth to rest once and for all.⁴⁹ On the other hand, the most persuasive casualty estimates for the Japanese side are truly hair-raising in their implications: here, the numbers on the order of a million do ring true. Thus, if we are counting not just Allied lives, but *human* lives, it is reasonable to conclude that the invasion of Kyushu would have resulted in one of the most horrific bloodbaths of World War II.

Richard Frank provides the most exhaustive and up-to-date overview

in his 1999 book, *Downfall*. He points out that there are numerous ways to estimate the casualties in a battle, and that most of these were actually tried by American planners as they prepared for Olympic. At the crudest level, one can simply compare the average statistics from previous engagements—so many attackers against so many defenders yielding so many casualties—and plug in the numbers for Olympic. A more sophisticated approach involves tailoring the formula to the specific terrain, types of troops, and conditions of attack, before running the numbers.⁵⁰

Okinawa offers a good point of comparison with the projected battle for Kyushu. In both cases, we have Japanese garrisons ready to fight to the end; we have large numbers of kamikazes to factor in; we can assume American superiority in overall firepower. Although the terrain on Kyushu was less mountainous than that of Okinawa, thus giving the Allies greater room for maneuver, this advantage would be offset by the fact that substantial portions of Kyushu's civilian population had been trained for guerrilla operations against advancing Allied troops.

On Okinawa, the defending Japanese garrison numbered 110,000; of these, about 95 percent, or 104,000, were killed. The civilian population totaled 400,000; about 25 percent of these, or 100,000, died in the battle. The attacking Allied naval and ground forces added up to 170,000; of these, about 7 percent, or 12,000, were killed.

On Kyushu, the defending Japanese garrison numbered 545,000; the civilian population was 10 million (with 3 million living in the areas directly targeted for the American landings); the Allies had 766,000 soldiers poised to strike on November 1. If we simply apply the Okinawa percentages to Kyushu, we get 517,000 Japanese soldiers killed; 750,000 Japanese civilians dead; 53,000 American troops and naval personnel killed. A total of 1.3 million dead.

Richard Frank offers a more conservative assessment, based on an analysis that takes into account such important intangibles as the degradation of American combat effectiveness caused by the reshuffling of fighting units after European demobilization. In the end, he estimates, at least 200,000 Japanese soldiers and 380,000 civilians would have died, while American battle deaths would lie in the vicinity of 33,000. A total of 613,000.⁵¹

But these numbers, of course, yield a tally only for the Kyushu operation itself, through late November or early December 1945. By that point in time, however, most of the deaths incurred in the "Soviet shock" scenario would also have taken place: indeed, that gruesome figure would

most likely be still higher by late November. Thus, if we take Frank's conservative estimate and couple it with the other deaths likely to have occurred in Japan, China, and the rest of Asia by the end of 1945, we get an absolute minimum number that stands in the vicinity of 1.4 million lives lost.

The third scenario—cancellation of Olympic and intensive blockade and bombardment of Japan—has already been described above in the section on alternatives to dropping the bomb. It is hard to estimate how many would have died under such an outcome, because we have no clear idea how long it would have taken for the Japanese government to face the facts and capitulate. If its leaders had held out into the spring of 1946, then the naval blockade, coupled with continued bombardment and the near-total destruction of the nation's transportation infrastructure, would probably have resulted in a famine of catastrophic proportions, in which estimates of deaths run as high as 10 million (one-seventh of Japan's population).⁵² Thus, if we conservatively estimate the starvation deaths at only 10 percent of this number (i.e., 1 million), and couple that number with those killed in the "Soviet shock" scenario, we have a final tally on the order of 1.8 million dead.

So we come to our cruel bottom line. The highest estimates for lives lost in the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki stand at 340,000. By comparison, the three nonnuclear scenarios we have just described yield conservatively estimated totals on the order of 850,000, 1.4 million, and 1.8 million, respectively. By this arithmetic, the atomic bombs probably resulted in the saving of at least half a million, and perhaps as many as 1.5 million lives.

In reaching this final judgment, we have dealt heavily in speculative reasoning, basing our conclusions on distinct sets of concatenated assumptions to construct the most plausible scenarios we could for an ending to the war without atomic weapons in play. It is still possible, of course, to imagine a much happier outcome: the swift capitulation of Japan's government without any need for either Hiroshima, invasion, or bloody battles in China—followed by prompt and orderly compliance of the country's far-flung military garrisons in laying down their arms. But this relatively felicitous outcome, as we have seen, is the least plausible of all: most of the available evidence points dramatically in the opposite direction.

Indeed, it is worth underscoring that the three scenarios depicted above are based on a systematic effort to err on the side of conservative assumptions and the lower end of statistical estimates. It is quite possible that the numbers of dead, down any one of those three paths, could have been

far higher. Therefore, it is with a fairly high level of confidence that we can reach this conclusion: dropping the bomb in 1945 (coupled as it was with the Soviet attack in Manchuria) significantly shortened the war, and thereby probably saved an extremely large number of human lives.

6. *Was the Nagasaki bomb necessary?*

The basic question here is whether the Japanese leadership stood poised on the verge of surrender on August 9, after Hiroshima and the Soviet attack in China, and would have tendered its August 10 capitulation offer anyway, regardless of the news coming in to Tokyo about the atomic blast at Nagasaki. Should the United States have waited longer, giving the Japanese more time to absorb the full impact of Hiroshima, before unleashing the nuclear holocaust on a second city?

We now have a detailed picture, from the research of both Japanese and American historians, of what was going on in the highest levels of the Tokyo government between August 6 and August 10. The emperor, in the aftermath of Hiroshima and the Soviet attack in China, had rapidly come around to the view that the war was hopeless, and that the army and navy leaders were not behaving rationally in their insistence on keeping up the fight. Thus, it is probable—although not certain—that Hirohito's mind was already made up for surrender by the morning of August 9, and that the bad news from Nagasaki only reinforced, but did not substantially alter, his position.⁵³

But the Nagasaki bomb did have one important effect within the Imperial Council: it dramatically undermined the position of the hard-liners in their ongoing struggle with the moderates. Admiral Toyoda, a key figure among the diehards, had argued emphatically on August 7 that the obliteration of Hiroshima was probably unique—that the Americans could not have produced more than a few such bombs, and that, even if they did possess an ample supply of nuclear weapons, they would not dare to keep dropping them for fear of being branded as war criminals by world opinion.⁵⁴ The news from Nagasaki on August 9 effectively destroyed this argument: the Americans, apparently, had both the weapons and the will to keep using them indefinitely.

This, it turns out, is precisely the psychological effect that the U.S. leadership hoped the second bomb would have. Originally, the dropping of Fat Man had been scheduled for August 11, but weather reports on August 8 forecast increasing storms and clouds over southern Japan starting on August 10 and continuing for several days—which would have delayed the dropping of the second bomb until August 15. The result was a frantic

rush on the island of Tinian to prepare Fat Man for immediate loading on a B-29, so that the bombing run could take place right away. As one member of the bomb assembly team put it: "The sooner we could get off another mission, the more likely it was that the Japanese would feel that we had large quantities of the devices and would surrender sooner."⁵⁵

We cannot know, of course, what would have happened if the Nagasaki bomb had not figured into the top-level Japanese debates of August 9–10. We can, however, hazard two tentative conclusions. First, the Nagasaki bomb probably facilitated the surrender decision, by simultaneously weakening the position of the diehards and strengthening the resolve of the moderates on the Imperial Council. Second, the Nagasaki bomb most likely helped to mitigate the resistance that some diehards (both inside and outside the Imperial Council) put up in the aftermath of the emperor's decision to capitulate. Faced with the Americans' seemingly unlimited supply of this supreme weapon, some of the diehards may have resigned themselves to surrender in a way that they would not otherwise have done. This was important, because the compliance of the nationalist zealots—not just those in the Imperial Council but also those scattered throughout the officer corps of the Japanese army and navy—was crucial to ensuring a smooth transition into peace. If these fanatical leaders had not been persuaded about the hopelessness of Japan's cause, then far more of them might have refused to accept the surrender order, taking up arms in rebellion against a government they now considered dishonored by capitulation.

In the end, it seems reasonable to conclude that the primary blame for the dead in Nagasaki should rest squarely on the shoulders of the Japanese army and navy militarists on the Imperial Council. It was they who refused to face reality on the morning of August 7, after the nature of what had happened to Hiroshima the day before had become abundantly clear. It was they who clung blindly to irrational shards of hope, after the Soviet entry into the war on August 8. If they had been less fanatical in their intransigence, less willing to brush aside the suffering of their fellow citizens, Japan's surrender could have been communicated to Washington with plenty of time to stop Fat Man from flying.

7. *Was there a plausible alternative for achieving surrender with a lower loss of life, by using the bomb differently than the United States actually did?*

Let us suppose that the United States had attempted a harmless demonstration of the bomb on a desert island, sometime around August 6—while formally giving the Japanese three days to accept the Potsdam terms. We

have reason to believe that this demonstration would have failed to make a sufficient impression on the Japanese leadership to secure a prompt surrender. But it is worth exploring at greater length the question that follows from this: what might have happened next?

The Soviet Union launched its onslaught against Japanese forces in China two days later, on August 8. Let us suppose that the United States, having allowed the three-day period to pass, had sent the *Enola Gay* on its mission against Hiroshima on August 9. It is plausible to argue that this sequence of actions—demonstration of bomb, Soviet attack, Hiroshima—might have decisively tipped the scales toward capitulation. By first demonstrating the atomic bomb and then following up promptly with the nuclear destruction of a city, the United States would have brought immense pressure to bear against the Japanese government. The Japanese could not know that the United States had used up its nuclear arsenal, and that a third bomb would not be ready for dropping until August 21. A powerful impression would have been created that the Americans possessed an unlimited supply of nuclear weapons, as well as the resolve required to use them against cities. Indeed, this impression would arguably have been all the stronger, precisely because the Japanese leadership would have had to admit to themselves the following disturbing fact: the United States evidently felt sufficiently well stocked with nuclear bombs that it could afford to use one on a harmless warning shot.

Given the actual historical record of the Imperial Council's decisions, it is reasonable to assume that a vote taken on August 9 or 10, in the wake of such a sequence of events, would have resulted (once again) in a three-to-three deadlock. Everything hinges, then, on the attitude of the emperor. What would Hirohito have done?

A strong argument can be made that the emperor would have found himself in a very similar frame of mind to the one that impelled him, in actual fact, to intervene personally and break the deadlock in the council with a decision for surrender. For almost two months—since mid-June—his outlook on Japan's prospects had been steadily growing more pessimistic. Although he had not yet made this bleak assessment explicit in his statements to the council, Hirohito had begun to voice grave doubts to his aide and confidant, Marquis Kido.⁵⁶ As August 1945 opened, his final hopes for a negotiated peace lay with playing the Soviet card through a last-ditch effort at secret diplomacy. Now, in the wake of August 8, that hope, too, would have been dashed. And then, on August 9, the Americans demonstrate all too vividly that they not only possess a revolutionary new

weapon, but are capable of using it to destroy Japanese cities at will. To Hirohito, this could plausibly appear as the beginning of a terrible sequence of atomic warfare against his country: first an ultimatum (Potsdam), then a nuclear demonstration shot fired as a final warning, then the actual obliteration of an entire city.

There is a significant possibility that Hirohito—with no grounds whatsoever left for hope, and strong reason to believe the Americans could continue waging atomic warfare indefinitely—would have made up his mind that it was time to surrender. If this had happened, then the war might have ended in mid-August without the need for a nuclear attack against a second Japanese city. Tens of thousands (or more) of Japanese noncombatants might have been spared. The final death toll for the war's closing act, along this path, would have stood at around 200,000—the long-term result of the sole nuclear attack on Hiroshima.

Of course, it is also possible to imagine a very different outcome to this speculative scenario. If Hirohito had not, in the end, made up his mind to break the council's deadlock after the nuclear destruction of a single city, and the war had therefore dragged on, then the number of additional dead in the overall Pacific Theater would have very rapidly surpassed 200,000. We can assume that the Soviet-Japanese confrontation in China would have proceeded apace, that the ongoing loss of life in Japan's occupied territories would have gone on, that the pummeling of Japanese cities by B-29s would have continued—and finally, that another atomic bomb would probably have been dropped on a Japanese city around August 21. At what point the emperor would finally have decided to give up, under such a scenario, is hard to tell.

On balance, the chances of this path leading to a surrender by mid-August are quite significant—significant enough to outweigh the countervailing possibility of even worse loss of life than the toll reached in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This assessment of the odds, while necessarily highly speculative, underscores once again the judgment that U.S. leaders missed an important opportunity when they decided against a noncombat demonstration of the bomb. We cannot be sure, of course; but it is at least plausible to argue that the war might have ended without the need for the nuclear annihilation of a second Japanese city.

8. *Did the United States drop the bomb to intimidate the Soviet Union?*

During the 1960s and 1970s, a group of American revisionist historians put together a new and highly critical interpretation of the history of American foreign policy. In this interpretation, responsibility for the Cold

War lay not just with Stalin, but equally with the United States. Revisionist history works portrayed the United States as an aggressive, neo-imperialist power, imposing its own political and economic system on countries and peoples all over the globe—by military force if need be.

According to some revisionists, particularly the historian Gar Alperovitz, American political leaders in 1945 regarded the bomb as an excellent way to keep the Soviets in a relatively docile and subordinate role during the postwar decades. If the Russians didn't behave themselves, and it came to conflict, we had the bomb and they didn't. According to this interpretation, therefore, the United States leadership fully realized that the Japanese were on the verge of capitulation in the summer of 1945, but insisted on dropping the atomic bombs anyway because of the powerful impression this would make on the Soviets. The bombs, in other words, were not militarily necessary, but were primarily intended as tools for gaining postwar political leverage. President Truman and the other U.S. leaders accepted the sacrifice of two Japanese cities as a way to play a strong hand in the ongoing struggle for power with the USSR.⁵⁷

The evidence presented by this group of historians is quite solid, but does not justify their full argument. What they show, without a doubt, is that the Anglo-American leaders fully appreciated the postwar implications of the bomb, as a device that immeasurably strengthened Western governments in dealing with the Russians. Henry Stimson referred to the bomb in May 1945 as the "master card" in the ongoing American relationship with the Soviet Union.⁵⁸ The British chief of staff, Field Marshal Alan Brooke, wrote in his diary at the Potsdam Conference on July 23, 1945, that the successful test of the atomic bomb in New Mexico had changed everything: "We now had something in our hands which would redress the balance with the Russians."⁵⁹ Truman, too, acutely felt the diplomatic impact of the new weapon he wielded, as the following entry from Stimson's diary at Potsdam makes plain:

[Churchill] told me that he had noticed at the meeting of the [Big] Three yesterday that Truman was evidently very much fortified by something that had happened and that he stood up to the Russians in a most emphatic and decisive manner. . . . When he got to the meeting after having read this report [on the Alamogordo test] he was a changed man. He told the Russians just where they got on and off and generally bossed the whole meeting.⁶⁰

Nevertheless, few historians have accepted Alperovitz's thesis that the main motivation for dropping the bomb was political rather than military,

and that a determined and pervasive effort to intimidate the Soviet Union outweighed all other considerations regarding atomic weapons in 1945. Most have concluded, rather, that American leaders primarily regarded the bomb as a military device that might contribute to ending the war swiftly and decisively, with a minimum loss of Allied troops—and that only as a *secondary* consideration did some American leaders view it as a political cudgel for the postwar era, to keep the Soviets in line.⁶¹ Other American leaders saw things very differently, moreover—to the point that they seriously considered the possibility, after 1945, of handing over control of atomic technology to the newly created United Nations.⁶²

9. *Did U.S. leaders rush to drop the bomb, in the hope of bringing about Japanese surrender before the Soviets could enter the Pacific War?*

The historian Tsuyoshi Hasegawa argues in his book *Racing the Enemy* that a key factor motivating President Truman and his secretary of state, James Byrnes, during the turbulent weeks of July and early August 1945, was a growing fear of Soviet expansion into East Asia. The American leaders distrusted Stalin, and felt certain that he would use the excuse of the war against Japan as a way of securing major territorial gains and postwar political leverage in the region. Therefore, Hasegawa maintains, Truman and Byrnes executed a nimble diplomatic about-face at Potsdam: whereas the United States had been pressuring the Soviets for two years to enter the Pacific War once Hitler was defeated, now the Americans did all they could to sideline the Russians and to position themselves for conquering Japan without Soviet participation. The successful test of the atomic bomb on July 16, according to Hasegawa, convinced American leaders that they might be able to bring Japan to capitulation through atomic warfare alone, and without the need for Russian involvement.

Hasegawa makes a compelling case for this interpretation of the Pacific War's climax. He demonstrates that Stalin indeed harbored extensive expansionist designs in the East Asian region; that the Soviets urgently moved up the date of their attack in Manchuria, with the intent of becoming major players in the defeat of Japan; and that in the aftermath of Japanese surrender they aggressively maneuvered to extract the maximum territorial and political gain from their brief participation in the Asian war. Truman and Byrnes, in other words, had been essentially correct in their reading of Soviet intentions.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude from Hasegawa's analysis that Truman's *primary* aim, in dropping the bomb, was to forestall Soviet entry into the Pacific War. Hasegawa presents a far more nuanced and complex picture than that: the Soviet factor was only one among many in

the American motivations for resorting to atomic weapons. Foremost in Truman's mind was the desire to save American lives;⁶³ but he also wanted to break the power of the Japanese government in a decisive manner that would pave the way for a thoroughgoing postwar reconstruction of the nation's polity; he believed that the Japanese deserved strong retribution for their attack against the United States and their barbaric conduct during the war; he wanted to avoid appearing weak before the American electorate; and finally he wanted to keep East Asia as free as possible from undue Soviet influence in the postwar peace. All these factors, according to Hasegawa, pointed toward the use of the atomic bomb as a powerful tool for bringing a speedy and decisive end to the Pacific War.⁶⁴

Toward the end of his book Hasegawa expresses his hope that the analysis he presents will help dispel the multifaceted myth that still surrounds the use of the atomic bomb in American culture—a myth that "serves to . . . ease the collective American conscience."⁶⁵ Contrary to what many Americans believe, he maintains, the bomb did not by itself provide "the knockout punch to the Japanese government"; rather, it only did so in conjunction with the Soviet attack of August 8.⁶⁶ The bomb was not dropped by the United States with great reluctance, as an absolute last resort after all other alternatives had been exhausted; rather, American leaders eagerly embraced it as a promising means of securing Japan's swift surrender. Finally, the bomb was not dropped solely to save Allied lives; it also served an important political purpose in forestalling the need for a Soviet invasion and occupation of Japan.

10. Was the bomb used out of racism?

In the years between 1942 and 1944, Japanese-Americans in the United States were rounded up and herded into detention camps; no such large-scale camps were ever set up for Italian-Americans or German-Americans. Hatred of the Japanese, according to the historian John Dower, ran deeper in American wartime culture than hatred of the Italians and Germans: it was based on rage over Pearl Harbor, and on a wide array of dehumanizing racial stereotypes that pervaded wartime America from top to bottom. These well-documented realities of World War II prompt the historical observer to ask, If the bomb had been ready for use before V-E Day, would the United States have considered dropping it on Munich or Hamburg? Or was this sort of treatment reserved solely for America's Asiatic enemy?

The problem with this hypothesis is that no evidence has emerged suggesting that the United States would have refrained from using atomic bombs against Germany had the military need arisen. The atomic bomb

was conceived, at its inception, as a specifically anti-German weapon: it was developed because the world's best physicists persuaded American leaders that Germany might be building a nuclear device of its own. To preempt this development, or at the very least to ensure that the Allies could equal this threat from Germany, the United States and Britain built the bomb. In the end, of course, it turned out that the European War ended before the weapon was ready. Nevertheless, if the European War had dragged on for very long without showing signs of a decision in the Allies' favor, and atomic weapons had become available, it is far from inconceivable that such bombs might have been brought into play against Nazi Germany.

The best way to think about this issue is to compare the types of non-nuclear bombing that the Allies were willing to undertake against Germany and Japan. What we see is that there was virtually no difference: Allied aircraft carpet-bombed and firebombed the cities of both nations with equal and impartial destructiveness. Allied attacks massacred both German civilians and Japanese civilians, by the hundreds of thousands: there is no reason to believe that attitudes governing the use of atomic bombs would have been any different.

Without a doubt, racial dehumanization did play a major role in the day-to-day conduct of the Pacific War at the tactical level—on the Japanese side as well as the American. It pervaded practices regarding the taking of prisoners, and ran deep into the motivations of many fighting men. Nevertheless, there is no evidence suggesting that racist impulses governed the key Allied strategic decisions that ultimately shaped the Pacific War: from the "Europe First" policy, to the planning of major land or seaborne operations, to the guidelines governing aerial bombardment, to the drafting of reconstruction blueprints for the postwar period. We have little reason to believe that racism constituted a salient factor in the decision to drop the atomic bomb.

11. Did the use of this weapon violate the basic principles of a just war?

Over the past two millennia, since the early Middle Ages, Christian church leaders and Western moral philosophers have struggled to define a doctrine for what constitutes a just war.⁶⁷ When is it morally acceptable for people to take their swords or guns or cannons and start killing large numbers of other people? And what rules should govern this violence once it has started?

The first of these issues, generally referred to as *jus ad bellum*, concerns the initial decision to go to war, and has usually entailed the following five principles:

- *Just cause.* The war must have a legitimate purpose, such as defending against unprovoked aggression or protecting the weak.
- *Legitimate authority.* Only governments, and not private individuals, can legally go to war.
- *Last resort.* The war must constitute the option of final resort, to be embarked upon only after all peaceful alternatives have been exhausted.
- *Probability of success.* The war must have a reasonable prospect of success, and not squander human life in senseless violence.
- *Proportionality of goals.* The human and economic costs incurred by the war must be proportionate to the good expected by taking up arms.

The second issue, generally referred to as *jus in bello*, concerns the conduct of warfare after the violence has commenced. Its principles have generally entailed the following two elements:

- *Proportionality of means.* The destructive devices and practices used in warfare must be proportionate to the overall aims of the warring parties.
- *Sparing noncombatants.* Innocent civilians and noncombatants should never become the direct targets of warfare; only military personnel and installations can be legitimately attacked.⁶⁸

Needless to say, Western history is replete with conflicts in which some or all of these moral constraints were deliberately violated. The siege of a city in the Middle Ages, for example, often violated the principle of shielding noncombatants, since it aimed at subduing an entire population through starvation. The carnage of the First World War, by contrast, generally respected the sanctity of noncombatants, but it arguably violated the principle of proportionality, since it is hard to see how the changes brought about by this conflict could be worth 8 million human lives.

Some political theorists have maintained that the concept itself of "justice" in warfare is irrelevant: once the state-to-state violence starts, the domain of justice is left irrevocably behind, and only force matters, until a new power equilibrium is reached, and on its foundation the domain of peacetime justice is then reestablished. According to this position, therefore, winning is everything: any and all means that can get you to victory are valid, and moral qualms represent only a needless distraction from the grim business at hand. Nevertheless, as philosophers like Michael Walzer have persuasively argued, the moral ideals of justice in warfare—though often ignored or violated—still bear great significance in human affairs.⁶⁹

Human beings are always moral agents, and cannot simply shuck off their moral nature when war is declared: they take their intuitions about fairness and justice with them even into combat. Mercy and honor on the battlefield have always made up a large part of the story of human conflict; nor should we underestimate the powerful restraints that these moral principles have placed on the historical conduct of warfare.⁷⁰ This restraint that humans have shown, even in the way they wield violence against one another, not only constitutes an important part of what makes us civilized beings: it is an outgrowth of the deepest moral qualities that render our lives meaningful, worth living.

How, then, does the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki figure into this tradition of thought? The answer is more complex than one might think at first glance. Dropping atomic bombs on these two cities egregiously violated the principle of sparing noncombatants; it partially violated and partially satisfied the principle of proportionality; and it fully satisfied the criterion of probability of success.

It doesn't take a great deal of imagination to realize that nuclear weapons are profoundly indiscriminate devices. They make possible the kinds of devastation that ultimately sweep away all distinctions: defense and aggression, innocent or culpable, military or civilian, bystander or active participant. With nuclear weapons, everyone becomes a participant. Amid the rubble of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, after August 9, lay the remains not only of Japanese old women and toddlers, mentally handicapped persons and Buddhist monks, but of Korean laborers pressed into service in those cities, as well as several dozen American, British, and Australian POWs—all equally reduced to ashes by the pitiless impartiality of the nuclear flash. There is no escaping this conclusion: according to one of the core traditions of Christianity and of Western moral thought, the use of nuclear weapons against civilian population centers is an inherently unjust form of warfare, because it inevitably slaughters vast numbers of helpless noncombatants. It is, by the very standards of ethics that have undergirded American civil society since its founding, utterly barbaric. The United States, by using such a weapon of indiscriminate mass destruction to annihilate a city, committed a clearly immoral act.

Our second criterion, the principle of proportionality, holds that the amount of destructive force we use in warfare must be commensurate with the threat we face and with the aim we are trying to achieve. In the Bible it says, "an eye for an eye." In concrete terms, the principle of proportionality stipulates that if you attack my city, using cannons and

infantry; saying that you want to enslave me and my people, I am justified in counterattacking, using cannons and infantry of my own. It is also morally justifiable for me to build a better cannon, if I can do this.

But if I develop totally new weapons, so that you are helpless before me, and I chase you down and destroy your army, and kill every one of you, and then I kill all your wives and children and grandchildren, and then I wipe your city off the face of the earth, and then I destroy every city you have ever lived in, poisoning the ground where all those cities lay, so that nothing can ever grow there again for hundreds of years—then, according to the moral doctrine on just wars, this would violate the principle of proportionality because my counterattack is not commensurate with the threat posed by your initial attack. My "self-defense" is seen as going too far.

At one level, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were extremely "unproportional" devices, because they obliterated not only the military garrison and war-related industries of these cities, but the entire cities themselves. They destroyed, in other words, not only the cities' contribution to the Japanese war effort, but their whole social order from top to bottom. Total destruction of this magnitude was hugely disproportionate to the attack that the Japanese had leveled against the United States.

At another level, however, the atomic bombing of these two Japanese cities *did* satisfy the criterion of proportionality, because it did not eliminate Japanese society in its entirety, but only threatened to do so through a graduated and continued use of these weapons. Although the destruction of the two targets themselves was close to total, the impact of these attacks on the Japanese nation as a whole remained proportionately limited: even after suffering this terrible blow, Japan could go on existing as a viable polity. Thus, precisely because the American attack came at the dawn of nuclear technology, and hence remained unavoidably constrained by the short supply of these horrific new weapons, it did not yet partake of the ecocidal quality that this technology would later acquire. The atomic bombing of 1945 was still relatively limited in scope—it was not yet an "instantaneous destroyer of entire nations"—and could therefore legitimately claim an element of measure, of proportionality, as an instrument of warfare.

In brandishing this extreme threat of destruction, moreover, the United States did succeed in achieving its immediate aim, which was to persuade the Japanese to surrender. The means—destruction of two cities—was

arguably proportional to the vitally important goal of bringing the war to a swift end. This brings us in turn to our third just-war criterion, the principle of probability of success. The Japanese leaders were egregiously violating this principle in the summer of 1945, by fanatically continuing to prosecute a war that they were doomed to lose. They seemed willfully blind, or in some cases even indifferent, to the bloodshed that their policies were causing. Dropping the atomic bombs brought this senseless squandering of human lives to a rapid and decisive end. Seen in this light, therefore, the destruction of two cities, cruel as it was, could be construed as a morally justifiable act because it probably resulted in a net saving of human lives on an immense scale.

What we have here, then, is a classic instance of a mixed verdict. According to the tradition of just-war theory, the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was unequivocally bestial, unconscionable, barbaric; yet it shortened the war and thereby probably saved a tremendous number of lives.

12. *Was the dropping of the atomic bomb justified? How to judge the morality of this act?*

In evaluating any moral decision, we need to take into account three basic factors: context, intention, and consequences. The broader context of the Second World War, as we have seen, firmly situates the atomic bombing of Japan within an escalating pattern of atrocious practices: the maltreatment or massacre of civilians on the part of the Japanese and Germans, the mass killing of prisoners of war by the Russians, Japanese, and Germans, the barbaric practices of area bombing and firebombing on the part of the Anglo-Americans. Well before Hiroshima, the human species in World War II had already stained itself with cruelty and butchery on a scale that was arguably unprecedented in history. Of course, this wider pattern of behavior in no way excuses what was done to the people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But it does put these acts into their wartime context: this was a time of desperate struggle for survival, a time in which horrendous loss of life filled the news on a daily basis, a time of extremes. The atomic bombings were unfortunately far from unique in their atrociousness: rather, they fit squarely into the generalized barbarization of human behavior in the war. While this broader wartime context does not in the slightest way legitimize any of the crimes that were perpetrated, it does help us to understand how seemingly ordinary people could have proved capable of unleashing such breathtaking cruelty. The situation itself had become far from ordinary, and human beings (on all sides)

proved all too malleable, all too amenable, in adapting themselves to the war's vicious pattern.

The intentions of the Allied and Japanese leaders must occupy a central place in our assessment. A heavy burden of responsibility lies on the shoulders of Hirohito and his Imperial Council: if they had been willing to face the reality of defeat when it became undeniable in the early months of 1945, they might have spared their nation (and many other nations) untold suffering. Defiance in the face of unfavorable odds can be seen as bravery; but protracted defiance in the face of impossible odds is nothing but a senseless waste. There is no honor here, but only an irrational stubbornness and an appalling disregard for human life.

As for the Anglo-American leaders, their primary intention in dropping the bomb was to end the war quickly and decisively, with as few casualties on their own side as possible. Their decision, as we have seen, was not motivated by racism, nor was it primarily motivated by any ulterior political motive such as intimidating the Russians or forestalling Soviet entry into the Pacific War (though these political considerations did count as significant secondary motivating factors). Their refusal to back down from unconditional surrender in the war's final months can be soundly justified on both moral and pragmatic grounds: an offer of peace negotiations would probably have strengthened the determination of the diehards on the Imperial Council to hold out even longer. Moreover, the way the Allied leaders fudged this issue in the Potsdam Declaration, and then partially yielded on it in the touchy give-and-take between August 10 and August 14, should be recognized as adroitly pragmatic statesmanship: it skillfully trod a delicate line between breaking the emperor's power and keeping him in place as a figurehead to ease the transition into a postwar occupation.

Where the Allied leaders arguably fell grievously short was in their failure to consider with sufficient seriousness the enormity of the device that they were introducing into human affairs. The fact that they never formally discussed the possible nonuse of the bomb is simply astounding, and inexcusable. Once it became clear in 1944 that Germany was headed toward inevitable defeat, and that no German nuclear weapons would likely come into play (which Allied leaders knew by November 1944),⁷¹ the most urgent rationale for developing atomic weapons faded away. The bomb was being built as a deterrent to counterbalance the possibility of German nuclear weaponry; now that this threat was gone, it was time to step back and reevaluate the implications of the Manhattan Project under the new strategic circumstances. But no such reassessment took place

in the spring of 1945: the giant project went rolling on, like a technological juggernaut outside human control. Even the wise and experienced public servant Henry Stimson, who recognized the bomb as a potential "Frankenstein," capable of "destroying international civilization," never brought up before the Interim Committee, which he chaired, the possibility of refraining from using this new weapon. Even if the committee's decision had ultimately come out in favor of using the device, it remains appalling that the U.S. government never gave this momentous question the consideration it deserved.

One rejoinder to this line of criticism might run as follows: You are forgetting that we were at war. With every passing day, Americans (and Japanese) were dying in large numbers. In such a situation, it is unreasonable to expect American leaders to have seriously considered relinquishing a potentially war-winning weapon. To judge them negatively for failing to do so is to apply an unfair form of 20-20 hindsight to the decisions made in a historical context of all-out war. What mattered was *winning*, quickly and decisively, and dropping the bomb held out the very real possibility of furthering that aim.

There is considerable validity to this line of argument: it embeds the decision-making process of the Allied leaders within the wartime context of 1945, and thereby helps us to understand how decent men could have gone forward so straightforwardly with the assumption that the bomb should be used. But this argument does not, in itself, justify the way they reached their decision. They knew (from the Alamogordo test) the magnitude of this weapon's destructiveness; they knew it would indiscriminately kill a huge number of noncombatants; they knew it would bring about a revolution in the nature of warfare: we have clear documentary evidence of the fact that the Allied leaders understood the grave consequences of unleashing this new weapon. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to expect them to have carefully weighed all their options, including nonuse of the bomb, before giving the green light. Even in the dire circumstances of wartime—indeed, especially in those circumstances—it was incumbent on the nation's leadership to weigh very deliberately and soberly the possible short-term and long-term consequences of their actions.

Much the same can be said—but even more emphatically—for the option of demonstrating the bomb on an uninhabited target. Even though we can be almost certain, given what we now know in retrospect, that such a demonstration would have failed to compel a prompt Japanese surrender, this simple act would have considerably strengthened the American moral position in the final phase of the war. Such a demonstration, followed by

the Soviet attack in China and by the atomic bombing of Hiroshima, could conceivably have resulted in a swift surrender, thereby sparing Nagasaki (or some other city) from nuclear incineration. But the U.S. government dismissed the possibility of demonstrating the bomb, after giving the idea only cursory consideration. It thereby cast an indelible shadow over America's handling of the war's final act. The nuclear era could have opened with a gesture of courageous magnanimity—a warning shot across the bow of Japan, a harmless demonstration of the bomb on an uninhabited site. Instead, it opened like a blind step off a precipice.

Finally, we come to the retrospective assessment of consequences. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki killed between 110,000 and 340,000 people; as we have seen, the three most plausible scenarios for the war's ending without nuclear weapons yield conservative estimates of deaths between 850,000 and 1.8 million. Can the logic of the lesser of two evils apply to events of such enormity, in which the loss of human life is so high? We have no alternative but to answer yes. If these were indeed the only realistic scenarios for ending the war—kill 340,000 or kill 850,000—then we are morally bound, in retrospect, to recognize the relative legitimacy of the path that resulted in the lower loss of life.

The United States has to bear the moral responsibility for the gap between the path it actually followed in ending the war and the nuclear demonstration path that might plausibly have spared the lives of 100,000 or more noncombatants. Nevertheless, the argument remains intact that the atomic bombing of at least one Japanese population center was necessary for a speedy end to the war. We still arrive at the conclusion, in other words, that atomic weaponry significantly shortened the war, and thereby probably saved a great many lives.

We must exercise caution in saying this, however. To argue that the atomic bombs "ultimately saved lives" can lead us to slip all too easily into a retroactive blanket justification of the entire process through which the United States went about ending the Pacific War. But this is actually a far from straightforward matter. We have to make a clear distinction between the intention of the Allied leaders in 1945, which was primarily to save Allied lives by ending the war swiftly, and the retrospective conclusion that dropping the bomb also probably ended up saving an even larger number of Japanese lives. These are two separate moral considerations.

Of course, the consequences of Hiroshima and Nagasaki extended well beyond the year 1945. They ushered in the era of nuclear arms races, of Mutually Assured Destruction, of terrorists potentially wielding WMD

(weapons of mass destruction). They opened up a Pandora's box that can never be closed again: human beings now know how to build these weapons, and have established the precedent of using them on one another.

These are heavy consequences indeed, but it is not reasonable to impute them entirely to the bombing of two Japanese cities in World War II. Sooner or later, these kinds of weapons would undoubtedly have emerged in our industrial civilization, regardless of the particularities of the war. Even if the Manhattan Project had never taken place, the science was there, waiting, and the human impulse to build ever more potent weapons would unquestionably have taken civilization down the nuclear path. Regardless of Hiroshima, we would no doubt live today in an age of atomic killing machines. World War II merely hurried the process along.

Was the dropping of the atomic bomb justified? This question cannot be answered in a straightforward way, with a clear-cut yes or no. Too many important contradictory factors come into play for that: either a pure yes or a pure no would force us to ignore or override extremely compelling arguments on the other side. The morality of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki cannot but remain profoundly ambiguous.

Those who consider the dropping of the bomb an absolute evil usually rest their case on the horror of what happened to hundreds of thousands of helpless noncombatants on the ground. If this is not pure evil, they ask, then what in the world is? This judgment, however—while understandable—fails to address one key point: the war had to end, somehow. In one way or another, the Japanese had to be brought to accept the need for surrender. Therefore, if we conclude that dropping the bomb was absolutely wrong, we are unavoidably affirming that one of the nonnuclear paths to surrender would have been morally preferable—even though, as we have seen, it is probable that all those paths would have exacted a much higher blood price than the path that led through Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This is, without a doubt, a deeply problematic position to take.

But the alternative is equally troubling. If we conclude that dropping the bomb probably resulted in a net saving of human lives, and therefore constituted the lesser evil among many terrible options, we are in effect saying that there can be such a thing as a "justifiable" atrocity. It is one thing to speak of the lesser of two evils when we are assessing something like the amputation of a gangrenous limb as a way of saving a person's life. It is quite another to use this logic, when the "items" being weighed in the

scale are hundreds of thousands of human beings. Logic is logic: it is indifferent to the scope of the factors being considered. But the full human reality in this case entails more than cold logic: we cannot help being brought up short by the sheer awfulness of *all* the courses of action we are comparing.

William Styron, in his novel *Sophie's Choice*, depicts a situation in which an SS man at Auschwitz forces a Polish woman to choose which one of her two young children will go to the gas chambers, and which will be spared. If she does not choose, he tells her, both children will go to the gas immediately.⁷² In a sense, the culmination of the Pacific War in August 1945 places all of us—as we look back in retrospective judgment on those momentous deeds—in an analogous position. We are presented with an impossible decision among courses of action that are all totally abominable. Either way we choose—kill 200,000, kill 340,000, kill 850,000, kill 1.8 million—we are in effect giving our assent to an abomination, in which hundreds of thousands of innocents will suffer and die. Either way we choose, we cannot but be morally lessened, spiritually wounded, by the choice. Despite our undeniable moral obligation to opt for the lesser among several terrible evils—despite the unavoidable need to adopt *some* course of action that would bring swift termination of a brutal war—this still does not take away the sense of stain that lingers from our decision. We are running, here, against the very outer limits of moral reasoning itself.

It would be a strange conscience indeed that could rest easy with this kind of choice. How could we ever reach a clear and “comfortable” conclusion regarding this atrocity that probably saved a vast number of lives? How can we possibly frame a moral response to the story of these two Japanese cities, without having profound misgivings, without agonizing and faltering in rendering judgment?

[A grocer in Hiroshima:]

The appearance of people was . . . well, they all had skin blackened by burns. . . . They had no hair because their hair was burned, and at a glance you couldn't tell whether you were looking at them from in front or in back. . . . They didn't look like people of this world.

[One of Dr. Hachiya's visitors:]

I came onto I don't know how many, burned from the hips up; and where the skin had peeled, their flesh was wet and mushy.

And they had no faces! Their eyes, noses and mouths had been burned

away, and it looked like their ears had melted off. It was hard to tell front from back.⁷³

When a moral choice entails using weapons of such cruelty, when it confronts us with loss of life on this scale, when all the options are so patently unspeakable, our moral faculty understandably cracks and groans under the pressure.

If it doesn't, there is something wrong.