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How US Hiroshima Mythology Insults Veterans

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“The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all.”
— Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay, WWII Air Force Commander
of the 21st Bomber Command, Sept. 20, 1945

With President Obama’s May 27 visit to Hiroshima, reporters, columnists and editors generally adhered to the official story that “the atomic bomb... ultimately spared more Japanese civilians from a final invasion,” as Kaimay Yuen Terry wrote for the *Minneapolis StarTribune*, or that, “Without it, more Japanese would have died in a US assault on the islands, as would have tens of thousands of Americans,” as Mike Hashimoto wrote for the *Dallas Morning News*.

“The dropping of the bombs stopped the war, saved millions of lives,” Harry Truman wrote in his memoir *Truman Speaks*. Oddly, historians have found no record of any memo, cable, command projection or study, military or civilian, where this estimate was suggested to him. In his book *The Invasion of Japan*, historian John Ray Skates says, “... prophecies of extremely high casualties only came to be widely accepted after the war to rationalize the use of the atomic bombs.” And historian Martin J. Sherwin has “cited a ‘considerable body’ of new evidence that suggested the bomb may have cost, rather than saved, American lives. That is, if the US had not been so determined to complete, test, and finally use the bomb, it might have arranged the Japanese surrender weeks earlier, preventing much bloodshed on Okinawa.”

Obama — uttering not a word about the historical controversy roiling since 1945 — perpetuated the rationalization, cover-up, and nostalgia that guarantees the US will never apologize for the needless and experimental massacre of 200,000 Japanese civilians. As Hashimoto wrote, “No apology [is] needed for sparing lives on both sides...”

The *New York Times* reported vaguely that, “Many historians believe the bombings on Hiroshima and then Nagasaki, which together took the lives of more than 200,000 people, saved lives on balance, since an invasion of the islands would have led to far greater bloodshed.”

While “many” historians may still believe this, the majority do not. As noted by the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission’s chief historian J. Samuel Walker: “The consensus among scholars is that the bomb was not needed to avoid an invasion of Japan and to end the war within a relatively short time. It is clear that alternatives to the bomb existed and that Truman and his advisers knew it,” Walker wrote in the winter 1990 issue of *Diplomatic History*.

Five years earlier, historian Gar Alperovitz wrote in *Atomic Diplomacy*, “[P]resently available evidence shows the atomic bomb was not needed to end the war or to save lives — and that this was understood by American leaders at the time.” Further declassification made his lengthy history, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of An American Myth* (Knopf, 1995) even stronger on this point.

Admirals and Generals Debunk the Myth

Contrary to Gov. Sarah Palin’s claim that Obama’s visit to Hiroshima “insults veterans,” the fiction that the atomic bombs ended the war is the real insult to the people who actually fought and won

the war against Japan. The official myth that incinerating Hiroshima and Nagasaki forced Japan’s surrender ignores and obscures the fact that combat veterans and bomber crews defeated Japan well before August 6, 1945 — by sacrificing so mightily in dangerous bombing raids and in bloody battles for Midway, Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and elsewhere. Dozens of high-level military officers have testified to this fact.

Most of the ranking officers who directed the war in the Pacific have never agreed that the atom bombs were conclusive. Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay, Commander of the 21st Bomber Command, speaking publicly and for the record Sept. 20, 1945, said unequivocally: “The war would have been over in two weeks without the Russians entering and without the atomic bomb.” Pressed by a reporter who asked, “Had they not surrendered because of the atomic bomb?” Gen. LeMay — who directed the destruction of 67 major Japanese cities using mass incendiary attacks — said flatly, “The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all.”

Likewise, Gen. George Kenny, who commanded parts of the Army Air Forces in the Pacific, when asked in 1969 whether it was wise to use atom bombs, said, “No! I think we had the Japs licked anyhow. I think they would have quit probably within a week or so of when they did quit,” Alperovitz recounts in *The Decision*.

Alperovitz’s research found that Adm. Lewis Strauss, special assistant to WW II Navy Secretary James Forrestal, wrote to the naval historian Robert Albion Dec. 19, 1960 “from the Navy’s point of view, there are statements by Admiral King, Admiral Halsey, Admiral Radford, Admiral Nimitz and others who expressed themselves to the effect that neither the atomic bomb nor the proposed invasion of the Japanese mainland were necessary to produce the surrender.”

In *Mandate for Change*, Gen. Dwight Eisenhower wrote that when Secretary of War Henry Stimson told him atomic bombs were going to be used, “I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary...”

President Truman’s Chief of Staff, Adm. William Leahy, adamantly agreed. As Robert Lifton and Greg Mitchell, report in *Hiroshima in America: 50 Years of Denial*, Leahy said, “It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons...” Lifton and Mitchell also note that Henry “Hap” Arnold, Commanding General of the Army Air Forces, said in his memoirs, “It always appeared to us that, atomic bomb or no atomic bomb, the Japanese were already on the verge of collapse.”

Answers to questions about the need of the atomic bombings were given early on, but some were kept secret. “[T]he US Strategic Bombing Survey published its conclusion that Japan would likely have surrendered in 1945 without atomic bombing, without a Soviet declaration of war, and without an American invasion,” Alperovitz reports in *The Decision*. The historian spent 30 years studying the issue and has revealed that a 1946 study by the Intelligence Group of the War Department’s Military Intelligence Division — discovered in 1989 — “concluded the atomic bomb had not been needed to end the war” and “judged that it was ‘almost a certainty that the Japanese would have capitulated upon the entry of Russia into the war.’”

The government’s official pretexts for incinerating Hiroshima and Nagasaki still dominate public opinion. In 2005, a Gallop poll reported that 57 percent of people surveyed in the US believed the bombings were justified and legitimate. The myth retains its usefulness. President Obama’s proposed 30-year, trillion-dollar program to rebuild the nuclear weapons production establishment can only go ahead if taxpayers hold fast to the idea that something good can come from the mass destruction of civilians.

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