

The Decision to Drop the Bomb¹

- (1) The option to explode it in an uninhabited area, with previous notification to the government of Japan, was discussed by a high-level committee, but was abandoned because “nothing would have been more damaging to our effort to obtain surrender than a warning or a demonstration followed by a dud--and this was a real possibility. Furthermore, we had no bombs to waste....the two atomic bombs which we had dropped were the only ones we had ready.”
- (2) “Japan, in July 1945,... had gone so far as to make tentative proposals to the Soviet government, hoping to use the Russians as mediators in a negotiated peace. These vague proposals contemplated the retention by Japan of important conquered areas and were therefore not considered seriously. There was as yet no indication of any weakening in the Japanese determination to fight rather than accept unconditional surrender. If she should persist in her fight to the end, she had still a great military force.”
- (3) By mid-1945, the Japanese army still numbered 5 million men. In the event of continued fighting, the US would have the job of fighting this army, combined with five thousand attack aircraft engaged in kamikaze attacks. An invasion of Japan (necessary without the bomb) was estimated to require 5 million US soldiers, and take 1 million US lives, along with a much greater number of Japanese lives (as had been the case with previous invasions of outlying islands). This would be in addition to an extensive bombing campaign on Japan.
- (4) “In March 1945 our Air Force had launched its first great incendiary raid on the Tokyo area. In this raid more damage was done and more casualties were inflicted than was the case at Hiroshima. Hundreds of bombers took part and hundreds of tons of incendiaries were dropped. Similar successive raids burned out a great part of the urban area of Japan, but the Japanese fought on.”

Didn't the Japanese offer to surrender before the bomb was dropped? Yes, they did—but their offer included the retention of the current Japanese government—ostensibly to control the Japanese population after they heard of the surrender. Imagine a Nazi offer to surrender, as long as Hitler could remain in power. Of course our nation wouldn't consider it.

Wasn't the bomb dropped to impress the Russians with our power? Actually, if that was our only motive, *this would have been the ideal opportunity to detonate it over an uninhabited location, with them watching.* We could have done this after, or during, our war against Japan. In fact, at the Potsdam conference we did mention its existence to the USSR. But to say that this was our only motive is to ignore the lives of two million-plus people who would have been killed, otherwise.

¹ The following is based on the article *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, by Henry L. Stimson (Sec. of War 1940-45) published in *Harpers' Magazine*, February 1947 (pp. 97-107). You can access this article at tinyurl.com/decisionbomb