

## **Why was the atomic bomb dropped in 1945?**

### **A Greenpeace background briefing summarising the American debate on the 60th anniversary of Hiroshima and Nagasaki**

#### **The official story**

On August 6<sup>th</sup> 1945 a US B-29 bomber, the *Enola Gay*, dropped an atomic bomb on the city of Hiroshima. On August 9<sup>th</sup>, another B-29, *Bock's Car*, dropped a second bomb on Nagasaki. In the years after the dropping of the atomic bomb American administrations, and the US military, have developed an official narrative which states that it was *militarily necessary* to drop the bomb to end the war with Japan. The only alternative was an invasion of Japan in which many US troops would have been killed.

This official narrative jars with statements by US military officers. The top Army commanders in the Pacific and Europe, Generals Douglas MacArthur and Dwight D. Eisenhower believed there was no necessity to use the atomic bomb. In the Navy, Truman's Chief of Staff Admiral William D. Leahy was opposed to the dropping of the bomb. His view was shared by the commander-in-chief of the US Fleet, Admiral Ernest J. King, and the commander of the US Pacific fleet, Admiral Chester W. Nimitz. The commander of the US Airforce, General Henry H. Arnold, saw no necessity to drop the atomic bomb, a view also held by Generals Claire Chennault and Curtis LeMay.

#### **The new historical research**

In recent years historians have been able to access declassified documents from the period. The result has been a series of books which challenge the claim that it was militarily necessary to drop the atomic bomb. They have shown that the Japanese government was already seeking to find a way to surrender and that, through the decoding of intelligence material, President Harry Truman, Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, and Secretary of State James F. Byrnes were aware of this.

What has emerged is that Truman, Byrnes, and Stimson came to see America's atomic monopoly as giving it the power to dictate how Soviet Russia should behave in Europe and East Asia. This led to a shift in US policy. At Yalta, Roosevelt believed he needed Soviet co-operation in the European and Pacific wars and would also need it in the years ahead to ensure that there was no re-emergence of the German threat.

Truman now envisaged a post war world in which America would use her atomic monopoly to lead the liberal capitalist world and to relegate the Soviet Union to a secondary status in world affairs. For this reason Truman delayed the Potsdam meeting with Churchill and Stalin until the bomb could be tested. "*If it explodes as I think it will,*" Truman said to aide Jonathan Daniels on the eve of the conference, "*I'll certainly have a hammer on those boys.*" When he received news that the July 16<sup>th</sup> Trinity test had indeed been successful Truman felt his hand was strengthened in his negotiations with Stalin. Churchill, too, shared the idea that the bomb could be used as a diplomatic lever. Sir Alan Brookes, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, records:

*[The Prime Minister] had absorbed all the minor American exaggerations and, as a result, was completely carried away. It was now no longer necessary for the Russians to come into the Japanese war; the new explosive alone was sufficient to settle the matter. Furthermore, we now had something in our hands which would redress the balance with the Russians. The secret of this explosive and the power to use it would completely alter the diplomatic equilibrium which was adrift since the defeat of Germany. Now we had a new value which redressed our position (pushing out his chin and scowling); now we could say, "If you insist on doing this or that, well ... And then where are the Russians!"*

The result was that by the time Truman left the Potsdam meeting his strategy for dealing with the Soviet Union depended on America's dropping the atomic bomb on Japan.

There continues to be, however, disagreement among US historians as to how much weight to assign to this factor in Truman's decision to use the bomb. Other arguments presented deal with the inertia of a process already in motion and difficult to derail; the desire of scientists and the military to test and display their technological achievement; the hope that such a display of the bomb's terrible destructive power would forever put an end to war; and the fact that the firebombing had so lowered the moral threshold that this hardly seemed like a dramatic step. As well the desire to force unconditional surrender so as to maintain Truman's political support, the fact that there was no strong reason presented not to use the bomb, and the realization that the Japanese leadership was still sharply divided about surrender terms and not quite ready to capitulate.

### **The debate within the US about the atomic bomb**

After the end of the Cold War the Smithsonian Institution decided to use the 1995 fiftieth anniversary of Hiroshima to open up a national debate over why the bomb was dropped. A major exhibition which centred around a display of the B-29 bomber used to drop the atomic bomb, the *Enola Gay*, was planned. The exhibition would present the official line but also contain statements by historians and by senior military officers who did not believe the atomic bomb had to be dropped. Graphic photographic images of the effects of the bomb on people of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were to be displayed.

The exhibit was fiercely opposed by The Air Force Association and some veterans groups. With opposition in Congress and hostile editorials in the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, USA Today and other papers the Smithsonian had to give ground. It cut out all statements by Eisenhower, Leahy and other senior military officers and decision makers. This led to a backlash from American historians. The executive board of the Organisation of American Historians passed a resolution condemning the removal of documents and other revisions because of Congressional pressure. Faced with conflicting pressures, the director of the Smithsonian Martin Harwit resigned and the exhibition was scaled back to a simple exhibit of the *Enola Gay*. Only one photograph of a dead victim of the atomic blast remained.

### **The consequences of the atomic attack**

Historians have documented the Truman administration's extraordinary and largely successful efforts to manage American public perceptions of the atomic attack. The initial press release described Hiroshima as a "Japanese Army base" and made no mention of the fact that it was also a city full of civilians. Moreover, it used terms which described the atomic bomb as similar to a high-explosive weapon and made no mention of the fact that it was also a radiation weapon – which made it similar to poison gas whose use was prohibited by international law.

When America occupied Japan, MacArthur went to great lengths to prevent journalists visiting ground zero and seeing the effects of the bomb, to prevent photographic images and film of the disaster reaching Americans and Europeans, and to suppress scientific assessments of the radiation damage and its long term effects.

Historians have also opened up new questions about the Cold War, the Korean War and Vietnam. They have argued bomb was a major driver of the Cold War. Vitaly, it revolutionised American policy towards Germany. The bomb permitted US leaders to reverse the agreement reached by Roosevelt and Stalin at Yalta that the two nations would work together to prevent a re-emergence of the German threat by going ahead with the rebuilding and rearming of Germany. This shift from co-operation to confrontation over Germany was a major factor in the development of the Cold War.

The bomb made the Korean and Vietnam wars more possible. True, the US might have decided to fight these wars anyway. But the possession of the atomic bomb did make it seem less risky for the US to commit US troops to these adventures. *"Had the weapon not been available to protect the US global flank in Europe,"* write Gar Alperovitz and Kai Bird, *"such episodes would always have been the 'wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time,' to use General Omar Bradley's words."*

### **New information about the bomb**

The sixtieth anniversary of Hiroshima has seen the debate entering a new phase. Thus Sadao Asada at the University of Kyoto has argued that Japanese military archives show that the dropping of the atomic bomb made it much easier for the Japanese peace party to overcome military resistance to surrender. This argument is, in turn, challenged by Tsuyoshi Hasegawa at the University of California San Diego in his recently published *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman and the Surrender of Japan*. In the first detailed examination of Japanese, Soviet and American archives, Hasegawa shows that that Truman decided to use the atomic bomb because it was a way of winning the war against Japan before the Soviets entered the Pacific war and this would enable the US to limit Soviet expansion in Asia. Moreover, it was the Soviet entry into the war and *not* the two atomic bombs that was ultimately decisive in convincing the Japanese military to give up their bankrupt diplomatic strategy and abandon a hopeless military position.

### **What does this mean for us 60 years after Hiroshima?**

The new historical research has shown that, had the US decided not to base its strategy for dealing with the Soviet Union on the use the atomic bomb in 1945 it might have been possible to build on the wartime cooperation with the Soviets, and to avoid or limit the nuclear arms race, the Cold War and the Korean and Vietnam wars.

This should give us pause for thought about the wisdom of current US and UK nuclear weapons developments, strategies, operational policies and deployments.

It shows that the Bush administration's declaration that it will use nuclear weapons as a means of coercion, its development of a new generation of small, more "usable," nuclear weapons, and its erasure of the line between nuclear and conventional war is less of a departure from previous US policies than it is commonly represented.

The same is true for Britain's development and deployment of its Trident nuclear missile submarine as a "sub-strategic" weapon with a low-yield warhead, which is more "usable" in defending Britain's "strategic interests."

Instead, both show a return to US nuclear developments, operational doctrines, deployments, strategies, and use of nuclear weapons at the end of the Second World War and during part of the Cold War which sought to use nuclear weapons to secure global dominance – and also to the similar British practices during the retreat from Empire in the Middle East and in Asia documented by Paul Rogers, Professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University, and independent researcher Milan Rai.

The history of the atomic bomb shows that the idea of using nuclear weapons in an attempt to exercise global control is already bankrupt.

It is morally bankrupt because it led to the sacrifice of two cities – contrary to international law and despite the fact that there was no military necessity – in pursuit of America's quest to be the global leader.

It is practically bankrupt because the actual result was, firstly, an out-of-control nuclear arms race which brought the world to the brink of nuclear war and which led to the proliferation of nuclear weapons to more and more countries, and secondly, a significant contribution to the Cold War and to the hot wars of Korea and Vietnam.

## **Notes:**

### **Some statements by US military commanders**

Eisenhower later recounted his opposition to the dropping of the atomic bomb in his second memoir, *Mandate for Change*. In it he described a 1945 meeting he had had with Secretary for War Stimson at Potsdam:

*During his recitation of the relevant facts, I had been conscious of a feeling of depression and so 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, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as a measure to save American lives. It was my belief that Japan was, at the very moment, seeking to surrender with a minimum loss of "face."*

A few years after Hiroshima in 1950 Admiral William Leahy, US Chief of Staff under both Roosevelt and Truman, publicly declared his opposition to the dropping of the atomic bomb:

*"It is my opinion that the use of this barbarious weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender....*

*My own feeling was that in being the first to use it, we had adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children."*

In his 1987 book, *The Pathology of Power*, Norman Cousins recalls a post war interview with General Douglas MacArthur:

*He saw no military justification for the dropping of the bomb. The war might have ended weeks earlier, he said, if the US had agreed, as it did later anyway, to the retention of the institution of the emperor.*

General Curtis LeMay expressed his opinion in a September 20, 1945 press conference.

**LeMay:** *The war would have been over in two weeks without the Russians entering and without the atomic bomb.*

**The Press:** *You mean that, sir? Without the Russians and the atomic bomb?*

**LeMay:** *The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all.*

### **Historians and books which question the official narrative**

Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, (Vintage, 1995).

Martin Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and Its Legacies*, (Stanford, 2003)

Barton Bernstein, ed. *The Atomic Bomb: The Critical Issues*, (Little Brown and Co., 1976).

Kai Bird and Martin Sherwin, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, (Knopf, 2005).

Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman and the Surrender of Japan* (Harvard, 2005).

Mark Selden and Laura Hein, ed. *Living With the Bomb: American and Japanese Cultural Conflicts in the Nuclear Age*, (Sharpe, 1997).

Peter Kuznick and James Gilbert, ed. *Rethinking Cold War Culture*, (Smithsonian, 2001).

Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial*, (Putnam, 1995).

Ronald Takaki, *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb*, (Little Brown, 1995).

J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of the Atomic Bombs Against Japan*, (University of N Carolina Press, 2005).

Milan Rai, *Tactical Trident: The Rifkind Doctrine and the Third World*, (Drava Papers, 1995).

Paul Rogers, "Sub-Strategic Trident: A Slow Burning Fuse," *London Defence Studies*, 34 (Centre for Defence Studies, 1996).