

Historiographical Essay

Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision:

A Search for Middle Ground*

In a poll conducted in 1999, the Newseum, a museum of the news media in Arlington, Virginia, asked a panel of sixty-seven American journalists to rank the top one hundred stories of the twentieth century. The event that placed first in the survey of “prominent reporters, editors, broadcasters, photographers, and cartoonists” was the atomic bombing of Japan in 1945; its closest competitors were the landing on the moon, the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the first successful flight by the Wright brothers.¹ In accordance with the importance that the panel of journalists assigned to the use of atomic bombs, the subject has, over the period of nearly six decades, received a great deal of attention from scholars. It has also produced bitter and highly polarized controversy. The publication of an enormous body of literature has failed to resolve the differences over President Harry S. Truman's decision to use atomic bombs; indeed, it has chronically fueled the debate between the opposing positions.

The polarization and acrimony over Truman's decision to use the bomb muddied efforts to evaluate the strengths and the weaknesses of the competing positions and to reach a defensible middle ground. The debate over the atomic bomb recurrently featured doctrinaire arguments at both ends of the spectrum that all too often advanced their points more with strong assertion than with strong evidence. The debate over the bomb reached its zenith—and its nadir—in the angry recriminations that broke out in the mid-1990s over the plans of the Smithsonian Institution to present a fiftieth anniversary exhibit on the *Enola Gay* and the end of World War II.² Since that time, partisans on this issue have

*The author gratefully acknowledges the comments of Bart Bernstein, Toshi Hasegawa, and an anonymous reader for *Diplomatic History* on earlier versions of this article.

1. *Washington Post*, 25 February 1999.

2. For discussions of the controversy over the proposed *Enola Gay* exhibit from many different perspectives, see Tony Capaccio and Uday Mohan, “Missing the Target,” *American Journalism Review* 17 (July/August 1995): 18–26; “History and the Public: What Can We Handle? A Round Table about History after the *Enola Gay* Controversy,” *Journal of American History* 82 (December 1995): 1029–1144; Philip Nobile, ed., *Judgment at the Smithsonian: The Bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki* (New York, 1995); Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and Other Battles for the American Past* (New York, 1996); Martin Harwit, *An Exhibit Denied: Lobbying the History of Enola Gay* (New York, 1996); Michael J.

continued their efforts to establish the superiority, if not the sanctity, of their arguments. While they carried on heated battles, other scholars offered more balanced presentations that narrowed the distance between the extremes. This essay surveys the critical issues still contested by traditionalist and revisionist scholars, evaluates both interpretations in light of new evidence and new scholarship, and provides a status report on the recent literature on the event that journalists ranked as the top story of the twentieth century.

The fundamental issue that has divided scholars over a period of nearly four decades is whether the use of the bomb was necessary to achieve victory in the war in the Pacific on terms satisfactory to the United States. The traditional interpretation insisted that the bomb was necessary to avert an invasion of Japan and in that way to avoid the loss of huge numbers of American lives. Scholars who advanced this position generally suggested that Truman faced a categorical choice between the bomb and an invasion that was forced on him by Japan's refusal to surrender. The revisionist interpretation that rose to prominence in the mid-1960s took sharp exception. It held that the use of the bomb was not necessary to win the war because Japan was teetering on the verge of defeat and close to surrender. In this view, Japan was seeking a way to end the war on the sole condition that the emperor be allowed to remain on the throne. Truman and his advisers were well aware of Japan's desperate straits and its desire to quit the war, but they still elected to use the bomb. The revisionist challenge to the traditional interpretation became a source of fierce debate after the publication of Gar Alperovitz's book, *Atomic Diplomacy*, in 1965. He contended that the United States used the atomic bomb primarily for diplomatic purposes rather than for military requirements, particularly to impress and intimidate the Soviet Union in the emerging Cold War. The argument that Truman ordered the atomic bombings of Japan primarily as an anti-Soviet weapon for fighting the Cold War became a prominent, though not unanimous, feature of atomic bomb revisionism.³

Around the time of the fiftieth anniversary of Hiroshima, several new works forcefully reasserted the revisionist position, in part by citing evidence that only became available in the 1970s and 1980s. Although the authors of those works

Hogan, "The Enola Gay Controversy: History, Memory, and the Politics of Presentation," in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, ed. Michael J. Hogan (New York, 1996), 200–32; articles by William S. Pretzer, Otto Mayr, Pamela Walker Laird, and Alex Roland in "Special Section: The Last Act," *Technology and Culture* 39 (July 1998): 457–88; Robert C. Post, "A Narrative for Our Time: The *Enola Gay* 'and after that, period,'" *Technology and Culture* 45 (April 2004): 373–95; and Robert P. Newman, *Enola Gay and the Court of History* (New York, 2004).

3. Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam* (New York, 1965). The historiography of the atomic bomb controversy into the mid-1990s is treated in detail in Barton J. Bernstein, "The Atomic Bomb and American Foreign Policy, 1941–1945," *Peace and Change* 2 (Spring 1974): 1–16; Barton J. Bernstein, "The Struggle over History: Defining the Hiroshima Narrative," in *Judgment at the Smithsonian*, ed. Nobile, 127–256; J. Samuel Walker, "The Decision to Use the Bomb: A Historiographical Update," *Diplomatic History* 14 (Winter 1990): 97–114, and a revised, expanded version of the same article in *Hiroshima in History and Memory*, ed. Hogan, 11–37.

sometimes differed in their explanations of Truman's decision, they concurred on the general proposition that dropping the atomic bomb was not necessary to end the war. Ronald Takaki emphasized racist attitudes toward the Japanese on the part of Truman and most Americans and the president's desire to prove his masculinity as the key elements in the use of the bomb. Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell also discerned important psychological motivations in Truman's actions, including his doubts about "his own strength, courage, and decisiveness as president and commander in chief." Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz backed Alperovitz in stressing anti-Soviet objectives as the foremost concern of American policymakers. Alperovitz, assisted by a team of seven researchers, published a hefty volume in 1995 that drew on recently opened evidence, especially American intercepts of Japanese diplomatic messages, to affirm and elaborate his conclusions of three decades earlier. He dismissed military demands, political expediency, and racial antipathy as primary reasons for dropping the bomb. He reiterated his earlier finding that the most plausible explanation for Truman's decision was the goal of impressing the Soviet Union with America's awesome and, for the short term at least, unmatched, atomic power.⁴

Revisionist scholars of the 1990s drew on several documentary foundations to show that Japan was ready to surrender. They insisted that evidence opened since the publication of Alperovitz's *Atomic Diplomacy* strongly supported if not conclusively proved their case. They contended that if the United States had pursued alternatives to the use of the bomb, the war could have ended just as soon, if not sooner, than it did. One option that they faulted the Truman administration for spurning was the entry of the Soviet Union into the Asian war. They maintained that the shock of a Soviet invasion of Japanese-controlled Manchuria might well have been sufficient in itself to force a surrender. Revisionists further insisted that Truman was aware that a Soviet attack could quickly convince Japan to quit the war. On this issue, they cited as at least highly suggestive a notation that Truman made in his diary after meeting Soviet premier Joseph Stalin for the first time at the Potsdam Conference. One of Truman's primary objectives at Potsdam was to ensure that Stalin would enter the war against Japan as he had pledged at Yalta. At a luncheon meeting on 17 July 1945, Stalin told Truman that, as the president recorded in his diary a short time later,

4. Ronald Takaki, *Hiroshima: Why America Dropped the Atomic Bomb* (Boston, 1995); Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial* (New York, 1995); Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz, "The Legend of Hiroshima" in *Hiroshima's Shadow: Writings on the Denial of History and the Smithsonian Controversy*, eds. Kai Bird and Lawrence Lifschultz (Stony Creek, CT, 1998); Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb and the Architecture of an American Myth* (New York, 1995). Other recent works that advance a revisionist view without discussing American motivations at length include Dennis D. Wainstock, *The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb* (Westport, CT, 1996); Richard H. Minear, "Atomic Holocaust, Nazi Holocaust: Some Reflections," *Diplomatic History* 19 (Spring 1995): 347-65; Philip Nobile, "On the Steps of the Smithsonian: Hiroshima Denial in America's Attic," in *Judgment at the Smithsonian*, ed. Nobile, xviii-xcvii.

he would “be in the Jap war on August 15th.” A euphoric Truman added: “Fini Japs when that comes about.” Revisionists regarded this notation as clear evidence that the president believed that the Soviet invasion of Manchuria was very likely to end the war quickly.⁵

Revisionist scholars criticized Truman and his advisers even more sharply for failing to ease the American demand for unconditional surrender. They argued that if the United States had clearly indicated that the emperor could remain as a titular head of state after the surrender, Japan almost certainly would have promptly quit the war. Alperovitz submitted that American policymakers recognized a “two-step logic” in which a combination of Soviet entry and a softening of unconditional surrender probably would have ended the war. As testimony for Japan’s willingness to surrender if the emperor was retained, he cited a “critical message” of 12 July 1945 from the Japanese foreign minister, Shigenori Togo, to the ambassador to the Soviet Union, Naotake Sato. The message read in part: “His Majesty the Emperor, mindful of the fact that the present war daily brings greater evil and sacrifice upon the peoples of all belligerent powers, desires from his heart that it may be quickly terminated.” Togo added that “so long as England and the United States insist upon unconditional surrender the Japanese Empire has no alternative but to fight on with all its strength.” Alperovitz called this cable “by far the most important diplomatic development of the summer,” and revisionists generally viewed it as powerful evidence that the emperor was prepared to end the war if the unconditional surrender requirement was moderated. Furthermore, they argued, a statement in Truman’s diary on 18 July 1945, in which he referred to the “telegram from Jap emperor asking for peace,” revealed that the president knew that Japan was ready to make peace if the emperor was not forced from the throne.⁶

Revisionist scholars usually placed the burden of blame for the failure to ease the surrender terms on Secretary of State James F. Byrnes. They pointed out that although most other U.S. leaders favored a modification of unconditional surrender, Byrnes adamantly opposed it. He succeeded in removing a clear statement in drafts of the Potsdam Proclamation that offered assurances about the status of the emperor, and when the declaration was published on 26 July,

5. Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, 149–50; Alperovitz, *Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, 241–2; Wainstock, *Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb*, 62, 93. For Truman’s diary notations, see Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Off the Record: The Private Papers of Harry S. Truman* (New York, 1980), 53.

6. Bird and Lifschultz, “Legend of Hiroshima,” lxi, lxxv; Wainstock, *Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb*, 32–33, 126; Takaki, *Hiroshima*, 33; Alperovitz, *Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, 232–38; Gar Alperovitz, “Hiroshima: Historians Reassess,” *Foreign Policy* 99 (Summer 1995): 15–34. See also Kai Bird, *The Chairman: John F. McCloy and the Making of the American Establishment* (New York, 1992), 250–52. The Togo cable of 12 July 1945 is located in “Magic” Diplomatic Summaries, 1942–1945, Record Group 457 (Records of the National Security Agency/Central Security Service), National Archives, College Park, Maryland. A somewhat different translation of the same document is printed in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States: Conference of Berlin* (Washington, DC, 1960), 1:876.

it strongly reaffirmed the American commitment to unconditional surrender. In revisionist accounts, this destroyed the last and perhaps best opportunity to end the war without the use of the bomb. They suggested that Byrnes's intervention, with the prospects for winning major diplomatic advantages from the new weapon uppermost in his mind, led to the unnecessary atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.⁷

Revisionists also took strong issue with a staple of the traditional position—that an invasion, had it proven to be necessary, would have cost staggering numbers of American lives. Differing perspectives on the meaning of casualty estimates in the summer of 1945 aroused more intense controversy during the 1990s than any other single issue relating to the use of the bomb. In 1986, Barton J. Bernstein, citing recently opened documentary evidence, showed that in June 1945, top military planners estimated that the number of American deaths in an invasion of Japan was not likely to exceed 46,000 and would probably be much lower. Those projections fell far short of the hundreds of thousands of deaths that Truman and many of his chief advisers later claimed would have been the price of not using the atomic bomb. John Ray Skates reached the same conclusion in a book he published in 1994; he argued that the “record does not support the postwar claims of huge Allied casualties to be suffered in the invasion of Japan.”⁸ Revisionist scholars depicted the new findings on casualty estimates as further testimony to the inadequacy of the traditional interpretation. Lifton and Mitchell asserted that Truman, and by implication, scholars who accepted his claims of enormous casualty estimates, “hammered away at the ‘lives saved’ argument because it placed the atomic bombings in the realm of moral virtue.” Alperovitz contended that even the smaller numbers cited by Bernstein and Skates “confuse[d] the central issues” because the United States could have ended the war without an invasion or using the bomb simply by modifying the demand for unconditional surrender and/or waiting for the Soviet invasion of Manchuria.⁹

The revisionist interpretation was vigorously contested by several scholars who published books in the mid-1990s. The most prominent defenders of the traditional view were Robert H. Ferrell, Robert James Maddox, Robert P. Newman, and Thomas B. Allen and Norman Polmar.¹⁰ Although their books

7. Alperovitz, *Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, 302–17, 665–66; Takaki, *Hiroshima*, 37–38, 128; Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, 136–40; Bird and Lifschultz, “Legend of Hiroshima,” lx–lxv.

8. Barton J. Bernstein, “A Postwar Myth: 500,000 U.S. Lives Saved,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 42 (June/July 1986): 38–40; John Ray Skates, *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb* (Columbia, SC, 1994), 76–82. Rufus E. Miles, Jr., “Hiroshima: The Strange Myth of Half a Million American Lives Saved,” *International Security* 10 (Fall 1985): 121–40, made a similar argument.

9. Lifton and Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America*, 180–81; Alperovitz, *Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, 633–36; Bird and Lifschultz, “Legend of Hiroshima,” li–liii.

10. Robert H. Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (Columbia, MO, 1994); Robert James Maddox, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later* (Columbia, MO, 1995);

differed in focus, tone, the directness with which they attacked revisionists, and the depth of their archival research, they reaffirmed long-standing traditional tenets and generally reiterated that the only reasonable alternative to an invasion was the use of the atomic bomb. They disputed the claim that Japan had decided to surrender and was seeking a way to end the war on the sole condition that the emperor remain. They contended that the militant elements of the Japanese government were still very much in control and that the advocates of peace were fighting an uphill battle. Traditionalist scholars took sharp exception to the revisionist argument that the Togo cable to Sato on 12 July 1945 was a sure indication that the emperor had decided that Japan should surrender. They regarded the message as a part of a desperate effort by Japanese officials who favored peace to make an end run around the still-dominant militants who supported a last-ditch “decisive battle” for the homeland. Maddox suggested that if the Japanese government had decided to surrender on the single condition that the imperial institution be guaranteed, it could have, and should have, approached the United States directly. But, he observed, “There was no evidence that the Japanese were prepared to surrender on anything resembling the terms even the most lenient American policy maker could support.”¹¹

Maddox countered the revisionist claim that American officials recognized that Japan would surrender if they guaranteed the status of the emperor by citing a memorandum written by a high military intelligence officer in response to the Togo message of 12 July 1945. General John Weckerling, deputy assistant chief of staff for military intelligence in the War Department General Staff, prepared an analysis of Togo’s message, which American code breakers had deciphered immediately, for Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall on 13 July. He concluded that the chances that the emperor had “personally intervened” in support of peace were “remote.” He conjectured that the most probable explanation for Togo’s comments to Sato was that “the Japanese governing clique is making a well-coordinated, united effort to stave off defeat” by seeking Soviet assistance and by appealing to “war weariness in the United States.” Weckerling noted that Joseph Grew, often hailed by revisionists for his tireless advocacy of softening the demand for unconditional surrender, agreed with his

Robert P. Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult* (East Lansing, MI, 1995); and Thomas B. Allen and Norman Polmar, *Code-Name Downfall: The Secret Plan to Invade Japan—And Why Truman Dropped the Bomb* (New York, 1995). Another book that defended the use of the bomb as a necessary and proper action but did not directly address historiographical issues is Stanley Weintraub, *The Last Great Victory: The End of World War II, July/August 1945* (New York, 1995).

11. Maddox, *Weapons for Victory*, 83–85, 117–25; Allen and Polmar, *Code-Name Downfall*, 263–66. Newman departed from other traditionalists by denying that Truman faced a stark choice between the bomb and an invasion. He argued that “it was simply not an either/or situation.” Rather, Truman “confronted the necessity of using every legitimate means available to end a global war—not one means as opposed to another.” See Robert P. Newman, “Hiroshima and the Trashing of Henry Stimson,” *New England Quarterly* 71 (March 1998): 5–32, emphasis in original.

views. Weckerling's memorandum suggested that the Truman administration was far from convinced that the emperor had decided to surrender or that the peace faction had won control in Tokyo.¹²

Traditionalist scholars strongly disputed the revisionist argument that the Truman administration's refusal to moderate unconditional surrender in the Potsdam Proclamation led to the unwarranted deployment of atomic bombs. They claimed that the declaration, although it used the rhetoric of "unconditional surrender," in fact presented terms that were less draconian. Further, Togo and other Japanese officials recognized that the Allied proclamation offered conditions that provided a reasonable basis for peace, including the likelihood that the emperor could remain. "Here is a conclusive answer to those who insist that unconditional surrender was a purely punitive stance," wrote Newman, "carried out by a malevolent president fanatically asserting American superiority over an inferior race." He and other traditionalists insisted that even if the Potsdam Proclamation had made a clear statement to guarantee the position of the emperor, the Japanese government was too divided and too indecisive to accept it and quit the war.¹³ In contrast to the revisionists, traditionalists gave little attention to Truman's diary entry on 17 July regarding the Soviet invasion of Manchuria, "Fini Japs when that comes about." Maddox observed that this statement came after Truman learned about the first successful test of the atomic bomb. Newman denied that the president and his advisers regarded Soviet participation as sufficient in itself to force a Japanese surrender.¹⁴

Traditionalist scholars directed their heaviest volleys at the revisionist position on casualty estimates. Drawing on the findings of Edward J. Drea in a book on code breaking in the Pacific war that he published in 1992, they contended that the projections made in June 1945 were obsolete within a short time. The Japanese buildup of forces on Kyushu, where the first phase of the invasion was scheduled to take place on 1 November 1945, was much more rapid and massive than anticipated. In June, Marshall had predicted that Japanese defenders on Kyushu would number about 350,000, but by early August the estimated size of enemy forces had already reached nearly 600,000. Thus, traditionalists argued, the casualty estimates in the many hundreds of thousands that Truman and his close advisers cited after the war as their justification for using the bomb were at least plausible. Maddox conceded that Truman and other U.S. officials might have "inflated" the potential costs of the invasion, but he also insisted

12. Maddox, *Weapons for Victory*, 83–84. The Weckerling memorandum is found in Army-Operations, OPD Executive File #17, Item 13, Record Group 165 (Records of the War Department General and Special Staffs), National Archives, College Park, Maryland. A copy of it is available in Reel 109, Item 2581, Marshall Foundation National Archives Project, George C. Marshall Papers, George C. Marshall Library, Lexington, Virginia.

13. Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*, 57–78; Maddox, *Weapons for Victory*, 109–111; Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman*, 215–16; Allen and Polmar, *Code-Name Downfall*, 268–70.

14. Maddox, *Weapons for Victory*, 92; Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*, 20.

that the casualty projections that the president used in his memoirs “did not come out of thin air.” He and other proponents of the traditional interpretation emphasized that whatever the reliability of the estimates of American dead and wounded from an invasion, the price of a landing in Japan was unacceptable if an alternative existed. Allen and Polmar underscored their point on the casualty issue by asserting that in 1945 the Philadelphia Quartermaster Depot “ordered more than 370,000 Purple Hearts for award to the wounded and the families of those killed in the final battles for Japan.”¹⁵

The differing perspectives of revisionists and traditionalists on the casualty issue were drawn in especially sharp relief by D. M. Giangreco. In an article in the *Journal of Military History* in July 1997, he claimed to have demonstrated “the existence and complete acceptance by the War Department and Army of estimates that battle casualties could surpass one million men” in an invasion of Japan. He set out to contest the allegation of “many historians” that Truman’s fear of immense losses “was fraudulent.” Giangreco examined Army staff documents and found one that concluded in the summer of 1944 that American casualties in an invasion of Japan could exceed one million. Further, he maintained, once Army experts adopted this estimate, they “never changed it.” He admitted that numbers of such magnitude were not expressly conveyed to Truman at the 18 June 1945 meeting in which the invasion was discussed, at least according to the minutes. Nevertheless, Giangreco suggested that the president understood that casualties could reach colossal proportions because of his “working knowledge of the nuances of military planning and analysis.” In a later article that covered much of the same ground, he discussed a lengthy memorandum that former President Herbert Hoover provided Truman that predicted a toll of 500,000 to 1,000,000 American deaths in an invasion. Although other researchers had commented previously on Hoover’s analysis, Giangreco attached far greater importance to it. He depicted it as conclusive evidence that Truman knew about and accepted huge casualty projections in the event of a landing on the Japanese mainland. Giangreco’s work unequivocally endorsed the traditional view that Truman faced a stark choice between dropping the atomic bomb and authorizing a tremendously costly invasion.¹⁶

15. Edward J. Drea, *MacArthur’s ULTRA: Codebreaking and the War against Japan, 1942–1945* (Lawrence, KS, 1992), 202–25; Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman*, 212–13; Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*, 1–28; Maddox, *Weapons for Victory*, 59–61, 70–71, 126; Allen and Polmar, *Code-Name Downfall*, 222–25; 291–93; Norman Polmar and Thomas B. Allen, “Invasion Most Costly,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 121 (August 1995): 51–56. See also Robert H. Ferrell, ed., *Harry S. Truman and the Bomb: A Documentary History* (Worland, WY, 1996), 3–6.

16. D. M. Giangreco, “Casualty Projections for the U.S. Invasions of Japan, 1945–1946: Planning and Policy Implications,” *Journal of Military History* 61 (July 1997): 521–82; D. M. Giangreco, “‘A Score of Bloody Okinawas and Iwo Jimas’: President Truman and Casualty Estimates for the Invasion of Japan,” *Pacific Historical Review* 72 (February 2003): 93–132. See also D. M. Giangreco, “Operation Downfall: The Devil Was in the Details,” *Joint Force*

Revisionist and traditionalist scholars were more adept at exposing flaws in the arguments of their adversaries than in providing a convincing answer to the crucial question of whether the use of the bomb was necessary to achieve a timely victory over Japan. Revisionists succeeded in raising important questions about key elements of the traditional view, but the explanations they offered for Truman's decision were often incomplete, overstated, or implausible. They were correct in pointing out that alternatives to the bomb might have ended the war, but they did not deal effectively with the more important question of whether those alternatives seemed likely to produce better results at a lower risk than the use of atomic weapons. Indeed, revisionists generally failed to discuss the serious drawbacks that American officials perceived in the alternative approaches to bringing about a Japanese surrender. They strongly criticized the Truman administration for refusing to soften the demand for unconditional surrender and maintained that the war would probably have ended if the United States had taken this step. They did not, however, fully or clearly outline the potentially grave consequences of this action that American leaders feared. One important concern was that if the United States offered more lenient terms to the Japanese during or after the costly battle for Okinawa, which raged from 1 April to 21 June 1945, it would strengthen the position of the militant faction within the Japanese government, who held that fierce resistance to American advances would lead to much more tolerable surrender terms. In that event, the effect of offering milder surrender terms could be to prolong the war.¹⁷

American military leaders were even more concerned that easing the requirement for unconditional surrender could undermine public support for the war in the United States. As Dale M. Hellegers and John D. Chappell made clear, ranking military and civilian officials worried that war-weary Americans would back away from their commitment to completely defeat and disarm Japan. Members of Marshall's staff suggested in June 1945, for example, that clarifying unconditional surrender had "definite merit" if it were done "in the nature of an ultimatum" and not in a way to "invite negotiation." Otherwise, they warned, "There is the danger of seriously impairing the will to war of the people of the United States, with consequent damaging effect on our war effort, prolongation of the war and unnecessarily increased cost in human lives; or alternately acceptance of a compromise peace." The strong rhetoric in the Potsdam Proclamation was at least in part an effort to show the American public that the government was sustaining an uncompromising stance toward the enemy even as it made a veiled offer to accept less severe surrender terms. Revisionist scholars argued that moderating the demand for unconditional surrender would have

Quarterly 9 (Autumn 1995): 86–94; and D. M. Giangreco, "To Bomb or Not to Bomb," *Naval War College Review* 51 (Spring 1998): 140–45.

17. *Foreign Relations of the United States: The Conference of Berlin*, 2:1267–71; Henry L. Stimson and McGeorge Bundy, *On Active Service in Peace and War* (New York, 1947), 628.

been a painless and probably successful method of ending the war, but they neglected to consider the possible disadvantages of shifting the policy that troubled American leaders. In this way, they underestimated by significant proportions the risks of changing the unconditional surrender formula.¹⁸

Revisionists were much more confident than were policymakers in the summer of 1945 that easing unconditional surrender would have quickly persuaded the Japanese to end the war on terms acceptable to the United States. American leaders were well aware from intercepts of cable traffic that the Japanese government was sharply divided between peace advocates and militant die-hards. There was no convincing evidence that the Japanese had decided to surrender or that the emperor had intervened in favor of peace. Revisionists placed much greater stock in the Togo message of 12 July than it could support. Furthermore, in contrast to the revisionist claim that the president and his advisers knew that Japan was prepared to surrender if the status of the emperor were guaranteed, the Weckerling memorandum made clear that key American officials did not believe that the Japanese government had decided on peace. This document goes a long way toward refuting one central argument of Truman's critics, and revisionist scholars have further weakened their position by completely ignoring its contents and implications.

Contrary to revisionist assertions, American policymakers in the summer of 1945 were far from certain that the Soviet invasion of Manchuria would be enough in itself to force a Japanese surrender. They were hopeful that Soviet entry into the war would be helpful, but as Marshall's staff wrote in a memorandum to Secretary of War Henry Stimson on 4 June 1945, "The point in our military progress at which the Japanese will accept defeat and agree to our terms is unpredictable. . . . Probably it will take Russian entry into the war, coupled with a landing, or imminent threat of a landing, on Japan proper by us, to convince them of the hopelessness of their position."¹⁹ In this analysis of high-ranking planners, it would require an invasion or "imminent" invasion, combined with Soviet participation in the war, to force a Japanese surrender. The precise meaning of Truman's famous statement in his diary of 17 July 1945, "Fini Japs when that [Soviet entry] comes about," is debatable. But it clearly did not reflect information he received from his top military advisers that Soviet participation in the war was sufficient to produce a prompt Japanese surrender. The "two-step logic" that Alperovitz viewed as prevalent among American

18. Dale M. Hellegers, *We, the Japanese People: World War II and the Origins of the Japanese Constitution* (Stanford, CA, 2001); John D. Chappell, *Before the Bomb: How America Approached the End of the Pacific War* (Lexington, KY, 1997); George C. Marshall to the Secretary of War, 9 June 1945, Marshall to the Secretary of War, 15 June 1945, with attached "Memorandum of Comments on 'Ending the Japanese War,'" 14 June 1945, Safe File (Japan after Dec 7/41), Record Group 107 (Records of the Office of the Secretary of War), National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

19. G. C. Marshall to the Secretary of War, with enclosed memorandum, 4 June 1945, printed in Martin J. Sherwin, *A World Destroyed: Hiroshima and Its Legacies* (Stanford, CA, 2003), 353-55.

leaders in the summer of 1945 disregarded the great uncertainties that they harbored about the prospects that alternatives to the atomic bomb would achieve a satisfactory end to the war within a short time.

Revisionists adopted the casualty estimates that Bernstein, Skates, and others reported as strong evidence in favor of their argument that the traditional interpretation, with its emphasis on the huge number of American lives the bomb saved, was hopelessly deficient. Yet they failed to deal adequately with the likelihood that the number of estimated casualties in an invasion was of far less importance to Truman than was ending the war at the earliest possible moment in order to prevent as many U.S. casualties as possible. It seems axiomatic that the president would have authorized use of the bomb even if the number of American lives it preserved was relatively small, at least compared to the numbers that he and others cited after the war. Alperovitz and Robert L. Messer commented that one suggestion that Truman used the bomb primarily for military reasons even if not to spare hundreds of thousands of American lives was "curiously" reasoned.²⁰ Revisionists overstated the chances that alternatives to the bomb would have ended the war promptly while they downplayed the significance that the president attached to forcing a Japanese surrender as quickly as possible by any means available to reduce American casualties. They rejected too easily the military incentives for dropping the bomb—that it seemed the least risky and most promising way to accelerate the end of the war, even if the number of U.S. lives likely to be saved was not in the range of hundreds of thousands.

Like the revisionist position, the traditional view suffered from major fallacies. In contrast to Truman's critics, who gave little attention to the difficulties and drawbacks of ending the war by pursuing approaches other than the atomic bomb, traditionalists underestimated the possibility that the alternatives could have forced a Japanese surrender before the invasion began. By failing to consider seriously evidence that suggested that an invasion was not inevitable and that the war could have ended without either the bomb or an invasion, they oversimplified a complex and crucial issue. In light of the documentary evidence, their insistence that Truman faced a stark choice between dropping the bomb and authorizing an enormously costly invasion is superficial, reductionist, and unpersuasive. In the summer of 1945, the president and his chief advisers never weighed a decision between the bomb and an invasion as an either/or proposition. This was a postwar construct that followed the dichotomy drawn by Stimson, Truman, and other policymakers in their explanations for using the bomb. During the last weeks of the war, they were keenly aware of alternatives to an invasion other than the bomb. Traditionalists generally disregarded the critical question of why the use of the bomb seemed to be the best of the available options.

20. Gar Alperovitz and Robert L. Messer, "Correspondence: Marshall, Truman, and the Decision to Drop the Bomb," *International Security* 16 (Winter 1991/1992): 204–14.

Traditionalists dismissed too lightly the possibility that the war could have ended before the invasion was launched on 1 November 1945. The conclusion that neither the bomb nor an invasion was necessary for a U.S. victory is, of course, unavoidably counterfactual. But so is the traditional interpretation's heavy reliance on unprovable assertions about the need for an invasion and the number of casualties it would have caused. Much could have happened in the twelve weeks between the bombing of Hiroshima and the launching of an attack on Kyushu to bring about a Japanese surrender. In that period, the combination of Soviet participation in the war, the continued bombing of Japanese cities with massive B-29 raids, the critical shortage of war supplies, the increasing scarcity of food and other staples required for the sustenance of the Japanese people, and diminishing public morale could well have convinced the emperor to seek peace. The peace faction in his government was gradually gaining strength, and the emperor's closest adviser, Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal Koichi Kido, was increasingly concerned that the greatest threat to the emperor's position was not American troops but the loss of domestic support. The militant die-hards would have resisted a decision for peace, but it is reasonable to assume that they would have gone along with the emperor's wishes, albeit unhappily and reluctantly, just as they did when Japan decided to surrender in August 1945.²¹

Contemporary evidence supports the conclusion that American policy-makers did not regard an invasion as inevitable. Marshall and other high-ranking Army officials often used conditional terms when referring to the proposed invasion. Truman's diary notations indicate that he did not believe that an invasion was inescapable. Whatever the precise meaning of his "Fini Japs" comment, it shows clearly that he thought the war could end without launching an attack on the Japanese mainland. The same is true of an entry in his diary on 18 July 1945: "Believe Japs will fold up before Russia comes in." None of those statements proves that Japan would have quit the war before an invasion or that American leaders were certain that a landing would not be necessary. But they raised important questions that the traditional interpretation does not address adequately.²²

The traditionalist position on projected casualties in the event of an invasion is also contestable. Like the experts who estimated casualties during the war, scholarly defenders of Truman cited numbers that varied considerably. But they

21. United States Strategic Bombing Survey, *Japan's Struggle to End the War*, typescript, 1 July 1946, in *The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb on Japan*, vol. 1 of *Documentary History of the Truman Presidency*, ed. Dennis Merrill (Bethesda, MD, 1995), 376-412; Herbert P. Bix, "Japan's Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation," *Diplomatic History* 19 (Spring 1995): 197-225.

22. Marshall to the Secretary of War, with enclosed memorandum, 4 June 1945, in Sherwin, *A World Destroyed*, 355; "Minutes of Meeting Held at the White House on Monday, 18 June 1945 at 1530," in *Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb*, ed. Merrill, 52; Alperovitz, *Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, 359; Weintraub, *Last Great Victory*, 229; *Off the Record*, ed. Ferrell, 53-54.

concluded on the fundamental point that the toll of an invasion, had it occurred, would have been several hundred thousand American casualties and a huge number of American lives (the ratio of deaths to casualties during the war was approximately 1:4 to 1:5). Bernstein's 1986 article had suggested that the estimated cost of an invasion of Japan in June 1945 was, in the worst case, about 46,000 dead, 170,000 wounded, and 4,000 missing in action. Traditionalist scholars contended that those figures were far too low. Newman and Giangreco showed that at the staff level, some experts projected that casualties in the hundreds of thousands and perhaps one million or more were possible.²³

Traditionalists did not, however, convincingly demonstrate that estimates of such magnitude were accepted by ranking military leaders or that they were ever conveyed to Truman by his most trusted advisers. In June 1945, in response to Stimson's request for an assessment of former President Hoover's estimate that an invasion could cost 500,000 to 1,000,000 American lives, the Army's deputy chief of staff, General Thomas T. Handy, reported those numbers "to be entirely too high." David McCullough, in his best-selling biography of Truman, claimed that Hoover's estimates, which he mistakenly attributed to Handy, proved that casualty "figures of such magnitude were then in use at the highest levels." As he later acknowledged, he failed "to read carefully on the place where Gen. Handy calls the figures 'entirely too high.'" But McCullough insisted that Truman was convinced that the price of an invasion would be "unprecedented carnage," and other traditionalists took the same position.²⁴

The evidence on what casualty figures, if any, were reported to the president after his meeting with military advisers on 18 June 1945 is too fragmentary and too ambiguous to settle the disagreement among scholars. Traditionalists slighted the uncertainties in the documentary record by arguing without apparent reservation that American casualties from an invasion would have been enormous. They placed great store in the huge numbers that Truman and other high-level officials cited after the war. But they did not deal effectively or persuasively with evidence that contradicts their claim. General Leslie R. Groves, for example, who had every reason to promote the idea that the bomb avoided massive American deaths and casualties, was quoted in October 1945 as saying that the atomic attacks saved "thousands of lives." Traditionalists also failed to explain two public statements that Truman made as the war was drawing to a close that cast doubts on the soundness of their position. In a radio address to the nation on 9 August 1945, the president declared that he had used the atomic bomb "to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and

23. Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*, 17–18; Giangreco, "Casualty Projections," 530–43.

24. David McCullough, *Truman* (New York, 1992), 400–401, 439; Tony Cappacio, "Truman's Author Errs on Japan Casualty Memo," *Defense Week*, 11 October 1994, 1, 8–9; Sherwin, *A World Destroyed*, 350–55.

thousands of young Americans.” In a congratulatory message on the same day to the men and women of the Manhattan Project, he expressed hope that “this new weapon will result in the saving of thousands of American lives.” If Truman had believed that dropping the bomb could save hundreds of thousands of American lives, it is difficult to imagine why he would not have used those numbers in his public statements. Truman’s references to sparing lives in the range of thousands rather than hundreds of thousands are not conclusive, but they created a dilemma for scholars of a traditionalist persuasion. Either Truman for unfathomable reasons sharply understated the casualty projections for an invasion in his comments on 9 August or he greatly overstated them after the war. Rather than attempting to resolve this issue, traditionalists simply ignored it.²⁵

The weaknesses and omissions in the traditional and revisionist interpretations made clear that neither provided a fully satisfactory explanation for the decision to drop the atomic bomb. Both fell short of offering a convincing answer to the question of whether the use of the bomb was necessary. “One of the curious features of the argument over why the atomic bomb was used on Japan,” Stanley Goldberg commented in 1995, “has been that both historiographic camps have treated questions as if one had to choose between the two alternatives.”²⁶ Goldberg’s observation captured the polarization of the debate but overlooked the work of scholars who evaluated the strengths and deficiencies of the competing views and selectively applied insights from both. During the 1990s, scholars of a middle-ground persuasion contributed fresh perspectives on familiar issues that accepted some key elements of the opposing interpretations while rejecting others. Many attempted to move beyond the fierce partisanship that often prevailed in discussions of the atomic bomb and the end of World War II.

The most prominent and prolific of the scholars who stood somewhere between the polar extremes was Barton J. Bernstein. Building on his work of the previous two decades, he published a series of articles during the 1990s that challenged pivotal elements of both the revisionist and traditionalist positions. In a discussion of Marshall’s consideration of using atomic bombs as tactical weapons in an invasion of Japan, he took issue with revisionist contentions that Japan was on the verge of surrender before Hiroshima and that the United States dropped the bomb primarily to intimidate the Soviets.²⁷ Another article

25. Robert S. Norris, *Racing for the Bomb: General Leslie R. Groves, the Manhattan Project’s Indispensable Man* (South Royalton, VT, 2002), 426; Barton J. Bernstein, “Reconsidering the ‘Atomic General’: Leslie R. Groves,” *Journal of Military History* 67 (July 2003): 883–920; *New York Times*, 10 August 1945; Message to the Men and Women of the Manhattan Project, 9 August 1945, Official File 692-A, Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.

26. Stanley Goldberg, “Racing to the Finish: The Decision to Bomb Hiroshima and Nagasaki,” *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* 4 (Summer 1995): 117–28.

27. Barton J. Bernstein, “Eclipsed by Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Early Thinking about Tactical Nuclear Weapons,” *International Security* 12 (Spring 1991): 149–73.

on growing alarm among American military leaders about the rapid buildup of Japanese forces on Kyushu affirmed the "crucial nature of concern about American casualties in an invasion." Bernstein admonished revisionists by adding: "To miss this theme, or to minimize it, is to misunderstand top-level American decisionmaking in the last stages of the Pacific war."²⁸ He independently reached the same conclusion as Robert Newman and other traditionalists on the reliability of a statement of the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey in 1946 that the war would have ended by 31 December 1945 or sooner without the bomb, Soviet entry into the Pacific war, or an invasion. This judgment had long been cited by revisionists to support their argument that the use of the bomb was unnecessary to force a surrender. Bernstein found that the Survey's "arresting conclusion was not substantiated . . . in its own work."²⁹

Just as Bernstein criticized the revisionist position, he skeptically probed fundamental traditionalist tenets. In a major contribution to the scholarship on American plans for an invasion of Japan, he showed that high-level military officials were so concerned about the Japanese concentration of forces on southern Kyushu that by early August 1945, they were seriously considering canceling the landing or moving it to a different location. Bernstein readily conceded that his analysis of planning for an invasion that never occurred was necessarily counterfactual, but the evidence he marshaled further damaged the traditionalist view that Truman faced a categorical choice between using the bomb or authorizing an invasion.

Bernstein challenged the traditional interpretation of casualty estimates more directly and more tenaciously. He denied that any primary sources demonstrated that Truman was told by his top advisers in the summer of 1945 that the cost of an invasion of Japan would be several hundreds of thousands of American casualties. And he criticized scholars who accepted the postwar casualty claims of Truman and other senior officials as more credible than contemporary documentary evidence. "There is no 1945 archival evidence supporting Truman's postwar contention" [that he received casualty projections of several hundred thousand], Bernstein submitted, "and . . . there is substantial evidence undercutting his claim."³⁰ Bernstein also countered Allen and Polmar's asser-

28. Barton J. Bernstein, "The Alarming Japanese Buildup on Southern Kyushu, Growing U.S. Fears, and Counterfactual Analysis: Would the Planned November 1945 Invasion of Southern Kyushu Have Occurred?" *Pacific Historical Review* 68 (November 1999): 561-609.

29. Barton J. Bernstein, "Compelling Japan's Surrender Without the A-Bomb, Soviet Entry, or Invasion: Reconsidering the US Bombing Survey's Early-Surrender Conclusions," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 18 (June 1995): 101-48; Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*, 33-56.

30. Barton J. Bernstein, "Writing, Righting, or Wronging the Historical Record: President Truman's Letter on His Atomic-Bomb Decision," *Diplomatic History* 16 (Winter 1992): 163-73; Barton J. Bernstein, "Seizing the Contested Terrain of Early Nuclear History: Stimson, Conant, and Their Allies Explain the Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," *Diplomatic History* 17 (Winter 1993): 35-72; Barton J. Bernstein, "Truman and the A-Bomb: Targeting Noncombatants, Using the Bomb, and His Defending the 'Decision,'" *Journal of Military*

tion that the case for enormous casualty estimates was strengthened by fact that the Philadelphia Quartermaster Depot ordered 370,000 or more Purple Hearts for distribution after the landings on the Japanese homeland. Bernstein found “no solid evidence of such a procurement” in the records of the depot or any other archival sources.³¹

In keeping with the polarized nature of the debate over the use of the atomic bomb, Bernstein’s findings were sharply attacked by both revisionist and traditionalist scholars. Alperovitz and Robert Messer asserted that Bernstein was “wrong” to argue that new evidence undermined revisionist contentions that Japan was ready to surrender before Hiroshima and that Truman used the bomb primarily for diplomatic purposes. They insisted that Truman’s diary, including the “Fini Japs” notation, and other recently opened documentary sources supported the revisionist position. Alperovitz also pointedly took issue with Bernstein in his 1995 book.³²

Traditionalists assailed Bernstein much more caustically. Maddox generally grouped him with revisionists and blasted his articles on casualty estimates as “misleading,” “discredited,” and “grievously flawed.” Maddox agreed with one article of Bernstein’s that suggested that Dwight D. Eisenhower had never expressed opposition to the use of the bomb before Hiroshima. He called the article a “judicious analysis,” but in a two-paragraph discussion neglected to identify Bernstein as its author. Rather than using Bernstein’s name, he referred only to “the author” of the article. Giangreco also described Bernstein as a committed revisionist and criticized him in even harsher terms than had Maddox. When Giangreco faced “space constraints” in responding to an article of Bernstein’s in the *Journal of Military History*, he elaborated his objections at length on a web site. He revealed that some unnamed military historians with whom he conversed had described Bernstein variously as a “charlatan,” a “vampire,” or most frequently, a “crackpot.” Giangreco allowed that those judgments seemed “overly harsh,” but added his view that “he is really just a misguided scholar completely and irretrievably out of his element when discussing things related to the military.” The disputes between scholars over the use of the bomb had frequently led to testy exchanges, but the personal nature of Giangreco’s poorly disguised name calling reduced the tone of professional discourse to unprecedentedly low levels.³³

History 62 (July 1998): 547–70; Barton J. Bernstein, “Reconsidering Truman’s Claim of ‘Half a Million American Lives’ Saved by the Atomic Bomb: The Construction and Deconstruction of a Myth,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 22 (March 1999): 54–95; Bernstein, “The Alarming Japanese Buildup,” 565–75, 602–9.

31. Barton J. Bernstein, “Reconsidering ‘Invasion Most Costly’: Popular-History Scholarship, Publishing Standards, and the Claim of High U.S. Casualty Estimates to Help Legitimize the Atomic Bombings,” *Peace and Change* 24 (April 1999): 220–48.

32. Alperovitz and Messer, “Correspondence: Marshall, Truman, and the Decision to Drop the Bomb,” 204–9; Alperovitz, *Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, pp. 648, 661, 662, 665.

33. “Communications,” *Pacific Historical Review* 69 (May 2000): 349–55; Robert James Maddox, “Casualty Estimates for the Invasion of Japan: The ‘Postwar Creation’ Myth,”

Bernstein not only questioned the foundations of both the revisionist and traditionalist interpretations but also offered his own middle-ground view of whether the use of the bomb was necessary to achieve victory at the earliest possible moment. He rejected the revisionist contention that the war could have ended as soon or even sooner than it did without dropping the bomb. He argued that none of the alternatives available to U.S. policymakers would have brought the war to a conclusion as rapidly as using the bomb. And he doubted that any of the alternatives, taken alone, would have been sufficient to force a prompt Japanese surrender. Bernstein suggested, however, that it seemed "very likely, though certainly not definite," that a combination of alternatives would have ended the war before the invasion of Kyushu began on 1 November 1945.³⁴

In a book intended to be both a synthesis and an original contribution to the subject, J. Samuel Walker arrived at similar conclusions. In addressing the question of whether the bomb was necessary he delivered an answer of "yes . . . and no." Yes, it was necessary to end the war at the earliest possible moment and in that way to save American lives, perhaps numbering in the several thousands. No, the use of the bomb was probably not necessary to end the war within a fairly short time before the invasion took place. And no, it was not necessary to save the lives of *hundreds* of thousands of American troops. Walker based his admittedly uncertain casualty estimates on the number of Army deaths in July 1945, the only full month between the end of the battle of Okinawa and the Japanese surrender. Although there were no major battle fronts at that time, 775 soldiers were killed in action and another 2,458 died from causes other than combat. Extrapolating from those numbers led to the conclusion that the continuation of the war for another few weeks could have exacted a price in American lives in the range of thousands. Walker argued that saving "a relatively small but far from inconsequential number" of American lives was, in Truman's mind, ample reason to use the bomb. The new weapon "offered the way most likely to achieve an American victory on American terms with the lowest cost in American lives."³⁵

Continuity 24 (Fall 2000): 11–29; Barton J. Bernstein, "Ike and Hiroshima: Did He Oppose It?" *Journal of Strategic Studies* 10 (September 1987): 377–89; "Letters to the Editor," *Journal of Military History* 63 (January 1999): 243–51; "Giangreco Rebuttal of Bernstein," available at <http://members.aol.com/VonRanke/giangreco.html>; Maddox, *Weapons for Victory*, 123–24. One prominent traditionalist scholar who did not criticize Bernstein as a doctrinaire revisionist was Robert Newman. He recognized that Bernstein's scholarship did not fit neatly into any specific category and hailed him as "far and away the most knowledgeable scholar in this field." See Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*, xiv. For an analysis of a spirited exchange of views on the use of the bomb on H-Diplo, an electronic discussion network on diplomatic history, see Barney J. Rickman, "H-Net and the Atomic Bomb: Historians Debate Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the 1990s," *Journal of the Georgia Association of Historians* 23 (2002): 45–76.

34. Barton J. Bernstein, "Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender: Missed Opportunities, Little-Known Near Disasters, and Modern Memory," *Diplomatic History* 19 (Spring 1995): 227–73.

35. J. Samuel Walker, *Prompt and Utter Destruction: Truman and the Use of Atomic Bombs against Japan* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997), 73–74, 92–97.

Another author who took a position between the poles of the debate over the bomb was Richard B. Frank. Drawing on American sources and important Japanese material opened after the death of Emperor Hirohito in 1989 that was translated for him, he evaluated the strengths and weaknesses of both the revisionist and traditionalist interpretations. He did not accept either unconditionally, but he was particularly critical of the revisionist view. Frank showed beyond reasonable doubt that the Japanese government had not decided to surrender before Hiroshima. Neither Hirohito nor his top military advisers had concluded that the war must end and for that reason they summarily rejected the Potsdam Proclamation. "It is fantasy, not history," Frank wrote, "to believe that the end of the war was at hand before the use of the atomic bomb."

Frank also took issue with staples of the traditional interpretation, though less directly. He emphasized that an invasion of Kyushu would have been exceedingly costly, but he concluded that the number of American casualties would have fallen short of several hundred thousand. He estimated that the invasion would have caused casualties in the range of 156,000 to 175,000, of which 33,000 to 39,000 would have been fatalities. He suggested that losses of such magnitude might have accomplished the objective of Japanese militants by persuading American leaders to ease their surrender terms. Frank stopped short of arguing that the war would probably have ended before an American landing on Kyushu without the use of the bomb. But he pointed out that food supplies in Japan were already growing short by August 1945 and that food distribution was dependent on a railroad system that was highly vulnerable to aerial attacks. As vast numbers of Japanese faced death from starvation, the emperor's fear that domestic unrest and internal upheaval posed a greater threat to his status than American forces might have increased to the point where he sought peace. Frank submitted that despite the horrors visited upon Japan by the atomic bombs, the ghastly effects of alternatives to ending the war made it wrong to assume that "any termination of the conflict that avoided the use of nuclear weapons would have been preferable."³⁶

In another recent treatment of the Pacific war, Thomas W. Zeiler drew on both revisionist and traditionalist arguments to present a middle-ground view of the end of the conflict. Like Bernstein, Walker, and Frank, his interpretation leaned more toward a traditionalist than a revisionist perspective, at least in citing military rather than diplomatic considerations as the primary reasons for using the bomb. Zeiler agreed with revisionists that American leaders practiced atomic diplomacy, but he denied that the desire to intimidate the Soviets dictated the decision to drop the bomb. "Truman, and his advisors, remained focused above all on finishing off the Japanese rather than on postwar strategy," he wrote. "The context of the ongoing Pacific War, and the objective of finally

36. Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York, 1999), 103–10, 178–96, 214–39, 331–60.

crushing an implacable foe, overrode considerations of U.S.-Soviet diplomacy at this time."³⁷

The findings of Frank and Zeiler not only supported a middle-ground position in the Hiroshima debate but also reflected other recent works that have examined the end of the Pacific war in a broader context, or at least with a different focus, than the atomic bomb decision. From varying perspectives, scholars have discussed the conventional bombing campaigns against Japanese cities in the spring and summer of 1945, the naval interdiction of the home islands, the virtual elimination of the Japanese merchant marine, Japan's increasingly desperate military weakness, the destruction of its industrial, agricultural, and transportation resources, the diminishing morale among both Japanese soldiers and civilians, and growing Japanese sentiment in favor of peace. The recent literature on the end of the war does not, of course, offer a definitive answer to the questions of how soon Japanese authorities might have decided to surrender and whether a U.S. invasion of Kyushu would have proven necessary. And it does not dismiss the hardships that an invasion would have imposed on American troops fighting against even poorly equipped and malnourished defenders of the homeland. Nevertheless, as Peter Maslowski observed, "Although convincing evidence of suicidal determination, spears were no match for machine guns and tanks." Recent studies of conditions in Japan in the closing months of the war point to the likelihood but cannot show conclusively that the war would have ended without the use of the bomb or an invasion of Kyushu.³⁸

Some of the most important and most interesting recent scholarly investigations have closely examined Japanese materials to provide a much fuller account of events in Tokyo during the last days of the war. While offering rich insights into Japanese policymaking, they largely supported the work of scholars who took a position on the use of the bomb between revisionism and traditionalism. And, perhaps not surprisingly, they also stirred new controversies. Drawing heavily on Japanese sources, Sadao Asada reached conclusions similar to those of Richard Frank. He strongly denied revisionist arguments that Japan was ready to surrender before Hiroshima or that it would have responded favor-

37. Thomas W. Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat: Japan, America, and the End of World War II* (Wilmington, DE, 2003), 182. I am grateful to Professor Zeiler for providing me a prepublication copy of his work on the atomic bomb.

38. Peter Maslowski, "Truman, the Bomb, and the Numbers Game," *MHQ: The Quarterly Journal of Military History* 7 (Spring 1995): 103-7; Conrad C. Crane, *Bombs, Cities, and Civilians: American Airpower Strategy in World War II* (Lawrence, KS, 1993); Kenneth P. Werrell, *Blankets of Fire: U.S. Bombers over Japan during World War II* (Washington, DC, 1996); Mark P. Parillo, *The Japanese Merchant Marine in World War II* (Annapolis, MD, 1993); Roger Dingman, *Ghost of War: The Sinking of the Awa maru and Japanese-American Relations, 1945-1995* (Annapolis, MD, 1997); Mark A. Stoler, *Allies and Adversaries: The Joint Chiefs of Staff, the Grand Alliance, and U.S. Strategy in World War II* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000). Robert A. Pape, "Why Japan Surrendered," *International Security* 18 (Fall 1993): 154-201, contended that the "key military factor" in forcing the surrender was not the atomic bomb or the strategic bombing of Japanese cities but the effectiveness of the naval blockade.

ably if the Potsdam Proclamation had clearly guaranteed the status of the emperor. He found that it required the atomic bombing of Hiroshima to overcome the emperor's ambivalence and the militants' opposition to ending the war. "In the end," he wrote, "it was the Hiroshima bomb that compelled them to face the reality of defeat." Asada thought it was possible though far from certain that without the use of the bomb, Japan would have surrendered before the invasion was scheduled to begin.³⁹

Like Frank and Asada, Herbert P. Bix found no support in Japanese sources for the revisionist claim that Japan was on the verge of surrender before the bomb was dropped. In a path-breaking article and in a biography of Hirohito, he demonstrated that the emperor was an active and well-informed policymaker who supported the objectives of the Japanese military. "Only toward the end," Bix wrote, "did he vacillate in his determination to fight the decisive battle in the homeland." The emperor continued to waver about surrendering until after the atomic attacks and Soviet entry into the war. Bix took issue with the revisionist position by concluding that the Japanese government would "probably not" have surrendered even if the Potsdam Proclamation had clearly guaranteed the status of the emperor. He also suggested that even after they agreed to accept the Potsdam Proclamation with the condition that the emperor remain on the throne, Japan's rulers envisioned not a constitutional monarchy but a retention of much of the emperor's power based on his divine status. Although Bix's findings about the political situation within Japan in the summer of 1945, along with those of Frank and Asada, struck a severe blow at the revisionist theory that Japan was ready to surrender, he did not assign sole responsibility for the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the emperor. He castigated the "power, authority, and stubborn personality" of Hirohito on the one hand and the "power, determination, and truculence of Harry Truman" on the other.⁴⁰

Tsuyoshi Hasegawa made a uniquely valuable contribution to atomic bomb scholarship by drawing on Soviet as well as Japanese sources to provide a multinational perspective on the end of the war. Although he did not unequivocally endorse the revisionist position, his findings offered more support for it than the recent work of other middle grounders. Hasegawa undermined one of the foundations of revisionist scholarship by agreeing with Frank and Asada that Japanese sources did not show that the emperor had decided to surrender before Hiroshima. But on other key issues, Hasegawa's conclusions set him apart. He explicitly took issue with Frank and Asada (and implicitly did so with Bernstein, Walker, Zeiler, and others) by arguing that the bombing of Hiroshima was less important in convincing the Japanese to surrender than Soviet entry into the

39. Sadao Asada, "The Shock of the Atomic Bomb and Japan's Decision to Surrender—A Reconsideration," *Pacific Historical Review* 67 (November 1998): 477–512.

40. Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York, 2000), 15, 487–530; Bix, "Japan's Delayed Surrender."

war. He submitted that although Japanese leaders were shocked by the atomic bomb, they did not agree to accept the Potsdam Proclamation with the sole condition that the emperor be retained until after they learned of the Soviet invasion of Manchuria. This ended their unrealistic hopes that the Soviets would mediate a negotiated peace settlement and made them realize that the Potsdam Proclamation gave them a better opportunity to preserve the imperial institution than the suddenly looming Soviet threat. Hasegawa argued that the combination of Hiroshima and the Soviet invasion forced the Japanese surrender; neither in itself was a “knock-out punch.” But he maintained that the evidence was “compelling” that Soviet entry was more influential. He emphasized that Truman's refusal to invite Stalin to join in the Potsdam Proclamation forfeited the best opportunity to end the war without using the bomb, because Stalin's signature on the document would have destroyed the Japanese fantasy of friendly Soviet assistance in achieving peace.

Hasegawa's conclusions buttressed the revisionist argument that the use of the atomic bomb would have been unnecessary if only Truman had waited for the Soviets to enter the war. He also provided support for the revisionist position in his discussion of a “race to the finish” between Truman and Stalin to force Japan to quit the war. He contended that Truman hastened to use the bomb before the Soviets could enter the war while Stalin rushed to launch an invasion out of fear that the bomb would bring about a prompt Japanese surrender. Hasegawa disputed the view of most nonrevisionist scholars that Truman regarded the bomb primarily as the most likely means to force a prompt surrender and that he would have used it even in the absence of growing American-Soviet tensions. Bernstein succinctly summarized this position when he wrote in 1975, “Even if Russia had not existed, the bombs would have been used in the same way.” Hasegawa's work added an important new dimension to scholarship on the atomic bomb and, perhaps, slipper slopes to the middle ground.⁴¹

Other scholars offered support for Hasegawa's argument that the combination of the atomic bomb and Soviet entry into the Asian war forced the Japanese surrender. Yukiko Koshiro reached the same general conclusion, though she sharply differed with Hasegawa's suggestion that the Japanese government was deluded into thinking that the Soviet Union would help end the war on more favorable terms. She contended that Japanese leaders sought to position themselves between American and Soviet ambitions in East Asia in the postwar

41. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, MA, 2005), chs. 4, 5; Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, “The Atomic Bombs and Soviet Entry into the War against Japan: Which Was More Important on Japan's Decision to Surrender in the Pacific War?” Paper delivered at workshop, “The End of the Pacific War Revisited,” Santa Barbara, California, April 2001; Barton J. Bernstein, “Roosevelt, Truman, and the Atomic Bomb, 1941–1945: A Reinterpretation,” *Political Science Quarterly* 90 (Spring 1975): 23–69. I am grateful to Professor Hasegawa for providing me prepublication copies of his work on the atomic bomb.

world. Their efforts to achieve this balance explained why they delayed surrendering to the United States until faced with the disasters of August 1945. Forrest E. Morgan joined the growing chorus of scholars who maintained that both the atomic bomb and the Soviet invasion of Manchuria were required to convince the Japanese to quit the war. He suggested that Japan's "strategic culture" delayed the decision to surrender because it inhibited competing factions from looking beyond their own narrow interests to consider the welfare of the nation.⁴²

The new scholarship on the Japanese surrender delivered rich new insights that pointed to a middle-ground position on the use of atomic bombs. The search for a reasonable middle ground on the atomic bomb decision was also apparent in two prominent studies of Truman. Although the authors, Alonzo L. Hamby and Arnold A. Offner, advanced conflicting views of Truman's performance as president, both took positions on the use of the bomb that stood between the interpretive poles. Hamby offered a warmly sympathetic, though not uncritical, portrait of Truman. He argued that Truman deployed the bomb to end the war as quickly as possible and he rejected that revisionist claim that Japan was on the verge of surrender. But he also expressed regret that the United States did not make a clear statement guaranteeing the status of the emperor in the Potsdam Proclamation and concluded that after the war Truman had exaggerated casualty projections for an invasion.⁴³

In contrast to Hamby, Offner sharply criticized Truman's conduct of foreign policy throughout his presidency. He agreed with revisionists that diplomatic considerations played a major role in the decision to use the atomic bomb. "The political gains to be made were more than just a 'bonus' derived from military action," he wrote. "Rather, they were a prize worth winning in their own right." Offner also accepted the revisionist contention that Truman believed that Soviet entry into the war would be enough in itself to force a Japanese surrender. But he rejected the revisionist claim that the Japanese government had decided to quit the war. He blamed the emperor and Japanese military officials for "prolonging the war and thereby inviting use of the atomic bomb." Offner faulted their failure to respond favorably to the Potsdam Proclamation's "vague or oblique offer to retain the emperor," which was consistent with the traditionalist position.⁴⁴

42. Yukiko Koshiro, "Eurasian Eclipse: Japan's End Game in World War II," *American Historical Review* 109 (April 2004): 417-44; Forrest E. Morgan, *Compellence and the Strategic Culture of Japan: Implications for Coercive Diplomacy in the Twenty-First Century* (Westport, CT, 2003).

43. Alonzo L. Hamby, *Man of the People: A Life of Harry S. Truman* (New York, 1995), 312-37.

44. Arnold A. Offner, *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953* (Stanford, CA, 2002), 47-99. Offner also echoed one prominent traditionalist, David McCullough, in another way. Both claimed that Truman issued an order to use the atomic bomb in a handwritten reply to a message from Stimson on 30 July 1945. In fact, Truman authorized a *press release* about the bomb at that time. See McCullough, *Truman*, photograph 10 following page 288, and Offner, *Another Such Victory*, 78.

Scholars who avoided the extremes of unalloyed traditionalism or revisionism on the use of the atomic bomb often disagreed on significant issues. As the Hamby and Offner books showed, the middle ground covered a wide spectrum of opinion that allowed much room for conflicting views. The differences between Hasegawa and other students of the Japanese surrender demonstrated the same pattern. Scholars who occupied the middle ground included academic historians from the United States and Japan, government historians, independent historians, and even nonhistorians whose professional training and personal backgrounds varied widely. The common denominator among them was their general agreement that the traditionalist and revisionist interpretations of Truman's use of the bomb that reemerged with such fanfare in the mid-1990s were inadequate in their pure forms.

Although those who occupied the middle ground generally agreed with the traditionalist position that Truman used the bomb primarily to shorten the war and save American lives, they rejected the argument that the president faced a stark choice between the bomb and an invasion. They suggested, with varying degrees of certitude, that the war was likely to have ended before an invasion became necessary. And several expressed doubts that had an invasion occurred, the costs in American casualties would have been nearly as large as Truman and other officials claimed after the war. Recent literature on the atomic bomb has inflicted even greater damage on key elements of the revisionist interpretation. It has gravely undermined if not totally refuted the fundamental revisionist tenets that Japan was ready to surrender on the sole condition that the emperor remain on the throne and that American leaders were well aware of Japan's desire to quit the war on reasonable terms. The ascendancy of a middle-ground position, however ill-defined, precarious, and diverse such a category was, represented a major historiographical milestone.

This was not the first time that a centrist view seemed to prevail. Walker found in 1990 a historiographical consensus that "largely resolved" the issues that had divided traditionalist and revisionist scholarship.⁴⁵ In light of the bitterness of the controversy that soon erupted around the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II, this conclusion failed rather spectacularly to stand the test of time. Nevertheless, the new sources and especially the new scholarly work that have appeared in the past few years have made abundantly clear that the traditionalist and revisionist interpretations are too weak and too dogmatic to be accepted unconditionally.

The middle ground remains contested terrain; partisans on both sides of the issue have not left the field.⁴⁶ Questions about whether the use of the bomb was

45. Walker, "Decision to Use the Bomb," *Diplomatic History*, 111.

46. Several scholars have recently reasserted views that fall at the far ends of the interpretive spectrum. D. M. Giangreco summarized his views on casualty estimates for readers of *American Heritage* to defend Truman from critics who claim, he said, that the bomb was used from considerations that "range from a desire to intimidate the Russians to sheer bloodlust." See D. M. Giangreco, "Harry Truman and the Price of Victory," *American Heritage* (April/May

necessary are perpetually inconclusive in no small part because the answers scholars have offered are so dependent on counterfactual analysis. As Zeiler suggested, the debate over some of the pivotal issues surrounding the use of the bomb “boils down to a guessing game and interpretation.”⁴⁷ In light of the importance of questions that cannot be definitively resolved because they require speculation and extrapolation from incomplete evidence, the controversy over the use of the bomb seems certain to continue. Recognition of the ambiguities, uncertainties, and complexities involved in the issue is essential for an informed debate. Recent scholarship that advanced a balanced position on the decision to drop the bomb has contributed substantially to achieving that end. Scholars who took a middle-ground position produced neither a definitive interpretation nor a broad consensus among themselves on many of the contentious questions surrounding the use of the bomb. But by demonstrating serious deficiencies in both the traditionalist and revisionist positions, they provided new perspectives and much-needed correctives to the oversimplified and uncompromising formulas that framed much of the scholarly and popular debate during and after the mid-1990s.

2003): 13–14. In an article in the *Los Angeles Times* on 18 July 2003, Peter J. Kuznick weighed in at the opposite end of the spectrum by declaring that Truman decided “to drop two atomic bombs at a point when the Japanese were already militarily devastated and seeking acceptable surrender terms.” Kuznick later provided a more scholarly and nuanced revisionist assessment. See Kuznick, “The Decision to Risk the Future: Harry Truman and the Apocalyptic Narrative,” in *The Second Nuclear Age: Political and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Michael Flynn (Lexington, KY, 2005). Nicholas D. Kristof suggested in a column in the *New York Times* that an “emerging consensus” agreed with the revisionists that the bomb was “militarily unnecessary.” Citing Sadao Asada’s work, he argued that “this emerging consensus is . . . profoundly mistaken” because the alternatives to the bomb “were worse.” See his article in the *New York Times*, 5 August 2003. Kristof’s column was immediately and sharply criticized by Alperovitz in a letter to the editor. Without specifying his sources, he asserted that American intelligence and “the vast majority of top American military leaders” in 1945 as well as “modern Japanese historians” agreed that the use of the atomic bombs was unnecessary. See *New York Times*, 11 August 2003.

47. Zeiler, *Unconditional Defeat*, 183.

Copyright of Diplomatic History is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.