

# THE ATOMIC BOMB: MILITARILY UNNECESSARY?

Influential Variables in Shaping Military Opinions

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"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."

– General Dwight D. Eisenhower

*The White House Years: Mandate for Change, 1963*

"It is my opinion that the use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons...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."

– Admiral William D. Leahy

*I Was There, 1950*

### ***Introduction***

Much has been made of statements by important military figures such as Eisenhower and Leahy above in expressing misgivings about the military necessity of using the atomic bombs.<sup>1</sup> The general assumption, however, that military opinions about the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki overwhelmingly subscribe to the orthodox view is remarkably pervasive. In the orthodox view, the atomic bombs were justified as necessary to bring the war to an early end, saving both Allied and Japanese lives by avoiding an invasion of the home islands.

Throughout the over fifty years that have passed since the atomic bombings, a wealth of alternative viewpoints have emerged. Most prominent is that of revisionist scholar Gar Alperovitz, who in his book entitled *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam*, advocates the notion that the atomic bombs were not necessary to end the war; rather, they were used in order to intimidate the Soviet Union. Alperovitz in particular, as well as other revisionist scholars including Ronald Takaki also attempt to co-opt views expressed by certain military leaders to strengthen their argument that the bombings were completely unnecessary. Nevertheless, military opinions that the bombs were *militarily* unnecessary do not imply that the use of the atomic bombs was not justified in order to achieve the broader U.S. and Allied objectives of Japanese surrender under acceptable terms as outlined in the Potsdam Declaration. There

seems to only be a fine line between views opposing the atomic bombs due to their being militarily unnecessary, and the view that they were not *at all* necessary, but the distinction between the two views can be clearly seen and is important to delineate. Some revisionist scholars seem to take expressions by military leaders that the bombs were not militarily necessary and turning them into an assertion that they wholly opposed the use of the bombs. Despite the revisionists' efforts, however, overall military opinions regarding the orthodox viewpoint and the perception that the military overwhelmingly subscribe to this stance remains persistent. This raises several questions: Are these revisionist scholars merely manipulating opinions expressed by military leaders in order to add a degree of legitimacy in promoting their own argument? Is the notion that military views predominantly subscribe to the orthodox view an accurate assumption? If so, is it a justifiable belief? Also, are there any clear interservice differences of opinion? In addressing these questions, this essay represents an effort to provide greater insight into the opinions of the military and identifies important lessons, particularly for the military with regard to future implications of the potential use of nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction.

This paper argues that a clear distinction exists between the view of the atomic bomb as *militarily* unnecessary, and the view that the use of the atomic bombs was *completely* unjustified in bringing the war to an end. That difference stems from the fact that military considerations were not the only factors considered in the decision to use the atomic bombs. The achievement of U.S. and Allied objectives in compelling Japan's surrender on acceptable terms and in a timely manner factored prominently in the decision making process. I also argue that military opinions were co-opted by some revisionist scholars in an effort to make it mean something that was not originally intended. In other words, drawing a connection between opposition to the use of the bombs due to lack of military necessity on the one hand, and the complete opposition to the use of the bombs on the other hand is simply a misguided conclusion.

Finally, I argue that military opinions, both pre- and post-Hiroshima, do in fact generally represent an orthodox perspective as a result of being influenced by several key variables.

This paper is organized into three main sections. In substantiating the arguments presented above, the first section examines in greater detail the various factors that influenced the military viewpoint about the atomic bombings. The six fundamental factors I have identified as contributing to the shaping of these military opinions are as follows: 1) the view of the atomic bomb as a "legitimate" weapon; 2) the context within which the atomic bombs were to be employed; 3) casualty estimates for the proposed invasion; 4) interservice "friction"; 5) the belief that the military <sup>is subordinate to the civilian government and</sup> simply carries out orders; and 6) generational factors. The second section then explores the opinions expressed by key military members within the context of those variables, and examines how the revisionists used their opinions as a tool to bolster their arguments. The paper next explores important lessons for military leaders in particular to learn from the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Finally, the paper concludes with the assessment that military opinions about the atomic bombs were greatly influenced by the key variables identified above, and were therefore largely limited to being within the context of the orthodox point of view. Before proceeding, however, several caveats must be stated at the outset.

First, there are clear problems in asserting a broad generalization in characterizing military opinions about the atomic bombings. As with any generalization, there are exceptions. This essay, however, simply endeavors to argue the overall accuracy of general perceptions regarding military opinions while also noting that there exist differences of opinion, although perhaps much less than sometimes perceived. Second, in citing the opinions of several prominent military leaders, the intent is not to claim to know all their thoughts in expressing particular opinions. Nevertheless, in an effort to provide an accurate representation of their viewpoints, quotes are examined to the extent possible within its entire context and not simply as "sound bites" to prove any particular point, as is often the case when quotes are utilized. Also, selected quotations express only a small sampling of the opinions of millions of service

members and are thus only representative of the military as a whole. Third, it is recognized that *military leaders are less than others,* as humans, even military leaders have a propensity to change their opinions from time to time.

With that said, this essay makes an effort to distinguish clearly between opinions expressed during pre- and post-Hiroshima periods. In addition, shifts in viewpoints due to other factors (political aspirations and the like) are also examined to the extent possible. Finally, this essay does not claim to address the question of whether the use of the atomic bombs themselves were justifiable, strong as my personal opinions concerning the issue may be. This matter – like other complex issues – is subject to different interpretations depending upon the perception and biases of the people being asked about it. It is also highly unlikely the debate will ever be resolved despite the fact that all available information regarding the dropping of the atomic bombs has been exhaustively scrutinized for decades. The desire to explore alternatives to the atomic bombs is understandable; however, a demonstration of the validity of suggested alternatives is obviously impossible – no one will ever know if or when Japan might have surrendered without use of the atomic bomb and without an invasion of the home islands. Thus, the debate quickly degenerates into an endless discussion of “what ifs”. Consequently, the focus of this study is instead on evaluating whether certain military opinions were taken out of context and used in a way to present an opinion which was not intended, and whether forces influencing general military opinions justifiably led to the development of a prevailing orthodox view regarding use of the atomic bombs.

### ***Factors Influencing Military Opinions***

The word “legitimate” has many definitions, but it is most appropriately defined here as being, “in accordance with accepted standards; reasonable.”<sup>2</sup> In view of this definition, the atomic bomb as a legitimate military weapon is the first factor influencing military opinion. “Total war,” a reality ushered in during World War I, was the backdrop against which the atomic bombs were to be employed. One definition from a prominent Air Force military journal describes total

war as, "a type of war consisting of the combination of many allies, enormous cost, unlimited use of highly destructive weapons, and unlimited war aims."<sup>3</sup> This description was largely based on the fact that wars were being waged not only on military battlefronts, but on the home front as well. Civilians were involved as an integral part of the war-making potential by contributing to the production of military equipment, weapons, and vehicles. In the case of Japan during World War II, the civilian population supplemented the war effort and was mobilized as the National Volunteer Combat Force. By the end of World War II, the distinction between enemy combatants and noncombatants began to blur. In addition, the lines between waging war and mass killings had largely been erased as well.

Within this framework, it reasonably follows that the use of atomic weapons was simply viewed as the utilization of another in a series of more potent and destructive new weapons. As stated by Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, "No man, in our position and subject to our responsibilities, holding in his hands a weapon of such possibilities for accomplishing this purpose and saving those lives, could have failed to use it and afterwards looked his countrymen in the face."<sup>4</sup> The original assumption behind the Manhattan Project was that the atomic bomb was a legitimate weapon to be used to end the war as soon as possible. Stimson continued further, saying, "The decision to use the atomic bomb brought death to over a hundred thousand Japanese...But this deliberate, premeditated destruction was our least abhorrent choice. The destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki put an end to the Japanese war."<sup>5</sup> It is clear that the view of the atomic bomb as a legitimate weapon of war contributed to its use being acceptance within the "total war" environment of World War II.

Within the framework of "total war," the second factor influencing military opinions was the background against which the atomic bombs were to be employed. The immediate military context of the decision to use atomic weapons was the Okinawa campaign – the last major battle of the war, which resulted in 49,151 U.S. servicemen killed or wounded.<sup>6</sup> In addition, intelligence estimates regarding the possible invasion of Kyushu estimated as many as 3.5

million Japanese troops, thousands of kamikaze aircraft and a mobilized population – the National Volunteer Combat Force – in defense of the home islands. In making the decision to use the atomic bomb, American leaders likely considered probable losses of an invasion possibly leading to, “an Okinawa from one end of Japan to the other.”<sup>7</sup>

In addition, other examples of Japanese aggression or mistreatment of captives such as the attack on Pearl Harbor (2,388 Americans killed/approximately 2,000 wounded) and the Bataan Death March (estimated total between 7,000 – 10,000 U.S. and Filipino casualties)<sup>8</sup> invariably contributed to the shaping of military opinions. As President Truman is quoted as saying, “The need for a fateful decision never would have arisen had we not been shot in the back by Japan at Pearl Harbor in December 1941.”<sup>9</sup> In this wartime game of “tit for tat,” the use of the atomic bomb was justified as an appropriate response to the atrocities already carried out by the Japanese. For those in the military, the unprovoked Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor hit particularly close to home. In view of this unyielding context during which the atomic bombs were to be used, such rationale can clearly be seen as following reasonable logic, and it consistently follows then, that military opinions would generally adhere to a similar logic as well.

A third contributing factor was the projected casualty numbers for the proposed invasion of Kyushu. With the atomic bombs largely viewed as the alternative to the costly but seemingly inevitable military invasion, casualty estimates not only impacted views about use of the atomic bombs but also served as empirical justification for its use. Intelligence analyses and military estimates made during the decision-making process some fifty years ago clearly indicated the proposed invasion might well have resulted in one of the biggest blood baths in modern warfare. The casualty estimates were expected to be very high – figures cited ranged anywhere from “conservative” estimates of 250,000 killed or wounded to upwards of one million casualties. In addition, troop ratios were calculated as well to determine probability of success in the campaign. In considering factors obtained through intelligence efforts such as enemy troop strength, equipment, level of experience and training, unit morale, and other factors, ratios were

mathematically determined in order to conduct a “cost-benefit analysis” on whether to carry out an operation based on its probability for success. Allied troops had consistently outnumbered Japanese forces by a ratio of 2:1 and sometimes 3:1 throughout the Pacific War. In the proposed invasion, however, it would be different – dismal ratios closer to 1:1 were projected. In view of these casualty projections and mathematical risk assessments, it makes sense that military opinions overwhelmingly favored use of the atomic bomb as an alternative to the proposed invasion.

In general, latter-day speculation by those who maintain that we should not have dropped the bombs cite lower expected casualty estimates for the proposed invasion; those who maintain that the decision to drop the bombs was justified refer to the higher ones. That this subjective use of casualty estimates continues to be used as justification for one point of view or the other demonstrates the continued influence of casualty numbers as a factor in shaping and promoting military opinions, and alternate views as well. Perhaps more important, however, is the fact that the United States did not have to expend the life of a single serviceman in an invasion. It is most certainly a given that due to the acute uncertainty of warfare, no one really knew how many Americans (and Japanese) would die or be wounded on the Japanese home islands.<sup>10</sup> Casualty predictions are viewed as a “treacherous business,” due to the fact that despite availability of the best intelligence, critical elements such as enemy intent, troop morale, skill, and morale are always an unknown.<sup>11</sup> In short, all projections of casualty numbers require a context. The context in this case was the Battle of Okinawa and the backdrop of “total war”.

Related to this issue of casualty estimates is the notion of “patriotic orthodoxy” – “the attitude of millions of American servicemen who believed that they personally had their lives spared by the bombs.”<sup>12</sup> The notion that the atomic bombs prevented an invasion and saved American lives remains strong, particularly by veterans convinced that it saved *their* lives.<sup>13</sup> On this personal level, the story over the years is similar to the following: “I was supposed to” – or

“My father was supposed to” – “be in the invasion of Japan. If we hadn’t dropped the bomb, I might not be here today.”<sup>14</sup> Invariably, details follow about where, exactly, the speaker (or his or her father) was on August 6, 1945, the day of Hiroshima. To be sure, servicemen who would have been tasked with the invasion of Japan were relieved by the bombings because it meant that they could hope to “grow up to adulthood after all.”<sup>15</sup>

One thing to note is that because the information regarding development and planning for the atomic bomb project was a secret restricted to only a select few, the average servicemen were unaware of it until after its employment. Following the end of the war, however, soldiers who were relieved that the fighting was finally over wholeheartedly embraced the belief that the use of the atomic bombs saved their lives by bring the war to an end. They recount their World War II experience with a narrative often beginning with vivid descriptions of the fighting in the Pacific theater and climaxing with the ferocious battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. The bombs logically followed then, as a reprieve from further carnage promised by an amphibious invasion of the Japanese home islands.<sup>16</sup> In this manner the concept of casualty projections, or more specifically, one’s perception of his own limited changes for survival served to strongly influence military views about use of the atomic bombs.

The “friction” of interservice rivalry is the fourth factor influencing military perspectives. In what Karl von Clausewitz’s classic treatise *On War* describes as “friction,” internal politics often influences the shaping of opinions as well as the decision making process.<sup>17</sup> Factors such as desired future roles and missions, increased budget shares and prestige, enhanced capabilities, more officer billets and promotions, and improved morale influenced military opinions about the use of the bomb within the various services. In addition, viewpoints based on the services’ roles within the war affected opinions on the use of the bomb as a means to induce Japanese surrender. Each service advocated a “better” way to force Japan to surrender: the Air Force by bombing, the Navy by blockade, and the Army by invasion. Once again, however, many military leaders were unaware of the atomic bomb project, which in turn left

them little choice but to advocate the superiority of their particular service's ability to bring the war to a decisive end. But even those who were aware of the atomic bombs did not seem to think that the use of the atomic bomb was a military necessity. Instead, each service's organizational interests fortified their stance against use of the atomic bomb, in favor of their independent service's strategies. For example, Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief of the U.S. Fleet and Chief of Naval Operations during World War II expressed the view that, "had we been willing to wait, the effective naval blockade would, in the course of time, have starved the Japanese into submission."<sup>18</sup> Of course, in the end the U.S. and Allied Forces were unwilling to wait and the atomic bombs were utilized to bring the Pacific War to a end; probably much sooner than would have been otherwise, had one of the other options been selected instead.

Even after the war, organizational interests were emphasized by service leaders in a manner which attempted to emphasize their service's contributions in bringing the war to a close; in other words, to gain some measure of credit for their particular service's efforts. From an Air Force perspective, a recent article by former Chief Historian of the U.S. Air Force asserts, "Strategic air power clearly played an important role in ending the great Pacific conflict. The Japanese, it is certain, were defeated long before August 1945, but only the crushing fury of B-29 attacks on their homeland enabled Japan's peace proponents to begin their campaign to end the war. The mounting horror and devastation of the great fire raids strengthened their arguments and hastened the move towards peace."<sup>19</sup> Similarly, several Air Force leaders also echoed the assertions of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS), which boasted of inevitable surrender due to conventional bombing alone. The USSBS stated in part that, "certainly prior to 31 December 1945 and in all probability prior to 1 November 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped..."<sup>20</sup> However, few military historians find the survey convincing, and others such as historian Jeffrey Roberts dismiss it, along with King's claim, as simply an example of "service bravado."<sup>21</sup> Of course, it

is impossible to substantiate the claims asserted in the survey, since it is impossible to validate any proposed alternative conclusion to the outcome of the war. What is clear, however, is that organizational interests played a key role both before and after the atomic bombs were dropped in shaping military opinions.

The fifth factor is the general belief that the role of the military is simply to carry out orders as determined by the civilian leadership. It is important to remember that the U.S. military forces operate under civilian authority, with the President as the Commander-in-Chief. This notion gives rise to two corollary lines of reasoning. One is the view that the use of the atomic bomb was not a military decision, but a political one. Many military leaders were unaware of the atomic bombs until after they were used in ending the war. But even those who knew of it still generally seemed to think that the atomic bomb decision was not theirs to make. In addition, the fact remains that a distinction exists between terminating a war by defeating the enemy and the political character of war termination in concluding a treaty of peace. The latter can only be accomplished through the action of states. In other words, that the military might have been able to accomplish its mission over time without the use of the atomic bombs is only part of the story. In order to compel Japan to surrender under terms acceptable to the Allies and to bring the war to a rapid conclusion, the bombs were deemed to be necessary by political leaders. This is not necessarily in conflict with military views; in fact, several military leaders contributed their expertise during the decision making process in determining whether or not to utilize the atomic bombs. However, there was a distinction between the roles of the military and civilian leaders in that the focus of the military was very specific, while the role of the nation's political leaders was much broader. There was a gap between conditions for military defeat and the considerations in the overall objective of producing an actual surrender and ending the war with Japan. In terms of the limited scope of the military point of view, the following explanation is relevant. Interview notes of General Marshall during a 1949 interview with Dr. Edward P. Lilly indicate that Marshall stated, "The military did not have any responsibility along this line, that the

civilians, especially the President, decided if the bomb would be used and the military decided where and when..."<sup>22</sup> In short, the role of the military was to be prepared for any contingency whether it was the continuation of the blockade or an invasion, and to follow through on the option as determined by civilian authorities.

Another view is that military members are bound to disobey illegal or "immoral" orders. In this case, immoral is defined as not being in accordance with established standards of conduct. Although what is or is not moral in the context of war is often difficult to establish, the context during World War II was, as previously discussed, a framework of "total war." Several revisionist authors, including Gar Alperovitz, Ronald Takaki, and Robert Lifton and Greg Mitchell who co-authored *Hiroshima in America: Fifty Years of Denial*, made much of reservations expressed by military leaders before the bombs were dropped. However, none of these authors noted any military leaders who threatened to resign, much less any who actually did so to indicate opposition regarding the use of the atomic bombs. Additionally, as observed by Robert James Maddox in his book, *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later*, "Pending the discovery of new material, there is no reliable evidence of *any* [emphasis in original] high-ranking officer expressing moral objections about the bomb to Truman."<sup>23</sup> If, as stated above, military officers are bound to disobey illegal or immoral orders, then General Marshall, Admiral Leahy, and General MacArthur, to name only some of those alleged to have opposed dropping the bomb, did not do their duty. Another conclusion is that their views have been taken out of context by revisionist authors in their attempt to legitimize their positions. In other words, the military point of view did not mean what some revisionists tried to say they meant. The views of specific military leaders will be addressed later in this paper. However, it is clear that once the decision to use of the atomic bomb was made, the defined role of the military is simply to execute the missions. As General Carl Spaatz, the person who received the order for the Army Air Force to drop the atomic bombs explained in a 1964 interview, "The

dropping of the atomic bomb was done by a military man under military orders. We're supposed to carry out orders, not question them."<sup>24</sup>

The final aspect influencing military opinions concerns generational factors. Distinctions can be made between the views of the older World War II generation and those of younger generations. Distinctions are also apparent between pre- and post-Hiroshima points of view. First, in terms of the older generation, many World War II veterans simply believed the atomic bombs saved them from a horrible invasion of Japan, in turn, saving their lives. As one Army officer reflects back on his thoughts about the proposed invasion: "We would have been sitting ducks coming off our assault boats onto a sandy beach that provided no cover or protection, with the enemy looking down on us from the heights."<sup>25</sup> The grim and deadly outcome promised by the proposed invasion reinforced an acceptance by veterans of the use of the atomic bombs as a necessity in order to bring the war to a timely end, in turn, saving their lives. Perhaps another difference may be that those of the World War II generation may have had a greater trust in their national leaders at the time. Particularly for those in the military, greater acknowledgement of President Truman's own military history may have also had an impact. Truman had commanded troops in battle in World War I and knew the importance of saving the lives of his men. Therefore, it stood to reason that, as Commander-in-Chief of the entire American armed forces, saving lives while ending the war on American terms would indeed be his highest priority.<sup>26</sup>

There was, however, another side to this atomic reality. As broadly summarized by military historian Jeffrey Roberts, "For those who fought World War II, the bombs served to end a cataclysmic struggle. For their descendants, however, the bomb brought forth fear of a new, more horrifying cataclysm."<sup>27</sup> Instead of ending a terrible war, the atomic bombs signified the dawn of the nuclear age for the younger generations. In view of this dichotomy, the differences in the perception of the use of the atomic bomb between the older World War II generation and the younger generations are evident.

Another important generational demarcation is the difference in opinions regarding the atomic bombs between the pre- and post-Hiroshima period. Those who expressed reservations before Hiroshima were relatively few and far between. This was partly due to the limited number of leaders privy to information about the atomic bombs. However, even among those who were aware of the atomic bombs, opposition seemed fairly limited. This was likely because of several factors: the escalating use of increasingly destructive weapons which made the employment of the atomic bombs seem the logical next step, a strong desire to use the available technology to bring about war termination, and perhaps, most significantly, the lack of knowledge about the level of destruction possible through use of the new atomic weapons.

The post-Hiroshima period may be further separated into the immediate postwar period and the timeframe several decades later. The immediate postwar period was overwhelmingly characterized by the "vengeful mood of most Americans."<sup>28</sup> This may have been attributable to bitterness lingering from the unprovoked Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, which was what initially brought America into the war. In addition, other wartime atrocities committed by the Japanese as well as the tremendous magnitude of casualties from the war in general may have contributed to these sentiments. A Gallup poll from August 1945, for example, showed that 85% of those polled approved the use of the atomic bombs on Japanese cities.<sup>29</sup> President Truman also expressed this vengeful mood in a 1946 nationwide report: "Having found the bomb, we have used it. We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten and executed American prisoners of war, against those who have abandoned all pretense of obeying international laws of war. We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war, in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of you Americans."<sup>30</sup>

In contrast, postwar skepticism several decades after the atomic bombings seems to be relatively more common. Now, fifty years later, there is a lot of second-guessing about whether President Truman should have used the atomic bomb. This can largely be attributed once

again to knowledge gained after the employment of the atomic bombs about its horribly destructive nature. In addition, revisionist scholars have introduced a variety of alternate opinions; many of these views were published during the mid-1960s and found an eager readership during the increased skepticism of the growing U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Another factor that also contributed to postwar criticism of the atomic bombs included the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union and the anti-nuclear and peace movements that developed as a result. In this manner, contemporary issues also impacted views regarding the atomic bombs. Interestingly, military historian Jeffrey Roberts recognizes one group that did not express postwar doubts: "the entire leadership of the United States Marine Corps, whose men would assuredly have been at the forefront of any invasion of Japan."<sup>31</sup>

Later in the postwar period and despite the emergence of alternative points of view and other contemporary factors that impacted opinions regarding the atomic bomb, the general orthodox view seems to continue to persist, in the military as well as the public in general. Why is this so? The view that the atomic bombs brought the war to a rapid conclusion and saved lives continues to prevail, due largely to the promotion of what is called "collective memory." Collective memory is broadly defined by J. Samuel Walker, historian of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, as the dichotomy between popular views and scholarly views; the ways in which historical events are perceived and interpreted in the shaping of popular views of historical events, including the dropping of the atomic bombs.<sup>32</sup> The views prevalent among the older World War II generation are not only passed down informally as memories and recollections to subsequent generations, but is also perpetuated on a mass level through such things as school textbooks and popular history accounts. In general, school textbooks continue to view the atomic bombings simply as the only alternative to a costly invasion of Japan. This promotion of collective memory in turn serves to continue to influence opinions regarding the atomic bomb.

In terms of the military opinions in particular, military journals such as *Military History Quarterly*, *Airpower Journal*, and *Army Magazine* also serve to strongly perpetuate the orthodox view through its own perpetuation of collective memory. In a 1995 review of the 50th anniversary editions of *Diplomatic History* and *Military History Quarterly* commemorating the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, military historian Jeffrey Roberts found that military journals promoted only strong defenders of the orthodox position, with not even a single revisionist article in the entire issue.<sup>33</sup> Promotion of the orthodox view is thus even more prominent when viewed in the context of military journals and articles.

In sum, generational differences do exist, particularly between the older World War II generation and the younger postwar generations. However, the differences are not as distinctive as one might initially assume. This is because the older generations' views influence the younger ones through the promotion of collective memory, where the predominant view continues to be that the atomic bomb was used to shorten the war and save lives. In short, the orthodox stance with regard to the atomic bombs continue to be perpetuated through teachings in school textbooks, military journals, and the bulk of popular literature.

In summary, the six key factors identified above were important elements that contributed to the overall shaping of military opinions about the atomic bomb. The view of the atomic bomb as a "legitimate" weapon was based on the existence of "total war," with the use of the atomic bombs viewed simply as the next step in the employment of new and more destructive weapons. The immediate military context within which the atomic bombs were to be employed included the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the tremendous number of casualties resulting from the battle of Okinawa. Casualty estimates for the proposed invasion of Japan and the notion of "patriotic orthodoxy" also impacted military views, as did interservice friction and organizational interests. The belief that the role of the military was to carry out orders once the political decision was made by the civilian authorities was emphasized by the gap between the conditions for military defeat and the production of an actual political surrender.

Finally, generational differences between the older World War II generation and younger generations also influenced military opinions, with the predominant orthodox views of the older generation being propagated through the promotion of collective memory. Collective memory perpetuated the view that the atomic bomb was dropped to achieve unconditional surrender as soon as possible and to save lives by avoiding a costly invasion.

Having identified and reviewed the six influential factors in the shaping of military opinions, we will now look at statements made by specific military leaders with respect to those factors. In addition, statements by these prominent military figures will be examined to determine whether they in fact support the revisionist argument, or whether they were perhaps taken out of context and made to mean something not originally intended.

### ***Leading Military Figures***

"I was against it on two counts. First, the Japanese were ready to surrender and it wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing. Second, I hated to see our country be the first to use such a weapon."

– General Dwight D. Eisenhower  
*"Ike on Ike" in Newsweek Magazine, 1963*

"I think it was quite necessary to drop the bomb to shorten the war."

– General George C. Marshall  
*George C. Marshall: Statesman 1945-1959*  
*by Forrest C. Pogue*

In exploring the opinions expressed by military leaders within the context of the six influencing variables identified above, the expressed views of figures such as Eisenhower, Leahy, MacArthur, and Marshall are examined in this section. In light of the fact that these men were military men – men whose views on military matters therefore could not easily be dismissed – they have gained some attention, particularly within the scope of revisionist scholarship. In fact, some revisionists such as Gar Alperovitz, Ronald Takaki, and others have co-opted their views in an attempt to lend authority to their own points of view. Yet, although the names Eisenhower, Leahy, MacArthur, and Marshall may seem impressive at first, the context

of their opinions require further scrutiny. General Dwight D. Eisenhower was the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe during World War II. Admiral William D. Leahy was the senior military officer of the United States as well as Chief of Staff to the President. General Douglas MacArthur was the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the Pacific, and General George C. Marshall was the U.S. Army Chief of Staff and the highest ranking Army officer during World War II. I chose to examine the views of these four military leaders specifically because revisionist authors have characterized their views as being against the use of the atomic bombs.

First, General Eisenhower's alleged opposition to the use of the atomic bombs as expressed in the quotes above, was based on his assessment that Japan was already prepared to surrender and that therefore the bombs were unnecessary. Several key factors demand attention with regard to the characterization of Eisenhower's views. First, he seemed to have had little knowledge about the situation in the Pacific and allegedly admitted as much, since he was the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces in Europe and thus focused his attention there. Second, even if Eisenhower was somewhat aware of the situation in the Pacific and based his opinion on a military assessment of Japan's diminishing ability to continue the war, a clear demarcation exists, as previously discussed, between military defeat and the production of an actual treaty of peace between warring states. Third, Eisenhower's opinions were expressed only after the atomic bombs had been utilized, when it had become apparent the horribly destructive nature of the new atomic weapons. In addition, his well-known article in *Newsweek* entitled, "Ike on Ike" was published in 1963. This was not only well after the dropping of the atomic bombs, but also during the rise of the worldwide nuclear arms race and after he had concluded his second term as President of the United States. In short, Eisenhower's views were likely based upon incomplete information, and were influenced by the limited scope of his strictly military point of view which failed to take into consideration the important political factors essential in concluding an actual surrender. In addition, generational factors were also

influential, in that Eisenhower's opinions were based on knowledge gained in the post-Hiroshima period, where he had the benefit of hindsight. Finally, political and personal considerations may also have impacted his views regarding the atomic bombs.

Another military figure, Admiral Leahy, went public a few years after Hiroshima and Nagasaki with a book containing the statement quoted in the introduction of this paper. He also insisted that even an invasion of Japan was unnecessary to bring the war to an end, citing that he was unable to see any justification from a national-defense point of view for an invasion of an already thoroughly defeated Japan. He then went on to conclude, along with other Navy representatives, "a completely blockaded Japan would fall by its own weight."<sup>34</sup> Leahy's opinions, like Eisenhower's also seem to be based solely on military perceptions, which failed to include political considerations necessary to bring about Japan's capitulation. In addition, the navy's organizational interest may have reinforced his stance against the bombing and in favor of a blockade. A blockade, however, would likely have taken considerably longer in bringing about a Japanese surrender, and in the end, the decision was made to utilize the atomic bomb in order to bring the war to a rapid conclusion. Finally, Leahy's opinions were expressed in his memoirs, which were published in 1950, once again only after the bombs and its devastating effects were realized.

A third military leader who is said to have considered the bomb as being "completely unnecessary" was General Douglas MacArthur. Although MacArthur was the Supreme Commander of Allied Forces in the Pacific, he was apparently not even consulted about whether to use the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Norman Cousins, who served as a consultant to MacArthur during the occupation of Japan recounts his postwar conversation with MacArthur about the decision to drop the atomic bomb in his 1987 book, *The Pathology of Power*. "When I asked General MacArthur about the decision to drop the bomb, I was surprised to learn that he had not even been consulted. What, I asked, would his advice have been? He replied that he saw no military justification for the dropping of the bomb."<sup>35</sup> MacArthur's opinion about bomb

being unnecessary may have also been fortified by his ambitions to lead the “greatest amphibious operation in history.”<sup>36</sup> His views were perhaps influenced as well by Army organizational interests in favor of an invasion of Japan. MacArthur was the strongest proponent for an invasion in 1945, despite the fact that his casualty estimates were among the highest offered to President Truman. This alone speaks volumes about General MacArthur. His position on the atomic bombs is also characterized as being motivated by political interests and varying over time. Not only were his remarks expressed during the post-Hiroshima period, but he also made his remarks at a point when he was considering a Republican run for the presidency.<sup>37</sup> In short, the fact that MacArthur was not even consulted about the atomic bomb decision reinforces the notion that the decision to use the atomic bombs was a political one. MacArthur’s views were influenced not only by organizational interests but were also predisposed towards his own desire for prestige and self-interests. In addition, his views were limited in scope once again to strictly military terms and were expressed only after the atomic bombs had been dropped.

A final example is General Marshall, who was apparently the only one who objected to the targeting of the atomic bomb on noncombatants *before* Hiroshima. On May 29, 1945, Marshall argued with Secretary of War Henry Stimson, albeit unsuccessfully, that the new atomic weapon should first be used against a straight military objective and then, if no result was derived from that, on large manufacturing areas after people were warned to leave the area.<sup>38</sup> He also seemed to initially argue against the use of the bombs in general. “Marshall stated from the point of view of postwar safety of the nation, he would have to argue against the use of the bomb in World War II, at least if its existence could be kept a secret.”<sup>39</sup> In this case, however, Marshall was not necessarily arguing *against* the use of the bombs, but rather the timing of it. He apparently did not feel the timing was appropriate for the United States to show its hand by revealing to the world that it had attained nuclear weapons capabilities. Either he felt the war would continue to a point where the atomic bombs would truly become a necessity,

or perhaps he felt that if the atomic bombs could be kept secret, they could be used later as a diplomatic tool for negotiation, or perhaps even a threat. Nevertheless, after being snubbed by Stimson, Marshall apparently never again raised these issues with the Secretary, the President, or anyone else.<sup>40</sup> Marshall also went along with the Interim Committee's recommendation to use the atomic bomb on Japan, and there was no evidence from this point on that Marshall objected to the use of the atomic bomb on Japan.<sup>41</sup> After World War II, Marshall was a staunch defender of the atomic bombings, saying, "We had to end the war. We had to save American lives. We had to halt this terrific expenditure of money which was reaching a stupendous total...The bomb stopped the war. Therefore, it was justifiable."<sup>42</sup> It is clear that Marshall's views seem to change over time, leaving unclear what his true opinions may have been about the use of the atomic bombs.

Despite the contradictions in the evidence concerning Marshall's views, several factors can be identified which may have influenced his opinions. First, he was widely recognized to be an extremely discreet official, serving under both President Roosevelt and President Truman, and subsequently being named Secretary of State in 1947. Marshall was viewed as being loyal to both men, and after the war never disclosed that he had held, as previously expressed, any doubts about using the atomic bombs to bring the war to an end. As explained by Barton Bernstein in his essay, *Understanding the Atomic Bomb and the Japanese Surrender*,<sup>43</sup> "Understanding the need to legitimize decisions and to shape national memory, [Marshall] was always unwilling to mention the moral objections that he had briefly stated, but perhaps deeply felt."<sup>43</sup> Second, the fact that the Manhattan Project fell under his purview may have influenced his views, especially in light of the vast expenditures which were necessary to build the bomb. Third, Marshall viewed the decision of whether to use the atomic bomb not as a military decision, but a political one. As summarized in Gar Alperovitz's book, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, "General Marshall was anxious to leave the main questions regarding the use of the

bomb to the President. He treated it as a matter involving the highest form of policy for which he looked to political leaders for direction."<sup>44</sup>

Thus, it may have seemed that the senior military leaders studied above – Eisenhower, Leahy, MacArthur, and Marshall – did not see the atomic bombings as a military necessity, but it is important to recognize that their views were based only on military considerations in their role as military leaders. Political factors regarding the use of the bombs were also important in the overall decision-making process. In fact, even if some military leaders viewed the bombs as being military unnecessary, that in and of itself does not necessarily mean that they felt the atomic bombs were not justified as being necessary to compel Japan to actually surrender. As an example, Japan's Imperial Navy was defeated long before the Japanese surrender in August 1945. Yet the collapse of the naval fleet did not bring about surrender for the small island nation of Japan. Therefore, it stood to reason that despite the realities of military defeat, some other greater force – in this case the atomic bomb – might have been necessary in forcing Japan's capitulation and unconditional surrender. Military leaders, despite their expressed opinions that the atomic bombs may have been unnecessary in a strictly military sense, also probably recognized the necessity of the bombs in bringing about the Japanese capitulation under U.S. and Allied terms of surrender.

In fact, not one of the military leaders above indicated opposition regarding the use of the atomic bombs to the President, and in the end, they all went along with the President's decision to use the atomic bombs. Historian Robert Maddox, in emphasizing the lack of evidence that any military leaders expressed objections about the bomb to President Truman, wrote, "Later claims by various generals and admirals about what they thought are immaterial and in many cases obviously self-serving or motivated by devotion to their particular branch of service."<sup>45</sup> As outlined before, organizational interests and political aspirations also influenced the opinions of these military leaders.

## Conclusion

In sum, I conclude that military opinions about the atomic bomb are greatly shaped by the six key variables identified above, and as such, are limited to being largely within the context of the orthodox point of view. Although the use of the atomic bombs may have been thought by some to be militarily unnecessary, it is evident from the discussion above that this view is limited in scope and only tells part of the story. In bringing about the Japanese surrender, something greater than simple military defeat was determined to be necessary, and in the end, the atomic bombs were key factors in bringing about the Japanese surrender. This is not to say that the death and destruction caused by our use of the atomic bombs was a "good" thing. However, it is clear that the use of the atomic bombs brought to an end what may have otherwise been a prolonged war of attrition, possibly resulting in even more death and destruction. What we do know is that the use of the atomic bomb is something we do not want to repeat again.

In terms of lessons learned, there are several. First, it is clear that military defeat in and of itself does not necessarily bring about political surrender. As such, it is important to consider all of the factors – both military and political – in arriving at a decision on the termination of war. Second, <sup>for historians interpreting this</sup> decisions of the magnitude require a thorough review of all known factors. In reviewing the decision to drop the atomic bomb, it is important to remember what information may or may not have been available at that time. It is easy now, for example, to criticize the decision to use the atomic bomb ~~now~~, having had the benefit of hindsight. Third, it is beneficial to realize the role that collective memory plays in the promotion of a particular point of view. One needs only to examine military journals, school textbooks, or the bulk of popular literature to find that the orthodox view about the atomic bombs remains the predominant view. In order to gain a greater understanding of history [so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past] the myriad complexities of the considerations that led to the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, as well as new findings about the atomic bomb decision and their implications must continue to be incorporated into future discussion.

*delivered*

Fortunately, we have thus far been able to avert nuclear war and have also brought an end to the Cold War. Still, rogue nations and regimes such as China, North Korea, Iraq and various terrorist organizations continue to threaten the world through <sup>their</sup> development and potential use of nuclear weapons. It remains to be seen how well we have learned the lessons of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. As best captured perhaps by J. Samuel Walker in the following expression, we must never forget the atomic bomb experience of World War II. "In exhibiting our willingness to use such power in war, we have shown a capacity towards self destruction that bears constant vigilance."<sup>46</sup> Let us hope that we have truly learned our lesson.

"History will not scorn us for our last-resort use of this most horrible of all weapons to end finally and completely the most horrible of all wars. But we will be damned as barbarians without vision or heart if we do not feel the deepest sadness at the necessity for authorizing such cruelty."

– ex-infantryman, in a letter to the Washington Post  
*Washington Post*, November 13, 1946

"The bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended a war. They also made it wholly clear that we must never have another war. This is the lesson men and leaders everywhere must learn, and I believe that when they learn it they will find a way to lasting peace. There is no other choice."

– Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson  
*Harpers – The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*

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- <sup>3</sup> Capio, Ralph J., "The Atomic Bombings of Japan: A 50-Year Retrospective," The Airpower Journal, (Summer 1995, <http://www.airpower.maxwell.af.mil/airchronicles/apj/capio/html>), p. 2.
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- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331
- <sup>13</sup> Boyer, Paul, "Exotic Resonances: Hiroshima in American Memory," in Hiroshima in History and Memory, ed. by Michael J. Hogan, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 146-147.
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- <sup>35</sup> Cousins, Norman, The Pathology of Power, pp. 65, 70-71, as quoted in Long, Doug, "Hiroshima: Who Disagreed with the Atomic Bombing?" <http://www.doug-long.com/quotes.htm>.
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- <sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.
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## ***Bibliographical Essay***

Issues of war involve not only the civilian leadership and authority that governs the actions of the military but also involve encompass the influence of military experience and military opinions in formulating U.S. policy. In this sense, I felt it not only important to dispel some assumptions, perhaps, that some may have about the military but to also provide greater insight into the opinions of the military in identifying lessons learned from the tragic events of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the concluding days of World War II.

Although the decision to drop the atomic bombs was not a military decision but rather a political one, this work was based on the premise that military opinions and concerns influenced the decision making process in some way, shape, or form. Research aimed at capturing the true essence and meaning conveyed by the opinions expressed by military leaders resulted in an analysis of numerous sources; yet, they did not come close to encompassing the sheer volume of available information. In making choices as to which sources to focus on, specific consideration was given to opinions expressed by military leaders who were characterized as being against the use of the atomic bombs. Upon further scrutiny, the military point of view did not necessarily mean what some revisionist scholars attempted to say they meant. These revelations only served to strengthen the importance of the need to provide further opportunities to share some insight into military opinions.

The majority of the source material for this paper came from U.S. military texts and internet sites, including the Center for Military History (CMH), the Combined Arms Research Institute Library (CARL), the U.S. Army War College, the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the U.S. Air Force Air War College (Airpower Magazine), Military History Quarterly, Army Magazine, and the Air Force Magazine. I found the most useful information in the 1995 editions of Military History Quarterly and Diplomatic History journals, both of which were published as commemorative issues in recognition of the 50th anniversaries of the atomic bomb of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

I was also assisted by several military colleagues who are currently stationed in Japan: U.S. Army Major Dawn M. Rodeschin for professional input as well as extensive research and background information on Hiroshima and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum; U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander Kenneth R. Spurlock for his expertise and assistance in helping to refine the paper topic; and U.S. Air Force Major Kevin Bennett for his input as well in shaping the focus of the paper.

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