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Casualty Estimates for the Invasion of Japan:

What Did the Truman Cabinet Know?

Introduction

We are up against some very big decisions. The time is approaching when we can no longer avoid them and when events may force us into the public on the subject. Our thoughts went right down to the bottom facts of human nature, morals and government, and it is by far the most searching and important thing that I have had to do since I have been here in the office of Secretary of War because it touches matters which are deeper even than the principles of present government.¹

There has been much controversy surrounding the casualty estimates for the invasion of Japan given by the Truman Cabinet and other key leaders involved with the Manhattan Project. Much of this is because there is such a wide range of estimates; starting with those under 100,000 to more staggering figures in the millions. Supporters of different numbers are often grouped according to their ideological or political lines of reasoning. While revisionist historians and anti-nuclear advocates tend to agree on smaller numbers, military historians and war veterans generally support higher numbers, especially those found in orthodox estimates. Fifty years after the atomic bombs these debates reached a boiling point as the Smithsonian Museum prepared for exhibition of the Enola Gay. Many scholars have contributed to this debate by coming up with independent estimates using various historiographical and mathematical techniques. In regards to casualty estimates for the invasion of Japan, John Ray Skates, a former professor at the U.S. Army Center of Military History in Washington D.C. considers it “the most hotly contested subject in the debate over the atomic bomb.”²

The purpose of this essay is to explain why the casualty estimates for Japan have become such an important fixture in understanding the end of the Pacific War, specifically the climactic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. First, a brief history of how the bombs came to be questioned after the first one was dropped and the subsequent justifications that developed.

¹ Henry L. Stimson, Diary Entry: 3 Mar. 1945. Online version per permission of Yale University: <http://www.doug-long.com/stimson.htm>. Online. 16 December 2002

² John Ray Skates, *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Spring 1996, p. 6.
Skates was responding to criticism of his book *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb*.

Secondly, in order to more fully appreciate the complexity of the subject a brief discussion of casualty estimate definitions, challenges, and techniques will be made. This will be concluded by a review of pre-surrender and post-surrender casualty estimates and the debates that surround them. There are many casualty estimates that can be discussed, including those found in various military documents, independent assessments, and Japanese estimates. The focus of this essay will be on the high-level estimates given by members in the Truman cabinet, especially those by President Truman and Secretary Stimson. To a lesser extent, casualty estimates given by Manhattan Project leaders will be discussed. The scientific leaders of the Manhattan Project were focused on research, development, deployment, and targeting of the atomic bombs. Making casualty estimates for the invasion of Japan was neither their responsibility nor their focus, and rarely did they attend meetings where such topics were discussed. High-level discussions of this sort involved the Secretary of War, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and only a few other select members of Truman's cabinet. Only after the atomic bombs were dropped and the public pressured justification did it behoove some Manhattan Project leaders to become involved in casualty estimate debates for the invasion of Japan.

Prior to the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, the Truman cabinet and leaders of the Manhattan Project were busily preparing themselves for the American public. On August 6, 1945, shortly after the first bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, President Truman and Secretary of War Stimson released official statements to the public. Both releases were largely concerned with announcing the world's first use of the atomic bomb and explaining the history of research and development of the new technology. In a thorough reading of their statements, it is clear that President Truman and Secretary Stimson were not overly concerned

about explaining or justifying themselves in regards to the use of the bombs.³ As will be shown, this is not surprising given the state of affairs at that time.

Since the unprovoked surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the position the U.S. played in the Pacific theater went from a more passive naval embargo and unprofitable diplomatic role, to an island-hopping strategy from the south. This strategy would involve scores of fierce battles with resistant Japanese troops. Eventually, successive victories would result in the seizure of Saipan and Okinawa, Japan's southernmost region, and bring U.S. air power within close aerial bombing range of mainland Japan. Especially since the successful February 1945 bombings of Kobe and Tokyo, the American bombing squads had increasingly been involved in concentrated aerial bombardment of military establishments and urban centers. As a July issue of the Fifth Air Force Weekly Intelligence Review said, "the entire population of Japan is a proper Military Target....THERE ARE NO CIVILIANS IN JAPAN" (author's emphasis).⁴ Even months before this publication, the devastating and indiscriminate March 9-10, 1945 aerial bombardment of Tokyo proved the unflinching military determination of the United States. In what is still considered one of Tokyo's worst catastrophes, an astonishing 1,665 tons of incendiaries were unleashed from 279 planes, resulting in the fiery death of an estimated 90,000 to 100,000 people, most of whom were civilians.⁵ Reflecting on the aerial bombings in Japan and comparing them to the possible use of the atomic bomb, Secretary Stimson's diary for June 6, 1945 recalled a conversation with Truman:

³ United States. President. Statement By The President Of The United States 6 Aug. 1945.

United States. Secretary of War. Statement Of The Secretary Of War 6 Aug. 1945.

Both of these statements, along with drafts, cover letters, British suggestions, and audio versions can be found online at the Truman Presidential Museum & Library website:

http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/official_releases.htm 23 Oct. 2002.

⁴ Fifth Air Force Weekly Intelligence Review, No. 86, 15-21 July 1945.

⁵ Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End Of The Imperial Japanese Empire*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), pp. 3-20.

*I told him I was anxious about this feature of the war for two reasons: first, because I did not want to have the United States get the reputation for outdoing Hitler in atrocities; and second, I was a little fearful that before we could get ready the air force might have Japan so thoroughly bombed out that the new weapon would not have a fair background to show its strength.*⁶

Barton Bernstein of Stanford University writes that Stimson was “Caught between an older morality that opposed the intentional bombing of noncombatants and a newer one that stressed virtually total war, Stimson could neither fully face the facts nor fully escape them.”⁷ He concludes that Stimson, “was not a hypocrite but a man trapped in ambivalence.”⁸

Nonetheless, public opinion polls conducted in the U.S. after the Tokyo bombing on June 1, just two months prior to Hiroshima and Nagasaki reflected that the majority of Americans supported continued attacks on Japan.⁹ Pulitzer Prize winning historian Allan Nevins wrote an essay in 1946 titled *How We Felt About the War*. In it he wrote the following: “Probably in all our history, no foe has been so detested as were the Japanese.”¹⁰ Pearl Harbor was still fresh in America’s memory and there were continuing reports of Japan’s war atrocities. These were determining factors in America’s mood at this time. The results of this poll and others coupled with the overall lack of apprehension from the American people to previous urban bombings and the fact that Japan had still not capitulated were certainly some of the reasons the initial statements regarding Hiroshima lacked more justification.

Soon after the widespread nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki became more apparent and as the war in the Pacific came to a halt, more Americans started to publicly

⁶ Barton J. Bernstein, “The Atomic Bombs Reconsidered,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 1995, p. 146.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁹ Leon V. Sigal, *Fighting To A Finish*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 95. The question posed was: “Japan may offer to surrender and call her soldiers home provided we agree not to send an army of occupation of her home islands. Do you think we should accept such a peace offer if we get the chance, or fight until we have completely beaten her on the Japanese homeland?” The results were nine-to-one in favor of continued prosecution.

¹⁰ Quoted in John W. Dower, *War Without Mercy: Race & Power in the Pacific War*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986): p. 33.

question some of the battle tactics of the U.S. military in Japan. Although the arguments came from only a minority of the population as a whole, many of these were respected leaders from some of America's most honored institutions.¹¹ Central to some criticisms and singularly to most was the use of atomic bombs in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. One of the first protests against the use of atomic bombs was an August 10 statement published in the New York Times by John Foster Dulles, a future Secretary of State, and prominent Methodist Bishop G. Bromley Oxman. Both of these men were leaders of the Federal Council of Churches. In their combined statement they wrote, "If we, a Christian nation, feel morally free to use atomic energy in that way, men elsewhere will accept that verdict....Atomic weapons will be looked upon as a normal part of the arsenal of war and the stage will be set for the sudden and final destruction of mankind."¹² A few days later, David Lawrence, the editor of what would later be called US News and World Report wrote that justifications would "never erase from our minds the simple truth that we, of all civilized nations...did not hesitate to employ the most destructive weapon of all times indiscriminately against men, women, and children."¹³

Arguably the most influential example that contributed to further questioning of the bomb was John Hersey's *Hiroshima*.¹⁴ In late 1945, a managing editor of The New Yorker discussed a story idea with Pulitzer Prize winning author John Hersey. William Shawn was "astonished that in all the millions of words being written about the bomb – how and why the decision was made, how the bomb came to be built, whether it should have been dropped at all – what had actually

¹¹ For example, a 1946 moral rebuke from titled "Atomic Warfare and the Christian Faith". This was authored by the Federal Council of Churches and had 22 prominent moralists. See Appendix IV in Gar Alperovitz, *Atomic Diplomacy: Hiroshima and Potsdam*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 321-337.

¹² Robert Jay Lifton and Greg Mitchell, *Hiroshima in America: A Half Century of Denial*, (New York: Avon Books, 1995), p. 26. The Federal Council of Churches would later release the statement *Atomic Warfare and the Christian Faith* which was signed by 22 prominent moralists. See footnote above.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁴ John Hersey, "Hiroshima," *The New Yorker*, 31 Aug. 1946. p. 20.
John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1946).

happened in Hiroshima itself...was being ignored.”¹⁵ The result was a moving, imagery filled description of victims of the bomb. This one year anniversary article was appropriately labeled *Hiroshima*. Eventually this article would evolve into a book of the same name and become a bestseller in the United States and Japan. Whatever the original intentions of the editor or writer, the article ignited much of the subsequent media criticism that followed. One example was the Norman Cousins’ editorial in the Saturday Review of Literature which was a scathing moral rebuke of the atomic bomb. In it he wrote of “a primitive fear, the fear of the unknown, the fear of forces man can neither channel nor comprehend . . . the fear of irrational death.”¹⁶ Rousseau and Montesquieu, both early advocates of just war principles, fervently argued against civilian casualties in the 18th century.¹⁷ However, ever since the climactic 1937 bombing of the Spanish city Guernica that claimed one third of the town’s 5,000 residents, and was poignantly symbolized in the famous Picasso painting, the devastating aerial bombardment of civilians had become commonplace. In 1939, a dismayed President Roosevelt would write an appeal to Europe for the prevention of further aerial bombing of civilians.¹⁸ Nonetheless, aerial bombing of urban centers continued to the very end of the war. As historian Richard Overy wrote, “the most striking moral paradox of the war years was the willingness of ostensibly liberal states to engage in the deliberate killing of hundreds of thousands of enemy civilians from the air.”¹⁹

Needless to say, continued criticisms about the use of the bombs had an affect on many decision makers who felt that they were unwarranted. Most of these leaders saw the bomb as a

¹⁵ Thomas Kunkel, “Genius in Disguise: Harold Ross of The New Yorker,” (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 370.

¹⁶ Lifton, *Hiroshima in America*, p. 35.

¹⁷ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, (New York: Penguin Books, 1968) and Charles de Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

¹⁸ United States. President. Appeal of Franklin D. Roosevelt on Aerial Bombardment of Civilian Populations, 1 Sep. 1939. Available online at Yale University: <http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/wwii/yellow/ylbk325.htm>. 16 December 2002.

¹⁹ Frank, *Downfall*, p. 46.

cause and effect relationship—coupled only perhaps with the Soviet entry—that quickly brought the war to a close. One central player who was instrumental in spearheading a response to the critics was James B. Conant. Besides being a former president of Harvard and an administrator for the Manhattan Project, Conant also had two sons who were stationed in the Pacific.²⁰ In a letter to Harvey Bundy, who was Secretary of War Stimson’s top aide, he wrote, “a small minority, if it represents the type of person who is both sentimental and verbally minded and in contact with our youth [could create] a distortion of history.”²¹ Eventually his efforts and others would culminate in two important articles. The first was a December 1946 article *If the Atomic Bomb Had Not Been Used* that was written by Karl T. Compton and published in The Atlantic Monthly. Karl T. Compton was a physicist and former President of M.I.T. During the development of the atomic bombs he was Head of the Interim Committee. More importantly however, was the February 1947 article *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* that was written by former Secretary of War Stimson and published in Harper’s Magazine.²² The content and tone of this essay would be markedly different from Stimson’s original statement about Hiroshima a year and a half earlier. His initial statement seemed a sober yet commemorative ode to the technological marvel of the atom. In contrast, the Harper’s Magazine article would be an unapologetic justification which emphasized what was hoped to be intuitive – the fact that the bomb ultimately saved lives.

Both of these articles, especially the longer and more authoritative one written by Stimson, would provide the general foundation for subsequent disclosures of bomb justifications by those involved in the decision. Whether official or unofficial, public or private, further justifications of the bombs were generally given with the explanation that they saved lives by

²⁰ Lifton, *Hiroshima in America*, p. 95.

²¹ Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 94.

²² Stimson, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, p. 97.

preventing a catastrophic and costly invasion of the Japan home islands. In addition, as if to give an aura of legitimacy or authority, many of these explanations were accompanied by casualty projection estimates for – what many considered the only alternative – an invasion of Japan. These reasons and numbers would soon become the foundation for what would be called the orthodox view of the atomic bombings. Many agree that the bombs did shorten the war and save countless lives: American, Japanese, and others, yet there is a continuing debate on how many lives would have actually been saved. As Richard Frank poignantly writes, “No discussion of invasion strategy can evade the ongoing obsessive and misplaced American controversy over casualty projections.”²³

A whole host of challenges have surfaced regarding the accuracy of the original casualty figures given by the Truman cabinet and whether or not these figures were arbitrarily or politically contrived. The debate regarding numerical accuracy is certainly lacking a more definitive mathematical approach. Indeed, most high-level casualty estimates are based solely on retroactive or somewhat abstract calculations which will be discussed later. As far as questions regarding the arbitrary nature or politics of the numbers, there are two main reasons. First of all is the lack of synchronization of numbers given by different officials. Even the initial estimates published in the articles written by Compton and Stimson, though only three months apart, had different numbers and varied in their approach to defining casualty estimates.²⁴ These numbers run from under 100,000 to millions. Even Winston Churchill, though he probably was not privy

²³ Frank, *Downfall*, p. 338.

²⁴ Stimson, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb”

Compton, “If the Atomic Bomb Had Not Been Used,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1946. Available online at The Atlantic Online: <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/46dec/compton.htm>. Also available in real format and Truman letter at Truman Presidential Museum & Library: http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/background/bmb4-1.htm

to U.S. military estimates, gave a quote of “1,200,000.”²⁵ Furthermore, some of these leaders, notably Truman, gave different estimates at different times, or changed their figures to match those of someone else. Forecasting is a dynamic process that can continually change based on any number of dynamic variables. Nevertheless when variables become frozen in time, estimates for that given time should also become frozen.

What is a casualty?

*The education of students at the University of Chicago was a war casualty.*²⁶
--Arthur H. Compton, 1956

Perhaps the number one problem with casualty estimate debates is that the word “casualty” is frequently used improperly. “Lives saved” and “casualties saved” sound very similar, but they are two different meanings. Both authors of casualty estimates and those involved in the debate frequently--and perhaps inadvertently--confuse the two. It goes without saying that definitions not clarified initially can be an advantage to forecasters who can adjust these ambiguities appropriately at a later time. Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language uses the following definition: “1 a: a member of the armed forces lost to service through death, wounds, sickness, capture, or because his or her whereabouts are unknown.”²⁷ A more authoritative definition can be found in a dictionary of military terms published by the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS): “Any person who is lost to his organization by reason of having been declared dead, wounded, injured, diseased, interned, captured, retained,

²⁵ Quoted in Barton J. Bernstein, “A postwar myth: 500,000 U.S. lives were saved”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June/July 1986, p. 38. Churchill gets a lot of flack for his number, but depending on what belief in Japan’s possibility of capitulation, this number is quite plausible. See below for capitulation potential factor.

²⁶ Quoted in “casualty, n.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. Ed. John Simpson. 3rd ed. *OED Online*. Draft Mar. 2000. Oxford University Press. 16 December 2002. <http://oed.com> Interestingly enough, Dr. Compton was a former professor and director of the Metallurgical Laboratory at the University of Chicago. When he became one of the three program chiefs for the Manhattan Project, it became one of the critical research facilities.

²⁷ “casualty n.” *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, (New York: Random House: 1996).

missing, missing in action, beleaguered, besieged or detained.”²⁸ However, the word becomes even more complicated since the JCS dictionary contains lengthy definitions for “battle casualty” and “nonbattle casualty.”²⁹ Even phrases such as “life was saved” or “saved life” can have fairly ambiguous connotations since they are not always used literally. “That cup of coffee saved my life”, “leaving the war saved my life”, and “the bulletproof jacket saved my life” have three different connotations. The first is used as a figure of speech, the second is hypothetical, and the third can be quite literal. Although the first connotation is not used in casualty estimate debates, the latter two are often seen. In addition to definitional ambiguities, parameters must be set for the scope of the subject. It is often overlooked, but the United States and Japan were only two of the many populations that were involved in the Pacific War. In his award winning book *Embracing Defeat*, John Dower wrote, “In the wake of defeat, approximately 6.5 million Japanese were stranded in Asia, Siberia, and the Pacific Ocean area. Roughly 3.5 million of them were soldiers and sailors.”³⁰ With the Soviet declaration of war on August 8, there was potential for massive casualties engaged with these soldiers, including Soviets, Chinese, and Koreans.

Further Problems with Casualty Estimates

By their very nature, casualty estimates are based on conjecture and can only be fully validated after the event or events upon which they are based have occurred. This is not to say that casualty estimates are trivially contrived. Nor is it true to say that estimates are contrived

²⁸ Quoted in “casualty, n.” Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, U.S. G.P.O., 1972. Available online at Department of Defense Dictionary of Military Terms: <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/index.html> 16 December 2002.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ John W. Dower, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999). p. 48.

without thorough moral examination. However, like any type of forecasting they can be used politically to steer a desired course or help deal with what Karl T. Compton once called the “after-the-event strategists”.³¹ In the case of casualty estimates made for the invasion of Japan, we are presented with a number of dilemmas. The most obvious fact is that the casualty estimates for the invasion are inconclusive, meaning their accuracy can never be determined. Unlike a scientific hypothesis that can be repeatedly tested in a controlled environment, the experiment involving the invasion of Japan ended posthaste when Japan surrendered on August 15, 1945.

Another problem is that there are a plethora of documents which often seemingly contradict one another. The Truman Presidential Museum and Library alone boasts 3,809 linear feet (over 7 million pages) of books and memoranda related to his presidency.³² The diverse array of documents in this collection represents multitudinous organizations and individuals which make up the Truman governmental institution. The mission and scope of administration among these various groups are also diverse. Many of the arguments revolve around whether a particular document is legitimate or not. The source of the document and context becomes important when trying to determine the degree of importance. However overwhelming the amount of documents there are, many events have also been left unrecorded or have not been released to the public. Many have even tried to fill these voids using various methods such as historiographical evidence and character analysis. For example, Robert L. Messer presented a paper to the American Historical Association suggesting that “even though the president never

³¹ Compton, “If the Atomic Bomb Had Not Been Used”, pp. 52-54.

³² Figure from Truman Presidential Museum and Library at:
<http://www.trumanlibrary.org/hst-pape.htm> 23 Oct. 2002.

acknowledged any feelings of remorse, he harbored a heavy burden of guilt arising from the discrepancy between the mass slaughter of civilians and his own moral convictions.”³³

When discussing casualty estimates it is also important to remember that different types of casualty estimates exist. D.M. Giangreco, has classified them into a minimum of three groups:

First, those used for specific logistical purposes by the medical staff charged with preserving lives of the wounded....

Second, figures used as the basis for estimating the number of replacements needed after a short battle, or to maintain the combat strength of the force during a lengthier fight....

Third, unlike the casualty estimates created to fulfill the above functional needs, long range estimates of an academic nature were also compiled at higher staff levels. This was done to estimate how future operations would fit into overall campaign objectives and what might be the possible costs of the options the staff either proposed or was directed to plan for or comment on. This type of estimate might be built from scratch like the first two, but was more likely to have used, or been influenced by, the other staffs' calculations when it was created.³⁴

Although this essay will focus on the third type of high-level casualty estimates, it is important to remember that much of the current debate involves whether or not some of these groups communicated their respective estimates.

Technical Approaches to Casualty Estimates

Even after digging through the enormous amounts of documents and finding the numbers, their accuracy can still be debated. Although this essay does not focus on the mathematical approach to casualty estimates, it is worth discussing some of the techniques used. When determining casualties, there are numerous variables involved, many of which are subjective or ambiguous. As Joshua Epstein of the Brookings Institution, wrote in his book, *The Calculus of Conventional War*:

³³ Quoted in Michael J. Hogan, *Hiroshima: In History and Memory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 24-25.

³⁴ G.M. Giangreco, "Casualty Projections for the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1946: Planning and Policy Implications," *Journal of Military History*, 61 (July 1997), pp. 521-82. Also online at the University of Illinois URL: <http://tiger.uic.edu/~rjensen/invade.htm> 16 December 2002.

*Soldiers, analysts, and students of history have long recognized that military outcomes depend upon operational factors, such as warning, readiness, geography, tactics, coordination, logistics, combat technology, and troop skill, none which can be reflected in the raw numerical comparisons that seem to dominate the debate.*³⁵

In order to clear up as many ambiguities as possible calculations are based on known and best guess variables. Most known variables are based on ones own numbers, such as number of own soldiers, artillery types. However, there are other possible known variables such as terrain or enemy data discovered through intelligence operations. Best guess or unknown variables can include the enemy's number of aircraft, the enemy's armor capabilities, and weather. All of these variables can then be plugged into various complex algorithms such as the Lanchester equations which were popular in World War II, and can determine expected attrition rates, casualty estimates, and expected date of victory.³⁶ While complicated mathematical methods such as the Lanchester equations were used for preliminary logistics planning, most of these were incorporated into more user-friendly tables that didn't require the requisite knowledge of complex algorithms.

These early methods have even been replicated in modern warfare, except that now sophisticated software is used to calculate casualties. The Dupuy Institute, a non-profit organization that does scholarly research on military campaigns, has developed software called *Campaign Database* which can be used to calculate such things as casualty numbers and determine a victor to an outcome. Like the casualty estimates done in World War II, the

³⁵ Joshua M. Epstein, *The Calculus of Conventional War: Dynamic Analysis without Lanchester Theory*, (The Brookings Institution, Washington D.C.) 1985: p. 1.

³⁶ On an interesting note, Lanchester's methods are now largely incorporated as marketing strategies, especially in Japan. Dr. Taoka Nobuo 1927-1984 adopted these strategies after discovering a Japanese government document that made a reference to Lanchester's equations. He has written a number of business bestsellers based on Lanchester strategy and his company Lanchester Systems KK, founded in 1976, has consulted companies such as Matsushita, Sumitomo, and Kanebo Cosmetics. More information can be found online at Lanchester Press: <http://www.lanchester.com>.

calculations done by this software are also determined by a number of variables such as force strength, armor capabilities, types of artillery, available aircraft and their sorties, terrain, and weather.³⁷ Coupled with these methods, casualty estimates performed in World War II were also retroactive. Retroactive methods are based on statistical methods of regression and ratios of previous battles. In this method, estimates for future battles are based on figures of prior battles. In the case of documented executive level discussions concerning casualty estimates for the invasion of Japan, these were almost singularly done using simple retroactive methods. D. M. Giangreco sums up the evolution of casualty estimate forecasting for the Pacific War in the following:

Early in the Pacific war, medical and campaign planners built their casualty estimates as best they could using tables constructed from the U.S. Army's World War I experience when factored with projected troop strength, operational plans, and intelligence estimates of Japanese capabilities, terrain, and relative firepower. By the invasion of the Philippines, planners at various echelons in MacArthur's headquarters were able to realistically replace the World War I baseline figures with data compiled from the hard-won battles on and around New Guinea. In general, several sets of figures would emerge that might or might not be completely synchronized, depending on the individual interpretations of intelligence data and the level of coordination between the different staffs within a command.³⁸

Regardless of how sophisticated the calculations, all military planners understand that calculations are not perfect and there is always any number of unknowns. Factors such as the enemy's intelligence capabilities, technological advances, and morale can be very difficult, if not impossible to gauge.

The Capitulation Factor

³⁷ The Dupuy Institute, *The Campaign Database (CaDB)*, (Created: 1998-99 by TDI), Available online at The Dupuy Institute: <http://www.dupuyinstitute.org/data/cadb.htm> 16 December 2002. This is a very interesting site and has lots of military logistics information. You can see screenshots of the software and read the specifications.

³⁸ Giangreco, "Casualty Projections for the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1946," p. 530.

Interestingly enough, most casualty debates seem to ignore such technical variables and have a stronger focus on retroactive controls, such as casualty ratios of previous battles, coupled with what they believe was the capitulation potential of Japan. This potential is based on any number of things including: troop strength, food supply, military production capabilities, domestic politics, and diplomatic movements. It is extremely difficult to gauge these variables since they often correlate and are interdependent. Too much concentration on one variable can give a limited or false interpretation of the whole. For example, the correspondences between Foreign Minister Togo and the Russian Ambassador Sato are often used as evidence of Japan's movements towards peace. However, the lack of forthrightness in their mission (perhaps through no fault of their own) resulted in less than tangible outcomes and did nothing to prevent the Soviet entrance to the war on August 8, 1945. Perhaps paradoxically to Japan's diplomatic efforts with the Soviet Union, some observers use the Soviet's entrance to the war as evidence of Japan's possible surrender. Others ignore the Soviet element entirely or downplay its importance to Japan's capitulation.

Those that side with the very high casualty estimates generally assume that the defeat of Japan was a distant reality and downplay factors such as the Soviet's entrance to war or Japan's diplomatic efforts. These observers take more literally military zealots such as Admiral Takajiro Onishi who, even after two atomic bombs had been dropped stated, "If we are prepared to sacrifice 20,000,000 Japanese lives in a special attack [kamikaze] effort, victory will be ours!"³⁹ On the other hand, those with lower casualty numbers tend to believe that Japan was on the brink of surrender, even before the atomic bombings. These debates often include arguments regarding staggering economic conditions, growing domestic dissent in Japan, and the growing possibility

³⁹ Quoted in Frank, *Downfall*, p. 311.

of imperial intervention. One of the biggest debates is the speculation of whether a change from an unconditional surrender to one giving the emperor clemency would have affected Japan's willingness to surrender. The goal of this essay is not to gauge the capitulation potential of Japan as this is a complex argument in itself and whole books are dedicated to this subject. However, it is important to remember that the belief in varying degrees of this potential, are key to all casualty estimate arguments.

June 18 1945: Meeting at the White House

There are numerous government documents regarding casualty estimates for the invasion of Japan. In order to maximize relevancy to the invasion it is only logical to examine those that involved decision makers and were dated just prior to Japan's capitulation. In an effort to prepare for the Potsdam Conference that would occur the following month, President Truman met with his senior military advisor to discuss invasion plans. In preparation for the meeting, Admiral Leahy prepared a memorandum for the Joint Chiefs of Staff who then forwarded it to the Joint Planning Staff and Joint War Plans Committee. According to the Leahy's memorandum, the President wanted to:

... discuss details of our campaign against Japan. He expects at this meeting to be thoroughly informed of our intentions and prospects in preparation for his discussions with Churchill and Stalin. He wants an estimate of the time required and an estimate of the losses in killed and wounded that will result from an invasion of Japan proper. He wants an estimate of the time and the losses that will result from an effort to defeat Japan by isolation, blockade, and bombardment by sea and air forces. It is his intention to make his decision on the campaign with the purpose of economizing to the maximum extent possible in the loss of American lives. Economy in the use of time and money cost is comparatively unimportant. I suggest that a memorandum discussion of the

*above noted points be prepared in advance for delivery to the President at the time of the meeting. . . .*⁴⁰

Using sources that had accumulated over the last year, the Joint War Plans Committee made casualty estimates for various scenarios and included them in a June 15 report to the Joint Planning Staff. Table 1 below is based on the figures they submitted.

Table 1.

Invasion Scenarios	Killed	Wounded	Missing	Total
Southern Kyushu, followed by Tokyo Plain	40,000	150,000	3,500	193,500
Southern Kyushu-Northwestern Kyushu (Japan surrenders) (sic)	25,000	105,000	2,500	132,500
Southern Kyushu-Northwestern Kyushu-Tokyo Plain	46,000	170,000	4,000	220,000

Source: Ibid.

In addition to these estimates, it was concluded that 766,700 US personnel would be involved in the operation. However, in a revised document, that would be presented in the meeting with President Truman three days later, both the casualty estimate numbers and the figures for US personnel were deleted with no explanation. Douglas J. MacEachin was a former Deputy Director for Intelligence for the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) from 1993 to 1995. In a CIA monograph titled *The Final Months of the War With Japan: Signals Intelligence, U.S. Invasion Planning, and the A-Bomb Decision* he wrote:

In an apparent effort to close or narrow the gap between presenting no casualty figures at all and presenting numbers that the Joint Planning Staff was unwilling to use with the President, the Army's Director of Operations, Maj. Gen. J. E. Hull, asked his staff for casualty figures for operations on Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Leyte and Luzon (both in the Philippines), and "overall figures on MacArthur's operations to date." He said these could be used as background at the upcoming meeting with the President, whom Hull described as "very much disturbed over losses on Okinawa." Hull then incorporated the following casualty figures into a

⁴⁰ United States. White House Meeting. Minutes of Meeting held at the White House on Monday, 18 June 1945 at 1530, June 18, 1945. Available online at Truman Presidential Library & Museum: http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/meeting_minutes/bmi13-1.htm. 16 December 2002.

summary of the longer report that had been prepared for the President's meeting.⁴¹

Unfortunately, MacEachin doesn't explain why he thinks the Joint Planning staff was "unwilling to use" the "casualty figures" with the President. Concurrent to discussions among the Joint Planning Staff, General MacArthur was also submitting figures to Army Chief of Staff Marshall. According to the memo sent by his staff on June 17:

*Estimate of OLYMPIC battle casualties for planning purposes . . . as follows:
D to D+30: 50,800
D+30 to D+60: 27,150
D+60 to D+90: 27,100
The foregoing are estimated total battle casualties from which estimated return to duty numbers are deducted. Not included in the foregoing are non-battle casualties estimated at 4200 for each thirty day period.⁴²*

Originally General Marshall wasn't quite sure what to make of these numbers and asked MacArthur for clarification. Unfortunately, MacArthur's response didn't clarify anything for Marshall except for his belief that the numbers were too high:

Estimate of casualties contained in my C-19571 was a routine report submitted direct by a staff section without higher reference for medical and replacement planning purposes. The estimate was derived from the casualty rates in Normandy and Okinawa, the highest our forces have sustained as 3.8 men per thousand per day. The total force involved was estimated as 681,000 with one half engaged the first 15 days and the entire strength thereafter. The estimate is purely academic and routine and was made for planning alone. It had not come to my prior attention. I do not anticipate such a high rate of loss.⁴³

The following day Marshall would bring the revised document from the Joint Planning Committee and MacArthur's telegrams to a meeting with President Truman.

⁴¹ Douglas J. MacEachin, "The Final Months of the War With Japan: Signals Intelligence, U.S. Invasion Planning, and the A-Bomb Decision," *An Intelligence Monograph*, Central Intelligence Agency: Center for the Study of Intelligence, December 1998. Available online at CIA – Center for the Study of Intelligence: <http://www.cia.gov/csi/monograph/4253605299/csi9810001.html>

⁴² Giangreco, "Casualty Projections for the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1946," p. 548.

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 548.

On June 18 1945, just a month before the Potsdam Conference, President Truman met with select members of his cabinet and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to discuss the current state of affairs regarding the invasion of Japan. Attending were Fleet Admiral William D. Leahy, General of the Army G.C. Marshall, Fleet Admiral E. J. King, Lieut. General I.C. Eaker (Representing General of the Army H.H. Arnold), The Secretary of War, Mr. Stimson, The Secretary of the Navy, Mr. Forrestal, The Assistant Secretary of War, and Mr. McCloy, Brig. General A.J. McFarland, who acted as secretary. At the top of the agenda were casualty estimates for the invasion of Japan. The notes of this meeting are one of the few pieces of evidence of high-level discussions that involved President Truman of casualty estimates for the invasion of Japan. The results are often used by historians to point out that casualty estimates for invasion given by Truman and Stimson after the war were exaggerated or randomly contrived. This is understandable considering few other substantiated documents with casualty estimates involving decision makers are dated before Japan's surrender. However, there a number of difficulties when making any kind of assumption regarding casualty estimates based on this document.

First of all, the baseline numbers provided in this meeting were incomplete and estimate numbers were admittedly difficult. Key leaders knew the subject was complex and admitted this in the first sentence: "Our experience in the Pacific war is so diverse as to casualties that it is considered wrong to give any estimate in numbers."⁴⁴ It was also noted that the numbers of troops in Kyushu were increasing daily as Japan fortified for Ketsu-Go. In order to lay a basis for potential casualties, numbers for prior campaigns with Japan and those for Normandy were listed and are shown below in Table 2.

⁴⁴ United States. White House Meeting. 18 June 1945

Table 2.

Campaign	U.S. Casualties: Killed, Wounded, and Missing.	Japanese Casualties: Killed and Prisoners	Casualties Ratio: U.S./Japan
Leyte	17,000	78,000	1:4.6
Luzon	31,000	156,000	1:5.0
Iwo Jima	20,000	25,000	1:1.25
Okinawa (ground)	39,000	119,000	1:3
Okinawa (Navy – not a complete count)	7,000	n/a	n/a
Normandy (First 30 days)	42,000	n/a	n/a

Source: United States. White House Meeting. 18 June 1945.

Although this table was helpful, it was missing some important information. For one, the Navy's numbers were noticeably smaller and incomplete. In addition, the numbers for Normandy only included American casualties and not the British, Canadian, French, or Polish numbers. The document also stated that General Marshall estimated a Japanese force of 350,000, yet Richard Frank points out that by the time Japan capitulated 900,000 soldiers were garrisoned in Kyushu.⁴⁵

Another problem is whether MacArthur's debatable political aspirations of wanting to lead the greatest amphibious invasion skewed his casualty estimates that were presented in the meeting. Although MacArthur wasn't present at the meeting, some of his views were expressed via General Marshall. Noticeably absent were the original figures MacArthur submitted to Marshall. His aspirations, although debatable are seemingly supported by his telegram to Marshall that stated:

I believe the operation presents less hazards of excessive loss than any other that has been suggested and that its decisive effect will eventually save lives by eliminating wasteful operations of nondecisive (sic) character. I regard the operation as the most economical one in effort and lives that is possible. In this

⁴⁵ Giangreco, "Casualty Projections for the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1946," p. 549.

respect it must be remembered that the several preceeding (sic) months will involve practically no losses in ground troops and that sooner or later a decisive ground attack must be made. The hazard and loss will be greatly lessened if an attack is launched from Siberia sufficiently ahead of our target date to commit the enemy to major combat. I most earnestly recommend no change in OLYMPIC. Additional subsidiary attacks will simply build up our final total casualties.⁴⁶

In addition to the vague statement provided by Marshall, it was still not decided how long it would take Japan to capitulate were an invasion to take place. Although Stimson's article in Harper's Magazine said the war could go on until late 1946, there is no reference in this document that stated this position.⁴⁷ As will be shown later it can be argued that the document hints that the campaign would have been far shorter.

Another crucial thing to remember is that the meeting took place before many key events such as the Potsdam Conference, further Magic and Ultra intelligence intercepts, and as has been stated earlier, increasing Japanese troop fortification in Kyushu. Due to weather considerations, it was decided that the invasion occur no later than November 1. If the U.S. decided to invade at the latest possible date, this would almost be three months away from the date of the atomic bombs. Given the continual aerial bombardment strategy of the U.S., if Japan had continued to refuse to capitulate, there is no doubt that casualties could have been massive, even before invasion. The attendees of the meeting felt that before invading on the November 1 date:

- a. *If we press preparations we can be ready.*
- b. *Our estimates are that our air action will have smashed practically every industrial target worth hitting in Japan as well as destroying huge areas in the Jap cities.*
- c. *The Japanese Navy, if any still exists, will be completely powerless.*
- d. *Our sea action and air power will have cut Jap reinforcement capabilities from the mainland to negligible proportions.⁴⁸*

⁴⁶ Giangreco, "Casualty Projections for the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1946," p. 549

⁴⁷ Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb."

⁴⁸ United States. White House Meeting. 18 June 1945.

This brings up another point that often becomes a gray matter in the discussion of casualty estimates. Many writers tend to gloss over the fact that had the U.S. not bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 8, they probably would have still continued the aerial bombardment of designated cities—perhaps Hiroshima and Nagasaki—with conventional weapons. This wouldn't have been as risky for Americans, but it would have taken a significant toll on the Japanese. The U.S. was already well armed without the Atomic bombs

Casualty estimates notwithstanding, if all these facts above are taken under consideration, it is very hard to believe that Japan wouldn't surrender until a year after invasion in late 1946 as Stimson states. There were also many other factors that were brought up later in the meeting that could have potentially had an affect on any calculation of casualties. One was a discussion regarding the Soviet promise to enter the war on August 8, 1945.⁴⁹ Not only Russian, but Chinese contributions to the war effort were recognized as important considerations. Both of these developments could have certainly had an affect on any future casualty estimates. Even in the opening notes, capitulation was hoped to be achieved by air bombardment and sea blockade, coupled with an invasion to Japan, and the entry or threat of Soviet entry to the war. Later it was written that the entry of the Russians “may well be the decisive action levering them into capitulation at that time or shortly after thereafter if we land in Japan.”⁵⁰ Another factor that was only briefly discussed was the “unconditional surrender”. Although the policy of unconditional surrender was to continue all the way up to Japan's capitulation, changes were still being discussed. Admiral Leahy brought up the unconditional surrender and said,

he could not agree with those who said to him that unless we obtain the unconditional surrender of the Japanese that we will have lost the war. He

⁴⁹ Stalin kept his promise that the Soviets would enter the war with Japan three months after V-E day. However, some argue that had America not dropped the bomb on Hiroshima, the Soviets wouldn't have entered as quickly. Instead, they argue that because of the bomb the Soviets wanted to share in the war spoils.

⁵⁰ United States. White House Meeting. 18 June 1945.

*feared no menace from Japan in the foreseeable future, even if we were unsuccessful in forcing unconditional surrender. What he did fear was that our insistence on unconditional surrender would result only in making the Japanese desperate and thereby increase our casualty lists. He did not think that this was at all necessary.*⁵¹

Truman agreed with Leahy, but felt that he “did not feel he could take any action at this time to change public opinion on the matter.”⁵² The core of the debate over the unconditional surrender was whether or not Emperor Hirohito would be put on trial. Truman’s concerns regarding public opinion were validated eleven days later in a poll conducted by the American Institute for Public Opinion. When asked what to do with the Emperor after the war, 33% were for capital punishment, 17% felt the court should decide his fate, and 11% favored life imprisonment.⁵³

Another concern for war prosecution was domestic politics in Japan. At one point Stimson stated,

*It was his opinion that there was a large submerged class in Japan who do not favor the present war and whose full opinion and influence have never yet been felt. He felt sure that this submerged class would fight and fight tenaciously if attacked on their own ground. He was concerned that something should be done to arouse them and to develop any possible influence they might have before it became necessary to come to grips with them.*⁵⁴

Indeed, as shown in his March diary, Emperor Hirohito’s closest advisor Marquis Kido was increasingly concerned about growing antimilitarism and public confidence.⁵⁵ These factors and countless others could have potentially affected any estimate of casualties. One last note worth addressing is that there was no mention of the atomic bomb in the June 18th meeting. Perhaps

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ “Opinion Poll on Treatment of Japanese Emperor,” AIPO: American Institute for Public Opinion, Public Opinion Quarterly, Summer 1945, p. 246. Online at Nuclear Age Peace Foundation: <http://www.nuclearfiles.org/redocuments/1945/450629-public-opinion.html>

⁵⁴ United States. White House. 18 June 1945.

⁵⁵ Leon V. Sigal, *Fighting to a Finish*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 45.

this is because some of those attending were still not privy to its development or because the bomb still had not been successfully tested.

The Leahy Document

As if this meeting wasn't confusing enough, it was later discovered that Admiral Leahy wrote the following notes regarding the June 18 meeting:

...the White House conference was held primarily to discuss the necessity and practicability of invading the Japanese home islands. He said Marshall and King both strongly advocated the invasion of Kyushu at the earliest possible date. Leahy had been opposed to invasion of the Jap mainland. Marshall held that such an attempt on Kyushu would cost in casualties not more than 63,000 of the 190,000 combatant troops (sic) estimated as necessary for the invasion. Leahy say (sic) the President approved the Kyushu operation but withheld for later consideration a general invasion of Japan.⁵⁶

As was stated in the original June 18 meeting notes, Leahy advocated a change in the unconditional surrender. However, it is hard to determine where the numbers provided in the statement above came from. First of all the June 18 document said "766,700 US personnel" would be involved in the invasion, not 190,000. In fact, nowhere in the June 18 document was there a discussion of 190,000 or casualties of 63,000. Barton Bernstein, in his review of Robert Ferrell's book *Truman and the Bomb*, takes him to task for not including the Leahy document in his book.⁵⁷ However, this document is far too vague and inconsistent with the more detailed June 18 document which involved many more people. In a rebuttal to Bernstein, D.M. Giangreco came up with two interesting theories regarding Leahy's figures. First, "if you exclude the very substantial nondivisional (sic) combat units and the service and support units...you get 190,000 men, and a third of that is 63,000." His other theory is based on an "old joke" he'd heard at

⁵⁶ United States. Secretary of War. "Statement of the Secretary of War. June 1945. Available online at Truman Presidential Library & Museum:

http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/chronology/text/bma9tx.htm

⁵⁷ Giangreco, "Casualty Projections for the Invasion of Japan, 1945-1946," p. 549.

CGSC's Department of Combat Support that "Leahy had just doubled the Luzon number of 31,000 casualties from the 18 June meeting because of the stated 2-1 Okinawa ratio. The joke goes that Leahy added "a thousand more bodies to be safe."⁵⁸ Regardless of what significance the Leahy document really had, as will be shown later, his figure of 63,000 would become the straw that broke the camel's back in the Smithsonian Enola Gay Debate.

The Mysterious Herbert Hoover Document

One other intriguing piece of data is the casualty estimate given to Secretary Stimson and President Truman by former President Herbert Hoover, who had been secretly calculating his own casualty estimates. In the memo he stated:

I am convinced that if you, as President, will make a shortwave broadcast to the people of Japan - tell them they can have their Emperor if they surrender, that it will not mean unconditional surrender except for the militarists - you'll get a peace in Japan - you'll have both wars over.⁵⁹

He concluded that if the war wasn't ended soon, the invasion plan would cost from "500,000 to 1,000,000" lives.⁶⁰ These memos are largely ignored for a number of reasons. Especially among those who favor lower casualty estimates, there is a lack of reference to this document. Assumedly this is because the numbers parallel orthodox estimates. Perhaps the biggest reason however is that Hoover wasn't considered a legitimate source and because he wasn't supposed to be privy to the latest intelligence and military briefings. In response to the memo, Lieutenant General Thomas T. Handy, chief of the Army Operations Division wrote that they were "entirely

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 550.

⁵⁹ Quoted in Richard Norton Smith, *An Uncommon Man: The Triumph of Herbert Hoover*, (High Plains Publishing Company: March 1990), p. 347. Available online at doug-long.com: <http://www.doug-long.com/quotes.htm>

⁶⁰ Frank, *Downfall*, p. 133

too high” for the “present plan of campaign.” However, Richard Frank believes he was “receiving intelligence briefings” and points to a meeting with President Truman on May 28 1945 in which “Hoover gave remarkably accurate order-of-battle numbers for Soviet and Japanese troops in Manchuria.”⁶¹ As former President it is possible that he could have used his previous connections with men such as his Secretary of State Stimson. What is most intriguing about Hoover’s estimates is that they closely parallel orthodox estimates given after the war by Arthur Compton, Secretary Stimson, and President Truman. In fact, these memos are the only documented evidence that orthodox casualty estimates were discussed with President Truman and Secretary Stimson. It is plausible that because these numbers were so large, they provided a convenient way for justifying the atomic bombs. This would also explain Stimson’s article in Harper’s Magazine that doesn’t name a source.⁶² Whether or not Hoover was privy to the atomic bombs development is not known. However two days after the bombing of Hiroshima, he wrote, “The use of the atomic bomb, with its indiscriminate killing of women and children, revolts my soul.”⁶³

Postwar Estimates and Recollections

Critics of orthodox casualty estimates often point out that there were no casualty estimates discussed at the executive level prior to capitulation that reflect postwar estimates. This argument is fairly solid if it is based on available documents dated prior to capitulation that had executive level officials. However, when considering other documents such as those based on

⁶¹ Ibid. p. 133

⁶² Stimson, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” p. 102. Stimson wrote he “was informed” but doesn’t say by whom.

⁶³ Nevertheless Hoover remained friends with President Truman and continued to work with him in a number of capacities. One was the Hoover Commission for streamlining the executive branch.

recollection or those found in military logistics planning archives, it becomes more apparent that orthodox casualty estimates did exist prior to capitulation. From this reasoning come two unsolved, highly debatable questions: 1.) Are the estimates found in these documents plausible? This would entail a mathematical survey and a subjective review of what the possibilities were for Japan's surrender. 2. Are the estimates consistent with others? 3.) Was the executive branch aware of the casualty estimates found in other military reports? This answer is a resounding "no" when only considering executive-level documents. Needless to say, it is worth discussing the main documents that have defined the orthodox view. In addition, a number of documents involving personal recollection will also be discussed and interpreted.

As was explained earlier in this essay, the first article to give a thorough defense of the use of the bomb was published in The Atlantic Monthly by Karl T. Compton in December 1946. The article begins with a discussion Compton and a group of engineers and scientists had with a Japanese Army officer. When asked about the Japanese response to an invasion, the officer replies, "We would have kept on fighting until all Japanese were killed". Prior to the atomic bombings he worked with General MacArthur in the Philippines and learned of the details of invasion. Throughout the article he gives examples of the fighting fanaticism of the Japanese and regarding casualty estimates wrote:

From this background I believe, with complete conviction, that the use of the atomic bomb saved hundreds of thousands -- perhaps several millions -- of lives, both American and Japanese; that without its use the war would have continued for many months; that no one of good conscience knowing, as Secretary Stimson and the Chiefs of Staff did, what was probably ahead and what the atomic bomb might accomplish could have made any different decision.⁶⁴

In an attempt to debunk the low casualties in the Compton article, Truman biographer Ferrell wrote: "Compton did not have access to war department estimates that later became

⁶⁴ Compton, "If the Atomic Bomb Had Not Been Used."

available...Moreover, Pentagon officers believed that MacArthur played down anticipated casualties, expecting to become commander of the greatest amphibious force ever assembled..."⁶⁵ However, it is rather odd that Ferrell makes note of this considering Compton gave a fairly liberal range of numbers.

Only three months after Compton's article was published, Stimson's more authoritative and detailed article *The Decision to use the Atomic Bomb* was published in Harper's Magazine in February 1947. While Compton's article was only three pages, Stimson's article was eight pages. Stimson also had the authority of being the Secretary of War that was involved in making decisions during Truman's cabinet. The article was full of official memorandums and historical insight to the development and logistical planning of the atomic bombs. Unlike Compton's article which used more anecdotes, Stimson's article was very concise, yet full of dates and figures. Stimson ultimately concluded the following:

*We estimated that if we should be forced to carry this plan to its conclusion, the major fighting would not end until the latter part of 1946, at the earliest. I was informed that such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties, to American forces alone. Additional large losses might be expected among our allies, and of course, if our campaign were successful and if we could judge by previous experience, enemy casualties would be much larger than our own.*⁶⁶

There are a number of differences between Compton's and Stimson's numbers. First, is the fact that Compton uses a range of "hundreds of thousand—perhaps several millions—of lives." Whereas Stimson carefully treaded through his sentence stating "such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties." Second is the fact that Compton included "both American and Japanese" while Stimson included only "American forces" with "Additional large

⁶⁵ Robert H. Ferrell, *Truman and the Bomb: A Documentary History*, (High Plains Publishing, July 1996), Chapter 17. Available online at Truman Presidential Library and Museum:

http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/ferrell_book/ferrell_book_chap17.htm

⁶⁶ Stimson, "The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb", p. 102.

losses” to allies and Japanese casualties “much larger than our own.” Third is the fact that referring to the use of the atomic bomb, Compton wrote, “without its use the war would have continued for many months.” Stimson on the other hand states that “the major fighting would not end until the latter part of 1946, at the earliest.”⁶⁷ While some of these differences are petty, the last one regarding capitulation date is quite extreme. Perhaps the biggest mystery is why they failed to compare notes before writing their respective essays. They both knew that the other was writing an essay on the same subject since James Conant had been the one encouraging both of them. It is also interesting that President Truman, who would have been closest and most synchronized with Secretary Stimson, failed to critique any references in Compton’s essay. Instead he wrote that it was the “first sensible statement I have seen on the subject.”⁶⁸

Both of the figures in Compton’s and Stimson’s article were not entirely unreasonable, at least not to Truman. In a series of correspondences and letters, Truman was often seen quoting similar casualty estimates. However, what will become clear is that Truman didn’t use any kind of consistency when discussing casualty estimates. One example below will even show a time when he could have been more consistent, but his correspondences are edited. While it is understood that recollection can be a weak and ineffectual tool for determining the past, it is surprising that such a critical detail would be changed so often. First, is a letter Truman wrote to Roman Bohnen regarding Hollywood’s first film about the atomic bomb *The Beginning or the End*. Truman was concerned that the film portrayed the decision to drop the atomic bombs as a “snap judgment.” However, he contradicts himself and the orthodox view in three subsequent sentences:

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 102.

⁶⁸ United States. President. Letter from President Truman to Karl T. Compton. 16 December 1945.

When it was finally demonstrated in New Mexico that the operation of the bomb was a successful one, it was decided to give the Japanese ample warning before the bomb was dropped. I have no qualms about it whatever for the simple reason that it was believed that the dropping of not more than two of these bombs would bring the war to a close. The Japanese in their conduct of the war had been vicious and cruel savages and I came to the conclusion that if two hundred and fifty thousand young Americans could be saved from slaughter the bomb should be dropped, and it was.⁶⁹

First of all, it was decided by the Interim Committee meeting as early as May 1st, 1945, that there would be no warning given to the Japanese regarding the atomic bomb. The only leaflets regarding the atomic bombs were those dropped shortly after Hiroshima on August 6, 1945 . Secondly, there is no evidence that supports the claim that “it was believed that the dropping of not more than two of these bombs would bring the war to a close.” In fact there were four cities initially targeted: Hiroshima, Kokura, Niigata and Nagasaki. According to the official bombing directive, “Additional bombs will be delivered on the above targets as soon as made ready by the project staff. Further instructions will be issued concerning targets other than those listed above.”⁷⁰ Third, Truman uses a figure of “two hundred and fifty thousand young Americans”. Although this number can be squeezed in between Compton’s “hundreds of thousands – perhaps several millions”, it would be in complete contradiction to Stimson’s article in Harper’s Magazine which stated “over a million casualties, to American forces alone.”⁷¹

Only four days after the letter to Bohnen was sent, Truman wrote a letter to Compton endorsing his article in The Atlantic Monthly. In it he wrote, “It is the first sensible statement I

⁶⁹ United States. President. President Truman letter to Roman Bohnen, 12 December 1946. Available online at Truman Presidential Library and Museum:

http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/background/bmb6-1.htm

⁷⁰ United States. Army Strategic Air Forces. “Official Bombing Order, July 25, 1945” From Acting Chief of Staff Thos. T. Handy to General Carl Spaatz. Available online at Atomic Bomb Decision:

<http://www.dannen.com/decision/handy.html>

⁷¹ Stimson, “The Decision to Drop the Atomic Bomb,” p. 102.

have seen on the subject.”⁷² This essay is not intended to debunk (nor support) the orthodox view regarding casualty estimates, and it would be ridiculous to base this on recollections. However, any serious look at the casualty debate does warrant a look into this question.

In February 1947, just 3 months after Compton’s article, Stimson’s article *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* came out. In it he wrote:

*We estimated that if we should be forced to carry this plan to its conclusion, the major fighting would not end until the latter part of 1946, at the earliest. I was informed that such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties, to American forces alone. Additional large losses might be expected among our allies, and, of course, if our campaign were successful and if we could judge by previous experience, enemy casualties would be much larger than our own.*⁷³

As was hoped by those backing Stimson, his article became the authoritative and orthodox interpretation for the dropping of the atomic bomb. However, Barton Bernstein, who emphasizes the June 18th meeting at the White House, wrote,

*When Truman approved the order of July 24 to use atomic bombs, he had never received a high-level report suggesting half a million or even a quarter million U.S. dead. All the estimates, especially those presented by Marshall, whom the president greatly trusted, were considerably lower in the months before Japan’s surrender.*⁷⁴

Although Stimson never divulged who “informed” him, many logically assume this was General Marshall or other Chiefs of Staff. Stimson and Truman defenders alike often surmise that the figure was either given in a private conversation or perhaps the figure by Hoover was used.

On December 6, 1952, Truman’s staff received a letter from James L. Cate, professor of history at the University of Chicago, who was co-authoring a seven volume titled *The Army Air*

⁷² United States. President. Letter from President Truman to Karl T. Compton. 16 December 1945. Available online at Truman Presidential Library and Museum:

http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/background/bmb4-1.htm.

⁷³ Henry L. Stimson, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb”, *Harper’s Magazine*, February 1947. p. 102.

⁷⁴ Barton J. Bernstein, “A postwar myth: 500,000 U.S. lives saved”, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, June/July 1986. p. 40.

Forces in World War II. In what sounded like a smoking gun, Cate asks Truman about a contradiction he came across while researching. Cate cites the Compton and Stimson articles which explain that the decision to drop the atomic bombs was due to Japan's refusal to adhere to the Potsdam "ultimatum." However, according to a declassified document dated July 25, 1945, General Carl Spaatz was issued a directive to launch the attack "as soon as weather will permit visual bombing after about 3 August 1945."⁷⁵ This was dated one day before the official Potsdam Declaration, and three days before Prime Minister's "mokusatsu" rejection on July 28th. The letter went through Truman's assistant press secretary Irvin Perlmeter and air aide Major General Robert B. Landry before ending up with Truman. After many changes to the original draft Cate received a response dated January 12, 1953 explaining that the early directive was "necessary to set the military wheels in action... but the final decision was in my hands, and was not made until we were returning from Potsdam." Although Truman did address Cate's question, the bulk of the response dealt with the justification of the bomb and included casualty estimates for the invasion of Japan. In the first draft dated December 31, 1952, Truman wrote the following:

I called a meeting of the Sec. of State, Mr. Byrnes, the Sec. of War, Mr. Stimson, Adm. Leahy, Gen. Marshall, Gen. Eisenhower, the Sec. of the Navy, Adm. King and some others to discuss what should be done with that awful weapon. I asked Gen. Marshall what it would cost in lives to land on the Tokyo plain and other places in Japan. It was his opinion that ¼ million casualties would be the minimum cost as well as an equal number of the enemy. The other military and naval men present agreed (my emphasis).⁷⁶

It is important to note the figure in this first draft, as it was consistent with the Truman's letter to Roman Bohnen on December 12, 1946. Nevertheless, this draft was then passed to Kenneth W.

⁷⁵ United States "Official Bombing Order, July 25, 1945"

⁷⁶ Robert H. Ferrell, *Truman and the Bomb: A Documentary History*. (Chapter 18). Available online at Truman Presidential Library and Museum:
http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/ferrell_book/ferrell_book_chap18.htm

Hechler, one of Truman's civilian assistants who made these comments regarding casualty numbers on January 2:

*Stimson says in his book On Active Service, p. 619: "We estimated that if we should be forced to carry this plan to its conclusion, the major fighting would not end until the latter part of 1946, at the earliest. I was informed that such operations might be expected to cost over a million casualties, to American forces alone." I think it is important that the President's casualty figure be changed to conform with that of Secretary Stimson, because presumably Stimson got his from Gen. Marshall; the size of the figure is very important.*⁷⁷

Once more on January 5, Hechler sent another letter with recommendations. In a memo to Truman from David Lloyd, Hechler's letters were summarized. Per the suggestions made, the final draft, issued the same day, used the following: "It was his opinion that such an invasion would cost *a minimum one quarter of a million casualties, and might cost as much as a million, on the American side alone, with an equal number of the enemy* (my emphasis)."⁷⁸ Although the letter to Professor Cate was edited to be consistent with Stimson's casualty estimates, Truman would have another opportunity to use his recollection. In an interview circa 1955, again Truman recalls his discussions with General Marshall: "It was the estimate of General Marshall that this action would probably save the lives of 250,000 of our soldiers and probably twice as many casualties - that was what I was trying to avoid."⁷⁹ Here Truman uses 250,000 *fatalities* and interjects twice as many in casualties.

On March 1 1958, Tsukasa Nitoguri, and other members of the Hiroshima City Council wrote a resolution demanding the former President to retract a statement he had given on television in connection to the atomic bombs. Truman replied the letter by refusing to retract his

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

statement and included his justifications for the bombings. In regard to casualty estimates, he wrote,

When Japan surrendered a few days after the bomb was ordered dropped, on August 6, 1945, the military estimated that at least a quarter of a million of the invasion forces against Japan and a quarter of a million Japanese had been spared complete destruction and that twice that many on each side would, otherwise, have been maimed for life.⁸⁰

In another letter dated August 5 1963 to Irv Kupcinet of the Chicago Sun-Times, a 79-year old Truman wrote his lowest casualty estimates: “and it was done to save 125,000 youngsters on the American side and 125,000 on the Japanese side from getting killed and that is what it did. It probably also saved a half million youngsters on both sides from being maimed for life.” He then justifies the use of the bomb by pointing that “between 3,000 and 6,000 youngsters” were killed at Pearl Harbor. It is quite interesting that he gives such high numbers given that the official toll, civilians included, was just over 2,400. In the last paragraph he doubles his initial numbers by writing, “I knew what I was doing when I stopped the war that would have killed a half million youngsters on both sides if those bombs had not been dropped. I have no regrets and, under the same circumstances, I would do it again - and this letter is not confidential.”⁸¹

Conclusion

Both apologists and defenders of the atomic bomb involved in the casualty estimate debate have selectively emphasized documents pertinent to their arguments. In the end the debate has ultimately come down to three key factors. First, assessing and debating the importance of various documents and statements. The source, date, and context must all be thoroughly

⁸⁰ Harry S. Truman. “Press release of letter from Truman to Hon. Tsukasa Nitoguri,” 12 March 1958. Available online at Truman Presidential Library and Museum at:

http://www.trumanlibrary.org/whistlestop/study_collections/bomb/large/opinions_responses/bmc8-1.htm

⁸¹ Harry S. Truman. Letter to Irv Kupcinet. 5 August 1963. Available online at Nuclear Age Peace Foundation: <http://www.nuclearfiles.org/redocuments/1963/630805-hst-kupcinet.html>

investigated to understand the value of the data. Second, debating the context and use of words such as “casualties” and “lives saved.” Definitional ambiguities, differences in connotation, and parameters should all be considered when interpreting any statement using these phrases. Third, measuring the capitulation potential of Japan. This is by far the most difficult to gauge since it includes so many different actors from various nations. The combination of these three factors is crucial to understanding any casualty estimate debate or independent assessment. It is clear that both sides have strengths and weaknesses to their arguments.

Those justifying the bomb favor high estimates found in orthodox explanations and tend to believe that Japan was far from capitulating. These estimates are very plausible, and perhaps too low, if the war had continued until the “latter part of 1946” and Japan had fought “literally to the death” as Stimson articulated.⁸² However, it becomes far more difficult when trying to determine whether or not President Truman knew. Indeed, few observers try to make this claim. The biggest weakness in this argument is the use of sources found further down the chain of command. These sources tend to have more comprehensive calculations and are helpful in defending independent casualty estimates. However, while it is documented that Joint Chiefs of Staff saw these records, it becomes very difficult, if not impossible to prove that they were ever discussed with President Truman, his cabinet, or Manhattan Project leaders. The only arguable exceptions would be General Groves and Secretary Stimson. The evidence that does exist is based on scanty personal recollection rather than official documentation. Deciding on which casualty estimates are official is also difficult since those given by President Truman, Secretary Stimson, Arthur H. Compton, and other decision makers are not synchronized with each other. Furthermore, successive casualty estimates released by certain individuals, especially Truman, are often either inconsistent or were changed during multiple phases of editing. Some of these

⁸² Stimson, “The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb,” p. 102.

inconsistencies can be attributed to their improper use of the word “casualty” or connotation ambiguities involving phrases such as “lives saved.” Even among those debating the issue—academics and scholars nonetheless—there is substitution of “casualties” with “lives” or “fatalities.” Another issue worth remembering is that World War II veteran groups overwhelmingly support high casualty estimates. Many veterans, especially those who would be involved in the invasion, rightfully saw the bomb as a lifesaver. It can be argued that these biases distort true assessments of history.

Those that favor low casualty estimates have a very strong argument if they are based solely on documents for discussions that included President Truman. Aside from personal recollection, as Rufus Miles and Barton Bernstein point out, there is no evidence that decisive discussions of numbers such as 500,000 or 1,000,000 ever took place in President Truman’s presence. On the other hand, the few pre-surrender documents that do exist are ambiguous, brief, and inconclusive. Assuming these documents were decisive in making final invasion plans is extremely doubtful. More plausible is the idea that commitments to the use of, and successful tests of the atomic bombs resulted in discontinued discussions of casualty estimates for the invasion. Another problem with many that favor low figures is that they unwisely use them as a basis for condemning the atomic bombs. The problem is that by focusing on casualty estimates, they end up pigeon-holing themselves by making the argument two-dimensional, either drop the bombs or invade. Thus they fail to add weight to alternatives such as a demonstration bombing or a change in the unconditional surrender. They also fail to forget about other equally catastrophic bombings such as the March 9-10, 1945 incendiary bombings of Tokyo.

It is understandable that these debates warrant so much attention given the sheer magnitude of the subject. Nevertheless, trying to debate whether or not President Truman and

others were aware of potential casualty estimates is beside the point. While many envision a war crimes trial involving Truman, Stimson, and others, it can't be forgotten that they were democratically elected and had the full support of the American people. This is not to say that a democratically elected official is without accountability. However, lest it be forgotten, the public opinion polls reflected that the majority of Americans would have done the same thing if not worse. Moreover, in measurement of lives lost, the bombs were no more barbaric than conventional bombing done in other cities. As Stimson pointed out in his Harper's Magazine article:

At no time, from 1941 to 1945, did I ever hear it suggested by the President, or by any other responsible member of the government, that atomic energy should not be used in the war... The possible atomic weapon was considered to be a new and tremendously powerful explosive, as legitimate as any other of the deadly explosive weapons of modern war.⁸³

These advanced technologies, economies of scale, and ultra-nationalism had evolved warfare in World War II into something which consumed the minds, hearts, and lives of all the world's inhabitants. Some of these were victims, others offenders, and there were even those who experienced both. Physical crimes such as murder and torture were the most visible and graphic, but weren't the only crimes. The seeds of the most brutal crimes started in the minds and included racism, hate, and ultranationalism. Coming to a final conclusion regarding details is less important than remembering how they can be used to prevent future conflict.

⁸³ Stimson, "The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb," p. 98.

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