Ultimately, Japan Brought the Bomb on Itself

By Elbridge Colby

WERE THE atomic bomb attacks on Japan in August 1945 justifiable? As the world marks the 70th anniversary of these momentous and terrifying events, it is important to ask this question anew, as the past remains alive in Asia’s present and as nuclear weapons and nuclear deterrence are becoming increasingly salient in world politics, particularly in Asia.

How should we judge whether the strikes against Japan were justifiable? The least problematic way to undertake this inherently fraught and contestable exercise seems through some variant of just war theory, which attempts to conduct moral theorizing about the use of violence through structured rationality. This approach takes myriad forms, but often clusters around an emphasis that, to be morally legitimate, actions in a conflict must be reasonably seen to meaningfully contribute to achieving defensible aims in a war that is itself just, and must involve or be accompanied by steps to alleviate the human cost of this effort, especially the cost to those most deserving of protection.

In light of this framework, the question of whether the atomic bomb attacks were justified really has two parts. First, was the general employment of such horrifying weapons excusable? And second, were the specific ways the two bombs were used defensible? Resolution of this issue must begin with the first question because the destruction of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was not a singular set of events but rather the culmination of what Robert Pape called “the most harrowing terror campaign in history” — the U.S. strategic bombing of Japan.

This effort, which started earlier in the war but began in earnest in late 1944, involved nothing less than the systematic destruction of Japan’s cities. While the United States initially sought to use precision bombing techniques against key Japanese industries to hobble the Imperial war effort, as the 8th Air Force was seeking (largely) to do against Germany in Europe, frustration with the modest results in the Far East — in part due to the complex weather patterns over Japan — led the United States to switch to the general use of incendiary weapons against wooden cities, dropped without real pretense of precision. The notional purpose of this was to destroy Japan’s industry, which was far more disaggregated than Germany’s concentrated industrial base, but also, in practice if not always candidly in principle, to break the will of Japan’s populace and leadership through the infliction of pure pain and suffering.

In concert with the U.S. naval, aerial, mining and other blockades designed to choke off Japan’s imports of key materials such as oil, the bombing wrought tremendous devastation on the nation, destroying the bulk of its urban landscape. Estimates vary widely but it is thought that upwards of 350,000 Japanese, and perhaps closer to a million, were killed in this horrifying campaign, with many more wounded or rendered homeless. Indeed, the largest incendiary raids were probably more destructive than the atomic bomb attacks, which represented a dramatic intensification of the campaign — its coup de grace — rather than something wholly unprecedented. The March 1945 air assault on Tokyo, for instance, is thought to have killed...
nearly 100,000 people, more than those lost in either the Hiroshima or Nagasaki attacks. So harsh was this campaign that one of its architects, 20th Air Force commander General Curtis Lemay, remarked that he expected to be treated as a war criminal if Japan prevailed.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE STRATEGIC BOMBING CAMPAIGN

Was such a ferocious effort, of which the atomic bombings were only the most exceptional instances, justified? This question must be approached with the greatest care and even trepidation given the indescribable suffering involved and the grave implications that follow from such a judgment. But the answer seems to be yes. The essential reason is that such attacks appeared to a reasonable observer then — and still seem so today, although this is subject to argument — to be materially contributing to hastening the end of a total war against an opponent that had initiated the conflict and was giving every indication that it would fight bitterly — let us say it, fanatically — to the very end, and to be doing so at a lower cost in Allied lives. Each of the components in this sentence is important, for such horrendous violence as was involved in the bombing campaign (culminating in the strikes on Hiroshima and Nagasaki) could not be justified for much less — for instance against an opponent waging a limited war or willing to meaningfully compromise, or if there were clear ways at a reasonable cost to end the conflict without needing to resort to such practices.

The first important point is that the purpose to which the bombing campaign was directed — Japan’s capitulation — was and remains an accepted and legitimate end. The reality was that the war in the Pacific was a total war that would not end without the full surrender of one of the combatants. This was not something that the Allies had conjured up but rather the type of conflict that Imperial Japan had created and cultivated throughout the struggle. Japan’s conduct, beginning with the war in China and the barbarities of which the Rape of Nanjing is only the most notorious instance and continuing with Tokyo’s initiation of the wider war in December 1941, presented every indication that Japan refused to abide by any meaningful rules or norms limiting the conflict. Not only did Tokyo begin the war with sudden and perfidious attacks, most notoriously at Pearl Harbor but also throughout East Asia and in China, but it also inflicted the most grievous treatment on prisoners of war, captive populations and enemy combatants. Japan’s behavior made clear that restraint on the part of the allies would not be reciprocated or respected but rather disdained and, if anything, exploited. so noxious was Japan’s conduct that it was considered largely uncontroversial by the allies that the war would be a fight to the finish and have to end with something approximating the empire’s full surrender. The allies’ employment of violence in pursuit of such a capitulation was therefore legitimate. A power that was so aggressive and so cruel needed to be fully defeated. It could not be reckoned with.

But was such bombing, even in pursuit of this legitimate end, reasonable? That is, was it reasonable for decision makers at the time to see it as meaningfully contributing to bringing about Japan’s surrender? It seems eminently clear that it was. While there is an active historical debate as to how meaningful the contribution of the bombing campaign was, there seems more than enough evidence to suggest that it did have a significant effect. Many Japanese officials after the war, including the Emperor himself, confessed that the bombing campaign played a significant role in their decision to give up. More relevantly to the moral question, it was reasonable for Allied decision makers making judgments under condi-
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Tions of imperfect and incomplete information to think that it would. Few would quibble that destroying a nation’s urban and industrial infrastructure will degrade its war-making ability.

This is true even in light of recent scholarship indicating that the Soviet seizure of Japanese-held Manchuria and the prospect of Moscow’s joining the invasion of the Home Islands played as much, if not more, of a role in Japan’s decision to surrender as did the atomic bomb attacks. Indeed, even then it was a very close call and had to survive a coup attempt by disaffected Army elements. In other words, even with the near-apocalyptic annihilation of two of its great cities, Imperial Japan was still uncertain about surrendering. The implication of this is not, as some argue, that the United States and its allies could have dispensed with the atomic bomb strikes or the strategic bombing campaign of which they were a part. Just because these were not necessarily the primary cause of Japan’s decision to surrender (though this remains very much in dispute), does not mean they were not meaningful. No one would argue against the use of rifles or submarines or aircraft carriers because they did not singlehandedly win the war. Rather, it simply shows how much force needed to be brought to bear to compel Tokyo to give up.

JAPAN’S RECALCITRANCE

But, even if the bombing campaign did contribute to the pursuit of legitimate war aims, was it important or necessary enough to justify the horrendous costs to the Japanese population? To answer this question, we must recall the context. What was clear by late 1944, at the beginning of the Allied strategic bombing assault, was that Japan would not capitulate even in the face of manifest military defeat. By this point, Japan’s fleet had been effectively destroyed, its air forces humbled and its ground forces in the Pacific marooned on those islands left behind by the American island-hopping campaign.

Yet Tokyo gave no indication that it was even close to capitulating. To the contrary, as Max Hastings and others have documented, Japan was giving every sign of preparing to fight with millennial violence to the last, even in the face of evident defeat on the battlefield, the bombings and blockade and impending invasion of the Home Islands. This perception built upon the one created by Japan’s conduct throughout the war, during which the Imperial Forces had reinforced their reputation for barbarity with an absolute, literally suicidal unwillingness to compromise or surrender. Japanese forces on islands assaulted by the Allies would literally fight to the last man, often using strategems and booby traps to take Allied soldiers with them. Both Japanese senior officers and the rank and file made clear their preference for (or were forced to prefer) death to surrender, most infamously at Saipan, where hundreds or more Japanese leapt off the island’s high cliffs rather than surrender.

This willingness became ever more pronounced as Japan’s military fortunes declined. On Okinawa, well over 100,000 Japanese — many of them civilians — died, taking over 20,000 American soldiers with them, in what would have been a prelude to the invasion of the main islands. Offshore, young, often well-educated Japanese pilots steered their bomb-laden aircraft into Allied ships.

In brief, Japan was making clear in word and, more importantly, in deed that the practical alternative to the use of strategic bombing and ultimately the atomic bomb — the invasion of the Home Islands — would have been met with nothing short of fanaticism, barbarity and wanton death on a scale staggering even to the grim minds of 1945. An assault on Japan’s four main islands would, Allied decision makers perceived, result in the nadir of total war. Historians differ on
The answer seems to be that the burden quite clearly was on Japan. Of course, this is not to say that the Allies had a totally free hand. The Allies were morally obligated to take steps to reduce unnecessary human suffering and did make some such efforts, such as through the dropping of millions of leaflets warning of air raids. And if the Allies had possessed weapons able to coerce the Empire’s decision-making leadership without harming Japan’s civilian population, then they would have been absolutely duty-bound to exhaust those capabilities. But the fact was that the Allies did not possess such weapons, as technology did not yet enable precision attacks. Even if it did, it is far from clear that Japan’s leadership would have been bowed by such threats or attacks. Japan’s leaders may have been cruel, fanatical and recalcitrant, but they were not necessarily selfish or cowardly. Not a few senior Japanese officials and officers committed suicide, after all, rather than “endure the unendurable” of surrender. It seemed that only the prospect of the very destruction of Japan and its conquest by Soviet Communism could tilt such a leadership to swallow the bitter pill of capitulation.

Since there was no silver bullet solution available to the Allies, the question was whether the people of Japan would bear a large portion of the toll of persuading their government to capitulate, or whether they — and likely many more of their...
compatriots — would share that terrible burden with the soldiers of the Allied armies. If Japan had faced mercenary armies, perhaps this would have posed a different kind of question. But Japan faced — let us be clear — massive groups of innocent, often terrified, and very young men, the vast bulk of whom had no interest in risking death to prove to a coterie atop a shriveled Empire that it was truly defeated. As George Orwell lucidly pointed out in 1944, there is no reason why, in a democracy, young men in uniform should be the only ones made to suffer. Ideally no one would, but that was not the question. And, while many in Japan’s population were not morally complicit in the Empire’s depredations, no one in the Allied armies was. Surely it would have been unjust to ask the Allied armies that were struggling so painfully to overcome Japan to have their lives weighed equally in the balance as the citizens of the Empire. While it is certainly iniquitous to hold the citizens of any nation fully accountable for the actions of their government, especially when it is an authoritarian one, neither is it justifiable or feasible to act as if they cannot rightly be compelled to bear any responsibility. And it is absolutely not tenable to ask those who oppose them to share an equal or even comparable degree of responsibility.

In a world of sovereign states, we may not equate citizens with their governments, but neither can we afford, especially under situations of the severest stress, to shield them from any consequence for what their governments do, particularly at the expense of those fighting them.

**HOW THE ATOMIC BOMBS WERE USED**

Accordingly, the Allies were justified in conducting strategic bombing attacks, ultimately including the atomic bomb strikes, against Japan in 1944-45. But were the specific ways in which the atomic bombs were employed defensible? This question has received more attention. One critique here is that the United States was influenced by Soviet entry into the Pacific War. But if Allied war aims and the bomb itself were legitimate, then such concerns may cast a shadow over the particulars but do not affect the fundamental legitimacy of the act.

Perhaps more telling is the suggestion that the United States could have given Japan more time between the two atomic bomb attacks. There were reasons for the quick succession in which the attacks proceeded, such as the desire to drive home the shock and to end as expeditiously as possible a war that was killing large numbers of soldiers and civilians, including Allied PoWs menaced by Japanese military orders to kill prisoners, but this critique seems to have some potency. Might the United States not have waited a few more days after Hiroshima? It seems maybe so. But, again, this is not a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the action. It was ultimately Japan’s responsibility to surrender, and surrender immediately.

Perhaps the most difficult issue, not directly related to the atomic bomb attacks but touching on them, is the question of whether the United States and the Allies should have compromised on the demand that Japan surrender unconditionally. It is certainly an arguable point that the Allies should, instead of insisting on Japan’s capitulation without any protection for the status of the Emperor, have offered Japan some even modestly conditional surrender on such a point, given the evident importance the Japanese leadership placed on this issue and its limited salience to the Allies. Indeed, the ultimate surrender terms led, perhaps deliberately, to the preservation of some status for the Emperor, albeit a reduced one.

Perhaps, then, the Allies could have signaled willingness to accept some essentially ceremonial conditions on Japan’s capitulation earlier, which might have spared lives without appreci-
abably compromising Allied interests. But here too, culpability must be laid substantially at Japan’s feet, given the type of war it had itself created. It is also worth noting that, when the Soviet Union responded to Japan’s peace feelers of July 1945 by asking what Tokyo’s proposed terms were, it received no clear answer. Even at that late stage the Japanese leadership did not really seem ready to capitulate, a point driven home by the fervent resistance of many to the surrender decision. Indeed, it required the unprecedented intervention of the Emperor to finally bring about the capitulation.

In the end, these questions of timing and conditions do not really affect the basic issue. Fundamentally, Japan brought total war on itself through a vicious campaign of aggression and cruelty, and for a long time refused to accept the conflict’s bitter verdict when it arrived. War of the most brutal and complete kind was the remedy Japan had chosen, to paraphrase the great American Civil War general William Tecumseh Sherman, and so the Allies were justified in compelling Japan to bear the costs of that recalcitrance rather than forcing this terrible burden upon their young men.

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