

Dropping the Bomb

The University of Melbourne / PHIL90022

DATE: *19/05/16*

REVISION: *A*

NAME: *Eirik Monslaup Eikaas*

CHAR. COUNT: *7 769*

STUDENTNº: *749244*

WORD COUNT: *1 488*

When President Harry S. Truman was faced with making the decision on whether or not to drop the newly developed atomic bomb over the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he made the decision on the basis of, first of all his own country's interest, but also on the basis of the lesser of two evils. When looking at the ethical and moral basis of the decision it is first of all easy to just evaluate this under hindsight. The decision was made and it cost the lives of over 129 000 people and is still the only use of nuclear bombs in the history of war. When the decision was presented, Pres. Truman knew the potential costs of engaging in further air warfare with Japan and he knew the resilience and fierceness of the Japanese warriors. As attempts had been made at making Japan surrender and which did not go anywhere, Harry Truman stands by the fact that dropping the bombs was the only possible course of action that would overthrow Japan's will to fight.

Running through the actions available to the Chiefs of Staff, we find five viable options:

1. Engage in further air warfare, knowing the potential costs
2. Drop the bomb in smaller, less populated or even unpopulated areas, showing the force of the weapon but minding casualties
3. Drop the bomb at the center of large, densely populated cities
4. Escalate peace talks with Japan by using the bomb as pressure
5. Negotiate in order to de-escalate the situation

Under these, we can first attest that the first moral consideration possible is the potential casualties. It should be given that although Truman was to act in the interest of his country and people, casualties should be considered in regards to the world as a whole; Japanese casualties are just as atrocious as American casualties. Given this, option four and five are the most viable courses of action in terms of limiting casualties, but is not necessarily the most efficient or guaranteed course in terms of getting Japan to surrender.

For this, we need to consider the impact on the state of mind of Japan. Japan and their men, as already stated, was willing to sacrifice their own lives for the better of the nation under the well known term *kamikaze*. The paradox that lies within these two considerations is that what is most efficient at surrendering Japan, that would exert power and superiority, is also arguably the most immoral in terms of cost of human lives. The rules of life change under war circumstances, but underneath of pragmatic decision takers are faulting persons that inherently adhere to the same moral laws as everyone else. For this consideration option three and potentially option two would rise to the top of the chart. When we look at these two in relation to the first consideration, option two could potentially demonstrate the awesome power of the atomic bomb to the population of Japan without immediately causing the same numbers of casualties, when would then have

potential to severely weaken the morale of the Japanese population and warriors. At the same time, there are severely different probabilities at play. An act from the United States upon the sovereign nation of Japan to, under the release of a single device from the sky, destroy the lives of upwards of 70 000 patrons of the planet would be, and was detrimental to morale and to the nation's exerted fighting will. Through looking at Truman's notes, the Chiefs of Staff decided, reluctantly, that the probability of option two convincing the 'fanatic' Japanese to surrender was too low and not viable, and as we all know, that option three was the best course of action. The rationale for deciding on the atrocious side of these two options, beyond the probability was that Truman effectively saved the lives of 250 000 American soldiers. At the same time, the estimated death tolls of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings run from 129 000 an upwards to 249 000, of which an approximate of 22 000 were soldiers of the Hiroshima garrison.

As we have touched on briefly, no life should more valuable than any other, and the same should go for under war conditions. Especially when it is readily conceivable that the casualties would be mostly civilian. The decision to drop the bomb over densely populated areas neglected every understanding of the value of the Japanese citizenry and the decision and action had the goal of silencing the Japanese will to fight, which it did, but at an extreme single incident cost to society that in my opinion stand as absolutely immoral. Not only due to its volume but also due to the remoteness and one-sided risk, not unlike the recent spike in the use of drones, which in itself is a delicate moral discussion. Just because the world is at war and lives are being lost, I do not share the opinion of Truman that lives were saved; we can call it semantics, but one side of the equation was 'spared' and the other came victim to a weapon far too powerful for our species. Just like Churchill and the enigma machine, Truman and his Chiefs of Staff made the decision a priori in their own interest and in disregard for universal moral laws. Harry S. Truman, in his speech that he quotes in his notes, made the decision also in disregard for "what history would say about [his] personal morality," believing that the implications of the decision was beyond what he could readily fathom—and that his regard was for U.S. interests. And even in order for option three to outweigh option one, the estimates of potential casualties of an invasion needed to be accurate and the question has also been asked if it indeed was—bringing into question the entire base of the equation.

Beyond that, I cannot even begin to consider that there should exist any grounds for committing such an atrocious act under the premise of it being the moral option. Both parties had suffered losses through the course of the war and instilling to the assured deaths of so many people can not under any circumstances be even remotely considered justified or reasonable and I find it hard to not see the decision in the broader light of maybe being able to test the newly developed weapon. Which of course is no good rationale for making the decision, but this would remain only insinuations and speculations.

But the question remains; could anything have been done differently? First of all, all of the four other possible courses of action still remain as plausible and beside option one, three options can still be considered more humane if not also more moral than the one that was executed. Then, we know that the last two options, namely four and five, are both morally and ethically reasonable, but weak in terms of reassurance and certainty of making Japan surrender. Option two would show the needed force but has been discussed, would not necessarily be enough in itself—just as the first bomb wasn't even enough and the second bomb over Nagasaki was released three days after. What could have been done and that I do not see readily discussed as an option would have been to escalate the use of the atomic bombs by first releasing over water and then closing in towards strategic goals, but still mitigating civilian casualties. This option would be able to escalate into the bombing of dense areas, but would give Japan the chance to surrender without first having to suffer the astronomic cost of up to 250 000 people.

The decision to go through with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki stand as truly immoral under the notion that other options *were* available. The United States were well inside of Asian waters and well away from home. I see it that they had every opportunity and moral obligation to strive for a de-escalation but I can understand how the demonstration of power was necessary. But in order to demonstrate power, it should not have to be necessary to commit to such atrocious numbers of civilian casualties? I absolutely think that it would have been possible to avoid committing this inherently immoral act that was executed in a total disregard for the most basic and universal laws of morality. I believe that the steps outlined could have forced Japan to the ground with *better* moral backing and that the world would have been better of. But everything is easy in hindsight.