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Imagining a Peaceful Peace in the Pacific, 1945

Timothy Braatz

In U.S. slang, "the bomb" has two basic meanings. Since 1945, "the bomb" has referred to a nuclear bomb or bomb program, as in "Eisenhower threatened to use the bomb" or "Israel has the bomb." Sometime around 1960, hipsters began using "the bomb" to mean "the best," as in "This essay is the bomb, yo!" This superlative, often pronounced "da bomb," became trendy around 2000—an unfortunate development, in my opinion.

Two atomic detonations, on August 6 and 9, 1945, killed well over 100,000 Hiroshima and Nagasaki residents (the dates that follow are all from 1945). Linguistically equating such destructive weaponry with something wonderful (da bomb!) is a form of cultural violence, as it trivializes slaughter and desensitizes people to the horror packed into the original meaning (like "killed it"—a boast currently in vogue in the United States). Just for the record, the instantaneous incineration of tens of thousands—or, next time, millions—of humans is not the best; it's the very worst.

Why declare the seemingly obvious? Because, according to recent opinion polls, a majority of U.S. citizens believe the two atomic bombings saved a vast number of lives. Many U.S. history teachers and a few scholars offer this same rosy interpretation. Not only do they see a positive outcome in the atomic slaughters, they emphasize that supposed boon over all the dismal facts—another example of cultural violence. Whence cometh such apologetics?

In 1947, some U.S. officials, including Secretary of War Henry Stimson and Gen. Leslie Groves, head of the bomb-building Manhattan Project, published a defense of their murderous plotting. They argued that the psychological shock of atomic bombing was the only way to force the "Japanese ruling oligarchy" to submit quickly in 1945 (Emperor Hirohito announced Japanese surrender on August 15). The one other way to end the U.S.–Japanese war, the plotters claimed, was a full-scale U.S. military invasion of Japan, which would have taken much longer and caused much

more Japanese suffering and "over a million casualties, to American forces alone" (often misinterpreted to mean over a million deaths).

U.S. President Harry Truman, who signed off on the bombings, also offered the lifesaver rationale: "We have used it in order to shorten the agony of war," he assured a radio audience on August 9, "in order to save the lives of thousands and thousands of young Americans." In later speeches, Truman insisted that the bombs spared "a quarter of a million young Americans from being killed." In his memoir, he upped it to "half a million American lives."

Truman may have mined his round, frightful numbers from former president Herbert Hoover's "Memorandum on Ending the Japanese War," dated May 30, which predicted the loss of "500,000 to 1,000,000 American lives" in an invasion of Japan. In both cases, the figures were rhetorical, not scientific. Hoover used them to make the case for a negotiated end to hostilities. Truman used them to justify non-negotiated atomic bombings.

The Truman Credo: Atomic attacks caused Japanese leaders to surrender promptly, thus ending the U.S.–Japanese slaughter and sparing otherwise doomed soldiers and civilians. Atomic bombings = war over = lives saved = moral good.

Scholarly defenders of the Truman Credo—typically, U.S. military historians—speculate about what a violent invasion of Japan in late 1945 would have looked like. They consider where Japanese defenders would have been deployed and where U.S. invaders would have gone ashore. Then they calculate the likely number of casualties. It's a counterfactual argument, neither provable nor refutable, but not without merit.

By the time Truman became president, on April 12, U.S. forces were closing in on Japan, and the collective human suffering was intensifying. In a month-long battle (February 23 to March 26), U.S. forces had captured the island of Iwo Jima. Combined fatalities totaled around 25,000. The U.S. conquest of Okinawa (April 1 to June 22) caused the deaths of over 12,000 U.S. troops and upward of 100,000 Japanese. That onslaught also killed possibly half of an estimated Okinawan population of 300,000 civilians.

Meanwhile, beginning in early February, U.S. planes hit Japanese cities with incendiary bombs. On the night of March 9–10, hundreds of long-range B-29 bombers dropped 1,600 tons of napalm cluster bombs on the wooden structures of Tokyo, a city of approximately 6.5 million residents. The military goal was to maximize civilian casualties in order to disrupt industrial production and destroy Japanese morale. Estimates for fatalities range from 80,000 to 200,000, with 1,000,000 survivors left homeless.

These horrific numbers bolster the Truman Credo. If the battles for comparatively small islands and one night of urban bombing could produce so many corpses, just think how many more humans would have died if U.S. forces had attempted total conquest, prefecture by prefecture, of mainland Japan and its 73 million residents!

Some Credo defenders have widened the body count even further, pointing out that Japanese imperialism, 1931 to 1945, caused the deaths of over 15 million, almost all of them noncombatants, in China, Burma, Borneo, Vietnam, and elsewhere. Every month that the war dragged on, hundreds of thousands more perished.

The Credo comes down to algebra. Assume that, without the atomic bombings, the war would have continued well beyond August 15. U.S. troops would have staged their catastrophic land invasion, even as U.S. pilots continued the non-atomic bombing of Japanese cities. Japanese occupiers would have kept at their murderous ravaging of other countries. The number of hypothetical post–August 15 victims (X) is far greater than the number of actual Hiroshima and Nagasaki victims (Y). $X - Y = Z$, Z being the number of lives saved by the atomic bombs.

This equation of mercy only has validity if you start with the assumption that the U.S. military state had to conquer Japan. U.S. forces had to occupy and rule the country. Unconditional surrender in August or full-scale invasion in November. For Credo defenders, no other scenario is worth considering.

That's essentially how the two relevant U.S. presidents saw it. In 1943, at the Casablanca Conference, President Franklin Roosevelt announced that Allied leaders would accept no less than "unconditional surrender" from Axis forces, including Japan. The following year, in a radio address he put it like this: "We can force the Japanese to unconditional surrender or to national suicide." President Truman, who succeeded Roosevelt, kept conquest of Japan the top U.S. priority in the Pacific. Why did these promulgators-in-chief of the U.S. military state assume total conquest necessary? What shaped their thinking?

One consideration was the matter of revenge. After learning of the Pearl Harbor attack and Bataan "death march," many U.S. citizens wanted violent redress. Truman certainly understood the prevalence of this sentiment, or he would not have appealed to vengeance as justification. In his radio speech after the bombing of Hiroshima, he crowed, "The Japanese began the war from the air at Pearl Harbor. They have been repaid many fold. And the end is not yet." In his speech after the bombing of Nagasaki, he said, "We have used it against those who attacked us without warning at Pearl Harbor, against those who have starved and beaten

and executed American prisoners of war." This is a standard trope in U.S. rhetoric: USA as victim of foreign atrocities, justifying U.S. atrocities.

A second consideration follows: The Japanese were evil, and good people do not fight evil halfway. We are on the side of God, Roosevelt told Congress in early 1942, "striving to be true to that divine heritage." Truman, guided by the same theology, insisted that "the whole world must be cleansed of the evil." This was not just for public consumption. In his July 25 diary entry, he referred to Japanese as "savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic." In a letter dated August 9, he described Japan as "a terribly cruel and uncivilized nation." You cannot negotiate and compromise with your enemies when they are diabolical, irrational monsters.

Third, this was a war between two empires, and U.S. imperialists wanted to ensure that their Japanese rivals would never again be able to threaten Hawaii, the Philippines, or any other U.S. colony. In fact, U.S. planners wanted to extend their sphere of dominance to include Japan and Japanese-occupied territories, and they wanted to keep their Soviet allies-cum-rivals out. They partially succeeded. Seventy-five years later, approximately 50,000 U.S. military personnel are currently stationed in Japan (including Okinawa), with another 28,000 in South Korea.

Finally, Roosevelt wanted unconditional conquest and U.S. occupation in order to remake Japanese society. His goal was a demilitarized, reeducated, politically and economically restructured Japan that would serve rather than challenge U.S. empire. Too populated and distant to be easily managed as a U.S. possession, Japan would be made junior partner in the U.S. global capitalist enterprise. This assimilation program was, as Roosevelt, in a 1942 Armistice Day speech, characterized the U.S. war effort, "the advancement of civilization."

So, for Roosevelt and Truman, subjugation of Japan was about justice, both evening the score (retributive justice) and making the world right (restorative justice). Conquest was necessary, as Roosevelt put it, "to impose punishment and retribution in full upon their guilty and barbaric leaders." U.S. rule would then enlighten and humanize Japanese society. In a secret memo, on April 25, Secretary Stimson got Truman up to speed on the atomic bomb: "If the problem of the proper use of this weapon can be solved, we should then have the opportunity to bring the world into a pattern in which the peace of the world and our civilization can be saved."

Extending the U.S. sphere, crusading against God's enemies, bringing civilization to savages—this is the language of "manifest destiny," a worldview deeply embedded in the minds of the U.S. political class. Roosevelt and Truman were intent on controlling the Pacific region, one way or another, because they could not imagine otherwise. When they

spoke about "peace" and "liberation" and "self-determination" for other countries, what they meant, ultimately, was U.S. dominion—God's chosen people ruling creation. In sum, U.S. wars must be "won," the enemies of "civilization" must be vanquished, punished, and then redeemed by God's earthly agents.

Like Roosevelt and Truman, scholars who profess the Truman Credo are assuming the necessity of unconditional U.S. military triumph. They are not simply defending Truman and Stimson and the decision to use atomic bombs; they are defending a worldview that assumes the inherent righteousness of U.S. militarism. They are defending the beatification of U.S. military personnel whose lives were sacrificed to that worldview. Too, they are likely defending their own sense of self as shaped by that worldview. More cultural violence.

With this in mind, we can understand why the tone of the Credo defenders' argumentation is sometimes far from collegial, expressing a visceral reaction to criticism. We can also understand why they take such pains with counterfactual calculations to portray the two atomic bombings, and the decision-making behind them, in a positive light. What else is to be gained from such imagining except a post facto justification of the slaughter of tens of thousands of civilians?

What about the Credo critics? A basic scholarly rebuttal to Credo apologetics is that saving lives was not a top priority for U.S. atomic strategists. A "Target Committee" of scientists and military officials, first assembled on April 27, agreed that destroying a large urban area would maximize fear and disorientation throughout Japan. If "sufficiently spectacular," the destruction would ensure "international recognition" of the new weapon—"recognition" implying the power to intimidate foreign leaders, especially Joseph Stalin of the Soviet Union. The committee recommended that the bombers target the heart of a city, not try to "pinpoint" a military or industrial site, even after physicist Robert Oppenheimer explained that the bombs would release lethal radioactivity with potentially devastating results.

The committee also favored destruction of a previously undamaged city, as this would allow accurate assessment of "the effects of the bomb." According to Stimson's June 6 diary entry, he explained to Truman why he was worried about the ongoing non-atomic bombing: "The air force might have Japan so thoroughly bombed out that the new weapon would not have a fair background to show its strength." Truman "laughed and said he understood." Truman's own diary reveals that the president was uncomfortable with the idea of killing Japanese women and children, but was willing to approve indiscriminate slaughter as a way to serve the

highest war priority (conquest of Japan), the second priority (intimidating Stalin), and the third (limiting U.S. military deaths).

Credo critics have uncovered alternative scenarios that, if enacted, might have led to Japanese surrender with neither atomic bombs nor full-scale invasion. U.S. strategists could have informed Japanese leaders of this terrible new weapon, even arranged a nonlethal demonstration, to convince them to capitulate. A more feasible alternative has Truman accepting the Japanese leadership's offer of conditional surrender, first made in July. The one condition requested by the Japanese was to leave their emperor enthroned, which U.S. officials ultimately did—after the atomic bombings. Even more conceivable, Truman could have delayed atomic slaughter to see if the Soviet declaration of war against Japan, scheduled for August 15, prompted Japanese submission, as he expected it would. Recent research suggests that, indeed, the Soviet Army's Operation Manchuria, initiated on August 9, was likely the immediate reason for the emperor's decision to surrender when he did.

In general, Credo critics are reactive, having accepted the defenders' terms of the debate. As disciplined historians, they limit their alternative scenarios to ones that Truman or his advisors actually considered and rejected. Typically, the critics do not question the need for U.S. forces to coerce Japanese surrender and occupy Japan. No atomic bombs, but still conquest; the war must be "won." In short, the critics do not overtly implicate the dehumanizing worldview that underlies the Credo. We might ask of them, Why take such pains to delegitimize the atomic bombings and not similarly interrogate the non-atomic destruction of Japanese (and German) cities?

Peace scholarship can transform the conversation from cultural violence into cultural peace, away from pernicious assumptions and toward new avenues of thinking about the reduction of violence—the *raison d'etre* of peace studies. In that spirit, I propose a more ambitious hypothetical scenario of the war's end, one that rejects rather than assumes U.S. dominion over the western Pacific. The goal of this thought experiment is neither to second-guess Truman and his advisors nor to absolve them. The goal is to promote awareness of positive peacemaking. (For those unfamiliar with peace theory, a temporary break between wars—the absence of war—is negative peace. Nonviolent resolution of the underlying conflicts that otherwise lead to war is positive peace.)

When contemplating history, the questions you ask shape the answers you get. Did the two atomic bombs save lives, yes or no? Were the bombs necessary to force quick Japanese surrender, yes or no? Let's ponder a different question—a more open-ended one. If Truman and company were truly trying to save lives, and if they were not blinded by

imperialist and imperious assumptions, and if they had courage to back their convictions, what might they have done differently in the spring and summer of 1945?

Three big ifs, but to those who prioritize basic human needs above all other considerations, the answer is obvious: Stop killing people.

In my hypothetical scenario, Truman assumes the presidency, takes a long look at the grim Pacific, and announces that saving lives is his first priority. And he means it. He discards Roosevelt's "unconditional surrender" doctrine and urges instead an immediate cease-fire. Call it the Humane Truman Campaign.

Conspicuous U.S. media voices promptly accuse the new president of "surrender." His political opponents label him "soft on fascism." Many vengeful citizens are angry; they want even more Japanese deaths. Addressing the country by radio, Humane Truman suggests that there has been more than enough suffering on all sides. He reminds listeners that being a Christian nation means acting with compassion and forgiveness, not vengeance and cruelty. He assures the fearful that, at that moment, no Japanese ship or plane can reach the USA.

Consider this historical reality: In summer 1945, U.S. ships had Japan blockaded, and Soviet forces were moving eastward toward Japanese lines. For months, Japanese civilians, faced with food and fuel shortages and fire from the sky, had been quitting factories and fleeing cities, not preparing to fight to the bitter end. Faced with impending military collapse, Japanese officials, via Soviet intermediaries, were proposing negotiations with U.S. officials to end hostilities. With these facts in mind, we can easily imagine Emperor Hirohito directing his government to accept Humane Truman's truce.

But the threat of a cease-fire unsettles top U.S. officials. Secretary of State James Byrnes argues that only unconditional surrender will satisfy U.S. public opinion. Secretary of War Stimson insists that the U.S. military state must rule postwar Japan to achieve Roosevelt's imperialist goals. Humane Truman rebuffs them by pointing to the Atlantic Charter (1941). In that document, Roosevelt and British prime minister Winston Churchill stated their purported war objectives, including "the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live" and "sovereign rights and self-government restored to those who have been forcibly deprived of them."

By late July, Humane Truman gets his way. After a flurry of negotiations, Japanese leaders agree to recall all troops. In exchange, Truman will end the bombing of Japan and cancel the invasion. War over = lives saved (someone else can do the math).

There is fallout but it's not radioactive. Stimson and Groves are disappointed that they do not get to demonstrate the slaughter capacity of their two bombs, one uranium-based, the other plutonium. Gen. George MacArthur is upset that the full-scale invasion of Japan is canceled. Still, the U.S. public is thrilled that the enemy has quit and the boys can come home.

But that's only a negative peace, so Humane Truman calls for a region-wide conference to discuss the future. Now we can really use our imaginations, friends. Hypotheticals can be limitless, and millions of human lives are at stake, so let's be bold and pursue positive peace.

Affirming self-determination for all peoples, our hypothetical 1945 peace summit is inclusive, with representatives from throughout the western Pacific: Chinese, Koreans, Malaysians, Samoans, Australians, and so forth. Hawaiians too. To focus their minds, the delegates first tour the harrowing remains of Okinawa, then reassemble to imagine a better world. Being so concerned with sparing lives, Humane Truman proposes making the Pacific pacific—an ocean without empires, without foreign occupiers. Leave the Philippines to the Filipinos, Korea to the Koreans, Vietnam to the Vietnamese. Hirohito agrees—he has seen what war did to Tokyo.

Working together, the delegates approve a Pacific Charter, borrowing directly from the Atlantic one: "The nations of the world, for realistic as well as spiritual reasons, must come to the abandonment of the use of force." U.S. and Japanese leaders denounce imperialism. Representatives of their former colonies ask for and receive reparations. Conference committees carefully schedule demilitarization of the region and arrange truth commissions. They recruit Mohandas Gandhi (Hindu/Buddhist), Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan (Muslim), and Bernice Fisher (Christian) to provide nonviolence training wherever invited. (Readers may add their own peacebuilding insights.) All conference participants embrace the principles of self-government and nonaggression, making the next war far less likely. That's how you save lives!

Imagining a peaceful peace in the Pacific, leaving behind the violent assumptions of empire, places the actual end of the war in a different light. Positive peacemaking was incompatible with the worldviews of U.S. and Japanese national leaders, and mostly unknown to them. Roosevelt claimed that the Allies would rid the world of war—through total war. In reality, after August 15, the war only went into remission. Many of the germs that caused the outbreak were still in place, and without a cure for the disease, each war leads to the next.

This understanding evokes a powerful refutation of the Truman Credo. The "saved lives" claim is fallacious because the atomic bombing

of Japan did not end the agony of war in the western Pacific. That's historical fact. Without positive peacemaking, the actual conclusion of the U.S.–Japanese–Soviet war led, undeniably, to a divided Korean Peninsula and to French recolonizing attempts in Southeast Asia, leading, respectively, to the Korean War and the U.S. invasion of Vietnam. That's at least four million more very real deaths, a consequence the Truman Credo defenders ignore and their critics rarely summon.

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