

Views of American Military Leaders on the Atomic Bombings of Japan*

Admiral William D. Leahy

In his memoirs *I Was There* (1950), Admiral William D. Leahy, the President's Chief of Staff and the top official who presided over both the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Combined American-British Chiefs of Staff, said:

[T]he use of this barbarous weapon at Hiroshima and Nagasaki was of no material assistance in our war against Japan. The Japanese were already defeated and ready to surrender. . . .

[I]n being the first to use it, we . . . adopted an ethical standard common to the barbarians of the Dark Ages. I was not taught to make war in that fashion, and wars cannot be won by destroying women and children....

General Henry H. Arnold

The commanding general of the U.S. Army Air Forces, Henry H. "Hap" Arnold, gave a strong indication of his views in a public statement only eleven days after Hiroshima was attacked. Asked by a New York Times reporter on August 17, 1945 – shortly after Japan's surrender – whether the atomic bomb caused the surrender, Arnold said:

The Japanese position was hopeless even before the first atomic bomb fell because the Japanese had lost

* Detailed references can be found in Part VI, Chapters 26, 27, 28, and 29 of *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb*, by Gar Alperovitz, Knopf, 1995 (or the Vintage Paperback edition of this book, a new edition of which will be published shortly).

control of their own air.

In his 1949 memoirs, *Global Mission*, Arnold observed that "it always appeared to us that, atomic bomb or no atomic bomb, the Japanese were already on the verge of collapse."

Arnold's deputy, Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker, summed up Arnold's understanding this way in an official military history interview:

Arnold's view was that it [the dropping of the atomic bomb] was unnecessary. He said that he knew the Japanese wanted peace. There were political implications in the decision and Arnold did not feel it was the military's job to question it.

Eaker reported that Arnold told him:

When the question comes up of whether we use the atomic bomb or not, my view is that the Air Force will not oppose the use of the bomb, and they will deliver it effectively if the Commander in Chief decides to use it. But it is not necessary to use it in order to conquer the Japanese without the necessity of a land invasion.

Major General Curtis E. LeMay

The New York Herald Tribune reported that on September 20, 1945, Major General Curtis E. LeMay, the famous "hawk" who commanded the Twenty-First Bomber Command,

said flatly at one press conference that the atomic bomb "had nothing to do with the end of the war." He said the war would have been over in two weeks without the use of the atomic bomb or the Russian entry into the war.

The text of the press conference provides these details:

LEMAY: The war would have been over in two weeks without the Russians entering and without the atomic bomb.

THE PRESS: You mean that, sir? Without the Russians and the atomic bomb?...

LEMAY: The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all.

General Carl Spaatz

Personally dictated notes in the papers of former Ambassador to the Soviet Union Averell Harriman describe a private 1965 dinner with General Carl "Tooey" Spaatz, who in July 1945 commanded the U.S. Army Strategic Air Force (USASTAF) and was subsequently chief of staff of the U.S. Air Force. Also with them at the dinner was Spaatz's one-time deputy commanding general at USASTAF, Frederick L. Anderson. Harriman privately noted:

Both men . . . felt Japan would surrender without use of the bomb, and neither knew why the second bomb was used.

Harriman's private notes also recall his own understanding:

I know this attitude is correctly described because I had it from the Air Force when I was in Washington in April '45.

General Douglas MacArthur

On the 40th Anniversary of the bombing former President Richard M. Nixon reported that:

[General Douglas] MacArthur once spoke to me very eloquently about it, pacing the floor of his apartment in the Waldorf. He thought it a tragedy that the Bomb was ever exploded. MacArthur believed that the same restrictions ought to apply to atomic weapons as to conventional weapons, that the military objective should always be limited damage to noncombatants. . . . MacArthur, you see, was a soldier. He believed in using force only against military targets, and that is why the nuclear thing turned him off. . . .

The day after Hiroshima was bombed, MacArthur's pilot, Weldon E. Rhoades, noted in his diary:

General MacArthur definitely is appalled and depressed by this Frankenstein monster [the bomb]. I had a long talk with him today, necessitated by the impending trip to Okinawa. . . .

In a 1960 letter exchange with former President Herbert Hoover, General Douglas MacArthur expressed his view that had Japan been offered clear terms safeguarding the position of the Emperor (in a figure-head role) as Hoover had urged President Truman in a memorandum in the Spring of 1945, the war could have been ended much earlier:

It was a wise and statesmanlike document, and had it been put into effect would have obviated the slaughter at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in addition to much of the destruction on the island of Honshu by our bomber attacks. That the Japanese would have accepted it and gladly I have no doubt.²

Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz

Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet, in a public address at the Washington Monument almost two months after the bombings stated:

The Japanese had, in fact, already sued for peace before the atomic age was announced to the world with the destruction of Hiroshima and before the Russian entry into the war. . . .The atomic bomb played no decisive part, from a purely military standpoint, in the defeat of Japan. . . .

² This recently discovered letter is from the Hoover Library.

Admiral William F. Halsey

Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr., Commander of the U.S. Third Fleet, stated publicly in 1946:

The first atomic bomb was an unnecessary experiment. . . .
It was a mistake to ever drop it. . . . [the
scientists] had this toy and they wanted to try it out,
so they dropped it. . . . It killed a lot of Japs, but
the Japs had put out a lot of peace feelers through
Russia long before.

Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King

In his "third person" autobiography *Fleet Admiral King* (1952) (co-authored with Walter Muir Whitehill), the commander in chief of the U.S. Fleet and chief of Naval Operations, Ernest J. King, stated:

The President in giving his approval for these [atomic]
attacks appeared to believe that many thousands of
American troops would be killed in invading Japan, and
in this he was entirely correct; but King felt, as he
had pointed out many times, that the dilemma was an
unnecessary one, for had we been willing to wait, the
effective naval blockade would, in the course of time,
have starved the Japanese into submission through lack
of oil, rice, medicines, and other essential materials.

Private interview notes taken by Walter Whitehill summarize King's feelings quite simply as: "I didn't like the atom bomb or any part of it."

US Navy Museum

One final matter bearing on the general views of the Navy, both in the past, and in modern times: The official Museum of the U.S. Navy in Washington, DC states unambiguously in its exhibit on the atomic bomb: "The vast destruction wreaked by the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the loss of 135,000 people made little impact on the Japanese military. However, the Soviet invasion of Manchuria...changed their minds."

General George C. Marshall

In a 1985 letter recalling the views of Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall, former Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy elaborated on an incident that was

very vivid in my mind. . . . I can recall as if it were yesterday, [Marshall's] insistence to me that whether we should drop an atomic bomb on Japan was a matter for the President to decide, not the Chief of Staff since it was not a military question . . . the question of whether we should drop this new bomb on Japan, in his judgment, involved such imponderable considerations as to remove it from the field of a military decision.

In a separate memorandum written the same year McCloy recalled:

General Marshall was right when he said you must not ask me to declare that a surprise nuclear attack on Japan is a military necessity. It is not a military problem....

General Dwight D. Eisenhower

There is a long-standing debate about whether or not General Dwight D. Eisenhower urged President Truman not to use the atomic bomb. In interviews with his biographer, Stephen Ambrose, he was insistent that he urged his views to Truman at the time. Quite apart from what Eisenhower said in 1945 before the use of the bomb, there is no doubt about his own repeatedly stated opinion on the atomic bombings. A few months after the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Eisenhower commented during a social occasion, "how he had hoped that the war might have ended without our having to use the atomic bomb."³ In his 1963 memoir *Mandate for Change*, Eisenhower reported the following reaction when Secretary of War Stimson informed him about plans to use the atomic bomb:

During his recitation of the relevant facts, I had been conscious of a feeling of depression and so I voiced to him my grave misgivings, first on the basis of my belief that Japan was already defeated and that dropping the bomb was completely unnecessary, and secondly because I thought that our country should avoid shocking world opinion by the use of a weapon whose employment was, I thought, no longer mandatory as

³ This confirmation of DDE's view from the diary of Robert P. Meiklejohn, an assistant to Ambassador W. Averell Harriman, was published for the first time by the National Security Archive, George Washington University, Washington, DC, on August 4, 2015, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb525-The-Atomic-Bomb-and-the-End-of-World-War-II/>.

a measure to save American lives. . . .

He put it bluntly in a 1963 public interview, stating quite simply: "[I]t wasn't necessary to hit them with that awful thing."

ADDENDUM

It is sometimes urged that there is no record of any of the military men directly advising President Truman not to use the atomic bomb--and that this must mean that they felt its use was justified at the time. However, this is speculation. The fact is there is also no record of military leaders advising President Truman to *use* the bomb.

We simply have little solid information one way or the other on what was said by top military leaders on the key question at the time: There are very few direct contemporaneous records on this subject. And there is certainly no formal recommendation by the Joint Chiefs of Staff that the atomic bomb be used.

On the other hand, what little contemporaneous evidence we do have strongly suggests that before the atomic bomb was used, at least two of the four members of the Joint Chiefs did not believe that military considerations required the destruction of Japanese cities without advance warning. Here, for instance, is how General George C. Marshall put it in a discussion more than two months before Hiroshima was destroyed (McCloy memo, May 29, 1945):

... he thought these weapons might first be used against straight military objectives such as a large naval installation and then if no complete result was derived from the effect of that, he thought we ought to designate a

number of large manufacturing areas from which the people would be warned to leave—telling the Japanese that we intend to destroy such centers.... Every effort should be made to keep our record of warning clear. We must offset by such warning methods the opprobrium which might follow from an ill-considered employment of such force.

Admiral Leahy noted in his diary of June 18, 1945 (seven weeks prior to the bombing of Hiroshima):

It is my opinion at the present time that a surrender of Japan can be arranged with terms that can be accepted by Japan and that will make fully satisfactory provisions for America's defense against future trans-Pacific aggression.

Leahy also stated subsequently something that should be obvious--namely that the Chief of Staff regularly made his views known to the President. His documented position in a meeting with the President opposing unconditional surrender, also on June 18, is only one indication of this. Although we have no records of their private conversations, we know that the two men met to discuss matters of state every morning at 9:45 a.m.

There is also substantial but less direct evidence (including some which seems to have come from President Truman himself) that General Arnold argued explicitly that the atomic bomb was not needed. As noted above, Arnold instructed his deputy Lieutenant General Ira C. Eaker that although he did not wish to press the point, he did not believe the bomb was needed. Also noted above, in his memoirs Arnold stated that "it always appeared to us that, atomic bomb or no atomic bomb, the Japanese were already on the verge of collapse."

We have very little direct evidence concerning the contemporaneous views of the fourth member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral King. As noted, in his postwar memoirs King said the bomb was unnecessary because he believed a blockade strategy would have ended the war without an invasion. Although at the June 18 meeting King did not argue against the invasion, evidence from King's deputy chief of staff, Rear Admiral Bernhard H. Bieri, suggests that prior to the bombing King and his staff seemed to believe the war could be ended before Russia entered in August. The well-informed and well-connected naval historian E.B. Potter explains that the brevity of a 1945 planning meeting in San Francisco between King and Nimitz

may well have reflected the near-conviction in the minds of both Nimitz and King [even before the atomic test] that neither Olympic nor Coronet [the plans for invading Japan] would ever take place.

Such indirect information suggests it is not unreasonable to think that King's judgment prior to the bombings may well also have been that the war could be ended early on without an invasion and without the atomic bomb. As noted, interview notes taken by Walter Whitehill summarize King's feelings quite simply as: "I didn't like the atom bomb or any part of it." Such a judgment is reinforced when other aspects of the problem are considered: King never publicly addressed the central question of whether the war could be ended by changing the terms and/or awaiting the Russian attack, so far as we are aware.⁴ It was well understood, of course, that both a modification of terms and the shock of the Russian attack would greatly add to the factors which would help produce a Japanese surrender.

All of the above--and detailed information available on the views of staff assistants, deputies and others working closely with the Joint Chiefs--makes it extremely difficult to

⁴ However, King had privately supported a clarification of the surrender terms in internal strategy discussions as early as June 19, 1945.

believe that the advice given to the President by his top military leaders at the time was that he had no alternative but to use the atomic bomb.

Moreover--and this is crucial--as noted in connection with our limited information regarding King's views, the question does not turn on the traditional debate between blockade versus strategic bombing versus invasion. Although debate over such issues was important earlier in the war, by July 1945 the terms of the debate at the very highest level were quite different; they involved whether the war could be ended through a combination of assurances for the Emperor and the impact of the Russian attack. We know from other sources that American leaders were advised that this combination would likely have ended the war as well. Indeed, President Truman went to Potsdam to meet with Soviet Premier Joseph Stalin in July 1945 precisely because he wanted to make sure that if the atomic test (scheduled for July 16, 1945) failed, the Russian attack would occur as planned.