

Nuclear weapons didn't save lives in 1945, wouldn't today either



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OPINION

False historical narratives abound in our contentious and divided world, as leaders and complicit historians endeavor to use public understanding of the past to push policies and gain control in the present. One of the most egregious cases is the widely accepted account of the decision by US leaders to drop the atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki on August 6 and 9 of 1945, respectively.

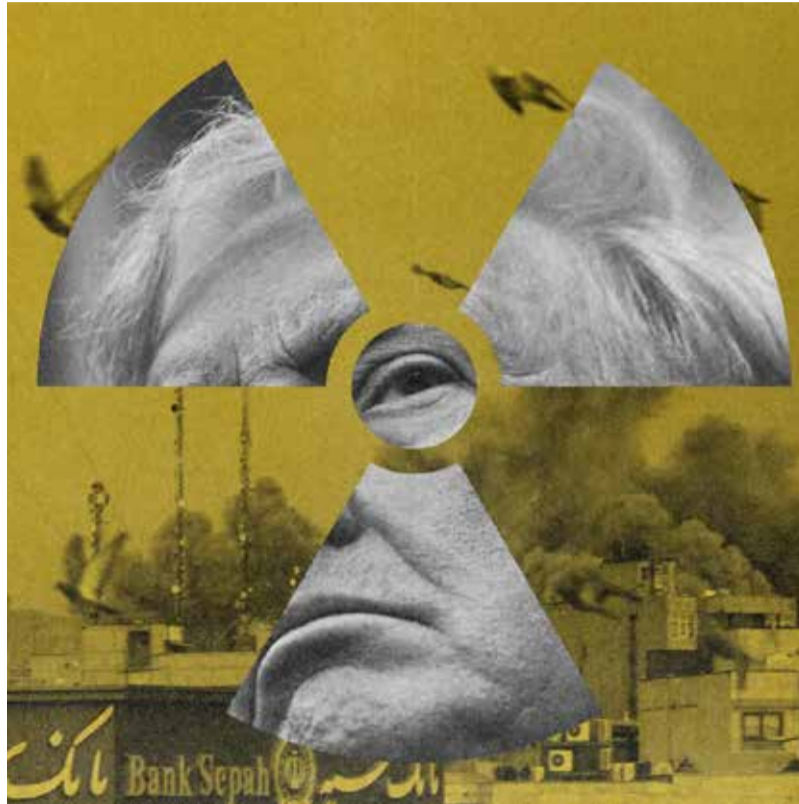
The generally held view, which is frequently taught in schools across the US and beyond, is that the bombings were necessary to save lives, both American and Japanese; just how many lives were saved has itself been subject to debate, though President Harry Truman claimed half a million US lives in his 1955 memoirs. This assessment is not only disputed by the facts, but it ignores the realities of what the bombings meant for the initiation of the Cold War and the future of humanity, in a world long awash with civilization-ending weapons.

Most importantly, the bombings quite simply were unnecessary. There were at least three ways that Japanese surrender could have been induced without the instantaneous killing of more than a hundred thousand civilians and another several hundred thousand men, women, and children being subjected to third-degree burns, injuries, and radiation exposure that would either end their lives shortly thereafter, or cause health problems in the years and decades following the fateful attacks.

One option was that the US could have altered the surrender terms to make them acceptable to the Japanese. What most Japanese leaders wanted in early August of 1945 was to keep their Emperor and the kokutai or emperor system. The Americans, who knew this from intercepted cables, should have accepted this term; they would eventually agree anyway out of self-interest. Sadly, most of Truman's top military and political advisors urged this course of action, but Truman, with the support of Secretary of State Jimmy Byrnes, refused.

Another possibility was to allow the Soviet Union to proceed with its ground invasion upon declaring a war on Japan at midnight on August 8. The Joint Intelligence Staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff predicted on April 11, "If at any time the USSR should enter the war, all Japanese will realize that absolute defeat is inevitable." As Japan's Supreme War Council stated in May, "At the present moment when Japan is waging a life-or-death struggle against the US and Britain, Soviet entry into the war will deal a death blow to the Empire." Japan would have surrendered once it saw that it would be fighting both the US and the Soviet Union. Moreover, President Truman knew that the Soviets were about to invade, and wrote at least twice that that would end the war.

The last, albeit arguably the weakest, alternative was to demonstrate the enormous power of the atomic bomb by exploding it, as was done on July 16 in New Mexico, in the presence of foreign leaders, and as was recommended by a group of scientists in the Franck Report. Such a display could



● SAM WHITNEY/THE NEW YORK TIMES

have exerted sufficient pressure on the Japanese government, especially in conjunction with the changed surrender terms and a warning about Soviet entry, to precipitate Japanese surrender. In fact, seven of America's eight five-star admirals and generals in 1945 said the bombs were either militarily unnecessary, morally reprehensible, or both. Truman's personal chief of staff Admiral William Leahy, who also chaired the meetings of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said the use of the atomic bombs put us on the moral level of the "barbarians of the dark ages". General Douglas MacArthur wrote that the Japanese would have "gladly" surrendered months earlier if we'd told them they could keep the emperor.

Beyond the fact that there were multiple ways to ensure the end of the war without committing the gravest nuclear crimes, the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki represent a violent entry into the nuclear age, with historians and scientists arguing that they mark the beginning of the Cold War, rather than the end of the hot one. By fancifully hoping that the bombs would force Japanese surren-

der before the Soviets made too much ground, the US sought to diminish the Soviet contribution to the final outcome of the war that consumed Europe and much of Asia. At the same time, the US leaders also managed to demonstrate to the Soviets their possession of a "new weapon," failing to recognize, as many of the scientists did at the time, the near certainty of a nuclear arms race that indeed came to pass and haunts us to this day. And the Soviets, who knew clearly that the Japanese were defeated and desperate to surrender because the Japanese had sought Soviet assistance in securing better surrender terms, saw themselves as the real target and not Japan — a view that was shared and stated explicitly by Manhattan Project head General Leslie Groves. Groves admitted, "There was never from about two weeks from the time I took charge of this Project any illusion on my part that Russia was our enemy, and the Project was conducted on that basis." Furthermore, the bombings didn't just set up a decades-long rivalry between the two states that stood diametrically opposed to each other in their ideologies and economic systems at that



very moment, it also set the world on a path toward nuclear weapons possession by many more states, nine at the latest count. Although nuclear weapons have not been used in a time of war ever since, their development and testing have left deep scars and much devastation around the world. And they have continued to threaten the world ever since.

Perhaps most shockingly, the US used these unnecessary weapons knowing full well that it was opening up the door to ending life on our planet. Robert Oppenheimer warned the top political and military officials on May 31 that within three years we'd probably have weapons between 700 and 7000 times as powerful as the bomb that destroyed Hiroshima. Upon receiving the report at Potsdam of how powerful the Alamogordo bomb test was, Truman wrote in his diary, "We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley Ear, after Noah and his fabulous Ark."

Why does getting this story right matter now?

At a moment when President Trump has repeatedly threatened to bomb Iran "into the Stone Age," genocidally declaring "a whole civilization will die tonight," which Congressman Adam Smith (D-WA) called "the ravings of a homicidal lunatic," some have argued that like the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, using a nuclear weapon or weapons on Iran would be the right choice, the moral choice, the winning choice. Such a stance should not be repudiated just on a moral level, but on a historical level, too.

Tucker Carlson recently stated that Trump is threatening to use weapons that have never been used in time of war before. We agree. The atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki bear little to no resemblance to the kinds of weapons in today's arsenals of not just the US, but all nine nuclear armed possessors. The differences are not only in the amount of energy they can produce, or the physical processes that underlie them, but also in the way in which they could be delivered in a matter of minutes via submarine-launched or intercontinental ballistic missiles. It is highly unlikely that a pilot would be dropping the bombs on Iran, the way that Paul Tibbets and Charles Sweeney did at the dawn of the nuclear age.

The argument has been made that lives would be saved if a nuclear weapon or weapons were used by Israel to attack Iran. This so-called argument fails to recognize not just the errors of history embedded in such statements, but also the threat that such an attack would pose to Israel and the whole world. Trump supporters like Mark Levin have done the same. And J.D., "the alleged dove," Vance has announced that the US has "tools in our toolkit that we so far haven't decided to use," but "the president...can decide to use them, and he will decide to use them if the Iranians don't change their course of conduct." All these bloodthirsty provocateurs could start by learning the actual history, followed by some basic facts of what would happen to Israel if it were attacked with even several Hiroshima-style bombs. They should then review the rich scientific literature on what would happen to the planet and humanity in case of a full-blown nuclear war. We look forward to hearing about their conclusions.

This article was first published in Arabic by Al Jazeera.



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A reference to the anti-Trump "No Kings" protests is left on a building at Tehran's prestigious Sharif University of Technology that was damaged in a US-Israeli air strike.

● MAJID-ASGARIPOUR/REUTERS