

On the 6th of August 1945, the USA used the world's first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan. 3 days later, they dropped another atomic bomb on the city of Nagasaki. In total, these bombings resulted in the deaths of 240,000 people. Over the years, there have been many debates over whether President Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was justified. There are multiple perspectives on this event, two of them being revisionist and post-revisionist. The revisionist perspective opposes the dropping of the atomic bomb while the post-revisionist perspective believes that the dropping of the bombs was the best decision that could have been made given the circumstances.

### Revisionist

The revisionist perspective opposes the dropping of atomic bombs. This perspective believes Japan was helpless and on the verge of surrendering, and it was the Soviet entry into the Pacific War that truly influenced their surrender, not the bombs. Those who believe this perspective believe that the main reason for dropping the bomb was to send a message to Stalin and the Soviet Union, warning them to stay out of American foreign affairs.

In June of 1945, Japan's navy had been sunk, their army was strongly limited, and many cities were destroyed by American terror bombing. Despite this, the Japanese refused to surrender, due to the US demanding an unconditional surrender. Oliver Stone (2012) argues that this was the only obstacle to the Japanese surrender. If the Japanese agreed to an unconditional surrender, they feared that they might have to get rid of their emperor, whom many looked to as a God. They would rather be destroyed in the war than be forced to give up their emperor. According to Gar Alperovitz (2011), key advisors such as Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, who, before the bomb was used, strongly recommended to Truman that the war would end without the use of the atomic bombs if the surrender agreement specified that Japan could keep the emperor. Truman refused. Despite this, when Japan did surrender after the bombings, they were allowed to keep the emperor anyway.

Stone strongly argues that it was the Soviet entry into the war that caused Japan to surrender, rather than the atomic bombings. During the Potsdam conference (July 17 - August 2nd 1945), evidence from Truman's personal diary and a letter to his wife indicates that he and Stalin agreed for the Soviet Union to enter the Pacific war. In his diary, Truman says "He'll be in the Jap War on August 15. Fini Japs when that comes about". Before the Potsdam conference, US intelligence advised in April of 1945 that Japan would surely surrender when the Soviet Union entered the war; "If at any time the U.S.S.R. should enter the war, all Japanese will realise that absolute defeat is inevitable." Stone claims that Japan was much more concerned with the Red Army, even after the first bomb was dropped in Hiroshima, Stone quotes General Masakazu Kawabe: "It was only in a gradual manner that the horrible wreckage made of Hiroshima became known; in comparison, the Soviet entry into the war was a great shock because we had been in constant fear of it". Upon the Red Army's entry into Manchuria on August 8th, 2 days after the bombing of Hiroshima, Japan took a heavy loss with an estimated 700,000 dead, injured or captured. Stone argues that the Japanese government and officials had no time to react and agree to surrender before the second atomic bomb was dropped in Nagasaki a day later. Stone backs this argument up with quotes from Japanese officials; Prime Minister Kantaro Suzuki said "Japan must surrender immediately or the Red Army will take not only Manchuria, Korea, Karafuto but also Hokkaido. This would destroy the foundation of Japan." This quote from the Prime

Minister of Japan shows that the Soviet entry into the war had much more of an effect on the surrender compared to the US, as the Japanese believed they would deal with them. Due to this evidence, it is believed that had Truman waited until after the Soviet entry into the war, the bombs would not have needed to be dropped. Alperovitz backs this up, saying “there was very little to lose by using the Russian attack to end the war...There were still three months to go before the first landing could take place in November. If the early August Russian attack did not work as expected, the bombs could obviously have been used anyway, long before any lives were lost in the landing.”

The revisionist perspective is that Truman had other motives. Stone claims that the dropping of the bombs was not a military decision, citing the fact that 6/7 U.S WWII military leaders were against dropping the atomic bombs. Admiral William Leahy, Truman’s chief military advisor, said after the war, “The Japanese were ready to surrender, and it wasn’t necessary to hit them with that awful thing. Second, I hated to see our country be the first to use such a weapon”. Both Alperovitz and Stone use multiple pieces of evidence to argue that the atomic bombs were a political decision. Alperovitz points to evidence such as Walter Barey, who was heavily involved in making the atomic bombs, recalling a conversation with Byrnes, who told him that he was concerned about Russian influence spreading in Europe, and he believed that demonstrating the bomb would make Russia more manageable. Stone also uses a quote from Leslie Grove, the General in charge of the Manhattan Project, which says “There was never any illusion on my part that Russia was our enemy and the project was conducted on that basis.” At this time, the Soviet Union was expanding their influence over Europe, which the US saw as a threat to their control and power.

### **Post-revisionist**

The post-revisionist perspective is for the dropping of the atomic bombs. The post-revisionist perspective argues that the Japanese were not about to surrender, so the bomb saved the lives of the soldiers who would have invaded Japan. Many counterarguments to the revisionist perspective are provided by historians. This perspective believes that dropping the bombs was both a military and political decision that ended the war and a warning to the Soviet Union.

The post-revisionist perspective argues against the revisionist perspective that the Japanese were close to surrendering. Both Robert Maddox (1995) and Lewis Fretz (1995) acknowledge the revisionist belief that Japan was essentially defeated, with Maddox saying, “By any rational calculation, Japan was a beaten nation by the summer of 1945”. However, they disagree that Japan was close to surrender without the use of atomic bombs. Maddox argues this by referencing the Japanese “Fundamental Policy to Be Followed Henceforth in the Conduct of the War,” which pledged to “prosecute the war to the bitter end in order to uphold the national polity, protect the imperial land, and accomplish the objectives for which we went to war.” Truman and other US government officials had no reason to believe this wasn’t true, they believed that Japan would fight until they absolutely couldn’t anymore. This belief was reinforced when the US invaded the island of Okinawa, Japan fought as they said they would in this policy. 100,000 out of 107,000 Japanese soldiers ended up dead at the end of the 3 months of fighting, many by suicide as they would rather take their own lives than surrender to the US, according to Fretz (1995). This invasion showed the US government that the Japanese would fight as hard as they could, for as long as they could, taking many American lives with them. Because of this, Fretz and Maddox believe that

Truman made the only decision he could in this scenario, to drop the bombs and quickly end the war. Fretz says that “Truman was advised that any Allied invasion of mainland Japan would result in 1 million casualties, probably 2 million being killed.” Because of this, Fretz believed that dropping the bombs was the lesser of evils. Maddox agrees with this, saying that as Truman was Commander in Chief of the American armed forces, he had a duty to the men fighting for the US and says “One can only imagine what would have happened if tens of thousands of American boys had died or been wounded on Japanese soil and then it had become known that Truman had chosen not to use weapons that might have ended the war months sooner.” While this is a good point, the revisionist perspective has a strong opposing argument, that the invasion of Japan was months away from happening and that the Soviet entry was planned for mid-August.

Fretz and Maddox further their argument that Japan was nowhere near surrender by discussing the debate within the Japanese government over surrender. Although Emperor Hirohito had overall power in Japan, it was up to the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War to decide whether Japan should surrender. This is due to the centuries-old tradition of Emperors not interfering with politics, to maintain their reputation and protect their lives from any extremists. The Supreme Council at the time was made up of Prime Minister Admiral Kantaro Suzuki, Minister of Foreign Affairs Shigenori Togo, Minister of the Army General Korechika Anami, Minister of the Navy Admiral Mitsumasa Yonai, Chief of the Army General Staff General Yoshijiro Umezu, and Chief of the Navy General Staff Admiral Soemu Toyoda. Fretz counters the revisionist argument that if the surrender agreement had been amended Japan would have surrendered, claiming that this Supreme War cabinet was strongly divided, with General Anami, General Umezu and Admiral Toyoda being strongly opposed to the idea of a surrender without 4 conditions: “the guarantee of the imperial monarchy, the disarmament of Japanese troops by Japanese commanders, the conduct of war crimes trials by Japanese officials, and the absence of any postwar occupation of Japan or just a token occupation in a few designated areas.” Fretz claims that “obviously any American administration that agreed to these conditions would not survive in office and, after its removal from power, its members would be charged with dereliction of duty or even treason” so therefore, due to the three extremist members in the War council, there was no way Japan would surrender unless the atomic bombs were dropped. It was only once the atomic bombs were dropped, the Soviets entered, and the Emperor stepped in, that Japan surrendered. Even then, the extremists still fought against the surrender but were overpowered.

Within Fretz and Maddox’s perspectives, they provide counterarguments for some of the revisionist points. Both historians deny Stone’s argument that 6/7 US military leaders were against the dropping of the bombs, claiming that they each thought their branch of the military would be the one which would eventually end the war and that they only voiced their disagreements after the fact, saying “There is no persuasive evidence that any of them did so, apart from Eisenhower.” Even saying this, Maddox argues that Eisenhower’s disagreement may not be entirely accurate, referring to the fact that Eisenhower’s story changed many times throughout the years after the bombings.

The validity of the revisionist argument is also somewhat countered by Maddox who highlights the retrospective bias present in the revisionist perspective, claiming that any information that came out after the war, that Truman did not previously have access to, is

irrelevant to deciding whether the bombs should have been dropped or not. As Truman had no access to some of the information that came out after the war, it shouldn't be used to argue against the dropping of the bombs, as the decision was based only on information available at the time. It is unfair to judge Truman's decision without considering what he was and wasn't aware of at the time.

Much of Stone and Alperovitz evidence they use to back up their arguments is reliable, many of which are quotes from government officials and US intelligence. The use of Truman's diary to back up their arguments is a very reliable source, as it provides a firsthand account of Truman's mindset and knowledge at the time. However, it may contain his personal bias. Evidence used by Stone such as the quotes from US officials such as William Leahy, and General MacArthur may be inaccurate as these quotes were said after the event, so therefore there is a chance that they were misremembered or taken out of context of the conversation. Some of the information and evidence used by Stone and Alperovitz was only made available after the war, such as quotes from Japanese officials about their fear of the USSR. Truman and other US officials wouldn't have access to that information when deciding to drop the bomb, so there is a question about whether this information is relevant to the argument of the morality of dropping the bombs, weakening the revisionist argument.

I neither agree nor disagree with both the revisionist and post-revisionist beliefs on what ended the war. Both arguments do make valid points, as the atomic bombs demonstrated that America had way more power than Japan, and the Soviet entry was what Japan feared most. As both groups provide valid evidence, and cannot refute the others argument, I don't agree with either perspective. Instead, I believe that it was the combination of the Soviet entry and the bombs that caused Japan to surrender.