

Prime Minister Suzuki and the atomic bomb – setting the record straight by Professor Brien Hallett

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Adm. Vasey's recent essay, "President Truman and the atomic bomb – setting the record straight" (*PacNet* # 45, May 18, 2016) does indeed "set the record straight," from a US perspective. However, three additional elements of the story can, perhaps, be mentioned to flesh out and balance the record.

First, Truman neither "ordered" nor "decided" to drop the atomic bombs in any direct or meaningful sense. Second, Truman and his advisors in Washington did not decide "to end the war and save lives." Prime Minister Suzuki and his advisors in Tokyo made that decision. And, third, any discussion of the Japanese surrender must take into account the baneful effects of Roosevelt's demand for an unconditional surrender in prolonging the war unnecessarily.

Unfortunately, this last element cannot be addressed here. Space does not permit. Yet, a moment's reflection should allow one to appreciate the inescapably harmful impact of a demand for unconditional surrender. If not, one can re-read Edmund Burke's 1775 defense of the American Revolution for an insightful analysis of counterproductive moral, strategic, and political effects of a demand for surrender at discretion.

Gen. Leslie Groves, commander of the Manhattan Engineering District, was always very clear in his actions, writings, and speeches that he had been given the mission to build and drop atomic bombs. President Roosevelt set the bureaucratic wheels in motion in 1939 and, once funded, the wheels would turn until the mission had been accomplished, until atomic bombs had been built and dropped. After he became president, Truman had to be kept informed of progress, of course, but no action or decision on his part was either anticipated or required.

As president, Truman could have stepped in and stopped the bureaucratic momentum. Had he done so, however, he would have had to explain why and would have had to have a good reason to do so. But, in 1945, no one could imagine any reason not to destroy whole cities. Sixty-two cities had already been destroyed in Germany – all the cities with a population of 100,000 or more, save one, Breslau – and 64 in Japan. This vast devastation, moreover, was in addition to the bombed out cities of Belgium, England, France, the Netherlands, and elsewhere.

Truman always took responsibility for the atomic bombings, because as he put it, "The buck stops here!" But his role, as Gen. Groves often said, was neither to "decide" nor to

"order" the dropping of the atomic bombs. His role was to get out of the way and let the bureaucracy do what it had been told to do.

Unique among the belligerents, Imperial Japan was the only country to change governments during the course of the war: Tojo, 1941-1944; Koiso, 1944-1945; Suzuki, April 7, 1945-Aug. 14, 1945. Other countries – France, Italy, Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Finland, Germany – all changed governments during the war, but the change came days before the new government capitulated. Except for Saddam Hussein, governments that are losing a war hang on until the last moment, and then fall. A new government is then formed to replace it and to manage the capitulation. Japan, however, was unique. Its declining fortunes can be traced by the rise and fall of the Tojo, Koiso, and Suzuki governments.

The Suzuki government came to power six days after the US assault on Okinawa. It came to power, first, because the Koiso government had failed to defend Japan and, second, because it had policy. The policy was not very good, but it was a policy. It had two prongs. The military prong was to strengthen the beaches in Kyushu so as to deliver a decisive blow against the forthcoming invasion. The diplomatic prong was to negotiate an extension of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the Soviet Union and Japan. Then, with this diplomatic success, Suzuki would ask Stalin to use his good offices with the US to negotiate surrender.

Japan lacked the material resources in 1945 to fortify the beaches in Kyushu and repulse a US assault. Likewise, Stalin had no intention of either extending the Treaty of Peace and Friendship or using his good offices to negotiate a Japanese surrender. Moreover, Prime Minister Suzuki and all his Cabinet knew this. Yet, crucially and critically, this hopeless and entirely unrealistic two-prong policy was a policy. With it, one could, as Suzuki did, form a government.

The alternative that made the hopeless two-prong policy viable and attractive was the fact that acceding to Roosevelt's demand for an unconditional surrender was both dishonorable and treason. Like all government officials across history, Suzuki and his Cabinet had sworn an oath to uphold the Constitution of Imperial Japan. Acceding to an unconditional surrender – an act that would abrogate the Constitution – would be a violation of their oath of office.

From the US perspective, what is most interesting about the events retold by Adm. Vasey is the amount of time spent and the seriousness of the administration's deliberations on whether to drop the atomic bombs or not. As already noted, in the context of 1945 and the daily devastation of city after city, the outcome was all but inevitable. No one could imagine in 1945 why a few more cities should not be eradicated. Did the physics of the explosive used – whether chemical or nuclear – make any difference?

Yet, from the Japanese perspective, what is most interesting is the timeline that goes from Aug. 6-14, 1945:

Aug. 6, 1945, Hiroshima bombed

Aug. 8, 1945, Soviet declaration of war against Japan as Stalin promised at Yalta

Aug. 9, 1945, Nagasaki bombed

Aug. 10, 1945, the first Imperial Conference

Aug. 11, 1945, first Japanese surrender, which was rejected as poorly drafted

Aug. 14, 1945, second Japanese surrender, which was accepted, leading to the fall of the Suzuki government

What is notable about this timeline is that the Suzuki government acceded in principle to surrender on Aug. 10 and effectuated the surrender on Aug. 14, on the day it collapsed. Tellingly, though, the cause of its accession and collapse was not the two atomic bombings.

The devastation of two more Japanese cities, on top of the 64 already in ashes, did not threaten the collapse of the Suzuki government. This was because the Suzuki government had a well-established policy to deal with the destruction of entire cities. The policy was not a very good policy, but it worked. Indeed, Winston Churchill had first pioneered it in 1941-1942: after a bombing, one tended to the wounded, buried the dead, cleaned up the rubble as best one could, and carried on. Trains were running two days after the atomic bombing in Hiroshima.

Not only had this policy worked in England, but, since March 1945, it had been successfully employed in 64 Japanese cities. Thus, the least of the Suzuki government's worries was the devastation of two more cities. As the North Koreans and the North Vietnamese will testify, dropping unimaginable tons of bombs is neither a reason nor an inducement to surrender, quite the contrary.

In brutal contrast, the Soviet entry into the Pacific war not only threatened the collapse of the Suzuki government; it guaranteed its collapse. The diplomatic prong of its two-prong policy had vanished. And without the diplomatic prong, the military prong was of no value, since, now, no diplomatic avenue existed to exploit a military victory in Kyushu. Hence, the Suzuki government no longer had a policy, or even the hope of a hope of a policy. It would fall.

In the context of the May 8 Soviet declaration of war, at the behest of the Emperor, the Cabinet spent the entire day of Aug. 9 debating the Potsdam Declaration, which called again for an unconditional surrender. At 10 AM, the Cabinet was informed of the Nagasaki bombing. These deadlocked discussions led, after midnight, to the first Imperial Conference at which the Emperor indicated his wish to accept the Potsdam Declaration. This produced the first Japanese surrender on Aug. 11, which was rejected because it was poorly drafted. A second Imperial Conference was held and a second, more competently drafted, letter was sent and accepted on Aug. 14, ending the war in the Pacific and the Suzuki government.

What is most interesting about the discussions of Aug. 9-14 is that all participants were honor bound by oaths of office to uphold the Constitution of Imperial Japan, except the Emperor. No participant could accept an unconditional surrender without violating his oath of office, except the Emperor. Because he was above the Constitution, he had never taken an oath to uphold it. His decision to surrender at discretion was neither dishonorable nor treason.

President Obama will not apologize for the atomic bombings during his visit to Hiroshima. The time is not ripe for that. But some future president will. When that time comes, in order for the apology to be honest and truly thoughtful, this future president will not apologize simply to the *hibakusa* of Hiroshima and Nagasaki for the atomic bombings. Rather, his apology will necessarily encompass the citizens of the other German and Japanese cities that were bombed during World War II, and the citizens of North Korean cities that were bombed during the Korean War, and the citizens of North Vietnamese cities that were bombed during the war in Vietnam.

The true and substantive moral and military issues that will motivate this future apology are not the physics of the explosive used – whether chemical or nuclear – but the devastation of entire cities without producing any military advantage. For in point of fact, the citizens of London and Rotterdam, Dresden and Tokyo suffered no less than the citizens of Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II. Thus, the substantive reason for an apology is the fact that they all suffered for no substantive military benefit or advantage. This sad conclusion results, on the one hand, from a close reading of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey for World War II, and, on the other hand, from the testimony of citizens of the cities of North Korea and North Vietnam. Not even the US Air Force advocates this type of militarily ineffective devastation, any more.

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