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Hiroshima and Nagasaki: Fictions and Facts

About the US atomic destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, popular accounts still stick to the false but “greatest generation” story that, “Without [them], more Japanese would have died in a US assault on the islands, as would have tens of thousands of Americans,” as Mike Hashimoto wrote in the *Dallas Morning News* in 2016.

The *New York Times* reported that year, “Many historians believe the bombings [of] Hiroshima and then Nagasaki, which together took the lives of more than 200,000 people, saved lives on balance, since an invasion of the islands would have led to far greater bloodshed.” Many historians, perhaps; but not that many.

On the contrary the chief historian of the US Nuclear Regulatory Commission, J. Samuel Walker, wrote in the journal *Diplomatic History* in 1990, “The consensus among scholars is that the bomb was not needed to avoid an invasion of Japan and to end the war within a relatively short time. It is clear that alternatives to the bomb existed and that Truman and his advisers knew it.”

Historian Martin Sherwin has debunked the tale of the “good” atom bombs, citing in his 2003 book *A World Destroyed* “a ‘considerable body’ of new evidence that suggested the bomb may have cost, rather than saved, American lives. That is, if the US had not been so determined to complete, test, and finally use the bomb, it might have arranged the Japanese surrender weeks earlier, preventing much bloodshed on Okinawa.”

Historian Gar Alperovitz wrote in *Atomic Diplomacy* (Vintage Books, 1967), “available evidence shows the atomic bomb was not needed to end the war or to save lives — and that this was understood by American leaders at the time.” Further declassification of

wartime secrets and 28 additional years of research make Alperovitz's definitive 1995 history *[The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb](#)* even stronger on this point.

Admirals and Generals Destroy the Myth

Combat veterans and bomber crews defeated Japan well before August 6, 1945 by fighting and dying in dreadful battles over Midway, Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, and elsewhere, a fact corroborated by dozens of military commanders, as Maj. Gen. Curtis LeMay, head of the 21st Bomber Command, boasted. LeMay said publicly on Sept. 20, 1945: "The war would have been over in two weeks without the Russians entering and without the atomic bomb." Asked to clarify, the general who directed the destruction of 67 Japanese cities using mass incendiary attacks doubled down saying, "The atomic bomb had nothing to do with the end of the war at all."

Gen. George Kenny, who commanded parts of the Army Air Forces in the Pacific, was asked in 1969 for his opinion and said, "I think we had the Japs [sic] licked anyhow. I think they would have quit probably within a week or so of when they did quit."

Alperovitz notes further that Adm. Lewis Strauss, an assistant to WW II Navy Secretary James Forrestal, wrote to historian Robert Albion in 1960: "[F]rom the Navy's point of view, there are statements by Admiral King, Admiral Halsey, Admiral Radford, Admiral Nimitz and others who expressed themselves to the effect that neither the atomic bomb nor the proposed invasion of the Japanese mainland were necessary to produce the surrender."

In *[Mandate for Change](#)*, President Dwight Eisenhower admitted that when Sec. of War Henry Stimson told him atomic bombs were going to be used, "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...."

President Truman's Chief of Staff, Adm. William Leahy, agreed. As Robert Lifton and Greg Mitchell, report in *[Hiroshima in America: 50 Years of Denial](#)*, Leahy said, "It is my opinion that the 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...." Even official histories have debunked the fiction. "[T]he US Strategic Bombing Survey published its conclusion that Japan would likely have surrendered in 1945 without atomic bombing, without a Soviet declaration of war, and without an American invasion," Alperovitz recounted in *The Decision*.

Still, the myth that the mass destruction of 200,000 was necessary to save lives is believed by millions in the US who refuse to consider or accept the historical record. This greatest of the "greatest generation's" yarns may help some sleep at night, and to think better of

killing civilians than does the rest of the world, but it doesn't help abolish nuclear weapons.