

Ending the Asia-Pacific War: New Dimensions

Richard B. Frank

For the last seventy years, the world has lived in dread of nuclear weapons, now inconceivably more powerful than those that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Both the scholarly and the popular literature on this passage focus overwhelmingly on the reasons for, the effects of and the morality of their use. This approach often segues into speculations on alternatives to the use of nuclear weapons and whether they actually figured in the termination of the war.¹

This short paper cannot begin to grapple comprehensively with these questions. The focus here will be to illuminate two critical aspects of these events: 1) U.S. intelligence that raised profound doubts about the viability of an amphibious assault on Kyushu scheduled for November 1945; and 2) the full implications of the U.S. campaign of blockade of Japan. This paper then goes on to assess the factors that produced the end of the war.

Operation Olympic in Prospect

President Franklin Roosevelt publicly articulated the national political goal of the United States at the Casablanca Conference in January 1943 as the unconditional surrender of the Axis powers.² The task of devising a military strategy to secure unconditional surrender fell to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Their divisive debates on this problem extended from 1943 into the spring of 1945.³ Ultimately, the JCS attained only an unstable compromise of

¹ The literature on the use of atomic weapons is too vast for a complete listing in this paper. A good starting point for English language works commencing in 2005 is J. Samuel Walker, "Recent Literature on Truman's Atomic Bomb Decision: A Search for Middle Ground," in *Diplomatic History* 29 no. 2 (2005): 311-334. Since that publication, some of the more notable works include: Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, ed., *The End of the Pacific War: Reappraisals* (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007); Wilson D. Miscamble, C.S.C., *From Roosevelt to Truman: Potsdam, Hiroshima and the Cold War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Robert James Maddox, *Hiroshima in History: The Myths of Revisionism* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2007); Michael Kort, *The Columbia Guide to Hiroshima and the Bomb* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Sean Malloy, *Atomic Tragedy: Henry L. Stimson and the Decision to Use the Bomb Against Japan* (Ithaca and New York: Cornell University Press, 2008); Andrew J. Rotter, *Hiroshima: The World's Bomb* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Craig Campbell and Sergey Radchenko, *The Atomic Bomb and the Origins of the Cold War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

² "Transcript of Press Conference, Casablanca, January 24, 1943," *Foreign Relations of the United States* [hereafter *FRUS*], *The Conferences at Washington, 1941-1942 and Casablanca, 1943*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1968), 726-31 (policy announced at 727); Herbert P. Bix, *Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 496-98 [hereafter Bix, *Hirohito*]; Barton J. Bernstein, "Japan's Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation," *Diplomatic History* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 204; Michael D. Pearlman, *Unconditional Surrender, Demobilization and the Atomic Bomb* (Fort Leavenworth, Kans.: Combat Studies Institute, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, 1996), 1-8.

³ JCS debates on ending the war with Japan: the basic documentary series are Campaign Against Japan, 381 POA (6-10-43), and JCS 924, in CCS 381 Pacific Ocean Operations (6-10-43), both Record Group [hereafter RG] 218, National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, Maryland [hereafter NARA].

two conflicting visions. Those visions arose not from purely military calculations but from a question with profound political origins: what factor would most likely undermine the will of the American people to see the war through to unconditional surrender?

The U.S. Navy, led by Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King, had studied war with Japan for almost four decades. From this protracted analysis naval officers distilled a number of principles. One deeply ingrained axiom was that invading Japan represented absolute folly. Naval planners calculated that Japan would muster much larger ground forces for defense than the United States could ever project across the Pacific and that Japan's terrain would negate American advantages of firepower and mobility. These assessments drove naval leaders to identify casualties as the factor most likely to undermine popular commitment to unconditional surrender. Thus, they advocated ending the war by a campaign of blockade and bombardment.⁴

In the literature on the end of the Asia-Pacific War, the campaign of the incendiary attacks on Japanese cities stands second only to that on atomic weapons. This emphasis has obscured the brutal fact that the blockade strategy actually posed an existential threat to the Japanese population. Blockade served as a legitimate component of naval warfare for centuries. Under the evolving legal regime governing blockades, naval forces could bar the importation of "contraband": weapons or supplies intended for war use. But the legal regime governing blockades exempted items for civilian use, particularly food. In the First World War Britain and Germany changed the rules. They extended the definition of "contraband" to encompass food for civilian populations. The American blockade campaign followed this new legal regime, and thus it aimed ultimately at threatening to or actually starving to death millions of Japanese, mostly noncombatants.⁵

The U.S. Army, led by General of the Army George C. Marshall, only turned in earnest to the problem of ending hostilities with Japan in 1944. It swiftly adopted a strategy mooted first in the late 1930's of invading the home islands. This choice reflected the bedrock army conviction that time was the critical challenge to public support for unconditional surrender—and thus an enduring peace.⁶

The JCS merged these two conflicting views into a strategic plan in May 1945. The Chiefs authorized the continuation and intensification of the strategy of blockade and bombardment until November 1, 1945. At that point, the United States would launch a two-phase initial invasion of the Japanese homeland under the overall code name Operation Downfall. The first step, Operation Olympic, involved the seizure of approximately the southern third of Kyushu, the southernmost main Japanese home island, by the Sixth Army, starting on November 1, 1945. Olympic would obtain air and naval bases to support a second phase, Operation Coronet, tentatively set for March 1, 1946, involving three armies to secure the Tokyo-Yokohama region.

⁴ U.S. Navy thinking: Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange* (Annapolis: U.S. Naval Institute, Press, 1991) esp. 165, 391-2, 395, 511.

⁵ Legal regime evolution concerning blockade: Michael Walzer, *Just and Unjust War: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations* 2d Edition (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 172-75.

⁶ U.S. Army thinking: Richard B. Frank, *Downfall: The End of the Imperial Japanese Empire* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999), 30-37 [hereafter Frank, *Downfall*]. The notes supporting this text from 369-71 contain voluminous citations to archival documents.

As the JCS pointed out in the policy paper they adopted to support this strategy, the overall Allied war aim remained unconditional surrender. As the paper noted, the evolving plans for post-war occupation had now emphasized that unconditional surrender provided the fundamental legal authority to execute the far-ranging political changes in Japan designed to assure that it never again posed a threat to peace. But the JCS acknowledged that no Japanese government had ever surrendered to a foreign power, a history stretching back over 2,600 years. Moreover, throughout the entire course of the Pacific War, no Japanese unit had ever surrendered. Thus, the JCS cautioned that there was no guarantee that the surrender of the Japanese government could be obtained, or that even if a Japanese government capitulated, that the Japanese armed forces would comply with that surrender. Therefore, an invasion was vital, because it was most likely to compel the surrender of the Japanese government. Moreover, an invasion would best position the United States to deal with the situation if there was no surrender or the Japanese armed forces refused to comply with the surrender of a Japanese government.⁷

Thus, the JCS recognized that the ultimate dire situation the United States faced was not Operation Downfall, the two-phase initial invasion, but the absence of an organized capitulation of Japan's government *and* armed forces. In the latter case, the United States would face the prospect of defeating in detail an estimated four to five million Japanese men under arms in the Home Islands, on the Asian continent, and across the Pacific Ocean. This made even the potential casualties in Operation Downfall only a down payment on the ultimate price of the complete defeat of Japan.

President Truman ordered a meeting of his senior subordinates in June 1945 to review the invasion plan. It is significant that the memorandum summoning the meeting singled out casualties as the president's fundamental concern. Although Truman's sanction of Operation Downfall formed the primary item on the agenda, Truman would only approve its first phase, Operation Olympic.⁸

Ketsu Go in Prospect

Japanese military and naval leaders greeted New Year's Day 1945 not with resignation but with resolution. Since mid-1942, the tides of war had surged with increasing intensity against them. Only remnants remained of the once great Imperial Navy while Japanese air resources stood under the shadow of overpowering Allied numerical and qualitative superiority. But Japan could still deploy plentiful ground forces to battle on home terrain eminently suited to defense. Behind these soldiers stood a civilian population expected to provide emphatic support. Yet the most important factor driving strategic planning loomed the bedrock conviction that although

⁷ JCS declares strategy for ending the war with Japan: JCS 924/15, April 25, 1945; CCS 381 Pacific Ocean Operations (6-10-43), sec. RG 218, NARA. On May 25, the JCS by "informal action" approved the draft directive for the invasion issued in Joint Chiefs of Staff to MacArthur, Nimitz, and Arnold, WX 87938 25th (May) (the Signal Corps Message form for MacArthur is dated May 26, 1945), RG 4, box 17, folder 4, MacArthur Memorial Archive, Norfolk, Va. [hereafter MacArthur Memorial Archive].

⁸ Truman's review of invasion plan: George C. Marshall Papers, Xerox 1567, "Minutes of White House Meeting, June 18, 1945 at 1530," George C. Marshall Library, Lexington Virginia [hereafter Marshall Library].

the Americans possessed tremendous material power, their morale was brittle.

In light of these considerations, Japan's uniformed and civilian leaders devised a military-political strategy titled Ketsu Go. It rested on the premise that if the U.S. initial invasion of the Japanese Home Islands could be defeated or sustained tremendous American casualties, Japan would secure bargaining chips for a negotiated peace far short of unconditional surrender.⁹

The implementation of Ketsu Go displayed a very shrewd appreciation. The U.S. never matched numerically Japanese ground forces in the Pacific. U.S. combat superiority rested on air and sea power. The majority of American air units relied upon land bases. Therefore, Japanese officers reasoned that an invasion of Japan would only be mounted in an area within range of large numbers of American land based aircraft. They further expected the U.S. to seize Okinawa to provide that base. Simple calculation of fighter plane range from Okinawa identified southern Kyushu and Shikoku as potential targets. Kyushu offered a much superior set of existing or potential air bases as well as sea bases to support further operations in the Home Islands. Elementary topographical assessment of Kyushu readily disclosed the likely landing areas.

Having astutely identified the critical battlefield, the Imperial Army transferred four good divisions from Manchuria to the Homeland while conducting a massive mobilization. By August, fourteen divisions and eleven brigades of various types maintained vigil on Kyushu. Naval preparations concentrated on various types of "special attack" or suicide craft, both surface and subsurface. Japan effectively converted its large aviation training establishment into an armada of suicide planes and embarked on a conservation program to preserve more up to date aircraft for attack missions and as escorts for suicide planes. The Imperial Army overall air commander later confided he had intended to send all of this aircraft eventually on suicide missions. It's hard to image the Imperial Navy not matching this measure.¹⁰

This strategy served as the agenda for an Imperial Conference in June 1945. The conference stamped approval on Ketsu Go as well as rejecting any other means of ending the war.¹¹ There are two signal features of this meeting. First, Japan had now staked its strategy on the premise that the U.S. must launch an invasion of the Home Islands. If the U.S. failed to follow this script, the uniformed leadership had nothing to offer but national suicide instead of surrender. Second, the staff papers laying out Japan's overall situation made patent that the cost of Ketsu Go would extend far beyond the predictably stupendous American and Japanese casualties in the titanic counter invasion campaign and the accompanying loss due to the ongoing campaigns of blockade and bombardment. The papers set forth that Japan's

⁹ Ketsu Go Strategy developed: See generally Boeicho Boei Kenshojo Senshi Shitsu, *Senshi Shosho, No. 57, Hondo Kessen Jumbi (2) Kyushu No Boei* (Tokyo: Asagumo Shimbunsha, 1972) (hereafter *Hondo Kessen Jumbi*), 159-64; *Reports of General MacArthur, Japanese Operations in the Southwest Pacific Area*, vol. 2, pt. 2, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966), 577; Statement of Baron Suzuki, 26 Dec 45, Interrogation No. 531, 308, Center of Military History, Ft. McNair, D.C. [hereafter CMH].

¹⁰ Preparations for defense of Kyushu: *Hondo Kessen Jumbi*, 164-70, 177-82, 211-25, 242-46, 278-92; *Reports of General MacArthur*, 2:2: 588-9, 591-2, 601, 604-7, 612, 619-22.

¹¹ June 1945 Imperial Conference: *Hondo Kessen Jumbi*, 24-26, 582-83; Edward J. Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army: Its Rise and Fall, 1853-1945* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 249-250 [hereafter Drea, *Japan's Imperial Army*]; Robert Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1954), 93-9 [hereafter Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*].

food situation would plummet into an abyss that posed a mortal threat to a vast swath of the population during the 1945-1946 Rice Year.¹²

Olympic Unravels

One of the most significant transformations of our understanding of these events emerged from the release of masses of declassified U.S. radio intelligence information since the 1970s. Moreover, the declassification process not only disclosed documents produced by the radio intelligence agencies, but also documents that discussed the radio intelligence information. This latter group includes heretofore unknown communications at the highest levels of American leadership. But perhaps ironically, these same documents shed new and important light on the highest levels of Japanese leadership. In the immediate aftermath of the war, there was massive destruction of documents Japanese leaders feared might play a role in war crimes trials. Because Japanese leaders did not apprehend the widespread compromise of their codes and ciphers, American archives hold a mass of contemporary, undoubtedly authentic documents that shed critical light on Japanese decision making.¹³

The hundreds of diplomatic cables intercepted, decrypted and translated for American leaders were distilled into the “Magic Diplomatic Summary.” This was distributed on a daily basis to a select group of the highest American officials.¹⁴ The “Magic Diplomatic Summary” between May and August 1945 disclosed that the Japanese government had bestowed no official authority on the Japanese representatives in Europe who presented themselves as emissaries to their American counterparts. What the “Magic” summary did reveal was that the sole authentic Japanese diplomatic initiative was to commission the Japanese ambassador in Moscow, Sato Naotake, to enlist the Soviet Union to act as a mediator for a negotiated end to the war.¹⁵

Sato’s dispatches read like a cross examination of feckless Japanese diplomacy. After ridiculing the notion that the Soviets would bestir themselves on behalf of Japan, Sato turned to his most pointed theme: if Japan’s statesmen seriously pursued an end to the war, they must provide a statement of terms. Foreign Minister Togo Shigenori could provide no statement of terms because Japan’s government never assembled specific terms for ending the war.

¹² Projection of failing food supplies: *Hondo Kessen Jumbi*, 24-26, 582-83; Drea, *Japan’s Imperial Army*, 250 (Imperial Army officers clearly understood “that widespread starvation was likely during the winter of 1945-1946”). Reinforcing this point is that at a Special Session of the Emergency Diet Vice Army Minister Shibayama admitted that the maximum time Japan could continue the war due to the food situation was one year. Statement of Col. Sako Tanemura, 21 Aug 50, Doc No. 61677, 8, CMH.

¹³ Radio intelligence information release: the most important holding of radio intelligence material by far is in RG 457, NARA. An important example of how the release of radio intelligence information resulted in the release of other important documents is what is known as the “Gray Book,” which is effectively the War Diary of the Commander in Chief Pacific Fleet. The link is: www.ibiblio.org/anrs/graybook.html.

¹⁴ Delivery of “Magic” summaries: SRH-132, History of the Special Distribution Branch, Military Intelligence Service, WDGS, Part 3, Section 7, RG 457, NARA; SRH-146 Handling of Ultra Within the Military Intelligence Service (MIS) 1941-1945, RG 457, NARA. These documents contain number of important revelations, among them that the distribution list for the diplomatic and military summaries was identical.

¹⁵ The messages pertaining to Japanese officials in Europe presenting themselves as emissaries are too numerous to cite here. See generally “Magic Diplomatic Summary” for May to August 1945, RG 457, NARA. For Under Secretary of State Joseph Grew’s explicit public statement of July 10, 1945, that no peace offer had yet emerged from the Japanese government see Butow, *Japan’s Decision to Surrender*, 111.

In exasperation, Sato in two messages in mid-July advised Tokyo that the best terms Japan could then hope to secure were in the words of the “Magic Diplomatic Summary” editors “unconditional surrender provided the Imperial House was preserved.” Togo’s response rejected even this formulation. Any American official reading this exchange could only conclude that a pledge to preserve the imperial system would not secure Japan’s surrender.¹⁶

If the diplomatic intercepts demonstrated diplomacy could not end the war, the military intercepts that appeared in the separate “Magic Far East Summary” also distributed daily to top American officials disclosed something much worse. Between July 9 and the end of August 1945, radio intelligence revealed to American leaders the huge Japanese build-up on Kyushu. The intelligence appreciations originally undergirding the Operation Olympic projected that on November 1, 1945, Japanese forces on Kyushu would comprise six field divisions, with only three in Southern Kyushu. The Japanese were expected ultimately to counter Olympic with 325,000 men in eight to ten divisions. Likewise Japan would deploy about 2,500 to 3,000 aircraft. The American forces would number fourteen divisions and two reinforced regiments and supporting forces numbering an estimated 776,700 men and about 7,000 aircraft. This would assure a comfortable three to one ratio against the defenders at the time of the initial landing and at least that ratio as Japanese reinforcement arrived piecemeal. This three to one figure was a military rule of thumb that normally assured victory without excessive casualties.¹⁷

Starting from July 9 and continuing to August, radio intelligence revealed the great bulk of Japanese deployments on Kyushu. By the end of this process, radio intelligence had identified all fourteen Japanese field divisions on Kyushu and many of the brigades. Just as significant, this intelligence also depicted the Japanese positioned opposite the landing areas. The new revelations also identified a massively larger Japanese air capability. American assessments credited the Japanese with 5,911 to 10,290 aircraft. The actual total was about 10,700.¹⁸

This alarming intelligence picture shocked most American commanders. By July 29, Major General Charles A. Willoughby, General MacArthur’s intelligence chief, declared that further unchecked increase of Japanese strength on Kyushu threatened “to grow to [the] point where we attack on a ratio of one (1) to one (1) which is not the recipe for victory.”¹⁹ Senior staff officers of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in Washington shared Willoughby’s doubts about

¹⁶ Sato-Togo exchanges: “Magic Diplomatic Summaries,” July 11-22, with particular emphasis on those of 17-22 July.

¹⁷ Intelligence estimates forming basis of Downfall Plan: Downfall, Strategic Plan for Operations against the Japanese Archipelago, OPD 350.05, Sec. 1, RG 165, NARA; “Minutes of White House Meeting, June 18, 1945 at 1530,” Xerox 1567, Marshall Library.

¹⁸ For specific citations to the mass of radio intelligence reports that tracked the build up on Kyushu, see Frank, *Downfall*, 403-9. In sum, these primarily are found in the SRH, SRS and SRMD-008 series in July and August 1945, RG 457, NARA

¹⁹ General Headquarters, U.S. Army Forces Pacific, Military Intelligence Section, General Staff, “Amendment No. 1 to G-2 Estimate of the Enemy Situation with Respect to Kyushu,” July 29, 1945, 1, Gen. John J. Tolson Papers, USAMHI (copy in RG 4, box 22, MacArthur Memorial Archive).

Olympic.²⁰

On August 7, Washington time, General Marshall sent a dispatch to MacArthur. Marshall pointed out the intelligence reports disclosing “a large buildup both of [Japanese] divisions and of air forces in Kyushu and Southern Honshu.” He highlighted that Japanese air units comprised mostly kamikaze planes poised to strike the Olympic target region. Marshall then requested MacArthur’s views on the prospects for Olympic in light of this intelligence. Marshall provided a copy of this message to Admiral William Leahy, President Truman’s chief of staff.

MacArthur’s reply on August 9 insisted the intelligence reports of Japanese air and ground strength were “greatly exaggerated.” MacArthur declared that “there should not be the slightest thought of changing the Olympic operation.” He ended with a highly dubious claim that in the past there had repeatedly been alarming intelligence of increased Japanese strength just before operations and that these reports had uniformly proved wrong.

Late on August 9 (Washington time), Admiral King moved to intervene decisively in the controversy over Olympic. He gathered both Marshall’s original query and MacArthur’s reply into a package, and sent both “Eyes Only” to Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, the senior navy officer in the Pacific, asking for “your comments” and requesting that a copy of these be sent to MacArthur.²¹ Fully appreciating the significance of King’s measure requires some background. In a memorandum to the other members of the JCS on April 30, 1945, King affirmed that he had only agreed that they must issue and order for an invasion of Japan so that all the necessary preparations could be made to have that option available in the fall. But he stated the JCS would be returning to review the actual necessity for an invasion in August or September. And King knew something undisclosed to his JCS colleagues or President Truman. Nimitz had notified King on May 25 that after two months of fighting on Okinawa, he could no longer support an invasion of the Japanese Home Islands.²²

King clearly intended to bring on as he had predicted in April a major confrontation over the viability of Operation Olympic. That said, great caution must be exercised in exploring any path history did not take. Plainly, the highest levels of American military and naval leadership were embroiled in a titanic battle over the viability of Operation Olympic in August 1945. Also clearly the naval leadership formed a united front against any invasion. It appears MacArthur remained committed to Olympic. We further know that Marshall detailed one of his key subordinates to look into bolstering Olympic by taking all atomic bomb production for what we would now call “tactical use” to support Olympic rather than any further attacks

²⁰ Senior staff of JCS share Willoughby’s doubts about Olympic: see for example Joint War Plans Committee, J.W.P.C. 397, August 4, 1945 (with attached copy of “Defensive Preparations in Japan,” Joint Intelligence Committee), RG 218, NARA; Joint Staff Planners, Minutes of 213th Meeting, Aug. 8, 1945, Xerox 1540, pt. 9, Marshall Library.

²¹ Exchanges Marshall to MacArthur, MacArthur to Marshall and King to Nimitz: OPD (WAR) [Marshall] to MACARTHUR WAR 45369; CINCAFAC [MacArthur] to WARCOS [Marshall] C 31897, CINCPAC Command Summary, bk. 7, 3508-10. The exchange is also found in OPD top secret incoming msg, Jul. 28-Aug. 17, 1945, RG 165, box 39, NARA.

²² Nimitz withdraws support for invasion of Home Islands: CINCPAC to COMINCH, 051725 May 45, Command Summary, Book 6, January to July 1945, 3232, www.ibiblio.org/anrs/graybook.html.

on Japanese cities.²³ Finally, we know that President Truman clearly stated in June that his principle criterion on evaluating an invasion plan was potential casualties. If that remained Truman's concern, then evidence of the Japanese build-up on Kyushu had shredded any thought that Olympic would not produce very steep casualties.

The New Strategic Bombing Directive

With the viability of Operation Olympic in severe doubt, the value of alternative strategies rose dramatically. Although the use of atomic weapons obviously figured prominently in this scenario, another option emerged. The B-29 program comprised the Twentieth Air Force in the Marianas with 1,002 B-29s on hand as of 1 August. With the redeployment and re-equipment of the Eighth Air Force from Europe, by early 1946, the B-29 force was projected to number some 1,648 aircraft.²⁴

A new set of operational directives issued on August 11, 1945 reflected the preliminary analysis of strategic bombing in Germany. That assessment identified transportation and oil as the most effective targets. Significantly, the new directives prioritized transportation (67 targets), particularly rail systems, rather than cities (euphemistically called "urban industrial areas") (35). The remaining targets included aircraft industry (36), munitions storage (41), arsenals (7), oil storage (17) and chemical plants (16).²⁵

Far from moderating the impact of strategic bombing on the Japanese population, the fresh directives promised vastly more dire consequences due to their interrelationship with Japanese food supplies, demographics and transportation. Japanese rice production fell from 10,027,474 metric tons in 1942 to 8,783,827 metric tons in 1944.²⁶ Then disastrous weather and flooding depressed the rice as well as other crops. In November 1945, the government estimated there would be just 6,355,000 metric tons of rice for the coming year. Worsening the situation, the fish catch which normally supplied about 10 percent of caloric intake plunged.²⁷ Imports of food had long filled the gap between Japan's needs and domestic production. But the destruction of shipping meant that by August 1945 only "insignificant levels" of food imports reached Japan. The overall shortage created a black market that siphoned large amounts of food out of official channels.²⁸

The food shortage devastated individual well being. The average citizen consumed about

²³ Hull and Seeman conversation, 1325 13 August 1945, George C. Marshall Papers, Verifax No. 2691, Marshall Library.

²⁴ Strength of Twentieth Air Force: USAF HC File 703.273 1 Aug 45; USASAF Station List, File 760.01 1 Jul-2 Sep v. 23; File 760.01v. 23 1 Jul-2 Sep.; USAF HC File 703.308 Jul & Aug 45, Headquarters, USASAF, Summary of Combat Operations.

²⁵ New Targeting Directive: USASTAF Operational Directive 11 August 1945, USAF HC File 703.302. United States Air Force Historical Center, Maxwell, Alabama.

²⁶ Food production 1942 to 1945: "History of the Nonmilitary Activities of the Occupation of Japan 1945 through September 1950," RG 5, Box 97, Folder 2, MacArthur Memorial Archive.

²⁷ Food situation in 1945: Supreme Commander of the Allied Powers, Summation of Non-Military Activities in Japan and Korea, No. 2, November 1945, 43-45, RG 5, Box 97, Folder 2, MacArthur Memorial Archive.

²⁸ Collapse of food imports: Mark P. Parillo, *The Japanese Merchant Marine in World War II* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1993), 218-9; United States Strategic Bombing Survey [hereafter USSBS], Effects of strategic Bombing on Japan's Economy, 54; USSBS, War Against Japanese Transportation, 88, 92, 96.

2,000 calories per day in 1941, but just 1,640 by 1945. This deprivation produced a soaring rate of diseases related to starvation and vitamin deficiency. Stop gap measures postponed a climax of the crisis to May and June 1946. By May 1946, the official daily ration per person in Tokyo stood at 1,042 calories. But the food was not always delivered so the average dipped to 800 calories per day.²⁹

Demographics vastly exacerbated the food shortage. Basically, three of four Japanese resided on Honshu and about 48 percent of the population lived on Honshu from Tokyo to the west.³⁰ The vast bulk of the food harvest rose from Hokkaido, parts of Kyushu and northern Honshu. Thus, about half of Japan's population dwelled in an enormous food deficit area.³¹

Alone among industrialized nations, Japan depended on waterborne transport for both overseas movement of goods and internal transportation. By August 1945, the combination of devastating merchant ship losses and then the strangling mining campaign and close blockade had halted the organized internal water borne transportation system. That left only the very modest rail system as a means of distributing bulk food from surplus to deficit areas.³² According to an analysis by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, about two days of operations by B-29s and carrier aircraft could have interdicted rail connections between Honshu and Kyushu at the Kanmon tunnel and between Honshu and Hokkaido at the rail ferries and inflicted about six cuts on Honshu rail lines. This would have "disposed effectively of the Japanese rail system as an economic asset," and catapulted virtually half of Japan's population into peril of death by starvation. Thus, the August 11 directives set a clock in increments of days or a few weeks ticking on the fate of millions of Japanese.³³

Ending the War

An enormous literature now exists on the end of the Asia-Pacific War. This essay will now focus primarily on two fundamental issues: 1) the actual reaction of Japan's leaders to news of atomic weapons and Soviet intervention; and 2) the ultimate causes of the collapse of will to continue the war.

On August 6, word reached Tokyo of colossal damage on Hiroshima. Radio monitors picked up President Harry S. Truman's statement attributing this catastrophe to an atomic

²⁹ Individual food ration: USSBS, *Effects of Strategic Bombing on Japan's Economy*, 53; USSBS, *Japanese Wartime Standard of Living and Utilization of Manpower*, 1; *Summation of Non-Military Activities in Japan and Korea*, December 1945, Chart: "Food Supply in Major Japanese Cities," RG 5, Box 97, Folder 3, MacArthur Memorial Archive; *History of the Nonmilitary Activities in the Occupation of Japan*, 12:16; *Occupation Trends Japan and Korea* 9 January 1946, RG 4, Box 37, Folder 1, MacArthur Memorial Archive.

³⁰ Distribution of Japan's population: Boeicho Boei Kenshujo Senshi Shitsu, *Senshi Shosho, No. 19, Hondo Boku Sakusen* (Tokyo: Asagumo Shimbunsha, 1968) Table 62.

³¹ Distribution of food sources: Army Service Forces Manual M 354-7, *Civil Affairs Handbook Japan*, Section 7, Agriculture, 1 April 1944, 45-48, 70-72, 84, Folder MHDC, No. 698, (Folder 2), papers of George L. McColm, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, Missouri.

³² Collapse of Japan's capacity for sea movement of bulk commodities in the Home Islands: USSBS, Report No. 54, *The War Against Japanese Transportation* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government, 1947) 1, 17-18, 27-28, 97-98 [hereafter USSBS, *The War Against Japanese Transportation*].

³³ Vulnerability of the Japanese raid system: USSBS, *The War Against Japanese Transportation*, 10.

bomb.³⁴ The Imperial Army refused to concede the U.S. actually possessed an atomic weapon until an investigation. The Chief of Staff of the Imperial Navy erected a second counter to the news: the U.S. could only possess a limited amount of radioactive material and hence the U.S. could not have that many atomic bombs, the bombs would not be that powerful or perhaps international pressure would dissuade the U.S. from using them.

These responses demonstrate that uniformed leaders possessed from Japan's own bomb program both knowledge of the theoretical possibilities of an atomic weapon and also grasp of the enormous practical problems of manufacturing large quantities of fissionable material. Given their understanding of these points, it appears extremely unlikely that a single demonstration of a nuclear bomb could have persuaded them that the U.S. possessed an atomic arsenal. Indeed, the failure to act immediately by Japan's leaders stemmed not from dismal of the significance of such weapons, but from rational questions as to whether the U.S. actually possessed powerful nuclear weapons in quantity.³⁵

In the early morning of August 9, Tokyo learned of the Soviet Union's declaration of war and of the Soviet attack on Manchuria. The Japanese commanders in Manchuria, however, grossly understated the size of Soviet forces and entirely failed to discover the massive Soviet invasion from the West.³⁶

The inner cabinet called the Big Six, met for the first time that morning to grapple with the questions of whether Japan could continue the war, and if not, what terms she would present for to end the war. In the midst of deliberations word came of the atomic bombing of Nagasaki. This was devastating news for those adhering to the theory (or the hope) that the U.S. lacked an arsenal of atomic weapons. The Foreign Minister Togo urged that Japan must accept the Potsdam Proclamation defining what "unconditional surrender" meant issued by the allies on July 26, with the exception that the imperial institution be preserved. But the Army Minister and the Chiefs of Staff of the Army and Navy advocated three additional conditions: 1) Japan would conduct self-disarmament; 2) any war crimes trials would be conducted by Japan and 3) there would be no occupation of Japan. In short hand, these form the "one condition offer" and the "four conditions offer."³⁷

Prime Minister Suzuki Kantaro reported to the Emperor's confidant, Marquis Kido Koichi, after the meeting. Suzuki advised that the Big Six had agreed on the "four conditions

³⁴ News of Hiroshima reaches Tokyo: *Daihon'ei Rikugun-Bu (10)* (Tokyo: Asagumo Shimbunsha, 1975) 418; Statement of Lt. Gen. Torashiro Kawabe, 23 Aug 48, Doc No. 61539, CMH; Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, 150-1.

³⁵ Reaction of Imperial Army and Navy to news of an atomic bomb: Statement of Sumihisa Ikeda, 23 Dec 49, Doc. No. 54479, pp. 3-4, CMH; Statement of Admiral Soemu Toyoda, 29 Aug 49, Doc. No. 61340, p. 7, CMH; Statement of Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo, 17 May 49, 30, CMH.

³⁶ Reactions to Soviet intervention: *Daihon'ei Rikugun-Bu (10)*, 430-2, 440; David M. Glantz, *August Storm: Soviet Operational and Tactical Combat in Manchuria*, (London: Frank Cass, 2003), 34. The Kwantung Army report stated the Soviet forces numbered three infantry divisions and two armored brigades, whereas the actual numbers were fifteen and eight respectively, not counting forces advancing from the west.

³⁷ Big Six Meeting, morning 9 August: Statement of Former Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo, 17 May 49, pp. 32-33, CMH; Statement of Former Admiral Soemu Toyoda, 1 Dec. 49, Doc. No. 57670, pp. 3-4, 6, CMH; Statement of Former Admiral Soemu Toyoda, 1 Dec. 49, Doc. No. 61340, 8-10, CMH; International Military Tribunal for the Far East. Law Library, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. [hereafter IMTFE], transcripts, Togo 35,787; Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, 161.

offer.” Since the Big Six required unanimity for a decision, Suzuki presumably presented the conditions on which all had concurred. It is quit revealing that Kido’s initially acquiesced with the “four conditions offer.” Since Kido was intimately familiar with the emperor’s thinking, this might be seen as signifying that at that moment they still aligned with the most rigid militarists, but perhaps more likely they entertained profound concerns about the compliance of the armed forces to any more stringent terms.³⁸

The debates continued. During an afternoon cabinet meeting, Army Minister General Anami Korechika announced that the Americans had one hundred atomic bombs; that they could drop three per day, and that the next target might well be Tokyo.³⁹ It is hard to imagine how Anami thought his stunning assessment could have persuaded others to continue the war. It is also evident that the Nagasaki bombing convinced Anami that the U.S. did indeed have an arsenal of powerful atomic bombs.

During this afternoon former Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro, Prince Takamatsu, and former Foreign Minister Shigenori Mamoru persuaded Kido that Japan must accept Togo’s “one condition offer” as the allies would treat the “four conditions offer” as effectively a rejection. Then the emperor also swung behind this position in what arguably was the most critical moment of the whole process.⁴⁰

An Imperial Conference convened that night to resolve the deadlock over terms. There Chief of the Staff of the Imperial Army, General Umezu Yoshijiro insisted the army could still deliver a smashing blow against the expected invasion, and while Soviet entry was unfavorable, it did not invalidate the plan for the fight in the Homeland. President of the Privy Council Baron Hiranuma warned of oppressive doubts eroding the fighting spirit of the population and warned that the deteriorating domestic situation, particularly the food shortage, threatened greater “domestic disturbance than would termination of the war.”⁴¹

Suzuki finally wheeled and asked for the emperor to break the impasse among the cabinet over the “one condition offer” and the “four conditions offer.” The emperor announced his support of the “one condition offer”—or so it has been presented. But when the Foreign Ministry dispatched a cable announcing that Japan would accede to the Potsdam Declaration, it added the caveat “with the understanding that said declaration does not comprise any demand which prejudices the prerogatives of His Majesty as a Sovereign Ruler.”⁴² This artfully drafted

³⁸ Suzuki reports “four conditions” offer as decision of Big Six and Kido finds it acceptable: Frank, *Downfall*, 291-2, 424n.

³⁹ Anami Statement to Cabinet: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Dai’niiji Sekai Taisen Shusen Shiroku*, vol. 2, (Tokyo: Yamato, 1990) 778, cited in Lawrence Freedman and Saki Dockrill, “Hiroshima: A Strategy of Shock,” in *From Pearl Harbor to Hiroshima*, ed. Saki Dockrill (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 207.

⁴⁰ Kido, Konoe, Takamatsu and Shigenori convince the emperor to accept the “one condition” offer: *Daihon’ei Rikugun-Bu (10)*, 437-8; IMTFE Togo 35,787; Kido 31, 175-76.

⁴¹ Imperial Conference: Memorandum of Vice Admiral Zenshiro Hoshina, Doc. No. 53437, CMH; Statement of Sumihisa Ikeda, 27 Dec. 49, Doc. No. 54483, CMH; Statement by Former Foreign Minister Shigenori Togo, Doc. No. 50304, 17 May 49, 32-33, CMH; Statement of Kiichiro Hiranuma, 16 Dec 49, Doc. No 55127, 10-15, CMH; IMTFE Sakomizu 35,608-9, Togo 35,788, Kido 31,177; *Daihon’ei Rikugun-Bu (10)*, 447. The statements from Hoshina and Ikeda amount to the “minutes” of the meeting.

⁴² August 10 Japanese surrender offer: *FRUS, 1945, The British Commonwealth and the Far East*, “The Swiss Chargé (Grässli) to the Secretary of State, August 10, 1945,” 627.

passage was not simply a request to preserve the imperial system. Rather, it effectively required that the Allies, as a condition precedent to ending the war, agree to the supremacy of the emperor not only over a Japanese government, but over the commander of the occupation. This would bestow in the emperor veto power over proposed occupation reforms.⁴³ The response known as the “Byrnes Note” after Secretary of State James Byrnes, stated simply that the emperor would be subordinate to the occupation commander, thus squashing a last grasp at forestalling the occupation reforms.⁴⁴

Key members of the leadership, importantly including Army Minister Anami, argued the “Byrnes Note” was unacceptable because it did not guarantee preservation of the kokutai. The emperor intervened again on August 14 to enforce compliance of Japan to the Potsdam Declaration.⁴⁵

During the night of August 14-15, an attempted coup d'état by middle grade officers succeeded initially in seizing control of the Imperial Palace. The plot was doomed, however, by the failure of senior officers, above all War Minister Anami, to support the coup. Torn in his obligations between the emperor and the army, Anami committed suicide.⁴⁶

Although the theatrics of the Tokyo coup attracted wide attention afterwards, the greatest threat to halting the capitulation emerged later. The Vice Chief of Staff, Gen. Kawabe Torashio, noted in this diary that after learning of the emperor's first decision, a senior officer in Imperial Headquarter expressed his doubts that the overseas commander would obey a surrender order. Kawabe noted he shared that view.⁴⁷ Allied radio intelligence intercepted messages first from the Foreign Minister conceding that the Imperial Army and Navy had not formally agreed to surrender and then from the senior Japanese commanders in China and the Southern area announcing they would not comply with the surrender order. It would be several days before compliance with the surrender order by the armed forces was assured.⁴⁸

With this necessarily abbreviated summary of the key events, we turn to the controversy over what exactly collapsed the will of Japan's leaders to continue the war. In approaching this controversy, three important points must be recognized. First, Japan's surrender involved not one but two steps: (1) a legitimate authority had to decide that Japan would capitulate; and (2) Japan's armed forces must then comply with that decision or the fighting would not end. It is essential then to bear in mind that the factor or factors producing (1) might be different from those producing (2).

The second point of importance concerns the basic framework for analyzing the available

⁴³ Significance of phrasing the August 10 Japanese offer: Bix, *Hirohito*, 517-18; Herbert Bix, Japan's Delayed Surrender: A Reinterpretation,” *Diplomatic History* 19.2 (spring 1995), 222.

⁴⁴ Byrnes' Note: “Byrnes Note”: *FRUS, 1945, The British Commonwealth and the Far East*, “Secretary of State to the Swiss Chargé (Grässli), 631-32; Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, 191.

⁴⁵ Reaction to Byrnes Note; second intervention by emperor: *Daihon'ei Rikugun-Bu (10)*, 506-8; Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, 207-9.

⁴⁶ Tokyo coup d'état attempt; Anami suicide: *Daihon'ei Rikugun-Bu (10)*, 523-5; Statement of Col. Saburo Hayashi, 23 Dec 49, Doc. No. 61436, 6-7, 9-11, CMH; Statement of Lt. Col. Takashita, 28 Feb 50, Doc. No. 56367, CMH.

⁴⁷ Kawabe's diary entry: *Daihon'ei Rikugen-Bu (10)*, 466-7.

⁴⁸ Radio intercepts on noncompliance with surrender: SRH-090, 20-1, 24-5; Frank, *Downfall*, 326-7.

evidence on this issue. The assessment here is based both on experience as an attorney with witnesses and as a historian with documentary evidence. These experiences inculcate the conviction that by far the most reliable evidence is that produced at or most proximate to the key times in question. Evidence produced years or decades later particularly that based on human memory is far less likely to be reliable.

The third point of importance is that when the contemporary evidence is examined, the customary framework that reduces the causes of Japan's surrender to a passionate dispute over the importance of atomic bombs versus Soviet intervention must be amended. At least one other major factor emerges that Navy Minister Yonai Mitsumasa clearly identified on August 12 when he confided to an aide:

I think the term is inappropriate, but the atomic bombs and Soviet entry into the war are, in a sense, gifts from the gods. This way we don't have to say that we have quit the war because of domestic circumstances.⁴⁹

The phrase "domestic circumstances" represented a euphemism for the profound fears coursing through important decision makers that the Japanese population would revolt and destroy the whole imperial system.⁵⁰ In addition to Yonai, a host of critical figures spoke of this issue: former Prime Minister Konoe Fumimaro to Hirohito (February 1945), Kido to Hirohito (June 1945), Togo in a diplomatic message (July 11), reports reaching Imperial General Headquarters (August 9), Anami to the cabinet (August 9), Hiranuma and Suzuki at the Imperial Conference (August 10), Umezu to the General Staff (August 10), Vice Chief of Staff Kawabe in his diary (August 11), Anami's aide, Col. Hayashi Saburo to Anami (August 13), and Umezu to Anami (August 14).⁵¹

But most significant of all looms as the fact that the emperor referred repeatedly to the "situation at home" or the "domestic situation" in describing the context of his decision in two important contexts. The first was the Imperial Conference on August 9-10 when he first effectively ordered the government and military high command to accept the Potsdam Declaration. The second appeared as part of the context in both the Rescript broadcast to the nation on August 15 and the second Rescript issued to the armed forces on August 17.⁵²

In addition to the "domestic situation" the emperor repeatedly spoke explicitly about his loss of confidence in Ketsu Go, citing specifically the lack of preparations to defend the beaches near Tokyo. In this context, he also conveyed a loss of confidence in the armed

⁴⁹ "I think the term is inappropriate . . .": Bix, *Hirohito*, 509-10.

⁵⁰ The "domestic situation" as a key factor driving Japanese decision makers to surrender: Bix, *Hirohito*, 523-24; Frank, *Downfall*, 310, 345; Jeremy A. Yellen, "The Specter of Revolution: Reconsidering Japan's Decision to Surrender," *The International History Review*, 35-1 (2013): 205-26. Yellen elaborates effectively on a point noted as significant by Bix and Frank.

⁵¹ Evidence on key role of "domestic situation": Frank, *Downfall*, 439n for page 345 itemizes the sources for these instances.

⁵² Emperor's references to "domestic situation" in Imperial Rescripts: Butow, *Japan's Decision to Surrender*, 175-6; 219-20; Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *Racing the Enemy: Stalin, Truman, and the Surrender of Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University), 250 (Imperial Rescript of August 17 referring to "conditions at home and abroad").

forces. Further, he spoke of the vast destructiveness of conventional and atomic air attacks. By contrast, he spoke of Soviet intervention explicitly just twice. Once on August 14 when he met with Japan's most senior uniformed leaders, and he coupled that comment to reference to the atomic bombs.⁵³ The second occasion was in his Rescript to the armed forces on August 17, but the significance of this reference will be addressed further below.

Also notable is the emperor's letter to the crown prince just a week after the surrender. In this letter the emperor ascribed the loss of the war to Japan taking the British and Americans too lightly and exalting fighting spirit over science. He further stated that if the war had continued the "three holy regalia" at the Ise Bay might not have been safeguarded—from what could only have been an American invasion. He made no mention of Soviet intervention.⁵⁴

With the legal government deadlocked, it fell to the emperor to take the vital first step towards ending the war by deciding that Japan must surrender. The best evidence on his reasons thus underlines: 1) loss of faith in Ketsu Go; 2) the destructiveness of conventional and atomic bombing; and 3) the "domestic situation." The decline of civilian morale stemmed overwhelmingly from the effects of the U.S. campaigns of blockade and bombardment. A rain of atomic bombs threatened to invalidate Ketsu Go and to accelerate perhaps radically the push of the population towards revolt.⁵⁵

As to why the armed forces complied with the surrender, the answers are more complex as reflecting the far larger number of actors. There is no doubt that the emperor's announcement that he had lost faith in the military and the Ketsu Go strategy delivered a devastating blow to the will of the leadership in Tokyo to continue the war. They too had been manifesting fears of collapsing domestic morale. More fundamentally, the entire rationale for continuing the war rested on the proposition that the U.S. must attempt an invasion of the Home Islands. As Prime Minister Suzuki told American interrogators in 1945, the advent of atomic weapons meant that the U.S. might choose not to invade. If there was no U.S. invasion, Japan's military leaders had nothing to offer but national suicide.⁵⁶

By contrast, with first word of Soviet intervention, Gen. Kawabe, heretofore a stalwart advocate of the proposition that keeping the Soviets out of the war was an indispensable condition to continuing the war, drafted up a plan to continue the war and perhaps ruling the nation through Imperial Headquarters, thus abolishing any vestige of civilian participation. Anami voiced his approval of this plan. This is important evidence as to the effect of Soviet intervention in Tokyo without any concomitant introduction of atomic weapons.⁵⁷

But when we turn to overseas commands, there is likely that Soviet intervention served an important role in collapsing will to continue the war which explains why it, not atomic bombs,

⁵³ Emperor meets with senior officers on August 14: *Daihon'ei Rikugun-Bu* (10), 491-2, 504-7.

⁵⁴ Emperor's letter to crown prince; concern about "three sacred regalia": Hidenari Terasaki and Mariko Terasaki Miller, eds. *Showa Tenno Dokuhakuroku—Terasaki Hidenari Goyogakari Nikki*, (*Bungei Shunju*, December 1990), 139; Dower *Embracing Defeat*, 290; Bix, *Hirohito*, 515.

⁵⁵ Atomic weapons as accelerator of domestic danger: Bix, *Hirohito*, 523 ("The atom bomb carried the infliction of death, pain, and suffering to unimaginably higher levels, and therefore also the threat from within").

⁵⁶ Prime Minister Suzuki's statement: Statement of Baron Suzuki, 26 Dec 45, Interrogation No. 531, CMH.

⁵⁷ Kawabe's plan for continuing the war after Soviet intervention: *Daihon'ei Rikugun-Bu* (10) 430-1, 440.

was cited in the August 17 Imperial Rescript. Overseas commanders understood little of atomic weapons and commanded areas where the utility of such weapons was doubtful. There appears to be little if any evidence they were aware of, much less deeply concerned about domestic morale in Japan. On the other hand, Soviet intervention presented a meaningful threat. Thus Soviet intervention was significant in securing the surrender of the most recalcitrant elements of Japan's armed forces.

There is a further dimension to Soviet intervention. At least 2.2 million Japanese nationals are believed to fallen into Soviet hands. According to a recent examination of Soviet archival evidence, the Soviets acknowledge that among these some 62,000 helpless prisoners of war and "perhaps" 180,000 civilians died. Since additional Japanese never appeared in official documentation and perished in flight or died at Soviet or other hands a grand total of over 300,000 Japanese—overwhelmingly noncombatants—are believed to have died in Northeast Asia after the end of the war.⁵⁸ The enormous lost of Japanese noncombatants are virtually never mentioned in discussions of the significance of Soviet intervention. Moreover, had the war ended solely after Soviet intervention, it presumably would have been difficult or impossible to deny the Soviet Union a significant occupation zone in Japan and probably Tokyo. Given the record in Northeast Asia, a Soviet occupation zone means many thousands of more deaths.

In summary, multiple factors account for the collapse of will to continue the war by Japanese decision. The first and indispensable decision of the emperor to order the capitulation of the government stemmed from loss of faith in Ketsu Go, the conventional and atomic bombing attacks and fears over the prospect of internal revolt. The reasons for the compliance of the armed forces with the surrender order varied between Homeland and overseas commanders. The prospect that atomic weapons would obviate the U.S. need to invade and fears of collapsing domestic morale stand in the forefront of concerns by Homeland commanders. Soviet intervention looms as a key determinant for compliance by overseas commanders.

⁵⁸ Japanese nationals in Northeast Asia who died in Soviet captivity: Andrew E. Barshay, *The Gods Left First: The Captivity and Repatriation of Japanese POWs in Northeast Asia 1945-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 167-8, 190-1 (Table 1). Barshay puts the total number of Japanese civilians in the area overrun by the Soviets at 1.55 million. Acknowledged Japanese POWs numbered 639,776. Dower, *Embracing Defeat*, 51-3 shows the Soviet turned over a list of 46,000 Japanese POWs who died in Siberia and that Japanese and American officials believed "more than 300,000" other Japanese nationals were unaccounted for after presumably falling into Soviet control.

