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## Was the Bombing of Hiroshima Necessary? Three Myths Debunked

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Between 100,000 and 200,000 Japanese were killed either during the bombing or afterwards in the radioactive fallout. (Photo: Getty Images)

How did Americans learn to stop worrying and love the bomb?

Sixty-six years after the devastation of Hiroshima, it's a question that historians and politicians are still debating. But as former U.S. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall writes in his book, [The Myths of August](#), it all starts with the president:

"In the first weeks after Hiroshima, extravagant statements by President Truman and other official spokesmen for the US government transformed the inception of the atomic age into the most mythologized event in American history. These exhilarating, excessive utterances depicted a profoundly altered universe and produced a reorientation of thought that influenced the behavior of nations and changed the outlook and the expectations of the inhabitants of this planet."



Hiroshima before and after the bombing.

Even after public opinion had begun to sour on the use of a weapon that caused 187,000 mostly civilian deaths, Truman never expressed any regret for his decision and remained bullish on the bomb's absolute necessity.

"When you have to deal with a beast you have to treat him like a beast," Truman [retorted](#) when the nation's post-war celebration was questioned by a correspondent.

As attitudes towards the Japanese continued to shift in the free-loving '60s, the one-time Missouri farmer still refused to show any empathy towards his former war-time enemy. Asked whether he would be willing to make an appearance in Japan as a goodwill gesture, Truman responded in typical hard-nosed fashion.

"I'll go," said the former president, "but I won't kiss their ass."

Thankfully for us (and international relations), Truman never made it across the Pacific. But on the anniversary of one of the greatest tragedies in modern history, it's worth taking a look at the ambiguous record that the bombing has left behind -- and how for decades we've been convinced that the devastation was necessary.

### **[MYTH #1: The Japanese Were Given Fair Warning](#)**

As the story goes, prior to unleashing the atom bomb Americans dropped millions of leaflets over various cities in Japan as a warning. But according to the Nagasaki Memorial, none of those leaflets ever mentioned the atom bomb prior to August 6, 1945.



The bomb destroyed 70% of Hiroshima's buildings instantaneously.

Over the summer, during the systematic bombing of 35 cities, Allied forces did drop leaflets that promised "prompt and utter destruction" if they did not "evacuate these cities immediately". But it wasn't until a full [two days after](#) the bomb had dropped that they mentioned the existence of a brand-new weapon.

As John J. McCloy, Assistant Secretary of War, recalled in his *Challenge to American Foreign Policy*:

"Not one of the Chiefs nor the Secretary thought well of a bomb warning, an effective argument being that no one could be certain, in spite of the assurances of the scientists, that the 'thing would go off.'"

### **MYTH #2: The Japanese Would Never Surrender**

Much has been made of the Japanese *kamikaze* spirit, but by early summer, Emperor Hirohito was already making overtures to surrender -- weeks before the bombing of Hiroshima.

In a [cable intercepted](#) on July 12, 1945, Hirohito revealed that he was ready to end the war on the condition that the monarchy be granted immunity from war crimes -- conditions which the U.S. only accepted *after* dropping two atomic bombs on the country.



A mother and child photographed 4 months after the bombing.

In Truman's own journal he called the message a "telegram from Jap Emperor asking for peace." And years later, in his book *Secret Surrender*, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles said he had [relayed a similar message](#).

"On July 20, 1945, under instructions from Washington, I went to the Potsdam Conference and reported there to Secretary [of War] Stimson on what I had learned from Tokyo – they desired to surrender if they could retain the Emperor and their constitution as a basis for maintaining discipline and order in Japan after the devastating news of surrender became known to the Japanese people."

Admiral William D. Leahy, who served as Chief of Staff for both FDR and Truman, [was even more blunt](#):

"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 because of the effective sea blockade and the successful bombing with conventional weapons.

### **MYTH #3: Dropping the Bomb Saved a Million American Lives**

Truman started out saying that "thousands and thousands" of American lives were saved by using the atom bomb. Later, in his memoir, he bumped it up to 500,000. And later still, he topped it off to a cool million.

But what would the actual death toll have been had the U.S. made a land invasion?



The Gebaku Dome, just 600 meters from the blast, was one of the few structures left standing. It was made a UNESCO Heritage site in 1996.

According to Stanford historian Barton Bernstein's research of declassified documents, the worst-case scenario proposed by military officials was [46,000 deaths](#) for U.S. forces if they invaded both Kyushu and Honshu islands.

50,000 lives is nothing to sneeze at, but it's clear that the exponential growth in death toll is a belated justification for using the bomb. And when you consider the number of American casualties in both the Pacific and European theaters *totaled* 405,000, the number seems all the more inflated.

As reported in the [Los Angeles Times](#) in 2005:

"The hard truth is that the atomic bombings were unnecessary. A million lives were not saved. Indeed, McGeorge Bundy, the man who first popularized this figure, later confessed that he had pulled it out of thin air in order to justify the bombings in a 1947 Harper's magazine essay he had ghostwritten for Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson."