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WHAT IF?™ 2

EMINENT HISTORIANS IMAGINE WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN

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NO BOMB: NO END

The Operation Olympic disaster, Japan 1945

Nearly six decades have passed since the United States dropped two atomic bombs on Japan, but the debate over the morality of Harry S Truman's decision has hardly dimmed. Did ending the war in the Pacific justify the obliteration of between 100,000 and 200,000 lives at Hiroshima and Nagasaki? The horror of what did happen—and those who were wiped out in the first instants were the lucky ones—may blind us to a question that has been too seldom asked: What if the United States had chosen not to drop the bombs? Richard B. Frank is one military historian who has examined in detail the plausible scenarios that would have resulted from not pursuing an atomic conclusion. In this case, as he makes clear, "what ifs?" may give us a better understanding of the unpleasant choices facing American military planners in the summer of 1945. As J. Robert Oppenheimer, the scientific director of the Manhattan Project, later put it, "We didn't know beans about the military situation in Japan."

If the bombs had not been dropped, how much longer would Japan have held out? Could Operation Olympic, the projected November 1 invasion of the southernmost home island, Kyushu, have succeeded? Or would the greatest invasion fleet ever assembled have run into disaster costly beyond the wildest estimates of its planners—or the recent revisionist historians? What about alternatives to the bomb, such as a naval blockade or the destruction of Japan's transportation system? Then there was the true, if unrecognized, wild card in the counterfactual deck: the Soviet Union. What would have been the effect of a Soviet invasion of

Japan? Would, ironically, postwar Japan have been in worse shape if the bombs had not been dropped but hostilities had continued? Would just as many, indeed more, lives have been lost?

In Frank's view, speed was of the essence. The war had to end when it did.

RICHARD B. FRANK is the author of two notable works of military history, *Guadalcanal: The Definitive Account of the Landmark Campaign* and *Downfall: The End of the Japanese Empire*.

THE DECISION TO lash Japan with nuclear weapons stands as the greatest and most enduring controversy of the Pacific War. Its defenders view it, in the words of Secretary of War Henry Stimson, as the "least abhorrent choice." Its impassioned critics argue that history would have taken a more humane and wiser path if nuclear weapons were not available or were not used. Which of these views is correct requires a careful examination of the facts, not the fantasies, about the forces steering events in the summer of 1945.

There can be no meaningful expeditions down the channels history did not follow without first comprehending the realities of power in Japan. Militarists held the destiny of Imperial Japan in a rigid grip. They possessed a legal veto over the formation, or continuation, of governments. Bolstering this formality was the implicit threat of their arms, and a history of terror. Between 1921 and 1944, some sixty-four spasms of right-wing political violence, including the murder of two prime ministers, thoroughly cowed those few individuals franchised to participate in any fashion in shaping the nation's fate.

In Japan's misshapen political structure, only eight individuals exercised any meaningful power of decision. An inner cabinet called the Supreme Council for the Direction of the War constituted ultimate governmental authority, but only if its members achieved unanimity. The contemporary shorthand for this body was the "Big Six": Prime Minister Suzuki Kantaro, Foreign Minister Togo Shigenori, War Minister Anami Korechika, Navy Minister Yonai Mitsumasa, Chief of the Army General Staff Umezu Yoshijiro, and Chief of the Navy General Staff Toyoda Soemu. Only Togo was a civilian. Suzuki was a retired fleet admiral and the rest were serving flag officers. The remaining two men who wielded real authority were the emperor and his intimate adviser, Keeper of the Privy Seal Kido Koichi. Kido's power lay in his ability to sway the emperor, and the emperor's power depended upon the compliance of the government and the armed forces to his orders.

To this day, no pre-Hiroshima document has been produced from Japan demonstrating that any one of these eight men ever contemplated a termination of the war on any terms that could, or should, have been acceptable to the United States and her allies. What history does document about their thinking illustrates just how intransigent they remained as late as August 9. On the day the second atomic bomb struck Nagasaki—and following three years of almost unrelenting defeats, the destruction of Japan's shipping lifelines, the incineration of sixty cities, and Soviet intervention—the Big Six for the first time seriously discussed, and agreed on, a set of terms for ending the war. Three members were prepared to surrender if Japan received a guarantee that she could retain the Imperial system. But the other three insisted on a trio of additional terms: Japan's right to repatriate her servicemen; Japan's authority to conduct "so called war crimes trials" only in Japanese forums; and, finally, no Allied occupation of Japan. Since the Big Six could only act in unanimity, these conditions denominated Japan's position.

And what of the emperor? The Japanese—with American complicity—took pains postwar to depict an image of Hirohito as a "symbol emperor" who reigned but did not rule. He was projected as a man who desired peace, but was barred from imposing his will until an extraordinary impasse in Japanese political structure—the deadlock of the Big Six over the terms for surrender—permitted him to intervene in the "Sacred Decision" to halt the war.

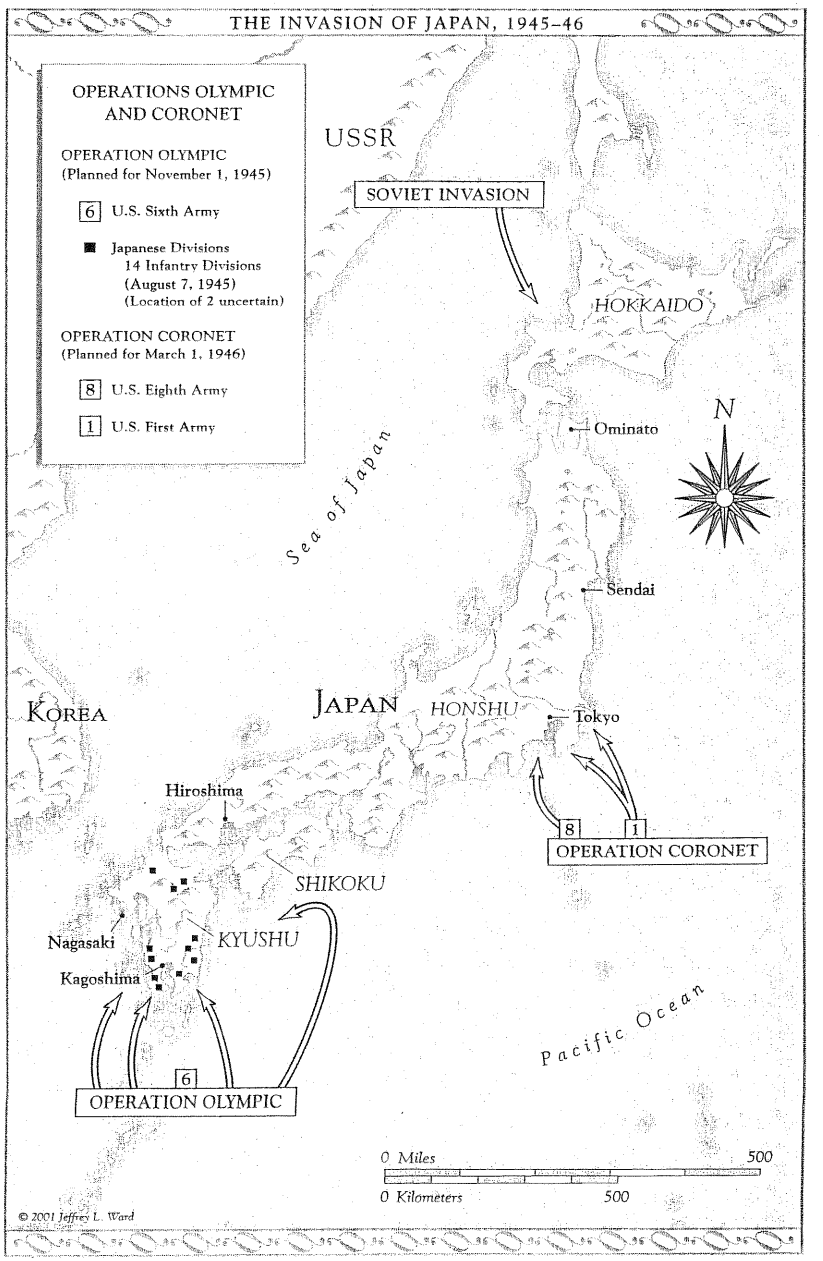
The emperor himself confessed that he actually shared the core convictions of the Big Six at least until June 1945, and he never moved decisively away from that stance. This explains why these men failed to move to end the war and points to what their response would have been in the absence of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Plainly stated, they believed, and with good reason, that Japan still possessed an excellent chance to obtain a negotiated

peace that would maintain the old order in Japan—in which they would be dominant.

In the first three months of 1945, Japan's military leaders forged a strategy they called *Ketsu Go* (Operation Decisive) to obtain the political bargaining chips to terminate the war in a manner they could abide. They were confident that no amount of blockade and bombardment, even if it cost the lives of millions of their countrymen, could compel them to yield. Moreover, they believed an impatient American populace would propel their antagonist to avoid a protracted siege and attempt to end the war swiftly. That dictated an invasion of the Japanese homeland.

Japanese strategists next examined the map in light of American operational habits. The United States could be expected to bring its huge preponderance of air strength to bear in support of an invasion. Land-based aircraft constituted the majority of U.S. air assets and thus dictated that the invasion must fall on an area within range of land-based fighter aircraft. From the positions the Japanese expected their opponent to hold by the summer of 1945, the nearest bases would be Okinawa and Iwo Jima. Okinawa, but not Iwo Jima, could support thousands of tactical aircraft, smaller than the B-29s that were already bombing the home islands. From Okinawa, American flyers could reach Kyushu and parts of Shikoku. Of these two, Kyushu offered the better set of potential air and sea bases from which to mount an attack on the obvious supreme objective—Tokyo, the political and industrial hub of Japan. A simple scan of the topographical map of Kyushu easily revealed to Japanese commanders three of the four chosen American invasion sites. Thus, the Japanese anticipated not only an invasion, but the two most probable invasion areas, the sequence of the two probable invasions, and the exact landing sites on Kyushu.

With a firm grasp of the strategic essentials, Japan embarked on a massive mobilization program. By midsummer there would be sixty divisions and thirty-four brigades mustering 2.9 million men in the homeland. A strict conservation program, plus the conversion of the aviation training establishment into kamikaze units, yielded the Japanese over 10,000 aircraft, half suicide planes, to confront the invasion. These forces were arrayed with primary emphasis on defending southern Kyushu and Tokyo.



By comparison to the tortured, military-dominated Japanese political structure, its well-designed American counterpart placed ultimate authority in civilian hands. But those hands changed on April 12, 1945, with the death of Franklin D. Roosevelt, which thrust Harry S Truman into the presidency. Roosevelt signally failed to ready Truman for his responsibilities, so the new president turned to his senior advisers for guidance on political and military strategy. Truman's military advisers, however, were not in accord on the strategy to end the war.

The United States Navy, led by Fleet Admiral Ernest King, had reached a number of fundamental conclusions about the conduct of a war with Japan based on decades of intense study. None of these precepts was more deeply held than the principle that it would be absolute folly to invade Japan. Naval officers calculated that the United States could never mount expeditionary forces across the Pacific that would even equal the manpower Japan would mobilize to defend the homeland and the terrain would wholly negate American advantages in heavy equipment and vehicles. Therefore, entrenched Navy doctrine held that the sound way to bring a war with Japan to a close was by a campaign of blockade and bombardment, including intense aerial bombing.

When the United States Army, led by General George C. Marshall, came to focus attention belatedly on how to bring a war with Japan to a close, it swiftly adopted the view that only an invasion could bring the conflict to an acceptable conclusion. After extended debate over these competing views, the Joint Chiefs of Staff reached an unstable compromise in April 1945. The army secured ostensible approval for a two-phase invasion campaign, code-named Operation Downfall. The first phase, Operation Olympic, set for November 1, 1945, involved a landing designed to secure approximately the southern third of Kyushu. This would provide air and naval bases to support a second amphibious assault, Operation Coronet, set for March 1, 1946, aimed to secure the Tokyo region.

The Joint Chiefs justified this strategy on the basis that the overall American war aim was an unconditional surrender that would assure that Japan never again posed a threat to peace. But history raised formidable

doubts about the practicality of that goal. No Japanese government had capitulated in 2,600 years; no Japanese detachment had surrendered in the entire course of the Pacific War. Accordingly, there was no guarantee either that a Japanese government would ever capitulate, or that Japan's armed forces would bow to such a command. Thus, the American nightmare was not the initial invasion of the homeland, but the prospect that there would be no organized capitulation of Japan's armed forces, over four million strong. Indeed, the official rationale for the invasion plan declared that it would be more likely than blockade and bombardment to produce the capitulation of Japan's government, and it would best position the United States to deal with the situation if Japan's armed forces did not surrender.

The navy obtained agreement that the campaign of blockade and bombardment would continue at an accelerating rate for six months prior to Olympic. Admiral King, however, explicitly warned his colleagues on the Joint Chiefs in April that he only concurred that orders for an invasion must be issued promptly so that all the preparations for such a gigantic enterprise could be mounted. He warned that the Joint Chiefs would revisit the necessity for an invasion in August or September.

Radio intelligence proved King prescient. During July and August, ULTRA unmasked for American leaders the ambush awaiting Olympic. The 680,000 Americans, including fourteen divisions, slated for the invasion of Kyushu had been expected to confront no more than 350,000 Japanese, including eight to ten divisions. But decrypted communications identified fourteen Imperial Army divisions as well as a number of tank and infantry brigades—also *at least* 680,000 strong—most positioned on southern Kyushu. Moreover, rather than only 2,500 to 3,000 aircraft to support their ground troops against 10,000 American planes, the ULTRA sources and photographic evidence revealed the Japanese had at least 5,900 to more than 10,000 aircraft, half of them kamikazes, waiting to pummel the invasion convoys.

Only reasonable estimates can be offered of likely casualties in a collision between *Ketsu Go* and Olympic. If the Japanese committed at least a half-million men to southern Kyushu for the customary fight to the death,

it is hard to imagine that fewer than a minimum of 200,000 to 250,000 of the emperor's loyal soldiers and sailors would have fallen by the end of the campaign. Moreover, Japan had thoroughly mobilized its adult population, regardless of gender, and organized them into a gigantic militia. Japanese commanders intended to use this sea of erstwhile civilians in a combat support and then combat role, similar to what occurred on Okinawa. According to the 1944 census, the three prefectures over which fighting on Kyushu would have raged contained a population of 3,804,570. If only one in ten of this populace died, a much lower rate of loss than on Okinawa, another 380,000 Japanese would have perished, bringing total Japanese fatalities to the 580,000 to 630,000 range.

When the Joint Chiefs authorized the invasion strategy in April 1945, they formally adopted a planning paper that addressed expected casualties. Rather than a raw number, however, this paper effectively provided a range of possible casualties based upon a pair of ratios derived from European and Pacific combat experience, both in rates per thousands of men committed per day.

	PACIFIC AMPHIBIOUS CAMPAIGNS	EUROPEAN PROTRACTED CAMPAIGNS
Killed in action	1.78	.36
Wounded in action	5.50	1.74
Missing in action	.17	.06
Total	7.45	2.16

A troop list designating the expected number of men committed for the campaign and an estimate of the duration of the campaign permit the application of these ratios. By August 1945, there were two troop lists of 766,700 and 681,000 (apparently differing mainly on the count of support units for base construction). Washington also was projecting a ninety-day campaign (a low estimate before the intelligence revelations). Applying these numbers to the ratios generates in the following range of potential losses:

PROJECTED CASUALTIES FOR OLYMPIC

for 90-day campaign

	PACIFIC EXPERIENCE		EUROPEAN EXPERIENCE	
	Troop list case 1	Troop list case 2	Troop list case 1	Troop list case 2
Total Troops	766,700	681,000	766,700	681,000
Killed and Missing	134,556	109,515	28,981	25,471
Total casualties	514,072	456,610	149,046	132,385

Even these terrible numbers are not comprehensive, for they represent only casualties ashore on Kyushu. Kamikaze attacks would produce most naval casualties, supplemented by mines, shore batteries, air crew losses, and losses among naval personnel ashore. Using Okinawa as a reference point, the number of sailors likely to die in suicide plane attacks ranges between about 5,700 to 11,400. If other losses were merely equal to non-kamikaze losses on Okinawa, the additional 1,500 bluejacket deaths would push the range of naval fatalities up to around 7,200 to 12,900. Thus, the overall range of American losses *just to seize one-third of Kyushu* would probably rest between 140,000 to 527,000, including between 32,700 and 147,500 deaths.

But in 1945 American leaders ignored speculation on casualties and focused on the fundamental question of whether Olympic was still rational. A ratio of only one American for every Japanese defender "is not the recipe for victory," warned one intelligence officer. On August 7, General Marshall asked General Douglas MacArthur, the designated army commander for the invasion of Japan, whether he still regarded Olympic as feasible. MacArthur replied that he did not believe the intelligence and therefore he was prepared to forge ahead. After this exchange, however, Admiral King sent copies of both messages to Admiral Nimitz and demanded his views. King knew the answer to the question before he asked it. On May 25, after two months of grueling fighting on Okinawa that generated an

American casualty list exceeding any prior campaign of the Pacific War, Admiral Nimitz privately informed King that he could no longer support an invasion of Japan. King's message of August 9 was clearly intended to bring on a full-scale confrontation over the viability of not only Olympic, but also the whole invasion strategy.

Thus, the first crucial issue confronting American leaders without nuclear weapons would be the prospects for Olympic. While Truman had initially approved Olympic in June, this was before the shocking intelligence revelations on Japanese preparations. Moreover, he singled out the fact that the Joint Chiefs had unanimously supported the operation as a key reason for his sanction. Even with MacArthur and Marshall's obdurate support, if the navy withdrew its endorsement, and the radio intelligence picture appeared so bleak, Olympic could not have survived a second review by Truman. Moreover, the ULTRA portrait of Japanese ground deployments to greet Coronet was equally appalling. Chances are zero that either of these operations would have been executed in 1945.

The two obvious alternatives to invasion were diplomacy and the blockade and bombardment strategy. With the possible exception of Joseph Grew, the assistant secretary of state, however, no senior American policy maker was likely to press for negotiation since the minimum Japanese position involved the preservation of not just the imperial system, but of the old order that produced the war. Intelligence analysts had expressly warned policy makers on July 27 that so long as the Imperial Army remained convinced of its success in *Ketsu Go*, there was no prospect that Japan would yield to terms America could abide. It is vastly more likely that policy makers would have switched their attention to blockade and bombardment and just at that moment they would have learned the prospects for that strategy were waxing dramatically.

In May 1945, a survey team from the United States Strategic Bombing Survey (USSBS) mounted a whirlwind investigation of Germany to derive lessons that could be applied against Japan. The USSBS party concluded that attacks on oil production and the Reich's transportation system had "contributed in decisive measure to the early and complete victory." Added to the very dim American understanding of Japan's war economy, this in-

formation triggered a fundamental change in the direction of the strategic bombardment program in the Pacific.

On August 11, 1945, Major General Curtis LeMay, who was then the chief of staff for General Carl Spaatz, the commander of United States Strategic Air Forces, Pacific, promulgated a new targeting directive. Under Spaatz's command were the Twentieth Air Force, based in the Mariana Islands, and the Eighth Air Force, redeploying from Europe to Okinawa. For the over 1,200 B-29s these two air forces would field by October 1, 1945, the directive listed a total of 219 targets. The new blueprint drastically curtailed the program of systematic incineration of Japan's cities begun in March and instead gave top priority to fifty-six railway yards and facilities and thirteen bridges that formed the core of Japan's land transportation system. Then came targets in the aircraft industry, munitions storage, and thirty-five urban industrial centers.

On cursory inspection, this new directive appears far more satisfactory as a means of reducing noncombatant casualties than city burning. But its actual effect would have been to inflict a catastrophic mass famine. In 1945, three of four Japanese resided on Honshu, the largest of the four main home islands. Nearly half the total population clustered in the southwestern half of that island. Japan harvested the great bulk of her food on Hokkaido, northern Honshu, and parts of Kyushu. The annual rice harvest in September and October marked the crucial event in the food supply. A host of factors tumbled the rice production from over 10 million tons in 1942 to only 6.3 million tons in 1945.

Japan customarily bridged the gap between domestic food production and need with imports, but the destruction of her merchant fleet virtually extinguished that source by August 1945. The collapse of the water transportation system threatened even more dire peril. Unlike any other major industrialized nation, Japan relied upon seagoing transportation for domestic as well as international trade. If Japan lacked ships to haul food from surplus to deficit areas, her only alternative was her railway system. That system, however, was limited and extraordinarily vulnerable to air attack. Postwar study by USSBS calculated that a mere half-dozen cuts of the major net along the Pacific coast of Honshu would have incapacitated the