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Dennis Giangreco

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# SET AND DRIFT

## "To Bomb Or Not to Bomb"

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Dennis Giangreco

- Maddox, Robert James. *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later*. Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1995. 215pp. \$23.95
- Newman, Robert P. *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*. Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press, 1995. 272pp. \$34.95
- Chappell, John D. *Before the Bomb: How America Approached the End of the Pacific War*. Lexington: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1997. 246pp. \$24.95
- Polmar, Norman, and Thomas B. Allen. *Code-Name Downfall: The Secret Plan to Invade Japan and Why Truman Dropped the Bomb*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995. 351pp. \$25
- Skates, John Ray. *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb*. Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1994. 276pp. \$27.95

**I**N THE MID 1960s, A GROWING DISTRUST OF government and sympathy for the Vietnam protest movement among American intellectuals revitalized

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D. M. Giangreco is an editor of the U.S. Army's professional journal, *Military Review*. He is the author of six books and has written extensively on Falkland Islands sovereignty, decentralization of the Soviet and Russian air force command and control structure, and Persian Gulf pipelines to circumvent the Strait of Hormuz for various Capital Cities Communications newspapers. His study "Casualty Projections for the U.S. Invasions of Japan, 1945-1946: Planning and Policy Implications" was published in the July 1997 issue of *Journal of Military History*.

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the antinuclear “ban the bomb” campaign, which few had taken very seriously before, and spurred criticism of the use of atomic weapons to end World War II. Since then, “enlightened opinion” has been dominated by a revisionism fueled by seductive tales of conspiracy in high places, unabashed fact-bending, and manipulation of the historical record.

The underlying premise behind most, if not all, of the recent efforts to reexamine the final days of the war against Japan is the idea that none of the options explored by Harry Truman and his contemporaries—atom bomb, invasion, or both—was warranted. Rather, a boisterous but essentially innocent Japan was maneuvered into the war by a cunning and duplicitous U.S. government, with ineptitude, chance, miscalculation, and the like figuring only in relatively minor ways. (The modern-day version of this is that President George Bush dangled Kuwait in front of a hapless, gullible Saddam Hussein in a sort of gigantic sting operation, for reasons related to petroleum economics.)

This view works well with the “United States-as-villain” theology and neatly sidesteps the historical framework in which Truman and his contemporaries had to live. In *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*, Robert P. Newman convincingly shreds the myths that have grown up around the use of nuclear weapons to end the Pacific War, such as the oft-repeated claims that the Japanese were on the verge of surrender when the bombs were dropped and that their use was primarily aimed at intimidating Joseph Stalin. The disastrous effects of a prolonged war on the populations of still-occupied regions of southeastern Asia and the massive number of prisoners and slave laborers in Japanese hands—subjects revisionist historians diligently ignore—are also dealt with effectively. In addition, Newman notes that Japan could have suffered approximately three hundred thousand additional deaths per month from the strategic bombing campaign alone, “with no atom bombs, no set-piece land battles, [and] no kamikaze attacks on a massed invasion fleet.”

Unlike Newman, who borrows Andre Ryerson’s insightful notion of a “Cult of Hiroshima”—complete with its own shrine (Hiroshima itself), holy day (August 6), scripture, and a distinctive rhetoric of victimization—and weaves it throughout his book as a unifying theme, Robert James Maddox takes a solid, journeyman’s approach in *Weapons for Victory: The Hiroshima Decision Fifty Years Later*. He examines in detail the conspiracy theories that have evolved into conventional wisdom, and he comes to what many academics will find an eminently unsatisfying conclusion: President Truman meant exactly what he said when he stated that the atom bombs were dropped in the hope that they would induce the Japanese to surrender before U.S. forces—being gathered in the Pacific from as far away as the battlefields of Germany—would be forced into a prolonged, bloody ground invasion of Japan.

Maddox and Newman's works complement each other well, since they approach the subject from dissimilar paths and frequently stress different points. Newman, for example, demolishes the much-quoted *Summary Report* of the United States Strategic Bombing Survey, which came to the conclusion that the bombing campaign and blockade would have forced Japan's early surrender without resort to the use of either atomic weapons or an invasion—a conclusion that its authors had reached *before* the survey began and is, in fact, countered by its own exhaustive investigations. Maddox, for his part, brings up the uncomfortable fact that the documents frequently cited by some historians as proof that Truman later inflated casualty estimates for political reasons are studded with disclaimers and qualifiers, which revisionists find unworthy of note.

Neither author, however, goes into any significant detail on the actual plans for the two massive ground invasions of Japan's home islands. For this, readers can consult John Ray Skates's *Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb*, as well as Norman Polmar's and Thomas B. Allen's *Code-Name Downfall: The Secret Plan to Invade Japan and Why Truman Dropped the Bomb*.

Combat during the Second World War had been so bloody and so prolonged that the men who experienced its brutalities firsthand felt little need to justify their belief that the dropping of the atom bombs probably saved their lives. But unlike battles that actually did occur and were known quantities to be endlessly rehashed, like Midway and the Battle of the Bulge, the invasion of Japan existed only in plans that were relegated to archives, only to surface in obscure monographs at the U.S. military's service colleges and in the numbers games of revisionist historians anxious to prove that "only" tens of thousands of Americans would have died in an invasion instead of the hundreds of thousands U.S. leaders were convinced could perish. Virtually no specialized works were produced on U.S. plans for the proposed invasion, Operation DOWNFALL, until the approach of the fiftieth anniversary of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Consequently, revisionists have generally had the field all to themselves.

*Code-Name Downfall* fills this void. Polmar and Allen have produced a clear, concise work outlining the invasion planning in the context of the increasingly bloody fighting in the Pacific. Conflicting casualty estimates and what U.S. leaders expected their troops to face on the Japanese home islands are addressed in detail, and the authors effectively clarify many of the misconceptions that have grown up around U.S. decision making during the war's final days. Like Newman and Maddox, they challenge the view—an article of faith among many who criticize the use of atomic weapons—that Truman and his advisors knew full well that Japan was effectively on the ropes and on the verge of

surrender when the order was given to drop the bombs. As Polmar and Allen aptly demonstrate, the reality in 1945 was somewhat different.

Much more raw data on both Japanese and American plans can be found in Skates's *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb* than in *Code-Name Downfall*, but readers must approach the former book with caution, since the author's knowledge of the subject is somewhat thin. Not all documents are created equal, and Skates gives unusual weight to some postwar reports. Moreover, while the author had access to a considerable body of relevant material, he seems to understand little of what he found. As a result, his book reflects innumerable misconceptions which directly or indirectly support his claim that casualties during an invasion would have been comparatively low and that using the atom bombs was unnecessary. These include an overly literal interpretation of what the Japanese meant by *beach* defenses, a misreading of the increasing effectiveness of their antitank tactics, and a failure to realize that weak centralized control of Japanese artillery was irrelevant when firing from dug-in, camouflaged positions on pre-ranged, congested landing sites and avenues of approach. He also seriously mishandles the question of the kamikazes.

The work is studded with logic bombs. For example, while readers can find a fine section on the redeployment of forces from Europe and a sensitive account of plans for possible use of poison gas, they will also find the assertion that the Japanese planned "to stake all in defending against [Operation] *Olympic*" on Kyushu and also that "little would have been left to defend the Kanto Plain against *Coronet*." Oddly, this follows Skates's accurate analysis that the Japanese could not have effectively reinforced Kyushu once the battle was joined (except with an inconsequential number of troops), and his contention, in just the previous paragraph, that Japanese casualties might have been "perhaps 250,000 in the *Olympic* area." In light of the fact that a force of over three hundred thousand soldiers remained under arms at the time of surrender—fully eight months before the second invasion operation could even be launched—the conclusion that the Japanese army would have expended itself during *OLYMPIC* is refuted by the author's own evidence.

As events played out, however, it was the Skates book that proved to have the most impact on the cascade of newspaper and magazine articles marking the fiftieth anniversary of the war's end—and for good reason. While all the other works, except John D. Chappell's recent *Before the Bomb*, were released in book or advance proof form in mid to late summer 1995, far too late for timely book reviews to appear, *The Invasion of Japan* had been rushed into print, warts and all, a year earlier. For reporters, whose knowledge of this subject is thin at best, Skates's book had the supreme advantage of being available when they needed it. Consequently, his book was picked up and used as an authoritative source for various high-profile articles appearing during the

anniversary, such as "Shock Wave: 'My God, What Have We Done?'" in *U.S. News & World Report*. Maddox, whose history of slicing and dicing Truman revisionists dates back more than two decades, was also contacted and selectively quoted in major dailies and numerous national television news venues, even though his book was released last of all, with reviews starting to appear only in 1996 and 1997.

Chappell's *Before the Bomb: How America Approached the End of the Pacific War* could well have had a significant impact on the debate surrounding the fiftieth anniversary, but its release two years after the event makes it likely that this fine work will simply be buried in the profusion of war-related books ground out by commercial and university publishing houses. Although some of his conclusions echo revisionist themes, by focusing almost exclusively on "the attitudes, opinions, and perceptions on the home front during the final chaotic months of the war" the author fleshes out our knowledge of the environment in which all life-and-death decisions had to be made in 1945: the Treaty of Versailles, the resurgence of Germany after "the War to End All Wars," the weak-kneed response by the League of Nations to growing aggression, "appeasement," and the subsequent plunge into a conflagration even bloodier than the First World War. These matters were seldom mentioned in the press so late in the war, but all hung like a cloud over the American consciousness as the fighting in the Pacific reached its climax. If World War II had not resulted in Japan's unconditional surrender and a U.S.-imposed reconstruction, it is not hard to imagine America's youth going across the Pacific to fight against Japan—instead of Vietnam—in 1965. It would have been an infinitely bigger, bloodier conflict than the late unpleasantness—no college deferments for that one. All one has to do is conduct a thorough reading of the day's newspapers, large and small, to see that it is neither imagined memory nor an indulgence in Brodie-esque psychohistory to say that something like this was the underlying fear of Americans both in and out of Washington. In *Before the Bomb*, Chappell clearly demonstrates that despite a growing war-weariness, understanding among Americans that the war had to be prosecuted to the bitter end was so fundamental that it actually did not warrant much discussion beyond the sticky matter of "how to."

Few servicemen became trained historians after the war, but all veterans remain intimately familiar with the temper and fears of the times examined by Chappell. Veterans groups today are derided with increasing frequency for their "oversensitivity" and their strenuous "uninformed" efforts during the "Enola Gay" controversy; yet as former Navy Secretary John Lehman wryly noted, "even paranoids have real enemies," and the former servicemen were fundamentally correct in the view that the image their leaders carried with them in the spring and summer of 1945 was one of landing ships filled from

bulkhead to bulkhead with covered stretchers. Such photos exist from Omaha Beach, Iwo Jima, and other bloody fights, and from the furor raised by the “Enola Gay” exhibit it is evident that many veterans would have liked to have seen the Smithsonian spend as much time digging those out of the archives as they spent acquiring Hiroshima artifacts.

But for all the gnashing of teeth by some over the “censorship” of the Smithsonian, what has not changed is that individuals interested in reengineering history invariably set the agenda for discussions of the atom bomb in seminars and academic journals, as well as college and even high school classrooms, where the unwary tend to accept their documentation and conclusions at face value. This happens because while the broad outlines of the plans for the invasion of Japan are fairly well known, few historians—military or civilian—have any knowledge of the fundamental details, or familiarity with the documentation so copiously cited by “acknowledged experts,” or the grim realities Truman and his contemporaries could not avoid.

The devil is in the details, and those who know instinctively that what is being said does not ring true frequently find themselves either being maneuvered into simply keeping silent or finding that the discussion leaders’ alleged command of “facts” is sucking them into the rhetorical equivalent of “Nyah, nyah, nyah, nyah. I’m right and you’re wrong.” The spate of new books by Newman, Polmar and Allen, Maddox, Chappell, and even Skates may go a long way to changing all that.

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