

DOUGLAS L. BENDELL AWARD

THE STARVATION MYTH: THE U.S. BLOCKADE OF JAPAN IN WORLD WAR II

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At 8:16 a.m., on August 6, 1945, the world changed. Fifty-seconds earlier, the *Enola Gay* had dropped an atomic bomb, "Little Boy", from 31,600 feet above Hiroshima, Japan. The world was ushered into the nuclear age. After seeing the "initial burst and 'ball of fire,'" co-pilot Robert Lewis questioned aloud, "My God, what have we done?"¹ Lewis, nearly six miles above the devastation, was responding to the pyrotechnic display. He could only imagine the very real damage the bomb had caused. While disagreements exist concerning the exact figures, it is undeniable that the bomb and its radioactive effects killed at least 70,000 people.²

Though he was one of the first to see its effects, Lewis was not the first to question the decision to use the atomic bomb nor would he be the last. The decision still sits at the center of one of the most debated historical (as well as historiographic) questions. The focus on this episode is justified. This singular event divides the Twentieth Century in numerous ways, but perhaps most relevantly it ends a hot and bloody war, and marks the beginning of a colder conflict. And since we examine the event in the year 2000, we must try to avoid the biases of the post-Cold War era. This paper tries to focus on two different realities: the first is what actually, really happened, the true state of affairs, then secondly the perceptions of that actuality.

The historical field relating to Truman's decision is broad, and it would be impossible to fairly cover all of the issues of relevance. There are numerous topics of contention: Did fear of the Soviet Union affect the decision to use the atomic device? How many casualties would an invasion of Japan have caused? Did racism contribute to the decision? Was the decision made to justify the two-billion-dollar expenditure on the Manhattan Project? Was the decision made because of the sheer unthinking momentum of a bureaucratic juggernaut? Was Japan ready to surrender? Did the United States *believe* that Japan was ready to surrender? How did all of these factors come to play in the ultimate decision to use the atomic bomb?

¹ W.F. Craven and J.L. Cate, eds., *The Army Air Forces in World War II: The Pacific-Matterhorn to Wagsaki, June 1944 to August 1945* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 5: 716-717

² The Japanese estimated 71,000 dead and missing, the Strategic Bombing Survey estimated 70,000 to 80,000 dead, while the British mission to Japan estimated between 70,000 and 90,000 were killed.

While a number of the above motivations have been used to varying degrees to show that the decision to drop the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki was made for non-military reasons, the issue of Japanese surrender appears to be the crucial piece of the revisionist argument. This thesis varies from author to author, but there is general agreement on the core issues. When viewed from a distance, the thesis appears impervious to criticism. Closer examination reveals its flaws.

The revisionist thesis, presented first by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey and later modified and expanded by Gar Alperowitz, argues that the United States persisted needlessly with its policy of unconditional surrender. This continuation was partially the fault of a failed understanding of the Japanese culture and, in particular, the position of the emperor in that society. Further, the United States had to use the bomb to justify its cost. The decision was also motivated by atomic diplomacy: the use of the bomb as a tool to intimidate the U.S.S.R. and gain concessions in the post-war world. The United States' strategic bombing campaign, when combined with the increasing control of the sea lanes had largely destroyed the Japanese war economy. Despite the fact that the Japanese viewed the unconditional surrender policy as national annihilation, that nation's leadership was so assured of a military defeat that they were quickly seeking peace. The entry of the Soviet Union into the war against Japan would have been a tremendous blow to morale, and probably would have caused immediate Japanese capitulation. Further, even if invasion were a necessity, and the revisionist consensus concludes that it was not, such an invasion would have caused only a relatively small number of casualties. From these premises, the revisionists conclude that the decision to use the bomb was not made out of military necessity, and that Japan would most likely have surrendered by November 1, 1945, and surely would have surrendered by December 31, 1945 *even if the bomb had not been used*.³

These arguments, however, are not internally consistent. The revisionists' must conclude that Truman was full of contradictions: he was power-hungry, deceptive, ignorant, simplistic, hate-filled, compassionate, heavily influenced by his advisors, while being weakly influenced by his advisors. The argument that Truman, and his Secretary of State, James F. Byrnes, were both ignorant and Machiavellian is, in my opinion, untenable and largely spurious. And though it would be easier to attack this straw man of the opponent rather than the facts of history, the reality also supports a more traditionalist view: Japan was not ready to surrender, they would not have done so in the immediate future, and the decision to use the atomic bomb was made on military grounds.

Thus, the issue of Japanese surrender is at the forefront. Why would the Japanese surrender? The answer, as it is normally presented, is that Japan's war economy had collapsed and she could no longer continue resisting because her people were near starvation. The statistics for this are nebulous, and there is very little support for this in the testimony

More recent estimates conclude that up to 200,000 may have died as a result of the atomic bomb. See Dennis Wainstock, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 86.

³ These precise and arbitrary dates were presented by the U.S. Strategic Bombing Survey [henceforth USSBS], *Japan's Struggle to End the War* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1946), 13.

of captured Japanese leaders after the war. In actuality the statistics seem to show that prior to the very end of 1945, things were going fairly well for Japanese agriculture. Even in 1945, when every perceivable stress had been placed on the Japanese, the situation was such that they probably could have sustained themselves for another six months to a year. By arguing that Japan was not on the verge of mass starvation, the cornerstone of the revisionist argument is removed. Starvation was the motivation for their scenario, and without it, the scenario as a whole seems significantly less likely.

The revisionists have built their persuasive argument around the assertion that a joint sea and air blockade caused the collapse of the Japanese war economy. In particular, they argue that there was a dire food shortage that would have quickly caused mass starvation. They also claim that the food shortage led to a loss of morale and absenteeism. This critical loss was exacerbated by the strategic bombing and the gradual collapse of the war economy caused by an increasing deficiency of raw materials and the destruction of factories. This collapse of the national economy, particularly mass starvation, would have forced even the Japanese hard-liners to capitulate. This theory is best articulated, ironically, by the United States Strategic Bombing Survey and its Vice-Chairman, Paul H. Nitze.

The USSBS was to evaluate the effects of strategic bombing. It was established pursuant to a directive of President Roosevelt to "conduct an impartial and expert study on the effects of aerial attack" on Germany and Japan, "to establish a basis for evaluating the importance and potentialities of air power as an instrument of military strategy for planning the future development of United States armed forces."⁴ This mandate gave the USSBS broad goals. When Truman gave his specific instructions to the Pacific War survey, he broadened the mandate further by including naval as well as air corps personnel. Also, the inclusion of post-war planning into the objectives, helped lead to the occurrence of "mission creep." The USSBS attempted to evaluate events that were only tangentially related to their core subject: the unique impact of atomic bombs, investigate why the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and why they ultimately surrendered.⁵

Nitze ultimately played a significant role in the USSBS reports concerning the war in the Pacific. The USSBS was chaired by Franklin D'Olier, president of the Prudential Insurance Company, and Nitze was one of several people under D'Olier who went on to have prestigious careers. However, D'Olier had difficulty persuading survey employees to transfer to the Pacific, and of the civilian directors, only Nitze was willing to take a major responsibility for the Pacific Survey.⁶ Nitze's conclusions *prior* to making his "impartial and objective study" are therefore very important in understanding the ultimate conclusions reached by the USSBS.

⁴ USSBS, *The Effects of Air Attacks on Japanese Urban Economy* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1947), iii.

⁵ Robert Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995), 34-5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 33, 35.

In June 1945, Nitze met with the Joint Target Group to discuss his view of the effect of strategic bombing upon Japan. His arguments then are evident in the findings he presented a year later. He argued that by attacking the essential lines of transportation they could isolate Japanese islands from one another and hence fragment the base of Japanese operations. The "interdiction of the lines of transportation would be sufficiently effective... that the bombing of urban industrial areas would not be necessary." Nitze concluded along with Fred Searles that Japan would surrender in matter of months; Nitze predicted that Japan would capitulate by November 1945. However, the Joint Chiefs did not concur with Nitze and Searles estimate and felt invasion was still necessary for surrender. That in turn would prompt Truman to choose to use the atomic bomb.⁷

Nitze's account contains numerous important facts, but three should be noted specifically. He had already formulated the basic conclusion to the USSBS before he surveyed the facts. The date of November 1945 for capitulation is also indicative. After thirteen months of research, Nitze concludes that Japan would have surrendered if the atomic bomb had not been dropped most likely by the 1 November 1945.⁸ Second, Nitze's views were not necessarily in accord with other military advisors, namely the Joint Chiefs. And, as a peripheral issue, Truman's decision was made in accord with his military advisors' belief that bombing and a blockade alone would not cause capitulation.

It seems difficult to believe that Nitze's data was precise enough to warrant a date by which the Japanese would probably have surrendered. And when examining the data used by the USSBS, it is frequently inconclusive, and certainly does not merit such an emphatic statement as the conclusion explicitly stated in two of the three reports issued by the Survey that, "certainly prior to December 31, 1945, and in all probability prior to November 1, 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated."⁹

To support this conclusion, Nitze points to the continuing air-sea encirclement of Japan. The "blockade was having an effect. People were starving in Japan.... They couldn't even ship between islands. They would soon run out of food. This would cause the Emperor to work for peace." This would force the Japanese to surrender; "even the military don't like to see all their people starve to death."¹⁰

However, this conclusion does not correspond necessarily to the data in the USSBS reports. In particular, the Manpower, Food and Civilian Supplies Division produced a lengthy report in January 1947, titled *The Japanese Wartime Standard of Living and Utilization*

⁷ Paul H. Nitze, *From Hiroshima to Glasnost: At the Center of Decision* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989), 36-7, quoted in Newman, *Truman and the Hiroshima Cult*, 34.

⁸ USSBS, *Japan's Struggle*, 13

⁹ *Ibid.*; idem, *Summary Report (Pacific War)* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1946), 26.

of *Manpower*. The blockade was having serious difficulty in cutting off Japanese food supplies. While the islands were largely dependent on imports for many raw materials, surprisingly they were largely self-sustaining agriculturally: "from 1931 to 1940 19 percent of Japan's food supply, on a caloric basis, was imported." This would increase to 20 percent by 1941, but then would gradually decline to only 9 percent.¹¹ It is important to note that even if the embargo completely stopped all importation of food, it would have affected only one-fifth of the Japanese food supply. The removal of 10 percent of a former source for food imports is a significant hardship, but there is no evidence to indicate that people were dying in Japan of starvation, or that such mass starvation would have happened before the end of 1946.

A close examination of food imports shows why the blockade was unable to cut the island nation off entirely from its foreign supplies. First, it must be noted that Japan depended only on imports of certain crops, namely rice (17% of which was imported), soybeans (21%), sugar (84%), wheat (21%), and other grains and beans (37%). It received these crops from various sources. "Rice was imported principally from Korea and Formosa [present-day Taiwan], sugar from Formosa and the Netherlands Indies [present-day Indonesia], wheat from Australia, Canada, and the United States, and soybeans and other grains and beans from Manchuria."¹²

Clearly, once the Greater East Asian War began, Japan lost almost all of its wheat imports from Anglo-American countries, but all of its other imports were with occupied territories across the Sea of Japan. Rice imports, as a percentage of total production, decreased throughout the war, partially due to poor harvests in Korea. Sugar production tapered off as well. However, for soybeans along with other grains and beans, Japan was able to maintain the same percentage of imports throughout the war.

The Sea of Japan was largely insulated from the enclosing Allied "ring of steel," and hence imports continued. B-29s mined the harbors of western Japan with mines, while some submarines were able to sneak into the Sea of Japan. The effects of the mining were ultimately crippling. During the last five months of the war, B-29s flew 1,528 mining sorties and planted 12,053 mines. Half of the shipping tonnage lost during this period was lost to mines. Still, neither the Straits of Tsushima in the south nor the La Perouse Straits in the north had been breached by surface vessels.¹³

The evidence, however, even taking into account the mining, is not conclusive. Despite the growing loss of shipping; and the consistent loss of supplies, raw materials, and fertilizers; the crop for 1944 had by almost all measures increased over that of the previous

¹⁰ Newman, 37.

¹¹ USSBS, *The Japanese Wartime Standard of Living and Utilization of Manpower* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1947), 2.

¹² *Ibid.*

year. First, per acre yield of almost all crops seemed to be improving. Wheat, naked barley, and barley all showed marked improvements in 1944. Rice, while still continuing a per acre yield decline that began in 1942, seemed to be moving towards stabilization or recovery. This decline was not, however, a sign the United States' campaign was taking a toll on Japanese agriculture, but was a random fluctuation. The USSBS survey has difficulty explaining away this fact, mentioning: "It is significant to note... that rice yields were maintained at prewar levels. The cause of this phenomenon was primarily the precedence given rice in the factors of production, especially with respect to fertilizer."¹⁴ This type of note is typical. The USSBS presents what would seem to be generally favorable data, and tries to mitigate that data with some exception explaining why the data is not truly representative of the situation. Although that is clearly true at certain points, the USSBS documents seem to go to great lengths to reach their conclusion.

The Survey found a trend towards both decreased arable land and cultivated acreage, and placed causality on numerous things, but mostly on a "progressively tighter farm labor situation." It concluded that it was very likely that the trend, which became pronounced in 1943, continued at an accelerated pace until the end of the war. However, these trends, which would seem to decrease productivity, clearly do not. One explanation could be that only the most fertile fields were cultivated when there was less manpower available; however, there is no evidence presented in the reports that demonstrates this.

The USSBS summarizes, "The decline in Japanese agricultural production between 1941 and 1945 was considerably influenced by a shortage of able-bodied farm labor." Specifically, "This manpower shortage contributed to the reduction of land under cultivation... and resulted in the use of less efficient farm labor, mainly women and older members of the farming households. The decline in labor efficiency along with the restricted use of chemical fertilizers were mainly responsible for reducing the per-acre yields of land under cultivation."¹⁵ However, we can note that there was *no decline in efficiency* evident in any of the data presented in the USSBS report. In fact, the available data seem to imply that, despite an increase of "less efficient labor," productivity actually increased in 1944.¹⁶ The USSBS conclusions are at odds with the data used to determine them.

The biggest factor affecting production seems not to be the strategic bombing or the blockade, which were having a significant impact, but the weather: "Exceptional weather conditions adversely affected production in 1941 and 1945 while favorable weather

¹³ John Ray Skates, *The Invasion of Japan: Alternative to the Bomb* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1994), 44, 49-50.

¹⁴ USSBS, *Standard of Living*, 6-7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁶ While clearly the manpower shortage was not felt as intensely until 1945, in 1944 there were already the beginnings of a reorientation of manpower in agriculture, with a three percent decrease for men in the labor force when compared to the 1940 statistic. See USSBS, *The Effects of Strategic Bombing on Japan's War Economy*, 31.

conditions were especially beneficial only in 1942.... The 1945 rice crop, however, was a disastrous failure and the 1945 spring crops were also below normal, due to unusually poor weather during the growing seasons.¹⁷

Hence, it is only in 1945, that production decreases in principal foods are really noticeable: rice, wheat, barley, naked barley and fruits all experienced a significant decrease in tonnage. Although there was an increase in the production of soybeans, sweet potatoes, potatoes, and other vegetables in 1945, the caloric level of those crops underwent a substantial decrease compared to the year before.¹⁸

Agricultural production from 1941 to 1945, then, ultimately showed a decline in both food imports and domestic production. The situation was soon becoming dire, but it still is not evident from the data available that surrender would have occurred before the end of 1945. First, the ration system, despite its inefficiencies, was providing staples to the Japanese people at a level determined by gender and type of labor. Further, the military's rations were only beginning to be reduced by the end of the war. Until 1945, the military enjoyed a complete daily ration, and it would be simplistic to argue that by mid-1945 they would be unable to fight. Also, scavenging was proving to be an adequate means of augmenting caloric intake for both the military and the public. One such campaign was put forth by the Board of Technology. In the first week of July, it announced that it would begin processing 150 million acorns as a supplement to the basic staple ration. This came at the same time that the Japanese government began a program to manufacture starch from potato vines and other plants.¹⁹ If the war had continued, no doubt further alternative methods would have extended the food capacity for additional months. As a whole, the domestic food production oscillated during the war, and only markedly declined in 1945, hence causing the new initiatives. According to the USSBS, holding the 1931-40 average as 100 for an index value, in 1941 the index value was 91, for 1942 it was 102, for 1943 it was 94, for 1944 it was 93, and finally for 1945 it dropped to 74.²⁰

The Survey also points out repeatedly that such a figure is biased by an overabundance of staple carbohydrates and not enough supplementary foods, and this caused a qualitative paucity of the Japanese diet.²¹ However, more recent scholarship seems to suggest that the Japanese diet was more balanced than originally thought. T. R. H. Haven notes that in 1945 the Japanese people "took in just 1,793 calories a day... yet even then the amount of protein

¹⁷ USSBS, *Standard of Living*, 3.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Gar Alperovitz, *The Decision to Use the Atomic Bomb* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 22.

²⁰ USSBS, *Standard of Living*, 2.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

people were eating held up reasonably well." And by way of summary, he adds, "To the very end people managed to find food, however sparse or untasty."²²

There can be no doubt, the food situation was worsening. D. D. Wainstock summarizes the situation well in a recent work that argues for a revisionist thesis. He asserts, "Before Pearl Harbor, the average caloric intake of the Japanese people was about 2,000 calories per day as against 3,400 in the United States. By the summer of 1945, it was about 1,680." He explains further, "In reality, on the average, the Japanese consumed 10 percent less than the Germans ate during the worst period of World War I under the British blockade. The average Japanese had only one small bowl of watered soup for breakfast and some pickles, and a piece of fish and a few vegetables for lunch. Supper was mostly a repetition of breakfast."²³

Wainstock's quote is insightful for a number of reasons. First, it must be noted that comparatively the Japanese were used to a lower per day calorie intake than the Western nations. Secondly, the description of the average meal was more or less the description of the average meal throughout the 1930s as well, though the meal in 1945 was smaller. Thirdly, the reference to the British blockade is interesting, because it must be noted that ultimately further military action was required to bring about an armistice with the Germans in the First World War. Finally, though, Wainstock produces a third figure for the average calorie intake in 1945. It is apparent that the evidence varies, and the range that these figures provide is from the USSBS's low figure of 1480, Wainstock's estimate of 1640, and T. R. H. Haven's estimate of 1793. These figures, when further analyzed, lead to several different calculations of consumption versus the pre-war norm. The range is from USSBS's 74 percent, Wainstock's 84 percent, and Haven's 89.65 percent. If Haven's 89.65 percent is correct, it is very near indeed to the USSBS's estimate of the Japanese diet in 1941 (91 percent), when no one in Japan felt that mass starvation was even a remote threat, and no one felt that their "meager" diet was sufficient reason to give up hope.²⁴ If nothing else, this range in statistics provides evidence of a general lack of consensus over the true state of affairs in Japan in mid-1945.

Whatever the actual proportion, Japan was able to maintain its food distribution because of the centralization of the process. All imported food goods and domestic products were distributed through the ration system. Near the end of the war, the Japanese government had to reduce levels of rice in the staple ration, largely because of the abysmal 1945 crop. An increase in potatoes and sweet potatoes allowed the substitution of one

²² Thomas R. H. Havens, *Valley of Darkness: The Japanese People and World War Two* (New York: Norton, 1978), 130-2, quoted in Newman, 38.

²³ Wainstock, 12.

²⁴ It is possible that the USSBS estimates are generally conservative and/or Haven is generally liberal and the comparison between Haven and USSBS is not valid. However, both documents are drawing from similar sources to extrapolate caloric intake and both are using 2,000 calories per day as the basis, so it would seem that the comparison is justified.

carbohydrate for another, though clearly not in equal caloric levels to the past.²⁵ In what seems to be desperation on the part of the reporters, the survey concludes:

The adulteration of the staple rice ration with substitute foods, such as barley and potatoes, unquestionably had an adverse psychological effect on the Japanese consumer. Although he could obtain virtually the same amount of calories from the adulterated ration, he would not be as satisfied with it, just as an American would feel dissatisfied at obtaining his proteins from cheese or soybeans instead of from meat. Such dissatisfaction would unquestionably affect the morale of a worker and tend to lower his efficiency.²⁶

It seems impossible to believe that a populace, whose morale had not been destroyed by daily bombing, would succumb to defeatism because they were not satisfied by the way their food tasted.²⁷ Any morale decrease would probably have been very small, although it could have been a minor factor in any cumulative decrease in Japanese morale. Even if the increasingly small ration affected morale, whether it was barley, potatoes, or rice, it probably did not have any statistically noticeable effect, and the USSBS presents only one anecdote from a minor staff officer to support the claim.²⁸

Also, it must be noted that while the Japanese government was rationing it was also storing food for emergency shortages in the future. Though the unprecedentedly poor rice crop of 1945 was ominous, it can be assumed that government storage of foodstuffs were sufficient to at least sustain the population of Japan until mid-1946. The crop was being harvested in 1945, even if it was low in quantity, and the USSBS estimates the stock on hand of rice was 133,000 tons, or a 10-day supply.²⁹ If this figure is correct, the poor harvest would have caused severe shocks to the Japanese ration system, and the starvation issue would have loomed large for the first time. Even if the USSBS estimate is valid, these

²⁵ At the beginning of the war, the domestic rice production was 10,146,000 metric tons. Domestic production of the two classes of potato was 4,528,000 metric tons. Thus, the ratio was about 10:4.5. The 1945 figure is substantially different. The rice crop, largely because of poor weather, was low at 6,600,000, while the potato crop was substantially larger at 7,970,000. This ratio is 10:12. USSBS, *Standard of Living*, 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

²⁷ Referring to morale decreases caused by the bombing, Toyoda Soemu, a member of the Supreme War Guidance Council in 1945, stated, "The effect on the people's morale was not as great as we had feared.... There was no idea that we must give up the war to avoid even a single additional day of bombing." USSBS, Naval Analysis Division, *Interrogations of Japanese Officials* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1946), 2: 323.

²⁸ USSBS, *Standard of Living*, 103.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

first shocks would not have signified the collapse of the Japanese agricultural economy, and still it seems unlikely that mass starvation would have occurred at this point. However, with that said, several reports seem to point to larger reserves of rice.

Yoshida Shigeru, prime minister from 1946-47, observed that while food was short during the postwar occupation, the Japanese relied on “the food stored in different parts of the country during the war—stocks that most fortunately proved to be far more abundant than was expected.”³⁰ A similar observation was made by Herbert Passin, a member of the U.S. occupation forces: “During the last year or so of the war, the Japanese military had stored away several years’ supply of food, clothing, raw materials, equipment, and funds in its arsenals, caves, and other hiding places.”³¹

Surrender by starvation is a very unsure thing. To place a specific date on such an event as agricultural collapse would be mistaken. Some people surely did starve. There were instances where Japanese soldiers on islands cut off from supply accepted starvation rather than surrender. The Japanese people were in a deteriorated physical state, which made them more susceptible to diseases caused or exacerbated by malnutrition.³² However, when taking an objective view of the data, mass starvation was not in the immediate future for Japan at mid-1945. Malnutrition, while becoming a problem, had not reached an unbearable state for Japan’s people or their war economy. Those factors, then, cannot be viewed as serious motivations for their ultimate decision to surrender. The fact that Nitze and the USSBS concluded that starvation was near, point to their willingness to ignore facts that seem to discredit their “surrender thesis.”

If the evidence does not seem to match the thesis, that appears to imply a bias on the part of the researcher. Evidence suggests that Nitze was heavily influenced by his fellow naval and aerial officers on the Pacific survey team. The USSBS report favored the role played by the Navy and the Army Air Force. Surprisingly enough, it is the Navy and Army Air Force (AAF) staff that wrote the USSBS. Its conclusions heavily favor the roles that the Navy and the AAF sought. The Navy felt that its embargo had had a crippling effect on Japan, and that the blockade could have succeeded without any help from ground forces (an invasion), foreign assistance (Russian intervention), or new elaborate weapons programs (the atomic bomb). The Navy had always assumed that a blockade alone would not be sufficient, but that strategic bombing (perhaps with their own bomber force) would be necessary to achieve capitulation.³³

The AAF was happy to oblige its new role. Since World War I aerial strategists had been pursuing three objectives:

³⁰ Newman, 38.

³¹ Herbert Passin, “The Occupation: Some Reflections,” in Carol Gluck and Stephen Graubard, eds., *Showa: The Japan of Hirohito* (New York: Norton, 1992), 111, quoted in Newman, 38.

³² USSBS, *Standard of Living*, 100-2.

Above all, air officers sought independence for air power and parity with the army and the navy. They chafed at the ground support mission, and they wanted recognition for an independent, war-winning role for airpower—strategic bombing. Finally, they wanted to develop a long-range heavy bomber [the B-29] to carry out that mission.³⁴

The USSBS supported these roles and doctrines, not necessarily intentionally favoring the portion of the military that wrote the survey, but more realistically because those personnel saw the world through the light of their field. Thus, the USSBS' conclusion "that certainly prior to December 31, 1945, and in all probability prior to November 1, 1945, Japan would have surrendered even if the atomic bombs had not been dropped, even if Russia had not entered the war, and even if no invasion had been planned or contemplated" must be understood in this context.³⁵ Simply put, the authors of the report had both certain biases and agendas that appear in the report's conclusions.

In actuality, there is little evidence to support the contention that these actions alone would have caused surrender, though they clearly were taking a toll on Japan's war economy. And despite the Survey's claim that it reached the opinion "based on a detailed investigation of all the facts, and supported by the testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved," the facts do not seem to be conclusive, and the surviving Japanese leaders seem to be emphatic that surrender was not imminent prior to August 6.

R. P. Newman has done a thorough survey of the interrogations and concludes:

Early surrender? With no atom bombs, no Russians, no invasion? Careful inspection of the "testimony of the surviving Japanese leaders involved"—even that incomplete sample available to the USSBS during its two short months in 1945—shows only [Marquis] Kido [Koichi, Lord Keeper of the Privy Seal] supporting Nitze, everyone else [including more than twenty other high level officials] stating that Japan would have fought on indefinitely. When would Japan have surrendered without the bomb and the Russians? The *only* credible answer is that given by Robert Butow when Freeman Dyson asked him about it: "The Japanese leaders themselves do not know the answer to that question."³⁶

Two further criticisms may be leveled at the USSBS report. First, there was a good deal of infighting between the AAF and the Navy staff of the USSBS, which brings into question

³³ Skates, 44.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

³⁵ USSBS, *Japan's Struggle*, 13.

³⁶ Newman, 51; Butow quoted in, Newman, 51.

the credibility and veracity of the report, and made consensus difficult. It seems that Nitze favored the AAF when it conflicted with the Navy's presentation of facts, much to the Navy's chagrin.³⁷ An extreme example is Admiral Ralph A. Ofstie's criticisms of the report, in particular the portion submitted by survey member Maj. Gen. Orvil Anderson of the AAF. These are the brutal criticisms of the top naval officer on the Pacific survey of the top air force officer. "The volume presents a completely inaccurate and entirely biased account of our war with Japan which is of absolutely no historical value, consistently misrepresents facts, and indeed, often ignores facts and employs falsehoods." He does not stop there, "From this light treatment of the Pacific war, the authors have arrived at a series of biased conclusions which...impose a threat to our future security."³⁸

The final criticism that can be leveled at the USSBS is that the Joint Chiefs of Staff did not feel that the blockade, at the levels of 1945, would have been sufficient to force Japan's surrender. In particular, the Joint Chiefs were wary of expanding the blockade, either as preparation to the invasion or as the sole allied strategy. The JCS chose not to pursue these options for a number of reasons. Intensifying the blockade would require moving troops to the west of Japan, along Formosa, and the Chinese coast, etc. General Douglas MacArthur, Commander Southwest Pacific Army, argued against such a plan, explaining that "peripheral operations would tie up a great part of the American resources in the Pacific so that Japan could be invaded only after redeployment from Europe. Lodgments on the China coast carried the danger of drawing American forces into 'heavy involvement' on the Asian mainland and perhaps of postponing the invasion of Japan into 1947." He argued that a series of these operations, "prior to the delivery of the main attack would result in greater loss of life." Commenting on bombing and blockade alone, he felt "such a strategy would 'prolong the war indefinitely,' and it assumed that the Japanese could be subdued by air power alone 'in spite of its demonstrated failure in Europe.'"³⁹

While MacArthur had his own army biases, it should be noted that both General George C. Marshall, Army Chief of Staff, and Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief, Pacific fleet and commander in chief, Pacific Ocean Areas (CINC-PAC and CINC-POA), agreed with MacArthur's thesis that blockade alone would not be sufficient. As such, the JCS did not support a continuation of the blockade, because they felt that it would be insufficient to cause Japan's unconditional surrender.

After examining the preponderance of evidence, it appears that this portion of the revisionist argument has been refuted. Japan was not about to experience mass starvation in mid-1945, so that had little perceivable effect on the decision to surrender. It would seem

³⁷ Newman, 55.

³⁸ Ofstie quoted in Newman, 52.

³⁹ Message, MacArthur to Marshall, 20 April 1945, Historical Record Index Cards, General Headquarters Southwest Pacific Army, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, MD, quoted in Skates, 53.

that from the Japanese could have maintained themselves for another year, which would have made the end of the war a costly process indeed for the Allies and the Japanese themselves. It is perhaps safe to say that initially, without examining other crucial issues, the decision to drop the atomic bomb does not appear inconsistent with the Japanese agricultural situation. That situation, in fact, appears to support such a drastic decision as a means to significantly shorten a conflict that did not appear about to end in the immediate future.

Finally, the USSBS itself is severely called into question. Its central thesis is unsubstantiated and as the report *The Japanese Wartime Standard of Living and Utilization of Manpower* shows, the USSBS took ambiguous data and produced conclusions favorable to those presenting the report, namely air force and naval officers. Interdepartmental conflict severely limited the ability to build consensus out of the data, which is why at times the reports seemed disjointed and contradictory. The available evidence at hand destroys the myth that has been central to our thinking about the Japanese surrender. The revision of the revisionists has begun.